

Immanuel Kant

On Soemmerrings's *Organ of the Soul*¹

Worthy Man! You present me for judgment your completed work about a certain principle of vital force in animal bodies, which, from the perspective of the mere faculty of perception, is called the *immediate* sense instrument (πρῶτον αἰσθητήριον)² but from the perspective of the unification of all perceptions in a certain part of the brain is called the common place of sensation (*sensorium commune*). This honor, in so far as it is intended for me as someone not completely inexperienced in the *study of nature*, I acknowledge with all due thanks. — There is, however, joined to it an inquiry addressed to Metaphysics (whose oracle, it is said, has long since fallen silent); and this puts me in a quandary, whether or not I ought to accept the honor: for the question of the *seat of the soul* (*sedes animae*) is raised in this inquiry, both with regard to its *receptivity to the senses* (*facultas sensitive percipiendi*) as well as with regard to its faculty of motion (*facultas locomotiva*). Thus a response is sought about which two academic faculties might come into conflict as to which has jurisdiction (the *forum competens*), the *medical* faculty in its *anatomical-physiological* section with the *philosophical* faculty in its psychological-metaphysical section; here, as in all *attempts at a coalition* between those who want to ground everything on empirical principles and those who first and foremost seek grounds *a priori*, some unpleasantness arises, which is based merely on the conflict of the faculties³ as to whom the question belongs to when a response is sought from the university (as an institution embracing all wisdom); (such a case even still occurs in the attempts at unifying the pure theory of right with politics as an *empirical-contingent* discipline or the pure theory of religion with revealed religion which is also *empirical-contingent*). — Whoever in the present case

¹This short essay by Kant bears no title in the printed version (Samuel Thomas Soemmerring, *Über das Organ der Seele*, Königsberg: Nicolovius 1796, p. 81). It is prefaced by the following two paragraphs:

“The pride of our age, Kant, has been so obliging as not only to applaud the prevailing idea of this essay, but even to extend and refine and thus to perfect it.

“His generous permission allows me to crown my work with his own words.”

²In the *Organ der Seele* (p. 40) Soemmerring cites a passage from Ernst Platner's *Quaestiones physiologicae*, (*Quaestionum physiologicarum libri duo*, Leipzig: Crusius, 1794), in which πρῶτον αἰσθητήριον and *sensorium commune* are equated. The Greek term may be found in Aristotle's *De anima*, 422b22. [See also 656b35 and 458a28].

³*Streit der Fakultäten*: the German University in Kant's time had four 'faculties' (schools): the 'lower' faculty philosophy (including the sciences) and the 'higher' faculties, medicine, law and theology. Kant later published a book under this title usually cited in English as “The Quarrel of the Faculties”

ingratiates himself with the *physician* as physiologist spoils things with the *philosopher* as metaphysician; and vice versa, whoever satisfies the latter comes into conflict with the physiologist.

But actually it is the concept of a *seat of the soul* which occasions the disunity of the faculties over the common sense instrument and which one ought better to dispense with entirely: this can be done all the more appropriately since the concept requires a *local presence*, thus ascribing a spatial relation to a thing which is merely the object of the inner sense and which thus can be determined only according to temporal conditions, but precisely in doing this, it contradicts itself; instead of this, a *virtual presence*, which belongs only to the understanding and thus is not local, provides a concept that makes it possible⁴ to treat the question posed (about the *sensorium commune*) as a merely physiological task. — For, although most people believe they feel themselves think in their heads, this is merely the mistake of subreption; namely, they take the judgment about the cause of a sensation at a certain place (in the brain) for the sensation of the cause at this place, and they let the cerebral traces of the impressions occurring upon this judgment afterwards accompany the thoughts according to laws of association under the name of *material ideas* (Descartes)⁵: which although they are quite arbitrary hypotheses, nonetheless at least do not make a seat of the soul necessary and do not mix a physiological task with metaphysics. — Thus we are dealing only with the matter which makes possible the unification of all sense-representations in the *mind*.^{*} — According to the discovery made by your profound anatomical studies, the only matter which (as *sensorium commune*) is qualified for this is contained in the cerebral ventricles and is mere water: as the

⁴ Zweig's translation in the Cambridge edition (p. 223) has "impossible"!

⁵The editors of Kant's *Gesammelte Schriften*, refer the reader to Descartes' *Passions de l'ame* [which is French!], bk. I, 23f., 35, 42 [AT 11:346–60]. Whether or not Descartes himself ever actually used this expression, 'ideae materiales' was a technical term in German university philosophy of the 18th century for the physiological correlates of certain mental phenomena. The definition given in §112 of Christian Wolff's *Psychologia rationalis* is: "Motum vero inde ad cerebrum propagatum vel ex illo in cerebro enatum *Ideam materialem* appellabimus." ("The motion indeed propagated [from the sense organ] to the brain or flowing from it within the brain we shall call a *material idea*.")

^{*}By *mind* [*Gemut*] is understood only the faculty (*animus*) of combining given representations and effecting the unity of empirical apperception, but not the substance (*anima*) according to its nature, which is entirely different from matter, from which one then abstracts; by this it is gained that with regard to the thinking subject we do may not cross over [*überschreiten*] into metaphysics, with which pure consciousness and the unity of the same a priori in the combining of given representations (with the understanding) has to do, but rather with the power of imagination whose intuitions (even without the presence of their object) as empirical representations can be assumed to correspond to impressions in the brain (actually *habitus* of reproduction) and to belong to a whole of inner self-intuition. [Kant's note]

immediate organ of the soul which, on the one hand, *separates* from one another the nerve bundles ending there, so that the sensations do not blend together through them [alternative: “sensations [coming] through them do not blend together”] and, on the other hand, effects a complete *community* among them lest some of them, although received by the same mind, be outside the mind (which is a contradiction).

But now a great misgiving arises: that this beautiful discovery may still not reach its goal, since *water*, as a liquid, cannot rightly be thought of as organized, but no matter is fit to be the immediate organ of the soul without organization, that is, without purposive and in its form persistent arrangement of the parts.

A *fluid* is a continuous matter, every part of which can, within the space the matter occupies, be moved from its place by the smallest force.⁶ This property seems to contradict the concept of organized matter, which is conceived as a machine and thus as *rigid*^{*} and as resisting the displacement of its parts (and thus also the change of its inner configuration) with a certain; force; but to conceive that water to be partly fluid and partly rigid (as for instance the crystalline moisture in the eye): would also partly contravene the intention on account of which one assumes that composition of the immediate organ of the sense, in order to explain its function.

What if, instead of the *mechanical* organization based on juxtaposition of the parts to form a certain figure, I were to suggest a *dynamic* organization based on chemical principles (as the former is based on mathematical principles) which would thus be compatible with the fluidity of that substance? — Just as the *mathematical* division of a space and the matter occupying it (e.g., the cerebral ventricles and the water with which they are filled) goes to infinity, so, too, it might be with the *chemical* division as a dynamic division (separation of different kinds of materials in one matter which are dissolved by one another) so that, as far as we know, it likewise goes to infinity (*in indefinitum*). — Pure ordinary water, until recently considered to be a chemical element, is now separated by pneumatic experiments into two different kinds of air. Each of these kinds of air contains besides its base also caloric [*Wärmestoff*], which in turn can perhaps be decomposed by nature into light matter and other matter, just as light can

⁶Newton (*Principia*, Bk. 2 Sec. 5, prop. 19) defines a fluid as: “A fluid is any body whose parts yield to any force impressed on it, and, by yielding, are moved among themselves.”

^{*}The opposite of the *fluid* (fluidum) should actually be the *rigid* (rigidum), as Euler, too, formulates the opposition to the former. To the *solid* we ought to oppose the *hollow*. [Kant’s note]

further be decomposed into different colors etc.⁷ If one also takes into account the immeasurable multiplicity of partly vaporous substances [*Stoffen*] which the vegetable kingdom is able to produce from that ordinary water, presumably by decomposition and a different kind of combination: then one can imagine the multiplicity of tools available to the nerves in the cerebral water (which is perhaps nothing else but ordinary water) with which they can be receptive of the sensible world and in turn be effective upon it.⁸

If one assumes as a hypothesis that the mind in empirical thinking, i.e., in the resolution and composition of given sense representations is supported by a capacity of the nerves to decompose in accordance with their differences the water in the cerebral ventricles into such primitive substances and thus, by releasing one or the other of these, to allow different sensations to come into play (e.g., that of light by means of the stimulated optic nerve or of sound by the auditory nerve, etc.) so that these substances, after the stimulus has ceased, immediately thereupon flow together: then one could say that this water *is* continuously *being* organized without however ever being organized:⁹ whereby we have attained just what was intended with the persistent organization, namely, the collective unity of all sense representations

⁷According to Adickes (where? [maybe *Kant als Naturforscher* 2, 160]) Kant is referring to a paper by Joseph Priestly: “Experiments and Observations relating to the Principle of Acidity, the Composition of Water, and Phlogiston,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* 78 (1788) 147–57. [“Versuchen und Beobachtungen über den sauren Grundstoff, die Zusammensetzung des Wassers und das Phlogiston,” *Grens Journal der Physik* 1790, I, 98ff.] The opening sentence of that paper reads “That water consists of two kinds of air, dephlogisticated and inflammable, is now, I believe, generally admitted as one of the most important, and best ascertained, doctrines in chemistry.” [“Es ist jetzt allgemein als eine der wichtigsten und am besten erwiesenen Lehren in der Chemie angenommen, dass das Wasser aus zwey verschiedenen Arten von Luft, aus dephlogistisirter und entzündbarer, bestehe.”] Priestley here also refers to other studies on the decomposition of the two kinds of air.

⁸In his second letter to Soemmerring (Sept. 17, 1795) Kant added a speculation about a possible function of the dynamical organization of water, which Soemmerring quoted in full in the *Organ der Seele* (§36):

“In the task of the common sense organ the main point is to bring unity of the aggregate into the infinite manifold of all sensuous representations of the mind [*Gemut*] or rather to make this comprehensible through the structure of the brain—which can only be accomplished if there is a means available for associating heterogeneous but temporally contiguously ordered impressions; for instance, the visual representation of a garden, with the auditory representation of music [played] in it, the taste of a meal enjoyed there, etc.—all of which would get confused if the nerve bundles affected one another through mutual contact. But the water of the cerebral ventricles can so mediate the influence of one nerve on the other and, by the counter-action [*Rückwirkung*] of the latter, can serve to connect the representation that corresponds to it in one consciousness without these impressions’ being mixed up – just as little as the tones in a polyphonic concert are mixed up in propagation by the air.” (Ak 12, 41–42)

⁹Kant plays on the difference between ‘organisiert *werden*’ (where ‘organized’ is a passive participle) and ‘organisiert *sein*’ (where ‘organized’ is a predicate adjective): the water *is* continually *being* organized but it *is* never organized: never has a permanent structure.

in a common organ (*sensorium commune*) but only to be made intelligible according to its chemical analysis.

With this, however, the actual task as Haller¹⁰ imagined it has not yet been resolved; it is not merely physiological but is also supposed to serve as a means to make imaginable the unity of consciousness of oneself (which belongs to the understanding) in the spatial relation of the *soul* to the organs of the brain (which belongs to the outer sense), and thus to make imaginable the seat of the soul, as its *local* presence, which is a task for metaphysics that is not only insolvable for it but also self-contradictory. — For if I am supposed to make the place of my soul, i.e., my absolute self, intuitable somewhere in space, then I must perceive myself through the same sense through which I perceive the matter immediately surrounding me; just as this happens when I want to determine my place in the world as a *human being*, namely that I must consider my body in relation to other bodies outside of me. — Now the soul can perceive itself only through the inner sense, but it can perceive the body (whether internally or externally) only through the outer sense and thus can by no means determine a place for itself, because to this purpose it would have to make itself the object of its own outer intuition and transpose itself outside itself; this is self-contradictory. — The solution demanded to the problem of the seat of the soul, which is expected of metaphysics leads to an impossible magnitude ($\sqrt{-2}$); and one can with Terence call out to whoever undertakes the task: *nihilò plus agas, quam si des operam, ut cum ratione insanias*;¹¹ but nonetheless the physiologist, for whom it suffices to have pursued the mere dynamic presence, if possible, up to the immediate presence, cannot be blamed for having exhorted the metaphysician to supply what is still lacking.

¹⁰Soemmerring (§ 59) refers to Albrecht von Haller, *Elementa physiologiae corporis humanae*, vol. 4 (e.g., Lausanne: Grasset, 1766) p. 395.

¹¹Terence, *The Eunuch*, Act I, Scene 1, lines 62–3: “You would accomplish no more than if you took pains to be irrational with reason.”