

The Irrepresentable Certainty of the Act of Thinking

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To have been awarded the distinction of Professor *honoris causa* by the International Institute for Hermeneutics, and thus to be admitted to the extraordinary group of renowned thinkers of *Agora Hermeneutica*, is both an honor and an immense privilege. It is with sincere gratitude and true humility that I receive such a distinction. But also acknowledging the responsibility that comes along with being part of such an outstanding network of celebrated intellectuals. I only hope my work will show itself worthy of the important and original projects the IHH, with the relentless efforts of its President, Andrzej Wierciński, is currently developing. In recognition (in a Ricoeurian sense) for this distinction, permit me to offer a Commencement Address where I will try to share an insight on the importance of Maine de Biran's analysis of the "act of thinking."

The Irrepresentable Certainty of the Act of Thinking: Genes and Brains

Anyone trying in our days to answer the old anthropological question about what it means to be human, about what our nature is, will quickly find himself surrounded by disapproving or condescending looks. Ours—so we hear—is the time of a new paradigm; questions about the specificity of the human condition are to be surpassed, and with them the obsolete distinctions between nature and culture, humanity and animality. A new *image of the human* must emerge, that of the "human animal" whose

nature is determined by complicated structures of DNA and neurobiological mechanisms (that can be found in other living beings).

A new naturalism is set in place: one that can be identified as a cognitivist paradigm.¹ Such a paradigm is established under the influence of a vast range of powerful and promising conquests attained by a new set of ruling sciences orbiting around biology:² the neurosciences (supported by the conquests of cerebral imagery and molecular experimental technics, allowing the observation of the brain “in action”), evolutionary biology (supported by the postulate that, in order to understand what we are, it is helpful to study genes in their biological specificities and peculiar evolutionary process, as they are determined by mechanisms of natural selection of the Darwinian type), primatology, ethology, paleoanthropology, etc.³ On one hand, such a paradigm tends to occupy, absorb, or rearrange all areas of the human sciences (from psychology to anthropology, from linguistics to sociology) under the tacit acceptance of the idea that everything concerning the *human way of being*—including consciousness, “mental” phenomena, culture, etc.—must be explained by physical-biological causal structures (genetic, neurobiological, behavioral, etc.), as if a “subjective side of things” were but a non-essential side-effect of material conditions. On the other hand, this novel naturalism promotes a new—and somewhat bizarre, at times—set of interdisciplinary “human sciences” that work with biological and computational constructions, schemes, and algorithms (evolutionary psychology, teleosemantics, sociobiology, etc.⁴) in view of representational models of knowledge—hence, self-assured that any knowledge about what it means to be “human” it to be found exclusively by observation, calculus, and *neuro-bio-genetic imagery*.

It is not the scientific conquests of biological sciences, when applied and limited to their specific fields, I’m interested in analysing here. I would not be competent to do so. But, in my view, there is something to be questioned regarding the transportation of a strictly biological model into the study of “what is man?” What I would like to address in this paper is, more specifically, the grounds on which the *option* to make that transference or transportation is based upon. It seems to me that such transference tends to reduce the human condition to a somewhat simplistic archetype. Over the assumption that “what we are” is, once and for all, to be found by *looking at* biological materials with the adequate methodologies, the new emerging

¹ Francis Wolff, *Notre humanité. D’Aristote aux neurosciences* (Paris: Fayard, 2010), 125. See also Francis Wolff, *Trois utopies contemporaines* (Paris: Fayard, 2017), 29-30.

² Wolff, *Notre humanité*, 125.

³ *Ibid*, 125.

⁴ *Ibid*, 125.

paradigm deems admissible to contend that the human condition is a *simple* one and, consequently, one entirely accessible to a single scientific, external, generalized perspective. My argument is that the problem with such a kind of naturalism regarding the study of the *human way of being*, as it is organized in concentric circles around a central cognitivist core, is that it promotes, by an undue transference of points of view, methodologies and assumptions, a univocal and simplistic epistemological approach on what it means to *be human*.

It is true (that is note, of course, the issue here) that we, human beings, are animals governed by the laws of biology. The processes by which we are born and by which we die are biological processes not essentially different from those we can witness in other animals. We are constrained by genes with their own reproductive and adaptive imperatives, and even our basic emotions can be linked to some specific evolutionary processes. But is this enough to assume that a new *image of the human* must emerge, that an epistemological unidimensional approach to the *human condition is admissible*, and that a scientific external point of view is the only way to pursue knowledge about what it means to be human?

In my view this a serious problem: can we identify all human phenomena by their mere biological, genetic, or neurobiological structure? Is it not the case that, considering the human way of being, the *simplicity* of physical and biological structures is doubled by an irreducible *apperceptive or conscious duality, that brings about an intricate personal and individual kind of phenomena*—phenomena that, while not surpassing the material conditions, are, nevertheless, *impossible to account for outside a persevering, conscious and lived first-person perspective*? If this is so, isn't it just a hypothesis to conceive of only one exclusive scientific methodology (the naturalistic explanation) to study human phenomena, of one sole point of view (an exterior point of view that generalizes all facts) on the human condition, of a unique type of facts (observable and localizable ones) occurring in human life? And isn't such a hypothesis and old one: that an integral *manifestation* of the human is possible regardless of what *I can know and testify about myself*?

Apperceptions and Persons

It was Maine de Biran (1766-1824) who, “without doubt for the first time in the history of metaphysics,” consistently confronted the emerging “paradigm of manifestation”⁵

⁵ Pierre Montebello, *La décomposition de la pensée. Dualité et empirisme transcendantal chez Maine de Biran* (Grenoble : Million, 1994), 173.

and the scientific dream of a complete cartography of the human. His critique was centred in “the postulate of the legibility of thought”⁶ promoted by physiology in the context of the emerging *science of man*.

It is useful to look closely at Biran’s arguments as he denounces the danger of transporting the external point of view and methodologies of the sciences of nature into the field of study of the new science of man. In fact, Biran’s philosophy represents a fundamental assessment of such an unjustified transportation. It is, in a way, a rigorous account of a precise historical context: one of fascination with an *episteme* based on the primacy of exterior representation, of intoxicated frenzy about the deemed possibility of a comprehensive (experimental, neurological) cartography of *man*. Under pressure from the methodologies of the sciences of nature, the emerging science of man will become the field of physiology. And the physiologic paradigm will be a clear one: to study the human condition one must reduce interior, non-representable phenomena to exterior, *readable data*—a hypothesis that is well alive today, *mutatis mutandi*, in the paradigm of biological naturalism we referred above.

Maine de Biran will argue that such a transportation of methods and inspirations is a misguided project, promoted by “hasty spirits” that are unable to “preserve themselves from physics;”⁷ more precisely, in such a transference we can see

the substance of a hypothesis that, once its first principle is admit, is perfectly coherent in its consequences, and will truly seem to convert and to translate the internal science of ideas and faculties of the human mind into a sort of external dynamics or theory of the movement of brain fibres.⁸

For Biran this is a clear symptom of a *crisis of science*. Let us not forget that the science of man, in an era (forged by the spirit of enlightenment) where knowledge is defined as a human secularized prerogative and capacity, is a fundamental science: it is up to the science of man to investigate the *first principles* and the *first conditions* that make

⁶ Pierre Montebello, *Nature et Subjectivité* (Grenoble : Million, 2007), 65.

⁷ Maine de Biran, *Rapports du physique et du moral de l’homme*, in *Œuvres de Maine de Biran*, t. VI (Paris : Vrin, 1984), 5 : «C’est en ayant égard sans doute à cette contrariété dans la tendance et moyens des deux sciences que Newton, touchant le nœud de la question qui nous occupe, s’écriait *ô physique ! préserve-toi de la métaphysique* ; c’est aussi en ayant égard à l’observation nécessairement double des deux classes de phénomènes, dont le mélange et la confusion offrent tant d’erreurs et d’illusions et de mécomptes, que nous pouvons nous écrier à notre tour, *ô psychologue ! préserve-toi de la physique*. » Each time I quote from the *Rapports*, my translation is oriented by D. Meacham and J. Spadola (edited and translated by), *Maine de Biran, The Relationship between the Physical and the Moral in Man*, (London/Oxford/New York/New Delhi/Sidney: Bloomsbury, 2016).

⁸ Biran, *Rapports*, 46.

possible for human knowledge. But—and this is a crucial “but”—how can one do that when an undue transference of methodologies promotes an epistemological uniformization of the study of man under the model of experimental science (exterior, based on observation and objective criteria)?

Such a uniformization clearly risks the peril of losing sight, on the side of the study of man, of the different kinds of *facts* that the complex reality of the humane way of being really entails. This is a crucial point, that Biran dresses as follows:

Could it be that all modes, ideas, or acts that have to do with understanding can be equally submitted to an external point of view and apprehended in the material traces of received impressions? Are not these impressions themselves in some cases products of acts apperceived before them or without them? Are there not thoughts, inner volitions that by no means can be read on the outside, nor represented by any kind of image? In order to conceive them, it will not be necessary to be identified with the force that actively and consciously produces such acts: with the self (*le moi lui-même*) that neither sees itself as an object nor imagines itself as a phenomenon?⁹

Biran is very precise here: how can a science *about man* begin by ignoring what only someone who has the *immediate felling* of himself, who is able to *communicate immediately* with his own thought, can really know about *being human* (and about the human way of knowing anything)? How can such a science be built without asking how *man* comes to know *himself* (in that state of *conscium*, or *compos sui*,¹⁰ without which nothing can be known) in the first place?

The project of trying to find thought in an image “is not really to explain thought,”¹¹ but to deface it: it is to ignore its authentic subjective source and its active differentiating essence. To explain thought, one must necessarily begin by clarifying how an act of thought is *thought by someone* and, at the same time, how its subjective evidence is “accompanied” by a reflexive exercise of individuation that allows an *interior* differentiation of “thought” from affections, sensations, attentions, perceptions, memories, etc. To postulate the legibility of thought in an *image* is,

⁹ Maine de Biran, *Mémoire sur la décomposition de la pensée*, in *CŒuvres de Maine de Biran*, t. VII-1 (Paris : Vrin, Paris, 1988), 326. (My translation)

¹⁰ Maine de Biran, *Essai sur les fondements de la psychologie* (2 vol.) in *CŒuvres de Maine de Biran*, t. VII-1/2 (Paris : Vrin, 2001), 3.

¹¹ Biran, *Rapports*, 38. See also Pierre Montebello, “Maine de Biran and the Mind-Body Problem: An Introduction and Commentary on *The Relationship between the Physical and the Moral in Man*”, in Maine de Biran, *The Relationship between the Physical and the Moral in Man*, edited and translated by D. Meacham and J. Spadola (London/Oxford/New York/New Delhi/Sidney: Bloomsbury, 2016), 147.

consequently, to silence the fundamental need to regulate a crucial epistemological question: is thought a thing one can look at? Or is it an act that depends on the presence of an *apperceptive self*? Because if thought is an act, it cannot be studied as a thing, nor even accessed without considering the apperceive activity of a *conscious self*.

In other words, if one wants to know what thought is, one should begin by investigate the real (not abstract) and concrete (not logical or physic-physiological) conditions for a thought *to appear* as such to someone who thinks. For Biran, as it is well known, those conditions—that should account for the real *ontogenesis* of thought—are to be found in the primitive and irrepresentable duality of effort. The *primordial effort* is, for Maine de Biran, the primitive inner relation, sustained by the active force of the will and the interior resistance of a muscular, consistent body, where the first *fact* we can ever know¹² is established: the fact of consciousness, the beginning of thought, the intimate evidence of the *self*.¹³ This is, as is well known, a central thesis of Biran’s philosophy: the *apperceptive I*, the conscious self, can be identified with the active force we call *will* only insofar as the existence of that force becomes a *fact* that occurs in a non-representable relational inner act; and this perseverant act can occur only if that force of will is applied to a consistent inner term that is the interior resistance of the body.¹⁴ Being in place such an act, one is the state of *consciium* or *compos sui*. The self, so to speak, is born. This means, among other major philosophical consequences and implications that the problem of the “beginning” of thought is not an experimental problem, but a philosophical one that corresponds to the investigation of the active, individualized, subjective condition by which we gain the conviction about the existence of ourselves.

To ignore all this is, consequently, to pursue the study of human condition over the basis of a simple hypothesis: that thought can be found “where the phenomenal *self* does not exist and cannot yet exist”:¹⁵ in the exterior organic surface of a physic-physiological “location” or image.

¹² Maine de Biran, *Essai sur les fondements de la psychologie* (2 vol.) in *Œuvres de Maine de Biran*, t. VII-1/2, (Paris : Vrin, 2001), 10.

¹³ Ibid, 506 : « Nous avons vu en quoi consiste l’aperception immédiate interne du *moi* dans l’effort, qui comprend indivisiblement une résistance organique laquelle est inséparable à son tour de l’espace intérieur du corps propre. ». See Anne Devarieux, *Maine de Biran. L’individualité persévérante* (Grenoble : Millon, 2004), 184 ss.

¹⁴ Ibid, 9.

¹⁵ Maine de Biran *De l’aperception immédiate. Mémoire de Berlin*, in *Œuvres de Maine de Biran*, t. IV, (Paris : Vrin, Paris, 1995), 83.

The Irrepresentable Conviction of Being Myself

For Biran, it is the “implicit and never elucidated dogma as such of psychophysiology,”¹⁶ according to which there must be at least an equivalence—if not a productive causal connexion, or even an identity—between the *physical* and the *moral* (between a “cerebral condition” and a “mental state”, between the neurobiological and the conscious), which operates, as a dogmatic unsubstantiated hypothesis, beneath all perspectives on the human condition that tend to ignore the specificity of an *interior point of view*.

This, once again, is a crucial point for Biran:

when it is a question of what is happening in ourselves, of those modes, ideas or even operations whose internal apperception or immediate feeling we have or can have directly, independent of any imaginary conception of the interplay or movement of fibres, what need do we have to resort to these means?¹⁷

The point here is not to undermine neurophysiological research, nor to dismiss the external detailing of material structures and dynamics that contribute to a better understanding of our biological structures; the problem is to know whether it is epistemologically rigorous to study a whole set of internal sense *conditioning* in the same way strictly external *conditions* can be explained. It is true, of course, that one can establish a relationship between physiological structures and activity, between conditions, and conditioning; but we also must understand when conditions cannot explain a certain type of phenomena,¹⁸ since it can only be examined from an apperceptive (or conscious) order of irrepresentable conditions. Regarding the human condition, we must understand that an individualized, inner, reflexive point of view is needed, since a certain type of human phenomena can only be accessed by identification with *the force itself that actively and consciously produces*. In other words, there are *facts* that only *appear* along with the presence of an apperceptive, conscious *self*—that never sees himself as an object or an organic image.

¹⁶ Montebello, *Nature et Subjectivité*, 65.

¹⁷ Biran, *Rapports*, 49.

¹⁸ Montebello, “Maine de Biran and the Mind-Body Problem », 147.

The oblivion of such circumstances is, according to Biran, to be found in all doctrines and theories that tend to reduce our whole system of knowledge to objective representations. By doing so, they

alter the nature of the most well established phenomena, assimilate the most obviously opposed classes, close our eyes on an entire class of facts that are an essential part of the complete knowledge of man.¹⁹

When one becomes fascinated by the extraordinary operations of our “organic machine,” it is always possible to lose track of what the organic signs really *mean*. In fact, one thing is to assume that an *organic sign* can function as an *expressive sign* and fulfil the role of suggesting to reflexion how a fact could have been conceived; in this case, our attention is directed towards that which is signified, and we can then link it to its original source *on the side* of our apperceived and reflexive *self*. Another thing entirely different is to assume that it is possible to explain inner apperceptive phenomena as if it were nothing more²⁰ (and nothing different) than *physiological signs*, like brain fibres, for example. When one seeks to laboriously analyse in all its details so complex machine as the brain, one can at times forget that we are dealing with just tangible signs that represent reflective operations of internal phenomena; in this case, what happens is that instead of directing our attention towards that which is signified, the organic sign will monopolize our attention. The organic sign then becomes an obstacle because it will *close our eyes on an entire class of facts*: inner, irrepresentable *facts*. In this sense, the organic sign does nothing but turn away or distract our attention from its own possible *signification* and subjective original source.

By focusing on the sign itself in this manner, something else will occur: over the oblivion of the real source of evidence of inner phenomena (the apperceptive effort), and having nothing else to analyse but the organic signs, *the mind is directed not to the apperceptive source of signified thought,²¹ but to another altogether different type of ideas²²*: those connected to their favourite science—physics. The result of this will be clear enough: the physiological sign itself becomes the principal and unique object of study, as if no difference or heterogeneity could be considered between the *image* of a brain fibre and the *reality of individualized thought*.

¹⁹ Biran, *Rapports*, 23.

²⁰ Ibid, 50.

²¹ Ibid, 50.

²² Ibid, 50.

When such difference is ignored, under the fascination for a strictly external point of view on human condition, a specific hypothesis becomes assumed as an undisputed fact: that to represent the nature of internal phenomena *over the external, manifested, objective surface of organic signs equals locating the reality of the former over the surface of the latter*. For Biran, this is a bizarre and dangerous assumption that favours an undue and unsubstantiated inversion of the order by which knowledge about the human condition is produced:

When we have the signified thing, what use is the sign? When that which is represented is there, why go so far seeking after that which represents it? When we are able to communicate immediately with our thought, why call on the aid of a foreign intermediary who may be unfaithful?²³

Across the last centuries the promoters of the *paradigm of manifestation* can be recognized by this bizarre theoretical (or metaphysical) option: over the primacy of an external point of view and the assumption that what is real must be *seen* in an image, they forget that the original source of knowledge about the human condition begins in the individual capacity everyone has to communicate immediately with their own act of thinking; after dismissing such an approach, they will try to look for human thought over the unfaithful intermediaries that are organic signs²⁴.

It is that same paradigm, with the same inversion of the order of production of knowledge, that operates under the naturalism of the cognitive paradigm. R. Dawkins, for instance, illustrates such a paradigm as he asserts, in terms borrowed from the zoologist G.G. Simpson (and with a surprising theoretical lightness) that from the point of view of evolutionary biology, all attempts to answer the question *what is man?* “before 1859 [i.e., before the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species*] are devoid of value and (...) we are much better off if we simply ignore them completely.”²⁵

²³ Ibid, 49.

²⁴ This is made by a specific use of language: the meaning of words such as “thought”, “emotions”, “suffering”, “capacity”, etc. is considered. Such meaning is not explored but assumed in its common sense. The reflexive origin of the differentiation of the realities named by those words is forgotten. The basic sense of the words is then transformed into a technical, operational concept used to name certain brain structures. The illusion is complete when, by using a same word to consider in everyday life what is “thought”, an “emotion”, etc. and to express an organic structure, one assumes to be working with the same reality.

²⁵ R. Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1. See also R. Scruton, *On Human Nature*, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018), 12-14; 18.

One could ask, provocatively, whether this is intended to avow that before Darwin no one really knew to be human, and that whoever has never read Darwin today, will live in ignorance of themselves as humans.

Final Remarks

Do we acquire the subjective certainty and conviction of ideas such as the idea of the *self*, of its unity or apperceptive identity in time, by first seeking it out in an external *location*, by forcing upon it the image of an organic surface with its *vibrations and fibres*, by arbitrarily *deciding* that such fibres resume all its nature?

For Biran, it all has to do with the undue transference or *passage* between the *physical* and the *moral in man* (between objective knowledge and internal subject knowledge, image and felt internal and immediate apperceptive certainty, between schemes of structures and exercised thought) promoted by the paradigm of manifestation. More precisely, it all has to do with the oblivion or silencing of the problem such *passage* encompasses. The *passage* between the physical and the moral is, in fact, problematic. And it must be regulated. When such a problem is not regulated, the temptation of epistemological uniformity prevails, the inner point of view is suppressed and the hypothesis of a parallel or analogy between observable phenomena and irrepresentable phenomena becomes an undisputed presupposition—along with the undermining of the epistemological *status* and importance of subjective evidence and certainty. For Biran, such an analogy is not confirmed by facts. The heterogeneity is complete between the

metaphysical simplicity of the *self* that exists and perceives itself as *one* in the act of thought (...) [and the] type of physical simplicity that is objectively attributed to an atom or an individual point taken to be the soul's *location*.²⁶

In the context of a science of man, it is decisive to recognise the evident disparity that exists between what Biran called the “external point of view” (served by the faculty of “imagination”) and the “interior point of view” (the point of view of apperceptive evidence, which is accompanied by the faculty of concentrated reflection). Such a distinction is not made with the intention of choosing one point of view over the other: but to preserve them both in their right field of application and

²⁶ Biran, *Rapports*, 66.

in face of the complexity of human phenomena. Contemporary human sciences should perhaps be a little more biraninan and learn to *preserve themselves from biology*.