

Contributi/2

***Plato's Phaedrus after Descartes'* Passions**

Reviving Reason's Political Force

Joshua Hall

Articolo sottoposto a doppia *blind review*. Inviato il 2/09/2018. Accettato il 16/05/2019.

For this special issue, dedicated to the historical break in what one might call 'the politics of feeling' between ancient 'passions' (in the 'soul') and modern 'emotions' (in the 'mind'), I will suggest that the pivotal difference might be located instead between ancient and modern conceptions of the passions. Through new interpretations of two exemplars of these conceptions, Plato's *Phaedrus* and Descartes' *Passions of the Soul*, I will suggest that our politics today need to return to what I term Plato's 'psychological virtue' (drawing on virtue's dual senses as 'goodness' and 'power'), defined as a dynamic tension among mindful desire (*nous*), carnal desire (*epithumia*) and societal desire (*thumos*) achieved through rational discourse (*logos*). The upshot of this concept of psychological virtue, is that mind, at least via discourse, is also a desiring force, and thus capable of helping create new actions for souls in the political world.

Through its mythological analysis, Plato's *Phaedrus* offers a metaphor of the soul as the dialogical relationship (more precisely 'natural union') of a winged chariot team among its charioteer, a light horse, and a dark horse. In other words, the soul is a triadic tug of war among carnal desire (for food, drink, sex, etc.), societal desire (for honor and glory), and mindful desire (for knowledge, beauty, justice, etc.) as managed by discourse (*logos*). Descartes's *Meditations*, by contrast, offers a metaphor of the soul as a (one-part) sailor who is not merely 'in' the boat of his body, but is «most tightly joined and, so to speak, commingled» therewith. Because of this fused status, the sailor-boat soul-body perceives and interprets six 'primitive' passions and a plethora of derivative ones, representing environmental stimuli affecting the soul-body, which makes the soul-body comparable to a kind of self-driving robotic boat¹.

¹ R. Descartes, *Meditations, Objections and Replies*, Indianapolis 2006, p. 45.

Framed in relationship to Plato, Descartes reduces the living being component of the soul to the mind, since (a) the sailor represents the mind, while the boat implicitly represents the rest of the *Phaedrus*' soul (what I have called carnal and societal desire); and (b) the only agents with any direct power over the boat are the inanimate water and air through which the boat moves. That is, the sailor-boat can only exert agency by redirecting the force of the environment, thereby acting as a kind of relay for the original casual power of the water and air. Or, put in terms of the secondary literature on Descartes' *Passions*, the mind's sole function is to try to temper the direct force of the environment on the body. In short, for Descartes the only thing that generates action for the soul-body is a combination of inanimate mechanistic forces, to which the mind can only react, and only in an attenuating fashion.

Viewing the *Phaedrus* from this angle, its soul includes functions that are now often attributed to both 'mind' and 'body,' which are often dichotomously conceived as 'thinking' versus 'feeling.' In Plato's text, that is, mind possesses the power (at least via rational discourse) to create a full one-third of the tension that constitutes the soul, as the charioteer occupying what one might term the 'biotechnology' of the horse-drawn chariot (as opposed to the sailor fused with the 'robotics' of the boat). In other words, the Platonic charioteer possesses his own desire, with which to help create actions in partnership with the desires of the two horses. Descartes' sailor, by contrast, can only modify the boat's mechanical responses to the causal powers of the environment (by means of, in Descartes' era, the sails and rudder).

Given this textual contrast, the political relationship between reason and the feelings in today's era appears less discontinuous than continuous with that in Descartes' era. The cause for this, my concluding section will suggest, is political economics. More precisely, Descartes lived at the beginning of the era of capitalist colonialism, making his personal economic fortune on the first modern stock market, in Holland. Then as today, the human psyche tended to be reduced to a mechanistic function, dedicated to calculating its body's responses to blind economic forces. Oppressed as we remain by these economic forces, exacerbated still by this Cartesian conception of mind, one solution to today's political crisis of reason and the emotions is to revitalize the *Phaedrus*' conception of psychological virtue. We need to reaffirm that mind (at least within rational discourse) is a power among powers, significant among the combined forces that sustain our psyches in our political world. In sum, the mind's powerlessness is not a natural and inevitable fact, but a self-fulfilling prophecy that privileges the unjust elite over the oppressed multitudes. We must leave such self-defeat in the past, or else forfeit a more virtuous future.

1. Reason's Virtuous Force: Plato's *Phaedrus*

Amidst the mountain of secondary literature on the *Phaedrus*, the most relevant chunk of discussion for my purposes here concerns the winged chariot

team, a central debate about which concerns the referent of each member of the team. This in turn bears directly on the members' interrelationships, and whether I am justified in regarding psychological virtue as presupposed therein. The most influential interpreter of the *Phaedrus* in English, especially regarding the winged chariot team, is G. R. F. Ferrari, in his monograph *Listening to the Cicadas*². Its distinctive feature, compared to the work of Ferrari's predecessors (such as Hackforth and de Vries), is that it treats the three members of the chariot team as, simultaneously, (a) powers, (b) characters, and (c) speakers of the dialogue's love speeches. Since most commentators treat the team members as just one or two of these three things, one result of Ferrari's tripled approach is an unrivaled comprehensiveness and cohesion³.

Before turning directly to Ferrari's text, I must first say a word about how to designate the members of the winged chariot team, because there is no interpretive consensus even here. Though the human is consistently the 'charioteer,' the two horses are variously named, the most popular choices being 'good' or 'white' and 'bad' or 'evil' or 'black.' It was in light of this debate, and of my suspicion (as a critical race theorist) of the implied correlation of goodness with whiteness (and of evil with blackness) that I have opted for 'light' and 'dark' horse. In addition to disrupting problematic assumptions, this approach has the additional benefit of connoting (a) with 'dark horse,' that phrase's meaning as an underestimated, surprise winner (which several commentators take that horse to be), and (b) with 'light horse,' something lacking in substance, weight, or power (as befits that horse's problematic fixation on honor).

Regarding Ferrari's interpretation of the winged chariot team's members as (a) powers, he joins the near-consensus in the secondary literature that the three members correspond – albeit only approximately – to the three types of soul in Plato's *Republic*: the carnal (dark horse), the spirited (light horse), and the rational (charioteer). As for Ferrari's interpretation of the team members as (b) characters, he sees each member as illustrating the kind of person or life that would result, *per impossibile*, from any of those three powers of the soul assuming total control of the soul for the duration of an entire human life. Thus, for example, the dark horse represents a hypothetical person who would always act only from carnal desire (and never from spirited desire or rational desire). Finally, regarding Ferrari's interpretation of the members as (c) speakers of the

² G. R. F. Ferrari, *Listening to the Cicadas: A Study of Plato's Phaedrus*, Cambridge 1990. For two scholars who have followed in Ferrari's interpretive wake, see E. Schiltz, *Two Chariots: The Justification of the Best Life in the Katha Upanishad and Plato's Phaedrus*, «Philosophy East & West», 56(3), 2006, pp. 451-468; and N. Budziszewska, *The Self-chariots of Liberation: Plato's Phaedrus, the Upanishads, and the Mahābhārata in Search of Eternal Being*, «Philosophy East & West», 67(2), 2017, pp. 318-351.

³ The most influential example of the 'powers' tendency is probably M. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, Cambridge 1997. Its counterpart for the 'characters' tendency would be S. Benardete, *The Rhetoric of Morality and Philosophy: Plato's Gorgias and Phaedrus*, Chicago 2009. For important predecessors of Ferrari, see G. J. de Vries, *A Commentary on the Phaedrus of Plato*, Amsterdam 1969; and R. Hackforth, *Plato's Phaedrus*, Cambridge 1952.

love speeches, he links (1) Lysias' speech to the dark horse disguising his erotic intentions, (2) Socrates' anti-love speech to the light horse's paralysis through guilty self-flagellation, and (3) Socrates' pro-love speech to the charioteer (blending the first two).

One important effect of these analyses is that they bring the members much closer together than does the standard view, in essence transferring significant goodness and nobility from the charioteer and light horse to the dark horse, and transferring significant desire and power from the dark horse to the light horse and charioteer. Extending and improvising on these analyses is Elizabeth Belfiore, whose extensions concerning primarily Ferrari's interpretations of the members as parts of the soul, and whose improvisations concerning primarily the interpretation of the members as characters⁴.

Starting with the extensions, Belfiore echoes his claim that all three members are internally complex, albeit for her own reasons. First, she argues that both the charioteer and the dark horse manifest both rationality and brute force (e.g. the dark horse argues rhetorically, and the charioteer uses the goad and whip to discipline both horses). Second, she finds it centrally important that the charioteer possesses a second-order desire to organize and harmonize the first-order desires of all three members with a view to the best life (namely a philosophical one). Moreover, Belfiore also follows Ferrari in attributing a partial, but not perfect, correspondence between the three classes of the *Republic* and the three parts of the soul in the *Phaedrus* (which Belfiore names 'appetite,' 'spirit' and 'reason'). In her words, «all three capacities share to some extent in reason and all three have desires»⁵. She thus makes explicit the implication I noted above in Ferrari, using her discourse to revise Plato's discourse, in pursuit of further balancing and integration of the team as a reasonably desirous force.

Continuing with Belfiore's improvisations, instead of following Ferrari, she argues that the dark horse represents the erotic Socrates. In this, Belfiore instead follows – albeit without citing him – Seth Benardete's *The Rhetoric of Morality and Philosophy*. Where Benardete connects the dark horse directly to Socrates, however, Belfiore adds an intermediary figure between the two, namely the daemonic satyr. Put briefly, Belfiore notes that all three of these figures (the dark horse, Socrates, and satyrs) have the following features in common: ugliness, snub noses, short and thick necks, an association with *eros*, and the role of mediating between mortals and immortals. The latter mediation, importantly, includes initiation rituals involving dithyrambic music and dance, both associated with the worship of Dionysius. Linking this dark horse/Socratic satyr analogy back to the *Phaedrus*' winged chariot team, Belfiore observes that «the dances performed by the soul-chariots are similar in many respects to the dithyramb»⁶.

⁴E. Belfiore, *Dancing with the Gods: The Myth of the Chariot in Plato's Phaedrus*, «The American Journal of Philology», 127(2), 2006, pp. 185-217.

⁵Ivi, p. 190.

⁶Ivi, p. 205.

Belfiore then fleshes out this analogy by recourse to Plato's *Laws*, noting the similarities between the *Phaedrus*' choral dance of the gods and «Corybantic dances, the musical education of children reeducation of older adults at symposia». ⁷ «To learn to dance», Belfiore concludes, «is to impose order upon disorder, create a psychic equilibrium like that represented in the myth of the chariot», requiring the virtuous dark equine Socratic satyr. By infusing the paradigmatically rational figure of Socrates into the dark horse, Belfiore thus further strengthens the interconnectedness of the three members of the winged chariot team. Moreover, her emphasis on the team's primary activity (what I will call the 'celestial martial dance') suggests, via group choreography, a vivid combination of reason and desire (namely, the desire to move the body in an artfully rationally-organized joyfulness).

Aligning myself with both Ferrari and Belfiore, I too interpret the charioteer as a representation of (among other things) rationality, and as possessing desire, force and power. Where the two theorists diverge, so do I. On the one hand, I follow Ferrari in thinking that the three speeches meaningfully correspond to the three members. This buttresses my claim that rational discourse is a vehicle for, in Plato's words, 'growing together' mindful desire (charioteer), societal desire (light horse) and carnal desire (dark horse). On the other hand, I follow Belfiore in seeing great significance in the team's celestial martial dance, which buttresses my claim that embodiment is central to the charioteer's rational desire (as contrasted with the lifeless mechanism of Descartes' boat).

Against this background of the secondary literature, I now turn to the *Phaedrus*, relying on the translation by Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, to identify additional moments therein that support my conception of the winged chariot team as manifesting psychological virtue⁸. Socrates' account of the team begins at 246a, and begins with the souls of gods, only afterward descending to the human realm. He first refers to 'our driver', the Greek being *archon* (from the root word *arche*, meaning both 'foundation' and 'source of action'), which would initially seem to suggest that the presumptively mindful charioteer is also an active, desirous force. At another level, however, it is not clear that the charioteer is the referent of 'driver'. As Nehamas and Woodruff point out in a footnote, the chariot 'driver,' as a literary trope in Ancient Greece, «was used in erotic poetry for the way a lover feels when he is under the control of the one he loves»⁹. From this angle, therefore, it seems that the driving force of the chariot is instead the beloved (whom we have no initial reason to suppose is either rational or erotic), and/or perhaps instead the erotic love itself for the

⁷ Ivi, pp. 207-208. More specifically, children are like unruly dark horses who need to be disciplined into more orderly movement, «to learn to use their god-given perception of order and disorder so as to move in rhythm and sing in harmony», while the elderly are like the overly restrained light horses who need to be inspired with a bit of choreographed energy «under the guidance of the sober symposiarch», ivi., p. 209-210.

⁸ Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. by A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff, Indianapolis 1995.

⁹ Ivi, p. 31, n. 69.

beloved felt by the lover –and/or perhaps even the poetic discourse of the erotic poetry that preconditions the lover’s first encounter.

In this way, at the very beginning of the passage, it is unclear who or what is in fact driving the winged chariot team, and thus also unclear whether the charioteer is most appropriately understood as representing rationality. At a minimum, one cannot assume, as do most contemporary readers, that the charioteer is calm and cold, with the primary function of dispassionately restraining a bad, sexual horse. On the contrary, insofar as driving desire is located within the chariot team at all, that desire is first named in the member most often associated with rationality.

Having thus introduced the charioteer, Socrates turns next to the horses, first describing the light horse as ‘beautiful’ (*kalos*) and ‘good’ or ‘noble’ (*agathos*), and then labeling the dark horse merely the ‘opposite’ (*enantion*) of the light horse. Before jumping to another popular conclusion (including in the secondary literature), namely that ‘opposite’ here implies that the dark horse is ugly and evil, a word of logical caution is in order. Strictly speaking, the ‘opposite’ of the beautiful is merely the non-beautiful (put formally, ‘not-B’), which includes – but is not reducible to – the ugly, as it also includes, for example, the plain. The same point applies as well for the opposite of the good/noble (which includes, but does not reduce to, evil). Thus, it seems entirely possible, at this point in the dialogue, that the dark horse is merely plain and common (rather than repulsive and evil).

Further support for this less prejudiced estimate of the dark horse (given Socrates’ intervening claim that «beauty, wisdom, goodness, and everything of that sort» that the charioteer sees above the heavens «nourish the soul’s wings»), can be found in Socrates’ later claim that «long ago, you see, the entire soul had wings» (246e, 251c). That is, the dark horse, as part of the soul’s entirety, (a) has wings, (b) wings are nourished by goodness, (c) goodness is opposed to the badness, and therefore (d) the dark horse cannot simply be bad.

Having thus provided an initial description of the human chariot team, Socrates then zooms back out to his original broader picture, with both divine and human winged chariot teams. «Any [*pantos*] soul looks after all that lacks a soul», he claims, «and patrols all of heaven, taking different shapes at different time» (246c)¹⁰. Two points here are relevant for the present investigation into ancient and modern passions. First, in ‘caring for’ (*epimeletai*) the soulless, any soul engages in a term that suggests police activity, or law enforcement, namely ‘patrol’ (*peripolei*, literally ‘going around the polis’). That is, Socrates introduces soul as, not Dionysius’ dance, nor Ares’ war-march, but rather a kind of cosmic policing. In other words, soul on this view is on a permanent political mission to preserve the domestic peace, caring for what exists by supervising the soulless.

¹⁰ I have modified Nehamas and Woodruff’s translation here only by rendering *pantos* as ‘any’, to capture the ambiguity between ‘each’ or ‘all’ in the Greek.

At this point in the dialogue, however, Socrates suddenly undercuts this account, sending shockwaves all the way back to the beginning of the winged chariot teams. It is 'pure fiction,' Socrates now claims, to say that «a god is an immortal living thing which has a body and a soul, and that these are bound together by nature for all time» (246c). Thus, humans are much less like the gods than the initial description implied, since they are not living beings or soul-body composites. Nevertheless, Socrates should not only be excused for what now appears as deceiving, because in reality he was positively enjoined to do so. The reason, he explains, is that «of course we must let this be as it may please the gods, and speak accordingly» (246d). Thus, it apparently pleases the gods for us to exaggerate our similarities to them. Put in terms of the winged chariot team as psychological virtuous, the surprising implication here is that humans are potentially more virtuous even than gods, not only because of the powerful tensions humans must cultivate, but also because the gods actively pressure us to lie about them and humans' relation to them.

Playing along, at least for now, with this divine deception, Socrates turns next to what is the shared, noblest activity for both gods and humans, namely the grand procession through the heavens that Socrates describes first as an 'army' and then as 'chorus', in the Ancient Greek meaning of a group of singing dancers featured in tragedy (247a). Note that both terms differ from the policing function implied by 'patrol' above, with one (army) connoting more a military force oriented outward from the polis to its neighbors, and the other (chorus) connoting an artistic performance that interprets the polis from within. It is to capture these military and dancing connotations that I refer to the procession as a celestial martial dance.

Interestingly, it is not until this moment in the dialogue that Socrates first calls the dark horse 'bad' (*kakos*), even though he introduced him much earlier. Perhaps the reason is that the dark horse could only be considered bad in relation to the activity of the gods, but since (as Socrates has just insisted) the gods are not in fact soul-body-composite living beings, this only amounts to saying that the dark horse is bad at being what he is not (and not that he is bad *per se*). In support of this interpretation, Socrates later specifies that the cause of what seems worst about the dark horse (namely, that he drags the «charioteer down to earth») is merely his 'heaviness,' and not any internal evil (247b). This relativizing of the dark horse's badness also further closes the apparent distance between charioteer-as-rational and dark horse-as-sensual.

After this fall, Socrates pivots to the lover's ensuing pursuit of the beloved on earth, something that most commentators have not noted is that the light horse has black eyes and the dark horse has white eyes, which suggests (like the yin-yang symbol, which includes a small circle of the opposite force in its center), not merely that the dark horse is not fully bad, but more specifically that this fact lies at the core of his being (and vice versa for the light horse). The eyes, which according to Plato are the noblest organs, are here opposed to the rest of each horse, and identical to the rest of each opposing horse. Put differently, the

dark horse has nobler noblest organs than the light horse, and thus perhaps sees more clearly than the light horse through those organs, which might explain the dark horses' stronger initial motivation to pursue the beloved. Also important on this subject is that the (for Plato) next-noblest perceptual power, namely hearing, is completely absent in the dark horse (whom Socrates describes as 'deaf as a post'). This means that the fact that the dark horse is unmoved by the charioteer's attempt at rational verbal persuasion does not necessarily imply irrationality or stubbornness in the dark horse. Perhaps, instead, the dark horse is simply incapable of engaging in the auditory mode.

On this note of complexity and internal tension, another possible instance of irrationality in the presumptively rational charioteer can be seen in his fearful response to the proximity of the beloved. This response is due to his remembering 'Beauty,' more specifically by seeing Beauty «again where it stands on the sacred pedestal next to Self-control» (254b). One might suggest that the charioteer is here subconsciously and irrationally provoked to withdraw in fear, not from pure awe at the magnificence of Beauty (as most commentators assert) but instead from the proximity of Beauty to Self-Control¹¹. In other words, because Self-Control happens to be next to Beauty in the charioteer's involuntary memory, he feels conflicted and, acting out of the cowardice identified in him by the dark horse, he chooses paralysis rather than pursuit. Worse, the charioteer enforces this paralytic state through increasingly bloody violence against the dark horse, until eventually the latter is so broken and traumatized that he shares the charioteer's fear and can thus follow the beloved «in reverence and awe», without attempting to initiate sex. Put simply, the charioteer forces the dark horse to literally incorporate his potentially irrational fear of beauty, sex, and intimacy. But this shows, yet again, that the charioteer is less rational than he appears, and the dark horse more wronged than wrong.

2. Reason's Negation: Descartes' *Passions*

Having thus attempted to establish the necessary interconnectedness of the three aspects of the soul in the *Phaedrus*, especially regarding the desirousness of the charioteer and the at least partial goodness of the dark horse, in my second section I move from the ancient to the modern world, to Descartes' *Passions of the Soul*, against the background of the *Meditations*' guiding metaphor of the soul-body composite as a sailor-boat. The central debate in recent Descartes scholarship in general is whether *The Passions* amounts to a palinode on Cartesian mind-body dualism, or at the very least undermines the traditional assumption that the Cartesian subject is a completely self-transparent, asocial, isolated,

¹¹The only exception to this trend in the secondary literature that I have found is Ch. L. Griswold Jr., *Self-Knowledge in Plato's Phaedrus*, New Haven 1996, p. 134.

asocial, anti-embodiment entity. I will now consider a representative Descartes scholar addressing each of these aspects.

First, attacking the self-transparency point, Andre Gombay claims that there is a kind of Freudian unconscious at work in the *Passions*, which thus enriches while subverting the self-transparent conscious cogito of the *Meditations*¹². Second, arguing against the Cartesian self as asocial, Patrick Frierson claims that the passion of love transforms the mature ethical subject from pure egoism to the altruistic pinnacle that is the virtue of generosity¹³. Third, regarding the self's alleged isolation, Rebecca Wilkin identifies a fundamentally relational body-mind in the *Passions*' discussion of the maternal-fetal connection (wherein the fetus' first passions are love inspired by joy at receiving nourishing fluids from its mother)¹⁴. Finally, and most importantly for my purposes here, regarding the Cartesian self's alleged disembodiment, several scholars argue that the *Passions* even undermines Cartesian dualism.

The founder of this embodiment-centered trend is Philip Hoffman, who claims that the soul's passions for Descartes are best understood as 'straddling modes' of mind and body, which straddling undermines the radical separation of mind-body dualism¹⁵. Defending Hoffman's conclusion, albeit by an alternate route, Deborah Brown argues that the *Passions* implies what she calls 'phenomenological monism,' in which the passions are defined as actions of the body experienced as inflections of the modes of feeling of the soul¹⁶. Finally from this embodiment-centered trend, Richard Hassing argues that the *Passions* introduces a new, 'anthropological' dualism in Descartes' thought, defined as humans' dual biological/historical natures¹⁷. I will refer to this group of scholars, hereafter, as the revisionists.

As a fellow historian of philosophy, I am sympathetic to the revisionists' effort to resist caricature of canonical thinkers, mining their texts instead for all their depth. And though I share their conclusion that Descartes is probably not a full metaphysical (mind-body) dualist, I come to this conclusion by a completely different route, which also leads me to agree with the revisionists' critics that their reasoning is ultimately flawed. More precisely, I see evidence, which I will present in my reading of the *Passions* below, that Descartes might instead come closer to something like Patricia and Paul Churchlands' eliminative materialism, conceiving the mind as merely the deluded awareness of the deterministic working of the body-machine. From this perspective, all

¹² A. Gombay, *Sigmund Descartes?*, «Philosophy», 83(3), 2008, pp. 293-310.

¹³ P. Frierson, *Learning to Love: From Egoism to Generosity in Descartes*, «Journal of the History of Philosophy», 40(3), 2002, pp. 313-338.

¹⁴ R. Wilkin, *Descartes, Individualism, and the Fetal Subject*, «Differences», 19(8), 2008, pp. 96-127.

¹⁵ P. Hoffman, *The Passions and Freedom of Will*, in *Passion and Virtue in Descartes*, ed. B. Williston and A. Gombay, Amherst 2003, pp. 261-299.

¹⁶ D. Brown, *Descartes and the Passionate Mind*, Cambridge 2006.

¹⁷ R. Hassing, *Thumos and Psychophysics in Descartes's Passions of the Soul*, «Interpretation», 38(1), 2011, pp. 27-71.

Descartes' soul-discussion appears as primarily a political attempt (a la Strauss) to placate his largely intolerant fundamentalist Christian audience.

In sum, I am inclined to go further than the revisionists, by interpreting Descartes as undermining metaphysical dualism, not just in the *Passions*, but throughout his entire corpus. And I draw the opposite overall conclusion from theirs, finding not a greater body/social positivity in Descartes than is generally believed, but instead an even more disturbingly mechanistic determinism (for which even the cogito is an illusion, projected under the hats of the automatons he famously suggests might be strolling beneath his windows). In support of this eliminative materialist interpretation, consider Brown's observation that, in response to Princess Elizabeth's concerns about mind-body interaction, «Descartes recommends to her that she should feel free to attribute extension and matter to the soul»¹⁸. This recommendation seems to entail at least some kind of materialist monism, and is clearly compatible with eliminative materialism.

Before getting into the details of my interpretation of the *Passions*, I will first consider two other critics of the revisionists in the secondary literature. First, Joel Schickel argues that the passions of the soul are not (a la Hoffman) modes shared by mind and body, nor are they anything less than really identical with actions of the body that inhere in the soul alone (a la Brown)¹⁹. In other words, though Schickel acknowledges that one can make what Descartes terms a 'rational distinction' between a soul-passion and its corresponding body-action (for example, the passion of fear in response to the action of seeing an abusive partner approaching), both passion and action possess one numerically identical referent, and one which is properly located only in the soul. As a result, Schickel reasserts (contra the revisionists) Descartes' metaphysical mind-body dualism, and claims (borrowing Descartes' example) that the body acts on the soul like a racket hits a ball. Situating this in terms of the present investigation, Schickel's interpretation, with its emphasis on the body's power to act and the mind's passivity in the fact of that action, supports my claim that there is a significant distance between minds' creative contributions to psychological virtue in the *Phaedrus* and reason's negativity in the *Passions*.

Among these critics of the revisionists, the one to whom I am most sympathetic is Hasana Sharp. In her view, despite having admirably emphasized Descartes' analysis of embodiment, the revisionists have nevertheless problematically focused one-sidedly on his account of the passion of love²⁰. The problem is not merely that love is but one of six primitive passions (along with wonder, desire, hate, joy and sadness) in the *Passions*. More importantly, Descartes explicitly states that the related passions of hate and sadness are more

¹⁸ D. Brown, *Descartes and the Passionate Mind*, cit., p. 18.

¹⁹ J. Schickel, *Descartes on the Identity of Passion and Action*, «British Journal for the History of Philosophy», 19(6), 2011, pp. 1067-1084.

²⁰ H. Sharp, *Hate's Body: Danger and the Flesh in Descartes' Passions of the Soul*, «History of Philosophy Quarterly», 28(4), 2011, pp. 355-372.

important than the similarly-related passions of love and joy. Sharp elaborates on this point as follows:

Just as one bears the imprint of fetal love throughout one's embodied existence, the healthy individual preserves a salutary and self-protecting hatred. Whereas love urges to join with others, hate erects a barrier. It is Descartes' reasonable contention that we need this barrier as long as we are alive. A key feature of his dualist perspective is that the body's interests, as opposed to the soul's, dictate that sadness and hatred are «in some way primary more necessary» than joy and love, «for it is more important to things which are harmful and potentially destructive than to acquire those which add some perfection which we can subsist without».²¹

As this quote suggests, Sharp is not criticizing Descartes for his pro-hate-and-sadness position; on the contrary, she acknowledges its value more than once in her essay. She notes, for example, that «the fragility of the flesh makes hatred a necessary (and primary) evil within human relationships»²². The reason for this, Sharp elaborates, is that «hatred and sadness cannot be shunned but must be moderately sustained and given due weight to protect our selves from noxious elements»²³. Thus, she concludes, «to be embodied is to be dangerously exposed to others, for better and for worse»²⁴.

This, in turn, and finally from Sharp, means that Descartes' acknowledgement of body-connectivity does not necessarily entail body-positivity (or body-connectivity-positivity). The soul's embodied connectivity poses various frightening threats to it, which for Descartes appears to require constant vigilance. For my part, what is most important in Sharp's analyses is that they reveal, again, that reason's power in the *Passions* is primarily nullifying, as when one gives free rein to the passion of hate in order to counteract the passion of love that would otherwise bind one more fully to others (and perhaps also to one's own body). Put differently, according to Descartes, the body, like the dangerous environment it inhabits, should be an object, not of rational desire as for Plato, but rather of mere negation.

By way of transition to my own reading of Descartes, I wish to return once more to the revisionists, specifically to Richard Hassing, because his essay (like the present investigation) terminates in politics. Like Sharp, Hassing begins by quoting and emphasizing the phrase «the whole nature of man», from Descartes' subtitle for Part I of the *Passions*. For Sharp, however, this emphasis entails considering Descartes' account of hate alongside his account of love (since both primitive passions are necessary for a complete and account of humans' 'whole nature'). For Hassing, that emphasis instead entails considering the historical and political contexts of the *Passions*. Most important of these contexts, in Hassing's view, is the Thirty Years War, which Descartes «mentions in the opening of

²¹ H. Sharp, *Hate's Body*, cit., p. 365.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ivi*, pp. 367-368.

²⁴ *Ivi*, p. 369.

Part 2 of the *Discourse of Method*, and which spanned his intellectual career»²⁵. The upshot of Hassing's historico-political reading is that the end of medieval feudalism, and the rise of bourgeois modernism, was accompanied by what he terms the «*embourgeoisement* or the attenuation of *thumos*»²⁶. Hassing the latter as follows:

The promotion and protection of what we could call the erotic and acquisitive desires and satisfactions, and the weakening or attenuation of the angry or *thumetic* passions, from the Greek *thumos*, found in Aristotle but especially in Plato, and often translated as spiritedness.

Thumos, or spiritedness, is also, as noted above, the defining characteristic of the *Phaedrus*' light horse in the winged chariot team. To situate Hassing's claim within my comparative reading of the *Phaedrus* and the *Passions*, Descartes is effectively trying to remove one third of the Platonic soul, unharnessing the light horse of spiritedness, and leaving only an oversimplified charioteer (now a sailor) to fight against the sole and monolithic desire of the dark horse (now part of the machine that is the sailor's boat). I will return to this point in my conclusion.

For now, I turn at last to the *Passions*, to note a few germane points not already addressed in my survey of the secondary literature. Most important of these points are as follows: (a) from Article 1, that «the Action and Passion are always a single thing»; and (b) from Article 2, that «what is a Passion in the former [soul] is commonly an Action in the latter [body]»²⁷. The apparent discrepancy between these two claims, and particularly the qualifier 'commonly,' is what spawned much of the abovementioned debate between the revisionists and their critics. While the revisionists tend to emphasize 'commonly,' in arguing that the relationship between passion and action (and thereby mind and body) is more complex than metaphysical dualism implies, their critics tend to emphasize «always the same thing», in arguing that a soul-passion is always the direct result in the soul of the body impinging on it.

For my part, I take it that the 'uncommon' case implied here would be when the soul-passion is caused by a reflexive action of the soul (with no agency from the body), which implies that soul-causation is at least far less common (if it occurs at all) in Descartes' view than is generally believed. In other words, for the most part, soul-passions are done to the soul by the body, and only uncommonly does the soul do anything to itself that it feels as a passion. Going further, I wish to suggest that the implied 'uncommonly' might even be a euphemism for 'never,' meaning that the soul might never act on itself – indeed, might never act at all. This is one moment where the abovementioned question of Churchland eliminative materialism arises.

Continuing this pattern of undermining the soul's apparent agency, in Article 3 Descartes claims that «everything we find by experience to be in us

²⁵ R. Hassing, *Thumos and Psychophysics in Descartes's Passions of the Soul*, cit., p. 28.

²⁶ R. Hassing, *Thumos and Psychophysics in Descartes's Passions of the Soul*, cit., p. 28.

²⁷ R. Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*, trans. Stephen H. Voss, Indianapolis 1989.

that we see can also be in entirely inanimate bodies must be attributed to bodies alone», while «everything in us which we conceive entirely incapable of belonging to a body must be attributed to our soul». Note that the two categories Descartes designates here are not, as today's readers might expect, 'humans' and (other) 'animals.' Instead, the categories are the 'animate' (including all animals, and possibly plants), versus the (entirely) 'inanimate' (like boats). Thus, anything that lies in us and does not lie in something as lifeless as a boat belongs to the body alone, which means that much of what is typically attributed to human souls should also be attributed to many non-humans (since the latter also possess many aspects lacking in boats). Since most of what humans can do can also be done by other animals, this further restricts the apparent agency of the soul, and thus reason.

Note, moreover, that the issue for Descartes here is not metaphysical – concerning what is *actually* incapable of belonging to a body – but epistemological – concerning what we *conceive* as being incapable of being in a body. Reinforcing this distinction is Descartes' next sentence, which is also the first sentence of Article 4, which includes the phrase «because we do not conceive the body to think in any way». Again, the explicit point is not metaphysical but epistemological; we do not conceive the body as thinking, but perhaps it does, and we are merely mistaken, underestimating what bodies are capable of (to borrow Spinoza's famous quip). This, in turn, would likely involve our overestimating the powers that Descartes assigns to the soul. At the very least, it raises the specters of imagination and its potential deception, which return when Descartes returns, later in the *Passions*, to the question of the soul's actions.

The surface reason for Descartes' emphasis on the soul's limited agency, at the beginning of the *Passions*, becomes clear in Article 5, dedicated to refuting the idea, popular in Descartes' era, that «the soul imparts motion and heat to the body». This matters in an orthodox Christian context because if the soul were able to impart motion and heat to the body, then death could be attributed to the soul's failing so to impart. Descartes puts his own view of the matter in positive terms in Article 6, writing that «death never occurs through the fault of the soul». The relevance of this issue for the present investigation is that it weakens even further the apparent agency of the soul while simultaneously strengthening that of the body. In other words, the soul is not the source of the body's life and animation, as illustrated by the soul's inability to cause death. Further supporting this implication are Descartes' subsequent comparison of the soul-body to a wound-down watch, along with the phrase «machine of our body» (Article 6, 7).

The fine details of this watch-like machine's workings, however, get Descartes into trouble, culminating (at the end of Article 7) with his introduction of the vaguest, most load-bearing concept in the entire *Passions*, namely «a certain very fine air or wind, called the animals spirits». Descartes describes these animal spirits further in Article 10, as «nothing but bodies», which «are very small and which move very rapidly – just like the parts of the flame that emanates from a

torch». Note that from his initial description of these entities as one of the four ancient elements (namely 'air' or 'wind'), Descartes has now described them in terms of a second and third ancient element (since the paradigmatic 'bodies' are made of 'earth,' along with being part of fire qua 'flame'). Completing this set of four ancient elements is Article 15, where Descartes claims the animal spirits are composed of wine vapors (which thus correspond to the ancient element of 'water'). Thus, in the space of just a few initial Articles, Descartes has basically said that these critical entities are, indiscriminately, basic stuff.

Troubling enough on its own, this implicit comparison to all four of the four ancient elements is merely the first indication of several that the phrase 'animal spirits' may be an empty concept for Descartes. Having thus surveyed the powers of the body, Descartes then turns – much more briefly – to the soul. He starts, in Article 17, by claiming that the soul's only function is 'thoughts', which Descartes then breaks down into (1) 'actions' (which he immediately parses as 'volitions') and (2) the titular 'passions'. Provocatively, however, Descartes immediately qualifies these 'actions' in a way that threatens to reduce them to nothingness. He writes that «we find by experience that they [actions/volitions] come directly from our soul and seem to depend only on it».

What this means, given Descartes' famous criterion for knowledge as «clear and distinct ideas», is that one does not in fact know whether one's soul acts, or whether volitions are real. Instead, one merely experiences things in that way, subjectively. Perhaps, therefore, these apparent volitions are simply misrecognized passions – further actions of the machine of the body, and which can also take place in inanimate machines, like boats. One initial reason to think this might be true for Descartes, namely that 'volitions' might be body-actions in disguise, is that he devotes only one Article (18) to action/volition, and it is a short article to boot.

A second reason to think that volitions might be illusory is found in the subsequent Article 19, which is also a crucial one for Schickel's reading of Descartes (in his challenge to the revisionists). It reads as follows:

And though with respect to our soul it is an action to will something, it can be said that it is also a passion within it to perceive that it wills. Nevertheless, because this perception and this volition are really only a single thing, the denomination is always made by the loftier one, and so it is not usually named a passion, but an action only.

Schickel prefers 'apperception' to 'perception' here, perhaps because the former sounds nobler (or 'loftier', in Descartes' language), giving one the impression that the soul is acting rather than being passively affected. Against this translational choice, however, 'perception' not only (a) is more straightforward, but also (b) forms Descartes' own title for this Article (namely 'About Perception'), (c) concerns the explicitly passive subset of the soul's functions (that is, the 'thoughts' that Descartes divides into 'perception' or 'knowledge' in Article 17),

and (d) is categorized (and explicitly justified in being thus categorized) under 'passions'²⁸.

A third source of support for my interpretation of the volitions as passions in disguise can be found in Article 20. When Descartes here takes his first step in the direction of attributing action to the soul in a less ambiguous fashion (than earlier in the *Passions*), the actions in question again involve imagination and the unreal (namely «an enchanted palace or a chimera»), followed by the phrase «its [the soul's] own nature». Since, however, it is not at all clear what the soul's nature is for Descartes (or indeed, whether there even is such a thing, at least within the ambit of his philosophy), the reader is left with a merely ostensive reference to the soul's nature, namely the foregoing imagining of sky castles and mythical monsters. Put more simply, all that Descartes is clearly and distinctly stating that the soul can do, here, is imagine unreal things. Moreover, as with the preceding Article, 19, Descartes also categorizes Article 20 under the heading of 'passions' (rather than actions), and again draws attention to that passive categorization within the article itself. To wit, he notes that people often mistake these passions for actions because «the perceptions it has of these things, depend principally upon the volition that makes it perceive them». In the end, however, for Descartes these perceptions remain, as indicated by their categorization, more properly passions.

Worse still for the apparent agency of the soul, Descartes proceeds in Article 21 to explain that there is also an entire subset of imaginings that are entirely caused by the body.

Thus, the only thing that we clearly know the soul can do Descartes – though this doing is admittedly embarrassingly deceptive and unreal, namely imagining things that do not exist – is not even the exclusive possession of the soul. In short, not only the soul, but also the body, can delude the soul through unreal imaginings. In sum, whenever one is perceiving (since all perceptions are a subset of the passions), and sometimes when one is imagining (since some imaginings are bodily), the soul is merely passively undergoing the actions of the body.

This pattern of undermining the soul's agency (and thus, its imagined dignity) reemerges in Article 25, where Descartes refers to «perceptions that are *referred* to the soul», instead of saying that perceptions that are, in truth, *caused* by the soul (emphasis added). In a similar vein, he adds that these perceptions «are those whose effects are *felt as* in the soul itself, and of which no proximate cause to which they may be referred is commonly known» (emphasis added).

²⁸ In other words, Schickel rejects Descartes' simple literal point here, namely that what we call the 'action' of willing is metaphysically identical to the passion of perceiving the alleged result of the alleged willing (like feeling and seeing one's arm raises after believing oneself to have willed raising it). Descartes strikes me as, again, suggesting that the experience of willing, of the soul acting on the body, is ultimately illusory: a misperception of its perception of bodily movement as itself causing that movement.

Thus, humans' feeling that the soul causes volitions is based on a mere 'as' structure. More precisely, one feels one's perceptions 'as' coming from the soul, a feeling reinforced by ignorance (as indicated by the phrase 'no proximate cause'). Interestingly, however, this ignorance might involve a merely empirical contingency (as suggested by not 'commonly known'), and might be lacking in today's most educated (along with the masses in some indeterminate future)²⁹.

This repeated undermining of the soul's agency will perhaps have prepared some attentive readers for Descartes' definition of the passions of the soul at Article 27, which would otherwise appear as not only unusual but also deeply unsatisfying. By «passions of the soul», he means «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». Note, again, that these perceptions, etc., are merely 'referred' to the soul (and do not necessarily actually existing there). Moreover, it is unclear as to what exactly is the agent of said 'referring', with one possible candidate being the body; and if this is the case, then the body is not only the cause of the perception, but also the cause of the attribution of the perception to the soul. In other words, the body as agent of referring would entail that body imagines the soul as the perceiver of that which the body in fact perceives and causes. In short, the soul would be the body's dream. In support of the latter interpretation, and finally regarding this definition, its referred perceptions are themselves defined as caused by Descartes's indiscriminately elemental animal spirits.

The details of this animal spirit causation, and the corresponding power implied thereby, becomes clearer in Article 40, where Descartes claims that «the principal effect of the passions is that they incite and dispose their soul to will the things for which they prepare their body». Thus, the one thing that the soul can allegedly cause for Descartes, namely the action that is volition, he here admits is, upon closer inspection, merely the effect of the bodily animal spirits' antecedent causal power. Again, therefore, volition in Descartes manifests as passion in disguise. In support of this surprising claim, Descartes notes in Article 44 that «nature or habituation» often motivates «some movement» of the body rather than the soul's volition. That is, most of what one does is not caused by the soul, but by nature and the 'second nature' of habit.

Supporting the latter claim is Descartes' concession in the subsequent article (45) that, to be able to cause certain other motions (specifically to «excite boldness and displace fear in oneself»), «it is not sufficient to have the volition to do so». That is, yet another thing that the soul is typically believed to be able to do by itself in fact requires the body. Article 46 then generalizes this point,

²⁹ Also relevant from Article 25, in this vein, is Descartes' distinction between (a) the concept of 'passions' in 'its most general sense,' namely 'all of our perceptions'; and (b) 'passions' that is «usually restricted to mean those [perceptions] only which have reference to the soul itself». This means that the soul is passionate, being the object of actions taken by not just the body but also everything else in its environment, thus making the soul even more passive than it would otherwise appear.

noting that «the soul cannot readily alter or check its passions», and that, on the contrary, the «most the will can do» is «to not consent» to the effects of bodily excitation. Similarly, in Article 47, «the will» does not have «the power to excite the passions directly». Again, therefore, and to conclude my reading of Descartes, the soul's power for him reduces to, at most, mere nullification, as opposed to its active, creative agency in the *Phaedrus*.

Conclusion: Rationally Re-inspired Politics

To flesh out this *Phaedrus/Passions* contrast further, and thereby also the concept of 'psychological virtue' I find in Plato, I will now return to Hassing's analysis of spiritedness (*thumos*), specifically the historical fate of the spirited passions during the transition from the ancient to the modern eras. Beginning with the rise of the bourgeois, according to Hassing, another major event has occurred, which he terms «the athumetization, or the weakening of the spirited, potentially warlike passions»³⁰. This is important, Hassing claims, because it is the spirited passions more than anything else that makes human beings not merely natural animals but also historical beings.

Hassing then elaborates, as follows: «The objects of *thumos* typically involve both *one's own* (reputation, ideology, ethnicity, nationality, loyalty, faith, etc.), and larger reasons, beliefs, principles that we think justify its spirited, often violent defense, often culminating in the loss of one's own life»³¹. In other words, spiritedness, facilitated by one's imagination's identification of one's individual selves with one's ethnic group, nation-state, religion, etc., can facilitate prejudiced and disastrous political violence (such as the medieval Crusades or the present day 'War on Terror'), specifically by motivating humans to regard those larger wholes as more valuable than either their own lives or the lives of their political enemies. If, by contrast, humans had only the sensual passions, closely associated with the winged chariot team's dark horse, then we would at least accurately pursue what empowers us and avoid that which threatens us. But because we also have imagination, the power that allows the charioteer to remember the Forms and recognize them in a beautiful beloved, we also have the capacity to go astray, wrongly confusing what is beneficial and harmful, and consequently sacrificing our being, and for nothing but a political nightmare. Hassing elaborates as follows:

Descartes's teaching is that it is unwise for people to imagine themselves to be parts of greater wholes whose greatness they partake of, and whose mission they

³⁰ R. Hassing, *Thumos and Psychophysics in Descartes's Passions of the Soul*, cit., p. 30.

³¹ *Ibid.*

subserve, and thereby to scorn or to fear and hate those whom they imagine to be opposed and harmful to that whole and its mission.³²

To give a substitution-case for this argument, using concrete present-day terms, if one is a Latinx person, and one imagines oneself to be part of a larger Latinx community, which one imagines as great, and whose greatness one imagines as enhancing one's own value as an individual, and whose community goals one believes oneself dutybound to advance, then one is also dutybound to hate and fear Anglos. As I hope the conclusion to this instantiation of Hassing's argument makes clear, it is unsound, as many Latinx people are committed to their community but do not hate Anglos.

Based on this argument, Hassing's solution to this alleged problem is what Descartes views as the greatest virtue/passion, namely 'generosity'. More precisely, Hassing writes, insofar as generosity «entails the specification by Descartes of what is truly one's own, namely, one's own, individual free will, and nothing else», generosity thereby «weakens the force of our attachments to the larger wholes in whose defense we would rise in anger»³³ (30). In other words, generosity for Descartes is the outgrowth of the realization that (à la the Stoics) the only thing that is purely me or mine is my will, and since my will has no ethnicity, nationality, country, etc., I should be a cosmopolitan, impartial citizen of the world, being happy to share generously with everyone else anything else (besides my will) that I come incidentally to possess.

Hassing's own concrete application of his interpretation of Descartes, in contrast to my above example about Latinx communities, further illumines what makes Hassing's interpretation problematic in my view. «In contemporary parlance», he writes, «generosity is incompatible with identity politics, for one cannot claim value by virtue of membership in a group but only by the right use of one's own will as an individual». Thus, Hassing's conclusion illustrates yet again how Descartes limits reason's agency to the mere nullifying of others' creative force. Put differently, the job of Cartesian reason is to reject the spiritedness that can inspire one to identify with a community to the point of even sacrificing one's life for that community.

If this position does not already sound problematic (that, in Hassing's words, «one cannot claim value by virtue of membership in a group») perhaps two more concrete examples will help. Think, for example, of a Jewish person in Nazi Germany, or a black enslaved person in the Antebellum South of the United States. To claim that these people would be wrong to identify with their communities to the point of sacrificing their lives, as Hassing and Descartes are required to conclude by their own reasoning, reveals the degree to which reason has, beginning with the era of bourgeois modernity, become politically disempowered, unplugged from the Cartesian soul-body-machine, and thereby

³² Ivi, pp. 55-56.

³³ R. Hassing, *Thumos and Psychophysics in Descartes's Passions of the Soul*, cit., p. 30.

prevented from using any positive, creative force to facilitate change, including for social justice.

The core problem with Cartesian generosity here, as already suggested by the positive valence Hassing attaches to this historical shift in favor of our bourgeois capitalist era, is its imaginary foundation, namely a radially minimal and isolated self, whose goodness consists exclusively of its hypothetical, nonobligatory allocation of private resources to others. In other words, Cartesian generosity assumes the abstract, self-interested self of bourgeois modernity, whom it praises whenever it chooses to reconnect to other selves by voluntarily sharing its wealth. And this, in turn, presupposes a stripping-down of the soul, removing the *Phaedrus*' light horse altogether and brutalizing its dark horse with the nullifying power of the charioteer qua reason.

One possible solution, therefore, is to return to the psychological virtue I have identified in Plato's *Phaedrus*. In Hassing's terms, I am calling for the soul's re-thumetization, or what I will call a 're-inspiring,' which means not merely sanctioning but actively encouraging and empowering, a rational discursive cooperation with the spirited and carnal passions. Put in terms of the *Phaedrus*' winged chariot team, reason must be empowered, via the discursive reins of the chariot, to contribute the creative force of its mindful desires to the societal and carnal desires of the horses. Put differently, we have had enough of Descartes' monologue of the self (itself obscuring its own dialogical origins in the correspondence with Princess Elizabeth) and its one-directional, self-to-world, nullifying force. What we need, instead, is the psychological virtue of Plato's *Phaedrus*, a dialogue among multiple souls, themselves constructed as dialogues among multiple partially-rational, partially-virtuous powers, with a multi-directional creative power of selves-to-selves-within-world. Otherwise, the social injustices of our benightedly capitalist world will persist, for lack of the rationally-desired creation of alternative, more virtuous worlds.

Joshua Hall, William Paterson University
✉ hallj38@wpunj.edu