

ORGANICISM (Organic Viewpoint)

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Psychiatry; Psychology; Medicine; Neurology

Key Proponents: Hippocrates; Galen; Wilhelm Griesinger; Emil Kraepelin

1. Core Definition and Tenets

The Organic Viewpoint, frequently termed **Organicism**, is a fundamental theoretical perspective holding that all disorders, encompassing both physical ailments and mental illnesses, possess an ultimate **organic basis**. This perspective stands in direct opposition to spiritual or purely psychological explanations for pathological conditions. Within the field of **psychiatry**, adherents to this view maintain that the most severe forms of psychological distress--including all psychotic disorders and potentially the more severe neurotic conditions--stem directly from detectable physiological abnormalities. These abnormalities are typically theorized as **structural brain changes** or significant **biochemical disturbances** that affect the intricate function of the nervous or glandular systems. Organicism posits that mental illness is not merely a psychological failing, but rather a manifestation of observable, material pathology. This encompassing framework seeks to explain both established organic brain syndromes--those caused by infectious diseases, toxic substances, nutritional deficiencies, and head injuries--as well as disorders historically categorized as 'functional,' by identifying their underlying biological etiology.

2. Historical Roots and Early Development

The intellectual roots of the organic perspective trace back to antiquity, particularly during the early **Greek and Roman times**, marking a crucial intellectual departure from the prevailing supernatural explanations of mental distress. Pioneering physicians, most notably Hippocrates and Galen, first advanced the revolutionary idea that mental disorders were attributable to disturbances within specific bodily organs, especially the brain, liver, or heart. This early medical view represented a profound advance over the dominant view of the era, which attributed mental illness to **possession by demons or spirits**--a concept known as demonology. Despite this strong foundation, the organic viewpoint failed to sustain systematic development for centuries. Throughout the **Middle Ages** and the subsequent early modern era, demonology largely returned to being the dominant framework for understanding and treating the mentally ill. A pivotal, though initially isolated, scientific moment occurred in 1757 when Albrecht von Haller advocated for the systematic **post-mortem study** of the brains of individuals diagnosed with insanity, signaling a nascent scientific interest in physical etiology that would ultimately pave the way for modern biological psychiatry.

3. The Systematic Development in Modern Psychiatry

Organicism was not systematically developed and institutionalized as a primary medical approach until the latter part of the nineteenth century, an era that defined the first period of modern psychiatry. This powerful resurgence was spearheaded by influential figures such as in continental Europe, particularly Wilhelm Griesinger and Emil Kraepelin. Both physicians became deeply convinced that all forms of mental illness could ultimately be explained by discoverable **brain pathology**. Griesinger's key assertion that "mental diseases are diseases of the brain" provided the necessary philosophical paradigm, while Kraepelin delivered the essential methodological structure through meticulous observation and classification. Kraepelin's comprehensive description and categorization of mental illnesses, which carefully distinguished conditions like *dementia praecox* (Schizophrenia) from manic-depressive illness, was entirely predicated on the assumption that distinct, underlying biological processes must delineate these separate categories. This unyielding commitment to physical etiology became the primary approach for subsequent psychiatric research, fueling intense investigation across the allied fields of physiology, anatomy, neurology, and biochemistry, all aimed at uncovering the precise material causes of mental dysfunction.

4. Major Discoveries and Therapeutic Triumphs

The robust adoption of the organic viewpoint beginning in the late 19th and extending into the early 20th century led directly to monumental advances in medical and psychological understanding. This approach allowed for the detailed identification and analysis of the mental effects resulting from various physical conditions, including **brain tumors**, exposure to toxic agents, **syphilitic infection**, arteriosclerosis, and traumatic brain injury. Furthermore, this period produced the first thoroughgoing description and classification system for mental illnesses, laying the groundwork for modern diagnostics. Arguably the most significant early triumph demonstrating the efficacy of the organic model was the successful treatment of **general paresis**. This severe neuropsychiatric disorder, known to be caused by chronic syphilis, was initially treated successfully with the risky malaria therapy, but was ultimately conquered through the introduction of **penicillin**. This instance served as the first clear-cut victory over a major mental disorder achieved through medical science, powerfully validating the organic perspective among the majority of medical practitioners and providing a massive impetus for continued biological research.

5. Contemporary Contributions and Advances

Even with the subsequent development of competing frameworks, such as the psychological and holistic viewpoints, organic research continued uninterrupted throughout the 20th century. These continuous investigations have made heavy contributions to three distinct types of contemporary scientific advance:

Elucidation of Etiology for Organic Psychoses and Retardation: Significant progress was achieved in the discovery and comprehensive classification of numerous organic psychoses and conditions that cause **mental retardation**. This includes the identification of psychoses associated with specific nutritional disorders (e.g., pellagra), glandular disorders (e.g., hypothyroidism), and various infectious diseases. Furthermore, conditions causing mental deficiency were linked to infections like encephalitis, German measles, and issues surrounding birth, such as anoxia and brain injury. Crucial advances were made in understanding the role of **chromosomal anomalies** and specific **metabolic disorders**, including phenylketonuria (PKU) and galactosemia, in cognitive impairment.

Development of Somatic Therapies: The organic premise provided the indispensable rationale for developing and applying a range of physical treatments, even to conditions that continued to be classified as 'functional,' such as schizophrenic and severe depressive reactions. These therapeutic modalities include controversial interventions like **psychosurgery**, alongside significant pharmacological breakthroughs, notably the development of **tranquilizers** (antipsychotics) and energizers (antidepressants). In addition, techniques like **insulin shock** and **electroconvulsive therapy (ECT)** were refined and applied. For specific, known organic conditions, the model drove the application of targeted medical treatments, such as replacement therapy for endocrine disorders and specialized diets for nutritional deficiencies.

Integration and Collaboration with Psychological Factors: The pursuit of organic causes compelled a fuller recognition of the complex and dynamic collaboration between physical and psychological factors, especially in determining an individual's reactions to intense **stress**. This led to a more nuanced understanding of psychophysiological (psychosomatic) reactions, with conditions like asthma and migraine being recognized as having multifaceted etiologies. Crucially, contemporary organic research continues the systematic investigation into the possibility that inherent **organic conditions** and strong **hereditary tendencies** may constitute the primary etiological factors in major mental illnesses, particularly schizophrenia and manic-depressive reactions, often operating in complex interplay with environmental stressors.

6. Significance and Enduring Legacy

Organicism's profound significance lies in its unwavering insistence on the biological reality of mental illness, effectively moving these conditions out of the realm of moral weakness or supernatural influence and placing them firmly within the medical domain. The enduring legacy of this viewpoint is most clearly reflected in the modern consensus surrounding the **biopsychosocial model**, which, while promoting a holistic view, utilizes the organic perspective as its essential biological foundation. By establishing the legitimacy of biological psychiatry, neuropsychiatry, and neuropharmacology, Organicism drove continuous research into genetics, neurochemistry, and brain structure as primary determinants of mental health outcomes. The systematic approach to

diagnosis pioneered by Kraepelin, rooted in identifying distinct biological causes, continues to influence diagnostic classification systems worldwide, ensuring that the methodical search for underlying physical and biochemical causality remains a central and highly funded tenet of modern medicine and psychological science.

Further Reading

[Organicism \(Philosophy\) - Wikipedia](#)

[Biological Psychiatry - Wikipedia](#)

[Emil Kraepelin - Major Academic Source](#)

[General Paresis of the Insane](#)

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