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“All in Their Nature Good”: Descartes on the Passions of the Soul

Abstract: Descartes claims that the passions of the soul are “all in their nature good” even though they exaggerate the value of their objects, have the potential to deceive us, and often mislead us. What, then, can he mean by this? In this paper, I argue that these effects of the passions are only problematic when we incorrectly take their goodness to consist in their informing us of harms and benefits to the mind-body composite. Instead, the passions are good in their motivational function, which they carry out by representing objects and situations as having various properties and thereby appearing to be “reasons of goodness.” Further, I argue that the main way in which the passions are problematic is merely an occasional physiological byproduct of a well-functioning system. I show, therefore, that the passions’ motivational function, representationality, and accompanying physiology are all significant and interrelated aspects of their goodness.

Keywords: Descartes, passions, goodness, motivation, representation, sensations, function

## 1. Introduction

Near the end of *The Passions of the Soul*,<sup>1</sup> Descartes claims that the passions of the soul<sup>2</sup> “are all in their nature good [*elles sont toutes bonnes de leur nature*]”<sup>3</sup> (AT XI.485/*Passions*, 132).<sup>4</sup> This

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<sup>1</sup> From this point on, I refer to *The Passions of the Soul* as “the *Passions*.”

<sup>2</sup> From this point on, I use ‘passions’ as shorthand for ‘passions of the soul,’ unless I indicate otherwise.

<sup>3</sup> Here, Stephen Voss’s translation improves on Robert Stoothoff’s, which renders the phrase *de leur nature* as “by nature” (CSM I.403). Stoothoff’s translation might suggest, in line with one of the senses of “nature” Descartes presents in the Sixth Meditation (AT VII.56/CSM II.80), that all of the passions are good simply in having been created by God. But *de leur nature* seems to refer to what is true of a thing in virtue of its essence as opposed to what is merely accidental to it: though the phrase is rare in the works Descartes himself wrote in French (as a search in Past Masters reveals), in a letter thought to be written either to Schooten or to Constantijn Huygens (AT II.600) he says, “the roots of cubic equations . . . are not rational numbers in their nature [*de leur nature*] but only sometimes accidentally [*par accident*]” (AT II.607). Thus, this paper seeks an account of what the passions share in common in virtue of which they are good. See also note 5, below.

<sup>4</sup> Translations of Descartes’s works derive largely from the following editions: translations of the *Passions* are from *Passions* (the Stephen Voss translation); translations of the *Meditations* and the *Objections and Replies* are from CSM II; and translations of Descartes’s correspondence are from CSMK. Translations of Descartes’s correspondence not included in CSMK (marked by the absence of a CSMK citation) are my own. In cases in which I alter the translations from *Passions*, CSM II, and CSMK, I

claim is surprising because Descartes elsewhere characterizes the passions in less than sanguine terms: they may be responsible for “all the evils and all the errors of life” (AT IV.284/CSMK 263);

[they] almost always make both the goods and the evils they represent appear much greater and more important than they are, so that they incite us to seek the former and flee the latter with more ardor and more anxiety than is suitable; (AT XI.431/*Passions*, 93)

and when we feel ourselves moved by some passion, we should “suspend our judgement until it is calmed,” so that we do not “let ourselves easily be deceived by the false appearance of the goods of this world” (AT IV.295/CSMK 267). If the passions lead to evil and error, make us seek things too ardently, and deceive us, how can Descartes also affirm that they are all in their nature good?<sup>5</sup>

Few scholars address this puzzle. But doing so reveals much about the value of the passions, a little explored issue in the secondary literature,<sup>6</sup> albeit one about which Descartes certainly had views: he explicitly distances himself from the Stoics when he says to Elisabeth, “I am not one of those cruel philosophers who want their sage to be insensible” (AT IV.201–2). Investigation of this puzzle also illuminates other issues that figure significantly in recent English-language discussions of the passions: their function; the question of whether the passions

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indicate that the translation has been modified and provide the text in its original language. Generally, I alter translations when a more literal rendering of the original text is philosophically relevant.

<sup>5</sup> Descartes presents a weaker version of the claim that the passions are all in their nature good in an earlier letter to Chanut, dated November 1, 1646: “in examining the passions I have found almost all of them to be good [*presque toutes bonnes*], and to be so useful in this life that our soul would have no reason to wish to remain joined to its body for even one minute if it could not feel them” (AT IV.538/CSMK 300). But in this letter, I take him to be using a different sense of ‘good’: good in our experience of them. In the *Passions* itself, Descartes seems to advance more than one conception of the goodness of the passions. He conceives of some of the passions in the same way as he does in the letter to Chanut, as experientially good in some way: some of them are the source of the “greatest sweetness in this life” (AT XI.488/*Passions*, 135). He also formulates the principle that each individual passion has some good or praiseworthy use (AT XI.462/*Passions*, 116). But these two possibilities are inadequate explanations of the text that I focus on in this paper because Descartes characterizes many of the passions (e.g. sadness, anger, fear) as experientially unpleasant, and what makes each individual passion good is something different. I argue in this paper that Descartes has a stronger, general conception of the goodness of the passions.

<sup>6</sup> One recent exception is Shoshana Brassfield, “Never Let the Passions Be Your Guide.”

are representational states, and if so, what they represent; and how they are problematic. Exploring the puzzle reveals a conception of the nature of Cartesian passions in which the passions' motivational function, representationality, and accompanying physiology are all significant and interrelated aspects of their goodness.

## 2. One Proposal: The Passions Are Good in Informing Us

It is widely held, by scholars who have considered the matter, that Descartes thinks the passions are good in just the same way that sensations are good, because the passions inform us of what is useful or harmful to the mind-body composite. In the Sixth Meditation, Descartes explains that although sensations might *seem* to us to be problematic in that they often lead us to make false judgments about the external world, they are not.<sup>7</sup> We make false judgments not because there is anything wrong with sensations themselves, but because we “have been in the habit of misusing the order of nature” (AT VII.83/CSM II.57): we take sensations to be “reliable touchstones for immediate judgments about the essential nature of the bodies located outside us; yet this is an area where they provide only very obscure information” (AT VII.83/CSM II.57–58).<sup>8</sup> We err in this way when we judge, for example, “that when a body is white or green, the selfsame whiteness or greenness which I perceive through my senses is present in the body” (AT VII.82/CSM II.56–57). Instead, the “proper purpose” of sensations is to inform us of what is

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<sup>7</sup> Descartes's category of “sensation” encompasses both external sensations such as color and light and the internal sensations of pain, pleasure, hunger, and thirst (he calls the latter two internal sensations the “natural appetites”). Although as I discuss shortly, Descartes defines the passions as a kind of sensation in the *Passions* (AT XI.349/) when I refer to ‘sensations’ in this paper, I refer only to external and internal sensations. See also the *Meditations* and *Principles*, where Descartes seems to include passions among internal sensations (AT VII.75/CSM II.52 and AT VIIIA.316–17/CSM I.280–81).

<sup>8</sup> For pain and pleasure, properly speaking, the error is that we take these mental items to exist outside our mind—that is, in the body (*Principles* I.67: AT VIIIA.32–33/CSM I.216–17).

beneficial and harmful to the mind-body composite (AT VII.83/CSM II.57), and in this regard they are “sufficiently clear and distinct” (AT VII.83/CSM II.57).<sup>9</sup>

Stephen Voss extends the foregoing explanation of the goodness of sensations to the passions:

The goodness of the passions is a consequence of the perfection of their author. According to the Sixth Meditation, the perceptions we refer to external objects or to our body are given to us by God “to inform the mind of what is beneficial or harmful for the composite of which the mind is a part; to this extent they are sufficiently clear and distinct” (AT VII.83/CSM II.57). *Mutatis mutandis*, the same is true of the perceptions we refer to the soul alone—the passions of the soul. (*Passions*, 133n46–Trans.)<sup>10</sup>

In the *Passions*, Descartes defines the passions as perceptions and sensations (AT XI.349/*Passions*, 34) and does not explicitly present a new account of their goodness. One might well therefore think, like Voss, that Descartes intends his Sixth Meditation account of the goodness of sensations to apply to the passions as well.<sup>11</sup>

Sensations and passions, however, differ with respect to the very feature that, according to Voss, accounts for their goodness. By “show[ing] us external bodies [not] exactly as they are, but only insofar as they are related to us and can benefit or harm us” (AT V.271/CSMK 362; see also AT VIIIA.41/CSM I.224), sensations inform us of benefits and harms to the mind-body

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<sup>9</sup> There is a wide range of scholarly views on the nature of Cartesian sensations. See Raffaella De Rosa, “Cartesian Sensations,” for an overview of some of the key issues.

<sup>10</sup> Voss here uses Descartes’s terminology: “perceptions we refer to objects outside of us” is another way Descartes characterizes sensory perceptions such as color and light (AT XI.346/*Passions*, 31), and “perceptions we refer to our body,” is Descartes’s characterization of the internal sensations (AT XI.346–47/*Passions*, 32).

<sup>11</sup> John Marshall also explicitly extends Descartes’s Sixth Meditation account of the goodness of sensations to the passions: “It is owing to the benevolence of God that we can rely on our passion-based judgments of value as being true judgments. Divine benevolence plays the same role with respect to passion-based value judgments as it does with respect to sensory-based judgments about the existence of external objects” (*Descartes’s Moral Theory*, 121). Ferdinand Alquié too holds this view: “the affirmation according to which ‘the passions are all in their nature good’ results from the established truths in the Sixth Meditation and the doctrine of divine veracity: affectivity informs us about the useful and the harmful” (Descartes, *Oeuvres Philosophiques*, 1100n1–Trans.). Others mention the issue only in passing but seem to hold a similar view. In discussing Descartes’s conception of regulating the passions, Lisa Shapiro says, “it is through the passions that nature tells us what is useful to us,” (“Descartes’ *Passions of the Soul* and the Composite of Mind and Body,” 221). And Deborah Brown says, “when controlled by reason, passions and sensations are our best source of information about circumstances external to the soul” (*Descartes and the Passionate Mind*, 25).

composite.<sup>12</sup> Passions, by contrast, nearly always mislead us about the benefit and harm things pose to us. In his letter to Elisabeth of September 1, 1645, Descartes says that “often [the passions make] us believe certain things to be much better and more desirable than they are” (AT IV.284/CSMK 263) and then explains how: “[the passions] all represent the goods to which [the passions] tend with greater splendour than [those goods] deserve” (AT IV.285/CSMK 264). In the *Passions*, in a passage quoted at the beginning of this paper, he says, similarly, “[the passions] almost always make both the goods and the evils they represent appear much greater and more important than they are” (AT XI.431/*Passions*, 93), where by ‘goods’ and ‘evils,’ Descartes seems to mean benefits and harms.<sup>13</sup> This exaggeration of the value of harms and benefits is not trivial: “[the passions] incite us to seek [benefits] and flee [harms] with more ardor and more anxiety than is suitable—as, we likewise see, beasts are often deceived by bait, and in order to avoid small evils rush into larger ones” (AT XI.431/*Passions*, 93). Descartes underscores the danger of taking the passions to inform us of benefits and harms by comparing us to animals putting themselves in mortal danger. Since the passions distort the value of benefits and harms, they cannot be good in the same way that sensations are good—that is, in playing an informational role.<sup>14</sup>

It may be objected that the difference between sensations and the passions is not as significant as I suggest.<sup>15</sup> In the Sixth Meditation, Descartes acknowledges that there are “true

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<sup>12</sup> Descartes acknowledges that there seem to be exceptions to this account, cases of what he calls “true errors of nature” (AT VII.85/CSM II.59). I discuss these exceptions below.

<sup>13</sup> Descartes says in the *Passions*: “we commonly call good or evil what our internal senses or our reason makes us judge suitable or opposed to our nature” (AT XI.391/*Passions*, 65). But by “our nature” in this context, Descartes sometimes means our nature as a thinking thing; at others, our nature as embodied creatures: he addresses harms and benefits to the body separately from those to the soul (AT XI.429–30/ and AT XI.432/). Thanks to Stephen Voss for emphasizing this point.

<sup>14</sup> One may ask whether even if the passions exaggerate harms and benefits they could be good in informing us of something else. Proponents of this account of the goodness of the passions do not suggest that passions inform us of different things than sensations do. But this is a possible variant that a proponent of this kind of account could advance. However, because of the lexical considerations I discuss in this section, and because, as I argue in the next section, the purpose of passions is not to inform us of things, I do not think that this variant fares much better. Thanks to Sean Greenberg for raising the possibility.

<sup>15</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for this journal for raising this worry.

errors of nature” (AT VII.85/CSM II.59), cases in which sensations fail to inform us about benefits and harms to the mind-body composite. Descartes mentions dropsy, a condition in which afflicted individuals feel thirst (which normally informs us that water would benefit us) even though drinking water with this condition would cause harm. If true errors of nature do not undermine Descartes’s account of sensations’ goodness, we might ask why the passions’ exaggeration of benefits and harms should pose a problem for their goodness.

In one way, at least, the passions seem to function better in informing us than sensations do. Although at times the passions err in the degree of harm or benefit to us, they often truly identify the potential cause of harm and benefit: our fear of a large animal indicates that the animal poses a danger to our well-being (AT XI.356/*Passions*, 39).

According to Descartes, the misinformation from sensation is an exception. True errors of nature, Descartes explains, arise because mental states (sensations) bear a one-to-one correspondence to brain states (AT VII.87–88/CSM II.60). Given this constraint, the “best system that could be devised” (AT VII.87/CSM II.60) is one in which a brain state produces the corresponding mental state that “is most especially and most frequently conducive to the preservation of the healthy man” (AT VII.87/CSM II.60). Cases of dropsy are exceptional: generally, the brain state corresponding to thirst occurs when drinking water would in fact be beneficial to us.<sup>16</sup> The misinformation of the passions, by contrast, is the normal case, not the exception.

Furthermore, Descartes thinks that the passions, unlike sensations, are not generally good guides to what to avoid or pursue.<sup>17</sup> Throughout the *Passions*, Descartes says that we should not follow what the passions tell us. He characterizes “the weakest souls” as those who “continually

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<sup>16</sup> Descartes’s explanation just raises further questions: for example, since God is omnipotent and omniscient, why not design a system that would not have required any exceptional cases? See Bernard Williams, *Descartes*, 234–35.

<sup>17</sup> See Brassfield, “Never Let the Passions Be Your Guide” for helpful discussion of this general claim. I disagree fundamentally with one significant aspect of Brassfield’s account, that the passions perform their motivational function by strengthening and prolonging representational thoughts. She follows Sean Greenberg, “Descartes on the Passions.”

[allow themselves] to be carried away by present passions” (AT XI.367/*Passions*, 46) instead of following “firm and decisive judgments concerning the knowledge of good and evil” (AT XI.367/*Passions*, 46). He says that when we are in the grip of a passion, we should distract ourselves by thinking about things other than what the passions suggest, and when our situation requires immediate action, we should “follow the reasons opposed to those the passion represents, even though they appear less strong” (AT XI.487/*Passions*, 134).<sup>18</sup>

Lexical considerations support this distinction between sensations and passions. Descartes says of sensations in the *Meditations* that they “report the truth much more frequently than falsehood [*multo frequentius verum indicare quam falsum*]” (AT VII.89/CSM II.61, translation modified); “my nature...does indeed teach [*docet*] me to avoid what induces a feeling of pain and to seek out what induces feelings of pleasure, and so on” (AT VII.82/CSM II.57); and “the proper purpose of the sensory perceptions given me by nature is simply to signify [*significare*] to the mind what is beneficial or harmful for the composite of which the mind is a part” (AT VII.83/CSM II.57, translation modified). By contrast, when Descartes discusses the passions of the soul specifically, he never states that they properly inform us anything. He does not use the French cognates of ‘report,’ ‘teach,’ and ‘signify,’ and instead uses the term ‘*représenter*’ to characterize how passions represent. The absence of these French cognates in discussing the passions cannot be dismissed as a mere artifact of the change from Latin in the *Meditations* to French in the *Passions*, because Descartes uses those and similar cognate terms in his discussions of *sensations* in the *Passions*. There, in reiterating the Sixth Meditation view that it is the purpose of sensations—pain and pleasure in particular—to inform us of harms and benefits to the mind-body composite, he says: “the soul is immediately informed [*est immédiatement avertie*] of things that harm the body *only* by the sensation it has of pain” (AT XI.430/*Passions*, 92, emphasis mine); pain is “instituted by nature to signify [*signifier*]” bodily

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<sup>18</sup> In section 4, I will return to this point and discuss how these prescriptions are consistent with Descartes’s conception of the passions as all in their nature good.

damage (AT XI.400/*Passions*, 71); and pleasure produces a brain impression that “testifies [*témoigner*]” (AT XI.399/*Passions*, 71) to the sound disposition of the body.

### 3. An Alternative: The Passions Are Good in Carrying Out Their Motivational Function

In this section, I present an alternative to the view of the previous section; I argue that the passions are good in carrying out their motivational function. Descartes says in the *Passions*, “the principal effect of all the passions . . . is that they incite and dispose their soul to will [*incitent et disposent leur âme à vouloir*] the things for which they prepare their body” (AT XI.359/*Passions*, 40–41) and explains that this “effect” is the use or purpose<sup>19</sup> of the passions:

The use [*l’usage*] of all the passions consists in this alone: they dispose the soul to will [*disposent l’âme à vouloir*] the things nature tells us are useful and to persist in this volition [*et à persister en cette volonté*], just as the same agitation of spirits<sup>20</sup> that usually causes them disposes the body to the movements conducive to the execution of those things. (AT XI.372/*Passions*, 51–52)

This passage seems to make clear that the function of the passions is to dispose us to form volitions—that is, to motivate us.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> “Use” [*usage*,] derives from the Latin ‘*usus*’ and means purpose or function; CSM translates the term as “function.” For example, CSM translates the title of Article 52 of the *Passions* as “the function [*usage*] of the passions, and how they may be enumerated” (AT XI.372/CSM I.349) in contrast with Voss’s “use,” above (AT XI.372/*Passions*, 51). In what follows, I use the terms ‘purpose,’ ‘use,’ and ‘function’ interchangeably. For more on ‘*usage*’ in the *Passions*, see Daisy Radner, “The Function of the Passions.” Although Radner discusses the different notions of function in the *Passions*, she does not attend to the function of the passions.

<sup>20</sup> The animal spirits are the very fine parts of blood that are central to the passions’ operation (AT XI.350/*Passions*, 34). I discuss the role of the animal spirits in Descartes’s theory of the passions in some detail in section 5, below.

<sup>21</sup> More precisely, the passions dispose us to form volitions of different kinds, including those regarding both action and judgment. Wonder is unique among the primitive passions because it helps us acquire knowledge—Descartes says, “it is useful in making us learn and retain in our memory things we have previously been ignorant of” (AT XI.384/*Passions*, 59). Descartes defines wonder as “a sudden surprise of the soul which makes it tend to consider attentively those objects which seem to it rare and extraordinary” (AT XI.380/*Passions*, 56). Thus, wonder seems to play a role in disposing us to make judgments rather than to forming intentions to act.

Although most scholars note that the passions are motivational, they disagree about the respect in which the passions are motivational.<sup>22</sup> In this section, I argue that the passions are motivational in virtue of being representational states and, further, that the passions motivate by representing things or situations as possessing various properties and thereby appearing to be “reasons of goodness,” which incline the will. It is their representational and motivational nature, thus, that accounts for their goodness.

### 3.1. *The Representationality of the Passions*

In the course of Descartes’s discussions of the passions, he repeatedly says that the passions “represent (*représenter*)” things. When discussing the passions generally, he says that “they almost always make both the goods and the evils they represent [*représentent*] appear much greater and more important than they are” (AT XI.431/*Passions*, 93), and “the will must . . . follow the reasons opposed to those the passion represents [*représente*]” (AT XI.487/*Passions*,

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<sup>22</sup> Most in the literature think, as I do, that the passions are motivational in virtue of being representational states. Gary Hatfield, for example, says: “[Descartes] regards the passion itself as representing the character of the situation (its novelty, its benefit, or its harm) under a motivational aspect. The passion has cognitive content, in virtue of which it motivates the will to fix attention on an object (as wonder does), or to approach or avoid or to maintain or abandon the object (as do desire, love and joy, and hatred and sadness)” (“Did Descartes Have a Jamesian Theory of the Emotions?” 424–25). Lilli Alanen similarly says, “To fulfill [their motivational function, the passions] have to be representational in a distinctive way: it is not enough that they have objects; their objects have to be represented as important—as mattering in one way or another” (*Descartes’s Concept of Mind*, 190). And according to Amy Schmitter, “through the passion of fear, I perceive that an oncoming train is dangerous to me, viz., I perceive it as dangerous. It is because these contents are evaluative that the passions will be motivating in ways that are normally functional” (“17th and 18th Century Theories of Emotions”; see also “How to Engineer a Human Being,” 435–36). Although Hatfield, Alanen, and Schmitter disagree about what the passions represent, they all connect the representationality of the passions with their motivational function. Shapiro too seems to hold the general view that passions motivate in virtue of their representationality: she says that “the appearance of suitability or harmfulness itself [of the passions] motivates us to act in the appropriate way” (“How We Experience the World,” 197). Recently, some have argued to the contrary that the passions can perform their motivational function without being representational states. See Greenberg, “Descartes on the Passions”; and Brassfield, “Never Let the Passions Be Your Guide.” Amélie Rorty presents a similar position but does not explicitly argue for it (“Cartesian Passions and the Composite of Mind and Body”).

134). Descartes also uses *représenter* in his characterizations of particular passions: he says “abhorrence is instituted by Nature to represent [*représenter*] to the soul a sudden and unexpected death” (AT XI.394/*Passions*, 67); love “represents [*représente*] to us what we love as a good that belongs to us” (AT XI.432/*Passions*, 94); “delight is particularly instituted by Nature to represent [*représenter*] the enjoyment of what delights as the greatest of all the goods that belong to man” (AT XI.395/*Passions*, 67); “despair, representing [*représentant*] the thing as impossible” (AT XI.457/*Passions*, 111); and so on. These passages indicate that Descartes thinks that the passions are representational in some sense.<sup>23</sup>

Descartes does not explain what he means by the term ‘represent,’ and, as many have noted, identifying the relevant conception of representation is no simple matter.<sup>24</sup> One pertinent way of understanding the representationality of the passions is as their possessing cognitive content.<sup>25</sup> Paul Hoffman says that the suggestion that the passions are representational “implies that passions are cognitive, that is, that they involve some sort of awareness of or representation of the world” (“The Passions and Freedom of Will,” 273). Others, in addition, suggest that if the passions are not representational, then they lack cognitive content and are thus “mere feelings.”<sup>26</sup>

Descartes’s conception of thoughts as ideas (AT VII.35/CSM II.24) or as involving ideas (AT VII 37; CSM II 26) supports this understanding of the representationality of the passions.

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<sup>23</sup> Even though there are many passages in which Descartes states that the passions represent things, there are many others that suggest that the passions arise in response to other states that are representational. Paul Hoffman thinks that this consideration, on the grounds of conceptual economy, counts in favor of the view that the passions are not representational (“The Passions and Freedom of Will,” 276), and Greenberg follows him (“Descartes on the Passions,” 721–22).

<sup>24</sup> For a helpful overview of representation in Descartes, see Simmons, “Representation.” For a discussion of the difficulty of extracting a theory of representation from Descartes’s remarks in the *Passions*, see *Passions*, 57n14–Trans.

<sup>25</sup> Margaret Wilson makes the connection between representationality and cognitive content in the context of discussing sensation broadly speaking (which includes the passions) and the ensuing literature on the representationality of sensation follows her. See Wilson, “Descartes on the Representationality of Sensations,” 69; and for example, Alison Simmons, “Are Cartesian Sensations Representational?” 348.

<sup>26</sup> See Greenberg, “Descartes on the Passions,” 715, and 730n6, for specific references to the secondary literature on the passions. Greenberg pushes back against this distinction by arguing that although passions themselves are non-cognitive, they bear a relationship to cognitive states and thus are not mere feelings (“Descartes on the Passions,” 715).

He claims that all ideas are “as it were images of things” (*tanquam rerum imagines*) (AT VII.37/CSM II.25, translation modified) or “as if of things” (*tanquam rerum*) (AT VII.44/CSM II.30, translation modified).<sup>27</sup> A natural precondition for an idea to be “as it were an image” or “as if of things” is that it possesses cognitive content. Take, for example, Descartes’s two ideas of the sun from the Third Meditation.<sup>28</sup> One “makes the sun appear very small,” whereas the other “shows the sun to be several times larger than the earth” (AT VII.39/CSM II.27).<sup>29</sup> For these states to present the sun as having certain properties, they must be content-bearing states. And since mental states that arise from the composite of mind and body are thoughts, just as are states that arise from the mind alone, one might conclude that Descartes holds that the passions too possess cognitive content.<sup>30</sup>

The passions, like our ideas of the sun, possess cognitive content, which presents things (or situations) as possessing certain properties. The characterizations of particular passions we have seen suggests this: love and delight represent things as goods (AT XI.432/*Passions*, 94; AT XI.395/*Passions*, 67); fear “represents death as an extreme evil avoidable only by flight” (AT XI.367/*Passions*, 46); esteem represents something as valuable (AT XI.443–44/*Passions*, 102); and despair represents something as impossible (AT XI.457/*Passions*, 111).

Although most commentators agree that the cognitive content of the passions is connected to their motivational function,<sup>31</sup> the nature of the connection is little discussed or

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<sup>27</sup> Wilson and Simmons discuss the connection between this consideration and the interpretation that all thought is representational (Wilson, “Descartes on the Representationality of Sensations 78–80; and Simmons, “Representation,” 647–48).

<sup>28</sup> I am grateful to Ed Curley for his suggestions regarding the reasoning in this paragraph and for pointing me to this example.

<sup>29</sup> Descartes specifies that the second idea of the sun is based on astronomical reasoning (AT VII.39/CSM II.27). This example thus makes clear, *contra* Hobbes’s concerns in the Third Objections (AT VII.179–80/CSM II.126–27), that when Descartes says that ideas are “as it were images of things” he distinguishes them from being images.

<sup>30</sup> Greenberg could argue, against this line of reasoning, that the passions fall into Descartes’s second category of thought—thoughts that “include something more than the likeness of” something (AT VII.37/CSM II.26)—and that sensations provide the likeness—or cognitive content—while passions supply the additional element, which is non-cognitive. I defer further argument against Greenberg’s view to another occasion.

<sup>31</sup> See note 22, above.

developed.<sup>32</sup> In the rest of this section, I propose an account to fill in the details. In virtue of their cognitive content, the passions appear to present what Descartes elsewhere calls “reasons of goodness (*rationes boni*),” which incline the will.<sup>33</sup>

### 3.2. *Reasons of Goodness*

Descartes introduces the notion of reasons of goodness in the context of his discussion of the will and freedom in the Fourth Meditation. Reasons of goodness, along with reasons of truth, motivate by inclining the will to pursue or avoid something, or in the case of reasons of truth, to affirm or deny something: “I incline [more] in one direction . . . because I clearly understand that reasons of truth and goodness point that way [*quia rationem veri et boni in ea evidenter intelligo*] (AT VII.57–58/CSM II.40). The discussion in the Fourth Meditation focuses primarily on reasons of truth rather than on reasons of goodness because Descartes’s focus there is on judgment and the reasons for assent or withholding assent, not on the reasons for pursuing or

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<sup>32</sup> On some views, the cognitive content of the passions is connected to their motivational function because of the specific nature of the cognitive content: it is because the passions represent things as important (Alanen, *Descartes’s Concept of Mind*, 190), or evaluative (Schmitter, “17th and 18th Century Theories of Emotions”), or as useful and harmful to us (Shapiro, “How We Experience the World,” 197) that they motivate. On these views, no further explanation is provided why contents with these features are motivational. On other views, it is not only the nature of the cognitive content of the passions but also the nature of the will that accounts for the passions being motivational. Hatfield (“Passions of the Soul,” 11) and Hoffman (“Three Dualist Theories of the Passions,” 188; “The Passions and Freedom of Will,” 263–64) suggest that because the will tends towards what appears good and the passions represent things as good and evil that the passions motivate. Descartes seems to suggest that the will is naturally drawn to what appears good in the *Discourse* (AT VI.28/CSM I.125). My account of how the passions motivate falls into the second class of views but differs from them in ways I go on to discuss.

<sup>33</sup> Hoffman entertains two possibilities about the nature of the inclining relation between the passions and the will. One option is that with the language of ‘inclining’ or ‘inciting,’ the passions can be understood as providing a reason (“Reasons, Causes, Inclinations,” 170), a variant of the idea I pursue here. Another, which Hoffman seems to favor, is that the passions can be understood as an efficient cause (“Reasons, Causes, Inclinations,” 171–72; also “The Passions and Freedom of Will,” 280–83).

avoiding things. But in grouping the two kinds of reasons together, Descartes indicates that he conceives of them as operating in the same way.<sup>34</sup>

The notion of a reason of truth/goodness is a normative one. By this, I mean that a reason of truth/goodness is not just any consideration that explains why someone assents to a proposition or pursues an object.<sup>35</sup> Instead, a reason of truth/goodness justifies willing something, that is, believing something (affirming or denying it) or doing something (pursuing or avoiding it).<sup>36</sup>

Descartes explains in the Sixth Replies why reasons of truth/goodness are normative: they depend on God, in the same way that the eternal truths depend on God. He says:

If anyone attends to the immeasurable greatness of God he will find it manifestly clear that there can be nothing whatsoever which does not depend on him. This applies not just to everything that subsists, but to all order, every law, and every reason of truth and goodness [*rationem veri et boni*]. . . . There is no need to ask what category of causality is applicable to the dependence of this goodness upon God, or to the dependence on him of other truths, both mathematical and metaphysical [*Nec opus est quærerere in quonam genere causæ ista bonitas, aliaevæ, tam Mathematicæ quam Metaphysicæ, veritates a Deo dependeant*]. . . . I]t can be called efficient causality, in the sense that a king may be called the efficient cause of a law, although the law itself is not a thing which has

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<sup>34</sup> Given Descartes's disclaimer in the Synopsis that the Fourth Meditation deals neither with sin "i.e. the error which is committed in pursuing good and evil" nor "matters pertaining to . . . the conduct of life" (AT VII.15/CSM II.11), one might suggest we ignore his talk of "reasons of goodness" in the Fourth Meditation. But Descartes continues to talk of "reasons of truth and goodness" in the Sixth Replies—after the addition of the disclaimer (CSM II.11n1).

<sup>35</sup> Descartes does not use the present-day philosophical terminology of "normative" and "motivating" reasons, but it is helpful to use the underlying difference to make sense of whether any consideration that leads us to act or judge—whether true or false—would count for Descartes as a "reason of truth or goodness" for Descartes. In what follows, I suggest that that "reasons of truth or goodness" do not include considerations that are false. See Maria Alvarez, "Reasons for Action," for a helpful (albeit critical) overview of the present-day distinction.

<sup>36</sup> Descartes's conception of the will as responsible for both doxastic and practical attitudes has been widely criticized. See David Rosenthal, "Will and the Theory of Judgment," for a defense.

physical existence, but is merely what they call a ‘moral entity’ [*ens morale*].<sup>37</sup> (AT VII.435/CSM II.293–94)<sup>38</sup>

Descartes seems to conceive of reasons of goodness as truths that ground the goodness of things: he alternatively refers to a reason of goodness as “some reason for something’s being good [*quæ ratio boni ejus*]” (AT VII.435/CSM II.294) and “the reason for the goodness of things [*ratio eorum bonitatis*]” (AT VII.436/CSM II.294, translation modified). Reasons of goodness are like truths of mathematics and metaphysics in that they have their ultimate origin in God’s will—God is their efficient cause.<sup>39</sup> And, we may add, since God is not a deceiver, these truths actually do justify willing their objects.<sup>40</sup>

Several additional points will help clarify the notion of reasons of goodness. First, reasons of goodness need not attribute the property of goodness to their objects, just as reasons

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<sup>37</sup> Descartes here may be referring to the view of Francisco Suárez, who conceives of *ens morale* as possessing a kind of intermediate ontological status between *ens reale* (“real being”) and *ens rationis* (“being of reason”). So, while an *ens morale* is not an *ens physicum* (“physical being”), it is also not a mere *ens fictum* (“fictive being”). For further discussion of various Scholastic views on *ens morale* in the context of the relationship between freedom in a metaphysical sense and freedom in the economic and political spheres, see Annabel Brett, “Human Freedom and Jesuit Moral Theology.”

<sup>38</sup> Descartes spends a great deal of the passage, here excerpted, on reasons of goodness, which is notable because his interlocutors asked solely about the mathematical and metaphysical truths that were at issue in the texts that prompted their questions. In the Fifth Meditation, Descartes says that “when . . . I imagine a triangle, even if perhaps no figure exists, or has ever existed, anywhere outside my thought, there is still a determinate nature, or essence, or form of the triangle which is immutable and eternal, and not invented by me or dependent on my mind” (AT VII.64/CSM II.45). Gassendi, then, in the Fifth Objections, asks how there could be such “immutable and eternal natures” outside of God (AT VII.319/CSM II.221), and in response Descartes expresses his infamous doctrine of the eternal truths, according to which God determines necessary truths like those of mathematics (AT VII.380/CSM II.261). The Sixth Objections inquire further about Descartes’s Fifth Replies response to Gassendi. I take Descartes’s focus and elaboration on reasons of goodness to indicate their significance in his thinking, despite his mentioning them only briefly in the Fourth Meditation.

<sup>39</sup> Descartes reiterates his claim that reasons of truth and goodness depend on God in a later letter to Arnauld (July 29, 1648): “I do not think that we should ever say of anything that it cannot be brought about by God. For since every reason of truth and goodness [*omnis ratio veri et boni*] depends on his omnipotence, I would not dare to say that God cannot make a mountain without a valley, or bring it about that 1 and 2 are not 3” (AT V.224/CSMK 358–59).

<sup>40</sup> Descartes gives a (epistemic) version of this argument in the Second Replies for why we properly give our assent to matters of faith even though, as his interlocutors pointed out, they may not be clear and distinct: the “supernatural light” which induces our assent (the only other source of inclination Descartes mentions in the Fourth Meditation) comes from God, and when we are thus illuminated, we are confident that God is the source of that which we entertain, and we know he can never deceive us (AT VII.147–48/CSM II.105).

of truth need not attribute truth to theirs. They need only to justify willing something, which they can do by attributing any number of different properties (including goodness) to their objects.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, reasons of goodness are not judgments about what is good because Descartes holds that judgments require an assent of the will, and the passages I have discussed show that reasons of goodness exist (in some sense) independently of our assent. Lastly, although Descartes does not make this explicit, reasons of goodness, as I understand them, may not only prompt practical attitudes from the will but also doxastic ones. One may affirm or deny reasons of goodness as well as pursue or avoid or attend to their objects.<sup>42</sup>

### 3.3. *The Passions Appear to Present Reasons of Goodness*

This account of reasons of goodness provides an explanation of how the passions carry out their motivational function: the passions incline the will in virtue of their cognitive content—by appearing to present truths that justify our willing something, that is, reasons of goodness. Thus, for example, desire “disposes [the soul] to will for the future the things it represents to itself to be suitable” (AT XI.392/*Passions*, 66) because in making something look suitable, desire appears to present a reason of goodness to pursue it.

I have said that the passions only *appear* or *seem* to present reasons of goodness. If reasons of goodness are truths caused by God, and if, as I have emphasized, the passions exaggerate the value of their objects, they cannot really present reasons of goodness in

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<sup>41</sup> If, as I go on to argue, the passions appear to present reasons of goodness, a reason of goodness may even attribute the property of evil to its object. Descartes holds that the privation of any good is an evil and the privation of any evil is a good: “there is no good whose privation is not an evil, nor any evil considered as a positive thing whose privation is not a good, and since in seeking riches, for example, we necessarily avoid poverty, in avoiding sickness we seek health, and so on, it seems to me that it is always the same movement that inclines us to the search for good and at the same time to the avoidance of the evil that opposes it” (AT XI.393/*Passions*, 66). Thus, when a passion represents something as an evil, it can appear to present a reason of goodness: a reason that justifies avoiding what seems evil and pursuing the corresponding, or opposing, good.

<sup>42</sup> Descartes’s discussions of the passions, I suggest in the next section, shows this.

Descartes's sense but merely seem to do so. Thus, though the passions possess cognitive content, they misrepresent features of the world.

Insofar as the passions merely appear to present reasons of goodness, the passions are not clear and distinct perceptions. They are confused and obscure, as are all states that arise from the “close bond” between the mind and body (AT XI.350/*Passions*, 34). Because of this they do not necessitate the will, which has the ability to refrain from forming a volition in response to a perception that is not clear and distinct: “If . . . I simply refrain from making a judgment in cases where I do not perceive the truth with sufficient clarity and distinctness, then it is clear that I am behaving correctly and avoiding error” (AT VII.59/CSM II.41).<sup>43</sup> Just as we have the ability to withhold assent when we do not perceive the truth with sufficient clarity and distinctness, we have the ability to refrain from assenting to or pursuing something when we do not perceive the good clearly and distinctly.<sup>44</sup>

The view that the passions appear to present reasons of goodness and thereby incline the will has support from two important aspects of Descartes's theory of the passions. First, Descartes's prescriptions for mitigating the problematic effects of the passions suggest it. At the end of the *Passions*, Descartes explains what he takes to be “the most general remedy for all the excesses of the passions” (AT XI.487/*Passions*, 134), which includes the advice that:

when [a passion] incites one to actions requiring one to reach some resolution at once, the will must be inclined [*se porte*] above all to take into consideration and to follow the reasons [*les raisons*] opposed to those the passion represents [*représente*], even though they appear less strong. (AT XI.487/*Passions*, 134)

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<sup>43</sup> I take Descartes in this regard to be departing from a traditional conception of the will as rational appetite. One way in which Descartes differs fundamentally from that view, at least as Aquinas conceives of it, is that for Aquinas, an appetitive capacity is passive, and thus the will has a passive aspect (as well as an active aspect) (*Summa Theologiae*, I, Q 80, A 2). In contrast, Descartes conceives of the will as entirely active (AT III.372/CSMK 182). See John Carriero, *Between Two Worlds*, 243–64, for a detailed comparison of Descartes's conception of the will with Aquinas's. I defer discussion of the will's activity and a defense of the claim that Descartes does not hold the traditional view to another occasion.

<sup>44</sup> I interpret Descartes as holding that we can make judgments about goods and evils as well as pursuing or avoiding them.

Descartes cautions that we should not follow the reasons that the passions represent when we have no time to deliberate about what they incite us to do. My account makes sense of this claim: it is because the passions appear—*but only appear*—to present truths that justify willing things that deliberately considering and following opposing reasons constitutes a remedy for them. In an earlier letter to Elisabeth, Descartes recommends another remedy: because “all our passions represent to us the goods to whose pursuit they impel us as being much greater than they really are,” “when we feel ourselves moved by some passion we [must] suspend our judgement until it is calmed, and . . . not let ourselves easily be deceived by the false appearance of the goods of this world” (AT IV.294–95/CSMK 267).<sup>45</sup> The passions, by appearing to present reasons of goodness, incline the will to assent. But because passions are obscure and confused, we can prevent ourselves from being deceived by them by suspending our judgment, or by refraining from assenting to the consideration they present.

Second, the view I have proposed provides a clear way of understanding Descartes’s discussions of strength and weakness of soul. Descartes says those with strength of soul are those who use the will’s “proper weapons,” “firm and decisive judgments concerning the knowledge of good and evil, which [the will] has resolved to follow in conducting the actions of its life” (AT XI.367/*Passions*, 46). He then suggests that those who lack the will’s proper weapons can instead avail themselves of judgments, which “are often false, and even founded on passions by which the will has previously allowed itself to be conquered or seduced” (AT XI.368/*Passions*, 47). On my account, it is clear how the passions tempt the will to make those false judgments: by seeming to present reasons that justify assent, thereby inclining the will. “The weakest souls of all,” Descartes says, are those whose will “continually allows itself to be carried away by present passions, which often being opposed to one another draw [the will] by turns to their side” (AT XI.367/*Passions*, 46). For example:

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<sup>45</sup> This is similar to Descartes’s second suggestion in the *Passions* (AT XI.487/*Passions*, 134).

When fear represents death as an extreme evil avoidable only by flight, if ambition from the other side represents the infamy of this flight as an evil worse than death, then these two passions agitate the will in different ways. (AT XI.367/*Passions*, 46)

The account I have presented clarifies the effect of the passions on the will of the weakest souls. One passion (here, fear) inclines the will in one direction by seeming to present a reason (death is an extreme evil avoidable only by flight) that justifies pursuing one course of action (to flee), but another passion (ambition) inclines the will in the opposite direction (to stay) by seeming to present a reason not to pursue it (infamy from fleeing is an evil worse than death). This causes the will of the weakest soul to vacillate so that “it is in continual opposition to itself,” putting the soul “in the most deplorable condition it can be in” (AT XI.367/*Passions*, 46).

#### 4. Exaggeration and Motivation

At this point, a problem might seem to recur. Earlier, in discussing the proposal that the passions are good in the same way sensations are—in informing us of harms and benefits—I made much of the fact that Descartes characterizes the passions as often, if not almost always, making the things they represent seem greater and more important than they are.<sup>46</sup> The passions’ distortion of the value of their objects, I argued, poses a significant problem for that account. But this aspect of the passions might seem to be a problem for my account as well. On my account, the passions’ cognitive content is central to their goodness—as I have argued, it is in virtue of their cognitive content that the passions motivate. But the passions’ exaggeration not only can lead to mistaken beliefs, as Descartes notes, but also might seem likely to have some problematic effects on their motivating.

Before considering the effects of the exaggeration of the passions, it is important to underscore the point that the exaggeration in itself is not a problem for my account. If the

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<sup>46</sup> See the introduction, above, for Descartes’ statement from the *Passions*. He is there reiterating what he has written in his letters to Elisabeth of September 1, 1645 (AT IV.285/CSMK 264) and September 15, 1645 (AT IV.295/CSMK 267).

goodness of the passions lies not in their informing us of things, as I have argued, then the fact that they systematically distort the value of their objects does not undermine their goodness, as long as the distortion does not get in the way of passions' properly motivating us. In the *Passions* Descartes does not recognize the passions' near systematic exaggeration as a problem for their goodness. Instead, in his correspondence with Elisabeth as well as in the *Passions*, Descartes expresses that it is the *effects* of the passions' exaggeration that Descartes conceives of as problematic. I will discuss these effects and show how they do not pose any difficulty for my account.

First, Descartes repeatedly says that the passions may lead to mistaken beliefs about the value of things. In a letter to Elisabeth of September 1, 1645, Descartes explains, "often [passions make] us believe certain things to be much better and more desirable than they are" (AT IV.284/CSMK 263–64). He seems to connect this to the passions' exaggeration:

there is no passion that does not represent the good to which it tends [*il n'y en a aucune qui ne nous représente le bien auquel elle tend*] with greater splendour than it deserves, and which does not make us imagine pleasures to be much greater, before we possess them, than when we have them. (AT IV.285/CSMK 264, translation modified)

In appearing to present reasons of goodness, the passions make what they incline us towards seem more worthy of pursuit than they are, and we then we readily form mistaken beliefs about their value either directly or indirectly (in virtue of their effect on the imagination).<sup>47</sup> He makes the connection between the passions' exaggeration and their leading us to form mistaken beliefs more explicitly shortly afterwards, in his letter of September 15, 1645 to Elisabeth, when he repeats his view about the passions' exaggeration and then prescribes a way of resisting the temptation to form false beliefs: "when we feel ourselves moved by some passion we [must]

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<sup>47</sup> Descartes repeats his view on the role of imagination in forming false beliefs in the *Passions*: "when one feels the blood stirred up like that, one should take warning, and recall that everything presented to the imagination tends to deceive the soul, and to make the reasons for favoring the object of its passion appear to it much stronger than they are, and those for opposing it much weaker" (AT XI.487/*Passions*, 134).

suspend our judgement until it is calmed, and . . . not let ourselves easily be deceived by the false appearance of the goods of this world” (AT IV.295/CSMK 267).

This effect of the passions’ exaggeration does not undermine the account of the goodness of the passions I have articulated. Again, it is only a problem for those committed to the view that the passions’ goodness consists in their informing us of what is useful and harmful to us. We form false beliefs about what is worthy of assent or pursuit when we take the passions to present truths that justify assenting or pursuing things, just as we form false beliefs about bodies when we take sensations to reveal bodies’ essential nature. The purpose of the passions is not to reveal truths about what is worthy of assent or pursuit, just as the purpose of sensations is not to reveal the essential nature of bodies. In both cases, we are to blame for the mistaken beliefs we form.

On the account I have presented, then, we cannot simply read off what grounds the goodness of things from the passions. But what Descartes says about the proper use of the passions shows that this consequence of my account is not problematic: we are supposed to use other mental faculties—reason, the will, and sensations—to correct the passions’ distortion of what they represent. Reason allows us to properly assess the value of goods: in the September 15, 1645 letter, Descartes explains, “the true function of reason is to examine the just value of all the goods whose acquisition seems to depend in some way on our conduct” (AT IV.284/CSMK 264).<sup>48</sup> Further, in the *Passions*, Descartes explains that our will enables us to attend to things (AT XI.361/*Passions*, 42), and we should use our will’s power of commanding our attention at times to correct for misrepresentation by “tak[ing] into consideration and [following] the reasons opposed to those the passion represents, even though they appear less strong” (AT XI.487/*Passions*, 134). Lastly, we can use our sensations, which as I have discussed, have the purpose of properly informing us of harms and benefits to the mind-body composite.

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<sup>48</sup> Brassfield provides a helpful discussion of how the passions may lead us to make incorrect judgments and how reason might serve as a corrective for those judgments. See especially sections 6 and 7 (Brassfield, “Never Let the Passions Be Your Guide,” 471–74).

A second effect of the passions' exaggeration is potentially more worrying. Descartes seems to indicate that the passions' exaggeration negatively affects how we are motivated to pursue or avoid things. This effect, unlike the previous one, looks like a substantial problem for my account because it undermines how the passions are supposed to be good. Descartes makes the connection between the passions' exaggeration and their motivating in a passage from the *Passions* we have seen:

[The passions] almost always make both the goods and the evils they represent appear much greater and more important than they are, so that they incite us to seek the former and flee the latter with more ardor and more anxiety than is suitable— as, we likewise see, beasts are often deceived by bait, and in order to avoid small evils rush into larger ones. (AT XI.431/*Passions*, 93)

However, Descartes's example suggests that it is through the mediation of a false assessment of the value of things— being deceived—that we are motivated improperly.<sup>49</sup> This explains why Descartes immediately follows the passage with a prescription for overcoming the improper motivational effect: “this is why we should make use of experience and reason to distinguish the good from the evil and to discern their true worth, in order not to take one for the other and not to tend toward anything with excess [*ne nous porter à rien avec excès*]” (AT XI.431/*Passions*, 93, translation modified). What initially looked like a problem for my account, that the exaggeration of the passions could lead to improper motivation, actually turns out to amount to the first effect I discussed—the passions' exaggeration leading to false beliefs about the value of things. This is why Descartes prescribes the very same corrective: to use other mental faculties (as well as experience) to understand the true value of things.

In fact, once we have corrected our assessments of goods and evils, the motivational aspect of the passions is beneficial to us:

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<sup>49</sup> Strictly speaking, Descartes's conception of animals grants them neither motivational nor cognitive states.

I do not think that . . . one should free oneself altogether from the passions. It is enough to subject one's passions to reason, and once they are thus tamed they are sometimes the more useful the more they tend to excess [*elles penchent plus vers l'excès*].<sup>50</sup> (AT IV.286–87/CSMK 265)

This passage, I suggest, supports the account of the passions' goodness I have presented: the passions are good in carrying out their motivational function. But because the passions do not accurately tell us about what makes things worthy of assent or pursuit, we need other capacities, particularly reason, to provide us with this information (thus "taming" the passions). To use the passions properly, we must let them dispose us only when our judgments are corrected, and we must prevent ourselves from being disposed unreflectively to those things that the passions by themselves appear to provide reason to will.<sup>51</sup>

## 5. The Physiology of the Passions

Although I have thus far focused solely on the passions as states of the soul, an account of the goodness of the passions would be incomplete without discussing the bodily mechanisms that accompany the passions. The physiological mechanisms that cause and sustain the passions are significant elements of Descartes's theory of the passions.<sup>52</sup> In his general definition of the passions, Descartes gives a prominent place to the animal spirits and explains that their role in

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<sup>50</sup> Descartes clarifies his conception of "excess" in a letter to Elisabeth: "When I said that there are passions which are the more useful the more they tend to excess, I only meant to speak of those which are altogether good; as I indicated when I added that they should be subject to reason. There are, indeed, two kinds of excess. There is one which changes the nature of a thing, and turns it from good to bad, and prevents it from remaining subject to reason; and there is another which only increases its quantity, and turns it from good to better. Thus excess of courage is recklessness only when the courage passes the limits of reason; but while remaining within those limits, it can have another kind of excess, which consists in the absence of irresolution and fear" (AT IV.331–32/CSMK 276–77). This clarification is consistent with my account—the increasing quantity of the passions is better because the motivational effects are compounded. When the passions' effects motivate us toward true benefits and away from true harms, more is better. It is only when the passions cannot be subject to reason that their excess is bad.

<sup>51</sup> In other words, we must have "strength of soul" (AT XI.367/*Passions*, 46).

<sup>52</sup> The literature on the passions pays far less attention to Descartes's physiological discussions of the passions. For notable exceptions, see Brown, *Descartes and the Passionate Mind*; and Hatfield, "Passions of the Soul."

the generation and maintenance of the passions distinguishes the passions from both volitions and sensations.<sup>53</sup> The physiological aspects of the passions also distinguish the passions from their purely intellectual analogs, which lack any accompanying bodily manifestation,<sup>54</sup> from judgments that are functionally similar,<sup>55</sup> and from virtues produced by the soul alone.<sup>56</sup>

Attention to the physiological aspects of the passions is important for present purposes in two ways. On the one hand, the physiological mechanisms involved in the passions' functioning are an essential component of the motivational system of the mind-body composite as a whole and thus a significant aspect of the goodness of the passions. On the other hand, the physiological mechanisms accompanying the passions play a significant role in the main ways in which Descartes characterizes the passions as problematic.<sup>57</sup> But as I show, these problematic effects of the physiological mechanisms are merely an occasional by-product of a well-functioning system.

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<sup>53</sup> "I also add [in the definition of the passions of the soul] that they are caused, maintained, and strengthened by some movement of the spirits, in order to distinguish them from our volitions . . . and also in order to explain their last and most proximate cause, which distinguishes them anew from other sensations" (AT XI.350/*Passions*, 34–35).

<sup>54</sup> An example of this is the difference between the passion of joy and intellectual joy (AT XI.397/*Passions*, 69–70).

<sup>55</sup> In his definitions of love and hatred, he explains, "I say these excitations are caused by the spirits in order to distinguish love and hatred, which are passions and depend on the body. . . from judgments which also [like love and hatred] incline the soul to join itself in volition with the things it deems good and to separate itself from those it deems bad" (AT XI.387/*Passions*, 62).

<sup>56</sup> Descartes says that "what are commonly named virtues are dispositions in the soul . . . [which] can be produced in the soul alone, but that often some movement of the spirits happens to strengthen them, and that then they are actions of virtue and at the same time passions of the soul" (AT XI.453/*Passions*, 108–9).

<sup>57</sup> That is, aside from the formation of false beliefs discussed in the previous section. The role of the psychological mechanisms is not obvious, because throughout the *Passions*, Descartes intermingles descriptions of bodily processes with those of mental occurrences and often does not make clear the distinctions and connections between them. For example, he defines the passion of wonder as "a sudden surprise of the soul which makes it tend to consider attentively those objects which seem to it rare and extraordinary," (AT XI.380/*Passions*, 56), where surprise is "the sudden and unexpected arrival of the [brain] impression that alters the motion of the spirits" (AT XI.381/*Passions*, 58). But on Descartes's dualistic ontology, the passion of wonder cannot be something occurring in the body, as the two passages taken together suggest—it must instead be a mental state that is accompanied by that particular brain manifestation. Descartes does not make clear that part of the explanation.

The physiological mechanisms accompanying the passions play an important role in preparing the body to operate in ways conducive to the well-being of the mind-body composite. Recall Descartes's characterizations of the function of the passions: "[the passions] incite and dispose their soul to will the things for which they prepare their body" (AT XI.359/*Passions*, 40–41), and

the use of all the passions consists in this alone: they dispose the soul to will the things nature tells us are useful and to persist in this volition, just as the same agitation of spirits that usually causes them disposes the body to the movements conducive to the execution of those things. (AT XI.372/*Passions*, 51–52)

The former formulation is worth pausing over. Descartes says that the passions incite and dispose the soul to will the things for which the passions, he implies, prepare the body. But, as seen in the latter formulation, strictly speaking, it is the animal spirits that prepare the body.

Descartes shows that the animal spirits play this role in his "example of the way the passions are excited in the soul" (AT XI.356/*Passions*, 39) in Article 36. He explains how a perception of a large animal excites the passion of fear:

in some men this so predisposes the brain that the spirits reflected from the image thus formed on the gland turn to flow in part into the nerves serving to turn the back and move the legs for running away, and in part into those which so enlarge or contract the heart's orifices, or those which so agitate the other parts from which blood is sent to the heart, that this blood, being rarefied there in an unusual manner, sends spirits to the brain suitable to maintain and strengthen the passion of fear—that is, suitable to hold open or reopen the pores of the brain that guide them into the same nerves. Simply in virtue of entering these pores, these spirits excite a particular movement in this gland which is instituted by nature to make the soul feel this passion. (AT XI.356–57/*Passions*, 39)

The animal spirits both dispose the body to move (they prepare our muscles and nerves to make the movements necessary for running away)<sup>58</sup> and also cause the passion (fear in this case).

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<sup>58</sup> In other cases, preparing the body may mean, somewhat counter-intuitively, holding the body still. For example, the physiological aspects of the passion of wonder facilitate our acquisition of knowledge. The movements of the animal spirits accompanying wonder, unlike their movements in most other passions, actually hinder us from acting in order to help us consider things that are new and important: the movement of the animal spirits flow from the brain "into the muscles for keeping the sense organs in the same position they are in" (AT XI.380/*Passions*, 57).

Because the movement of the animal spirits both disposes the body and causes the passions, it cannot be the passions that dispose the body.<sup>59</sup>

Thus, the physiological mechanisms causing and accompanying the passions play an important and beneficial role in the proper functioning of the mind-body composite: they initiate the bodily movements that are conducive to the well-being of the mind-body composite, in tandem with the passions' effects on the will.<sup>60</sup> The physiological mechanisms, then, are an important component of the motivational system of the mind-body composite as a whole.

In addition to initiating bodily movements conducive to the well-being of the mind-body composite, the physiological processes that accompany the passions also play another role: they strengthen and preserve thoughts. Descartes explains, throughout the *Passions*, that the animal spirits maintain and strengthen passions (AT XI.357/*Passions*, 39),<sup>61</sup> sustain volitions (AT XI.358–59/*Passions*, 40),<sup>62</sup> and strengthen thoughts generally (AT XI.451/*Passions*, 107).<sup>63</sup> But these physiological processes sometimes malfunction and problematically strengthen and preserve thoughts:

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<sup>59</sup> I am grateful to Stephen Voss for prompting me to clarify my thoughts on this issue.

<sup>60</sup> Hatfield shows that it is not the passions that initiate the bodily movements that are beneficial to the mind-body composite but the physiological mechanisms that cause the passions (“Passions of the Soul,” 13–15). He takes the passage at AT XI.372 to show that the passions “have the effect of enjoining the will to go along with what the body is already doing” (“Passions of the Soul,” 424).

<sup>61</sup> Descartes explains that all of the passions “are caused principally by the spirits contained in the brain’s cavities, insofar as they proceed toward the nerves that serve to enlarge or contract the heart’s orifices or in various ways to drive the blood in other parts toward [the heart] or in any other way there may be to *maintain the same passion*” (AT XI.357/*Passions*, 39, emphases mine). And, as mentioned earlier, the fact that the animal spirits cause, maintain and strengthen the passions is what distinguishes them from sensations and volitions (AT XI.350/*Passions*, 35 and AT XI.350/*Passions*, 34).

<sup>62</sup> In the context of explaining the differences in passions between individuals, Descartes says “the same movement of the gland which in some excites fear, in others makes the spirits enter the brain’s pores that guide part of them into the nerves that move the hands for self-defense, and part of them into those that agitate the blood and drive it toward the heart in the manner needed to produce spirits suitable to continue this defense and *sustain the volition for it*” (AT XI.358–59/*Passions*, 40, emphases mine).

<sup>63</sup> Descartes says, in the context of discussing the difference between passions that are vices and those that are virtues: “I see no reason at all why the same movement of spirits that serves to strengthen a thought when it has a foundation that is bad could not also strengthen it when it has one that is just” (AT XI.451/*Passions*, 107).

All the evil [the passions] can cause consists either in their strengthening and preserving those thoughts [which it is good that the soul preserves and which could otherwise easily be effaced from it] more than necessary or in strengthening and preserving others it is not good to dwell upon. (AT XI.383/*Passions*, 59)

Although Descartes here says that this effect is the result of the passions itself, contextual considerations suggest that the *physiological processes* accompanying the passions play a dominant (and underappreciated) role in the problematic strengthening and preserving of thoughts. This passage is situated squarely in the middle of Descartes's discussion of wonder, which he defines as having the characteristic effect of leading the soul "to consider attentively those objects which seem to it rare and extraordinary" (AT XI.380/*Passions*, 56). He then explains the physiological mechanism that allows wonder to do this: "the motion of the spirits disposed by the impression [in one's brain that represents the object as rare] to advance with great force upon the place in the brain where it is, to strengthen and preserve it there" (AT XI.380–81/*Passions*, 57). This mechanism is just like the physiological mechanism that makes the passions difficult to control: in both, a bodily excitation accompanying a passion makes a thought (corresponding to the brain impression) present to our mind. In the former case, the accompanying bodily excitation holds a passion present to our thought; here, it holds some other thought or perception present. So when Descartes says, "all the evil [the passions] can cause consists either in their strengthening and preserving [good] thoughts more than necessary, or in their strengthening and preserving [non-beneficial thoughts]" (AT XI.383/*Passions*, 59), one might reasonably hold that the physiological mechanisms play a dominant role in producing these problematic effects.<sup>64</sup>

Thus, despite the fact that the physiological system generally works effectively, it sometimes sustains certain beneficial thoughts for too long or sustains non-beneficial thoughts because of the very properties that make it effective. The animal spirits "are nothing but bodies .

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<sup>64</sup> Greenberg and Brassfield take the passages I cite to show that the passions' maintaining thoughts is the mechanism by which they carry out their motivational function; see Greenberg, "Descartes on the Passions"; and Brassfield, "Never Let the Passions Be Your Guide." I have presented an alternative mechanism—appearing to be reasons of goodness—in the previous section.

.. which are very small and which move very rapidly” (AT XI.335/*Passions*, 24). Their size and speed allow them to easily penetrate all the parts of the body in which they need to go to prepare the body to move in coordination with the mind: the brain’s cavities, the nerves, and the muscles (AT XI.335/*Passions*, 24). Furthermore, the size and speed of the animal spirits contribute to the speed of the physiological system accompanying the passions, which is a hydraulic system in which force is transmitted through fluids (blood) and fluid-like substances (the animal spirits). This system, once set in motion, is not easily controlled. In the *Passions*, Descartes says of the movements of the blood and the animal spirits:

[They] immediately follow so swiftly from mere impressions formed in the brain and from the disposition of the organs, even though the soul may in no way contribute to them, that there is no human wisdom capable of withstanding them when one is insufficiently prepared for them. (AT XI.486/*Passions*, 133–34)

The strength of the flow of blood and animal spirits, in addition to the speed, makes it difficult to control both the movements and their effects. Descartes says in *Treatise on Man*, his earlier account of the physiological workings of the human body,<sup>65</sup> that when the blood and animal spirits enter the brain, “we must imagine . . . a very full-flowing spring” (AT XI.130).<sup>66</sup> When we are in the grip of a passion, “the most the will can do while [the bodily] excitation is in its full strength is not to consent to its effects and to restrain many of the movements to which it disposes the body” (AT XI.364/*Passions*, 44). After the blood and spirits that accompany the passions are set in motion, the physiological system’s “natural momentum”<sup>67</sup> may result in volitions being strengthened to too great an extent or the animal spirits being routed to the wrong brain impressions and thoughts altogether. But since the properties of the physiological processes that lead to the problematic strengthening and preserving of thoughts generally properly serve

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<sup>65</sup> Descartes wrote *The Treatise on Man* between 1629 and 1633. He retains the same conception of the animal spirits and the circulatory system from this text that he describes in great detail in the *Passions* (1649).

<sup>66</sup> Descartes, *The World and Other Writings*, 106.

<sup>67</sup> I take this term from Marshall’s characterization of the physiological mechanisms that produce the passions (*Descartes’s Moral Theory*, 101). The speed and strength of the movement of the blood and spirits contribute to its natural momentum.

the passions in carrying out their motivational function, as I have shown, the occasional malfunction does not undermine the goodness of the passions.<sup>68</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

I return to the puzzle presented at the outset: how are the passions “all in their nature good” if they are problematic in all the ways I have discussed? I have argued that the answer requires recognizing that passions do not inform us, guide us, or justify assenting to or pursuing things. Instead, the passions are good in carrying out their motivational function, and their accompanying physiological mechanisms initiate the bodily movements that work in tandem with passions’ effects on the mind. Specifically, on my account of the passions’ goodness, the passions’ ability to carry out their motivational function is tied to their representationality: the passions motivate by appearing to provide reasons of goodness, truths that justify willing things. Finally, what is problematic about the passions is not that they exaggerate but, instead, an occasional byproduct of an underlying physiological system that enables the body and mind to operate together and that thus properly serves the motivational system of the mind-body composite as a whole.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> The defense for the occasional malfunction of the passions I provide here is akin to Descartes’s explanation for “true errors of nature” and might seem unsatisfying in the same way that that explanation is. See section 2 for my discussion of “true errors of nature.”

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