

Using the passions

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Seventeenth-century philosophers searched not only for truth, but for wisdom, for a sure guide in all the acts of life. This guide was supposed to be based on metaphysical and physical principles; it was to offer an account of virtue, and in particular of the use of the passions. In more ambitious works, the treatment of the passions is preceded by a more or less extensive physiology, which, being the study of the body, its organs, their powers, including most pertinently sensation and its effects on the animal spirits, was part of natural philosophy. The passions, at least as they depend on the body, or the inferior parts of the soul, fall, therefore, within its purview. But their use does not. One is therefore led to wonder what relation the physiology of the passions bears to the moral philosophy of their use.

Though it would be anachronistic to ask how Descartes or Spinoza dealt with “the fact-value distinction”, it is not anachronistic to ask how the natural philosophy of the *Passions* or the *Ethics* is brought to bear on their accounts of virtue. Consider the tree of knowledge in the Preface to the French edition of Descartes’ *Principles*. The root of the tree is metaphysics, the trunk physics (i.e., natural philosophy), the three branches are mechanics, medicine, and *morale*, that is, moral philosophy. The three branches have in common a reference to human needs and desires. Mechanics has as its subject-matter the design of useful machines; medicine preserving the health of the human body, and *morale* the acquisition and exercise of virtue. The three branches are distinct from the trunk (and from each other), and yet continuous with it, just as physics is continuous with metaphysics.

The continuity of moral with natural philosophy is confirmed by the design of the *Passions*, which was published two years after the

Preface to the *Principles* but composed at more or less the same time. Descartes declares at the outset that he will treat the passions “en physicien”—as a natural philosopher, that is, not as a moralist. But a great deal of what elsewhere he calls *la morale* finds its way into the latter parts of the *Passions*, we are entitled to take his declaration with a grain of salt. (*En physicien*, I think, does not mean that the work will contain nothing of moral philosophy; it indicates rather that there will be no exhortations to virtue.) At no point can the reader say, here *la physique* ends and *la morale* begins; instead remarks on, for example, the physiological effects of the passions are interspersed among remarks on their characters and uses in a way that suggests it would be artificial to separate them.

The question then is not so much of relations between statements of fact and statements of value taken individually as it is between two disciplines acknowledged to be distinct: natural philosophy—in particular, physiology—and moral philosophy. Descartes intends that his advice, however much it may resemble here and there that of the earlier authors whom he chooses to ignore, should have behind it the authority of his science.

One topic on which physiology would seem to have a direct bearing is the use of the passions. Unlike reflections on providence or the freedom of the will, love and hate appear to have immediate and particular bodily causes and effects. Like sensations, they depend on the motions of various parts of the body; Descartes seems to think that ordinary experience suffices to prove this. Even though the relations, as we will see, of passions in the mind to motions in the body are arbitrary (with qualifications to be noted later), there ought to be, given that those relations exist, a causal if not a deductive account of them. My task here will be to show what those relations are supposed to be, and then to consider how they bear on the advice Descartes offers us concerning the use of the passions.

A few words, first, about *use* (*usage, usus*). The body—human or animal has the capacity to undergo physiological changes in response

to certain sensations. This capacity we share with animals: I and the sheep, when we see a wolf, both experience the changes that in me give rise to the passion of horror. That capacity can be studied and (so Descartes thinks) understood completely in Cartesian physiology. Its usual effect is to cause me (or the sheep) to run away from the wolf, an effect that tends to promote the survival of creatures like us.

The exercise of the capacity to have the animal spirits move in the manner characteristic of horror upon receiving certain sensory impressions is not yet what Descartes would call the *usage* of that passion. *Usage*, or use in a stricter sense, is with respect to a norm or end, so that there can be good and bad use. In Jean-François Senault's *De l'usage des passions* (1641), the bad use of love, which arises (he says) from original sin, is self-love: self-love is a "passion déréglée"; it turns the soul away from God and justice (172–173). The good use of love consists in loving God, man and creatures, in that order and with the proviso that creatures shall be loved only insofar as they lead us to God; so that the love that some people exhibit for their pets is again a "passion déréglée" (186).

The second-order capacity, as we might call it, to direct the passions so that they always assist our striving for the good, is what Descartes calls "mastery". He distinguishes himself from those philosophers who call for the extinction of passion. That is not only an impossible but also an undesirable aim. On the contrary, the pleasant self-esteem one feels in using all of one's faculties correctly, especially the will, supports us in our striving for the good. In particular it aids us in mastering the other passions.

Mere capacity, use or *usage*, and mastery, then, are the gradations of use. One aspect of the question concerning the relation of natural to moral philosophy, then, is to understand how physical function stands to use, or how claims about physical function bear on claims about use. In what follows I will proceed by ascending from the trunk of Descartes' tree upward along the branch corresponding to moral

philosophy, with the intention of tracking the role of physiology and the introduction of what we would call normative content.

I

We start with the body-machine, whose parts are described and whose operations are explained in the *Treatise on man* and subsequent works. The basic setup is this. Blood, coming to the heart from the liver, is heated to the point of ebullition. Some of it is distributed to the body via the arteries; some of it, the “animal spirits”, having become very finely divided, or *subtle*, rises and penetrates the pores of the brain. From those pores the spirits, directed by the pineal gland, enter other pores, eventually issuing forth into the muscles and elsewhere. The configuration of the pores of the brain is altered by sensation, which thus has an effect on the flow of the spirits, and so too on the muscles and motions of the body.

The *Treatise on man* mentions the passions twice, in passages that differ enough that one might suppose them to have been written at different times. In the first passage, Descartes says of the animal spirits that they can vary along four dimensions: abundance, size, agitation, and equality or inequality of size. “By means of these four differences”, he says, “all the diverse humors or natural inclinations in us [...] are represented in this machine” (166). A greater abundance of spirits than usual resembles those movements that in our body are “attested to” (*témoigné*) by love; greater size those that are attested by confidence or boldness; and so forth. Combinations of the four differences represent other passions: joy is a combination of greater agitation and greater equality. All of this is quite in keeping with Descartes’ treatment of sensation, and with his general project of establishing physical “codes” for various classes of mental state—a point to which I will return.

Later in the *Treatise* Descartes says that sensation may give rise to “exterior movements” of pursuit or avoidance, and to “interior movements, commonly called passions” (194). The passions dispose various organs, notably the heart and liver, to alter the “temperament” of the blood so that “the spirits which then arise turn out to be suited to cause” various movements. For example, if the movement that “must follow” is that of “avoiding some bad thing by force”, the spirits will be “more unequally and more strongly agitated than usual”, thus supplying additional force to the body’s motions. That condition of the spirits corresponds to *anger*.

Already in this description, from which the mind and its affections are absent except to help supply labels for various conditions of the animal spirits, there seem to be two appearances of a norm. The four dimensions used to define conditions of the spirits are defined not absolutely but with respect to what is *usual*; and the actions that follow from this or that passion are those that “must follow”, where it is clear that *must* means “with respect to the preservation of the machine”. Descartes frequently refers in his physiological works to what we would call a normal state of the organism. Motions are said to be suitable to an end which is usually understood to be continued existence.

In an Aristotelian setting, the state of the organism toward which its acts naturally tend is that of perfection, of being all that something of its kind can be. The sheep flees the wolf because that act, “always or for the most part”, will save it from harm. Descartes, however, insists in the *Sixth Meditation* and elsewhere that to appeal to perfection as an end, or—in the case of animals—to describe a thing as healthy or ill is arbitrary. The laws of nature make no such distinction; if we do, that is a projection of some estimate of utility—at any rate it corresponds to nothing real in the things we judge, or at least to nothing real of which we can have any knowledge. From the standpoint of natural philosophy all we can say is that the state of a healthy animal is different from that of one that is ill. Health, considered as a norm,

cannot be derived from physiology. On the contrary, the appearance of norms in Descartes' description of bodily passions must be derivative upon norms already established in medicine or morals.

II

Descartes allows no attribution of ends to natural things considered in themselves. Health would seem therefore to be on an equal footing with the ends we impute to machines—an analogy that Descartes of course makes use of. (In the *Traité de l'Homme*, however, the end to which God has built the man-machines of that work is not well-being; it to imitate us “as much as possible”—an end irrelevant to the derivation of norms.) Medicine, if it is treated on the analogy of mechanics, can no more provide grounds for the norms that govern its practice—its treatments and regimens—than the physiology it is based on. In particular it cannot justify norms governing the use of the passions.

In the *Meditations*, especially the Sixth, we find a more satisfactory though very general account on which to base claims about the proper use of the passions. Nature alone is of no help to us: but in my case, and yours, we have God and the mind to appeal to.

In the Fourth *Meditation* Descartes argues that if I use my will and understanding properly, then (since God is not a deceiver) I cannot judge falsely. The sense of ‘properly’ here is given by the rule governing the use of judgment: affirm or deny only that of which you have a clear and distinct idea. Oddly enough—at least from an Aristotelian standpoint—this is a rule which, in the Fourth *Meditation*, does not depend on attributing an end to the faculties of judgment. Nothing in that *Meditation* entitles us to infer that the understanding, or the portmanteau “faculty” of judgment, has as its end the affirmation of truths or the acquisition of knowledge. In fact, the meditator consid-

ers an argument one of whose premises is that the perfection of judgment is knowledge; but he rejects it.

Thus things remain until the *Sixth Meditation*. In the proof of the existence of body, the narrator holds that ideas of body could not have been produced in his mind directly by God. If they were, he would have no means of knowing that they were; and he has a strong inclination, which he supposes to have been instilled in him by God, to believe that his ideas of bodies are produced by bodies. God would be a deceiver if God gave him an incorrigible natural inclination that was *bound* to lead to error. Being omnipotent, God could certainly do better; and being good, he does. The human mind cannot have been designed to fail.

In fact we can infer that “there can be no falsity in my opinions for which [God] has not given me some faculty capable of correcting it”, and so “I can conclude with assurance that I have the means to know those things with certainty” (7:79–80). Not only am I not designed to fail, I am designed to succeed. The cognitive faculties of the Cartesian mind have true belief as their end; error results, therefore, from their perturbation or perversion.

This argument does not go so far as to vindicate sensation, or at least not the obscure and confused ideas proper to sensation. Those ideas “depend on the union and so to speak the mixture of the ind with the body” (9:64). Experience, especially the experience of pleasure and pain, tells us that sensation makes us pursue some things and avoid others. Merely from that we cannot infer that that is their end. But the meditator knows to each movement in the appropriate part of the brain there corresponds a particular sensation. The constant conjunction of the two owes nothing to the nature of either; modes of thought and modes of extension enter into no demonstrative relations. It does not originate from nature alone; it must have been established by God. Here the meditator finds it necessary to appeal to divine ends: the best arrangement one can think of is that each movement should cause “that sensation which is most properly

useful to the conservation of the human body”. An arrangement, Descartes adds, that testifies not only to the power of God but to his goodness.

From the establishment of regular correspondences between bodily motions and sensations, and the effects that those sensations are known to produce, a norm of health and disease for the human body can be derived. A body in which the sensation of pain, for example, rather than having its usual effect of making the body move itself away from the pricking pin, made the body move itself toward the pin, is deranged or badly formed. On the basis of that norm, and thus of the end with which God established our sensory capacities, empirical regularities concerning the response of the body to various treatment or regimens can be elevated into practical maxims.

Descartes asserts that the end for which God instituted correspondences between movements in the brain and sensations in the mind is the conservation of the mind-body union. The basis for this claim is unclear. The body, taken apart from the mind, is complete, considered as an animal-machine. Even granting that pain-movements of the animal spirits have been conjoined by God with pains in the mind, it is not clear that we have any reason to assign a purpose to that setup, if in fact the body is sufficiently well-preserved by actions that do not involve the mind, and if the preservation of the union requires—as Descartes suggests in the *Passions*—only that the body be fit for joining. We can derive, if we like, practical maxims from the “natural institution” of relations between motions in the body and ideas in the mind, but they do not take us beyond a purely instrumental conception of the body: medicine would be a higher mechanics, a biomechanics. That view is indeed suggested by the treatment of the correction of vision in the *Optics*. The *Passions*, however suggest another view.

III

I return to the notion of *use*. We have seen that what is used is a capacity of some sort, and that the use of a capacity can be evaluated according to a norm. It is natural to ask on what grounds the norm is adopted. In what follows I will sketch a line of argument, implicit in the *Passions*, that exhibits the ultimate ground of virtue in the freedom of the will, and that shows the role of physiology in Descartes' moral theory. Medicine and morals are bound more tightly than one would think. The *Passions* is not only a treatise on virtue, but also an advance toward a psychosomatic medicine.

Contemporary readers of the *Passions* tend to skip over the physiological sections. Cartesian science proved here to be fundamentally mistaken; and in any case modern moral theory hasn't much use for physiology, false or true. But for Descartes it was essential. Not only does he detail the bodily causes and effects of each passion, he attempts also to exhibit a fit between the motions of the spirits associated with certain passions and their psychological character; and he warns the reader not only against the viciousness, but also the unhealthiness, of certain habits of feeling.

The most detailed attempt to give a rationale for the correspondence between a type of passion and certain motions of the spirits occurs in Descartes' discussion of love. When a person feels love, the animal spirits are conducted through the appropriate channels ("the sixth pair of nerves") toward the muscles around the intestines and the stomach; this has the effect of speeding up digestion, heating up the heart, and thus of sending back to the brain spirits that are "larger and more agitated than usual", thereby strengthening the sensory impression that set this causal chain in motion, so that the mind will dwell on it longer.

But how is it, one might ask, that love (and not some other passion) sends the animal spirits through the sixth pair of nerves (and not some other pair)? Descartes reminds the reader that "when we have

first joined a corporeal action with a thought, neither of them presents itself to us unless the other does too”. The mere coincidence of a thought and a motion amounts to an incipient habit for the same to occur again—a regular correspondence of just the sort that God has established between motions of the spirits and sensations in the mind. Among the earliest passions of the soul was one that occurred when the blood was more fit than usual to sustain the heat of the heart, the “principle of life”. The soul thereupon joined itself in will to the nutrients that made this happen—where “joining in will” is the act of mind Descartes has included in the definition of love—and at the same time the animal spirits ran from the brain to the digestive system so as to make it send more nourishment to the heart. That *this* movement should be joined with an inclination to join the will with the cause of the sensation that gave rise to it has its basis, therefore, in this early experience, one that presumably all of us enjoy in the womb. (Love, though not connatural to the mind, is congenital.)

[Alquié says at this point that Descartes has explained the “affective component” of love, by our grasping in consciousness the bodily movements now associated with the cognitive and volitional components of love. I’m not so sure. Alquié’s view implies that the affective component of love is an obscure perception of the movement of the animal spirits. That is not inconsistent with Descartes’ general definition of the passions; but it seems to me that all that is established in his explanation of love is the character of the regular correspondence between bodily motions and the inclination to join in will.]

Each passion will thus be associated with movements of the animal spirits that prove to be suitable to what we understand to be a suitable bodily expression of the volitional component of that passion. Love causes reaching out, desire pursuit, and so on. The movements of the spirits have other effects on the body as well. Descartes sometimes adverts to them. People given to envy, for example, tend to have a leaden complexion—their skin tends to be of a “pale tint, mixed with yellow and black, and as if of clotted blood” (§184). Envy he defines

to be a species of sadness mixed with hate. Hate increases the flow of black and yellow bile to the arteries and veins, and so it makes the complexion yellowish and blackish; sadness, for its part, makes the venous circulation cooler and slower than usual, and so makes the complexion livid. That is why the habitually envious have a leaden tint. We could add that excess of bile and sluggish circulation are to be avoided for more than cosmetic reasons: they affect the digestion and the nerves. Excess of envy is to be avoided not only of what it does to the mind but because it impedes bodily functions.

In Descartes' "general remedy against the passions" we find confirmation of the role of physiology in the pursuit of virtue. What is to be avoided is not the passions themselves but excess of those that can be excessive, and of the unwarrantedly favorable or unfavorable evaluations they tend to promote. One can learn to separate, Descartes says, "the movements of the blood and spirits from the thoughts to which they are customarily joined", and thus undo the work of nature if not that of God. Our ability to do so has its limits: some people cannot but faint with fear or tremble with anger. In such cases we may still attempt, when we feel the blood moving, to remind ourselves of the errors commonly induced by the passions, and so dampen the motions of the blood. Those motions, Descartes has earlier argued, sustain the passions themselves past the time when it is useful to feel them; and, worse, they distort judgments concerning their objects.

Having said that, I should add that Descartes primarily concerns himself with the cognitive and volitional effects of the passions. The motion of the blood sustains the passion, and so should be checked if possible; but more important is combatting the passion within the mind, by evoking a contrary passion or recalling to mind the tranquility-inducing thoughts on providence and the scope of our control over events that Descartes elaborates at the end of the second part of the *Passions*. If I tremble from excessive anger, that is a failing of sorts.

But compared with the unjust harm that might result from my acting on the inclinations that come with anger, trembling is a venial sin.

IV

I turn now to mastery. One could imagine a creature much like us, a creature that had passions as we do, but that unlike us, was a sort of machine, some of whose components are mental (in saying this, I am of course deviating from Descartes' conception of machines: I intend the word 'machine', applied to modes of thought, to carry over its connotations of determinism and of functional division into "working parts"). This creature's mind includes a "Stoic consolation device" which at appropriate moments issues forth considerations about providence and God's will; those considerations mitigate, as they do in us, the passions; but whatever acts result from passions mitigated by consolation do so automatically, by some process of competition or weighing of passions (think of Hobbes: "the will is the last appetite in deliberation"). That process is governed by the end of conserving the creature.

This creature I take to be a two-substance counterpart to the automata of the *Traité de l'homme*. Considered from a Cartesian standpoint, wrong behavior can no more be imputed to this automaton, supposing that it has a malfunctioning consolation device, than a faulty heart leads to ill health in a dog. Even though its behavior might well resemble that of a diligent follower of the Cartesian way, it has—I would say—no moral qualities.

In early modern philosophy, as we know, it was a commonplace to conceive the relation of the self to its passions in terms of mastery and servitude. The defining feature of the slave is that the slave has no will of his own. To have lost one's will, to be in the condition of having one's acts determined by others, is for Descartes the most abject condition of all. We must at all events avoid the condition of

those people who always give in to the passions of the moment, to those passions which, “employing the will in combat against itself, put the soul in the most deplorable state possible”, the state of *irresolution*, of being incapable of decision.

The creature whose passions are moderated automatically by a Stoic consolation device may well do what is best; it will never fail to act; but it is no better than a slave. What it lacks is a *will*. Its passions are moderated by its understanding (encapsulated in the Stoic consolation device); we could even credit it with a reflexive awareness of them. But it is a mere spectator at their parade. Its passions are controlled, but not mastered. They are under the rule (*empire, imperium*) of no-one. Even though, as Descartes says in the Fourth *Meditation*, the highest condition of freedom is to have one’s acts determined by the good, not determination simply, but determination of the *will*, is essential.

In Descartes’ system the key to mastery of the passions is *générosité*, a species of esteem, which is itself a species of wonder or admiration. Wonder arises when an object is presented to the mind as new or rare—remarkable for not having been encountered before. Its end is to cause the mind to dwell on the object of wonder, so as to know it better. Esteem is wonder at something that strikes the mind as bigger or better than usual. Esteem may have the mind itself as object, as it does in pride. *Générosité* is the esteem one has for oneself considered as having a free will; this, we know from the *Meditations*, is effectively infinite, not distinguishable in character from God’s will. In general, wonder depends on experience. What was remarkable once no longer is, and we esteem it less or not at all. But the value attributed to the will, it would seem, is absolute. We are always capable of being struck by it.

Générosité, or rather the habit of feeling *généreux*, is a remedy, we are told, for all “disorders” (*déreglemens*) of the passions. The generous person becomes “entirely master” of his passions, and especially of desire, jealousy, and envy, not immediately through wonder at the

will, but at the recognition that in oneself one can find all that is needed to merit the warranted favor of others; this lies within one's power to acquire (§146). The mastery of the passions that the generous person attains to is mastery not only by the will, but out of the will's own character as free.

Générosité is peculiar among the passions in being generated solely from the mind's contemplation of its own faculties, notably of the will in pursuit of the good. Angels may be exempt from some of our passions, but famously not from pride, and so not from *générosité* either. *Générosité* in humans has bodily accompaniments, but they are not necessary to its existence in the mind. The capacity I have for *générosité* I have by nature—by my nature in what Gueroult calls the strict sense, i.e. my nature as a thinking thing. In feeling *générosité* I am, as I am not with other passions, an autonomous spirit.

Nevertheless, Descartes insists on the bodily accompaniments of *générosité*. In pride the movements of the spirits are obvious; but *générosité* is in effect a justified pride in oneself, and so it moves the spirits too. We are led to infer that the habit of *générosité* will benefit not only the mind (by enabling it to master the other passions) but also the body (by counteracting or impeding their unhealthy effects).

[**NB.** I may add here a bit more—not over a page—on mastery.]

V

The study of the passions could not be all of moral theory. Nothing has been said about the good except that the wise person will pursue it. Descartes tells us that the generous person will want to do good deeds, but not what those deeds might be.

Nevertheless I think there is something to be learned from theories of the passions—Descartes' and others' in the period. Moral philosophy, especially Kantian, has been accused of neglecting the body, of failing to accommodate what in us is specifically human, and not just

rational or free. There is a hint of this in the autonomy of *générosité*. But Descartes never loses sight of the physical concomitants of passion. The *Passions of the soul*, despite its title, concerns itself also with the passions of the body.

There is more to be gleaned here than yet another invitation to give the body its due (though there is *some* novelty in finding such an invitation in the arch-dualist Descartes). More interesting is the suggestion that morals and medicine, though they are, both for Descartes and for us, distinct branches of knowledge, nonetheless share more than a common root in natural philosophy. The person who, by virtue of studying morals, has learned to control his or her passions, and thereby achieve virtue, will also—by virtue of that same study—have a better-regulated body. A kind of harmony will preside over the motions of the animal spirits, replacing the turbulence of irresolution and the continual back-and-forth of contrary desires. Moreover, as Descartes tells us again and again, there is what we would call feedback from the spirits to the passions and back again, so that health and morals are mutually reinforcing.

What can be learned from Descartes and other early modern theorists of the passions is that the boundaries between medicine and morals are in part of our own making. Though we agree that health is *a* good, we tend to treat it—and so too the practical science of staying healthy—as if it were separable from other goods. Descartes' treatment of the passions, considered from our point of view, seems to muddle morals with medicine. In reading his moral philosophy, we are permitted, or so we suppose, to ignore his medical opinions. The science that supported those opinions is indeed obsolete. But the close relation he supposes to obtain between the norms of health and those of morality may well be worth recovering.