

Feeling as a Body: On Maine de Biran's Anthropological Concept of *Sentiment*

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Abstract

In this paper I would like to argue that in the context of Maine Biran's anthropological project – and among many other points of interest – one can find a particularly interesting theory of feeling (sentiment). Since it is impossible, in the short space of this modest article, to fully deal with such a vast and intricate subject, I will simply try here to formulate the essential terms of this possibility of analysis, leaving the more problematic implications, scope and details for further work.

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1. First remarks

In this paper I would like to argue that in the context of Maine Biran's anthropological project - and among many other points of interest - one can find a particularly interesting theory of *feeling* (sentiment). Such a theory, in addition to illustrating the internal coherence of Biranian thought up to its last developments, still holds today all its interest, as can be confirmed, for example, in comparison to P. Ricoeur's analysis of feeling developed in *L'homme faillible* (Ricoeur, 1993).

If we consider Biran's anthropological project in a global way, it can be said at the outset that the philosopher definitively removes

the concept of feeling from the classical horizon of the *Treaties of Passions*. It can be argued that, for Biran, *feeling* seems to play the role of *revealing* the various strata of human condition, the various *lives* – as Biran puts it – that make our complete human condition. Since it is impossible, in the short space of this modest article, to fully deal with such a vast and intricate subject, I will simply formulate here the essential terms of this possibility of analysis, leaving the more problematic implications, scope and details for further work.

2. Maine de Biran's "last philosophy"

In October 1823, Maine de Biran notes in his *Journal intime* the project to return (once again) to the immensity of his unpublished manuscripts in order to give them a new coherence and a renewed deepening. The philosopher will die a year later. The results of such a return to the totality of his work thus remain Biran's last word on how to understand the whole of his own philosophical work.

In the context of this final foray, it is particularly significant that Biran's central defining concept for the new coherence discovered in the maze of his texts is "anthropology". This is the word that looms clearly in the title chosen for the book that would spell out the new internal organization and the ultimate deepening of Biranism: *Nouveaux essais d'anthropologie ou De la science de l'homme intérieur* (de Biran, 1989: 1–210). Biran justifies this title in his *Diary* by stating that he intends to elaborate "the most instructive and most complete treatise on anthropology to date" (de Biran, 1957: 389). In the text that serves as *Avant-propos* to the *Nouveaux essais* he will write essentially the same: "This title announces that I intend to consider the totality of man, not just a part or a face of humanity" (de Biran, 1989: 1). It could be said, then, that the "anthropology" is taken by Biran as the new name for the full scope of the "science of man" (*la Science de l'homme*).

There is something particularly suggestive about this late project of organization and development: Biran confirms that a shadow of thoughtlessness remained present throughout the first stages of his philosophical project. The philosopher assumes it in these terms: "I felt that if I adopted the title of psychology according to my first intention, this would not indicate my goal better than that of physiology [...]" (1989: 1). This is a surprising statement: the psychology of effort – the basis and central axis of Biranism – would in itself be a partial approach to the human, just as any strictly physiological approach to the human has also always remained segmental. What, then, was left to consider of man's defining condition? What face of the human remains to be considered beyond the detailed description of the life of consciousness, beyond the account of the repercussions suffered under the power of affective life, beyond the portrayal of an ontological quest?

Here is Biran's answer: a third *life* must be recognized as constitutive of man's complete way of being, a life that is heralded in the peculiar "spiritual" experiences in which we seem to suffer the transforming effect of a transcendent, excessive, decentralizing force – a force that is not our own and seems capable of awakening the most noble and authentic of the human spirit. In other words, a complete treatise on anthropology must include the consideration of three defining or constitutive dimensions, strata or *lives* of the *humanity of man*: *human life* (based on aperceptive consciousness), *animal life* (grounded on the fluxes of affectivity) and *spiritual life* (connected to moral and religious experiences).

3. Three lives, three circles of feeling

3.1. Human life and the feeling of oneself

In the context of Maine de Biran's anthropological project, *human life* (*vie humaine*) is defined on the basis of his famous theory of effort.

Although the late texts of Biran on this subject provide important details and transformations in this regard (Azouvi, 1995: 371 ss), it can be generally stated that in the context of Biranian anthropology *human life* is shaped by the presence of the conscious *I*, that is, the state of *conscium* or *compos sui* that is born out of the inner relation of effort with its two constitutive elements: the so called hyper-organic force of will and the continuity of internalized resistance constituted by the *own body*. More precisely, such an aperceptive *I* (*Moi*) is confirmed, in the persevering exercise of the dual (non-dualistic) inner and immediate relation of effort, as a cause recovered in its embodied effect and as an embodied effect enlivened in its voluntary cause. The *I* of the biranian *volo* is thus a dynamism, an act that remains a unity in duality, a non-separated difference made of will and continuity of internalized resistance (de Biran, 2000: 2).

The bodily dimension of the aperceptive *I* is decisive in that self-awareness is inseparable from the docile inner resistance of the so-called inner resisting (and non-representable) body. The Cartesian distinction between *res cogitans* and “machine-body” is definitively discarded, precisely because the *unity in the duality* of effort is “manifested” by a “feeling”: the feeling of oneself (*le sentiment de soi*) – an immediate feeling forged as the relation itself of effort. I feel myself as an incarnated, *consisting I*; and only for this reason can I act upon my body (de Biran, 1989: 10) and feel other things.

In considering the *sentiment de soi* as a real, current, and living feeling I have of myself - and of which only concentrated reflection will reveal its distinct but not separate terms: the elements of primitive effort – Biran thus identifies a first stratum or circle of feeling. This layer is defined by Biran in a way that distinguishes his approach either from the perspectives of a philosophy of understanding (which always reduces feeling to a remnant that reason must discard), and from the complacent considerations of a philosophy of feeling (which

sees feeling as an almost magical source of intuitive knowledge): in the *sentiment de soi* Biran finds the enigmatic circumstance that the very fact of consciousness as self, aperceptive consciousness is an “identical and constant feeling that we invariably have of our personal existence” (*Ib.*).

To this extent, the *sentiment de soi* remains, as Biran points out, a *sui generis* feeling. This is why; feeling is generally defined by its “intentional” (Ricoeur, 1959: 261) dimension, that is to say, feeling is always a feeling about something (love is the feeling of what is lovable, hate the feeling of what is hateful, etc.) and always aims, therefore, at felt qualities of objects or people; the Biraninan *sentiment de soi*, however, remains a non-intentioned sphere and, in a certain way, also non-intentional: it is a feeling that accompanies one’s own aperceptive effort and thus corresponds to the architectural plan of one’s own primitive certainty of oneself: it is the feeling of being born to oneself; it is not a feeling of a quality, of a thing, or of another person. It is the attestation of the primitive fact of apperception itself, and, in this sense, is what allows all other “feelings” to be unfold. In this sense it is a condition of possibility: a subjective, conscious, bodily condition. I know it is *I* I’m aperceptively certain of, because *it feels*.

3.2. Animal life and the feeling of existence

A second *life* of Maine de Biran’s anthropology is *animal life* (*la vie animal*). Here another stratum or circle of feeling is to be found: the properly affective layer, that is, the “intentional” dimension by which the feeling remains at the same time certainty of oneself, self-awareness of being intimately affected by what can be felt and a *feeling of something*.

On the basis of what Biran calls, in the context of his anthropology, *animal life* are somehow the main achievements of his theory of

affectivity. This theory is developed from the description of what Biran calls the “affective or sensitive simplicity system”. Such a system “comprises all internal or external affections of sensibility without recourse to will and without the active participation of the self” (de Biran, 1995: 138). There is, therefore, according to Biran, an “affective life” under the line of aperceptive conscience, a *life* that has its own laws and, as it is impossible to control it by means of consciousness, often imposes itself to *human life* in a disturbing way. In other words, Biran argues that it is part of the human condition not only to know itself actively, but also to passively suffer the flow of a life operating in us without us - a life whose origin (blind to consciousness and outside of the aperceptive I), although it seems to be rooted in the impersonal and unrepresentable inwardness of the body’s *fatum* (of the affective body that resists becoming resistance in effort), “it matters little that it is in us or outside us” (de Biran, 1988: 92). This is a crucial statement. Indeed, it is not clear where affectivity “begins”. The affective dimension of the body brings to the heart of human condition the strangeness and bizarre reverberations of a life that constantly crosses consciousness without our being able to identify its nature, its causes, its origins. In a sense, it is an unconscious layer of the humanity of man that is outlined here: not the layer of a psychological unconscious, because for Biran the pure affections are outside the aperceptive I (which is the reference of the psychological), but of a *somatic unconscious*: there is an anonymous stratum of lived corporeality whose power to anonymously disturb the level of aperceptive consciousness can only be confirmed by all sorts of fluctuations in temperament, that is to say, by the inexplicable alternations in the way we *feel our existence*. Here is the new layer of feeling.

The repercussions of the *vie animal* (or affective live, *vie affective*) take the concrete form of intersubjective attractions and repugnance without reason, of inexplicable sympathies and antipathies, of

hallucinations and wild images that make our temperament, our humour fluctuate inexplicably (alienation itself has the same source). This is an important aspect: as we suffer the reverberations of affective life, we *feel* exactly at what point being an aperceptive I is not all that *I am*. I also can become the melancholic variations of a particular layer of feeling Biran calls the *sentiment d'existence* (the feeling of existence) – a name for the dramatic inner rhythm of human condition that flows under the layer of the aperceptive I, but constantly crosses it and deranges it.

Because *I never know* the origins or causes of the *sentiment d'existence* (de Biran, 1957: 123–124) referred to by Biran, I cannot know where it begins: in me? Outside me? It doesn't matter, really: I feel in the variations of the tone of my existence, something that can be felt. The *sentiment d'existence* remains a feeling of "something" that, in us or outside us, anonymously makes us change. Such a feeling thus corresponds to the certainty that my interior landscapes – my *inner meteorology* – are drawn by virtue of pre-predicative, pre-reflexive, pre-objective links established between the affective body and the world. In this context, to feel our existence is the inverse of the act of objectifying: the *sentiment d'existence* does not objectify, but simply attests to affinities, to "orbital" influences of others, of places, of actions over me. This feeling thus becomes the *veil* that makes me suffer without reason elective preferences, funeral disgusts, strong sympathy or inescapable repulsions. And this is precisely a key function of feeling: to manifest a co-natural (Ricoeur, 1959: 263) identification between my "inner meteorology" and the world, the others and the fluxes of life.

4. Spiritual life of religious feeling.

According to Biran, it still remains to consider, as part of a complete anthropological treatise, a third life. Biran calls it *la vie de l'esprit*, the

life of the spirit. It is as the *metaphysical Columbus* of the *continent of inner experience* that Biran, amazed at a whole host of new moods plaguing him in old age, wonders about the full meaning of his anthropology. Biran feels progressively more fragile at the end of his life, less free and less secure of any one of his philosophical ideas, values and opinions. He is aging. And everything seems to be constantly changing around him. He feels like losing depth. And if he feels it, it must be “human”, it must be anthropological. As a philosopher he thus must question these experiences, these new prevailing feelings and new ideas that came along them; and as Biran does that, he finds it increasingly adequate and justified to ask about the constitutive and defining human need to look for – and to hope for – an *absolute foothold of security*.

Biran finds the pertinence of this search to be confirmed by the texts of Saint Paul, of Bousset or Fénelon. The project of a complete anthropology is partly motivated by these authors which Biran, as always, meditates as a philosopher: it is not the case that a truly complete *science of man* should include, as a properly human trait, the spiritual experience of hoping for the *grace* of Love, of Beauty, of Peace and serenity, of hoping for the grace of God? This is an important philosophical question for Maine de Biran: a complete anthropology would remain incomplete without the consideration of what we would today call *religious experience*, since religious experience represents the defining human *thirst* for a fixed and absolute foothold, for something greater than us that can deliver us from harm, for something grand that one can only glimpse in graceful soothing moments.

The most curious feature of what Biran understands to be “the experience of grace” is this: in such an experience, we “tend to be absorbed in God by the loss of self-feeling and the identification of self with its real, absolute, unique object” (de Biran, 1989: 322). For

Biran such "identification" corresponds to a new form of passivity, in some way symmetrical of the passivity that characterizes affectivity: in both cases there is an identification or a kind of dissolution of the *aperceptive I* under the influence of forces that are independent of the line of effort and exterior to the forces of conscious thought. In fact, in both cases we can even talk of a kind of "alienation" of the I, in the sense that it seems that something other than *aperceptive certainty* takes its place as certainty of something else. It is in this sense that Biran speaks of "absorption into God".

Now, in this context, a third dimension or circle of feeling must be considered since the experience of grace (Gouhier, 1966: 94) does not correspond to a divine illumination that would make God more intelligible to intelligence, but rather to the idea that something divine - something sublime, elevated, beautiful, good - becomes more sensitive to the heart (102) (we cannot help thinking here in the platonic *thumos* and, also, in another way, of Pascal's *coeur*). As we suffer the influence of something greater than ourselves, we feel its truth.

But what exactly does this third layer of feeling correspond to? Consider this hypothesis: perhaps it corresponds to the attestation (precisely as feeling and through feeling) of the controversial mediation (and thus also of the disproportion) of the two impersonal or passive dimensions of human life which, by virtue of the spirals or circles of feeling, will somehow intersect, enlarge and decentre the *sentiment de soi*. Maybe this is what we are: a *sentiment de soi* somehow always touched, crossed and haunted by stratified and mixed layers of feeling: the layer affectivity, with its blind connections to bodily, mundane, intersubjective and earthly things (that are felt by the *sentiment d'existence*) and the plane of the *vie de l'esprit*, with its connection to "divine things" (de Biran, 1989: 322-333) (which illuminates the "restless heart" of religious feeling).

5. Final remarks

It should be noted that the third life of Biran's anthropology is not meant to deny the achievements of the theory of effort (de Biran, 1989: 225). Aperceptive consciousness, in a way, is born along the feeling of being an I; it then has always something to teach feeling, namely that feeling belongs to the one who knows what to feel is. But feeling has also something to teach aperceptive conscience: that all that I suffer in my life is in fact suffered by *me*, in *my life*.

This is the definitive teaching of feeling to aperceptive certainty: to be self-consciousness is not all human existence is; to be human is also to give room to what, in us, is not ourselves. Better still: to be human is to risk being more and being less than oneself: be it by identification to the orbit of others and the forces of the earth, be it by losing ourselves in the real, absolute and unique object of grace.

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