

*Mortal Subjects: Passions of the Soul in Late Twentieth-Century French Thought.* By CHRISTINA HOWELLS. Cambridge: Polity. 2011. x + 263 pp. £17.99. ISBN 978-0-7456-5275-7 [final draft]

Ought an essay on passion, death and the soul to be beautiful? Is there something of love and death demanding sensitivity of touch and style? Is this what theories miss when they claim to have finally defined, explained or determined passionate living and the torments of approaching death? It might be impossible to answer these questions, but Christina Howells has given us proof of the precious quality of an art of thinking about human finitude. The achievement is almost perverse, since her material from recent French thought is difficult and abstruse, yet her writing is exceptionally accessible, without ever resorting to commonplace imagery or expectations. This is a rare book. It manages to be companionable and generous on some of the most demanding ordeals and high points of existence, while avoiding the sad simplifications of philosophical consolation that render popular studies useless and damaging.

The heart-beat of her argument is set by a very old problem. How are mind and body related? If they are fully united, then why do love, death and the passions have a hold on us? If they are separate, how do they work together and then pull apart? What is the soul if it is a vehicle between the two, yet finds its vocation in eternity after death? In charting a path through recent French thought, through its genealogy in Descartes and Classical philosophy, alongside literary and artistic sources, and in counterpoint to analytic philosophy and contemporary sciences of the mind, Howells is able to outline a new possibility. The soul is in the body, in its passions and mortality. It is distorting, though, to render her reflections in this bald proposition. Howells offers us variations, in the musical sense, such that her short but scholarly studies of a wide range of thinkers temper the temptation to a simple identity of soul and body, or to swing back to their independence. Here is her rejoinder to Sartre's separation of consciousness from the tortured body in the free courageous act: '[...] the torpor of my limbs, the weakening of my vision and hearing, the confusion of my mind, and the heaviness of my consciousness are rather signs of approaching death, from which I cannot escape in either pleasure or distraction.' (39) This entanglement of subjectivity and flesh leads into subsequent discussions of Merleau-Ponty and Beauvoir, then on through religious thinkers, to psychoanalysis and deconstruction.

Despite subtle shifts from problems in one thinker to alternatives in others, Howells' argument is not dialectical. It does not spiral towards better representations of the problem of the soul. Instead, the idea of the passionate situation of the soul in the body grows stronger yet more complicated as the book unfolds. The most intense moment comes at the end, with the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, which then reverberates through earlier chapters and views. Nancy allows for the firmest answer to the objection that if the soul is strictly in the body, then body takes full control and we lose the kinds of subjective freedom and directedness making sense of the passions, for instance in dread as posited on our capacity to forestall death. Like the twining of soul and body, Howells detects a difficult fusion of the subject and death in Nancy's work, so neither can be thought alone: 'Finitude and death are now what mark the subject, what enable the subject to exist, what free the subject from its subjection to sclerotic self-identity. Human, all too human, the subject is perhaps more precisely, mortal all too mortal.' (215)

In its insistence on life as marked by death, as enabled by it too, in its attention to the special freedom of passionate limitedness rather than isolated free will, and in its search to go beyond the seductive but false image of the human as opposed to death, this is a deeply ethical work. It seeks and shares neither solace nor distraction from death, but a new wisdom.

James Williams, Edinburgh 2014