***RESEARCH STATEMENT***

I began my research focusing on various accounts of habituation processes, and the strength of habits, once they are formed: in my master’s thesis, I focused on Proust and Gontcharov, just as much as on Ravaisson or Bergson. Aside from what literature had to offer, my dissertation discussed the sociological and psychological analysis of habit formation within a philosophical perspective. This research later gave birth to a book, published by *Editions Universitaires Européennes*, Broché, in 2018: “*La Force des Habitudes : Anthropologie Philosophique de la notion de Sclérose : Genèse, emprise, libération*” (“The Strength of Habits: Philosophical Anthropology of Sklerosis: Genesis, Influence and Liberation”).

My research remains fundamentally multi-dimensional, sometimes dealing with areas of research far off my field of origin: I co-wrote a book with professor Charles Ramond, *Feeling of Injustice and Popular Songs* (2018), questioning the origins of what we call injustice under the prism of the philosophy of ordinary language. I contributed to a book about Montaigne (“*Montaigne et Nous*”, 2019), and to one about punishment (to be published by *Presses Universitaires de France* soon).

Under Denis Kambouchner’s direction, my Ph.D. dissertation[[1]](#footnote-1) at Paris 1, Panthéon Sorbonne, dealt with the relationship between continental philosophy and experimental psychology, with a focus on the impairments of the willpower. I intended to shift the focus from the classical debates about *akrasia*, to the psychological arena, within a historical perspective. I studied how modern philosophers have tackled the question of the relationship between desires, passions, and will, to better compare their views with 19th and 20th centuries’ approaches to willpower. The minute observations of various forms of defeat of the will made me question common accounts of the lack of motivation, and of the inability for decision making. In a dissertation of over 400 pages, I delivered a comparative, descriptive and clinical analysis of Ribot’s work, whose contributions to philosophy are unjustly forgotten. Greatly influenced by John Stuart Mill, Spencer, William James but also, in a subtle and often unacknowledged way, by the early moderns as well as by metaphysicians such as Schopenhauer*[[2]](#footnote-2)*, he was considered the Founder of French experimental or “scientific” psychology. I pointed out in my dissertation how Ribot’s conception of the willpower and of its diseases is actually of great philosophical relevance. It can be traced back into the work of the very philosophers he so openly criticizes, and it finds numerous ramifications in more contemporary conceptions of the will (notably in neuroscience). My approach, just like Ribot’s (despite his insisting on moving beyond philosophy), was fundamentally philosophical. I offered a critical reflection about the definition of the willpower *via* the analysis of its troubles, putting an emphasis on Ribot’s “dissolution” method[[3]](#footnote-3).

I share the conviction that the description of every mental phenomenon would benefit from the parallel characterizations of its evolution and its morbid disorders. Especially when it comes to willpower, Ribot insists on the necessity of getting away from too rigid a theory of mental faculties, and from the moral concerns of the metaphysical approach. Consciousness being considered as a mere epiphenomenon added over and above the physiological phenomena, voluntary actions, or “volitions” appear as the expression of the individual's physiology, character and affective tendencies. Ribot’s substantial impact not only on Freud, but also on philosophers like Nietzsche or Bergson[[4]](#footnote-4) is obvious, and helped me study the work of these 3 authors in depth. I also explored further how the 19th century conceptions of the lack of motivation, and of the inability for decision making should be reevaluated for a finer descriptive, phenomenological approach that some major works of literature greatly illustrate[[5]](#footnote-5).

Pathologies are considered as "natural experiments" which enable us to investigate the nature of the will in an original way, while making us question the blurry frontiers between the normal and the abnormal. The reflection I then developed on the abnormal, the sick, the disabled went beyond these psychopathological and "experimental" approaches. I am currently expanding this aspect of my research towards a further inquiry into the current medical accounts of anomalies - not only focusing on mental disorders, but also on physical disabilities. Teaching Bioethics in my class about “Issues of Life and Death” at Fordham has also contributed to develop my areas of inquiry towards the Ethics of Health Care in parallel with Gender Ethics.

Today, I still study the dysfunctions of the will, such as indecisiveness, apathy, *abulia[[6]](#footnote-6)*, but also obsessions, *idées fixes*, addictions, and FOMO[[7]](#footnote-7) (I am currently working on an article about FOMO and Free Will Anxieties: A Bergsonian Remedy”). When reading about the relationships between the will and what Ribot calls ‘the passions’, I found myself surprised at seeing drunkenness and love of gambling listed among Ribot’s passions. I went on and explored the relationship between passions and addictions, both defined according to similar criteria: a fixed idea or obsession, a long-term, affective and cognitive orientation towards a salient, persistent object; a relationship to morbidity and psychopathology. I wrote an article on that question, published in the refereed philosophy journal *Implications* philosophiques (“*La Passion Morbide : Une approche physiologique de l’addiction chez Théodule Ribot”*: “Morbid Passion : A Physiological Approach of Addiction in Théodule Ribot’s works”). I later wrote another article more specifically focused on the inability to decide (“*L’irrésolution et l’Aboulie chez Théodule Ribot*”: “Irresolution and Aboulia in Theodule Ribot’s works”, *Revue Implications Philosophiques*, 2018), and one about the great Swiss author Henri-Frédéric Amiel whose Journal explores this specific disability with amazing sophistication (“*Le cas Amiel à la lumière de la psychologie expérimentale*”: “The Amiel Case in the light of Experimental Psychology”, *Revue Implications Philosophiques*, 2019). I am also currently working on a book about Philosophical Issues in Personality Disorders,to be edited by Konrad Banicki & Peter Zachar, who have kindly asked me to contribute a chapter, given my expertise in the history of European psychology.

Over the coming years, I intend on pursuing my research about irresolution by enriching it with neuroscience and psychopathology perspectives, but also with contemporary decision theory, touching on issues in epistemology, philosophy of mind, and metaphysics. Within the analytical field, the orthodox decision theory emphasizes the maximization of a compound of values and beliefs: decision-making is concerned with the mere reasoning underlying an agent’s choices. This focus on logic and probabilities spotlights what the agent should rationally do. I want to explore in what ways this normative, idealistically rational approach to the will could benefit from the descriptive, psychological and phenomenological approach necessary to explain real human behavior.

On the other hand, my passion for Gender Ethics has led my current research to three different paths:

- Over the last year, I have been focusing on prostitution, with a strong emphasis on narratives, allowing me to simultaneously add materials to the traditional debate about its legalization, and to develop a philosophical, sociological and psychological reflection that intends to go beyond it. Correlatively, I have begun research about pornography and eroticism. Sexual desire and eroticism are constant preoccupations in life; yet the vast majority of philosophers have refused to really pay attention to such a-philosophical, even anti-philosophical topics[[8]](#footnote-8). Philosophers are facing an embarrassing subject; the reasons why most of them remain silent on the topic might have to do with concerns about decency, or with a mere indifference: sexual desire might be considered too trivial to be worth their attention. But one could also argue that the intellectual tools philosophy uses are inappropriate for grasping the erotic experience, in its personal and psychological dimensions. I am exploring the implications of this argument[[9]](#footnote-9) within the context of feminist thought.

- While teaching bioethics, I have questioned common conceptions of reproductive organs. Exploring E. Kingma’s position on parthood vs. containment view about the fetus and its mother[[10]](#footnote-10), I realized that the common imagery of fetal development tends to convey the idea of a fetus growing inside a uterine cavity, and hooked to it by a mere umbilical cord. In reality, not only is the foster growing within the uterine wall (to the point, we believe, that it is more accurate to refer to that very “wall” as being the uterus, more than the very small cavity in between), but also, that very uterus has little to do with a cavity, a recipient, or a container. In fact, I aim at debunking gender bias behind the “pea in the pod” vernacular that might, among other disastrous consequences, have led to the incredibly high rate of hysterectomies in the US today (Article accepted and to be published within the next months in the International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics (IJFAB). “Women and their Uteri: Symbolic Vessels for Prejudiced Expectations”, co-authored with Paola Nicolas, bioethicist).

- The inmates I taught at Rikers were exclusively women - or identified as such. The presence of transgender people in female prisons is not exceptional, and it has been a fascinating subject of conversation with the inmates (one of my last sessions was about exploring the very definition of the concept “woman”), along with homosexuality, sexual tolerance, and gender identity in general. This pushed me to further explore the narrative aspects I deemed necessary for my research on sex and gender, this time within the context of our women prisons[[11]](#footnote-11).

I hope to develop my research at Harvard in a way that contributes not only to its academic influence, but also to its commitment to promoting innovative and pluralistic collaborations between faculty from philosophy and other disciplines. I would be honored to help the existing network of boundary-breaking programs flourish, and to participate in Harvard’s vision for an inclusive liberal arts education.

1. I graduated on July 5th, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ribot, Th. (1874). *La philosophie de Schopenhauer*. Paris: Baillière. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ribot, T. (1883). *Les maladies de la volonté*. Paris: G. Baillière. – Ribot, T. (1894). *The diseases of the will* (trans. by Merwin-Marie Snell). Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Company. This book was reissued in 32 subsequent editions in French and English. He already had adopted this method in his famous *Les Maladies de la mémoire* (*Diseases of Memory*, 1881), Influenced by the work of Hughlings Jackson. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Both of whom count among the philosophers I have read most extensively. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Henri-Frédéric Amiel’s journal is an example of the most acute and sophisticated introspective testimony of a man desperate about the paralysis of his will. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Lack of initiative, motivation, will. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Fear Of Missing Out. The psychological phenomenon of FOMO presents us with interesting challenges to the definition of free will. I recently gave a talk about the ways in which FOMO highlights the contrasting views on free will one can find in Bergson and Sartre’s work. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. As Montaigne rightly claims in *Les Essais*, what we speak the least about is often what we think about the most.  [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Please refer to my CV and website (<https://jeanneproust.github.io/>) for interviews and talks I gave about this topic. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Elselijn Kingma, Were You a Part of Your Mother?, *Mind*, Volume 128, Issue 511, July 2019, Pages 609–646, <https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/fzy087> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. I am working on this project with Barry Zack, a national (U.S.) expert and international consultant in the field of correctional (prison, jail and other detention settings) and community health. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)