

Descartes through the Passions of the Soul

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Proposal

In developing their interpretations of Descartes, most philosophically minded commentators in the Anglo-American tradition have ignored Descartes' last work, *The Passions of the Soul*. Indeed, if they have noticed *Passions* at all it has been read as a biological work, philosophically interesting only insofar as in it we can see the development of a physiological account of the emotions. While scholars are becoming more and more interested in the work, there has as yet been no systematic treatment of it in English. It is my aim in this book to show that the *Passions* is an integral part of Descartes' metaphysics and philosophy of mind, for it is there, I argue, that Descartes presents his most considered account of the union of mind and body. And in light of his account of the union, he revisits and refines his account of body-mind causation and his account of the representationality of body-caused ideas. While my discussion will focus on the *Passions*, and Descartes' other writings, I also bring in the writings of Descartes' near contemporaries, the Cartesian philosophers and their critics, to support my interpretation.

Descartes is pressed to offer an account of the union insofar as he can no longer avoid the tension in which three theses central to his metaphysics stand with one another. In the first of these theses, Descartes wants to offer a mechanist account of the natural world. In his physics, there is no appeal to final causes which shape matter, but rather bodies affect one another simply insofar as their motion is determined by natural laws. And so, change in the natural world is describable solely in terms of the efficient causal relationships between things. Second, Descartes wants to insist that mind is distinct from the material world. For, in thinking, we give reasons for our beliefs and actions, and these reasons, insofar as we are not determined by anything outside us to have the thoughts we do, are not reducible to the causal order constituting the natural world. And finally, Descartes wants to maintain, along with these two ontological theses, that human beings are in themselves part of the natural world. I aim to show that with the *Passions of the Soul* Descartes aims to explicate and defend this third thesis as consistent with the first two. In doing so, I make a somewhat controversial claim, for it is widely thought that Descartes has little to say about the mind-body union and what follows from it. In working through Descartes' account, I also aim to get clear on just where the problems for a Cartesian world view lie.

I begin by defending the claim that the *Passions* is a philosophical work. I show first that Descartes takes this work to be of a piece with his *Principles of Philosophy*, quite likely the unrealized sixth part (on the nature of man) of that work as it was originally proposed. I then go on to show that the *Passions* makes good on this promise, as the work as a whole is structured as an argument in which Descartes aims to derive the passions (states of mind caused by the body, and so an effect of the mind-body union) from their first principle: the union of soul and body. I conclude this chapter by sketching out that argument, showing how the three central issues regarding the union are situated within it. In the second through fourth chapters, I explicate the basic premise of this argument -- the nature of the mind-body union -- and how it impacts Descartes' account of mind-body causation and his theory of ideas drive the argument forward. I have a near final draft of this first chapter. A version of it was published as "The Structure of the

Passions of the Soul" in *Passion and Virtue in Descartes*, edited by Byron Williston and André Gombay.

In claiming that mind and body are united, Descartes faces a real philosophical problem, for it is not clear that, given his substance dualist ontology, he is entitled to this claim. How, after all, are we to make sense of the two most basic sorts of things uniting to form another sort of thing? If a human being is a substance, then shouldn't mind and body each be aspects or elements of that substance, and not substances themselves? On the other hand, if mind and body are substances, then shouldn't a human being be reducible to those component parts, and so not properly speaking, an entity unto itself? In Chapter Two, I address these issues and argue that Descartes conceives of mind and body as united in virtue of their sharing of what can be called the human good. Understanding the union in this way requires neither that that mind-body union be a third Cartesian substance nor that that union is merely accidental. Thus, this reading of Descartes allows him to avoid many of the central charges against his account of a human being. We can retain the common-sensical reading of him as a substance dualist, while not saddling him with an unpalatable if not untenable 'ghost in the machine' picture of the human being. I have a working draft of this second chapter. Parts of the argument figure in my "Descartes' *Passions of the Soul* and the Union of Mind and Body," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 23, 2003.

The problem of the ontological status of the Cartesian human being is tied to two other philosophical problems. First, in claiming that mind and body are united, Descartes also claims that they interact causally, but it is far from clear what the nature of this causal interaction is. In Chapter Three I turn to consider this topic. Descartes is usually read as asserting that mind and body interact in virtue of the natural institution which binds them. But this notion of a natural institution often goes unanalyzed. From the *Passions*, we learn something new about Descartes' account, for there he distinguishes two elements of the causal interaction of mind and body. First, Descartes continues to claim that mind and body have the power to affect one another. This power is not explained, but is simply asserted. But this power alone is not taken to be sufficient to explain the regularity of the causal relation between a particular physiological state and a particular thought. I think that Descartes takes his account of the union to explain this second aspect of the causal relation between mind and body. This insight can help explain Descartes' way of talking about this causal relation in the way he does, as an 'institution of nature' rather than a 'law of nature'. The former expression, historically, has a connotation of contingency, whereas the latter connotes a necessary relation. Indeed, insofar as Descartes does think that we can change the way each thought is joined to the motion of the gland by habit, he would have a hard time explaining how we are warranted in interfering with God's creation. This new understanding of Descartes' 'natural institution' works well with recent interpretations of Descartes that bring out the occasionalist strands in his account of body-mind interaction; pointing out the problems with it will further understanding of the path from Descartes to Malebranche's full-blown occasionalism.

How philosophers have answered the question of causal interaction is deeply tied to the way in which they work out the details of how body-caused ideas can be said to represent the world. On the one hand, one might think that we have our ideas of the world passively, that ideas of things are simply given to us in experience. This view would seem to imply that what we know directly is not the world but rather our ideas of it, and so that we can only know the world through the veil of our perceptions. On the other hand, one might claim that we play an active role in forming our ideas of the world, and so in having an idea we know the world directly, and not through any given intermediary. While Descartes is usually taken to be a veil of

perception theorist, there are strands in his earlier writings which lean in the other direction and seem to indicate that he takes us to perceive the world directly through some kind of activity of the mind. In Chapter Four I argue that in the *Passions* Descartes moves from this equivocal position to one in which he univocally assigns the mind agency in having its passions and present an account of his reasons for doing so. Given his dualism, Descartes is not able to claim that our thoughts represent the world in virtue of any resemblance between the representation and that object represented. In light of this problem Descartes needs to offer another account of representationality of our ideas. However, his account of the causal relation between mind and body would seem to rule out a straightforward causal account of the representationality of ideas, for it is not any causal power on the part of the body which leads to a particular thought. So, Descartes, it seems, goes in the other direction, assigning an agency to the mind in forming its ideas. The notion of the good at the core of the union then provides the normative force underpinning the representationality of ideas.

I will conclude *Descartes through The Passions of the Soul* by discussing how the passions lend themselves to the development of Descartes' views. First, I consider why a work on the passions in the special sense (what we would call emotions) is the forum through which Descartes chooses to address these issues. And second, I consider to what degree the account developed through a consideration of the passions is extendable to the passions in general, and in particular to the case of sensation. That is, I want to understand the interconnection between Descartes' moral psychology and his metaphysics and philosophy of mind. In doing so, I also aim to clarify just what the continuing tensions and problems are in Descartes' account and so to gain further perspective on the place Descartes holds in the history of early modern philosophy.

This book will certainly be of interest to scholars of the early modern period. This project is in conversation with recent works which have begun to reconsider the philosophical value of Descartes' *Passions*. Susan James, in her *Passion and Action*, and John Marshall, in his *Descartes' Moral Theory*, both attend to the ethics put forward in the work, and James and others (i.e., Paul Hoffman, Deborah Brown, Andre Gombay, Calvin Normore) have recognized that Descartes' account of the passions fits into a long-neglected history of medieval and early modern theories of the passions which directly bear not only on ethics but also on philosophy of mind in general and theories of ideas in particular. However, there has not, as yet, in English (in French there is Denis Kambouchner's two volume *L'Homme des passions*), been any systematic interpretation of the *Passions* as a whole philosophical work. Moreover, this systematic treatment will facilitate an understanding the relation between Descartes and other prominent Early Modern theorists of the passions including Malebranche, Spinoza, the British Moralists and Hume. It is also in conversation with recent works (both books and articles) on Descartes' metaphysics and philosophy of mind and the reception of these views. John Cottingham, Dennis Des Chene, Dan Garber, Gary Hatfield, Paul Hoffman, Nicholas Jolley, Steven Nadler, Marleen Rozemond, Tad Schmaltz, Alison Simmons and many others have been engaging with these issues. None, though, approach them from the perspective of the *Passions*. Thus, this book will thus also contribute something new to the discussions emerging from these works.

In addition this book will appeal to a more general audience of contemporary philosophers and advanced philosophy students. For it will contribute to the more long-standing discussions and debates around Descartes' metaphysics and philosophy mind which have and continue to influence contemporary work in these areas of philosophy. It will thus be of interest to contemporary philosophers of mind, as well as those interested in philosophical anthropology and philosophy of the emotions.