

Guest Editor's Preface

On the premises of the mind-body problem: an unexpected German path?

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Johann Nikolaus Tetens published in 1777 his *Philosophical Enquiries on human nature and its development*. In this monumental work, it is easy to recognize the conceptual knots and the questions that had been rapidly arising as a consequence of a wider and deeper scientific knowledge and that remained decisive for more than a generation of scientists and thinkers. Since the very beginning, Tetens explicitly challenges the most relevant and influential position of his time. In particular, anticipating the close confrontation with Bonnet, that he considers a focus point of his research, he acknowledges that the development of the essence of the soul, as well as of the series of ideas, the implementation of the whole system of thoughts and the origin of capacities are all *something physical in the brain* and trigger therefore the question whether or not they should be considered as a process analogous to the development and growth of organized bodies. An enquiry on human nature cannot but end as an enquiry on *freedom*, i.e. on the capacity of the soul to be the active, autonomous and sufficient *cause* of action, even if this causality implies the capacity to contrast all sensations and representations that affect the soul itself, the capacity to fight them down and, in the end, to *eliminate* their effects¹.

¹ J.N. Tetens, *Philosophische Versuche über die Menschliche Natur und ihre Entwicklung* (1777), Hildesheim-New York, Olms, 1979, vol. I, pp. XI e XXXV e vol. II, pp. 121-122.

Tetens was designed by Karl Rosenkranz as “the German Locke”. His work provides a prize example of the clear awareness of the content and possible consequences of the European scientific and philosophical debate in which Germany was also engaged and, at the same time, of a specific way to meet this challenge, a sort of “third way” between dogmatic and materialistic psychology. His method is unquestionably the one that starts with experience. For Tetens, the argument that an inner part of our *body* (brain, *sensorium commune*, *schema perceptionis*) is working whenever the *soul* expresses itself is a matter of experience and therefore a kind of “empirical proposition”. On the other hand, building on Wolff’s distinction between *vis* and *facultas*, he points at a *fundamental power* whose effects are – as to the inner point of view – always expressions of one and the same type: it is from this fundamental power that all other capacities and powers derive². The final outcome of this balance is uncertain and wavers in Tetens’ *Enquiries* between the idea of an *animated brain* and the old-fashioned, ontological conception of the substantial unity that should be provided by an *immaterial essence*, beyond the body organ³.

The “classics” of German philosophy between eighteenth and nineteenth century did not dismiss this commitment to a deeper insight of what really happens *in* and *through* our brain and our body. They did not remain simply unaware of the new findings that jeopardized and progressively eroded the theological as well as philosophical bulwarks of dualism. However, they are not usually considered a promising starting point for understanding the historical background of the contemporary philosophical reflection on the body and, in particular, of the so called mind-body problem. In the end, that seems to be for sound reasons. Kant’s great division between the realm of necessity in which the *homo phaenomenon* lives and eventually dies and the realm of freedom that constitutes the responsibility of the *homo noumenon* has become the touchstone of metaphysical incompatibilism. There needs to be

² Cfr. *Ibidem*, vol. II, p. 158 and vol. I, p. 731.

³ *Ibidem*, vol. II, pp. 169 and 210.

such a deep, insurmountable fault, in order to guarantee an actual causal capacity of the will with regard to its own deeds. This conception did not withstand the clash with the more and more advanced knowledge about the functioning of the brain and the many “material” premises of what we are used to call freedom. The least we have to say, looking back at the age of Enlightenment, is that many other authors and lines of thinking paved the way to the contemporary “scientific” debate. These authors’ language was either French or English. Their explicit goal was to completely dismiss the old metaphysics, rather than renew it and its dualism. Nowadays, we cannot escape the challenge of the uncompromising materialism attested in Diderot’s *Letter to Landois*, even when we do not share all the consequences of a naïve monism: “There is, properly speaking, but one and only one sort of causes: the physical causes. There is but one and only one sort of necessity, that is the same for all beings, whatever destination we might like to look at”⁴. At the same time, the content of “practical” reason appears much more focused on the goal of “worldly” happiness than on that of a too much spiritualized, “disembodied” virtue. According to Helvétius, moral is simply “the science of the instruments discovered by human beings to live together in the happiest possible way”⁵. Bentham, some decades later and building on his new principles of morals, proposes a table of the “springs of action” with the aim of getting rid of the many psychological entities that we call wishes, hopes or interests. All of them are nothing more than “*fictitious* entities”, that are to be reduced to the only *real* entities we are allowed to speak of: pleasure and suffering⁶.

This would be an easy, yet a hasty conclusion. More than two centuries have lapsed, but even for the strongest reductionism, that relies on the

⁴ D. Diderot, *Lettre à Landois*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. IX, Paris, Hermann, 1981, pp. 253-60.

⁵ C.A. Helvétius, *De l’homme* (1772), in *Ouvres complètes*, Hildesheim, Olms, 1967-1969, vol. IX, p. 140.

⁶ J. Bentham, *Table of the Springs of Action*, in *Deontology together with A Table of the Springs of Action and Article on Utilitarianism*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1983, pp. 5-115.

argument that moral properties are just supervening properties, it remains true that the moral, “spiritual” experience brings something new in the naturalistic point of view. Maybe, the relevant facts concerning human beings and their world are in the end as objective as stones. However, this argument has to be balanced with the awareness that there would be no room for good and evil in a universe just made out of stones: put persons in it, and you will introduce the possibility of value with one and the same shot⁷. This is where the mind-body problem still steps in. It is not simply about developing the compatibilist approach, therefore starting with Hume and his interpretation of freedom as spontaneity, that was – it goes without saying – quite different from Tetens’ (as well as Kant’s) conception: we consider our deeds as *free* inasmuch as they are caused by acts of will and not because we think that those acts of will are themselves free in the sense of a first, autonomous and unconditional ground. Neither is it about contending a “thin” conception of universality, that should give up whatever sort of “metaphysical” explanation of the will and build on the humble awareness that there must be some principle of humanity in which every human being, in some degree, concurs, at least as long as the human heart will be compounded “of the same elements as at present”⁸. It is about the possibility to overcome the “great division” not just by the unilateral conclusion that “on the scientific view human behavior is not caused by our intentions, beliefs, and desires” and “free will is an illusion because the brain is a deterministic physical organ, and it is the brain that is doing the causal work”. What we are called upon to deal with is the question whether or not it could be possible to maintain a plausible meaning and possibly a specific domain – according exactly to the scientific view – for the vocabulary of the so called “humanistic view”, based on concepts such as intentional agents and their goals, responsibility, social

⁷ P. Railton, *Essays Toward a Morality of Consequence*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 16 and 47.

⁸ D. Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the principles of morals*, London, A. Millar, 1751, Section IX, Part I.

and cultural frameworks of human action⁹. This is not edification *outside* or sometimes even *against* science. This is rather the legacy of Darwin's acknowledgment that just the moral sense and its expressions remain perhaps the most important and highest distinction between human beings and other animals, a difference – even though in no way an ontological threshold – that we have to pay attention to, once that the “mystery” of our descent has been disclosed. This is with all evidence the case – just to give an example – with neuroethics, that “has emerged because advances in the neurosciences present us with ethical questions; however, there would be no questions at all if we believed that ethics and neurosciences were incompatible”¹⁰.

The issue of freedom as embodied freedom plays indeed an important role, even if a too often neglected one, in the most influential authors of the German philosophy on the edge of *Aufklärung* and after it. The “anthropological” side of their works has long been the less frequented and considered. Nevertheless, it is a chapter of the history we are moving forward, trying to line with the unprecedented pace of the progress of scientific knowledge. There may even be some points, where it is exactly this progress that renews the topicality of this thought and allows us to speak of a German path (that is in any case not to be confused with the main road) to the mind-body problem.

⁹ T. Buller, *Brains, lies, and psychological explanations*, in J. Illes (ed.), *Neuroethics. Defining the Issues in Theory, Practice and Policy*, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 52.

¹⁰ Ivi.