



Christina Howells

MORTAL SUBJECTS

Passions of the Soul  
in Late Twentieth-Century  
French Thought

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# Mortal Subjects

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## Note

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# Abbreviations

The following offers an alphabetical key to references given within the text. Published English translations have been used where possible, though frequently altered for reasons of accuracy, or better to fit the context of the discussion. Citations from works not translated into English, or whose translations are out of print or unduly difficult to obtain, have been done by Gerald Moore. For reasons of consistency, abbreviations in the text refer to the original French titles, with full details of translations given in the bibliography. The page number is given initially for the French, followed by the English reference, which is separated by a backslash (/).

- 58IC Jean-Luc Nancy, *58 indices sur le corps et Extension de l'âme*; *Corpus*, including 'Extension of the Soul' and '58 Indices on the Body' (2004/2008).
- A Jacques Derrida, *Apories*; *Aporias* (1992/1993).
- AE Jacques Lacan, *Autres Ecrits* (2001).
- AEL Jacques Derrida, *Adieu: à Emmanuel Levinas*; *Adieu: to Emmanuel Levinas* (1997/1999).
- AQE Emmanuel Levinas, *Autrement qu'être*; *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence* (1978/1991).
- C Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*; *Corpus*, including 'Extension of the Soul' and '58 Indices on the Body' ([1992] 2002/2008).
- CFU Jacques Derrida, *Chaque fois unique, la fin du monde*; *The Work of Mourning* (2003/2001).

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- CP Jacques Derrida, *La Carte postale: de Socrate à Freud et au-delà*; *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (1980/1987).
- DA Jacques Derrida, *Demeure, Athènes: Photographies de Jean-François Bonhomme*; *Athens, Still Remains: The Photographs of Jean-François Bonhomme* (1996/2010).
- DMT Emmanuel Levinas, *Dieu, la mort et le temps*; *God, Death and Time* (1993/2000).
- DM Jacques Derrida, 'Donner la mort', in *L'Ethique du don. Jacques Derrida et la pensée du don*; *The Gift of Death* (1992/1995).
- DS Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième sexe* (DS II = vol. 2).
- E Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits*; *Ecrits. The First Complete Edition in English* (1966/2007).
- EA Gabriel Marcel, *Etre et avoir*; *Being and Having* (1935/1949).
- ED Jacques Derrida, *L'Ecriture et la différence*; *Writing and Difference* (1967/1978).
- EGM Gabriel Marcel & Paul Ricœur, *Entretiens avec Gabriel Marcel*; 'Conversations between Paul Ricœur and Gabriel Marcel', in *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond* (1968/1973).
- EN Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Etre et le Néant*; *Being and Nothingness* (1943/1958).
- ETE Jean-Paul Sartre, *Esquisse d'une théorie des émotions*; *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions* (1939/1994).
- HA Julia Kristeva, *Histoires d'amour*; *Tales of Love* (1983/1987).
- HS Emmanuel Levinas, *Hors sujet*; *Outside the Subject* (1987/1993).
- HV Gabriel Marcel, *Homo viator* (1944).
- IRS Jean-Luc Nancy, *L' 'il y a' du rapport sexuel* (2001).
- MA Jacques Derrida, *Mal d'Archive: une impression freudienne*; *Archive Fever* (1995/1996).
- MHO Paul Ricœur, *La Mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*; *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2000/2004).
- MPD Jacques Derrida, *Mémoires: pour Paul de Man*; *Mémoires for Paul de Man* (1988/1986).
- OE Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'œil et l'esprit*; 'Eye and Mind' in *The Primacy of Perception* (1964/1964).

- 
- OG Jacques Derrida, *Introduction à L'Origine de la géométrie de Husserl* ; Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry: *An Introduction* (1962/1989).
- PA Jacques Derrida, *Politiques de l'amitié*; *The Politics of Friendship* (1994/1997).
- PP Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*; *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1945/2002).
- SI Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, livre I*; *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, book I: Freud's Papers on Technique* (1975/1991).
- SII Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, livre II: Le Moi dans la théorie de Freud et dans la technique de la psychanalyse*; *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954–55 (The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, book II)* (1978/1991).
- SMA Paul Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre*; *Oneself as Another* (1990/1992).
- SN Julia Kristeva, *Soleil noir: dépression et mélancolie*; *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (1987/1992).
- SVII Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, livre VII: L'Éthique de la psychanalyse*; *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1986/1997).
- SXI Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, livre XI : Les Quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*; *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1973/1998).
- SXVIII Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, livre XVIII: D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant* (2006).
- SXX Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, livre XX: Encore*; *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, book XX: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge* (1975/1999).
- TA Emmanuel Levinas, *Le Temps et l'autre*; *Time and the Other* ([1948] 1979/1987).
- TE Jean-Paul Sartre, *La Transcendance de l'ego*; *The Transcendence of the Ego* ([1936] 1965/2004).



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- TI Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et infini; Totality and Infinity* (1961/1991).
- V Paul Ricoeur, *Vivant jusqu'à la mort, suivi de Fragments; Living Up To Death* (2007/2009).
- VP Jacques Derrida, *La Voix et le phénomène; Speech and Phenomena* (1967/1973).

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# 1

## Introduction: Love and Death

Love's mysteries in soules doe grow  
But yet the body is his book.

(John Donne: *The Extasie*)

Only *we* see death.

The whole reach of death, even before one's life is  
underway.

(Rainer Maria Rilke: *Duino Elegies*)

Several interweaving strands traverse this study, which attempts to explore the relations between body and soul, love and death, desire and passion. These have been the subjects of literature and philosophy from their origins and it may seem a hopeless or hubristic task to try to bring them together in a single book. But it does not seem possible to work on subjectivity in the twenty-first century without considering the mind-body relationship, and an investigation of human mortality tends to lead directly or indirectly to questions of love and desire. What is more, the impulse to undertake this work arose from an acute personal experience of love and death that has necessarily given the book much of its particular flavour and texture. The difficulty of reconciling philosophical reflection with experience is especially severe where mortality is concerned, and it seems as though grieving for the dead may never be able to escape the aporias that Derrida detects in Freud's notion of the work of mourning.<sup>1</sup> It is impossible as well as necessary to 'mourn well', that is to say to respect

individual specificity at the same time as avoiding melancholia and abjection.<sup>2</sup>

The focus on death inevitably brings passion into the frame, for the relationship between love and death, and passion and death, seems to be more than intimate; it is intrinsic to human subjectivity. All experience is predicated on its ultimate transience, in other words on its death.<sup>3</sup> It is the inevitable death of the other, be s/he friend, lover, mother, child, that gives our relationship with them its poignancy and intensity. This was the theme of all Derrida's obituary eulogies for his friends, and will be an important element of this study. Friendship, love, and passion are always already permeated by loss and death. As I look on the face of my sleeping baby or lover I am acutely aware that I cannot contain or possess the moment. As Roland Barthes points out so beautifully, this provokes the pain and pleasure of the photograph which, in capturing the moment as it passes, brings us face-to-face with death, irrespective of whether the subject of the image is still alive when we contemplate his portrait.<sup>4</sup> *Sic transit gloria mundi*.

But awareness of transience does not simply give human experience its ambivalent and bitter-sweet quality as we try to hold onto the moment that we cannot suspend in its flight towards oblivion; it is fundamentally constitutive of that experience. In Rilke's terms, 'we live our lives, forever taking leave'.<sup>5</sup> Human subjectivity does not pre-exist its relationship to the other: as we shall see, identity and alterity are mutually self-creating; indeed, one of the constants of twentieth-century French thought is precisely its sensitivity to the inescapable imbrication of self and other, subject and object, love and loss. It is our awareness of mortality that creates the lack or fissure in the self through which subjectivity is born; it ultimately prevents the closure that would ossify the subject and allow the rigid ego to take hold. In existential terms, we desire the impossible combination of liberty and identity – to know (and be) who we are while still remaining fully free. In psychoanalytic terms, we seek narcissistic closure, that is to say self-sufficiency and self-identity, but such closure would entail the death of the subject: paradoxically, perhaps, the subject remains alive and mobile only because of its relation to mortality, both its own and that of others.

It is love that makes us fear death, love of self, and love of the other: we fear losing our very selves when we risk losing what we

love.<sup>6</sup> And it is our anguish in the face of loss and death that lies at the heart of our uncertainty about the ontological significance of the body. If I *am* my body, I die when my body dies; but this prospect of ineradicable loss (be it of self or other) is precisely what is most inimical, since it puts my very identity at stake. Consequently, I am tempted to differentiate myself from my body in a form of natural dualism. But this dualism too founders, as we shall see, on the reefs of experience and imagination: if I – or the beloved – am not to be identified with the body, what does this mean for the powerful physical affection and desire that accompanies and arguably constitutes human love? We are trapped between the Scylla of dualism and the Charybdis of materialism in all our diverse attempts to understand and conceptualize human embodiment.

It will already be clear that, looked at in this way, the question of the relationship between subjectivity and mortality is not easily circumscribed. Indeed, this became increasingly evident to me throughout the writing of this project, as the paradoxical and even aporetic nature of this relationship made closure and conclusion impossible. Moreover, since it would not be feasible to write even a brief ‘history of everything’, much as I might like to, the subject matter itself will of course be limited. I shall focus in particular on French thought of the second half of the twentieth century, broadly understood, starting from phenomenology and existentialism (Sartre, Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty), ending with deconstruction (Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy), and exploring religious philosophy (Gabriel Marcel, Ricoeur, Levinas, and Vladimir Jankélévitch) and psychoanalysis (Lacan, Kristeva, and Didier Anzieu) along the way, dipping, from time to time, into the texts of other theorists, such as Freud and Barthes. These approaches constitute the four major philosophical discourses about mortality and subjectivity of the twentieth century, and will enable us to explore how well the modern age deals with this most fundamental problematic.

Ancient and contemporary philosophers have, of course, examined these questions many times before, and I have drawn on them for inspiration and regulation as well as sparring partners. If Plato’s *Symposium* and Aristotle’s *De Anima* still engage modern lovers of wisdom, advances in neuroscience remind us of the very real



claims of radical materialism, and analytic philosophy – by which I am surrounded in Oxford – has been a true friend in keeping me a little closer to the straight and narrow path, despite all my Continental wanderings. This introduction will attempt to situate my work fairly schematically with respect to a variety of different philosophical traditions, before passing on to a more detailed exploration of recent currents in French thought and theory. For this purpose I shall take as exemplary Aristotle and Descartes in particular, as well as some strands of the current debate between contemporary philosophy and neuroscience. Then I will look briefly at the implications of the notorious ‘death of the subject’ in twentieth-century French philosophy and consider how it relates to the issues of mortality, subjectivity, and passion that constitute the major preoccupations of this project.

### Body and soul: some historical signposts

One of the major motifs of twentieth-century philosophy concerns the extent to which I am, or am not, identical with my body and, given the importance of this question for the conceptualization of subjectivity, it will constitute a recurrent theme throughout this book. Even the apparently materialist claim: ‘I am my body’, which is made by both Sartre and Merleau-Ponty (EN, 391/326; PP, 175/174), contains a syntactic dualism at odds with its intention, a dualism which Jean-Luc Nancy attempts to overcome with his formulation ‘Corpus ego’ (*Corpus*, 26/27) and his insistence that ‘the soul is the body’ (C, 67/75). But the attempt to overcome dualism goes back at least as far as Aristotle’s refusal of Plato’s radical separation of soul and body (though the late texts of Plato do recognize a relationship between them).<sup>7</sup> It is worth spending a little time with Aristotle now, not only because of the inherent interest of his texts, but more especially because his approach to the most fundamental questions of human existence – life and death, body and soul – is in many ways closer to those of the French philosophers whose work I want to explore than are the prevailing post-Cartesian preoccupations of contemporary philosophy of mind with its obsession with subjectivity, consciousness, and the problems of dualism.

For Aristotle, the soul is precisely the form of the (living) body, the vital, animating, principle without which the body would be purely material. This means that the soul is a feature of all living beings, not just of human beings, and one consequence of his interest in the principle of life is a concomitant concern with the death and decay of the body and the implications of this for the soul. ('By life we mean self-nutrition and growth and decay.' *De Anima*).<sup>8</sup> Indeed, it has been claimed that, in the ordinary Greek of Aristotle's day, 'the antithetical term to *psyche* was not "body" but "death"'.<sup>9</sup> Exegetes and interpreters of Aristotle vary widely in their understanding of his views on the body/soul relationship, but one thing is certain: his various formulations all struggle precisely with the problem of how to express the intimacy of the relationship in terms which avoid identity:

Now given that there are bodies of such and such a kind, viz. having life, the soul cannot be a body; for the body is the subject or matter, not what is attributed to it. (*De Anima*, 412a)

That is why we can dismiss as unnecessary the question whether the soul and body are one; it is as though we were to ask whether the wax and its shape are one . . . It is clear that the soul is inseparable from its body, or at any rate that certain parts of it are (if it has parts). (*De Anima*, 412b–413a)

Since it is the soul by which primarily we live, perceive, and think . . . the body cannot be the actuality of soul; it is the soul which is the actuality of a certain kind of body. Hence the rightness of the view that the soul cannot be without a body, while it cannot *be* a body; it is not a body but something relative to a body. That is why it is *in* a body, and a body of a definite kind. It was a mistake, therefore, to do as former thinkers did, merely to fit it into a body without adding a definite specification of the kind or character of that body. (*De Anima*, 414a)

Aristotle believes that most of the faculties of the soul, such as desire, sensation, movement, are inseparable from the body, which means that his Psychology is necessarily a part of his Physics and that he is not satisfied with the apparent limitations of the expression 'passions of the soul' (or 'affections of the soul') which seems to overlook the body:

A further problem presented by the affections of the soul is this: are they all affections of the complex of body and soul, or is there any one among them peculiar to the soul by itself? To determine this is indispensable but difficult. If we consider the majority of them, there seems to be no case in which the soul can act or be acted upon without involving the body; e.g. anger, courage, appetite, and sensation generally . . . It seems that all the affections of the soul involve a body – passion, gentleness, fear, pity, courage, joy, loving and hating; in all these there is a concurrent affection of the body . . . Hence a physicist would define an affection of soul differently from a dialectician; the latter would define e.g. anger as the appetite for returning pain for pain, or something like that, while the former would define it as a boiling of the blood or warm substance surrounding the heart. The one assigns the material conditions, the other the form or account. (*De Anima*, 403a–b).

But this is not so clearly the case for the rational soul, some aspects of which (specifically the theoretical intellect, sometimes called ‘nous’) have an ambiguous, possibly immaterial status:<sup>10</sup>

Thinking seems the most probable exception; but if this too proves to be a form of imagination or to be impossible without imagination, it too requires a body as a condition of its existence. If there is any way of acting or being acted upon proper to soul, soul will be capable of separate existence; if there is none, its separate existence is impossible. (*De Anima*, 403a)

Aristotle’s wrestling with the enigma of the relationship between body and soul may appear to anticipate in some ways the views of Descartes and the post-Cartesians who attempt to explain the union of body and soul in the human being, or, in more contemporary terms, the lived interdependence of body and mind, consciousness and brain; but it is important to bear in mind that his frame of reference is indisputably the attempt to understand the soul as the principle of life rather than as subjective or intentional consciousness.<sup>11</sup> Indeed there is no term in Ancient Greek truly corresponding to ‘consciousness’,<sup>12</sup> even though Aristotle does occasionally reflect on the question (or *aporia*) of self-awareness, or of how precisely we are (reflectively) aware that we see, hear or think, suggesting that all our senses ‘are accompanied by a

common power, in virtue whereof a person perceives that he sees or hears'.<sup>13</sup>

If he who sees perceives that he sees . . . and in the case of all other activities similarly there is something which perceives that we are active, so that if we perceive, we perceive that we perceive, and if we think, that we think. (*Nichomachean Ethics*, 1170a)<sup>14</sup>

As I have indicated, however, his preoccupation with the principle of life, and with questions such as the mortality and the necessary and intimate embodiment of the individual soul,<sup>15</sup> bring him far closer to recent attempts by philosophers such as Jean-Luc Nancy to bypass Cartesianism and natural dualism than to the philosophers of mind or of consciousness who currently dominate the intellectual arena, at least in analytic philosophy. And if Aristotle has been variously assimilated to the contemporary camps of Dualists, Physicalists, and Functionalists, this very variety must surely warn us that any such appropriation inevitably involves a degree of violence to the spirit as well as the letter of Aristotle's work.<sup>16</sup>

This is perhaps a good moment for a brief note on terminology. Not only do we need to try to understand the Ancient terminology of Soul and so on in modern terms, and *Psuche* is of course far broader than the Christian 'soul' not least because it is to be found in all living beings; but there is also a more contemporary problem: 'Mind' does not have a real equivalent in French. 'Ame' (soul) is too spiritual, but 'Esprit' (Spirit) is not much better, and has other meanings such as wit. 'Conscience' is fine as a French translation for 'consciousness' (despite the fact that in French it cannot be distinguished from conscience) but will not do for Mind either. Some contemporary French philosophers have opted to force the issue and declared that Philosophy of Mind will be termed 'philosophie de l'esprit', despite the violence this does to ordinary usage. Derrida entitled one of his collections of essays *Psyche*, and he spends many pages exploring a multiplicity of different meanings for the term. In any case, this fundamental lack of equivalence between epochs and between languages means that this book will not be able to maintain a consistent terminology throughout: my solution will be to use the terms of the philosopher in question,