
Coenesthesia or the Immediate Feeling of Existence: Maine de Biran and the Problem of the Unconscious between Physiology and Philosophy

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The term “coenesthesia” was introduced at the end of the eighteenth century by the German physiologist Johann Christian Reil to designate the general perception of the living body through the nerves. Over the course of the nineteenth century, this notion circulated widely not only in Germany, but also in France, where it was developed in particular by Théodule Ribot. However, a good sixty years before Ribot, Maine de Biran had already employed the notion of “coenesthesia” to indicate the “immediate feeling of existence,” which he distinguished from the apperception of the self in relation to the body. What Biran emphasized, in his philosophical appropriation of “coenesthesia,” is the impersonal and mostly unconscious nature of this feeling, which never leaves us and plays a key role in the shaping of our personal and conscious life, unnoticeably influencing the course of our ideas, our character, and the emotional tone of our perception of the world. The purpose of this article is to study Biran’s philosophical use of the notion of “coenesthesia” in the last phase of his philosophical reflection (1823–1824) in relation to the emergence of the problem of the unconscious.

1. Introduction

In a passage from the *Journal* that closely resembles well-known pages by Rousseau and Proust, Maine de Biran described a remarkable experiment that he would carry out on himself every morning when he awoke, in an

attempt to grasp the “immediate feeling of existence” before the self reappears fully on the scene:

I am always unhappy with myself upon waking, and in the moments afterwards, until the soul enters into full possession of the body and the mind attends to its usual operations; in this transition from sleep to wakefulness, the immediate feeling of existence, or the pure sensory *coenesthesia* [la pure *coenesthèse* sensitive], distinguishes itself much better from the apperception of the *self*, in relation to the body; for as soon as the self makes itself present to the impressions and the whole composition of associated ideas join the coenesthesia, the latter merges into the whole and another, composed, feeling of existence is formed, which may be more or less good, happy, confident, as opposed to the first feeling, which is the pure and immediate effect of the sensory dispositions, which is sad, painful, full of mistrust and of fear. (Maine de Biran 1954–57, 2: 383)¹

This was not the first time that Maine de Biran had tried to describe the transition from sleep to wakefulness.² If this transition interested him in particular it is because he hoped to grasp in it, by “analogy,” something that is essentially outside our cognitive reach, that is to say the original conditions of the birth of the self and of personal existence. However, what is of specific interest in this text, written on 18 August 1823, is the reference to a rather unusual notion—that of “coenesthesia”—used to designate the “immediate feeling of existence.”

A term that has fallen into disuse today, and is often confused with other almost homophonous terms, such as “synesthesia” or “kinesthesia,”³ “coenesthesia” was a concept at the forefront of the most recent theories developed in the field of medical physiology between the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century. It indicated a specific type of sensory faculty or bodily sensation distinct from the five senses and capable of giving us a generalized perception of the body in its totality, resulting from the nerves. Associated with the name of then famous German physician and physiologist Johann Christian Reil, the

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

2. See for instance Maine de Biran 1984a, in particular pp. 104–5, Maine de Biran 2001, vol. VII/1: 134–35, and Maine de Biran 1989, pp. 130–31.

3. For the difference between “coenesthesia” and “synesthesia,” a term taken up by nineteenth century medicine to indicate the psychological and neurological association or mixture between different senses (see Starobinski 1977, pp. 3–4; Schiller 1984). The term, “kinesthesia” (from *kineō*, movement) instead indicates the “muscular sense,” which is to say the sensation that, of our own body, we receive through movement (see Bastian 1887; Forest 2004).

notion of “coenesthesia” was widely circulated during the nineteenth century not only in Germany but also in France, where it was used in particular by Théodule Ribot. However, Maine de Biran was among the first to speak of “coenesthesia” in France, a notion which he became aware of in 1823.⁴ From that date on, we find various references to “coenesthesia” not only in the *Journal*, but also in some of his writings on physiology contemporary to the drafts of the *Nouveaux essais d'anthropologie*. These include the *Considérations sur les principes d'une division des faits psychologiques et physiologiques*, a text written in 1823 but first published by Victor Cousin in 1841.⁵

In this article, I aim to revisit some aspects of late Biranian philosophy in the light of the concept of “coenesthesia.” After some initial clarifications regarding the medical and physiological significance of this notion and the context of its reception by Maine de Biran, I would like to show how the idea of “coenesthesia” provided him with not only a particularly effective or expressive name (“un nom expressif,”⁶) but also the conceptual tools to focus on a series of issues related to a possible theorization of the unconscious. In particular, we will see how the notion of coenesthesia allowed Biran to circumscribe and define “sans mélange,” that is in a pure way⁷, the immediate feeling of existence in its essential difference with respect to the feeling that the self has of its own existence. If the first feeling, as we can read in the aforementioned page, is nothing but the “pure and immediate effect of the sensitive dispositions,” the second feeling derives instead from the “the apperception of the self, in relation to the body” and is therefore linked to the *sens de l'effort*. While the latter is the feeling in which the self grasps the immediate unity with its own body, the immediate feeling of existence coincides with life itself. Distinct as they are, these two feelings tended, however, according to Biran, to be confused by authors who had already dealt with the immediate feeling of existence, such as Lignac, Rousseau, Condillac, or Cabanis. As we will see, these two feelings correspond, according to Biran, to two types

4. According to Bernard Baertschi (1990, p. XIX), Biran is the first to use the term *coenesthésie* in French, which appears in the *Complément du Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* only in 1842. According to Azouvi (1995, p. 416), Biran became aware of the notion of “coenesthesia” only in June 1823. The term is used for the first time in a passage from the *Journal* of June 28, 1823, always in relation to the moment of awakening. Here Biran observes how “*coenesthésia* of sensitivity affects firstly the soul or immediately captures the *self* upon waking,” providing it with a kind of “muffled consciousness” [conscience soured] or a “prénotion” of the state of the body (Maine de Biran 1954–57, vol. 2: 373–74).

5. Maine de Biran 1841, vol. 3: 138–293. References to coenesthesia are also found in the notes entitled “Extrait de Reil” (Maine de Biran 1990b, pp. 172–223).

6. Maine de Biran 1990a, p. 125.

7. Maine de Biran 1954–57, vol. 2: 383.

of immediacy and give us access to two different ways of feeling the body and relating to it.⁸

It is often claimed that one of the great merits of Biranian philosophy consisted in having highlighted the existence of two different ways of feeling and knowing the body, one *objective* and the other *subjective*. The body can be grasped from the outside, through the external senses and represented in the form of an external extension (the objective body). The body can also (and first of all) be grasped from within, through immediate internal apperception, in the voluntary contraction of the muscles, which makes us feel the body as ours, as something that belongs to us and is subject to our will (*corps propre* or the sense of one's own body).⁹ It is precisely the subjective experience of the *corps propre*, which coincides with the birth of the self, of consciousness, and of personal existence, which allows Maine de Biran to correct and to move beyond both Descartes and Condillac: instead of "I think, therefore I am" or "I feel, therefore I am," Biran asserts, "I will, therefore I am." The feeling that the self has of its existence corresponds to this subjective experience of the *corps propre*.

However, there is another way of feeling the body from within that remains irreducible to the experience of the *corps propre* as we have just defined it: this is what I would like to refer to when speaking of *corps vivant* [living body], according to an expression borrowed in particular from Biran's *Considerations*.¹⁰ Generally overlooked because of its fleeting

8. On the two types of immediacy, see Azouvi 1982a. As Devarieux (2004, pp. 13–14) notes, in Biran there is a fundamental hesitation between these two opposing feelings.

9. See Baertschi 1992, pp. 143–5. On the complexity and ambiguity of the notion of *corps propre* in Maine de Biran, see Azouvi 1995, pp. 219–23, according to whom, in some cases Maine de Biran identifies the *corps propre* with the object of immediate apperception, in other cases, not: "the internal immediate apperception, far from extending to the totality of the *corps propre*, is circumscribed within the limits of the voluntary organization" (p. 221). In other words, the object of immediate apperception "is not the whole *corps propre*; it is exclusively, in the *corps propre*, what belongs to effort" (p. 220). The need arises, in any case, to introduce another way of feeling and knowing the body from within, in addition to that of immediate apperception. Azouvi (1995, pp. 252–8) speaks of the "living body" as the "subject of inherence" [*sujet d'inhérence*] of a subjective modality of knowledge of the body no longer specific to apperception but to affection. In this second case the relationship with the body is no longer that of "having" (of property) but of "being."

10. Maine de Biran 1990a, p. 130. What we call here the "living body" is different from the "corps organique" mentioned by Henry (1965, pp. 179–88), who also stresses the need to distinguish between three types of body. In fact, as Devarieux (2004, p. 169) notices, Henry's "corps organique" remains "an empire over which we have authority." After all, Henry himself (Henry 1965, pp. 179–80) underlines how the "corps organique" is distinguished, by reason of its structure and internal differentiation, from the general feeling of the body corresponding to coenesthesia, an undifferentiated, "vague and confused

nature, this third way of feeling the body emerges with particular clarity in the page from the *Journal* from which we started. In the moments immediately following awakening, the body is grasped through the immediate feeling of existence (or pure sensory coenesthesia), now clearly distinct from immediate apperception. In rare and transient moments like this, the body reveals itself to us not so much as a *corps propre* (as something that belongs to us as an object of effort and will) but as a *living body*: as something that, while being close, intimate, and familiar, still remains constitutively *inappropriable*.¹¹ A silent companion that is with us at all times and never abandons us, the living body is only noticed by us momentarily in exceptional circumstances, such as moments of awakening, states of bodily discomfort, sudden illuminations, or moments of distraction and reverie. However, it plays a fundamental role in our conscious life, on which it continuously projects, albeit inadvertently, its effects and shadows, according to a phenomenon that Biran calls, with remarkable expressive genius, “organic refraction.”

2. The History and Prehistory of Coenesthesia

The Latin term “coenesthesia” (composed of *coen/koinos* and *aisthesis*, literally a shared or common sensation or feeling) is a neologism that appeared in the medical dissertation of one of Reil’s students, Christian Friedrich Hübner, submitted as a thesis in 1794 at the University of

feeling of an indeterminate sensitive existence.” The “living body,” seized through coenesthesia, could be compared to the “body without organs,” which, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is opposed to the organism as well as to signification and subjectivation (see Smith 2012, pp. 189–221). Unlike the *corps propre* (in particular as taken up by Merleau-Ponty (1945, pp. 184–90), the “living body” is not linked to the dimension of spatiality and implies no localization. In this respect, the case of the paralytic illustrated by the physician Rey Régis in his 1789 book *Histoire naturelle de l’âme*, and also discussed by Biran on several occasions, including the *Considérations* (Biran 1990a, pp. 131–2), can be regarded as exemplary. Finally, unlike the “the absolutized body of the metaphysician” [*corps absolutisé du métaphysicien*], which is the “the passive material substance outside of the self that I believe to be at the foundation of my body” (Montebello 2000, p. 15), the “living body,” although outside the self, is not the object of a belief, because it is grasped through coenesthesia or the immediate feeling of existence.

11. On the body as an example of the “inappropriable,” see Agamben 2014, pp. 114–31. According to Agamben (p. 116), a correct understanding of the problem of the body would have “been durably misled by the phenomenological doctrine of the *corps propre*,” where the experience of the body is originally related to the experience of the self. In this sense it could be said that Maine de Biran’s philosophical use of the notion of coenesthesia can provide an alternative to the phenomenological theory of the *corps propre*. For the idea of the “inappropriable,” see also Agamben 2005.

Halle under the title *Commentatio de Coenesthesi*.¹² The term was introduced to indicate a particular type of sensation that gives us, through the nerves, a confused and overall representation of the state of the body. This sensation can be pleasant or painful and is distinguished both from external sensation, to which we owe the representation of objects outside us, and from internal sensation (attributable to the “organ of the soul,” which is to say the brain) through which the mind becomes aware of itself:

We find in the mind (*anima*) three kinds of representations, which differ in relation to the object represented.

The mind:

1. Represents its own status, its powers, its actions, its ideas and notions, and distinguishes these from itself and in this way is made conscious of itself.
2. It represents to itself the external state of the body or the link of the whole man with the world.
3. Finally, it presents to itself its own bodily state.

We see that each of these representations, by which man is represented according to three different states, is located in the body in its own particular apparatus:

1. Coenesthesia, by which the state of its body is presented to the mind through the activity of the nerves distributed throughout the body.
2. External sensation, which is stimulated by the action of the senses presenting the world to the mind.
3. Lastly, the activity which is initiated in the organ of the mind itself and confined to it. By this activity imagination and judgments are formed, the powers, ideas, and notions of its consciousness are presented to the mind, and the mind is made conscious of itself (Hübner 1794, pp. 3–5).

Jean Starobinski, one of the first to bring attention to this fundamental but forgotten text, observed how the tripartition proposed here by Reil

12. Although the dissertation bears the name of Hübner, rightly or wrongly it is believed that the true author is Reil (see Starobinski 1977; Schiller 1984). According to Schiller (p. 511), this would correspond to an “established academic tradition based on the principle that a dissertant had only to prove he was capable of defending the work he was submitting,” regardless of whether he was the author or not. By citing and commenting on this text in his writings, Biran showed that he shared the opinion that Reil is the author. For reasons of clarity and to avoid confusion, I will therefore attribute to Reil the theses set out in Hübner’s dissertation.

implicitly retraced the distinctions already suggested by Descartes in *Les passions de l'âme* (articles XXIII–XXV) between the “perceptions that we relate to our body,” the “the perceptions that we relate to objects that are outside of ourselves,” and the “the perceptions that we relate to our soul/mind.”¹³ With the difference, by no means secondary, that in Reil the corporeal representation coming from coenesthesia and connected to the living body does not seem to have a conscious character. Reil tended to think of this sensation as a form of “touch” or tactile sensation and gave it a priority in the order of our sensitive life: it is the first vital sensation to appear in the fetus.

Starobinski also specified how, despite the etymological similarity, the concept of “coenesthesia” should not be confused with what the philosophical tradition has designated, since Aristotle, as *koinon aistheterion* (or *sensorium commune*). Although they derive from the same roots, these two terms indicate different functions: “According to *De Anima*, what is unique to *koinon aistheterion* is that it receives and conjoins all sensations, in order to perceive a *unique* object when sensory organs communicate to us qualitatively heterogeneous impressions. This sense operates, at the level of perception, the syntheses that allow us to be present in a *single world*.” Starobinsky contrasted this with coenesthesia, which “only brings *supplementary information*, of a somatic origin, to the mind and the *Sensorium commune*. The two must not be confused with each other” (Starobinski 1977, p. 4). More recently, Daniel Heller-Roazen has nevertheless highlighted the existence of a possible line of continuity between the ancient notion of *Sensorium commune* and “coenesthesia,” observing how the operation indicated by Starobinski (the union and conjunction of sensations coming from different senses in a single object) is actually only one of the possible functions of the *koinon aistheterion*: “The power known to the ancient and medieval thinkers was also responsible for a further operation, unmentioned by Starobinski, presumably because by the eighteenth century it had ceased to be consistently attributed to the *koinon aistheterion*. The master perceptual power of the philosophical tradition also perceives the fact of perception, allowing sentient beings to sense when they are sensing and, moreover, when they are not.” Even with the necessary clarifications, linked to the physiological dimension of the notion “coenesthesia,” absent in the ancient concept, “it is difficult not to hear an echo of this sensation [the *koinon aistheterion*] in the feeling defined by Hübner and Reil, which registers the bare fact of sensitive existence” (Heller-Roazen 2007, p. 241).

13. Starobinski 1990, p. 23. See Descartes 1999, pp. 83–4.

François Azouvi has observed how, before learning about the word from Reil, Maine de Biran was already familiar with the notion of “coenesthesia” thanks to Cabanis. It is through his work, starting from 1798, that Biran discovered “internal sensations” and the idea of *sensibility* (*sensibilité*) as a general fact of life.¹⁴ However, Azouvi explained that, while Cabanis “would never see anything else, in his discovery, other than the way of reforming, by complementing it, the *Traité des sensations* [...], Biran was induced right away to make of this discovery the way to access a prior and foundational element that would hold everything” (Azouvi 1995, p. 47).

In the light of these considerations, the question that I would like to raise and that will guide the course of my investigation is the following: what is this “prior and foundational element” accessed by Biran, which goes beyond Cabanis’ discovery? What role did the notion of “coenesthesia” play in this advancement? Before answering, it will be necessary to clear the ground of a possible misunderstanding.

When drawing the contours of the prehistory of the notion of coenesthesia, one often encounters, alongside the name of Cabanis, that of Lelarge de Lignac,¹⁵ another author known by Maine de Biran. Around the middle of the eighteenth century, Lignac had spoken of an “intimate” or “interior sense” [*sens intime* or *intérieur*] corresponding to the “perception of the coexistence of our body [which] radiates, so to speak, from within our body towards the outside” (Lelarge de Lignac 1753, p. 103). This perception, Lignac pointed out, never leaves us, not even while we sleep, although most of the time it goes unnoticed. It is an “always subsistent background” (Lelarge de Lignac 1753, p. 108), corresponding to a “vague feeling” [*sentiment confus*] (p. 102) that reflects back to us everything that we are. This feeling “completes our being [*personne*]” (p. 429) and causes our body to become part of the representation of what we call the self. Lignac’s theses were particularly well known at the time and echoes of this feeling as he defined it can be

14. Azouvi 1982a, p. 80n10. For the discovery of Cabanis and internal sensations, see also Gouhier 1947, pp. 108–21. Before encountering the work of Cabanis, Biran did not have (despite his familiarity with Rousseau) a vocabulary that would allow him to include “the feelings of existence within the science of the mind” (Gouhier 1947, p. 110). Thus, thanks to Cabanis, “what Rousseau had simply sketched out becomes here the methodological framework for an experimental investigation. This investigation involved a human being whose sensitivity was not limited to the five senses opened onto the world of objects; there is a sensitivity connected to visceral organic life” (Gouhier 1947, p. 115). On the discovery of Cabanis and the role played by the latter in revolutionizing Biranian philosophy, starting from 1798, see also Azouvi 1995, pp. 35–47.

15. See Starobinski 1990, Gusdorf 1976, chapter 4, and Azouvi 1984a.

found in the article “Existence” of the *Encyclopédie*,¹⁶ as well as in authors such as Maupertuis, d’Alembert, and Rousseau.¹⁷

And yet, it is evident that, unlike “coenesthesia,” the *sens intime* of which Lignac speaks, belongs more to the history of consciousness than to that of the unconscious: “Lignac’s aim,” Azouvi correctly notes, “is to describe the *consciousness* of the body itself rather than to analyze, as Cabanis would do later, internal sensations. These were, in fact, always understood by Lignac as modalities of a global *consciousness* of bodily extension” (Azouvi 1984a, p. 117; my emphasis). In other words, what Lignac described through the sense of the coexistence of the body is the unity of a consciousness. Therefore, if Lignac might have played any role in Biranian philosophy it was not so much in relation to the definition of the immediate feeling of existence (later identified with “coenesthesia”), but rather in relation to the immediate internal apperception and the genesis of the consciousness of the *corps propre*.¹⁸ As Daniel Heller-Roazen pointed out, what decisively distinguishes “coenesthesia” from these pre-existing tradition represented by Lignac is precisely the fact that it does not involve any conscious perception:

The late 18th-century German physician rigorously distinguishes the ‘general feeling’ from both the forms of external perception and the ‘inner sense’ of the tradition: in the terms of the medical treatise, coenaesthesia is no more a perception of consciousness than it is a perception of objects distinct from the body. By definition, *the “common feeling” is a perception of the living being as such: a sensation of the*

16. Without needing to name Lignac, the article mentioned “this multitude of confused sensations that never leaves us, which circumscribes in a way our body, which makes it present to us, and which for this reason certain metaphysicians have called *sense of the coexistence of our body*” (Turgot 1756). On this entry from the *Encyclopédie*, see Grimsley 1952, pp. 125–51. In his *Cours de l’histoire de la philosophie* (18th century), Cousin makes of Turgot a forerunner of Spiritualism and Idealisms, together with Rousseau (see Cousin 1829, vol. 2, pp. 12, 21).

17. See Maupertuis 1757, p. 397, where the author wonders if “the feeling of pure existence” that we experience when we are not affected by any other sensation is not due to the body (and D’Alembert 1759, pp. 154–64). On the feeling of existence in Rousseau, see Heller-Roazen 2007, pp. 211–18, and Gouhier, who writes: “The feeling of existence, according to the expression of the ‘solitary walker’, is the testimony at every moment about the body as an intimate companion” (1947, p. 109). Mortier (1964, pp. 183–95), argued that an immediate antecedent of the feeling of existence in Rousseau should be looked for in the article “Délucieux” of the *Encyclopédie* (see Diderot 1754). In 1747, Françoise de Graffigny, *Lettres d’une péruvienne* (see Graffigny 2016, chapter 41), had already spoken of “the pleasure of being; this forgotten pleasure, neglected even by so many blind humans; this very sweet thought, this very pure happiness, *I am, I live, I exist.*”

18. See Azouvi 1982b.

sensing organism itself. Hübner and Reil's early readers were well aware of this point. The first among them in France may have been Maine de Biran. (Heller-Roazen 2007, p. 242; my emphasis)

3. On the *Considérations sur les Principes d'une Division des Faits Psychologiques et Physiologiques*

We now come to Maine de Biran. As anticipated, it is in the *Considérations sur les principes d'une division des faits psychologiques et physiologiques* that we find an articulated discussion of the notion of "coenesthesia," accompanied by the quotation of numerous passages taken from Hübner's dissertation *De Coenesthesis*, which are freely translated into French and commented upon. Written on the occasion of Biran's reading of Joseph Frédéric Bérard's book *Doctrine des rapports du physique et du moral pour servir de fondement à la physiologie dite intellectuelle et à la métaphysique*,¹⁹ which appeared in June 1823, the *Considérations* are one of the last texts written by Biran. Despite the purely descriptive title, Biran must have considered this an important text, as evidenced by the fact that he had had it copied. According to Ernest Naville, it was supposed to have been included, at least partially, in the *Nouveaux essais d'anthropologie*, a definitive and recapitulative work, which however remained unfinished.²⁰

At the heart of the *Considérations* there are two closely related questions: 1) the question of "sensations without consciousness," or as we would say today "unconscious"; 2) the question of the status of *psychology* in its essential difference from *physiology*: if psychology is the "interior knowledge [*science intérieure*] of intelligent, active, moral, and free beings," physiology is instead the science that has as its object "everything that happens within man outside the light of consciousness, everything that adheres to a passive and animal nature" (Maine de Biran 1990a, p. 116).

19. Joseph Frédéric Bérard (1789–1828) was a vitalist doctor belonging to the Montpellier school. His medical dissertation was titled *Plan d'une Médecine Naturelle, ou la nature considérée comme médecin, et le médecin considérée comme imitateur de la nature* (1811). He was also the author of several articles for the *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences médicales* (1812–1821), including the articles "Contemplatif," "Cranoscopie," "Extase," "Élément," and "Force musculaire." His numerous works include *Doctrine médicale de l'école de Montpellier et comparaison de ses principes avec ceux des autres Écoles, anciennes et modernes* (vol. 1, 1821) and *Doctrine des rapports du physique et du moral pour servir de fondement à la physiologie dite intellectuelle et à la métaphysique* (1823). In this book, while praising the depth of Biran's thought, whom he considered a great metaphysician, Bérard also criticized the Biranian theory of causality (Bérard 1823, p. 327–8). Traces of Biran's discussion with Bérard can be found in the *Journal* (Maine de Biran 1954–57, vol. 2: 380). On Bérard's relations with Biran see Azouvi 1995, p. 421; Azouvi 1984b, p. 157. On Bérard in general see Dupuy 1828; Dulieu 1990, pp. 665–8.

20. See Naville 1859, vol. 3, p. 324; Baertschi 1989, p. XXVI.

As the title of the text reminds us, Biran's aim was to clarify the relationship between psychological and physiological facts, between "what belongs to the self" and "what belongs to life" (Maine de Biran 1990a, p. 89), without losing sight of a separation that, although for opposite reasons, both "materialism" and "animism" ended up canceling out: materialism by reducing thought and consciousness to a simple modification of matter (Cabanis), animism by stating that every sensation implies consciousness (Stahl). To preserve the distinction between psychology and physiology, and to avoid falling back into the Cartesian dualism between two substances, it was necessary, according to Biran, to first clarify the status of "sensations without consciousness." Without denying them the nature of sensations by making them something purely mechanical (which would mean losing sight of the difference between physics and physiology and making animals simple automatons), Biran strove to establish clearly how "sensations without consciousness" are different from conscious perceptions and from all that is felt by the self.

My hypothesis is that it is precisely within the aporia of this debate—rekindled by the controversy with Bérard²¹—that, thanks to the notion of coenesthesia, Biran arrived at a real theorization of the unconscious, conceived of not simply in negative terms (such as what is extraneous to the self and to consciousness) but essentially positive ones. As we will see, he could do this by making a properly "Leibnizian" philosophical move: a move that closely recalls the way in which, by way of the theory of "small perceptions," Leibniz himself had emerged from the impasse of the debate that saw Locke oppose Descartes's followers about the nature of the soul.²²

We have already mentioned how in Maine de Biran there are two types of "immediacy" that, although they are often confused, must nevertheless be kept distinct: the immediacy of internal apperception and the immediacy of life or the immediate feeling of existence. In the *Considérations*, two

21. According to Biran, Bérard ran the risk, against his own intentions, of transporting psychology into physiology in the manner of Stahl (see Maine de Biran 1990a, pp. 89–90). The same idea is also expressed in Maine de Biran 1989, p. 35 and following.

22. The problem was, more precisely, to establish whether the mind always thinks (Descartes) or not (Locke): cf. Heller-Roazen 2007, chapters XVIII–XIX, and Aloisi 2021. In this sense, it can be said that what Biran called, following Reil, "coenesthesia" corresponds, from the philosophical point of view, to what, with Leibniz, he had already called "obscure perceptions" (see Azouvi 1984b, pp. 160–61). On Biran's "strategic" and "selective" use of Leibniz, which proved to be crucial for the development of nineteenth- and twentieth-century French thought, from Félix Ravaisson to Gilles Deleuze, via a lineage that also passes through Émile Boutroux and Henri Bergson (see Dunham 2015, 2016). On the reception and strategic uses of Leibniz in France in the mid-nineteenth century, see also Antoine-Mahut 2015.

types of primitive facts correspond to these two types of “immediacy” that guarantee the separation between psychology and physiology:

1) The primitive fact of the self or of effort, which are the primitive fact of the order of knowledge or consciousness: “Let’s say [...] that the self is primitive, or that it has nothing anterior or superior to it *in the order of cognition*” (Maine de Biran 1990a, p. 105, my emphasis) (the primitive fact of psychology).

2) The primitive fact of the vital sense, a primitive fact that is not of the order of consciousness but, we could say, of the unconscious, and is here called “true simple primitive fact” [*vrai primitif simple*]: “This vital sense is the true simple primitive fact, it is even the first and necessary condition of all our external sensations” (1990a, pp. 124–5) (the primitive fact of physiology).

The primitive fact of the vital sense is that from which the self “begins not so much to exist as to produce itself under this interior mode of the perceiving *self* as one, simple, identical, which associates itself with every adventitious modification, to every variable and passing sensation” (pp. 109–10). Of this primitive fact, site of “sensations without consciousness,” Biran writes:

How not to recognize, in fact, that there is a multitude of these obscure impressions that are passively perceived without being in the conscious to the self, for which they will always remain foreign; *and when the apperception is involved, it only manifests to the self what exists outside the self*, and whose very presence or activity cannot change the nature or character. For example, the self can be asleep while more or less sharp pains agitate the animal sensibility; *the sensation is complete, although the apperception is not there*; the latter does not add anything more, and produce nothing but a mere association of the human part with the suffering of the animal part. (Maine de Biran 1990a, p. 120; my emphasis)

Maine de Biran noted how this second type of primitive fact, which Condillac failed to really understand,²³ was instead taken up by physiologists, in particular by Reil, who was able to characterize “in the most remarkable way the really simple modes of this immediate feeling, which is also, according to him, the proper fact of pleasure or pain, inseparable from everything that lives.” Reil gave this immediate feeling the name of “coenesthesia, which denotes an overall feeling, a mode composed of all the

23. Although he spoke of a “fundamental feeling” [*sentiment fondamental*] and was able to recognize the existence of sensations without consciousness, Condillac did not understand the specificity of the facts of consciousness. For the critique of Condillac in the *Considérations* see Biran 1990a, pp. 16, 124.

vital impressions inherent in each part of the organism” (Maine de Biran 1990a, p. 125).

Biran recognized how, before Reil, other authors had spoken of one or more internal senses, nearly discovering the existence of coenesthesia. Yet, lacking an appropriate knowledge of the human body or a sufficiently deep analysis, these authors didn’t know how to study the meaning of the feeling itself. Specifically,

they mistook the limits which separate coenesthesia from external sensations or from particular functions of the organism, paying much more attention to the perceptions of the self than to the changes or very modifications of sensitivity specific to the living body; this is how they merged the immediate affections of coenesthesia with those which belong to sensitive [*sensitives*] habits, to the cold, to heat, to hunger or to thirst, odors, flavors, etc. (Biran 1990a, p. 125)

Although it is impossible to know exactly to which authors Biran was referring, we can conjecture that he was thinking, for different reasons, of Cabanis and of Lelarge de Lignac. This passage seems to display an intersecting and superimposed critique of both authors. Cabanis could be the one accused of having privileged external sensations over internal organization, thereby confusing immediate affections, due to an internal sensitivity, with sensitive habits. In the *Brouillon du premier mémoire*, Biran had already reproached Cabanis for giving too much importance to external sensations over internal organization.²⁴ Lignac, for his part, did not appeal to anatomical or physiological considerations and, as we have seen, he seemed more interested in describing the phenomenon of *consciousness* than in analyzing internal sensations in themselves. Biran therefore probably referred to Lignac when he criticizes the definition of the immediate feeling of existence as giving more importance to the perceptions of the self than to the modifications of the sensitivity specific to the living body. Compared to Cabanis and Lignac, Reil’s merit would therefore be twofold: he was able to comprehend this particular sense or sensation in itself, distinguishing it both from other types of sensation (internal or external) and from the perceptions of the self.

About this primitive feeling so successfully identified by Reil with the name of coenesthesia, the following characteristics seem to be of particular interest to Biran:

1) It is a *continuous* feeling, which never leaves us and persists even in sleep.²⁵ It does not stop working even in the suspension of one or more

24. See Azouvi 1995, pp. 45–7.

25. Sleep is nothing but “a sleep of the thinking being, since there is no complete sleep for the sensing being except for absolute death” (Maine de Biran 1990a, p. 138).

external senses, continuing to ensure the obscure feeling of the presence of the body. However, when the external senses are exercised, the coenesthesia is less noticeable, becoming confused with the rest—just as, to use a Biranian image, the light of a lamp is concealed by the daylight.²⁶ Coenesthesia can be temporarily suspended only in a local way, for example with the numbness of a limb due to pressure on the nerves. Biran specifies that this phenomenon makes foreign to us this part of our body, still perceptible through touch and sight (“as foreign as if it belonged to another individual”) (Biran 1990a, p. 127). This is an interesting addition, which clarifies indirectly how coenesthesia is for Maine de Biran the condition for an internal experience of the body which is different from that of immediate apperception, linked to voluntary effort.

2) Coenesthesia is a *confused* feeling and the mind does not distinguish the various elements that are combined to form it in every moment. It even includes “the impressions of all the parts of the organized body, including the smallest living molecules” (Biran 1990a, p. 128). Such a feeling can be more or less obscurely perceived and its intensity varies according to the state of health or disease of the body. When we are healthy, coenesthesia is weak and not very pronounced, ensuring a vague and widespread feeling of pleasure that goes mostly unnoticed—otherwise, Reil pointed out, “we would be troubled by the multitude of its impressions” (Maine de Biran 1990a, p. 127). But when we are sick, it becomes stronger and more noticeable to warn us of the danger, giving rise to a painful feeling which, however, remains unlocalizable.

3) Identical to the feeling of the existence of the living body, coenesthesia makes us know the body from the inside and not from the outside, giving us a confused and immediate knowledge of it and its functions, which is essentially different from the knowledge of the body that we receive through the external senses.

4. The Criticism of Reil and the Problem of the Unconscious

At this point, however, a problem opens up for Maine de Biran which, in his opinion, was treated too cursorily by Reil. What is the relationship between coenesthesia, as an immediate feeling of the existence of the living body, and immediate internal apperception? According to Biran, this question deserved to be examined better, while Reil preferred to resolve it superficially.²⁷ This is where Reil seems to have made a mistake that made

26. See Maine de Biran 1984b, p. 102.

27. Therefore, not only did Reil’s theses fail to respond to Bérard’s animism, but they risked leading to it, since Reil was not able to distinguish the threshold where the mastery of the self ends and that of vitality alone begins. According to Azouvi (1995, p. 418), the *Nouveaux Essais* were a response to this solicitation.

him lose sight of the essentially impersonal character of coenesthesia as a feeling devoid of self and consciousness:

It clearly follows from these observations about coenesthesia that wherever there is life, there is also a certain degree of affective sensation of pleasure or of pain; but everywhere where there is affection, must we admit that there may also be an indivisible perception or consciousness? This question was worth examining; however, it was supposed to be resolved without further examination. By means of coenesthesia, through the immediate impressions of the vital sense, the mind, it is said, has the feeling of the *presence of its own body* [le sentiment de la *présence de son corps*]. (Maine de Biran 1990a, p. 129; my emphasis)

The problem raised by Biran lies, we might say, in the use of the possessive adjective “son” [“its own body”]. According to Biran, Reil’s error consisted in saying that coenesthesia is sufficient to give the mind the feeling of the “presence of *its own* body,” which would imply the presence of an already constituted self and the consciousness of a specific individual existence. Now, recognizing, as Reil did, that any affection or affective sensation linked to coenesthesia could in itself involve a conscious perception (and therefore the presence of an indivisible consciousness) meant, for Maine de Biran, not only to lose sight of the specificity of the self and of consciousness, but also—and above all—to overlook the reality of that “true simple primitive fact” which, in other ways, Reil himself described so well. Biran concludes that if Reil had been able to develop his theses in a coherent way, he would have realized that: “It is certainly not coenesthesia that constitutes the person. By recognizing an animal that would be reduced to this more or less obscure sensitive life, it is not possible to suppose that coenesthesia would suffice to give it consciousness, or the idea or the perception of *its own* existence. This perception has thus another source” (Biran 1990a, p. 129; my emphasis).

It is therefore by correcting, or rather by perfecting, Reil’s theses that Biran came to define the nature of this “true simple primitive fact,” now fully focusing on the difference between the feeling of existence and the feeling that the self has of its own existence. Too often confused with immediate apperception due to its fleetingness, the immediate feeling of existence has an impersonal character and is not enough by itself to give us the feeling of our personal existence.

We can now return to the question I posed above: what is that prior and foundational element that Maine de Biran discovered thanks to Reil, going beyond Cabanis? We have seen how this is not so much the *corps propre*, which is the object of immediate apperception and can be traced to

Biran's reading of Lignac, but rather the *living body*, intimate and at the same time inappropriable, grasped through coenesthesia or immediate feeling of existence. It is precisely this discovery that allowed Biran to access a real theorization of the unconscious.

In the second part of the *Considérations*, Biran begins to analyze and revisit, in the light of the notion of coenesthesia, a series of "mixed" phenomena located at the intersection between psychology and physiology, which he had already discussed in previous *mémoires*. Linked to the physical constitution of each individual and subject to continuous changes determined by age or health as well as by the influence of various external factors, coenesthesia can also throw new light on the phenomenon of "organic refraction." This notion had been introduced in particular in the *Aperception immédiate* to indicate the inadvertent interference that the affective background related to our sensitive and bodily existence continually exerts on conscious and relational life, influencing the course of our ideas and our character, causing inexplicable changes of mood and imbuing things and images with "colors" and emotional nuances that seem to belong to them.²⁸ Taking an almost word for word passage from *Aperception immédiate* that seems to illustrate a phenomenon similar to what Ruskin will call the "pathetic fallacy,"²⁹ Biran observes: "It's this sort of organic refraction [*réfraction organique*] that shows us the external or internal world sometimes in a joyful and gracious light, sometimes covered in a veil of mourning which makes us find in the same objects either reasons for hope and love, or subjects for hate and fear. The most energetic will can change the course of ideas or the course of feelings which are tied to these affections, but it can do nothing against the sensitive background itself" (Biran 1990a, p. 137).

It is not only dreams that can be traced back to coenesthesia or immediate feeling of existence, but also a phenomenon that, with some hesitation, Biran called "imperfect recollection" [*réminiscence imparfaite*].³⁰ According to a process that seems to contain in a nutshell the Proustian idea of *mémoire involontaire*, imperfect reminiscence denotes the periodic recurrence of certain images and affective states related to specified times of the day, to the return of the seasons, or to the recurrence of specific places and objects. Coenesthesia in fact exposes us to the influence of innumerable

28. It will therefore not be a coincidence if, once he has discovered the notion of coenesthesia, Biran feels the need to rework the very pages of *On Immediate Apperception* where he had spoken of "organic refraction." It is precisely here that we find another important reference to the notion of coenesthesia, added in 1823 (see Maine de Biran 1995, p. 73).

29. Ruskin 2011.

30. See Maine de Biran 1990a, pp. 137, 151: hesitation due to the fact Biran believed that there cannot be a real and true reminiscence or recollection without attention and will.

environmental or atmospheric factors, with which it resonates, and which are known to us only minimally. In the absence of better explanations at the physical and physiological level, Biran relates them to the effects of magnetism and the remote action of certain “invisible fluids”:

Hence, in part, the successive variations that we experience in the immediate feeling of existence, through changes in habitat, climate, season, temperature. Hence too the sudden effect that the action of certain contagious miasma has on our entire sensibility [...] sometimes communicated by immediate contact, sometimes transported from one place to another by means of these invisible fluids, which occasionally establish a fatal solidarity between the inhabitants of the farthest reaches of the globe. (Maine de Biran 1990a, p. 143)

Similarly, the phenomena of suggestion and sympathy, already described in the *Mémoire sur les perceptions obscures*, also seem to be attributable to coenesthesia or the immediate feeling of existence.³¹ These phenomena seem to be associated with the “vital atmosphere” (Biran 1990a, p. 143) of certain individuals, capable of transmitting their passion to others and of “electrifying” anyone in their proximity with a simple look or tone of voice: “Wouldn’t several extraordinary phenomena of this kind tend to make us believe that there exists, in each living organism, a more or less clear potential to act from a distance, or to influence outside it within a certain sphere of activity, similar to the atmospheres that surround the planets?” (p. 143).

But it is above all in the *Journal* that we can see how the idea of coenesthesia determines, in the last phase of Biran’s work, a decisive rethinking of critical philosophical questions, together with a re-evaluation of the role of “animal life” (perfectly identified with the immediate feeling of organic and sensitive existence) in the understanding of the complex life of the mind. In a page written in July 1823, immediately after the first mention of “coenesthesia,” Biran examined the possibility that sudden intuitions, moments of grace or inspiration, are actually constitutively linked to specific modifications of coenesthesia: “In these modifications of the sensitive *coenesthesia*, what is very sure is that the state I am speaking of is completely involuntary and that the mind has no way of making it born or of bringing it back when it has passed. Mystics, magnetizers, etc. ... are well aware of specific techniques that, in certain cases, can modify the mind or the organ” (Maine de Biran 1954–57, vol. 2: 375). The

31. It is in this text that, not by chance, Biran added another late mention of the notion of coenesthesia (see Maine de Biran 1984b, p. 24).

activity of the self, and even of the most energetic will, has no direct power over these modifications. The only thing we can voluntarily do in this regard is to predispose ourselves to “receptivity,” almost in an exercise of opening towards distraction.³²

This is a part of Biranian philosophy that is often underestimated, when not viewed with reserve: moving away from the core of Biranism understood as a philosophy of effort and animated by the attempt to account for religious experience, late Biranian philosophy seems to indulge in a drift towards the “mystical.” However, it played a decisive role in the theorization of the unconscious. Like involuntary memory for Proust, religious experience for Biran has a more phenomenological than doctrinal significance. By religious experience we should understand the set of those experiences and those phenomena which are constitutively inappropriable on the part of the self or the will—phenomena that today we would attribute to the realm of the unconscious. These experiences are nothing more than the evidence of our constant relationship with something that exceeds us.

5. Conclusion

It is often asked whether the Biranian unconscious has a “psychological” or “physiological” nature—that is, if it concerns only physical phenomena or also includes mental ones. The difficulty of answering this question unambiguously suggests that the question itself may be framed incorrectly. On closer inspection, the answer depends, first of all, on the definition of “psychology” and “consciousness” that one uses, and so the problem lies, as Azouvi has suggested, in the impossibility of making our categories coincide with those of Biran.³³ If we stick to the Biranian definition and make psychology the science that studies the facts of the self or consciousness, the answer about the nature of the Biranian unconscious cannot but be tautological: everything from which consciousness is absent is necessarily—as we have seen with regard to the *Considérations*—a phenomenon pertaining to physiology. To this observation, we can add the fact that, in the absence of the term, Maine de Biran never gave a definition of the “unconscious” and therefore, when we go in search of a Biranian unconscious, we are necessarily faced with two possibilities: either we project our own idea of the unconscious onto him, or we define the unconscious in simply negative terms, as everything that is outside the domain of the self and of consciousness understood as voluntary effort or immediate apperception.

32. See Maine de Biran 1954–57, vol. 2: 382.

33. See Azouvi 1995, pp. 202–6. On this problem, also see Piazza and Vincenti 2023.

Perhaps, rather than questioning the psychological or physiological nature of the Biranian unconscious, what is worth asking is whether and in what way Maine de Biran contributed to the emergence of the modern conception of the unconscious: of an unconscious conceived not simply in negative terms (as what is outside of consciousness) but in positive terms, that is to say as a reality or dimension of the mind with its own cognitive range that exceeds conscious life. The fact that Maine de Biran never gave a definition of the “unconscious” does not mean that he did not contemplate the existence of psychic or mental phenomena that we can, in this sense, define as unconscious.³⁴

We have seen how, in order to save the autonomy of psychology and, with it, the specificity of consciousness and of personal existence, which was put into question by both materialists and animists, Maine de Biran made a “Leibnizian” philosophical move, allowing him to fully recognize the status of “sensations without consciousness” and to avoid any reductionist solution (either sensations without consciousness are a purely mechanical fact or every sensation implies consciousness). As in the case of Leibniz, this move turns out to have two implications. It allowed Biran not only to affirm the autonomy of consciousness or immediate apperception, but also to open up space for a new cognitive dimension, corresponding to Leibniz’s “small perceptions”: a lower form of knowledge that, without being of the order of consciousness, is not by that very fact something merely negative that can be reduced to simple automatism. A form of “cognitive nonconscious” intimately connected to the body, shared by all living beings, and able to put us in osmotic communication with the world.³⁵

It is therefore clear why the notion of “coenesthesia” had a decisive significance in this regard. As a general and unified sensation of the living body capable of giving us a confused pre-understanding of our bodily existence essentially different from immediate apperception, the idea of “coenesthesia” allowed Maine de Biran to trace the plane on which this lower form of knowledge is situated, bringing back to a single sensation that dispersed field of affective phenomena and impressions that he had already dealt with extensively in other texts (in particular in the *Mémoire sur les perceptions obscures*). Thanks to the notion of “coenesthesia,” which implies the “consensus of all the parts of the affective system,” affective sensations without consciousness now find a single principle in which, “united and

34. In this sense I agree with Gouhier (1942, p. 31), according to whom “what we call ‘unconscious’ is here [in Maine de Biran] a positive notion that is perfectly defined: it corresponds to a purely passive psychic life outside the zone where there is this *I* that is felt through effort.”

35. The expression “cognitive nonconscious” is borrowed from Hayles 2017.

fused together,” they form the immediate feeling of existence.³⁶ Tracing phenomena such as these to a single sensation actually means recognizing the existence of a dimension that is very close to what we now call the unconscious—an unconscious understood in properly Leibnizian terms, that is to say as a *virtuality* which, without lacking any reality, accompanies us at every moment and participates, in a more or less obscure way, in our conscious life.

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36. Maine de Biran 1990a, p. 136.

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