

Generosity and Mechanism in Descartes's Passions

Emer O'Hagan

Abstract

Descartes's mechanistic account of the passions is sometimes dismissed as one which lacks the resources to adequately explain the cognitive aspect of emotion. By some, he is taken to be "feeling theorist", reducing the passions to a mere awareness of the physiological state of the soul-body union. If this reading of Descartes's passions is correct, his theory fails not only because it cannot account for the intentional nature of the passions, but also because the passions cannot play the role in Descartes's moral theory they are meant to play. I argue that Descartes's account is not best read as a feeling theory. I defend a reading of the Cartesian passions which acknowledges their mechanistic nature, arguing that for Descartes, passions are modes of the soul with cognitive significance, they are perceptions of relational axiological properties. Thus, Descartes's theory of the passions has the resources to connect it with an account of good conduct. As a means of elaborating on the normative nature of the passions I consider the role of generosity in Descartes's moral theory.

Cartesian generosity is both a virtue and the master passion. The generous person has a form of self-mastery that leaves her full of good will for others and, fortified by sound judgement about what is most valuable in her person, invulnerable to slights and petty wrongs. Generosity is the perfection of our dispositions as practical reasoners in the sense that it includes a theoretical understanding of what is most valuable in us and the disposition to act in a manner which honours that value. It includes the identification of oneself with one's will and the resolve to use that will well. Descartes's moral theory is, in part, an exhortation to perfect one's capacity for judgement, to appropriately esteem that capacity, and to develop the dispositions associated with that esteem and capacity.

According to Descartes, the principal utility of moral theory is the regulation of desires. As agents our experience is made meaningful by the passions; in order to flourish they must be well-ordered. Descartes's moral theory requires that the passions bear some cognitive significance, operating within a representational system which itself serves to maintain and benefit the agent. Hence, the passions must be understood in terms which can grant them cognitive status sufficient to guide and regulate conduct. Yet some philosophers claim that Descartes's treatment of the passions is excessively mechanical and insufficiently cognitive to allow them such a role. They argue that Descartes's mechanistic theory of the passions cannot adequately explain their normative significance in action, as passions are for him a mere awareness of a physiological state. Without normative significance, his account of the passions is inadequate and his moral theory undermined.

However, Descartes' account of the passions is more robust than is often supposed. The passions operate within the soul-body union to inform and guide us in a manner which promotes our well-being. In this paper I will defend a reading of the Cartesian passions which acknowledges their mechanistic nature, arguing that for Descartes, passions are modes of the soul with cognitive significance, they are perceptions of relational axiological properties, and so Descartes's theory of the passions has the resources to connect it with an account of good conduct. As a means of elaborating on the normative nature of the passions I will consider the role of generosity in Descartes's ethics. The generous person is the master of his own passions; for Descartes, generosity itself is the key to all the other virtues (Descartes, 1989, A

156, A161). In the virtue and passion of generosity theoretical insight and moral disposition come together as practical wisdom.

The Passions

Descartes wrote his treatise on the passions, *The Passions of the Soul*, in response to Princess Elisabeth's persistent and acute questioning about the nature of the soul-body interaction. In order to distance himself from the Stoics who saw the passions as pathological phenomena to be overcome, he described his approach as that of a physicist, not a moral philosopher (Rodis-Lewis, 1989, xvi). Descartes aimed to explain the operation of the passions scientifically within the domain of the soul-body union. For Descartes, the bodies of animals are automata which, like any mechanism, are moved as a result of the particular organization of its parts and facts about mechanical laws. He rejects explanations of the movements of animals which make reference to an immanent Aristotelian telos (Rodis-Lewis, 1978, 161). The adaptive behaviour of non-human animals is partially regulated by systematic bodily events similar to those which cause passions in the souls of persons. In explaining the bodily causes of the passions physiologically, Descartes is committed to explaining them as causal systems functioning automatically. Because we have the capacity for voluntary action humans are not mere automata, so while Descartes seeks a scientific account he must reconcile this with his commitment to human self-determination through the will.¹

According to Descartes, "Whatever is done or happens afresh is generally called by the

Philosophers a Passion with respect to the subject it happens to, and an Action with respect to what makes it happen” (Descartes, 1989, A1). Given this dual aspect nature of the passions, Descartes must carefully distinguish between the functioning of the body and the soul respectively. He must account for the functioning of the passions both in terms of their subjective reference and in terms of their mechanical operation within the body, and he must reconcile these operations. In the Second and Third Parts of *The Passions of the Soul* Descartes focuses on the role of the will, but in the First Part the focus is on some of the machinations involved in the production of a passion. Here he writes that all of the movements of the muscles and the senses depend on nerves coming from the brain, containing a wind or subtle fluid called “animal spirits”. The heart rarefies the very finest parts of the blood which compose the animal spirits. In fact, blood flow plays such an important role in the formation of the passions that in one place Descartes speculates that watching too many tragedies can gradually constrict the heart, slow the circulation, and ultimately cause ill health (Descartes, 1991, 250).

The soul has two types of attributes: actions and passion. The actions of the soul are its volitions, they come directly from the soul and depend on it alone. These volitions may have as their end either the soul itself, as when one wills to love God, or the body itself, as when one wills to take a walk and one’s legs begin to move. The passions are perceptions of the soul, and part of thought, although thought without volition. The perceptions of the soul are mediated by the nerves and refer to one of three sources: objects outside us which strike our

senses, to our body (or body parts), or to our soul (Descartes, 1989, A22). The perceptions we refer to the soul are those whose effects are felt as though in the soul itself, they are the passions proper.

Passions of the soul, properly so called, are “perceptions or sensations or excitations of the soul which are referred to it in particular and which are caused, maintained, and strengthened by some movement of the spirits” (Descartes, 1989, A27). In the early part of his treatise Descartes considers a fearful response to an animal, the result of a complex causal process. Fear is produced when the light reflected off the perceived animal creates images on the perceiver’s eyes which, via the optic nerves, make their way to the brain where they form two images. The images are consolidated into one after animal spirits direct the images to the pineal gland which acts on the soul, causing it to see the animal’s shape. If the shape resembles things harmful to the body, if it is frightening, passions are excited in the soul: first apprehension, then fear, then terror or boldness. The passionate response depends upon the temperament and past experience of the individual. In some cases the flow of animal spirits from the pineal gland to the nerves will cause the back to turn and the legs to run away (Descartes, 1989, A35-36).

As mechanistic as this sounds, the passions are nonetheless not entirely beyond our control. Indeed, Descartes seems very optimistic about our capacities to regulate the passions, claiming “there is no soul so weak that it cannot, when well guided, acquire an absolute

power over its passions” (Descartes, 1989, A50). Although one cannot will a passion into or out of existence directly, one can do so indirectly by considering reasons, or attending to objects which are usually connected with an alternative passion. For example, when feeling fearful one might consider how one will regret fleeing, or conjure up an image of oneself as victor over the feared object (Descartes, 1989, A45). The will is authoritative but needs to call upon other cognitive resources. Some times the will can only control or limit the effects of a passionate state. For example, when one is in the grip of a passion such as anger, Descartes admits, one can only control its effects. In anger the hand will rise to strike one’s foe but the will can restrain it (Descartes, 1989, A46).

Non-human animals share with human animals the bodily apparatus which make possible the human passions; they too have animal spirits and the pineal gland which regulate their flow. Of course, non-human animals cannot have passions of the soul because they don’t have souls, but the movement of their nerves and muscles occurs because of the movement of the animal spirits. The machinery of their bodies can be adjusted and thus they can be trained to behave differently. A dog which is naturally inclined to run towards a partridge, and run away once a gun is fired, can nonetheless be trained to stop upon spotting a partridge and run towards it upon hearing the gunfire. Because human animals possess reason our capacity to remodel our bodily machinery is even greater. We can, through the use of our will, train ourselves, so that our passions more readily accord with what is beneficial to us. Although we are propitiously constructed, and the passions are guides to what is good, they are

imperfect.

Descartes's position is not, as it is sometimes characterized, one hostile to the body. He concludes that the passions are almost all good and are "so useful in this life that our soul would have no reason to wish to remain joined to its body for even one minute if it could not feel them" (Descartes, 1991, 300). Indeed, Descartes ends his treatise on the passions by concluding that all of the good and evil of this life depends upon them, their mastery being an enormous benefit for any individual life (Descartes, 1989, A212). We should not try to eliminate the passions, but should instead aim for skilful and wise management of them.

Are the Passions Cognitive?

The particulars of Descartes's physiology aside, this view of the passions as bodily mechanisms aimed at facilitating our survival, and making our lives interesting, is one that modern theorists of the emotions are quick to adopt. Descartes's account of the passions is often dismissed, however, not because of its antiquated physiology, but because he is taken to be offering a strict feeling theory of the passions. In fact, Descartes is widely misread as a feeling theorist.² Feeling theories treat the emotions as relatively simple, unanalyzable 'feels' and subsequently focus on the causal mechanisms which produce them. Feeling theories of the emotions reduce them to sensations or bodily states, making the conscious feeling of the physical state the emotion. Thus feeling theories deny the passions both an intentional object and any significant role in the guidance of behaviour.

William Lyons is perhaps typical of those who dismiss Descartes as a feeling theorist. He argues that Descartes's description of the passions of the soul is really an account of the causation of emotion, not of emotion itself. Lyons takes the passivity of the passions to be fundamental to Descartes's view, and so interprets the Cartesian passions as particular forms of bodily commotion, along with a reflective awareness of that commotion (Lyons, 1980, 1-16). According to Lyons, because the passions are sensation-like for Descartes, they are unable to provide any cognitive content and, because passions clearly incorporate cognitive elements, Descartes fails to provide an adequate account.

The passivity of the passions is a difficult issue for Descartes. He cannot hold that the emotions have the cognitive status of judgments. If they did they would be actions of the soul, not passions. On the other hand, if the passions are conceived as modes of the soul with respect to which we are entirely passive, in the sense that they are subjectively meaningless happenings, then it is unclear how they could play any role in the regulation of good conduct.

Lyons, in effect, challenges Descartes's claim that the passions, as perceptions of bodily sensations, can be attributed to the soul. His suggestion is that although Descartes considers the passions to be a species of thought, he is not justified in his move from passions as awareness of bodily commotion to the cognitive phenomenon that typically describes an emotion. Consider Descartes's account of fear. According to Lyons, Cartesian fear amounts

to the awareness of the machine of one's body turning and running away. Fear exists due to the motions of spirits, which in turn is caused by something like the perception or imagining of a strange animal. While a person's past experience with animals will influence her fearful responses to them, that experience is not part of the emotion *per se*. Furthermore, if fear is a bodily state and awareness of that bodily state, the desire consequent upon the mechanistic motions (the 'I want to get out of here') isn't part of the passion either. The judgment that I ought to get out of here is an action of the soul and cannot be part of the passion. According to Lyons, Descartes's account of fear is neither able to give us knowledge of the world nor does it reflect an attitude about the world: "It merely registers, as a feeling, our physiological changes and bodily movements.... fear is not an awareness that something is frightening and that I am fleeing, it is the subjective concomitant feeling of my flight and of my being physiologically in a certain state" (Lyons, 1980, 6). Descartes's theory cannot account for the connection between the awareness of bodily commotion attributed to the soul, and the emotion of fear proper because sensations themselves do not lead one to act. Awareness of a rapid heart beat, the onset of perspiration, and an immobilizing sensation do not by themselves lead one to flee. They will only do so when combined with the further awareness that one is in danger and should get out of harm's way. This latter, necessary component of the phenomenon, is not strictly passive, nor strictly bodily and thus not available to Descartes.

If Lyons' complaints were correct, Descartes's account of the emotions would preclude a

connection with practical reason; however, the Cartesian account is richer than Lyons grants. To see this, let us be clear about what Lyons' objections are. First, he claims that the awareness of bodily commotion attributed to the soul is not sufficient for the formation of an emotion which has cognitive import for the agent. As a simple feel the passion fails to constitute the thoughts or perceptions Descartes takes them to be. And second, he claims that as an awareness of bodily agitation referred to the soul, the passion has no reference to anything other than the soul-body union. The passion cannot provide any knowledge of the world, nor can it reflect an attitude about the world because it has no reference to anything outside of the soul-body union.

Given Descartes's proclivity for explanation involving reference to blood flow and animal spirits, it is perhaps understandable that interpretations of his account overstate the physiological components while discounting the normative dimension. However, when regarded as a systematic means of protecting and enhancing the union of soul and body, Descartes's mechanistic account can be seen to be both intelligibly motivated, and beyond classification as a simple feeling theory. Passions are not judgments nor are they simply the awareness of a bodily state. Lyons's reading, while not implausible, ignores other important aspects of Descartes's account.

The first objection attempts to drive a wedge between the bodily movements which result in a passion, and the passion as a form of thought or attribute of the soul, thereby depriving the

passions of their guiding function for the soul. However, Descartes is clear that the passions are an information resource: “the principal effect of all the passions in men is that they incite and dispose their soul to will the things for which they prepare their body, so that the sensation of fear incites it to will to flee, that of boldness to will to do battle, and so on for the rest” (Descartes, 1989, A40). This can be consistently interpreted as implying that the soul-body union is merely disposed to respond to its environment without being aware of the disposition as a reason and so is merely caused but not informed. However, attention to Descartes’s texts demonstrates that it is part of Descartes’s account of the human design plan that the passions function in us as reasons.

Descartes’s discussion of fear includes the claim that the blood is rarefied and transmitted through the body in such a way that the back may turn and the legs may begin to run away, but also includes the claim that the spirits excite a particular movement in the pineal gland “which is instituted by nature to make the soul feel this passion” (Descartes, 1989, A36). Lyons interprets this to imply that the delivery of this passion to the soul is a simple sensation, but it is not. According to Descartes, the body is set up in such a way that certain movements of the animal spirits naturally coincide with fear as a perceptual state of the soul. One need not infer from one’s rapid heartbeat and trembling limbs that one is fearful, because persons are so designed that the significance of the embodied state is by our nature represented to the soul directly by the emotion (albeit via the pineal gland to the soul). This can be seen from Descartes’s remark that the purpose of the passions is to “dispose the soul

to will the things nature tells us are useful and to persist in this volition” (Descartes, 1989, A52). In the case of fear, nature tells one not only that one’s heart is racing, and one’s legs are trembling, but simultaneously informs one that the situation is dangerous. The same conception of a naturally beneficial mechanism is found in Descartes’s discussion of pain in *Meditation* Six, where he notes that God could have constructed us so that when in pain one was only aware of the actual motion occurring in the brain, and was not stimulated to get rid of the pain. However, the design plan most conducive to the continued well-being of the body is one which immediately informs the soul of bodily actions in a meaningful way, and this is the one which God has invoked (Descartes, 1985, 60-61).

In other words, Descartes’s theory of the passions attributes natural meanings to our inner states as a consequence of our design plan. His insistence that we have the capacity to correct the natural meanings conveyed by the body can be seen as yet another way we are designed to reach the truth. Fear and other passions are, as Descartes describes them, perceptions or thoughts proper and not simple sensations.³ The passions, “according to the institution of Nature... all have reference to the body, and are given to the soul only insofar as it is joined with [the body], so that their natural use is to incite the soul to consent and contribute to actions which can serve to preserve the body or render it more perfect in some way” (Descartes, 1989, A137). Of course, the question of whether meaning can arise out of natural design is a vexing philosophical problem, currently much-discussed in philosophy of mind. My claim is not that Descartes has solved the problem by appeal to benevolent design.

Rather, my claim is that a reading of Descartes's theory of the passions which neglects this crucial part of his account is flawed. Descartes's mechanistic model is specifically designed to make the operative connection between bodily agitation and a perception of the soul.

All of the passions represent "the goods to which they tend" (Descartes, 1991, 264). Moral philosophy has as its principal utility the regulation of desires, through desire we are led to act, and so our good depends upon a well-ordered character. Descartes's account of the natural value of the passions for human well-being rules out a feeling theory interpretation of his passions in favour of one in which their occurrence is significant of harms or goods, precisely in a way which gives them a role to play in guiding behaviour.

Lyon's second objection is that because a passion is, for Descartes, an awareness of bodily agitation attributed to the soul, it has no reference to anything other than the soul-body union and thus cannot represent a perspective on the world. I have already argued that attention to Descartes's texts suggests that for Descartes the passions do have axiological relations as normative content. The soul-body union is so designed that when the body is excited by the presence of something frightening, for example, the soul experiences fear directly without requiring an inference or judgment from the fact of bodily agitation to its fearful import. Descartes's account is, in this respect, strictly parallel to his account of visual perception where the sense organs are excited by an object outside the body and the soul recognizes the object directly without requiring an inference from the effect of the animal spirits on the

brain to its awareness that it sees the object. The parallel with perception is only partial however. We should not take Descartes to be attributing fear to the external objects which give rise to the agitation of the body.

In perception the soul attributes a property to the object perceived. When fearful, the soul does not refer the property of fear to the external object. Fear represents a relation between the thing feared and the one feeling fearful. It is an axiological relational property, identifying the relation which that object has to the soul-body union as it pertains to its well-being (its 'being a threat to me'). Passions of the soul represent the soul as affected in a manner which connects the passion to its object. Some passions are influenced by judgements, but the passions themselves are not judgements: "Passions represent the state of the soul as a consequence of its relation to objects and thus are reasons, whether good or bad, for forming certain judgements and initiating certain actions" (Brown, 1999, 228). As representations of the state of the soul-body union in its environment, passions have normative significance. Descartes takes their guiding function to be integral in their design, noting that "objects which move the senses do not excite different passions in us in proportion to all of their diversities, but only in proportion to the different ways they can harm or profit us or, generally, be important to us" (Descartes, 1989, A52). Fear and other passions are attributed to the soul and their correlation with bodily states is an arrangement instituted by nature. This arrangement, although mechanical, is not deterministic; the passions incite and dispose the soul to will but do not determine it.

The passions are part of a natural maintenance system, disposing the soul to want the things which nature deems useful for us. The parallel with perception resides in this: both are natural maintenance systems which provide the soul with information. Perceptions provide the soul with corrigible information about properties of the environment, and the passions provide the soul, again corrigibly, with information about our good. The benevolence of God's design plan, according to Descartes, makes it so. Thus the well-ordered, well-functioning soul-body union is crucial in both Descartes's account of theoretical reasoning and his account of practical reasoning.

Amelie Rorty has argued that in order to be able to make certain claims about the world, or to discover certain physical laws, Descartes requires an account of a reliable perceiver (1992). For perceptions to be reliable the various parts of the body need to be maintained in good working order, the body must be sound, protected and in good health in order to function well, hence a maintenance system is essential to reliable perception. On Rorty's view, the perceptions of external objects along with the perceptions of our bodily states constitute an information system. The perceptions of our bodily states and the passions proper constitute a maintenance system, each of which contain subsystems. Just as each of the modalities of sense provide different types of information of objects outside the body, so each of the basic emotions have a function within the maintenance system.

We have a rough notion of a normal and reliable healthful body as one whose interactions with other bodies produces changes that enable it to maintain and enhance its functioning. It is a body whose maintenance system operates so that it feels hunger and moves toward food when its body is depleted, a body that is, furthermore, nourished by the food it eats. It is a body that feels pain and moves away from harmful stimuli, experiences pleasure at and moves toward physically beneficial interactions. It inclines the mind to fear what is dangerous, hate what injures it, to love what benefits it (Rorty, 1992, 381).

The passions function in the maintenance system, but not infallibly. However, the maintenance and information systems need not be infallible. In order to enable reliable perception all that is required is that there be a means of discovering law-like correlations between them. The healthy body provides a baseline, not a norm, for establishing reliable perceptions. As long as we can recognize our own deviations from the baseline the intellect is in a position to make good the deficit. The hot-tempered man is in a similar condition as the colour-blind man insofar as each has a deficit in respectively the maintenance or information system. Once aware of his colour-blindness, the colour-blind man can use the system of law-like correlations to infer that what he sees as grey is really green or red, or to refrain from passing judgment. Similarly, once aware of his hot temper the hot-tempered man can recognize his rage as an over-reaction and try “not to consent to its effects and to restrain many of the movements to which it disposes the body” (Descartes, 1989, A46). Through habituation we are able to modify our natural responses. This isn’t only relevant to individual deficits, Descartes’s account of perception acknowledges the naturally unreliable, but correctable nature of the senses. Our perceptions of the world are unreliable if not understood

in the appropriate way. For example, we have two different ideas of the sun: our simple idea makes the sun appear very small, while our idea, based on astronomical reasoning, shows the sun to be much larger than the earth (Descartes, 1985, 29).

In a similar fashion, the passions are part of a natural maintenance system. The passions are part of a divinely created system which allows for the flourishing of the soul-body union. However, while Descartes's account of the passions is very modern in its mechanistic focus, he doesn't attempt to explain purposiveness in mechanistic terms. Non-human animals lack their own purposes and thus can be described in entirely mechanistic terms, but human animals, because they are a union of soul and body defy complete mechanistic description. A discussion of generosity highlights the central role freedom plays in Descartes's account of the passions. Because generosity depends upon excellence in willing, it is unlike other passions which share some of the necessary physical features for passion mechanisms with the passionless non-human animals (they don't have souls and so cannot have passions of the soul). Generosity, the master passion, helps to maintain the soul-body union by maintaining the will.

Generosity

Descartes's discussion of generosity is important because it completes his account of self-governance by the correct operation of the will. Our good lies in an appropriate disposition to value what is most valuable in us. This is the virtue of generosity. Descartes's use of the term

“generosity” to denote the particular passion and virtue which he so describes is strikingly odd. This oddity should not be attributed to a different use of the term in his day, as “generosity” had much the same usage that it now has, although then it also connoted a certain sense of nobility.⁴ Descartes’s generosity includes the liberality of spirit one typically associates with the concept, but does so while focusing on the correct operation of the will:

True Generosity, which makes a man esteem himself as highly as he can legitimately esteem himself, consists only in this: partly in his understanding that there is nothing which truly belongs to him but this free control of his volitions, and no reason why he ought to be praised or blamed except that he uses it well or badly; and partly in his feeling within himself a firm and constant resolution to use it well, that is, never to lack the volition to undertake and execute all the things he judges to be best — which is to follow virtue perfectly (Descartes, 1989, A153).

Contrasting pride and generosity, Descartes tells us that pride is distinguished by being a good opinion of oneself which is based on some cause other than the correct use of one’s free will.⁵ If the cause of self-esteem is anything other than “the volition we feel within ourselves always to make good use of our free will, from which I have said Generosity arises, it always produces a most blameworthy Pride” (Descartes, 1989, A158). Generosity and pride both consist in a good opinion of oneself, however in the former case the opinion is just and in the latter it is unjust. Generosity and pride are both caused by a movement of the spirits composed of wonder, joy, and love; they arise out of the same sort of physiological change (Descartes, 1989, A160). Pride, however, entails a variability in the movements of the spirits which generosity does not, because the proud are more likely to be subsequently humbled.

The proud are slaves to their desires and thus their souls are constantly agitated. The generous person, whose passion doesn't rest upon misplaced or mistaken evaluation, will experience a movement of that passion which is in comparison, firm and constant.

Although generosity and pride can be referred to the same body-based cause, they are distinct passions. The difference between pride and generosity rests in the agent's just or unjust, accurate or inaccurate, perception of her own sound functioning. In at least some cases passions are distinguished by the intentional object they represent.⁶ Pride and generosity are distinguished by their different intentional objects which will vary in accordance with differences in the agent's attitude and beliefs. The passions must be understood not as mechanisms operating independently of cognitive constraints, but as complex states with intentional components.⁷ Descartes's remarks on generosity indicate that we play an important role in the functioning and refinement of our passions insofar as we have some capacity to determine the passion's referent. Because the passion represents a relational axiological property, Descartes's account of the passions has the resources to build a morality on the proper ordering of the soul. We should strive to esteem ourselves appropriately. This will require directing our attention away from those aspects of our behaviour over which we have little control toward the quality of our willing in thought and action.

Passions have two necessary features: they must have a good use, and they must be caused, maintained, and strengthened by some movement of the animal spirits (Descartes, 1989,

A176, A27). Generosity is useful to us because it combats vain desires, manifesting an understanding and appreciation of the will which curtails futile concerns. Not only is it useless to fervently desire something which one has no capacity to bring about, it is detrimental insofar as it occupies one's thoughts and thereby distracts one from desiring what is within the realm of human acquisition. Generosity also counters excessive anger, results in a virtuous humility, leaves one full of good will for others, and makes one the master of her own passions (Descartes, 1989, A203, A154). Generosity makes us esteem what is in our power; what is not within our control deserves little esteem. Generosity makes "us greatly esteem liberty and absolute dominion over ourselves, which we cease to have when we can be injured by anyone, it limits us to having scorn or at most indignation for the wrongs at which others usually take offense" (Descartes, 1989, A203). The generous are masters of their own passions and, while inclined to take on great tasks, will not take on anything impossible. Aware of our imperfect nature, and still aware that every person has the capacity to use the will properly, the generous person will demonstrate a virtuous humility. She will demonstrate a good will for all and will never scorn others, because she will realize that all persons have the capacity for generosity and that errors must be due to a lack of understanding rather than a lack of good will (Descartes, 1989, A154).

Generosity is the master passion, involving three components. First, the generous person recognizes that she is most fundamentally her free will; second, she understands that she ought only to be praised or blamed according to the operation of this faculty; and third, the

generous person must be resolutely disposed to use her will well. The emphasis on free will is, of course, a well-established feature of Descartes's philosophy. In *Meditation* IV, when Descartes considers how it is possible that God might have made him such that he is prone to error, he concludes that God has given him a perfect free will, and error arises only through his own misuse of it. It is his free will that assures Descartes that he has been made in the likeness of God. Non-human animals, whose movements are determined, are not appropriate subjects of praise. What is praiseworthy in a person is his success at authoring his own actions: "The supreme perfection of man is that he acts freely or voluntarily, and it is this which makes him deserve praise or blame" (Descartes, 1985, 205). Mastery of the operation of one's will is thus of fundamental importance in agent evaluation, because the will is all that is entirely under one's control and thus its actions are the proper objects of evaluation. The connection between the free will and the good is prominent in Descartes's writings on morality.

The third component, that the generous person have a settled and sure commitment to use his will well, marks generosity as a disposition and virtue which itself manifests an appropriate evaluative response to one's own nature.⁸ The generous person is characterologically disposed to value what is valuable in us. Hence, the virtue in generosity is the unification of theoretical insight and practical commitment. Our free will is not merely the source of that which makes us appropriate subjects of praise, but because the will can be used well, the perfection of the will is the source of the agent's own good. Virtue is our supreme good

(Marshals, 1998, 149).

According to Descartes, the supreme good of each person “consists only in a firm will to do well and the contentment which this produces” (Descartes, 1991, 324). The moral quality of a life depends upon the operation of the will because it alone is absolutely within our disposal. Excellence in willing is thus a way of perfecting what is most essential to the self.

The will cannot be better disposed than

by a firm and constant resolution to carry out to the letter all the things which one judges to be best, and to employ all the powers of one’s mind in finding out what these are. This by itself constitutes all the virtues; this alone really deserves praise and glory; this alone finally, produces the greatest and most solid contentment in life. So I conclude that it is this which constitutes the supreme good (Descartes, 1991, 324-5).

Cartesian generosity is a foundational epistemic and moral virtue as well as a passion. The passions are an important part of the machinery of our bodies and are mechanisms that we can, indeed must control and develop. The passions are part of the human machinery supplied by a benevolent Creator and, insofar as they are mechanisms, their role in our design plan is to guide us roughly toward what is in our interest. Both human and non-human animals are constructed in a manner which is overall advantageous to their survival, however because non-human animals lack free will and rationality their mechanical ordering is not in any respect under their control. The design of human mechanisms is more complicated and it is part of that design that they be partially under voluntary control in the soul-body union.

Descartes acknowledges exactly this when he develops the idea of generosity as the master virtue and passion which leads the will to choose rightly and value rightly those things presented to it.

References

Alston, William 1967. "Emotion and Feeling," *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 2., ed., Paul Edwards, New York, Macmillan Publishing Co.

Brown, Deborah 1999. "What Was New In The *Passions* of 1649?," *Acta Philosophica Fennica*, (64), 1999, 211-131.

Calhoun, Cheshire and Robert Solomon 1984. *What is an Emotion?*, New York, Oxford University Press.

Dayton, Eric 2004. "Could It Be Worth Thinking About Descartes on Whether Animals Have Beliefs?," *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 21 (1), 63-80.

Descartes, 1989. *The Passions of the Soul*, trans., Stephen Voss, Indianapolis, Indiana, Hackett Publishing Company. 1989.

Descartes, 1985. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Volumes One and Two*, trans., John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Descartes, 1991. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Volume Three*, trans., John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

de Sousa, Ronald 1987. *The Rationality of Emotion*, Massachusetts, MIT Press.

Gaukroger, Stephen 1995. *Descartes: An Intellectual Biography*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.

Greenspan, Patricia 1988. *Emotions and Reasons*, New York, Routledge.

Lyons, William 1980. *Emotion*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Marshall, John 1998. *Descartes' Moral Theory*, Ithaca, N.Y, Cornell University Press.

Rodis-Lewis, Genevieve 1989. "Introduction," in *The Passions of the Soul*, trans., Stephen Voss. Indianapolis, Ind., Hackett Publishing Company.

Rodis-Lewis, Genevieve 1978. "Limitations of the Mechanical Model", in *Descartes: Critical and Interpretive Essays*, ed. Michael Hooker, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Rorty, Amelie 1992. "*Descartes on thinking with the body*," *Cambridge Companion to Descartes*, ed. John Cottingham, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Shapiro, Lisa 1999. "Cartesian Generosity," *Acta Philosophica Fennica*, 1999, 64, 249-275.

NOTES

1. This is a large and important tension in Descartes's thought. In this paper I do not evaluate his success in resolving this tension.

2. For example, Patricia Greenspan refers to a Cartesian account of emotions as sensations (Greenspan, 1988, 3). William Alston counts Descartes among feeling theorists (Alston, 1967, 480). See also Cheshire Calhoun and Robert Solomon (Calhoun and Solomon eds., 1984, 8-11).

3. For further discussion of Descartes's naturalism see Eric Dayton's "Could It Be Worth Thinking About Descartes on Whether Animals Have Beliefs?" (Dayton, 2004).

4. Stephen Voss notes this in a translator's footnote on p. 104 (Descartes, 1989).

5. In some translations other than the Voss translation used here, "pride" is translated as "vanity", which more clearly expresses the vice involved in that form of passionate response.

6. Stephen Gaukroger complains that Descartes's only means of explaining differences in temperament is through a "tennis-racquet" account of the workings of the pineal gland. If I am correct, this charge is mistaken (Gaukroger, 1995, 402).

7. de Sousa's notion of the "paradigm scenario" is useful in thinking about such variability because it acknowledges the essential biological component of an emotion while accommodating diversity in the normative functions and significance that emotional responses may come to possess. "Paradigm scenarios involve two aspects: first, a situation type providing the characteristic *objects* of the specific emotion-type...and second, a set of characteristic or "normal" *responses* to the situation, where normality is first a biological matter and then very quickly becomes a cultural one" (de Sousa, 1987, 182).

8. While it does seem legitimate to question the plausibility of describing generosity as both the peculiar kind of passion that it is and also a virtue, for the purposes of this paper, this question will go unanswered. For an insightful discussion of how generosity can be both a passion and virtue, see Lisa Shapiro's "Cartesian Generosity," (1999).

ISSN 1393-614X

Minerva - An Internet Journal of Philosophy 9 (2005): 236-260

Copyright © 2005 Minerva

All rights are reserved, but fair and good faith use with full attribution may be made of this work for educational or scholarly purposes.

Emer O'Hagan is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Canada.

E-mail: emer.ohagan@usask.ca