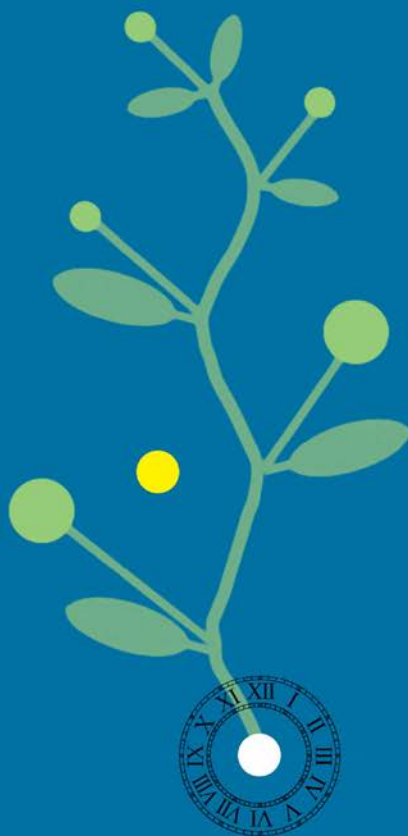


Catherine Malabou

BEFORE
TOMORROW

EPIGENESIS AND RATIONALITY

TRANSLATED BY CAROLYN SHREAD



Before Tomorrow

Before Tomorrow
Epigenesis and Rationality

Catherine Malabou
Translated by Carolyn Shread

polity

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TRANSLATOR'S FOREWORD

Epigenesis of Her Texts

Tomorrow, the order of precedence between program and its translation will be inverted.

Catherine Malabou

With every new Malabou translation comes a fresh understanding of my practice and another translation manifesto. Working with her – especially this time, where for over a year the author has been the translator's partner in transforming her text – translation has assumed its plasticity, its change, its accident, and, now, its epigenetic function. As Malabou analyzes the epigenesis of Kant's notion of rationality in *Before Tomorrow*, I am led to consider how, in translation, her own texts undergo a process of epigenesis: that is, the biological process of cellular differentiation. Which parts are sloughed off and which undergo maturation? How does Malabou develop in her arrival in English? Does the move into the Anglophone context allow for a development of that which is premature or impeded in French? Where else is she going? Who will retranslate her work tomorrow?

In the sinews of her rigorous and unrelenting tracking of Kantian philosophy, Malabou proposes that “critique itself, from the *Critique of Pure Reason* to the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*,” is subject to “*epigenetic development*” (156). Drawing again on the sciences that other continental philosophers have turned their backs on, she finds the most exciting movements of our era and brings to life biology. She confronts the moment when Kant is to be relinquished by speculative realists by uncovering in his work the resources she needs to open “the chink of a farewell” (xiii). She will bring in the life force of new frontiers in biology, for “the time has come to say

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it: transcendental epigenesis is epigenesis *of* the transcendental itself" (158). That which we thought was set in stone will be rocked by a new focus, shattered, then regrounded, differently: "The transcendental is subject to epigenesis – not to foundation" (158).

Beyond all the trying genetic investigations, always in search of a lost, inaccessible, founding origin, Malabou's book on Kant acknowledges frankly that "epigenesis can produce" (50), even if it builds on moving grounds. For our part, as translation theorists, we have been thinking translation in genetic terms and therefore failing to account for, or recognize, epigenetic productivity. Yet translation is epigenesis. After the afterlife and after survival, the plastic life of the text. As translators, "we now all have a new word"¹ for our art, something to help us explain how it is that texts are not complete until they are translated. How it is that texts bear the program to translate, the need to develop their parts in translation. That translation is generative, not as "a succession or connection of events taking place in a linear fashion starting from a given, identifiable point" (175), but rather, more holistically, as "the temporality of a synthetic continuum within which all of the parts are presented together in a movement of growth whereby the whole is formed through self-differentiation" (178). Translation is that process in which the text self-differentiates and thereby grows, develops, matures.

Malabou deploys new biological paradigms to read Kant, and in turn, reading her, I propose that we adopt epigenesis in translation studies to better describe the plasticity of the translating process. But is this any different from the multiplicity of metaphors that the discipline has already developed? The proposal and contestation of metaphors is integral to our field, from Lori Chamberlain's foundational "Gender and the Metaphorics of Translation" (1988) to James St André's recent essay collection, *Thinking through Translation with Metaphors* (2014).² Analogical thinking seemingly corresponds to our relational practices. But epigenesis is different. Just as Malabou is sensitive to the fact that her argument rides on being more than a "rhetorical artifice," that her parsing of Kant's phrase in paragraph 27 of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, "as it were a system of epigenesis of pure reason," must be more, for "if it turns out that epigenesis is only an image with nothing other than an exoteric, pedagogic, or illustrative role, then my entire elaboration is meaningless" (181). Indeed. To say *what is* goes far beyond *as it were*, and at this point, translation studies, too, must go beyond analogy to talk mechanics, life systems.

The slow seismic shifting or the shock of the quake. The moment

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in a translation when words slip, leap, echo, fly. Epigenesis: is that what translation is? Is that how we rid ourselves of the genetic paradigm that has shackled us to the original? Is it here, again, translating Malabou, that I find an answer to my questions about how to frame translation? It is – and I don't think it's just a translator's conceit. Even as the authors' closest readers, we, translators, work at the surface, determined to achieve the moment where "their difference disappears right into their contact" (157). We translate and retranslate, conscious that "epigenesis marks the current valency of the meeting point between the old and the new, the space where they reciprocally interfere with and transform one another" (158). Epigenetics describes how specific genes are activated or deactivated in response to environmental variants – the gene expression that is the transcription and translation of genetic code. The epigenesis of translation is about how texts turn off and on to speak to their audience, to react to their specific contact point. And so here, with a translation that is at once biological and textual, I find that epigenesis, then, is the meaning in translation.

Carolyn Shread

Epignomai: (1) to be born after (*oi epignomenoi*, the descendants);
(2) to arise, to take place; (3) to add.

All evolution is epigenetic.

Georges Canguilhem¹

Hence natural things which we find possible only as ends constitute the
best proof of the contingency of the world-whole.

Immanuel Kant²

PREFACE

Why write another book on Kant? Why add to the already extensive list of dissertations, monographs, and articles written on him even today?

Quite simply, because, working behind the screen of all this recognition and celebration, my plan is to trace out the opposite, namely the chink of a farewell. A break with Kant is in the works in contemporary continental philosophy. Under the banner of “speculative realism,” a new approach to the world, thinking, and time puts into question a number of postulates considered untouchable since the *Critique of Pure Reason*: the finitude of knowledge, the phenomenal given, the *a priori* synthesis as the originary relation between subject and object, the entire structural apparatus said to guarantee the universality and necessity of the laws of both nature and thought, in a word, the “transcendental.” And the rallying cry of new post-critical thought is *relinquish the transcendental*.

This relinquishing has been on the cards for some time. Initiated by Hegel, it marched on unrelenting until we reached the destruction and deconstruction of metaphysics. From Hegel to Heidegger, then from Heidegger to Derrida and Foucault, the transcendental was interrogated on the grounds of its rigidity, its permanence, its purported role as the condition *sine qua non* of thinking. To bring time, as did Heidegger, or history, as did Foucault, into the transcendental was already a way of relinquishing it. But that’s not all. The neurobiological revolution of the late 1980s, which must at last be acknowledged, and which brought to light a set of questions that are not entirely germane to the analytic tradition, also undermined any notion of the transcendental. Recent discoveries about how the brain functions have, in their own way, challenged the supposed invariability of laws of thought.

PREFACE

How, then, should we situate speculative realism, given that it views itself as even more radical than the deconstruction of metaphysics and cognitivism? And amidst all these upheavals, what happens to Kantian philosophy, or, for that matter, philosophy itself?

I believe that it is important to formulate a response to these questions by presenting a panorama of the ultra-contemporary philosophical landscape, where several major readings of Kant are being staged in terms of three questions: time; the relation between thinking and the brain; and the contingency of the world.

Of course, the indispensable counterweight to this exploration is the response of Kant himself to his own posterity.

I have constructed this response here around *epigenesis*, a figure that Kant summons in the *Critique of Pure Reason* in reference to the gestation of the categories. In biology, epigenesis designates the growth of the embryo through the gradual differentiation of cells – as opposed to preformation, which assumes that the embryo is fully constituted from the start. I develop the thesis that, far from being simply a rhetorical artifice, epigenesis applies to the transcendental itself. The transcendental grows, develops, transforms, and evolves. This evolution is such as to ensure that it spans the centuries separating the epigenetism of the eighteenth century from contemporary epigenetics.

Thus, the transcendental begins life anew.

After *The Future of Hegel*,¹ the time has come to write on Kant's future. The next task will be to return to the relation between epigenesis and dialectic.

*

I wish to thank Monique Labrune and John Thompson, my publishers in France and the UK, for their patience and confidence. I also thank Øystein Brekke for his invaluable aid, both philosophical and bibliographic; this book owes much to our exchanges between Paris and Oslo. Étienne Balibar also provided me with books that were nowhere to be found, and I would like to express my gratitude and enduring friendship to him here. Lastly, I am deeply grateful to my translator and friend Carolyn Shread, and to Steve Howard, from Kingston University, who so generously reread the translation. Without their scrutiny and expertise, this project would not have come to light.

INTRODUCTION

Assessment: An Unstable Kant

Three questions

Three questions lie at the origin of this book, three addresses to contemporary continental philosophy that seek to reveal in it, as their negative or paradoxical echo, the outlines of three areas of incomprehensible silence.

The first question concerns time. Why has the question of time lost its status as the leading question of philosophy? Why did it simply disappear after *Being and Time*, and why did Heidegger himself go so far as to confirm, in his late work, the need to leave behind the question of time as such? In *On Time and Being*, he even asserted that “time” ends up “vanishing (*verschwinden*)” as a question.¹ Indeed, no one asks this question anymore, no one has taken up the problem by trying to develop afresh a decisive concept of temporality, be it with or against Heidegger.

The second question concerns the relation between reason and the brain: why does philosophy continue to ignore recent neurobiological discoveries that suggest a profoundly transformed view of brain development and that now make it difficult, if not unacceptable, to maintain the existence of an impassable abyss between the logical and the biological origin of thinking? Can we continue to claim, without further examination, as Paul Ricœur does in his interviews with Jean-Pierre Changeux, that “the brain is [nothing but] the *substrate* of thought [. . .] and that thought is the *indication* of an underlying neuronal structure”?² How should we understand this intractable and systematic resistance to a possible reformulation of

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rational activity as the dispositions of the brain? Isn't it urgent to face the question today, rather than allowing it to slip entirely out of the field of philosophy?

The third question concerns Kant's status. This is the first time that the authority of Kant – the guarantor, if not the founder, of the identity of continental philosophy – has been so clearly up for discussion, from within this same philosophical tradition. The *a priori* character of causal necessity, on which Kant builds the principle of the validity of knowledge and the stability of nature, is openly in question today. Quentin Meillassoux's book *After Finitude* – which might be better read as “after Kant” – was a thunderbolt that toppled the statue of “correlation.”³ “Correlation” is what Meillassoux terms the *a priori* synthesis in critical philosophy, that is, a structure of originary co-implication of subject and object that ensures the strict equivalence of the laws of the understanding and the laws of nature and thereby guarantees their “necessity and strict universality.”⁴ Meillassoux states that “correlationism consists in disqualifying the claim that it is possible to consider subjectivity and objectivity independently of one another.”⁵ He explains: “[T]he central notion of modern philosophy since Kant seems to be that of *correlation*. By ‘correlation,’ we mean the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other.” We can therefore describe as correlationist “any current of thought which maintains the unsurpassable character of the correlation so defined.”⁶ In a move explicitly defined as post-critical, *After Finitude* asserts the urgency of thinking antecedence, the “prior,” before and beyond the *a priori*, before the synthesis that would impose its form as the only possible form of the world.

Since the world started well before “us,” it could, in fact, be entirely indifferent to “us,” to “our” structures of cognition and thinking. Likewise, it could be indifferent to its own necessity and could therefore prove to be absolutely contingent. This radical contingency calls for the development of a new philosophical thought. While Kant calls the study of the possibility of *a priori* knowledge “transcendental,” the thinking to come must proceed purely and simply via “the relinquishing of transcendentalism.”⁷

Meillassoux's book enjoyed a very rapid international uptake. The term “speculative realism,” which, rightly or wrongly, is now attached to the philosophical position presented in his work, is all the rage, on the tip of every student's, every researcher's, tongue. Yet no one has undertaken the task of discussing or assessing the implications of the immense provocation involved in the proposal that we

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relinquish the transcendental. No one has yet thought to ask what continental philosophy might become after this “break.”⁸

Break with what? According to Meillassoux, synthesis – or “correlation” – cannot, in the last instance, be legitimized, nor can it legitimate anything whatsoever, contrary to what Kant claims to have proven with the transcendental deduction. From that point on, causal necessity remains without any true grounding, in other words, without necessity. To break with the transcendental thus implies no less than to break in two the deductive solidarity between synthesis and natural order.

The a priori and the condition of possibility

However innovative and surprising it may be, Meillassoux’s intervention in fact serves to confirm what can only be called a tradition of reading, even as it claims to be taking its leave from this tradition. His greatest contribution, his true innovation, is to give a lost edge back to this tradition. It serves to return us to the question of what to do with Kant, how to inherit from him, thereby making this a defining issue for philosophical contemporaneity.

What tradition are we referring to? Initiated by Hegel, reworked and reoriented in the twentieth century, across the range of its instances, this tradition comprises all the interpretations of Kant that observe a fundamental instability of the transcendental. This observation inevitably leads if not to relinquishing Kant, then at least to reading him against himself, paradoxically, in order to secure the deductive force of the critique. We have to recognize that any serious reading of transcendental idealism in fact always tends, thematically or otherwise, to point to and indeed run the risk of exacerbating, what may appear as its lack of foundation.

“Unstable” means both off-balance and changeable. Immediate objections arise: is it really possible to apply this term to the “transcendental,” which, according to Kant, is precisely what confers on the rational edifice the solidity of its foundations? The multiple meanings of “transcendental” in the Kantian lexicon, some of which are contradictory, do not obscure the fact that Kant offers some very simple and entirely unambiguous definitions in the Introduction to the *Critique of Pure Reason*.⁹ He writes that the transcendental can be understood either as a pure and simple synonym of *a priori*, “*absolutely* independent of all experience,”¹⁰ or – if one wishes to distinguish it from the *a priori* – as the characteristic not of all *a priori* cognition, but of that which “is occupied not so much with objects

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but rather with our mode of cognition of objects insofar as this is to be possible *a priori*.”¹¹ “Transcendental” thus refers to the “possibility of cognition or its use *a priori*.”¹² The lexicon of the transcendental is therefore one and the same as the condition of possibility. These definitions are unequivocal.

If relinquish the transcendental we must, it is nevertheless, as Meillassoux demonstrates, less because of *definitional* than *foundational* problems. The pure forms of thought, categories, judgments, principles, in fact appear to be simply established by decree:

Kant maintains that it is impossible to derive the forms of thought from a principle or system capable of endowing them with absolute necessity. These forms constitute a “primary fact” which is only susceptible to description and not to deduction (in the genetic sense). And if the realm of the in-itself can be distinguished from the phenomenon, this is precisely because of the facticity of these forms, the fact that they can only be described, for if they were deducible, as is the case with Hegel, theirs would be an unconditional necessity that abolishes the possibility of there being an in-itself that could differ from them.¹³

Relinquishing the transcendental thus implies also relinquishing the *a priori* itself, weighing the doubt regarding the manner in which Kant undertakes the deduction of the *a priori* character of the structures of thinking and cognition – categories, judgments, principles – by taking them precisely as “conditions of possibility.”

Here again, Meillassoux radicalizes a problem frequently raised in the past, regarding the fact that while the transcendental is defined as an originary condition, it cannot explain its origin. Kant simply asserts that it is *a priori*, that there is the *a priori*. A true deduction would have to show how the transcendental forms itself, how it constitutes itself as the condition of the forms of thought. Yet, paradoxically, this act of self-positing, self-formation, or self-legitimation is lacking in the transcendental deduction. The synthesis is a fact. Derrida had already commented on this: in *Glas* we read: “[T]he transcendental has always been, strictly, a transcategorical, what could be received, formed, terminated, in none of the categories intrinsic to the system.”¹⁴ It “assures the system’s space of possibility” without this overhanging position being able to itself account for its own possibility. The transcendental, Derrida also says, is thus “excluded” from the system, which appears to be imposed on it from the outside.

This type of questioning also affects the nature of antecedence contained in the term *a priori*. “Independent of all experience” means

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prior to all experience. But what exactly is the meaning of this anteriority? What legitimacy, what value, does its primacy hold? In other words, how is the *a priori* founded, if indeed it founds itself? These questions have been raised on numerous occasions. The idea proposed in *After Finitude* of another possible world, one that is indifferent to “us,” does not come out of nowhere. It reinforces a set of suspicions regarding the circularity of the *a priori* and the transcendental.

Is the transcendental innate or fabricated?

Let’s take this thought a little further. One way or another these difficulties have always been related to what appeared to be a lack of clarity at the border between the innate and acquired *a priori* in Kant’s thought. This phenomenon is all the more paradoxical in that the outline of this boundary is one of the touchstones of critical philosophy. Kant himself says as much: while they are given before all experience, the *a priori* forms of cognition are not exactly innate. In *Kant’s Inaugural Dissertation of 1770* we read that the categories find their source “in the very nature of the pure understanding,” but certainly not “as innate notions.”¹⁵

We should instead understand that *a priori* elements are *acquired*. But since they are also not derived from experience, they must be considered more precisely as *originarily acquired*. Subsequently, Kant stated in 1790 that

The *Critique* [of *Pure Reason*] admits absolutely no divinely implanted (*anerschaffene*) or innate (*angeborene*) *representations*. It regards them all, whether they belong to intuition or to concepts of the understanding, as *acquired*. There is, however, an original acquisition (*Erwerbung*) (as the teachers of the natural right formulate it), consequently also of that which previously did not exist, and therefore did not pertain to anything before the act. Such is, as the *Critique* shows, *first of all*, the form of things in space and time, *secondly*, the synthetic unity of the manifold in concepts; for neither of these is derived by our faculty of knowledge from the objects given to it as they are in themselves, but rather it brings them out of itself *a priori*.¹⁶

We must, of course, return to the idea of original acquisition (*acquisitio originaria*). For the moment, we’ll focus on the logical problem it both contains and attempts to resolve. Original acquisition relates to the in-between of experience and the given of birth. Kant states clearly that there is no antecedence without this logical intermediary space where the circular structure of the *a priori* sits along with the transcendental. The original acquisition contradicts

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innatism precisely because it is an acquisition. It takes place and takes time while also having neither space nor time because it is originary.

Can this paradoxical legal case really come to the rescue of the possibility of the condition of possibility? It seems that for many readers it cannot: transcendental instability and ambiguity result directly in the poorly defined character of just such an in-between. Some claim that Kant is more “innatist” than he admits. Moreover, the statement that follows the passage cited above appears to justify their suspicion, for he goes on to say: “There must, however, be a ground in the subject which makes it possible for these representations to originate in this and no other manner, and which enables them to be related to objects which are not yet given. And it is this ground, at the very least, that is innate.”¹⁷ He says it. The constitution of our cognitive power is thus and not otherwise. The “peculiar constitution of [our] cognitive faculties”¹⁸ is innate.

Meanwhile, other scholars firmly assert that, on the contrary, in critical philosophy one must acknowledge the work of a type of “genesis” of the *a priori*. If the *a priori* does not mean innate, then it must be that the *a priori* constitutes itself – and thus, in that case, borrows from experience! The idea had already occurred to Kant’s contemporaries: perhaps what Kant did was to hide a productive power of manufacture behind the notion of the *a priori*. The suspicion of a form of labor inherent in the *a priori* was articulated by Schlosser in 1795 when he described the Kantian system as a “manufacturing industry for the production of mere forms (*Formgebungsmanufaktur*).”¹⁹ But Kant defended himself against this interpretation straight away, responding that for the *a priori* “it is not an arbitrary *form-giving* undertaken *by design*, or even *machine-made* (on behalf of the state), but [. . . an] industrious and careful work of the subject, his own faculty (of reason).”²⁰ This work before “machine-made” manufacture, this industry before the handling, and this designing before the shaping, immediately reintroduce the risk of innatism. How do we defend the idea of “pure labor” without assimilating it, quite simply, to a lack of labor, to mystery, to a gift, once more?

The question arises again: how can this “before” that Kant names the *a priori* – neither innate nor shaped – find its foundation within itself without leaning constantly in one direction or another? Isn’t the validity of the transcendental secretly threatened again by the disequilibrium of such an in-between, always fated to borrow something from the two extremes it rejects?

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Definitive or in default?

The link between our three initial areas of investigation – time; taking the brain into account in thinking; the fate of a philosophy of radical contingency – appears in a surprising manner here, at the site of a similar problem. With the transcendental, Kant brings to light a specific mode of identification of rationality that, through the logic of an incredible coincidence, is at once definitive and in default. It is definitive, for this mode of identification confers its specificity on continental philosophy.²¹ At the same time, it is in default, for this same philosophy constantly observes the founding insufficiency and must therefore, in order to continue to exist, either attempt to reinforce the transcendental, or reject it so as to find its own origin elsewhere – which, as we shall see, in a sense amounts to one and the same. Today, time, the biology of thinking, and contingency appear as the three most meaningful expressions of this complex relation to Kantian reason, a relation of simultaneous debt and separation. The three initial questions correspond to three different ways of relinquishing the transcendental: a conservative relinquishing (time); a relinquishing that does not recognize the debt (the brain); a relinquishing as an awareness of legacy (contingency).

Time

Let me explain. Reading Kant against himself in order to better find him again is Heidegger's declared intent in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, where he goes so far as to slice Kant in half by separating the two editions of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.²² Heidegger claims that in the first edition, Kant justifies the founding formation of the *a priori* by bringing to light its temporal structure. This perspective suggests perfectly that the transcendental refers to all the structures of "transcendence," by which thinking departs from itself in order to "meet" what it encounters. This type of "ecstasy" assumes a prior orientation towards the object, a "before" that is none other than the mark of primordial temporality. Temporality thus saves the *Critique* from the assault of an artificial foundation.

And how does temporality enable Kant to elude the dual trap of innatism and manufactured production, a trap that differs in its expression, but is identical in its effect? Heidegger argues that in the first edition, temporality is unfolded in the in-between that is the playing field of the transcendental imagination. The imagination is truly the formative instance of the transcendental, which produces

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the “pure view” of everything that comes to meet it as the horizon of transcendence itself. The imagination is effectively defined as “the formative self-giving of that which gives itself,”²³ but without this act proceeding from a “doing,” and at the same time without the act being annulled in the already done of an innate giving. The imagination produces images, yet these images are not artifacts for once again we are outside the alternative of innate or fabricated. Such images are in fact not beings, the register in which this alternative holds us captive. Insofar as they are pure images of time, “the pure intuitions in their representing cannot allow any beings to spring forth.”²⁴ Instead they cause time to appear as the ontological ground of objectivity, the unity of what is, what occurs, and what is coming as the originary condition of any encounter with the object.

We have seen that Kant asserts the innate nature of the constitution of our cognitive power, in other words, the partitioning of this constitution into the two “stems” of sensibility and the understanding. But now the intermediary role of the imagination, which simultaneously ensures the “original unification” of sensibility and the understanding, opens the slit of an ontological formation into the artificial obscurity of their innateness.²⁵

Heidegger explains that “originality” should not be understood in ontic or psychological terms, and that it does not refer to given presence, or even to the innateness of these images. The original can only be understood as that which does “spring forth.”²⁶ There may be an innateness to stems, but for the root there is neither innateness nor fabrication. In fact, if it were not thus, transcendental philosophy would offer nothing but a fake version of grounding. Heidegger acknowledges this point:

If the established ground (*der gelegte Grund*) does not have the character of a floor or base which is at hand (*ein vorhandener Boden*), but if instead it has the character of a root (*Wurzel*), then it must be ground in such a way that it lets the stems out from itself, lending them support and stability. With that, however, we have already attained the direction we sought, by means of which the originality of the Kantian ground-laying can be discussed within its own particular problematic. This ground-laying becomes more original if it does not simply take the already-laid ground in stride, but if instead it unveils how this root is the root for both stems. But this means nothing less than that pure intuition and pure thinking lead back to the transcendental power of imagination.²⁷

If we follow the reasoning of the first edition, the questions of the priority of the innate or the acquired would then be nothing but quar-