



## Descartes and Modern Theories of Emotion

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## DESCARTES AND MODERN THEORIES OF EMOTION.

THE publication of Descartes' treatise *Les passions de l'âme* deserves to rank as a noteworthy event in the history of Psychology. Though written in the earliest days of modern science, this work will bear comparison with anything that has been produced in recent years. It will be difficult, indeed, to find any treatment of the emotions much superior to it in originality, thoroughness, and suggestiveness. The position maintained is similar to that now held by Professor James, but Descartes does not content himself with defending in a general way the assertion that emotion is caused by physical change. After coming to the conclusion that there are six passions from which all the others are derived, he attempts to show that a special set of organic effects is concerned in the production of each of these primary states. He maintains, further, that the bodily changes in each case are of such a nature that they might naturally be expected to cause the emotion with which they are associated. He strives to prove, therefore, not only that there is a definite physical cause for each emotion, but also that there is a natural fitness in the fact that a particular emotion is dependent on a particular sum of conditions. The organic changes, it may be added, are not confusedly massed together in an undifferentiated whole. The internal disturbance is sharply opposed to the purposive action of the bodily members, and incidental effects, such as weeping, reddening, and trembling, are treated separately. It is evident, therefore, that the theory advanced is worked out with a completeness which is not to be found in the modern presentations of the same general point of view.

In other points, not so closely connected with the main contention, the same acuteness and thoroughness are manifest. It is clearly recognized that objects do not cause emotion by

means of their particular differences, but only by virtue of the different ways in which they are important to us. (*Œuvres*, vol. IV, p. 86, Cousin's ed.) The strength and relative permanence of the passions are explained and the question of control is discussed. Emotion is regarded as having a definite function,<sup>1</sup> and a constant attempt is made to show how it can play its part, and yet be subservient to the purposes of a well-regulated life. Cases of morbid terror, aversion, etc., are explained in an interesting way by means of experiences in infancy, which have left their mark on the psychical constitution of the individual, although they have lapsed from memory (pp. 147, 148). Reference is made to those states which seem to come into being without any definite cause. Some of these are accounted for as effects of the accidentally determined course of ideas (p. 86). The distinction between emotion proper and mere intellectual attitude and mode of behavior, is emphasized. Respect and Contempt, for instance, are stated to be at times merely our opinions of the value of objects (p. 163). Courage is classed as an emotion, but not when it is simply a habit or a natural disposition of the individual (p. 182). Gratitude, we are told, has no opposite, for Ingratitude is a vice merely, *i.e.*, a mode of behavior (p. 197). The almost unvarying consistency with which this distinction is adhered to, is in marked contrast to modern carelessness in this respect.

The remarkable subtlety of the author is not least apparent when he comes to deal with the individual concrete states. He describes Pity as "a species of sadness mingled with love or good-will towards those whom we see suffering some evil which, in our opinion, they do not deserve" (p. 191). The definitions of Disdain, Hope, Jealousy (pp. 176, 177, 178), though not equally good, are still much superior to anything that has been written on those emotions in recent years. A somewhat interesting account is given of 'Love,' in the common acceptation of that term. Nature, according to Descartes, causes us to feel at a certain period of our life that we are incomplete and require an *alter ego* as a supplement. The individual

<sup>1</sup> *Œuvres*, IV, pp. 71, 86, 98, 148. Cousin's ed.

whom we regard as fitted to this end, is that one of the other sex who has, from our point of view, some advantage over the others. 'Love' is simply the desire for possession which follows when the particular individual has been chosen, and, since Nature represents the attainment of the end in question as the highest possible good, our whole soul is concentrated in this desire (pp. 111, 112). Though quaintly expressed, this conception embodies an aspect of the truth. Many minor points give evidence of careful and acute observation on the part of the writer. Fear as opposed to Hope, for instance, is distinguished from the fear of some impending danger, and the presence of Surprise in the state of Terror is noted (pp. 177, 185). Desire is asserted to have no contrary, for it is always the same movement of the soul which impels it to seek a good or avoid an evil (p. 109).

Enough has been said to show that Descartes' contribution to the theory of emotion deserves more attention than it has hitherto received. It is important both intrinsically and by reason of its relation to modern thought on the same subject. It is not by any means a perfectly consistent whole. This is the case, however, mainly because Descartes submits everything to an absolutely impartial investigation, and in this way arrives at conclusions which do not always harmonize with his own theory. Just because it is inconsistent, therefore, it has all the more significance for friends and foes alike of the point of view adopted.

To understand how Descartes came to regard emotion as the result of physical conditions, it is necessary to bear in mind his position with reference to the nature of body and soul and the bond between them. The body, he states expressly, is simply a machine, and all its movements can be explained by the mechanical interaction of its parts. Motion is due to the fact that the heat of the heart keeps the blood circulating, and causes it to give off those quick-moving subtle particles which compose the 'animal spirits' (pp. 43-46). Since the blood is continually passing from the heart to the brain, the process of separating the animal spirits from the grosser elements of the

blood is performed in a very simple way. The former enter those parts of the brain lying near the pineal gland, while the latter are prevented from doing so by the fineness of the pores. As the animal spirits are never at rest, they immediately find their way out of the brain, and, by acting on the muscles, cause movements in different parts of the body. The course they take on leaving the brain is determined, sometimes by their condition at the time, and sometimes by the manner in which the brain is affected, through the medium of the nerves, by the objects of sense. The soul, therefore, is not the cause of all movements in the body. On the contrary, these could all be carried out in a purely mechanical way. This does not actually happen, however, for the soul has a close connection with the body by the means of the pineal gland, situated in the center of the brain. Different states of consciousness arise in accordance with the manner in which the gland is modified by stimuli from outside, and the soul can, by affecting the gland, change the course of the animal spirits and so cause particular actions.

We can now follow the line of argument leading up to the definition of the passions. In order to determine what are the passions of the soul, we must distinguish the functions of the latter from those of the body (p. 38). We see that heat and movement may belong to inanimate bodies, like flame, and we must, therefore, attribute these to the body alone (p. 39). Applying this principle, we discover that thought or consciousness in various forms (*pensées*) belongs exclusively to the mind (p. 53). The passions of the soul are those facts of consciousness which we know that the soul did not constitute by its own activity (p. 54). But what is passion in respect of one object must be action in respect of another (p. 38). There is, however, no object more closely connected with the soul than the body, so that what is passion in the former must usually be regarded as action in the latter (p. 38). In this way the conclusion is reached that the peculiar physical changes which accompany the various passions are the causes of those mental states. Descartes is aware that on his principles all

passions are not emotions, and that he is using the former word in a restricted sense. He indicates clearly the special fact which the term, thus limited, denotes. He defines the 'passions' as 'the perceptions, feelings, or emotions which one refers to the soul itself, and which are caused and maintained by some movement of the animal spirits' (pp. 60, 61). It is better to call them emotions than perceptions or feelings, for they agitate the soul more than anything else, and 'emotion' is a more general term. That they are referred to the soul, distinguishes them on the one hand from colors, sounds, etc., which refer to outward objects, and, on the other, from hunger, thirst, pain, etc., which refer to the body. That they are caused in a peculiar sense by the animal spirits, distinguishes them at once from the other 'perceptions' and from volitions (pp. 61, 62).

It will be noted that emotion is consciously opposed to perception (as we understand it), hedonic effect, and will. Seeing that Descartes uses such terms as '*pensée*' and 'perception' very loosely, we must be careful not to misinterpret him by imagining that he attributes a purely intellectual character to emotion. For the same reason, it might be urged, there is not sufficient evidence to warrant the definite assertion that he regarded the fact in question as a unique element of consciousness, especially when one remembers that he gives no ground of distinction between it and mental pleasure and pain. Nevertheless it is evident, I think, that the tendency is to view the passions as distinct not only in cause but also in psychological character.<sup>1</sup>

To complete our exposition, it will be necessary to give some account of the manner in which the author works out in detail the position he has arrived at. Every external object, by imparting a peculiar motion to the nerves, makes an impression on the pineal gland, and so gives rise to an image of itself in the mind. If the object is related to us in any way for good or ill, a special impression is made, corresponding to this rela-

<sup>1</sup> This statement is made, at present, only in regard to the treatise under discussion.

tion. In consequence of the second cerebral modification, the animal spirits are set in motion, so that they cause certain definite changes in the heart and the parts of the body which convey blood to it. The blood is thus acted on in an unusual manner, and animal spirits are therefore sent to the brain, which are fitted to cause that impression on the gland which conditions a particular emotion. This movement of the spirits to the heart and elsewhere involves, of course, a large amount of internal organic change. The emotion is not due, however, to the latter, but to the action and interaction of the animal spirits and the blood. The advantage of this position is obvious. Descartes can admit that the incidental bodily effects vary; the important thing for him is the clearly defined physical process which underlies the confused multiplicity of particular events, into which the general organic disturbance may be reduced.

When the gland is modified in accordance with the relation of the object to our well-being, the animal spirits do not merely rush to the heart and cause emotion by the process just described. They proceed, at the same time, to the nerves which move the limbs, and thus put the body in a certain attitude (p. 70). The function of the passions is to dispose the soul to will those things which Nature declares to be useful, and the same general agitation of the animal spirits which causes them, disposes the body for the movements which serve to bring those things about (p. 86). The one process in its entirety really gives rise to several results. It causes, for instance, the emotion of fear, prompting to flight, and at the same time starts the movements necessary for that end. It also gives rise to the consciousness of the way in which our body is disposed. On important occasions, therefore, Nature not only supplies a strong incentive to action of a certain kind, but, to facilitate matters, puts the requisite movements in train. The will, however, is free, and 'Nature' herself cannot actually coerce it. The soul can call up various considerations which bring contrary passions into existence (p. 75), or it can act in accordance with the clear and distinct judgment of reason without any

other motive (p. 80). On the other hand, the soul has no direct control over the physical agitation, and, so long as this continues, the passion originally aroused remains and exerts its influence on the will. The conflict which necessarily ensues in these circumstances, must be regarded as a struggle between the soul and the animal spirits, and not between a higher and a lower part of our nature (p. 77). When the emotion is very strong it cannot be easily controlled, for it is apt to take the will by storm.

The theory outlined above may be regarded as the groundwork of the treatise. It is laid down at the beginning, and follows naturally enough from Descartes' principles. It is, on the whole, a consistent working out of the view that emotion is physically conditioned. That view is a difficult one to bring into harmony with the actual state of affairs, and Descartes had a shrewd eye and an open mind for all the facts of the case. The result is, of course, a number of inconsistencies, which at first sight are rather perplexing.<sup>1</sup>

The first complication is caused by the assertion that the soul itself can cause emotion, in so far as it makes the object what it is.<sup>2</sup> If the object is not caused by sense impressions, but by the activity of the mind itself, emotion follows at once without the intervention of bodily change.<sup>3</sup> Such states remain pure a very short time, however, for by association the physical process appropriate to the emotion comes into action. In some

<sup>1</sup> The vital inconsistencies can be explained in this way, but there are minor ones which seem due simply to looseness and inaccuracy of expression.

<sup>2</sup> Descartes calls them 'passions' nevertheless, conforming to popular usage. This, though not exactly misleading, is apt to be confusing.

<sup>3</sup> This disposes of M. Fouillée's assertion that Descartes reduced the passions to a confused feeling of movements in the body (*Descartes*, p. 144). It will be remembered, also, that emotion is distinguished from color, sound, pain, etc., in that it is referred to the soul, while the latter are referred to the body (p. 62). A feeling of organic change, therefore, could not be the emotion, since it involves a reference to the body. Further, emotion is caused by a peculiar change in the pineal gland, brought about by a special movement of the animal spirits, and the consciousness of organic change is a separate fact produced by another modification of the same organ (p. 70). M. Fouillée draws largely upon Descartes' letter to Chanut. This was written in 1647, however, and differs very much from the Treatise, which was published two years later.



ways this reminds one of Professor James' distinction between the 'coarser' and the 'subtler' emotions, as it appears in the *Principles of Psychology*. In itself it would not make much confusion, though one might urge that the same thing could not be caused by a physical or mental process indifferently. It fits in well enough with Descartes' general principles, and was probably deduced from them, though doubtless in emphasizing it the author was influenced by observation of what actually happens.

The stress laid on the fact that emotion is caused by the relations of objects to us for good or ill, is more serious in its consequences. There seem three ways in which these relations may act. They may make a direct impression on the brain, and, by means of this, set the animal spirits in motion without the intervention of the soul (p. 114). In this case, though an obscure notion of good or evil may rise in the mind, it has nothing to do with the production of the emotion. This is the consistent view, since the whole process is mechanically determined. Descartes seems to say, however, that an obscure notion of good or evil may on occasion determine the emotion (p. 111). In this instance, though a mental condition is introduced, it is itself physically determined. The remaining mode of procedure is the most common, since the natural thing is for the soul to recognize whether the object is hurtful or advantageous (pp. 150-4). But, the soul thus *makes the object*, so far as emotion is concerned. Not the particular objects, as such, but their relations to us, are operative, and we make the relations in a real and literal sense, for our opinion in the matter, whether true or false, is the essential factor. The first result of this admission, therefore, is to destroy the distinction between an emotion of the soul and a passion caused by the body, at least as originally stated. Descartes regarded as a 'passion' any emotion which arose when an external object was present. As we have seen, however, it is not the object as such, but our judgment with regard to it, which is usually the essential thing, and this judgment is an activity of the mind. It is clear, then, that if Descartes had realized the full scope of the principle he

had invoked, he would have classed the great majority of the passions as emotions of the soul, and would have been compelled to consider whether the few remaining cases could be regarded as exceptions.

The second result has a wider significance, for it concerns the general point of view, and not merely the special form in which it is here presented. By admitting that an intellectual condition intervenes between the perception of the object and the organic disturbance, Descartes is forced to take up a very artificial position. We perceive the object and regard it as hurtful, or the reverse. This second cognition makes an impression on the gland, and thereupon the physical process appears which causes the emotion. Though the author is not aware of the fact, the intellectual condition is undoubtedly the essential thing. As our view of the case varies, the emotion varies with it. The physical condition becomes a useless interpolation; its occupation is gone. It is evident that Descartes *felt* this, though he never became clearly conscious of it. It is interesting to note how he tends unconsciously to shift his ground. Indeed, in the latter half of Part II, he seems to have made insensibly an almost total change of front. It there appears as if emotion came in immediately after the intellectual condition, and was merely strengthened by the physical process (p. 121). The organic changes in each emotional state are explained on principles which imply a point of view entirely different from that originally adopted. We read, for instance, that the first passion of Hate was caused by the advance of some substance, capable of diminishing the vital heat, towards the heart. At the same time that the animal spirits caused the emotion, they proceeded to the nerves which send blood from the liver and spleen to the heart, so that the foreign body might be prevented from gaining an entrance there. They affected also the nerves which are capable of driving the substance in question into the intestines and stomach. This is why these movements of the body have always accompanied the passion of Hate, for, when a mental and a physical state have once been conjoined, one cannot recur without calling up the other (p. 124). It has

already been implied, however, that the bodily movements peculiar to Hate are naturally adapted to cause that emotion (p. 121). If they followed in accordance with a law of nature, this could be easily understood. If, on the other hand, they arose at first in a purely accidental manner, the case is somewhat different. Besides, it is difficult to see how the physical disturbance, peculiarly fitted to cause Hate, should only come into being after the first emotion of the kind had arisen. The truth is, that the explanation, as it stands, presupposes that the physical process is not the cause but merely the accompaniment of the mental state. It is made avowedly to clear up the fact that the former always *accompanies* the latter (pp. 124-7). The account of the 'external signs of the passions' manifests the same tendency. Sadness, we are told, affects the rapidity of the movement of the blood, and so causes paleness (p. 131). This is not necessarily inconsistent with the original position, it might be urged. It fits in, however, in a remarkable way with the changed attitude, and involves the admission that emotion, as a psychical fact, can produce physical effects directly.

We can, I think, understand these deviations from the original standpoint in the way I have indicated. Descartes starts with the view that the passions are caused by organic change in those cases where sense presentation is concerned. He then notices that an object affects us emotionally, not in so far as it is a particular entity, but in so far as it stands in some relation to us. On the latter point the soul in most instances decides, and as we judge so we feel. The intellectual condition, therefore, becomes all important and the physical condition can only be its organic duplicate. The latter is still retained, however, though it is evidently an inexplicable superfluity. Such a view is difficult to maintain, as the development of Descartes' thought shows plainly enough. It is worthy of notice that the tendency to change is most marked, after it is evident that a clear recognition of the importance of the intellectual condition has been attained. It is in this respect mainly that this treatise is instructive in view of

modern controversy.<sup>1</sup> Professor James has recently made the admission which proved so fatal in Descartes' case (*Psychological Review*, I, 5, p. 518). He therefore occupies the position which his predecessor has unwittingly shown to be so untenable. The original theory of both does not square with the facts, while emendation increases sorrow and diminishes plausibility.<sup>2</sup>

In conclusion we can only deal briefly with the important section which treats of the emotional states in themselves. In classification, as well as in definition, considerable originality is evinced. Descartes rejects the old method of classification on the ground that it depends on the division of the sensitive part of the soul into two parts, the 'concupiscible' and the 'irascible.' This implies that there are two faculties, but if you start in this fashion you will find that there are 'faculties' of admiring, loving, fearing, of acting in accordance with these passions, and so on indefinitely<sup>3</sup> (p. 93). His own method is based to a large extent on his view that emotion is due to the relation of the object to the subject. He states in one place that anything which is hurtful to the body causes pain and the passion of Sadness, then Hate of the cause of the pain, and finally Desire. In the same way, when we are pleased Joy appears, and is succeeded by Love and a corresponding Desire (p. 149).<sup>4</sup> The only primitive emotion which does not find a place here is Admiration. This is defined as 'a sudden surprise of the soul which induces it to concentrate its attention on such objects as appear rare or extraordinary' (p. 95). From

<sup>1</sup> In estimating the significance of Descartes' work, one must also refer to the fact that the same rather paradoxical conclusion has been arrived at independently in recent times.

<sup>2</sup> No radically new conception, however, is put forward in vain. It causes reflection at the least and brings new facts to light. The stimulating effect has been specially marked in the present instance. There is now a strong and increasing interest in the subject of emotion, but practically nothing was done in modern times till Professor James, in 1884, startled psychologists into activity.

<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless Descartes cannot be regarded as free from the error of the 'faculty' psychologists. The distinction between passion and will (p. 71) makes this plain. The point has been brought out recently by Dr. Titchener (*PHILOSOPHICAL REVIEW*, iv, 2, p. 198).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. pp. 88-93.

these six passions all the others are derived, and a good deal of space is devoted to proving this in detail. The number of primitives is of course too small. Fear, Anger, Respect, and Contempt, should at least have been added to the list. The ambiguity of the word 'admiration' helps the author out somewhat, and enables him to get an apparent derivation for Respect, Contempt, Pride, and Humility. Anger is confounded with Hate, and Fear makes its appearance in a very surreptitious fashion. When all has been said, however, it cannot be denied that this endeavor to introduce order into chaos is noteworthy. It compares very favorably with the later attempt made by Spinoza, for Descartes builds on a sounder foundation, and is throughout more in touch with fact.

Although the definitions and descriptions of the various emotions deserve the highest praise, we cannot help feeling that Descartes would have achieved more in this department, if he had at the outset determined accurately in each case the characteristic of the fact as it appears in consciousness. The variations in the account of 'Love,' for instance, are simply due to the fact that he did not take sufficient pains to determine what the state is, from the point of view of conscious content. This is accompanied, of course, by a similar negligence with regard to the psychical characteristics of emotion as such. Few psychologists of the present day, however, are in a position to reproach Descartes on this score. The present chaos of opinion with regard to emotion can be traced almost entirely to the same carelessness with respect to this vital question.

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