

Kant's Organicism

JENNIFER MENSCH

Offsetting a study of Kant's theory of cognition with a mixture of intellectual history and biography, *Kant's Organicism* offers readers an accessible portrait of Kant's scientific milieu in order to show that his standing interests in natural history and its questions regarding organic generation were critical for the development of his theoretical philosophy. By reading Kant's theoretical work in light of his connection to the life sciences—especially his reflections on the epigenetic theory of formation and genesis—Jennifer Mensch provides a new understanding of much that has been otherwise obscure or misunderstood in it.

"Epigenesis"—a term increasingly used in the late eighteenth century to describe an organic, nonmechanical view of nature's generative capacities—attracted Kant as a model for understanding the origin of reason itself. Mensch shows how this model allowed Kant to conceive of cognition as a self-generated event and thus to approach the history of human reason as if it were an organic species with a natural history of its own. She uncovers Kant's commitment to the model offered by epigenesis in his first major theoretical work, the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and demonstrates how it informed his concept of the organic, generative role given to the faculty of reason within his system as a whole. In doing so, she offers a fresh approach to Kant's famed first *Critique* and a bold new understanding of his epistemological theory.

Jennifer Mensch teaches philosophy and the history of science and medicine at the Pennsylvania State University.

"Jennifer Mensch's account of how Kant came to understand the thinking of the naturalists over the course of the eighteenth century and relate it to his own quest for a transcendental ground of reason in self-generation is very well wrought. She has made sense of a number of elements that I knew separately but had not seen in this compelling conspectus."

JOHN H. ZAMMITO, RICE UNIVERSITY

"In recent years a host of editions, translations, monographs, and articles have introduced Anglo-American readers to a Kant different from the anti-metaphysical epistemologist and rigorous ethicist of earlier scholarship. Kant has emerged as a pragmatic anthropologist, a physical geographer, and a natural historian. Jennifer Mensch's book seeks to unify the two pictures of Kant by tracking the formative background of the *Critique of Pure Reason* in Kant's own original account of the biological development of individuals and species. Her provocative epigenesist reading challenges the distinction between matters of fact (*quid facti*) and grounds of validity (*quid iuris*) in Kant's account of a priori knowledge."

GÜNTER ZÖLLER, UNIVERSITY OF MUNICH AND UNIVERSITY OF BOLOGNA