Sigmund Descartes?

ANDRÉ GOMBAY

Abstract
For all his insistence that the mind has no parts, Descartes often describes inner mental conflicts, sometimes his own: ambivalence, fixation to childhood prejudice, are for him fixtures of human life. "Sigmund Descartes?" examines this aspect of his thought.

1. Here is a quotation, call it *A*:

> *A* . . . when a husband mourns his departed wife, whom (as sometimes happens) he would be sorry to see brought back to life again, it may be that his heart is wrung by the sadness aroused in him by the funeral display and by the absence of a person to whose conversation he was accustomed; and it may be that some remnants of love or pity, present in his imagination, draw genuine tears from his eyes. Nonetheless he at the same time feels a secret joy in his innermost soul, and this emotion has so much power that the sadness (and the tears that go with it) can do nothing to diminish its force.

These lines are—yes! – from Descartes. And they appear not in a minor or incidental piece of writing, not in a letter or the reply to an objection. No, this is straight primary text, article 147 of the *Passions of the Soul* (AT 11, 441; CSM 1, 381); and the secret joy of the grieving husband is offered as an example of a category of mental states that Descartes has just mentioned for the first time and wants to distinguish from passions proper – he calls the new kind "inner emotions" (*émotions intérieures*). Here are the lines that come immediately before what I have just quoted, call them *B*:

> *B* Our good and ill depend chiefly on inner emotions [*émotions intérieures*] – which are aroused [*excitées*] in the soul just by the soul itself, in which respect they differ from passions, which always depend on some motion of the spirits. And although these emotions of the soul are often joined to the passions that resemble them [*qui leur sont semblables*], they may also often occur with other passions, and may even be born from

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those that are contrary to them [*peuvent* [...] *même naître de celles qui leur sont contraires*] (AT 11, 440–441; CSM 1, 381).

Article 147 raises many questions, but for the moment I shall confine myself to one. I shall not, for example, ask what it means for an inner emotion to be *semblable* to a straight passion – say, how does the husband's joy resemble what he would feel if he had just learnt that a vicious detractor, not his wife, had died? Would the two joys have basically the same texture? Would they feel similar – even though one was an inner emotion and the other presumably a straight passion? Let us assume for the moment that Descartes would answer "yes" – joy is joy.

Nor shall I ask exactly in what sense the husband's joy is *secret* (look at text *A*): is it secret just from other mourners, or from the husband as well? And if it is secret from him, how to square this with the Cartesian canon with which we are all acquainted – that "we cannot have any thought of which we are not conscious at the very moment that it is in us" (*Reply* to Arnauld: AT 7, 246; CSM 2, 171)? Allied question: exactly where does the husband's *innermost* soul (*le plus intérieur de son âme*) reside? Let us leave these matters undecided.

What interests me now is a different word of *B*, namely "*contraire*". The husband is described as feeling both joy and sadness; and – look at Descartes' own words – these are states of mind *contrary* to one another. What is more, they are occurring at the same time (again, look at *A* – the word is "*cependant*"). Speaking plain English, then, we might describe the situation as one where the husband is experiencing some sort of inner conflict; where he is divided between tears and smiles; where part of him grieves and part is joyful. Or if we want to speak *à la* Freud, we might say that we have here a passion's vicissitude (*Schicksal*): grief giving birth to its opposite – look at the last line of *B*. Or still *à la* Freud, we might say that the husband's state is one of *ambivalence* – not love-hate, but joy-sadness. And a question that arises is this: if we speak of the husband in any of these ways, how to square our words with Descartes' insistence that human minds have no parts, that they are simple and indivisible?

2. For that, too, is Cartesian dogma. In fact, it is a view standardly identified with Descartes: he is *the* philosopher who has held that human minds have no parts. A statement of the dogma appears in one of the best-known passages in the entire opus – we all know it, it stands at the centre of *Meditation Six*:

C there is a great difference between the mind and the body, in that the body by its very nature is always divisible, while the

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> mind is entirely indivisible [*plane indivisibilis*]. For in truth, when I consider the mind – or myself in so far as I am merely a thinking thing – I can distinguish no parts within myself; I regard myself as something entirely one and complete [*rem plane unam et integram*]. [. . . ..] The faculties of willing, sensing, understanding, etc, cannot be termed parts of the mind, since it is one and the same mind that wills, senses and understands (AT 7, 85–86; CSM 2, 59).

Call this *C*. What is more, a similar thought is also voiced in the *Passions* – not once, not twice, but at least three times (quotations *D*, *E* and *F*):

D [The soul] is of a nature that has no relation to space or dimensions or other properties of matter that make up the body [. . . . .] – as is apparent from the fact that we cannot in any way conceive of a half or a third of a soul or of what space it occupies (article 30: AT 11, 351; CSM 1, 339–340).

E All the struggles that people customarily imagine between the lower part of the soul, which they call "sensitive", and the higher – "rational" – part, consist only in the opposition [*répugnance*] between the movements that the body, by its spirits, and the soul, by its will, tend to excite at the same time in the gland: it is between natural appetites [*appétits naturels*] and the will [*volonté*]. For there is in us but one soul, and that soul has within it no diversity of parts; the very one that is sensitive is rational, and all its appetites are wills [*volontés*]. The error that has been committed in having it play different characters – usually opposed to one another – arises only from the fact that its functions have not been properly distinguished from those of the body, to which alone must be attributed everything observed in us that is opposed to reason (article 47: AT 11, 364–365; CSM 1, 345–346).

F I am well aware that I part company from all those who have previously written about the passions. But it is not without good reason. For they obtain their enumeration from a distinction that they draw within the sensitive part of the soul, between two appetites which they call "concupiscible" and "irascible". As I have said already, [. . .] I recognize no distinction of parts within the soul (article 68: AT 11, 379; CSM 1, 352).

I shall be concerned with only one of these four texts, namely *E* (article 47 of the *Passions*). But before we leave the other three, it may be worth

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noting that, in each of them, the mind's indivisibility is invoked to establish an important philosophical result. *C*, you may remember, is offered as an argument (adjunct perhaps, but argument nonetheless) for the conclusion that each mind is a substance distinct from body; so *C* is a major prop of Cartesian dualism. In *D* (article 30 of the *Passions*), interestingly and perhaps not very convincingly, the indivisibility of the mind is invoked as an argument not for the distinction of mind from body, but for its opposite – an argument for there being a special kind of union between the two, a union different from mere interaction *via* the "little gland" (which Descartes discusses in the next article, 31). As for *F* (article 68), and perhaps again not very convincingly, the mind's indivisibility is offered as the reason for the falsity of the traditional scholastic list of the primitive passions, and a reason for Descartes' offering a new, shorter, list [NOT: love, hate, joy, sadness, desire and aversion (the so-called *concupiscible* passions) + hope, fear, courage, despair, and anger (*irascible* passions). BUT: admiration, love, hate, joy, sadness, and desire].

3. So: Descartes is certainly keen to stress the unity, the unpartitionability of the mind – no question of that ("I regard myself as something entirely one and complete"). And yet . . . and yet . . . for all his stressing, it is difficult to think of a philosopher who has more often reported grievous conflicts within himself while working out his doctrines – about his final conclusions as well as on the path that led up to them.

Think for example of early *Meditation Three*, call this *G*:

> *G* whenever the preconceived thought of God's supreme power comes to me, I cannot but admit that it would easy for him, if he so wished, to bring it about that I go wrong even in what I think I see most clearly with my mind's eye. Yet when I turn to the things them-selves which I think I perceive very clearly, I am so convinced by them that I burst out: "let whoever can deceive me, he will never bring it about that [. . .] two and three added together make more or less than five, or any such thing in which I see a manifest contradiction." (AT 7, 36; CSM 2, 25)

Again a well know passage. Descartes is reporting in himself incompatible beliefs: when he entertains the thought of God's power, he believes that this God could deceive him about any proposition, however obvious; but when he actually entertains one such proposition (say, "two plus three equal five"), he feels certain that he could not be deceived about it by any God, however powerful.

Let me make a few points about *this* kind of mental conflict. First of all, it is not a case of ambivalence – Descartes is not simultaneously

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adhering to contrary propositions. Rather, he is switching from one conviction to its opposite; then back again; then back once more – like a pendulum swinging, endlessly. Let me give that predicament a name, which I owe to a play by August Strindberg. In *The Father*, Adolf, the hero, believes that women – all women – are infinitely deceitful, and can feign love for a man when in fact they feel none. Given this and [end-of-nineteenth-century] facts of human nature, no man can ever know for certain that the child whom he takes to be his natural daughter really *is* his daughter. True enough, Adolf acknowledges that at various moments of his conjugal life he has been unable to resist the conviction that his wife loved him; and for all he knows, in the future he may again be unable to resist. But he reflects that his inability to doubt his wife on those occasions can only be taken as yet a further proof of women's immense ability to deceive. And so the pendulum keeps swinging, again and again.

Well, let me call the predicament described in my text *G* an *Adolf syndrome*, and say that Descartes is in its grips as *Meditation Three* begins. In Strindberg's play, Adolf is unable to recover and ... commits suicide; and here of course, the parallel with the *Meditations* stops – as we know, Descartes has a happier fate. He is able to prove to himself that there is no deceiving God; able to prove that "the faculty of intellect given to [him] by God cannot but tend toward the truth (*tend[ere] in verum*)" (AT 7, 146; CSM 2, 104). And more important, the conviction acquired *via* that proof cannot, once acquired, ever be lost (AT 7, 70; CSM 2, 48). Imagine that Adolf were able one day, while in his wife's arms, to prove to himself through abstract reasoning that women were entirely to be trusted; and imagine also that this conviction, once achieved, never withered. He too would be rid of his obsession; he too would enjoy peace of mind.

Obviously, there is much to discuss about the Adolf syndrome in general, and about its occurrence at the beginning of *Meditation Three*; much to discuss, also, about the therapy offered in the *Meditations* that follow. Discussion has been abundant, and I shall not add to it – beyond making one small observation.

Imagine that in the first years of their marriage, Adolf had tender feelings for his wife and was not beset by doubt. Question: did he love and trust her *then*? Many would answer "no" – this was not true love, only its semblance. Why? Because had it been true, it would not have gone away: if you can doubt tomorrow, you do not love today. Let me call this conception of love *holistic*; it has a long history – think only of Aristophanes' description, recounted in Plato's *Symposium* [189d–193b], of lovers as those human beings

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who have found "their other half". Well, they either have found or they have not – and manifestly, Adolf had not. It only looked for a while as though he had.

How Descartes thinks about love, I cannot tell. But he certainly thinks holistically of *knowledge*: if you can doubt tomorrow, then you do not know today. If tomorrow, or in ten years' time, you can become unsure of Pythagoras' theorem because the thought occurs to you that you cannot trust your intellectual powers, then you have no real knowledge of the theorem today – even though you happen to have just proved it and are convinced by the proof. This holistic attitude leads Descartes to his provocative insistence that there are no *atheist* geometers – an atheist being typically a person who might be struck by the fear of intellectual infirmity, since, unlike the post-*Meditation Three* believer, he has no assurance that his mental make-up is not the product of blind natural forces. He is always apt to be touched by doubts; he has no knowledge of Pythagoras' theorem – ever.

So, one conclusion to draw is that Descartes certainly regards what I have called the Adolf syndrome as a greatly debilitating condition. If like the atheist you are not immune, science is for you a Sisyphean goal.

4. I shall come to feelings and emotions in a moment, but let me mention one more set of conflicting, or quasi-conflicting, beliefs that Descartes reports having had in the course of his philosophizing. This report occurs in the *Reply* to the *Sixth* set of *Objections*. The objectors had declared themselves unconvinced by the *Meditation Six* argument for the real (= substantial) distinction of mind and body; and Descartes begins his reply by offering, as he often does, a piece of mental autobiography – passage *H*:

> *H* When, on the basis of the arguments set out in the *Meditations*, I first drew the conclusion that the human mind was really distinct from the body, was better known than the body, and so on, I was compelled to accept these conclusions because everything in the reasoning was coherent, and was inferred according to the rules of logic from quite evident principles. But I confess that for all that, I was not entirely convinced [*non fuisse plane persuasum*]: I was in the same plight as astronomers who have established that the sun is several times larger than the earth, and yet still cannot prevent themselves judging that it is smaller when they actually look at it (AT 7, 440; CSM 2, 296).

I'd like to observe a few things about this story. The first concerns the example – the size of the sun. Obviously Descartes liked it, since he offers it again in the *Principles* (text *I*):

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I in our early childhood we imagined the stars as being very small; and although astronomical arguments now clearly show us that they are very large, our preconceived opinion is still strong enough to make it ultra-hard [*perdifficile*] for us to imagine them differently from how we did before (part 1, article 72: AT 8a, 36–37; CSM 1, 220).

Well, I don't know about 17th century astronomers, but somehow the example does not greatly speak to me – my hunch is that I have always imagined the sun to be large. So let me alter a detail, and switch from *size* to *motion*. For a number of centuries now, the western world has known that the sun was motionless relative to the earth; but we still speak as we did in the old days – we speak of the sun as rising, setting, etc, etc. The idiom is even more homely in French: *le soleil se couche*, we say. Does this mean (and this is my second point) that we are "not entirely convinced" (*non plane persuasi/æ* – Descartes' phrase in passage *H*) of the truth of Copernican astronomy? I doubt that we should put it that way. It is not altogether clear, perhaps, how we want to say it; let me propose *this* idiom.

Let me say that, of course, I am fully convinced that the sun does not move. But I am also able, perhaps even inclined, to look at what is happening right now in the sky, namely the gap on the horizon between the sun and the mountains to the south-west of me growing smaller by the minute; I am inclined to look at this shrinking gap from a different mental perspective. I view it from a different, perhaps less reflective, standpoint: I see the sun as disappearing behind the mountains.

Granted, this vocabulary of *standpoint*, of *perspective*, of *viewing* or *seeing as*, sounds a bit facile; yet it is one that we often use, and not just in ordinary affairs. Many philosophers have resorted to it at important moments of their doctrines. Take for example Spinoza, saying (in the scholium of proposition 7 of book 2 of the *Ethics*) that

J thinking substance and extended substance are one and the same substance, which is comprehended now under this attribute, now under that [*quæ jam sub hoc, jam sub illo attributo comprehenditur*]

– this is used to do away with Cartesian substance-dualism. Or take Kant in the *Dialectic* of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, discussing how to conceive the relation between freedom and necessity:

K the effect may be seen as free [*kann* [. . .] *als frei* [. . .] *angesehen werden*] in respect of its intelligible cause, and yet at the same time [*und doch zugleich*], in respect of appearances, seen as

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resulting from them according to the necessity of nature (*KRV*: A 537, B 565).

In both passages, we have typically perspectivist language – the same substance, we are told, may be viewed as thinking and also viewed as extended; the same act may be viewed as free and also viewed as necessary. It all depends on how you look.

Well, there is no such idiom in Descartes – not ever, so far as I know. He too, for example, discusses the problem of freedom and necessity; in his case, the problem of how to square human freedom with divine preordination. Here is his solution:

L we cannot get sufficient grasp of [God's power] to see how it leaves the free actions of humans undetermined [*indeterminatæ*]. Yet we are so conscious of the freedom that is in us that there is nothing we grasp more evidently and more perfectly. So it would be absurd simply because we do not grasp one thing – which we know must by its very nature be beyond our comprehension – to doubt something else of which we have an intimate grasp and which we experience within ourselves. (*Principles*, part 1, article 41: AT 8a, 20; CSM 1, 206).

How can any of my acts be undetermined [please draw a red-pencil circle around *indeterminatæ*: *that* is what freedom involves, for Descartes], when everything that I do is predestined? Answer: don't ask – the explanation is beyond human mental powers; just accept that freedom and predestination co-exist. This too, of course, is an easy way out; but it is also an admission of impotence: as far as we humans go, the conflict (and it is a conflict!) must remain unsolved. We are certainly not told that here are two perspectives from which we can cogently and simultaneously view the same human act.

Nor is there any perspectivist tinge to the story that Descartes tells the *Sixth Objectors* about mind and body – and here I return to text *H*. The tale is much more complex, and has to do with personal history. Why do astronomers still judge the sun to be small when they actually look at it? Answer: they are regressing to a childhood belief on which they are fixated. In case you think I am reading Descartes anachronistically and tendentiously, look at these lines:

M Because the light coming from the stars appeared no brighter than that produced by the meager glow of an oil lamp, [the mind in early childhood] did not imagine any star being bigger than that light. [. . . . . .] In later years, the mind is no longer a total slave to the body, and does not refer everything to it; it inquires into the truth of things considered in

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themselves, and discovers very many of its previous judgements to be false. But despite this, it is not easy for the mind to expunge [*expungere*] these false judgements from its memory, and as long as they are stuck [*hærent*] on it, they can cause a variety of errors.

Hærere does mean "to be stuck on", as in "ad*here*". The first three lines of this text are from article 71 of part 1 the *Principles* (AT 8a, 36; CSM 1, 220), and the remainder is the beginning of the next article – sentences that immediately precede my earlier quotation *I*. Return now to the *Sixth Reply*: the astronomers are not so strongly fixated as to make an outright mistake – they are not induced to believe straightforwardly that the stars are small. Yet when they actually look, it is "ultra-difficult" (*perdifficile*) for them to judge that the sun is not small. In that sense, they are not "entirely convinced" of what they know: a mental conflict, for sure – hard to describe though it may be.

Well, Descartes is in the grips of a similar condition as far as his beliefs about mind and body go:

N From earliest childhood, having a confused awareness that I was made up of mind and body, I conceived them as somehow one and the same thing: for it happens in almost every case of imperfect knowledge that different things are apprehended as one and the same and need a later, more careful, examination to be distinguished (*Sixth* set of *Replies*: AT 7, 445; CSM 2, 300).

As a child, Descartes believed that his mind and his body were one and the same; and he is still sufficiently "stuck" on this childhood belief not to be fully convinced that they are distinct – even though he has just proved that they are. And the same is true of the "learned men" who are his *Sixth Objectors*: even though they cannot point to any actual fault in Descartes' proof, they refuse to accept it – their behaviour is symptomatic, "they are just like the astronomers who, as noted earlier, do not find it easy to imagine the sun as being bigger than the earth even though they can demonstrate this by most reliable arguments" (*Sixth* set of *Replies*: AT 7, 446; CSM 2, 300).

Such is the diagnosis; but let me make a broader point. Descartes shares with Freud the view that childhood prehistory (as Freud calls it) figures a great deal in later life. But unlike Freud, Descartes holds a disparaging view of children – disparaging in its estimate of their intellectual capacity.[1] In our younger years, our mind is a "total slave

[1] Descartes is not alone among his contemporaries in having a low opinion of children. Bérulle, for example, writes at length about the vileness (*bassesse*) of childhood [for example pp. 117–119, vol.5 of *Œuvres complètes*, Cerf, Paris, 1997].

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to the body" (*tota corpori servit*, text *M*) – a catch-phrase for all sorts of cognitive sins. Descartes lists some of them in article 71 of part 1 of the *Principles* – for example, thinking that stars are no larger than oil lamps because they do not shine any more brightly (again see *M*); or believing that there is more substance to stones than to water because stones feel heavier and harder; "and a thousand other prejudices (*milleque ali[a] præjudici[a]*)". Hence the title of the article:

The chief cause of our errors lies in the prejudices of childhood. We ought to pause and think a little about the word "prejudice" [*præjudicium*, *préjugé*] – a Cartesian favourite. Its prefix has a compound significance: I pre-judge, in a general way, when I believe a thing without having examined it with sufficient care. My belief may be true, and still be a prejudice; but of course, odds are that it will not be true – hence the title of article 71 which I have just quoted. But there is a more particular case of pre-judging: it occurs when I believe something today simply because I believed it yesterday. Hence the title of the next article (72) of the *Principles*:

The second cause of error is that we cannot forget our prejudices. "We cannot forget" means here not that we forever recollect having had these hasty convictions during our childhood, but that – even as adults – we are still in their grip. We have not outgrown them; we are still "slaves to the body".

A last word about this fixation. According to Descartes it bears not merely on particular beliefs such as the ones listed in article 71 – about the size of the sun or the substance of stones. It even involves a broader, metaphysical, conviction, namely that mind and body are *tanquam unum quid*, "as it were one thing" (*Sixth Replies*: AT 7, 445; CSM 2, 300). And this, in effect, amounts to believing that everything is corporeal, including our minds: look once more at our text *M* – the diagnosis that children "refer everything" to body. It is presumably to overcome *that* fixation in his readers (and in himself!) that Descartes, as he tells Elisabeth in the letter of May 21st 1643 (AT 3, 665; CSMK, 218), "said hardly anything" in the *Meditations* about the union of mind and body, but on the contrary tried to make "well understood" the distinction between the two. Were it not for that therapeutic aim, the content of the *Meditations*, perhaps even their title,[2] might have been quite different; and who knows, we might not today ascribe to Descartes *Cartesian* dualism.

[2] From the 2nd edition onward, the subtitle is "wherein the existence of God, and the distinctness of the human mind from body, are demonstrated".

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5. So much for children and infantile beliefs. Let me turn to adult feelings and emotions and so return to our texts *A*, *B*, and *E*. I shall start with *E*, which is the beginning of article 47 of the *Passions* – a longish article that has for title: *En quoi consistent les combats qu'on a coutume d'imaginer entre la partie inférieure et la supérieure de l'âme* ("What the conflicts consist in, that people are in the habit of imagining between the lower part of the soul and the higher"). And I shall discuss the thesis that Descartes defends there, by considering the kind of example that somehow always comes to philosophers' pens when they discuss inner conflict – we find it in article 47 all right: the attempt to repress one's *fear*. Let me tell you of a real occurrence.

A few months ago one of my students, call her Samantha, told me this story. She had gone with her partner to see *United 93*, a movie that depicts the fate of one of the aeroplanes hijacked in the United States on September 11th 2001 – it was eventually made to crash onto a field in Pennsylvania, killing everyone aboard. Well, as the film was being shown that evening in Toronto, suddenly the screen went blank and the room was plunged into darkness. Samantha could not stand it: she jumped out of her seat, ran out of the room; in fact, she even ran out of the building, and stood in the street, trembling. Nor, apparently, was she alone.

I did not ask for details, but let us assume that Samantha tried to resist the terror before she jumped up and ran; and that some others in the room felt as she did, but resisted. In all these spectators, then, there occurred what we might call a *mental*, or *inner*, conflict: a conflict between on one side a feeling or emotion – fright, even terror; and on the other side, another part of themselves – call it "will" if you wish, or "reason". These are certainly common ways of talking; and events of that kind – repressing, or trying to repress, one's emotions – have interested philosophers for millennia, at least since Plato's *Phædrus* (see 253c–254e).

Well, according to article 47 of the *Passions of the Soul*, common though the idiom that I have just used may be, it is misleading – in fact even false. It embodies what, in post-Rylean lingo, we might call a category-mistake: it embodies the view that minds have parts – which, as we (Cartesians) know, they have not. According to our article, what happened to Samantha was this. The perception of the sudden darkness in the room caused the little gland in her brain to move in a certain way, which in turn would cause in her body the motion of jumping from her seat and running; and in her mind, the passion of fear. Samantha, on the other hand, wanted to push the gland another way – a way that would result in her continuing

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to be seated (and perhaps also, in her having the feeling of being courageous). So yes, there was a conflict – but not an inner, or mental, conflict. It was an opposition between Samantha's mind and Samantha's body. Look back to the first lines of our passage *E*:

> All the struggles that people customarily imagine between the lower part of the soul, which they call "sensitive", and the higher – "rational" – part, consist only in the opposition [*répugnance*] between the movements that the body, by its spirits, and the soul, by its will, tend to excite at the same time in the gland: it is between natural appetites [*appétits naturels*] and the will [*volonté*].

This is said even more clearly a few lines later in the article (passage *O*):

> *O* We observe conflict [*combat*] between movements of the gland and the volitions that oppose them – for example between the force [*effort*] by which the spirits impel [*poussent*] the gland so as to cause the soul to desire something, and that by which the soul repels [*repousse*] it through its will to avoid this same thing.

So: the spirits pushed Samantha's gland in one direction; her will pushed, or sought to push, it in the opposite direction. *That* was the conflict.

So far, so good. But surely, not *very* good. For, surely, this account leaves one important aspect of the story unexplained. We know well enough what repressing a bodily urge or impulse feels like. I am at the opera, watching Don Giovanni and Zerlina in their great duet, *Là ci darem la mano* – he, trying to seduce her away from Mazetto, the peasant she is about to marry; and she, divided, torn, singing *vorrei e non vorrei* [I want and I don't want]. Suddenly, as the duet plays out on the stage, I, in my seat, feel a terrible urge to sneeze. Obviously I resist, and may or may not succeed. Here we have a typical body-mind conflict. I want to sneeze; i.e. my chest wants to expel air violently – Descartes would call this a "natural appetite" (look at *E*): convulsions are occurring in my nose, chest and throat. On the other hand, I (André G.) want to repress them. I want not to sneeze.

In similar fashion we could imagine that Samantha, when seated anywhere, suffers occasionally from muscular spasms that make her stand up and run—and that this is what happened during the movie; she tried to repress the convulsion, and failed. Here would be a straightforward *combat* between a "natural appetite" and the will. But if we compare this *combat* with the one that actually occurred

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in the movie theatre, there seems to be a major difference between the two. In the episode she told me about, Samantha was trying to repress not a spasm, but terror. Or at least so it felt to her. And Descartes' account has in no way explained *that* feature of the situation.

If you look, however, it is clear that Descartes is aware of the gap in his account, and does try to fill it. Here are the lines that follow what I have just quoted from article 47, call them *P*:

> *P* We observe conflict [*combat*] between movements of the gland and volitions that oppose them—for example between the force [*effort*] by which the spirits impel the gland so as to cause the soul to desire something, and that by which the soul repels it [*la repousse*] through its will to avoid this same thing. And what mainly makes this conflict become noticeable is the fact that the will – not having the power to arouse the passions directly – is compelled to make an effort [*user d'industrie*] and to apply itself in succession to different things. If the first of these happens to have the strength to change the course of the spirits for a moment, it may happen that the next one doesn't and that they immediately revert – because the previous disposition in the nerves, heart and blood hasn't changed: this makes the soul feel as though it were almost at the same time driven to desire and not to desire the same thing. This is what has given people occasion to imagine two powers in the soul that fight one another (AT 11, 365–366; CSM 1, 346).

This is terse prose, and I hope that I am reading it correctly. Let me revert to Samantha. What, according to Descartes, makes Samantha feel as though she were trying to repress a feeling – fear – rather than a motion of the little gland, is an oscillation, a swing of the pendulum, that is occurring inside her. In order to repress the gland she has to use "industry" – have not just one thought, but a series of them coming in quick succession, like for instance:

"*no – a terrorist attack would not occur in a cinema*"
"*it wouldn't occur in Toronto*"
"*I am over-affected by what I have just been watching*"
"*what will people think of me*?"

etc, etc. Now it may be that the first of these has the power to alter the motion of the gland; but the next one doesn't have the power to keep the gland on the new course; and so the gland reverts to its former position. And so the swinging continues, as successive thoughts unfold in Samantha's mind. And as this goes on, the gland-motion that she wants to repress (*repousser*) and that keeps recurring

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(i.e. the motion that will eventually make her jump up and run) has had time to also incite in her mind a certain feeling – the feeling of fright. And so it feels to Samantha as though the *feeling* is what she is trying to repress. The vacillation between the motions of the gland misleads her about the object of her repression. She has the illusion that she is repressing fear, and not the gland.

As I have said, I hope that this is a correct reading of *P*.[3] What to think of it? I shall hazard just two remarks. One: the explanation seems to entail that if there had been *no* vacillation in Samantha – if she had simply had *one* thought to oppose to the motion of the gland, which either succeeded or failed; if, in other words, there had not been this protracted succession of contrary motions of the gland, no pendulum swinging; then she would *not* have evolved the thought of an inner mental conflict; she would *not* have got the impression that what she wanted to repress was fear. She would just have repressed, or tried to repress, a motion of the gland. It would have been like my trying to repress a sneeze at the opera. I leave you to judge whether this is a plausible account.

My second point is more abstract. What we are witnessing in the lines of article 47 (our text *P*) that I have just glossed, I hope correctly, is a general tendency of Descartes to argue that what look like simultaneous and contrary states of mind, are in fact states that may be contrary, but are not simultaneous – they occur one after the other, and the mind oscillates between them. The oscillation may be conscious – as it was between the beliefs that Descartes reported at the beginning of *Meditation Three* (the "Adolf syndrome"). There might likewise be conscious oscillation not between contrary beliefs but between contrary passions – this happens to "weak souls". Read *Q*:

> *Q* When *fear* represents death as an extreme evil avoidable only by flight, while on the other side *ambition* represents the infamy of this flight as an evil worse than death, then these two passions agitate the will in different ways; and as it obeys one and then the other, it is continually opposed to itself, and so makes the soul enslaved and miserable (*Passions*, article 48: AT 11, 367; CSM 1, 347).

(was *this* perhaps Samantha's plight at the movie?)

[3] As it happens, this makes Descartes a follower of the Stoics: "some people say that passion is no different from reason, and that there is no dissension and conflict between the two, but a turning of the single reason in both directions, which we do not perceive owing to the sharpness and speed of the change." Plutarch, *On Moral Virtue*, 446f—in Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, vol.1, p.412. I owe this reference to Jon Miller.

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But the oscillation can also go unnoticed, when it is very rapid; and then we get the (false) impression that we are ambivalent, or prey to a conflict of concurrent feelings – which brings me back to where this discussion began: the case of the Merry Widower[4] and his *émotion intérieure*.

6. Look again at our texts *A* and *B*. I take it that the sadness in the widowed husband is a passion; and the secret joy, an internal emotion. Also, the two are occurring concurrently – it's not that at one instant the wife's death arouses sadness and at the next instant, joy; and that the husband goes back and forth, as in the vacillation between fear and ambition mentioned in article 48 (text *Q*). No, the husband has grief and "at the same time (*cependant*) feels a secret joy": these are not the swings of a slave-soul.

So we should ask, exactly what is the Merry Widower's mental condition? Why is one of his mental states a passion, and the other an inner emotion? We are told that unlike his grief, his joy "has been aroused (*excitée*) in [his] soul just by the soul itself": well, does endo-creation leave a special mark on what is created? Is the joy *inner* simply because it occurs at the same time as the sorrow, or is there some distinctive internal feature? More generally, what is an inner emotion?

These are not easy questions, partly because of Descartes' laconicism; but partly also because of the other example of *émotion intérieure* that he gives. Here is the final third of article 147 (AT 11, 441; CSM 1, 381):

R When we read of strange adventures in a book, or see them acted out on the stage, this sometimes arouses sadness in us, sometimes joy, or love, or hate, and generally any of the passions, depending on the diversity of the objects presented to our imagination. But we also have pleasure in feeling them aroused in us, and this pleasure is an intellectual joy which may as readily be born from sadness as from any of the other passions.

I am watching the final scenes of *Œdipus Rex*: Jocasta has killed herself, Œdipus has torn out his eyes and goes into exile, forever in the care of his two daughters. This has been a rivetting production, and I have tears in my eyes; yet in a strange way, there is also warmth in my heart. I am deeply content to have seen the tragedy. Do we want to say that I am divided – part sad, part joyful? that I am in conflict with myself? That I have grief in me which I seek

[4] I owe this apt label to Denis Kambouchner, *L'homme des passions*, (Paris, 1995), vol.2, p.173.

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to repress? None of these sound like apt descriptions. In fact, it is hard to tell what is apt – theorists have tried ever since Plato's *Ion*. Aristotelians, for example, will say that my contentment is a "purgation" or "purification" of my tears. Well, perhaps. Whatever we do say, though, I don't think that we want to speak of mental conflict, of ambivalence – or if we say "ambivalence", or "conflict", they must be of a special, complicated, kind.

So the question is, how are we to understand the conjunction of the two examples, the widower and the theatre-goer? They are the only examples that Descartes gives, and in both the *émotion intérieure* is called "joy": does he want to stress the similarity between how the widower and the theatre-goer feel; or on the contrary, show how broad the category of inner emotions is? How are we to read article 147?

I shall opt for the first alternative and suppose that the two cases are meant to be basically siblings; and to assist this interpretation, I shall introduce a third example. Imagine that Descartes has taken to mountaineering, and is at this moment scaling the north face of the Eiger. As he casts a glance at the abyss below, he cannot help closing his eyes and being stabbed by terror. But, however violent that stab is, it also has a peculiar tonality – it is not what he would feel (say) were he to see a huge boulder rolling toward him. It has a more complex texture. For it is tinged by other, we might almost say contrary, feelings: pride at not having been deterred by fear of height, excitement at approaching the summit, triumph at having conquered this formidable wall – joy, if we want to use just one word. We might even be prepared to call it a "secret" joy. Why secret? This would be to stress the fact that the joy is not a distinct episode in the climber's life – not a separate feeling to which he will swing, away from the pang of terror; or away from which the pang of terror has swung him. It could of course have been separate and distinct in those ways, but it isn't. The joy that Descartes feels is a more pervasive presence; it is like an atmospheric aura infusing the sky – it colours even the fright. In that sense, one might say that it resides in the "innermost part" of Descartes' soul; that it has been "aroused by the soul itself"; that it is *une émotion intérieure*.

Well, assume that a similar description applies to the widower and the theatre-goer – like the mountaineer, their joy is "atmospheric". Granted, this description rests on the sort of word that Descartes insists we should not use when speaking of minds – a corporeal term. But then as we saw, Descartes himself does not always escape corporeality: "*le plus intérieur de l'âme*", we read. Let us assume that these are allowable images – images, furthermore, that have

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the merit of drawing attention to one important Cartesian doctrine that we have not considered so far. Look again at the opening sentence of article 147, the first line of our passage *B*:

> Our good and ill depend chiefly (*principalement*) on inner emotions.

Our three examples illustrate well that primacy. Each of them features a passion and an inner emotion; in each, the emotion is in some sense contrary to the passion. Yet in each also, the emotion wins out. Yes, I have shed tears watching *Oedipus*, but overall it has been a heart-warming experience: I shall remember with pleasure even my tears. Likewise, Descartes did at times shiver as he ascended the peak, but the excitement of the conquest far outweighed the distressing moments of fright: why else would he choose to climb? As for our merry widower, remember how Descartes ends his portrait (text *A*):

> he at the same time feels a secret joy in his innermost soul, and this emotion has so much power [*pouvoir*] that the sadness (and the tears that go with it) can do nothing to diminish its force.

So here again the mood overrides the twinge. A question arises, should we perhaps simply equate Descartes' inner emotions with *moods*? In article 180 (AT 11, 466; CSM 1, 393) he does speak of an *honnête homme*'s "cheerfulness of mood" [*gaieté de son humeur*], insisting also that it is not a passion: would he wish to call it an internal emotion? Let us hope he would. Granted, "mood" seems a less appropriate label for Descartes' other example, the theatre-goer's joy (see *R*). Notice, however, that he calls the joy "intellectual"; so perhaps we might venture to speak here of an *intellectual mood*. Anyhow, whether inner emotions and moods, taken as a class, coincide or only overlap, they affect the good or ill of our life more deeply than momentary passions do – and this not only when the emotion and the passion are contrary. Imagine that I have just watched a brilliant performance of the *Misanthrope* and laughed heartily at the clever repartees; yet even then, the overall thrill of the play is likely to count more than the bursts of amusement. Here, too, the inner emotion weighs more.

7. One further fact about article 147 might grasp our attention – let me end this piece by mentioning it. Why, even though Descartes insists that when a passion and an internal emotion occur together, they need not be opposed – why does opposition have pride of

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place when he gives an example of joint occurrence? Here again are the last lines of 147, about the theatre-goer:

> we also have pleasure in feeling [passions] aroused in us, and this pleasure is an intellectual joy which may as readily be born from sadness as from any of the other passions.

Oedipus comes to mind, not the *Misanthrope*. And joy-sadness is of course a constitutive feature of the widower story. Perhaps there is a moral to be drawn here, or at least a question to be asked. Could it be that, even though he outright denies the existence of *some* sorts of mental conflicts, like passion *versus* reason – could it be that Descartes is in fact very interested in conflictual emotional situations? And would it be totally fanciful to suppose that distinguishing, as he does, the category of "inner emotions" helps direct our attention to one kind of inner conflict – the kind involved in emotional perversion? It would be natural enough, wouldn't it, to say that the sobs of the merry widower are perverse. This does not mean that they are ungenuine, that they intend to deceive, or even that they are self-deceptive. In fact it is not easy to say what the word means, but I think it carries at least this implication, that the sobbing of the widower is in some complicated way abnormal – contrary to the constitution of simple and straight human beings: sobbing has not been given to us to consort with pleasure. What about Descartes' other example, the play? We might not wish to say that my tears at watching *Oedipus* are perverse; but consider another watching, not far removed. What do I think of keen horror-movie-goers – opting for fear and tension? Does the label not fit them quite aptly? And it could likewise fit my alpinist: perhaps he *enjoys* the pangs of terror, he would be disappointed if one day they ceased – if while climbing, he could stare at the precipice and feel not even a smidgen of fright. Here too, then, is perversion. So let me end with a big word, one that Descartes could *not* have used. Perhaps among the mental conditions that he wants us to recognize by speaking of inner emotions, lies not just what he calls "intellectual joy", but something else, more complicated – we might call it "inner masochism", might we not?

University of Toronto

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