Richard F. Hassing, *Cartesian Psychophysics and the Whole Nature of Man: On Descartes's Passions of the Soul*, London: Lexington Books, 2015, xvi + 229 pp.

There is an underlying theme of reunification running through Hassing's *Cartesian Psychophysics and the Whole Nature of Man*. Part of it is right there in the title—this is a book about Descartes and 'psychophysics'; it's about Descartes and the *whole* nature of man. Those are fighting words in the context of a certain, canonical picture of Descartes, in which his primary achievement is taken to be the metaphysical splitting of the mind from the body—and in which he is seen as something like the father of modern scientific reductionism, for whom everything should be dealt with in terms of singular essences, and should be explained through the most minimal units. The Descartes in that picture enforces a radical separation between the psyche and physics. He deals with humans either as minds or as bodies, and clumsily avoids accounting for the union of the two. Arguably, the most traditional image of Descartes depicts him as avoiding the physical side altogether: for that Descartes, humans, to all intents and purposes, just are their souls, and their bodies are little more than error-producing encumbrances that can, and should, be happily ignored. So, when, at the end of the letter-preface to his *Passions of the Soul*, Descartes states that his aim in the treatise is to explain the passions not as an orator or a moral philosopher but only as a physicist, it might look as though he is compartmentalising his approach—as though he is dealing with something purely physical, cordoned off from the issues of rhetoric and morals (in a wide sense) that, presumably, pertain to the domain of the mind. Initially, this also looks like the direction that Hassing is taking here, when he brings up Descartes's 'only as physicist' comment at the start of his own preface, and then again in his introduction. Hassing claims that *Cartesian Psychophysics* addresses the Cartesian conception of the self not in the traditional way, through the metaphysics of the *Meditations*, but 'from a less common perspective, that of natural philosophy' (p. 1), and then goes on to provide a brief overview of Descartes's physics. Specialists might bristle a bit at this—addressing Descartes through his physics is not so uncommon anymore, after a good thirty years, at least, of prolonged scholarship on the topic. But Hassing is not aiming this book primarily at specialists, I think, and, in the wider world, the old image of Descartes, as the quintessential metaphysician of mind and rational epistemologist, still has teeth. But both Hassing's preface and introduction—and, for that matter, the book as a whole—move quickly from physics, and the physiology of the passions, to philosophy of action, ethics, and politics—and it becomes very clear just how integrationist his approach is.

Speaking of the *Passions of the Soul*, it's worth noting that this is ostensibly a study of that book. The subtitle—literally, *On Descartes's Passions of the Soul*—states as much. But it is more than a commentary on a single treatise; there is some reunification going on here too. This is a fairly short book (unlike, say, Denis Kambouchner's roughly 1,000-page, two volume treatment of the *Passions*), but it still finds space to dedicate its first four chapters to, first, the Scholastic

background, and then to the ‘prerequisite[s] for’ (p. 29) what Hassing takes to be at stake in the *Passions*, in, respectively, the *Treatise on Man*, the *Meditations*, and the *Discourse*. His interest here is in what the self becomes, for Descartes, following the rejection of the Aristotelian conception of the soul. Accordingly, he starts off, in Chapter 1, by outlining what it is that Descartes rejects—in particular, the premodern stratification of the self in terms of different souls or soul-parts, and, consequently, the central role of that stratification in ethics and politics. Since Descartes splits the responsibilities of the various Aristotelian souls between two utterly separate kinds of substance (body and mind), Hassing argues, he is going to need some way for (mind-based) will and reason to influence bodily activity, in order for anything like an ethics to be possible. On Hassing’s account, Descartes’s solution lies in his identification of the pineal gland as the seat of the mind in the body.

Like Descartes himself, Hassing focuses on the physiological and practical implications of the union of mind and body—both of them are interested here in what it is, if our minds really are connected to our bodies at the pineal gland, to be a human being, to have passions and sensations as a human being, and, most importantly, to act as a human being. The metaphysics of how such a connection might actually work is, on Hassing’s reading, somewhat beside the point for Descartes; what matters are the consequences for human action. The rest of *Cartesian Psychophysics* sets about examining those consequences. Hassing dedicates most space to the physiological side—that is, to the issues of how a body works when it is connected to a mind through its pineal gland, and how a mind is affected by that connection. This is because he takes the physiology of the Cartesian (united) self to ground its action—at least insofar as the physiology provides the framework in which human action takes place.

The fundamentals of this physiology get set out in Chapter 2, through a brief analysis of the *Treatise on Man*, in terms of what Hassing calls ‘Descartes’s *inertial* principle’, by which he means, ‘a distinctive mechanism of inertially persistent connections in the temporal development of the human brain and its conjoined soul’ (p. 37). In Chapter 3, he goes on to interpret Descartes’s discussion of the ‘teachings of nature’ in Meditation 6 in light of this inertial principle, showing how it shapes the experience of being human, how it gives us a natural teleology (the health of the union), and how it accounts for epistemic error. Chapter 4 then takes a slightly different tack and addresses the relationship between the mind, the body, and language in Discourse 5. In some broad sense, this latter seems to be the reintegration of the orator that Descartes set aside in the preface to the *Passions*—at least, the traditional relevance of the passions for rhetoric, amongst other aspects of language, gets incorporated back into Descartes’s psychophysical account. As Hassing puts it, ‘there is a close connections between human passion and human speech [. . .]. This is one, very obvious sense of the Aristotelian definition of human being as political animal possessing speech [. . .], namely, a lot of speech is impassioned—political speech especially so’ (p. 64).

With these prerequisites covered, chapters 5–10 work their way through the *Passions*. The treatise itself is broken up into a series of slightly over two hundred short articles, and, for the most part, Hassing deals with them stepwise, either individually or in small groups. This structural choice, in itself, makes the book a useful resource for anyone interested in Descartes's *Passions*—and while Hassing's reading and emphases are in line with his own focus on the self, there is plenty here for a more general audience. This extended reading of the *Passions* ends up, as it probably must, in a treatment of Descartes's conception of generosity (Chapter 10). Out of everything in Descartes's work, it is in generosity that the passions and something like an ethics really come together. Cartesian generosity is an individual's awareness of having complete control over their own volitions and complete responsibility for how they use that control, combined with the constant resolve to use it virtuously. Generosity, then, on Hassing's reading, is the most developed state of the mind's relation to the body—it is the ideal endpoint of psychophysical development.

The final chapter before the conclusion is a short diversion into Descartes's treatment of heaviness. Descartes rejects the Scholastic conception of heaviness, or *gravitas*, as a real quality—as something in the object itself that pulls it downwards. He takes this to be an error that comes from confusing the way our own minds operate on our bodies with the way bodies operate on each other. Hassing addresses this partly as a particularly apt example of how our psychophysical self influences our thoughts, for Descartes, and of how self and thoughts can be emended (in this case, by coming to an understanding of heaviness in terms of extension alone). But he also, I suspect, inserts this chapter to come back to physics—this time, from the top down, as it were. In the preface, he says that the book is the result of his 'lifelong interest in two things: physics and political pathologies' (p. xi). Throughout, he has been using physics (in the form of physiology) to be able to talk about practical philosophy; here, at the end, he uses what amounts to philosophy of action to talk about basic physics—to talk about gravity. It's somehow fitting, then, that, by the end of the chapter, this discussion of physics turns into a discussion of Descartes's treatment of the passion of love.

Although, throughout the book, Hassing concentrates mainly on the psychophysics of its title, the practical—and especially the political—side of the Cartesian self is rarely far removed from his account. An analysis of articles 18 ('The will') and 20 ('Imaginings and other thoughts formed by the soul') in the *Passions*, for example, brings up the assassination of Henry IV of France, alongside the Dutch War of Independence, and quotes both Henry Kissinger and Osama Bin Laden (pp. 89–93). This is the major, overriding reunification at work in the book: the reunification of physics with politics, of physiology with practical philosophy, with epistemology, with (although more implicitly) metaphysics, and so on. In Cartesian terms, this is the reunification of a tree of knowledge that modernity has tended to compartmentalise. Hassing refuses to treat any of his subjects in isolation, presenting an image of Descartes in which (at the

very least) politics, ethics, philosophy of action, psychology, physiology, physics, and metaphysics coincide with each other, and are inextricable from each other.

This brings me to the final kind of reunification I want to mention here: that of past and present. Hassing is explicit that what he is giving is a ‘post-9/11 interpretation of *The Passions of the Soul*’ (p. xii). Specifically, he thinks that reading Descartes in the context of present-day religious extremism brings out previously hidden elements in Descartes’s thought—and that those elements might tell us something about how religious extremism works and how, at least on an individual level, it might be overcome. This is where he takes Descartes’s concept of generosity. Hassing argues that radical individual responsibility is at the heart of Cartesian generosity, and that this prevents individuals from acting for the sake of wider, depersonalised groups, such as a religion—he calls this ‘the depoliticization or [. . .] *de-religionization of thumos*—or, equivalently, [. . .] the athumetization of religion and politics’ (p. 172). This integration of history and the present—and its being done through politics—gives the book a compelling urgency, and it’s good to see history being put to work in this way. On the other hand, in many very real ways, it no longer seems entirely appropriate to think of our current context as ‘post-9/11’; the religious extremism that is Hassing’s focus now seems like a much smaller part of an even more complicated political situation. Of course, this book was published in 2015, and a lot has changed in the last couple of years. It would be interesting to see what resources Hassing could find in Descartes for addressing a world of Trump and of the UK’s departure from the European Union; I’d worry that the individualism and localism he sees in Cartesian generosity could be more of a contributor than corrective to the political pathologies at work here. This is not a criticism of Hassing, though—it’s a continuation of the approach in a rich, dynamic book that refuses to disengage from the present while studying the past.

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