

The Self-Apperception and the Knower as Agent: an introduction to Maine de Biran's *Notes* about Kant

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1. *Maine de Biran and Kant's philosophy*

“My dear friend, this book by [...] Kant is what you should read before handling your work” (Ampère's letter, in Biran 1993b: 317). It is the year 1812 and André-Marie Ampère is aware of the several theoretical *impasses* with which his friend had been confronted while writing his last work, *Essai sur les fondements de la psychologie* (*Essay on the fundamentals of psychology*), and therefore he gives a precise suggestion to Maine de Biran: to go beyond the limits of his own philosophical tradition and to focus on the new and fruitful discussions on metaphysics. We know that, after this letter, the project of publishing the *Essai* was quite soon abandoned, but precisely this step in the development of Biran's thought introduced him to his dialogue with Immanuel Kant's philosophy. This dialogue, which was undertaken with great effort and several mistakes or misunderstandings, is often characterized by a rhapsodic unfolding and can be read only upon close scrutiny within the weave of Biran's philosophy. We can consider as exceptions to this rule only two short texts, whose English translation is here presented for the first time: *Note sur les antinomies de Kant* (*Note on Kant's antinomies*) and the denser *Notes sur la philosophie de Kant* (*Notes on Kant's philosophy*), probably written between 1815 and 1816 (Baertschi 1993: xxv), which are the only instrument that allows us to reconstruct the history of this dialogue. Undoubtedly, we are aware that Biran's interpretation of Kant's thought is somehow forced, so that, rather than talking about a “French Kant”, according to Jules Lachelier's emphatic definition (La Valette-Monbrun 1914: 513), we could consider Biran as reflecting on his own thought through Kant. The quality of his interpretation nevertheless consists in his particular style of receiving Kant's philosophy and therefore shows the development of his thought as well as his future interpretative outcomes.

Why did he cross his National borders? Why did he redact two commentar-

¹ Paragraphs 1 and 3 have to be ascribed to Denise Vincenti, whereas 2 and 4 to Marco Piazza.

ies on Kant's doctrine? The possible reasons should be detected in the extremities of this period, that is, the step right before the redaction of the *Notes* and the research resulting from these. This confirms the role of mediation and transition played by this essay on Kantianism. Indeed, this is precisely the period of one of Maine de Biran's several 'conversions' – according to Henri Gouhier's expression (1948) –, that leads him to the foundation of psychology on an ontological basis. In his introduction to *Rapports des sciences naturelles avec la psychologie* (*Relations of natural sciences with psychology*), written in the same period, we read that "rational psychology" has to find "a sufficient guarantee not only for *certainty*, but for the reality of our knowledge of beings, causes and substances" (Biran 1986: 16). Indeed, according to Biran, from the *mémoires couronnés* (*Influence de l'habitude* [*The influence of Habit*], 1802; *Décomposition de la pensée* [*Decomposition of the thought*], 1804; *De l'Aperception immédiate* [*On immediate apperception*], 1807), psychology had played the role of a science endowed with its own form of *certainty*, according to which the primitive fact of consciousness, or in other words the Self considered within its wilful ability, appeared as a self-evident datum. However, nothing was said about the origin of this epistemic certainty. The only reference to this was a sort of immediate deduction executed by the subject while reflecting on himself, or an intuitive judgment, immanent to the apperception of the Self. What is rather realized in the *Rapports* is the act of providing this certainty with a content, the object of psychology with evidence and especially with *reality*. Such a passage from the epistemological perspective of the earlier *mémoires* to the ontological one of the *Rapports* would be still not clear, if we did not take into consideration the studies carried out by Biran on Kant's philosophy at that period. Although he is not really interested in the specific criticist aspects of this thought, he nevertheless recalls Kant's notion of *noumenon*, while he talks about existence, and moreover recalls the *distinction between intellectual system and moral system*, in order to develop his own critique of the theory of knowledge.

Although he had already dealt with the problem of noumenon in the *version remaniée* (*revised version*) of his *mémoire* on the decomposition of thought, Biran comes back to this question in his short *Note sur les antinomies* (*Note on antinomies*), and definitively overcomes the criticist lesson, by showing that experiencing a phenomenon allows the subject to establish its reality and absolute existence: "Since, undoubtedly, the effect has no similarity to the cause, we cannot *guess* what is the cause by experiencing the effect; nevertheless, only the fact that we think [*unreadable*] or better that we believe that there is necessarily a cause is enough for us to have the *idea* of a sensible *quality* which is not the sensation itself nor similar to this latter in any aspect" (*infra*, p. 115). In other words, according to Biran, while undergoing and suffering

an experience even in the physical meaning of the word, the subject possesses a knowledge that cannot be reduced to the mere phenomenal sphere. It is still true that, as Kant states, it is impossible to judge the essence of things in themselves through the nature of phenomena, given that the effect does not contain the attributes of the cause. However it is also true that the ‘suffered’ effect can guarantee the real and absolute existence of the cause by which it is produced. He who experiences the shock of an electronic device, hidden from his sight, cannot know such a device nor define it as “the thing that made him feel that shock”, but he can deduce the *existence* of any cause that might have produced that shock. However, what is surprising is the *way* in which the subject reaches the notion of existence: believing in this latter is sufficient. The act of belief is therefore what founds our dealing with noumenal reality. But where does it come from? It is not a mere statement of apodictic and non-deducible existence (Gouhier 1948: 237), but rather a tension related to the intellectual constitution of the subject, that is, a ‘primitiveness’ existing with and through the fact of consciousness (Azouvi 1995: 305). Appealing to the belief, the *Note* does not specify how we can shift from the intimate sense to the notion of existence, but it states the possibility of such a shift, because believing in the existence of something independent of our mind is already a bridge towards the noumenal reality. Furthermore, such a belief is what allows us to “organize our actions or coordinate our ideas according to an order determined by the existence of these causes, and precisely in such a way that we can either enjoy their favourable influence or avoid their harmful influence” (*infra*, p. 116). In other words belief is the fundament of praxis and morals.

However, the question of the derivation of the category of substance or absolute existence (noumenon) from the primitive fact of consciousness is not the object of the *Note sur les antinomies* (*Note on antinomies*), but of the *Notes sur la philosophie de Kant* (*Notes on Kant's philosophy*). Through his critical analysis of Kant's category of *causality*, Biran states that upon close scrutiny there is no distinction between the cause understood as free agent producing sensible effects and the cause understood as fundament of what is accidental and contingent, which necessarily exists as substance. Indeed, if we recall the intimate sense, it is clear that the relation of causality already contains the category of absolute existence, because only through the effort given by the *relationship* between inner force and muscular resistance the Self can *feel* its own noumenal being. Biran writes: “then we would detect either in the primary relation of phenomenal causality or in the primitive fact of consciousness the origin of the two separated notions of passive substance and force” (*infra*, p. 119). On reflection, the consciousness then becomes aware of the unexpressed virtual force and the *feeling* of its noumenal nature becomes a

cognition. It is clear that what prevented Kant from being aware of such a relationship is the fact that he distinguished the intellectual from the moral system, excluding the former from the sphere of the Self. On the contrary, according to Biran, the intellect and the forms of consciousness are inherent in the intimate sense of individuality, since “causality, the primary and universal law of the subjective and objective *knowledge*, is [...] essentially contained by this primary point of view of the consciousness, within which man observes and considers himself as *an individual being in itself*” (*infra*, p. 123). In the same way, any distinction between the theoretical and the practical use of reason is abandoned, so that at the same time the subject becomes thinking *and* acting. Or better thinking insofar as he acts.

2. *The problematic foundation of metaphysics on psychology*

The way in which Biran writes about Kant is clearly affected by his partial and *heterodox* reading, which was and continued to be typical of the French intellectual world of that time (Bellantone 2010: 13-47). In fact, the only Kantian work that Biran had fully read was the *Dissertatio* dated 1770 – in which the notion of noumenon is still affected by Platonism and Rationalism – whereas his knowledge of the *Critique of Pure Reason* was merely based on the commentaries by Villiers and Kinker or on the *Histoire comparée des systèmes* (*Compared history of systems*) by Degérando. Although for this reason we cannot separate our interpretation of the *Notes* from such historiographical issues, we should nevertheless specify that precisely his partiality made possible a way of reading and receiving Kantianism that has later affected the Spiritualistic philosophy, from Félix Ravaisson up to Henri Bergson. However, the main aspect of this heritage is not, or not only, the interpretative way typical of criticism, but rather the peculiar use of this doctrine. The project of founding metaphysics on psychology, that later received a more complete and articulated formulation by Victor Cousin’s Eclecticism (1838), is realized through the ability of the Self – and of the introspective experience – to reveal the ultimate properties of the world, that is, to access the noumenal reality. Such an ability is clearly established by Biran in his *Notes* on Kant, where he states that only from the primary relation of causality (that presented by the primitive fact of consciousness) it is possible to draw the notion of necessary and absolute existence.

However, the Spiritualistic deduction of ontological properties from contents that ultimately are material is an intrinsically problematic operation, which is supposed to make clear – in order to avoid any empiristic and skeptical outcomes – the limits and borders between what belongs only to the sub-

ject and what has an universal and necessary value within the subject. Many commentators, including the contemporary ones, have underlined this difficulty inherent in Spiritualism. How can an inquiry into the merely subjective world describe the nature of the objective world and the ultimate properties of reality (Engel 2008: 236-237)? In some aspects, the answer is simple: it cannot do it, unless it deals with reality in a psychologistic and idealistic sense. This is even clearer, if we consider that the Kantian question of *transcendental* has been eluded or even misunderstood by these authors. This is why “the result of the inquiries of the Spiritualists was bound to look like a hybrid mixture of psychology and metaphysics, congenial to what Cousin called ‘Eclecticism’ and to what Ravaisson called ‘spiritualistic positivism’ but in fact much closer to a form of psychologism than they claimed to be. It is indeed, in all respect, a form of idealism” (245). Once it has established a correspondence between mental contents and the real properties of the world, Spiritualism has only to fit into a pattern of *idealistic* nature or to involuntarily surrender to *psychologistic* outcomes. Since the ontological characters are considered as depending on the a-priori (innate) intuition proper of the thinking subject, the reference epistemic frame is indeed a frame of idealistic nature, according to which the true reality is, ultimately, spiritual or mental. In the same way, by projecting outside what has a value only for consciousness, Spiritualism, instead of preserving metaphysics as science of being, would rather dissolve it into a “psychological washbasin” (245). It is worth remarking that this double alternative had already characterized Descartes’ proposal and now arises from Biran’s considerations, and despite Biran’s intention, with respect to the introspective method as well as to the Platonistic and Rationalistic – and therefore non-Kantian – use of the term *noumenon*.

In order to evaluate the rightness of this interpretation, our priority has to be the analysis of Biran’s reading of Kant’s thought, so that we may resolve whether there are still open possibilities that cannot be reduced to a mere Rationalistic interpretation of these issues. Of course, Maine de Biran is not Kantian, or at least his assumptions are not Kantian. This notwithstanding, his conclusions develop themes that are undoubtedly Kantian, so that under this aspect it is possible to say that, while overcoming Criticism, he re-embraces it. An indication of this is provided by the *Notes* and their analysis of the relationship between phenomenon and noumenon. If we read more precisely Biran’s shift from Self-apperception (phenomenal experience) to the conception of its absolute existence (noumenal reality), the supremacy of psychology over metaphysics diminishes: such a supremacy would be possible only if the reality of its object was *induced* or *deduced* from the primitive fact, and Biran does not consider it at all possible. The absolute is given *within* the intimate sense, as immanent to the

primitive fact of consciousness. For this reason, if on the one hand the apperceptive experience is still a moment of its own conception, on the other it is not a founding element in the ontological sense. In order to better understand this argument, we should above all take into consideration that, according to Biran, there is no distinction between phenomena and noumena. The only possible distinction is between “appearances perceivable by an outer or an inner sense” and “*absolute* realities that cannot be perceived by any *sense*” (Biran 1986: 275). In this perspective, there is only one being, the noumenon, within which we distinguish the invisible, that we believe but do not know, and the visible, that we know without believing (Azouvi 1995: 232). Once this essential homogeneity has been established, the distinction is nothing more than an epistemological result, and the shift from the Self-apperception to the absolute existence is nothing more than a shift within the same reality. On the basis of these issues, it becomes therefore difficult to talk about a psychologistic re-reading of Kantian notion of transcendental, since we are rather confronted with a radicalization or an extension of his theory of noumenon.

In this sense, the reversal of the traditional relationship phenomenon/noumenon avoids any suspicion of ontological correspondence or isomorphism – that, on the contrary, characterized Victor Cousin’s considerations on Kant (Lachelier 1896: 112; Bellantone 2010: 44) –, because what was previously considered as a psychologization of reality is actually a noumenization. This becomes clearer as Biran deals with the fundament of consciousness and, *a fortiori*, with that of the scientific knowledge: “Whereas, according to Kant, the representation of the phenomenon is organized in accordance with the rules of mind, in Biran it is rather the establishment of noumena or the things in themselves, conceivable behind our sensations, what justifies the organization that we apply between them through an objective attribution. Objectivity is not founded on compliance with rules, but on existence” (Paliard 1925: 189). Within this process of *establishing* noumena the notion of belief introduced in the *Notes* on Kant strongly recurs. Biran’s ontology is actually an ontology of projection, which moves from the subject, not considered as holder of the ultimate properties of reality (Psychologism) nor of rules regulating the organization of phenomena (Idealism), but as *executor* of the ontological construction of the world. In the perspective of Biran’s philosophy, this ontologically constructive ability of the Self constitutes an activity of formulating hypotheses, which, being based on the *belief* in the existence of a determined order, have later to be confirmed through observation (Azouvi 1995: 370). An example might be Copernicus, who starts from the hypothesis of heliocentrism and then deduces consequences that are still hypothetical. By comparing them with phenomena, “as they should actually be within the absolute space, in order to produce the sensible appearances

that we remark” (Biran 1986: 58), he can finally reach the *absolute* truth of the hypothesis. Moving from the projection of the order to the discovery of the actual *reality* of such an order, according to Biran, scientific knowledge builds its own epistemic certainty and objectivity of the external world.

3. *Against Kant or beyond Kant?*

In some aspects, the way in which Biran proposes the question of science follows that introduced by Kant in the *Critique of the Pure Reason*, but is opposed to the latter with respect to the solutions it offers. However we cannot talk here about anti-Kantian outcomes. What seems to be a sort of ‘metaphysical’ resistance actually outlines a path that was later followed by the French epistemological thought of the Twentieth century, namely by Gaston Bachelard, who, by analysing the notion of noumenon in relation to the progress of microphysics, reaches solutions that could only superficially be defined as anti-criticistic. In *Noumenon and Microphysics* Bachelard writes: “This noumenon is neither a mere metaphysical posit nor a conventional rallying sign. [...] This noumenology brings to light a phenomenotechnique, by means of which, new phenomena [...] are not merely discovered but made up from scratch” (1970: Eng. tr. 78). According to Bachelard, the new scientific knowledge, essentially mathematical, is a noumenology, that is, the establishment of existences which develops through *technical* construction of reality. Scientific reality is not discovered, but invented in accordance with projective processes and elaborations of mathematical nature, which create their own object of knowledge in an operative way. In fact, the knowledge of a hyper-microscopic object is useless, if we claim to isolate it: isolating a corpuscle means to detect nothing more than a “center of irradiation”, something de-individualized that lost its own nature of object or entity (Eng. tr. 76). Only by making the reference epistemic frame explicit, this latter can acquire again its nature as object and reality. Bachelard’s analysis achieves a reformulation of the ontological and constructively realistic function of the scientific knowledge (Vinti 2007: 242), that is possible thanks to the reversal – already proposed by Biran – of the relationship phenomenon/noumenon. Since the phenomenon is “more a means of analysis than an empirical bit of knowledge” (Bachelard 1970: Eng. tr. 76), what is left is nothing other than the noumenon, now understood as rational structure, as functional presentation and centre of notions drawn from the scientist’s projective-constructive work. In this sense, Bachelard’s reading is not opposed to Criticism, but defends it, protecting it from phenomenalist or noumenalist tendencies and avoiding idealistic outcomes, by reformulating the *ontological* function of

knowledge (Vinti 2007: 246 and 256; Pera 1974: 257). This consideration could be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to Biran's considerations on Kant.

Once the focus shifted from the ruling activity of the mind to the (projective and constructive) establishment of noumena, Maine de Biran and Bachelard both explain how this construction takes place and especially with which means. Again the two authors refer to Kant's structure, in order to carry out their critique of the faculty of knowledge. However, if, as for mathematical physics, it is not particularly difficult to state that the object of knowledge is derived from the psychologically dynamic and inventive work of scientists' community, it is harder to establish what such an activity is according to Biran, since he was rather in contact with a scientific *milieu* of clear classical tradition. As we said, the projective nature of the scientific knowledge has first of all to be understood as a projection of hypotheses that are later to be confirmed through observation, but the conditions that make this epistemological process possible have to be detected in the subject's possession of a dynamic and mobile order of categories, rooted into the immediate Self-apperception. In 1807, Biran had already prepared this foundation of the intellectual system on the intimate sense, when, defining the *reflexive abstractions* as formal patterns of the perceptive material (1995: 23), he effectively connected the categorial system to the qualities of simplicity, unity, permanence and causality, immediately given to the pure phenomenal Self (Piazza 2013: 22). In the *Notes*, the derivation of categories from the intimate experience of the Self is actually underlined, insofar as the author shows the pragmatic and moral nature of those criteria on which the constitution of the knowledge principles is based. Maine de Biran states that: "Kant inappropriately established a demarcation line between the principles of cognition and those of human morality; he did not understand that the *primitive* will, devoid of any phenomenal or sensible character, was at the same time the principle of science as well as that of morals" (*infra*, p. 120). It is, therefore, through the Self's apperception of its own qualities that categories gradually arise within it: the Self recognizes its being unique, as unique is the object of its knowledge; it knows its own simplicity, which simplicity it eventually finds in the external world as causal force and in accordance with such qualities it judges the objective reality. The only difference with respect to the theory of reflexive abstractions, presented in the *De l'Apperception immédiate (On immediate apperception)*, is that the author adds to the fore-mentioned categories that of reality, according to which the Self is not merely unique, simple and causal, but is so in that it exists in a necessary and absolute manner.

4. *The knowing subject as agent*

Biran's emphasis of the difficulties inherent in the distinction between intellectual and moral systems does not represent an unjustified diversion from Kant's doctrine but, on the contrary, outlines a perspective on our epistemic activities, which, developed in the Twentieth Century and still fruitful now, present the subject of knowledge as an ever-*acting* subjectivity (Chang 2008). In the *Mind and the World Order*, Clarence Irving Lewis deals with the a-priori principles of knowledge and underlines that any epistemic activity requires a context of *alternatives* and variations, in order to be such. "The rationalist prejudice of an absolute human reason, universal to all men and to all time, has created an artificially exalted and impossible conception of the categories as fixed and unalterable" (1929: 233), which does not allow us to account for the historicity of a-priori nor of its dependence on a determined social context or a particular system of individual and shared beliefs. However, this does not mean that the principles ruling the scientific knowledge are connected with the changeable and arbitrary activity of our mind; what is shown here is rather their *pragmatic* nature, their way of working as "attitudes tentatively assumed, disappointments in the ends to be realized, and consequent alteration of behavior" (239). The pragmatic choices that characterize the formation of our categorial system are questions of value which cannot be reduced to forms of conventionalism nor to irrationalistic drifts (Chang 2008: 121). On the contrary, "this a priori element in knowledge runs very deep; it is present whenever there is classification, interpretation, or the distinction of real from unreal – which means that is present in all knowledge" (Lewis 1929: 266).

The critique on the static nature of Kant's categorial system and, therefore, on the abstract character of the transcendental Self results in such a general interpretative frame, according to which the *knower is always given as agent*. However, Lewis' appeal to the pragmatic criteria is limited to the postulation of the existence of an active subject of knowledge, without clarifying on *what* it acts. In her *The Knower and the Known*, Marjorie Grene takes this argument further and from the knowledge considered as pure doing she shifts to the *executor* of this construction, who is now presented within his organic and cognitive determinations (Chang 2008: 121). "The activity of mind is not like the 'activity' of a strong acid, it is not a bare event, but a *doing*, and it must be done by *someone*" (Grene 1966: 143); thus, reducing the analysis to this mere doing would exclude from the question the only protagonist of the knowledge activity, returning to the "Kantian agent" who is actually an "agent with no identity" (143). Developing an argument vaguely inspired by Biran, Grene's epistemology underlines the importance of the organic and individual sphere

of the knowing subject within the process of acquisition of cognitive competences: indeed, the human being is an historical person rooted, as living organism, into a world of living organisms; only this double paradigm can frame the activity of a knowing mind. In other words, this proposal is a conception *embodied* in the mind, which accounts for the limits, hopes and discordances entailed by the process of acquisition of cognitive competences and indicates the degree of risk for (never the abolition of) the reason. Mind's being "within a situation" is, however, an important statement of *reality*. In fact, as conclusion of her chapter on Kant, Grene adds that only if we recognize these characters as belonging to the Self, "the object of possible experience, the Transcendental Object = X, becomes itself clearly the *real* reality" (152). This means that, in an epistemic frame, truth and reality have the same step.

As already occurred in Maine de Biran, any interpretation of Kantianism aimed at inquiring into the empty nature of the transcendental Self, in order to detect its fundamental characters and criteria, has in the end to subordinate the epistemic *certainty* to the *reality* of its object. The subject may be conceived, according to Lewis, as a centre of variations and alterations, so that he is the holder of a structure of knowledge that has become stable through time and that can be modulated in accordance with the pragmatic needs, or it may be conceived as the *living* subject of Grene's epistemology; however, in terms of subject, there is a radicalization of the gnoseological revolution carried out by Kant. Analyzing more in depth the subjective element of the relation of knowledge actually allows us to frame the rules of formation of the categorial structure not only into the Self's knowledge activity, but especially into its ontological and biological-vital composition. Although he did not directly influence this debate, Biran's considerations on the subject's active role is still the first example of reinterpretation of Kantianism in this direction. However, the fact that this does not entail any form of psychologism or idealism is assured by the conception of the subject not merely as he who 'makes' reality, but as he who plays a creative and receptive role in the process of knowledge of the world.

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