

Self, Will and Habit. Early-Nineteenth Century Philosophical Interpretations of Bichat (Hegel, Maine de Biran, Schopenhauer)

Abstract

In this paper, I discuss the way Hegel, Maine de Biran and Schopenhauer took up Bichat's physiological distinction between organic and animal life to ground their philosophical systems on empirical science. I then look at the ecological implications of such a reinterpretation in terms of biocentrism. I argue that Hegel's, Maine de Biran's, and Schopenhauer's reading of Bichat can be understood as subscribing to a form of *relative* biocentrism.

1. Introduction

Xavier Bichat's anatomical works have had a tremendous impact on the development of modern medicine. Sometime coined the »Napoleon of Medicine« his »anatomical studies gave birth to *General Anatomy*, which is considered one of the foundations of today's medicine«¹. Less well-known is the influence his *Physiological Research*

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- 1 Perdicoyianni-Paleologou, Hélène (2024): »Xavier Bichat and the renovation of the pathological anatomy«. *Journal of Medical Biography* 32(1), 90. As Shoja *et al.* write: »For historians and biologists, Bichat is known as a great master-genius (Drake and Wood, 1836), the most important medical inventor of the Enlightenment era (Burns, 2003), the founder of histology (King and Meehan, 1973) and descriptive anatomy (Simmons, 2002) and even the founder of modern medicine (Shryock, 1947)«. (Shoja, Mohammadali M./ Tubbs, R. Shane/ Loukas, Marios/ Shokouhi, Ghaffar/ Ardalan, Mohammad R. (2008): »Marie-François Xavier Bichat (1771–1802) and his contributions to the foundations of pathological anatomy and modern medicine«. *Annals of Anatomy* 190(5), 413–20, 413–14.)

ches on Life and Death (1800) exercised on early-nineteenth century philosophy.² In this chapter, I want to discuss three distinct ways in which Bichat's distinction between organic and animal life has been taken up in Hegel, Maine de Biran and Schopenhauer's respective works. I argue that while each of these philosophical readings of Bichat focuses on the same aspect of his thought (the question of habit, of will and of subjectivity), they eventually draw very different conclusions which nevertheless subscribe to (different versions of) biocentrism³.

This is, I am well aware, an ambitious proposal. A lot could be said merely on the relation between Bichat and Maine de Biran, or Bichat and Hegel or Bichat and Schopenhauer, but what a comparative study can do, is show how the same distinction can lead to very different interpretations that are of importance for the understanding of each philosopher. For instance, as we shall see, for both Hegel and Maine de Biran in a sense, Bichat's distinction helps us

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- 2 A notable exception regarding Bichat's influence on Hegel is Achella, Stefania (2024): «Anatomopathology of Reason: The Legacy of Bichat in Hegelian Thought.» In: Luis Felipe Garcia (ed.): *The Concept of Nature in Classical German Philosophy*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 231-48.
 - 3 Joseph R. Des Jardins offers a pretty standard definition when he writes: «*Biocentric ethics* refers to any theory that views all life as possessing intrinsic value». (Des Jardins, Joseph R. (1997): *Environmental Ethics*. Belmont: Wadsworth, 130.) Biocentrism is often opposed to more restrictive approaches such as anthropocentrism which only grants intrinsic value to human beings, pathocentrism which grants value merely to sentient beings, or zoocentrism which grants value to animals in general, sentient or not, but not to plants or bacteria for instance. It can also be distinguished from more inclusive approaches like holism which take into account not only the living individuals (from the human and the non-human animals to plants and bacteria), but the whole ecosystem, non-living elements included. Those distinctions should not always be considered as clear-cut distinctions, however. For instance, one could conceive of a robust biocentric approach that would converge with an holistic viewpoint on the necessity to preserve the land, the rivers, and so on, but as a *mean* to nurture life (thus granting intrinsic value only to living individuals). Likewise, one could think of, as Christopher Belshaw argues, «a modest biocentric view, under which we show concern for life in general while still putting human life first». (Belshaw, Christopher (2001): *Environmental Philosophy*. Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 140.) As a matter of fact, I will argue that both Hegel and Biran in a sense subscribe to such a «modest biocentric view» that effectively merge a general concern for life (biocentrism) with a particular interest for human life (anthropocentrism).

understand how natural life is related to the development of spirit as a self-conscious, willful entity, both because it serves as its material ground and a limit to be superseded for the actual establishment of human freedom and subjective spirit. In that, although their overall project and terminology may differ, they follow a similar path. Whereas, as we shall see, for Schopenhauer, on the contrary, the importance of Bichat's distinction is precisely to provide support to the claim that there is no such thing as human freewill, that this illusion is merely an expression of a metaphysical will that Schopenhauer associates with Bichat's notion of »organic life«.

I will thus proceed as such: in section 2, I will present the nature of Bichat's distinction between organic and animal life. I will then, in sections 3, 4, and 5, present how each philosopher – Hegel, Maine de Biran and Schopenhauer – reappraised in their own way Bichat's distinction. Finally, in section 6, I will briefly sketch out how each interpretation can lead to a form of (relative) or »modest biocentric view«.⁴

2. Bichat's Distinction Between Organic and Animal Life

Trying to grasp the dynamical process of life and death within the human body, Bichat establishes a distinction between different sets of organs that have different characteristics and functions. Those organs are thus divided between those belonging to what Bichat calls an *organic*, »interior« life and those belonging to what he calls the *animal* life oriented toward the »outside«.⁵ The first part of the *Physiological Researches on Life and Death* is devoted to the meticulous description of the different aspect that distinguishes both forms of life. For the purpose of this chapter, however, I only insist on the most relevant aspects of the distinction for our three philosophers.

Despite their differences that can be contrasted term by term, »each of both life, animal and organic, are composed of two orders of functions which follow one another and are linked in an opposite

4 Belshaw 2001, 140.

5 RP: Bichat, Xavier (1973) [1800]: *Recherches physiologiques sur la vie et la mort*. Verviers: Marabout, 12. All translations are our own unless otherwise indicated.

direction».⁶ Each of these orders are differentiated following the binary opposition of »receptivity/activity«. For example, following the first order of animal life, namely sensation, sensitive impressions affect the organs of sensation federated by the brain which, in turn, according to the second order, that of motricity and volition, acts on the organs of locomotion, voice and thought.

Similarly, the essence of organic life is the assimilation of nutrients and other elements, such as the air we breathe or the vitamin D with synthesise for instance. It is accordingly, at first, receptive, since it needs something to synthesise or metabolize. It becomes active, however, when it needs to transform the external element into a constitutive part of the living body.

But despite this parallel, everything opposes animal and organic life:

1. Organic life is what characterizes the inner life of a living organism. Exteriority, on the opposite characterizes animal life. The animal »exists outside itself, it is the inhabitant of the world, and not like the plant, of the place where he was born«.⁷
2. A difference that will be quite important for Hegel emerges from the form of both lives. The organs and (blood) system of organic life are asymmetrical, while the organs and (nervous) system of animal life are symmetrical.⁸
3. Consequently, the shape of an organ belonging to organic life can vary without affecting the organs« function in any way, while negative consequences may ensue from the irregularity in the constitution of an organ of animal life. A poorly formed eye, for example, has a partial (astigmatism) or total (blindness) influence on its function (sight). But a slightly larger or smaller liver will not necessarily affect its ability to function.⁹
4. Another significant difference for Hegel is the fact that the activity of organic life is necessarily continuous: »The cause which

6 RP, 13.

7 RP, 12. It is interesting to relate this passage which implies a certain cosmopolitan worldview to Rousseau's *Émile* which similarly states that »A man is not planted like a tree in a country to remain there forever« (Rousseau, Jean-Jacques (1966) [1762]: *Emile or On Education*, trans. A. Bloom. New York: Basic Books, 52.)

8 RP, 16_21.

9 RP, 22_32.

suspends breathing and circulation suspends and even annihilates life, provided it is prolonged long enough»;¹⁰ while the activity of animal life necessarily changes intermittently between periods of rests and activity: »each sense, tired by long sensations, momentarily becomes unfit to receive new ones«. ¹¹ »In what Bichat calls animal life, then, as Hegel writes, there is an alternation of rest and activity«. ¹²

5. This is necessarily related to the fact that organic life is immediately adequate to its function: »Untouched by habit, organic life is immediately for Bichat what it should be«. ¹³ On the contrary, »animal life needs to develop«, ¹⁴ since there is no immediate adequacy between an organ and its function, the eyes *learn* to see, the legs to walk, etc. As such, the adequacy of an organ to its function is mediated by habit and education: »Everything is changed by habit in animal life«. ¹⁵
6. Lastly, organic life is the fount of our passions and emotions, while animal life is the fount of our intelligence, memory and understanding. ¹⁶ Nonetheless, and this will be of importance for Schopenhauer, according to Bichat, passions which are related to organic life can affect and influence animal life:

See this man whom anger, fury, agitate, his muscular forces, doubled, even tripled, are exerted with an energy which he himself cannot moderate. Where to look for the source of this increase? It is obviously in the heart. This organ is the natural stimulant of the brain through the blood it sends to it. ¹⁷

There is in fact, a constant struggle at play between organic and animal life, a struggle that Schopenhauer will easily translate into

¹⁰ RP, 34.

¹¹ RP, 34.

¹² W: Hegel, G.W.F. (1986): *Werke in 20 Bänden*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, X, 91, §398Zu.; E. PhS: Hegel, G.W.F. (1971) [1830]: *Philosophy of Mind*, being Part Three of the Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences, trans. W. Wallace & A.V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 68.

¹³ Huneman, Philippe (1998): *Bichat, la vie et la mort*. Paris: PUF, 52; RP, 43.

¹⁴ Huneman 1998, 52.

¹⁵ RP, 38.

¹⁶ RP, 45–60.

¹⁷ RP, 53.

the struggle between the unconscious drive of the Will and the conscious forces of the intellect. But this is already tangible in Bichat:

A man learns, by letter in front of an assembly, a piece of news which it is in his interest to conceal; suddenly his forehead wrinkles, he turns pale, or his features come alive according to the passion which is brought into play: here are sympathetic phenomena born of certain abdominal viscera suddenly affected by this passion, and which, consequently, belong to the organic life. Soon this man constrains himself; his forehead blooms, his redness is reborn or his features tighten, although the inner feeling remains: it is the voluntary movement which has prevailed over the sympathetic; it is the brain whose action has overcome that of the stomach, liver, etc.; it is animal life which has resumed its dominion.¹⁸

Organic and animal life are thus in conflict to a certain extent for Bichat, and this is significant for both Hegel, Maine de Biran, and Schopenhauer, but in this open conflict, some like Schopenhauer favors the triumph of organic life as the natural expression of this metaphysical will that covertly rules our lives. Others, like Maine de Biran or Hegel will favor animal life as a step toward the realisation of the self or of subjective spirit. In this latter case, the notion of »will« is nevertheless central, but obviously not in Schopenhauer's sense. What is central for both Hegel and Maine de Biran is the fact that through the notion of symmetry and habit, which characterizes animal life for Bichat, we can understand when and how the will comes into play and enables, for Maine de Biran, for instance, self-apperception. The central notion of effort that distinguishes a voluntary movement from a merely mechanical one for Maine de Biran is only intelligible with Bichat's distinction in mind. Likewise, for Hegel, the possible imbalance of animal life that allows its refinement through habit is understood as the »sign« (*Zeichen*)¹⁹ of spirit within nature through the concept of will.

18 RP, 56.

19 W, X, 192, §411.

3. Symmetry, Asymmetry and Dissymmetry: Hegel's Reappraisal of Bichat's Distinction

The importance of Bichat's distinction for Hegel is threefold: 1) to establish the physiological norms of animal (and human) life within nature;²⁰ 2) to mark the difference between strictly natural life and spiritual living organisms;²¹ and 3) to similarly mark the aesthetic difference between natural beauty and artistic beauty.²² As I have discussed those aspects in details elsewhere²³, I shall remain here at a more general level.

Hegel's reappraisal of Bichat's distinction essentially orbits around his insistence on the symmetry of animal life and the asymmetry of organic life:

In the system of sensibility [related to animal life], observes Bichat (loc. cit., pp. 15–17) quite correctly, the sensory and motor nerves are symmetrical [...] similarly with the sense organs [...] the osseous system also is extremely symmetrical. In the system of irritability, the muscles, the female breasts, etc., are symmetrical.«²⁴

20 W, IX, 455–59, §355

21 W, IX, 458–59, §355Zu.

22 W, XIII, 183–84; Hegel, G.W.F. (2005): *Esthétique*. Cahier de notes inédit de Victor Cousin. Paris: Vrin, 58–59.

23 Chaput, Emmanuel (2021): »Hegel and Bichat on Symmetry and Life: Between Physiology, Aesthetics and Freedom«. *Cosmos and History* 17/3, 196–223.

24 W, IX, 457–58, §355Zu.; E. PhN: Hegel, G.W.F. (1970) [1830]: *Philosophy of Nature*, being Part Two of the Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences, trans. W. Wallace & A.V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 375. See also the Hueck notebook to the 1828 *Lectures on the Philosophy of Nature* (GW: Hegel, G.W.F. (1968-): *Gesammelte Werke*. Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 24.2, 1153). While no explicit reference to Bichat is made in the first edition of the *Encyclopedia* (Heidelberg, 1817), the second and third Berlin editions (1827, 1830) contain a direct reference to Bichat's distinction in the printed text (although Hegel mistakenly talk of Biot instead of Bichat in the 1827 edition). In the 1828 *Lectures*, the first and only one based on the second edition of the *Encyclopedia*, Hegel corrects that mistake: »Bichat, not Biot, (*sur la vie et la mort – vie organique et vie animal* [On Life and Death/Organic and Animal Life] [shows how] in this [animal life], the regular duality is everywhere – this is very sensible, as the French generally have a great sense of nature – heart, lungs, liver, stomach, intestines, are irregular, but what goes outwards is symmetrical and therefore difference, duality, because it goes outwards...« (GW 24.2, 1153). In 1830, Hegel gave a *Lecture on the Philosophy of Nature* based on his third edition. Unfort-

Hegel is not wrong to insist on this aspect of Bichat's distinction. For Bichat as well, this is »the most essential of the differences which distinguish the organs of animal life from those of organic life«:²⁵ The eyes, ears, arms, legs and nose, but also the osseous system, the muscles, the breasts, the ligaments, etc. are symmetrical. The stomach, lungs, heart and liver, which belong to organic life on the other hand, have no symmetry according to Bichat.

Accordingly, »organic life [...] forms a unique system where everything is linked and coordinated, where the functions on one side cannot be interrupted without, as a necessary consequence, those on the other being extinguished«.²⁶ The symmetry of the organs of animal life, on the contrary, allows a substitution of the right side by the left. So, whoever loses the right hand can always learn to use the left. More simply, the one who closes the left eye can still see from the right. Because of their symmetry, the organs of animal life can »supplement each other«.²⁷

This enables the specific development of certain organs of animal life through habit and education:

The ear in the musician, the palate in the cook, the brain in the philosopher, the muscles in the dancer, the larynx in the singer, etc., have, besides the general education of external life, a particular education, which frequent exercise singularly perfects.²⁸²⁹

unately, no notebooks of that lecture has yet been discovered. Hence, on the present issue of Hegel's relation to Bichat, C. L. Michelet's *Zusätze* (additions) remain, for want of a better alternative, the most relevant source material. First, because he had access to now lost notebooks to the 1830 *Lectures* in addition to notebooks of previous *Lectures*. Second, his *Zusätze* closely matches the documents (notebooks) we now have, and lastly, because it remains still the most accessible material for the reader.

25 RP, 16.

26 RP, 19.

27 Ibid.

28 RP, 94.

29 Once more, we can feel Rousseau's (or Condorcet's) influence on Bichat with this notion of »perfectibility« (Rousseau, Jean-Jacques (1984) [1754]: *A Discourse on Inequality*, trans. M. Cranston. London: Penguin Books, 77–78; Condorcet, Nicolas (2012): *Political Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2.). Interestingly, when Hegel refers to this passage in the *Encyclopedia*, he introduces a normative dimension largely absent in Bichat, that gives precedence to »spiritual« skills and activities over merely physical skills (W, IX, 459, §355Zu.; E. PhN, 376). It thus seems as if there were a belittlement of sport and

As a result, although animal life is symmetrical, its immediate inadequacy and therefore its possibility and even necessity to improve will create something of an imbalance that reintroduces, if not »asymmetry«, at least »dissymmetry«. I use, as I have elsewhere³⁰, the term »dissymmetry« to speak of this singular imbalance of development that will and consciousness introduces in the human body through habit and education to distinguish it from the asymmetry that is naturally and immutably related to organic life. Animal symmetry therefore does not mean »identity«, especially not in the case of the human being: »As the habit of acting perfects the action, we can understand the cause of the excess of agility of the right limb over the left.«³¹ And this is what specifically interests Hegel: »These symmetrical pairs are not [...] perfectly symmetrical.«³²

For Hegel, this dissimilarity, particularly present in human beings, is essentially contingent upon the specific interests and habits of a given individual and thus linked to the spiritual dimension of man »who *voluntarily* introduces inequality«³³ between the right side and the left side, or between different organs of animal life. This »dissymmetry« within symmetry constitutes for Hegel the manifestation of the greater subjectivity, autonomy and freedom of the human being in comparison to the animal. To a certain extent, as the issue here for Hegel is subjective spirit, the human being as a singular natural/spiritual being, some of his conclusions concur with Maine de Biran's. As a free and conscious being, the human being »alters his shape, turning his individuality outwards and so individualizing his bodily strength at one point of his body and concentrating it on one side—for a particular purpose, e.g. writing—rather than holding it in equilibrium«.³⁴ This is the salutary dimension of habit to the

more generally of the physical body in its physical-muscular development, since it would be a kind of fixation, and even a (voluntary) regression to the level of the animal and of nature, in opposition to one's spiritual (*geistig*) development.

30 Chaput, Emmanuel (2018): »Hegel lecteur de Bichat«. *Symposium* 22(1). 159–86. Chaput (2021). 196–223.

31 RP, 29.

32 W, IX, 458, §355Zu.; E. PhN, 376; see also GW 24.1, 724; GW 24.2, 1153.

33 W, IX, 459, §355Zu.; E. PhN, 376 [my emphasis]; This quote can be found in the Griesheim notebook to the 1823/24 *Lectures on the Philosophy of Nature* (GW 24.1, 724).

34 W, IX, 458, §355Zu.; E. PhN, 376.

extent that it is voluntary:³⁵ it introduces the possibility to reconfigure one's body according to one's *will*³⁶, and not only according to one's *desire* – an important distinction also central to Maine de Biran's argument³⁷ and significant for Hegel's own biocentric view.

If spirit is always seen as somewhat more significant than nature in Hegel's system, nonetheless, »the determination of Life« is that »towards [which] Nature strives« and the summit of nature,³⁸ both as the first adequate figure of the concept within nature and as a prefiguration of subjectivity and freedom (which characterizes spirit for Hegel) in nature. And Hegel's reappraisal of Bichat's distinction helps us understand this latter point: how natural life can in some-way be related to the development of spirit as a self-conscious, will-ful entity through the dialectic between animal (natural) symmetry and a spiritually-induced human dissymmetry. Hence the idea, developed further below, of a relative biocentrism: life is within Hegel's Philosophy of Nature, the ultimate manifestation of the Concept in nature and, as such, of central importance, but only relatively, since nature remains subordinated to (subjective, objective, and absolute) spirit.

4. From the Organic to the Hyperorganic: Maine de Biran's Reappraisal of Bichat's Distinction

Concerning Maine de Biran's relation to Bichat, as Colonna D'Istria writes:

Maine de Biran did not always maintain the same attitude towards Bichat's doctrine. At first, he was strongly attracted to it. He first perceived above all the affinities which united his thought to that of Bichat. As he better defined the main ideas of his own system, he moved away

35 W, X, 183–87.

36 This is what Khurana calls the »ruse of habit« although this »ruse« itself can always revert back to a »curse of habit« when habit merely becomes an unreflective automatism that ends up being an obstacle rather than a stepping stone for freedom (W, XII, 100; Khurana, Thomas (2013): »Life and Autonomy: Forms of Self-Determination in Kant and Hegel«. In: Khurana, Thomas (ed.): *The Freedom of Life. Hegelian Perspectives*. Berlin: August Verlag, 155–93, 189.).

37 O: Maine de Biran, Pierre (1984–96): *Œuvres*. 19 Vol. Paris: Vrin, IV, 105.

38 W, IX, 334, §335Zu.; E. PhN, 270; W, IX, 37, 337–40, §251Zu., §337.

from Bichat. But he always recognized the partial truth of his doctrine and he aimed rather to rectify and overcome it than to refute it.³⁹

But what are precisely Maine de Biran's »main ideas« and how did they move away – without ever being completely separated – from Bichat's thought and especially his distinction between organic and animal life?

Maine de Biran's main goal is to develop a properly human science that would rely not only on external observation, but on inner observation as well. One cannot merely describe the living being from an external vantage point. To understand what life is, one must combine another perspective with such an external description that would fit any physical object. This is the perspective of the inner sense, of internal observation, of experience.⁴⁰

In other words, from the physiologist's standpoint a reflex-movement, the provoked contraction of a muscle or a voluntary motion may be described exactly in the same way. Only the consideration of the inner life of the subject allows us to understand the actual difference experienced by it. This allows Maine de Biran to distinguish between the passive and active systems of an organism, the ones that may be felt, but remain unaffected by my will and those on which I can exercise a certain activity.⁴¹

Naturally here, we see why Maine de Biran first became interested by Bichat's distinction between organic and animal life,⁴² but also why he saw certain limits to Bichat's empirical approach. Bichat's distinction helps explain from a physiological standpoint the nature of our inner experience, which is pervaded with the more or less unconscious and uncontrollable influence of organic processes⁴³, but at the same time pervaded with the feeling that we are also able to

39 Azouvi, François (1995): *Maine de Biran. La science de l'homme*. Paris: Vrin. II; Colonna d'Istria, François (1926): »La psychologie de Bichat«. *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 33(1). 31–34.

40 O, IV, 120.

41 O, IV, 138.

42 Azouvi 1995, 65.

43 As we saw, Bichat explains such a phenomenon through the potential impact organic life may have on animal life. This point will have its importance not only for Maine de Biran, but for Schopenhauer as well (Colonna d'Istria 1926, 34). On the relation between organic life and passivity, see Azouvi 1995, 70.

overcome, from time to time at least, these urges through self-control and thus through the activity of the will.

Maine de Biran's position thus stands between the rationalist or idealist perspective that essentially revolves around the exploration of consciousness and subjectivity and the physiologist one that revolves around the analysis of material biological processes.⁴⁴ For Maine de Biran, a proper exploration of inner experience will provide us proof of both our physical anchorage *and* (relative) autonomy as a subject.⁴⁵ And this is precisely where the concept of »effort« will come in play. One of, if not *the* central concept of Maine de Biran's system.⁴⁶ And considering the nature of this notion of effort at the threshold between what is for Maine de Biran the *hyperorganic* dimension of the will and the physiological nature of the body, we can see how, while Bichat's distinction is of interest, Maine de Biran claims to go beyond it. What Bichat missed, for Maine de Biran, is precisely the true nature of the will and of subjectivity that constitutes an »hyperorganic force, applied to a living organic resistance«.⁴⁷ Will doesn't emerge from animal life as with Bichat, but as with Hegel, it will come out as a more fundamental principle that affects and modifies the reality of animal life.⁴⁸ The organs of animal life are merely the matter upon which the will may act, but not its origin.

But what about biocentrism? Bichat's distinction applies to both human and non-human animals alike and the difference between the human and non-human animal is merely quantitative: the extent of one's faculties defines the limits of its potential in term of perception, learning-processes, cognition, etc. Nonetheless, all lifeforms have essentially the same characteristics and therefore may be granted the same kind of importance. There is a direct continuity

44 O, IV, 148–49.

45 O, IV, 156–57.

46 O, IV, 26, 57, 85, 104, 120, 124.

47 O, IV, 153; Drevet, Antoinette (1968): *Maine de Biran*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 48.

48 Maine de Biran 2016 [1812], 97–99; Nonetheless as G. Bianco insists, even this »innovation« is indebted to and grounded on Bichat's distinction. (Bianco, Giuseppe (2016): »Vie de douleur. Contradiction et effort chez Georges Canguilhem«. In: Frédéric Worms (ed.): *Le moment du vivant*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 69–84, 83–84.)

between lifeforms, even though in terms of capabilities differences may exist. Maine de Biran, on the other hand, belongs to another trend, in tune with the overwhelming majority of the philosophical tradition, that argues for a *qualitative* difference between animal and human life.⁴⁹ But like Hegel who famously said that »because he *knows* that he is an animal, [the human being] ceases to be an animal and attains knowledge of himself as spirit«,⁵⁰ likewise Maine de Biran's take on the distinction between human and animal is not unambiguous. There is, as with Hegel, a continuity between us and non-human animals because of our common physiological configuration divided between what Bichat named the organic and animal life of the organism. The only difference, for Maine de Biran, is that the human being, as a spiritual being, would have the benefit of an hyper-organic will nonetheless necessarily linked to its organic body. In other words, the concept of effort shows 1) the necessity to relate the concept of self and will to its physical anchorage, i.e., life and one's body. And as such, life *is* of central importance, and not only one's own life as the object of my effort, but life outside of me as it can also be the destination of an external effort. 2) Although Maine de Biran *was* mainly interested in describing human existence through the exploration of our inner-lives, we cannot exclude *a priori* the possibility of a specifically animal interiority. Of course, for lack of a common mean of communication, we can never be sure what is the nature of this possible inner life in the animal, since, for Maine de Biran, we can never perceive or grasp the inner-life from the outside, but only through a self-exam of our own consciousness. However, we can at least assume the *possibility* of an animal cognition that would be to some extent similar to our experience of the will. Thus, going beyond Maine de Biran, as he claimed to go beyond Bichat, we could reintroduce the possibility of a biocentric view grounded on the notion of effort⁵¹.

49 O, X-2, 72–73.

50 W, XIII, 122; Hegel, G.W.F. (1975) [1835]: *Aesthetics* (vol. 1), trans. T. M. Knox. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 80.

51 In a note in his 1807 Berlin Essay, Maine de Biran argues that »animals do not speak, because they can't think. They do not think, because (or rather *as far as*) they do not have the ability to form the simple and truly primitive or fundamental judgment of intelligence, i.e. to notice (*apercevoir*) internally the personal *causal*-relation in a voluntary movement grasped in its free determination« (O,

5. Nature's Will and Animal Intellect: Schopenhauer's Reappraisal of Bichat's Distinction

Quite famously, Schopenhauer wrote: »[Bichat's] reflections and mine mutually support each other, since his are the physiological commentary on mine, and mine the philosophical commentary on his; and we shall be best understood by being read together side by side«⁵². And once again, it is Bichat's distinction between »organic« and »animal« life that is the center of his interest. According to Schopenhauer, it corresponds to his own distinction »between will and intellect«,⁵³ and thus constitutes a scientific confirmation of his own metaphysic of the will.

According to Schopenhauer, we first experience the world as a realm of representations (*Vorstellungen*) that derives from our intuition, sensations, or understanding. This is what a Kantian would call the sphere of experience. Here, the Thing-in-itself remains beyond our perceptual and intellectual boundaries. This is the realm of the »Intellect«. But Schopenhauer claims that we can go beyond this realm of representation, of the phenomenon (*Erscheinung*) that would merely be an appearance (*Schein*). What we would thus discover is what he calls the »Will«: »a mindless, aimless, non-rational impulse at the foundation of our instinctual drives, and at

IV, 177). But as he admits himself, this is merely a matter of opinion. The truth however is that in the absence of any testimony of the animal inner life for lack of a common language, we cannot be sure of what actually takes place in the animal's consciousness. The bias that Maine de Biran shared with his time was that in the absence of any testimony, we could conclude to the absence of will and consciousness and reduce the animal behaviour to the notion of instinct. Contemporary research in ethology and animal ethics could lead us to the opposite conclusion: in absence of any testimony pro or contra, we could at least admit the possibility of something like what Maine de Biran describes as the will gaining through effort an apperception of the self in the non-human animal as well, thus reintroducing the possibility of a biocentric view with a Biranian twist.

52 WWR: Schopenhauer, Arthur (1969) [1844]: *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E.F.J. Payne. New York: Dover, II, 261.

53 WWR, II, 261.

the foundational being of everything.«⁵⁴ As Schopenhauer writes in »On the Will in Nature«: »The fundamental truth of my doctrine, which places that doctrine in opposition with all others that have ever existed, is the complete separation between the will and the intellect«. ⁵⁵ In fact, the intellect that produces the world as a realm of representations is merely the result of the brain's activity, the brain being itself merely a part of the body and the body an objectification of the will, our understanding of the world is but a by-product of a more fundamental, unconscious, aimless drive.⁵⁶ And this is precisely what Schopenhauer sees in Bichat's organic life, these aimless processes that cannot modify their course of action, that never cease to function for it is otherwise the end of the organism. Of course, Schopenhauer's will is not reducible to organic life, it governs any given motion, organic or otherwise. Bichat's organic life is merely the expression of will in the realm of living entities. Nonetheless, Schopenhauer's metaphysic of the will and, more precisely, of the »will-to-live« will have an enduring influence on biocentric thinkers such as Albert Schweitzer⁵⁷

Schopenhauer's attempt to articulate his own metaphysical framework with Bichat's physiological work however raises a certain number of questions:

- 1) What would Schopenhauer's metaphysic of the will gain from such a scientific confirmation, if precisely science belongs to the realm of representation? One can understand why, as Schopenhauer writes: »No one [...] should venture (in the realm of metaphysics) without having previously acquired a knowledge of all the branches of natural science which, though only general, is yet thorough, clear, and connected. For the problem must come before the solution; but then the investigator must turn his glance

54 Wicks, Robert (2021): »Arthur Schopenhauer«. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/schopenhauer/> (accessed 18/08/2023).

55 Schopenhauer, Arthur (1889): *Two Essays. I. On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason. II. On the Will in Nature*. London: George Bell, 236.

56 Schopenhauer 1889, 237.

57 Schweitzer, Albert (2017) [1923]: »Reverence for Life«. In: Pojman Louis P. et al. (ed.): *Environmental Ethics*. Boston: Cengage Learning, 169–76; Belshaw 2001, 130.

inwards». ⁵⁸ Indeed, »the very special province of *metaphysics*« as Schopenhauer calls it does not lie in the external realm of objective science, but in the realm of »mental philosophy« ⁵⁹ (as for Maine de Biran in a sense). What is then the use of Bichat's empirical distinction? Why would Schopenhauer need it to confirm through *representation* something that precisely claims to go beyond the realm of representations?

- 2) In what sense can we even speak of a »confirmation«? Is Bichat's distinction truly in tune with Schopenhauer's metaphysic? Asking this question immediately leads us toward another question, namely:
- 3) What is to be done of Bichat's own notion of will or volition that is largely foreign to Schopenhauer's concept and actually linked to animal life which Schopenhauer associates with the intellect *in opposition* to what he conceives as the »Will«. Is Bichat not one of those thinkers that associated will and intellect unlike Schopenhauer?

I shall leave the first question open for it would steer us away from our own problematic and will focus on the last two. Let's begin with the last question since it is directly addressed by Schopenhauer himself. Essentially, he dismisses the issue:

He who looks at the sense, not at the words, will not be put out by Bichat's ascribing the will to animal life, for by this, as usual, he understands merely conscious, free choice. This certainly proceeds from the brain, where, however, as shown above, it is not as yet an actual willing, but the mere deliberation on and estimation of the motives whose conclusion or product ultimately appears as an act of will. All that I ascribe to the *will* proper he attributes to *organic* life, and all that I conceive as *intellect* is with him the *animal* life. ⁶⁰

In other words, for Schopenhauer, Bichat is merely a victim of the misconceptions of his time. As with almost everyone, he understands volition as a conscious and reflective act, but nevertheless adequately describes what will truly is, under the expression of »organic life«.

58 WWR, II, 178–79; Young, Julian (2005): *Schopenhauer*. London: Routledge, 55–56.

59 WWR, II, 179.

60 WWR, II, 261.

Contrary to both Maine de Biran and Hegel, it is clear that for Schopenhauer what is the most important element of Bichat's distinction is the organic one. For Hegel and Maine de Biran, Bichat's description of the animal life helps us explain (to some extent) the emergence of consciousness, will (in a non-Schopenhauerian sense), freedom, spirit, etc. Organic life is what the subject needed to *overcome* (not in the sense that we could totally get rid of those natural determinations related to organic life, but in the sense that we should not let those dimensions of our organic being define what we are). The activity associated with animal life is a step toward an hyper-organic form of activity or a spiritual form of life, and as such it must take precedence over the passivity and aimless mechanism of organic life.

On the opposite, Schopenhauer emphasizes organic life's influence on animal life in order to underline the subordinate character of the latter, and therefore the subordinate character of the intellect in relation to the will.⁶¹

To a certain extent, Schopenhauer's reading of Bichat is accurate. Bichat indeed asserts that passions and emotions are the results of organic life superseding (momentarily at least) animal life. Bichat even goes further and argues that one's character is essentially determined by one's organic life.⁶² One's temperament or character, which unavoidably influences one's behaviour (Schopenhauer would probably say that it actually *drives* us) is, according to Bichat, something that cannot be changed.⁶³

Schopenhauer then is right to underline that for Bichat, certain aspects of organic life impact our intellect and question our belief or our self-conception of ourselves as free, autonomous beings. But can we truly find in Bichat a confirmation of Schopenhauer's metaphysics of the will or are we witnessing a biased reading where Schopenhauer picks and chooses what already fits his own preconceived view? As with Hegel and Maine de Biran, I would argue that the latter is the case. All three pick and choose what either fits their view or allows them to (allegedly) go beyond Bichat's limits. In Schopenhauer's case, his insistence on organic life downplays Bichat's idea

61 WWR, II, 203.

62 RP, 107.

63 RP, 107–08

of a constant struggle between organic and animal life, a struggle in which Bichat is far from granting predominance to organic life. If he admits that education cannot affect one's character, he nevertheless insists: »It can moderate the influence [of character], perfect judgment and reflection enough to make their empire superior to its own, strengthen animal life, so that it resists the impulses of the organic one.«⁶⁴ And this seems to be, in opposition to Schopenhauer's claim, Bichat's aim, from a normative standpoint, to advocate for an education that would emancipate the human being through animal life from its more primitive, natural, organic stage.

The dominion of animal life and voluntary movements over automatic ones, of intelligence over instinct, seems to be favored by Bichat, despite the fact that he acknowledges that this animal life can never rule supreme. In this sense, Hegel and Maine de Biran's approaches, while hogging the blanket in their own direction, seem more in line with Bichat's. They too acknowledge the recurring influence of organic life but argue that from the struggle between organic and animal life emerges a new kind of freedom and life that is not reducible to a mere expression of organic life or »will«.

Nevertheless, Schopenhauer's reference to Bichat remains significant as it allows us to understand his very own biocentric view, which is, in a sense, far more radical than those of Hegel and Maine de Biran, who while granting a certain importance to life itself in general, nevertheless seem to hold all at once a pretty anthropocentric view. All lives are important, but some (the spiritual, human, voluntary ones) more so than others. On the contrary, Schopenhauer's focus on organic rather than on animal life may be seen as underlying the equality of lives and thus more in tune with Schweitzer »reverence to life«. As various expressions of the will, none are particularly more important than others. It is on the contrary, our focus on intellect rather than on »will« as the true source of our representation that gives us the illusion of our own importance as sentient, intelligent beings.

64 RP, 108.

6. Three Versions of (Relative) Biocentrism

Now that we have seen how our three philosophers have used Bichat's distinction in their own way to lay down their philosophical perspectives, I want to show how and in what sense they each subscribe to a certain version of biocentrism.

Environmental questions have gained prominence for obvious reasons in philosophy recently and Hegelian scholars have not been unresponsive to those issues. Naturally, an apparently straightforward answer would be to classify Hegel as an anthropocentric thinker that has little to say on the topic of environment since nature is essentially the negative moment that spirit must supersede to attain freedom. But one should note the fact that Hegel's *Aufhebung* implies not only the overcoming, but also the preservation of the superseded. Accordingly, spirit should not be thought of as an abstract negation of, but rather as in interaction with nature. More generally, one should exercise caution when using any clear-cut distinctions that Hegel often associates with the understanding (*Verstand*) rather than reason (*Vernunft*). A proper philosophical (i.e. speculative) perspective on environmental question would not be either anthropocentric, or pathocentric, or biocentric or holistic for Hegel. It would most likely be a dialectical process reconciling various dimensions of the aforementioned approaches. For example, what we have called, following Belshaw, a »modest biocentric view« could grasp adequately the complexity of Hegel's viewpoint, where the anthropocentric primacy of spirit needs to be articulated with the importance of life (biocentrism) within nature.

A number of Scholars have argued as I do, that Hegel's philosophy implies a biocentric view that needs to be articulated rather than opposed to the primacy of spirit and thus of the human being.⁶⁵ Others, like Sebastian Rand, have implied that Hegel's philosophy

65 Ferrini, Cinza (2010): »From the Physical World to the Habitat: Biocentrism in Hegel's Interrelation of Animal Subjectivity with its Environment«. In: Breidbach, Olaf/Neuser Wolfgang (ed.): *Hegels Naturphilosophie in der Dritten Moderne*. Berlin: VWB, 119–35; Kisner, Wendell (2014): *Ecological Ethics and Living Subjectivity in Hegel's Logic*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2, 158; Wilford, Paul/Anderson, Nicholas/Calhoun, Zachary (2019): »Hegel and Jonas on the Ethical and Onto-Theological Implications of Life«. *Plí* 31, 166–203, 201.

could even be considered under an holistic light as the »study of nature not only tells us about our natural existence but reveals that other natural objects »have an existence just as justified and satisfied as ours,« and are therefore »self-contained and rational,« such that nature's »essence is our own, namely reason«. ⁶⁶

But as life reigns as the absolute value of nature for Hegel, a biocentric label – broadly understood as granting a central importance to life – seems less controversial than advocating for an »holist« Hegel in regards to environmental issue. Indeed, life represents, within nature, the logical structure of the concept, the aesthetical norm of beauty and so on. Naturally, even within nature some forms of life are more adequate to the concept of life, understood as the ability to sublimate inner contradictions and maintain a *dynamic order* ⁶⁷. But life is truly, within the realm of nature, *central*. Of course, if we take a step back and look at Hegel's system as a whole, nature is *not* the pinnacle of his system, spirit is. And so, Hegel's philosophy of nature, his discussion of natural beauty and so on, may appear as advocating for a biocentric view, but one might argue that life is superseded by spirit, and consequently, Hegel's view is in the end far more anthropocentric than anything else.

It is indeed true that Hegel grants a greater value to human or spiritual life than to merely animal or natural life, but I would still argue three things:

- 1) As we see in Hegel's famous struggle between »Lordship and Bondage«, self-consciousness can never get completely rid of its relation to natural life: »In this experience, self-consciousness learns that life is as essential to it as pure self-consciousness«. ⁶⁸ While the subjective spirit asserts itself through the sublation of its own natural determination, sublation always implies the double motion of negation and *preservation*. As such, natural life remains a necessary condition to spirit's development (*Ent-*

66 Rand, Sebastian (2023): »Hegel's Philosophy of Nature«. In: Moyar, Dean (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Hegel*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 385.

67 Neither static order (mechanism), nor dynamic disorder (chaos), life must combine the dynamical structure of the negative with the stability of systematicity.

68 PhS: W, III, 150; Hegel, G.W.F. (1977) [1807]: *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 115.

wicklung) and as such remains of central importance even if it remains subservient to spirit.

- 2) Even with spirit's unfolding, one could argue that we remain, with Hegel, within a »life-paradigm« that grants a central importance the category of »life«. Spirit is indeed described as yet another form of life,⁶⁹ although more adequate to the concept of life understood as the ability to endure and maintain itself within negativity and contradiction than natural life *per se*. As such, life remains a central value to Hegel's system even when natural life seems demoted to spirit's profit.
- 3) Following both Rand and Ferrini, one could argue that since the life of Spirit (or human life) is grounded on natural life and its physical environment as a material condition of existence, then Hegel's anthropocentrism must also be a biocentrism with a certain holistic dimension that takes into account the inorganic nature as an (eco)system.⁷⁰ Once again, Hegel's stance is to go beyond the clear-cut distinction of the understanding and show how *our* relation to *our* environment cannot either be anthropocentric or biocentric or holistic, but must consider the possible mediations between those standpoints without reverting to an all-encompassing abstract universal »as the night in which, as the saying goes, all cows are black«.⁷¹

This is also why we need to talk of a »modest« or merely »relative« biocentrism in Hegel's case. Some forms of life, the human, spiritual

69 W, III, 36; PhS, 19.

70 In this sense, Hegel's biocentrism would address the usual critiques made against biocentrism: 1) that its perspective is often individualistic rather than holistic, by focusing of the individual living being rather than on the ecosystem that allows such being to live (Curry, Patrick (2011): *Ecological Ethics*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 76; Des Jardins 1997, 141–42), 2) that its egalitarianism is unenforceable and misanthropic (Belshaw 2001, 136, 139, 145). By rejecting Taylor's egalitarian perspective, Hegel's (relatively) anthropocentric and hierarchical perspective would allow to solve the aporia of biocentrism when it comes to choosing between saving a vine, an insect, a tree or a mammal, while retaining life as a central value. By offering a systematic account of life in all its entanglement with inorganic nature, Hegel potentially offers an eco-systemic account that does not remain at the abstract level of preserving this or that individual, but consider the inorganic nature that is also part of life's survival in holistic terms.

71 W, III, 23; PhS, 9.

ones, are naturally more valuable, but within the realm of nature, all forms of life, as the first expression of the concept, of subjectivity and even freedom, *do have* a certain *intrinsic* value.

The same goes for Maine de Biran as well in a sense: one could easily and not totally erroneously argue that he is far more a proponent of anthropocentrism than of biocentrism. But I would nonetheless argue that his approach can be consistent with a biocentric view. In a sense, Maine de Biran is but the victim of the bias of his time: his philosophical system of the inner sense should normally lead us to the *sceptical* conclusion that we can neither prove nor disprove the existence of will within animal cognition. First, because the discovery of such a capacity is possible only through an inner examination and not observable externally. Second, because in the absence of any possible communication, we have no means to verify this inner experience of non-human animals. Thus, we cannot know whether they (or at least some of them) can become conscious of their own will exercising an effect of their muscles or not. But Maine de Biran concludes from their inability to speak, their inability to experience. Because they cannot express the nature of their experience, we could rule out the possibility that they *have* such an experience. Naturally, this dogmatic conclusion is at fault.

My point then, is that if we correct this aspect of Maine de Biran's view which is inconsistent with his own philosophical presuppositions, it could imply, to a certain extent, a biocentric conclusion. If the possibility exists that (at least some) animals may have the same kind of inner experience as us regarding the relation between will and motion, that they could through the experience of effort become conscious of themselves not as mere mechanisms of nature, but as autonomous *living* being, then we should assume such a benevolent position and grant the animal, in absence of evidence to the contrary, an intrinsic value as a free, sentient being.

But even if one refuses this revisionist stance, one could nonetheless argue that Maine de Biran's view remains compatible with a (relative) biocentric view because of the fact that one's body, that is, one's organic and animal life, is necessary for self-apperception. Indeed, Maine de Biran's point is that it is through the experience of effort, which is played out on the border between the will and one's organism, that we become conscious of ourselves. As such, the experience of life (our own) is necessary and central to Maine

de Biran's philosophy. And if we push further, we see that it is not only our own life that is of importance, but all lives outside of us that also entail through their resistance to my will the experience of effort. Again, as with Hegel, human, spiritual life is deemed superior, but life in general nonetheless remains necessary and central, ergo a form of relative or »modest« biocentrism.

With Schopenhauer, the issue is quite different. Focusing on the organic life which is common to all forms of life, Schopenhauer argues that no life has privilege toward others, as they are all equally manifestations of the will. But this biocentrism, which, contrary to both Maine de Biran's and Hegel's, remains in radical opposition with any form of anthropocentrism, would nonetheless remain only a relative biocentrism. To understand in what sense, one must look at what Clément Rosset called Schopenhauer's »Metaphysic of Death«:⁷² »death reaps unweariedly«, Schopenhauer writes, »But despite all this, in fact as if this were not the case at all, everything is always there and in its place, just as if everything were imperishable«.⁷³ Death appears tragic only to those who believe that life has a beginning and an end, while life as the eternal repetition of species is eternal. But this endless and dull repetition of life and death as the expression of the Will deprives in a sense not only death of its tragic character, but life of its value as well. To live is but an illusion of the intellect.⁷⁴ What is, is merely the repetition of the same. As an endless cycle of repetition without beginning or end, without aim or goal, life is just another manifestation of the will that has value only for us, within the realm of representation, but none in itself. One cannot thus speak of Schopenhauer as subscribing in an absolute sense to biocentrism. But still, within this realm in which most of us (thankfully) strive, in the realm of representation, one could still argue for a biocentric view using Schopenhauer's argument. Life, no matter its form, is, as an expression of the will, of equal importance and the ecological balance should be preserved as it ensures the perpetuation of life. This is something that is clearly in tune with, and has influenced Schweitzer's »reverence for life« biocentric approach.

72 Rosset, Clément (1968): *Schopenhauer*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 43.

73 WWR, II, 478.

74 Rosset 1968, 43.

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Dr. Emmanuel Chaput

Postdoctoral Fellow in Philosophy

Johns Hopkins University (Baltimore, MD, USA)

chaputemmanuel@yahoo.ca

echaput3@jh.edu