
While Félix Ravaisson has enjoyed sustained attention in French scholarship since his death in 1900, it is only in recent decades that he attracted significant interest among Anglophone scholars. This new interest is sorely overdue. Ravaisson is a key figure in the tradition of French Spiritualism, which exerted a profound influence on the development of Continental philosophy throughout the twentieth century, and many of Ravaisson’s philosophical concerns have are relevant to many contemporary debates, such as the function of habit and plasticity, the continuities between biological and intellectual life, and the place of religion in relation to philosophical inquiry.

Mark Sinclair’s new collection of translations makes a substantial contribution to English-speaking Ravaissonian studies. The selection of eleven texts in Selected Essays roughly (though not exactly) mirrors Dominique Janicaud’s 1985 collection L’art et les mystères grecs. The bulk of the translations are by Sinclair, with a few written or co-written by other scholars. The bulk of the translations are by Sinclair, with a few written or co-written by other scholars (Jeremy Dunham, Adi Efal, Tullio Viola). Sinclair provides an excellent introductory essay that sets the chosen texts in the context of Ravaisson’s fascinating biography and gives an orientation to Ravaisson’s basic philosophical commitments. A brief but useful bibliography of both French and English scholarship is also included, and the paperback volume is handsomely produced.

The book begins with Ravaisson’s brilliant essay, ‘Of Habit’, republished here in a revised translation. (The 2008 Bloomsbury edition of this translation, which includes a facing edition of the French original and more substantial editorial material, remains the more useful one for scholarly work.) In this text Ravaisson extends the Aristotelian thought that habit constitutes a second nature beyond the human polis to incorporate the whole biological order, such that habit is elevated from an aspect of anthropology and psychology to become a basic metaphysical principle that mediates matter and mind. It is for this speculative analysis of habit that Ravaisson is most often celebrated, and rightly so.

The following ten texts touch on a wide range of historical periods and philosophical loci. Ravaisson’s profound expertise in antique thought is evident in his ‘Essay on Stoicism’, which shows an admiration for the Stoics even while clearly preferring Aristotle’s metaphysics to their ‘theological physics’ that identifies incorporeal phenomena finally with
physical existence. ‘Metaphysics and Morals’ proposes an Aristotelian unification of action, value, and being that Ravaisson argues is missing in Kant and the positivism of his time. Aesthetics is the focus of four pieces, including ‘The Art of Drawing According to Leonardo da Vinci’, which is an extract from a commissioned report on the teaching of drawing in French schools, and ‘The Venus de Milo’, a selection from Ravaisson’s reflections on the famed statue and his own efforts in the 1880’s to restore it more closely to its original form.

Many of the texts in Selected Essays deal with religious and theological themes. In ‘Mysteries’ Ravaisson argues that, for all their differences, Greek, Roman, Jewish, and Christian religious practices aim at a common divine principle that is revealed as ‘a depth of luminous shadows’. In ‘Pascal’s Philosophy’ Ravaisson traces a peculiar sort of theological epistemology that, contra many readers of Pascal, should not be contrasted with reason but instead seen in terms of a loving will that is its necessary companion: ‘true science and true religion... are hardly different’ and ‘allow us to participate in divine felicity’. The amicable relation that Ravaisson finds between philosophy and religion is shown above all in his ‘Philosophical Testament’, an unfinished work based on notes gathered after his death. Here we see the Augustinian theology that is alluded to at several points in ‘Of Habit’ developing into a full-blown philosophy of nature, which construes material existence, biological life, and human culture as finite participations in divine love: ‘for the philosophy that goes to the ground of things, to the light that emanates from the heart, everything is explained in the movement of nature by a pre-existent love, by a prevenient grace’. Secular readers will perhaps find themselves on strange territory here. But throughout his texts Ravaisson labours to show how philosophical inquiry, at least when it is done in the style of greats like Aristotle, the Stoics, or Leibniz, inevitably converges with religious questions, and this argument can command the attention of any who are interested in the nature of philosophy as such.

This book is a great boon for anglophone readers of Ravaisson and we are indebted to Mark Sinclair for putting it together. Many important texts remain to be translated—the Rapport on philosophy in nineteenth-century France and the commentaries on Aristotle are two particularly significant items here—but Selected Essays will go a long way toward establishing Ravaisson’s place in English-speaking scholarship.

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