***Maine de Biran: The relationship between the Physical and the Moral in Man***

***Editor’s Preface (forthcoming with Bloomsbury Press)***

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***Editor’s Preface – Darian Meacham (Maastricht University)***

In his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, the French Neurobiologist Alain Prochaintz told his audience that science is very often a story of friendships.[[1]](#footnote-1) In Prochaintz’s case, he was talking about the lending of microscopes or microscope time from one team to another. The endeavour of science is marked by competition but also by collaboration and the spirit of advancing a task – that of truth and discovery. The story of this edition is surely more modest, but involves the same sense of intellectual collaboration; and the story of French philosopher Maine de Biran’s journey through the currents of intellectual history and especially the continual reconstruction of the history of philosophy is also marked by these same themes.[[2]](#footnote-2) First, a brief recounting of how this edition came to be.

In 2012, I was teaching a graduate seminar at the University of the West of England, Bristol, on ‘Problems in Phenomenology’. The aim of the seminar was to explore the development of certain problems and themes in the phenomenological tradition from their pre or proto-phenomenological origins through to their contemporary treatment. The topic that year was ‘Body and Habit’. I knew that the French philosopher François-Pierre-Gonthier Maine de Biran (1766–1824), most commonly referred to as Maine de Biran or simply Biran, had exerted a very considerable influence on the development of these themes in French philosophy, an influence that extended and indeed to an extent pervaded the French phenomenological tradition. I also knew that, like another influential thinker of habit, Félix Ravaisson, very few English-speaking students were familiar with his name, let alone his writings.[[3]](#footnote-3) But how could it be that a philosopher studied, lauded, and sometimes critiqued by such canonical names as Arthur Schopenhauer, Henri Bergson, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Paul Ricœur, Michel Henry and Gilles Deleuze, as well as of course Ravaisson,[[4]](#footnote-4) could be so absent from the curriculums of students studying these later philosophers? This was the philosopher about whom Henri Bergson wrote: ‘from the beginning of the century France had a great metaphysician, the greatest she produced since Descartes and Malebranche: Maine de Biran’;[[5]](#footnote-5) at whose funeral Royer-Collard remarked, ‘he was the master of us all’; and to whom Jules Lachelier referred, in reference to his influence not the character of his thought, as ‘the French Kant’.

A lack of translations is surely one of the reasons, but this simply asks once more the question: why has so little of Biran’s work been translated into English? As Delphine Antoine-Mahut explains in her preface to this translation, and as Jeremy Dunham also addresses, there may well be other (less friendly) factors playing the central role in Maine de Biran’s lack of visibility within the traditions that he influenced. These reasons have to do with the reaction to his work from his younger contemporary Victor Cousin (1792–1867), the first editor of Biran’s work after his death. Cousin edited a four-volume edition of Biran’s work in 1834, declaring that this edition contained all that was relevant from Biran’s posthumous papers. He also wrote a critical introduction to the edition, wherein he declared Biran’s philosophy to be limited in its contribution. Cousin’s preface is the main focus of Antoine-Mahut’s preface to this volume.

As Antoine-Mahut also details, Cousin subsequently used his positions not only as editor of Biran’s unpublished work but also as *Conseil supérieur de l’instruction publique*, *présidence de l’Agrégation de philosophie et de l’Académie des sciences morales et politiques,* and *direction de l’École normale* – roles which led to Cousin being referred to as a ‘philosopher king’ – to suppress Biran’s role and significance in the development of French philosophy in order to prop up his brand of philosophy, ‘spiritual eclecticism’, which through Cousin’s various important political positions was elevated to the status of the official philosophy of the French state. We shall return to that in a moment.

The logistics of teaching Biran to English-speaking students turned out to be no mean feat. The only published English translation of Biran’s work was the 1929 translation of *Influence de l’habitude sur la faculté de penser* (1802) (*The Influence of Habit on the Faculty of Thinking*,translated by Margaret Donaldson Boehm with an introduction by George Boas and published by London by Baillière & Co). The only available copy I could locate sat in the British Library. Before simply cutting Biran out of that year’s curriculum, I contacted the Bergson scholar Michael Kelly, who had recently edited a collection on the work of Michel Henry, the most Biranian of the French phenomenologists.[[6]](#footnote-6) Kelly in turn suggested that I contact Joseph Spadola, who, while a graduate student in philosophy at the University of Toulouse, had made a translation of one of Biran’s *Sur les rapports du physique et du moral de l’homme* (1812), an essay that Biran wrote as an entry into an essay competition sponsored by the Royal Academy of Copenhagen. Joseph kindly agreed to let me use the translation and I taught Biran that year alongside Ravaisson, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and Ricœur.

The students were enthralled, drawn into a world of French philosophy and eighteenth-century science of which they previously knew almost nothing. Among the many intriguing aspects of Biran’s text for them was the fact that in a curriculum of modern European philosophy dominated by the shadow of Kant, the German philosopher seems minimally present in Biran’s work. Biran’s text seemed to give some indication of what line the history of French philosophy might have taken without Kant, but rather with Hume and Leibniz as the most significant foreign influences on the development of French philosophy. As Dunham points out in his chapter, the first half of the nineteenth century should indeed more properly be referred to as ‘post-Leibnizian’ than ‘post-Kantian’.

Biran was indeed familiar with Kant’s work thought primarily through French commentaries.[[7]](#footnote-7) But as Gilson, Langan and Maurer note, Biran’s work is also the first entry of Kant into the work of a major thinker in the French tradition.[[8]](#footnote-8) Of Kant, Biran writes: ‘I am indebted to Kant for having made a necessary distinction between two terms which all metaphysicians, including Descartes, have confused and which is one of the greatest causes of obfuscation and embarrassment in metaphysics. We feel our phenomenal individuality or existence, but we do not feel the very substance of our soul, no more than any other one.’[[9]](#footnote-9) Biran’s praise for Kant’s work was, however, limited. Elsewhere he wrote that Kant

mistakenly drew a line between the principles of cognition and those of human morality. He failed to see that the primitive act of willing is at one and them same time the principle of knowledge and the principle of human morality. Without the intimate sense of effort which constitutes the “I”, there can be nothing in the understanding, and thus even the ideas of sensation and perception are dependent upon willing.[[10]](#footnote-10)

In short, Kant had ‘confused the primitive facts’ or effort with ‘the first passive modification of sensibility’.[[11]](#footnote-11) Biran’s own position contra Kant can be coarsely summarized with a passage from *The Influence of Habit on the Faculty of Thinking* (1802), which also conveys the germ for the central kernel of Biranian thought concerning the absolute facts of the will and what resists it, the body; and effort as the primordial relation between these two absolutes, the relation from which all consciousness, perception, knowledge, judgement and the entirety of the spiritual life of the subject springs:

Effort necessarily entails the perception of a relation between the being who moves, or who wishes to move, and any obstacle whatsoever that is opposed to its movement; without a *subject* or a will which determines the movement, without something which resists, there is no *effort* at all, and without effort no knowledge, no perception of any kind. If the individual did not *will* or was not determined to begin to move, he would know nothing. If nothing resisted him, he likewise would know nothing, he would not suspect any existence; he would not even have an idea of his own existence.[[12]](#footnote-12)

But the students were also intrigued as to why they had never encountered this philosopher before, if he had indeed exerted such an influence on Ravaisson, Bergsonism, Phenomenology and Post-Structuralism. It seemed important that Biran be made more accessible to English-speaking students, although, again as Antoine-Mahut points out, the question of Biran’s importance to the tradition is also being posed in France. I suggested to Joseph that we publish his translation with a group of accompanying essays that would help to situate and indeed invigorate Biran’s thought for an English-speaking audience. Joseph kindly agreed and set to work preparing his translation for publication as well as translating two introductory and critical essays from two important French scholars both working at the University of Toulouse who agreed to contribute to the volume: Pierre Kerszberg and Pierre Montebello. Jeremy Dunham has been kind enough to contribute to this volume an essay explaining Maine de Biran’s important relation to Leibniz. Bloomsbury secured the rights to publish F.C.T. Moore’s philological preface to the 1984 publication of *Sur les rapports du physique et du moral de l’homme* in volume six of Vrin’s thirteen-volume *Oeuvres de Maine de Biran*, published under the direction of François Azouvi. As mentioned, Delphine Antoine-Mahut has written a new preface (or a kind of counter-preface to Cousin’s initial 1834 preface) for this English translation dealing with the intellectual and historical context of Maine de Biran’s work, its reception in French philosophy and its place in the larger current of *Spiritualism*.

Readers unacquainted with nineteenth-century French philosophy may be unfamiliar with this term, *spiritualism*. In this context, it refers specifically to a current of thought in nineteenth-century French philosophy that, while traceable back to Descartes or Leibniz (see Dunham’s chapter for more on these two lineages), does have its proper origins in Biran’s work. Most simply, spiritualism gives both priority and autonomy to the life of the mind or spirit and rejects physicalist determinism. We can see easily how this is expressed in Biran’s emphasis on the original and absolute fact of the will as being at the origin of all knowledge. Thus, more specifically, the spiritualist tradition, which originates with Biran and continues through Ravaisson, Lachelier, Bergson, and to a degree into the French phenomenological movement, places emphasis on the power of the will as a counterpoint to materialist determinism. The French spiritualist lineage running back to Biran was to a great extent established retrospectively by Felix Ravaisson’s seminal 1867 report on philosophy in France in the nineteenth century, *Rapport sur la philosophie en France au XIXe siècle*. Ravaisson’s report is also generally understood as restoring Biran to his rightful place as the founder of Spiritualism, after Cousin’s attempt to suppress Biran’s philosophy and influence. As Dunham discusses, Ravaisson’s report was also the final nail in the coffin of Cousin’s brand of ‘spiritualist eclecticism’.

In a broader philosophical lineage, Spiritualism as founded by Biran and continued by Ravaisson can be situated both intellectually and chronologically after the ‘ideological’ philosophy of Destutt de Tracy (1754–18236 and Cabanis (1757–1808), who befriended Biran in 1801 after reading the first draft of his *Influence de l’habitude sur la faculté de penser*, which he submitted to an essay competition sponsored by the *Institut de France* (in this instance, Biran did not win). ‘Ideological’ philosophy was concerned with the genesis of ideas. (Marx took over the term from the Ideologues but his usage of the term bore more in common with Napoleons attack on ‘ideological philosophy’ for being unscientific – Marx famously referred Destutt de Tracy as a ‘fischblütige Bourgeoisdoktrinär,’ a ‘fish-blooded bourgeois doctrinaire.’). It was development of Condillac’s psychology, and its forerunner Lockean Empiricism, which ultimately sought to reduce or provide explanation of all mental activity by way of experience and observation. For reasons that are made clear in the main text of this volume, Destutt de Tracy and Cabanis saw Biran as a potential ally in the development of ideological philosophy. Biran was, however, going to go in another direction; his philosophy along with suppression by Napoleon marked the end of ‘ideological’ philosophy in France. Philosophy is a story not only of ideas and friendships, but also of politics and violence.

In understanding the situation of a philosopher historically and intellectually, it is helpful to know something of their lives. François-Pierre-Gonthier Maine de Biran, né François-Pierre-Gonthier de Biran (he picked up the Maine after inheriting an estate by that name, and is usually referred to as Maine de Biran or simply Biran), was born in 1766 in Bergerac in the Dordogne, France. His family was political, but not noble; his grandfather and great grandfather had both served as Mayor of Bergerac. A royalist, he was enrolled in the Royal Guard at the age of eighteen. Following the revolution, the guard was dissolved in 1791, and in 1793 Biran returned to the southwest of France, namely the castle Grateloup, just south of Bergerac. Despite the imprisonment of several members of his family and the exile of four others, Biran was left alone during the Terror. In 1795, he was appointed administrator of the department of Dordogne, and in 1797 he was elected to the Council of 500 (lower house of French legislature during the period of the French Revolution known as the Directory (*Directoire*), which lasted from 22 August 1795 until 9 November 1799). However, due to his anti-revolutionary politics, the election was annulled and he never assumed his post. This drove Biran happily back into philosophy. He continued to hold various relatively minor political posts, which he carried out with rigour: Counsellor to the Prefect of Périgord, Sub-Prefect of Bergerac. Biran’s career seemed at risk in 1813 when he was part of a group that publicly expressed opposition to Napoleon. But, following Napoleon’s defeat and the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy in the form of Louis XVIII in 1814, Biran’s longstanding royalism and opposition to the revolution and the emperor was rewarded. He was made Quaestor of the Chamber of deputies (something like a financial overseer and auditor). Having made a return to public life, he always felt awkward and ill at ease. Nonetheless, he was friends with the great and good of the day, including such figures as Ampère, Cuvier, Guizot and Madame de Staël, as well the aforementioned Cousin and Royer-Collard. He died in 1824, before completing the full articulation of his philosophical thought that he had been working towards, earning him the title of ‘author of one book that was never written’.

Aldous Huxley wrote a remarkable essay on Biran, ‘Variations on a Philosopher’, published in 1950, which I have drawn upon for biographical information. The focus on Huxley’s essay is not however Biran’s public biography, but rather the incredible account of his internal life that he recorded in his *Journal Intime*, edited and published in its entirety in three volumes by Henri Gouhier in 1954–1955.[[13]](#footnote-13) Huxley likely read a previously published version published by Plon in 1927.[[14]](#footnote-14) Biran suffered both physically and psychologically throughout the course of his life, and those sufferings are intimately detailed in his journal. As Huxley points out, this remarkable document allows the reader to contextualize the ideas with which Biran grappled – of particular interest are the central ideas of the will as a hyper-organic force, and effort as the experience of that force as it meets the resistance of the body in its inertia and its material qua physiological determinations – within a life. Moreover, perhaps foreshadowing Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis on the philosophical productivity of pathology and illness or Sartre’s analyses of shame, anxiety and nausea, the life that Biran detailed in his journal was one lived with a constant sense of unease and being out of place, marked by physical as well as psychological pains and extreme sensitivities. Biran’s alienation from the world and his introversion give his descriptions a rare phenomenological depth which accompanies and supports his philosophical writing.

This volume begins with a timeline of the development of Maine de Biran’s philosophy and the French Spiritualist tradition compiled by Jeremy Dunham. This is followed by F.C.T. Moore’s original introduction to volume VI of the *Oeuvres* or collected works of Maine de Biran, edited by François Azouvi and published by Vrin in thirteen volumes between 1984 and 2000 (volumes ten through thirteen are published in two, three, two and three parts, respectively). Scholars who wish to explore Biran’s work, and specifically the text translated here, further will surely wish to consult the original Vrin publication, as it contains many editorial notes that we have not included here for the sake of simplicity and accessibility. Moore’s introduction is primarily philological. It provides an account first of Biran’s process of writing and refining the text that appears here as *The Relationship between the Physical and the Moral in Man* (*Sur les rapports du physique et du moral de l’homme*). It then details the painstaking editorial work carried out in order to establish the provenance and fidelity to Biran’s work in the edition published as volume VI of the collected works. Moore’s philological introduction is followed by Delphine Antoine-Mahut’s historical and intellectual introduction. She gives a vivacious account to the often treacherous intellectual context in which French Spiritualism developed. Antoine-Mahut explains the context of *Rapports du physique et du moral de l’homme* as being ‘part of a triptych consisting of two other essays, the essay from the *Institut de France*, *Sur la décomposition de la pensée*,and a third that was awarded by the Berlin Academy in 1807, *De l’aperception immediate*’. Antoine-Mahut then turns to Cousin’s infamous preface to 1834 edition of Biran’s work that he edited. She provides the context of Cousin’s preface, how it functioned to suppress Biran’s thought, but also the response that it received from those loyal to Biran. Finally, she asks if and how rereading *The Relationship between the Physical and the Moral in Man* can help to correct the damage done by Cousin’s suppression.

Antoine-Mahut’s preface is followed by Joseph Spadola’s translation of *Sur les* *rapports du physique et du moral de l’homme*. A word must first be said about the title. We have translated the French word ‘*moral*’ literally. This may seem like an error, as the function of the term in Biran’s title is much broader than the more limited sense of the term in English. Perhaps an adequate rendering would be something like ‘life of the mind’ or ‘life of spirit’. But there was perhaps a reason to leave the term as it was. As Biran notes in his critique of Kant, cited above, he was steadfastly opposed to the absolute distinction between the will, knowledge and morality. For him, the three were originally founded in the primitive act of willing. It could be argued that the use of the term ‘moral’ in English pulls us closer to that absolute origin that is the will than a more cognitively oriented rendering might.

It is best to let Biran’s essay speak for itself, and it is helpfully complemented by the contributions which follow it from Montebello, Dunham and Kerszberg. These chapters contextualize, respectively, Biran’s essay in terms of its treatment of the mind-body problem, the selective reading of Leibnizian metaphysics that underpins this treatment and the phenomenological analyses that support it. The question posed by the Royal Academy of Copenhagen, to which Biran’s essay is a response, begins with a rather loaded statement: ‘There are people who still deny the utility of the doctrines and physical experiences to explain the phenomena of mind and the inner sense.’ The ‘still’ in the sentence implies a rearguard, futile and perhaps wrongheaded denial. Nonetheless, Biran makes it clear in his essay that he is one of those people. As Kerszberg points out, what is perhaps most remarkable is the radicality and forthrightness with which Biran denies the utility of the physical sciences to explain the life and workings of the mind. As such, *The Relationship between the Physical and the Moral in Man* can be considered Biran’s most incisive text on the mind-body problem. It is also a mature representation of the philosopher’s work and thus suitable for a first introduction to his thought. It is important to note that Biran is considered to have three main intellectual phases – his Ideological phase, the ‘philosophy of will’ stage (1804-1818), and then the mystical metaphysical stage. This work is from the middle of the ‘philosophy of will’ stage, seen by many to be the most important.

One area that is not touched upon in detail in this essay, but which is central to Biran’s legacy, is his theory of the lived body. Biran is indeed considered by many to be one of the ‘first philosophers of the body’ and his concept of the body qua resistance is of course absolutely central to his theory of the self. A self is constituted in its capacity to move and in the feeling of voluntary effort, which can be analysed in terms of the lived-feeling of the force of the will against the resistance of the body and the sensation of muscular contraction.[[15]](#footnote-15) The body as experienced, i.e. the lived body, is a central dimension in Biran’s philosophy and one that we hope will be further elucidated for English-speaking audiences in future translations. In the meantime, Mark Sinclair has written a very helpful account of the status of the lived body in the work of the main figures of French Spiritualism: Maine de Biran, Ravaisson, and Bergson.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Biran’s essay is followed in this volume by Pierre Montebello’s Introduction and Commentary on *The Relationship between the Physical and the Moral in Man*. Montebello locates the origins of the modern formulation of the mind-body problem in Biran’s ‘relationist’ philosophy of consciousness. He begins by asserting that Biran’s greatest contribution lies not in his development of a philosophy of consciousness, or his discovery of the lived body, but rather in his relational theory, which locates consciousness in the relation between the organic body and the hyper-organic will. Montebello writes:

Thought and consciousness are born of this *polarity of forces* (resistance and will). This explains why our own psychological reality is never given in the form of an absolute. The absolute designates that which can be grasped in and of itself, in its substantial, objective, exterior unity, without any fissures, whereas the free, conscious, existing subject only perceives itself within a relationship of effort that constitutes it – a relationship that is at the heart of psychology.

Thus Biran’s conception and structuring of the mind-body problem is an effort to give philosophical dignity to the lived experiences of personal existence, but without either ignoring the body or reducing lived-experience to physiology and anatomy – or neuroscience. Montebello argues that this is still the impetus of contemporary versions of the mind-body problem. In doing so, he shows the close similarity between Biran’s formulation of the mind-body problem and its development in contemporary analytic philosophy of mind, specifically the work of John Searle. Montebello argues along Biranian lines, which he points out are, almost verbatim, the same argument deployed by Searle, for the intractability of the mind-body problem and its continued resistance to physicalist or mechanist reductionism.

The metaphysical underpinnings of these arguments are further developed in Jeremy Dunham’s chapter, which follows. Dunham illustrates how and where, according to Biran, Descartes’ metaphysics led his formulation of the relation between *res extensa* and *res cogitans* astray. Cartesian metaphysics risks collapsing into a form of pantheistic monism where both *res extensa* and *res cogitans* are ‘swallowed up’ by one ‘infinite and active substance’ – God. By giving back to the passivity of the body its proper activity, Biran’s metaphysics and subsequently his formulation of the mind-body problem evade this trap.

Dunham argues, on the basis of a reading of Biran’s 1819 *Exposition de la doctrine philosophique de Leibniz*, that Biran’s selective interpretation and adaptation of Leibnizianisn was not a rejection of Leibnizian metaphysics, but rather a refinement, an *ampliative* rather than a *distortive* Leibnizianism. He also argues that Biran’s apparent critique of Leibniz was also operationalized for an (at least initially) unsuccessful intellectual battle against Victor Cousin’s spiritualist eclecticism, which would become the official state philosophy of France under Cousin’s stewardship of the French national curriculum. Dunham offers a novel thesis concerning the reasons why Biran might publish a critique of Cousin’s philosophy under the pretence of a critique of Leibniz. He also deftly demonstrates how this amplification of Leibnizian thought, laid out in 1819, functions to clarify some of the central concepts of the earlier *Relationship between the Physical and the Moral in Man*.

In order to do all this, Dunham first illustrates Biran’s development of the spiritualist current of thought against French and British sensualism (Locke, Hume, Condillac) and the rationalism of Descartes, Malebranche and Spinoza. But in doing so, he also highlights the influence of Madame de Staël (1776–1817) and in particular her three-volume work on Germany, *De l’Allemagne* (1810), which played an important role in the reception of German philosophy in France and specifically on Biran’s understanding and development of Leibnizian thought. Staël’s influence is also perhaps important for grasping the relative lack of engagement with Kant in Biran’s work. Dunham quotes Staël in arguing that while Kant was indeed the rightful successor to Liebniz, ‘[n]o one in France would give himself the trouble of studying works so thickly set with difficulties as those of Kant’. Dunham gives Staël’s reading of the history of philosophy as ‘a major contributing factor for why France’s philosophy for the first three quarters of the nineteenth century is better understood as “post-Leibnizian” than “post-Kantian” ’.

Dunham shows how Leibniz’s concept of force shaped Biran’s understanding of self-consciousness or *effort vollu* (willed effort) that is lived through in relation between he will and the body that resists movement, and which is conceptually so pivotal to the centrepiece of Biranian metaphysics, the hyper-organic force (the will) which is apperceived only in its relation to this body whose inertia resists it. Biranian metaphysics is thus, by Dunham’s account, not a retort to Leibniz, but a selective amplification of specific aspects of Leibnizian thought.

From this selective amplification of the Leibnizian concept of force qua willed effort, Biran also derives a theory of the virtual that is one of the lasting legacies of Biran’s thought in twentieth-century French philosophy. As Dunham explains, self-consciousness, when lying dormant (i.e. when not felt in the relation between the will and the body manifest as willed effort), does not simply become nothing. Rather, the force of the will shifts into a virtual existence as a *tendency* towards action which perdures as ‘half way between power and act’ even when not actualized in motility. This will is thus defined by Biran as a ‘*virtual absolute force* which exists before the manifestation, and which remains the same after, even though its exercise is suspended’.

As stated, Biran’s *Exposition de la doctrine philosophique de Leibniz* (1819) was equally a critique of Victor Cousin’s emerging position as well as an amplification of Biran’s own species of Leibnizianism. Dunham’s contribution also provides us with further insight into the relation between Biran and Cousin.Cousin, through his role both as the editor of Biran’s works after his death and as the administrator for public instruction where he reigned supreme over the national philosophy curriculum, consigned his onetime friend but also critic, Maine de Biran, to the sidelines of official French philosophy. He did this by delaying for ten years the publication, and then falsely representing his deceased friend’s work. Cousin’s spiritualist eclecticism eventually fell, after sustained philosophical attack from thinkers such as Pierre Leroux,[[17]](#footnote-17) Charles Renouvier and Felix Ravaisson, all of whom ‘used distinctly Biran influenced readings of Leibniz to attack the philosopher king’. Despite the huge influence that Ravaisson’s *Rapport sur la philosophie en France au XIXème siècle* (published in 1967, the year of Cousin’s death) had in terms of its critique of Cousin and its redirecting the course of French philosophy towards a more Biranian spiritualism, the damage to Biran’s official reputation had been done. But via Ravaisson’s work, Biranian philosophy began to live something of a virtual life within the development of French spiritualism.

As Dunham also points out with the mention of Gilles Deleuze’s last text ‘*L’Immanence: une vie ...*’ in the intellectual timeline that he has written for this volume, Biran’s sidelining is increasingly recognized as erroneous and his influence does indeed rise to the surface at points. Writing of life itself as a ‘transcendental field’, Deleuze asks: ‘Indeed did something similar not happen to Maine de Biran in his “later philosophical project” (which was too exhausted to end well), when he discovered beneath the transcendence of effort *a life*, absolute and immanent? The transcendental field is defined by the plane of immanence, and the plane of immanence by a life.’[[18]](#footnote-18) It is indeed significant that in the last text he composed in his lifetime, Deleuze, himself exhausted, reflecting on the central themes of his life’s work, transcendental empiricism, immanence, the virtual and life itself, turns himself to Maine de Biran’s own final project.

Pierre Kerszberg turns to Maine de Biran’s role as one of the founders, *avant la lettre*, of that other current of twentieth-century French philosophy: phenomenology. As Kerszberg notes at the beginning of his chapter, both Merleau-Ponty and Michel Henry considered Maine de Biran’s philosophy to be phenomenological in nature. Between the two (chronologically), Biran’s thought also swells the pages of Paul Ricoeur’s *Freedom and Nature* (1950). Merleau-Ponty not only considered Biran’s work to be a precursor to the phenomenology of the lived body for, but he also considered Biran to be an anticipation of phenomenology insofar as he did not acknowledge nor was ‘indifferent’ to the distinction between interior and exterior. As Merleau-Ponty writes in his lectures on ‘The Union of the Soul and the Body in Malebranche, Biran and Bergson’, given at the École Normale Supérieure in 1947–1948:

Biran did not reduce consciousness to motoricity, but identified motoricity and consciousness. The primitive fact is consciousness of an irreducible relation between two terms themselves both irreducible. It’s not consciousness becoming movement, but consciousness reverberating in movements. This is neither an interior nor an exterior fact: it is consciousness of self as a relationship between an I and an other term. It’s not a question of an empiricist philosophy that would fill consciousness with muscular facts, but of a philosophy that recognizes a certain antithesis, that of the subject and the term that bears its initiatives [the body], as originary.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Biran’s understanding of the subject thus bears an affinity to the idea of the embodied subject that Merleau-Ponty had developed in *Phenomenology of Perception* and that he would continue to develop throughout his life. We can see why Merleau-Ponty considered Biran’s philosophy an anticipation of phenomenology in its ‘identification of absolute objectivity with absolute subjectivity’.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Biran’s theory of consciousness, which Merleau-Ponty sketches out in his lecture, cited above, is grounded in the observation of the apodicticity of what Biran calls the ‘primitive fact’ (*fait primitif*): ‘I observe within myself a remarkable psychological fact that gives consistency and persistence to the self: voluntary effort, which reveals the indissoluble link between will and consciousness ... voluntary effort is a hyper-organic force to which only inner experience is witness.’[[21]](#footnote-21) Around six years prior to Merleau-Ponty’s lectures at the École Normale Supérieure, Sartre had taken issue with Biran’s phenomenology of the primitive fact of consciousness as consciousness of effort. In his analysis of the body in Chapter Two of *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre calls into question very existence of the ‘primitive fact’ of consciousness qua the effort of motoricity. He writes:

Either it [the body] is a thing among things, or else it is that by which things are revealed to me. Both it cannot be both at the same time. Similarly I see my hand touching objects, but I do not *know* it in its act of touching them. Thi is the fundamental reason why the famous ‘sensation of effort’ of Maine de Biran does not really exist. For my hand reveals to me the resistance of objects, their hardness or softness, but not *itself*.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Sartre later continued his critique in writing: ‘the famous “sensation of effort” by which Maine de Biran attempted to reply to Hume’s challenge is a psychological myth. We never have any sensation of effort.’[[23]](#footnote-23) Hence the fundamental difference between Satrean and Biranian notions of resistance, each fundamental to their respective phenomenological ontologies. For Biran, the resistance that is partly constitutive of consciousness is on the side of the body, hence consciousness is the sensation of the effort of movement against the resistance of the body. For Sartre, resistance was to be found in the world.

Moreover, as Renaud Barbaras points out, Merleau-Ponty’s entire philosophical project, which centred on articulating a philosophy of sensation, the body and eventually the ‘flesh’, which placed sensation itself within what was sensed (i.e. that posited sensing itself within the sensible), also eventually hinged on a rejection of Biranism.[[24]](#footnote-24) At the end of his three lectures on Biran, Merleau-Ponty tells his students:

In conclusion, Biran’s importance depends more on certain of his descriptions than on an intellectual grasp of the proper principles of his philosophy. He attempted to move beyond psychologism, to show that a subject’s experience is not the simple application of a logos; but he failed to save the particular, to show its movement and transition to the universal. Thus the conclusion of his philosophy sees the problem of the soul and the body posed once more, and in just as difficult terms; he re-establishes the absolute soul facing the absolute body: we find ourselves again where we started.[[25]](#footnote-25)

It is Michel Henry who is ultimately the most Biranian of the phenomenologists and also most insistent on Biran’s phenomenological style of thinking. As Barbaras points out, Henry’s entire project of rediscovering life as auto-impressionality rests on the Biranian theory of effort as the primitive fact of consciousness feeling itself as the relation between the will and the resistance of the body.[[26]](#footnote-26) In the opening sections of his *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body* (1965), Henry writes: ‘Maine de Biran’s “discovery” of the subjective body was not an accident. His discovery takes place in a context which makes it inevitable and this context is nothing other than that of a phenomenological ontology.’[[27]](#footnote-27) And a few pages later:

The bringing to light of this sphere of absolute certitude [the ego], which is also a sphere of absolute certitude, presupposes a division be established between that which stems from such certitude and that which rather cannot pride itself therewith, at least in a direct manner. To build a science endowed with an absolute certitude is to effect this division, to reduce to the vast field of human knowledge to that of original and absolute knowledge, knowledge which presents itself to us phenomenologically as apodictic evidence; it is in other words to effect the phenomenological reduction.[[28]](#footnote-28)

But Kerszberg focuses not on what other phenomenologists say or have said about Biran’s philosophy, but rather on the distinct phenomenological analyses proper to Biran’s own work. He begins by noting the radicality of Biran’s response to the question posed by the Royal Academy of Copenhagen: ‘Biran emphasizes the central thesis of his book, namely that a genuine science of man must become indifferent to causal explanations.’ Kerszberg then shows how Biran turns to the things themselves to defend and develop his thesis. It is the phenomenon of hearing that is exemplary in this regard:

Better than any other sensory event, sound phenomena highlight the theoretically inexplicable yet observed relationship between raw nature and intelligent nature, the feeling world and the thinking world ... Sound experience in its natural state is a reminder that causal explanations are futile in accounting for the disorders and alterations of perception that physiology attempts to explain.

Kerszberg points to timbre as a particularly illustrative example of this. When we attempt to describe timbre, we quickly tend to lapse into mechanical explanation, accounting for tonality as the product of overtones, or use metaphor. The thing that we actually hear, the timbre, is elusive. The phenomenon of hearing is also particularly illustrative of the double nature of the self as passive and active. I am a voice that projects and the ear that hears. Kerszberg writes: ‘On the one hand, I have the power to create impressions in myself, since I have the power to give myself auditory sensations, to hear the sounds that my voice produces.’ He uses Biran’s analysis of the phenomena of hearing and voice to parse a whole constellation of related concepts: memory, attention, Stimmung (mood), sympathy and intersubjectivity among them. Kerszberg ends with a reflection on the value of Biran’s phenomenological analyses for future investigation:

The more the senses feel, the less intelligence thinks and discerns. How do we think about this lived fact that everyone immediately experiences, without relying on a theoretical basis which would be illusory? Maine de Biran’s analysis reveals that sound experience offers the most appropriate way to think about this question.

*The Relationship between the Physical and the Moral in Man* is intended to provide a path into Biran’s thought for English-speaking readers. We clearly think that reading and understanding Biran’s work is an essential aspect of understanding the development of nineteenth-century French philosophy, the reception of Kant and Leibniz in France, and also the immense influence that the tradition of French Spiritualism (of which, properly speaking, Biran is the originator) has had on the development of twentieth-century philosophy, where the problem of the mind-body relation and the question of what dimension of explanation is appropriate to the phenomenon of the will and the experience of effort remain alive and kicking. It also, as Antoine-Mahut points out at the end of her preface, opens up another history of French philosophy, almost totally overlooked, with rich seams for investigation. The accompanying essays from Delphine Antoine-Mahut, Pierre Montebello, Jeremy Dunham and Pierre Kerszberg are meant to provide introduction and critical commentary on *The Relationship between the Physical and the Moral in Man* and on Biran’s thought and reception more generally. They are also meant to show the lasting vibrancy and vitality of Biran’s ideas and to encourage further investigation.

A last word on the central themes of will and effort is necessary here. The work of the translator can be thankless. Yet to have and to teach a proper history of philosophy, to understand how problems have developed, translations are essential. Joseph Spadola has made an enormous effort, not only in returning to his translation of *Sur les rapports du physique et du moral de l’homme*, but also in translating Montebello’s and Kerszberg’s essays. To do this, essentially in his spare time, must have taken a monumental act of the will. Thanks.

*Darian Meacham, Brussels, January 2016*

1. Alain Prochiantz, *Géométries du vivant*, Paris: Collège de France, Fayard, 2008, p. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The example of Prochiantz is not arbitrary here; in his more philosophically oriented work, Prochiantz has concerned himself with investigating the neurological and also evolutionary basis of thought, precisely the kind of explanation that Biran argues against in the text translated here, *The Relationship between the Physical and Moral in Man* (*Sur les rapports du physique et du moral de l’homme*). See, for example: Alain Prochaintz, *Les anatomies de la pensée, à quoi pensent les calamars*, Paris: Éditions Odile Jacob, 1997. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ravaisson’s seminal essay *De l’habitude* was translated into English in 2008 by Clare Carlisle and Mark Sinclair, and published in a critical edition with introduction and commentary as *Of Habit* by what was then Continuum Press (Félix Ravaisson, *Of Habit*, C. Carlisle and M. Sinclair (eds), London: Continuum 2008). This opened up Ravaisson’s extremely influential thinking to English-speaking audience for the first time. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ravaisson’s indebtedness to Biran is clearly explained in Clare Carlisle and Mark Sinclair’s ‘Introduction’ and ‘Editorial Commentary’ to their edition of *Of Habit*; see Ravaisson, *Of Habit*, pp. 8–11, 89–94, and in Jeremy Dunham’s ‘From Habit to Monads: Félix Ravaisson’s Theory of Substance’. *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*. 2015.23(6): 1085-1105In *Of Habit*, Ravaisson affirms what is perhaps the central thesis of Biran’s thought, that consciousness is originally always consciousness of effort. He refers to Biran in writing: ‘Movement is the result of an excess of power in relation to resistance. The relation and the measure of both power and resistance are present in the consciousness of effort. In the end, if the subject opposed to the objectivity of extension knows himself only in actions that initiate movement, and if motive activity has its measure in effort, it is in the consciousness of effort that personality, in its highest manifestation as voluntary activity, becomes manifest to itself.’ Ravaisson, *Of Habit*, p. 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Bergson, H. *Mélanges*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1972, p. 1172. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Michel Henry: The Affects of Thought*, J. Hanson and M. Kelly (eds), London and New York: Continuum, 2012. On Henry’s Biranianism, see Michel Henry, *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps. Essai sur l'ontologie biranienne*, Paris: PUF, 1965 (translated as Michel Henry, *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body*, G. Etzkorn (trans.), The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975). There is a very brief discussion of Henry’s Biranianism later in this preface. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. E.g. Charles Viller’s *Philosophie de Kant ou des principes fondamentaux de philosophie transcendantale* (Mezt: Collignon, 1801) and J. Kinker’s *Essai de un exposition succincte de la critique de la raison pur traduit du hollandaise par J. Le Fèvre* (Amsterdam: Changuion et Den Hengst, 1801). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Etienne Gilson, Thomas Langan and Armand A. Maurer, Recent Philosophy, Volume 2, Hegel to the Present, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, p. 182. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Ouevres Choisi de Maine de Biran*, H. Gouhier, Paris: Aubier, 1942, pp. 33–35. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Cited in Aldous Huxley, Themes and Variations, ‘Variations on a Philosopher’, London: Chato and Windus, 1950, p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Maine de Biran, *Essai sur les fondements de psychologie et sur les rapport avec l’etude de la nature*. *Oeuvres de Maine de Biran*, Tisserand, Paris: Alcan, 1932, p. 164fn. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. ### Maine de Biran, *The Influence of Habit on the Faculty of Thinking*, translated by Margaret Donaldson Boehm (trans.) with an introduction by George Boas, London: Baillière & Co, p. 58 (*Influence de l’habitude sur la faculté de penser*, Paris: Henrichs, 1803 – a digital copy of this text is freely available for download from the website of the British Library); also cited in Ravaisson, *Of Habit*, p. 92.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Maine de Biran, *Journal*. Édition intégrale publiée par H. Gouhier, Paris: Éd. de la Baconnière, 1954–1955. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Maine de Biran, *Journal Intime* (1792–1824), introduction, translation and notes by A. de La Valette-Monbrun, Paris: Plon, 1927, 2 vol. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See, Dorthée Legrande, ‘Phenomenological Dimensions of Bodily Self-Consciousness’, in: The Oxford Handbook of the Self, S. Gallagher (ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 210. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Mark Sinclair, ‘Embodiment: Conceptions of the Lived-Body from Maine de Biran to Bergson’, in: *Edinburgh Critical History of Philosophy*, vol. IV, A. Stone (ed.) Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See Lucie Rey. *Les enjeux de l’histoire de la philosophie en France au XIXe siècle.* Paris: L’Harmattan, 2012, pp. 410–421. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Gilles Deleuze. ‘Immanence: a Life’ in *Two Regimes of Madness*.David Lapoujade (ed.), Ames Hodges and Mike Taormina (trans.). Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003, p. 386. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Incarnate Subject, Malebranche, Biran and Begson on the Union of Body and Soul*. P.B. Milan (trans.), Amherst: Humanity Books, 2001, p. 64 (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L’Union de l’âme et du corps chez Malebranche, Biran et Bergson*, J. Deprun (ed.), Paris: Vrin, 1978). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Merleau-Ponty, *The Incarnate Subject*,p. 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Maine de Biran, *The Relationship between the Physical and the Moral in Man*, p. 268. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, H. Barnes (trans.), London: Routledge, 2003, p. 304 (Jean-Paul Sartre, *L’être et le néant*, Paris: Gallimard, 1943). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 324. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Renaud Barbaras, ‘The Essence of Life: Drive or Desire?’, *Michel Henry: The Affects of Thought*, J. Hanson and M. Kelly (eds), London and New York: Continuum, 2012, pp. 40–61. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Incarnate Subject, Malebranche, Biran, and Bergson on the Union of Body and Soul*, P.B. Milan (trans.), Amherst: Humanity Books, 2001, p. 85. [Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L’Union de l’âme et du corps chez Malebranche, Biran et Bergson. Notes prises au cours de Maurice Merleau-Ponty à l’ École Normale Supérieure*, J. Deprun (ed.), Paris: Vrin, 1968.] [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Barbaras, ‘The essence of life’, p. 46. Barbaras cites a passage from an older article of Henry’s to illustrate the latter’s Biranianism. Henry refers to a sentence from Biran, ‘there is no force that is absolutely foreign’, as one of the most ‘laden with meaning the philosophical tradition has ever produced’ and then comments further: ‘An absolute force, an efficient causality, a power in its efficacy, in the reality and actuality of its exercise, of what it is and what it does, cannot be in the milieu of exteriority, cannot be external to [it]self or as if external to [it]self, cannot be separated from itself and cannot be a stranger to [it]self. This signifies that to all real power a first power is given ... in the immanence of its radical interiority.’ The first power is of course, from Biran’s perspective, which Henry here affirms, the primordial force of the will. See Michel Henry, ‘Le concept d’âme a-t-il un sens?’, *Revue philosophique de Louvain* 67 (1996), 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Michel Henry, *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body*, G. Etzkorn (trans.), The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975, p. 11 (Michel Henry, *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps, Essai sur l’ontolgie biranianne*, Paris: PUF, 1965). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Henry, *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body*, p. 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)