

# Descartes's *Passions of the Soul*

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## Abstract

While Descartes's *Passions of the Soul* has been taken to hold a place in the history to human physiology, until recently philosophers have neglected the work. In this research summary, I set Descartes's last published work in context and then sketch out its philosophical significance. From it, we gain further insight into Descartes's solution to the Mind–Body Problem – that is, to the problem of the ontological status of the mind–body union in a human being, to the nature of body–mind causation, and to the way body–caused thoughts represent the world. In addition, the work contains Descartes's developed ethics, in his account of virtue and of the passion of *générosité* in particular. Through his taxonomy of the passions and the account of their regulation, we also learn more about his moral psychology.

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Certainly, Descartes's last work, *The Passions of the Soul*, holds interest because it is a rare one of his works that has not been subject to centuries of study.<sup>1</sup> In it, we might find something new to say about a canonical figure in the history of philosophy. However, there are also more philosophically minded reasons for taking an interest in the work. The account of the passions, or emotions, developed in the *Passions of the Soul* opens new lines of approach to the long-standing Mind–Body Problem, as well as fuels a new line of inquiry into Descartes's and other rationalists' ethics.<sup>2</sup> It is worth mentioning, too, that these areas of research within the history of early modern philosophy parallel recent interest in the emotions in contemporary philosophy of mind and virtue ethics. I begin by situating the *Passions* in relation to Descartes's other writings and providing an overview of the work. I then sketch out these lines of research.

### 1. *The Passions of the Soul in the Context of Descartes's Other Writings*

Descartes began drafting *The Passions of the Soul* at the request of his correspondent Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, who writes, in her letter of September 13, 1645, that she “would also like to see you define the passions, in order to know them better” (4:289). Elisabeth's request comes in the middle of a discussion concerning the regulation of the passions, virtue, and the sovereign good. In his response in a letter of October 6, 1645, Descartes begins by offering general principles to guide emotional therapy, but he

then begins to detail the physiology of the passions, claiming to be drawing on an earlier work on animal physiology – perhaps the *Treatise of Man*, published posthumously. Elisabeth comments on a draft of a *Traité des Passions* in her letter to him of April 25, 1646 (4:403). The *Passions of the Soul* was first published in 1649, shortly before Descartes's death in 1650.

The work seems to follow on from the end of his *Principles of Philosophy*, in which Descartes issued promissory notes for a fifth part, on animals, and a sixth part, on man. Part I of the *Passions* echoes the first parts of the *Principles*, setting out the principles proper to body, and those proper to mind.<sup>3</sup> It then proceeds to discuss the passions as states proper to the union of mind and body. In its concern with states proper to the union constituting a human being, the *Passions* can be seen as part of the projected sixth part of the *Principles*. Insofar as the *Passions* addresses the Mind–Body Problem it also follows up on questions left open in the *Meditations*. Its concern with ethics follows up on the *morale par provision* of Part III of the *Discourse on Method*.

## 2. An Overview of the Work

The *Passions* is divided into three parts. Part I (PA aa.1–50) is titled “About the Passions in General, and incidentally about the entire nature of man.” Here, as noted above, Descartes lays out the functions of the body (PA aa.7–16) and the functions of the soul (PA aa.17–29), before turning to consider how the soul has thoughts caused by the body (PA aa.30–50). In the title to PA a.44 Descartes first articulates what he will later characterize as “the principle which underlies everything I have written about [the passions]” (PA a.136, 11:428): “That each volition is naturally joined to some movement of the gland, but that by artifice or habituation one can join it to others” (11:361). It concludes with a discussion of the regulation of the passions. Part II (PA aa.51–148) is titled “About the Number and Order of the Passions and the Explanation of the Six Primitives.” For Descartes, there are six primitive passions: wonder, love, hate, joy, sadness, and desire. The primitives are meant to capture the basic ways in which things in the world are important to us. In most cases, things will prove important insofar as they benefit or harm us at some point in time. The vast majority of the passions we feel result from some combination of these primitives.

Descartes's taxonomy of the passions differs both from those who preceded him and from his contemporaries. The Stoics, for instance, counted four primitive passions (joy, sadness, desire, and fear), while Aquinas counted eleven (love, desire, joy, hatred, aversion, sadness, hope, courage, despair, fear, and anger). For Hobbes, the “simple passions” are “called appetite, desire, love, aversion, hate, joy and grief” (ch. 6).<sup>4</sup> For Spinoza there are but three primitive passions: desire, joy, and sadness.

It is particularly remarkable not only that Descartes identifies wonder as a primitive passion but also that he lists it as the first of all the passions. For

wonder does not refer to a thing's benefit or harm directly. Rather, we wonder at something which appears to us as rare or extraordinary. Marking something as new and different in this way moves us to learn more about it – perhaps to discover whether it is beneficial or harmful – and wonder, for Descartes, disposes us to science, or systematic knowledge. Interestingly, self-esteem amounts to a wonder at ourselves combined with joy, and a proper self-esteem, or generosity, involving a wonder at our free will, is “the key to all the virtues.”

Part II also includes an extensive discussion of the expression of the passions, and it concludes with a discussion of the regulation of desire and the exercise of virtue. I consider the latter discussion in the section on Cartesian ethics below. With regard to our emotional expressions, for Descartes, “there is no passion which is not manifested by some particular action of the eyes” and face (PA a.113, 11:412). He offers in painstaking detail an account of the physiology of these expressions. These details were used by court painter Charles Le Brun (1994) in setting out the canonical depiction of expressions. What is not clear is *how* the facial movements express the passions. It does not seem that Descartes takes our expressions to be directly caused by passions in the soul – they are not, in the first instance, intentional acts. We might understand the expressions to signify the passion in virtue of their sharing of common physiological cause, but this view is not without problems given Descartes's views on the regulation of the passions.<sup>5</sup> Equally puzzling is how Descartes thinks we are each able to understand one another's expressions (for “even the stupidest servant can tell from their master's eye whether or not he is upset with them” (PA a.113, 11:412)). While Descartes does not address this issue, his near contemporaries who read the work do so. Malebranche posits a natural mechanism whereby the expression of one person is communicated to another (5:7, see also 2:1.4, 5:3). Similarly, Spinoza allows that we have a natural sympathy with the passions of those who are similar to us (3:27).

Part III (PA aa.149–212) is titled “About the Particular Passions,” and it continues the taxonomy of the passions. Of particular interest here is the discussion of generosity (discussed below), as well as the extensive remarks concerning the regulation of the passions interwoven into these articles. The work concludes with specific remedies for the “disorders” of the passions, paired with the claim that “all the good and evil of this life depends” on them alone (PA a.212, 11:488).<sup>6</sup>

### 3. *The Passions and the Mind–Body Problem*

In response to Princess Elisabeth's initial query about the interaction of mind and body in May 1643, Descartes responds that he has said “almost nothing about” how the soul's union with the body allows it to “act on and be acted upon by it” (3:664, May 21, 1643). The end of Part IV of the *Principles* (published in 1644) does include a discussion of sensation and the passions,

but it adds little to the discussion of the mind–body union in the Sixth Meditation. *The Passions of the Soul*, on the other hand, is a work devoted to states proper to a mind united with a body. It thus holds promise for shedding light on Descartes's final response to Elisabeth and the constellation of issues known as the Mind–Body Problem.

The Mind–Body Problem comprises three distinct problems surrounding the relation of body and the immaterial human mind. The first problem lies in understanding the ontological status of the human being, a union of mind and body. Descartes insists that the union of mind and body constitutes an *ens per se*,<sup>7</sup> and so is something more than the accidental union of associations between mental states and physical states. He does not, however, detail just what makes the human being a true unity. Is Descartes a trialist? That is, does he take the union to constitute a third substance, with its own proper principal attribute and modes? Or are we to understand the union as an *ens per se* in another way? I will refer to this as the Ontological Problem. The second problem – the Causal Problem – concerns the nature of the interaction between mind and body such that motions proper to the body can cause thoughts in the soul and that our willing to act – a state of mind – can cause motions in the body. While one concern might be whether it is in principle possible for two different substances to interact causally,<sup>8</sup> another is what the nature of the causal relation could be. Elisabeth's initial query about mind–body interaction raised the latter concern. A third problem, the Representation Problem, asks how it is that we can have thoughts that represent the world without resembling them. These three sub-problems can be seen as part of one Mind–Body Problem insofar as the answers to them are closely interconnected.

How does *The Passions of the Soul* shed light on Descartes's response to the Mind–Body Problem? Descartes does not, in the *Passions*, directly address the Ontological Problem. However, commentators have mined the text for answers to this question. Paul Hoffman (1990) has argued that Descartes's identification of action and passion in PA a.1 entails that the passions are what he terms “straddling modes,” that is, each passion is a single entity that is equally a mode of mind and a mode of body. Hoffman thinks this account supports a weak trialist solution to the Ontological Problem, one which does take the mind–body union as a third substance, but one which does not have one single principle attribute.<sup>9</sup> Descartes's account of the regulation of the passions suggests an alternative approach to the Ontological Problem, though it does not address this issue directly either. As noted above, in PA a.44 Descartes maintains that we can come to feel appropriately about things not only by controlling our emotional responses but also by changing the naturally instituted associations between mental states (passions) and physical states (bodily motions) (see also PA aa.107, 136 and especially 211). This altering of mind–body associations to regulate the passions is guided by considerations of the good of the human being. I have argued that this account of the regulation of the passions suggests that mind and body form

a true union (or *ens per se*) in virtue of mind–body associations that are instituted to promote the good of the human being (Shapiro 2003b). In my view, Descartes's union of mind and body is a teleological one, which is neither weakly nor strongly dualist.

Descartes does not address the Causal Problem head on in the *Passions* either, but again we are given further insight into what the solution to this part of the Mind–Body Problem must involve. First, it is clear from the *Passions* that Descartes does think that body and mind causally interact and that there is nothing metaphysically problematic in their doing so. His consistent claims that motions of the pineal gland cause thoughts (passions) in the soul (see in particular PA a.31) bring to the fore the question about the nature of body–mind causation. Second, there is something odd about the causal connection between body and mind in the context of the passions. As noted above, Descartes thinks that in regulating the passions we can change the naturally instituted associations between body and mind. This position suggests a subtle shift from that articulated in the Sixth Meditation. There, Descartes intimates that the associations governing mind–body interaction are law-like; they are instituted by God and so are at least contingently necessary, i.e., necessary given God's will. In the *Passions* Descartes moves away from this claim. While this is surprising, it can be seen as working through implications of other of his remarks. In correspondence with Elisabeth, Descartes maintains that mind–body causation is not of the same kind as body–body causation (see Descartes's letter of May 21, 1643, 3:667, 3:219). It is plausible, then, that he takes mind–body causation to be plastic in a way that body–body causation is not.<sup>10</sup> A more detailed examination of Descartes's discussion in the *Passions* of the causal relations between mind and body might well prove instructive in understanding the conception of causation Descartes employs, and in particular how it compares to that figuring in the interaction between bodies.

The *Passions* holds promise in shedding light on the Representation Problem. In the Sixth Meditation, Descartes raises a question of how any body-caused mental state *could* represent the world, other than as simply existing. He rejects a resemblance account of sensory representation, and so seeks an alternative account.<sup>11</sup> At the end of the Sixth Meditation, Descartes's provisional answer seems to be that sensations represent the ways in which things affect the well-being of a human being (as a union of mind and body).<sup>12</sup> Descartes's discussion of sensation in Part IV of the *Principles of Philosophy* continues in this vein, but adds little. With the *Passions*, we are presented with a whole work devoted to thoughts the mind has in virtue of the mind–body union. Moreover, Descartes is committed there to maintaining that the passions, just as much as sensations, are representational. We can thus expect to find here a development of his initial answer to the second part of the Representation Problem.

As Descartes outlines his view, there are three species of passions in general, or those perceptions that “come to the soul by the mediation of

the nerves" (PA a.22, 11:345). They differ in what we refer or relate those perceptions to.<sup>13</sup> Some of these perceptions "we refer to objects outside us" (PA a.23, 11:346); these are just our sensations of external objects. Others "we refer to our body" (PA a.24, 11:346), and these include internal sensations such as hunger and thirst. Finally, others "we refer to our soul" (PA a.25, 11:347); these are the passions in the particular sense, and the focus of the work. Descartes defines them in PA a.27 as those "perceptions or sensations or excitations of the soul which are referred to it in particular and which are caused, maintained and strengthened by some movement of the spirits" (11:349). Further, the principle of taxonomy of the passions suggests that the passions represent the way things harm, benefit, or are generally important to us.

What Descartes intends by claiming that we refer these perceptions to one or another object is puzzling. Getting clear on how our body-caused thoughts represent involves getting clear on this relation, as well as explicating what leads us to refer some perceptions to external objects, others to our body, and still others to the soul. This second interpretive issue is especially pressing given that Descartes in the *Meditations* maintains that our sensory experiences represent the way things affect our well-being, and in the *Passions* he maintains that the passions also represent the importance of things to us.

#### 4. Descartes's Ethics and Moral Psychology

While the *Passions of the Soul* does elaborate and illuminate Descartes's metaphysics and philosophy of mind, the work is far from being a metaphysical tract. It also contains a worked out moral psychology and some further insight into Descartes's ethics. I will discuss Descartes's moral psychology in the course of considering his ethics.

One can approach the question of what the *Passions* tells us of Descartes's ethics in several ways. First, we can ask how it relates to Descartes's earlier writings on ethics. Descartes's ethical thought is expressed directly in but three places: Part Three of the *Discourse on the Method for Rightly Conducting Reason*, the correspondence with Elisabeth (especially that of 1645–46), and the *Passions of the Soul*. While these writings certainly have affinities with one another, it is hard to fit them together. The ethics of the *Discourse* is advertised as a *morale par provision*, and the temptation has been to read this as a stopgap measure, a set of rules subscribed to until a fully grounded system is established. However, in correspondence with Elisabeth, Descartes reiterates these rules, and seems to subscribe fully to them. (See letter of August 4, 1645, 4:265ff) Moreover, the Stoicism expressed in several of the *Discourse* rules reappears in both the letters to Elisabeth and in the *Passions*. The continuities suggest that the *Discourse* gives us the start of a developing ethics, of which the *Passions* is the last chapter. The interpretive issue then is how that development progresses, and towards what end. John Marshall (1998) has argued that in the *Passions* we find a fully fledged moral theory

grounded in the principles articulated in the *Discourse* and subscribing to an objective standard of value and prescribes a set of duties a moral agent must follow. One might, however, maintain that while the ethics of the *Passions* does follow on from the *Discourse*, we are there presented with a virtue ethics rather than a deontological morality. Descartes does seem to be principally concerned with perfecting our character as moral agents, ensuring that our actions derive from a proper understanding of the world.

We can also reconstruct Descartes's ethical view from the *Passions* on its own. At least part of Descartes's ethics emerges from a consideration of the regulation of the passions. For him, there are three ways in which we can correct for the evaluative errors of the passions. First, we can simply refrain from acting the way our passions dispose us to, pausing to assess whether our evaluations are well-founded. Second, we can correct any passionate misrepresentations of the value of things much as we correct mistaken judgments, considering "reasons, objects and precedents" which argue against our evaluations and representing to ourselves things associated with the feelings we ought to have (see PA a.45). Finally, as discussed above, we can change how we feel things in the first place. In order to undertake any of these, we are to evaluate things *properly* and correct our assessments. For Descartes, proper evaluation of things requires properly distinguishing what depends on us from what does not. We can then strive to control only that which does depend on us. The self-knowledge and resolve to make oneself as complete, or as perfect, as one can form the core of his account of the regulation of the passions and pervades his ethics as a whole. The focus of Descartes's moral philosophy is thus not whether the actions we undertake are good or bad. Rather, for him, moral evaluations concern agents, and in particular whether they have their thoughts in order.<sup>14</sup>

We might also consider the *Passions* through the lens of the Stoicism and neo-Stoicism which clearly influenced him. His remark that he treats the passions not as a moralist but *comme physicien*, as a natural scientist,<sup>15</sup> positions the work within the context of the neo-Stoicism of the seventeenth century. In the early part of the century, moralists such as Guillaume DuVair (1603) and Pierre Charron (1604)<sup>16</sup> revived a Stoic ethics while abstracting it from the rest of the Stoic system. According to these neo-Stoics, we should all strive to be like the sage who is fully in control of his thoughts and actions, and thereby fully virtuous and without passions. Descartes's account of the passions and their regulation is clearly influenced by these neo-Stoic accounts. However, Descartes rejects the neo-Stoic ideal of a passionless sage.<sup>17</sup> He also diverges from the neo-Stoics in a more substantive way, as he re-inserts this moral philosophy into a systematic treatment of the world. For Descartes, as well as for the classical Stoics, ethics follows from natural philosophy: we can only gain understanding of our passions, and so be able to properly regulate them and lead a virtuous life, by properly understanding the nature of the human body, of the human soul, and of their union. In this way,

Descartes's *Passions* sets the stage for Spinoza's *Ethics*, a more thoroughly Stoic work.

Descartes's ethics has other affinities with classical Stoic ethics. Like the Stoics, he maintains that a person is virtuous insofar as he has "a firm and constant resolution to execute all that reason advises him to do" (Letter to Elisabeth, Aug 3, 1645, 4:265). On his view, the outcome of action has nothing to do with whether an agent is virtuous. Thus, we should rest content, he maintains, so long as we have done the best we can, whether or not things turn out the way we expect them to (see also PA a.144ff). Classical Stoics also deny the relevance of moral luck to virtue. Equally, Descartes's account of the source of ethical normativity also faces some of the same problems of the Stoics. For Descartes our first evaluations are founded on our body's relations to the world. Love, hate, joy, and sadness are all first felt upon the body's being in a better or worse state of well-being, and these states of relative physical well-being constitute our first evaluations (see PA aa.107–111).<sup>18</sup> We then come to value things that do not seem to bear a direct relation to our self-preservation, for instance, other people or our country (Letter to Elisabeth of September 15, 1645, 4:293, 3:266). Similarly, the Stoics understand correct moral judgements as developing from a proper concern with self-preservation to a grasp of a higher good that comes with understanding and reason.<sup>19</sup> And just as interpreters of classical Stoicism are puzzled by the account of this move from a self-interested conception of the good to a conception of a greater good,<sup>20</sup> so too must interpreters of Descartes's ethics understand how he understands our progress from our very first primitive passions to the feelings and evaluations we make as adults. There is, however, a deep difference between the Stoics and Descartes with regard to this problem. The Stoics aim to offer a wholly materialist account of human understanding, and so of our moral development. For Descartes, on the other hand, human reason is a faculty of an immaterial mind united with a body. Descartes's dualism and account of mind–body union complicates any developmental story.

There is related point of difference between Descartes and the Stoics here. Both claim that we are to regulate our passions by distinguishing what properly depends on us from what does not. Equally, both would agree that what properly depends on us is our assent and that we are to assent only to those thoughts which we understand adequately. Both the Stoics and Descartes understand this assent to be an act of will. For Descartes, however, the will is a faculty of an immaterial mind.

The central role of the will in Descartes's ethics and account of virtue is captured in his notion of generosity. Generosity, for Descartes, consists in the knowledge that one has a free will and that we are to be praised and blamed for how we use it, combined with a firm and constant resolution to use the will well (PA aa.153–161).<sup>21</sup> In understanding our nature as freely willing beings, we are able to distinguish properly what depends on us and what does not. And so, in resolving to use our will well, we resolve to act

in accord with our nature and our proper place in the world. Generosity is “the key to all the other virtues, and a general remedy for all the disorders of the passions” (PA a.161, 11:454). It thus seems to contain the whole of Descartes’s ethics. Insofar as Cartesian ethics emerges from the rest of his thought, it is, as Geneviève Rodis-Lewis puts it, the fruit of the tree of his philosophy.<sup>22,23</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> There are currently very few book-length studies of the *Passions*. Denis Kambouchner (1995) is certainly the most comprehensive. Williston and Gombay (2003) collect a set of essays on Descartes’s *Passions*. Only a handful of scholars have incorporated the *Passions* into their work. Susan James (1997) deals with Descartes’s work along with other 17<sup>th</sup>-century writings on the passions. Alanen (2003) incorporates the *Passions* into her account of the Cartesian mind. Paul Hoffman has written a number of articles concerning the passions. See in particular Hoffman (1990) and (1991). See also Williston (1999), Brown (1999) as well as other essays, including some by these authors, in Williston and Gombay (2003).

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Voss’ excellent translation of the work has helped facilitate these studies.

<sup>3</sup> In what follows I use “mind” and “soul” interchangeably. There is no clear principle governing Descartes’s use. However, later Cartesians, such as Pierre-Sylvain Régis do draw a theoretical distinction. Régis uses “mind” to refer to what engages in pure intellection and “soul” to refer to the agent of thought united to a body. See Schmaltz (2002).

<sup>4</sup> It is not clear to me that these simples are primitives in the same way, for Hobbes earlier in this chapter claims that desire and love are kinds of appetites and hate and aversion are of a piece. Equally, joy is a kind of pleasure and grief a species of pain.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of issues concerning the expression of the passions see Shapiro (2003a).

<sup>6</sup> For an extended discussion of the problems in understanding the structure and argument of the work see Shapiro (2003c).

<sup>7</sup> Descartes uses the expression “ens per se” in a letter to Regius of January 1642 (see 3:492f, 3:206). Elsewhere he refers to a human being as a unit or a true union. See 7:81, 2:56, 6:59, 1:141; and 3:691–2, 3:227, as well as PA a.30, 11:351.

<sup>8</sup> Much of the literature on mind–body interaction has concerned this issue. Radner (1971) and others argue that any causal interaction of mind and body would violate the causal principle articulated in the Third Meditation. O’Neill (1987) argues that, insofar as any interaction would be either between substances or between modes of substances, no metaphysical boundaries are crossed in such interaction and so mind–body interaction is consistent with the Causal Principle.

<sup>9</sup> Hoffman (1986) argues for the claim that the Cartesian human being is a third substance, a hylomorphic union of mind and body.

<sup>10</sup> There are other potentially significant disanalogies in Descartes’s language. Despite the prevailing assumption among commentators that for Descartes mind–body interaction follows laws of nature, Descartes never refers to mind–body associations as laws or even rules, concepts he freely employs in the case of body–body interaction. Equally, in the *Passions* Descartes nowhere mentions God’s instituting mind–body associations. Indeed, he assigns *us* agency in joining bodily states with passions. How to interpret the textual difference is a matter for future investigation. Equally, while this point about the plasticity of mind–body associations might cause some readers of Descartes unease, if it is right, it does shed new light on Malebranche’s occasionalism. Malebranche, unlike Descartes, develops an account of causation that applies equally to body–body and mind–body (and body–mind) interaction.

<sup>11</sup> See Rozemond (1999) for a very nice discussion of this point.

<sup>12</sup> See Simmons (1999) for the definitive discussion of this point.

<sup>13</sup> In the passages that follow, “refer” is a translation of the French verb *rapporter*.

<sup>14</sup> Of course, others can also play a role in our moral development and in particular in the regulation of our passions. For instance, family or friends can create a set of circumstances that will result in our feeling different passions that we would feel naturally. We might well be encouraged to

overcome fears, for instance. In the end, however, we will be held accountable for the evaluations figuring in these passions engineered by others.

<sup>15</sup> Descartes makes this remark in a prefatory letter to the work. See 11:325.

<sup>16</sup> For a good overview of the moral philosophy of the period see Levi (1964).

<sup>17</sup> As noted above, in the last article of the *Passions* (a.212) he maintains that “all the good and evil of this life depend on them [the passions] alone” and that we “derive joy from them all” (11:488). See also the letter to Elisabeth of May 18, 1645, 4:202.

<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the passions’ “natural use is to incite the soul to consent and contribute to actions which can serve to preserve the body or make it more perfect in some way” (PA a.137).

<sup>19</sup> See Cicero, *De Finibus* 3.17, 20–2, for a concise account of this progression.

<sup>20</sup> See Frede (1999) for a discussion of this issue.

<sup>21</sup> For a full discussion of Cartesian generosity see Shapiro (1999).

<sup>22</sup> She is playing with the tree of philosophy Descartes himself describes in the *Principles of Philosophy*, where metaphysics constitutes the roots of the tree, physics the trunk, and mechanics, medicine, and morals the branches. See 9B:14, 1:186.

<sup>23</sup> Thanks to Andrew Pessin and an anonymous referee for their helpful suggestions on improving this research summary.

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