

MAINE DE BIRAN.

(1766–1824.)

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MAINE DE BIRAN was said by Cousin to have been the first of French metaphysicians since Malebranche. This is true, especially, if we understand by a metaphysician, as they did in the eighteenth century, a thinker who studies the origin of our knowledge, and the genesis of our ideas. Yet this original and deep philosopher was but little known to his contemporaries. Maine de Biran, though he wrote much, published but little during his lifetime, and what he gave to the world was not sufficient to make his thought fully understood. It was Cousin, who, in 1834, and afterwards in 1841, edited part of the manuscripts left by Maine de Biran. Since then other unpublished works have been edited, chiefly by M. Naville. If we have not yet the whole of Maine de Biran's writings, we possess enough to feel assured that no essential part of his doctrine now escapes us.

Maine de Biran never taught. Being a life-guardsman to Louis the Sixteenth in 1789, and later sub-prefect, and councillor of State, if he was also a philosopher it was in virtue of a strong natural aptitude and inclination. A sort of instinct irresistibly impelled him to make a study of himself. His health being delicate, he was watchful of the slightest changes in his physical condition and in his consciousness due to surrounding circumstances, and was consequently predisposed to introspection. "When one has little vitality," he writes, "or but a faint conscious sense of vitality, one is more inclined to observe internal phenomena. This is why I became so early in life a psychologist." He heard the springs of the machine creaking, and he felt his thought straining or slackening with them.

His taste for psychology first found food in Condillac, and then

in the Ideologists. He became acquainted with Cabanis, and was afterwards his friend; and though later he thought that he had advanced beyond his doctrine, he never completely rejected it. But he also read the Genevese Charles Bonnet, and it was probably by him that he was led to study the philosophy of Leibnitz, and to seek a psychological interpretation of it that would be in harmony with his own tendencies. It was at this time that he wrote his *Mémoire sur l'Habitude* (1805), an original and thoughtful work, which, under a form that suggests Condillac, already manifests



VICTOR COUSIN (1792-1867).

many of his own personal and independent views. In the next period he reached the clearest expression of his thought and expounded what he looked upon as his most important theory, to wit, the theory of effort, or of the first fact of consciousness. In this he was seconded by his friend Ampère, the celebrated physicist, whose philosophical work is inseparable from his own. He often enunciated his ideas at philosophical meetings held at his house in Paris. Royer-Collard was wont to be present, and also "young Professor Cousin," who comprehended the thought of

Maine de Biran marvellously well. In later years, when ill, and anxious to find a "firm and steady prop," Maine de Biran inclined towards a mystical and religious kind of philosophy; and he had yielded himself fully to it before the end of his life.

Condillac's psychology had separated, so to speak, consciousness from organism. Convinced that "we never get out of ourselves," he thought himself thus justified in studying only what reflection and analysis can reach and decompose within ourselves. Now this is an abstraction which Maine de Biran constantly finds to be contradicted by his personal experience. Our humor changes, our attention flags, our self-confidence disappears or returns without our knowing how; is it not because a multitude of dim sensations are produced within us, of which we are made aware only by their effects? Thus experimental psychology can as yet describe only the smallest portion of the soul's phenomena. This science begins with clear apperception, and with the distinction between the "self" and its modifications. But how many things take place in the soul before, during, and after the first consciousness of the self, which will never come within the range of our knowledge! These things Maine de Biran calls pure impressions, or simple impressions; they constitute the "affective life." They correspond to Leibnitz's dim and insensible perceptions; or, perhaps more exactly, to Cabanis's "sensibility." "These impersonal sensations, which I shall term pure affections, may be considered as the most immediate results of functions that underlie a general organic life . . . a state previous even to the birth of a conscious and thinking subject." This was a fruitful thought, which experimental psychology has turned to excellent account in our days. This science admits as a principle, as Maine de Biran did, that "simple impressions may constitute an absolute sort of existence, *sui generis*, apart from any distinct personality or consciousness of self. M. Pierre Ganet, for instance, has returned to this hypothesis in order to explain many surprising cases of hysterical anesthesia and amnesia, of twofold personality, etc.

This part of ourselves which escapes our knowledge also escapes our power. The affective life is independent of our will, though our will depends upon it. It is a purely passive basis of our complex being, from which the Ego can never be separated, and which becomes tense or slack or altered without our being able to interfere, at any rate directly; a sum of organic dispositions we are the less able to modify since they are the very source of our powers and volitions. They result from our temperament, and

what we call character is but the physiognomy of temperament—a striking phrase, for which we are indebted to Bichat, the physiologist, and which Maine de Biran made his own by exploring it thoroughly.

At about the same epoch Schopenhauer in Germany was saying the same thing; and though he was in nowise acquainted with the works of Maine de Biran, there is in this more than a mere fortuitous coincidence. Between Schopenhauer's psychology and that of Maine de Biran there lie hidden, under obvious differences, deep analogies. If little attention has hitherto been paid in France to this fact, it is because of a predisposition to see in Maine de Biran one of the founders of contemporary spiritualism,—and he is therefore associated with Cousin rather than with Bichat or Cabanis.

But this interpretation, while not false, is certainly incomplete, and not in harmony with history. Maine de Biran owes nothing to Cousin, and was, especially in his two earlier periods, imbued with the doctrines of Bichat and of the “immortal author of the *Rapports du Physique et du Moral*.” Now this was no less true of Schopenhauer. True, in Schopenhauer the ideas borrowed from Bichat and Cabanis were mingled with other elements taken from Kant, Plato, and Buddhist metaphysics, whereas Maine de Biran contented himself with investigating certain problems propounded by the eighteenth century. Yet both these men alike oppose to the conscious personality of the Ego the dim unconscious background which enfolds it, sways it, and even directs it, and predetermines, unknown to ourselves, our thoughts and actions, our intelligence and character. Only afterwards do their doctrines diverge.

Affective life constitutes in us what Maine de Biran calls “animality.” Above it, but linked to it, appears “humanity,” i. e., consciousness reflecting on itself and master of itself, personality, or the Ego. This latter begins to exist by itself only when exercising free activity or determined effort. Thus—and Maine de Biran likes to remind us that he is here taking up the thought of Leibnitz—the idea that the human person has of itself is originally the idea of an active force. The Ego is first of all activity and liberty. In other words, the Ego is the soul, insomuch as it perceives its own existence, but this it perceives only when its activity meets (within the body) with a resistance which it endeavors to overcome.

If this observation is correct, the whole structure of Condillacism falls to pieces. Sensation is no longer the first fact of con-

consciousness, the principle of all the soul's life. The very term "sensation" is abstract and ambiguous, because Condillac did not carry the analysis far enough. For, if sensation be conceived as simply passive, then it is only an "affective impression," and the Ego does not yet appear: sensation may take place without consciousness being aware of it. Does sensation imply a motor reaction, conscious and deliberate? Then it resolves itself into a passive and an active element. The latter is intentional effort. In it, and not in any received impression, must we seek the special origin of our active faculties, the pivotal point of existence and the foundation of all the simple ideas we may acquire concerning ourselves and our intellectual activity.

Yet Maine de Biran does not think that the soul appears to itself just as it really is. "I was at first rather inclined," he says, "to mistake the inmost feeling of our individuality, or what I called the Ego, for the very core of the substance of the soul. But Kant has taught me better. We feel our own individuality; but the real substance of our soul we feel no more than any other substance." No doubt the Ego that perceives and judges is the same that is perceived and judged; but this being which is perceived and judged has still an inmost core of substance inaccessible to apperception. It may be endowed, as Malebranche thought, with a multitude of properties or attributes which are unknown or do not come within the range of our inward sense. This inward sense may indeed assure us that *we* are thinking; and on this point Descartes's "I think, therefore I am," is irrefutable. But the most subtle analysis of this inward sense cannot possibly throw the slightest light upon our knowledge of ourselves, "as an object, outside of thought." To believe that, by means of analysis based on purely internal experience, we can at length arrive at the notion of a substantial Ego, is to mistake the psychological fact of what is within us, that is, ourselves in the actual exercise of thought, for the metaphysical notion of the substance which is supposed to remain the same beyond and beneath thought.

Maine de Biran here agrees with Kant, as he says. In Kant, however, the theory of the Ego's knowledge of itself has for its basis the whole of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and more especially the theory of sensible and intellectual knowledge. Maine de Biran, on the contrary, starts from the analysis of the first fact of consciousness, and on that analysis he afterwards attempts to found a theory of the understanding and reason. In opposition to the doctrine of categories, which is quite *à priori* in Kant, he endeavors to

maintain a psychological genesis of the general principles of thought. Thus, because the Ego perceives itself as a cause, Maine de Biran finds therein "the pattern and model of every idea of power, force, and cause." Unity, simplicity, existence, etc., are ideas which the Ego obtains by means of an abstraction wrought upon itself, and which in a way isolates its own attributes. If we find these attributes again in objects, it is because they have been, so to speak, projected by the Ego. In one word, reason is thus held to be the spontaneous result of a sort of self-analysis of consciousness.

But this is rather a sketch than a regular theory, and Maine de Biran was suspicious of everything that might carry him beyond the firm ground of experience. The science he seeks to establish starts from a fact and must lead only to facts and to the laws which they obey. The absolute, as Maine de Biran does not hesitate to confess, is beyond its grasp. How, he says himself, could all things fail to be relative in our eyes, since the very existence of the Ego, the individual personality which is the basis of the thinking being, is relative? The thing called Ego being a compound, or the result of the union and relation between two substances, can conceive or feel nothing but as a compound or relation. The very idea of substance seems suspicious to Maine de Biran. The Ego does not find it within itself, for it apprehends itself as a cause, not as a substance. This idea must, therefore, originate without our knowing it, in the representation of exterior things, space and matter. It was this idea that caused the philosophy of Descartes to tend in the direction of pantheism. It is the secret enemy of personality and liberty; it tends to mingle together in an obscure metaphysical unity the Ego-person in which everything has its beginning, and the God-person in which all things end.

Though an original and deep psychologist, Maine de Biran was a timid metaphysician. No doubt the study of the Ego induced him to think of it as a "hyperorganic" force, while the inward sense assured him of his liberty; but he was fully aware that there are problems, and most essential ones, to which his doctrine gives no direct answer, the moral problem, for instance. Therefore he wished to complete his psychology by a reasoned adherence to a general system of philosophy in accordance with his inmost tendencies. In his second period he felt himself won over to Stoicism, which is, in his eyes, a moral philosophy based upon the dignity of the human personality and upon the energy of active effort. But Stoicism expects too much from man's will; and although

Christianity, in its turn, makes man too weak and helpless, it was to Christianity that Maine de Biran turned in the latter years of his life for the "prop" of which he felt the need. He then wrote his *Nouveaux Essais d'Anthropologie*, which distinguish in man three lives, one above the other, as it were: sensitive life, which is in us that of the animal; human life, that is, the life of action and the struggle of the thinking principle against the instinctive and animal principle; and lastly, divine life, in which animalism is conquered and the struggle ceases because love has united man to the supreme source of all beings and all good. And thus, in a sort of quietism, ended this philosophy which had begun as a continuation of Condillac and Cabanis.