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Deborah J. Brown, *Descartes and the Passionate Mind*. Cambridge, U.K., and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. xi + 231 pp. Bibliography and index. \$85.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-521-85728-4.

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Descartes is one of those figures in the canon of western thought who have become metonyms for grand philosophical problems. The boldness with which his *Meditations* (1641) seems to argue for the essential distinction and independence of mind and body has made him the poster child of dualism and the concomitant mind-body problem. According to the longstanding interpretation, Descartes is responsible for splitting the self in two and treating a spiritual mind as if it can operate most effectively when divorced from an interfering material body. This dualism has long been criticized by thinkers like Gilbert Ryle who named it “the dogma of the Ghost in the Machine”[1] and, more recently, Antonio Damasio for whom it is a foil to his argument that “aspects of the process of emotion and feeling are indispensable for rationality.”[2]

In this book, Deborah J. Brown argues that, contrary to conventional readings, Descartes developed a coherent theory of the integrated self for whom not only is embodiment *not* an impediment to the mind, it is *crucial* to rational action, acquiring scientific knowledge, understanding causality, and the benefits of social relations. Brown’s strategy in developing this interpretation is to argue that what Damasio criticizes as “Descartes’ error” was not Descartes’ at all, but rather that of people who misread his works by privileging the metaphysical writings, particularly the *Meditations*, over the ‘practical’ ones (p. 58). The core of these practical writings is Descartes’ *Passions of the Soul* (1649). Brown shows how this treatise grew out of his correspondence with Princess Elisabeth, who pressed him to explain how mind and body could interact with each other and to recommend strategies for dealing with personal difficulties she was then experiencing.

Brown argues that Descartes’ “*Passions* complements the project of the *Meditations* in providing an account of the passions compatible with the general rejection of sensations as epistemically foundational” (p. 26). Brown suggests that conventional readings of Descartes as a dualist focus on merely the metaphysical side of what is a composite but integrated corpus of writings. On the other side of the corpus are Descartes’ practical writings, which for the sake of making recommendations for navigating “ordinary life” re-integrates what his metaphysics “disintegrates.” Brown thus recognizes distinctions in the orientations of the representative works of these two sides that together form the composite whole of Descartes’ corpus: the *Meditations* and the *Passions*. “The most significant difference between the two texts,” she writes, “is that whereas the *Meditations* recommends withholding assent in *all* theoretical matters which are not clear and distinct, Descartes can make no such demand in the practical sphere” (p. 26). Brown thus presents Descartes as having two distinct but complementary projects, one that is skeptical and metaphysical and another that is positive and practical and privileges embodiment and the sufficiency of “moral certainty” for “ordinary life” (p. 27). Brown’s Descartes thus resembles Hume, a metaphysical skeptic who nonetheless made ethical recommendations for the sake of “common life.”

Arguing that “our understanding of the union is anything but a peripheral concern in Descartes’ corpus” (p. 140), Brown’s re-reading of this corpus as a composite whole made up of metaphysical and of

practical elements turns out to be analogous to what she argues was Descartes' own strategy for resolving certain philosophical problems involving identity and difference. Brown argues that ultimately Descartes distinguished between two different "conceptual strategies that cannot be simultaneously employed" for understanding the self. She suggests that, for Descartes, one's practical experience of the self as whole composed of a soul and a body is what facilitates one's understanding of other composite wholes. In chapter four, for example, Brown proposes that Descartes' "notion of an idea is to be understood as a whole composed of two parts—a mode of mind and the thing it represents, in an objective mode of being" (p. 113). In chapter five, she argues that Cartesian passions and actions should be similarly understood "as constituting a whole which is made up of events in the body and thoughts in the mind" (p. 134). She also argues that, for Descartes, even causality is best understood not through metaphysical categories of mind and body, but rather through *a posteriori* concepts gleaned from experience, particularly that of the union of mind and body as a single operating entity.

The second of Descartes' two conceptual strategies, that of focusing on "the experience of our own agency," grounds his claim that to be an epistemic agent is precisely to be an embodied self, especially one that is embedded in complex social relations (p. 141). Much of Brown's focus is on how Descartes understood the passions in particular as helping to orient the integrated whole of mind and body. She explores, for example, the central role that he assigned to wonder. Wonder, she shows, "motivate[s] us to obtain scientific knowledge" by "holding the body and sense organs fixed and attentive" on novel phenomena. Brown thus notes that, contrary to conventional characterizations, Descartes did "not countenance the idea of a purely dispassionate relationship to knowledge" (p. 148). Cartesian wonder not only motivates us to know the world; more significantly, it has a role to play in our understanding of human nature by fixing attention on our own inward experiences of being agents in the world.

Brown explores implications for Descartes' moral theory by noting that species of wonder which direct the mind's attention inward also involve a form of self-assessment. For Descartes, the passions of self-esteem and self-contempt are central to our experiential knowledge of the unified mind and body because they represent feedback when we either succeed or fail to move our bodies. While self-esteem and self-contempt principally function to get us to know ourselves and while generally the passions function to preserve the union of mind and body, Brown explores how, for Descartes, there are also "interplays between our own passions and those of others, which affect our conception of our own agency, and make us attuned to other minds" (p. 159). The passion of love in particular helps us understand, as Descartes explained in a letter to Elisabeth, that "one could not subsist alone and that one is...one of the parts of the universe,...of this state, and of this society and of this family" (p. 160). Descartes' discussion of love thus runs counter to conventional caricatures of Cartesian dualism and Brown rightly notes that "this is not the thinking of a hyper-rationalist but of someone sensitive to the fact that our embodiment is important to our identities as individual and socially related persons" (p. 163).

In the final two chapters, Brown explores how, according to Descartes, the composite self achieves self-mastery by rationally managing desires, particularly those of *regret* and *générosité*. As our passions, like our senses, can misrepresent things to our minds, regret results from desires that cannot be fulfilled because certain things depend on fortune rather than on us. "The first task of moral philosophy" for Descartes, "is thus to 'free the spirit' from vain desires" (p. 178) and to find satisfaction by "desir[ing] what God decrees" (p. 180). Brown adds that, besides the management of regrets, there is "a stronger medicine" for achieving happiness: *générosité*. Brown develops her reading of *générosité* by contrasting Cartesian virtue with Machiavellian *virtù*, for which prudential behavior is an end in itself. The problem for Descartes was how to conceive of virtue "in the absence of omniscient knowledge" (p. 196). Brown argues that the key to distinguishing Cartesian virtue from Machiavellian *virtù* is to see that, for Descartes, bringing the passions "under rational control will significantly reduce the likelihood of cases that involve gross moral errors" (p. 197). Cartesian generosity is fundamental to his understanding of virtue because it is the feeling one gets when one recognizes that one has used the will well. Brown

points out that “it is first a passion and then, through habit, a virtue” (p. 198).

People cultivate virtue, the habit of generosity, “through various cognitive exercises” (p. 199). Brown explains that Descartes’ therapeutic exercise for achieving happiness involves the use of wonder to get the soul to fix its attention on “the freedom of its will,...to those things which depend on it alone, and to esteem them more highly than things which do not depend upon it” (p. 201). In order to properly function as a therapy, we must recognize the power and value of our wills by attending to “images caused by our acting through our bodies.” It is by comparing these images of real power and value to those images that merely “present themselves as good” that the embodied person feels *générosité* and can train oneself to be virtuous, or in other words, to will those things which both depend on us and are consistent with desiring what God decrees.

The Cartesian self that takes shape from this re-reading of Descartes’ corpus through the prism of the *Passions* is very different from the one presented in conventional accounts. This Cartesian self turns out to be an integrated composite of mind and body for which the passions play a crucial role in cognition and action. On this reading, Descartes may turn out to be as foundational a figure for an “age of sentiment” as he was for an “age of reason.”

While this is a welcome corrective to canonical readings that privilege the *Meditations*, most, if not all, of the problems for which Descartes’ conception of the integrated self as a passionate mind provides resolutions were problems generated by embodiment in the first place and so, in his letter of 1 September 1645, Descartes reassured Elisabeth that “natural philosophy by itself makes us hope that our soul will be in a happier state after death than now.”[4] There are also a number of other issues that may be of concern, particularly to intellectual historians. Besides her exploration of Descartes’ correspondence with Elisabeth, for example, Brown’s discussion essentially ignores the wider contexts of the New Philosophy, which made understanding the role of passions in cognition and action one of its concerns. Chapter two, which purports to examine Descartes’ place in the history of ideas about the passions, barely mentions Edward Reynolds’ *Treatise of the Passions and Faculties of the Soule of Man* (1640), which he dedicated to Princess Elisabeth. Brown also makes only the briefest mention of such other French works as Marin Cureau de la Chambre’s *Les caractères des passions* (1640-62) before focusing exclusively on classical, medieval, and Renaissance works. Also, although Brown discusses aspects of the medical and moral traditions of treating the passions, she ignores a very important third tradition. This is the tradition of rhetoric, which Descartes explicitly claimed to reject and which stretched back to Aristotle’s extensive discussion in his *Art of Rhetoric*. Reynolds called this rhetorical tradition the “Civill discourse” of the passions and described it as exploring “how [the passions] may be severally wrought upon and impressed; and how, and on what occasions, it is fit to gather and fortifie, or to slack and remit them, how to discover, or suppress, or nourish, or alter, or mix them, as may be most advantageous.”[3] Given Brown’s description of the Cartesian self as fully integrated not only with itself as a composite but also with others as communicating social beings, it seems—on the surface at least—strange that he should so explicitly have distanced himself from this tradition. Besides, Descartes’ *Passions* did leave a sufficiently deep mark on this tradition to have influenced Bernard Lamy’s important *Art de parler* (1675) and sparked a nasty quarrel between the chairs of philosophy and rhetoric in the Collège de Quatre Nations over its significance for orators.

These omissions bring into focus another historical question: if Brown is right that “Descartes’ error” was really an error of reception, then when and how could this error have arisen? Brown does suggest that the error resulted from a tendency to privilege the *Meditations* over the *Passions*, but this error seems to have occurred very early; the line of questioning that Elisabeth put to Descartes suggests that she was among the earliest in a long line of mis-readers. Also, as Brown notes, despite “the richness of Descartes’ conception of the *whole self*,” Elisabeth herself “never quite bought the story about the passions...[and] never ceased to express reservations about his prospects for reuniting the human being” (p. 208). Brown admits being “disappointed” by the fact “that [Elisabeth] could not see the

adjustments being made to so much of his thought through her influence as progress” (p. 209). That Descartes never managed to convince Elizabeth that he had a workable conception of the self as integrated raises suspicion about Brown’s exegesis in presenting Descartes’ integrated self as a coherent one.

These suspicions are reinforced by her frequent use of peculiar exegetical strategies. Brown notes that many relevant Cartesian passages are either opaque or “under-described” (p. 78) and she frequently conjectures that they *can be* read in ways that make their meaning consistent with a coherent theory of an integrated self. At other points, Brown tries to clarify the meaning of such passages by translating them into equally opaque, if current, idioms of analytic philosophy and cognitive science. At one point, for example, she writes that “Descartes treats sensations in a way we would now refer to as informationally encapsulated” (p. 67). At another point she writes: “using terminology that Ned Block has recently popularized, we may characterize this as the problem of *phenomenal content*....In terms of Descartes’ theory of sensation, the problem of phenomenal content may seem particularly acute. The claim that rational action depends on available sensory information answers a question about the need for (in Blockspeak) ‘access consciousness’ of sensory information” (p. 72). These exegetical strategies at least raise a suspicion that Brown has substituted current concepts for Descartes’ in order to rescue his corpus from criticism and the Cartesian self from disintegration. In the end, these difficulties may leave readers with the impression that what Brown has found in her rereading of Descartes’ works through the *Passions*’ prism, i.e., a coherent conception of the whole and well integrated human self, may ultimately turn out to be just a ghost in his corpus.

NOTES

[1] Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (New York and London: Hutchinson’s University Library, 1949), p. 17.

[2] Antonio Damasio, *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1994), p. xiii.

[3] Edward Reynolds, *Treatise of the Passions and Faculties of the Soule of Man, With the severall dignities and corruptions thereunto belonging* (London: Printed by R. H[earne and John Norton] for Robert Bostok, 1640), pp. 41-42.

[4] René Descartes, *Oeuvres de Descartes*, edited by Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris: Leopold Cerf, 1897-1913), 4:263.

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