



## The passions of the soul and other late philosophical writings

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## BOOK REVIEW

**The passions of the soul and other late philosophical writings**, by René Descartes, edited by M. Moriarty, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015, 400 pp., £10.99 (pb), ISBN: 978-0199684137

Descartes's final work published in his lifetime was *The Passions of the Soul* (hereafter *Passions*) of 1649. The general purpose of the text, referred to by its author as his 'little treatise' (74), is to explain the causes and functions of the various emotional perceptions or 'passions' that arise in the immaterial soul due to its very intimate connection with the material body. Although good English editions of the *Passions* are readily available (e.g. by Cottingham, Stoothoff, and Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); and Voss (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989)), Michael Moriarty presents us with an important and enlightening new translation that he supplements with pertinent writings from Descartes's later years.

Descartes explains in his prefatory letter to the *Passions* that he wishes to approach the subject 'simply as a natural philosopher' (194); his explicit concern is to account for phenomena that fall under the scope of the mind-body union. This reflects his tripartite distinction of philosophical inquiry: the 'primary notions' of knowledge that we find within ourselves pertain to (i) the body alone, (ii) the soul alone, and (iii) the union thereof (5; see also 139–40). The focus on mind-body unity puts the intention behind the *Passions* in contrast with most of Descartes's other major works, say, the *Treatise on Man*, primarily a physiological discourse, and the *Meditations*, which, he says, is largely concerned with 'an understanding of the soul alone' (5) – although of course Meditation Six invokes and describes mind-body unity. Relatedly, Moriarty correctly points out a distinction to be made, when reading Descartes, between 'our inner selves' and 'our embodied selves' (xxvi). The *Passions* is Descartes's major discourse on the embodied self.

Passions themselves are perceptions in the mind due to the permutations of the body, and especially movements of animal spirits – the finest particles of blood – in the brain and into the nerves to the muscles. In the narrower sense with which Descartes typically refers to the passions, these perceptions are ascribed to 'the soul alone' (206). Although caused by the body, much like any other perception (e.g. of an object before the senses), passions are distinct in that we usually do not refer them to a proximate cause either inside the body (as we do with hunger or thirst) or in the external world (as we do with perceived objects; 204–5). An explanation of the passions therefore involves a story of what goes on in the body and how that affects the mind (and the reverse) when circumstances arise which potentially impact one's well-being. Moriarty's finding of an embodied Cartesian self in the *Passions* is well justified.

The text of the *Passions* itself fills only around ninety pages in this volume. Moriarty precedes it with other late writings of Descartes, along with numerous letters, that help to contextualize the 'little treatise'. These writings offer insight into Descartes's ambitions and help elucidate his occasionally heterodox use of terms. Worth focusing on are the 59 letters exchanged between Descartes and Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, written over a period of six-and-a-half years prior to Descartes's death. Elisabeth is a proficient interlocutor, pushing Descartes to explain what she sees as gaps or problems in his theories, as well as motivating him to produce the *Passions*. Moreover, she highlights practical hurdles pertaining to social status and sex that Descartes otherwise may not have pondered. For these reasons, Moriarty describes Elisabeth as a collaborator in Descartes's later work (xvi).

While the included correspondence provides background information about motivations underlying the *Passions*, Part One of the *Principles of Philosophy* (first published in Latin in 1644, translated into French and republished in 1647) offers a refresher of metaphysical principles from which explanations of mind-body relationships can be built. Descartes here also describes the fundamental notions and principles of knowledge that allow for any sort of philosophical inquiry. The reader may wish to take this inclusion merely instrumentally, as a tool for understanding the ontology at work in the *Passions*, though the concepts discussed herein are philosophically interesting in their own right. For instance, in the preface to the *Principles* is Descartes's metaphorical tree of philosophy: metaphysics is the roots; physics the trunk; and in the branches one finds the principal scientific domains of mechanics, medicine, and ethics (131).

By bringing together these different parts of Descartes's later writings, Moriarty is able to present a more complete picture of Descartes's prescriptive philosophy than previous editions of the *Passions*. However, Descartes's tree is very tall, and a truly complete understanding of his theory of mind-body interactions requires more than can be offered in this volume. Missing from it are details on the physiological aspects of the mind-body union, such as can be found in the *Treatise on Man* (originally composed in the early 1630s but on which Descartes continued to work during the 1640s) or the *Description of the Human Body* (composed in the latter 1640s). Descartes does mention certain bodily functions in the opening pages of the *Passions*, but this is the briefest of introductions to his physiological account, sufficing only to explain how passions in general are aroused. If the reader desires to learn the specifics of, say, the bodily movements that correspond with a feeling of fear, one will have to look elsewhere than this volume for Descartes's reply. On the other hand, Moriarty's primary interest is Descartes's practical philosophy (which he voices not just throughout the *Passions* but often in his letters with Elisabeth). To that end, one will not find a more helpful edition than this.

Moriarty's careful translation shows respect for Descartes's typically precise, often unorthodox terminology. Of note is his translation of Descartes's use of 'générosité', a term that bears no clear English equivalent (xxvi). Moriarty translates it as 'nobility of soul', diverging from previous translations in which it appears as 'generosity'. Moriarty's account of its etymology differs somewhat from Voss's

(see page 104, note 4 in Voss's translation). However, it is perhaps worth pointing out that Descartes and Elisabeth use 'générosité' conventionally in their letters, prior to its formal analysis in the *Passions*. One can question whether 'nobility of soul' is the best translation for 'générosité' in the letters, even if it is accurate for the *Passions*.

The usefulness of the volume is augmented by detailed explanatory notes on all the works in it, and by a brief appendix elaborating aspects of Descartes's physics as mentioned in the translated letters. Overall, Moriarty's new volume brings together some of Descartes's most important later works, and his translation succeeds in conveying Descartes's pragmatic project as the fruit borne of his natural philosophy.

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