

On the Extent to Which There Can Be a
Cartesian Science of the Passions

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✓ good

Part of Descartes' explanation of the passions depends on an explanation of what the human body is and how it works. Since the human body is a part of body (Res extensa) in general, one would expect to find the kind of explanation peculiar to body as an important element, at least, in Descartes' talk about the human body. In no sense, however, can a purely "physical" explanation, without functional or teleological elements, of the human body be adequate. What we find in Descartes' treatment of the human body, as we expect to find in any explanation of organic life that he might have attempted, is a mixture of mechanism, functionalism, and, at least indirectly, reference to final cause. Whether the enterprise of The Passions thus constitutes a "science" in Descartes' sense is a difficult question; but he must have thought that the "mechanistic" component of his explanations would inject some scientific clarity into a hitherto obscure field. To the extent that we can acquire "knowledge" of the passions in this sense, we can also win a control over them not hitherto available. ✓

In Descartes' analysis of human anatomy and physiology, mechanism and functionalism so thoroughly interpenetrate that it is difficult to separate them for discussion. Descartes' great discovery, the mechanical element of the human body, pertains to the movement of the "animal spirits" within it. ✓ The motion of these "minute material bodies" is in itself thoroughly mechanical, that is, subject to all the laws of

matter in motion. As such, this microscopic motion serves as the "efficient cause" of the macroscopic movements of the body, as well as of the microscopic "actions" of the pineal gland on the soul (its "passions" in the broad sense).

However, when Descartes calls the human body a "machine," he does not imply that the body works completely according to mechanical laws. The human (or animal) machine is "so formed by nature" to serve certain functions, such as self-preservation and, in some cases, self-improvement or perfection. In other words, what we would call "organic" bodies are systems of parts which in turn are organized to serve specific functions with respect to the whole. }

In themselves, then, the animal spirits move in a strictly mechanical fashion, while their "effects" in the bodily systems of an organic body have a functional result. Though one can claim that there is thus no Cartesian science of the entire organic body (and hence, of the passions), certain phenomena very important to its functioning can be isolated for scientific analysis and strategic manipulation.

To what extent, then, can sci^en^e help us to understand and to control the passions? at least to the extent, Descartes would claim, that the passions are understood in terms of the movement of the animal spirits throughout the circulatory and nervous systems. To be sure, the passions in themselves have a "utility," are "good by nature," and support or fortify "good" thoughts; to this extent, they are subject to a thoroughgoing teleological explanation. The same point holds for the explanation of

macroscopic bodily movement, in so far as the body moves in a functional way. The problem of the passions arises, however, when they support a desire more than is necessary, or a desire of the wrong kind. Here an understanding of the movements of the spirits is decisive: every corporeal action (movement of spirits) is connected with a correlative thought (passion), and the force of the passions depends completely on the force of the "actions" of the spirits. It is when the force of the latter is great that the passions are difficult to control.

Knowledge of the way the spirits behave is relevant in all but one of Descartes' "remedies" for the passions. The exception is to generate a feeling of satisfaction from performing virtuous actions, an "inner emotion" so powerful on the soul that it becomes screened off from the assaults of all the other passions. Should any of them manage to "sneak through," however, one can immediately be forewarned of the "dubious" character of the corresponding images by a rise in blood pressure or some other indication of "spirit-commotion." If time permits, one should wait until the commotion of spirits has returned "mechanically" to a state of rest; then one can judge whether to act on the images. When time does not permit the spirits to subside before action is necessary, one should turn the soul toward good, though possibly contrary, thoughts and reasons for action, and resolve to act according to them. In any case, one cannot intervene directly into the mechanical force of the passions to control them; but one can "subvert" the effects of the passions with this knowledge of them.