

**CORNELL STUDIES IN
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5. MAINE DE BIRAN'S
PHILOSOPHY OF WILL**

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NATHAN E. TRUMAN

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MAINE DE BIRAN.

From Lévy-Bruhl's *History of Modern Philosophy in France*.—Courtesy of the Open Court Publishing Company.

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No. 5

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PHILOSOPHY OF WILL

BY

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PREFACE.

No special account of Maine de Biran's philosophy has before appeared in English, and the sources are rendered somewhat difficult by the author's highly involved style. It has seemed, therefore, that a somewhat extended exposition of his work may prove useful. In the composition of this monograph my object has been two-fold: to give a statement of Biran's system, and to show his exact position in the history of speculative thought. As a result of careful investigation, I have found it necessary to call attention to the unitary character of the system, which, as a matter of fact, centers around the single idea — will. This conclusion is, of course, opposed to the view of Naville, who in his introduction to the *Œuvres inédites* divides Biran's work into three sharply distinguished periods. I am convinced, however, that this division rests on insufficient grounds. For in the idea of activity is to be found the keynote of the entire philosophy. This idea is clearly evident in the writings assigned by Naville to the earlier and the later periods, as well as in the more important works that were written during the intervening years.

On the whole, it may seem surprising that I have not emphasized more strongly the importance of Biran's philosophy. It is perhaps unusual in a work of this kind to minimize the significance of the subject. However that may be, I have to confess that the motive which led me to begin my study, the expectation of finding elements of permanent value in Biran's philosophy based on frequent references to him as 'the French Kant,' has scarcely been realized by my subsequent investigation. Even with the most sympathetic interpretation, Biran cannot be placed among philosophers of the first rank. Kant's great significance does not consist merely in his emphasis on the activity of mind against the empiricists, but rather in the fact that he shows that the activity in which the nature of mind is expressed is universal and objective in character. Biran, however, remains at the point of

view of empiricism ; for his epistemology is developed from the subjective psychological fact of will, and continues relative to the end. The universal and necessary character of causality is left unexplained. His psychology aims at being introspective and factual, but is lost in a bewildering mass of abstractions. I have shown that he stands for a position which is neither a third view correlative with empiricism and rationalism nor a synthesis of these two recognized systems, but rather an extension of the former — a development of the Locke-Condillac school, yet a development that is still on the same epistemological plane.

Finally it should be noted that my conclusions in regard to Biran's relation to subsequent philosophical positions refer exclusively to the logical connection of his ideas, and not to his indirect influence, which was certainly very great, but which I have made no attempt to estimate. With this reservation, my results indicate that his effect on later thought, *e. g.*, on that of Cousin or of Renouvier, was not extensive.

In working out this subject I have received most valuable advice and suggestions from Professor J. E. Creighton, under whom I had been studying during the time devoted to the composition of the monograph, and from Professor Ernest Albee, who very kindly read my manuscript at an early stage.

N. E. T.

BAINBRIDGE, N. Y.

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SECTION I.

LIFE AND WORKS.

Maine de Biran was regarded by Cousin as "the first French metaphysician of our time."¹ Two reasons are sufficient to explain why this estimate was not made earlier or more generally accepted. Biran was not, like his great contemporary Kant, a teacher of philosophy. His career, as far as it was public, was almost entirely in the field of politics. To the men of his time he was better known as a statesman than as a philosopher. But the most important cause which contributed to his failure to gain early recognition was the fact that he published very little work. He was never quite satisfied with the form in which he had expressed his thought. The result was that his principal writings were left unfinished. Adequate material for estimating the value of his system was provided only by posthumous editions of his works.

The life of Biran was uneventful. He was born November 29, 1766, and died July 20, 1824. His father was a physician of the town of Bergerac, in the southwestern part of France. He was educated in the neighboring town of Perigueux, where he studied Condillac's philosophy under the direction of the *doctrinaires*. In 1785 he became a life-guardsman, but early in October of that year was wounded in the arm. He then went to Grateloup and remained there during the Reign of Terror. Subsequently he held several administrative offices in the province of Dordogne. But in 1809 he was chosen a member of the legislative assembly; and after 1812 he established his residence permanently at Paris. He was a member of the commission which took advantage of the reverse that Napoleon had sustained in Russia to demand guarantees of the peace of Europe and the liberties of the French citizens. After the Restoration, Biran was a member of the Chamber of Deputies until his death,

¹ Maine de Biran, *Œuvres Philosophiques*, Vol. I, p. xi.