

Book reviews

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William Wood *Blaise Pascal on Duplicity, Sin, and the Fall: The Secret Instinct*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press). Pp. viii + 243. £65.00 (Hbk). ISBN 978 0 19 965636 3.

Thomas Mann once wrote that ‘sin’ is ‘an amusing word used only when one is trying to get a laugh’. In this book, William Wood argues that it is considerably more than that.

Wood’s aim is to show – by exegetical argument and constructive example – that Pascal has much to offer today’s reader. In particular, Pascal’s depiction of the noetic effects of sin is ‘both traditional and innovative’. Pascal’s Fall ‘is a fall into duplicity. [Pascal] holds that, as fallen selves in a fallen world, human beings have an innate aversion to the truth that is also, at the same time, an aversion to God’ (1). We are born into a duplicitous world – surrounded by self-deceivers who encourage us to deceive ourselves and to participate in social duplicity. Consequently, we find it easy to reject God and deride that laughable word – ‘sin’.

The book is well crafted; each chapter’s aim is clearly stated and concisely argued. Consequently, it is difficult to do justice to its rich chapters in a few words: the following should be taken for the *amuse-gueule* that they are.

Chapter 1 presents us with the argument that Pascal’s Fall is an evaluative Fall, which results in the disorder of our loves and an aversion to the truth. Wood writes that though Pascal believed in a factual Fall and subsequent punishment, one need not be committed to such historical claims to find Pascal’s insights into the noetic effects of sin illuminating. ‘The most important such consequence’, on Wood’s reading, is that ‘our capacity to love has been deformed and disordered by the Fall and that, as a result, we can no longer love coherently.’ For Pascal, the capacity to love is identified with the capacity to evaluate competing goods, with the result that ‘every aspect of human life is affected by its deformation’ (20). Rather than being guided by the love of God or truth, our evaluations are warped by lapsarian (il)logic.

It is worth dwelling on this language of love a little longer. Wood cites a famous passage from the *Pensées* at length, in which Pascal writes that ‘the origin of all vices and all sins’ is self-love (*amour-propre*):

God has created man with two loves, the one for God and the other for himself, but with this law: that the love for God would be infinite, that is to say, without any other end than God himself, and that the love of self would be finite and referred to God . . . Since, with the arrival of sin, man has lost the first of these loves, the love of self alone remained in this great soul that is capable of an infinite love, and this self-love has spread out and over-flowed into the vacuum that the love for God has left. . . . Behold the origin of *amour-propre*. It was natural to Adam and just in his innocence, but it has become both criminal and immoderate, as a result of his sin.

Since we no longer affirm God as the standard of value, we attempt to fill the value-gap by many different means. Pascal seems to take impish pleasure in pointing out the panoply of philosophers’ ‘supreme goods’: virtue, pleasure, truth, peaceful ignorance, idleness, indifference, and more. Without God as the arbiter of good, we are left to the relentless whim of *desire*. But what Pascal means by desire is not just the day-to-day felt desires that commonly go by that name. Such quotidian desires can’t be explanatorily basic, Wood says, because ‘they are not the psychological bedrock of the human person.’ Rather, one’s ‘felt desires, goals, and actions are shaped by whatever he affirms (implicitly or explicitly) as a comprehensive good: a lover of money will have a different set of desires than, say, a lover of justice’ (35).

But such ostensibly ‘comprehensive’ goods are finite, with the consequence that even when the desire for them is fulfilled human beings are still dissatisfied. We are hostile to finding the truth about our situation, however, so we attempt to escape it (and our dissatisfaction) through the incessant busyness of work and pleasurable ‘diversions’ (*divertissements*). As *fallen* rational agents, we may be hostile to truth at the level of reason – for example, by finding the claim that we are fallen ‘rationally repugnant’ (50). This is why, Wood suggests, Pascal’s *Pensées* offer an ‘affective and aesthetic’ appeal to truth – its fragmentary form may be less susceptible to reason’s indignation than linear argument.

The role of the affective and aesthetic is explored further in the second chapter, on Pascal’s political theology. Here Wood offers further exposition of the *Pensées*, moving from the individual to the social. Pascal offers a genealogy of the social order which is simultaneously an aetiology of society’s ills: through imagination we are shaped by a duplicitous world and ‘habituated into duplicitous patterns of thought and action’ (68). Sin, like ideology, is ‘a transpersonal force that shapes personal agency’ (83).

Throughout these expository chapters Wood highlights the pertinence of Pascal’s thinking to contemporary discussions. In Wood’s discussion of politics, for example, we read that because Pascal’s analysis of state power is built on his understanding of humanity as fallen, he is able to ‘show how the mechanisms of ideology are, at the same time, both cognitive and epistemic, on the one

hand, and embodied and social, on the other' (85), and to anticipate or even elucidate elements in the works of Bourdieu and Althusser.

The book's third chapter – on the fallen human subject – further aims to establish Pascal as a worthy philosophical and theological source: this time, on the self. The Cartesian self is the subject of much disdain, but 'even as theologians hurry to distance themselves from the Cartesian subject, they often overlook Pascal, one of its first and greatest critics' (92).

Wood here gives a theological (Pascalian) account of human subjectivity – according to which the 'self' (*le moi*) is imaginary, merely 'the story I tell myself about myself, my subjective narrative identity'. This self does not usually correspond to the way one actually is, however; it is how we imagine we are seen by others. 'My subjective narrative identity is therefore the story that I imagine that other people would tell about me: my fantasy about your fantasy about me' (94).

To be a true self, for Pascal, is to be an object of love. But in a fallen world, our idolatrous, disordered loves deliver false, imaginary selves. Pascal writes that the 'most indelible quality in the human heart' is the desire to 'enjoy the good opinion of his fellows' (quoted, 99). But this does not lead us to virtuous self-improvement; rather, 'the desire for esteem creates the desire to seem' (99). This subjectivity is performative, in that 'we enact the false self and thereby hold it in being' (108), but to do so we must deceive others and ourselves.

This language of 'false' selves may be off-putting or question-begging to some readers. Wood again refers to Pascal's form, in this context, writing that Pascal's claims about selfhood are 'best read as the work of a moralist and not a metaphysician' (105). But Pascal's 'moralizing' provokes questions that can fruitfully be approached analytically. The question of how false selves are sustained, for example, leads Wood to ask: (how) is self-deception possible? Lying to oneself smacks of paradox, 'because it seems to require that a single agent believes the truth (as liar) and yet also believes its contradiction (as the victim of the lie)' (115).

Chapter 4 discusses self-deception in Pascal's moral theology. Sin, Wood writes, is performatively inconsistent. For even in a fallen world we do not adopt the motto of Milton's Satan: "Evil be thou my good" is not the cry of an intelligible human agent.' Sin has to *seem* good, 'which is why duplicity is its ever-present henchman' (120).

From this point in the book Wood's focus narrows in on the strongest form of self-deception: lying to oneself. Wood takes self-deception to be 'the central threat to the moral life' (124), because the sinful self-deceiver falsely interprets himself and his moral commitments. In order to proceed Wood lays the necessary foundations, outlining his understanding of belief-formation (empirical and interpretative) and giving an account of Pascal's 'heart'. Those who know this term only from the oft-anthologized fragment from the *Pensées* – 'the heart has reasons which reason does not know' – will find an illuminating introduction to an *evaluative* faculty which unites the intellect and the will. Wood's account simultaneously

challenges the fideist reading of Pascal and reveals Pascal to be an early modern proponent of ethical intuitionism (134–137). According to Wood's Pascal, we intuit the good, but even though our sentiments give a felt sense of truth, we are strongly motivated to believe that our imaginative (i.e. fallen) fantasies are true.

Chapter 5 – 'On lying to oneself' – offers a 'Pascalian critique of contemporary analytic philosophy on self-deception'. Wood imitates Pascal's attitude to the philosophers of his day by refusing 'the terms in which the analytic inquiry poses the question of self-deception'. Throughout the *Pensées*, Pascal mocks and criticizes philosophers: 'To make light of philosophy is to philosophize truly' (L513/S617, cited 147). But Pascal 'offers much more than mocking aphorisms' (147). He engages with philosophy in order to subvert it on its own terms. In this chapter, Wood offers both a narrative and an argument: the narrative is about how a trajectory of inquiry developed in analytic philosophy in the wake of Raphael Demos's 1960 article 'Lying to oneself'. The argument is that lying to oneself is both coherent and a fruitful subject of investigation. Wood's survey of the analytic literature shows that many philosophers have cursorily dismissed lying to oneself as paradoxical. But they have not *argued* that this is the case. It seems that 'Merely introducing the charge of paradox is enough to dismiss this conception of self-deception' (157). In brief, Wood argues that Pascal's theological anthropology provides a "necessary corrective" to contemporary analytic philosophy on self-deception' (177).

In chapter 6 Wood develops his view of self-deception as morally culpable self-persuasion, which is 'more like an ongoing activity than a mental state' (179). Lying to oneself is common, Wood says, because 'we are more easily persuaded by attractiveness than by truth' (180–182). Fallen minds engage in extended temporal processes of internal rhetoric – a form of self-talk that slowly persuades us not to listen to the truth (196).

After six chapters on deceit, the final chapter – entitled 'The way back' – outlines its remedy: self-lucidity and a love of truth. This remedy is possible, but only by divine grace, which – like the sin it overcomes – is affective and aesthetic.

This book deserves a wide readership. Given the dearth of recent literature on Pascal or indeed on the noetic effects of sin, it shows that both the thinker and the topic are worthy of greater consideration. For this reader, it might have been enriched by more discussion of Pascal's historical and theological context. The translation of Pascal's *néant* as 'nullity', for example, seems to obscure its roots in the Augustinian, ontological soteriological debates of seventeenth-century France. But Wood does bring Pascal into dialogue with many recent thinkers of different philosophical and theological traditions, including Slavoj Žižek, Jean-Luc Marion, and Charles Taylor, among others. Wood presents Pascal as an astute psychologist, whose insights into human evaluating may anticipate more cognitive phenomena than there was space to discuss in this book. It seems to me that a 'Pascalian' analysis could fruitfully be made of implicit bias, cognitive dissonance, availability and selection biases, and more.

There has not been a book-length study of Pascal's theology in English for more than forty years. This volume, however, leaves no question whether ' "Pascalian" theology is both possible and fruitful' (18): there is much more to Pascal than his wager.

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Wendy Doniger *On Hinduism*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
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Wendy Doniger deals with the complexity of Hinduism by following the thread of ideas through their winding historical biographies in this compendium of essays. She traces key doctrines through the vast archive of Hindu texts, from the process of reincarnation, to the conflict between transcendent and immanent conceptions of the divine, to ideologies of dissent, and to the rights of minorities. In essays that have something of the familiar, literary charm of writing by Sigmund Freud, Claude Lévi-Strauss, or Clifford Geertz, Doniger finds the underlying motivations, social conflicts, conceptual paradoxes, or insights that animate each doctrine. In order to tell these fascinating cultural tales Doniger must often be selective in her treatment of Hinduism's vast history, focusing more on some contexts than on others. The consequence is that this collection can be misleading if taken as a general picture of Hinduism. But as an exploration of religious ideas in their changeful complexity it offers a unique perspective – not only on Hinduism, but also on the way that all religious ideas develop over time.

A lifetime of work on a huge range of texts and topics is collected in *On Hinduism*. Doniger lets themes that re-emerge repeatedly in Hindu culture dictate her topics. The first section treats key defining doctrines: karma, the body, rebirth, yoga, and the notion of Hindu-ness itself, and examines the tension between transcendence and devotional particularism in Hindu forms of theism. The second section looks at concepts of the divine, sacrifice, and salvation, and the third at views of women and other genders. The sections that follow consider the themes of desire and sex, animals, illusions, and subversions, and the outsider views of orientalist and scholars. In each section Doniger does not aim to be comprehensive, but instead touches on key themes in novel, challenging, and usually insightful ways.