



Soul and Passions: A Probe into Descartes' Ethical Thoughts

ZHENG Chang^{[a],*}

^[a] College of State Governance, Southwest University, Chongqing, China.

* Corresponding author.

Supported by the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities (SWU1909531).

Received 15 November 2020; accepted 16 January 2021
 Published online 26 February 2021

Abstract

The interest in passion pervades every field of research in the 17th century philosophy and even becomes the central topic of the philosophical theories of Hobbes, Descartes, Spinoza and Locke. René Descartes' *Les Passions de l'âme* reveals the intrinsic features of passion and its relationship with those subjects to be perceived. Getting insight into dualism of mind and body, he uncovers the sophisticated bonds between the two. In a narrow sense, passions can be deemed as a kind of perceptions connected with a man's soul. Descartes explains what is passion from the perspective of internal dynamics of our bodies and employs both rational and objective methods to examine it. It is worth noticing that training a person to be virtuous makes the best way to remedy our passions which are always out of control. Descartes particularly concentrates on tolerance as a virtue and its function of treating other people equally to honor their free will. Though our passions are unpredictable, our soul still has the ability to control them by its power of wisdom to counter the impermanence of fate. Starting with the researches about passions, Descartes builds up his ethical system and finally proposes a kind of liberal morality aimed at respecting everyone's free will.

Key words: René Descartes; Soul; Passion; Free will

Zheng, C. (2021). Soul and Passions: A Probe into Descartes' Ethical Thoughts. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 22(1), 16-20. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/12040>
 DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/12040>

INTRODUCTION

Passion is an important aspect of the study of virtue ethics. The interest in passion research pervades every field of research in the seventeenth century philosophy, and even becomes the central topic of the philosophical theories of Hobbes, Descartes, Spinoza, and Locke. However, in today's researches on early modern thoughts, few scholars pay attention to this theme, so by re-examining Descartes' ethics, we can get insight into it.

Les Passions de l'âme was first published in Amsterdam and Paris in November 1649. It was the last of four works published by Descartes during his lifetime. Though our academic community generally believes that Descartes is a typical representative of the dualism of mind and body, but in this ethical work, he re-examines the relevant problem and reveals the interrelationship between the two. The initial idea about writing this book is related to Princess Elizabeth. After reading Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Princess Elizabeth began to sigh that, due to her unhealthy physical conditions and her volatility, her regular life was often disturbed by the unpredictable fate, so she raised doubts about the dualism of mind and body, hoping that Descartes can define the passions that interfere with the constancy of fate, so as to better help people control them in order to live a joyous life.

DESCARTES'S MAIN IDEAS ABOUT PASSIONS

First, Descartes mentions three original concepts in his letter to Princess Elizabeth on June 28, 1643. In his view, if metaphysical problems can be explored based on the original concept of "thinking", while physical problems can be approached from the original concept of "extension", then the combination of the two can explain the unity of soul and body. The original concept

is a definite and innate one, which can be used to discuss issues related to the passion of the soul. The definition and classification of passion can further explain its use and warn of its harm. From here we can see that Descartes has broken the restraints of physical and mental separation and moved towards the path of physical and mental integration. He believes that we are facing neither pure spirit nor matter, but a unique individual. In *Treatise on Man*, he proposes a similar philosophical path, that is: "We are composed of body and soul. Therefore, I should examine our body and soul separately and finally show you how these two properties are united to form human beings" (Descartes 1999, 807). The activity of the soul is in association with our free will and passions are all about our perception. Passion is a specific phenomenon experienced by a person as a single individual. Therefore, the study of passion can be considered from these three dimensions to form an overall view. Descartes lays the foundation of his philosophical research in *Meditations on First Philosophy* and his ethical thoughts about passion has become the cornerstone of his broader anthropological researches.

Descartes establishes his ethical pedigree based on his researches about passion. In this process, he abandons some inherent principles and insists on some new important principles. First of all, Descartes is opposed to the Stoic school's natural law. The Stoic school believes that the world is an orderly arrangement. Both humans and natural things act according to the principle of purpose. God is a rational entity, which exists in all things. This ubiquitous entity controls the developing process of all things, and we should follow its arrangements. The passivity and adaptability of man in front of God or reason is the basis of the Stoic moral philosophy. "God is the soul of the world, and everyone's soul is a part of God" (Stumpf & Fieser, 2012). Divinity penetrates into the human body, making it move and possess all sensational abilities, but human reason does not enable people think and reason about all things, but only represents the consciousness of the actual position of people in the entire universe. Obeying the laws of nature and accepting the destiny that cannot be chosen, we are happy to be in a state of "apathy" or tranquility and free from emotional disturbances. Descartes does not start from the perspective of the rational nature of the world, but explains the generation of passion from the perspective of the internal dynamics of the body. From the perspective of the objectivity of the body, the generation of passion conforms to the inevitable order of mathematics, which can be regarded as a physical and mechanical process. Descartes starts to explore passions by deeming people as machines. Passion is an inevitable phenomenon in the operation of the body, which is maintained by blood circulation, l'esprit animal, nerves, muscles, etc. Descartes sees passion as a kind of intérieur of the body, that is, a body's own

natural traits and tendencies (humeurs ou inclinations natuellites). These natural qualities and tendencies mainly include bonté (goodness), libéralité (liberality), l'amour (love), désir (desire), l'humeur joyeuse (cheerful mood), l'humeur triste (gloomy mood), etc. Descartes adheres to the principle that the passion of the soul needs to be manifested as the activity of the body, but the function of body cannot really explain the physiological basis and nature of passion. He proposes that "when a watch or other machine is well equipped, it has the driving force for physical movement and for this reason, it is assembled" (Descartes, 2000, pp.7-8).

In order to understand the passion of the soul, it is necessary to distinguish between the functions of body and soul. Now that we have examined the functions of the body that passions attach to, we can more easily understand what we have left that should only belong to our soul, and that is our thinking. The action of the soul is closely related to our will. In contrast, our perception and understanding are not directly recognized by our soul. Our soul recognizes it by relying on the perception or the representation of the object. The passion of the soul includes all kinds of perceptions: perceptions associated with external objects, the body itself and with the soul itself. Descartes discusses the last one. If Descartes' early view of passion is determinate, then the latter view is vague and mixed. The main reason is that he no longer only regards our passions stem from a passive and inevitable order. Our body is not only purely passive. Its reactions include much more complex characteristics and our subjective factors. Our passion exhibits sophisticated interweaving objective and subjective characteristics. On the one hand, the passion of the soul must be based on a certain physiological activity of the body. It depends on our blood, animal spirits, muscles and other activities, which reflects the principle of passiveness; On the other hand, the passion of the soul is the perceptual behavior of the soul itself. Its generation, maintenance and strengthening require human experience, reason and will, which embodies the connotation of initiative. Being both passive and active is the realistic situation people are generally faced up with. This is in line with Descartes' positioning of people in *Meditations on First Philosophy*: "I noticed that not only a real and affirmative idea of God, or a supreme and complete existence, appears in my mind. At the same time, there has also been a negative idea of nothingness, that is to say, a concept that is completely opposite to various types of completeness, and I seem to be somewhere between God and nothingness, and I am placed in the supreme being and between non-existence..." (Descartes 1998, 56-57) Man is neither a pure, negative, passive existence, nor an absolute, positive, active existence. There is a kind of initiative in the passivity, and there is passivity in the initiative. This happens to be the meaning of human life.

From a methodological point of view, Descartes' method of studying passion follows the scientific research method he puts forward in his philosophical work *Le Discours de la méthode* (*Le Discours de la méthode*). Although his methodology has certain flaws and has been replaced by comprehensive methods proposed by modern scientific research due to its own limitations, the emotional problem, which originally seems to be subjective, has been clearly presented through objective scientific methods. On the whole, Descartes' methodology follows the following steps: Primarily, he says that :“I don't accept any truth that I don't know, which means to avoid recklessness as much as possible, and I can only understand what is very clear based on my own judgment. Certainly, there is nothing doubtful as truth”(Descartes 2003). Secondly, he tries to break down complex problems into simple small problems, and start with these simple items. Thirdly, he arranges problems into a hierarchical order of being from simple to complex, and start with those problems easy to be coped with. Fourthly, after the problem is solved, he checks it again to make sure whether it is completed. Following this approach, Descartes positions the issue of passion in a larger category. First of all, he believes that passion is the perception related to the soul itself. This perception is not completely triggered by the soul. It stays on the inner perception of the soul, such as the belief in God. However, the inner emotions of the soul (*les émotions intérieures*) is related to the soul, and at the same time it gives the body impetus and feedback through the soul. Furthermore, he uses rational and objective methods to abstract the essence from the specific passions through their manifestations. The six basic passions are: surprise, love, hate, longing, happiness and sadness. Surprise is Descartes' own invention. All other passions evolve from these six passions, which are different from the previous understanding that passions only include desire or anger. Surprise is a kind of passion that brings people a strong impact, but it has no judgment of good and evil. When people feel surprised, the body stops there, and people can feel the first impression of things, so they can get special understanding about things. We can distinguish his definition from those of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. For Aristotle, the most basic passions are happiness and pain. The passions derived from this are anger, gentleness, love, hate, fear, shame, goodwill, compassion, righteous indignation, jealousy and triumph. Thomas Aquinas names some passions in *Summa Theologica*. These passions include love, hate, desire, happiness, mourning, hope, disappointment, fear, courage, anger, etc. After defining these six basic passions, Descartes suggests that all other passions are composed of certain such passions, or belong to one of them.

THE CORE ELEMENTS OF DESCARTES' THEORY OF PASSIONS

First, Descartes denies that all movements of the body that people generally believe depend on the soul. He believes that our body can move according to the heat provided by our hearts to blood vessels, which is the driving force. This is similar to the motivation in Aristotle's theories about four causes. Aristotle's "purposeful cause" is the ultimate cause of the development of things, and the form factor, material cause, and dynamic cause are the assistance of the "purposeful cause", while the dynamic cause of the development of things proposed by Descartes is more like a physical one for pure promotion. With this motivation, the next step is to explain how various objective objects produce impressions and leave traces in our brains. Descartes compared this process with the process by which visual objects act on our eyes as he has explained in *Optics*. All visual objects use some transparent substances between them and us to act on the optic nerve filaments deep in our eyes. Similar to this situation, sounds, smells, tastes, heat, pain, hunger, etc., whether from external sense organs or internal desires, also cause certain movements in our nerves and reach certain areas of the brain accordingly. The various movements of the brain can not only make our soul have a variety of feelings, but also can cause the animal's essence to flow to certain muscles of the body without the participation of the soul, thereby causing the activities of the limbs. Here, we can see that the object causes the movement of the brain, and the movement of the brain gives feedback to the impression brought by this object.

After examining the functions that belong to our body, we can understand the things that belong to our soul, that is our thinking. The action of the soul is the activity of the will. It comes from the soul and belongs to the soul. All kinds of perceptions or knowledge in us can be called the passion of the soul, because the production of these perceptions is not the active role of the soul, but the reflection of the soul from things. The actions of the soul are also divided into two categories: one is to rely on the soul to complete itself, such as the fear of God; the other is the movement that the soul needs to complete on the body, for example, we have the will to walk, the soul gives us instructions, and our legs start to move forward. From a narrower view, the passion of the soul is different from other thoughts. The passion or emotion of the soul exists in the close connection between the soul and the body, but it is often vague and chaotic. For example, we suddenly feel a burst of sadness when we sleep, but in fact, the body does not come into contact with anything that can arouse our sadness. It can be seen from this that the passion of the soul is neither pure volitional activity nor pure physical sensation.

We can connect and distinguish the core “perception” of the passion of Descartes’ soul with Hume’s theory of perception. Hume believes that the entire connotation of the mind can be attributed to the materials given to us by the senses and experiences. There are two forms of mental perceptions: impression and idea. The original material of thought is impression. Their basis is feeling or emotion, and ideas are the imitation of impression. Ideas are based on impressions, but the ambiguity between them is that not every idea has a precise impression corresponding to it. The ability of the mind is to combine, transform or reduce the materials provided by these feelings and experiences. Hume thus concludes that there is no self away from perception, and our mind is a combination of memories left by our impressions. Perception determines the existence of self and thinking. Hume’s extreme empiricism is obviously different from Descartes’ understanding of perception. Descartes always delineates a territory for the soul, and this territory is autonomous for us to move in it freely.

Although the soul and the body have their own territories, Descartes also emphasizes that the soul is connected with all parts of the body. The body is a whole, and the so-called organs are connected to each other. Although the soul’s nature has nothing to do with its extent and has no material dimensions and characteristics, it is still combined with the body’s organs. The soul exists by attaching to the small glands in the brain. Small glands are suspended above the ducts, and the animal spirits in the front brain cavity and the back brain cavity are connected, which constitutes the material basis of the activity of soul. Our tiny neural networks are widely distributed on the body. Once a sensory object stimulates movement, it will open the small holes in the brain accordingly, and animal essence will enter the muscles in different ways to promote the movement of the limbs. It can be seen from here that Descartes’ theory of the soul has the basis of material promotion. Although the soul does not have extensive and material properties, it can accept the impressions created by the various movements of the body, thereby producing various perception.

SEVERAL BASIC PASSIONS AND THEIR MORAL SIGNIFICANCE

The emergence of passion requires two factors: one is the empirical knowledge of related objects; the other is the participation of the soul to provide rational use. Only in this way can we have experience love, hatred, desire, surprise, etc. Descartes analyzes several typical passions and their moral significance. The first is surprise. Surprise is that we use our intellect and reflective will to pay special attention to things we have never seen. The passion of surprise can make things seem rare and special. People who do not have this passion often lack

natural endowments, so these people are usually ignorant. People with good daily knowledge and cognitive skills can often be surprised at new things and possess what we call “curiosity.” But Descartes also proposes that if people lack control over excessive surprises, for instance, people pay attention to things that are of little importance in themselves, instead of placing much emphasis on things that are really worth exploring, surprises will turn into blind curiosity or astonishment which can only be detrimental. We can see that Descartes’ view of moderation is similar to the middle way proposed by Aristotle. Excessive surprise can break up the balance of emotions and may even make people’s actions deviate from the right track.

Next, Descartes analyzes the four basic passions: love, hate, happiness and sadness. Their function is similar to Empedokler’s idea that love makes the four roots grow, and hate makes the four loose. Love makes people get close to the things in which they develop strong passion. Therefore, love has the function of aggregation; while hate keeps people away from the things they dislike. Love arouses the emotion of intimacy, which the emotions caused by hate are just the opposite. Regardless of the passion of love or hate, their objects can be presented to the soul by some external sense organs, or presented to the soul by internal sense organs and by people’s own reason. Through internal senses and rational judgments, we can form a kind of judgment about value. People usually have a strong love for beautiful things and a strong hatred for unpleasant things. This passion of appreciation and hatred has a strong stimulus to the soul. Because judging beauty and unpleasantness mainly depends on the external senses of vision, the things that these senses bring to the soul are more touching than the things presented through reason, so people should be especially careful about these two passions. This kind of bodily pleasures are different from pure intellectual happiness, which is more advanced and gives soul the comfort.

Happiness can help us maintain physical perfection, while sadness sometimes has a positive effect too. Sadness comes from pain. Painful feelings can trigger a passion of sadness in the soul, leading to hatred for things that cause pain, and thus a desire for liberation. The soul will be alert to things that hurt the body, making us want to escape from the harm it brings. These passions are very useful, and the impact on us needs to be viewed dialectically. Sadness can make people restrain and fear, and then make people cautious. It is more necessary than happiness, because happiness driven entirely by desire may cause us to indulge in unreal illusions and this leads to our reckless behaviors. Hatred is also more useful than love, because it can help us reject those that are harmful to us. As regards to love, when our love is not sincere, it brings us close to something that may be detrimental to us, or at least something that is not worth thinking about

in this way, which makes us deplete. It is particularly worth reminding: love contains the passion of desire. The main function of morality is to control inappropriate desires. When the desire comes from a real knowledge, it is always beneficial; when it is formed based on some mistakes, it must be evil. From this we can see: passion comes from value judgments. In addition to the good and bad judgments based on desire, there are also judgments on the probability of occurrence of things that also trigger our passions in other aspects. For example, things with high probability of occurrence will stimulate our expectations, but the probability of occurrence is small. Things will trigger our emotions such as worry, hesitation, weakness, and fear. In addition, passion also includes moral judgment. The good from ourselves and our own perfection give us inner satisfaction, while the evil caused by ourselves gives us bitter remorse.

The training of passion, soul and virtue

Virtue training is the best way to remedy passion. As long as our soul has its own satisfaction within it, all troubles from elsewhere will not harm it in any way. On the contrary, it will increase its own happiness, because seeing that it cannot be violated by these passions will make it realize its advantages. In order for our soul to have something satisfactory for itself, it is only necessary to make the soul follow virtue exactly. The idea that the soul has virtue can be traced back to Plato's view of the soul. Plato gives a new interpretation of the Pythagorean view of the soul and points out the essence of the soul. He believes that the purely rational soul enters the human body and becomes a prisoner of the body. It is often controlled by passion, especially desire. Therefore, the soul is divided into three parts: reason, passion, and desire. Desire is an impulse for reproduction, nutrition, and possession. Passion is an impulse for fame and power. Because of its obedience to the orders of reason, its status is higher than desire. Only reason has the ability to pursue wisdom and the ability to seek for truth. The virtue of the rational part of the soul is wisdom, the virtue of the passion is bravery, and the virtue of the desire is temperance. Reason governs passions and desires. Passions obeys the leadership of reason. Desires also follow the command of reason. Although Plato's ideas are different from those of Descartes, the same thing remains that passions are both restricted and controlled by the rational part of the soul .

The process by which the soul controls our passion is the exercise of our free will. Those who are full of passion are usually those who do not have enough self-knowledge. When new things appear, they cannot use their free will to make a sound judgement about it. Reason can make people become the masters of passion. Like Plato, Descartes also believes that good education is very useful

for us to obtain knowledge about good and evil to guide our actions .Moreover, if people realize the importance of using free will, they can unlock the keys to all other virtues. People who act according to virtues will always feel the inner tranquility of soul, which we usually call it stability of consciousness.

In addition, Descartes especially emphasizes the importance of tolerance as a virtue for us .The reasons are as follows: first, magnanimity is the best remedy for these excessive behaviors. If we have too strong feelings about what we imagine that may deceive the soul, we should not make any judgments before this emotion has cooled down, and turn our attention to other ideas until the animal spirit in the blood is completely agitated. This is a magnanimous attitude. Second, magnanimity means that we do not value ourselves so much that we can treat each other as equals with respect to free will of everyone. Descartes believes that a person who possesses this kind of virtue can become the master of his own passions.

CONCLUSION

Passions are not good or bad. Their appearance is sometimes unpredictable, but the soul has the ability to control and use them. This ability of the soul comes from the knowledge of free will, the knowledge of the truth of things. Descartes builds up his ethical system by starting from his researches about passion, and finally highlights the core concept of morality , that is , respecting everyone's free will .Whether we want it or not, passions will come to us and we are all affected by them. What we can do is to live in harmony with it. Passions reflect the impermanence of human life, so if you do not know how to control your passion, your destiny will become out of you control, and it is easier to realize the bitterest connotation of life. We need to rely on wisdom, because it can be instructive for people to be the masters of their passions, and to arrange and control them skillfully. In this way, the undesirable consequences that these passions may cause become completely bearable and people can find their inner peaceful state of mind again.

REFERENCES

- Descartes, R. (1998). *The first philosophical contemplation*. The Commercial Press.
- Descartes, R. (1999). *Works and letters*. Galima Press.
- Descartes, R. (2000). *Les Passions de l'âme*.
- Descartes, R. (2003). *Discours de la méthode*. Le Livre De Poche.
- Samuel, S., & James, F. (2012). *Socrates to sartré and beyond: A history of philosophy*. McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc..