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A Universal and Absolute Spiritualism

Maine de Biran's Leibniz

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In France during the nineteenth century the production of new editions, interpretations, and expositions of early modern philosophical texts was a flourishing activity. However, it is important to recognise when examining the scholarly works of this period that such interpretation and exposition was almost never produced without an agenda. A favourable interpretation of one of the giants of early modern philosophy that shows them to be the natural 'father' of one's own philosophical perspective could act as a significant legitimation of this view and, consequently, could become a weapon in philosophical combat. In this chapter I argue that Maine de Biran's interpretation of Leibniz, and in particular his 1819 *Exposition de la doctrine philosophique de Leibniz*, should be partially understood in this spirit. I show that the importance of Biran's *selective* Leibnizianism is clear already in the 1811 Copenhagen treatise; however, it gains added significance in the 1819 text since he, I argue, uses his selective interpretation as a defence of his own position and critiques the remaining aspects of Leibniz's philosophy to demonstrate the weaknesses of another philosophical position developed by one of Biran's contemporaries: the 'young professor' Victor Cousin. Furthermore, even after Biran's death in 1824, this strategic encounter with Leibniz turned out to be crucial for the development of nineteenth-century French thought. Not only did Biran present an alternative spiritualism to Cousin's eclecticism (which was to become the orthodox philosophy of the State), he correctly identified its major faults, and left the seeds for its eventual overthrow. Understood as such, therefore, we can recognize the vital historical role played by Biran's short *Exposition de la philosophie de Leibniz*. It was in part responsible for a significant change of direction in French philosophy and its

influence can be recognised in a lineage that passes through Félix Ravaisson, Pierre Leroux, Émile Boutroux, Henri Bergson, to Gilles Deleuze.

The question driving this chapter is 'why did Maine de Biran believe it to be productive to engage selectively with Leibnizianism?' I argue that there are three main reasons, and this chapter is structured so that each reason is addressed in turn roughly following the chronological development of Biran's thought. In §1, I show that by separating the a priori from the a posteriori aspects of Leibniz's philosophical method, Biran believed he could more distinctly bring to light a key part of Leibniz's metaphysics of experience. Contrary to previous commentators on Biranian Leibnizianism, I argue that Biran's project is not opposed to Leibniz's conception of force and experience, but fundamentally in line with it. Nonetheless, I do not suggest that Biran's project is reducible to Leibniz's, and in §2 I show how Biran used this engagement with Leibnizian philosophy to develop his own. I focus on [i] his defence of force contra Hume and [ii] his theory of the virtual, and I argue that these promising developments of Leibniz's metaphysics, although not without problems, are crucial for understanding both the fertility of Leibniz's system and the influence of spiritualism in French philosophy more generally. The final reason Biran engages with Leibnizianism is that he could use the argument for the necessity of the selection to present a clandestine critique of Victor Cousin's eclecticism. As I show in §2 Biran believed that his philosophy was a spiritualist development of the best parts of Leibnizianism; and, I argue in §3, he was able to use the opportunity of the 1819 *Exposition* to show the superiority of his spiritualism to Cousin's alternative by concurrently insinuating that the latter's was in line with Leibnizianism's worst parts. In the battle for the true heart of Leibniz's philosophy, Biran believed his own spiritualism to be the real descendent of the monadology properly understood.

1. MAINE DE BIRAN'S SELECTIVE LEIBNIZIANISM

Biran's 1811 Copenhagen Treatise opens with an epigraph from Leibniz's 1707 letter to Michael Gottlieb Hansch on Platonic philosophy (D.II.222-25). Both the choice of text and the way the quote has been 'cut' are important. The choice of this reasonably esoteric text shows us that Biran must have already been deeply engaged in his study of Leibniz's work. Nonetheless, the most interesting point for understanding Biran's appropriation of Leibnizian philosophy is the cut. Here is the sentence in full with the part used for the epigraph in bold:

> For we have now seen, from the pre-established harmony, that God has ordered all things so wonderfully that **corporeal machines serve minds and what is providence in a mind is fate in a body**. (E.446: L.593)

The relevance of the cut is that Biran believes that Leibniz's philosophy is crucial for presenting us with a way to reconsider the mind's 'providence' in relation to organic corporal machines. Nonetheless, Leibniz undermines this insight's full potential by overshadowing it with his rationalist theory of pre-established harmony (PEH). However, if we cut this latter part from his system, we are left with a philosophy of experience that is a stark improvement on either the Descartes-Malebranche-Spinoza rationalist school or the Locke-Hume-Condillac sensualist school. I call Biranian Leibnizianism 'selective Leibnizianism' because I disagree with the previous commentators on this work (Naville, 1859, Robef 1925, Naert 1983, Vermenen 1987 and 1995) who agree that the Leibniz Biran creates through this move is more Biranian than Leibnizian and the conception of force that results is distinctly opposed to Leibniz's own. On the contrary, I argue in this section that Biran was a remarkably insightful reader of Leibniz's philosophy, and a close reading of texts that were available to him, as well as of texts that were not, show that Biranian Leibnizianism is still recognisably Leibnizian. As I show in §2, it is an *ampliative* rather than a *distortive* Leibnizianism, even if, as I argue in §3, Biran's choice to write an exposition of Leibniz's philosophy was made with a significant strategic agenda.

Although Leibniz's philosophy was always a presence in Biran's writing, its importance considerably increased towards the end of the first decade of the nineteenth century. At the century's commencement, Leibniz is the audacious genius who attempted but failed to execute the impossible project of the universal characteristic (OMDB.I.297; II.290-291), yet by 1811 (as I suggest the epigraph is supposed to signify) he has become Biran's important influence: thinking *with* Leibniz became one of Biran's most important strategies for the development of his own thought. This is also exemplified by the fact that one of the mere two texts that Biran published after the 1802 *Influence de l'habitude* and before his death in 1824 was an exposition of Leibniz's philosophy. His change of attitude was principally encouraged by an engagement with two books: Joseph Marie Degérando's (1804) *Histoire comparée des systèmes de philosophe* and Madame de Staël's (1810) *De l'Allemagne*. The first caused a global change in Biran's attitude to philosophy's history. As Henri Gouhier (1948: 251-252) shows, before reading Degérando's text, Biran believed it was not possible to develop both the 'intense erudition' necessary for historical scholarship and the judgment and reflection necessary for progress in 'psychology'. However, the former's book proved that the two could be 'very happily reconciled... and even lend mutual aid to each other' (1948: 252). Degérando showed Biran that the history of philosophy need not simply be thinking *about* a past great philosopher; thinking *with* a past great philosopher could be to do philosophy, and even significantly improve one's philosophizing. Nonetheless, it would be Staël's work (and conversation[1]) that would suggest to Biran the great profit that could be gained from thinking specifically with Leibniz and present in embryo the view of his work Biran would develop in his philosophy – especially in the 1819 *Exposition*.

Staël's engaging three-volume work on Germany was of the utmost importance for the reception of German philosophy in France during the first half of the nineteenth century[2]. *De l'Allemagne* was pioneering because it clearly identified both the problems with eighteenth-century French

[1] 'Conversation with this famous woman is always brilliant and animated' (JI.I.224-225).
[2] See Vermeren (1995: 35-39) to which the discussion of Staël owes much.

philosophy and the direction it should take in the nineteenth. For Staël, the sensualism or Lockean empiricism that took hold of French and English philosophy throughout the eighteenth century was the 'principal cause of immorality'. Locke and Condillac's replacement of conscience and liberty with interest and determinism made philosophy the enemy of humanity and alienated it from the profoundest 'beliefs of the heart' (See MDS.III.29-30). Nonetheless, since Leibniz, she claims, the greatest German minds have taken a more productive route, one in tune with the spirit of humanity. They have shown there is an inextricable link between metaphysics and morality. This, she believes, is a profound discovery since it shows why philosophy must be studied by all educated minds. The difference between a philosophy of mind which defends the doctrine of the passive tabula rasa and one which defends the existence of the causa sui active mind which can draw truth from its own resources carries with it the greatest of consequences. It is the latter on which liberty and morality depends. The father of this 'true philosophy' is, according to Staël, Leibniz. He is both Germany's:

> Bacon and Descartes. We find in this excellent genius all the qualities which the German philosophers in general glory to aim at: immense erudition, good faith, enthusiasm hidden under strict form and method… everything in Leibniz displayed those virtues which are allied to sublimity of thought, and which deserve at once our admiration and our respect. (MDS.III.58-59)

After stressing her admiration, she proceeds to split Leibniz's work into two halves; a division Biran will follow. First, she claims that Leibniz's wild a priori reasonings are indefensible. He 'pushed his abstractions too far' (MDS.III.63), and the result—PEH and the theory of monads *qua* the universe's 'simple elements'—were gratuitous over-speculations. Nonetheless, when Leibniz resisted the temptation to be led astray by abstraction, and stuck to concrete reflection on the soul's inner workings, the results were amongst the most insightful in philosophy's history. His greatest achievement was to add the sublime restriction 'except the intellect itself' to

the empiricist claim that there is nothing in the intellect that was not first in the senses (NE.111). This restriction is the result, and signifies his defence, of the activity of the soul, his experimental reflection on inner sense, his affirmation of moral liberty, and his maintenance of the 'moral being in its independence and rights' (MDS.III.69). This is the everlasting foundation on which the great German speculative systems were built.

Importantly, Staël insists that France's turn to the Locke-Hume-Condillac school has been an unfortunate detour. Had France continued to follow its seventeenth-century great minds, such as Descartes and Malebranche, it would now share the same philosophical opinions as those promoted in Germany. France's philosophical progress in the nineteenth century could be significantly boosted by a return to the systems of its early modern genii. Leibniz then should become a crucial figure for French philosophers wishing to reinstate the conversation with those intellects *outre-Rhin*, since 'in the progress of philosophy', she claims, 'Leibniz is the natural successor of Descartes and Malebranche, and Kant of Leibniz' (MDS.III.38). Nonetheless, despite emphasising the era-changing importance of Kant's work, she is lukewarm regarding the necessity of studying it in the requisite depth to master it. She even says that '[n]o one in France would give himself the trouble of studying works so thickly set with difficulties as those of Kant' (MDS.III.96). Her judgment that Leibniz provided modern philosophy's everlasting foundation while Kant was barely worth studying in original was probably a major contributing factor for why France's philosophy from the first three quarters of the nineteenth century is better understood as 'post-Leibnizian' than 'post-Kantian'[3].

Biran follows Staël's evaluation of the most important aspect of Leibniz's metaphysics since he too regards it is a system capable of providing a proper analysis of the inner workings of the soul. Furthermore, for Biran, it offers a metaphysics of personality; a way to do justice to individuality without it either being swallowed up in the all-encompassing power of the God of

[3] See Dunham (forthcoming).

the occasionalists, or becoming, with the empiricists, the mere passive effect of impressions. Leibniz's metaphysics presents us with a 'universal and absolute spiritualism' (OMB.XI-I.151); a doctrine capable of conquering the inherent passivity in both the aforementioned positions, leaving us with a truly free moral subject. Again, metaphysics and morals are inextricably linked[4]. Following Staël further, Biran divides Leibniz's work into two parts: the first rationalistic, the second experiential. However, he advances on Staël by demonstrating that these two parts are fundamentally incompatible. First, we have the Leibniz of forces and free individuals, but second, we have Leibniz's rationalist God, or absolute, that, in common with the Gods of all of the Cartesian metaphysical systems, threatens to subsume the freedom of the individual under its all-encompassing power and leads to pantheism. In this section, I explain Biran's understanding of the experiential part, but I leave his argument for its incompatibility with the a priori part until §3.

Metaphysics begins, for Biran, with Descartes (OMB.VI.17-8). His philosophy marked its genuine commencement for three related reasons. First, he established the dividing line between the functions of the body and those of the mind whilst he, second, inaugurated the proper introspective method or 'way of reflection' to study the latter. Finally—and for Biran consequently—he made the testimony of inner sense the generative principle of all knowledge. Nonetheless, Biran argued that the Cartesian metaphysical system suffers from a serious flaw. The fundamental system is prone to slip towards pantheism. As soon as the idea of a 'passive' substance is introduced, the Cartesian metaphysics begins to collapse into a form of monism; both *res extensa* and *res cogitans* are swallowed up by the infinite substance: God. According to Biran's interpretation of Descartes's metaphysics, no power belongs to 'extended substance' through which it could cause itself to act. The only qualities that belong to its essence are extension, flexibility, and changeability (AT.VII.31: CSM.II.20). As extension has no power of its

[4] 'Madame de Staël appeared to have been well aware of the intimate links which unite metaphysics and morality in a common principle' (JI.I.84).

own, whenever it feels as though we are resisting the power of a material object, we are actually resisting God. Unfortunately, extension is not the only passive substance in Descartes's system. For he argues that the distinction between creation and preservation is only 'conceptual' and the same force needed to initially create the world, i.e., the infinite force of God, is required at every moment to preserve it: duration is constant recreation (AT.VII.48-9: CSM.II.33). Thus, whenever it feels as though I voluntarily will an action, it is not the I that wills, but God. I have the desire (itself caused by God), but I am not responsible for the causal action (cf. G.IV.515: AG.165-6). The dynamic play of the mind and universe results from God's power alone. Biran argues that the pantheist consequence of this hypothesis is the same for all of the Cartesian systems. His logic is simple:

1. God is the sole cause, and every other existing being is merely an effect of God's power.
2. It is 'logically certain that all effects are eminently or formally enclosed in their cause' (OMB.XI-I.142)
3. Every created being is enclosed in God and there is no real distinction between God and nature. [By 1 & 2]

Spinoza's route is different, but the destination is the same. For the Spinozist argues that if the distinction between extension and thought depends on a difference of *attribute* or *fundamental mode* alone, there is no reason why these attributes or modes should not belong to one ultimate substance. This logically follows from Descartes's definition of substance as a 'thing which exists in such a way as to depend on no other thing for its existence' (AT.VIIIA.24: CSM.II.210) and his belief that 'extension' and 'thought' exist 'only with the help of God's concurrence'. Biran concludes that only mysticism separates occasionalism and Spinozism, 'logic unites them' (OMB.XI-I.142).

Leibniz's great merit is that he escaped the errors of pantheism by developing a metaphysics of forces and refused to allow 'force' to be subsumed under the power of the infinite being:

> To what did Leibniz grasp onto to keep himself from this dangerous precipice, which, since the origin of philosophy, has led the boldest and most profound speculators towards the empty concept of the *great whole*, *nothingness* deified, the devouring abyss that comes to absorb all individual existence? We must say it, the author of the system of monads was saved from this disastrous aberration only by the nature or the proper character of the principle on which he based his system; a principle truly one and individual - the primitive fact of the existence of the *I*, before having acquired a unique and absolute notion. A system that multiplied or divided the living forces in accordance with the intelligible elements or atoms of nature, would, it seems, prevent or dissipate forever those sad and disastrous illusions of Spinozism, too favoured by Descartes's principle. (OMB.XI-I.140)

While all Cartesian created substances are, on the final analysis, passive, Leibniz presents a metaphysics where all created substances are ultimately active: '*Toute substance est force en soi, et toute force ou être simple est substance*'. For Leibniz, rather than substance being a placeholder for forces in which they inhere, force *constitutes* substance. While Descartes 'constructed thought with elements borrowed from a passive nature', Leibniz 'constructed nature with elements taken from the activity of the I' (OMDB.VIII.223). Biran places a great deal of importance on a 1694 text called 'On the Corrections of Metaphysics and the Concept of Substance' (G.IV.468-70: L.432-434), and on one short passage in which he claims to find Leibniz's whole system condensed. The passage follows (I have divided it into five parts for analytical reasons):

> [A] from the concept of substance I offer…. follow… primary truths even about God and minds and the nature of bodies – truths… of the greatest utility for the future in the other sciences… [B] the concept of *forces* or *powers*, which the Germans call *Kraft* and the French *la force*, and for whose explanation I have set up a distinct science of *dynamics*, brings the strongest light to bear upon our understanding of the true concept of *substance*.

> [C] Active force differs from the mere power familiar to the Schools, for the active power or faculty of the schools is nothing but a close possibility of acting, which needs an external excitation or a stimulus, as it were, to be transferred into action. Active force, in contrast, contains a certain act or entelechy and is thus midway between the faculty of acting and the act itself and involves a conatus. It is thus carried into action by itself and needs no help but only the removal of an impediment. [D] This can be illustrated by the example of a heavy hanging body which strains at the rope which holds it or by a bent bow. For though gravity and elasticity can and ought to be explained mechanically by the motion of the ether, the ultimate reason for motion in matter is nevertheless the force impressed upon it in creation, which inheres in every body but is variously limited and restrained in nature through the impact of bodies upon each other. [E] I say that this power of acting inheres in all substance and that some action always arises from it, so that corporal substance itself does not, any more than spiritual substance, ever cease to act. (G.IV.469-70: L.433; cf. UL.VI.530: WFNS.35 & G.IV.472: WFNS.22)

This passage is so valuable for Biran for two reasons. First, the novel conception of force in [C] presents an alternative to the Cartesian theory of passive substance and thus blocks one route to pantheism; and, second, he believes it shows that the notion of force, which replaces substance, is gained from analogical reflection on the active nature of the primitive fact of our self-consciousness, and we can methodologically work from first-person introspection to metaphysical truths concerning souls, bodies, and God. Most commentators have argued that by reading Leibniz this way, Biran has actually *reversed* Leibniz's method. Euthyme Robef argued that Leibniz introduced active force into philosophy to make it 'fully rational following the purely a priori type of objective truth'. Leibniz's concept of force is obtained from external origins and is 'objective, abstract, formal, and universal' and 'not at all subjective, inner, reflexive' (1925: 22-23; cf. Naville, OI.I.CV, Naert 1983: 511, and Vermeren 1995: 55-56). Robef concludes that we

could even say that Biran's and Leibniz's doctrines of active force diverge so profoundly that they are in fact opposed to each other. Rather than 'spiritualize' nature, Leibniz 'materializes the mind': 'The reflexive notions of radical energy, active force, or tendency participate more in pure automatism and the passivity of matter, than in the final efficacy and freedom of the mind' (1925: 100). From the passage above, we can see that this claim is not without some prima facie plausibility. In [B] Leibniz relates 'force' to his science of dynamics and the examples he uses in [D] to illustrate active force as described in [C] are drawn from external sense perception, not from ideas of reflection. Nonetheless, I suggest that if we play close attention to [E], the real role of [D] is illuminated. In [E] Leibniz takes it for granted that spiritual substances never cease to act. He believes we cannot doubt this considering our constant access to its proof: internal reflection. What needs to be shown is that this is true also of corporeal substances and this is what he attempts to show with the examples in [D], i.e., we are justified in going by *analogy* from all spiritual to all corporeal substances. Leibniz says elsewhere, 'nature, as is her custom, gives us several visible examples to help us work out what she keeps hidden' (G.III.340: WFNS.204). [A] bolsters this point by implicitly suggesting the 'principle of uniformity' (PU), which states that (when Leibniz makes it explicit) 'all the time and everywhere everything's the same as here' (G.III.343: WFNS.220-221). We can go by analogy to discover not only truths about the nature of created substances, but even about the ultimate substance: God.

As Paul Lodge (2014) has shown[5], an interesting aspect of Leibniz's argumentation for this new conception of substance is emphasised in his correspondence with the Cartesian Burchard De Volder. In at least eleven letters, De Volder pushed Leibniz for an a priori proof to demonstrate that the essence of substance is active force. However, contrary to Robef's claim that Leibniz's concept of active force purely follows 'the a priori type of objective truth', Leibniz never

[5] I am grateful to Lodge for allowing me to see this work before publication and for a helpful discussion concerning Leibniz's work. The following quotes from the *Leibniz-De Volder Correspondence* and *Of Nature Itself* are from Lodge's article.

attempted to and instead insisted 'the fact is demonstrated a posteriori'. He tells him 'I do not see how you could have doubts about the internal tendency to change in things since we are taught that there are changes in things by our experience of the phenomena, as well as from the inside, where the operations of the mind themselves exhibit changes' (LDV.279; cf. 157, 277, and 307). That Leibniz considers this so obvious lends credit to my claim about the role of [D] and [E] above. Leibniz can then reason from our experience of internal activity to the nature of all substances via the application of the PU. Biran would have been aware that Leibniz uses such a method from works such as *On Nature Itself*. Leibniz there writes:

> if we attribute an inherent force to our mind, a force for producing immanent actions, or… a force for acting immanently, then… it is reasonable to suppose that the same force would be found in other souls or forms, or… in the nature of substances – unless someone were to think that, in the natural world accessible to us, our minds alone are active, or that all power for acting immanently, and... all power for acting vitally is joined to an intellect, assertions that are neither confirmed by any rational arguments, nor can they be defended except by distorting the truth. (G.IV.510: AG.161)

What is especially interesting about Leibniz's two-step argument from experience is that he uses it in two ways relevant for Biran's purposes: First, in texts such as *Of Nature Itself* and the *Conversation between Theodore and Ariste* (see G.IV.589: AG.265), he uses it to argue against passive substance and occasionalism. Crucially, for Biran, the argument is used to allow ontological space for the willing subject. However, second, as Pauline Phemister (2004) has shown, Leibniz uses it in relation to English empiricist philosophers such as Locke. This use is vital because Biran's work was an attempt to reform empiricism (see Hallie 1959). Biran's central methodological claim is that the true metaphysics or science of principles must start from introspection, i.e., the examination of *sens intime*. He writes that 'internal observation is nothing other than the present application of this sense to that which is in us, or which properly belongs to us, and whatever

idealism may say, it is by focusing upon its testimony, and not by raising ourselves up to the *heavens* or by descending into the abyss, on the wings of the senses or of imagination, that we may contemplate our thought and know our nature' (OMB.VI.5). The fundamental mistake of the empiricists has been, he argues, to leave the analysis of inner sense incomplete and to confuse it with the outer senses. His work is intended to be a development of an empiricism of inner sense which would entail the discovery of primitive facts that are not obtained by any process of deduction, but immediately experienced whenever we are conscious. As Phemister explains, Leibniz's use of the PU can also be seen as a reformation of Lockean empiricism. It will therefore be of profit to this discussion to summarize some of Phemister's main points regarding Leibniz's reformation of the Lockean PU, to show how Biran adopted and amplified this reformation.

Like both Leibniz and Biran, Locke's empiricism relies on a PU and he 'assumes that our sensory experience provides the standard upon which our understanding of the indivisible microscopic and the macroscopic aspects of the universe should be modelled' (2004: 201). For Locke, this principle is applied solely to primary qualities. We can divide a grain of wheat however many times we like, the remaining parts will always possess such qualities. For Locke, as for Leibniz and Biran, *analogy* plays a vital role in his philosophical method: 'We can', he writes, 'go no farther than particular Experience informs us of matter of fact, and by Analogy to guess what Effects the like Bodies are, upon other tryals, like to produce' (EHU.4.3.29; cf. NE.473). However, when Leibniz appropriates Locke's PU, he relies, Phemister shows, on a fundamentally different conception of experience 'that demands a far wider application' (2004: 204). When Locke uses the word 'experience' he uses it as a noun – it is that by which we receive ideas, but it is the ideas themselves rather than experience as such that interest him. In contrast, Leibniz uses it as a verb in the active voice. As Phemister shows 'Leibniz's focus is… on the nature of experience itself. And this experiential state is one in which sensation and reflection are

combined so that, through self-awareness he can understand himself as a thinking and perceiving being who is embodied and has sense-experiences of a world outside' (2004: 207). This is a radical move, one which, in fact, is not given its full due if merely referred to as a reformation of empiricism. It is rather a true 'philosophy of experience' which attempts to go beyond rationalism and empiricism to do justice to both the evidence of our external senses as well as the inner activity of our minds. Such reflection reveals to us our nature as a spontaneous and active being embodied in a material world governed by mechanical laws. This is the essential connection by which we are shown, returning to the epigraph, 'that corporeal machines serve minds and what is providence in a mind is fate in a body' (E.446: L.593). Most importantly, we can see from this discussion that rather than provide a philosophy in the final analysis opposed to Biran's, Leibniz's project from the perspective of the philosophy of experience is almost exactly Biran's project.

Patrice Vermeren has written that 'the reading Biran proposes of Leibniz's philosophy aims not at the simple reproduction of the doctrine, but constitutes an *enjeu décsif* for the elaboration of his thought in the agnostic field which opposes, under the Restauration, the sensualist heritage of the eighteenth century to the renascent French spiritualism' (1995: 45). I do not want to suggest, as Cousin did, that Biran found all his ideas in Leibniz's writings (FP.III.77), nor do I wish to deny that Biran's reading is more than a simple reproduction. What I do claim is that the aspects of Leibniz's philosophy Biran emphasizes are real elements and not distortions; real elements that Biran amplifies in novel and interesting ways. Therefore, he shows the fertility of *thinking with* this side of Leibniz's thought. To show the importance of these ampliative aspects of Biran's work, in §2 I discuss two crucial developments which reveal the distinctive character of Biranianism: [1] his defence of 'active force' contra Hume; and [2] his theory of the virtual. These two developments map respectively onto the order of progression of Leibniz's two-step methodology from the philosophy of experience.

2. MAINE DE BIRAN'S AMPLIATIVE LEIBNIZIANISM

2.1 Leibniz Contra Hume

Leibniz's theory of force and his reconceptualization of experience as a verb in the active voice are vital for Biran because he regards active force as the consciousness of *effort voulu*. The experience of force or *willed effort* reveals our very sense of self to ourselves. As Ravaisson wrote, for Biran, 'to be, to act, to will' are just different terms to refer to 'one and the same thing' (RR.16). By beginning our deductions from the concrete *fact* of this force, Biran believes we have a proper foundation for metaphysics, freed from the abstractions of the empiricist and idealist schools. However, unlike Leibniz, Biran lived in a post-Humean context and the idea that we could obtain a meaningful concept of 'force' or 'necessary connexion' from introspection had received a powerful and by now widely-known attack from the Scottish empiricist. Biran engages with Hume's arguments in his incomplete *Fondements de la psychologie* (circa 1813) and considers Hume's work as merely an important stepping-stone on the route to the true conception of force found via inner sense. Biran's arguments are careful and challenging and he showed in a more striking way than any of his contemporaries that the question 'is a Leibnizian spiritualist metaphysics possible after Hume?' could be answered in the affirmative.

In §VII of Hume's *Enquiry*, he famously argues that there are three possible sources for the idea of force or necessary connection: first, external objects; second, reflection on the operation of our minds; and, third, divine power. In the first two cases, Hume shows, we only ever experience distinct events, but, try as we might, we would never perceive the necessary connection between any two events. The third, divine power, is dismissed as a theoretical 'fairy land'. Hume provides a 'sceptical solution' to this problem: the idea of necessary connection is derived from the

'customary transition of the imagination from one object to its usual attendant… the connexion… which we feel in the mind' (HE.75). This is a *meaningful* idea, because it is derived from an impression—the customary transition from one mental event to another—but ultimately an *imperfect* idea, because it is not derived from 'forces' or 'necessary connections' themselves. Such forces, Hume believes, will remain forever hidden from view and a *scientia* capable of discovering the true essence of power or force is impossible.

Biran considered it Hume's achievement to have shown that we cannot discover force in external objects, but finds Hume's argument to be misguided when he attempts to extend it to the evidence of *sens intime*. Hume, like Locke and Condillac, failed to adequately distinguish between what Locke referred to as ideas of 'sensation' and 'reflection'; Locke introduced 'ideas of reflection' only to leave us with an imperfect analysis. However, once this distinction is clarified we can understand that it is only through the feeling of the I, the primitive fact of consciousness identified with *effort*, that we can 'recognize the real character of the principle of all metaphysics' (OMB.VII.159). Biran agrees with Hume that we could only discover the influence of the will on the body through experience, but argues that we must recognise a fundamental distinction between an act of will and a mere sense impression. This distinction is a 'true antithesis': the antithesis between activity and passivity, which he regards as equivalent to the antithesis between freedom and necessity (OMB.VII.162). Hume's error is to conceive the subject as merely *subjected* and to subsume the active will under impressions. Consequently, Hume has closed himself off from any possible recognition of the fact under investigation. I shall now turn to how Biran applies this to Hume's arguments.

Perhaps the most crucial element of Hume's argument for Biran is the claim that if we were able to perceive a causal connection or power, we would be able to 'foresee' the effect in the energy of its cause. Biran responds that it is not a question of 'foreseeing', but rather *feeling* (*bien sentir*). He claims that 'at the moment when the will, the motive force, goes to exercise itself, when an

effort is determined, and indeed the first willed effort (*effort voulu*), it is necessary that the *energy* of the cause carries with it a sort of *presentiment* or vision (*prévoyance*) of success; otherwise there would only be simple desire and no willing' (*ibid*). To clarify Biran here and to understand what he means by this *presentiment* or *prévoyance* of success, we must advance in two stages: we need [1] to introduce the distinction between what he calls *desire* and *will*; and, [2] further explain his concept of *effort voulu*. First, Biran argues that desire and will are two distinct but often-confused faculties. To clarify this distinction he puts forward an imagined hypothesis: his version of Condillac's statue. Biran's statue enjoys only the sense of smell and the ability either to inhale or not in accordance with its will. Placing odorous flowers next to the statue would not suffice for the statue to smell the scent of the flowers. The statue must inhale to smell anything; if it is not inhaling, the scent of the flower will not be sensed. Imagine the flowers are next to the statue's nose and whenever the statue inhales, it smells the pleasant scent of the *jasminium polyanthum*. As this smell is 'constantly conjoined' with the statue's active willing, the statue will believe it is the scent's cause. An outside observer would not see this connection. She would believe the statue was only passively receiving the flowers' scent. In truth, the statue is neither merely passive nor fully active. It is active insofar as it inhales, passive insofar as it receives the odour. However, as the statue has never experienced the two separately, it cannot make this distinction. Now let us imagine that the flowers have been removed from the statue's olfactory organ and that it chooses again to inhale, wishing to smell the Jasmine. This time the smell will be absent and after attempting and failing to smell it a few times, it will realise it was not the scent's true cause after all. The scent of Jasmine has become the *object of desire*, rather than the *effect of willing*. Our desires more often than not precede our willings, but they are distinct from them and are not their sufficient conditions.

To understand the second step of Biran's argument and to clarify what he means by *effort voulu* we must now consider Hume's argument that if there were a necessary connection between the

'movement' of the arm and the conscious 'willing-to-move' the arm, it would be impossible to have the latter without the former. A true cause necessitates its effect. However, in the case of the man with paralysis of the arm, Hume argues, we have precisely this occurrence. The man wills the arm's movement, yet the arm does not move. Biran's response again depends on the distinction between desire and will (see GH.239). In inner sense the 'willing the movement of the arm', on the one hand, and the 'movement of the arm', on the other, are not experienced at distinct moments of time, but felt simultaneously. If the willing did not carry with it the feeling of success, there would be no feeling of *effort voulu*; rather, there would be only desire. This illuminates Biran's claim that there is a 'feeling of success' which accompanies the willing, rather than a 'foreseeing'. To expect a 'foreseeing' is to confuse desire with *effort voulu*. If we were to take the case of an amputee who has had their arm removed, there would be two possibilities. First, if the amputee attempted to move their arm, forgetting the operation had taken place, and moved only the residual limb, there would still be *effort voulu*. It would be a mistake in memory, not a mistake in feeling (See Hallie, 1959: 89). Second, if there were no effect at all, no movement, not even in the residual limb, there would be no *effort voulu*, but desire alone. This concurs with Biran's claim that the individual who has never once voluntarily moved any of their limbs, could never have experienced *effort voulu*. Experience is necessarily embodied. In sum, Biran claims that Hume is wrong to conclude that we do not have an experience of power or necessary connection because he has mistaken desire for will. Unless there is some relation between a willing and the feeling of an effect—even if this is the movement of a residual limb rather than the intended arm—there is no willing, only desire: willing *is* necessarily connected to its effect, desire is not. The essential point is that examples where *desires* do not lead necessarily to effects cannot be used as exceptions to the necessary connection between *willings* and their effects.

For Biran, *willing*—the primitive fact of consciousness in which the true concept of force is discovered—reveals to us a 'hyper-organic force' that is ontologically inseparable from 'organic resistance'. Although, 'hyper-organic force' is distinct from the body, it is only realised in relation to it. Unless there is organic resistance, there is no hyper-organic force. In addition, it is only through this relationship that our feeling of personal existence emerges. This feeling raises human consciousness above the mere sensitive being of animals. It is responsible for *apperception* as opposed to mere *perception*. Biran is clear that he understands apperception in Leibniz's sense, *perception cum reflexione conjuncta* (OMB.VI.104), yet where Leibniz saw a difference in degree, Biran sees a difference in kind; the force responsible for apperception is not the same kind of force as the kind responsible for sensibility. This distinction amounts to a real distinction between physiology and psychology. Animal experience reduced to material actions and reactions dependent on the external senses alone would amount to little more than a 'vague and confused feeling of existence'. This is the empire of destiny in which no being can rise above the 'blind determinations of instinct' (OI.I.225). Biran calls the force essential for human apperception 'hyper-organic' to distinguish it from the organic forces of the physiological world. It is a *sui generis* force dependent on nothing exterior to itself for its activation and is the source of our free will and inner sense of identity. Even though this force has an ontological reality distinct from organic forces, it impossible to experience it except in relation to organic force; the two forces together form for us an essential and indivisible correlation (OMB.VII.125). Nonetheless, as highlighted by the epigraph, hyper-organic force takes a superior and providential role.

Returning to Hume's *Enquiry*, anyone who knows this work well will wonder how Biran responds to Hume's argument that if we really were able to observe a connection between our volitions and corporeal movements, we would be intimately aware of the movements of the nerves and muscles responsible for the chain of events that leads from the volition to the arm's movements. Again, Biran believes that this line of attack follows from the misconceived

assimilation of inner to outer. It is true that we do not observe this connection, but this is because it involves two heterogeneous kinds of knowledge. The fact that we cannot represent these effects of external movement does not, he argues, prevent us from assuredly experiencing the feeling of our 'primordial power' or what he calls the 'empire of the will over its organs'. He asks:

> What species of analogy is there between the representative knowledge of position, of the interplay and the functions of our organs, such as an anatomist or physiologist can know them, and the inner feeling which corresponds to these functions, and also the internal knowledge of the parts localized in the continuous resistance of which we spoke previously? How could one not see the opposition that occurs between these two kinds of knowledge, an opposition such that at the very moment when the will moves an organ, if the instruments of motility could represent themselves instead of being felt, or be inwardly apperceived, the will could never arise? (OI.I.262)

If we were able to observe all of the internal actions and reactions inside the retina, we could not experience the colours. This is why the 'hidden springs and principles' are withdrawn from view of external senses. However, this does not mean we have no feeling of power or causal force, but rather that we can only know this force through *sens intime*. The real reason for Hume's ignorance, Biran believed, is that it is exactly the development of habit to which Hume attributed the origin of the *idea* of cause that conceals the feeling of effort from many of our actions. To the extent that our actions are undertaken more easily, less consciously, and more through the influence of habit, the determinations of inner sense fade and the impressions of external senses dominate. However, we should not be misled by habit. Real reflection on the feeling of *sens intime* proves Hume indisputably wrong. For Biran, Hume's real success was (even though he was misled through his confusion of inner and outer sense, on the one hand, and will and desire, on the other) his careful demonstration of the impossibility of deriving the idea of force from outer

sense, which showed conclusively that it must be located in the operations of inner sense. For this 'Hume deserves our gratitude' (OMB.VII.167).

To clarify further what he means by *effort voulu*, Biran compares his theory to Johann Jakob Engel's. Engel argued that we discover force through the exercise of muscular sensation when attempting to resist an exterior force. If I attempt to lift a heavy box, I grasp the idea of force from attempting to overcome its weight. For Engel, Hume's error was to attempt to obtain the idea of force from the wrong senses (sight, sound, touch etc.), force appears to muscular sensation alone. The problem with his argument is that Hume has already addressed it (HE.67 n.1). He argues that although we experience some feeling of resistance, it is too obscure and we consequently attribute it to too many objects 'where we never can suppose this resistance of existence of force to take place', such as in inanimate matter or even the supreme being. Biran was frequently misrepresented for simply attempting to defend force as Engel did (See Cousin, EE.65-66, and Renouvier, ECG.156). But this ignores the extra distinction Biran makes, not just between a foreign body and my body, but also between my body and hyper-organic force. In the experience of lifting a box, there are two essential distinctions: first, the distinction between my hyper-organic force which initiates the action and my body which resists my initiation according to its inertia, but nevertheless obeys my commands; and, second, the distinction between my body and the resistance of the box as a foreign body. Consequently, Biran argues that while Engel takes a step in the right direction, by attributing this feeling of 'effort' to *sens intime*, he fails to go far enough. Engel derives the experience of effort from the *mediate* feeling of muscular sensation resisting an exterior object. If the sensation were only experienced mediately, Hume would be right that we cannot accurately attribute this sensation to a particular source. However, we do not experience a *mediate* feeling of effort, but rather an *immediate* one and it is only by recognising this vital fact that we can overcome Hume's problem:

> The true origin (I do not say essence) of the idea that we attach to the word *force*, consists in the immediate power of the will to grasp and determine the inertial or resistant force proper to the muscular organs, and thereby to enter into a conflict of actions. In the sense of M. Engel, it follows from the complication or from the conflict of our force with the alien exterior force, either that the latter is overcome, or that ours is momentarily suspended or as if paralysed by the object. In my sense, the muscular inertia is always surmounted, and the hyper-organic force, far from being relaxed [*détendue*] or as if paralysed by this resistance, believes [*croit*] in energy and activity, to the degree that this resistance increases. (OMB.VII.169-70)

The key distinction is that the muscular sensation is still *presented to us*, in the same way as the impressions of our external senses; thus, Engel's theory does not emphasise the essential activity that cannot be dissociated from the feeling of effort. To understand this feeling we need only reflect on our active exercise of willing (OMB.VII.118-9). A person born paralyzed, who has never moved any of their organs willingly, could not understand this feeling of effort, just as a person born blind could never understand the feeling of sight. Biran extends this thesis further and argues that the paralyzed person mentioned above would not even experience self-consciousness, as self-consciousness and the activity of willing are identical (*ibid*); even our passive sensory impressions are only knowable in contrast to our essential activity, just as we could not know shadows without light. At this point the importance of Leibniz's metaphysics of forces becomes clear. First, like Leibniz's force which is 'half-way between a faculty and an action, and contains in itself a certain effort, or *conatus*' (UL.VI.526: WFNS.32-33), Biran's *effort voulu* requires no impetus from outside, it contains its action within itself; 'we apperceive and reproduce it at every instant' (OMB.VII.121). The action is both indivisible and instantaneous. This is in contrast to our sensible impressions for which we are not responsible. Second, for Biran, we complete Locke's incomplete analysis of the distinction between ideas of sensation and

reflection, when we understand it as a distinction Hallie (1959: 34) sums up as between 'presentation to' and 'living through'. Ideas of sensation are *presented to* us, while we *live through* ideas of reflection. The first are received passively, the latter are the result of our agency: Locke's analysis of inner sense is therefore reconceived according to Leibniz's theory of force. Again, we return to previous discussion of experience as understood as a noun, on the one hand, and as an active verb, on the other. The distinction between Engel's and Biran's theories is that while Engel was unable to move past understanding experience as *presented to*, Biran's analysis of hyper-organic force completes the theory of inner sense and moves us to experience as *living through*. This analysis has deep metaphysical consequences because it means that instead of having to think causation in terms of customary transitions from one event to the next, we can obtain a true understanding of agent causation based on our internal activity. Biran's next step, following Leibniz's two-step methodology, is to show we can apply this new understanding of causation to our understanding of nature.

2.2 The Virtual

Once we realise we must discover the 'science of principles' by reasoning from the introspective view and not the God's eye view, Biran insists that the true importance of Leibniz's system is unveiled: 'The fixed point being given, thought takes to the air, and, on the wings of Leibniz, swiftly flies from pole to pole, or ascends, with the calmness of reflection, through each link in this great chain of being, of which the system of monads offers so great and so magnificent a representation' (OMB.XI-I.149). Biran asks us to consider Descartes's famous 'piece of wax' argument. Descartes asks 'what remains of the wax when all the sensible qualities have been changed or removed?' His answer is 'pure extension' alone (AT.VII.31: CSM.II.20). This extension involves no power of its own, and to activate its 'potential' (flexibility and changeability), it must receive excitation from outside: from God's force. Descartes's theory of extension is, Biran argues, really a scholastic theory of 'bare faculties'. Consequently, it is Leibniz

who provides the true answer to the question 'what remains of the wax after every secondary quality has been removed?' The 'direct and true response' is that *force* remains. Force is the proper ground of our being, which exists either as *actualised,* in particular determinate qualities, or *virtually*. When there is no self-consciousness, i.e., *effort voulu*, we do not become *nothing*, or a naked faculty waiting for excitation from outside, our being remains virtual; there is always a *tendency* to action. Biran believes that this distinction found in Leibniz helps to clarify the question of innate ideas obscured by Descartes and Locke. Our innate ideas and modes are virtual forces which ground our proper being. They are tendencies to action which subsist even when not actualised in consciousness or *effort voulu*. This theory of virtuality is crucial to Biran's theory of the self. This is because he is highly critical of the Cartesian inference from the existence of thought to the claim that there must be some sort of passive receptacle—substance—in which all of these individual thoughts are united. Yet, Biran is no bundle theorist, there is a unity to the self, but the unity comes from these virtual tendencies: tendencies which are not passive or bare possibilities, but rather 'half way between power and act'. As he explains in his 1817 *Anthropologie*:

> In us, and only in ourselves, the cause, the productive force of the movements or free acts executed by the organs, is immediately manifested, both as phenomenon or fact of inner sense in willed and felt effort, and as [a] notion or conception of the active being in its essence, or of *virtual absolute force* which exists before the manifestation, and which remains the same after, even though its exercise is suspended. The phenomenon and the reality, being and appearance coincide therefore in the consciousness of the *I*, identical with the immediate feeling of force, or cause, which operates by the will'. (OI.III.412)

Leibniz argued that our knowledge of necessary and eternal truths, gained through our reflective acts, causes us to rise above simple animals and brings us closer to God. Biran argues that Leibniz was correct in inferring that it is from our reflective acts that we gain knowledge of

necessary truths, and these truths raise us above simple animals; however, he was wrong to infer knowledge of abstract ideas[6]. Biran believes that we do not gain such abstract knowledge, but rather *concrete* knowledge of the virtualities, tendencies, or forms of the human mind, which are concrete conditions of the possibility of knowledge. The 'conditions' Biran discovers through his introspective reflective analysis, such as *substance, cause, unity,* and *identity*, are what he calls simple reflective ideas and sound prima facie like Kantian categories. In the process of forming 'general abstract ideas', one experiences a number of similar external objects, for example, books, and one removes everything unique to the individual books, leaving only the general characteristic or idea of 'book'. However, by doing so, Biran argues, we have eliminated the reality of any individual book. The idea has become a mere logical concept and does not reflect the reality of any individual thing. Unlike general abstract ideas, which refer to characteristics common to many particulars, the simple reflective ideas are always individual and simple. Like Kant, Biran believes these concepts are not abstracted from sensible things, but are rather heterogeneous to external sensibility. These simple concepts are discovered once we abstract from all sensible perception:

> The *I* which exists or apperceives itself internally, as *one*, as *simple*, as *identical*, is not itself abstracted from those sensations such as may be of the common or of the general in themselves, except insofar as it abstracts itself by the act of internal apperception, which distinguishes and separates up to a certain point the individual or the *one* from the

[6] Biran is wrong to claim that Leibniz defended bare abstract ideas. In the *New Essays* Leibniz says the 'thorniest brambles' of the Scholastics 'disappear in a flash if one is willing to banish abstract entities' (NE 217-218). Biran comes close to Leibniz's theory; he argues that the 'forms' of the mind that exist as virtual tendencies underlying our conscious thoughts are what provide the unity of our personal identity. However, Biran limits these forms to his own 'categories': substance, cause, unity, and identity. He fails to recognise that for Leibniz all our forms or ideas have this kind of pre-existent reality as virtualities. Whether or not we are able to clearly and distinctly express these ideas, they always play an essential and constitutive role in our thought. Using a nice example Leibniz says 'we use these maxims without having them explicitly in mind. It is rather like the way in which one has implicitly in mind the suppressed premises in enthymemes, which are omitted in our thinking of the argument as well as in our outward expression of it' (NE.76). Biran comes close to recognising the full novelty of Leibniz's own theory of ideas (which makes a distinction between bare abstract ideas and efficacious Platonic ideas, i.e., ideas qua forces), but then ends up criticising Leibniz for a mistake he does not make. This is surprising since Biran will later put the distinction between Descartes and Leibniz clearly as a distinction between Aristotelianism and Platonism: 'Descartes's system is linked to Aristotelianism by the nature of its… purely modifiable passive substance, endowed with receptivity, and… Leibniz's system is linked to Platonism by the principle of force' (OP.III.153-154).

> collective and from the multiple; the active force or the cause, from the effect produced; the action from passion; in a word the subject which makes the effort, from the term which resists and which undergoes diverse modifications. The *I* is therefore truly *abstrahens* in its reflective action, and not *abstractus*.[7] (OMB.VII.200)

Biran's categories are the inseparable characteristics of *effort voulu* discoverable from reflection. Our primitive metaphysical ideas, such as cause, substance, and unity, have meaning only insofar as they are derived from this introspective analysis.

With the theory of virtual force in place, Biran claims that '[t]he *reformed* metaphysics no longer allows two great classes of being, entirely separated from each other and excluding all intermediaries, but one and the same chain embracing and bonding all of the beings of creation' (OMB.XI-I.151). He agrees with Descartes that there must be a distinction between the organic and the 'hyper-organic', but he does not believe that this distinction must lead us to a separation between two heterogeneous substances. Virtual force is the metaphysical ground of nature; it is what remains when the sensible qualities of the wax change. We can, Biran argues, perform a kind of 'natural induction' from our experience of causal activity, to true causal action all throughout nature. We know from Biran's *Journal intime* that his friends Ampère and Cousin had insisted to him that such natural induction was problematic and Ampère convinced him that there is 'between the individual feeling of the causality of the *I*, and the belief or necessary universal notion of cause, an abyss that cannot be crossed by recourse to analysis alone, or by analogy or induction.' Nonetheless, Biran stuck to his defence of the PU and maintained:

> it is natural that we should perceive, or that we should conceive things which do not depend on the *I*, in the manner in which we exist, and under the form or idea which constitutes our individual existence. We exist as an *I*, or as an individual person only insofar as we are causes; it is therefore natural that we could conceive of nothing, or

[7] The distinction comes from Kant's 1770 *Inaugural Dissertation*, the only one of Kant's works Biran read.

> realize it outside of ourselves except in the same way: "I would like to know", said Leibniz, "how we could conceive of the idea of *being* if we did not, as beings ourselves, find being within us" [NE.86]. I extend this principle and I ask how we could not conceive that there are causes, or a single cause alone throughout, when we exist only as causes. (JI.I.226-27; cf. NE.473)

Biran cannot admit the principle of causality as a necessary truth throughout nature, but as this shows, he accepts that. Even with this admitted, he believes we nevertheless cannot consider causality in any other way than by analogy with our *effort voulu*. It remains the safest ground for our reflections on the metaphysics of nature.

I conclude this section by emphasising two main problems involved in Biran's developments of Leibniz's metaphysics. First, by postulating a difference not in degree but in kind between the *sui generis* nature of his hyper-organic force and the lesser organic forces, Biran introduces a lacuna in nature between physiology and psychology that is almost as severe as Descartes's. Yet this does not concern him. Partly, this is because he claims to have replaced Descartes' heterogeneous substances with a metaphysics of forces. However, even so, Biran still argues for a troubling heterogeneity within these forces, between the *sui generis* hyper-organic forces, on the one hand, and the organic forces determined by the laws of dynamics, on the other. The postulation of one ontological type outside of space and the constraints of the physical, and another within reproduces the interaction problem in its entirety and Biran has no recourse to PEH to escape it. This primitive duality is made evident by the primitive fact of consciousness and cannot be rejected, but also cannot be explained. However, a second, perhaps more serious, problem stems from the fact that he starts his natural induction from the reflective experience of spontaneous and active embodied beings endowed with inner sense and infers from this the existence of forces throughout nature. Nonetheless, there is a stark difference in kind between the hyper-

organic force of human beings and the organic and mechanical forces in the rest of nature. It seems that for Biran all the time and everywhere things are not the same as they are here. Consistently followed, Biran's use of the PU should have led to panpsychism and this was recognized and implemented by later Biran-influenced spiritualists such as Ravaisson and Boutroux. For this reason, highlighting Biran's fecund metaphysical suggestions is more interesting than criticising his systematic inconsistencies. He was, first and foremost, a psychologist and his metaphysical speculations of cause, substance, and existence only began to be of explicit concern to him in the last two decades of his life. His was not a final polished systematic theory and most of our sources he had not intended to publish. What is most important is the influence his essays on these ideas had for later generations and, therefore, the resources they provided for those philosophers more explicitly concerned with such fundamental issues in metaphysics and epistemology.

3. MAINE DE BIRAN'S LEIBNIZ AND VICTOR COUSIN

Vermeren argued that we can only understand the nineteenth-century readings of Leibniz and Biran in the context of the 'struggle for the conquest and maintenance of the philosophical hegemony of university spiritualism in the emerging modern constitutional state' (1987: 167). In this final section, I argue that the 1819 *Exposition* played a foundational role in the creation of this situation. This is because the article's most cutting critical argument was not in truth aimed at Leibniz's philosophy (and, as Biran must have known, it would have not successfully hit its target if it were), but rather at the young professor Cousin. The professor who would, after Biran's death, gain an all-encompassing control over the direction of France's philosophical education and be instrumental in the creation of a national philosophy: eclectic spiritualism. The

critiques in the *Exposition* showed that the system Cousin was developing is fundamentally flawed.

The story of Cousin's life is an extraordinary journey from rags to riches. Although born into abject poverty in 1792, by 1830 he had become a philosopher king who would determine the hegemony of his spiritualist philosophy. As Jules Simon wrote: 'The 1830 Revolution, which made Louis-Philippe king of France, made Cousin king of philosophers. But Louis-Philippe was only a constitutional king, Cousin was an absolute king'[8]. Simon also tells us that Cousin considered France's philosophy instructors his 'philosophical regiment' and that 'he had every hold over this regiment' (1888: 98; cf. 116). However, when Biran wrote the 1819 *Exposition*, Cousin did not enjoy such absolute power; he was, in Biran's mind, a talented young professor with the potential to guide French philosophy from sensualism to spiritualism. Despite being too 'hot-headed', he was France's greatest hope for fulfilling the hopes expressed by Staël (JI.II.303). We know from Biran's *Journal* that from around 1816 Biran and Cousin met frequently, that Cousin was a member of Biran's 'metaphysical society', that Biran attended some of Cousin's lectures, and that they discussed their philosophical systems, their metaphysics, substance, and the absolute in great detail[9]. Therefore, Cousin's philosophy was well known to Biran. But why would Biran publish a critique of Cousin's philosophy under the pretence of a critique of Leibniz? My hypothesis is based on three main claims: [1] Cousin's character prevented Biran from wanting to name the true aim of this critique; [2] Biran was enough of a scholar to recognize that the critique did not affect Leibniz; and, [3] Biran knew and cared enough about Cousin's philosophy to recognize that his argument fundamentally undermines it. Although this does not amount to conclusive proof, nonetheless, even if I am wrong about the intention of the author, we can be certain that Cousin and many of his contemporaries read it as such and this is

[8] *La philosophie et l'enseignement official de la philosophie*, archives privés, fonds Jules Simon 87 AP 16. Cited in Vermeren, 1995: 176.
[9] See JI.I.126-127, 128-129, 131, 224. 228, 230, 235, 245, 247; JI.II.10, 23, 37, 120, 177, 185-6, 303

why the text plays such an important role in the struggle for the hegemony of Cousin's spiritualism in the nineteenth century[10].

Starting with [1], although Cousin was not then a philosopher king, he had never been able to take criticism. As Simon tells us 'even in boyhood, Cousin had the habit and instinct of superiority; if a dispute arose, instead of arguing, he inveighed, wounded, crushed. This was a life-long characteristic' (1888: 110). Biran clearly recognised this (see JI.II.303). Biran was also nervous about publishing his work so published very little. Therefore, it is reasonable to believe he would not have wanted to suffer a public philosophical 'crushing' from Cousin. Consequently, [1] seems a fair assumption. To defend [2] and [3], we must turn to the critique itself.

Biran states that there is a major problem with Leibniz's system because he argues for its truth from two separate and incompatible points of view. Biran 'selects' a part of Leibniz's philosophy, but this selection is necessary given the overall inconsistency of the system. On the one hand, Leibniz starts from the 'introspective' method and argues deductively from indubitable facts of inner sense; but, on the other, he argues from the 'God's eye view'. From the first perspective, Biran claims, Leibniz provides us with a real foundation for metaphysics; however, from the second, he fares no better than the other rationalists whose systems collapse into pantheism. Leibniz's early meditations on the universal calculus caused him, Biran says, to search for the fundamental elements of reality through a process of analysis that would lead him to *final abstracts*. Through logic we are taken from the concrete to the abstract, and the abstract ideas of God's understanding are found to be the source of all reality. When Leibniz derives his fundamental metaphysics using his faith in logic alone, he ends up in the same place as Spinoza and his monads become nothing more than the passive effects of God's ideas. Biran argues that the central problem is that these two perspectives contradict one another. The 'psychological'

[10] This reason is why Leibniz's philosophy was on the 'first level' in the French intellectual climate from at least 1810, and not only from the 1850s as Moreau (2014) has attempted to show.

perspective emphasises the importance of force, freedom, and individuality, and the 'God's eye view' eliminates all three.

Biran's methodology is founded on what we might call the 'Principle of the Primacy of Introspective Constraint' (PIC). This asserts that there are fundamental introspective truths that cannot be denied without consequently denying existence. Any hypothesis that undermines these indubitable truths must therefore be rejected. Descartes claimed that '[t]he *freedom of the will is self-evident*… so evident that it must be counted among the first and most common notions that are innate in us' (AT.VIIIA.19: CSM.I.205-6). Biran agrees with this wholeheartedly, but, unlike Descartes, he is unwilling to let freedom be watered down by a compatibilist theory that would lead to the conclusion that God is the only true cause. We have an exclusive disjunction: either the individual is free and responsible for her actions, or God is the only true cause. Biran's adherence to the PIC means the latter disjunct is prohibited. Since Leibniz's 'God's eye view' and the metaphysics of PEH would undermine the former disjunct, they must be abandoned. However, Biran does not see this rejection of PEH as altering Leibniz's doctrine 'at its essence' but rather as re-affirming it and establishing its full importance freed from rationalist dogmas.

According to Biran, the 'absurd' nature of the a priori reasoning that led Descartes, Spinoza, Malebranche, and even Leibniz to determinism is shown by the fact that we begin reasoning from the free individual and then end up at a rationalist system that denies the existence of the free individual from which it began. Nonetheless, as it stands this is a weak argument. There is nothing wrong in principle with starting from a proposition we believe to be certain and then via a process of reasoning coming to find that this proposition is false or that it needs to be revised with regard to a fuller understanding. This is the Socratic method. It only becomes a problem if the conclusion can only be true if the original proposition is understood as necessarily true. Now we can turn to my defence of [2]: Leibniz need not be worried by this problem and Biran would have known it. This is because Leibniz does not accept the PIC. In the *Theodicy*, a text which

Biran owned and read, Leibniz agrees with Biran that Descartes's attempt to combine the inner experience of free will with God's providence left his philosophy with an inexorable problem (T§292). Indeed, this is one of the 'two famous labyrinths': the one that 'perplexes almost all the human race' (G.VII.29: T.53). However, Leibniz did not agree that introspection provides us with proof of the existence of freedom (even if he did believe that it provides us with evidence of internal activity and spontaneity). He cites Pierre Bayle's discussion of the weathervane and agrees that if an external force unfailingly moved us whenever we desired to move, we would believe ourselves to be the source of this action. The weathervane that always desired to move in the direction it was coincidently blown, would be, for Bayle and Leibniz, 'persuaded that it moved of itself to fulfil the desires which it conceived' (T§299). Leibniz claims that Bayle's arguments are 'excellent' (T§300). However, he believes they have no effect against the fact of freedom when it comes to the system of PEH, because the arguments for it are a priori and not from introspection. Given that Leibniz rejects introspective analysis in this case, his theory would not collapse under the weight of the PIC. Contrary to Biran and (as we shall see) Cousin, Leibniz argues that it is only from the rationalist proof of PEH and the independence of monads that we can defend free will, since only then can we regard individual beings as free from outside influence and therefore acting in complete accordance with their will (T§300; cf. G.III.471).

Turning to [3], we can now discuss why it affects Cousin in a way it does not Leibniz. Cousin agreed with Biran that psychology was the foundation of philosophy (FP.Ia.XII). He believed that faulty psychological analyses have been the cause of the major philosophical errors of eighteenth-century philosophy and these errors led to disastrous consequences. Sensualism led to scepticism by explicitly relativizing all knowledge to the individual. However, Kantian criticism led to a 'new and original' scepticism by relativizing reason to the phenomena of individuals[11].

[11] For Cousin, Fichte shows the necessary consequences of Kant's philosophy. The I that posits itself, the world, and God 'is the final degree of all subjectivity, the extreme and necessary term of Kant's system, and, at the same time, its refutation' (FP.Ib.10). Clearly Cousin, despite what he claimed, did not have a good understanding of classical German philosophy.

Together these philosophies were responsible for an 'age of criticism and destructions' that 'let loose tempests'. The aim of the nineteenth century, he insisted, should be 'intelligent restorations' (TBG.31). Such restorations would bring together the ideals of the French revolution—freedom and equality—with principles essential for the stability of the nation, such as immutable principles of truth, beauty, and goodness. Cousin's recommendation was that philosophy should progress according to a principle of eclecticism 'which judging with equity, and even with benevolence, all schools, borrows from them what they possess of the true, and neglects what in them is false' (TBG.33); a statement which sounds as sensible as it is trite until we add that careful psychological analysis must act as said judge.

Summarizing his 1817 and 1818 lectures, the lectures Biran would have attended and discussed with Cousin prior to the writing of the 1819 *Exposition*[12], Cousin tells us that their main aim was to establish the truth of both 'voluntary' and 'rational' facts in addition to the already well-established 'sensual' facts (FP.Ia.XIII-XIV). A complete psychological analysis will show the necessity of all three classes and that not one can be reduced to another. An example of a 'rational fact', he claims, is that every effect must have a cause. Despite the ingenuity of Hume's arguments, Cousin thought it impossible, if we are honest to ourselves, to deny our belief in this principle. Honest reflection on our consciousness brings the principle with it, and shows that it is both universal and necessary, since an uncaused experience is unfathomable. As further reflection shows our experience is not principally caused by our volition, we must admit the existence of an external cause. Concurrently, we move from ontology to psychology and this is the reason why psychology is philosophy's essential foundation. The most important claim for Cousin is that the principal light for our phenomena comes from reason. No knowledge would be possible without it and 'reason perceives itself, and the sensibility that envelops it, and the will that it compels without constraining' (FP.Ia.XVII-XVIII). Furthermore, as Cousin argues that reflection on our reason shows us that these 'rational facts' are universal and necessary, we are

[12] Biran wrote this text between 10th April and 1st July 1819 (See JI.II.229-231).

led to infer the existence of a foundation for them that is also universal and necessary. This foundation cannot be our finite and contingent minds. As the universal and necessary principle is absolute, it leads us to an impersonal, absolute, universal, and necessary cause. 'The laws of intelligence', he tells us, 'constitute a separate world, which governs the visible world, presides over its movements, sustains and preserves it, but does not depend on it' (FP.Ia.XXIII). This, he claims, is the theory of the realm of ideas, introduced by Plato, but crowned and completed by Leibniz's theory of God or the Absolute[13] (TBG.79, 89). For Cousin, God is:

> at once true and real, substance and cause, always substance and always cause, being substance only insofar as he is cause, and cause only insofar as he is substance, that is to say, being absolute cause, one and many, eternity and time, space and number, essence and life, indivisibility and totality, principle, end and centre, at the summit of Being and at its lowest degree, infinite and finite together, finally triple, in a word, that is to say, at the same time God, nature, and humanity. In effect, if God is not every thing, he is nothing. (FP.Ia.XL)

We can begin to see why Biran's argument in the 1819 *Exposition* affects Cousin in a way that it did not Leibniz. As I showed in §1, Biran argued that all Cartesian systems are led to pantheism by means of the following argument:

1. God is the sole cause, and every other existing being is merely an effect of God's power.
2. It is 'logically certain that all effects are eminently or formally enclosed in their cause' (OMB.XI-I.142)
3. Every created being is enclosed in God and there is no real distinction between God and nature.

[13] As Manns and Madden (1990) show, when Cousin uses the term 'Absolute', he conceptualizes it in a way that is much closer to Leibniz's 'Absolute' than Schelling's or Hegel's. Indeed, Cousin frequently references Leibniz's use of the term in *The True, the Beautiful, and the Good.* (See NE.157, 158, D.II.17, 24, & T§189).

It is difficult to see how Cousin could escape the consequences of this argument. Unsurprisingly, therefore, he would be continually pestered by accusations of pantheism (See FP.Ib.18-23 & Vermeren 1995: 223-244). However, Biran did more than simply demonstrate that the eclectic system is pantheistic, he showed it is inconsistent. This is because, it asserts not only the existence of 'rational facts', which lead to the existence of an all-encompassing absolute; but also 'volitional facts'; facts which reveal our freedom and personality. For Cousin, unlike Leibniz, these volitional facts are principal facts of conscious experience (FP.Ia.XXV; cf. TBG.114). Our first 'immediate internal perception' presents us as free personalities and by reflecting on this free experience we are led to rational facts; nonetheless, Cousin's further reflection on these facts leads him to a theory of the absolute which undermines the possibility of the evidence presented in the first immediate internal impression: volitional facts. The criticism is fatal for Cousin's project because the evidence for the truth of free will is on the same level as the evidence for the truth of 'universal and necessary' principles, such as 'every effect has a cause'. If his argument turns out in the end to undermine the evidence for freedom, it follows that the evidence of the universal and necessary truths is similarly undermined. Yet, these were the premises on which the proof of the infinite being depends: the argument's conclusion entails the falsehood of the premises. In addition, Cousin would not accept either the truth of 'individual freedom' or 'God as absolute' alone, both are necessary. Biran's argument against the possibility of this reconciliation, at least upon the arguments that Cousin has provided, proves fatal for the latter's whole project. This then is my reason for [3] and completes my defence of the claim that the argument was always intended for Cousin.

Although together [1], [2], and [3] provide a strong case for my hypothesis, one need not be convinced to see that Cousin understood it as an attack on his work, or at least as a serious threat to his philosophy's prominence. He was concerned with the establishment of his eclectic philosophical system as France's official philosophy, and did not want Biran's spiritualism to

emerge as an alternative. Nonetheless, he could only repress Biranianism for a definite period of time. It was a ticking time bomb that would eventually explode and leave his eclecticism in tatters. Cousin's method of repression began when he inherited Biran's *œuvre* after his death. Despite the riches known to be contained within these manuscripts, he delayed publication for ten years, and then published at first only one volume; a volume he claimed (falsely) to contain Biran's thought in its entirety (FP.III.63). Vermeren (1987: 159) offers two reasons for this delay. First, Cousin wanted to retain the glory of being the philosopher who overturned eighteenth-century sensualism; and, second, he feared that Biran's spiritualism would contest the hegemony of his own. As we have seen above, Cousin was right to be afraid and the *Exposition* required special treatment in his introduction to Biran's *Œuvres posthumes*. Cousin's treatment proceeds in three steps. First, he shows Biran was wrong to claim that Leibniz's philosophy is fundamentally inconsistent. He insists that when Biran presents an absolute and universal spiritualism, freed from the universal and necessary principles of reason that support both his and Leibniz's spiritualisms, it is an incomplete philosophy. It is the commencement of a system but not a system properly speaking. Second, Cousin argues that his philosophy is more Leibnizian than Biran's. This is because Leibnizian apperception leads not only to the consciousness of the I *qua* force, but also to the awareness of the not-I. Then the awareness of the rational facts which are also part of the not-I, via Cousin's method, leads us to the cause of causes. Here we reach not only 'the foundation of the monadology, but the monadology in its entirety, and perhaps also pre-established harmony' – with Cousin's important proviso added - 'well-understood' (FP.III.80). Bringing the first two steps together, Cousin argues that PEH does not deny the action of monads and lead to pantheism, quite to the contrary, it contends that the I and the not-I act together and modify each other according to their own actions governed by laws. Every being acts on every other being within limits. This well governed universal concordance is all PEH is supposed to suggest (FP.III.81). The scene is then set for Cousin's attempt to properly reclaim Leibniz for his eclectic school:

> it is necessary for my eclecticism to recognise and savour the eclectic direction found throughout all of Leibniz's works. To the degree that I advance, or believe to advance in philosophy, it seems to me that I see more clearly into the thought of this great man and all my progress consists in better understanding him. Maine de Biran, at the point when he stopped, grasped well from the whole system of Leibniz only the part that clarified in his eyes his own theory. (FP.III.83)

With this reappropriation in place, he moves on to his third and final step and attempts to reverse Biran's critique and show that it is actually Biran's philosophy and not his own that leads to pantheism[14]. Cousin's argument is typically unpromising. He claims Biran has dangerously 'over-animated' nature. If we start from our free internal causality and argue that we can infer the existence of analogous active substances throughout nature, our unique causality ends up being no different in kind than the activity of any corporeal substance, and ultimately human liberty is reduced to the destiny of nature (PS.181). As all causality is reduced to the same level, it is Biran's system not Cousin's that brings with it the true threat of pantheism.

Nevertheless, Cousin's attempt to become the true Leibnizian failed. Partly due probably to the unconvincing nature of his arguments, but also because Leibniz was appropriated by Cousin's fiercest critics. Pierre Leroux[15], Charles Renouvier, and Ravaisson all used distinctly Biran influenced readings of Leibniz to attack the philosopher king. Finally, Cousin changed his strategy and turned to Descartes. Descartes became the great founder of spiritualist philosophy and Cousin significantly reduced Leibniz's role in his historical story. By turning to Descartes, he could retain the importance of the psychology of reflection, but also gain the benefits of a safe political philosophy, which he believed lent support to the constitutional monarchy, while concurrently providing France with a national hero[16]. At the start of his career, he built his

[14] See Antoine-Mahut (2015) on 'La cousinianisation du biranisme'.
[15] See Rey (2012: 410-421)
[16] See Ziljstra (2005).

reputation on his supposed knowledge of the philosophies of Germany, but by the end he was at pains to distance himself from the accusations of presenting a naturalized German pantheism. Appropriating Descartes turned out to be the most effective strategy to do so. The battle turned from one over the true heart of Leibniz's philosophy to one between Leibnizian and Cartesian spiritualisms.

Simon recounts a conversation with Cousin from around 1848 which would turn out to be prophetic. Simon had just come from a discussion with Cousin's critic Leroux, who had told him "the whole structure will fall with Cousin. When Cousin disappears, your whole gang of professors and your whole school will disappear with him". Simon says he was 'boiling over with rage after this conversation… I repeated the story to Cousin as he was breakfasting on bread and honey. "Leroux is right", he calmly replied, eating away at the slice he had spread' (1888: 136-137). As Cousin almost predicted, the text that put the final nail in his philosophical coffin was published the same year the final nail was put in his real coffin - 1867. In 1840, Ravaisson published a savage critique of Cousin's philosophy that had, due to Cousin's all-encompassing influence at the time, cost him his university career. Ravaisson's return to philosophy came in 1863. He was asked by Victor Duruy, the minister of public instruction, to be the chair of the committee in charge of setting the *agrégation*. When the government decided that a series of reports on the progress of the sciences and the arts should be written, Duruy again chose Ravaisson for the philosophy report; a decision which had an enormous impact. His *Rapport sur la philosophie en France au XIXème siècle* provided a summary of the development of French philosophy throughout the century, but at the same time served as a manifesto for a Biran-inspired Leibnizian spiritualism in sharp opposition to Cousin's eclecticism and Comte's positivism. Published in 1867, the year Cousin died, Ravaisson's *Rapport* gave French philosophy a whole new lease of life. It gave rise to a veritable sea change in philosophy because it became essential reading for the hundreds of students studying for the *agrégation* for several generations.

In terms of understanding the renaissance of Leibnizian ideas towards the end of the nineteenth century, it is difficult to overestimate the importance of this work. Bergson explains this well:

> No analysis can give an idea of these admirable pages. Twenty generations have learned them by heart. They have counted for a great deal in the influence exercised by the *Rapport* on philosophy as studied in the universities, an influence whose precise limits cannot be determined, nor whose depth be plumbed, nor whose nature be exactly described, any more than one can convey the inexpressible colouring which a great enthusiasm of early youth sometimes diffuses over the whole life of man... The *Rapport*… [gave] rise to a change of orientation in philosophy in the university [and] Ravaisson's influence succeeded the influence of Cousin. (1946: 284, 290)

4. CONCLUSION

Interpreting and thinking with Leibniz played a central role in the development and battles that characterised nineteenth-century philosophy in France. Understanding this strategic role for Leibniz's metaphysics in this period is crucial for grasping why many philosophers provided their particular interpretations of his thought. Nonetheless, as I have shown in this chapter, this does not mean that they did not gain important insights into the sage of Hannover's philosophy. In fact, Biran developed strikingly original arguments that breathed new life into Leibniz's work and showed the great potential of his spiritualist experiential metaphysics, so that, through Ravaisson, it would become deeply embedded in French thought in such a way that the limits of this influence could never be precisely determined. Boutroux, Renouvier, and Émile Boirac, amongst others, would all further explore the great potential of experiential Leibnizian spiritualism

throughout the nineteenth century and provide ingenious insights of their own. However, the first to expose this great potential was Maine de Biran.

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ABBREVIATIONS

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AT: Descartes, R. (1974-1989) *Oeuvres de Descartes*. Edited by C. Adam & P. Tannery. Paris: J. Vrin

CSM: Descartes, R. (1984-1991) *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. 3 Vols. Translated by Cottingham, J., Stoothoff, D. & Murdoch, D. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

D: Leibniz, G.W. (1768) *Leibniz: Opera Omnia*. Edited by L. Dutens. Geneva: De Tournes

E: Leibniz, G.W. (1839-40) *God. Guild. Leibntinii Opera quae existant Latina, Gallica, Germanica Omnia*. Edited by J.E. Erdmann. Berlin: Eichler

ECG: Renouvier, C.B. (1912) *Essai de critique générale. Deuxième Essai: Traité de psychologie rationnelle d'après les principes du criticisme*. 3 Vols. Paris: Librairie Armand Colin

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