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NEVER LET THE PASSIONS BE YOUR GUIDE:

DESCARTES AND THE ROLE OF THE PASSIONS

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1. Introduction

In *The Passions of the Soul* and in much of his correspondence with Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia Descartes offers practical advice about the role the passions play in a good life.¹ Descartes's advice is that the key to a happy life is learning not to just follow our passions, but to use our judgment to guide our passions so that we come to want and enjoy what we also dispassionately judge to be good. I think many commentators fail to fully appreciate Descartes's practical advice because of a common misconception about the role of the passions. Commentators commonly assume that one of the functions of the passions, for Descartes, is to inform us or teach us which things are good (or beneficial) and which are evil (or harmful), and as a result, they tend to infer that Descartes regards the passions as an appropriate guide to good and evil. Thus Lilli Alanen says the passions “embody a kind of instinctive, natural knowledge about what is beneficial or harmful or important in some other way” (2003a, 190), and Desmond Clarke says that the “general primary function” of the passions “is to act as general guides”

¹ I am using the term “passion” almost exclusively to refer to what Descartes calls the “passions properly so called,” that is, “Thoughts that come from some special agitation of the spirits, whose effects are felt as in the soul itself,” as distinguished from sensations, dreams, and appetites, which Descartes includes under the more general use of the term “passion” (Letter to Elisabeth, 6 October 145, CSMK III: 271; AT IV: 311). See also *Passions* 17, 25, 27 (CSM I: 335, 337-338, 338-339; AT XI: 342, 347-348). References to the *Passions* will be given by article number followed by page reference to CSM(K) and AT editions.

(134).² This conception of the role of the passions in Descartes is mistaken. I will argue that Descartes does not regard it as one of the functions of the passions to inform us about which things are good or harmful, nor does he think we should be guided by them.³ When we appreciate that the function of the passions is largely motivational and not informative,⁴ we can more easily understand Descartes's practical advice that we can make life happier by becoming masters of our passions and teaching ourselves to want those things we judge to be good instead of allowing our passions to guide us.

2. The role of the passions is motivational but not informative

On the surface, there is good reason for reading Descartes as saying that the passions inform us about the goodness or badness of things since he repeatedly describes the passions as

² See also Alanen 2003a pp. 187, 195, 201, 207, Alanen 2003b, and Clarke 2005 122. Also, John Marshall says that because of God's benevolence we can, after appropriate corrections, take our passions to be veridical representations of value, and rely on them to identify true goods (1998, 119-130). Byron Williston describes the passions as "a complex mechanism of perception," that, "inform us *qua* embodied minds of those features of the world which play a role in our preservation and perfection as individuals" (1999, 42). See also pp. 37, 40 (Williston 1999). Susan James describes the role of the passions as informative and says that many are "finely tuned perceptions of our own interests" (1997, 107, 103-108). Lisa Shapiro says, "it is through the passions that nature tells us what is useful to us" (2003a, 221). Sean Greenberg says, "it is as appropriate to follow passions as it is to follow sensations" (2007, 728). Amy Schmitter says, "through the passion of fear, I perceive that an oncoming train is dangerous to me..." (2006b), and that the passions are guides for action (2008, 434,435; 2006, pt. 4). Deborah Brown says, "When controlled by reason, passions and sensations are our best source of information about circumstances external to the soul" and that the sage is "to some extent, guided" by the passions (2006, 25).

³ Vance Morgan is one author who gets the role of the passions right, emphasizing how Descartes thinks that under the guidance of reason we can manipulate our passions by forming new habits of association (1994, 157-171). Morgan does not, however, try to argue against alternative interpretations of the role of the passions, as I will do in this paper. Shapiro also emphasizes the importance of manipulating our passions so that they support our considered conception of the good, offering an excellent account of the ability to change the psycho-physical connections that the passions embody. Nevertheless, she retains a conception of the passions as, with some corrections, a generally reliable source of information at least about what is good for the body. She fails to notice that her account is in tension with a conception of the passions as informative. (Shapiro 2003a 221, 223, 229, 246; 2003b 54-63). Greenberg also makes the point that the role of the passions is not informational, in arguing that the passions are not representative states, but fails to draw the consequence I want to emphasize, that the passions should not guide us (2007).

⁴ I do not mean to claim that the purpose of the passions is entirely motivational. As I will go on to discuss, Descartes thinks the passions serve the purpose of directing and fixing our attention on certain thoughts, and they serve the function of preparing the body for whatever course of action they make the soul want (*Passions* 40, CSM I: 343; AT XI: 359). I also do not mean to suggest that other scholars deny the motivational role of the passions. Rather, most attribute to Descartes both a motivational role and an informational role.

representing things as good or evil. For instance, in a letter to Elisabeth Descartes says, “all our passions represent to us the goods to whose pursuit they impel us as being much greater than they really are” (15 September 1645, CSMK III: 267; AT IV: 294-295). He tells us in *The Passions* that “repulsion is ordained by nature to represent to the soul a sudden and unexpected death” (*Passions* 89, CSM I: 359; AT XI: 394) and that attraction “is specially ordained by nature to represent the enjoyment of that which attracts us as the greatest of all the goods belonging to mankind” (*Passions* 90, CSM I: 360; AT XI: 395).⁵ These quotations describe the passions as representing things as good or evil, albeit in an exaggerated manner that calls for us to use the faculty of reason to correct for this exaggeration.

Given the picture of the passions that these passages seem to paint, we might expect that the passions inform us of good and evil in a way that is analogous to sense perception, providing essential information that contributes to our knowledge of the things around us that may be beneficial or harmful, but needing to be checked by reason in order for us to avoid being deceived by illusions.⁶ As persuasive as this at first sounds, this is not how Descartes understands the role of the passions. Unlike sense perceptions, which, although sometimes misleading, are nevertheless necessary for knowledge of contingent existing things, the passions are not actually necessary for knowing about whether things are beneficial or harmful to us. Descartes’s conception of the good, with respect to practical knowledge, is one of self-perfection, so our knowledge of the good requires judgments about which things will make us more perfect.⁷ Descartes seems to think these judgments are informed by sense perception, the

⁵ See also *Passions* 48, 138 (CSM I: 347, 377; AT XI: 367, 431) and the letter to Elisabeth, 1 September 1645 (CSMK III: 264; AT IV: 285).

⁶ Marshall, Shapiro, and Brown explicitly claim that the passions are comparable to sense perceptions in this way (Marshall 1998, 121; Shapiro 2003b, 55; and Brown 2006, 25-26). See also Alanen (2003a, 200), Clarke (2005, 122, 134).

⁷ See the letter to Queen Christina, 20 November 1647 (CSMK III: 324; AT V: 82), the letters to Elisabeth, 1

appetites (particularly pain and pleasure), past experience, and reason, but he does not ever claim that the passions proper are sources of information about good and evil.⁸

Furthermore, it is not at all clear that Descartes even regards the passions as the right kind of thought to inform us about the goodness or badness of things. In the Third Meditation Descartes classifies his thoughts into two kinds; the first kind includes thoughts that are “as it were the images of things,” which are the thoughts properly termed ‘ideas,’ and the second kind includes “various additional forms” that get attached to those ideas. Descartes puts emotions like fear in a different category from ideas because they do not by themselves represent anything (CSM II: 25-26; AT VII: 37). In *Passions* article 47, Descartes also distinguishes two kinds of movements of the pineal gland, one responsible for representing and the other responsible for causing passions (CSM I: 346; AT XI: 365). If passions are not representational thoughts for Descartes, this casts doubt on the standard interpretation of the passions as having an informative function.⁹

September 1645 and January 1646 (CSMK III: 263, 265, 283; AT IV 283-284, 354-355), and *Passions* 56-57 (CSM I: 350; AT XI: 374-375).

⁸ See the Sixth Meditation (CSM II: 52, 53, 57, 58-61; AT VII: 74, 76, 83, 84-89), *Passions* 94, 137, 138 (CSM I: 361-362, 376, 377; AT XI: 398-400, 430, 431), the *Conversation with Burman* (CSMK III: 354; AT V: 179), and the letter to [The Marquess of Newcastle], October 1645 (CSMK III: 276; AT IV: 330). In article 85 of the *Passions*, Descartes ambiguously claims, “we commonly call something ‘good’ or ‘evil’ if our internal senses or our reason make us judge it agreeable or contrary to our nature” (CSM I: 358; AT XI: 391). Whether the “internal senses” include the passions and the appetites or just the appetites is unclear. In some texts Descartes uses the term to indicate both the passions and the appetites (*Treatise on Man* pt. 4, Gaukroger 139-142; AT X 163-170; *Principles* pt. I, §190, CSM I: 280; AT VIII A: 316) and others he uses it to indicate only the appetites (6th Meditation, CSM II: 58; AT VII: 83-84; Letter to Elisabeth 6, October 1645, CSMK III: 270; AT IV: 310-311). Since the internal sensations mentioned in *Passions* article 85 are supposed to give rise to passions, however, it seems likely that they are not themselves meant to be passions in this text.

⁹ Amélie Oksenberg Rorty holds the view that the passions are not representational (1986, 524). Paul Hoffman notices that Descartes sometimes talks as if the passions are representational and at other times as though they are caused by something representational, but does not take a firm position on the question (2003, 272-276). Sean Greenberg has recently argued at length for the claim that the passions do not represent at all (2007). If Descartes does not think the passions are representational, that strengthens my claim that the passions do not have the role of informing us of good and evil. Nevertheless, the question of whether the passions inform and whether they represent are not quite the same, and some accounts of the representational content of the passions are compatible with my claim that it is not the role of the passions to guide or inform us. For instance, Deborah Brown and Calvin Normore make a persuasive case for a relational account of passions as representing ways in which the soul is affected by beneficial or harmful objects. On their account the passions result in a pre-judgmental *seeing as*, that is,

Descartes explicitly discusses what the function, or use, or effect of the passions is, in articles 40, 52, 74, and 137 of *The Passions*. If one of the functions of the passions were to instruct us or to convey information about which things are good for us, I would expect him to say so there. Instead, Descartes attributes to the passions the functions of *moving* or *motivating* us to pursue what it is good. For instance, In article 40 Descartes says, "...the principal effect of all the human passions is that they move and dispose the soul to want [*vouloir*] the things for which they prepare the body. Thus the feeling of fear moves the soul to want [*vouloir*] to flee, that of courage to want [*vouloir*] to fight, and similarly with the others" (CSM I: 343; AT XI: 359). In articles 52 and 137 Descartes offers similar descriptions; the passions make us *want* the good and prepare the body to pursue it.¹⁰ In the fourth article, 74, Descartes adds that it is a function of the passions to strengthen or prolong thoughts about what is good for us, but does not say that the passions *are* thoughts about what is good for us. I will return to this article in the next section.

The motivational role of the passions is reiterated in Descartes's description of the primitive passions. Love, hate, and desire incline the will to join with, avoid, or possess

the passions lead us to see their causes *as* having certain (relational) properties. See Brown (2002, 267; 2006, Ch. 4) and Brown and Normore (2003, 100-104). A similar position can be found more recently in Hatfield (2007, 425-426) and Schmitter (2008, 435). Insofar as *seeing as* is not *seeing that*, my argument that the role of the passions is neither to inform us about nor to guide us in choosing what is beneficial or harmful is compatible with such an interpretation or some version of it. An interpretation according to which the passions are representations of something other than what is beneficial or harmful (such as states of the brain or body), would also be compatible with the claim that the role of the passions is neither to inform nor to guide us.

¹⁰ In article 52 of *The Passions*, Descartes says, "The function of all the passions consists solely in this, that they dispose our soul to want [*vouloir*] the things which nature deems useful for us, and to persist in this volition; and the same agitation of the spirits which normally causes the passions also disposes the body to make movements which help us to attain these things" (CSM I: 349; AT XI: 372). In article 137 he says, "[T]heir natural function [in so far as they relate to the body] is to move the soul to consent and contribute to actions which may serve to preserve the body or render it in some way more perfect" (CSM I: 376; AT XI: 429-430). Article 137 only describes the function of the passions insofar as they are useful to the body, and the title of article 139 announces that that article will tell us the function of the passions "in so far as they belong to the soul" (*Passions*, CSM I: 377; AT XI: 432). I omit article 139 from the places where Descartes states the function of the passions because the text of the article does not actually provide a clear statement of the function of the passions.

something.¹¹ Joy and sadness motivate by being pleasant or unpleasant rewards for possessing something good or harmful. In article 91, where Descartes defines joy, he describes it as the *only* reward that we get for possessing something good (CSM I: 360; AT XI: 396). Similarly in article 92, Descartes describes sadness as an unpleasant emotion we feel when we represent ourselves as possessing some evil (*Passions*, CSM I: 361; AT XI: 397).¹² Joy and sadness then naturally give rise to love, hate, or desire of their causes (*Passions* 137, CSM I: 376; AT XI: 430). Only wonder does not function to make us want to pursue good and avoid evil.¹³

This description of joy as the soul's reward for possessing something good echoes Descartes's account of the relationship between virtue and happiness. In the letter to Elisabeth, 1 September 1645, Descartes asserts that virtue is the highest good, but he compares it to a bull's-eye, and he describes contentment as the prize for hitting the bull's-eye, without which we would not be motivated to aim at virtue (CSMK III: 261-262; AT IV: 276-277). Together these passages suggest that the passions are at least partially constitutive of that contentment that Descartes thinks is the prize that motivates us to be virtuous.¹⁴

3. The role of the passions as strengthening and prolonging representational thoughts

In article 74, Descartes says, "the utility of all the passions consists simply in the fact that they strengthen and prolong thoughts in the soul which it is good for the soul to preserve" (CSM I: 354; AT XI: 383). Descartes then adds that all of the passions except for wonder "serve to

¹¹ See *Passions* 79-81, 86, 139 (CSM I: 356, 358, 377; AT XI: 387-388, 392, 432). See also the letter to Chanut, 1 February 1647 (CSMK III: 307; AT IV: 603).

¹² A similar description of joy and sadness occurs in 141 (*Passions*, CSM I: 378; AT XI: 434).

¹³ In *Passions* article 71, Descartes says that wonder, "has as its object not good or evil, but only knowledge of the thing that we wonder at" (CSM I: 353; AT XI: 381). Schmitter argues that it is an important role of the passions, particularly wonder, to promote the ends of theoretical reason (2002), pointing especially to article 71.

¹⁴ Descartes thinks that we also experience intellectual emotions, including intellectual joy, in addition to the passions (*Passions* 91, CSM I: 361; AT XI: 397). It is not clear to what extent he regards intellectual emotions as motivating. See also the letter to Elisabeth, 1 September 1645 (CSMK III 263; AT IV: 284).

make us take note of things which appear good or evil” (*Passions* 75, CSM I: 355; AT XI: 384).¹⁵ Here also the passions are useful not because of any information they themselves convey, but rather because of their effect on our other thoughts. Moreover, this description of the function of the passions will help us to properly understand the quotations using the language of “representation” that seem to support the standard view.

Let us look at an example of this process in Descartes’s letter to Elisabeth, 6 October 1645:

[W]hen it is announced in a town that enemies are coming to besiege it, the inhabitants at once make a judgement about the evil which may result to them: this judgement is an action of their soul and not a passion.... Their souls can receive the emotion that constitutes the passion only after they have made the judgement, or else at least conceived the danger without making a judgement, and then imprinted an image of it in the brain, by another action, namely imagining. When a soul does this it acts upon the spirits which travel from the brain through the nerves into the muscles, and makes them enter the muscles whose function is to close the openings of the heart. This retards the circulation of the blood so that the whole body becomes pale, cold and trembling, and the fresh spirits returning from the heart to the brain are agitated in such a way that they are useless for forming any images except those which excite in the soul the passion of fear. All these things happen so quickly one after the other that the whole thing seems like a single operation. Similarly, in all the other passions there occurs some special agitation in the spirits leaving the heart. (CSMK III: 271-272; AT IV: 312-313)

In this example the passion itself is not informing us that the coming enemy is evil. Rather, it either results from the judgement that something is evil, or it results from imagining that evil, and then the accompanying motions in the body, cause us to entertain only fearful images which are likely to lead us to judge that the enemy is evil if we did not do so already.¹⁶

¹⁵ Wonder, on the other hand, strengthens, makes us take note of, or makes us remember thoughts or sensations which are unusual or extraordinary. Thus when wonder makes us dwell on certain thoughts, it does not tend to exaggerate the *value* of the represented objects, but rather it tends to exaggerate their significance and wondrousness. See *Passions* 53-55, 70-78 (CSM I: 350; AT XI: 373-374, AT XI: 380-386).

¹⁶ Also in article 120 of *The Passions* Descartes says, “...love makes the soul so engrossed in thinking about the loved object that it uses all the spirits in the brain in representing the image of this object, and it stops all the movements of the gland which do not serve this purpose” (CSM I: 370; AT XI: 417). For other examples where Descartes makes it explicit that the passions cause us to have certain kinds of thoughts and not others see the letter to Chanut, 1 February 1647 (CSMK III: 307; AT IV: 603), the letter to Elisabeth, 1 September 1645 (CSMK III: 263-

What I want to emphasize about this story is the way the passions, understood to include the accompanying bodily processes,¹⁷ reinforce certain thoughts and prevent the formation of others. According to Descartes, when an image is physically formed in the brain, it sets off a process in the body that has several different effects: it causes an emotion, or passion of the soul; it causes the outward physical symptoms of the emotion; and it causes the brain to produce more images of only a certain kind, images that will excite the same emotion and begin the same process over again. This creates a cycle that reinforces a particular passion, giving it an exaggerated effect, not only on our will, but also on our very thoughts.

The close causal role that the passions play in focusing our attention on, strengthening, and prolonging other representational thoughts explains why Descartes sometimes describes the passions as representative.¹⁸ The situations where Descartes describes the passions as representative fall into two kinds of contexts. One is where Descartes is distinguishing particular variations of the six primitive passions by appealing to characteristic representations that they strengthen or prolong.¹⁹ It is natural in these cases for Descartes to speak loosely and extend the description of those passions to include the characteristic representations that they reinforce.²⁰

264; AT IV: 284-286), and *Passions* 39, 102, 121 (CSM I: 343, 364, 370; AT XI: 359, 404, 417-418).

¹⁷ Although Descartes defines passions as states of the *soul*, he frequently describes the passions as including the accompanying physical processes occurring in the body, particularly the accompanying motions of the animal spirits. See *Passions* 27-29, 38 (CSM I: 338-339, 342; AT XI: 349-350, 358).

¹⁸ This explanation of the sense in which the passions can be described as representational agrees with Greenberg's explanation that, "it is not because the passions are themselves representational states, but with respect to their *function*, that the passions may be said to 'represent' things as good and evil" (2007, 726). Hoffman also makes a similar point (2003, 275).

¹⁹ See *Passions* article 51 (CSM I: 349; AT XI: 372). *Passions* articles 89 and 90 fall into this category, although they also seem to emphasize an exaggerated representation (CSM I: 359-360; AT XI: 394-395). Article 149 also falls into this category (*Passions*, CSM I: 383; AT XI: 443-444).

²⁰ In fact this extension of the conception of a passion to include the thoughts or judgments it causes may be the same confusion Descartes is referring to when he describes the passions as confused thoughts. In the *Principles*, Descartes refers to the passions proper as "confused thoughts... quite different in kind from the distinct thoughts which we have concerning what is to be embraced or desired or shunned" (Pt. IV, §190, CSM I: 281; AT VIII A: 317). See also the letter to Chanut, 1 February 1647 (CSMK III: 306-308; AT IV: 602-603, 606), and the letter to Elisabeth, 6 October 1645, where Descartes says, "All these things happen so quickly one after the other that the whole thing seems like a single operation" (CSMK III: 271-271; AT IV: 313). Since the passions are aroused at the

The second context is where Descartes is emphasizing the manner in which the passions exaggerate.²¹ In the second kind of case, since the passions not only influence the will directly but also tend to exaggerate our value judgments by causing us to dwell on certain thoughts rather than others (e.g. the desirable, lovable, fearful, etc. scenarios and aspects of things), it is natural for Descartes to say that the *passions* represent things as greater than they really are. In neither of these two contexts, however, is it appropriate to conclude that the passions are themselves representations or that they function as a source of information about what is good or evil.

4. The passions *should* not be our guide

If the passions' function were to inform us of which things are good and which are bad, as the standard reading has it, then they might be well suited to guide us toward the good and away from bad. Nevertheless, it does not automatically follow from the claim that the passions are not informative that we cannot be guided by them. Even if they lack representational content, since the passions motivate us to pursue some things and avoid others, when we submit uncritically to the course that they motivate us to pursue, we treat them as a kind of guide, and grant our passions a discriminatory function that is not appropriate to them. Descartes does not think this is the proper role of the passions in rational beings. Thus he advises that we “consider *without passion* the value of all the perfections... which can be acquired by our conduct...” and “when we feel ourselves moved by some passion we [should] suspend our judgement until it is

same time or almost the same time as judgments that we make about the object that arouses them, and by mechanisms of which we are not ordinarily aware, it is easy to confuse a passion with a judgment. Thus, a confused understanding of our own passions might include cognitive content in a fashion analogous to the way that a confused conception of pain can be thought to include the content that there is something painful in the foot (*Principles* Pt. II, §46, CSM I: 208; AT VIII A: 22). On this reading then, one explanation of why Descartes sometimes describes the passions as representing is that they tend to be confused with the judgments or perceptions that they cause or with the judgments or perceptions that precede them and originally arouse them.

²¹ The letter to Elisabeth, September 1645 falls into this category (CSMK III: 267; AT IV: 294-295).

calmed”.²² Descartes thinks that we should make an effort *not* to let our passions influence our judgments about what is beneficial or harmful.

Descartes thinks we ought not be guided by the passions because, as we have seen, the passions tend to exaggerate the goodness or badness of things.²³ Descartes also thinks we should not allow our passions to guide us because, although they are part of human nature, Descartes regards them as contingent and changeable. Which passions we tend to feel may be the result of random events that happened to us as babies or the result of bad habits that we have formed.²⁴ Thus, before we submit to a passion, we must consider whether it is the result of some bad habit rather than the result of God’s wisdom and providence. This danger is shown by the funny story Descartes tells Chanut about the squint-eyed girl:

...when I was a child I loved a little girl of my own age who had a slight squint. The impression made by sight in my brain when I looked at her cross-eyes became so closely connected to the simultaneous impression which aroused in me the passion of love that for a long time afterwards when I saw persons with a squint I felt a special inclination to love them simply because they had that defect. At that time I did not know that was the reason for my love; and indeed as soon as I reflected on it and recognized that it was a defect, I was no longer affected by it. So, when we are inclined to love someone without knowing the reason, we may believe that this is because he has some similarity to something in an earlier object of our love, though we may not be able to identify it. Though it is more commonly a perfection than a defect which thus attracts our love, yet since it can sometimes be a defect as in the example I quoted, a wise man will not altogether yield to such a passion without having considered the worth of the person to whom he thus feels drawn. (6 June 1647, CSMK III: 322-323; AT V: 57)

Descartes is saying that although we might find ourselves loving someone without being aware of any other evidence of their goodness, the passion is not a reliable sign that something is good,

²² Letters to Elisabeth, 1 September 1645 and 15 Sept. 1645, (CSMK III: 265 emphasis added, 267; AT IV: 286, 295). See also *Passions* 138 (CSM I: 377; AT XI: 431).

²³ See especially the letters to Elisabeth, 1 September 1645 and 15 September 1645 (CSMK III: 264-265, 267; AT IV: 284-287, 295) and *Passions* 138 (CSM I: 377; AT XI: 431).

²⁴ See the letter to Elisabeth, 6 October 1645 (CSMK III: 271 AT IV: 312), the letter to Chanut, 1 February 1647 (CSMK III: 307-308; AT IV: 604-605), *Passions* 36, 39, 107, 111, 136 (CSM I: 342, 343, 365-366, 367, 375-376; AT XI: 356, 358-359, 407-408, 410-411, 428-429), and *The Treatise on Man*, Part 4, (Gaukroger 140-142; AT X: 164-171).

and therefore we should not give in to it without looking for some other kind of evidence of the object's goodness.²⁵

If Descartes did view the passions as a generally appropriate source of guidance about what is good and evil, then we would expect to see him advising us to allow ourselves to follow the passions at least when we do not have time for deliberation or when we do not have any other evidence available. Indeed, Descartes is commonly thought to be endorsing the passions as a guide in these limited circumstances.²⁶ This reading is not, however, borne out by the text. In *Passions* article 211 Descartes tells us that when a passion

impels us to actions which require an immediate decision, the will must devote itself mainly to considering and following reasons which are opposed to those presented by the passion, even if they appear less strong. For example, when we are unexpectedly attacked by an enemy, the situation allows no time for deliberation; and yet, I think, those who are accustomed to reflecting upon their actions can always do something in this situation. That is, when they feel themselves in the grip of fear they will try to turn their mind from consideration of the danger by thinking about the reasons why there is much more security and honour in resistance than in flight. On the other hand, when they feel that the desire for vengeance and anger is impelling them to run thoughtlessly towards their assailants, they will remember to think that it is unwise to lose one's life when it can be saved without dishonour, and that if a match is very unequal it is better to beat an honourable retreat or ask quarter than stupidly to expose oneself to a certain death. (CSM I: 403-403; AT XI: 487-488)

In this passage, Descartes considers an example where an *immediate* decision about what to do is required and one feels the passions impelling him toward an action, and yet he still recommends considering opposing reasons that will help one not to be moved by his passions, rather than

²⁵ Descartes does make an exception to his caution against yielding to passion in the case of love that has its cause in the mind rather than in the body, on the grounds that love in that case is more likely to be reciprocated, saying about such cases, “these secret inclinations... should always be followed” CSMK III: 323; AT V: 58). While Descartes’s meaning is not entirely clear here, I think this exception is for precisely the kind of case where the love is not grounded in a changeable physical response, but rather in an intellectual appreciation of the other’s goodness.

²⁶ For instance, Lilli Alanen says, “we have, according to Descartes, strong reasons for following our confused inclinations and emotions in those numerous circumstances of our lives where the light of reason fails to give us guidance” (2003a, 207). Sean Greenberg makes the limited claim that it is appropriate to follow the passions with respect to the preservation of the mind-body union, so long as they do not run counter to a previous firm and decisive judgment of ours (2007, 728).

recommending following his present passions.²⁷

Just as Descartes thinks we should not be guided by the passions even when there is no time for deliberation, likewise, he thinks we should not allow ourselves to be guided by the passions in those cases where reason has made no previous judgment about the right course of action. Descartes repeatedly encourages us not to put ourselves in any situation where we have no judgment to guide us, emphasizing that virtue requires making firm and determinate judgments and following them resolutely.²⁸ He urges us to make decisions about how we will act in advance and then stick to them when the moment arrives.²⁹ He describes those who do not equip themselves with firm and determinate judgments as “the weakest souls” who always allow themselves to be “carried away by present passions” (*Passions* 48, CSM I: 347; AT XI: 367), and he says that it is better to follow judgments that are “false and based on passions by which the will has previously allowed itself to be conquered or led astray” than to choose only what our passion dictates (*Passions* 49, CSM I: 347; AT XI: 367-368). It is only the cases where the passions accord with and support our judgments that Descartes thinks it is good to be moved by them, but in those cases we can hardly consider the passions as *guiding* our choices.

5. Parallelism with animals

²⁷ Descartes is concerned in *Passions* 211 with the remedy for *excessive* passions, and we might read this as an indication that Descartes thinks we need to resist being guided by our passions only if our passions are excessive but that moderate passions could be a substitute for rational deliberation. An understanding of what “excessive” means to Descartes, however, shows us that what makes these passions excessive is precisely the fact that they are not subject to the guidance of reason. See Descartes’s distinction between two senses of “excessive” the letter to Elisabeth, 3 November 1645 (CSM I: 276; AT IV: 331-332). Thus, if we have made a rational judgment about how to conduct ourselves in battle, we will not need a remedy for the passions that are in harmony with and guided by that judgment. If we have made no judgment about how to conduct ourselves in battle, then we need a remedy against our passions lest they move us to an action we will regret.

²⁸ See the *Discourse on Method* Pt. 3 (CSM I: 123; AT VI: 24-25) and letters to Elisabeth, 18 May 1645, 4 August 1645, 18 August 1645, and 6 October 1645 (Blom 119, CSMK III: 257-258, 261-262, 268; AT IV: 202, 265, 277, 305).

²⁹ See for example the letters to Elisabeth, 1 September 1645, 15 September 1645, (CSMK III: 265, 267, 287; AT IV: 286-287, 295-296, 411).

Descartes thinks that animals are determined to pursue and avoid things by the same kind of internal physical motions that in humans are accompanied by the passions of the soul.³⁰ Since these bodily passions, as it were, allow animals to survive, the parallelism between humans and animals seems to some to imply that the passions alone serve as a fairly reliable guide, at least to what is beneficial or harmful to the body.

In spite of this parallelism, however, Descartes is clear that the passions are not reliable guides even to bodily goods. In *Passions* article 138 he says,

Nevertheless it is not always good for the passions to function in this way, in so far as there are many things harmful to the body which cause no sadness initially (or which even produce joy), and in so far as other things are useful to the body, although at first they are disagreeable. Furthermore, we see that animals are often deceived by lures, and in seeking to avoid small evils they throw themselves into greater evils. That is why we must use experience and reason in order to distinguish good from evil and know their true value, so as not to take the one for the other or rush into anything immoderately. (CSM I: 377; AT XI: 431)

Humans have more reliable faculties than the passions for distinguishing between good and harm. Animals have no faculty for making judgments about the good, nor the free will to resist the course of their bodily movements, and as a result there can be no distinction for them between the faculties that move them toward their good and those that guide them.³¹ In humans, however, the faculties of reason and the will make it both possible and appropriate to divide the guiding and motivating functions. Humans should try to *understand* the good, and use reason and judgment to guide our actions.

³⁰See *Passions* articles 137-138 (CSM I: 376-377; AT XI: 430-431), *Passions* 50 (CSM I: 348; AT XI: 369-370), *Discourse on Method* Pt. V (CSM I: 139; AT VI: 55-56), and the Fourth Set of Replies (CSM II: 161-162; AT VII: 229-231).

³¹ It is not clear that Descartes would want to describe animals as guided, or as having a good at all, since this implies a teleological explanation of the movements of animals, and it is quite controversial whether Descartes would admit that animals are the right kinds of things to have a *telos* toward which the physiological elements of passions and appetites guide them. Nevertheless, the discussion of animals at *Passions* 138 suggests that animals may be deceived by lures and such into pursuing what does not tend toward their good. In light of Descartes's discussion of animals here, and his commitment to some significant degree of parallelism between human and animal physiology, it seems legitimate to entertain the objection that animals might be guided by their nature to pursue their good, even if in Descartes's considered view they turn out to lack a genuine nature or a genuine good.

Furthermore, what is good for an embodied soul will not always be the same as what is good for a body, and this also gives us reason to be guided by a higher faculty. Frequently the motions of the animal spirits function to make us automatically want things that are good for the body, but since we are embodied souls it is sometimes better to sacrifice the good of the body for the sake of the good of the mind. Therefore, even when we are concerned only with bodily goods, we should be guided by our faculty of judgment, lest in abandoning ourselves to our passions we are led to pursue a bodily good that conflicts with a good of the soul, or pursue it to such an excess that it conflicts with a good of the soul.³²

6. Are the passions part of a deceptive nature?

If we take seriously all of the passages where Descartes warns us not to be guided by our passions, then a problem arises for the view that the passions function as a guide. It starts to look like human nature is systematically deceptive. If the passions are supposed to guide us in choosing what is beneficial, then whenever they exaggerate, or lead us to choose a lesser good over a greater good, or lead us to love cross-eyed girls merely in virtue of their crossed eyes, then they seem to perform their function badly. Indeed, since the passions *almost always* exaggerate (*Passions* 138, CSM I: 377 AT XI: 431), it would appear that we are naturally constituted so that we systematically go wrong. Since Descartes famously proves in the *Meditations*, however, that God is not a deceiver and that he has given us a nature that is basically reliable, Descartes cannot consistently hold that the passions systematically deceive us. This consideration has led commentators to downplay the many places where Descartes clearly indicates that the passions

³² See for instance, the Preface to the French edition of the *Principles* (CSM I: 180; AT IXB: 3-4).

are not reliable guides.³³ In order to justify this construction, they point to the several places where Descartes claims that the passions are all good and useful.³⁴ On the standard view, the passions are useful because being guided by the passions is good and useful.

If we do not interpret the function of the passions as one of informing and guiding us, then the exaggerated appearance of goods and evils is not a malfunctioning of the passions. By abandoning the standard view of the function of the passions, the exaggerated appearance of goods and evils can be seen as mere side-effects of the passions. In fact, if the function of the passions is not to identify the good, but merely to make us want the good, then the more they exaggerate, the *better* they perform their function.

It may be objected, however, that even if we attribute a merely motivational function to the passions the worry that our nature is deceptive still arises. We might suppose that the passions malfunction when they exaggerate the goodness and badness of things because they make us want things disproportionately to their value. Likewise, if they sometimes lead us to want what is evil rather than what is good, they also seem to perform this function badly.

If Descartes does not think the passions are supposed to guide us, however, then the idea that the passions should make us always want things in proportion to their value is also based on a misconception. The passions are not designed to perform a discriminatory function, proportioning our desires according to what is the all-things-considered best in the circumstances. The goods that the passions make us want are whichever goods happen to come

³³ Marshall, for instance, reasons that since God would be deceiving us if the passions led us to pursue what were not true goods, the passions must be a reliable source of value judgments. (Marshall 1998, 120-121, 124). Williston, on the other hand, takes seriously Descartes's claim that the passions exaggerate, but suggests, "Descartes is by his own lights misguided," because this makes God a deceiver (Williston 1999, 43-44). Greenberg does observe that because the passions exaggerate they do not seem suited to represent things (2007, 221), but does not notice that this also makes them not suited to guide us.

³⁴ See *Passions* 137, 175, 211 (CSM I: 376, 392, 403; AT XI: 430, 463, 485-486), and the letter to Chanut, 1 November 1646 (CSMK III: 300; AT IV: 538).

to our attention and make an impression on the brain.³⁵ Since the passions are part of our God-given nature, it is right that Descartes must hold that they tend to make us want only those things that are good for us, but there is no deception here. The passions do only make us want the things that are good for us – it is just that the things that are good for us may also be bad for us, that is, they may not be all-things-considered good.³⁶ As a result the passions will sometimes lead us to want things that are merely pleasant, or good only for the body, or good only in the short-run, or impossible to achieve, etc. The function of discriminating between goods belongs properly to the judgment.³⁷ Once our passions are in accordance with the judgment of reason, however, Descartes says the passions cannot be too excessive. They cannot be too excessive in that case because once we have judged an action to be all-things-considered best, we cannot want it too much.³⁸

7. Generosity and Virtuous Passions

It may be objected that Descartes's remarks about generosity seem to contradict my interpretation. Descartes describes generosity as a passion, but also as a virtue and as “the key to all the other virtues and a general remedy for every disorder of the passions” (*Passions* 161, CSM I: 388; AT XI: 454).³⁹ Given the prominent role Descartes accords to generosity in

³⁵ Of course, which things come to our attention is partly due to another passion, wonder. See *Passions* 53 (CSM I: 350; AT XI: 373).

³⁶ Descartes adopts the Augustinian doctrine that evil is a privation. Anything with positive being has some goodness in it, and so evil is always joined with goodness. See *Passions* 140 (CSM I: 378; AT XI: 433). See also the letter to Elisabeth, 6 October 1645 (CSMK III: 268, 269; AT IV: 306, 309). Thus, even when we desire something which is harmful, our passions may be genuinely directed at some good or the appearance of good in the thing.

³⁷ See for example the letters to Elisabeth, 18 May 1645 (Blom 119; AT IV: 202), 1 September 1645 (CSMK III: 263-265; AT IV: 283-287), and 15 September 1645 (CSMK III: 267; AT IV: 294-295).

³⁸ See *Passions* 212 (CSM I: 404; AT XI: 488) and letters to Elisabeth 18 May 1645 (Blom 119; AT IV: 202-203), 3 November 1645 (CSMK III: 276; AT IV: 331-332), and May 1646 (CSMK III: 287; AT IV: 411).

³⁹ See also *Passions* 156, 160 (CSM I: 385; AT XI: 447-448) and many of the following sections where Descartes describes the way in which generosity is the key to possessing various virtues and avoiding vices.

regulating the other passions, we might conclude Descartes does think we should be guided by a passion, the passion of generosity.

Although Descartes does accord a central role to generosity, a more careful analysis of Descartes's conception of that passion shows that the passionate aspect of generosity is a virtue because it supports and strengthens good judgments, not because it guides them. Generosity consists in the habit of having certain beliefs, specifically the belief that the only thing which is praiseworthy or blameworthy is our use of our free will, and also in having a certain disposition of the will, a firm and constant resolve to do what we judge best (*Passions* 153, CSM I: 384; AT XI: 446). In article 161, Descartes explains that generosity is a passion when the movements of the animal spirits strengthen and maintain these habits (CSM I: 388; AT XI: 453-454). Although the passions play an important role in the virtue of generosity, it is not a guiding role. The generous are generous because they are guided by their judgments about what things are good, and the *passion* of generosity helps to strengthen the habit of remembering and wanting to follow those judgments.⁴⁰

It might still be argued that Descartes does regard it as the role of the passions to guide us, but only *after* we have cultivated generosity and trained our passions to make us want the things that we judge to be best. Indeed, one of the significant themes of *The Passions* is the trainability of our passions.⁴¹ For instance, Descartes ends Part One with the claim that human beings can master their passions by changing the automatic motions in the brain through clever training, in just the same way as a dog can be trained to stop when it sees a partridge (*Passions* 50, CSM I: 348; AT XI: 370). Accordingly, some may think that Descartes is saying that after

⁴⁰ See also the letter to Princess Elisabeth, 15 September 1645 (CSMK III: 267; AT IV: 295-296), and *Passions* article 160 (CSM I: 386; AT XI: 451).

⁴¹ Shapiro argues for this in detail (2003 a). Brown claims, "The overriding aim of the *Passions* is to instruct the reader on how to master the passions so that they will be an indispensable resource for the will in determining right action" (2006, 27).

properly training our passions, we can let our reason and judgment rest from evaluations of good and harm, and safely rely on our passions alone to make those discriminations, except perhaps in exceptional cases. This reading would reconcile the standard reading with the various texts where Descartes warns us against the deceptiveness of the passions, and it would leave room for passions to play a guiding role once we have trained them to make us want the right things.

Passages from the correspondence with Elisabeth, however, tell against this reading. They indicate that Descartes thinks there is never a time when we might rely on the passions and no longer need to use our reason to guide them. In the letter to Elisabeth, 18 May 1645, Descartes says, "...the greatest souls possess arguments so strong and cogent that, although they also have passions, and passions indeed often more violent than those of ordinary people, their reason nevertheless *always* remains mistress..." (Blom 119, emphasis added; AT IV 202). In the letter to Elisabeth, 3 November 1645, Descartes explains that the passions cannot be too excessive so long as the excess does not prevent the passion from "remaining subject to reason," (CSMK III: 276-277; AT IV: 331-332). The picture we get from these passages is that the greatest souls make their passions serve their purposes by *constantly* keeping them under the guidance of another faculty. So long as they are subject to reason they cannot be too excessive, but the moment they are no longer guided by reason they become vices.

Still, *why* cannot we simply follow our passions when they have already been trained to make us want and enjoy the things we judge to be good? The question really arises because this interpretation misunderstands the purpose of the passions. Consider an example. Suppose that I naturally hate to exercise, but that since I understand that exercise is beneficial for me, I set about changing how I feel about it. I start incorporating comparatively enjoyable exercises into my routine, focusing my mind on how refreshing the sunshine and outdoor air is and on how

vigorous, healthy, self-disciplined, and attractive I am becoming. After a while exercise becomes something that fills me with joy and self-satisfaction. My new passion for exercise harmonizes well with my rational conception of what is good for me, and therefore I no longer need to suppress or act contrary to my passions in order to do what is virtuous with respect to physical exercise. Nevertheless, even though I now desire to exercise and it is good for me to allow myself to be moved and motivated by that passion, I do not make that passion the *regulating principle* of my fitness. It would be unwise for me replace my rational judgments about when, whether, how much, and how long to exercise with a principle of exercising whenever I desire for as long as I am enjoying it. I need to use my judgment in order to make sure I am not exercising too long, or exercising when I should be working, or exercising at a dangerous time or place. Training my passions makes it easy and rewarding to do what is virtuous, but it does not transform the passions into an appropriate guiding principle. Thus, the usefulness the passions have when properly trained does not obviate the necessity of being guided by reason.

Although I am claiming that Descartes thinks the passions should never guide us, this does not mean that the passions must be constantly suppressed or that we may never do what our passions make us want. When our passions are in accord with what reason demands, we may pursue what we desire and be deeply passionate without danger. Indeed, so long as our passions remain under the guidance of our judgment, it is good for us to be moved by them.

8. Descartes's practical advice for living a happy life

The title of the final article of *The Passions* says, "*It is on the passions alone that all the good and evil of this life depends*" (*Passions* 212, CSM I: 404; AT XI: 488). This title is much quoted by commentators, but it is not so easy to understand what it means, especially in light of

the importance that Descartes usually assigns to the faculty of reason.⁴² The article reads:

For the rest, the soul can have pleasures of its own. But the pleasures common to it and the body depend entirely on the passions, so that persons whom the passions can move most deeply are capable of enjoying the sweetest pleasures of this life. It is true that they may also experience the most bitterness when they do not know how to put these passions to good use and when fortune works against them. But the chief use of wisdom lies in its teaching us to be masters of our passions and to control them with such skill that the evils which they cause are quite bearable, and even become a source of joy. (ibid.)

As I read it, “the good and evil of this life” refers to the happiness and unhappiness proper to an embodied soul, and Descartes is telling us that that happiness or unhappiness is constituted by having pleasant passions such as joy, or unpleasant passions such as sadness.⁴³ If we can guide our passions so that we take joy in our own virtue, then we can find life a source of joy even when external circumstances bring misfortune and sadness.⁴⁴

We are now in a better position to understand the practical advice Descartes is offering in his ethical writings. By training ourselves to want what reason and judgment teach us are good, we align our passions with what is virtuous, the pursuit of virtue becomes pleasant, and we are rewarded with a contentment that is stable. If we have not trained our passions, we are liable to pursue superficial and illusory goods that will bring us sadness, or to be constantly swayed by conflicting passions, leading to irresolution and remorse.⁴⁵ On the other hand, if we stoically suppress and resist our untrained passions, although we follow sober judgment, the pursuit of

⁴² For instance, in the letter to Elisabeth, 1 September 1645 he says, “nothing can completely take away our power of making ourselves happy provided it does not trouble our reason” (CSMK III: 263; AT IV: 283).

⁴³ See also the letter to Elisabeth, 4 August 1645 (CSMK III: 258; AT IV: 267).

⁴⁴ Descartes’s claim in *Passions* article 212, that we can make bearable the evils that the passions cause, is an allusion to earlier passages where he describes our ability to find joy even in sadness (articles. 94, 147,187, CSM I:362, 395; AT XI:399, 470). Although in article 147 Descartes specifies that it is the intellectual emotion of joy which we may arouse at the same time as sadness, in article 94, it is the *passion* of joy which can be aroused by sadness. See also the letters to Elisabeth, May 18 1645 (Blom 119-120; AT IV: 202-203) and 6 October 1645 (CSMK: 270; AT IV: 309).

⁴⁵ See especially *Passions* articles 48-49, 177, and 191 (CSM I: 347, 392-393, 396-397; AT XI: 366-368, 464, 472-473). There is much more to be said about the prominent role that avoiding irresolution and remorse plays in Descartes’s ethics. For a closer analysis of irresolution and its connection to the influence of the passions and to remorse see “Descartes and the Danger of Irresolution” (Brassfield 2010).

what is good and virtuous becomes an arduous and unpleasant task. Thus, when the role of the passions is properly understood, we can appreciate Descartes's advice that the way to be happy is to learn to want the good by guiding our passions instead of letting our passions guide us.⁴⁶

⁴⁶Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the American Society for Value Inquiry, APA Eastern Division, Group Session, Washington D.C., December, 2006 and the Upstate New York Early Modern Workshop, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York, February, 2007, as well as to audiences at Hamilton College, Kenyon College, and the College of Wooster in 2009. I am particularly grateful to Sean Greenberg, Nic Koziolk, Gideon Manning, Donald Rutherford, and my anonymous referees for helpful comments that have led me to improve this paper, and to Barrett Brassfield and Garrick Byers for enthusiastic editing.

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