

Descartes entry from *Sex from Plato to Paglia: A Philosophical Encyclopedia* edited by Alan Soble.

Rene Descartes (1596-1650), a Frenchman, was educated by the Jesuits and did groundbreaking work in mathematics and science as well as philosophy. He lost his mother in infancy, suffered from frail health, never married, lived in several countries without settling down, led a private and quiet life, maintained a voluminous correspondence with virtually all the major minds of his time, and died shortly after going to Sweden to be philosopher in residence at the court of Queen Christina (1626-89). He had a brief affair with a Dutch servant named Helene Jars, with regard to which he remarked, “Only a little while ago I was young; I am a man and did not take a vow of chastity, and have never claimed to pass as better behaved than other men”(Rodis-Lewis, 138). He acknowledged the daughter, Francine (1635-40), whom Helene bore him, arranged for the child and her mother to live near him (in spite of his frequent moves), made provisions for her education, and was deeply grieved by her death at age 5.

He is best known for his contributions to epistemology and metaphysics—in particular for his use of methodological doubt and for his radical mind-body dualism, according to which the mind is a thinking (conscious) substance, and the body is simply matter extended in space. This constituted a profound break with the Aristotelean/Thomistic tradition, entailed a rejection of teleology (purposiveness) in nature, and committed him to explaining all bodily processes in a mechanistic manner. He viewed life as merely a kind of heat produced in the organs of the body by a process similar to fermentation. His understanding of reproduction is similarly mechanistic. He believed that each of the sexes produces a sort of seminal fluid and that the seminal material of each acts as a kind of yeast for the other, generating the heat that is the essence of biological life. (*Description of the Human Body*, in Cottingham, Stoothoff and Murdoch, Vol. 1, 322).

Although these changes threatened to undercut the metaphysical foundation of the way the tradition understood sexuality, Descartes' own views about love, desire, and sexuality remained quite conventional. He discusses these in letters and in his last book *The Passions of the Soul* (hereinafter PS) which grew out of his correspondence with Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia (1618-80), who had been pressing him to explain the mind-body union more adequately.

The passions are particularly important for understanding the way mind and body are joined, for they are “so close and so internal to our soul that it cannot possibly feel them unless they are truly as it feels them to be” (PS, Art. 26). Yet they are “caused, maintained and strengthened by some movement of the spirits” (PS, Art. 27). (The term “spirits” refers to animal spirits which are tiny, fast-moving particles involved in perception and movement.) They “dispose our soul to want the things which nature deems useful for us, and to persist in this volition; and the same agitation of the spirits which normally causes the passions also disposes the body to make movements which help us to attain these things” (PS, Art 52), being “ordained by nature to relate to the body, and to belong to the soul only in so far as it is joined with the body” (PS, Art. 137). Behind the use of the term “nature,” of course, stands a benevolent God who joined our souls and bodies together in the way He did for our good. Far from believing the passions to be evil, Descartes says, “It is on the passions alone that all the good and evil of this life depends....” for “persons whom the passions can move most deeply are capable of enjoying the sweetest pleasures of this life.” The chief use of wisdom, he tells us, lies in teaching us to be masters of our passions (PS, Art. 212).

There are six primitive passions: wonder, love, hate, desire, joy, and sadness. Love is “an emotion of the soul caused by a movement of the spirits that prompts (*inciter*) the soul to join itself in volition (*de volunte*) to objects that appear agreeable (PS, Art. 79, my translation). More

precisely, it is “the assent by which we consider ourselves henceforth as joined with what we love in such a manner that we imagine a whole, of which we take ourselves to be only one part, and the thing loved to be the other” (PS, Art. 80). Love covers a very wide variety of phenomena, ranging from the prenatal infant’s feeling of love for suitable food, to our love for God (to Chanut, 1 February, 1647, Kenny, 211-15). Sometimes we regard ourselves as the larger and more important part. Persons, however, are capable of becoming a “second self” (PS, Art. 90), and there are cases where we regard ourselves as the smaller and less important part, as happens with a good father’s love for his child, a soldier’s love for his country, or in the extreme case our love for God. In these latter cases, we are ready to sacrifice even our lives for the other; love thus enables the soul to break out of its isolation and egoism. For Descartes’ views about love, see Beavers, Frierson, Matherton and Voss. On ethics more generally, see also Marshall, Morgan and Rodis-Lewis (1957). The passion of love is commonly associated with a mysterious heat around the heart and a tendency to open our arms as if to embrace something (To Chanut, 1 February 1647, Kenny, 209).

Desire is forward-looking; stimulating us into action to acquire a good or avoid an evil (PS, Art. 57). Sexual desire arises from attraction, and is a result of normal maturation. “Nature has established a difference of sex in human beings, as in animals lacking reason, and with this she has also implanted certain impressions in the brain which bring it about that at a certain age and time, we regard ourselves as deficient—as forming only one half of a whole, whose other half must be a person of the opposite sex.....” When we observe something that attracts us in one of them, it makes our soul “feel towards that one alone all the inclination which nature gives it to pursue the good which it represents as the greatest we could possibly possess” (PS, Art. 90). We are moved (*inciter*) to love one person more than another by two sorts of causes—one in the body

and one in the mind (*esprit*). It is a mark of the latter that, unlike the former, they are almost always reciprocated; he says he is confident that his inclination toward Chanut is reciprocated so it is clear that he is using the term *aimer* broadly to include friendship.

The physical causes that move us to love one person more than another, even before we know their merit, are dispositions or arrangements of the parts of our brain, sometimes (but not always) caused by previous experiences (letter to Chanut (6 June, 1647, AT V:56-8). Passions based on attraction, being perceived through the senses, affect the soul particularly strongly, but they are also “the most deceptive of the passions, against which we must guard ourselves most carefully”(PS, Art. 85). Love is stronger than hatred, and disordered love, he tells Chanut, is more harmful than hatred because there is “more danger in being united with and almost transformed into, a thing which is bad than in being separated in volition from one that is good” (Kenny, 216). Citing a poem about Paris setting Troy ablaze to cool his own passion, Descartes says that the greatest evils of love are those done or permitted for the sole pleasure of the beloved or oneself.

Mastering our passions requires us to be guided by reason. We cannot control them directly, since we continue to feel them until the agitation of spirits subsides, so we need to use indirect means for managing them, and he offers a variety of practical suggestions for doing so. Sometimes we just need to wait them out, refraining from action, and trying to direct our attention to something else. But over time we can try to retrain ourselves and build in new habits. Sometimes merely realizing the cause of some inclination may free us from it, as Descartes’ realization that he was drawn to cross-eyed people because of his childhood love for a cross-eyed girl freed him from feeling this inclination any more (To Chanut. 6 June, 1647, AT 5:56-8).

Bibliography

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