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Hume in the Prussian Academy: Jean Bernard Mérian's "On the Phenomenalism of David Hume"

JOHN CHRISTIAN LAURSEN and RICHARD H. POPKIN,
with a Translation from the French by PETER BRISCOE

Recent interest in the place of the Prussian Academy of Sciences and Belles-Lettres in eighteenth-century intellectual life has focused on both the influence of the Academy on German philosophy of the time, and on the influence of the surrounding German intellectual world on the Academy.¹ From its refounding by Frederick the Great in the 1740s until the 1790s, the Academy was predominantly francophone, consisting largely of French and Swiss thinkers and scientists, including Huguenot exiles. Some of them played a significant role in making David Hume's texts available to the French-speaking intellectual community throughout Europe.

Swiss philosopher and member of the Prussian Academy Jean Bernard Mérian (1723-1807) made two major contributions to the reception of the philosophy of David Hume. He translated Hume's *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (1758) into French, which gave it wide distribution in Europe.² Then, thirty-five years later in 1793, he presented a paper entitled "On the Phenomenalism of David Hume" to the Prussian Academy, which was published in 1798 in its *Mémoires*.³ The rest of this introduction will set the context for the following transcription and translation of Mérian's essay.

Interest in Hume at the Prussian Academy

Mérian translated Hume at the behest of Pierre Louis Maupertuis (d.1759) and Jean Henri Samuel Formey (d.1797), President and Permanent Secretary

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of the Prussian Academy, respectively. Formey was probably the chief representative, by reason of industriousness, of a school of anti-skeptics in Berlin and elsewhere whose primary objective was the defense of morality and Christianity. A review of the ideas of this school will help us appreciate the originality of Mérian's response to Hume.

Jean-Pierre Crousaz was the spiritual ancestor of the moral anti-skeptics. His *Examen du Pyrrhonisme ancien & moderne* of 1733 was a massive attempt to refute Pyrrho and Bayle, largely *ad hominem*. Over and over, he insisted that the determinism, skepticism, cynicism, insincerity, and immorality of the skeptics would undermine society, morality, and Christianity. In the years between 1733 and 1740, Formey drafted an abridgment of Crousaz's work designed to eliminate the many repetitions and confusions, which was eventually published as *Le triomphe de l'evidence* (1756, 1761).

Meanwhile, the Swiss polymath Albrecht von Haller translated Formey's abridgment of Crousaz into German, which was published as *Prüfung der Secte die an allem zweifelt* (1751). Haller's long German introduction was translated back into French for separate publication (1755, 1760) and for publication as the introduction to Formey's French abridgement. This introduction represents the apogee of the moral argument against skepticism: atheistic skeptics will kill their own fathers, skeptical judges will judge according to their own desires, the poor will rob from the rich, the "philosophical" masses will overthrow princes, and "philosophical" princes will rule according to their whims.⁴

In other writings, Formey attempted to refute Diderot and other more recent skeptics, arguing from moral consequences.⁵ In 1756 and 1757 he published a five-part review of the first German translation of Hume's *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*. Rather than engaging with Hume on a philosophical level, he stressed Hume's ambition to say outrageous things.⁶

Formey's attitude toward Hume came out in his introduction and notes to Mérian's translation of the *Enquiry* in 1758, where, among other things, he recommends Haller's introduction (ME 2:76). We have gone from an "excess of dogmatism" to an "excess of Pyrrhonism" (ME 1:viii); regrettably, "order, beauty, regularity, connections, proportions, purposes, plans, wisdom; these are ideas for which there is a decided aversion" nowadays (ME 1:x). After similar ruminations, the rest of his introduction was a French translation and précis of John Leland's refutation of Hume in *A View of the Principal Deistical Writers*, which had been published in English in 1754 and in German in 1755 (ME 1:xx-lxiii). In his notes, he drew attention to the moral consequences of Hume's ideas, with scant attention to the philosophical:

It is incontestably dangerous to shake the foundations of society and religion...[and those who bring up dangerous ideas should] carefully balance the utility attached to their real and pretended discoveries against [the utility of] the notions they combat. (ME 1:243n.)

He used Hume's own vocabulary against him: where Hume says philosophers are not infected with enthusiasm, Formey asserts that they are a thousand times more enthusiastic, proud, and passionate than the devout (ME 2:115). Over and over, he casts Hume as an extreme, universal Pyrrhonist (ME 1:xiii, 1:204, 2:70-71, 120).

If he thought it was so dangerous, why, one might ask, did Formey encourage Mérian to translate Hume's text? He provided his own answer: hiding it would just pique "curiosity, such a strong and natural passion" (ME 1:xiv). The German translation had already appeared in 1755 and *Mélanges Littéraires* in Berlin had printed extracts in French in 1756 (ME 1:xvi-xvii). So the best thing would be to have it published with an introduction and notes that would draw its sting. There was also an ambivalence about skepticism among many of these thinkers. Maupertuis used skepticism against the Wolffians and materialists, in order to further his own religious stance.⁷ Formey had to admit that Bayle "is by most scholars considered to be the greatest genius who ever lived."⁸ These philosophers were prepared to admit that the skeptics were right on many points, and that Hume was an ingenious thinker; their chief charge was that he and other skeptics went too far. To the extent that they actually domesticated many a skeptical point into their own canons of argument, they contributed to the process of assimilating skepticism into the modern world view.

The German translation of Hume's essay also had a connection to the Prussian Academy. Although it was translated by somebody else, Johann Georg Sulzer of the Academy wrote the introduction and notes.⁹ He was clearly a member of the Crousaz/Formey/Haller school of anti-skepticism, limiting himself to the moral argument. On the one hand, he admired Hume's writing style, and wrote in his introduction that Hume's clarity and anti-dogmatism would surely be healthy models of good taste to wake up the German philosophers (S iv-v, xix). On the other hand, he seems to have thought he could refute Hume's critique of causation by simply asserting that "where there is a cause, there is an effect, and where there is an effect, there is a cause" (S 93). Over and over in his commentaries, the ultimate appeal is to "calm and happiness." He claims that Hume's moral sense is an "occult quality" (S 131-133), but then goes on to argue for "an original drive toward moral order" (S 136-138). He has no sense that his claim that moral truths can be as certain as that the sun will rise the next day (S 93) is undermined by Hume's point that nature could change. His final argument is that if Hume were right, and he could be convinced that the world is a moral chaos, he would no longer wish to live (S 333). After drawing attention to Sulzer's many mistakes in his refutation of Hume, Sulzer's biographer is reduced to praising the warmth of his conviction of the existence of God and the immortality of the soul!¹⁰

It should be noted that Haller and Sulzer were practicing natural scientists, eager to prove the harmony of natural science with religion and morality. The

scientists of the Prussian Academy were not responsible for assimilating Humean skepticism into the modern world view, but rather resisted it whenever it seemed to threaten religion. As we shall see, however, Mérian was a philosopher with a bent toward the analysis of language, and his answers to Hume prefigured the contemporary ordinary language 'refutation' of skepticism.¹¹

Mérian's Engagement with Skepticism

Educated in Basel not far from his birthplace, Mérian was serving as tutor in the family of an Amsterdam magistrate when he was called to the Prussian Academy of Sciences and Belles-Lettres in 1748 at the suggestion of Jean Bernoulli, a member of the eminent Bernoulli family of mathematicians. In a long career at the Academy, he succeeded Formey as Permanent Secretary in 1797, and died in 1807.

Our sources indicate that Mérian translated Hume at the request of Maupertuis and Formey, not *sua sponte*.¹² Mérian had written the substantial review of Hume's *Enquiry*, with extracts, in the *Mélanges Littéraires*,¹³ in which he expressed the hope that the work would only be read by philosophers because it might confuse people who were less morally and intellectually grounded.¹⁴ But in other early essays for the *Mémoires* of the Academy, he seems to have been more interested in refuting the skeptical implications of the ideas of Descartes and Leibniz.

In his first contribution to the *Mémoires*,¹⁵ Mérian challenged Descartes's famous "I think, therefore I am." What effect would it have on a skeptic? "Whoever possesses enough skepticism to place his own existence in doubt could not agree with anything positive, and would not be in accord with us concerning any principle; he would be outside of the reach of our arguments" (M49 424). Descartes tries to prove too much: some things must be taken as immediately given. "One does not know how to dispute with the skeptics without conceding a considerable advantage, such as engaging to demonstrate all propositions as evident as that" (M49 424). The best answer to skeptics is that their doubts are a matter of misunderstanding ordinary language. Thus, "for my part, I regard absolute skepticism as an incurable illness; and a skeptic as a man who speaks to me in an unknown language, with whom in consequence I cannot ever enter into communication" (M49 428). Descartes himself never really doubted his own existence, which is "an intuitive truth" (M49 430).

Prefiguring Kant, as well as later ordinary-language refutations of skepticism, Mérian concludes that knowledge of one's own existence is a matter of primitive, immediate apperception. "An intelligence that does not apperceive itself is absurd and contradictory" (M49 434). Without such immediate knowledge, "the human spirit would be like a rudderless ship with

a broken mast, drifting at the mercy of hurricanes on an ocean without shores" (M49 431).

Mérian's next target was Leibniz's principle of indiscernibles,¹⁶ the principle that any two things which differ from one another in space and time must also differ in other ways. Mérian thought that it would lead to chaos if we could not say that two things in different places or one thing at different times were not perfect resemblances, or identicals. For him, the choice was between "a world which contains perfect resemblances and a world with nothing but absolute differences among things, which is to say a veritable chaos" (M51 55). This is because in Mérian's view, our reasonings are based on comparisons, resemblances, and analogies; we cannot think at all without resemblances (M51 32). The answer to Leibniz again prefigures Kant. It is that resemblance is not something "out there" ("*quelque chose d'extérieur*"); rather it is *our ideas* that resemble one another (M51 33).¹⁷ Daily life and common sense require these resemblances, even if some philosophers' systems reject them. Then Mérian returns to the Crousaz-Formey-Haller-Sulzer style of argument when he concludes that we are entitled to resemblances because they refute "physico-moral skepticism, the most terrible and desperate of all skepticisms" (M51 54).

In his next essay on the same subject, Mérian expanded on the ordinary language critique of skepticism that he had begun in the essay on apperception of the self.¹⁸ If there were no indiscernibles, how would we get the idea that there were any? Our way of life requires resemblances as axiomatic. In this essay, Mérian leans heavily on the social nature of our standards and our knowledge. Imagine a dozen people watching the moon. Would anybody seriously say that each has a different image in his mind? (M54 385-386). Two drops of water are perfectly indiscernible *to us*, before the microscope is used. This is enough to establish the identity of indiscernibles *for us* (M54 386).

In yet another essay on this theme,¹⁹ Mérian drew out the ethical and political implications. Personal identity, he argued in good Humean fashion, is in fact nothing more than a custom we have of taking perceptions that resemble each other for the same thing (M55 462). Our identity is not a matter of the more rigorous numerical identity, but rather of the sort of resemblance identity that Mérian had been arguing for all along. Here, Mérian stressed the distinction between ordinary language (including the Bible) and philosophical language, warning against using fine philosophical distinctions in making moral decisions and public policy (M55 468). Thus, a person should be punished for a crime even if at a later time he is not, philosophically speaking, the same person that he used to be (M55 471-475).

Mérian mentioned Hume briefly in an essay "Sur le sens moral" in 1758, and attacked other problems such as Molyneux's problem in a series of papers published in the 1770s.²⁰ Hume did not seem to be uppermost in his mind. In 1771 he became director of the *belles-lettres* section of the Academy and turned

more of his attention to historical and literary studies. This work may have reinforced his penchant for historicizing philosophical debates and for solving philosophical puzzles by attention to ordinary language.²¹ In 1793, he was ready to dedicate an entire article to Hume's "phenomenalism."²²

Mérian's Essay on Hume's Phenomenalism

So far, we have an anti-skeptic who accepts many a skeptical position for use against other philosophers, but who draws the sting of skepticism by a series of "ordinary language" moves. This strategy is played out at length in "Sur le phénoméisme de David Hume."²³ In this essay, Mérian reveals familiarity with both Hume's *Treatise* and his *Enquiry*. He never mentions the critiques of Hume of the Scottish Common Sense school: Reid, Beattie, and Oswald.²⁴ Rather, he develops his own critique largely from the philosophy of language.

Mérian claims to coin the term "phenomenalism" [*phénoménisme*] for Hume's insistence that all we have are impressions and representations of objects, even when considering knowledge of ourselves (MHP 420-421). This is Lockeanism extended farther than Locke would have allowed, and leads to "a desperate skepticism," Mérian thinks (MHP 421).

Mérian claims that his strategy is to attack Hume's "skepticism with its own weapons"; to raise doubts about its doubts (MHP 422). But in fact, most of what he does is to reject the skeptics' conditions for the fight, substituting his own. In effect, he accepts Hume's analysis if it is understood as a common-sense, skeptical realism that relies covertly on the existence of something stable behind appearances.

If we grant that phenomena exist, don't there have to be real things that cause them, or that perceive them? Then Hume would have to admit causation, which he cannot do (on Mérian's interpretation) (MHP 423). There would have to be real subjects that do the perceiving, because it sounds absurd to say that phenomena perceive other phenomena (MHP 424). Hume may be trying to preach universal skepticism, but "in order to preach anything at all, one must be understood" (MHP 426). By the very nature of understanding, one cannot understand phenomena without supposing something that causes them and something that perceives them. Thus, either Hume contradicts himself or he does not know what he is saying (MHP 426). We do not have a language that can express what he is trying to say (MHP 427).

Mérian's target here is largely Hume's *Treatise*, which contains Hume's theory of personal identity and which had appeared in German in 1790-1792.²⁵ His attack on Hume's notion of identity may have been inspired by Hume's own doubts about his theory, as expressed in the Appendix to the *Treatise*. Much of the recent literature on Hume's theory of identity might have benefited from knowledge of Mérian's essay, either to rely on it or to show it up as a misunderstanding of Hume.²⁶

Along the way, Mérian takes a shot at Kant. Notice, first, that it was impossible to discuss Hume in this period without discussing Kant. Notice also that Mérian describes Hume's philosophy as reappearing in the philosophy of Kant.²⁷ He does not mention Kant's critique of Hume; rather, Kant appears as a follower carrying Hume's work forward (MHP 419, 433-434).²⁸ Phenomenalists will understand Kant's doctrine of the noumenal to mean that the self, the soul, the spirit are all noumena (MHP 433). But "*thought presupposes the thinker*"; "the product of thought presupposes the thinker or the ability to think" (MHP 434). The phenomena cannot do this thinking, so "some stable thing" must do the thinking (MHP 434). This much, Mérian believes, is implicit in any language and is axiomatic for all thought.

This reference to stability is a clue to what Mérian is looking for. He wants more than Hume's concession to habit. He wants to prove that the assumption of continuity of the self is "a primitive form where this spirit is, so to speak, molded" (MHP 436). The self is not a chance collection, but something that all peoples and all languages take as basic (MHP 430, 436). If philosophers forge a new philosophical language that dispenses with pronouns, that will be a "rare chef-d'oeuvre" (MHP 437).²⁹ But it will never be more than a "vain effort to fight against the nature of things" (MHP 437). Mérian's argument from personal pronouns is not in Hume, and may be an original contribution to the debate. It is the final element of his ordinary language refutation of extreme skepticism.

Mérian's argument in this essay is a *modus vivendi* with skepticism that concedes skeptical arguments such as the indemonstrability of basic principles, but rejects the need for such a demonstration. Its structure is similar to the fideism of Pascal and Bayle in that it admits that many things must be accepted on faith. But it underpins a modern secular world view rather than a religious vision.

Mérian's essay on Hume in 1793 does not represent the end of concern with Hume at the Prussian Academy. A few years later, Mérian's colleague Louis Ancillon published an amusing "Dialogue between Berkeley and Hume." The story of that piece will be told in "Hume in the Prussian Academy II."³⁰

The full history of the reception of Mérian's interpretation of Hume cannot be traced here, but suffice it to say that two great French philosophers of the nineteenth century paid serious attention to it. Victor Cousin devoted a substantial part of a lecture to Mérian's 1793 essay, comparing his view to Reid's and revealing no sense that Mérian was wrong in his interpretation of Hume.³¹ Maine de Biran owned Mérian's translation of Hume's *Enquiry*, drafted a life of Mérian for the *Biographie universelle*, and left substantial manuscripts of extracts and critical comments on both Hume and Mérian.³² There is no direct evidence that he read Mérian on Hume's phenomenalism, but his solution to skepticism, the recognition of immediate knowledge,³³ is close to Mérian's.

Contemporary philosophers may conclude that in the last analysis Mérian was wrong about Hume. But the history of misunderstandings may be as important as the history of correct understandings. It is certainly likely that the former make up a much wider field.

NOTES

1 See, e.g., Hans Aarsleff, "The Berlin Academy under Frederick the Great," *History of the Human Sciences* 2 (1989), 193-206; Mary Terrall, "The Culture of Science in Frederick the Great's Berlin," *History of Science* 28 (1990), 333-364; John Christian Laursen, "Swiss Anti-Skeptics in Berlin," in *Die Schweizer im Berlin*, edited by Martin Fontius and Helmut Holzhey (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1996); René M. Piedmont, *Beiträge zum französischen Sprachbewusstsein im 18. Jahrhundert* (Tübingen: G. Narr, 1984); Conrad Grau, *Die Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin* (Heidelberg: Spektrum, 1993); Wolfgang Förster, ed., *Aufklärung in Berlin* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1989); Jürgen Storost, *Die Diskussion über die Universalität des Französischen an der Berliner Akademie der Wissenschaften im 18. Jahrhundert* (Bonn: Romantischer Verlag, 1994). For a discussion of some of the connections to Hume, see Manfred Kuehn, "David Hume and Moses Mendelssohn," *Hume Studies* 21.2 (1995): 197-220.

2 *Essais philosophiques sur l'entendement humain* (Amsterdam, 1758), 2 vols., hereafter cited as ME; a third and fourth volume in the *Oeuvres philosophiques de Mr. D. Hume* contained *Histoire naturelle de la Religion, Dissertations sur les Passions, sur la Tragedie, and sur la Regle du Gout* (Amsterdam, 1759); a fifth volume contained *Essais de Morale* (Amsterdam, 1760). Some of these have also been attributed to Mérian (see Christian Bartholmèss, *Histoire philosophique de l'Académie de Prusse* [Paris: Franck, 1851], vol. 2, 38, but he gets the dates wrong; also, T. E. Jessop, *A Bibliography of David Hume and of Scottish Philosophy* [New York: Russell & Russell, 1966], 10).

3 *Mémoires de l'Académie Royale des sciences et belles-lettres depuis l'avenement de Frédéric Guillaume II au throne, 1792 et 1793* (Berlin: George Decker, 1798), 417-437.

4 For more detail, see the discussion in Laursen.

5 For example, *Pensées raisonnables opposées aux Pensées philosophiques* (1749; Leiden and Göttingen, 1756); see Laursen.

6 See Richard Popkin, "The Early Critics of Hume," in *The High Road to Pyrrhonism*, edited by Richard Watson and James Force (San Diego: Austin Hill Press, 1980), 208-212.

7 See Giorgio Tonelli, "The 'Weakness' of Reason in the Age of Enlightenment," *Diderot Studies* 14 (1971): 227; Tonelli, "Maupertuis et la critique de la métaphysique," *Actes de la journée Maupertuis* (1973); Tonelli, *La pensée philosophique de Maupertuis* (Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1987); and Lionel Gossman, "Berkeley, Hume and Maupertuis," *French Studies* 14 (1960): 304-324.

8 Jean Henri Samuel Formey, *Histoire breve de la philosophie*, cited from translation, *A Concise History of Philosophy and Philosophers* (London, 1766), 222.

9 *Philosophische Versuche über die Menschliche Erkenntnis* (Hamburg and Leipzig, 1755); Sulzer cited hereafter as S. It is not clear who did the translation, which appeared as volume 2 of Hume's *Vermischte Schriften*. Reinhard Brandt and Heiner Klemme (*David Hume in Deutschland* [Marburg: Universitätsbibliothek, 1989], 32, 45) follow the tradition of attributing it to Hermann Andreas Pistorius, who translated volumes 1 and 3 of *Vermischte Schriften*. But Günter Gawlick and Lothar Kreimendahl have pointed out that Pistorius did not claim authorship in a later review, where he asserted that the 1793 translation was better (*Hume in der deutschen Aufklärung* [Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1987], 20-22).

10 Christian Friedrich von Blankenburg, "Einige Nachrichten von dem Leben und dem Schriften des Herrn Johann Georg Sulzer," in *Johann George Sulzers vermischte Schriften*, zweyter Theil (Leipzig: 1781), 69.

11 See, among many, Peter Strawson, *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985) and the review essay by Ernest Sosa, "Beyond Scepticism, to the Best of our Knowledge," *Mind* 97 (1988): 153-188.

12 Bartholmèss, 2:38; Adolf Harnack, *Geschichte der Königlich Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin*, Vol 1, First Part (Berlin, 1900), 454; and elsewhere.

13 *Mélanges littéraires et philosophiques*, vol. 1 (1755), 49-78, 180-203 and vol. 2 (1756), 83-117.

14 See Gawlick and Kreimendahl, 56.

15 "Sur l'apperception de sa propre existence," *Mémoires de l'Academie royale des sciences et des belles lettres de Berlin* for 1749, vol. 5 (Berlin: 1751), 416-441; hereafter cited as M49. This and later articles by Mérian have received recent attention from Udo Thiel, "Between Wolff and Kant: Merian's Theory of Apperception," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 34 (1996): 213-232. Mérian's essay on Hume is mentioned only in one footnote (217n.).

16 "Réflexiones philosophiques sur la ressemblance," *Mémoires...* for 1751, vol. 7 (Berlin: 1753), 30-56; hereafter cited as M51.

17 Kuehn points out that Mérian is using Hume's principles of association against Leibniz in these essays, in "David Hume and Moses Mendelssohn," 201, 216.

18 "Sur le Principe des Indiscernables," *Mémoires...* for 1754, vol. 10 (Berlin, 1756), 383-398; hereafter cited as M54.

19 "Sur l'Identité Numérique," *Mémoires...* for 1755, vol. 11 (Berlin: 1757), 461-475; hereafter cited as M55.

20 There is a modern edition of Mérian's essays on the Molyneux problem: J. B. Mérian, *Sur le problème de Molyneux*, edited by Francine Markovitz (Paris, 1984). See also Marjolein Degenaar, *Molyneux's Problem: Three Centuries of Discussion on the Perception of Forms* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1996), 78-85.

21 See Bartholmèss, 2:64ff.

22 Bartholmèss speculates that "the old man may have wanted to repair damage done in his youth, and suffered from remorse at having contributed to

the reputation of the Scottish philosopher" (2:58).

23 Mérian's essay (cited in the text as MHP) is discussed in Harnack, 457; Gawlick and Kreimendahl, 90-91; and note 31 below.

24 See Manfred Kuehn, *Scottish Common Sense in Germany, 1768-1800* (Kingston/Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987). Victor Cousin (*Cours d'histoire de la philosophie moderne* [Paris, 1841], 135-136; [Paris, rev. ed., 1846], 114-115) claimed that Mérian's reasoning was similar to Reid's, although Mérian did not know Reid.

25 Translated by Ludwig Heinrich Jakob, Halle, 1790-1792.

26 See, e.g., Corliss Swain, "Being Sure of One's Self: Hume on Personal Identity," *Hume Studies* 17.2 (1991): 107-124; the articles by Louis Loeb, Wayne Waxman, Keith Yandell, George Pappas, and Terence Penelhum in *Hume Studies* 18.2 (1992): 219-291; and David Pears, "Hume on Personal Identity," *Hume Studies* 19.2 (1993): 289-299.

27 In this view of the relation between Hume and Kant, Mérian parallels his contemporary, Carl Fridrich Stäudlin, *Geschichte und Geist des Skepticismus* (Leipzig: Crusius, 1794).

28 In a later essay, Mérian ironized a great deal about the power of the Kantian school in Prussia, suggesting that its form of skepticism had become the new dogma. He claimed that the academy did well to avoid becoming identified with any one school: "Eclecticism is the only sect, or non-sect, that ought to exist in an academy" ("Paraléle historique de nos deux philosophies nationales"), *Mémoires...* for 1797 (Berlin: 1800), 53-96, at 58, 91-5). Kant's philosophy is described as the same as Hume's, "with a few modifications," and a sociology of knowledge is provided. Coming from a Scot, Hume's ideas got little attention in Prussia. But cultural patriotism makes all the difference: coming from a Prussian, they boomed (82-83). Note that Cousin devoted a lecture to the claim that Kant's philosophy ends in skepticism (rev. ed., 1846, 105-113; 1841 edition, title of lecture only, 134).

29 Mérian does not seem to have considered languages like Japanese, which, without entirely dispensing with pronouns, make much less use of them than the major European languages.

30 Louis Ancillon, "Dialogue entre Berkeley et Hume," *Mémoires...* for 1796 (Berlin: George Decker, 1799), 86-127. The authors of this introduction are preparing a translation and introduction to this essay as "Hume in the Prussian Academy II." There is, in fact, a lot more to the story: Ancillon's son Frédéric also wrote an "Essai sur le scepticisme," dealing with Sextus Empiricus and David Hume as "les deux philosophes sceptiques les plus profonds," in *Mélanges de Litterature et de Philosophie* (Paris: F. Schoell and H. Nicolle, 1809), vol. 2, 3-70.

31 Cousin, first series, 1841, 134-143; rev. ed., 1846, vol. 1, 113-120.

32 See Maine de Biran, *Oeuvres*, vol. 11 part 2, *Commentaires et marginalia: dix huitième siècle*, edited by Bernard Baertschi (Paris: Vrin, 1993), 10-48 and 221-238, and François Azouvi and Bernard Baertschi, "Maine de Biran et la Suisse," *Cahiers de la Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie* 12 (1985): 5-35.

33 Maine de Biran, vol. 11 part 2, 19, 39, 42, 47-48.

Sur Le Phénoménisme de David Hume¹

M. MÉRIAN

[417] Pour mieux saisir les spéculations de ce philosophe profond & subtil, remontons à leur origine, suivons la marche progressive qui les a peu à peu exaltées à ce degré de raffinement; & pour cet effet jetons un coup d'oeil sur l'histoire philosophique de la Grande-Bretagne, leur lieu de naissance, la souche d'où elles se sont propagées.

Locke avoit retranché à la Matière, ou aux substances matérielles, toutes ces qualités qu'il nomme secondaires, telles que la lumière & la couleur, les faveurs, les odeurs, les sons, plusieurs qualités tactiles, comme le chaud & le froid, le dur & le mou &c. Mais il leur avoit laissé les qualités premières, primaires ou primitives, l'étendue, la figure, [418] l'impénétrabilité, la mobilité, lesquelles suffisoient pour leur assigner un rang parmi les substances, ou parmi les êtres réellement existans, existans par eux-mêmes, hors de nous, indépendamment de nous.

Reconnoissant de plus des substances spirituelles, il plaçoit dans leur nombre les ames humaines, il ne nioit ni celle des animaux ni les intelligences supérieures à l'homme; & il établit formellement l'existence nécessaire de l'Intelligence suprême.

Le Dr Berkeley introduisit bientôt un changement très-notable dans cette philosophie. En partant des principes mêmes posés par Locke, il tâcha de prouver que les qualités de la Matière nommées primitives n'y appartinrent pas davantage que celles qui portoient le nom de secondaires. Par là toutes les substances matérielles s'en alloient en fumée; il ne restoit que des substances spirituelles avec les diverses modifications qu'elles subissent. Le monde ne fut composé que d'esprits, surveillés & dirigés par leur créateur & souverain modificateur. Mais ces esprits étoient de vraies substances.

Cet Idéalisme de Berkeley fut poussé bien plus loin par de nouveaux spéculateurs, qui de la bizarrerie de leur doctrine ont pris le nom d'Égoïstes. Selon cette doctrine, je ne puis admettre qu'une seule existence, la mienne propre. Toutes les autres que je crois apercevoir, ou dont je me forme des idées, ou que j'induis par des raisonnemens & des conclusions, n'existent que là précisément où existent mes perceptions, mes idées, mes jugemens, mes conclusions, c'est-à-dire en moi, dans mon ame, d'où, quelque effort que je fasse, je ne puis jamais sortir, ni par conséquent m'assurer que rien au dehors réponde à ce qui se passe au dedans de moi. Je suis, en un mot, mon propre univers, l'univers tout entier. Tous les êtres, corporels & spirituels, ne sont que des phénomènes, des idées, des modifications de mon être.

L'Égoïsme dérive de l'Idéalisme, comme celui-ci de la philosophie de

Locke. C'est peut-être ce qui lui donne quelquefois l'air d'une parodie ou d'un persiflage de l'Idéalisme.

[419] Ne croiroit-on pas que nous sommes au bout, & que voilà toute la subtilité de l'esprit humain, ou de l'esprit Britannique épuisée? Il s'en faut bien. Il restoit à faire un dernier pas, dont rien n'égalé la hardiesse.

L'Égoïste conservoit une substance, la sienne. Or celle-ci même va disparoître en un moment, & s'ensevelir, avec toutes les autres, dans la nuit du Chaos.

La nouvelle Théorie, ou le paradoxe nouveau, qui devoit les envelopper toutes dans une ruine commune, fut étalé dès l'année 1738, par le célèbre David Hume,² dans son *Traité sur la nature humaine*, ouvrage qui alors fit peu de sensation, & mourut en naissant, comme il l'avoue lui même avec beaucoup de franchise. Mais, après dix ans écoulés, il le reproduisit, dans sa *Recherche sur l'Entendement humain*, sous une forme plus séduisante, qui lui donna du relief, en surprenant le monde philosophique par son étrange singularité.

Cependant un plus grand éclat encore l'attendoit dans ces derniers temps, & hors de sa terre natale. Nous l'avons vu reparoître dans cette philosophie réformatrice de notre grand philosophe de Königsberg³ qui a étendu ses conquêtes du Nord au Sud de l'Allemagne, où néanmoins ses partisans habiles & zélés semblent avoir rencontré des antagonistes dignes de leur disputer le terrain.

Sans m'ingérer dans ces disputes, je me borne à un court examen de la doctrine du philosophe Écossois, dont voici le sommaire.

Tout ce que nous sentons, imaginons, pensons, connoissons, se réduit à des phénomènes, coëxistans ou successifs, qui s'associent, se détachent, vont & viennent, durent plus ou moins, paroissent, disparoissent, reparoissent, tantôt sous des aspects diversifiés, tantôt sous le même.

Il ne faut pas demander par quoi ils sont produits ni ce qui les fait cesser: c'est de quoi nous n'avons pas la moindre notion. Ils ne [420] se produisent pas les uns les autres; ils ne font que se côtoyer ou se suivre. Ils ne sont produits par aucune cause ni extérieure ni intérieure; nous n'avons jamais aperçu de cause en action. Ces mots mêmes, production, cause, effet, s'ils ont un sens, ne peuvent désigner que la succession plus ou moins habituelle de ces phénomènes, ou leur apparition plus ou moins simultanée. On a nommé cause le phénomène qui précède, effet celui qui suit, & qui devient cause à son tour relativement à celui dont il est suivi, sans que nous soyons en droit d'inférer de là une nécessité de liaison, sans avoir même l'idée de cette nécessité.

Causalité n'est donc qu'un terme abstrait, un être d'imagination, une idée, si vous voulez, ou un phénomène intérieur, qui signifie la succession de phénomènes quelconques soit externes soit internes.

Encore moins peut-on demander où résident ces phénomènes, à quoi ils adhèrent ou inhèrent. Ils sont là; c'est tout ce que nous en savons.

Il en est tels assemblages qui se présentent, ou semblent se présenter au dehors ou de dehors; nous les appelons des corps, & l'étoffe commune que nous leur supposons, de la matière. Il en est d'autres que nous nous figurons au dedans; & nous leur donnons des noms conformes à la variété de leurs aspects, ceux d'images, de souvenirs, d'idées, de jugemens, de raisonnemens, & à ce qu'ils ont ou semblent avoir de commun, les noms de mémoire, d'imagination, de raison, d'intellect, d'esprit; d'où nous formons les adjectifs imaginaire, raisonnable, intellectuel, spirituel &c.

Mais, & ce qu'ils ont de particulier, & ce qu'ils ont de commun, ne sont encore que des phénomènes externes ou internes, caractérisés par des noms plus ou moins abstraits.

Ce que nous avons décoré de la dénomination plus générale de sujet ou de substance, n'est rien de plus. Ce n'est qu'un assemblage de phénomènes, sensibles ou spirituels, qui le plus souvent coexistent ou se succèdent de la même manière; & c'est à leur ensemble que nous avons appliqué cette dénomination.

[421] Et voilà ce qui a engendré l'erreur de croire que ce sont de vrais êtres, des êtres existans par eux-mêmes, servant de support aux phénomènes, qui n'en seroient que les attributs, les accidens, les modifications, ou comme on voudra les appeler. Mais quand ces phénomènes se seroient mille & mille fois succédé, ou auroient mille fois coexisté dans le même ordre; cela ne les fait pas changer de nature, ni ne les transforme en ce qu'ils ne sont pas. Et l'on ne sauroit même conclure qu'ils continueront à coexister ou à se succéder ainsi.

Nous ne connoissons donc absolument rien dont nous puissions garantir la permanence, encore moins la substantialité. Sujet & substance, pris dans ce sens, sont des termes vides de sens, de purs êtres de raison, c'est-à-dire des phénomènes, ou des suites ou des amas de phénomènes, qu'il nous a plu de nommer abusivement de ces beaux noms.

Enfin, que suis-je Moi-même, mon Moi, ma personne, que suis-je sinon un pareil amas, qui coexiste avec d'autres amas, lesquels se succèdent, comme je succède à ce que j'appelle moi-même? Je ne me connois sous aucun autre rapport: je suis phénomène comme tout le monde.

Voilà donc où aboutit toute notre science, de quelques termes empruntés, de quelques titres pompeux qu'il nous plaise de la revêtir. Nous n'en savons pas plus loin; & au de-là il n'y a que chimères ou que phénomènes chimeriques.

Toutes ces spéculations de Hume sont encore filées d'après la théorie de Locke; & il faut convenir que le tissu en est travaillé avec beaucoup de finesse. Mais le sage Locke se fût-il jamais douté qu'on pût tirer de pareilles conséquences de sa philosophie, y bâtir de telles ruines, & la faire servir à plonger l'esprit humain dans un scepticisme aussi désespérant?

Je laisserai les philosophes dogmatiques & systématiques le combattre en bataille rangée. Pour moi, qui n'aspire pas si haut, & qui n'ai point, pour me

rendre invulnérable, trempé mon armure dans les eaux [422] du Styx, je ne ferai que la petite guerre, j'attaquerai le Scepticisme avec ses propres armes, & tâcherai de le harceler en opposant mes doutes aux siens. Car pourquoi n'aurois-je pas le privilège de douter aussi bien que les élèves formés dans son école?

Je voudrais être court & précis.⁴ Il faudra cependant me pardonner certaines répétitions, inévitables dans des recherches qu'il importe si fort de tourner & de retourner en tout sens, & où souvent les redites ne sont qu'apparentes, vu que les réflexions qui paroissent, les mêmes au premier coup d'oeil, considérées de plus près & mieux analysées, se discernent par des nuances qui amènent des points de vue nouveaux.

I.

Entendons-nous d'abord sur le mot Phénomène. Qu'est-ce qu'un phénomène?

Peut-il exister sans être aperçu? ou, comme son nom sembleroit l'indiquer, est-il de sa nature de se manifester, de se faire apercevoir? Et, cesser d'être, est-il à son égard synonyme avec cesser de paroître?

Mr Hume ou ses partisans ne sauroient affirmer le premier sans se contredire. Car dès lors le phénomène, devenu une chose subsistante indépendamment de son apparition, seroit un être réel, durable, en un mot un sujet, une substance.

Mais si le Phénomène n'existe ni ne peut exister sans paroître, sans être aperçu, je demande: devant qui ou devant quoi paroît-il? par qui ou par quoi est-il aperçu?

Ici il n'y a que trois réponses possibles.

Le Phénomène est aperçu par lui-même, ou par un autre phénomène, ou par quelque chose qui n'est pas phénomène.

Un phénomène s'apercevant soi-même, ou s'apparoissant à soi-même, seroit une chose bien étrange. A le prendre ainsi, il n'existe[423]roit que des phénomènes individuels, isolés, égoïstes, si je puis m'exprimer de la sorte. Les sons s'entendroient eux-mêmes; chaque odeur se flaireroit elle-même: l'arc-en-ciel verroit tout seul les riches couleurs dont il est paré.

Il n'existeroit aucune comparaison entre les phénomènes, ni en conséquence aucun jugement fondé sur leur comparaison, aucune induction, aucune idée générale, aucun raisonnement, aucune conclusion.

Et puis, ne voyez-vous pas que cette apercevanche de soi-même supposeroit une action ou une réaction sur soi-même? que par conséquent elle supposeroit des causes & des effets, lesquels en votre conscience philosophique vous ne sauriez admettre?

Je craindrois même qu'à la longue cela ne vous conduisit à quelque chose de subjectif ou de substantiel dans la partie apercevante du phénomène, dont

la partie aperçue ne seroit qu'une modification. Mais ce n'est pas encore de quoi il s'agit.

Des phénomènes s'apercevant les uns les autres seroient sujets aux mêmes incongruités, & à de plus grandes encore.

Des odeurs qui entendent des sons, qui savourent, touchent &c., & réciproquement des sons, des couleurs &c. qui flairent, touchent &c. quel sens peut-on attacher à de pareilles expressions?

Et ne faudroit-il pas encore que ces phénomènes agissent les uns sur les autres? Or ils ne font, suivant vous, ni ne peuvent faire autre chose que coëxister ou se suivre sans aucune liaison entr'eux, & sans influence mutuelle.

Ce qui est vrai de chacun d'eux en particulier, l'est également de leurs assemblages quelconques, qui ne leur donnent droit qu'à la coëxistence & à la succession: de sorte que ce qui ne peut avoir lieu pour aucune de leurs parties détachées, & elles sont naturellement toutes détachées, ne sauroit non plus avoir lieu pour l'Ensemble ou le Tout collectif qu'il vous plaira d'en former.

Ainsi ni un phénomène particulier ne peut percevoir un autre également particulier, ni une collection de phénomènes une autre col[424]lection, ni ces collections un phénomène particulier, ni celui-ci aucune de ces collections.

Il ne resteroit donc que la troisième hypothèse, un être, un *substratum*, un sujet, une substance animée, ou comme vous voudrez nommer ce qui n'est pas phénomène, qui seroit affecté par ces phénomènes, dans lequel ou devant lequel ils viendroient comparoître ou se représenter. Mais cet être ou ce sujet vous l'avez relégué dans le pays des chimères.

Pendant, en accordant que nous ne le connoissons par aucune observation ou expérience directe, s'il n'y avoit point d'autre moyen de nous tirer d'affaire que d'y recourir, & si des phénomènes qui ne tiennent à rien, étoient inintelligibles & inconcevables, quel parti prendre?

II.

En donnant à ces phénomènes un fond sur lequel ils se montrent ou quelque chose qu'ils viennent affecter, non seulement on évite les contradictions & les incompréhensibilités que nous venons de voir; mais il me semble que c'est là que doit finalement vous conduire votre propre Théorie.

Je vous accorde pour un moment que les phénomènes puissent s'apercevoir eux-mêmes, ou s'entr'apercevoir les uns les autres. Il y aura, dans les deux cas quelque chose d'apercevant & quelque chose d'aperçu.

Or ce qui aperçoit est aussi un phénomène, & a par conséquent le même besoin d'être aperçu, sans quoi il ne seroit pas phénomène. Mais par qui? Par un troisième, qui sera dans le même cas: & ainsi de suite. A est aperçu par B, B par C &c. Cela ira à l'infini, à moins que vous ne vous arrétiez à un point fixe; & ce point ne pourra plus être un phénomène. Ainsi vous vous arrêterez,

malgré vous, à ce qui n'est pas phénomène, à un sujet ou à quelque chose de subjectif.

Et cela sera d'autant plus inévitable que cette suite ou cette subordination infinie d'apercevances enchâssées les unes dans les autres, n'est [425] pas seulement une absurdité complète, mais de plus contraire à votre propre observation, qui vous découvre ou des phénomènes isolés, ou plusieurs ensemble, sans aucune apparence ni aucun besoin d'une pareille progression infinitésimale.

III.

Il me prend envie de vous faire une autre chicane, & peut-être n'en est-ce pas une.

Vous soutenez que toutes nos connoissances se réduisent à des phénomènes. D'où le savez vous? & comment le prouvez-vous?

Par induction sans doute. Votre expérience ne vous a jusqu'à présent découvert autre chose: vous ne trouvez autre chose dans rien de ce qui porte le nom de perception, d'idée, de connoissance, de science &c.

Comme apparemment vous sentez vous-même que cela ne constitue pas une preuve rigoureuse, & que de ce que vous n'avez pas encore observé une chose, il ne s'ensuit nullement qu'elle ne soit observable, & ne puisse tôt ou tard être observée, ou même l'avoir déjà été par d'autres, je n'insisterai point là dessus.

Je vous demande comment vous tirez votre induction, & comment vous la fondez. Or je dis qu'elle ne peut être fondée sur rien, n'être liée à aucun phénomène, ni à aucune suite de phénomènes, qui eux-mêmes ne sont pas liés entr'eux. Quelle conclusion prétendez-vous inférer de prémisses qui subsistent chacune à part, n'influent pas l'une sur l'autre, ne s'entr'amènent pas, ni n'entraînent aucune conséquence par une connexion naturelle & nécessaire. S'il n'y a ni cause ni effet, il ne sauroit non plus y avoir des raisons ni des conséquences fondées sur elles; vu que ces raisons seroient des causes, & ces conséquences leurs effets.

Votre induction n'est donc elle-même qu'un phénomène à la suite d'autres phénomènes, & par là même elle ne prouve rien. La proposition que vous y bâtissez est donc nulle de toute nullité. Elle ne [426] sauroit être vraie, puisqu'il ne peut y avoir de vérité selon cette proposition même, & qu'en vertu d'elle la vérité n'est qu'un phénomène passager, une apparence transitoire.

Me direz-vous par hasard que c'étoit-là précisément votre intention, parce que vous voulez prêcher le scepticisme universel? Je vous féliciterois de vos succès s'il ne me restoit un petit scrupule. Pour prêcher quoi que ce soit, il faut se faire entendre; sans quoi tout le fruit de votre prédication sera perdu, & il eût mieux valu se taire. Or je ne vous entends pas. Vous voulez me prouver que tout est phénomène. Mais votre preuve même suppose qu'on ne peut rien

prouver. Vous ne m'avez donc rien prouvé. Vous ne m'avez donc pas prouvé que tout est phénomène, mais seulement que vous vous contredisez, ou que vous ne savez pas ce que vous voulez dire.

IV.

Ces phénomènes qui ne tiennent à quoi que ce soit, qui ne subsistent nulle part, qui flottent en l'air, dans la vide, je ne sais où, comment les concevoir? & comment Mr Hume est-il parvenu à se les représenter?

Le développement naturel de nos sens par le jeu de leurs organes nous conduit tous à croire qu'il existe des corps que nous apercevons par leur moyen. Nous croyons même les apercevoir hors de nous, les voir, les toucher, flairer leurs exhalaisons odoriférantes, broyer sur notre langue & goûter leurs particules savoureuses, entendre les sons qu'ils nous envoient par le mouvement vibratoire de l'air. Nous découvrons pour chacune de nos perceptions sensibles des organes creusés & très-artistement fabriqués dans nos corps.

Une recherche ultérieure nous apprend que ces organes ne font que recevoir & transmettre les impressions qui leur viennent de dehors, & qui à travers ces organes se propagent dans le cerveau, & de là dans le siège quelconque d'un être quelconque, lequel nous appelons ame, & qui seul, à proprement parler, est capable de sentir. Mais tout ce-[427]la, loin d'exclure les corps extérieurs, les suppose & nous en constate l'existence.

Lors même que la Philosophie dépouille ces corps des qualités secondaires pour les revendiquer à l'Ame, elle leur laisse au moins la figure & le mouvement, dont les diverses combinaisons demeurent toujours les causes productrices de ces mêmes qualités secondaires, telles que nous les percevons. Elle leur laisse en outre l'étendue, l'impénétrabilité, & les élémens matériels dont ils sont composés.

La philosophie même qui fait main basse sur ces derniers, celle de Leibnitz, établit du moins des êtres simples, de vraies, & les seules vraies substances, qui servent de base à tous les phénomènes sensibles dont nous sommes frappés. Les corps y sont des *phænomena substantiata*.

L'Idéalisme, en excluant tout le monde sensible extérieur, a cependant besoin de sujets pour prêter des points d'appui aux phénomènes des sens, sujets dans lesquels ces phénomènes se déploient, & dont ils sont les modifications. L'Égoïsme même ne sauroit s'en passer.

Comment donc Mr Hume a-t-il fait pour s'en débarrasser? Qu'est-ce qu'un phénomène sans soutien, un phénomène en lui-même? Si ce n'est pas une substance, ce n'est rien du tout; c'est un attribut qui n'est pas attribué, un accident qui n'est l'accident de quoi que ce soit, un mode ou une modification par où rien n'est modifié. Il n'est point de langue qui puisse rendre ceci intelligiblement; pourquoi? parce qu'il est inintelligible en lui-même.

V.

Je ne saurois m'empêcher de remarquer une certaine ressemblance entre le Phénoménisme de Hume & le système d'Épicure, nonobstant l'intervalle immense qui sembleroit devoir les séparer. Mais en haute Métaphysique, plus que par tout ailleurs, les extrêmes se touchent.

Dans le système d'Épicure que sommes-nous en effet, nous & l'univers entier, sinon des phénomènes que le Hasard a amenés, que [428] le Hasard dissoudra, & dont en peu de temps il ne restera plus de trace? Le même souffle qui disperse les élémens de notre vie, & jusqu'à ces nobles facultés de notre esprit dont nous nous enorgueillissons si fort & si mal-à-propos, dispersera les élémens du monde. Oui, ce grand phénomène, ce beau théâtre où nous faisons notre petit rôle fugitif, avec ses décorations les plus superbes, ne tient qu'à une cheville, qui étant enlevée, le fera crouler sur ses frêles fondemens.

Mais, quoique convaincu de la fausseté de cette doctrine, j'oserois pourtant affirmer que le monde phénomène d'Épicure a des avantages marqués sur le monde phénomène de notre philosophe Écossois.

C'est d'abord que le phénomène universel d'Épicure, & tous ceux qu'il contient, malgré leur nature dissoluble & leur existence précaire, reposent au moins sur un appui solide & permanent, sur les parties élémentaires dont la composition fortuite les fait naître, & la décomposition également fortuite les détruit. Par là ils offrent au moins à notre conception une facilité de se les représenter, une anse, si je puis m'exprimer de la sorte, par laquelle on peut les saisir. Au lieu qu'un phénomène qui n'est que phénomène & rien de plus, ne me donne aucune prise, & ne laisse dans mon esprit qu'un mot vide d'idées.

Ces deux théories ont encore ceci de commun que l'apercevant & l'aperçu sont faits de la même étoffe.

Mais 1. dans celle de Hume on ne sait pas bien, comme nous l'avons vu, ce qu'est l'apercevant, ni où le loger, ni même s'il y en a un.

2. Dans celle d'Épicure, cette étoffe se conçoit très-aisément, étant toute matérielle pour l'un & pour l'autre: tandis qu'on ignore de quoi sont faits les phénomènes de Hume, de quelle étoffe ils sont fabriqués.

Ces deux théories ont enfin de commun d'attribuer leurs phénomènes au Hasard. Mais certainement le hasard Épicurien est moins hasard que celui de Hume, ou plutôt il se résout dans des causes assignables, dans le concours & la collision des Atomes; au lieu que les [429] phénomènes de Hume s'engendrent sans principe générateur, sans cause, on ne sait comment; on ne doit pas même le savoir ni le demander.

VI.

Mais laissons-là le monde extérieur, puisqu'on n'en veut plus: & ne nous promenons désormais que dans le monde des apparences. Voici des doutes, ou des apparences de doutes qui m'y viennent assaillir.

Je contemple le beau phénomène du jour naissant, ou, pour parler avec Homère, l'Aurore aux doigts de roses m'apparoît aux portes de l'Orient.⁵ Elle m'apparoît, dis-je, à moi, non à elle même: je ne suis pas l'aurore, elle n'est pas moi. Je distingue très-exactement le spectacle du spectateur; quand le spectacle a disparu, le spectateur demeure, se le rappelle, voit d'autres scènes de la nature remplacer celle-ci, ou s'en crée lui-même de nouvelles & d'infiniment variées.

Car ceci s'applique non seulement aux perceptions sensibles immédiates, mais aussi à leurs copies ressuscitées dans la mémoire, aux simulacres formés dans l'imagination, à toutes les idées que j'en abstraïs, à mes raisonnemens, à mes notions intellectuelles, & aux phénomènes spirituels les plus sublimes. Que toutes ces choses m'arrivent de dehors, ou se tracent au dedans de moi; elles ne sont pourtant pas Moi; je me distingue de toutes ces choses.

Qu'est-ce donc ce Moi? Ne sembleroit-il pas devoir être quelque chose de constant, un fond durable, une toile permanente où viendroient se peindre & se déployer toutes ces variétés; & de plus quelque chose de capable de les grouper, de les séparer, de les diversifier?

Je rayerai, si vous le désirez, tous les objets externes; mais il m'est impossible de me rayer moi même. Il se peut très-bien que les premiers ne soient que des phénomènes; mais il faut qu'ils soient quelque part; & puisque j'en suis affecté, aurois-je si grand tort de les regarder comme des modifications de ce Moi, sans cependant être ce Moi, c'est-à-dire sans épuiser le fond de ce Moi, vu qu'ils peuvent tantôt [430] y être présens, tantôt s'en absenter, & s'y faire place les uns aux autres.

A le prendre ainsi, que suis-je relativement à ces modifications? La chose, l'être, le sujet, la substance qui les éprouve; car c'est-là tout ce que j'entends par ces termes. Et malgré votre aversion pour eux, je ne vois pas comment on peut les éviter, si l'on veut se comprendre soi-même ou s'expliquer aux autres. Leur usage est justifié par l'observation & l'expérience même qui nous les ont suggérés. Mais c'est à quoi nous reviendrons.

VII.

Plus je m'enfoncé dans la Phénoménologie, plus mes doutes s'accumulent. En voici de nouveaux qui me paroissent assez graves, & dont je souhaiterois fort d'être délivré.

S'il n'existe que des phénomènes, il faut bien que je passe par là. Me voici donc phénomène, & rien de plus.

Mais suis-je chaque phénomène que j'aperçois ou crois apercevoir? En ce cas mon existence ne seroit que momentanée: d'instant en instant ce ne seroit plus Moi, ou ce seroit un autre Moi. Que suis-je donc? quand suis-je? où suis-je? Je ne sais plus où me trouver, ni même où me chercher: *Quo teneam vultus mutantem Protea nodo?*

Ensuite, comme je l'ai déjà dit, je ne pourrais ni rapprocher ces phénomènes pour les confronter, ni en tirer aucune induction. Je ne pourrais le faire ni en phénomène passé, car en cette qualité je n'existerais plus, ni en phénomène présent, car je ne serais que cela même, sans liaison nécessaire avec le passé ni avec ce qui coëxiste.

Serois-je par hasard une collection, un faisceau, ou comme qui diroit une liasse de phénomènes? Si vous supposez ici un lien qui les réunit, je pourrais être ce lien; & j'y consens très-volontiers. Je m'appliquerais successivement à divers phénomènes, que je lierais tant bien que mal, & retiendrais ensemble durant plus ou moins de temps, [431] sans cesser d'être le même lien. Et c'est ce que, sauf votre permission, j'appellerais *Moi* ou ma personne.

Mais vous ne sauriez le permettre, puisque cela répugnerait directement à votre doctrine. Selon vous, les phénomènes ne se lient jamais entr'eux; ils ne font que marcher à côté ou à la suite l'un de l'autre.

Or, parmi cinq ou six phénomènes qui coëxistent, où voulez-vous que je me place? Serai-je, tout à la fois, chacun de ces phénomènes à part? ou serai-je tous ces phénomènes ensemble? Dans la première supposition je me multiplierais d'une étrange manière: il y auroit autant de *Moi* que de phénomènes; & l'un de ces phénomènes n'étant pas l'autre, ne serait plus *Moi*, serait un autre *Moi*, ou le *Moi qui n'est pas Moi* du *Sofie* de Molière: ou comment voulez-vous que je l'entende?

La seconde supposition, en me déclarant l'Ensemble de tous ces phénomènes, exigerait de nouveau un lien, une réunion qui fit dominer le même *Moi* sur eux tous. Et c'est ce que vous rejetez péremptoirement.

Lorsque d'un amas de phénomènes les uns restent, les autres disparaissent, & font place à de nouveaux venus, que deviens-je? Est-ce que le *Moi* se partage pour déloger en partie avec ceux qui s'en vont, & pour rester, de sa moitié, supposons, ou de son tiers, avec ceux qui demeurent, & puis se grossir des *Moi* de ceux qui surviennent tout fraîchement?

Je me tourne en vain de tous les côtés pour chercher une issue à ce labyrinthe.

Le *Moi* est un phénomène. Mais ne serait-il pas un phénomène plus constant, plus fixe que les autres, & qui les accompagnerait durant leur succession & leurs altérations?

Pendant, sous ce point de vue, le *Moi* phénomène, qui s'arrête tandis que les autres s'écoulent & refluent, n'auroit-il pas un peu l'air d'une chose permanente, ou si j'ose le dire, d'un sujet, d'une substance? [432] Il est toujours-là en société avec ses frères volages. Après le sommeil le plus profond, dans lequel il semble expirer avec eux, il se réveille, se rappelle les phénomènes passés, assiste aux présents, & se remet au courant. Dans ce qu'on nomme absence d'esprit, dans le délire même, il ne s'évapore pas entièrement, ni de manière à ne pouvoir revenir & se réinstaller: ce qui lui assurerait au moins une certaine identité, un fond de continuité, & pourroit même faire présumer

ou espérer sa perpétuité. Il ne seroit pas du moins impossible qu'après avoir, en apparence, exhalé son dernier soupir ou son dernier phénomène, dans le sommeil de la mort, il se relevât tôt ou tard de ce sommeil léthargique pour se remonter sous de nouvelles formes, peut-être sous des formes plus belles, & sur une scène plus brillante.

Je fais que vous me répérez que je me forge d'agréables chimères; que ce prétendu souvenir du passé succédant au réveil, n'est qu'un nouveau phénomène illusoire, appartenant à un autre phénomène Moi, ou l'accompagnant.

Mais trouvez bon que je vous répète à mon tour l'observation que j'ai déjà faite. Ne pouvant, ni vous ni moi, être sûrs que nous sommes vous & moi deux instans de suite, puisque la possibilité que nous nous y soyons transfigurés est égale, je ne sais pourquoi nous raisonnons pour conclure qu'on ne peut raisonner de rien ni rien conclure. Convenez du moins que vos raisons ne valent pas mieux que les miennes. C'étoit donc bien la peine de faire de gros livres cousus de spéculations transcendantes. Nous devons, comme j'ai dit, garder le silence tous deux; mais c'étoit à vous à m'en donner l'exemple.

Prenez que le phénomène Moi ait une permanence plus ou moins longue, ou prenez que ce n'est pas le même Moi, mais seulement un Moi quelconque coëxistant avec d'autres phénomènes; je reviens à la question: ce Moi aperçoit-il ces autres phénomènes? ou ne les aperçoit-il pas? S'il ne les aperçoit pas, il n'est bon à rien; il est-là avec les autres sans avoir avec eux la moindre communication; ils coëxistent sans se connoître. S'il les aperçoit ou en est aperçu, ils agissent sur [433] lui, ou il agit sur eux. Et vous rappelez de son exil la Causalité, que vous aviez si solennellement proscrite.

En général, ce que j'ai observé dès le commencement sur la nature des phénomènes, s'applique encore ici, & fait voir l'inconsistance du Phénoménisme, quelque aspect, quelque tournure qu'on veuille lui donner. Car si le phénomène ne peut exister sans être aperçu, il vous conduira toujours finalement à quelque chose qui n'est plus phénomène. Et que peut-ce être sinon une substance capable de perception & de ce qui s'ensuit?

VIII.

Les philosophes phénoménistes semblent quelquefois avoir senti que leurs phénomènes, errant ils ne savent où, & se faisant apercevoir ils ne savent à qui ou à quoi ou comment, ne présentoient pas un idée fort lumineuse.

En conséquence ils admettent au moins des êtres ou des sujets fictifs auxquels on a coutume de les rapporter pour leur servir d'états ou de soutiens.

Ici notre nouvelle philosophie Germanique semble venir à leur secours, & leur fournir un expédient très-ingénieux.⁶ Les substances, & le sujet nommé Moi, Ame, Esprit &c. sont des *êtres pensés*,⁷ que nous posons comme des bases

communes, ou que nous plantons comme des étendarts sous lesquels ces phénomènes ambulans, sensitifs & spirituels, viennent se rallier, & se ranger chacun à leur tour. Ou bien, c'est une idée fondamentale, engendrée par la raison transcendante.

Mais d'abord le besoin de concevoir un pareil être, sans lequel nous ne concevrions rien du tout, sa conception plus aisée que celle [434] des phénomènes isolés, & sans quoi nous ne saurions que faire d'eux, ne prouveroient-ils pas la nécessité indispensable de son existence, ou que son existence est pour le moins aussi avérée que la leur, qui ne seroit pas même concevable sans avoir recours à cet être ou à ce phénomène auxiliaire.

Puis revient mon éternelle Question, pierre d'achoppement éternelle pour le Phénoménisme.

Cet être fictif, ce sujet *pensé* ou intellectuel, ou enfant de la raison transcendante, comment s'engendre-t-il? & qui est-ce qui l'aperçoit? Étant lui-même, selon vous, un phénomène nouveau, il lui faut un nouveau sujet fictif ou *pensé* pour s'y étayer, & à celui-ci encore un autre; & quand cela finira-t-il?

Le *pensé* suppose le *pensant*,⁸ la fiction quelqu'un ou quelque chose qui feint; comme le tableau suppose un peintre, l'idée transcendante de l'entendement cet entendement même qui la forme, & celui-ci comme qualité ou faculté, un être, un sujet qui possède cette qualité ou faculté. Il faut donc, malgré vous, s'arrêter en dernière instance, à quelque chose de stable; sans quoi vous ne feriez que penser & parler en l'air.

Ainsi le secours par lequel vous prétendez parer les inconvénients de vos phénomènes, est assujetti à ces mêmes inconvénients, & demanderoit un subside semblable: & vous n'y trouverez jamais de fin sans le seul subside efficace de la stabilité ou de la permanence.

IX.

Ce sont, dites-vous, l'observation & l'expérience qui vous portent à affirmer que nous ne connoissons que des phénomènes, parce qu'elles ne vous présentent que des phénomènes.

Or, je l'ai déjà dit, mon observation, mon expérience me font constamment distinguer ces phénomènes de Moi qui les aperçois ou les observe. Je sens qu'au milieu de ces phénomènes qui voltigent au[435]tour de moi, je demeure en place. Je les vois venir, s'en aller, revenir; je me les retrace dans ma mémoire, les examine, les compare, réfléchis sur eux. J'ai la conscience intime que ce que j'observe n'est pas moi qui observe.

Comment me prouverez-vous que mon observation n'est pas aussi bonne, aussi vraie que la vôtre?

Elle l'est d'autant plus qu'au fond vous expérimentez la même chose. En disant que vous observez, ne vous discernez-vous point par là même de l'objet

de vos observations?

Et que seroit-ce qu'une observation sans observateur?

Ainsi mon assertion auroit encore par dessus la vôtre le mérite de l'intelligibilité.

—Mais je me fais illusion en me distinguant ainsi des choses que j'observe.— Et vous, ne vous feriez-vous point illusion en ne voulant pas vous en distinguer, en vous obtenant à vous confondre avec vos phénomènes?

—Mais ce Moi que je place si fièrement à la tête de tout, je n'en connois pas la nature, je ne sais ce que c'est.—

Soit. Et vous, savez-vous mieux ce qu'est un phénomène, en quoi consiste sa nature, si tant est qu'il en ait une, & son indépendance absolue? Pouvez-vous même vous en former la moindre notion sans revenir à sa dépendance, sans le discerner de ce qui n'est pas lui, sans le rapporter, du moins mentalement, à un sujet quelconque, auquel vous êtes obligé, en dépit de vous-même, de vous figurer qu'il appartient?

Voilà une considération où je crois devoir insister en la présentant sous toutes les faces dont elle est susceptible. Et c'est encore par où je vais finir.

X.

Que signifient, dans votre esprit & dans votre bouche, ces pronoms personnels dont vous ne pouvez vous empêcher de faire continuellement usage, & sans lesquels vous ne sauriez ni penser ni exprimer vos pensées, *Moi, Je, Nous &c.*?

Vous vous supposez donc une personne. Et de quel droit vous arrosez-vous cette personnalité, phénomène ou fagot de phénomènes que vous êtes?

Vous la supposez même aux autres hommes, quoiqu'à vos yeux ils ne soient encore que des phénomènes. Vous leur parlez, & vous parlez d'eux dans la seconde & dans la troisième personne, en revendiquant la première.

Vous ne pouvez vous détacher de ces formes de penser, de parler, d'agir. Cela est plus fort que vous, & indique bien que ces formes sont, pour ainsi dire, enracinées dans un principe quelconque qui vous constitue, & que vous croyez être abusivement appelé votre esprit, votre ame, votre intelligence.

Car vous vous servez aussi de ces dernières expressions, en protestant, il est vrai, que c'est uniquement pour vous conformer aux usages populaires, mais au fond parce que sans elles vous ne sauriez ni vous comprendre ni vous faire comprendre. Vous avez beau faire; vous ne parviendrez jamais à vous renier vous-mêmes.

— Mais les langues n'ont point été faites par des philosophes.— Je le sais; & tant mieux pour la cause que je défends.

Il étoit, je l'avoue, inévitable que dans la confection des langues des différens peuples il ne se glissât des erreurs, des faux points de vue, des préjugés, des superstitions dont ces peuples étoient imbus. — Mais ce qui leur

est commun à toutes; qui appartient au langage en général, non à telle ou telle langue en particulier, décèle manifestement une origine commune, quelque chose d'essentiel ou un principe constitutif de ce que nous nommons l'esprit humain, une forme primitive où cet esprit est, pour ainsi dire, moulé, qui en est inséparable, & dont il ne sauroit s'écarter dans le plus simple développement de ses facultés.

Or il n'est point de langue ni de peuples barbares ni de peuples civilisés qui ne porte cette empreinte, & qui se puisse dispenser des pro[437]noms personnels ou de leurs équivalens. Ils exercent leur empire dans toutes les plages & sous tous les climats. Le Lappon, le Samoyède, le Caffre, l'habitant de l'île du Feu, les tribus errantes dans les déserts de l'Asie, de l'Afrique, de l'Amérique, se distinguent tous & entr'eux, & de leurs cabanes, & de leurs forêts, & des proies qu'ils y poursuivent. Cette distinction est marquée dans leurs idiômes ou dans leurs jargons, aussi bien que dans nos langues Européennes le plus cultivées. En un mot, elle est énoncée par la voix universelle de la nature humaine.

Enfin, voici le problème qui je vous donne à résoudre.

Vous voulez une langue philosophique. Eh bien! faites-vous-en une; ou purifiez une de nos langues déjà existantes de cette lie d'Égoïté, de Subjectivité, de Substantialité dont elles sont toutes infectées & ternies. Forgez-en une, vous dis-je, exempte de tout pronom personnel, de toute inflexion pronominale, de tout ce qui en porte le moindre vestige, & dans laquelle vos phénomènes puissent correspondre ensemble sans aucun alliage étranger. Je serai le premier à applaudir à ce rare chef-d'œuvre, & à l'admirer comme le plus curieux de tous les phénomènes.

Mais que dis-je? Vous devriez avoir prévenu mes souhaits, & avoir déjà construit cette langue. D'où vient que dans vos ouvrages mêmes qui tendent à faire main basse sur ces fausses opinions, vous êtes forcés d'employer vous-mêmes ce langage vicieux qui les reproduit sans cesse, & que vous retombez à chaque instant dans ce même abus que vous voulez extirper? Si vous n'y pouvez réussir, vous avouez par là que ce n'est pas un abus, que vous avez fait de vains efforts pour lutter contre la nature des choses, & tourmenté inutilement votre esprit pour le mettre en contradiction avec lui-même.

Transcribed by Cyrus Masroori

NOTES

1 Lu le 10 Octobre 1793. J'ai imaginé le mot de *Phénoménisme* pour désigner la Théorie dont je fais l'examen, quoique je sache très-bien que Mr Hume ne se sert que très-rarement du mot de *phénomène*, il préfère ceux d'*impression*, de *représentation*, celui même d'*objets*, mais qui dans le sens qu'il y attache ne signifie autre chose que *phénomènes*. Et c'est probablement pour cette raison que notre nouvelle philosophie Allemande emploie le plus volontiers ce dernier terme dans la partie de ses spéculations qui coïncide avec la philosophie de Hume. Ainsi le nom que je donne à celle-ci paroît lui convenir le mieux, & propre à la caractériser de la manière la moins équivoque.

2 Agé alors de 27 ans.

3 Il faut voir dans l'ouvrage même de Mr Kant jusqu'où il a adopté la théorie de Hume. Je ne m'occupe ici que de cette dernière.

4 *Ac sic decrevi philosophari potius, ut Neoptolemus apud Ennium, paucis.- Cic. de Orat. Lib. II. c. 37.*

5 Phiane zododachtulos eos.

6 Je me touche à la philosophie de Mr Kant qu'autant qu'elle peut favoriser les Humistes, avec lesquels seuls j'ai ici à faire. Car je n'ignore pas d'ailleurs que ce célèbre philosophe, loin de nier les êtres existans par eux-mêmes, les *ontôs onta*, a produit, pour établir leur existence, & pour réfuter le phénoménisme, l'idéalisme même, une nouvelle preuve de sa propre invention, mais dont ce n'est pas ici le lieu de parler.

7 *Nooumena.*

8 Le *Nooumenon* suppose le *Noôn* ou le *Nooun*.

On the Phenomenalism of David Hume

JEAN BERNARD MÉRIAN¹

Translation from the French by PETER BRISCOE

In order to better grasp this philosopher's profound and subtle speculations, let us return to their origin, following the progression that elevated them little by little to this height of refinement; and to this end let us glance at the history of philosophy in Great Britain, their place of birth, the stock from which they all are propagated. Locke had excluded from matter, or from material substances, all the qualities that he calls secondary, such as light and color, tastes, odors, sounds, several tactile qualities such as warmth and cold, hard and soft, etc. But he had left the primary qualities, extension, shape, impenetrability, mobility, which suffice to be assigned a rank among substances, or among really existing beings, existing by themselves, outside of us, independently from us.

He also recognized spiritual substances and counted human souls among them; he denied neither those of animals nor intelligences superior to man; and he formally established the necessary existence of a supreme intelligence.

Dr. Berkeley soon introduced a very notable change in this philosophy. Departing from principles proposed by Locke, he tried to prove that the qualities of matter named primary appertained to it no more than those carrying the name secondary. With that, all material substances went up in smoke. Nothing remained but mental substances with the diverse modifications that they undergo. The world was composed only of minds, observed and directed by their creator and sovereign modifier. But these minds were true substances. Berkeley's Idealism was pushed much further by the new thinkers, who from the singularity of their doctrine have taken the name Egoists. According to this doctrine, I can admit only a single existence, my own. All of the others that I believe I perceive, or about which I form ideas, or that I induce from arguments and conclusions, only exist precisely where my perceptions, ideas, judgements, conclusions exist, that is to say, in me, in my soul, from where, no matter how hard I try, I can never leave nor by consequence assure myself that anything external corresponds to what takes place inside me. I am, in a word, my own universe, the entire universe. All beings, physical or mental, are only phenomena, ideas, modifications of my being.

Egoism derives from Idealism, as the latter derives from Locke's philosophy. Perhaps that is what sometimes gives it the appearance of a parody or mockery of Idealism.

Wouldn't we believe that we were at the end, and that all the subtlety of the human mind, or of the British mind, were exhausted? Very far from it. There remained a last step of unequalled boldness.

The Egoist preserved one substance, his own. But even that is going to disappear in a moment, and be buried with all the others in the night of chaos.

The new theory, or the new paradox, which was going to engulf them all in a common ruin, was exposed in the year 1738 by the celebrated David Hume² in his *Treatise of Human Nature*, a work that caused little sensation then, and that died stillborn, as he himself admitted with much frankness. But, after ten years elapsed, he reproduced it in his *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, under a more seductive form that accentuated it, surprising the philosophic world by its strange singularity.

However, a greater brouhaha awaited it recently, and outside its native country. We have seen it reappear in the reforming philosophy of our great philosopher from Königsberg,³ who has extended his conquests from North to South in Germany, where nevertheless his clever and zealous partisans seem to have met antagonists worthy of disputing every inch of ground.

Without meddling in these disputes, I limit myself to a brief examination of the Scottish philosopher's doctrine, summarized hereafter.

All that we feel, imagine, think, know, is reduced to phenomena, coexisting or successive, which join together, separate, come and go, endure more or less, appear, disappear, reappear, sometimes under different aspects, sometimes under the same. One must not ask what produces them nor what makes them cease: of this we haven't the least notion. They do not produce one another; they only mix together or follow each other. They are not produced by any cause either exterior or interior. We have never perceived a cause in action. These words themselves, production, cause, effect, if they have a meaning, can only designate the more or less habitual succession of these phenomena, or their more or less simultaneous apparition. We have given the name cause to the phenomenon that precedes, effect to the one that follows, which becomes cause in its turn to the one that follows it, without our having the right to infer a necessary connection, without even having the idea of this necessity.

Causality is thus only an abstract term, a thing of the imagination, an idea, if you wish, or an interior phenomenon that signifies the succession of any phenomena whether external or internal.

Still less can we ask where these phenomena are located, to what they adhere or inhere. They are there; that is all that we know about them.

Such assemblages present themselves, or seem to present themselves outwardly or from without; we call them bodies, and the common stuff that we assume them to be, matter. Others we imagine inside; and we give them names conforming to the variety of their aspects, those of images, memories,

ideas, judgements, reasons, and to what they have or seem to have in common, the names of memory, imagination, reason, intellect, mind; from which we form the adjectives imaginative, reasonable, intellectual, mental, etc.

But what they have in particular and what they have in common are still only external or internal phenomena, described by more or less abstract names.

What we have distinguished by the more general denomination of subject or substance is nothing more. It is only an assemblage of phenomena, sensible or mental, which most often coexist or succeed each other in the same manner; and it is to their general effect that we have applied this denomination.

And this is what has engendered the error of belief that these are true beings, beings existing by themselves, serving to support phenomena, which would only be attributes, accidents, modifications, or whatever one would call them. But when these phenomena have succeeded each other thousands and thousands of times, or have coexisted in the same order a thousand times, that does not make them change their nature nor transform them into what they are not. And we will not even be able to conclude that they will continue to coexist or to succeed each other in the same way.

We know then absolutely nothing about which we can guarantee permanence, still less substantiality. Subject and substance, taken in this sense, are terms empty of meaning, pure creatures of reason, that is to say phenomena, or the succession or accumulation of phenomena, that it pleases us to name improperly with these fine names.

Finally, what am I myself, my self, my person, what am I if not such an accumulation, which coexists with other accumulations, which succeed each other, as I succeed to what I call myself? I do not know myself under any other aspect: I am a phenomenon like everyone.

Here then is where our science ends, whatever the borrowed terms or the pompous titles that it pleases us to dress it up in. We do not know anything further; and beyond, there are only chimera or chimerical phenomena.

All of Hume's speculations are still spun out according to Locke's theory; and one must agree that the fabric is worked with much finesse. But wise Locke, did he ever suspect that one could draw such consequences from his philosophy, and build from such ruins, and use it to plunge the human mind into so desperate a skepticism?

I will let dogmatic and systematic philosophers combat it in pitched battle. For me, who do not aspire so high, and who have not, to render myself invulnerable, dipped my armor in the waters of the Styx, I will only make war on a small scale. I will attack skepticism with its own weapons, and will try to harass it by opposing my doubts to its. For why would I not have the privilege of doubting as much as students formed in his school?

I would like to be short and precise.⁴ However, it will be necessary to

pardon certain repetitions, inevitable in investigations needing to be turned over and over in all directions, and where the repetitions are often only apparent, as reflections, appearing the same at first glance, when considered more closely and better analyzed, will become differentiated by nuances that lead to new points of view.

I.

First let's make sure we understand the word "phenomenon." What is a phenomenon?

Can it exist without being perceived? Or, as its name would seem to indicate, is it in its nature to manifest itself, to make itself perceptible? And, ceasing to be, is that synonymous with ceasing to appear?

Mr. Hume or his partisans would not know how to affirm the first without contradicting themselves. For the phenomenon, having become from that moment a substantive thing independent from its apparition, would be a real, durable being, in a word, a substance.

But if the phenomenon neither exists nor can exist without appearing, without being perceived, I ask: before whom or before what does it appear? By whom or by what is it perceived?

Here there are only three possible responses.

The phenomenon is perceived by itself, or by another phenomenon, or by something that is not a phenomenon.

A phenomenon perceiving itself, or appearing to itself, would be a very strange thing. To assume this, only individual, isolated, egotistical phenomena would exist, if I can express myself frankly. Sounds would hear themselves; each odor would smell itself; the rainbow would see, all alone, the rich colors that adorn it.

Comparison between phenomena would not exist, nor in consequence, any judgement founded on comparison, any induction, any general idea, any reasoning, any conclusion.

And then do you not see that this self-perception would suppose an action or a reaction on itself? That by consequence it would suppose causes and effects, which in your philosophic conscience you would not know how to admit? I would even fear that, in the long run, this would lead you to something subjective or substantial in the part perceiving the phenomena, of which the perceived part would be only a modification. But this is still not what is in question.

Phenomena perceiving each other would be subject to the same incongruities, and to still greater ones.

Odors that hear sounds, that taste, touch, etc., and reciprocally sounds, colors, etc. that smell, touch, etc. What sense can be attached to such expressions?

And wouldn't it still be necessary for these phenomena to affect each other? But they do not, according to you, nor can they do any thing other than coexist or succeed each other without any connection, and without mutual influence.

What is true for each of them in particular is equally so for any of their assemblages, which only give them a right to coexistence and succession: indeed what cannot take place for any of their separate parts, and they are all naturally detached, could not take place either for the whole or the collective totality that it will please you to form of them.

Thus neither a separate phenomenon can perceive another equally separate, nor a collection of phenomena another collection, nor these collections a separate phenomenon, nor the latter any of these collections.

There remains then only the third hypothesis, a being, a *substratum*, a subject, an animate substance, whatever you would call that which is not a phenomenon, which would be affected by these phenomena, in which or before which they would come to appear or represent themselves. But this being or subject you have relegated to the land of chimeras.

However, in conceding that we do not know it by any direct observation or experience, if there were no other means of resolving the problem than by resorting to it, and if phenomena that are attached to nothing were unintelligible and inconceivable, what position should one take?

II.

In giving these phenomena a ground on which to show themselves or something that they come to affect, not only does one avoid the contradictions and the incomprehensibilities that we have just seen, but it seems to me that is where your own theory must lead you. I grant to you for a moment that phenomena can perceive themselves, or among themselves perceive each other. There will be in both cases something perceiving and something perceived.

But what perceives is also a phenomenon, and has by consequence the same need to be perceived, without which it would not be a phenomenon. But by whom? By a third, which will be in the same situation, and so on. A is perceived by B, B by C, etc. That would go on to infinity, unless you would stop it at a fixed point; and this point will no longer be able to be a phenomenon. Thus you will stop, despite yourself, at what is not a phenomenon, at a subject, or at something subjective.

And that will be all the more inevitable as this succession or this infinite subordination of perceptions imbedded into each other is not only a complete absurdity but also contrary to your own observation, which discloses either isolated phenomena, or several together, with neither appearance nor need of such an infinite regression.

III.

I would like to pick another quarrel with you, or perhaps it is not one.

You maintain that all the things we know reduce to phenomena. How do you know this? And how do you prove it?

By induction without a doubt. Your experience up to now has not revealed anything else: you do not find anything else in anything that carries the name of perception, idea, knowledge, science, etc.

As apparently you feel yourself that this does not constitute a rigorous proof, and that when you have not observed something, it does not follow that it is unobservable, and cannot sooner or later be observed, or even has not already been so by others, I will not insist on that.

I ask you how you elicit your induction, and on what you base it. But I say that it cannot be based on nothing, nor be linked to no phenomenon whatever, or to no succession of phenomena which are themselves not linked together. What conclusion do you claim to infer from premises that each subsist separately, one not influencing the other, not leading to the other, nor entailing any consequence by a natural and necessary connection. If there is neither cause nor effect, one can neither have reasons nor consequences based on them; seeing that these reasons would be causes, and these consequences their effects.

Your induction is then itself only a phenomenon coming after other phenomena, and so even it proves nothing. The proposition that you have constructed is thus totally null. It cannot be true, since according to the proposition itself truth is only a fleeting phenomenon, a transitory appearance.

You will tell me perchance that this was precisely your intention, because you want to preach universal skepticism? I would congratulate you on your success if there did not remain for me a small scruple. To preach anything, it is necessary to make yourself understood; without which all the fruit of your preaching will be lost, and it would have been better to remain quiet. But I do not understand you. You would like to prove to me that all is phenomenon. But your proof itself supposes that one can prove nothing. You have then proved nothing. You have then not proved that all is phenomenon, but only that you contradict yourself, or that you don't know what you mean.

IV.

These phenomena which are not attached to anything, which exist nowhere, which float in the air, in the void, where I do not know, how does one conceive them? And how did Mr. Hume manage to picture them to himself?

The natural development of our senses by the working of their organs leads us to believe that there exist bodies that we perceive by means of them.

We believe that we perceive them outside of us, see them, touch them, smell their odoriferous exhalations, crush on our tongue and taste their savory particles, hear the sounds that they send us by vibrations of the air. We discover concave and very artfully made organs in our bodies for each of our sense perceptions.

A further search teaches us that the organs only receive and transmit impressions that come to them from without, which through these organs are propagated to the brain, and from there to whatever seat of whatever being that we call soul, and which alone, strictly speaking, is capable of sensing. But all that, far from excluding external bodies, supposes them and establishes their existence for us.

Even though philosophy strips these bodies of secondary qualities in order to claim them for the soul, at least it leaves them shape and movement, whose diverse combinations always remain the productive causes of these same secondary qualities, such as we perceive them. It leaves them besides extension, impenetrability, and the material elements of which they are composed.

The philosophy that makes the most of the last, that of Leibnitz, at least establishes simple beings, the only true substances, that serve as the basis of all the sensible phenomena that strike us. Bodies are the *phænomena substantiata* [well-founded appearances] of them.

Idealism, in excluding everything sensible that is exterior, needs, however, subjects to prop up sensible phenomena, subjects in which these phenomena show themselves, and of which they are modifications. Egoism itself could not do without them.

How then has Mr. Hume gotten rid of them? What is a phenomenon without support, a phenomenon in itself? If it is not a substance, it is nothing at all; it is an attribute that is not attributed, an accident that is not an accident at all, a mode or a modification by which nothing is modified. Language cannot render it intelligible. Why? Because it is unintelligible in itself.

V.

I would not know how to prevent myself from noticing a certain resemblance between Hume's phenomenalism and Epicurus's system, notwithstanding the immense interval that must seem to separate them. But in high metaphysics, more than elsewhere, the extremes touch.

In Epicurus's system, what are we indeed, we and the entire universe, if not phenomena that chance has brought about, that chance will annul, and of which in a short time there will remain no more than a trace? The same wind that disperses the elements of our life, including the noble faculties that we pride ourselves so much on, and so improperly, will disperse the elements of the world. Yes, this great phenomenon, this beautiful theater where we play

our small fleeting role, with its most superb scenery, is held together only by a pin, which being removed, will make it collapse on its weak foundations.

But, although convinced of the falsity of this doctrine, I would dare to affirm, however, that the phenomenal world of Epicurus has definite advantages over the phenomenal world of our Scottish philosopher.

First, the universal phenomenon of Epicurus, and all those it contains in spite of their dissoluble nature and their precarious existence, rests at least on a solid and permanent support, on elementary parts whose fortuitous composition gives birth to them and equally fortuitous decomposition destroys them. That way they at least offer to our understanding a facility of representing themselves, a handle, if I may so express myself, by which one can seize them. Instead of a phenomenon that is only a phenomenon and nothing more, gives me no grasp, and leaves in my mind only a word empty of ideas.

These two theories still have in common that the perceiver and the perceived are made of the same stuff.

But 1. in that of Hume one doesn't really know, as we have seen, what is the perceiver, nor where it lodges, nor even if there is one.

2. In that of Epicurus, this stuff is very easily conceived, being entirely physical for one or the other: while one does not know what Hume's phenomena are made of, what stuff they are fabricated from.

Finally these two theories both attribute their phenomena to chance. But certainly the Epicurean chance is less random than that of Hume, or rather it is determined in assignable causes, in the concourse and collision of atoms, whereas Hume's phenomena generate themselves without a principle of generation, without cause, one doesn't know how. One must not even know or ask.

VI.

But let us leave the exterior world, because it is no longer needed, and ramble henceforth only in the world of appearances. Here are doubts, or appearances of doubts, that come to assail me.

I contemplate the beautiful phenomenon of daybreak, or, to speak with Homer, the rosy finger dawn appears to me at the gateway of the Orient.⁵ It appears to me, I say, to me, not to itself: I am not the dawn, it is not me. I distinguish very exactly the spectacle from the spectator. When the spectacle has disappeared, the spectator remains, recalls it, sees other scenes of nature replace it, or creates itself some new ones of infinite variety.

For this applies not solely to immediate sensible perceptions, but also to their copies revived in the memory, to images formed in the imagination, to all the ideas that I abstract from them, to my arguments, to my intellectual notions, and to the most sublime spiritual phenomena. Let all these things reach me from without, or trace themselves within me; they are, however, not

me. I distinguish myself from all of these things.

Then what is this me? Would it not seem necessary to be something constant, a solid ground, a permanent canvas where all these varieties would be painted and displayed; and furthermore, something capable of grouping, separating, and diversifying them?

I will cross out, if you desire it, all external objects; but it is impossible for me to scratch myself out. It is quite possible that the former are only phenomena; but they must be somewhere; and since I am affected by them, would I be so terribly wrong to regard them as modifications of this me, without however being this me, that is to say without exhausting the essence of this me, seeing that they can sometimes be present, sometimes absent, and make room for each other?

Considering it in this way, what am I relative to these modifications? The thing, the being, the subject, the substance that experiences them; for this is exactly what I mean by these terms. And in spite of your aversion to them, I do not see how one can avoid them, if one wishes to understand or explain himself to others. Their usage is justified by the very observation and experience that have suggested them to us. But to this we will return.

VII.

The more I delve into phenomenology, the more my doubts accumulate. Here are some new ones which appear to me rather grave, and from which I wish to be delivered.

If there exist only phenomena, then I must be considered that way. I am then a phenomenon, and nothing more.

But am I each phenomenon that I perceive or believe that I perceive? In this case my existence would be only momentary: from instant to instant it would no longer be me, or it would be another me. What am I then? When am I? Where am I? I no longer know where to find myself, nor even where to look for myself:

By what knot am I to hold Proteus as he changes his appearance?

Then, as I have already said, I could neither bring these phenomena closer to confront them, nor obtain any induction. I could do it neither as a past phenomenon, for I would no longer exist in this capacity, nor as a present phenomenon, for I would only be that alone, without necessary connection to the past or to what coexists.

Would I be by chance a collection, a bundle, or so to speak a wad of phenomena? If you suppose here a link that unites them, I could be this link; and I consent very willingly. I would apply myself successively to diverse phenomena, and I would connect as well as can be expected, and hold together for more or less time without ceasing to be the same link. And it is

this, with your permission, I would call me or my person.

But you could not permit it, because it would directly clash with your doctrine. According to you, phenomena are never joined together; they may only proceed beside or behind one another.

But, among five or six phenomena that coexist, where do you want me to place myself? Will I be, at the same time, each of these phenomena separately? Or will I be all of these phenomena together? In the first supposition I would multiply myself in a strange manner: there would be as many of me as phenomena; and one of these phenomena not being the other would no longer be me, would be another me, or *the Me that is not Me* of Molière's Sophie. Or how would you like me to understand it?

The second supposition, declaring me the whole of all these phenomena, would require a new relationship, a union in which the same me dominates them all. And this is what you reject preemptorily.

When, from a mass of phenomena, some remain, others disappear and make room for newcomers, what do I become? Does the me divide itself in order to partly go away with those who are disappearing, and to stay by half, let us suppose, or by a third, with those who remain, and then to grow big with the me of those that just showed up.

I turn all around in vain looking for a way out of this labyrinth.

The me is a phenomenon. But would it not be a phenomenon more constant, more fixed than the others, which accompanies them during their succession and alterations?

However, given this point of view, the phenomenal me, which stops while others ebb and flow, would it not look a little like a permanent thing, or if I dare say it, a subject, a substance? It is always there in society with its flighty brothers. After the most profound sleep, in which it seems to expire with them, it awakens, recalls past phenomena, witnesses the present, and brings itself up to date. In what one calls loss of mind, in delirium itself, it does not entirely evaporate nor become unable to return and reinstall itself: which would assure it at least a certain identity, a basis of continuity, and could even make it presume or hope for its perpetuity. It would not be in all events impossible, after having in appearance exhaled its last breath or its last phenomenon in the sleep of death, to awaken sooner or later from this lethargic sleep in order to recover under new forms, perhaps under more beautiful forms, and on a more brilliant scene.

I know that you will repeat to me that I am conjuring up pleasant fantasies; that this supposed memory of the past occurring after awakening is only a new illusory phenomenon, belonging to or accompanying another phenomenal me.

But allow that I repeat to you in my turn the observation that I have already made. Being not, neither you nor me, sure that we are you and me two instants apart, because the possibility that we are being transfigured is equal,

I do not know why we reason to conclude that we cannot reason about anything or conclude anything. Agree at least that your reasons are worth no more than mine. It would be then worth the effort to make large books filled with transcendent speculations. We should, as I have said, both keep the silence; but it was you who set the example.

Assume that the phenomenal me has a more or less long permanence, or assume that it is not the same me, but only a nondescript me coexisting with other phenomena; I return to the question: this me, does it perceive the other phenomena? Or does it not perceive them? If it doesn't perceive them, it is good for nothing; it is there with the others without having the least communication with them; they coexist without knowing each other. If it perceives them, or is perceived, they have an effect on it, or it has an effect on them. And you summon from its exile causality, which you have so solemnly proscribed.

In general, what I have observed from the beginning on the nature of phenomena still applies here, and makes apparent the inconsistency of phenomenalism, whatever aspect, whatever direction one wishes to give it. For if the phenomenon cannot exist without being perceived, it finally leads us always to something that is no longer a phenomenon. And what can this be if not a substance capable of perception and of what follows from it?

VIII.

The phenomenalist philosophers sometimes seem to have sensed that their phenomena, straying they know not where, and making themselves perceptible they know not to whom nor to what nor how, do not present a very luminous idea.

Consequently they admit at least some beings or fictitious subjects which they have the habit of referring to in order to use them as props and supports.

Here our new German philosophy seems to come to aid them, and furnish them a very ingenious expedient.⁶ The substances, and the subject named me, soul, mind, etc., are *mentally conceived beings*,⁷ that we pose as common bases, or that we plant as standards under which these moving, sensitive, and spiritual phenomena come to join and to arrange themselves each in its turn. Or, it is a fundamental idea, engendered by the transcendent reason.

But first the need to conceive a similar being, without which we would conceive nothing at all, its conception easier than that of isolated phenomena, and without which we would not know what to make of them, would they not prove the indispensable necessity of its existence or that its existence is at least as authenticated as theirs, which would not even be conceivable without recourse to this being or to this auxiliary phenomenon.

Then my eternal question returns, eternal stumbling block for

phenomenalism.

This fictitious being, this *mentally conceived* or intellectual subject, or child of transcendent reason, how does it produce itself? And who perceives it? Being itself, according to you, a new phenomenon, there must be a new fictitious or *mentally conceived* subject to support it, and for that one, another; and when will that finish?

Thought presupposes the *thinker*,⁸ fiction someone or something who pretends; as painting presupposes a painter, the transcendent idea of understanding presupposes the understanding itself that forms it, as a quality or faculty, a being, a subject that possesses this quality or faculty. It is necessary then, in spite of you, to stop in the last instance at something stable, without which you would think and speak wildly.

Thus the aid by which you pretend to remedy the shortcomings of your phenomena is subjected to these same shortcomings, and would ask for similar aid: and you will never find it in the end without the only effective aid of stability or permanence.

IX.

You say that observation and experience persuade you to affirm that we only know phenomena because they only present phenomena to you.

But I have already said that my observation, my experience make me constantly distinguish these phenomena from the me who perceives or observes them. I sense that in the middle of these phenomena that flit about me, I remain in place. I see them come, go, return; I recall them in my memory, examine them, compare them, reflect on them. I am intimately conscious that what I observe is not me who observes.

How will you prove to me that my observation is not as good, as true as yours?

It is so much more because at bottom you experience the same thing. In saying that you observe, do you not distinguish in the same way yourself from the object of your observations?

And what would an observation without an observer be?

Thus my assertion would still have over yours the merit of intelligibility.

— But I deceive myself in distinguishing myself thus from things that I observe. — And you, will you not deceive yourself in not wanting to distinguish yourself from it, in insisting on confusing yourself with your phenomena?

— But this me that I place so proudly at the head of everything, I do not know its nature, I do not know what it is. —

So be it. And you, do you know any better what a phenomenon is, what its nature consists of, if indeed it has one, and its absolute independence? Can you even form the least notion of it without returning to its dependence,

without distinguishing it from what is not itself, without relating it, at least mentally, to some subject to which you are obliged, despite yourself, to figure that it belongs?

Here is a consideration that I believe I must insist on presenting under all possible aspects. And it is the way I am going to finish.

X.

What is the meaning in your mind and your mouth of these personal pronouns which you cannot prevent yourself from continually using, and without which you would not know how either to think or to express your thoughts, *me, I, we*, etc?

You consider yourself then a person. And by what right do you assume this personality, phenomenon or bundle of phenomena that you are?

You grant it even to other men, although in your eyes they are still only phenomena. You speak to them, and you speak of them in the second and third person, while claiming the first.

You cannot detach yourself from these forms of thinking, speaking, acting. They are stronger than you, and indicate that these forms are, so to speak, rooted in some principle that constitutes you, and that you believe is abusively called your mind, your soul, your intelligence.

For you also use these last expressions, protesting, it is true, that it is solely to conform to popular usage, but at bottom because without them you would not know how to understand nor make yourself understood. You try in vain; you will never succeed in denying yourself to yourself.

— But languages have not been made by philosophers. — I know it; and so much the better for the cause I defend.

It was, I avow, inevitable in the development of different peoples' languages that errors slipped in, false points of view, prejudices, superstitions in which people were steeped. — But what is common to all of them belongs to language in general, not to such and such language in particular, clearly revealing a common origin, something essential or a constitutive principle of what we call the human mind, a primitive form where this mind is, so to speak, molded, which is inseparable from it, and from which it would not know how to deviate in the simplest development of its faculties.

Neither the language of barbaric nor of civilized people fails to bear this mark, and can dispense with personal pronouns or their equivalents. They exert their empire on all shores and under all climates. The Laplander, the Samoyed, the Kaffir, the inhabitant of the Island of Fire, the nomadic tribes in the deserts of Asia, Africa, and America, all distinguish themselves and among themselves, and their huts, and their forests, and the prey that they pursue in them. This distinction is noticeable in their dialects or slang, as well as in our most cultivated European languages. In a word, it is enunciated by the

universal voice of human nature.

Finally, I give you this problem to resolve.

You want a philosophic language. Well! Make one; or purify one of our already existing languages from these dregs of egoism, subjectivity, substantiality, of which they are all infected and sullied. Forge one, I tell you, exempt from all personal pronouns, from all pronominal inflexions, from all that carries the least vestige of them, and in which your phenomena can communicate together without any foreign mixture. I will be the first to applaud this rare masterpiece, and to admire it as the most curious of all phenomena.

But what am I saying? You would have to have foreseen my wishes, and have already constructed this language. How is it that in your works themselves which tend to help themselves to these false opinions, you are forced to employ this faulty language that reproduces them without cease, and that lands you at each instant in the same misuse that you want to extirpate? If you cannot succeed, you avow that it is not a misuse, that you have made vain efforts to battle against the nature of things, and uselessly tormented your mind in order to place it in contradiction with itself.

NOTES

1 Read October 10, 1793. I have coined the word *Phenomenalism* in order to designate the theory that I am examining, although I know quite well that Mr. Hume uses the word *phenomenon* only very rarely; he prefers *impression*, *representation*, even *objects*, but these signify nothing more than *phenomena* in the sense that he attaches to them. And it is probably for this reason that our new German philosophy most willingly employs the last term in the part of its speculations that coincides with Hume's philosophy. Thus the name I give it appears most suitable and characterizes it in the least ambiguous manner.

2 Then 27 years of age.

3 One must see in Mr. Kant's work itself how far he has adopted Hume's theory. I am only concerned here with the latter.

4 "And so I have decided to philosophize rather, as Neoptolemus [says] in the works of Ennius," briefly. — Cic. de Orat. Lib. II. c. 37.

5 Rosy fingered dawn. [Translation from the Greek.]

6 I touch on Mr. Kant's philosophy in so far as it can favor the followers of Hume, with whom alone I have to do here. For besides I am not ignorant that this celebrated philosopher, far from denying beings existing by themselves, beings in reality, has produced, to establish their existence and to refute phenomenalism, idealism itself, a new proof of his own invention, but of which this is not the place to speak.

7 Things conceived in the mind. [Translation from the Greek.]

8 The product of thought presupposes the thinker or the ability to think.