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Alienation and Self-Knowledge in Maine de Biran

Sarah Horton | ORCID: 0000-0003-3273-5485
Institut Catholique de Paris, Paris, France;
Australian Catholic University, Melbourne, Australia
sehorton42@gmail.com

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Abstract

For Maine de Biran, one knows oneself through effort. Crucially, effort involves both a force and a resistance: thus, I am the relation between my soul and my body. Biran may seem to bring the body wholly within the sphere of the self's interiority, and, indeed, he has often been credited with discovering the lived body of phenomenology. This article argues, however, drawing on Emmanuel Falque's recent reading of Biran, that *the Biranian myself* turns out to be, to an extent, external to itself. For the organic resistance that I encounter in all my actions, and that is necessary for me to act at all, can never be wholly transparent to me. The very possibility of self-knowledge thus depends on a certain obscurity, even a certain alienation. The article concludes with a brief consideration of the compatibility of Biran's late, religious writing with his philosophy of effort.

Keywords

alienation – body – effort – Maine de Biran – self

"Man," writes Maine de Biran, "take man as the constant object of your study"; and, commenting on the instruction to "Know yourself," he adds, "*Stude* instead of *nosce*: that is the true precept that is suited to us."[1] While it is certainly neces-

1 Maine de Biran, *Discours à la société médicale de Bergerac*, in *Œuvres de Maine de Biran*,

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sary to know oneself, is not a certain impossibility of knowing oneself also essential to the constitution of human beings? An attentive reading of Biran's oeuvre will show that alienation, although it seems to be the most improper of states, is in fact what is proper to humans: it is not that we should seek out just any experience, or rather non-experience, of alienation (drunkenness, illness, etc.), but rather that the limits to self-knowledge and even to experience are essential to human being – a theme that is central to Emmanuel Falque's recent study of Biran, on which my argument here draws.[2] His *Journal* – a veritable testimony to, as Falque puts it, "a life that in reality he never ceased to conceptualize philosophically"[3] – makes clear the pain that these limits sometimes, even often, cause us: "It is the intellectual faculties that raise man above the brutes," a proclamation that immediately becomes the worried question, "Nevertheless this portion of our being that is so great, at times so sublime when one considers the degree to which it has risen – how slight is that on which it depends? A mere nothing will destroy it."[4] In truth, however, there is no sense of oneself and no self-knowledge without the strangeness that resists them, for humans are constituted by a non-assimilable exteriority, and we can know ourselves, to the extent possible – which is indeed an important task – only on the basis of this resistance, even this alienation.

1 Effort and Self-Knowledge

1.1 *The Relation That I Am*

The human being knows himself through effort: this is the leitmotif of Biran's philosophy. To Descartes who finds in thought alone the sufficient and irrefutable proof of his own existence, Biran replies that the author of the *Meditations* "did not, perhaps, sufficiently observe that this *myself* that thus retreats into itself to affirm its own existence and deduce its absolute reality thereby performs an action, makes an effort; yet does not every action essentially and in reality suppose a subject and a terminus? Can effort be considered as absolute

dir. François Azouvi, vol. V, ed. François Azouvi (Paris: Vrin, 1984), p. 49. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

2 Emmanuel Falque, *Spiritualisme et phénoménologie: Le cas Maine de Biran* (Paris: PUF, 2024); *Spiritualism and Phenomenology: The Case of Maine de Biran*, trans. Sarah Horton (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, forthcoming).

3 Maine de Biran, *Discours à la société médicale de Bergerac*, p. 24.

4 Maine de Biran, *Journal*, ed. Henri Gouhier, vol. III (Neuchâtel: La Baconnière, 1957), "Vieux cahier 1794 ou 1795" (Old notebook, 1794 or 1795), pp. 23–24.

and without resistance?"[5] To the philosopher of the *cogito*, willing is certainly thinking,[6] but Biran reverses the terms: thinking is willing, and willing is acting. It is important to emphasize that the word *willing* [*vouloir*], for the philosopher from Bergerac, designates, not a purely internal act, but rather that conscious activity of the soul that succeeds, sometimes even contrary to our desires, at setting the body in motion.[7] By identifying himself with his thought, Descartes therefore missed what is essential: thinking is already acting, and if my thought does indeed permit me to know myself, the same is true of all my voluntary actions. But my voluntary actions, including the act of thinking, belong also to the domain of the body and not only to the *res cogitans*. Consider an example: since I want to extend my hand, I extend it, and the effort by which my will is accomplished (not to be confused with the physical sensation of movement)[8]

5 Maine de Biran, *Mémoire sur la décomposition de la pensée*, in *Œuvres de Maine de Biran*, vol. III, ed. François Azouvi (Paris: Vrin, 1988), p. 364, footnote. (*Le moi*, literally "the me" or "the myself," is often translated as "the self." I have preferred the more literal translation "the myself" because, while Biran does also refer to *le soi* ["the self"] or to *soi* ["oneself"], there are contexts in which it is important to remember that the self in question is precisely *mine*.)

6 René Descartes, *Méditations métaphysiques*, in *Œuvres*, AT-IX (Paris: Cerf, 1904), p. 22; *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, 4th ed., trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), p. 66 (emphasis added): "But what then am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, *wills*, refuses, and that also imagines and senses."

7 The French *vouloir*, typically translated as *to want*, can also mean *to will*. Given Biran's distinction between *vouloir* and *désirer* (to desire), his usage of it is closer to the English *will*. See Maine de Biran, *Commentaires et marginalia: XVII^e siècle*, in *Œuvres de Maine de Biran*, vol. XI-1, ed. Christiane Frémont (Paris: Vrin, 1990), p. 118: "we will and do first, by virtue of our free activity, what we do not like or desire; reason itself and duty make us ask things that are repugnant to our sensory nature and contrary to all our natural desires"; and *Commentaires et marginalia: XVIII^e siècle*, in *Œuvres de Maine de Biran*, vol. XI-2, ed. Bernard Baertschi (Paris: Vrin, 1993), p. 62: "But the soul wills only the movements that are at its disposal, in its power; and when performing them, it senses that it would be able to not make them and to will or act otherwise than it does." This explicit distinction goes back as far as the second version of his *Influence of Habit on the Faculty of Thinking*: "As our purely affective modifications have no natural *signs* (I mean voluntary movements that enter into their formation), we have no power to recall them. But in the order of nature the limits of the *will* are the same as the limits of *power*; there could therefore be, outside of organic action, no motive to *will* (I do not say *desire*) to recall these modifications" (*Mémoires sur l'influence de l'habitude sur la faculté de penser*, in *Œuvres de Maine de Biran*, vol. II, ed. Gilbert Romeyer-Dherbey [Paris: Vrin, 1987], second version, p. 153, footnote, emphasis in original; this footnote is omitted in the English translation of the text).

8 Maine de Biran, *De l'aperception immédiate*, in *Œuvres de Maine de Biran*, vol. IV, ed. Ives Radrizzani (Paris: Vrin, 1995), p. 57, footnote; *Of Immediate Apperception*, trans. Mark Sinclair, in *Maine de Biran's Of Immediate Apperception*, ed. Alessandra Aloisi, Marco Piazza, and Mark Sinclair (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), p. 59, n. 20 (emphasis in original): "I must signal in

reveals my existence to me, immediately and therefore beyond any possibility of doubt, as a willing and at the same time a corporeal being. Wherever there is effort, there is necessarily also resistance, precisely so that it can be *ef-fort* and not only force: the prefix *ef-* in fact comes from the Latin *ex-*, which marks, in this case, the separation of the force from itself by virtue of the opposition that it must combat to impose itself.[9] Without this resistance that accompanies all my conscious acts, an evil genius could indeed make me doubt the reality of my body – but because I sense myself resisting myself, I know at once that I exist and that I am, not a soul or a body considered separately, but rather the relation between a hyperorganic force and an organic resistance. Thus Biran writes, concerning the second *Meditation*: "Assuredly this meditative genius was deluding himself when he believed he was surer of his soul's existence than of his body's; for he could neither think nor be himself without having the continuous internal sentiment (I do not say the objective idea or the image) of this co-existence of the body."[10] Let us be clear here: it is a matter, not at all of a logical deduction that the thinker of the *cogito* would indeed have the right to doubt, but of a certainty that is originary and therefore prior to the very possib-

advance that this fundamental mode or primitive act designated here under the individual sign of *effort* is quite distinct from sensation of movement, taken also by other philosophers as fundamental or as originating consciousness (see in particular de Tracy's *Elements of Ideology*). I must say in anticipation that it is not enough that the movement is simply felt for it to have the characteristic of the immediate apperception that I tie to effort; it is also necessary that this movement be produced and *initiated* by this hyperorganic force, properly termed *will*, as we will see in what follows." Movements can occur in my body without my willing them, and I can will, and therefore make an effort, without producing a movement that can be sensed. This point of disagreement with Destutt de Tracy marks Biran's break with the Ideologues, whose sensualism does not recognize the fundamental importance of the *inner* sense; moreover, this break precedes *Of Immediate Apperception*, for although Biran, in the prizewinning version of his *Influence of Habit on the Faculty of Thinking*, praises Tracy for being "the first who has clearly connected the origin of knowledge […] with the faculty of moving and with voluntary *motility*" (*Mémoires sur l'influence de l'habitude sur la faculté de penser*, second version, p. 136, footnote; *The Influence of Habit on the Faculty of Thinking* (1929), trans. Margaret Donaldson Boehm [Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1970], p. 56, n. 2, emphasis in original, translation modified), he also insists on the fact that "*motor* activity […] is manifest to my inner sense with the greatest clearness" (*Mémoires sur l'influence de l'habitude sur la faculté de penser*, second version, p. 135; *The Influence of Habit on the Faculty of Thinking*, p. 55, emphasis in original).

9 Note that this "separation of the force from itself" does not introduce any representational distance within the *myself*, since the resistance of the lived body that interrupts the voluntary force accompanies it immediately.

10 Maine de Biran, *Mémoire sur la décomposition de la pensée*, p. 364, footnote.

ility of doubt.[11] I apperceive the relation between this force and this resistance rather than deducing it or representing it to myself – that is, I sense it directly. Nothing but immediate apperception could permit me to attain indubitable knowledge of myself; and still less could I know myself by representing to myself a force without resistance, or vice versa: as Anne Devarieux observes, "of these two terms considered in isolation, I know nothing."[12] This sentiment of the relation that I am, that is, the sentiment of effort or of myself, is what Biran calls the primitive fact of consciousness – "primitive" because it is prior to any representation or reasoning.[13]

1.2 *Organic Resistance*

Thought itself depends on the body, and this to such a degree that a completely paralyzed person would never become conscious of his existence: Biran explains that

> a child who was born with all its limbs paralyzed with regard to movement, without being paralyzed with regard to sentiment, and who could live thus, would feel impressions, would be *affected* by them without relating them to any place, consequently without perceiving them, separating them from the sentiment of his *myself*, without having consciousness, without being a constituted *person*.[14]

Since I exercise no effort when my body passively undergoes impressions, I am literally uninvolved. In contrast, every conscious activity of my will is necessarily accompanied by some bodily resistance. And since it is necessary to make an effort in order to think, voluntary thought, even though it is internal, also belongs to the body – which the philosopher of Grateloup already establishes

11 Thus Bernard Baertschi is correct to write that "if the primitive fact is the first step in the order of being and in the order of knowing, any prior doubt is inconceivable: hence Maine de Biran begins not with doubt but with certainty" (*L'ontologie de Maine de Biran* [Friburg: Éditions Universitaires Fribourg Suisse, 1982], p. 18).

12 Anne Devarieux, *Maine de Biran: L'individualité persévérante* (Paris: Millon, 2004), p. 25.

13 See, for instance, Maine de Biran, *Essai sur les fondements de la psychologie*, ed. Pierre Tisserand, vol. VIII (Paris: Alcan, 1932), p. 177: "I take up Descartes's principle: *I think, I exist*, and, descending into myself, I seek to characterize more specifically what this primitive, substantial thought is that is supposed to constitute my whole individual existence, and I find it identified at its source with the sentiment of an action or a willed effort. This effort will therefore be for me the primitive fact, or fundamental mode, that I seek and whose characters and signs I am called upon to analyze."

14 Maine de Biran, *Mémoire sur la décomposition de la pensée*, p. 434 (emphasis in original).

in his first published work (and his only monograph to appear before his death), *The Influence of Habit on the Faculty of Thinking*: as he explains in a footnote that is, however, essential,

> I use the term *movement* in general to express any act of will, any employment of centrally initiated motor activity, whether this employment is apparent externally by the execution of muscular movements or is limited to that simple determination, which, having no external sign, is apparent only to the individual through consciousness of what I have called *effort*. Thus, in solitary meditation, in the midst of the most apparent repose and silence, it is no less the case that I sense or recognize the movements of articulation which accompany or determine the regular recall of my ideas: is speech [*la parole*], on account of being internal, any less a vocal movement?[15]

The man who thinks does indeed know that he exists, not because he is in essence only a *res cogitans*, but on the contrary because his internal activity does not take place without resistance. Since the relation that he is between a force and a resistance is immediately present to him in the primitive fact, he has no need of any "external sign," nor even of an internal one, to apperceive himself, even when such signs of his will do become perceptible. Of course, he has no direct knowledge of the movements of his cerebral matter; in and by the sentiment of effort, he is conscious, not of the existence of the brain as such,

15 Maine de Biran, *Mémoires sur l'influence de l'habitude sur la faculté de penser*, second version, p. 154, footnote; *The Influence of Habit on the Faculty of Thinking*, pp. 77–78, n. 1, translation modified (emphasis in original). This note appears in the version published in December 1802 and not in the version to which the Institute of France awarded their prize in July of that same year. But in the first treatise on *The Influence of Habit*, which narrowly missed out on the prize in 1801 (in fact, the Institute's jury chose not to award a prize that year but wrote to Biran to encourage him to revise his work and to submit a second version to the next year's competition) he writes, "Then I will examine the different movements of the organ of thought that can correspond to the modes of the exercise of this thought, modes of which we can acquire knowledge by reflecting on what we feel internally; or, rather, I will make use of these supposed movements as of a *symbol* or material representation of the hidden effects that I must express" (*Mémoires sur l'influence de l'habitude sur la faculté de penser*, first version, p. 2, emphasis in original). One should not be confused by the term *symbol*: the movements in question, although symbolic, are not in the least fictitious. For the philosopher from Bergerac, a voluntary movement is always the sign or symbol of the will that is its cause, and every effort implies both a hyperorganic force and a voluntary organic movement, whether this latter is external (and therefore visible) or purely internal, as in the case of thought.

nor even of the movements that take place in the matter of which it is composed, but rather of the union of his soul and his body, terms that – as Biran repeatedly insists – are "distinct and not separated."[16]

According to Jean-Paul Sartre, who addresses a brief critique to the philosopher from Bergerac, "Maine de Biran's famous 'sensation of effort' does not really exist. For my hand reveals to me the resistance of objects, their hardness or their softness, but it does not reveal *itself*."[17] For the author of *Being and Nothingness*, considering that my body is revealed to me in effort amounts to making my body a thing: since it is not originarily an object for me, I do not perceive it as a body. And Sartre insists, "We never have the sensation of our effort [...]: we perceive the *resistance* of things. What I perceive when I want to carry this glass to my mouth is not my effort but its *heaviness*."[18] Certainly, I also perceive the heaviness of the glass, and I will discuss below the resistance of objects, which is other than the body's resistance, and by which the existence of the external world is given to me as certain. Without going too far into a discussion of the Sartrean perspective, it is nonetheless important to note that here there is a misunderstanding on the part of the existentialist, and not a simple conflict of intuitions, for the apperception of effort in no way thingifies the body. One senses that one's active behaviors, even including being awake, do not arise on their own, do not just happen to one like events that are out of one's control, but that one must oneself devote energy to producing them; and this expenditure of energy, however minimal it may be, entails that the sentiment by which one knows oneself is the sentiment of an internal effort. Extending one's hand is not remaining immobile; standing is not collapsing to

16 See, for example, Maine de Biran, *Essai sur les fondements de la psychologie*, p. 245: "This identity [...], as it has its whole foundation in the primitive fact of consciousness, is referred equally to its two terms, which are distinct and not separated from each other"; *Dernière philosophie: Existence et anthropologie*, in *Œuvres de Maine de Biran*, vol. x-2, ed. Bernard Baertschi (Paris: Vrin, 1989), p. 13: "primitive *thought* is nothing other than the consciousness of personal individuality and is expressed by the word *I*; [it] [*sic*] admits two elements that are distinct and not separated, an essential duality that cannot be brought back to *absolute* unity unless one leaves the point of view of internal experience to enter into the field of abstractions or *a priori* systems"; and ibid., p. 177–178: "It is in the sense of effort that the ineffable link is to be found that indivisibly unites the two terms of the fundamental, primitive relation of causality, the two necessary elements, distinct and not separated, of the fact of consciousness of the human *myself*, existing *in concreto* and not *in abstracto*."

17 Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'etre et le néant* (1943) (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), p. 343; *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Sarah Richmond (New York: Washington Square Press, 2018), p. 410 (emphasis in original).

18 Sartre, *L'être et le néant*, p. 364; *Being and Nothingness*, p. 435 (emphasis in original).

the ground; and – this point is fundamental if one is to avoid misunderstanding Biran's conception of effort – being conscious is neither falling asleep nor losing oneself in madness.[19] In sum, voluntary action, for the thinker of Grateloup, is not a discontinuous series of movements, for being awake is already an act that is radically distinct from the passivity from which the *myself* is absent, but of which the possibility always haunts us, precisely because effort is necessary if we are not to sink into it. Without needing to compare these states by any reasoning, I sense, not a body-object, but the constitutive tension by which I maintain myself in activity.[20]

2 The Interiority of the Body

2.1 *The Discovery of the Lived Body*

What proves, though, that the resistance that is one of the two terms of that tension comes to me from a body? One could suspect circular reasoning: at first glance, it seems that the sentiment of effort renders my body's existence certain only on the condition of defining my body as resistance, a definition that may not be self-evident. Such a question, however, misunderstands the primitive fact, which reveals to me all at once that I am not only a soul; I am a duality or, better, the relation by which the duality between these terms of force and resistance does not fall into a simple opposition of contraries. Indeed, Biranian organicity is nothing other than the resistance that I feel directly, but it is a question, neither of an illegitimate presupposition, nor of an arbitrary definition, but of a radical reconceptualization of the nature of the body, necessitated by the immediate knowledge of my dual nature. Henceforth corporeality is no longer to be thought only on the side of exteriority. It is no surprise to read, in Paul Ricœur, that "Maine de Biran is therefore the first philosopher to have introduced the lived body [*le corps propre*] into the region of nonrepresentative certainty."[21] And, as Devarieux emphasizes, he is, moreover, the first, "in French-language philosophy" – excepting Leibniz, for whom the phrase does not yet, in any case, take on the full sense that it will have for Biran – to employ the

19 Cf. Baertschi, *L'ontologie de Maine de Biran*, p. 44: "As long as man is in the waking state, there is effort, and this effort bears first of all upon the body."

20 Cf. Devarieux, *Maine de Biran: L'individualité persévérante*, p. 137 (emphasis in original): "Biranian effort has nothing to do with any sort of voluntarism: the *myself* is not given in a series of efforts but is always there in the waking state, constituted by a *tension that is immanent to the ego*, in the absence of any voluntary act of objective perception."

21 Paul Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), p. 372; *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 321, translation modified.

expression *le corps propre* (often translated as "the lived body"),[22] for, prior to him, "no philosopher had succeeded in grasping the sense of the apperception of oneself":[23] while he certainly has predecessors who wrote *corpus meum* ("*le corps mien*," "my body") or even *mon propre corps* ("my own body"),[24] it belongs first to the philosopher from Bergerac to have thematized the body that is not only mine or my own but that is, as it were, internal to myself. Despite Jean-Luc Marion's attempt to bring together the Cartesian *corpus meum* and the Biranian primitive fact by proposing that "Descartes' doubt, which does *not* annihilate the *meum corpus* while the *ego cogito* subsists, already enunciates what Biran defines as the *primitive fact*,"[25] it remains that the primitive fact, according to its

22 The French term *le corps propre* has often been translated as "the lived body," to convey the meaning of the body as it is lived by the subject; more recently, it is often translated as "one's own body," although "one's own body" would literally be *son propre corps*, with the adjective before the noun; sometimes it is translated as "the proper body," understood as "the body that is proper to me." The English translation of Ricœur's *Oneself as Another* uses both "the lived body" and "one's own body" as translations of *le corps propre*. Given the contrast that Devarieux rightly draws between *le corps propre* and *mon corps* (my body) or even *mon propre corps* (my own body), I have avoided the translation "one's own body" for *le corps propre*, preferring "the lived body" or, occasionally, "the proper body."

23 Anne Devarieux, "Maine de Biran et l'invention du corps propre," in *Corps ému: Essais de philosophie biranienne*, ed. Luís António Umbelino (Coimbra: Presse universitaire de Coimbra, 2021), pp. 27–59 at 31; on Leibniz, see note 5, p. 31. For Leibniz, the expression appears in *The Principles of Nature and Grace Based on Reason* (1714) in Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Principes de la nature et de la grace fondés en raison; Principes de la philosophie ou monadologie*, ed. André Robinet (Paris: PUF, 1986), p. 31; *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, trans. and ed. Leroy E. Loemker (1956), 2nd ed. (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1989), p. 637: "And each outstanding simple substance or monad which forms the center of a compound substance (such as an animal, for example), and is the principle of its uniqueness, is surrounded by a mass composed of an infinity of other monads which constitute the body belonging to this central monad [*le corps propre de cette Monade centrale*], corresponding to the affections by which it represents, as in a kind of center, the things which are outside of it." But while Leibniz thus emphasizes the essential relation between the "central monad" and the monads that constitute its body, going so far as to highlight "the accord and the physical union of soul and body" (ibid.,), he insists neither on the interiority of this *corps propre*, nor on its resistance (which, as we will see, also confers an exteriority upon it).

24 Devarieux, "Maine de Biran et l'invention du corps propre," pp. 33–34. Cf. also François Azouvi, "Genèse du corps propre chez Malebranche, Condillac, Lelarge de Lignac et Maine de Biran," *Archives de philosophie* 45, no. 1 (Jan.–Mar. 1982): 85–107.

25 Jean-Luc Marion, *Sur la pensée passive de Descartes* (Paris: PUF, 2013), p. 115, n. 1; *On Descartes' Passive Thought*, trans. Christina M. Gschwandtner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), p. 99, n. 21 (emphasis in original). But we should note that, despite his critique of the *cogito*, Biran, as Baertschi observes, is not insensible to the originality of the thinker who proposed it: he recognizes Descartes as "the first to have discovered that only

Biranian conception – and this is the originality of the thinker of Grateloup – reveals to me not that I have a body that I know is mine, nor even that I am indissolubly or indubitably united to my body, but that I am the union of my body and my soul, which are mine not because I possess them, even if it is impossible to doubt this possession, but because they constitute me from inside. To say it with Devarieux, "when Biran says, not my body [*mon corps*], but the lived body [*le corps propre*], he refers not only to the body that belongs to each one, to the body that each one can say is his or her own [...], but indeed to the body that lives our life of relation."[26] And it bears repeating that this relation is precisely the relation of effort: if Maine de Biran is the first to have discovered the lived body, that is because he is also the first to have seen in effort the fundamental sense of human being.

It is in his *Mémoire sur la décomposition de la pensée* (*Treatise on the decomposition of thought*, meaning the breaking of thought down into its component parts), which won the prize of the Institute of France in 1805, that he writes *le corps propre* for the first time, opposing it to the "foreign" body in his analysis of touch, of which "the function that relates to external knowledge is almost isolated; its products offer themselves of themselves as distinct and *separated* even from the sensation."[27] This insistence on the separation between sensation and that which is external to me clearly indicates that, in the passage that follows, the lived body is not to be understood simply as the body that belongs to me, in opposition to those that do not belong to me:

> [O]nly active touching establishes a direct communication between the being causing the movement and other existences, between the subject and the external term of effort, because it is the first organ with which the motive force, being first constituted in the direct and simple relation of action, can constitute itself again, in this same relation, with foreign existences. As knowledge and the double relation of the *myself* to the *proper* body [*corps propre*] and the *foreign* [*étranger*] body relate above all to the exercise of such a motive function, nature had no need to establish, in the organ that is its seat, any particular sensing apparatus whose

a philosophy that begins from the *myself*, given in a first experience, is safe from doubt, from skepticism, and that there exists, therefore, a privileged reality on which philosophy must rest" (Baertschi, *L'ontologie de Maine de Biran*, p. 15).

26 Devarieux, "Maine de Biran et l'invention du corps propre," p. 49.

27 Maine de Biran, *Mémoire sur la décomposition de la pensée*, p. 203 (emphasis in original). Earlier in this same work he cites the passage in which Leibniz uses the expression *le corps propre*: see p. 86.

> various modes or dispositions would have altered the constancy of the relation at which it aims.[28]

It is by touch that I act directly on external objects, and yet in so doing I do not risk confusing them with myself, precisely because they are given as external to or separated from my effort. Communication with the world, though it is direct, is no less communication; that is, it does not have that immanence that characterizes my relation with myself. What is immediate, in my relation with things, is their essential exteriority, for their resistance to my will involves less obedience than does my body's resistance. "If we could exist without finding any invincible resistance," I would perhaps believe that the entire world was part of my body;[29] but in fact, "in the effort deployed against a foreign obstacle, the voluntary determination does not have its full effect: there is a part of the force that finds itself arrested or destroyed."[30] If I know that extending my hand is not remaining immobile, I also know, just as immediately, that lifting an object, be it as light as a feather, is not simply extending my hand. A dust mote obeys me less than my body in that willing does not suffice for the dust mote, in contrast to my body, to yield to my force: because I will to make a certain gesture to take up the mote, my body moves, but it remains possible that my action will not lead to the desired result – a possibility of which I remain aware even in success, for the gap between my will and the movements of external things is never altogether closed.[31] Whereas the physical exhaustion that finally prevents me from willing marks a breakdown of the will itself, and even of the *myself*, the inability to lift or displace an external obstacle is lived, rather, as a limit to my

28 Ibid. (emphasis in original).

29 Ibid., p. 207.

30 Ibid., p. 210.

31 Cf. Baertschi, *L'ontologie de Maine de Biran*, pp. 119–120: "It is this idea of independence [of the external object] that is central in the problem that occupies us, and it is important to Maine de Biran to mark this. […] The resistance [of the object] is dead, that is, it does not participate in the subject's act, whereas the body, for its part, does participate in it: it is a living body [*corps vivant*], and it is because the resistance of the object is dead that that resistance is absolute and invincible. The *myself* cannot make it its own; it does not obey the *myself*, it does not lend itself to the *myself*'s projects, or at least does not easily lend itself to them; it does not espouse the movements of the will, and even if, in a certain sense, it does so, it can break the contact at any moment. […] We must not, however, overemphasize the opposition […]; the world does not rise up as an enemy of the *myself*; it is capable of espousing the *myself's* projects […]. It is within this relation that the independence is revealed, and it is necessary that the world be revealed as independent because it is neither the *myself* nor the body: it is separated, and not only distinct."

will that is imposed from the outside.[32] In sum, the lived body is not simply the body that I have but the body that is united to the soul to constitute the *myself*.

2.2 *The* Myself *and the Body*

While revising the *Mémoire sur la décomposition de la pensée* (which in fact would be published only posthumously), Biran adds, on a page given as an appendix in the Vrin edition (1988), a passage that indicates still more clearly the interiority that characterizes the lived body:

> But if the sentiment of personal existence is inseparable from the sentiment of the common effort that is simultaneously deployed across inert or continuously resisting parts, one conceives how a certain internal form of space or of bodily extension can be indivisibly united, from the origin, with the relative sentiment of the *myself* beginning to exist for itself in a time.
>
> This internal space of the lived body [*corps propre*] [? from which] [*sic*] the *myself* must distinguish itself for the fact of consciousness to complete itself, [is] [*sic*] the *place* of the affective impressions sensed by the *individual*, who cannot perceive them in another form or without placing himself outside them, just as external space is the place of objects and non-affective modes, which can be perceived only at a distance and altogether outside the *myself*.[33]

"The *myself* must distinguish itself" from the "internal space of the lived body" first because I am not only my body and second because I am affected in it without taking an active role in those affections. From this same text, nonetheless, it is also necessary to retain the fact that the lived body, being an "internal space," is not "altogether outside the *myself*": without my having a full mastery over the lived body, it is never simply external to me.

In truth, though Biran sometimes seems to identify the *myself* with the hyperorganic force, it would oversimplify his texts to insist on such an identity at the expense of the organic resistance, a term that is equally essential to the *myself*. It is true that he writes, in his *Essai sur les fondements de la psychologie* [*Essay on the foundations of psychology*], that "the cause or productive force becomes *myself* only because of the distinction that is established between the

32 In truth, the possibility of such a breakdown of the will reveals a certain *outside* within the *myself*, a theme that I will develop below.

33 Maine de Biran, *Mémoire sur la décomposition de la pensée*, "Appendice II", p. 432 (emphasis in original).

subject of this free effort and the term that immediately resists by its proper inertia."[34] Certainly, the spiritualist interpretation of Biran's corpus does not fail to emphasize the force that is the will, indeed at the risk of forgetting the organic, whose resistance, as we will see, also has its force. According to Paul Janet, for instance, to whom we in fact owe the first explicitly "spiritualist" reading of the philosopher from Bergerac,[35] "the *myself* attests itself to itself as force,"[36] and while Janet recognizes that "the [Biranian] *myself* sens[es] itself only by the shock that it encounters in an obstacle that opposes it and in the fight that it exercises against this obstacle," he surprisingly fails to mark the distinction, which is, however, clearly established in the *Essai*, on which he is commenting, between the resistance of the lived body and that of external objects.[37] It is not, however, a question of entirely invalidating this interpretive approach, for, although Biran never calls himself a spiritualist and, in fact, the philosophy thus named decidedly postdates him,[38] Bernard Baertschi justly remarks (though without commenting on the spiritualist tradition) that "the *myself* is conscious because it is will, that is, the power to act, and it is a cause, that is, it does not only react but is capable of acting."[39] I know myself because I act, as we have seen: this is why the thinker of Grateloup grants to the "productive force" the status of the *myself*. But because "willed effort, immediately apperceived, expressly constitutes individuality, the *myself*, the primitive fact

34 Maine de Biran, *Essai sur les fondements de la psychologie*, p. 179.

35 See Jean-Louis Vieillard-Baron, *Le Spiritualisme français* (Paris: Cerf, 2021), p. 13. See also Emmanuel Falque's commentary in *Spiritualisme et phénoménologie*, § 1, "Spiritualisme de Maine de Biran," pp. 41–55; *Spiritualism and Phenomenology*, § 1, "Maine de Biran's Spiritualism."

36 Paul Janet, *Les Maîtres de la pensée moderne* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1883), p. 376.

37 Ibid., p. 379.

38 See Falque, *Spiritualisme et phénoménologie*, § 1, "Spiritualisme de Maine de Biran," especially § 1a, "Une étrange étiquette," pp. 42–45; *Spiritualism and Phenomenology*, § 1, "Maine de Biran's Spiritualism," especially § 1a, "A Strange Label."

39 Baertschi, *L'ontologie de Maine de Biran*, p. 51. To spiritualism he makes but a single reference, contrasting it with the phenomenological interpretation: "This movement [that interprets Biran in phenomenological terms] has permitted us not only to become fully conscious of the richness and profundity of Biran's philosophy but also to show that history erred in seeing in our philosopher only the origin of the French spiritualist school that led to Bergson" (ibid., p. 433). As Falque has argued, the spiritualist and phenomenological interpretations both have a certain value, as well as real limits that it is necessary to emphasize (see Falque, *Spiritualisme et phénoménologie*, § 1, "Spiritualisme de Maine de Biran," pp. 41–55, and § 4, "Phénoménologie de Maine de Biran," 80–91; *Spiritualism and Phenomenology*, § 1, "Maine de Biran's Spiritualism," and § 4, "Maine de Biran's Phenomenology").

of the inner sense,"[40] and because resistance is one of the two terms that constitute effort, my body remains a lived body, known precisely through the inner sense of consciousness and therefore, to that extent, as I have noted, internal to the *myself*.

3 The Exteriority of the Body

3.1 *The Strangeness of the Lived Body*

What precedes could seem to justify Michel Henry in finding in Biran's thought a support for and the source of his thesis that "our body is originally neither a biological body nor a living body *nor a human body*; it belongs to an ontological region radically different which is the region of absolute subjectivity."[41] For the philosopher from Bergerac, the body takes on a certain immanence to the subject, and that is a mark of his originality: this I grant. But is this subjectivity of the body absolute, and could it be absolute? I maintain, on the contrary, following Emmanuel Falque, that Biran's greatest originality lies precisely in that, having emphasized the sentiment of the lived body, he also recognizes, in and through this very sentiment, the objectivity, even the strangeness, that, far from being separable from the lived or proper body, grounds it to constitute the *myself*.[42] We must not forget that it is also in my body that I am passively affected, sometimes without sensing anything, without having consciousness of anything, and therefore without being involved in any way; and yet, since it is not a matter of a mere exteriority that has nothing to do with myself, interiority and exteriority turn out to be intertwined. In short, I am myself only by virtue of an interiority that cannot, however, be wholly identified with the *myself* and of which I will never have full knowledge – and the soul, or the hyperorganic force, also remains obscure in that it cannot be understood or known inde-

40 Maine de Biran, *Essai sur les fondements de la psychologie*, p. 178.

41 Michel Henry, *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps: Essai sur l'ontologie biranienne* (1965), 2nd ed. (Paris: PUF, 2011), p. 11; *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body*, trans. Gerard Etzkorn (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975), p. 8 (emphasis in original); see also p. 12 (p. 8 in the English translation; translation modified): "The first and actually the only philosopher who, in the long history of human reflection, saw the necessity for originarily determining our body as a subjective body is Maine de Biran, that prince of thought, who merits being regarded by us in the same way as Descartes and Husserl, as one of the true founders of a phenomenological science of human reality."

42 See Falque, *Spiritualisme et phénoménologie*, in particular ch. II, "Résistance du corps," pp. 77–123, and ch. V, "Le corps étranger," 211–253; *Spiritualism and Phenomenology*, ch. 2, "The Resistance of the Body," and ch. 5, "The Foreign Body."

pendently of this organicity that is indeed proper to me. And this amounts to saying that, nevertheless without being able to doubt my existence, I always remain, to a certain degree – a degree that, moreover, it is impossible to definitively delimit – a stranger to myself.

On Henry's view, however, this exteriority is merely the remainder of an old dualism, unworthy of "Biranian philosophy" to which we must "d[o] justice" by removing "what he borrowed from others."[43] Could Henry therefore be more Biranian than Biran himself? On this point, Emmanuel Falque rightly observes that

> as early as the *Mémoire sur la décomposition de la pensée*, Maine de Biran had already, in reality, been determined to distinguish and establish the internal and the external on the basis of the 'primitive fact *of existence*' – which is not exclusively the 'primitive fact *of the inner sense*.' And this could or should have not escaped Michel Henry's reading.[44]

In truth, it is not even necessary to look for explicit references to exteriority, which are certainly not lacking, to understand that, far from amounting to a borrowing from other, less enlightened authors, exteriority is in fact situated at the heart of Biran's thought. How indeed could I not be a stranger to myself, since it is effort that permits me to know myself? For, as we have seen, making an effort implies a resistance that constitutes it precisely by opposing it – and which, by virtue of this opposition to the only means by which a human being can sense himself existing, always remains obscure. In consequence, exteriority, which we might have believed had definitively been distanced from man considered in himself, already returns from its exile or, better, was never banished. Certainly, it is not yet a question here of the resistance of external things, such as a ball kicked by a foot, even if the existence of the not-myself is also given to me as certain, but rather of the resistance inherent in one's own body: that is, it is a matter of a resistance, even an exteriority, at the very heart of the *myself*, and without which the *myself* would never discover itself. In the sentiment of effort, the body is not given to me as an object, as I have said: but it is now a question of what is not given to me, of what resists givenness without being separable from it. Despite Henry's reading that insists on interiority and on the flesh as auto-affection, we must also recognize that, in the thought of the philosopher from Bergerac, a sort of exteriority is found precisely within

43 Henry, *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps*, p. 215; *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body*, p. 155.

44 Falque, *Spiritualisme et phénoménologie*, pp. 139–140 (emphasis in original).

interiority and the organicity of the flesh. As Biran writes in his *Mémoire sur la décomposition de la pensée* (notably read by Henry),

> I have substituted organic inertia or resistance for foreign resistance, and I have seen the faculties originarily constituted, not exclusively in that constrained movement that teaches us that there exists something outside ourselves, but more generally in the effort that is essentially relative to some term, be it applied to the lived body or the foreign [*étranger*] body.[45]

This substitution, far from removing the foreign or strange body, on the contrary reveals the strangeness of the organic and even of the own or the proper: my own body or, indeed, my proper or lived body is first disclosed to me not as a flesh whose coincidence with myself would be total but as a resistance. Thus the thinker who discovered the proper or lived body is also the one who saw to what extent the proper depends on the improper, such that I would remain ignorant of myself without this resistance that is necessarily opaque but that is essential to any effort. Unaware that his body resists him, the agitated sleeper or the sleepwalker is equally, and consequently, unaware that his body is in motion; no effort, therefore, can be attributed to him, and he does not apperceive his existence.[46] From the moment that I begin to know myself, I discover myself as always already a stranger, and I will never escape this constitutive alienation.

3.2 *Madness at the Heart of the Human*

"I am a force that goes!" says Hernani to Doña Sol in Victor Hugo's eponymous play,[47] and this could also be the cry of Biranian man – or, better, "I am forces that go!" For the resisting organicity is not itself without force: indeed, knowing oneself through effort is not mastering oneself, and while "the hyperorganic force that we call the soul"[48] governs our voluntary acts, Biran recognizes a "human duality, a free and active force and a force under the authority of neces-

45 Maine de Biran, *Mémoire sur la décomposition de la pensée*, p. 164, footnote.

46 See in particular Maine de Biran, *Discours à la société médicale de Bergerac*, "Nouvelles considérations sur le sommeil, les songes et le somnambulisme," pp. 82–123.

47 Victor Hugo, *Hernani*, in *Théâtre complet*, vol. I, ed. Jean-Jacques Thierry and Josette Mélèze (Paris: Pléiade, 1964), p. 1227, act III, scene IV, line 284. In context, he is warning Doña Sol not to love him (a warning she disregards) because his opposition to the king has repercussions that are out of his control and that he cannot predict: thus he is a force that he himself cannot direct.

48 Maine de Biran, *Commentaires et marginalia: XVII^e siècle*, "Règles de Descartes pour la direction de l'esprit," p. 30, footnote.

sity."[49] Certainly, it would be easy to identify ourselves only with the soul, that is, with that voluntary force that indeed we are, while rejecting as foreign to the self the forces of the organic unconscious that have, however, more power over us than we desire. It is not without regret that the thinker of Grateloup himself contemplates the influence of the physical on his temperament, complaining, for instance, in his *Journal* of "a series of disagreeable impressions that make existence painful to me, are opposed to any regular and consistent exercise of my faculties, give me the sentiment of my incapacity and my weakness, and make me feel a need to disperse myself outwardly, finding myself ill at ease at home [*chez moi*] or with myself."[50] Henry himself does not fail to observe that Biran "had already transformed the existential alienation, to which our own experience doubtless testifies, into an ontological alienation which is no longer an experience but a principle of explanation,"[51] but the phenomenologist immediately rejects this principle as "external [...] to true Biranianism," precisely because he affirmed it "starting in his earlier writings" and therefore before "the building of an ontological theory of the body."[52] Yet the same reasoning would also, and better, justify a reading that sees in this "ontological alienation" the cornerstone of Biran's work, the fundamental insight to which he remained faithful until the end despite the temptation of pure interiority. "There is nothing more instructive for the reasonable man than the history of madness," affirms Biran in 1809,[53] and therefore after the discovery of the lived body, not to show us errors to avoid, nor even to motivate us to better appreciate our condition as "reasonable men," as if that were a fixed and stable state, but rather because there is in each of us a share of an essential madness.[54]

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49 Maine de Biran, *Dernière philosophie, Existence et anthropologie*, "Appendice XIX," p. 373.

50 Maine de Biran, *Journal*, ed. Henri Gouhier, vol. II (Neuchâtel: La Baconnière, 1955), p. 46, entry from between May 22 and 26, 1817.

51 Henry, *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps*, p. 213; *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body*, p. 155.

52 Henry, *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps*, p. 214; *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body*, p. 155, translation modified.

53 Maine de Biran, *Discours à la société médicale de Bergerac*, p. 105.

54 On Marion's view, "Descartes' doubt [...] does *not* annihilate the *meum corpus*," and the "hyperbole" of the second *Meditation*, "remains rhetorical, not conceptual" (*Sur la pensée passive de Descartes*, p. 115, n. 1; *On Descartes' Passive Thought*, p. 99, n. 21, emphasis in original). For, indeed, "Descartes could not and should not have *directly* called my body [*le corps mien*], *corpus meum*, *directly* through the literally *insane* disqualification that the argument from folly seems to propose" (ibid., p. 106, emphasis in original). Biran, in contrast to the philosopher of the *cogito*, refuses to thus invalidate madness out of hand. Cf. Emmanuel Falque, *Spiritualisme et phénoménologie*, ch. IV, "Une contre-histoire de la folie," pp. 173–210; *Spiritualism and Phenomenology*, ch. 4, "A Counter-History of Madness."

Granted, the *myself* is abolished in madness, as also in sleep, but it does not follow that madness has nothing to do with people said to be "sane," for in truth, reason, sanity, and health are never as constant as we desire. To be human is to live at the limits of experience, precisely because human beings are, from the very moment of conception,[55] constituted by an absence of the *myself* that precedes and forms any presence to oneself. Thus, as the philosopher from Bergerac is led to admit,

> It seems certain to me [...] that such simple and fundamental affections as mirth or sorrow, courage or timidity, fear or intrepidity, strength [*force*] or weakness, etc., correspond immediately to certain natural or accidental dispositions that are always inherent to the organic system and inseparable from its particular mode of life; and that these simple and primitive affections also immediately determine the manner in which each individual senses his existence and, as a result, the direct relations of sympathy or antipathy that he maintains with beings and with things.[56]

To be clear, these "dispositions" and "affections" are not necessarily good, and it is sometimes, even often, necessary to resist them. Biran, a great admirer of stoicism even if he ultimately finds it inadequate,[57] is well aware of this. But "man is a mixed being,"[58] which means that he would no longer be human if one could, impossibly, remove from him this unconscious organicity thanks to which he inhabits the world.

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55 See Maine de Biran, *Discours à la société médicale de Bergerac*, "Mémoire sur les perceptions obscures," "Considérations sur les impressions intérieures dans le fœtus, dans l'état de sommeil et de délire ; et les sympathies qui s'y rapportent," pp. 30–36, in particular p. 32: "It is by such first determinations of sensibility or by the effect of such internal impressions conceived during the very time of gestation that one can account, up to a certain point, not only for the appetites, penchants, and inclinations of the nascent animal, such as, for example, the instinctive action of nursing in the child, and for the tastes of predilection, such as that manifested by a baby goat, of which Galen speaks, for the laburnum presented to him mixed with other plants when he emerges from his mother's womb, but also for certain precocious passions, certain marked sympathies or antipathies for certain things or certain people, without it being possible to explain the obscure causes of this invincible attraction or repulsion."

56 Maine de Biran, *Discours à la société médicale de Bergerac*, 105.

57 See, for instance, Maine de Biran, *Journal*, vol. 11, 67 (entry dated September 30, 1817): "This Stoic morality, as sublime as it is, is contrary to the nature of man because it tends to place under the authority of the will affections, sentiments, and causes of excitation that in no way depend on it, because it annihilates a veritable part of man from which he cannot detach himself."

58 See, for instance, Maine de Biran, *Discours à la société médicale de Bergerac*, 49.

Internal to myself, there lies exteriority; within what is most proper to me, there lies the improper. How then can we know or understand what it is to be a human being? The wise man is "he who knows that he knows nothing," as Plato's Socrates warns us; and he knows himself who admits the impossibility of knowing oneself. Yet it is not a matter of a pure impossibility that would consign us to animality; on the contrary, this impossibility founds all possible knowledge and reminds us, at the same time, that we should not expect too much certainty. It is necessary that man study himself in order to not fall into the ignorance of animals, to learn better how to live in a manner suited to human beings, to discover remedies to the ills from which we suffer – but also to not lose sight of the limits that constitute our existence and that we must recognize with a grateful humility.

4 Conclusion: Effort, Alienation, and Grace

By way of conclusion, I will comment, briefly and as something of a promissory note,[59] on Biran's late philosophy, the better to insist on his fidelity, throughout all the evolutions of his thought, to the contradictions of human life. Near the end of his life, he seeks in God the stability that he finds neither in himself nor in man in general – a turn that it is easy to misunderstand by supposing that it is a question of a desire to escape human limits. But if the thinker of Bergerac desires a fixity that humans will never attain, he seeks it precisely outside himself, and outside humanity, when he treats, in his late writings, of the possibility, for the human being, of forgetting himself in God[60] – a forgetting that is not without resemblance to Biran's vision of the creative inspiration that permits the genius to compose a work of art without needing to reflect on it.[61] Certainly, this final Biranian conversion may disconcert, to such an extent that

59 My future work will examine Biran's late philosophy in more detail.

60 See, for instance, Maine de Biran, *Dernière philosophie: Existence et anthropologie*, "Derniers fragments," 322, note from 1823 or 1824: "[Man] can also, up to a certain point, identify himself with God, by absorbing his *myself* through the exercise of a superior faculty."

61 See, for instance, Maine de Biran, *Mémoire sur la décomposition de la pensée*, p. 251 (emphasis in original): "This ineffable force of *inspiration*, which is the source of the most surprising *powers* of man, is itself outside the limits of his power; what is more, it ceases to exist and loses all the ascendency that it has to move us as soon as the will tends to give it laws or seeks to reproduce or imitate its supreme charm." This phrase is repeated almost identically in *De l'aperception immédiate*, pp. 186–187; *Of Immediate Apperception*, pp. 152–153 (I have not followed the translation given there).

the thinker of Grateloup himself asks, "How can this be conciliated with my doctrine of the *myself*?"[62] But Maine de Biran is not a philosopher of conciliation, and we should not seek too much to either unify or divide, according to much-discussed conversions,[63] a thought whose very tensions signal its veritable force. Indeed, the great thinker of effort, often so ill-satisfied with the fruits of his labors, does not make his readers' task easy, but he thereby shows us the portion of irreconcilability at the heart of the human condition. Since we are mixed beings – as he constantly reminds us – why would we seek a falsely simple image of our existence? Contradictions themselves, provided that they retain an essential relation to the truth, are worth more than the facile explanations that reconcile everything, but at the risk of losing all contact with existence.

Certainly, we must examine these contradictions to learn their lessons, rather than noting them without plumbing their depths, which would only be another way to distance ourselves from human nature. Even though we are constituted by effort, there are efforts that remain beyond our powers, such as the effort of perfecting ourselves, and by sparing us this impossible effort, divine grace transforms us without rendering us inhuman: it is precisely as a human that I am united to God by the gift of God himself. A journal entry written in June 1818 expresses by itself all the tension of Biran's late philosophy: "It is by *elevating ourselves* toward God, by *seeking to identify ourselves with him, by his grace*, that *we see and appreciate* things as they are."[64] It is, therefore, God's grace that permits us to "elevate ourselves toward" him, and even to "seek to identify ourselves with him," a search that will then permit us, not to be anni-

62 Maine de Biran, *Journal*, vol. II, 197 (entry dated December 28, 1818).

63 See Henri Gouhier, *Les conversions de Maine de Biran* (Paris: Vrin, 1948).

64 Maine de Biran, *Journal*, vol. III, p. 164, entry from June 1818 (emphasis added). In view of this remark, it is interesting to note that, far from seeing a contradiction between Biran's religious writings and his philosophy of effort, Auguste Nicolas proposes that "Maine de Biran experiences the divine excellence of Christianity [...] which [...] subjects the gift of this divine life to the condition of purifying the will by moral detachment from perishable goods and giving it to God by detachment from oneself: and this gift enriches, this detachment fortifies the will against the weaknesses of nature, by subjugating it only to free it, and by stripping it of the narrow love of itself only to expand it in God's immense charity" (Auguste Nicolas, *Étude sur Maine de Biran d'après le journal intime de ses pensées* [Paris: Auguste Vaton, 1858], p. 170). Biran's last philosophy is, in the eyes of this devout interpreter, a veritable apotheosis, a conclusion that naturally follows from his prior works. This reading, which finds in the *Journal* a proof of Christianity (see ibid., p. 221) may certainly surprise, given the reserves put forth by the author of the *Journal* himself regarding the possibility of "conciliating" his religious thought and his conception of effort. Might it not be legitimate to suspect Nicolas of reading Biran's *Journal* on the basis of his own

hilated, but on the contrary to be granted a new power that philosophy alone could never confer on its adepts, that of "seeing and appreciating" the reality of things. It is thus given to us to glimpse beyond the dichotomy of passivity and activity: the forgetting of oneself in God, like inspiration, is a sort of alienation that cannot be (entirely) attributed to the active efforts of the *myself*, but it is not a matter of a destructive annihilation that would reduce the *myself* to total passivity. And the passion of grace is still more profound than that of inspiration: as Falque emphasizes, it is a question precisely of "positive attachment to God as the unique *source* of phenomenality,"[65] including of the phenomenality of the *myself*. God reveals himself as the source of the limits that constitute me, and not as their negation. Including in his last writings, Biran opens for philosophy a new path, which is still too little recognized, in which alienation becomes as important as presence to oneself and the unknowable becomes as important as knowledge.

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conception of Christian life, or even of his own piety, which finds in Christianity not the *myself's* annihilation but rather its fulfillment? Yet the hypothesis according to which the thinker of Bergerac finally subscribed to a theory of divine grace in which the *myself* of effort would no longer have a place is hardly compatible with this *Journal* entry from June 1818. We should not seek either to conciliate or to exaggerate the possible contradictions too greatly, and if Nicolas risks interpreting the *Journal* on the basis of Christian theology, and not of the text itself, his reading is far from being as unfaithful to Biran's work as one could suppose at first glance.

65 Falque, *Spiritualisme et phénoménologie*, 295 (emphasis in original).

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