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H-France Review Vol. 16 (November 2016), No. 278

Hélène Bah Ostrowiecki, *Pascal et l'expérience du corps*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2016. 206 pp. 68€ (hb) ISBN 978-2-406-05755-0; 29 € (pb) ISBN 978-2-406-05754-3.

Review by Michael Moriarty, University of Cambridge.

This book deals with an important issue, not only for Pascal, but for early modern philosophers generally: the place of the body in our lives and in our thinking. Aspects of Pascal's approach to it have been discussed in the literature, but this is the only comprehensive book-length study of which I am aware. Hélène Bah Ostrowiecki sets out to rectify a *prima facie* plausible view: that Pascal is hostile to and suspicious of the body, and that, by contrast, he promotes the primacy of the mind. There are two chief reasons why this view is plausible. First, the biography by his sister Gilberte seems to vindicate Pascal's spirituality, one might even say, to demonstrate his holiness, by many anecdotes indicative of a negative attitude to the body. He practised mortification of the senses, refusing any kind of sauce or flavoring with his food (though, revealingly, Gilberte says, this was against his natural inclination). He wore a spiked belt next his skin, so that he could jab himself with the spikes when he found himself enjoying a conversation. His concern for "purity" was incredibly meticulous, so that he often pointed to Gilberte's infringements of it in speeches she had thought perfectly innocent. Perhaps most unpalatably for the modern reader, he told her off for letting her children hug her.[1]

In short, Ostrowiecki argues that Gilberte establishes an opposition between an impure body and a pure soul, and points to passages in Pascal's own writings, including the "Prière pour demander à Dieu le bon usage des maladies," in which he seems to endorse this scheme of values (praying to be rendered unable to take pleasure in the world, whether by bodily weakness or by charitable zeal). Secondly, Pascal endorses Descartes's dualist ontology, with its distinction between an immaterial thinking substance and inert matter, the latter subject only to mechanical laws. He tells us, famously, that our only dignity lies in thinking.[2] In the light of all this, it looks as if his general attitude to the body combines Platonist philosophical scorn with a fear and suspicion often thought of (rightly or wrongly) as characteristic of Christianity.

Ostrowiecki sets out, not exactly to refute this view (there is obviously some truth in it), but to complicate it considerably. She does not restrict herself to commenting on passages only in their immediate context in the *liasses* (Pascal's original chapter divisions). This is a perfectly reasonable strategy, and does not, in my view, lead to distorted readings. Her work is carefully argued and thoroughly informed by a wealth of scrupulously acknowledged secondary literature on Pascal and Descartes in particular, and interestingly, she makes good use of Bourdieu's *Méditations pascaliennes*. Her first move is to revisit the distinction between, on the one hand, the external and the bodily and, on the other, the internal and the spiritual. Yes, Pascal does assert that distinction, but he also disturbs it. Withdrawal from the body and the physical world into the self may seem an attractive idea, but it is simply not possible to find happiness within a hollow and corrupt self. The impulse that drives us outward to lose ourselves in things comes, after all, from an inner instinct. The distinction between greatness (*grandeur*) and wretchedness (*misère*) cannot be mapped onto that between soul and body. It is

our thinking that is responsible for the misuse of the body, in that we choose to indulge in bodily pleasure. (This claim is questionable. In the *Écrits sur la grâce*, Pascal describes the Fall as causing concupiscence to well up in our body—“membres,” he says, in a reminiscence of Romans 7.23—so as to titillate and delight our will in evil.)[3] The body is not necessarily an obstacle to piety. Indeed, through suffering it links us to Christ and keeps the mind fixed on our relationship with God. It has real claims that it is right to satisfy, distinct from the appetites fostered by our imagination. In this light Pascal’s rigid adherence to a regular diet makes perfect sense.

The second chapter, “Chair,” argues that the scheme of the three orders displaces and transcends the dualist distinction between mind and body. Here the argument takes a perhaps unnecessary turn, for Ostrowiecki claims that the dualist distinction is essentially a rhetorical framework, not corresponding to a metaphysical insight. There is too much textual evidence (L 199, 108, 115/S 230, 140, 147) to the contrary. To be sure, Pascal declares the union of body and soul to be incomprehensible (L 199/S 230), but Descartes himself didn’t exactly find it easy to explain, as witness his discussions with Princess Elisabeth. Later, Malebranche, though thoroughly committed to dualism, was to assert that we have no clear idea of the soul. Ostrowiecki furthermore argues that dualism cannot account for the conflicts Pascal discusses between reason, on the one hand, and the senses, the imagination, and the passions, on the other. But is not the point rather that these latter aspects of human nature, whether one explains them in a Thomist-Aristotelian or in a Cartesian fashion, all involve both the soul and the body (which does not mean the distinction between them is unsettled)?

In any case, it seems to me that Ostrowiecki has sufficiently established the axiological point, that one cannot superimpose a hierarchy of value on the distinction between mind and body. She argues that Pascal creates a multiplicity of binary oppositions, each expressing a legitimate though partial point of view, and irreducible to a global perspective on the human condition. Above all, she claims, he complicates the dualist schema by the ternary hierarchy of orders: “the flesh, the mind, the will” (L 933/S761). Pascal’s vocabulary is unstable here, because sometimes he uses a different trio of terms: body, mind, and charity (L 308/S 339). Nonetheless, Ostrowiecki argues convincingly that the body/mind distinction is advanced from an ontological perspective, whereas the term “flesh” indicates a theological point of view. Greatness according to the flesh—the greatness of kings, plutocrats, and commanders (L 308/S 339)—is not a physical quality as such, even though it is unthinkable without a physical dimension: it clearly involves ideas, desires, and aspirations. Ostrowiecki makes sense of the flesh/body distinction in a highly interesting way: the flesh is a perspective on bodies. That is, it is created by the mind viewing bodies in the perspective of sensual pleasure as distinct from that of scientific intelligibility. The flesh is a way of living the body.

The chapter on “Sentiment” deals with cognition, including the form of direct knowledge of God that is termed mystical experience. Here, the principal claim is for an association between the body and that key Pascalian term *cœur*. The heart is the seat both of faith (defined as “Dieu sensible au cœur, non à la raison” (L 424/S 680)) and of direct non-discursive knowledge (the knowledge of time, space, and number) on which all reasoning depends. It is not easy to locate the heart in terms of the dualist ontology (just as it is difficult to locate the self, the *moi*: see L 688/S 567)).

But Ostrowiecki makes the crucial point that these fundamental categories with which the mind thinks are derived from the body into which it is “thrown” (L 418/S 680). She also shows that the language by which Pascal designates the heart’s operations (“sentir/sentiment,” “instinct”) is thoroughly corporeal. So we can certainly accept that, whatever its exact relationship with the body, the heart is understood as functioning like one; moreover, not like a mechanical body, but like a living animal body. A section on witnessing, a significant term both in Pascal’s scientific and in his religious thought, again stresses the primacy of bodily presence, rather than intellectual qualifications, in conferring authority. Perhaps the overriding theme of this chapter is that the body is associated with passivity and receptivity, and that

these are aspects of the human condition we must come to terms with, whereas a focus on thought can give us an unjustified sense of autonomy and free agency.

The chapter, “Machine,” engages with one of the most challenging utterances of the *Pensées*, at the end of the wager fragment (L 418/S 680), where the unbeliever asserts that he simply cannot believe. Pascal tells him to do as other converts have done, to engage in religious rituals: “cela vous fera croire et vous abêtira.” The last word is notoriously difficult to translate: “will make you stupid”? “will turn you into an animal”? Ostrowiecki argues that the connotations of the latter reading are important, in keeping with the overall argument of the chapter that the body, paradoxically, plays a key role in the spiritual life, by regulating the workings of the mind, and, in particular, diminishing the passions (which always involve a mental input). As she says, Pascal is urging the putative convert to “faire comme” and to “faire comme si,” to do as other people do, and to act as if one believed.

Ostrowiecki draws a subtle distinction between the recommended use of the body to keep one’s mind in order and the superficially similar activity of *divertissement*, criticized by Pascal, where, by focusing, for instance, on executing the steps of a dance, we stop ourselves thinking about the emptiness and futility of our lives. The paradox about *divertissement* is that it requires us to be unconscious of this fundamental motivation; moreover, the conscious thoughts by which it is driven are typically competitive (L 136/S 168). Thus Ostrowiecki is justified in seeing it as instrumentalizing the body so as to achieve a kind of self-affirmation. By contrast, when we commit ourselves to a bodily discipline of a religious nature, we do so by an initial act of will, but our goal, and the end-result, is an escape from (self-)will. There is a good section on Pascal’s handling of the term “inclination” in this context, which might have been further enriched by comparing it with Augustine’s somewhat similar term *pondus*, especially since the scientific models involved are significantly different.

In the final chapter, “Tout,” Ostrowiecki discusses the place of our body within the physical universe. She expands helpfully on the spiritual benefit Pascal identifies in physical suffering as a sort of expropriation of the self-centered self, opening us up to this larger physical reality. Scientific activity, the methodical study of this domain, is often seen as something Pascal abandoned for spiritual concerns, a move apparently justified by his assertion of the superiority of the “science des mœurs,” the study of human nature (L 23/S 57). But Ostrowiecki reminds us that Pascal continued with scientific activity even after his second conversion (his role in setting up a system of public transport is helpfully alluded to here). She argues for the spiritual benefit of science, as, again, a means of transcending the self-centred ego through focusing outside oneself and working within a community. Scientific instruments are physical bodies we use in the study of other physical bodies to supplement our cognitive deficiencies. Science reveals the interaction of natural phenomena within a totality that becomes a kind of figure for the spiritual vision of the Christian community, as a body with its constituent members. This chapter is one of the most original in the book, and succeeds in significantly complicating a straightforward antithesis between the scientific and the spiritual. The argument here sometimes pushes beyond the letter of the text, but remains faithful to its spirit.

All in all, Ostrowiecki has produced a significant and thought-provoking book, from which even the experienced reader of Pascal has much to learn. In particular, she warns us to beware of reading the dualist opposition between body and mind in terms of a theological and spiritual hierarchy.

## NOTES

[1] Gilberte Pascal, *La Vie de M. Pascal*, in Blaise Pascal, *Pensées, opuscules et lettres*, ed. Philippe Sellier (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2010), pp. 107-50, §49, p. 124; § 42, p. 121; §57, p. 128. Ostrowiecki refers to Lafuma’s edition of Pascal’s *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Seuil, 1963), which gives a text of the *Vie* that differs somewhat from that of the manuscript used by Mesnard and Sellier in their more recent editions.

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[2] Pascal, *Pensées*, Lafuma no. 200, Sellier no. 232. Subsequent references will be given in the text, with the Lafuma number (L) followed by the Sellier number (S).

[3] *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Lafuma, p. 317b.

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ISSN 1553-9172