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## Cabanis' physiological researches - Meaning and scope in relationship with the political dimension of human life

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*Paris, date 24<sup>th</sup> May 2016*

*I would like to submit to Gesnerus the following contribution:*

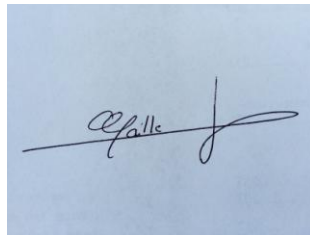
*Cabanis' physiological researches - Meaning and scope in relationship with the political dimension of human life*

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*See the Author's form*

*With my best regards*

*Marie Gaille*

A handwritten signature in black ink on a light blue background. The signature is cursive and appears to read 'M. Gaille'.

## **Title page**

**Title:** Cabanis' physiological researches - Meaning and scope in relationship with the political dimension of human life

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## Summary and keywords

### Summary

Cabanis established a connection between three philosophical crucial issues: the relationship between body and soul, body and mind; the status and place occupied by medicine into politics; the content of anthropological theory. To him, an understanding of the moral dimension of human existence can be gained only on the basis of knowledge of the physical person. The focus of this contribution is the meaning and scope of Cabanis' materialistic anthropology. On the basis of a commentary of the *Rapports* and of Cabanis' previous works, it highlights the attention paid by Cabanis to the complex processes and interactions that give birth to the moral manifestations of human life. It allows to depart from a linear interpretation of his main thesis. This contribution also aims at proposing an analysis of the place granted to physiological knowledge in regard of the specific goals pursued by political bodies, in a complementary approach to Staum's interpretation of Cabanis' thought.

Keywords: medicine, physiology, anthropology, politics,

## **Cabanis' physiological researches**

### **- Meaning and scope in relationship with the political dimension of human life -**

Pierre Jean Georges Cabanis (1757-1808) is a bit of an oddity, as a philosophical figure. He was part of a group that dedicated itself to concrete sciences and positive facts rather than speculation (Moravia 1981, viii). Trained in medicine, Cabanis himself was deeply engaged in the political discussions of his time, publishing essays on prisons, hospitals, and treatment institutions, as well as epistemological writings. Often presented as an important member, if not the most important one, of the French ideologists, the “idéologues”, he appears as being part of a group of various people: “philosophers and literary men, psychologists and physicians, historians and geographers, anthropologists and travellers, who lived in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” (ibid, vii).

In the history of philosophical thought, this group is often viewed as largely unknown, or, at best, considered as a minor element (ibid., vii). It has even become a *cliché* to remind of this status (Citton 2013, 21). This group of “idéologues” was proposed such a name by one of its members, Destutt de Tracy, who intended to describe the contributors to a science of ideas and sensations (1992, 71). Staum proposed to characterize it by its ambition to elaborate a science of ideas (their formation, expression and combination), to study the physiological basis of psychology, and to contribute to ethics, politics and economics (1980, 4). In addition, Staum stressed the fact that the members of this group were strongly related to each other and had political kinship, especially in the support to a moderate republic after 1794 and an opposition to Bonaparte after 1801 (Ibid., 5).

This contribution is inspired by the conviction that philosophers could benefit from a better knowledge of Cabanis' works. This was already underlined about the notions of health and disease (Saad 1997). Cabanis also proposes original and meaningful answers to issues that are crucial to

philosophers: namely, the relationship between body and soul, body and mind; the status and place occupied by medicine into politics; the content of anthropological theory (Moravia 1974 and 1982). Cabanis formulated his own view about these various issues and above all, he established a relationship between them with significant epistemological, anthropological and political implications. To him, an understanding of the moral dimension of human existence can be gained only on the basis of knowledge of the physical person, the word “moral” being broadly used to describe the various operations of intelligence and will (Cabanis 1956c; Clauzade 1998, 48). This thesis confers a prominent place to physiology in the understanding of human morality understood as indicated above.

Before, during and after the revolution, Cabanis occupied himself almost exclusively with medicine. He intended to answer the question of whether medicine could become a rigorous science (Moravia 1982). His wish was to see medicine resist the recurring attempts of subordinating it “either to the *esprit du système* of metaphysics of various kinds, or to laws and methods of other natural disciplines” (Moravia 1981, xiv). If medicine could develop in the proper direction, that of an “explanation of natural phenomena on the sole basis of controllable empirical data” (ibid., xvi), then it could become an epistemological model for philosophy and claim its primacy as an anthropological knowledge.

By asserting that ideas and judgments, feelings and passions must be understood in terms of the organic conditions which give rise to them, Cabanis’s philosophy appears to be a response to the fundamental question of the relationships between soul and body, mind and body. The position he stated on this matter was inherited from Lockean empiricism, as he himself noted. From this standpoint, Cabanis is presented as one of the proponents of materialism and of a critique of the dualism connected to Cartesianism: “what the 19<sup>th</sup> century called the materialism of Cabanis (...) stuck to his skin like a shirt of Nessus.” (Teyssie 1981, 2).

This decisive dimension of his thought has been examined in several perspectives. One focuses on

his personal trajectory (education, political involvement, professional and social positions) in order to give an account of his theoretical choices and to situate them between the 1770s and the 1810s (Williams 1994; Chappey 2001, 2006; Arosio 2009). The works by S. Moravia are cornerstones for this account. They contextualized Cabanis' thought in the wider period of the Enlightenment: Moravia relates Cabanis' questions to the Enlightenment especially in relationship with anthropology, psychology and theory of knowledge (1971 and 1982). In this large period of time that embraces the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the scientific context is of a particular importance to give an interpretation of Cabanis' epistemology and medical thought (Levin 1984; Saad 2004). Another perspective has stressed the importance of the European scale in order to give a proper interpretation of Cabanis' thought and of its influence (Mitchell 1979; Deane 1988; Saad 2015). The relationship of Cabanis to German anthropology appears as particularly crucial to this perspective and still requires further study (Buchenau and Gaille 2014; Saad 2015).

In this contribution, we intend to come back on the meaning and scope of Cabanis' materialistic anthropology. The point at stake here is not the consistency of his materialism. On this matter, we follow Staum's interpretation: Cabanis readers must probably accept that he "blended" various medical and philosophical traditions in such a way that his materialism could combine with Montpellier vitalism; they have to consider that his materialism is distinctively biomedical (1980, 8-9). We would rather like to offer some elements of understanding that allow to break with the somehow simplistic and negative interpretation of Cabanis' materialism based on his affirmation that the brain "secretes" the ideas just as the stomach secretes certain gastric juices (Canguilhem 1971 and 1993). Cabanis indeed expressed such a perspective. However, its significance is far from obvious (Moravia 1981, xviii). In Cabanis' works, the thesis that moral knowledge is medically founded actually unfolds itself in the examination of complex processes and interactions. We will argue that the study of these processes is as important as the knowledge of their result, that is the "production" of feelings, passions, ideas and judgments. They imply intermediate phases in this production and interplays between the sympathy instinct and intellectual operations. The attention

Cabanis dedicated to these processes prevents us from following Canguilhem's interpretation of Cabanis. In addition, Cabanis's writings contain a political dimension that cannot be ignored. Its importance was well acknowledged (Staum 1980; Keel 2002). The relationship between "Cabanis the physician" and "Cabanis the social therapist" was one of the major topics in Staum's work (1980, 5). He intended to "explore the relationship between Cabanis's philosophy and his politics in the context of the Revolution » (Ibid., 9). His study clearly related Cabanis' materialism to the political dimension of his work. However, we need to understand how medicine and politics combine with each other in Cabanis' thought. On this matter, Staum's focus on medical and political analogies does not allow us to understand fully why the physician's competences and knowledge are essential to politics and in the same time, why politics is not reducible to medicine. In order to tackle these two issues – that if the nature of his materialism and its combination with politics, we shall begin with a review of the main stages and terms of the formulation of his thesis about a medically founded anthropology (section I). We will then go on to examine the meaning and scope of what Cabanis views as physiological researches (section II). Finally, we shall show how the medical competences based on such researches articulate with the political dimension of human life (section III).

### **I. Articulating physical and moral knowledge of human beings**

To comment on Cabanis's materialism, the reference is often made only to his *Rapports du physique et du moral de l'homme* (1802) [from now on *Rapports*]. *Les Rapports*, Cabanis' most well known book, was written over a period that lasted several years. Cabanis read the first six chapters to the Institute in 1796-97, and then continued writing and revising his work until 1802. In this work, physiology was presented as the "foundation" of moral knowledge of human beings. Cabanis advocated for a physiological understanding of "anthropology".

However, Cabanis asserted his materialistic position very early, even before the French Revolution.



It was presented in epistemological writings intended to summarize the content of medical knowledge or its status in relation to the other sciences. Over the years, his statement underwent various significant modifications. Before taking into account its final formulation in the *Rapports*, let us first come back to the earlier writings in order to examine Cabanis' initial attempts to elaborate and ground his medical anthropology.

In the epistemological reflection, Cabanis developed prior to the French Revolution, on the relationship between medicine and certain types of knowledge, he expressed his thesis very clearly. *Du Degré de certitude en médecine* affirmed that medicine is “the basis of all good rational philosophy” in that it provides us with “knowledge of the laws of the living machine,” in both healthy and pathological conditions.<sup>1</sup> Cabanis explicitly described the special role played by medicine in relation to morality: medicine “shows us, naked, the whole physical man, of which moral man is himself only one part or, if you like, another side” (Cabanis 1956a, 36). This work also contained a brief explanation of how Cabanis established the relationship between physical and moral man, based on the concept that passions, like ideas, *are born* or *are formed* – he was still unsure of the proper expression – from physical sensibility. Therefore, an analysis of “organic states” appeared as essential to an understanding of moral behaviours (like that of judgments of understanding, in fact).

Seven years later, in 1795, he took up that thesis again, in *Considérations générales sur les révolutions de l'art de guérir*, a work that was later renamed *Coup d'œil sur les révolutions et sur la réforme de la médecine*. It had incorporated the concept of anthropology, and related medicine to a science of man, including but not limited to its moral dimension: “The general picture of human nature is divided into two principal parts: its physical history, and its moral history. The result of methodically combining them and indicating the many points where the two touch each other and are blurred is what could be called the *science of man*, or *anthropology*, according to the Germans' expression.” (Cabanis 1956b, 77).

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<sup>1</sup> The translations from Cabanis' works are original except for the *Rapports*, for which we used the Mora edition (1980).

In this picture, one of the two histories is more prominent than the other: because “the physical part” forms “the fundamental outline” of the moral part. Now, Cabanis suggested that we define the articulation between the physical and moral parts differently. Instead of two sides (moral and physical), Cabanis saw a two-part picture, one part of which he considered to be the “fundamental outline” of the other. In the same book, the idea of medicine as the basis for moral knowledge was reiterated in the chapter devoted to moral philosophy: “we have already acknowledged above that all of the moral sciences must be based on physical knowledge of man” (Cabanis 1956b, 247).

*Les Rapports* had an epistemological ambition. However, Cabanis did not return to the subject he touched upon in *Du degré de certitude en médecine*. In a different way, he was driven by the question of the relationship between the various branches of human knowledge. His decision was justified in light of the context in which his thinking was unfolding. In 1796, he was admitted to the Institute’s class in moral sciences, in the section “analysis of ideas.” Cabanis referred to the significance of this enrollment and to the introduction of medicine into the field of philosophical and moral reflection. More fundamentally, his ambition in this work may be related to the Baconian questioning on the unity of science. Cabanis put it forth as the basis of his understanding, associating it more generally with the *Idéologues* (1956c, 125). The epistemological perspective of the *Rapports* was also supported by a firmly stated determination to put ideas and knowledge in the proper order, “the natural order,” and to avoid a degeneration of philosophical reflection into “metaphysics” due to sloppiness in the classification of its analyses.<sup>2</sup>

A combination of this determination to classify the branches of knowledge correctly and the consideration of the unity of knowledge led Cabanis to reiterate the thesis already stated several times in his earlier writings: the only method for the acquisition of moral knowledge borrows from the study of physical phenomena. Physical knowledge of man is “the basis” shared by philosophy

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<sup>2</sup> In this respect, as Cabanis’s ambition was assigning order to ideas, and his relationship to mathematics was ambivalent. He referred to the field in positive terms when his subject was classification, because his method was related to the rigorous series of statements in a mathematical proof (1956c, 118). However, he refused to admit that mathematics should play an exclusive and predominant role in the definition of the medical art. He frequently insisted on the uncertainty that always confronts the physician.

and morality (1956c, 126). In fact, Cabanis presented the *Rapports* as the summary of a set of “physiological investigations” on the subject (1956c, 121). Feelings, passions, ideas and judgments referred *in fine* to the study of organic life. The outcome of physiological research was therefore an anthropological perspective, as Cabanis had noted as early as 1795:

“Permit me, therefore, citizens, to address you today on the relations of the physical study of man to the study of the processes of his intellect; on those of the systematic development of his organs with the analogous development of his sentiment and his passions, relations from which it clearly results that physiology, analysis of ideas, and ethics are but the three branches of a single science, which may be justly be called THE SCIENCE OF MAN (1) [it is this that the Germans call ANTHROPOLOGIE, and by which they include, in fact, the three main subjects of which we are speaking] (Cabanis 1981, 33).”

Moreover, in the *Rapports*, the thesis on medical knowledge as the foundation for moral knowledge acquired a hitherto unstated historical lineage. Cabanis referred to Hippocrates as the one that brought philosophy into medicine, and medicine into philosophy (Saad 2000). In addition, he established the statement as heir to an important philosophical legacy, the fatherhood of which he attributes chiefly to Locke. The earlier thinkers he mentioned are Aristotle, Democritus, Epicurus, Bacon, and Hobbes; later ones are Helvetius and Condillac (1956c, 111). All of them acknowledged physical knowledge as the basis for moral knowledge. Mentioning this philosophical heritage allowed Cabanis to insist on medicine as the spinal column of philosophical thinking and to integrate this dimension in a long run historical view of philosophy.

## **II. The results of the “physiological researches”: the knowledge of human needs and understanding of the emergence of passions and ideas**

We would now like to understand the meaning contained in the ideas of “physical knowledge” and of “physiological researches”, according to the words chosen in the *Rapports*. As previously, we do not only focus on this work, but intend to give an account of this meaning throughout its elaboration through Cabanis’ writings from the end of the 1780’ on.

From the outset, *Du degré de certitude en médecine* suggested that physical knowledge should be considered as broadly as possible. In this work, even though Cabanis had not yet referred to the study of human nature in the German sense of the term, he had something much greater in mind than the study of the life of the organs *stricto sensu*. He offered a portrait of the human condition in the flesh. He described death as “the inevitable end of life,” pain, and pleasure, that is to say, human life as bound to the perspective of death and to the possibility of suffering and disease (Cabanis 1956a, 38). Human beings were also considered in relation to their “sensibility” – a concept to which Cabanis would later grant crucial importance (Moravia 1974).

In this text, Cabanis also introduced a consideration on the subject of the capacity for empathy that he would enlarge upon in his later writings. Even though the idea is expressed only briefly, it is important to note, because it would later play an essential part in the moral knowledge of human beings. According to him, more than anyone else, the physician is driven by his empathy, his attention to any man, rich or poor, powerful or weak (Cabanis 1956 a, 101).<sup>3</sup> However, as early as 1789, Cabanis conceived the idea that empathetic attention for the life of the other was not specific to the physician, although physicians did express it prominently in the practice of their professional skills.

Cabanis also evoked empathy in political writings, such as the *Observations sur les hôpitaux*, in which poverty was perceived as arousing “sensitive souls” in general (1956e, 3 and 28). The presence of this idea in writings of quite different nature could simply be attributed to the fact that they were drafted at the same time, between 1788 and 1789. Nevertheless, we must not underestimate the impact of Cabanis’ own political experience and observations, apt to demonstrate the practical and moral effect of this sensibility. The conviction that one person is sensitive to the life of another person - an element we gain from physical knowledge of the other - is supported by the observation of social relations.

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<sup>3</sup> Four years before he wrote *Du degré de certitude en médecine*, Cabanis took the Hippocratic oath, stipulating that his main priority was healing the poor: “I swear (...) that my tender pity and consoling care, Will be devoted above all to solitary woe, And to the poor man’s hut will they go” (Cabanis 1956d, 301).

*Quelques principes et quelques vues sur les secours publics*, composed after the Revolution, between 1791 and 1793, seemed to confirm this analysis. Devoted to enlarging upon the theme of sensibility, this work tied it to the idea of sharing the affections of other sensitive beings:

“Man is a sensitive creature: his sensitivity is the instrument whereby outer objects make an impression upon him; it is the principle of his needs; the decisive cause of his wills and appetites; in a word, man lives only because he feels. Within him, the faculty to feel is joined to the faculty of sharing the affections of other sensitive beings, especially those of creatures similar to him. Rather, these two faculties are identified and combined in his organization, and the combination of the two forges the nature of his sensitivity. The sight of suffering or misery moves the human entrails: a prompt return to ourselves of the ills we witness warns us of those we may feel. A vivid feeling associates us with this anguish, in a way, as if it were personal. We have a need to share them with our compassion, to soften them with our assistance (Cabanis 1956f, 5).”

Here, it is important to note the use of the word “entrails” by Cabanis, because it tends to immerse us in the heart of human physiology, bringing to life the idea that moral knowledge rests upon physical knowledge. Hence, Cabanis could assert that resistance to this empathetic attention is against nature. If human beings refuse to yield to it, they are in conflict with themselves. As indicated in the chapter devoted to veterinary medicine in *Coup d’œil sur les révolutions et sur la réforme de la médecine*, this empathetic attention even extends to the consideration of animal life. According to Cabanis, our interest enjoins us to care for and preserve animals, but beyond that, human sensibility invites us to lavish this empathetic attention on animals, full-fledged members of the “human family”, due not only to the fact that they share in human labour but also because animals themselves are sensitive (Cabanis 1956b, 328).

Later on, the *Rapports* developed this perspective. They also defined it more precisely by further analysing the notion of sensibility. As we saw earlier, Cabanis acknowledged his kinship to a certain number of philosophers, especially Locke, in the idea according to which physical knowledge is the basis for moral knowledge. Nevertheless, Cabanis also indicated that this kinship contained certain deficiencies, to his way of thinking, especially in relation to the concept of “sensibility”. Following Montpellier physicians as well as Diderot, Cabanis granted primary

conceptual status in his *Rapports*. For him, sensibility was the essential reference for any account of human nature, including such moral phenomena as sympathy (Moravia 1974, 187).

Human “needs” were described within the examination of the notion of sensibility. As we learned from *Du degré de certitude en médecine*, these needs are not only organic ones. The *Rapports* explicitly stated that there were two types of needs: “physical” and “moral,” and that both were rooted in human physiology. The former are directly related to it and the latter indirectly (Cabanis 1956c, 156-157). Both engender relationships between human beings, relationships that are the source of an essential enjoyment of human life: “it is soon recognized that the only side on which his pleasures can be extended indefinitely is that of his relations with those that are like him – that his existence becomes broader in the measure in which he becomes involved in their emotions and makes them share those that move him” (Cabanis 1981, 17).

The physiological investigations in which Cabanis engaged therefore led him to assert that the life of relationships was consubstantial to human existence and deserved to be considered as a primary human need, like eating and sleeping, essential to life and happiness. In light of the *Rapports*, empathetic attention to the lives of other humans and to those of animals, the subject of Cabanis’ earlier writings, appears to be an important facet of this relational life. Its mooring in nature is reinforced by the introduction of the notion of need, at the same time as it is encompassed in a vaster array of manifestations of human sociality.

By cultivating the physical knowledge of human beings to gain an understanding of their moral dimension, Cabanis was led to suggest an altogether original conception of “personal interest”. Far from tending towards man’s selfish, egocentric penchants, it was conceived in connection with this need for relations, visible in the vital dependency of the newborn and the child upon the care lavished upon him, but also in the pleasure men take in social intercourse, and in their relationships with all sensitive species. A lecture intended for a group of medical students explicitly stated this point. The *Discours de clôture* concluding the course on Hippocrates recused a social, moral, and

political vision of egocentric man, in the name of physiological knowledge itself:

“Humans, who remain in the bosoms of their families throughout a long childhood, are then later maintained within society as a whole by their needs and their feelings of weakness. They find security, release, and a flood of enduring enjoyment only in unity, and in cooperating with others for the common interest. Moreover, because they are attracted to their own kind by the powerful cord of sympathy, they derive their sweetest pleasures from this mutual existence. The greatest happiness to which our natures are susceptible is doubtless the arousal of happiness in the nature of another being. Hence, moral and virtue are directly driven by self-interest, irrespective of any crude calculation of needs.” (Cabanis 1956g, 322).

In the *Rapports*, Cabanis also built upon this conception of the life of relationships to formulate what he saw as a basic difference between the sexes. Although the need for congress with their own kind is universal among human beings, Cabanis held women, as nurses to infants and to the bedridden, to be exemplary illustrations of the social nature of humanity. Cabanis insisted that, based on gender, the sensibilities differed. In his opinion, feminine sensibility is lively, light, fluttering, and therefore the best adapted to the care of newborns and the weak and bedridden, whereas masculine sensibility is lumbering and awkward. “She [the woman] is aware of the slightest cry, the slightest gesture, the slightest movement of the face or the eyes. She runs, she flies, she is everywhere, she thinks of everything, she provides for even the most fleeting fantasy” (Cabanis 1981, 239).

Thus defined by Cabanis, “physical knowledge” goes well beyond the study of organic life we understand by a common use of the terms “physical” (or “physiological”). In the idea of human nature that emerges from it, the needs of human nature arise an appetite for congress, for sociability, that seeks satisfaction with the same pangs of hunger or weariness. Cabanis conceived of sociability in a broad sense, both in terms of the urgent survival needs of the newborn, the child, and the dependent creature, and of the happiness experienced in other altruistic relationships.

Cabanis thus associated medicine with anthropology, and conceived of medicine as pregnant with a knowledge of human nature. On the basis of this conception, he argued for a new anthropological

philosophy (Moravia 1974, 33).

However, it is not enough to highlight this materialistic view of anthropology. An important part of Cabanis' theoretical intention also lied in an effort made to propose a thorough description of the various stages through which feelings, passions, ideas and judgments emerge. Cabanis' materialistic position is all the more interesting as we take into account his will to unfold the complexity of the process of their production. The 10<sup>th</sup> *Memoire* of the *Rapports* gave an interesting insight on this dimension. It showed that, when Cabanis indicated why he who possesses physical knowledge of man must still learn to know human beings, he did not intend to qualify his materialistic vision of human life. He rather stressed the complex process through which feelings, passions, ideas and judgments emerge. Under no circumstances do they derive in a simple, linear fashion from human "needs". Let us examine this point into further details. Undertaking a commentary on the notion of sympathy, Cabanis stated that it is related to the "domain of instinct" defined as a "tendency of a living being toward others of the same or different species" (1981, 585). It manifests itself in the form of various attractions and repulsions related to needs. Nevertheless, matters are complicated, because another feature of human physiology is intelligence. This intelligence holds sway over the determination produced by the sympathy instinct and, according to Cabanis, is itself influenced and modified by the instinct. Therefore, from this point of view, human life is characterized by the emergence of a series of elements spawned by the interaction between "sympathetic tendencies" and "operations of the intellect". The combination of these two forces engenders "*sentiments*" and "more or less rational affections", to some extent much distinct from the expression of "pure instinct" (Ibid., 598). In addition, the brain not only participates to this transformation of impressions into ideas in an active way, but is also considered as able to produce by itself a specific kind of impression through reflection.<sup>4</sup> In this description, Cabanis stressed the processual and complex dimension of his materialistic conception of human life and highlighted the interplays

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<sup>4</sup> In doing so, Cabanis raises the issue of the status of the brain as stressed by Clauzade (1998, 55, and 2008). We will come back to his issue in a future study that will take place in a collective book project edited by C. Chericci, J.-Cl. Dupont and Ch. Wolfe.



between instinct and intelligence, from which passions and ideas emerge.

### **III Medical knowledge and the political dimension of human life**

As we mentioned, the relationship between “Cabanis the physician” and “Cabanis the social therapist” is one of the major topics in Staum’s work (1980, 5). Staum especially emphasized the analogies that can be found between Cabanis’ political views and physiological works. They put forward the necessity to balance the « natural » and the free with the "artificial" and the regulated (Ibid., 11). Staum’s analysis of the way political thinking is, at least partly, framed and expressed through categories borrowed from medicine is enlightening. Like Staum, we consider that Cabanis the physician and Cabanis the social therapist cannot be studied separately. However, this does not entail that the political realm has no specificity of its own in regard of the knowledge brought by medicine. It is thus necessary to understand the specific role and place of medicine in regard of politics and the way medicine and politics combine with each other in Cabanis’ thought.

Cabanis’ materialism is not only an epistemological stance about the knowledge of human nature. It has also, up to a certain extent, political implications we would like first to comment upon. Cabanis examined the political dimension of human life early in his writings, expressing it quite clearly by 1788 in *Du degré de certitude en médecine*. After indicating that human being’s constitution destines him to die one day, and to experience disease and suffering as much as pleasant sensations before the day of his death, he stated that he refused to consider human beings without the background of their social condition. He denied any pertinence to the concept of a natural human state. Humans are inescapably wedded to a social existence.

It is now clear that in Cabanis’ works, this epistemological framework depends upon what he has learned from physical knowledge. Physical knowledge teaches us that humans are sociable due to needs of various natures (dependency for survival, fulfilment in relationships with others). From the standpoint of this knowledge, it was therefore logical to conceive of human beings as part of a web

of social relations:

“I shall therefore ignore all of the declamations in favor of what is called the state of nature, of which there is likely no example whatsoever. The writers who talk the most about it have given only extremely vague descriptions of it. I am unaware of what instinct alone would inspire in the state of nature, for the treatment of all diseases, and this subject is not the point of my research. As a result, because I reject any hypothesis that another condition is possible for the human race, I shall take man as he is in society, with all of the abilities society develops and the resources it perfects (Cabanis 1956a, 41).”

Three or four years later, Cabanis reiterated this vision of things, taking it for granted. He did not even mention the state-of-nature hypothesis. *Quelques principes et quelques vues sur les secours publics* asserted, for example, that “Man’s existence is not isolated and solitary. Nature makes him a *sociable being*: it makes society necessary as a fulfilment of his life. According to nature, man is born and lives only in society” (Cabanis 1956f, 5). In this frame of thought, physicians were given a special place, because of the knowledge they are supposed to have of human beings. As we saw previously, the physiological knowledge of human beings not only entailed physical knowledge, but also what Cabanis called “moral knowledge”. As a result, in principle, physicians were especially skilled to interpret and understand passions.

In a postscript to *Du degré de certitude en médecine*’s conclusion, Cabanis pointed out that it was difficult to know the passions of the human heart, because they are so rapid and fleeting (1956a, 102-103). To perceive them, one should hold a complete and interrelated moral and physiological apprehension of them. In this sense, the physician is a “healer”, that is to say someone who is aware of the various effects of moral impressions, as vast as the knowledge of the effects of remedies or foods (Ibid, 100-101).

Later on, Cabanis reiterated this conception of the physician’s skills in *Coup d’oeil sur les révolutions et sur la réforme de la médecine*, and in *Discours d’ouverture du cours d’Hippocrate*. He affirmed that morality should be perceived as a “sister” to medicine. This meant that the physician “must be able to detect the signs of a tormented mind or wounded heart in the patient’s

features, gaze, and voice” and he would do so on the basis of his knowledge of “the organic lesions that may cause these moral disorders” (Cabanis 1956b, 247). Moral sciences were indeed based on physical knowledge (Saad 2000). This statement about morality as a sister to medicine also implied that a physician ‘s mission was not only to cure her/his patient from an organic point of view, but to care about her/his moral state. In order to do so, the physician should be aware of all the variety of expression of human passions: “the physician who has not learned to read in the human heart as well as he can recognize a fever is doomed” (Cabanis 1956b, 247).

From Cabanis’ point of view, this conception of a physician’s skills had significant social and political implications: a good physician, who masters the art of healing and possesses profound knowledge of human moral life, can claim an entitlement to practice as a public moral judge. Such knowledge thus grants physicians with a special social and political position.

However, medicine was not the only key to govern human beings in Cabanis’ mind. First, physicians must approach their patients with a consideration of their social conditions. They must take into account the possible pathological effects of these conditions and their impact on human health:

“Here the moralist and the doctor still tread the same path. The doctor acquires complete knowledge of the PHYSICAL MAN only by considering him in all the states through which the action of external bodies and the modifications of his own sensory faculty can make him pass. And the moralist has ideas of the ETHICAL MAN that are all the more extensive and accurate, the more attentively he has followed man in all the circumstances in which he is placed by the accidents of life, by social events, by various governments, by laws, and by the sum of all the errors or truths prevalent around him (Cabanis 1981, 7-8).”

In addition, the political dimension of human life cannot be fully understood on the basis of physiological researches. For Cabanis, political bodies in which human social existence unfolds develop specific motives for action. *Quelques principes et quelques vues sur les secours publics* defined the source of this motive as the well-understood interest of these bodies, which cannot be deducted from the well-understood usefulness of each individual, or from the sum of the usefulness

of each member of the social body (Cabanis 1956f, 4). By introducing this perspective, on the basis of which he argued against a “Machiavellian” vision of the morality of political bodies,<sup>5</sup> he stated that political bodies had the same moral principles at their disposal as individuals, but applied them in a different manner, as a function of their own goal of conservation:

“The voice of humanity will not be less powerful in speaking to governments established on equitable foundations than in speaking to kind and reasonable individuals; however, the way the voice is heard and obeyed will differ between the two. Individuals exist only in purely isolated and local relationships: they may indulge in private affections, give themselves a choice, and allow the heart to arbitrate to some degree their beneficial virtues. Governments, as the authors and executors of laws, act in the name and for the interest of the people they represent. They must therefore constantly have the people as a whole in mind, and forbid themselves any favoritism or preference for any single member of the public. Even in compassionate and charitable deeds, they must substitute the principle of equal justice for all for the feeling of pity, which feeds upon individual impressions. Political humanity embraces society as a whole: national welfare mainly has an eye to the public utility that prescribes it. Lastly, in addition to the motive of individual ills, the bitterness of which it must be willing to sweeten, the principal object of political humanity is maintaining peace, well being, and general order (Ibid., 4-5).”

As a result, in order to govern a society, physiological knowledge about human moral life must be completed by an insight about the specific goals of political entities. From Cabanis’ point of view, it was essential to give each element its proper place in order governments to determine the proper course of political action.

The *Note sur le supplice de la guillotine* provides us with an enlightening example of the way Cabanis mobilized together and hierarchized arguments drawn from physical knowledge of human nature and from an analysis of political purposes. As we know, the *Note* was a recommendation that the use of the guillotine be abolished. At the very beginning, it rejected as a motive for abolition “public indignation” (Cabanis 2002, 9) with regard to the pain caused by this punishment. It was by virtue of a piece of epistemological evidence, the distinction between irritability and sensitivity, that Cabanis denied the existence of such pain (Chamayou 2008). However, he above all emphasised

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<sup>5</sup> The notion of Machiavellianism first appears in the *Discours de clôture du cours d'Hippocrate* (Cabanis 1956g, 324).

another criterion on the basis of which the use of the guillotine could be opposed: the conservation of the political body itself. From this point of view, Cabanis judged that the sight of an execution by guillotine was counterproductive for several reasons. It may accustom men to the view of bloodshed, which is morally reprehensible; secondly, the execution is so rapid, that it serves no educational purpose:

“When a man is guillotined, it takes only a minute. The head disappears and the body is packed into a basket on the spot. The crowd watching sees nothing; for them, there is no tragedy; they don’t have time to feel emotion. All they see is blood flowing. If they learn a lesson from this sight, it only toughens them to shed blood themselves with less repugnance, in the drunkenness of their furious passions, whereas the most valuable feeling in the human heart, the one that makes it sorry for the agonies and destruction of other human beings, should be carefully cultivated by all public institutions and deeds (Cabanis 2002, 24).”

This example helps us to understand how Cabanis, when he turned toward political considerations, used the results of his physiological researches: he gave them a prominent place in the government of political bodies, but also conceived a specific political knowledge, related to the ends pursued by these bodies.

## **Conclusion**

The point of the analysis presented here is not to “rehabilitate” Cabanis, despite the initial observation about his ambivalent philosophical legitimacy. Many other commentators have clung to this ambition, arguing that Cabanis had been unfairly marginalized, in reaction to a historical narrative that relegated Cabanis to defeat and silence. Some of them have emphasized his medical thinking to the detriment of his philosophy (Durand 1939, 9). Others have insisted on the philosophical dimension of his thinking (Poyer, 1913, 52-53). Still others have praised Cabanis from other standpoints, especially by pointing out his role as one of the founders of the field of psychophysiology. They insisted on the current relevance of his writings in relation to the somato-psychic relationship (Labrousse 1903; Teyssere 1981; Lanteri-Laura 1997; Cousin, Garrabé and

Morozov 1999).

Philosophers and historians of the sciences, whose goals are not hagiographic, have argued, as we recalled, about the complexity of Cabanis' position on the issue of materialism (Moravia 1974 and 1982, Staum 1980). Following Staum's ambition to propose a more accurate (and complex) understanding of Cabanis' materialism, we commented upon two elements of his thought: first, the outcome of his physiological researches is indeed a materialistic anthropology. It is of a kind that insists on the interplay between instinct and reflection, on the process of production, the interactions and the various steps it implies. Second, this materialistic position needs to be conceived in regard of Cabanis' political concern. We have tried to highlight that the knowledge about human beings based on this anthropology confers a special and prominent place to the physicians. In the same time, governments pursue goals that cannot be merely inferred from this anthropology. In other words, human political life, while deriving from human needs, imposes its own criteria for evaluation as political bodies have specific ends of their own. The point at stake here is to relate, but not to merge with, Cabanis' moral and political philosophy to his physiological researches.

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