

Enlightenment Pathologies of Autonomous Materials: Kant and the New Materialists

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Immanuel Kant has become an obligatory reference point for New Materialists, as uniquely culpable for privileging human freedom, a prejudice that they think also compromises Historical and Dialectical Materialisms. A New Materialist history would be, against Kant, a deep history, which would instead privilege the agency and vitality of the more-than-human world. But Kant likewise argued for material vitality and even, in some sense, agency. This is especially clear in the context of the medical literature with which he engaged deeply. Physicians were anxious about the effect of new material stimulants on human bodies, their power to corrupt and shape the will and so the realm of human action. In these medical discussions, Kant favored vitalism, endorsed histories of deep time, and was keen to speculate about non-human realities. Kant's philosophy is quite distinct from the caricature typically drawn in New Materialism, but then the question becomes why this caricature captures the imagination and how it operates. Kant emerges, I suggest, as a figure against whom the claim of a soon-to-be-thoroughgoing materialism may continually announce and renew itself. But such a materialism would be, for Kant, in the last analysis, only a form of subjective idealism. Materialism would be incomplete without us, but is necessarily incomplete with us. In reconsidering Kant's legacy, I also reconsider the place of history and dialectics in today's novel materialisms.