

Descartes and the Education of the Emotions

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Abstract

Descartes' physiological theory of emotions stresses the autonomy of the body in producing passions. The purpose of the theory is to help in controlling the emotional sphere. While he does see the value of emotion for a more rounded experience of the world, he also stresses the need to master the emotions in order to live a life according to reason. The virtue of generosity is central here; it enables us to fight the battle against unruly emotion with the best weapon: an awareness of the freedom of the will and the power of clear reasoning.

He is sometimes called a virtue ethicist, and he stresses the goodness of a life according to virtue. Unlike traditional virtue thinkers, he places virtue exclusively in the soul (reason and will) and does not regard passion as open to virtuous education; passion is autonomous and reason simply controls it.

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Descartes' treatise of the passions is associated with his friendship with Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia, a most attentive reader of his earlier works. She had been asking him, since June 1645, to apply the principles of his philosophy to the question of the emotions. But its origin is not traceable to her insistence alone. Descartes had often referred to the ability of music and other stimulations to produce, within us, various affections and desires. In earlier sketches, however, he had contented himself with *naming* a few of these affections — liberality, love, strength of character, diligence, desire, and, by contrast, malice, timidity, lassitude and unrest. These matters were to be, at least according to the sketch offered in *Traité de l'homme*, interpreted as passions which our humours dispose us to, and which the precise movements of the animal spirits would be able to account for, one by one.¹

1 DESCARTES' PHYSIOLOGICAL ACCOUNT OF THE PASSIONS

It was probably Elizabeth's requests which eventually concentrated his mind, and brought him to work on the problem of the passions in particular. She had been concerned from the beginning of their acquaintance with the problem of *dualism* in Descartes' writings,² and this with particular emphasis on her own personal experience. Her chief interest in investigating the passions (or, better, in having Descartes investigate them) was to achieve *dominion* over them. She declares that while determined to do everything she could to master emotion and keep it in its place, she found herself often quite overturned by it, and had to wait until it had run its course. This made her wonder how the soul, completely spiritual, could possibly be so much at the mercy of these vapours, which take it over at times.³

Descartes' first replies bear some signs of the dismissive attempts of a busy person keeping his distance. His advice to her has neo-Stoic overtones: his letters of 1645 suggested that the best method to mitigate her susceptibility, both to bad health and the onset of gloom or other distempers was to avoid all painful thoughts and graze the eyes on pleasant landscapes and other relaxing and undemanding sights. Elizabeth is not impressed: there are, she declared «...illnesses which make it quite impossible even to reason correctly, and ... others still which would leave even the most moderate of men quite transported by passion.»⁴ She wants a full definition of the passions. Otherwise it will prove impossible to domesticate them. By 1646, probably in March, he is able to present his first draft to her. Three years

will pass before it is published, probably with minor adjustments, in 1649, a few short months before Descartes' death.⁵

Elizabeth may have been disconcerted by Descartes' claim in the preface that he wishes to deal with the matter not as a *moral philosopher*, but simply as a 'physicist'.⁶ The *Passions of the Soul*, indeed, contains a *complete* explanation of Descartes' system of living creatures, how the arrangement of the parts of the body alone, independent of the soul, permit us to carry out so many of the operations which are common to us and to the beasts, rather like a «watch's movement is produced by the sheer force of its spring and the shape of its wheels» [PA 16]. Passions are «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 [animal] spirits» [PA 27], that is, the most rarefied part of the blood heated in the heart, which reach the base of the brain and there become the principle of muscular and other movement. They are also affected and guided by objects outside of us coming through nerves like the optic nerve, for example, and, continuing on their journey to the brain permit it to represent the objects of vision to us, *even give rise to sensations in the soul* (including passions), and then move to and control certain muscles rather than to others [PA 10-16]. The treatise is replete with points reflecting on this *autonomy* of the body, how it is able to fend for itself so completely, on the one hand, in the *production* of the passions, and, on the other, through the passions, to look out for its own better good [PA aa.4-6, 37-38].

2 PASSIONS ARE BENEFICIAL

Before explaining how these passions may be domesticated and mastered, as Elizabeth had requested, Descartes draws attention to the second of two criteria which passions must satisfy: that they be produced by a special agitation of the animal spirits, *and* that they be *useful*.⁷ He denies, for example, that *fear* is a particular passion, simply because he cannot see any use for it [PA 176]. There are passages in his letters to Elizabeth where he tries to persuade her of the benefits that emotions bring to human life, but his words to Chanut might stand for them all: «you seem to conclude from the fact that I have studied the passions that I must no longer have any. But let me tell you, on the contrary, that in examining the passions I have found almost all of them to be good, and to be so useful in this life that our soul would have no reason to wish to remain joined to its body ... if it could not feel them.»⁸

Amélie Rorty, in a series of articles dealing with Descartes' treatise, has

also evoked this aspect of the passions: their *usefulness* for body, soul and composite. Writing in 1982 she spoke of the three characters for which emotions are of benefit: the soul, the body and the 'we'. The passions save us from the self of the early parts of the *Meditations*, an impersonal mind, «an ironic theft and transformation of the traditional religious meditation». ⁹ It is the passions — those ideas which the soul would not have unless it were united to the body — which reveal the second or coarser 'we'.

More recently, she has narrowed this notion down a little further. The passions are needed by the mind for, in principle, none of its body-based ideas are essential to the mind as such. Intellectual pursuits might go on in their own way, for ever, were the passions not there to tell us of good and harm and give us a sense, rightly or wrongly, of what is important for us. ¹⁰ The passions 'concentrate the mind' as well as safeguarding the body. They focus the mind and enable it to be personal and committed, here and now.

I think that this can be extended further. The process by which passions can — and do — bring our minds into this rapport with the real is related to the notion of *connaturality*. The emotions set up a relationship between us and the reality around us, which has a number of effects, and not the least of these are the reverberations in the way we experience that reality. This possible propaedeutic to knowledge arises not so much out of the information available to the person as from that person's very being. He or she may be possessed of, indeed possessed by, an inclination towards the object of knowledge. The love of God, for example, may produce an inclination towards the object of mystical knowledge, the practice of virtue may produce an inclination towards the objects of ethical knowledge — did not Aristotle speak of the virtuous man's judgement through inclination? — and the poetic spirit, the spirit of music (Descartes' own example, as we mentioned above) seem to possess an unconceptualisable union with the world, which gives fruit in an original, personal and still most real perception of some feature of the world. Descartes repeatedly claims that passions also enrich our experience. Indeed, «all the good and evil of this life depend on them alone». Those they can move the most are capable of tasting the most sweetness in this life [PA 212].

3 CONTROLLING THE PASSIONS

Elizabeth, however, is right: our relationship to the passions is ambivalent; they do enrich our experience of reality and help us to identify what is good for us; but Descartes also points out their dangers. She wished to control,

domesticate or master them; Descartes agreed and repeatedly speaks of the need for a 'remedy' for the 'assaults' of the passions [PA 148], and adds that the soul must attempt to exercise control over passions by attending to reasons, objects and precedents which convince it that the passions in question are not the full answer to life's questions. The indirect nature of this control underlines the need for vigilance and sincerity, in order to distinguish what is useful from what can lead us to making false or hasty judgments.

In the *Passions of the Soul*, virtue is seen, above all, as *self-mastery*, the subjection of the passions to reason. While passions may oppose one another, and oppose what we believe to be for our good, managing to overcome them depends to a great extent on fighting them with the correct, *rational* weapons, and these weapons are firm and decisive judgements concerning the knowledge of good and evil, which it has resolved to follow in conducting the actions of its life. Otherwise, weaker souls will allow the battle among the opposing passions to rule their will, which is drawn in different directions from time to time and ends up struggling against itself [PA 48]. Decisive judgements are the proper weapons to use, even if these judgments may sometimes be false.

Thus subjecting our passions to reason is enough to domesticate them and give them a role in our ethical life; Descartes guides Elizabeth's slightly fearful complaint about the strength of passions affecting her by pointing out that even those which tend to excess can all the more useful once tamed in this way, as their very excess can bring us face to face with the good or evil they respond to, in a more realistic way.¹¹

Chief among the virtues which help us in educating and controlling passions, for Descartes, is generosity. It is, paradoxically, itself one of the passions of the soul, and a basic one, emerging from the original encounter with some object which 'surprises' us, and which we deem important or admirable. One of the first things which we thus encounter and esteem is *ourselves*: and generosity enables us to identify the «single thing in us which could give us just cause to esteem ourselves, namely the use of our free will and the dominion we have over our volitions» [PA 152]. Descartes stresses the effect that this discovery of ourselves has. Not only is it a virtue which we use to dispose ourselves to certain thoughts, it is also a *passion* which alters our countenance, our gestures, and even our walk and «in general all the actions of those who contrive a better or a worse opinion of themselves than the usual.» [PA 151] As Lisa Shapiro puts it, «generosity is just a wonder at our own power».¹²

Generosity makes us esteem our freedom of will, the one thing which depends totally on ourselves, and also enables us to feel within ourselves a

constant and firm resolution to use that free will well. As a result, Descartes claims that it serves «as a remedy for all the disorders of the passions», giving a list of how an attitude of generosity is able to master passions such as desire, jealousy, envy, hatred, fear and anger, by showing us that the causes of such passions, being outside of ourselves and of our free will, is not worth enough to be greatly wished for [PA 156].

4 DESCARTES A VIRTUE ETHICIST?

Does this concentration on the virtue of generosity, spurring us to live in a way befitting free and autonomous beings, make Descartes a virtue ethicist? According to Lisa Schapiro, this is the case: the virtue-passion of generosity, Descartes' «key to all the other virtues» [PA 161] enables us to grow in self-understanding, realise what depends on us and our actions and what does not, and thus discover our place in the world. It thus permits us to grow in our resolution to carry out what we believe that reason demands, and thus to grow in virtue. For her, the achievement of this virtuous attitude is more important in his mind than the rules (provisional or definitive) of Cartesian morality.¹³

PA 148 is of interest here:

Anyone who has lived in such a way that his conscience cannot reproach him for ever having failed to do anything that he judged to be best (which is what I call following virtue here) derives a satisfaction with such power to make him happy that the most vigorous assaults of the Passions never have enough power to disturb the tranquillity of his soul.

But can generosity, a passion itself, also be a virtue? Is Descartes saying that one of the passions is actually the remedy of the disturbances he associates with the life of the emotions? For Descartes generosity indeed is both a virtue and a passion [PA 161]. As a virtue, it is related to the soul, producing thoughts within it and being produced by certain habits of thoughts itself; it enables us be aware of our free will and our mastery of ourselves, passions and all; as a passion, it can strengthen the impression on the soul of this conviction, by means of the movement of the animal spirits which it, in common with all the passions, can excite.

John Marshall has pointed out that generosity's dual role is, precisely, *dual*. A passion of the soul bears witness simply to the power of the animal spirits to strengthen and maintain a thought in the soul; in this case the thought of the freedom of the will and the resolve to use it well – virtue, as a voluntary disposition, is on a different plane from the play of our physiology. The generous are generous because they are guided by their *judgements*

about what things are good; all that the *passion* of generosity – a physiological process, after all – can do is help to strengthen the habit of remembering and wanting to follow such judgements.¹⁴

In summary, Descartes offers a system for controlling the passions, based above all on the power of reason and the will to make good choices, based on firm reasons. Whether this can be called an ethic of virtue depends on what one means by virtue.

5 TRADITIONAL VIRTUE ETHICS

If we look to the traditional view of an ethics of virtue, Aristotle and Aquinas speak of the virtues in the irrational appetites because they listen to reason and obey it rather as one might ‘take account’ of one’s father or one’s friends. The passions are ‘persuaded’ by reason.¹⁵ For Aquinas the irrational part of the soul does in this way ‘participate’ in reason.¹⁶ He claims that this co-operation between the appetites (for him, passions are acts of the sensitive appetite) and reason gives rise to a need for ‘training’ or education of the sensitive appetite, so that it may be better able to conform with reason.¹⁷ He concludes that moral virtues actually reside in the sensitive appetites and that these are gradually transformed by virtue, giving rise to a harmony in which they spontaneously follow the inspiration of reason, not by being subject to its control or command, but by ‘finding contentment in the proper scope of their own function of loving limited objects for what they are worth’.¹⁸

Passions, on this reading, both need and are open to improvement. Aquinas uses the term ‘*habitus perficiens*’¹⁹; they need to be ‘completed’, for our emotions need to be habituated to reason, and exercise in this co-operation either strengthens or weakens the participation, making virtue more or less firmly rooted in the emotional sphere.

In the Cartesian vision, however, the separation between passion and reason is complete, as we noted particularly in the case of generosity which is actually both passion and virtue, but separately; passions are explained in a physiological manner, and they are quite sufficient unto themselves. It is not easy to see how they can be transformed, elevated or educated by virtue; they are, rather, *controlled* and *mastered* by it. The virtues which Descartes encourages us to practice in our emotional lives (centrally, generosity, firm judgments and detachment) are located in the will and the reason. What are commonly named virtues, he says, are «dispositions in the soul which dispose it to certain thoughts, so they are different from these thoughts but

can produce them and conversely be produced by them» [PA 161].

So to turn finally to the topic of this seminar, Descartes' theory is not engaged in emotional education so much as in mastery of the emotions and the habits we are to form for this purpose dwell in our reason and will rather than in the emotions.

NOTES

1. G. Rodis-Lewis, Introduction and notes to *Les Passions de l'âme*, Vrin, Paris 1970 (hereinafter referred to as RL), p. 6.
2. In 1642, when Elizabeth appears to have read the *Meditations*. «In a letter of May 1643, she had asked how the soul, being only a thinking substance, can determine the bodily spirits to perform voluntary actions» [*The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (Cottingham, Stoothoff, Murdoch, Kenny trans.) Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1991, Volume III, p. 217, translators' footnote].
3. RL p. 7, fn.
4. May or June 1645, Adam-Tannery IV, 269, cited in RL, p. 8.
5. It is likely that the final text is substantially that which Elizabeth received in 1646, although Descartes had intended to augment it by a third, on the basis of suggestions made by Clerselier. He probably did not manage to, since he admits in his letter preface that only a couple of changes had been made, and that these did not really affect the argument.
Les Passions de l'âme is contained in Volume XI of Adam-Tannery. References in the present paper mention only the article number [e.g. PA 1] within the treatise. Quotations in English are taken from Stephen Voss's translation, *The Passions of the Soul*, Hackett, Indianapolis 1989.
6. «... mon dessein n'a pas été d'expliquer les Passions ... en Philosophe moral, mais seulement en Physicien.»
7. Their natural use is to incite the soul to consent and contribute to actions which can serve to preserve the body or render it more perfect in some way [cf. PA 137].
8. Letter to Chanut, 1.11.1646 (AT IV 538), in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (trans. Cottingham, Stoothoff, Murdoch, Kenny), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1991, Volume III, p. 300.
9. *From Passions to Emotions and Sentiments*, «Philosophy» 57 (1982), p. 161.
10. *Descartes on Thinking with the Body*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1992, p. 386.
11. Cf. *Ibid.*
12. L. Shapiro, *Cartesian Generosity*, in T. Aho and M. Yrjönsuuri (eds.), *Norms and modes of Thinking in Descartes*, «Acta Philosophica Fennica» 64 (1999), pp. 249-275 at p. 259. Charles Taylor, in *A Secular Age*, also highlights Descartes' analysis of the virtue of 'Generosity', a key point in the development of modern humanism; the moment when we no longer seek to be in tune with nature, but

- look rather to our intrinsic worth in a way that had never before been possible [cf. *A Secular Age*, Belknap, London 2007, p. 135].
13. L. Shapiro, *Descartes' Ethics*, in J. Broughton and J. Carriero (eds.) *A Companion to Descartes*, Blackwell, Oxford 2008, pp. 445-463 (at p. 462).
 14. Cf. J. Marshall, *Descartes' Moral Theory*, Cornell University Press, New York 1998, p. 151 and Sh. Brassfield, *Never let the Passions be your Guide: Descartes and the Role of the Passions*, «British Journal for the History of Philosophy» 20 (2012), pp. 459-477 (at p. 473).
 15. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1, 13, 1102b31-1103a2
 16. *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q. 55 a. 4, ad 3.
 17. *Ibid.*, I-II, q. 56, a. 4.
 18. W.D. Hughes, *Virtue in Passion*, Appendix to volume 23, *Summa Theologiae*, Blackfriars, London 1969, p. 246.
 19. *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q. 56, a. 4.
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