

DESCARTES AS A PSYCHOTHERAPIST*

THE USES OF RATIONAL PHILOSOPHY IN THE TREATMENT OF DISCOMFORT AND DISEASE; ITS LIMITATIONS

by

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DESCARTES' psychotherapeutical designs can be derived from his correspondence with the Bohemian Princess Elizabeth and from his *Treatise of the Passions*, published in 1649, at the age of 53, a few months prior to his death. These psychotherapeutical designs are closely related to his theory of the passions.

Descartes conceived the passions as being caused, upheld and fortified by some movement of the (animal) spirits, which he believed to be the 'most active and quickest particles of the blood' converted into a very subtle air or wind. He defined the passions as cognisings, or feelings, or emotions; in fact, his aim was 'to consider how the passions of the soul differ from all its other thought.'¹ He thus stressed and always maintained the primarily psychological nature of the passions, regardless of their physical equipment. Not only did he add 'that they quite specially refer to the soul, in order to distinguish them from the other feelings which are not so referred—some, such as odours, sounds, colours, referred to external objects, other, such as hunger, thirst, pain, referring to our body';² he explicitly stated that feelings exist only in my thought ('*sentiments . . . n'ont aucune existence hors de ma pensée*') and that they are as different from the objects as pain is from the shape or the movement of the arrow which causes it.³ Moreover, since he believed animals to be deprived of reason and thought, and since, on the other hand, he could not deny to them the movements of the spirits and the gland, he ascribed to animals no more than the movements of the nerves and the muscles which, as a rule, accompany the passions. However he denied to animals the passions themselves, ascribing them solely and unmistakably to beings endowed with reason and thought.⁴

The first therapeutical design is embodied in two letters addressed to the Princess Elizabeth. In his letter of May or June 1645, Descartes confessed that there is only one remedy which consists in diverting our imagination and our senses as much as possible and in using only our understanding in considering the enemies, who are within us and with whom we must live, the 'enemies' evidently being the state of suffering and the symptoms which the princess must have described in her own letter. He drew the picture of

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¹ Article 27 of the *Passions of the Soul*.

² Article 29 of the *Passions of the Soul*.

³ Replies to the Sixth Objections.

⁴ Article 50 of the *Passions of the Soul*.

a person who would have an infinity of valid reasons for suffering but who would make every effort to divert the imagination to such an extent that these reasons would never be an object of thought, except when a pressing need would arise, and that all other moments be devoted only to objects capable of bringing contentment and joy . . .

Descartes here referred to the self-observation and self-treatment of an early indisposition which, in spite of the physician's poor prognosis, he succeeded in overcoming, due to his inclination to look at events from the angle that made them seem most pleasant and to act in such a way that his main satisfaction depended on himself alone. The statement definitely implied a *stoic* element despite Descartes' polemic attitude towards Seneca. In terms of modern psychotherapy, the Cartesian method emerges as an early design of autosuggestion or autopersuasion. Being a treatment by psychological means, it also emerges as a pre-design of a *traitement moral* though its target was not mental alienation but inner unrest, distress, and their physical after-effects. He reaffirmed his recommendations in another letter, addressed to this same person, July 1647, He then even used terms such as 'strong persuasion' and 'firm belief'. Like Pinel, the authentic originator of 'moral treatment', Descartes left room for the healing power of nature. Though he approved of diet and exercise, he still believed that the remedies of the soul rank highest among all remedies applied.

The truly psychological nature of his treatment is also conspicuous in article 45 of *The Passions of the Soul*.

In order to excite courage and to suppress fear, the will to do so is not sufficient; we have to bring to mind the reasons, the signs, which suggest to us that the danger is not great, that there is more security in defense than in flight, that we shall have the glory and joy of having conquered, whereas we can expect nothing but regret and shame from having fled . . .

In article 211 of *The Passions of the Soul* he finally formulated this design as 'the general remedy' against the passions.

When the passions urge us only towards things the execution of which necessitates some delay, we ought to abstain from pronouncing any judgment on the spot, and to divert ourselves by other thoughts until time and rest shall have entirely calmed the emotion which is in the blood. And finally, when it incites us to actions regarding which it is requisite that an immediate resolution should be taken, the will must make it its main business to consider and follow up the reasons which are contrary to those set up by the passions, although they appear to be less strong . . .⁵

This text appears to be an amplification of article 46 of the same treatise:

There is one special reason why the soul is unable to change or suppress its passions in an effortless manner [promptement] and this reason is what has led me, in defining them, to say that they are not merely caused, but also upheld and fortified by some particular movement of the [animal] spirits. They are almost all accompanied by some excitation [de quelque émotion] taking place in the heart, and consequently also in all the blood and [animal] spirits, so that until this commotion has subsided, the passions remain present to our thought in the same manner as sensible objects are present to us in thought during the time they act on our sense-organs. Just as the soul, in making itself closely attentive to some other thing, can prevent itself from hearing a slight noise or feeling a slight pain, but cannot the same way escape hearing thunder or feeling fire burning the hand, it is similarly easy to overcome the lesser passions, but not those that are more violent and powerful; we have to await the abating of the commotion in the blood and

⁵ *Descartes Selections*, ed. Ralph Eaton, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1927, pp. 401–403.

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spirits. The most the will can do while this commotion is in its full strength, is to refuse consent to its effects, and to restrain several of the movements in which it disposes the body. For instance, if anger causes the hand to be upraised for striking, the will can usually arrest it [from further action]; if fear incites the legs to flight, the will can restrain them, and so in all other like cases.⁶

Common to all these texts is the disbelief in an immediate and direct suppression of the passions, the various movements accompanying them and the belief in the delaying and diverting thoughts and movements. Thus took shape a psychotherapeutical design⁷ which did neither deny the first principles of a philosophy seeing in man primarily a thinking being, nor the point of departure of its author trusting to have reached firm grounds only when he had retreated to his conscious thinking and doubting self as the only remaining and unshakable ground. The twentieth-century reader trained in the science and power of the unconscious, may be reluctant to accept the efficacy of Descartes' method; but he will not remain unimpressed by the inner coherence of the same thought no less palpable in Descartes' theory of knowledge than in its practical consequences and applications.⁸

The conclusion seems inescapable that ultimately in Descartes' thought the passions and the movements exciting them in the brain remained two irreducible terms bringing home to the reader the Cartesian fundamental and indissoluble distinction between mind and body.

This distinction between the movements and the passions excited by them, reappears in another therapeutical design in which Descartes anticipated the methods and results of a now self-sufficient branch of experimental neurophysiology which took shape more than two hundred years after his lifetime, i.e. the conditioned reflexes. Each movement of the gland, he said in article 44 of *The Passions of the Soul*, seems to have been naturally joined from our earliest years to some one of our thoughts; we can nonetheless by habituation join it with another. Though the movements which represent certain objects to the soul, are naturally connected with these which excite in it certain passions, they can, by habituation, be separated from them and joined with other very different passions. Although animals lack reason, and perhaps thought of any kind, all the movements of the spirits of the gland, which in us excite the passions, are none the less in them. They serve to maintain and fortify not, as in humans, the passions, but the movements of the nerves and muscles which customarily accompany them. He believed these considerations to be helpful in encouraging us to practise watchfulness in respect of our passions. He maintained that since we

⁶ Descartes' Philosophical Writings selected and translated by Norman Kemp Smith, London, Macmillan, 1952, pp. 300–301.

⁷ On the other hand, one may also see in the Cartesian union and apparent fusion of mind and body, the prerequisite for the therapeutical effects of *physical* agents likely to reach the soul. ' . . . I am not only lodged in my body as a pilot in a vessel, but . . . I am besides so intimately conjoined, and as it were inter-mixed with it, that my mind and body compose a certain unity'. *The Meditations and Selections from the Principles of René Descartes*, translated by John Veitch, Open Court Publishing House, Illinois, 1945, p. 94.

⁸ Delay as a therapeutical device appears for the first time in Seneca's moral essay *On Anger*; the crucial passage reads as follows: ' . . . The cause of anger is an impression of injury, and to this we should not easily give credence. We ought not to be led to it quickly even by open and evident acts; for some things are false that have the appearance of truth. We should always allow some time; a day discloses the truth'. The method to delay action in a state of anger reappears in Dacier's biography of Plutarch (A.D. 46–120). Again, the method is illustrated by the angry master setting out to punish a slave who has committed a fault. André DACIER, *Les vies des hommes illustres pour servir de supplément aux vies de Plutarque*, Nouvelle édition, Paris, 1803, tome 12, An XI.

can with some little address and skill change the movements of the brain in animals devoid of reason, manifestly we can do so still more effectively in the case of men.^{9,10}

Descartes declared all passions to be good by nature ('toutes bonnes de leur nature': art. 211 of *The Passions of the Soul*) and that one should only avoid their wrong use or excess. Similarly, he understood that 'the utility of all the passions wholly consists in their manner of fortifying and prolonging in the soul the thoughts which it is good it should conserve, and which lacking their support, might readily have been effaced from it. On the other hand all the harm they can cause consists in their fortifying and conserving these thoughts beyond what is required, or in their fortifying and conserving others on which it is not good to dwell'.¹¹ In other words, Descartes conceived the passions as *instrumental* in human life, thought, and conduct.

Descartes was not satisfied with the instrumental role of the passions in general and abstract terms; he described in detail and in concrete terms the utility of a number of them. He thus offered a teleological interpretation of pain as a warning against imminent physical harm. It excites in the soul the passion of sadness (*tristesse*), succeeded in its turn by that of hatred (*haine*) of the cause of pain and finally the desire to get rid of it. Similarly, the passion of joy succeeds the feeling of titillation (*chatouillement*) by which the soul is informed about the things beneficial to the body; then the passion of love (presumably of the cause) originates, succeeded in its turn by the desire to obtain the cause of the feeling of titillation.

But Descartes did not apply the instrumental function of the passions to a more specific therapeutical design as he did when recommending to the Princess Elizabeth other significant constituents of his doctrine, above all, the primacy of soul and thought as methods of treating mental distress and even physical ailments. The reason for not using the passions therapeutically might have been lack of similar personal contacts and problems resulting from individual distress such as were conveyed to him by his intelligent and distinguished correspondent, who asked for advice and assistance. Were this true he would neither have been the first nor the last author to owe the development and elaboration of his thesis to opportunity and request.

In spite of their inner coherence and its scope, Descartes' therapeutical designs contain certain presuppositions and captious elements which must be denounced. The design presupposes the union of body and mind. The notion of this union was considered by Descartes as one of the few 'primary notions' which are, as it were, the originals on the pattern of which we form the rest of our knowledge (letter to Elizabeth of 31 March 1643). But the notion implies a *seat of the soul* in the pineal gland as the area in which the union takes place. This doctrine was denounced as ambiguous at an early hour (by Gassendi). I have myself emphasized its most precarious and equivocal nature whenever I have discussed the history and the principles

⁹ Descartes' Philosophical writings selected and translated by Norman Kemp Smith, London, Macmillan, 1952, pp. 304–305.

¹⁰ W. Riese, 'Descartes's ideas of brain function', *The history and philosophy of knowledge of the brain and its functions*, ed. F. N. L. Poynter, Oxford, Blackwell, 1958, pp. 115–134.

¹¹ Article 74 of *The Passions of the Soul*.

of cerebral localization.¹²

The second precarious presupposition implied in Descartes' therapeutical designs is that of the 'animal spirits' by the intervention of which the action of the soul reaches the bodily organs. The conception of the animal spirits carries the same ambiguity as that of the seat of the soul. Though the 'spirits' are conceived by Descartes as invisible, they are still conceived by him as corporeal and it is precisely their corporeal nature which makes them unfit for serving as intermediary between soul and body. *No matter (res extensa) can serve as seat or carrier of thought which by definition is understood by Descartes to be unextended.*

The third and the most precarious constituent of Descartes' therapeutical designs is to be found in his 'general remedy against the passions'.¹³ He placed among the remedies 'the forethought and diligence whereby we can correct our natural faults in exercising ourselves in separating within us the movements of the blood and spirits from the thoughts to which they are usually united'. But do we really sense these movements? Can we separate from thought neurophysiological processes which we do not sense? Descartes here reiterated the same thesis on which he constructed his theory of vision, namely that the soul perceives only in so far as it is in the brain. Descartes' theory of the passions cannot be understood unless we understand his theory of vision; and his theory of vision cannot be understood unless we understand the basic tenets of authentic Cartesianism.

Descartes finally declared that 'the most general remedy and the most easy to practise against all excesses of the passions is that, when we feel our blood to be thus agitated, we should be warned of the fact, and recollect that all that presents before the imagination tends to delude the soul and causes the reasons which serve to urge it to accomplish the object of its passion to appear much stronger than they are, and those which serve to dissuade it to be much weaker.'¹⁴ No passage in the whole treatise, if not in the Cartesian texts at large, seems to bring home to the reader with greater force the general significance of Cartesianism for the mastery of the passions, and thus for Cartesian ethics. In this passage the philosopher, once more, turns to reason and sound judgment as the ultimate criteria and moving principles of moral conduct.

But granted that at the height of the passions, when an immediate resolution should be taken, we are able to *consider* 'the reasons which are contrary to those set up by the passions, although they appear to be less strong'—does it follow that we are always able to follow these reasons under the circumstances and to *act* according to these reasons? Do these reasons have in themselves *moving* power? Is insight sufficient to set into motion those instrumentalities by means of which we act according to insight? Does the one who knows how he *should* act, necessarily act accordingly?

¹² W. Riese, *Principles of neurology in the light of history and their present use*, Nervous and Mental Disease Monographs No. 80, New York, 1950.

W. Riese, *History of Neurology*, M. D. Publications Inc., New York, 1959.

W. Riese and E. C. Hoff, 'A history of the doctrine of cerebral localization, sources, anticipations and basic reasoning', *J. Hist. Med.*, 1950, 1, 50-71.

W. Riese and E. C. Hoff, 'A history of the doctrine of cerebral localization'. Part II: Methods and Main Results', *J. Hist. Med.*, 1951, 6, 439-70.

¹³ Article 211 of *The Passions of the Soul*.

¹⁴ *loc. cit*

In this most crucial area of his *moral* doctrine Descartes' thought again became neurophysiological. But granted that the soul by willing makes the small gland move, the question at stake is precisely that of an intelligible explanation of this mysterious moving power of the soul which is simply stated in neurophysiological terms, but not answered. When trying to master the *reality* and living experience of the passions, we are thus compelled to fall back to Descartes' purely *speculative* design of brain structure and brain function. The alarming dialectic between reason and passion persists in all its strength. It appears that man striving for decision, is left with Descartes' imaginary neuroanatomical and neurophysiological knowledge, which did not stand the tests of observation and experimentation. But can we in fairness expect that the road to the mastery of the passions, and thus to moral principles and conduct, leads through neuroanatomy and neurophysiology? Does a better knowledge in these sciences provide for a better resistance against the threatening power of the passions? Here ends the contribution of Descartes as a psychotherapist, and here begins the problem of his twentieth-century reader.

TWO LETTERS FROM DESCARTES TO THE PRINCESS ELIZABETH

Egmond, May or June, 1645

Madame,

I could not read the letter which your Highness did me the great honour of writing to me, without being intensely moved by the fact that so rare and so accomplished a virtue should not be accompanied by health or the prosperity it deserves; and I can well understand the multitude of sufferings encountered and which are all the more difficult to overcome because true reason does not command that they be opposed directly and driven out. These enemies are within us and we must live with them, and thus we must always guard ourselves against them to prevent them from causing us harm; and there is only one remedy which consists in diverting our imagination and our senses as much as possible and to use only our understanding in considering these enemies, when prudence itself obliges us to do so.

In this particular case I feel that it is easy to notice the difference which exists between the understanding and the imagination and the senses; for this difference is such, I believe, that a person who would have every reason to be happy, but who would be continually shown tragedies whose every act would be ominous, a person whose sole occupation would be the consideration of objects of sadness and pity known to be fictitious and fabulous, so that the only result would be to bring tears and move the imagination without touching the understanding, I believe that that only would suffice to accustom the heart to anguish and to sighs. As a result, the circulation of the blood would be retarded and slowed down, the grossest parts of the blood, adhering one to the other, could easily obstruct the spleen, by getting caught and stopping in the pores; and the most subtle parts, retaining their agitation, could alter the lung and cause a cough which ultimately might prove dangerous. On the contrary, a person who would have an infinity of valid reasons for suffering, but who would make every effort to divert the imagination to such an extent that these

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reasons would never be an object of thought except when a pressing need would arise, and that all other moments be devoted only to objects capable of bringing contentment and joy, such a person not only would find this conduct useful in judging more sanely matters of importance, which would thus be regarded without passion, but doubtlessly would find that this conduct by itself would be capable of restoring health even though the spleen and the lung would be in a poor condition on account of the bad temperament of the blood which is caused by sadness. It would be even better if her Highness used also medical remedies in order to dissolve that part of the blood which causes obstruction. To that effect I judge that the waters of Spa would be indicated, especially if your Highness observes while taking them what physicians are accustomed to recommend, that is to rid the mind completely of all manner of sad thoughts and even of all types of serious meditation related to the sciences. I should advise your Highness to imitate those who while looking at the greenness of a forest, the colours of a flower, the flight of a bird, and whatever spectacles require no attention, persuade themselves that they are thinking of nothing whatever. And that would not be wasting time, but making good use of it; for in so doing, we have the satisfaction of hoping that by this means we shall recover perfect health which is the foundation of all the other blessings, which we can have in this life.

I am aware that what I have written here is even better known to your Highness than to myself and that it is less theory than practice which causes difficulties in the situation. However, the extreme favour which your Highness has bestowed upon me of being interested in my opinion, emboldens me to write it down such as it is. Moreover, I take the liberty of adding that I have myself experienced that a nearly similar, and even more dangerous, disease which I had contracted, was cured by the remedy which I have just described. For, as I have been born of a mother, who died a few days after my birth of a lung disease caused by grief, I had inherited from her a dry cough as well as a pale complexion, which lasted beyond my 20th birthday, and which made all the physicians who examined me before that date condemn me to an early death. But I believe that the inclination to look at events from the angle that made them seem most pleasant and to act in such a way that my main satisfaction depended on myself alone, is the reason why this indisposition, which was natural to me, has little by little vanished from my system.

I am very much obliged to your Highness for having been so kind as to express her opinion concerning Sir Digby's book, which I shall not be capable of reading until it has been translated into Latin. I have been told by Mister Jonsson, who was here yesterday, that several people wish to do so. He also told me that I could address my letters to your Highness by ordinary messengers, a thing I would not have dared to do without his advice, and I had even put off writing this one because I had been waiting for one of my friends to go to the Hague and take it with him. I greatly regret the absence of Monsieur de Pollot because I could have learned from him the state of your health; but the letters that are sent for me to the messengers of Alkmaar never failed to reach me, and as there is nothing in the world that I desire with more passion than to be of service to your Highness, nothing can make me happier than the honour of receiving her orders.

I am, etc.

Paris, July 1647

Madame,

My trip could not have been troubled by any misfortune, for I had the great happiness during my voyage of remaining in your Highnesses thoughts; that most gratifying letter which bears witness to this fact is the most precious object that I could possibly receive in this country. And it would have made me completely happy had it not informed me that the disease from which your Highness was suffering before I left the Hague had left some traces of stomach discomfort. The remedies which your Highness chose, i.e., diet and exercise, constitute in my opinion the best possible after the remedies of the soul, which undoubtedly has great power over the body, as is shown by the great changes that anger, fear and other passions excite. But it is not directly by its volition that the soul leads the (animal) spirits in the places where they can be useful or harmful; it is only by willing or by thinking of something else. For the structure of our body is such that certain movements naturally follow certain thoughts; as we see that blushing follows shame, tears compassion, and laughter joy. And I cannot think of any thought more suited to the conservation of health than a strong persuasion and a firm belief that the architecture of our bodies is so good that once we are healthy we cannot easily fall sick, unless we have indulged to excess or else the air or other external causes have done us harm. And if we do suffer from a disease, we can easily recover by the sole force of nature, especially when we are still young. This persuasion is without doubt much more true and reasonable than that of certain people who, on the report of an astrologer or physician, make themselves believe that they must die at a given date, and by that alone become ill and even in frequent cases succumb, as I have seen it happen to several persons. But I would not fail to become extremely sad if I thought that your Highness was still indisposed; I prefer to hope that health is restored; and yet, my desire to be reassured makes me extremely eager to return to Holland. I expect to leave in 4 or 5 days for Poitou and Brittany where I have business to transact; but as soon as this is settled I firmly hope to return to those happy places where I had the honour of conversing a few times with your Highness. Although there are many people here whom I honour and esteem, I have found nobody who could make me stay. And I am, beyond anything that I can say, etc.

This first English translation of the two letters by Descartes to Elizabeth was made by W. Riese, M.D., with Professor J. Hubert (University of California, Los Angeles). The edition from which the text of the letters is quoted is that of the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade: Descartes, *Oeuvres et Lettres*, textes présentés par André Bridoux, Paris, Librairie Gallimard, 1952, letter of May 1645, p. 1186; letter of July 1647, p. 1280.

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