

Michael Moriarty. *Early Modern French Thought: The Age of Suspicion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. xii + 271 pp. \$120.00. Review by TODD JANKE, CLAYTON STATE UNIVERSITY.

For those with an interest in early modern philosophy, this book by Michael Moriarty is a welcome addition to the field. Unlike what is characteristic of many texts dealing with philosophy of the period, Moriarty's prose is a delight to read, and the arguments are compelling, enticing us to adopt a new attitude towards well-worn accounts of the three figures he treats: Descartes, Pascal, and Malebranche. That new attitude amounts to a rethinking of the way that both the body and a deep suspicion of everyday experience figure in these philosophers' work. Moriarty deftly traces the roots and trajectory of early modern French thinking about these issues, placing them squarely within a cultural milieu dominated by belief in a transcendent God, drawing liberally on both historical, primary texts and contemporary sources (from Aristotle to Charles Taylor)—demonstrating an admirable breadth of knowledge with respect to the field. In that sense, the text will be a valuable resource for both historians and philosophers interested in the period. Moriarty's careful scholarship and accessible style should also make it a good read for advanced students of early modern thought.

The stated aim of the book is to articulate how contradictory tendencies of the early modern period, in particular a deep mistrust of the body and a profound sense of the inevitable misery of human existence, juxtaposed with the scientific and cultural achievements of the Renaissance, prompted Descartes, Pascal, and Malebranche to develop "certain habits of analysis, a disposition to scrutinize the taken-for-granted of everyday experience" (6). Moriarty also attempts to determine how their outlook of suspicion towards the quotidian is informed by commitment to belief in a transcendent God. Chapter two provides a brief, but effective, overview of the influence of the Church on intellectual developments during the period. He traces, in particular, the effect Jansenist treatments of Augustinian themes had on Descartes, Pascal, and Malebranche. The upshot of the chapter is that all three were inheritors of an Augustinian understanding of the self on which "our knowledge of ourselves . . . is hopelessly compromised by self-love and the passions. We are condemned to opacity and illusion" (46).

In the chapter on Descartes, Moriarty places emphasis not so much on

what we already tend to accept about Descartes (i.e., that he rejected the deliverances of the senses as the domain of proper and certain knowledge in favor of an inward-looking subject who can be certain only of her own cogitations); instead, Moriarty focuses on what Descartes' rejection of the body tells us about the grounding and pervasive role the body and the senses play with respect to our understanding of ourselves as imperfect, embodied agents with an unshakeable dependence on God. His targets, in this re-reading of Descartes, are ideological objections to Descartes as the author of a too thin conception of the self as disembodied thinking thing, transparent to itself in doubting (55). According to Moriarty, in rejecting the body and proclaiming the certainty of its own thoughts Descartes does not, in the end, "erect the self, or subject, into a secure position of self-mastery" (99), as is often claimed. This is so because the fundamental achievement of the doubting self, for Descartes, the apparently self-transparent cogito certain of its own existence, cannot in fact deliver itself from uncertainty, for in the consummatory act of the cogitating self there is the disquieting residue of a self-undermining doubt. As Moriarty notes, "[d]oubt has assured me of my existence but what it gives, so to speak, with one hand, it takes away with the other, for it assures me equally infallibly of my imperfection" (98). Though the self-reflecting cogito may achieve a kind of certainty, it can only do so at the price of acknowledging, at the same time, its imperfection—its fundamental posture of doubt. Mistrust of the body and the deliverances of the senses, then, for Descartes, result ultimately *not* in a wholehearted commitment to the claim that the only thing of which the self can be certain is its own existence, but rather, an acknowledgment that whatever achievements the self may make in coming to know itself, it can never escape the grip of doubt, or its dependence on God. The Cartesian self is not a bloodless, disembodied, cogitating mind, but an embodied, doubting, fractured agent, alienated from itself, and utterly dependent.

In Moriarty's reading, Pascal's recognition that the experience of our everyday lives as embodied agents is shot through with error and illusion eventuates not in attempts, as in the case of Descartes, to root out the sources of this error in order to gain philosophical certainty, but in acknowledgement of the loneliness, misery, and hopelessness of the human condition—a condition that can be ameliorated only by embracing the saving grace of God. Pascal is not, however, entirely anti-Cartesian, as he shares with Descartes "a sense of

radical solitude,” which culminates in the claim that “[w]e are ridiculous to fall back on the society of our fellow-creatures, wretched like ourselves, helpless like ourselves; they will not help us: we shall die alone. We must therefore act as if we were alone” (25). For Pascal, in the end, the recognition of the fragility and precariousness of our epistemic condition and the futility of attempts to gain philosophical certainty must lead us to reject as suspect at best any knowledge we may gain of ourselves: the true self is always hidden and unknowable. Rooting out sources of error, withdrawing from the everyday world and the deliverances of the senses bring us closer to the truth (i.e., God), but they are not enough: “Only by divine grace’s reordering our affections, subordinating our love of self to the love of god, can we ever hope to enter into possession of a selfhood purified of illusion” (150). So, like Descartes, Moriarty argues, the retreat into the self is a necessary response to the recognition of our epistemic situation, but for Pascal, unlike Descartes, this is not a philosophical movement. It is rather the initiating gesture of a search for enlightenment about our essential nature that can only come from the illuminating light of grace.

Descartes provided the impetus for Malebranche to take up philosophy, and the latter adopted from Descartes a commitment to the idea that “the spontaneous promptings of everyday consciousness are a source of error: the quest for knowledge takes the form of a resistance” (151). Unlike Descartes, however, the goal of this resistance for Malebranche, Moriarty writes, was not only to better grasp the nature of truth and certainty but to understand the soul’s essential closeness to God. What is to be understood as the achievement of Descartes’ philosophical work for Malebranche is not simply that “the soul, and God, are more easily known than the body,” but that “the soul is actually more essentially united to God than to the body” (152). The importance of this claim is that suspicion of the body and the deliverances of the senses make us aware not only of the sources of error with respect to knowledge, but also, and more importantly, make us aware of the ways in which these sources of error misinform us about the true nature of ourselves, which in turn “impacts our existential attitudes, evaluations, and behaviour-patterns” (152). The goal of philosophical suspicion, then, is more adequately to understand our relationship to others and to God. Failing to understand the essential connection of the soul to God, we fail to understand the true nature of error—that it is not simply an epistemic matter—and thereby

condemn ourselves to ignorance. “The vivid babbling presence of the body, and of bodies, drowns the Master’s voice with its message of truth. So true is it that for Malebranche any philosophy that ignores theology cannot hope to diagnose, or even correctly to describe, the obstacles besetting the search for truth” (248).

Michael Moriarty’s *Early Modern French Thought: the Age of Suspicion* is an exemplary work of scholarship. It deals deftly with complex philosophical issues and draws on a wide range of sources, from history and theology to critical theory and psychoanalysis. In the midst of all the erudition, though, the central theme of the book is never lost, nor does the reader ever come to feel that the forest is missed for the trees. The development of the attitude of suspicion in early modern French thought is carefully charted in the works of Descartes, Pascal, and Malebranche, in a way that will not fail to encourage among its readers a rethinking of the significance of this attitude and its enduring philosophical legacy.

Françoise Lavocat. *La Syrinx au bûcher. Pan et les satyres à la Renaissance et à l’âge baroque*. Geneva: Droz, 2005. 536 pp. + 62 illus. CHF 140.00. Review by FRANÇOIS RIGOLOT, PRINCETON UNIVERSITY.

This is a well-researched and amply documented book with numerous illustrations on a fascinating topic, namely the representation of the figure of Pan and the satyr in the early modern period from the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century to the first third of the 17<sup>th</sup> in several European countries, especially France and Italy, with some scant remarks about England. Although several studies have already been devoted to the subject, none is as wide-ranging and intellectually ambitious, since it addresses the treatment of a ubiquitous theme in a variety of cultural media, including lyric poetry, narrative, essay, drama, dance, opera, and iconography. It purports to trace a two-century long evolution in the representation of mythical figures associated with the Pan legend (i.e., Marsyas, Midas, Faunus, Silenus, Sylvan, and the satyrs), as artists, dancers, poets, medical doctors, philosophers, and theologians debated about their symbolic meaning and significance through the Renaissance and Baroque Age.

The title translates rather convolutedly as “Pan’s pipes burnt at the stake.”