

# PSYCHOLOGY AND METAPHYSICS FROM MAINE DE BIRAN TO BERGSON

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## *Introduction*

What can psychology, understood as a study of the nature of mental phenomena, tell us about metaphysics, understood as an account of the nature of being and of the most general properties of the world? At a certain degree of generality this question is itself a metaphysical one: how can what we know about our own minds tell us something about the world? But the meaning of the question depends in turn upon what one means by “knowledge of our own minds”. If this knowledge is subjective and first person, then we have the familiar idealist question concerning the relationship between the contents of our minds and the nature of an objective reality external to them. On the other hand, if knowledge of our minds is objective, or can claim some form of objectivity, than the question becomes how the account of what humans think, feel and do impinges upon their conception of reality. Psychology, along with sociology, history, and anthropology, belongs among the disciplines which deal with the latter question. There are many different ways to understand the nature of this enterprise and these depend upon what one takes psychological properties to involve. Correlatively there are various ways of understanding our initial question about what psychology can tell us about metaphysics. Two of these are prominent.

One distinctive project proceeds along the lines of Hume’s naturalism. It consists in the attempt to understand the origins of our “ideas”, or

“representations” or concepts”, starting from a study of “human nature” - which Hume himself conceived as a study of the laws of association of ideas. These “ideas”, or “representations”, or “concepts”, concern objects, properties, existence, space, time, causality, necessity and possibility, and other such issues usually considered as pertaining to metaphysics or ontology. Such metaphysical notions are found to have a natural origin in our minds. A contemporary version of this naturalistic enterprise, which replaces associationist psychology with modern day cognitive science, consists in an investigation into our “naïve physics”, our “natural theories of mind”, or our common sense notions of object, property or event. For instance, in *Philosophical Applications of Cognitive Science*, Alvin Goldman (1996) explicates a project of this sort, and it is today pursued in various ways elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> It purports to give us a *psychological* account of metaphysics. It is important to understand how this kind of descriptive metaphysics differs from the two traditional forms of metaphysics: speculative metaphysics and revisionary metaphysics respectively. It differs from the speculative metaphysics first in that it does attempt to derive metaphysical theses from *a priori* reasonings or intuitions, in the traditional fashion. It differs from revisionary metaphysics in that it does not try to replace our ordinary conceptual scheme by a better one as, for instance, when certain metaphysicians urge us to replace of our tri-dimensional view of objects as continuants by a quadri-dimensional picture which identifies objects with temporal parts. Such a descriptive project gives us a sense in which psychology, and other sciences, tell us something about metaphysical issues. The problem, however, is that this kind of project seems to toll the death knell of metaphysics instead of enriching it. At least within the Humean framework, an inquiry into the nature of ideas of cause or necessity shows that these concepts are psychological and moreover nothing but psychological. The mind projects, or spreads itself onto the world, but the causes and the necessities are not in the world, but only in the mind.

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<sup>1</sup> This particular project has affinities with Strawson’s descriptive metaphysics, although he did not mean to describe our conceptual scheme from a material taken from psychology, but

The descriptive project seems to amount to the dissolution of metaphysics into psychology.

There is another way of understanding the relationships between psychology and metaphysics which is less deadly for the metaphysical enterprise, but is bolder. It consists in an attempt to derive conclusions about metaphysical concepts, such as substance, self, causality or necessity, from an introspective investigation into the contents of our own minds. This enterprise has an obvious idealist ring, and it raises the immediate question: How can an investigation into our purely subjective world be a guide in our attempt to understand and describe the nature of the objective world and the ultimate properties of reality? In many ways this question has been asked since the first use of the notion of “psychology” in a metaphysical setting. This critical question can be directed at Descartes’s attempt to argue for the real distinction of mind and body from the *cogito*. It can also be directed at Wolff’s *psychologia rationalis*, which attempted to deduce necessary properties of the self as a substance from an investigation into the contents of our concepts. At this latter project Kant struck a deadly blow in the *paralogisms of pure reason*, by which he demonstrated that the very attempt necessarily fails.

In the 19th century there was one school of thought which explicitly attempted to derive metaphysical theses from an investigation into the mind, namely the school of *French spiritualism*. A number of French philosophers of the 19th century thought that they could proceed from an inner description of the mind to the metaphysical properties of the self and to ontology in general. The extent to which this kind of project can be pursued depends on the nature of the psychological investigation and its scientific character. The project of French spiritualists is based on introspective psychology, and it was essential to the spiritualists that the contents of the mind were discovered from the first person perspective, even though they were supposed to be objective in some sense. But

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from our common understanding of our language. (P. F. Strawson, *Individuals* [London: Methuen, 1959])

spiritualism soon had to confront itself with the results of the emerging scientific of the words psychology.

Here I would like to review some doctrines and methods of the spiritualist school, from – Marie Francois Pierre Gontier de Biran to Henri Bergson, and to suggest why this bold attempt to disguise metaphysics in psychological clothing fails.

### ***Maine de Biran: from the bodily self to the substantial self***

In order to understand the prehistory of the thesis that psychology can guide metaphysics, it is good to return to a classical discussion, which originated in Descartes and in his argument for the real distinction of mind and body. Descartes famously argued that since he has a clear and distinct idea of the main attribute of a thinking thing, and since he can conceive of this thinking thing as existing without the body, it follows that there is a real distinction between the mind (thinking substance) and the body (extension). Thus he moved from what we *conceive* of the mind to what it *is*. But this move seems fallacious, as Father Bourdin remarked, *ab nosse ad esse non valet consequentia*: from the fact that we can conceive of mind and body as distinct, it does not follow that they are distinct in reality. Descartes refused this maxim, and argued that when my thought and conception is clear and distinct, and when we actually know the thing as it is, we capture the real nature of things.<sup>2</sup>

Descartes had no place in his system for a separate science of the mind: on the contrary, he took mind and body not only as separate but also as tied together by a substantial “union”. The *cogito* allows us to know the nature of the soul, but it cannot be the basis of a scientific study of the mind. As regards the objective study

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<sup>2</sup> Descartes, *Responses to the 7<sup>th</sup> objections*. AT VII, 519. On Descartes’ reasoning, see B. Williams, *Descartes, the pure inquiry* (Penguin books, 1976) and T. Gendler & J. Hawthorne (eds.), *Conceivability and Possibility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 13-26

of the mind, the proper object of it is more properly the body, and not the inner realm of a thinking subject.

The view that psychology could be a science of the “inner sense” is not Descartes’. It emerged during the 18th century, with the British empiricists. In France it was introduced by Etienne Condillac and more extensively, at the time of the French revolution, by the “Idéologues” (Destutt de Tracy, Jouffroy, Royer-Collard) who conceived the project of a purely introspective psychology. Maine de Biran (1766 – 1824) was their disciple and he proposed that psychology could be based on the foundation which Descartes thought to be impossible:

“Whereas Descartes thought that he had put forward the first principle of all science, the first self-evident truth, by saying : I *think*, therefore I *am* (a *thinking* thing or substance), we would say better, in a more determinate manner, and this time with the undeniable self-evidence of the inner sense: I act, I want or I think the action, hence I feel myself as a *cause*, hence I am or exist really as a cause or a force. It is exactly under this relationship that my inner thought is the expression or the conception or the production of my own *real* existence, and at the same time the primary manifestation and birth of the *self*, which is born for himself by starting to know itself.” (Maine de Biran 1824, V, X-2, 77)

What Biran calls «the primitive fact» is a psychological fact in the sense of a being which is only accessible through introspection. This is the basis of all knowledge, subjective knowledge as well as objective knowledge. Hence psychology is the basic science. But these primitive facts, and in the same way all the fundamental facts of psychology, are not merely psychological, in the sense of being mind-dependent and mid-relative. They are also and actually *objective* facts. But we should not understand in the same way as the facts of physics:

“There are two order of phenomena, distinct and even opposed, and consequently two sorts of observation, which have nothing in common in their means, their object, or their aim – and even seem generally to be at odds with each other. The one takes wing far from ourselves, the other as close as possible to the self, seeking only to incline in its depths.

It is no doubt with this divergence in the means and the direction of the two sciences in mind that Newton, touching on the question that concerns us, cried “Physics, preserve me from metaphysics.

We also, having in mind the observation, necessarily twofold, of two classes of phenomena of which the mixture and confusion offer so many errors, illusions and miscalculations, may cry out in turn “Psychology, preserve yourself from physics”.(*Oeuvres*, VI, *Rapports du physique et du moral chez l’homme*)

The question then becomes: What is the nature of these primitive psychological facts? Maine de Biran’s characteristic doctrine is that it is not any form of cognition or thinking in general, but the perception of our action or volition. The real “cogito”, then, is not a cogitation, but the feeling of what Maine de Biran calls “*effort*”, willed movement or the experience of trying.

The description of this experience of effort and willed movement is one of Maine de Biran’s most important contributions. The body which is experienced in the attempt of trying to do something, such as raising one’s arm, is not physical, in the sense of being external to us and extensive. On the contrary, it is constituted by *kinesthesia*; it is a bodily awareness, a lived body or “*corps propre*”, to use the phrase that Maurice Merleau-Ponty has later made well-known. The lived body is thus distinct from the materiel body: the first is the object of our immediate awareness, whereas the second is organic. Maine de Biran’s analyses of the bodily self had a

deep impact on later French philosophy, on Bergson and on Merleau-Ponty and the French existentialists.<sup>3</sup>

Maine de Biran, however, refuses to infer directly the nature and existence of a substantial self from the mind's feeling of itself in action and volition:

“If I do not get out of the conscious fact, I could not find any support for this proposition: *I am a thinking being*, for my thought would have to be felt or perceived as the fundamental mode or permanent *attribute* of the substance, such that there existed in consciousness a real duality, or a relationship between two distinct terms, one of which being the substance and the other the mode or the attribute. (Biran 1812)

Unlike Descartes, Maine de Biran does not accept the step from the mode of thinking to the thinking substance. The idea of the self does not contain the idea of the soul. In this sense, Maine de Biran is a phenomenalist: nothing exists in consciousness except the feeling of a relationship. The felt relationship is that of causality, which is experienced in action and bodily movement. It follows that the self only exists, according to Biran, at the moment in which it is perceived in effort and action. When we are asleep for example, or are unconscious, the primitive fact is not there.

However, in a number of writings Maine de Biran rejects the consequences of a strict phenomenalist point of view and rejects the bundle conception of the self associated with it. But he does not want either to assert the reality of the self as a perceived phenomenon. The self and the soul do not exist as reality. But they exist

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<sup>3</sup> See Merleau Ponty, *Les relations de l'âme et du corps chez Malebranche, Maine de Biran et Bergson* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964); Merleau Ponty, *Phenomenology of perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948); Michel Henry, *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps* (Paris: PUF, 1967). In contemporary anglophone philosophy one writer whose views on action and willing have some affinities with Biran is B. O' Saughnessy, *The Will* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), and to a certain extent the idea is rediscovered in contemporary philosophy of mind with the idea of a bodily self. See in particular Jose Luis Bermudez, Anthony Marcel & Naomi Eilan, *The body and the self* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995)

as *noumena*. Through our experience of action we know only effects, but there is a cause of these effects, although it is unknowable.

This means that Maine de Biran does not make any inferences from the psychology of our inner sense to the nature of a metaphysical self. But his disciples, such as Victor Cousin (1792-1867) and the philosophers whom he inspired, such as Ravaisson (1813-1900), drew the inference from introspection to metaphysics. They maintained that through reflection and the experience of freedom that belongs to it, the mind acquires knowledge of itself as a product of the Absolute. Lachelier later gave a vivid and ironical description's of Cousin's method and objectives.

“In the “facts of the will” he thought that he could reach free will, as a permanent power and condition of all consciousness, which is in us the person or the self; in the « rational facts » consciousness seemed to him to raise itself, so to say, above itself to be identified with reason into absolute truth, as it exists both in god and in the universe. Having reached these peaks, nothing would prevent Mr Cousin from going farther than the boldest kind of metaphysics: for one time he thought that he had demonstrated, through Condillac's method, Schelling's philosophy ». (Lachelier 1896)

### ***Denying the premise: Comte and Lachelier***

Auguste Comte, the founder of the positivist school, resisted the inference from psychology to metaphysics by simply denying the spiritualist premise that the mind is knowable by a special method of introspection. In his *Dioptrics*, Descartes (following

Aquinas<sup>4</sup>) had denounced the homunculus fallacy: if the mind could observe itself, it would need another observer to observe itself observing and so on.<sup>5</sup> Comte denounces the same fallacy in the *Idéologues*, and in Maine de Biran's attempt to found a science of the mind upon introspection. For him, psychology can only consist of a physiological study of the brain and of a social and historical study of the products of the human mind, i.e. the history of institutions. There are no *facts* of the inner sense, and thus there is no introspective psychology, from which metaphysics can derive.

This was also Cournot's approach. Like Comte, he pointed out the arbitrariness of the "primitive fact"<sup>6</sup>, and denounced the pretensions of the spiritualist philosophers who tried to derive so-called metaphysical truths from psychology. His castigation of his contemporaries' psychologism has much in common with the critique that one finds later in the writings of the German Neo-Kantians and Husserl at the end of the 19th century:

Apart from empirical psychology which probably belongs to anthropology, ...there is another psychology which does not need that apparatus of observations, this slow accumulation of detailed facts, and which one must no more classify among the sciences of observation than arithmetic or geometry, although it relies on some observable and observed facts, a condition without which any science would be chimerical. It is clear that one can study the conditions of a conclusive reasoning, classify our ideas in various categories, expounds the rules of a good method, discuss the value of various proofs and inductions, invoke the principles of morals, and further the applications to various species, without investigating how, under what conditions, and in virtue of which forces, by which nature springs the notions, ideas, rules and principles made their appearance in the mind (Cournot 1851: 440)

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<sup>4</sup> As Cournot reminds us, Cicero already observed: "*Ut oculus, sine animus, se non videns, alia cernit*" (Cournot A.A. Cournot, *Essai sur les fondements de nos connaissances et sur les caractères de la critique philosophique* (Paris: Vrin-CNRS, [1851] 1975), 437.

<sup>5</sup> Auguste Comte, *Cours de philosophie positive* (Paris: Rouen frères, 1830; repr. Paris: Herman, 1975), 45<sup>ème</sup> leçon.

<sup>6</sup> Cournot, *Essai sur les fondements de nos connaissances et sur les caractères de la critique philosophique*, ch. XXIII

During the second part of the 19th century, most members of the spiritualist school renounced the pretensions of Cousin's school to found metaphysics on psychology. But they did not withdraw from the position that metaphysics, in some sense, has to be a branch of psychology or psychology a branch of metaphysics.

Henri Bergson, as we shall see, took the first course and argued that metaphysics is a part of psychology. Jules Lachelier (1832-1918) developed the second alternative and argued that psychology belonged to metaphysics. In his long article "Psychologie and metaphysics", he tries to arbitrate the argument between the partisans of introspective psychology and those of naturalistic physiology. Against Biran and Cousin he argues that psychology is not a form of first philosophy which takes us from facts about consciousness to metaphysical conclusions. Against the naturalists he argues that the mind is not just the object of physiology. Lachelier's main inspiration is Kantian, and his critique of introspectionism comes quite close to Kant's refutation of the paralogisms of pure reason. We cannot *know* the self from introspection. But we can understand it through reflection and the affirmation of our self affirms freedom:

The inner man is double, and there is nothing surprising that he can be the object of two sciences [psychology and physiology] which complete each other. Psychology has consciousness as its proper domain: it knows about thought only the light which it spreads on sensation: the true science of thought itself, the light in itself, is metaphysics. (Lachelier 1885)

### ***Bergson***

At the time when Lachelier was writing his treatises, psychology was born as a science in France. Its main advocate, Theodule Ribot (1839-1916), the editor of the *Revue philosophique*, was an experimentalist and a naturalist, who tried to understand psychological phenomena through the study of neurophysiology. In his lucid

presentation of French philosophy in *Mind* (Ribot 1877) Ribot derided the French Spiritualists' attempt to reach the Absolute through reflection, and defended a more modest and more scientific psychology, which he also practiced. The very year when William James published his *Principles of psychology* (1889), Henri Bergson published his first book, *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (1889). An interesting feature of Bergson's work, which distinguishes it from the approaches of the other French spiritualists, is the emphasis that it gives to scientific data of psychology and neurology. His book is full of references to physiological optics, to Gustav Fechner's psychophysics, to studies of aphasia and brain lesions, and to other experimental works. In this way he raised philosophical psychology to a new level which is absent from the writings of his spiritualist predecessors. His main concern, however, was to reinterpret the data of the scientific psychology of his time in order to defend his own philosophical views, which were distinctively dualistic and spiritualistic. Thus, in the *Essay* he attempted to show that mental life cannot be subjected to quantitative measurement and analysis, and that psychological time is misunderstood when it is modelled on spatial extension. In *Matter and Memory* Bergson's criticised Ribot's view according to which memories are located in the nervous system and not in the soul. Although he pretended to overthrow the traditional divisions between matter and mind, self and body, or idealism and realism, his own distinction between two kinds of memory - memory as habit, which is mainly bodily and adaptive, and "pure" memory, which is coextensive with consciousness and irreducible to brain processes – is highly dualistic in spirit. According to Bergson, the brain is merely a sensor-motor organ devoted to the regulation of action, and not a processor of information or knowledge.

When Bergson comes to describe the method of metaphysics, he characterises it as the method of intuition. Intuition as the proper tool for philosophy is opposed to analysis, the proper tool for the science. By "intuition" Bergson means something which is both broader in scope and richer in effects than a simple introspective certainty. The work of intuition, according to Bergson, consists in trying to get into the very nature of the phenomena, as they are given in their flux and in their becoming – what he calls

*durée*, duration. In contrast, scientific psychology freezes or solidifies the passing of time and the perpetual movement of the psychic life. When describing the work of intuition, Bergson comes up with the following account:

Suppose that we place ourselves, by an effort of intuition, within the concrete flow of duration. No doubt there will be no logical reason to posit multiple and varied durances. Conceivably there could be no other durance, but our own, just as there might be no other colour in the world but orange, for instance. But just as colour based consciousness, which has an internal affinity with orange instead of perceiving it externally, would feel itself caught between red and yellow, we would even, perhaps, sense unconsciously beneath this colour a whole spectrum displaying the continuum between red and yellow, so the intuition of our durance, so far from leaving us suspended in the void as pure analysis would do, puts us into contact with a whole continuum of durances which we have to try to follow at a lower or higher level; in both cases we can expand ourselves indefinitely by a more and more violent effort, in both cases we transcend ourselves. In the first case, we proceed in a more fragmented duration, whose palpitations, more rapid than our own, and dividing up simple sensation, dilute its quality into quantity. The limit of this would be the purely homogenous, the pure *repetition* which we define materially. Going in the other direction, we go towards a duration which is more and more tense, contracted and intensified; the limit here would be eternity.<sup>7</sup>

This is meant to be a part of what Bergson calls “true empiricism”, which attempts to

“get closer and closer the original itself, to dive deeper into it, and through a sort of *spiritual auscultation*, to feel the palpitation of its soul” (*ibidem*, p.1408)

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<sup>7</sup> *Introduction à la métaphysique*, 1903, in Bergson 1991, p. 1418-19, translated by F.T. C. Moore 1996 p. 92-93

Bergson's notion of intuition differs both from the traditional rationalist concept of intuition and from the introspective understanding that one finds in Maine de Biran and his followers in the French tradition. It differs from the rationalist concept because it is not *intellectual*. He makes this clear when he criticises Kant for having missed the true nature of intuition:

“It is not necessary, to reach intuition, to transport oneself outside the domain of the senses and of consciousness. Kant's mistake was to believe this. After having proved through decisive arguments that no dialectical effort will ever introduce us into the hereafter and that an effective metaphysics will necessarily be an intuitive metaphysics, he added that we necessarily miss this intuition and that such a metaphysics is impossible. It would be so, indeed, if there were neither any other time nor any kind of change distinct from those that Kant had figured out and with which we deal anyway, because our typical perception could neither get out time nor grasp anything else than change. But the time in which we are necessarily placed, the change to which we are typically subjected, are a time and a change that our consciousness have reduced to ashes to facilitate our action upon things. Let us undo what they did, let us bring back our perception to its origins, and we shall have a knowledge of a new kind without having recourse to new faculties.”<sup>8</sup>

Intuition should both start from ordinary perception and bring us at the heart of being which is both duration and *life*. Unlike the concept of intuition that is used by introspective psychology, from Maine de Biran to the associationists, this is not any kind of *analysis* or *decomposition* of thought, which would necessarily be abstract. On the contrary, intuition is claimed to grasp the concrete flux of duration in itself, without analysing it into any parts. Intuition-based psychology, as we could call it, is supposed to be true metaphysics, in opposition to the kind of psychology which is practiced and recommended by analytic psychologists such as John Stuart Mill or Hyppolite Taine,

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<sup>8</sup> Henri Bergson, “L'intuition philosophique”, in H. Bergson, *Oeuvres, Edition du Centenaire* (Paris: PUF, 1991), 1364

“who could not content themselves with being simply psychologists in psychology” and who, although they were psychologist through their method, were metaphysicians by the object which they set to themselves” (*ibid* p.1406). Analysis produces bad metaphysics, intuition provides good psychological metaphysics.

Psychological metaphysics, based on intuition, has not only the positive result of bringing us to the heart of life and being, but it also has a negative or critical correlate in the denouncement of the philosophical illusions which arise when the metaphysical problems are ill-posed. The most well known example of the critical part of Bergson’s analyses is his famous attack upon the metaphysical notion of possibility. He argues that we represent possibilities to ourselves as states of the world which are not actual but which could be realised. But possibility is nothing but a mirage or an illusion, which is created when we project into past an image of the present states of the world and suppose that it has been actualised. There is nothing possible, everything is actual, in the present of consciousness. We merely *project* in past - and in future – our present perception in a “retrograde motion”.<sup>9</sup> This illusion of retroaction of the past, which creates the ghost of the possible, is also responsible for our conception of time as a structure of branching possibilities and for our conception of free will as a choice between possibilities.

This negative strand of Bergson’s thought has often been compared to the kind of criticism of metaphysics that have been presented by analytic philosophers, for instance when pointing out category mistakes.<sup>10</sup> But there is a crucial difference between these two critical approaches. For Bergson the factitiousness of philosophical problems and the falsity of a number of metaphysical theses do not stem from a failure to respect grammatical or logical distinctions, but from a failure to place oneself in the position required by the method of intuition: inside the true movement of duration and time. Given that this method is a sophisticated form of psychological introspection, as we

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<sup>9</sup> Henri Bergson, “La pensée et le mouvant”, in H. Bergson, *Oeuvres, Edition du Centenaire* (Paris: PUF, 1991), 1331-1345. I have analysed these points in Pascal Engel, “Plenitude and contingency: modal concepts in XIXth century French philosophy”, in S. Knuuttila (ed.) *Modern Modalities* (Dordrech: Kluwer, 1988)

<sup>10</sup> Such a reading of Bergson is proposed by F.C.T. Moore, *The psychology of Maine de Biran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966).

have argued, it follows that the intuition of duration is the true criterion of the meaningfulness of any metaphysical concept or problem. Metaphysical concepts, such as *possible*, *order*, or even *free will*, are misconceived, when they are approached from a point of view which is alien to the perspective of intuition, and are mere products of psychological projection.

It is at this point that the principal difficulty of the spiritualist strategy arises. For, on the one hand, its project is to reach metaphysical *facts* from a psychological standpoint – the standpoint of introspection and reflection or “intuition”; but on the other hand it makes these facts relative to the psychological inquiry. But how can one reach metaphysical *objectivity* or metaphysical facts from a point of view which is *subjective* by essence? This is the first part of the difficulty. The other follows immediately. If the so-called objective metaphysical facts are actually constitutively psychological in the sense of being produced by some process of introspection, reflexion, or intuition, then they are not objective at all. They are actually psychological facts. This explains why Bergson can attempt what looks very much like a psychological *debunking* of the notion of possibility. Such debunking was not uncommon at his time, and it has some affinities with Nietzsche’s attempt to criticise metaphysics through his own version of the psychology of sentiments: “We psychologists of the future...” In other words, French spiritualism attempted to preserve metaphysics as a science of being, but it ended up dissolving it in the psychological washbasin, to use Frege’s terms when he criticised Husserl’s early psychologism.

***Conclusion: metaphysics out of psychology, or vice versa?***

When the French spiritualists conceived their project of discovering metaphysical truths by an introspective inquiry into our minds, they did not aim at what the empiricist philosophers, in the 18th century, called the origin of our ideas about space, time, object, possibility or the self. Neither did they aim at any form of psychologisation of metaphysics or at any anthropologisation of concepts, as the one attempted by the

German “psychologists” philosophers of the same time, such as Beneke, Fries, Herbart and others, or by heirs of British empiricism such as John Stuart Mill or Alexander Bain. They did not work to bury metaphysics, but to praise it. They intended to preserve, and to value, the metaphysical truths about being, the self, and substance, which the rationalists philosophers had attempted to discover through intellectual intuition. But at the same time, they did not accept the assumptions of rationalistic thinkers, or their apriorism. They hoped to get to the highest regions of Being and Spirit, but starting from a psychological inquiry which would take into account both the operations of the senses and the power of conscious reflexion. They accepted Kant’s critique of metaphysics and his rejection of empiricism, but they also dreamt of a “true empiricism” which would allow the mind to communicate directly with the nature of the self and with the very essence of life. They also rejected psychology as an objective, third-personal, and scientific inquiry into the mind.

The result of the inquiries of the spiritualists was bound to look like a hybrid mixture of psychology and metaphysics, congenial to what Cousin called “eclectism” and to what Ravaisson called “spiritualistic positivism”, but in fact much closer to a form of psychologism than they claimed it to be. It is indeed, in all respects, a form of idealism: what is experienced is supposed to work a guide to what exists and what is conceivable is taken as a guide to what is possible, and the true reality is of spiritual nature. Bergson’s critique of the illusion of possibility, for example, although it could be interpreted as a form of what is today know as actualism in modal metaphysics, is much closer to the a psychological account of the genesis of our concept of possibility. Bergson’s main argument is that we have a mirage *representation* of the present in the past, which produces in us the *mental* illusion of possibles which would be actualised, and that we can only *conceive* of a world which is full of being.

This is not to say that the project of attempting to derive essential properties of things from introspective data is in itself absurd or contradictory. At the time when Bergson was writing, Brentano formulated his own project of a descriptive or phenomenological psychology, which was supposed to proceed to the essence of mental

states starting from an introspective investigation into our mental acts. What differentiates French spiritualism from an enterprise of this sort? Firstly the answer lies in the fact that Brentano's psychology was meant to be *analytic* in precisely the sense which Bergson rejected. Secondly it was embedded in a metaphysics which was *independent of*, and not *derived* from the introspective investigation that constitutes descriptive phenomenology. Thus according to Brentano psychology depends on metaphysics whereas according to French Spiritualism metaphysics depends on psychology.

Similarly we should not reproach the French spiritualists for having emphasised the faculty of intuition, but for having relied to heavily and to uncritically on it. Bertrand Russell famously criticised Bergson's notion of intuition and accused it of mysticism (Russell 1917). But it does not follow that there is no space for an epistemological theory of intuition and its role in knowledge. On the contrary, a number of contemporary philosophical enterprises are based upon intuition.<sup>11</sup>

Neither should my critical remarks about French spiritualism should be understood as restating the objection that Father's Bourdin presented to Descartes, claiming that conceivability does not imply possibility. It is not obvious that we can derive any propositions about what is possible from what we sense or feel, or from what we imagine, but it is less obvious that no conclusion can be drawn about metaphysical possibility from what can *conceptually* be conceived and thought.<sup>12</sup> Some serious contemporary projects in metaphysics are based on the idea that conceptual analysis *can*, under certain constraints, ground conclusions about metaphysics. This project can also be understood as a project of analysing the basic concepts of folk-psychology – understood as a functionalist theory of mind – and deriving certain metaphysical conclusions from this basis (Jackson 1998). I do not of course mean to endorse such a project, but merely want to point out that there is no doubt that it makes sense. But it is

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<sup>11</sup> Most prominently Chisholm's foundationalism, see F.C.T. Moore *The Foundations of Knowing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), and more recently M. De Paul & W. Ramsey *Rethinking intuition* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> On this contemporary debate, see T. Gendler & J. Hawthorne (eds.) *Conceivability and Possibility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), and the essays therein.

equally obvious that such project has very little to do with the kind of developments described in this article.

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