

Biran and Schelling: “Contact Points” for a Radical Anthropology

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1 Introduction

The magnificent pages that Michel Henry dedicated to Maine de Biran have contributed to the fresh interest that Biran’s work has drawn in France, especially from those interested in phenomenological anthropology and the method of immanence.¹ It is also clear that Henry’s analyses and critiques of Biran afford him a foundational epistemological space for restating the set of theses that structure his radical ontology of life. As soon as Henry posits the “absence of any ontological theory of passivity”² as the principle guiding his interaction with Biran’s text—a principle which incorporates Henry’s position that this absence has led the majority of commenters to misunderstand and even “distort” its ontological significance—we understand that Henry’s heuristic goals, which go beyond simple exegesis, require him to create this space of dissonance. In Henry’s meta-text, the phenomenological viewpoint is repeatedly superimposed onto that of the simple reader in order to constantly bring us back to the primary text’s main point, that is, the question of a fundamental ontological tonality, a form of passive synthesis that “is not reserved to the properly active modes of willing and effort.”³

- 1 For a monumental exploration of this complex link, see the work of Anne Devarieux, *L’intériorité réciproque* (Grenoble: Millon, 2018). See also the contribution of Anne Devarieux in this volume, “(An) Unforgettable Maine de Biran? The Biranian heresy of Michel Henry.”
- 2 Michel Henry, *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps. Essai sur l’ontologie biranienne* (Paris: PUF, 2011 [1965]), 220 [trans. by Etzkorn (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975), 159]. [Unless otherwise indicated, quotations have been translated by the author of this chapter.]
- 3 Ibid., 224 [Etzkorn translation, 162].

between his doctrine and Schelling's work⁷⁵—despite the prism imposed by Degérando⁷⁶—that of a self's archi-passibility constituting its immanent condition or absoluteness. If “Schelling's whole idealism is founded on this hypothesis that we only immediately perceive our own states,”⁷⁷ as Biran notes, this is due to the self's internal apperception⁷⁸ that precedes any theoretical or practical knowledge and can only be explained by a primitive principle that imparts its absoluteness: love. All knowledge is derived from this primitive incarnation that holds back the internal self amid all will: “[in] the way that we internally perceive that the *self* (thought) is and remains in the soul, always lingering and always produced.”⁷⁹

75 Biran, *Œuvres*, vol. XI-3, 104.

76 On the one hand, Biran takes a step away from the bias he perceives in Degérando (*Œuvres*, vol. XI-3, footnote of page 135), but, on the other hand, Degérando provides him with a Schelling theorizing the will and the primitive identity that escapes the division operated within Fichtean syntheses, that were build according to a self already considered as productive and not just according to a self in its productive power (archi-consciousness of the absolute Self). So, the Baron's quotes from the *Philosophisches Journal einer Gesellschaft deutscher Gelehrten* (vol. 6–2, 1797) involve an “aperçu général de la littérature philosophique la plus récente” following the delivery (vol. 5–4) of Schelling's famous *Neue Deduktion des Naturrechts*, a text which accords a central role to the positive powers of a singular will (Degérando, *Histoire comparée*, 303–305, note 1).

77 Biran, *Œuvres*, vol. XI-3, 414, following Biran's reaction written in the margins of Passavant's annotations of Fichte's *Thatsachen*, a text from 1810.

78 “Die erste Innigkeit,” as Schelling puts it 1811 in *Die Weltalter* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1979), 17.

79 As Biran comments echoing John's *Prologue* and Bossuet, in *Œuvres*, vol. X-1, 154.