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*Of Immediate Apperception*. Maine de Biran. Edited by Alessandra Aloisi and Marco Piazza. Translated by Mark Sinclair. London: Bloomsbury, 2020. Pp. viii + 176

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Maine de Biran (1766–1824) holds an usual place in the history of philosophy. On the one hand, Biran exercised substantial influence on the intellectual discussions of his day, corresponding at length with important French intellectual figures such as the natural scientist André-Marie Ampere (1775–1836). He was among the first French philosophers to read and interpret Immanuel Kant, so he is an important figure in the French reception of German idealism. Although little of his work was published in his lifetime, he was nonetheless a founder of the French spiritualism tradition, a movement which foregrounds questions of the mind (*l'esprit*) that included some of the most important French philosophers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries such as Victor Cousin (1792–1867), Félix Ravaisson (1813–1900), and Henri Bergson (1859–1941). For his resonances with German idealism, Hippolyte Taine described Maine de Biran as “un Fichte français.”<sup>1</sup> In his own overview of French philosophy, Henri Bergson mused that with Biran’s project “on peut se demander si la voie que ce philosophe a ouverte n’est pas celle où la métaphysique devra marcher définitivement.”<sup>2</sup> Michel Henry, a French phenomenologist who wrote a study on Biran, considered him to be “that prince of thought, who merits being regarded by us in the same way as Descartes and

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1. Hippolyte Taine, *Les Philosophes classiques du XIXe siècle en France* (Paris: Librairie de L. Hachette et Cie, 1868), 61.

2. Henri Bergson, “La philosophie française,” *La Revue de Paris* (May 15, 1915): 12.

Husserl, as one of the true founders of a phenomenological science of human reality.”<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, Biran’s work is essentially unknown among English-speaking readers. F. C. T. Moore described Biran as “an author almost without critics, indeed almost without readers in the English philosophical tradition.”<sup>4</sup> If he is known at all, it is only as a transitional figure on the way to more important and interesting avenues that would only later come to fruition. Because he is seen as a transitional figure, Biran has been characterized as many things in English scholarship: an empiricist, a proto-phenomenologist, or a Neoplatonist, depending on the agenda of the interpreter. None of these characterizations are entirely wrong, as Biran adopts versions of these positions at various stages in his career. The mistake is to take one of these stages in Biran’s perpetual philosophical development as if it were the whole of his thought. Biran wrote and rewrote many books, and few were published in his lifetime, almost always because he was unsatisfied with their presentation or the quality of his own argumentation. For this reason, Henri Gouhier somewhat sardonically quipped that “Maine de Biran est l’homme d’un seul livre, et, ce livre, il ne l’a jamais écrit.”<sup>5</sup> Regardless of his conversation partner or the stage of his own intellectual development, Maine de Biran nevertheless maintained a singular focus on the fundamental nature of the mind and on developing a metaphysics capable of comprehending this nature. The translation *Of Immediate Apperception* offered by Mark

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3. Michel Henry, *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body*, trans. Girard Etzkorn (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975), 8.

4. F. C. T. Moore, *The Psychology of Maine de Biran* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 2.

5. Henri Gouhier, *Les Conversions de Maine de Biran* (Paris: Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, 1947), 6.

Sinclair is very significant, as it is the first major work of Biran to be published in English. Compared to other examples of his work, it is a succinct and detailed account of Biran's mature position on the nature of the mind, and features the versions of his positions that proved the most influential and decisive in subsequent development of French thought. This translation by Mark Sinclair therefore gives English-speaking readers an opportunity to appraise Biran's ideas and influence on their own terms, and in their own philosophical context.

Biran's philosophy principally involves the development of a new philosophical method, so it sets itself against the form of empiricism that dominated eighteenth century French thought. The first section of the book begins with a recounting of Biran's philosophical context. Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, a figurehead of the empiricist tradition in France, published his influential *Le Traité des sensations* in 1754. Therein, Biran recounts, Condillac radicalizes Locke's empiricism and argues that all knowledge, even the subject's own psychological self-knowledge, is derived from the reception of empirical sense data. Biran does not think that this empirical method, as discussed by Francis Bacon, is mistaken per se. He does, however, think that empiricism as a method is erroneously applied when used to understand the fundamental nature of consciousness: "Without rejecting the validity of that same method [Bacon's], but with regard to a sort of wholly internal experience, different to that which has constantly guided Bacon's disciplines [...] one would thereby be led to wonder whether Bacon's method, recommended by so much success in the physical sciences, can reach even the outer limits of a genuinely first philosophy" (28–29). Put briefly, Biran's principal thesis is that wholly internal experiences are of a qualitatively different nature than external ones and produce a different sort of evidence (which

he calls “internal facts”). A different sort of method is required to adjudicate this evidence so that the nature of the mind can be correctly analyzed at its most fundamental level.

For Biran, the main problem with empiricism is that it can only come to grips with the intuited effects or results of the mind’s actions, and not the original source of these effects. Biran calls this original knowledge of the mind’s action “immediate apperception.” This is related to the term coined by Leibniz to refer to the representative or reflective knowledge of the inner states of consciousness. Biran is not interested in knowledge acquired through reflection, but in the kind of original knowledge we have of the inner states of the mind that both precede and make reflection possible. This original knowledge is not perceived in a way that is mediated or empirical; instead, it is coterminous with psychic acts themselves. Biran writes, “perception is different to intuition, as a cause is different to its effect, or as the act itself, immediately apperceived in its free determination, is distinct from its result, mediately perceived, or represented outside of the subject or without any consciousness of productive force” (163). What Biran strives to explain, in other words, is the mind’s activity in terms of its source. To illustrate our immediate apperceptive capacity, Biran refers to our sense of bodily motility. When we make use of a limb, say, we first have to bring about the virtual desire of our will into actual movement. While we feel the actual movement of our limbs passively, we are certainly aware of the difference between when we ourselves direct our limbs compared to when someone else moves them for us. The distinction, Biran maintains, is in the sense of effort that supervenes between our psychic will to bring a movement about and the resistance encountered in engaging our body in some kind of movement. This sense or feeling of resistance, according to Biran, is immediate internal apperception (130).

There is much to commend in this translation and little to fault with it. It bridges a significant gap in English-speaking scholarship on French philosophy. This scholarly gap is especially egregious given Biran's persistence in, and influence on, the development of twentieth century French philosophy, in particular issues around a phenomenology of the body in thinkers such as Henri Bergson, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The only issue with this volume is found in its otherwise informative introduction, specifically in its narration of Biran's place in these twentieth century debates in French phenomenology. The authors of this introduction, Alessandra Aloisi and Marco Piazza, contend that Michel Henry's reading of Biran is based on Merleau-Ponty's work because it comes later (17). In actuality, Michel Henry's work on Maine de Biran dates to the same period as Merleau-Ponty's lectures on Biran in terms of its composition (ca. 1948), even though it was not published until 1965. This minor complaint of historical characterization, however, cannot dampen my enthusiasm about this volume, and the attendant hope that this is not the last volume of Biran's sizable oeuvre that will appear in English by this translation and editorial team.