

Is There a 'Dispositional Modality'?
**Maine de Biran and Ravaisson on Agency and
Inclination**

Within the contemporary metaphysics of powers or dispositions, it is often remarked that 'power' is not, in fact, synonymous with 'disposition'. A power is a capacity or ability, such as the salt's capacity to dissolve in water, the bridge's capacity to bear a load or my ability to drive a car. A disposition, however, can mean more than a mere ability or capacity, particularly when we speak of being disposed to do something, and this in the sense of having a tendency, propensity or a 'proneness' to do it. I may have an ability to do a particular thing, I may even have honed a skill in doing it, but this does not entail that I am disposed to do it, i.e. that I have the tendency or inclination to do it. A tendency or inclination to do something does not merely facilitate that action, as does a capacity, but is rather, it would seem, a veritable principle of action, something that can lead me to act even in advance of voluntary decision, and that possesses a drive to realise itself.

Our ordinary intuitions and language, then, seem to differentiate a disposition in particular from power in general. Nevertheless, accounting philosophically for this difference is not straightforward. Within the domain of psychological powers, it is not obvious how to avoid reducing a tendency or inclination to the status of an efficient cause – a cause of an event that is no longer, in the narrow sense of the term, an action. In a related sense, we might consider that a tendency or inclination is a power whose manifestation does not, in any circumstances, *have to* occur, but it is not clear how we could account for this non-necessitation without falling back into the idea that the manifestation is simply possible. In relation to this question of the modal status of dispositions, however, a recent argument advanced by Stephen Mumford and Rani Lil Anjum is of great import. For in their 2011 *Getting Causes from Powers*¹ they argue that: 1) dispositions, as tendencies or inclinations, have a modal status irreducible to more familiar notions of necessity or possibility, and 2) that we have a

¹ Steven Mumford and Rani Lil Anjum, *Getting Causes from Powers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

direct experience of this *sui generis* modality in our experience of agency. What they call the ‘dispositional modality’ is, they contend, in some sense a phenomenological datum, and this contention serves, in fact, to support a general theory of powers: all powers, and not just psychological powers are a function of tendency, of being-disposed or being-inclined. ‘Power’ and ‘disposition’ are, on this account, synonymous, because the tendential quality ascribed to dispositions in the narrow sense already characterises powers in general. This is to say that our ordinary intuitions concerning the difference between powers as capacities, on the one hand, and tendencies or inclinations, on the other, would register a difference of degree and not in kind.

In what follows I respond to Mumford and Anjum’s claims with reference to two 19th-century philosophers seldom studied in the Anglophone world but no less pivotal in the development of French philosophy: Pierre Maine de Biran and Félix Ravaisson. Mumford and Anjum are aware that their claims have precedents in the philosophical tradition, but the work of both French philosophers, whom they do not mention,² allows us both to criticise and to develop their claims. Maine de Biran, I contend, allows us to see how the appeal to voluntary agency in *Getting Causes from Powers* is unconvincing and ultimately illegitimate, whilst Ravaisson’s account – in his 1838 *De l’habitude* – of agency becoming, in the acquisition of a habit, a function of inclination, provides one way of thinking what is required if we are to justify and cash out Mumford and Anjum’s interesting ideas concerning the modality of dispositions. I first examine these ideas *in situ* before turning to Maine de Biran and then Ravaisson.

1. The ‘Dispositional Modality’

² Mumford and Anjum mention neither French philosopher, but they do have a faint link to them: they acknowledge (*Getting Causes from Powers*, ix) that their ideas concerning the dispositional modality, i.e. of tendency or inclination owe much to A. N. Whitehead, whose ideas in this regard were influenced by Henri Bergson, who, in turn, was profoundly influenced by Ravaisson.

Mumford and Anjum remark – at the risk of confusion – that they use the term disposition in a “non-tendential sense”,³ which is to say that their account of tendency or being-disposed is supposed to characterise all powers as such, and not just a narrow subset of them. All powers have “an irreducible *sui generis* modality ... something between pure necessity and pure contingency and that is reducible to neither”. Powers in general tend towards their manifestations without necessitating them; and although “the idea of something irreducibly *tending* towards certain outcomes has not attracted many adherents in modern philosophy ... it is ... the core modal notion”. This idea may not have attracted many adherents in modern philosophy, but it has prominent advocates in Medieval and Early Modern Philosophy, and thus Mumford and Anjum admit that their “innovation” is more like “the reassertion of a very old innovation”.⁴

Getting Causes from Powers presents this ‘innovation’ within the framework of an account of causation according to a realist theory of powers: powers only incline towards their manifestations, which means that in causation there is something other than necessitation at work. Now, a particular causal process, such as my striking the match on the box to light it, can be prevented by other, external factors, such as rain. In any process, power A could be present, but its typical production of effect

³ *Getting Causes from Powers*, 4. Throughout this essay I use the terms ‘tendency’ and ‘inclination’ as synonymous, without denying that in common usage there may be significant differences between them. We often use the word tendency purely to name a statistical regularity, whereas ‘inclination’ seems to speak more deliberately of a power underlying such regular occurrences. For some interesting remarks on the use of the term ‘tendency’, see T. S. Champlin “Tendencies”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 91 (1990-91), 119-133. It should be noted, however, that the difference between tendency as a statistical frequency and tendency as, in Champlin’s words, an “occult causal power” does not mean that there is “more than one kind of tendency” (119); it just means that with the second we attempt to provide an ontological account of the possibility of the former.

⁴ All three quotations: *Getting Causes from Powers.*, viii.

B could be interrupted, diverted or swamped by other factors. In this everyday fact Mumford and Anjum find grounds for a thesis: “[w]e defend the bold thesis”, they write, “that the possibility of prevention leaves no room for any kind of necessity in causal production”.⁵ The possibility of B not happening because it is prevented by C or D means that no necessity – logical, metaphysical or physical – is to be found in the causal process. A can be sufficient for the production of B, without it being a sufficient condition of B, precisely because external factors can intervene to prevent the occurrence of B.

Here I do not assess Mumford and Anjum’s defence and development of this claim with their ‘antecedent strengthening’ logical test for causal necessity and by modelling what they take to be the polygenic nature of causal processes by means of vectors.⁶ My focus is solely on the idea of tendency or inclination that they contrast with necessitation. This contrast within a theory of causation is one that they inherit from a tradition going back to J.S. Mill at least, who claimed that “all laws of causation, in consequence of their liability to be counteracted, require to be stated in words affirmative of tendencies only, and not of actual results”, and that “if it were stated to be a law of nature, that all heavy bodies fall to the ground, it would probably be said that the resistance of the atmosphere, which prevents a balloon from falling, constitutes the balloon an exception to that pretended law of nature. But the real law is, that all heavy bodies

⁵ *Getting Causes from Powers*, 53.

⁶ For discussion of the logical test, see E. J. Lowe, “Mumford and Anjum on causal necessitarianism and antecedent strengthening”, *Analysis* 72(4): 731-735, and of Mumford and Anjum’s use of vectors, see Troy Cross’s NDPR review of Mumford and Anjum’s 2010 contribution to *The Metaphysics of Powers: Their Grounding and Manifestation*. ed. A. Marmodoro (London: Routledge): <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/31889-the-metaphysics-of-powers-their-grounding-and-their-manifestations-2/>, and Luke Glynn’s review of *Getting Causes from Powers* in *Mind* 121 (484):1099-1106.

tend to fall".⁷ This venerable lineage does not, of course, relieve Mumford and Anjum of the obligation to clarify what they mean by 'tendency'. Their anti-necessitarian arguments, however, tell us nothing about what the purported dispositional modality 'actually' *is*. They say only what it *is not*. The idea of a disposition tending towards its manifestation, its being inclined towards that manifestation, is conceived merely negatively in relation to necessity: a tendency is a power that does not necessitate its manifestation, and it does not because another outcome is always possible. Moreover, when Mumford and Anjum attempt to show that the possibility of a power's manifestation is more than one possibility amongst a potentially infinite number of equals, more than a mere abstract logical or metaphysical possibility, they do so only in terms of statistical regularities and probability: dispositions are "reliable, tend to manifest" and "disposed to happen with a non-negligible probability".⁸ With their 'dispositional modality', then, Mumford and Anjum are offering a propensity theory of probability without saying anything positive about what propensities or tendencies are.⁹ In the end, it is only because they attempt to explain causation with a realist theory of powers that they can claim that their anti-necessitarian arguments about causation justify their ontological and modal innovation; if powers, understood as real characters of things, explain causation understood as irreducible to necessitation,

7 J. S. Mill, *A System of Logic Ratiocinative and Inductive* (1872), Book III, ch. 10, §5, in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. J. M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), vol. VII, 445, and "On the Definition of Political Economy and on the Method of Investigation Proper to It" in *Collected Works*, vol. IV, 309-99, 337.

8 *Getting Causes from Powers*, 181.

9 For a survey of different forms of the propensity interpretation of probability, see Donald Gillies, 'Varieties of Propensity', *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 51 (2000), 807-835.

then powers themselves must have a modal value other than necessity. Nevertheless, at this stage of their argument, the idea of the dispositional modality is merely an inference, and an inability to say anything positive about what is being inferred might lead us to question what motivates the inference, namely the explanation of causation in terms of a power realism.

Mumford and Anjum openly discuss the problem of what we can meaningfully say about dispositionality, and the problem is all the more acute in that, for them, dispositionality is the most primitive or basic form of modality in things; it is “the core modality from which the other two standard modal operators draw their sense as being limit cases on a spectrum”. Our idea of natural possibility – as distinct from logical possibility – derives from the dispositions that things have, in that for an event to be naturally possible, something must have the disposition to produce that event; and when we consider those dispositions whose manifestation is less and less frequent, then “we reach the idea of a pure contingency as an ideal, limiting case”. At the other end of the spectrum, our idea of natural necessity – again, as distinct from logical necessity – is an “extrapolation” from an “idea of what dependably happens with hardly any exceptions”,¹⁰ and this idea originates in what is disposed or inclined to happen.

How, then, to say something concrete and positive about what this primary and *sui generis* dispositional modality ‘actually’ is? *Getting Causes from Powers* addresses this question head-on with the claim that dispositionality is a primitive concept – primitive in the sense of unanalysable – known directly from experience; known not from the objects of experience, but rather from our own exercise and experience of power. There is, first, a direct experience of power in agency, and, second, this power is not necessity but rather the dispositional modality. With the first claim Mumford and Anjum aim – and this is a project they share with a

¹⁰ All three quotations, *Getting Causes from Powers*, 182.

variety of recent philosophers¹¹– to challenge David Hume’s sceptical arguments concerning the experience of causal power in agency. All we experience in agency, Hume claims, is the constant conjunction of a volition with a physical movement that succeeds that volition, and we have no internal impression of an apparent energy or force connecting them – but this sceptical position is built on an “implausible” separation of volition and agency that a “reunificationist” account of agency can overturn.¹²

There is, for Mumford and Anjum, a simultaneity of volition and act, and not a precedence of the one in relation to the other. When you will to raise your arm, it is not that “you will to raise your arm, and then, sometime later, your arm rises. The temporal priority condition loses all credibility here”. Wishing to act, in the sense of idle thinking about acting, can certainly precede the act, but genuine willing, they hold, is simultaneous with the bodily movement, and need not “be ... a distinct and observable mental episode”.¹³ In the experience of resistance – however slight that resistance may be – there is an experience of force or active power, and not just of a conjunction of discrete events; activity and passivity, force and resistance are inseparable. Our sense of proprioception – a sense of effort irreducible to the other five senses – shows, Mumford and Anjum contend, that the two are “integrated closely”, such that they are no ordinary, separable relata: lifting an empty box that I thought was heavy my body adjusts itself immediately to the amount of effort required in order to meet the resistance. Here “the willing

11 Their list of 20th-century philosophers includes Martin Heidegger, Brian O’Shaughnessy and Tom Baldwin; see *Getting Causes from Powers*, 205.

12 Both quotations: *Getting Causes from Powers*, 204.

13 *Getting Causes from Powers*, 206.

and the movements ... must be an entirely integrated process. It could not be, for instance, that the volition has already been and gone. One could not successfully act it out, if it had, because it is only once one has the proprioceptive information available that one knows exactly what must be done".¹⁴

These remarks about agency and proprioception deserve development, but their claim that there is a direct experience of force or power in agency leads to the further claim that this force or power is a *sui generis* form of modality. Any one of my powers has a "limited class of outcomes, out of all those that are merely possible",¹⁵ and yet the realisation of a member of this particular class of outcomes is not necessary, precisely because any power can be defeated or prevented from manifesting itself. When, to take their – to varying degrees surreal – examples, I try to push over a well-built wall or "resist the power of an oncoming train", our experience shows us that "we do not have enough power to overcome some obstacle. Such an experience does not illustrate causal necessitation".¹⁶ Things only tend to fall over when I push them, and it is in this experience of tendency apparently common to us all that we experience the dispositional modality: "our actions only dispose or tend towards their outcomes, never guaranteeing them, and everyone knows what this means".¹⁷

14 Both quotations: *Getting Causes from Powers*, 208-209.

15 *Getting Causes from Powers*, 210.

16 Here it becomes clear that Mumford and Anjum are imagining experiences in order to defend an already prepared thesis, rather than drawing a thesis from attention to experience.

17 *Getting Causes from Powers*, 210.

Now, even if we are sympathetic to Mumford and Anjum's reunificationist sketch of agency, and accept that there is some direct experience of force in voluntary action, this appeal to the allegedly obvious fact of the dispositional modality is hardly convincing. It is hard to see how the appeal to the defeasibility of intentions provides what Mumford and Anjum are explicitly looking for: an account of what the dispositional modality *is* rather than what it *is not*. We remain with the idea that the dispositional modality is dispositional because the manifestation does not have to occur and because it will to some degree probably occur. Certainly, now Mumford and Anjum claim that we have direct epistemological access to a principle that underlies and grounds statistical regularity: we somehow "perceive" or "experience"¹⁸ the dispositional modality in our actions, we perceive our intentions tending to be realised. Yet there is still no *positive* description of what this perception or experience is; each time they attempt to say what it is, they say only what it is not. Notwithstanding their appeal to the obvious, and for all that they claim that the dispositional modality is "the modality with which we are most familiar"¹⁹, Mumford and Anjum's idea of tendency or inclination – i.e. of dispositionality – remains without positive content. Consequently, they seem unable to provide a convincing response to the Humean objection that the only thing I experience concerning the realisation of my intentions is the external result of my action. It is plausible that I have a sense that my intended outcome may not be realised only because I know my intentions have in the past occasionally been defeated, and only

18 Chapter 9 of *Getting Causes from Powers* is entitled 'Perceiving Causes', and it contains a three-page section entitled "Perception and the Dispositional Modality" but how exactly this 'proprioceptive' perception differs from external sensory perception is never clearly spelled out.

19 *Getting Causes from Powers*, 212.

because of a customary association of the present with the past. Pointing to a supposedly obvious immediate experience that, in the end, has no positive content, hardly represents a successful way of challenging such a position.

2. *Necessity in Maine de Biran's Reunificationist Account of Agency*

Mumford and Anjum claim that their 'reunificationist' conception of agency develops a long tradition going back to Locke, without mentioning Pierre Maine de Biran, whose work in the first decades of the nineteenth century represents one of the richest moments of this tradition. Like Mumford and Anjum, Biran argues that we have a direct experience of force in agency whilst criticising Hume's sceptical arguments, and yet for him the force in agency is still a matter of necessity. Here I present briefly the main elements of Biran's critique of Hume's sceptical position on agency in the first *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* as a way of illuminating the French philosopher's own conception of necessity in agency.

Biran's critique of Hume initially appears in his prize-winning 1807 work *De l'aperception immédiate (On Immediate Apperception)*, at a time when he was just coming into his own as a philosopher.²⁰ Biran takes up several points of Hume's argument in Section VII of the *Enquiry* in order to

20 In 1817 Biran published – and this is one of the few texts that he did publish – a longer response to Hume as an appendix to the *Examen des Leçons de philosophie de M. Laromiguière*. This essay ("Opinion de Hume sur la nature et l'origine de la notion de causalité") is contained in Maine de Biran, *Oeuvres* vol. XI-2, *Commentaires et marginalia; dix-huitième siècle*, ed. B. Baertschi, Paris: Vrin, 1993, 37-49, together with a later, more developed draft of it ("Examen des doutes de Hume sur l'idée de pouvoir, d'énergie et de liason nécessaire, et sur l'origine que peut avoir cette idée dans le sentiment interne de l'effort, ou du pouvoir efficace de la volonté dans les mouvements du corps", 3-31). Below I refer to the 1807 reading and to this later of the two essays. On Biran's response to Hume, see also Jean Pucelle, 'Maine de Biran critique de Hume: essai de philosophie comparée', *Hume Studies* VI/1 (1980), 45-60.

unveil and attack the presuppositions that underlie it.²¹ First, Hume sets up his sceptical analysis by arguing that the fact that the “motion follows the command of the will is a matter of common experience, like other natural events”.²² Hume considers inner experience, that is, the relation of the will to the body, on the model of outer experience and the relations between objects. This, Biran argues, is a ‘naturalistic’, unjustified presupposition that deforms the entirety of Hume’s analysis; the relation between the will and a resistant term is certainly a fact, but it is not of “the same order as the other operations of external nature”.²³ The difference between inner and outer experience is, for Biran, radical, and conscious experience must be considered from a genuinely first-person perspective. Experience reveals that the most fundamental or ‘primitive fact [*fait primitif*]’ of consciousness is the unity in duality of will and resistance: will is what it is only in relation to resistance, and *vice versa*. This peculiar dual fact of effort is ‘primitive’ or basic, according to Biran’s voluntarist psychology, in the sense that it is the measure and extent of all consciousness; we are conscious only insofar as we are making an effort, however minimal and merely mental than effort may be. Yet we know of the ‘fact’ of effort, we are self-consciousness, not by means of

21 On Hume’s increasing concern with human agency as a possible origin of the idea of power in the *Treatise*, its Abstract, its Appendix and then in the first *Enquiry*, see, for example, Joshua M. Wood, “Hume and the Metaphysics of Agency”, *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 52/1 (2014) 87-112, 88.

22 I refer to Tom Beauchamp’s 2000 edition of Hume’s *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) with the abbreviation *EHU* followed by the chapter number and paragraph number. Here: *EHU* 7.10.

23 “That this is a fact is quite enough for us; but it is a fact of experience of the same order as the other operations of an external nature. I deny the equivalence. It is precisely this, it seems to me, that is the source of all those illusions that give heart to the sceptics”; *Oeuvres* vol. IV, *De l’aperception immédiate*, ed. I. Radrizzani (Paris: Vrin, 1995), 119.

perception, or by 'common experience' in Hume's terms, but rather by an 'immediate apperception', a form of awareness that is wholly different to objective knowledge.

Second, concerning the "influence of volitions over the organs of the body" Hume writes that "this influence ... can never be foreseen from any apparent energy or power in the cause, which connects it with the effect, and renders the one an infallible consequence of the other".²⁴ The argument, in separating volition from the 'consequent' movement, is that we have no experience of a causal relation or necessary connexion underlying the temporal succession of the two terms. Yet, for Biran, "the relation of *causality* is completely different to that of *succession*",²⁵ and the presupposition that causality, if it exists, must be a matter of succession is another unjustifiable motivation for the scepticism Hume seems to profess. The causal force or power in our action is not prior to the effect, but is rather present in it: "the internal energy of the cause is directly *felt (sentie)* in the effect or the movement produced".²⁶ Biran shares with Mumford and Anjum, then, the idea that causation is not a matter of succession but rather simultaneity.²⁷

24 *EHU* 7.10.

25 *De l'aperception immédiate*, 117.

26 *De l'aperception immédiate*, 119.

27 It should be noted, however, that Mumford and Anjum claim (*Getting Causes from Powers*, ch. 5) that this simultaneity also characterises causation in the objects of experience, whereas Biran maintains the Humean position according to which worldly processes are successive and that there is no force, power or necessity to be found in them.

Third, Hume holds that “we are so far from being immediately conscious” of how the mind affects the body “that it must forever escape our most diligent enquiry”.²⁸ We know neither why only some of our bodily organs can be directed by the ‘soul’, nor how the soul affects the parts that it can direct, particularly when we consider what “we learn from anatomy”, namely “that the immediate object of power in voluntary motion is not the member itself which is moved, but certain muscles, and nerves, and animal spirits, and, perhaps, something still more minute and unknown”.²⁹ We might think we feel an immediate power to move our limbs, but in physiological reality our will does not have to act on the limb as a whole, but rather on a host of intermediaries, beginning with the brain – and we have no immediate knowledge of this in experience. Biran responds first by attacking the claim that we have to know *how* the will moves the body in order for us to know *that* it moves the body.³⁰ We may as well claim, Biran argues, that we can see only if we know the physiological processes according to which we see, which is absurd. Moreover, to know and explain how the soul moves the body would amount to presenting an “external image or representation”³¹ of the

28 *EHU*, 7.10.

29 *EHU*, 7.14.

30 When Edward Craig holds that with this argument Hume employs a “gratuitously strong condition” (“The Idea of Necessary Connexion” in *Reading Hume on Human Understanding*, ed. P. Millican, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, 211-29, 216) for the possibility of discovering power in voluntary agency, he echoes Biran’s claim that what Hume “advances in the form of an incontestable argument is a purely gratuitous hypothesis” (*Oeuvres* vol. XI-2, *Commentaires et marginalia; dix-huitième siècle*, 7).

31 *Oeuvres* vol. XI-2, *Commentaires et marginalia; dix-huitième siècle*, 7.

relation of two separate entities – and such picture thinking can only obscure the primitive, inexplicable fact of voluntary consciousness as given in immediate apperception. It also obscures the primary nature of the human body: when moving my arm, Biran argues, I do indeed will to move my arm and act directly upon it; but this arm is not the physiological object the doctor examines, but rather my arm as belonging to *le corps propre*, to my own body, to my pre-objective body of which I am aware in internal apperception.

The basic position of Maine de Biran's philosophy, then, one that he will rework and refine in several failed attempts to write a masterwork over the next two decades, is this: there is an immediate apperception of power in its unity with resistance, and the primary resistant term is not the body as anatomical object, but rather the body as *le corps propre*. Accordingly, when Hume concludes that "our idea of power is not copied from any sentiment or consciousness of power within ourselves, when we give rise to animal motion, or apply our limbs to their proper use and office", Biran responds that he is insufficiently attentive to experience, and, in the end, denying an evident fact.³² Untested presuppositions and naturalistic theories have occluded the unity – a peculiar unity in duality – of agency.

For all that it is 'reunificationist', this appeal to experience certainly differs from Mumford and Anjum's in that Biran is more ready to develop the epistemological and ontological implications of a non-separatist conception of agency. Yet, as I have indicated, there is a more fundamental difference in their positions, since Biran explicitly argues that

³² *EHU* 7.15. Ultimately, such a denial cannot be met with an argument, as Biran will write in the *Essai sur les fondements de la psychologie*, written and re-written in the second and third decades of the century: "What should we say to someone who denies a visible or tangible fact? Perhaps nothing. We should only make him see or touch what he denies, and if he persists in saying that his senses lead him into error, all discussion will end there"; Maine de Biran, *Oeuvres* vol. VII, *Essai sur les fondements de la psychologie*, ed. F. C. T. Moore, Paris: Vrin, 2001, 165.

the force of the will in its unity with resistance is a matter of necessity: “the only necessary relation (*liaison*) is that which primitively occurs between a living force and a resistance or inertia”.³³ The claim is that in the exercise of the will we have a direct apprehension of an *a posteriori* necessity. Certainly, within the unity in duality of will and resistance, the necessity is not a necessary *connexion* – but, for Biran, it is necessity none the less: when I am willing to raise my arm, my arm *by necessity* rises. Mumford and Anjum would object that someone may have placed a straightjacket on me in my sleep, or that I may be standing in a gale, and thus my arm will not move in the way I intended. Yet, for Biran, if there is resistance, my effort will *necessarily* be having *some* effect, even if, from the outside, that effect is merely microscopic.

Of course, the cases of paralysis and phantom limbs that Hume invokes in the *Enquiry* may seem to represent counter-examples to this thesis:

A man, suddenly struck with palsy in the leg or arm, or who had newly lost those members, frequently endeavours, at first to move them, and employ them in their usual offices. Here he is as much conscious of power to command such limbs, as a man in perfect health is conscious of power to actuate any member which remains in its natural state and condition. But consciousness never deceives. Consequently, neither in the one case nor in the other, are we ever conscious of any power. We learn the influence of our will from experience alone. And experience only teaches us, how one event constantly follows another; without instructing us in the secret connexion, which binds them together, and renders them inseparable.³⁴

Biran denies, however, that what we describe “*only in an improper sense*” as the ‘endeavours’, i.e. the ‘efforts’ of the paralysed person to move, “are determined in the same way and by the same immediate principle as

³³ *De l'aperception immédiate*, 120.

³⁴ *EHU*, 7.13.

before the loss of the member or of its use [...]”. They are not determined by the same principle because “there is here rather a desire to move than an explicit act of will, and there is no real power exercised or felt”;³⁵ in these cases, there is no willing or volition present at all. The paralysed person can wish or desire to move her arm, but not will to do it – and the apparent feeling of his command over the limb is merely a function of memory and thus wholly different to the apperception of force in actual effort.³⁶ It is perhaps not “implausible to claim that someone in such circumstances *could* have an experience of volition”,³⁷ but, from Biran’s perspective, it possesses this veneer of plausibility only on the grounds of a ‘separatist’ and successive conception of agency. Once we recognise that the will is what it is only insofar as it meets resistance in movement, the idea that the paralysed person wills to move her arm becomes much more questionable.

Maine de Biran, in any case, sees necessity, but Mumford and Anjum tendency or inclination, in a reunificationist account of agency. How would the French philosopher respond to Mumford and Anjum’s appeal to the phenomena of failure and prevention, to the defeasibility of intentions? It seems clear that he would object that Mumford and Anjum have failed to

35 *Commentaires et marginalia, Oeuvres* vol. XI-2, ed. C. Frémont (Paris: Vrin, 1993), 11-12.

36 Anna Devarieux (*L’individualité persévérante* Grenoble: Millon, 2004, 60) is right to take issue with F. C. T. Moore’s claim that this aspect of Biran’s response to Hume is “lamentably obscure” (*The Psychology of Maine de Biran*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970, 97).

37 Joshua M. Wood, ‘Hume and the Metaphysics of Agency’, 101. Wood is concerned simply “to establish that there is *some* merit to Hume’s claim that volition and action are separable” (96), rather than to defeat the arguments offered by philosophers including Mumford and Anjum (to whom he refers) against Hume’s sceptical analysis.

recognise “what distinguishes the primitive facts furnished by inner experience from the secondary or derived facts that habit alone or repeated induction can erect as laws of nature”.³⁸ The realisation of my intentions, as Hume had already argued, is a matter of external fact, a matter of objective experience, and I have a sense of whether my intention is likely to be realised only through having tried such a thing in the past. In any action, my intention, of course, may fail – but this takes nothing away from the primary or primitive necessity of my will having an immediate effect on my body. Playing pool, I intend to pot the black, and if I am in the habit of playing, then it is, perhaps, likely but by no means certain that I will succeed; but if I do try to pot the black, i.e. if there is effort, my will necessarily has an effect on my body. That is, Maine de Biran helps us to see that Mumford and Anjum base their analysis on a secondary phenomenon that is given only in objective or ‘external’ experience. Small wonder, then, that their claims concerning a direct experience of the dispositional modality in the experience of agency are hardly convincing – they attempt to persuade us that we have an inner, proprioceptive experience of an aspect of action that is only given in outer experience. In short, Mumford and Anjum make an illegitimate, unjustifiable claim about the dispositional modality by passing over a more fundamental or primitive modality of powers. One could put the problem this way: I can fail to realise my intentions, but I cannot fail to will what I will.

3. *Ravaisson on Habit as a Disposition*

In no way do I pretend, here, to have shown that Maine de Biran offers decisive and definitive arguments against Hume’s sceptical construal of agency. My aspiration stretches no further than to have shown, with Maine de Biran, that the defeasibility of intentions has no bearing on the

³⁸ Biran, *Oeuvres* vol. XI-2, *Commentaires et marginalia; dix-huitième siècle*, 8.

primary, original modal value of voluntary action. Now, if this were the only way in which nineteenth-century French philosophy was relevant for our purposes, we would be led to the wholly negative response that in action there is no direct experience of inclination or tendency, of any kind of dispositional modality irreducible to necessity and possibility. However, in the work of Félix Ravaisson, Maine de Biran's principal successor and inheritor in the 'spiritualist' tradition of French philosophy, we find grounds for a more positive response to Mumford and Anjum's claims. For in his 1838 *De l'habitude* Ravaisson argues that there is a direct experience of tendency or inclination – a direct experience, thus, of a 'dispositional modality'. Yet this experience is not available in purely voluntary action, Ravaisson argues, but rather in the principle that we have just seen Biran invoke, in a Humean fashion, to account for the origin of our ideas of 'laws' of nature, namely habit.

Of course, the idea that an account of inclination as irreducible to causal necessity can be gained from an analysis of habit, and motor habits in particular, may seem counter-intuitive. If, as is often the case in modern philosophy, we think of acquired habits as mechanical and lifeless – as, in Henri Bergson's memorable phrase, *the fossilised residue of a spiritual activity* – then nothing would seem to separate habit from the apparent necessity of mechanical causation.³⁹ Yet it is precisely this classically modern conception of habit as a mechanical principle of action that Ravaisson opposes. A physical action – say, learning how to drive or pronounce the words of a foreign language – by means of its repetition, becomes, as Ravaisson characteristically puts it, *less and less* voluntary, *less and less* deliberate and conscious. It does not, for all that, "become the mechanical effect of an external impulse, but rather the effect of an

39 Henri Bergson, "La vie et l'oeuvre de Ravaisson" in *La pensée et le mouvant, Oeuvres* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1959), 253-291, 267. On the basis of this phrase Bergson substantially misinterprets Ravaisson's thinking; on this point see Dominique Janicaud, *Ravaisson et la métaphysique: une généalogie du spiritualisme français* (Paris: Vrin, 1997).

inclination that follows from the will".⁴⁰ The acquisition of a motor habit does not consist in the transformation of an originally voluntary movement into a dead mechanism; it rather involves more of the movement becoming *inclined*. It is not even the case – as we might be tempted to think – that more and more parts of the movement become mechanical, and that more and more of a movement escapes voluntary control; it is rather that more and more of the movement takes on a life of its own, a life or spontaneity that is continuous with rather than antithetical to voluntary decision. This life or spontaneity is precisely what Ravaissou thinks of as inclination or tendency, as a pre-theoretical – or post-theoretical – orientation to goals or possibilities that were previously posited in reflective consciousness.⁴¹

An acquired habit is not merely a “state”, as Ravaissou announces in the introduction to his work, but “a disposition, a virtue”, and the idea of a disposition is here thought in an active, tendential sense.⁴² An acquired habit tends towards, is inclined towards its manifestations, and although Ravaissou does not explicitly write of a ‘dispositional modality’, he certainly aims to elucidate the nature of tendency or inclination by distinguishing its modal status from traditional ideas of necessity and possibility. If habitual inclination can be understood in terms of possibility, then rather than an intellectual conception of possibility as conceivability,

40 Ravaissou, *Of Habit*, 55.

41 Ravaissou does not deny that some habits – particularly bad habits – can be acquired without first being fully conscious and deliberate acts. His descriptions of habits beginning with consciously posited and explicit goals is a function of his concern to reveal how habit is continuous with the will and consciousness, but these descriptions do not amount to the assertion that habits have to be acquired in this way. Morally speaking, however, Ravaissou may well be too optimistic about the role of habit in the good life. On this point, see Clare Carlisle, “Between Freedom and Necessity: Félix Ravaissou on Habit and the Moral Life”, *Inquiry* 53/2 (2010) 123-145.

inclinations are a matter of possibility in this sense having become incorporated or realised:

In reflection and will, the end of movement is an idea, an ideal to be accomplished ... It is a possibility to be realised. But as the end becomes fused with the movement, and the movement with the tendency, possibility, the ideal is realised in it.⁴³

A habit as a disposition has, as Mumford and Anjum would say, a limited class of outcomes, and so these outcomes are not simply possible in any typical sense of logical possibility or even of 'real' or 'metaphysical' possibility. Yet Ravaisson attempts to account for this limited sense of possibility in terms of a vital spontaneity, obscure activity – obscure because no longer fully conscious – or desire that is realised in the habitual movement and, thus, in the habitual agent. In the acquisition of a motor habit, "inclinations ... become more and more the form, the way of being, even the very being of those organs" used to perform the movement; the "spontaneity of desire is dispersed in some way ... within the indeterminate multiplicity of the organism."⁴⁴

42 Ravaisson, *Of Habit*, 25. In a recent essay concerning, principally, Aquinas and Leibniz, Paul Hoffman ("Reasons, Causes, and Inclinations" in *Emotion and Cognitive Life in Medieval and Early-Modern Philosophy*, eds. M. Pickavé and L. Shapiro, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, 156-175) has attempted to distinguish inclinations from habits: "I am tempted ... to conclude that we should not think of inclinations, as the term is used by these philosophers, to be dispositions or habits to act in a certain way. That is, they are not like being soluble or like being a smoker. Instead we should think of them as incipient actions or movements that will have a certain outcome unless something intervenes." (161). Yet the example of smoking hardly serves the purposes of this tendentially non-tendential interpretation of dispositions and habits, for faced with cigarettes, a smoker, it seems clear, will smoke unless something else comes to intervene, namely the will.

43 *Of Habit*, 55.

44 *Of Habit*, 57.

Concerning necessity, Ravaisson writes:

habit is not an external necessity of constraint, but a necessity of attraction and desire. It is, indeed, a law, a *law of the limbs*, which follows on from the freedom of spirit. But this law is a law of *grace*. It is the final cause that increasingly predominates over efficient causality and which absorbs the latter into itself. And at that point, indeed, the end and the principle, the fact and the law, are fused together within necessity.⁴⁵

An acquired habit, on this account, is not something external to me, a principle wholly independent of the will, and thus what we might call, *faute de mieux*, the ‘necessity’ in the force of habit is not the iron rule of mechanical necessity. It is the incorporation of a purpose or final cause into nature, a nature that becomes the ‘second nature’ of the habitual agent. Thus, as Ravaisson puts it in a sentence that responds to traditional ideas of both necessity and possibility, habit is “at once active and passive, equally opposed to mechanical Fatality and to reflective Freedom”.⁴⁶

Although Ravaisson does not explicitly discuss a form of modality irreducible to any idea of necessity or possibility, it does no violence to his thinking to see in it a conception of what Mumford and Anjum termed a ‘dispositional modality’ – a dispositional modality that is given directly in experience. Maine de Biran had argued that in effort there is a direct apperception of the force of the will in its unity with resistance; and Ravaisson develops Biran’s position by arguing that in the *decline* of effort in the acquisition of a habit there is an apperception of this voluntary force becoming less and less voluntary, and more and more spontaneous.⁴⁷

45 *Of Habit*, 55.

46 *Of Habit*, 55.

47 Ravaisson develops Biran’s own tentative hypotheses about the principle of habit as an ‘obscure activity’, some of which he added to his early prize-winning dissertation on the *Influence sur l’habitude sur la faculté de penser* before its

Certainly, this development of Biran's argument involves a methodological difficulty, for it involves the attempt to describe within conscious philosophical reflection that which by its nature begins to transcend conscious awareness, namely inclination. Yet Ravaisson appeals to our experience of *becoming* habituated, of *becoming* inclined, as an experience wherein we at least glimpse a kind of vital spontaneity of inclination that is continuous with the will and consciousness. It is precisely this experience that, Ravaisson argues, both 'intellectualist' and 'realist' or physiological interpretations of habit acquisition are unable to account for.⁴⁸

Moreover, Mumford and Anjum's idea that the dispositional modality forms a spectrum accommodating material, *de re* necessity and real possibility is not foreign to Ravaisson's thinking: the modality of tendency or inclination, he argues, is primary in that it forms a continuum underlying ideas of mechanical necessity and pure contingency. Motor habits can become *less and less* voluntary, *less and less* conscious, only because there exists an infinitely graduated scale between the freedom of thought and will and the apparent inertia of body. The experience of habit acquisition is the experience of degrees of freedom and voluntary activity according to a continuum – that Ravaisson names 'desire' – underlying our abstract oppositions of reflective thought to extended matter. Hence

publication in 1802, and which are missing from the English translation. On this development see Chapter 1 of Dominique Janicaud, *Ravaisson et la métaphysique*.

48 Ravaisson's attempt to steer between 'intellectualist' and 'realist' or physiological accounts of motor habit acquisition will, of course, be taken up by later French thinkers such as Merleau-Ponty. Yet although it is certainly the case that Merleau-Ponty appeals in the phenomena of habit "to a kind of understanding or know-how located in the body that is outside the space of reasons and outside the realm of mechanical causes", as Paul Hoffman puts it ("Reasons, Causes and Inclinations", 158), this does not directly involve an idea – Ravaisson's idea – of habit as inclination or tendency.

Ravaisson can claim that reflection on habit is an essential philosophical method, “the only real method ... for the estimation, by a *convergent infinite series*, of the relation, real in itself, but incommensurable in the understanding, of Nature and Will”.⁴⁹ Our idea of a pure, mechanical nature and a pure will are merely ideas deriving from the experience of a continuum that can never descend into absolute mechanical necessity.

This applies not just to human nature but to nature as a whole, and Ravaisson also shares with Mumford and Anjum the idea that psychological reflection can offer a guiding thread for a general metaphysics; by the “most powerful of analogies” we can deduce that the continuum underlying the relation of mind to body is present throughout nature as a whole. Tendency or inclination is present in the natural world from the ground up; what might look like dead mechanical necessity at the lowest levels of inanimate nature is – according to Ravaisson’s activist and Leibnizian interpretation of inertia⁵⁰ – still an expression of inclination or tendency. In this way, reflection on habit allows Ravaisson to claim that “the primordial law and the most general form of being is the tendency of persevere in the very actuality that constitutes being”.⁵¹ Habitual tendencies are but a higher, more intelligent expression of this basic law of being; and, conversely, on this basis it becomes possible to claim that the apparent laws of nature are, in the end, just consolidated habits – and this not simply because of how *we* tend to *think* about things.

49 *Of Habit*, 59.

50 In the first part of *De l’habitude* Ravaisson offers a general philosophy of nature which begins from the apparently inanimate, inert realm of matter, and he attempts here to show how inertia as force is continuous with the force of life and thus that it is not simply mechanical.

51 *Of Habit*, 77.

The parallels between the respective projects of Ravaisson and the authors of *Getting Causes from Powers*, then, are several – and yet they are just that, parallels, because Mumford and Anjum advance merely a negative notion of tendencies or inclinations in terms of their manifestations not being necessary and not just being possible, and because they claim to locate a positive experience of the dispositional modality in an aspect of agency of which there is no immediate, proprioceptive experience. Mumford and Anjum are certainly right to underline that the dispositional modality, if it exists, is primitive, *sui generis* and unanalysable, but Ravaisson, I contend, points us in a more convincing way to a positive experience of it. Mumford and Anjum attempt to find something positive in failure, but fail to do so, whereas Ravaisson points us to a direct experience of being, as it were, carried away by an inclination. To be sure, the problem remains of what we can say about this positive experience of inclination, given its primitive and *sui generis* nature. Yet the metaphysics that Ravaisson presents in *Of Habit* – particularly his ideas of the habituated body and of the continuum underlying traditional oppositions of mind and body – attempts to render intelligible how inclination could be a force that is not a mechanical force, a force that may not come to realise itself for reasons other than that another force overcomes it.

To conclude, my argument concerning the claims of Mumford and Anjum amounts simply to this: if we want to find a positive experience of a dispositional modality irreducible to the traditional modalities of necessity and possibility, then we first have to examine our experience of what we ordinarily speak of as tendencies or inclinations. Reflection on purely voluntary agency will not provide us with what we are looking for. At one stage in their argument, Mumford and Anjum do mention action that they take to be not wholly voluntary. When criticising ‘volitionism’ and its improbable assertion that all my bodily movements – when, for example, playing football or driving a car – are governed by particular and preceding acts of will, they hold that it is not “necessary for an act to be

intentional”,⁵² which is to say that in action there is a form of intelligence that cannot be reduced to explicit acts of the mind. Yet they do not develop this point by offering a phenomenology of skilled or habitual experience, and they do not illuminate the difference between power or capacities in general and tendencies or inclinations in particular. Yet if, following Ravaisson, we begin our inquiries in the metaphysics of powers with inclinations in this narrow sense, we do not, to be sure, have to remain within the confines of a philosophy of only a particular subset of powers, at least not when we follow his argument – one with which Mumford and Anjum concur – that all dispositions, even the least tendential of capacities, are to some degree a function of being-inclined.

52 *Getting Causes from Powers*, 205.