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Cartesian Passions as Representational Mental States
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The question of whether the passions, for Descartes, are representational mental states arises from two orthogonal directions. First, there has been a significant amount of discussion within contemporary philosophy about whether emotions are representational. Until rather recently, philosophers have divided into two camps. One side maintains that the passions are representational insofar as they are judgements of value. The other side maintains that passions are non-representational motivational states.¹ Readers of Descartes's *Passions of the Soul* can well ask how his account of the passions fits into this contemporary discussion, and the answer is far from clear. For Descartes, the passions cannot yet be judgements. Cartesian judgements involve an affirmation or denial of an idea put forward in the intellect, and it seems that the passions are at the level of an idea in the mind. Descartes defines the passions as "perceptions, 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" (PA a.27; 11:349). Through this definition Descartes groups the passions with other mental states he takes to be representational – sensations 'we refer to' external objects and those 'we refer to' the body, such as hunger and thirst. Both this general definition of the passions, and the definitions of several passions strongly suggest that he takes the passions to be representational. Nonetheless, Cartesian passions are motivating -- their principal use is to "incite and dispose their soul to will the things for which they prepare their body" (PA a.40; 11:359). It thus does not seem as if being representational and

¹ Indeed, philosophers on this side seem to assume that any mental state that has motivational force cannot be representational. In this regard, they take themselves to be following Hume, who in Book II of his *Treatise on Human Nature* writes:

[quote]

It does not seem to me that Hume here is committed to the view that the passions are non-representational in the sense of non-intentional states. Though I cannot discuss this interpretation of Hume here, it is far from clear that the assumption is warranted: that passions move us to action need not preclude their being intentional.

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being motivational are two distinct alternatives for Descartes. Insofar as Descartes's account of the passions does not fit neatly into the framework of contemporary philosophical discussion of emotions, it could provide a basis for moving that discussion forward in an interesting way.²

However, to bring the Cartesian position to bear on contemporary discussion, we first have to get clear on the Cartesian position, and in particular on the way in which the passions *are* representational. That is my task here.

Much ink has been spent considering the question of whether Cartesian sensations represent. We can frame the debate in terms of a distinction introduced by Margaret Wilson, between a sensation's presenting its content and its representing that content. On this distinction, a sensation represents insofar as it provides information about some really existing thing in the world.³ What a sensation presents is simply what we take ourselves to be aware of. My sensation of a freshly picked Macintosh apple before me presents a spherical object, of a mix of red and green color, with a crispy, sugary-yet-tart taste and smell, whether or not there is any object before me, and if there is, whether or not that object has (or even could have) the properties I think it does. We can say that a sensation purports to represent what it presents. It might in fact fail to represent its object veridically. However, such misrepresentation, even if it is systematic, need not entail a wholesale failure to represent, that is a failure to provide some information about the world. We might think, for instance, that we can get everything wrong about the apple, except for the fact that something (it might not even be an apple) exists. In this case, my sensation, though presenting something quite thick, would represent something quite thin. For the purposes of my discussion, I will use similar terminology. I will say the passions (or other

² Prinz

³ Wilson characterizes representing as a matter of referring to an object, and she proposes that at best Descartes's texts suggest he held a causal account of reference for sensation. Because a part of much of my discussion will turn on understanding Descartes's expression 'refer to', I do not want to confuse the issue by using Wilson's sense of 'refer to' here.

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mental states) present what they do insofar as they purport to be about their objects. I will say the passions (or other mental states) represent what they do insofar as they give us information about the world. Furthermore, presentational mental states and representational mental states are both intentional mental states, in my use of the term. That is, both purport to be about something in the world. A presentational mental state fails its effort, whereas a representational state succeeds at least to some degree. I take it that the dominant view in the current literature is that Cartesian sensations are representational – they give us information about the world.⁴ Commentators disagree, however, about what Cartesian sensations represent: Do they represent ecological features of the world, primary qualities, even secondary qualities, or merely the existence of material world?⁵ My aim here is not to settle these disagreements, though I will inevitably weigh in on them insofar as my discussion turns to sensation. I rather am concerned to demonstrate that the passions are not merely presentational but also representational states of mind.

Seeing that the passions are representational involves first getting clear on both what the passions present and what they represent, and how the two are related to one another. In order to do this, I propose to explicate in some detail just what Descartes means by this somewhat puzzling expression ‘refer to’ in his definition of the passions (and of external and internal sensations in the *Passions of the Soul*). In particular, we need to understand in just what way the passions refer *to the soul*, for it is far from clear how to do so while respecting both the principle of taxonomy of the passions and how it is consistent with what Descartes has to say about other representational mental states. Descartes’s claim that the passions refer to the soul (and equally that sensations refer to external objects or internal bodily states) effectively concerns what

⁴ The accounts which prevail in the current literature still need to account for Descartes’s claim in the *Meditations* and *Replies to Objections* that our sensory ideas are materially false, that is, that they provide us with material for error, and in particular that they represent non-things as things.

⁵ Cites

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Wilson terms the presentational content of the passion. This presentational content does represent the world, I argue, in two distinct, but related ways. First, I suggest that the passions are re-presentations of other mental states – what Descartes terms second grade sensations in the Sixth Replies to Objections accompanying the *Meditations*. I will call this sort of representation literal representation. Through this literal representation our passions tell us about how the soul is affected by the world. These second grade sensations are representational in Wilson’s sense, that is, virtue of the information they provide through their causal connection to the world. I will call this causal representation, though we must take care here: second grade sensations carry information about the way things benefit and harm us, and not about the natures of things that cause them. Furthermore, the passions have representational content insofar as they stand in an inferential or functional relation it stands to other mental states. We regulate our passions through other passions. I will call this sort of representation inferential representation. This aspect of the passions is not only an important part of Descartes’s account of the regulation of the passions, it also figures in his account of the good. These three sorts of representation are tightly intertwined in the case of the passions, and of particular interest is the way in which the literal representation of the causal representational content of second grade sensations can explain the motivational aspect of the passions.

Before beginning this discussion of how to understand Cartesian passions as representational, however, I want to take a step back to survey Descartes’s characterization of the passions as representing. Though Descartes claims the passions represent, his remarks only suggest the passions are intentional mental states and do not decide the question of whether the passions are merely presentational or are truly representational. To settle this question, we need to examine Descartes’s definition of the passions in more detail. Through considering what

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Descartes means in claiming that the passions are sensations that ‘are referred to the soul’, I develop my account of Cartesian passions as representational mental states. With that account in place, I consider how we can read Descartes’s near contemporaries – Malebranche and Spinoza in particular – as responding to this account. Finally, I will offer some preliminary remarks on how Descartes’s account of the intentionality of the passions can be brought to bear on contemporary philosophy of emotion.

Descartes on the passions as ‘representing’: Cartesian passions as intentional mental states

Throughout the *Passions of the Soul* Descartes talks of particular passions as representing. In these cases it seems clear that he is taking the passions to have some intentional content, that is, at the very least, to purport to be about something. However, these remarks do not settle the question of whether the passions merely present or actually represent their content in some way.

In some cases, he is quite straightforward: “abhorrence is instituted by nature to represent a sudden and unexpected death” (a.89; 11:394); “delight is particularly instituted by nature to represent the enjoyment of what delights as the greatest of all the good that belong to man” (a.90; 11:395). Other cases, though less clear cut, still invite us straightforwardly to understand the passions at issue as having intentional content. Consider the accounts of love and hatred. According to Descartes, “love is an excitation of the soul, caused by the motion of the spirits, which incites it to join itself in volition to the objects that appear to be suitable to it,” and “hatred is an excitation, caused by the spirits, which incites the soul to will to be separated from the objects that are presented to it as harmful” (a. 79; 11:387). While it can seem that, by claiming that love and hatred are emotions of the soul moving us to action, Descartes is effectively denying that they are intentional, his discussion here is better read as simply referring back to his

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definition of the passions as “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” (a.27; 11:349). Descartes glosses the first part of this definition in a.28, and in doing so he claims, most relevantly to the point here, that the passions are “better named excitations of the soul, not only because this name may be attributed to all the changes that take place within it, that is to all the different thoughts that come to in, but in particular because, among all the sorts of thoughts it can have, there are no others which agitate it and shake it so strongly as these passions do” (11:350). Since all thoughts are excitations of the soul, and all thoughts for Descartes are intentional, excitations of the soul are, by Descartes’s lights, intentional.⁶ In the case of love and hatred, then, the motion of the spirits causes an appearance of goodness or harmfulness, that is, love or hatred. And this appearance, or this feeling of the passion, in turn motivates us to act in the appropriate way.

Another set of cases in which Descartes’s talk of representation and the passions is a bit harder to handle. It can seem as if Descartes takes the passions to *result* from intentional states, though not necessarily intentional themselves. In his first round of definitions of the particular passions he claims that our judging an object which has surprised us to be new or different from our past experience “makes us [*fait que*] wonder and be astonished at it” (a.53, 11:373); that when something “is represented to us ... as being suitable to us, this makes us have [*nous fait avoir*] love for it” and that a representation of something as harmful “excites us to hatred” (a.56, 11: 374); that “consideration of a present good excites joy in us, that of evil sadness, when it is a

⁶At the very least, being an excitation of the soul does not preclude being intentional. **M3**; There is a dispute as to whether, for Descartes, all thoughts are representational. Lilli Alanen, in *Descartes’s Concept of Mind*, maintains that what is distinctive about Cartesian mental states is that they are representational. Alison Simmons (??), though she admits that Cartesian mental states are often representational, maintains that awareness distinguishes Cartesian mental states. She leaves open the question of whether there can be non-representational mental states for Descartes. Nonetheless, as I understand Simmons, even non-representational mental states, for Descartes, would still have presentational content, and so, in the sense I am employing here, be intentional mental states.

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good or an evil which is represented as belonging to us” (a. 61; 11:376). While Descartes is clearly concerned here with ideas about something’s being good or bad for us, these passages do not compel us to take the passions associated with these ideas as *themselves* about the way things benefit and harm us. They do not rule out, however, the passions being intentional in this way. Moreover, it is worth noting that these passages do cut against the very definition of the passions as caused by motions of the animal spirits. Though one might well think that the passions could be excited or otherwise caused by other thoughts. Descartes is clear that the passions are typically and in the first instance have a bodily cause. For this reason, I prefer to read Descartes here as detailing the intentional contents constituting (at least in part) the passions at issue here.

From this survey of Descartes’s remarks about particular passions, several things should be clear. First, Descartes does not take the passions to be judgments in the sense of affirmations of or assents to particular ideas. Nonetheless, he does take the passions to be more than mere feelings and to have intentional content. Moreover, the intentional content of the passions concerns our benefit and harm; the passions are about the various ways in which things are good or bad for us, or in the case of wonder about a newness to us. However, though Descartes does talk of passions ‘representing’ their objects, these remarks do not in themselves entail that the passions are representational in the robust sense of giving us information about the world, that is, about real benefits and harms to us. The passions might merely present the intentional contents they do, without those contents giving us information about the way things really are.⁷ To understand the representationality of Cartesian passions, and indeed to determine whether they are representational, we need to proceed beyond these textual cues.

⁷ Thanks to Sean Greenberg for persistently pressing this point. Greenberg maintains that the passions only have presentational content.

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Before moving on to do this, I want to note one more set of cases, a more problematic one. In these cases Descartes suggests that brain impressions, rather than the mental states caused by those brain states, are representational. Wonder “a sudden surprise of the soul, which moves it to consider attentively those objects which seem to it rare and extraordinary ... is caused first by the impression in one’s brain that represents the object as rare and consequently as worthy of being accorded great consideration” (a. 70; 11:380); joy “is a delightful excitation of the soul, wherein consists the enjoyment it has of the good which the impressions of the brain represent to it as its own” (a.91; 11: 396); and “sadness is an unpleasant languor, wherein consists the distress which the soul receives from the evil of defect which the impressions of the brain represent as belonging to it.” (a.92; 11:397). Descartes’s language here is reminiscent of his early writings on sense perception. In both the *Treatise of Man* and the *Optics*, he maintains that the corporeal ideas on the surface of the pineal gland that are caused by the motions of the animal spirits through the sensory nerves represent their objects through their resemblance to them. While representing through a resemblance relation does not seem to be in play here, Descartes does seem to be harkening back to his earlier thinking. And I suspect that the status of these bodily ‘representations’ is similar to that of the images on the surface of the pineal gland detailed in the *Optics*. Ann Wilbur MacKenzie⁸ has very helpfully understood Descartes’ position as follows: the brain images are not so much representations of objects themselves, but rather serve as ‘vehicles of representation.’ They are, as it were, natural signs which “enable the mind to sense what the brain images signify.”⁹ We can treat Descartes’ claims in the *Passions* that there are bodily representations of various benefits and harms in a similar way. These brain states are not themselves passions properly speaking, but rather they are the vehicles through which we come

⁸ Ann Wilbur MacKenzie (*Optics*)

⁹ MacKenzie (132).

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to feel the passions, and so to have ideas which have as their intentional contents benefits and harms to us.

“Which we refer to the soul in particular”: Cartesian passions as representational states

In the previous section I argued that, for Descartes, the passions are intentional mental states. They purport to represent the ways in which things benefit and harm us. We now need to ascertain whether they merely present their intentional contents or whether those contents succeed in representing the world. The place to start is the definition of the passions. As noted at the outset of this discussion, in a. 27 of the *Passions of the Soul* Descartes defines the passions as “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). Descartes is here aiming to distinguish the passions in the specific sense from the other kinds of perceptions that “can generally be called its [the soul’s] passions” (a.17; 11:342), that is, those perceptions “we refer to things outside us, namely to the objects of our senses” (a.23; 11:346) and those perceptions “we refer to our body or some of its parts” (a.24; 11:346), or feelings “of hunger, thirst, and our other natural appetites, ... [as well as] pain, heat and the other natural affections we feel as in our members” (*ibid.*).¹⁰ Central to this taxonomy of our perceptions is the expression ‘refer to’, or *rapporter à*. How are we to understand this rather peculiar expression?

Contemporary theories of reference are quite diverse, and I will not here engage in the debates driving the contemporary discussion. Many dominant theories – including

¹⁰ There are a number of points of difference between Descartes’ definition of the passions and his account of external and internal sensations: whereas external and internal sensations are simply perceptions in his accounts, he defines the passions as ‘perceptions or sensations or excitations of the soul’. One can ask about the significance of the disjunction here. Similarly, while external and internal sensations are simply characterized as caused by ‘the mediation of the nerves’, and so presumably by the movement of the animal spirits in the nerves, the passions are not only caused but also maintained and strengthened by our physiology. Again, one can ask about the significance of the added complexity in the definition. Here, however, I do not want to focus on these points of difference.

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straightforward causal accounts of reference as well as functional accounts – do share a simple common assumption: referring involves corresponding to something real¹¹. From this contemporary perspective, it seems natural to assume that Descartes’s language of referring implies that passions (as well as sensations) represent the world.

However, we need to be careful before we import contemporary notions of reference into Descartes’s discussion in the *Passions*. Though I do take it that most commentators agree that sensations are representational, there are few, if any, who claim that our sensations represent objects as they are presented to us in experience.¹² This view that what sensations represent is distinct from their presentational content. raises questions about whether Descartes, in claiming in the *Passions* that we refer sensations to external objects, takes it that our sensations are properly representing those objects. Indeed, the way Descartes’s fleshes out his point here suggests otherwise:

So, when we see the light of a torch and hear the sound of a bell, the sound and the light are two different actions, which, solely by exciting two different movements in some of our nerves and thereby in the brain, impart to the soul two different sensations, which we refer to the subjects we suppose to be their causes in such a way that we think we see the torch itself and hear the bell, and not that we only feel the movement proceeding from them. (PA a.23, 11:346)

In referring our sensations to external objects, we ‘suppose’ those sensations tell us about objects in the world. Such suppositions might be completely unwarranted. It thus does not seem that

¹¹ So, for instance, such theories would maintain that ‘the present king of France’ fails to refer, since there is no such entity existing. Some theories might take it that this failure to refer is sufficient to make any claim purporting to be about the present king of France meaningless. Other theorists, who focus on the function terms serve in our use of language and the inferences we draw, maintain that though ‘the present king of France’ might not refer to anything real, it is not meaningless. Claims about the present king of France are simply false. It doesn’t seem to me that these inferentialist accounts of meaning are helpful to answering the question before us now.

¹² And rightly so... material falsity, etc.

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Descartes is here claiming that our perceptions of external objects represent those objects veridically. However, nor does he seem to be saying that our perceptions of external objects have a merely presentational content. They are, after all, caused by movements of objects, which, we might say, they represent. Thus, it seems that in referring our perceptions to the objects we do, we attribute what we are presented with in our sensory experience to objects, but it is not yet clear how this attribution relates to the causal history of our sensory experiences. And so it is not clear how the referring relation bears on the question of the representationality of our perceptions. It certainly does not seem that Descartes is using ‘refer’ in the contemporary philosophical sense.

Let us then take a step back to try to recover the mid-17th century sense of the verb. ‘To refer’ seems a perfectly adequate translation of the French verb *rapporter à*. *Rapporter* is listed in the 1606 *Trésor de la langue française* where it defined by the Latin verbs *referre*¹³ and *reportare*.¹⁴ In clarifying the senses of the word, the *Trésor* also employs the Latin *ferre*, and *nuntiare*.¹⁵ Its primary use seems to be in reporting news of war. By the first edition of the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française* in 1694, the primary use of the word is to transport goods to a destination, and it can apply to merchants just as well as hunting dogs who retrieve the kill. It does, however, retain ‘to report’ as a secondary sense.¹⁶ According to both dictionaries’s definitions, these reportings can be either true or false. The explications that employ to the construction Descartes uses -- *rapporter à* – conform to these definitions.^{17, 18} Descartes’s

¹³ Refero, referre: To carry or bring back (objects to places)

¹⁴ Reporto, reportare: To carry or bring back

¹⁵ Fero, ferre: To bear, carry, to bring forth, produce; Nuntio, nuntiare: to announce, report

¹⁶ Other senses include those of to draw from, as in drawing honor and glory from a military campaign; to allege; and to produce, as land produces its harvest.

¹⁷ Here, the principal sense includes that of reporting to or bringing back to. The standard example in both the early and later part of the 17th century involves gossip. This construction is also used to indicate an end or direction of action.

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Passions was written right into between these two points of reference, and so should conform to them, even if his own usage doesn't fit neatly into the paradigm cases of the dictionary definitions.¹⁹

There are two elements we can draw from these definitions of *rapporter*. First, a standard use of *rapporter* does carry with it a connotation of representation. A messenger, in reporting news from the battlefield, is taken not to be merely presenting a story he has come up with to entertain folks at home. Rather, it is assumed that his account bears a relation to what has happened at the front. His reportage can be true, as is usually assumed to be, or it can be false, and it will be judged to be so depending on how well it informs people about the events he relates.²⁰ This ability to play this epistemic role is an important feature of a representation. Second, the use of *rapporter* also includes some sort of causal dimension. We can say that a messenger reports what he does in virtue of being causally positioned to do so. Even someone who typically reports falsely, such as a gossip, is taken to offer reports because of his position in a causal chain of information. This aspect of the word's meaning comes out more clearly in other standard uses of the term. A merchant brings his goods to market; a dog, in retrieving the hunter's quarry, brings it home; a field brings forth its harvest. In all these cases the subject of the verb *rapporter* effects some change in the world. However, they do not do so through some causal power of their own. They hold a place in a causal process along with the object of the

¹⁸ Also of interest are reflexive uses of that construction [*se rapporter à*]. The most common context of the examples of this reflexive construction in the *Tresor* are juridical – a defendant is referred to the good will judges, a decision is referred to an arbitrator, but there are other contexts as well. The sense here seems to be something like 'give oneself over to', 'to leave something at the disposal of something else.'

¹⁹ Descartes uses forms of '*rapporter*' in a range of interesting contexts. The term figures frequently in Descartes's geometrical writings, referring to proportions as well as to projections (for instance, in the *Optics*), and in the development of algebraic geometry. In these contexts, the term implies a kind of equivalence or measure. Descartes also uses '*rapporter*' in his reply to Arnauld in the Fourth Replies regarding the issue of complete substances, and in his reply to Elisabeth in clarifying a point in ethics, regarding how each refers everything to himself in evaluating whether it is good.

²⁰ Note though, that a report of events does not represent those events by resembling them. Typically, a messenger does not offer us a dramatic re-enactment of the battle.

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verb. A field provides the conditions in which seeds can grow and result in a crop; a dog transports the quarry from out in the field back to the hunter; a merchant moves the goods to market where they can be sold.

Attending to these elements, we can see a similarity between the 17th century sense of referring and the contemporary philosophical sense. Both involve ascribing a causal relation between a concept or idea and what it refers to. There is, however, an important difference. In the 17th century sense, this causal relation does not exhaust the reference relation. The messenger's report must stand in a causal relation to events to represent them, but that representation will present things in a way that need not correspond to the way they actually took place. It may narrate events in a non-linear order; it may highlight some elements as salient; it may omit some details. These potential variations in the messenger's presentation do not in themselves make the report less representational, though the presentation may well distort events to such a degree that it does cease to represent real events and becomes a work of fiction. The line between a representational report and a fictive one will be in part a matter of the elements of the report standing in the appropriate causal relation to real events. But this causal relation in itself is not sufficient to determine the report's representational content. Not only is it possible for quite different reports to represent events equally well, but also it is also possible for different reports to represent events to different degrees. The evaluation of the truth or falsity of reports will need to take into account the relations different elements of the reports stand in to one another, as well as to consider a range of reports about the same events.

Let us return to Descartes's claims about how we refer perceptions to external (and internal) objects, with our insight into the definition *rapporter*. Most clearly, our referring our sensations to the objects we do presupposes both the sensations and their objects hold places in a

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causal process. In the passage from PA a.23 quoted earlier Descartes is explicit on this point: we refer our sensations “to the subjects we suppose to be their causes” (*op. cit.*).²¹ But can we also say that our sensations report something about the world, and so are representational? I take it that the argument for the existence of the material world in the Sixth Meditation establishes that, at the very least, sensations report that there is something out there, distinct from other things, affecting in us in some distinctive way. Insofar as our sensations report that the things exist, we can say they represent the world in a minimal sense. This consideration is the basis of the general consensus that sensations are representational. In Descartes’s discussion in the *Passions* of both our external and internal sensations, however, he goes beyond maintaining that we refer our sensations to the world in general. We refer sensations of light to a torch, of sound to a bell, of heat and coldness to our hands. Is Descartes here claiming that sensations represent something more robust? Since my topic here is the representationality of the passions, I do not want to stray too far in considering this question. I do think, however, that the way reports represent their subjects can provide us with a way of understanding Cartesian sensations as representing the world through what they present to us. On this view, whether what the report presents represents the world will depend not only on the causal history of the report but also on the way in which the elements of the report cohere with one another and its relation to other reports presenting similar states of affairs. In the last paragraph of the Sixth Meditation, Descartes suggests something similar. There, recall, we are to appeal to the coherence of our sensory experiences, along with the causal etiology of our sensations, to distinguish waking from dreaming, and in

²¹ We need to be careful here. To say that our sensations serve as vehicles in a causal chain, the way a merchant or a hunting dog do, does not seem quite right here. Indeed, such a reading of ‘*rapporter*’ might well be more appropriate to a Scholastic account of sensation which takes sensory representation to be a matter of the transmission of sensible species. Descartes rejects this model of sensation and sensory representation. That is a large part of the point of the discussion of sensation in the Sixth Meditation, as well as that of the piece of wax in the Second Meditation. I find it implausible to think he slides back to the Scholastic view in the *Passions of the Soul*. Nothing in the account presented is committed to a particular account of causation.

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general to avoid error in our sensory beliefs. I will return to consider our sensory representations in a bit more detail (though still not completely) later in my discussion.

Let us leave aside sensations of external objects and our body and turn to the passions to see if this account of ‘refer’ can help us make sense of the definition of the passions as sensations (or perceptions or excitations) of the soul that we refer to the soul in particular.

First: Do the passions, in referring to the soul provide a report about it, and so represent the soul in some way? On its face, this is a hard question to answer. What, after all, is there to report about the soul? That it is having a thought? If that is what the passions report about the soul, then it would seem to be contained in the awareness we have in just having a thought. This sort of answer can suggest that the passions merely present the soul in a certain way, one which has no basis in reality. In having a thought about something we already are aware of that thought, and so, presumably, that we are having a thought. The passions, as we have seen, have a much richer presentational content. It is not clear that the report contained in these presentations adds any new information. This suggestion gains some support from a remark Descartes makes in PA a. 25:

The perceptions that are referred to the soul are those whose effects are felt as in the soul itself, and of which no proximate cause to which they may be referred is commonly known. Such are the sensations of joy, anger and others like them, which are sometimes excited in us by objects that move our nerves and sometimes also by other causes. (11:348)

Descartes can here seem to be claiming that we refer perceptions to the soul because we have no basis for referring them to any other objects. Descartes enumerates a large number of passions, which differ from one another in a number of respects. The different passions present the soul differently – as feeling love, hate, joy, sadness, etc – but these presentational differences, the

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story goes, have no basis in the causes of those mental states. That is, on this reading, all there is to report about the soul is that it is having a thought (and we knew that anyway); the differences in the passions are merely phenomenal differences in of feeling; they do not refer to any real differences in the soul or to the causes of the mental states; and so the intentional contents of the passions are not representational but rather merely presentational.

This conclusion, however, sits quite uncomfortably. For one, about two thirds of the work is devoted to detailed discussion of different individual passions. Perhaps Descartes was just interested in exploring the phenomenal character of our passionate lives, but his discussion suggests he means to do more than that. Intertwined with his exposition of the passions is a virtue ethics in which the passions are tied to our good – indeed, the work concludes with the claim that “all the good and evil of this life depend on them” (PA a.212; 11:488). Reading Descartes as holding that the passions have merely presentational content stands in tension with this virtue ethics.²² Equally, per the definition of the passions, Descartes does maintain that the passions have a bodily cause, and that differences in the passions we feel is due to differences in their bodily cause.²³ At the very least, the different passions should report on differences in the way the soul is causally affected by motions of the animal spirits. The issue gets more complicated if we consider how Descartes distinguishes the passions from one another. He maintains that the “common and most principal causes” of the passions²⁴ are the “objects which move the senses” (PA a. 51; 11:372, and the different ways in which these objects move us should serve as the principle of taxonomy of the passions. In particular, he maintains that objects cause different passions in us “in proportion to the different ways they can harm or profit

²² See my generosity paper and blackwell paper, as well as othes

²³ See PA aa. 36-39, as well as the many articles detailing the physiology of the passions in Part II of the work.

²⁴ Descartes admits that the passions can be caused simply by “the temperament of the body alone” or haphazard brain states, but these moods or spontaneous outbursts of emotion are not to be taken as paradigm cases.

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us or, generally, be important to us” (PA a.52; 11:372). This taxonomic principle suggests that different passions report on the different ways in which things are important to us. We have seen that the definitions of the particular passions bear this out. Love represents being good or suitable to us; hatred represents being harmful or unsuitable to us; wonder represents newness to us; sadness represents an evil to us; joy a good to us, and so on. There is reason to think that Descartes takes these reports to be not merely presentational but representational. Descartes maintains that the passions often, if not always, exaggerate or otherwise distort the importance of things to us, and that we can in regulating them come to feel what we should. In so doing he effectively maintains that our passions have a moral epistemic role to play, and this in turn implies they are truly representational.

However, this understanding of what the passions represent does not solve our problem. It would seem on this view that the passions report something about objects in the world – that they are important to us in some way. But if I am right about the ‘refer to’ relation, the passions, insofar as they refer to the soul, ought to be reporting something about the soul. One way of resolving this problem is quite straightforward. For an object to appear suitable (or unsuitable or extraordinary) ought not be understood as a representation of a property of the object in and of itself. Rather, an object’s suitability is a function of its relation to me, and in particular, for Descartes, of its importance to my well-being. The passions, in being referred to the soul, are reporting the way we (unions of soul and body) are affected by things. They tell us as much about us as they do about the world. Thus, they represent the way things benefit and harm *us*.
{Discussion of secondary literature here –Alanen? Brown? What is James’s line?}

While I have some sympathy with this straightforward resolution, it ignores a potentially

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serious difficulty. In recent years, led by a provocative piece by Alison Simmons,²⁵ some commentators have maintained that, while sensations might not veridically represent the nature of things, they do represent the ways in which things benefit and harm us as unions of mind and body. If this sort of account is correct, and if my account of what the passions represent is also correct, it is hard to know how to distinguish passions from sensations. One possibility is to maintain that all body-caused mental states represent the same sort of thing: the way things benefit and harm us. They are distinguished from one another, however, in virtue of their presentational content, and any additional representational content accruing to that.²⁶ I will defend a view that has this general shape. The form of the sort of solution I will propose involves relating the presentational content to the representational content. My focus is on the passions, and I will not be able to offer more than a sketch of how we ought to understand the case of sensations here. However, my account will draw substantially on remarks Descartes makes about sensations in his Replies to the Sixth Objections, as well as in the *Principles*. The interpretation I offer sees the account of referring in the *Passions* as a development of these remarks.

Before developing this part of my account of how Cartesian passions are representational states, I want to point out that it will not do to distinguish external and internal sensations (or at least internal sensations) from the passions on the basis of a motivational aspect. In the Sixth Meditation, Descartes is quite clear that sensations are also motivating of action. Sensations of hunger and thirst move us to eat and drink, just as much as love and hate move us toward and

²⁵ Simmons (1999)

²⁶ I am trying to be careful here. One form of this sort of solution would claim that the presentational content of our sensations and passions bears no relation to their representational content. The presentational content, on this line, is purely phenomenal. I have suggested that this is not the way to understand Descartes's remarks in the *Passions* on we refer sensations to external objects, and I will have more to say in this regard below. It is even more problematic in the case of the passions insofar as their presentational content and representational content resemble one another.

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away from their objects. It is thus far from clear that being motivating of action will serve to mark out the passions from other body-caused mental states.

Descartes's account of sensation in the *Objections and Replies*

In the Sixth Replies, in response to a query about how he thinks we recognize and respond to sensory error, Descartes distinguishes “three grades of sensory response”(7:436; 2:294):

The first is limited to the immediate stimulation of the bodily organs by external objects; this can consist in nothing but the motion of the particles of the organs, and any change of shape and position resulting from this motion. The second grade comprises all the immediate effects produced in the mind as a result of its being united with a bodily organ which is affected in this way. Such effects include the perceptions of pain, pleasure, thirst, hunger, colours, sound, taste, smell, heat, cold and the like, which arise from the union and as it were the intermingling of mind and body explained in the Sixth Meditation. The third grade includes all the judgements about things outside us which we have been accustomed to make from our earliest years – judgements which are occasioned by the movements of these bodily organs. (7:436-7; 2:294-95).

To address the problem at hand – the distinction between sensations and passions and the relation between presentational and representational content – we need to get clear on how sensations and passions fit into the schema proposed in the Sixth Replies.

First, it should be clear that Descartes's talk of sensations and passions does not concern the first grade of sensation. First grade sensations are simply a matter of the way our bodily sense organs are affected by the world, but the sensations we are concerned with are states of mind, had in virtue of the union of mind and body. The same is true of the passions. The question is

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whether to fit the representational content of sensations (that is, of benefits and harms to the human being) and the passions into the schema of the Sixth Replies at the second or the third grade. In order to answer this question we need to clarify the distinction between these two grades, and how they relate to one another. For clarity, and since Descartes's own account focuses on sensations, I begin there, and then move to apply the model to the passions. I do so, however, with the proviso that I will not be able here to offer a full account of Cartesian sensations.

The first thing to note is that Descartes's account of the three grades of sensation comes as a response to an objection to Descartes's position on the possibility of sensory knowledge, and in particular regarding his view that the intellect is a more reliable source of knowledge than the senses. (See 7:418; 2:281f.) The objectors maintain that any intellectual certainty must be derived from the senses, properly functioning. Moreover, they maintain, any correction to an ill-functioning sense modality must come first from another sense modality: our sense of touch is what corrects errors of vision. Descartes's tripartite distinction is thus aimed at explaining how sensory information figures in the economy of the mind, in particular in relation to the intellect, in order to provide an account of sensory knowledge and error.

With this context in mind, it seems clear that Descartes's tripartite distinction is meant to point out an equivocation in the objection. Our sense organs certainly play a role in our sensory knowledge insofar as they are the loci where our bodies are affected by the world. The bodily motions effected by the stimulation of the sense organs in turn affect our mind. Through the institution of nature, these bodily motions bring about thoughts in the soul – “perceptions of pain, pleasure, thirst, hunger, colours, sound, taste, smell, heat, cold and the like.” Descartes explains further that the mind has these perceptions in virtue of its union with a body; they are

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not perceptions proper to the intellect alone (7:437; 2:295), and it seems that the intellect is hardly involved in our having them. The third grade of sensation does involve the intellect, for sensations in this sense consist in habitual judgements that we make. But is intellectual involvement enough to allow for sensory knowledge and error being province of the third grade of sensations?

Descartes's use of 'judgement' in explicating the third grade of sensation suggests that it is, but still his use here is puzzling.²⁷ For these judgements cannot be the same as the judgements at the center of the Fourth Meditation. The judgements with which Descartes concerns himself in the Fourth Meditation are the locus of truth and falsity. These judgements begin from a fully formed idea in the intellect, an idea that in itself is neither true nor false.²⁸ We might say that the idea has some intentional content, and that in making a judgement we take a stand on whether the intentional content is truly representational. We either affirm or deny it. And we can be either correct, when what we affirm is true, or mistaken, when it is false. Insofar as the truth or falsity of the judgements bears on whether we have knowledge, we can call these Fourth Meditation judgments *epistemic judgements*. The judgements proper to the third grade of sensation outlined in the Sixth Replies are not yet epistemic in this way. They do not yet involve affirmation and denial of the way the world *is*. Rather they involve claims about the way the world *appears* to us. In Descartes' example, we make a judgment in taking a pattern of light and color to be a stick, perhaps one that appears bent. We can call these sorts of judgement *psychological*. With these psychological judgements in mind we go on to make epistemic judgements about them. That is,

²⁷ Simmons 'Cognitive Structure' provides a good overview of the puzzles here. I agree with much of her discussion regarding sense of 'judgement' in play in the third grade of sensation, and adopt her useful terminology of epistemic and psychological judgements below. However, I do have fine-grade disagreements with her account of the relation between second and third grade sensations. Some of this disagreement will emerge in my discussion below.

²⁸ It might, however, be materially false, disposing us to make false proper judgments. These false judgments might involve, for instance, taking non-things as things, but they might also might involve simple exaggerations of properties things do have.

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we can go on to make a judgement about whether what appears to be a bent stick before us is one in fact.

Let me say a bit more about the role I take second grade sensations to play in the psychological judgements constituting third grade sensations. It is noteworthy that in his discussion of second grade sensations, Descartes nowhere mentions objects of sensation. Rather at the second grade we have sensations of various qualities in virtue of the institution of nature. While Descartes's language suggests that these sensations are caused by objects in the world, at the second grade we do not yet attribute them to objects. When we encounter a stick, our second grade sensation consists not in a perception of a stick, but rather in "a perception of the colour and light reflected from the stick" (7:437; 2:295). The intellect enters into the picture at the third grade of sensation, forming an idea of an object, say, a stick of a certain colour, from second grade sensations. Descartes's idea here, as I understand it, is that from a very early age we develop habits of forming our ideas of objects out of our sense perceptions. Our changing understanding of the world around us, however, can lead us to reflect on the ideas we have, and perhaps correct for the errors of these habits.

In *Principles* I.71 Descartes suggests something very similar to this.²⁹ There, also in an effort to explain 'the chief source of error', Descartes tells a story of our cognitive development. He writes:

In our early childhood the mind was so closely tied to the body that it had no leisure for any thoughts except those by means of which it had sensory awareness of what was happening to the body. It did not refer these thoughts to anything outside itself, but merely felt pain when something harmful was happening to the body and felt pleasure when something beneficial occurred. And when nothing very beneficial or harmful was happening

²⁹ Thanks to Marleen Rozemond for emphasizing the relevance of this passage.

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to the body, the mind had various sensations corresponding to the different areas where, and ways in which the body was being stimulated, namely what we call the sensations of tastes, smells, sounds, heat, cold, light, colours and so on – sensations which do not represent anything located outside our thought <but which vary according to the different movements which pass from all parts of our body to the part of the brain to which our mind is closely joined and united>. (8B:35; 1:219.)

I take Descartes here to be adding detail to his account of second grade of sensations. He does claim that at this stage we do get some sensations of sizes, shapes, and motions presented as “things, or modes of things” but at the same time denies that we are “aware of the difference between things and sensations” (*op. cit.*) It is not until the next stage of cognitive development, once we are able to move about “in random attempts to pursue the beneficial and avoid the harmful” that we begin to form ideas of objects outside of us. We attribute to these objects “not only sizes, shapes, motions and the like ... but also tastes, smells and so on...” (8B:36; 1:219) insofar as we take these objects to be the causes of our sensations. However, we ascribe causal power in part on the basis of the degree to which we are affected by the world. So, for instance, we do not see the light from a star as particularly bright, we do not take it to be any larger than a lamp. As Descartes writes, “right from infancy our mind was swamped with a thousand such preconceived opinions” (*op. cit.*) At this point we have an account of our third grade sensations. Our ideas of objects, involving attribution of various properties to objects we take to exist outside of us, are built up out of a sense that what they are is a function of their impact on us. These ideas, however, require critical examination, and if we affirm what they present to us without sufficient attention we will fall into error. Once we have an understanding of astronomy, for instance, we can and should take stars to be much larger than a lamp.

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This reading of the Sixth Replies, insofar as it squares well with the *Principles* account, helps to explain how Descartes's discussion there is in fact a reply to the objection about the sources of our errors. Truth and falsity do not properly figure in either the first or the second grade of sensation. Rather, the third grade of sensation, insofar as it consists in the way things appear to us provides us with the material to affirm or deny things about the world. We make judgements in the epistemic sense from these sensations and can correct our take on how things do appear on the basis of our beliefs along with our sense perceptions.

We can also relate the discussion of the Sixth Replies and the *Principles* to Descartes's language of 'refer to' in the *Passions*, at least in the case of our perceptions of external objects. In referring our sensations to an object – for instance, our sensation of light to a torch, or of sound to a bell – we form an idea of an object with certain properties from the sensations we experience in virtue of the union of mind and body (ie second grade sensations). Our ideas of external objects are informed by what we take to be the cause of our sensations. These perceptions of external objects, those that involve referring sensations to something, are third grade sensations.

If this account of third grade sensations is correct, however, it is not clear how we are to understand our sensations as representing the way things benefit and harm us. Consider a typical third grade sensation, an idea of an object – say, a stick. The content of this idea includes various properties we attribute to a stick, that it is cylindrical, but a bit knobby, about a six inches long, a grey-brown color and so on. That is, with this idea we represent the stick as an object with these properties. An object with these properties may well bear on our benefit and harm, but it is not obvious what the practical import of such an object is. Indeed, it seems that we would need to draw some inferences to see how it can benefit and harm us. Nonetheless, there is good textual

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evidence that in the Sixth Meditation Descartes does maintain that our sensations represent the way things benefit and harm us as unions of mind and body.

As Alison Simmons has drawn attention to,³⁰ in his discussion of the union of mind and body, Descartes makes clear that, while our sensations might not represent the natures of things, the variation in our sensory experiences does represent the variation in the material world. And through this variation, our sensations represent the ways in which things benefit and harm us as unions of mind and body. He writes:

And from the fact that I perceive by my senses a great variety of colours, sounds, smells and tastes, as well as differences in heat, hardness and the like, I am correct in inferring that the bodies which are the source of these various sensory perceptions possess differences corresponding to them, though perhaps not resembling them. Also, the fact that some of the perceptions are agreeable to me while others are disagreeable make it quite certain that my body or rather my whole self, in so far as I am a combination of body and mind, can be affected by the various beneficial or harmful bodies which surround it. (7:81; 2:56)

Thus, our sensations of colour, while presenting a body as coloured, do not represent that the body is of that colour. Instead, our sensations of colours serve to indicate real variations in the world, and insofar as we are made aware of those variations we are better able to navigate our way through the world. Moreover, our sensations are either agreeable or disagreeable, and through this aspect of our sensations we are steered towards what is beneficial and away from what is harmful to us. Descartes makes a similar point a few paragraphs later:

the proper purpose of the sensory perceptions given me by nature is simply to inform the mind of what is beneficial or harmful for the composite of which the mind is a part; and

³⁰ See Simmons (1999)

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to this extent they are sufficiently clear and distinct. But I misuse them by treating them as reliable touchstones for immediate judgements about the essential nature of the bodies located outside us. (7:83; 2:57-8)

Rather than representing the natures of things in themselves, our sensations represent how things are in relation to us, how they benefit and harm us.³¹ It is through our sensations that we get information about the world as it relates to us and our well-being. Of course, as Descartes recognizes, we can be mistaken about the benefits and harms things offer us – we can feel thirsty when we ought not to take in more fluids – but for Descartes we experience sensations in accord with the system which “is most especially and most frequently conducive to the preservation of the healthy man” (7:88; 2:60).

It makes the most sense to read Descartes in these remarks as taking the second grade of sensation as causally representing our benefits and harms. First, Descartes’s focus in the remarks concerning how our sensations inform us of benefits and harms to us is on those sensations we have in virtue of the institution of nature. The Sixth Replies is clear that those sensations we have in virtue of the institution of nature are second grade sensations. Moreover, Descartes’s account in the Sixth Meditation of how the variation of our sensations informs our ideas can help us to make sense of the claim in the *Principles* that at the second grade we have ideas of things without distinguishing our sensations from things outside us. We begin to discriminate things in our experience in virtue of the variations in that experience, but this does not yet demand that we identify those things with objects outside us. Furthermore, since the representational content of these second grade sensations is due to the causal connection between mind and body, it is fair to characterize this as causal representation. By ‘causal representation’ here I do not intend to restrict the content of the representation to resembling its cause, as many contemporary causal

³¹ Simmons

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accounts of representation do. Rather, I only mean to indicate that the etiology of the representation is causal. Insofar as our sensations represent benefits and harms

With this view of Descartes's account of sensation through the lens of his discussion in the Sixth Replies, we can sketch an answer to the question of the relation between the presentational and representational content of sensations. From there, we can complete the account of Cartesian passions as representational mental states.

The sensations of interest to us here are third grade sensations, sensations which present objects with an array of properties to us. The presentational content of these sensations is just what they present in experience. We see a brown knobby stick, slightly bent, sitting in a glass of water. This presentational content is the result of psychological judgements, made from early infancy, derived from information received through the union of mind and body. That is, these psychological judgements, or ideas of objects, are derived from second grade sensations. Insofar as the information contained in second grade sensations is transferred to the judgements derived from them, we can say that our ideas of objects still represent what second grade sensations do. So, since second grade sensations represent benefits and harms to us in the world, so too do our ideas of objects represent those benefits and harms. There is thus, at this point, a gap between what our sensations of objects present and what they represent.

I do not think that Descartes's story about the representational content of sensations of objects stops here, however. He claims from Sixth Replies to the *Principles* and through to the *Passions* that we form psychological judgements about objects, or refer sensations to objects, through a kind of causal inference. We ascribe properties to objects on the basis of what we take to be the cause of the sensations of those properties. The conclusions of these causal inferences constitute the presentational content of our sensations of objects. It is important to note that not

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all these inferences are false. The fact that some, for instance, those about shape and motion, can be true suggests that our sensations of objects represent something more than the way things benefit and harm us in virtue of their presentational content. Here, it seems the text is ambiguous. On the one hand, in the *Principles* Descartes suggests that our second grade sensations include representations of shape and motion not related to benefit and harm. If so, the information contained here can be transferred to our sensations of objects. However, Descartes also seems to allow for more than this. In the *Principles*, for instance, he claims that whether we rightly attribute stars a certain size depends on whether we have sound beliefs about astronomy. This would seem to suggest that our sensations of objects also inferentially represent. Not only does their content depend on the other beliefs we hold, but also whether they tell us something about the world will depend on whether the set of relevant beliefs is true. I cannot expand admittedly very suggestive and sketchy point more, but it is perhaps enough to note that we get some added value in the presentational content of our sensations of objects, beyond that afforded by the information contained in second grade sensations from which they are derived.

The passions and the schema of the Sixth Replies

With this understanding of the relation between presentational and representational content in the case of our sensations of objects, let us return to consider the passions. It might seem initially that the passions too are second grade perceptions. The *Principles of Philosophy* provides good evidence in favor of this way of thinking about the passions. There Descartes distinguishes various kinds of sensations, all of which are caused by the stimulation of movement in the nerves, a movement that is transmitted to the brain to the area around the seat of the soul. In the *Principles* he divides these mental states into internal sensations and external sensations, depending on which set of nerves they derive from. Sensations of hunger, thirst and

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the like derive from nerves that go to organs “whose function is to keep our natural wants supplied”(8:316; 1:280). The passions arise from the nerves that go to the heart and surrounding areas. Our external sensations derive from each of the sets of nerves corresponding to our five sensory organs. From nerve endings in the skin, we gain sensations of tactile qualities, as well as pleasure and pain. From other nerves we get sensations of taste, smell, sounds, and of light and colour. According to the Sixth Replies, second grade sensations are those states of mind arising immediately from its union with a body. That is, they are those mental states arising directly from the natural institution of mind and body. So it certainly seems that here in the *Principles* Descartes is concerned to articulate the different kinds of sensations of the second grade. We might say, then, that the passions are another species of second grade perceptions.

There are, however, reasons to think that the passions of the soul might rather be more akin to the third grade of sensation than to the second grade.³² In the *Passions of the Soul* Descartes subtly alters his views about bodily caused thoughts, and in particular about the taxonomy of such thoughts. Recall that in the *Principles*, Descartes distinguished body-caused thoughts into two sorts, distinguished only by the nerves whose motions engender them. In the *Passions*, Descartes still marks a class of perceptions which “come to the soul by mediation of the nerves” (a. 22, 11:346), indeed the whole of the work is concerned with these perceptions. However, according to this work the nerves that bring about the sensation in the soul do not distinguish one

³² It can be tempting to assimilate Descartes’s talk in the *Passions* of brain states representing various benefits and harms to the notion of the first grade of sensations introduced here. However, there are good reasons to resist this temptation. I offered an explanation of Descartes’s talk of bodily states as representational earlier. Equally, we might keep in mind that the title of the work is the *Passions of the Soul*. Descartes’s subject clearly is not simply passive bodily states, but rather states of mind resulting from its union with the body. Moreover, it is not clear what is to gain from indulging in this temptation. We would still need to understand what the passions, as mental states, are, and it is not clear how considering their physiological precursors could settle the outstanding questions of whether these states are representational or merely motivational, and of how the passions figure in our moral judgements. Still, if we follow my earlier suggestion and take talk of physiological states as representational to indicate that these physiological states are vehicles for representation, it seems we are still left to conclude that that the passions are akin to second grade sensations. For the bodily states are vehicles for mental representation in virtue of the institution of nature.

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kind of sensation from another; rather sensations of external objects, sensations of our body and passions are distinguished from one another in virtue of what we refer our perceptions to. As we have seen, our external sensations are not simply those sensations caused by nerves originating in our sensory organs, but rather they are defined as those bodily-caused perceptions we refer to objects outside us. Other bodily-caused perceptions we refer to our body. Finally, there are perceptions we refer to the soul alone, and these are the particular passions. Whereas in the *Principles* Descartes seemed to want to distinguish between varieties of second grade sensations, in the *Passions* Descartes distinguishes our body-caused thoughts from one another at the level of third-grade sensations. We should thus think of the passions as analogous to sensations of third grade.

With this understanding of the passions, let us return to the question of how the passions are representational mental states. First, let's consider how should we understand them as 'referred to the soul'? At the most basic level referring perceptions to the soul we are attributing properties to it. Just as we attribute sound to the bell by saying we hear the bell ringing, so too do we attribute love, say, to the soul by saying we feel love. Our question, however, was about what this sort of attribution comes to. I have been arguing that we ought to understand the passions are not merely presentational but are representational mental states: in saying that we feel love we are not simply making a claim about the phenomenal character of our experience. Love does feel a certain way, for certain, and a way different that hate or sadness or even joy, but that feeling also contains information about the soul. If I am correct in understanding the passions as akin to third grade sensations discussed in the Sixth Replies, the passions inform us of how the soul has been affected by the world. They do so in virtue of literally re-presenting second grade sensations. In this way, in the absence of knowledge of any further cause, our passions are

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properly referred to the soul. But there is more to the representationality of Cartesian passions than this. Through this literal representation of second grade sensations, how we have been affected by the world enters into our cognitive economy at the level of the intellect. We form ideas, feel passions, which represent the way things benefit and harm us. However, the information about benefits and harms to the union of mind and body contained in our second grade sensations is preserved through this re-presentation in our ideas in a way it is not in the case of our sensations of external objects. Our passions represent the way things benefit and harm us immediately; we need not draw inferences to reach these conclusions. In this way, the content of our passions depends on the causal representation proper to second grade sensations.

At this point the account of Cartesian passions as representational mental states is almost complete. There are, however, a few threads to tie up. I have developed this account by considering how we ought to understand Descartes's claim that the passions are perceptions we refer to the soul. My discussion thus far has focused on that aspect of referring that involves reporting or conveying information. But recall that there is also a causal aspect to the 17th century notion of referring. In the case of our sensations of external objects, we saw that referring perceptions to an external objects involves attributing properties to a thing we take to have caused those sensations. It is not clear how this aspect figures in Descartes's claim that in the passions we refer perceptions to the soul. Indeed, recall that PA a. 25 suggested that the soul is not part of the causal process that figures in the content of the passions, in suggesting that we refer our perceptions to the soul, in the case of the passions because we do not know their proper causes.

Is it really the case that the soul plays no causal role in determining the content of the passions? Though the fact that the passions of the soul are *passions* makes this seem a reasonable

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presupposition, much of Descartes's language in this work argues against it. For he often assigns us – and I presume he means the soul in these cases – agency in having the passions we do. For instance, many passions involve a psychological judgment about the import of their objects. In wonder, we judge an object to be new (a.53). It is sufficient for desire that we “think that acquisition of a good or escape from an evil is possible” (a.58, 11:375). Hope, apprehension, jealousy, confidence and despair involve a further “consideration ... whether the likelihood of obtaining what one desires is great or small” (ibid.). We feel joy upon “consideration of present good” belong to us, and sadness upon consideration of a present evil belonging to us (a. 61; 11:376). At the very least, our feeling the passions we do requires that we act by focusing our attention. Focusing attention, though, requires taking certain features as salient, that is, as important to us in some way. And so, in simply focusing attention we determine in part the content of the passion we feel. It is worth noting that reporting depends upon a similar attention to salient features. A good report does not simply catalog of every detail of a situation but rather focuses on what is important and puts those relevant details together. As for those passions which Descartes claims involve judgements, we play an even larger role in determining their content. The soul, then, does play a causal role in determining the content of our passions precisely because the content of the passions consists in our evaluations of the importance of things to us. These evaluations, while they might come naturally, are not automatic or wholly passive. In re-presenting second grade sensations, then, the passions do not simply reproduce them so that we might engage with them cognitively. Rather, their literal representation involves highlighting some aspects of our contact with the world rather than others.³³ Rather, our passions are a function of what we take as salient. That is, what *we* care about, what *we* take to be important figures causally in the content of the passions. What we care about and take to be

³³ Relevance for mixed-feelings?

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important is a function of how we think about things, that is, of other ideas we have and how they are connected with one another. Insofar as what we feel, that is, the content of our passions, depends on the network of our ideas, our passions will also inferentially represent.

Let me summarize the account I have been developing of Cartesian passions as representational mental states. In virtue of the institution of nature, the mind has a variety of sense perceptions, or second grade sensations. While these sense perceptions do not inform us of the nature of things, through them we are made aware of the variety of ways in which things effect us, that is, of the various ways in which things are beneficial or harmful to us as unions of mind and body. The mind refers these second grade sensations by to different objects. (We might think of this act of referring as a kind of cognitive processing insofar as through the psychological judgments constituting this referring, these second grade sensations are brought into the intellect.) We can form ideas of objects existing outside of us and possessing certain properties, we can form ideas of our bodily condition, and we can also feel particular passions of the soul. These passions are ideas of how the world affects the soul; they are ideas of second grade sensations. Insofar as our second grade sensations represent the way things benefit and harm us, so too do our passions. There is, however, an important difference. In forming the ideas that are our passions, we focus attention on particular aspects of our second grade sensory experience. In virtue of what we care about, of what we take as our ends, we consider particular aspects of our experience as more or less salient. This focus shapes our perceptions of the importance of things to us – the way things benefit and harm us – tailoring them to our conception of our ends.³⁴

With this account now fleshed out, I want to return to two points. First, the passions motivate us to action, or, as Descartes writes, they “incite and dispose the soul to will the things

³⁴ [support here from aa.137-142]

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for they prepare their body” (PA a.40; 11:359). This account helps to explain why this is so, and moreover, how having such motivational force is intertwined with the representationality of the passions. Our second grade sensations in representing the way things benefit and harm us already move us to seek out the beneficial and avoid the harmful. The passions, in literally representing these sensations retain their motivational force. However, in representing these sensations in such a way that they enter into our reasoning, we are afforded the opportunity to reflect critically on the way we find ourselves moved to action. We can thus be moved by reasons to act differently than we are initially disposed.

Second, as just noted, it is an important feature of mental representations that they play a role in our reasoning. Let me say a bit more know about the nature of that role. Descartes maintains that the passions “almost always make both the goods and the evils they represent appear much greater and more important than they are, so that they incite us to seek the former and flee the latter with more ardor and more anxiety than is suitable”(PA a.138; 11:431). The epistemic value of the passions detailed here is not very high.³⁵ The passions often distort the value of things, and so dispose us to both errors of judgment and errors of action. Still, the passions enter into our reasoning in virtue of their representational features. Because of this, we can regulate the passions, using “reasons, objects and precedents” to correct for our mis-evaluations. But the passions enter into our reasoning in another way. Part of the representational content of the passions involves our focusing our attention and endorsing a measure of value. The reports of our passions will thus be better or worse representations of our good insofar as we get the measure right, that is, insofar as we properly understand the good. Once we properly understand our good, we will also have a proper sense of our well-being, and so properly

³⁵ Descartes takes pains to note the usefulness of the passions: they “serve to preserve the body or render it more perfect in some way” (a.137, 11:430); through sadness “the soul is immediately informed of things that harm the body,” and through joy “the soul is immediately informed of things useful to the body” (ibid.).

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understand our relations to things. In this way, we most effectively regulate the passions, and come to feel what we ought to feel. In this regard it is important to note that the passions play a positive role in our understanding of the good. We do not regulate the passions from above, but rather from within the value scheme they afford us, along with our understanding of our own nature as freely willing beings. Insofar as the passions play this role in our understanding of the good they figure centrally in our moral lives. There is more to say here about the nature of the good, for Descartes, and how we come to understand our good. That, however, is the topic of another paper.

Descartes's contemporaries

The contemporary context