
Introduction: Debates on Experience and Empiricism in Nineteenth Century France

Delphine Antoine-Mahut

ENS de Lyon, IHRIM, CNRS UMR 5317, LABEX "COMOD"

Silvia Manzo

Universidad Nacional de La Plata – IdHICS/CONICET (Argentina)

The lasting effects of the debate over canon-formation during the 1980s affected the whole field of Humanities, which became increasingly engaged in interrogating the origin and function of the Western canon (Gorak 1991; Searle 1990). In philosophy, a great deal of criticism was, as a result, directed at the traditional narrative of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophies—a critique informed by postcolonialism (Park 2013) as well as feminist historiography (Shapiro 2016). D. F. Norton (1981), L. Loeb (1981) and many others¹ attempted to demonstrate the weaknesses of the tripartite division between rationalism, empiricism and critical philosophy.² As time went on, symptoms of dissatisfaction with what has been called the “standard narrative” (Vanzo 2013) and the “epistemological paradigm” (Haakonssen 2004, 2006) only increased. Indeed, at present, a consensus has been reached that the narrative of the antagonism between “Continental rationalism” and “British empiricism”, and the consequent *Aufhebung* provided by “German critical philosophy,” has been unable to make sense of the complexity, variety and dynamics of early modern

We would like to thank Daniel Whistler for helping us in preparing the English version of the Introduction. We wish also thank to Vincent Philippe Guillin and Guiseppe Bianco for their valuable comments and suggestions on an earlier version of the whole issue.

1. For a larger bibliographical survey of criticisms of the standard narrative, see Dobre and Nyden (2013) and Manzo (2016).

2. This standard narrative can still be found in recent works like Priest (2007). For a study of the presence of the standard narrative in the work of Bertrand Russell and Frederick Copleston, see Calvente 2016.

philosophy. Such a reconstruction oversimplifies and distorts the complex picture of the actual positions and conceptual relations through which the canonical figures associated with these labels were intertwined (Cottingham 1988, pp. 1–4; Woolhouse 1988, pp. 1–3; Ayers 1998; Haakonsen 2004, 2006; Huenemann 2008, pp. 1–2; Fraenkel et al. 2011, pp. 1–6; Gaukroger 2010, pp. 155–57).

What is more, the flaws of this reductive narrative have ultimately had negative consequences for our representation not only of the philosophical developments of that period but of the nineteenth century as well, by replicating the tripartite division “empiricism, rationalism, critical philosophy” under the label “empiricism/sensualism, spiritualism, idealism.” Accordingly, depictions of the various “national philosophies” of the nineteenth century have usually been put into the following terms: to British “empiricism” corresponds French “spiritualism” and German “idealism.” On the other hand, such representations are also informed by the existence of intra-national oppositions. In the case of France, French spiritualism is interpreted as a response to various forms of *idéologie* (Antoine Destutt de Tracy, 1754–1836), as well as being seen as a reaction to positivism (Auguste Comte, 1798–1857), a school that recovered the empiricist legacy of Étienne Bonnot de Condillac’s “sensualism” (1714–1780), heir of John Locke’s (1632–1704) “empiricism.” Furthermore, Franco-German relations have been interpreted in terms of a fight on both sides of the Rhine to produce the most rational and least hypothetical proposal for a new psychology and a new metaphysics. From the British point of view, France and Germany are led astray from the correct path of a genuine philosophy of experience. Moreover, when it comes to the renewal of psychology and metaphysics, Germany is seen to triumph over a defeated France on the grounds of both experience and rationality. Such an account customarily concludes that from Pierre Maine de Biran (1766–1824)³ to Henri Bergson (1859–1941) nothing happened that was philosophically coherent in France, because the epistemological potential of its experimentation shifted from philosophy to the positive sciences, and also because its contributions to new developments in psychology and metaphysics bore fruit on the other side of the Rhine.

Criticism of the canon often involves a historiographical commitment to dealing with the past in a certain way. In general, those who criticize the misuse of the traditional categories oppose the “appropriationist” historiographic approach, considering that, through them, features that had their origin much later were improperly transferred to the past. Relatedly, adherents to a critical review are much more sensitive to “contextualist”

3. Complete name: Marie François Pierre Gontier Maine de Biran.

reconstructions, which seek to read the philosophical past in approximately the same terms in which it was thought by its own protagonists, through attention to its context (Laerke et al. 2013). Such an approach has been dismissed as “antiquarianism” by its detractors. Several authors with a more sympathetic approach to contextualism have pointed out that the distinction between rationalism and empiricism is only rooted in the last quarter of the eighteenth century (Norton 1981, pp. 331–33; Cottingham 1988, p. 2; Haakonssen 2004; Vanzo 2013, 2014, 2016). While Norton and Haakonssen argue that initial indications of it can be recognized in those reconstructions of the philosophical past found in the works of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) or Thomas Reid (1710–1796), Vanzo’s recent investigations (2016) have cogently demonstrated that, strictly speaking, it is only in Kant’s work that the earliest antecedent of this dichotomy can be found. Furthermore, what was only sketched in Kant is standardized in the histories of the German Kantian school, such as those of Karl L. Reinhold (1757–1823) Wilhelm G. Tennemann (1761–1819) and Johann G. Buhle (1763–1821). With the institutionalization of philosophy, this narrative began to dominate German intellectual life, particularly through the works of Tennemann and Buhle. Thus, the nineteenth century became a momentous period for canon formation, not only because it was the moment in which the standard narrative took shape, but also because it was then when the philosophical canon became institutionalized in the educational system (Schneider 1999).

According to the standard narrative, empiricism was to be typically understood as exclusive reliance upon sense data to attain knowledge. By the same token, science has often been considered the field of application for philosophical empiricism, paradigmatically by means of the “experimental method” allegedly endorsed by the Scientific Revolution. Bacon, Locke and Newton were recognized as the champions of this way of thinking and practicing science.⁴ However, reappraisals of the standard narrative have challenged such a view. P. Anstey (2005) has suggested replacing “empiricism” by “experimental philosophy,” a category used by the historical actors themselves in opposition to “speculative philosophy.”⁵ Other studies have offered a more nuanced and convincing interpretation: for example, A. Charrak (2009) has distinguished two forms of empiricism. On the one hand, a “genetic empiricism” (*empirisme de la genèse*), dating back to the seventeenth century, that attends to the origins of knowledge and analyses its progressive growth; and, on the other hand, an “empiricism of constitution”

4. On the “idols” in the study of empiricism see Bodenmann and Rey 2018.

5. See also Anstey and Vanzo 2016. For criticisms to Anstey’s interpretation see the editors’ introduction in Biener and Schliesser 2014, pp. 1–15; and in Bodenmann and Rey 2018, p. 6. For another historical study of the concept “experimental philosophy” see Feingold 2016.

(*empirisme de la constitution*), developed in the second half of the eighteenth century, that attempts to explain the constitution of positive scientific objects. More recently, S. Bodenmann and A.-L. Rey (2018) have pointed to the existence of a plurality of empiricisms and claimed that eighteenth-century empiricisms integrated rather than rejected rationalism.⁶

Drawing on the aforementioned interrogation of the origin and function of the canon, this special issue studies the concept of experience and of empiricism during the nineteenth century. It concentrates on the reflections and debates around these concepts by representatives of French eclecticism and spiritualism, particularly (but not only) in their exchange with their German counterparts. The papers collected in this volume will contribute to showing the extent to which these debates exhibited a much more diverse, complex and nuanced understanding of experience and empiricism than has been the case for adherents of the standard narrative. Particularly, it will demonstrate how this debate was formed in a specific location, France, where spiritualism was institutionally dominant. It is precisely the historiographical narrative of spiritualism as dualistic and inhospitable to the positive sciences that has for a long time relegated to the shadows the actual interactions that took place between spiritualist authors and their interlocutors of other persuasions. As a result, this special issue will point out that the historiographical categories empiricism, rationalism and criticism and the nineteenth-century labels sensualism, spiritualism, idealism are ideological constructs that obscure, hide and overlook the complicated contestations around experience ongoing between historians of philosophy of various persuasions (Joseph-Marie Degérando [1772–1842] and Tennemann) within the dominant eclectic and spiritualist school itself (Victor Cousin [1792–1867]), between various strands of post-Kantian philosophy (Cousin and Friedrich W. J. Schelling [1775–1854]), and among those spiritualisms competing with that of Cousin (Paul Janet [1823–1899]).

In the particular case of France, the classificatory categories applied to philosophical schools were subject to critical assessment, readjustment and transformation by two key figures, whose role in forging the canon cannot be underestimated: Degérando and, above all, Cousin. Degérando was a prominent public figure, who both occupied various high-level government positions, and, although he has often been identified as an *idéologue* of the "third generation" (Picavet 1891, pp. 101, 505–518; Daled 2005, p. 27), other approaches prefer to characterize him as an eclectic, a thinker of synthesis, rather than as a fully-committed *idéologue* (Chappey et al. 2014, pp. 12–13, 20). Throughout his life, Degérando maintained intellectual

6. For another study pointing out the existence of several forms of early modern empiricism see Biener and Schliesser 2014.

links with Germany, notably with the Berlin Academy of Sciences, the main representative of what has been called the “empiricism of constitution” (Charrak 2009, 2018). Moreover, he became known in the philosophical field through his treatise *De la génération des connaissances humaines* (Degérando 1802), that took the prize in a competition sponsored by the Berlin Academy of Sciences on the question of the origin of knowledge.⁷ At the same time, he authored *Histoire comparée des systèmes de philosophie*, one of the first French general histories of philosophy. The first edition of this work, published between 1802 and 1804 before the start of the Cousinian era, had an important reception in Europe, to the point that it was soon later translated by Tennemann. In addition, it was highly valued by the Scottish Dugald Stewart (1753–1828), a representative of the Scottish Enlightenment and an influential figure on both Degérando and Cousin (Daled 2005). The *Histoire comparée* set the tone and the terminology for later accounts.

In turn, Cousin personified the “State Philosopher” (*philosophe d’Etat par excellence* (Vermeren 1995)). On the one hand, he personally took on all of the institutional functions relevant to the establishment of a “State Philosophy”: Professor of History of early modern philosophy at the Sorbonne, director of the École Normale, Counsellor of State, a peer of the realm, a member of the French Academy, director of the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences, Minister for Public Instruction, president of the *agrégation*⁸ jury and in charge of appointing teachers throughout France as well as of the syllabus. No doubt, this indicates some success at the institutional level—he was the main actor of the time in forging and establishing the canon which dominated the French educational system. Besides, Cousin has been considered as the founder of a *philosophie française*, consisting in a syncretic eclecticism (Antoine-Mahut & Whistler eds., 2019), neither purely German, nor purely Scottish,⁹ and a metaphysics based on a narrow interpretation of the Cartesian *cogito*. However, he fell short of creating a long-standing philosophical school. And such a defeat is to be discerned in the fact that today French syllabuses have space for Comte’s philosophy but not for Cousin and his followers. Moreover, contemporary scholars express doubts about Cousin really belonging to “true” French spiritualism.¹⁰ Thus, Cousin’s undertaking represents both an institutional triumph and a philosophical failure.

7. On the association of empiricism and eclecticism in the Berlin Academy see the special issue edited by Dumouchel, Ferraro, and Leduc (2018).

8. Namely the exam qualifying to be a university professor.

9. On Cousin’s relation to Scottish philosophy see Arosio & Malherbe 2007. On his relation to German philosophy see Espagne 1999 and 2004.

10. Janicaud 1997, p. 4n2: “Victor Cousin pose un problème particulier. Si l’on n’y regarde pas de trop près, on doit évidemment l’inclure dans la vaste famille du spiritualisme

In terms of our special issue, the initial stage of debate over the label empiricism at the very beginning of the nineteenth century is examined in Silvia Manzo's article, which compares the historiographical approaches of Degérando and Tennemann. Both authors judged that "empiricism" required substantial reform to provide a theoretical foundation for knowledge. Moreover, they shared the goal of "pacifying" the philosophical battlefield, by constructing a middle way—that is, a system that would overcome the excesses and extremes exhibited by other systems. Nonetheless, in their attempts to distinguish proper experience from "rough empiricism" neither of them agreed as to the meaning of "empiricism" nor as to the solutions to the problems posed by it. Whereas Degérando embraced the Baconian path of natural historical "philosophy of experience" (*philosophie de l'expérience*) and thought that Kant in fact adopted empiricist tenets, Tennemann held that Baconianism was empiricist and that Kant's critical philosophy was the sole possible way of overcoming its flaws. In addition, Manzo's article provides new insight into the first French reactions towards Kantianism and Kantian historiography, by showing that Degérando's disagreements with critical philosophy in this respect were in sharp contrast to the earlier reception by Charles Villers (1765–1815).

Interestingly enough, the posthumous edition (1847) of Degérando's *Histoire comparée* rehabilitated the French philosophy of experience, as developed both by Pierre Gassendi (1592–1655), the so-called "sensulist" philosophers of the eighteenth century, and the exemplar of Cousin's own spiritualism: René Descartes (1596–1650). While, in Degérando's first edition (1802–4), the Descartes of Part IV of *Discours de la méthode* (1637) and of the second *Méditation métaphysique* (1640) was seen as inhibiting the progress of the philosophy of experience in France, in the latter 1847 edition, Descartes came to be considered as one of the most significant representatives of the very same philosophy of experience, owing to his physiological writings, the *Passions de l'âme* (1649) and his correspondence with Princess Elisabeth (Antoine-Mahut and Whistler eds., 2020). About three decades earlier, in 1811, Stewart placed Descartes in the same lineage, and portrayed him as the father of "experimental Philosophy of the Mind."¹¹ Such an account emphasizes the continuities instead of the confrontations between Baconianism and Cartesianism. In this manner, the two opposed interpretations of the *cogito* that Maine de Biran distinguished

français. Ravaisson, cependant, voyait en lui plus un rhéteur idéaliste, superficiel, qu'un spiritualiste digne de ce nom."

11. "He [Condorcet] has extolled Descartes as the father of Experimental Physics: he would have been nearer the truth, if he had pointed him out as the father of the Experimental Philosophy of the Human Mind" (Stewart 1854, p. 113).

in 1819, the empiricist one and the “pure” spiritualist one, were articulated in harmony, rather than opposed.¹²

The next stage of our survey is to be found in Delphine Antoine-Mahut’s essay, which studies the evolution of Cousin’s attitude to experience in the field of psychology. Early in his career, Cousin exhibited a positive recovery of the Baconian and Condillacian legacy in order to thereby found a new psychology. Accordingly, experience takes the form of a sort of self-observation that attempts to transform the collection of sensible, voluntary, and rational facts of consciousness into scientific facts. This methodological roadmap, laid claim to and adopted by the members of the Cousinian *régiment*, was later abandoned in favor of a dualist and ontological turn, which, according to the same members of this *régiment*, fell back into the excesses of a hidden metaphysics already denounced by Condillac and his positivist heirs. Thus, it is because of Cousin’s failure to give psychology a truly experimental scope, and not because he ruled out such a goal, that his philosophy failed, even if at the same time his program triumphed at the institutional level. At the same time and despite himself, Cousin opened the way to other forms of spiritualism, much more anxious to exploit the positivist traces in his early works. In this sense, Cousin also became implicated in the history of “experimental psychology.”

There were two different reactions to Cousin’s attempts to build a concept of experience compatible with a metaphysics of ontological pretensions. On the one hand, the young French Cousinians judged it to be outright impossible to establish a metaphysical view of experience, instead of identifying observation with experimentation in order to establish a truly empirical and clinical psychology. On the other hand, Cousin’s German readers rethought Cousin’s project by redefining experience as speculative experience in order to create an authentic idealism.

Denise Vincenti’s paper explores the first kind of reaction to Cousin’s challenge. She analyzes the case of Paul Janet, a spiritualist philosopher and a key figure in the renewal of philosophical psychology. Janet’s concerns with methodology in the field of psychology entailed, at the same time, a renewal of philosophical spiritualism, by creating space for a methodology that shared interesting points of contact with the experimental psychology of the late nineteenth century. Furthermore, he was engaged in transforming spiritualist psychology at the educational and academic level. Faced with the clinical experience of madness, Janet denounced the

12. “Le principe de Descartes laissait ouvertes à la philosophie deux routes opposées; l’une qui, partant de l’expérience et n’admettant rien que de sensible, conduirait à nier toute réalité des *notions*; l’autre qui, partant des notions *innées*, comme de l’absolue réalité, conduirait à rejeter tout témoignage de l’expérience et des sens. Là, c’est le *scepticisme* spéculatif joint au *matérialisme* pratique. Ici, c’est l’idéalisme et le spiritualisme *pur*” (Maine de Biran 1819, p. 7).

false, introspective, and subjective form of observation advocated by Cousin, and, instead, following the lead of Théodule-Armand Ribot (1839–1916) and his German counterparts (Wilhelm Wundt [1832–1920], Ernst Heinrich Weber [1795–1878], Gustav Fechner [1801–1887], Hermann von Helmholtz [1821–1894]), he encouraged rigorous experimentation conducted in the laboratory. In addition, he drew on the practices of the French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot (1825–1893), which used hypnosis as an experimental means of reproducing and understanding functional pathology. In this way, mental illness became a way of experimenting on “normal” (physical) illness. To this experimental approach, Janet added a therapeutic function, by means of which psycho-pathological psychology came to be established in all its clinical dimension. At the same time, Janet founded an absolutely new spiritualism, capable of integrating the most powerful objections that had been addressed by its positivist detractors to the institutionally dominant version of spiritualism. In this way, Comte’s famous criticism to Cousinian introspection was no longer seen as a problem for spiritualism as such, but as the engine of this new experimental spiritualism.

The alternative kind of reaction to Cousin’s attempt to build a new concept of experience is addressed in Daniel Whistler’s essay, which shows how, through extensive interactions with Cousin, Schelling rigorously established what was to become a variant of “German idealism,” not in opposition to empiricism, but, on the contrary, in the name of a “true empiricism.” The frontiers of empirical metaphysics posed by its British and French predecessors were thus surpassed to the benefit of the foregrounding of a speculative experience—one that Cousin’s far closer attachment to the British and French traditions did not allow him to articulate, at least explicitly. Against readings that claim that Cousin and Schelling were entirely opposed on this matter, Whistler argues that they both confronted Kantianism, by reviving a tradition of “true empiricism” that they claimed had been lost in the wake of critical philosophy.

By returning to a time when these categories had not yet been fossilized in a dominant historiography, the essays collected in this special issue allow us to remark that, beyond the supposedly antagonistic oppositions and determinate categories representative of the standard narrative’s treatment of different national identities, the nineteenth century bears testimony to international exchanges and conceptual transferences between English, Scottish, French, and German philosophers and scientists. Thus, Degérando’s stance cannot simply be interpreted as a variety of the French *idéologie* movement, since it was developed through interaction with English, Scottish, and German traditions. In addition, even if it highly valued the Kantian philosophy, it still reacted against it. In turn, Cousin initially relied upon the legacy of Bacon, before abandoning it as means of returning to Descartes, as well as reacting against German philosophy. Even a reaction is the product of an interaction, as proven by the exchange between Cousin and Schelling. Similarly, attempts

to rebuild French spiritualism were not only constructed out of French materials, but also constructed out of the appropriation and transformation of ideas and practices from German and Scottish schools. Certainly, this whole picture discloses, once more, that the institutional and political approach to the formation of the canon exemplified by the standard narrative has ended up impoverishing, deforming and neglecting the philosophical history of modernity (Bloch 1979, 1997; Daled 2005; Rey 2012; Borghero 2017).

Our survey of the construction of, evolution of and interaction between historiographical categories indicates that discussions of the origins and methods of knowledge were reconfigured anew in the nineteenth century in terms of the value, functions and scope of experience. The same holds for the correspondent reconfigurations of metaphysics, which were at the core of early modern projects to reform philosophy. Moreover, this had a notable impact on the constitution of psychology and its borders with other disciplines, such as metaphysics and medicine. What was at stake in these interactions was the definition of the limits of philosophy itself and, by extension, of disciplines alternately considered as related to or different from it. The clarification of the meaning of “metaphysics” and its re-qualification as psychology continued throughout the period and thereby affected the legacy of Condillac and that of Kant as well.

On the other hand, the articles exploring both Cousin’s spiritualism and alternative spiritualisms make clear that spiritualist philosophy was built not so much *against* philosophies of experience inherited from Francis Bacon, John Locke or Thomas Reid, on the one hand, or from Pierre Gassendi and Etienne Bonnot de Condillac, on the other, but rather in constant *interaction and dialogue* with them. Hence it becomes possible to think “French philosophy” by insisting on the term *philosophy* rather than on the term *French*, and by working through its composite character (woven from several threads), rather than by focusing on what it excludes (Macherey 2013). Seen in light of this analysis of experience and empiricism, “French spiritualism” thus takes on the form of a metaphysics that seeks to put itself in permanent dialogue with positive science. It became one part of the foundation of “human sciences” in the nineteenth century—moreover, it is a part of this history that more rigid varieties of the canon has excluded.

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