

## Learning to Love: From Egoism to Generosity in Descartes

The whole of philosophy is like a tree. The roots are metaphysics, the trunk is physics, and the branches emerging from the trunk are all the other sciences, which may be reduced to three principle ones, namely medicine, mechanics, and morals. (*Principles of Philosophy*, I.186; AT IXB.14)<sup>1</sup>

Descartes is well known for his metaphysics and physics, the roots and trunk of his philosophical project. But Descartes's morals are generally neglected, partly because they are so difficult to find. He does not dedicate a major published work to morality. His most direct comments on it are in letters to Princess Elizabeth and Pierre Chanut. The published work that most touches on moral issues is the *Passions of the Soul*, which is primarily a treatise on the relationship between mind and body. As a result of this lack of primary sources (and perhaps also a general prejudice in favor of metaphysics and epistemology in the history of philosophy), there have been only a few significant studies of Descartes's moral philosophy in French, and only two major works devoted to it in English.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> References to Descartes's works are from *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, ed. and trans. by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984) and the standard French edition, the *Oeuvres de Descartes*, edited by Ch. Adam and P. Tannery (revised edition, Paris Vrin/C.N.R.S., 1964-76). Citations are given by the volume number and page number in both editions. (I.186; AT XI.382 refers to page 186 of volume one of the English edition, page 382 of volume XI of the French.)

<sup>2</sup> In French, see the work of Julien Eymard D'Angers, Martial Gueroult, Alfred Espinas, Pierre Mesnard, and especially Genevieve Rodis-Lewis's *La Morale de Descartes* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1957). In English, see John Marshall, *Descartes's Moral Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998) and Vance Morgan, *Foundations of Cartesian Ethics* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1994). For a more selected treatment of Descartes's provisional morality, see too Robert Cumming, "Descartes's Provisional Morality," *Review of Metaphysics* 9 (1955): 207-35.

This neglect of Descartes's ethics is unfortunate, not least since ethical concerns sometimes influence his work in other areas. This influence is particularly evident in his account of the passions, which is presented in the context of a practical program of self-discipline and moral cultivation. Although this paper does not focus primarily on Descartes's moral theory as such, it shows how moral considerations play an important part in a specific problem that arises for Descartes's account of love.<sup>3</sup> Descartes's moral concerns lead him to describe the passion of love as altruist and involving self-sacrifice. His general account of passions, however, suggests that all passions (including love) spring from and promote self-interest. This paper addresses the problem of reconciling the apparent contradiction between a selfless account of the passion of love and an egoist account of passions in general.

In Part One, I discuss the structure of Descartes's *Passions of the Soul* and point out the role of egoism – by which I mean a concern for the preservation of the mind-body unity that constitutes one's life – in the account of passions. Part Two draws attention to Descartes's non-egoist account of the passion of love. In this context, I show that non-egoist love is neither improper nor purely intellectual. Part Three sketches a general framework for alleviating the tension between an altruist love and a selfish account of the passions in general. Finally, in Parts

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<sup>3</sup> Descartes's account of love has received even less attention than his moral theory. To date, the only published discussions of any length are Alexandre Matheron, "Amour, Digestion, et Puissance selon Descartes," *Revue Philosophique de la France et de L'Etranger* 178 (1988): 433-445; Andrew Gombay, "Amour et Jugement chez Descartes," *Revue Philosophique de la France et de L'Etranger* 178 (1988) : 446-55; and Anthony Beavers, "Desire and Love in Descartes's Late Philosophy," *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 6 (1989): 279-294. The last of these, the only account in English, includes only a very brief account of love in Descartes, and this account is offered primarily in the context of an overall point about desire. Marshall discusses love in the context of Descartes's moral theory more generally (see Marshall, 104, 126-28, 135-40). Stephen Voss's more substantial account of love – "Cartesian Love," delivered at the 1998 joint meeting of the Midwest Study Group in Early Modern Philosophy and the Centre D'Études Cartésiennes – is not yet published.

Four through Six, I apply this framework to unfold three ways of explaining altruism. The first is broadly metaphysical. If one makes certain metaphysical claims, the egoism of the passions in general can, it seems, be reconciled with love. Although this might be a way of solving the problem, I suggest that on its own, it is one with which Descartes should not be entirely satisfied. The second explanation is practical; it turns on a developmental theory of the passions. It makes sense from the agent's own point of view at each stage in moral development to progress to the next stage. Eventually an egoist love develops into a morally rich, self-sacrificial love. The third explanation roots all love in the love of God. This account need not conflict with or make superfluous either of the first two, and it has the advantage of providing a way to reconcile Descartes's practical foundation for ethics with his beliefs about the nature of God. Ultimately, the strongest account that integrates altruism with the passions uses all three explanations.

### **Part One: Descartes's Account of the Passions as Egoist**

#### *a) The Structure of The Passions of the Soul*

Descartes's account of the passions is explained in the greatest detail in his published work, *The Passions of the Soul*, so it is important to briefly lay out the general structure of the *Passions*.<sup>4</sup> My purpose here is not to give a detailed account of the work, but only to provide enough understanding of its structure to appreciate Descartes's overall conception of the role of the passions in human life. In this context, I argue that the general account of passion in the *Passions* is egoist. By this I mean that the passions are directed towards what is useful or agreeable to oneself as a unity of mind and body. In particular, the *Passions* shows how the body acts on the soul to give rise to passions that protect and perfect *the body*.

The *Passions* begins with a brief account of the nature of body, mind, and the relationship

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<sup>4</sup> This book draws extensively on Descartes's correspondence, especially with Queen Christina, Princess Elizabeth, and Pierre Chanut. These letters often clarify positions in the *Passions*, as will become clear in the course of this paper.

between the two. Descartes defines “passions of the soul” as “perceptions, sensations or emotions of the soul which we refer particularly to it, and which are caused, maintained, and strengthened by some movement of the spirits” (§ 27, I.338-39; AT XI.349). This first part of the *Passions* ends with an account of techniques for controlling the passions. The second part of the work, “the number and order of the passions” (I.349; AT XI.371) describes and defines the six basic passions – wonder, love and hatred, desire, joy, and sadness – and offers accounts of several variations on these, such as hope, despair, and pride. A brief enumeration of these passions is followed by more detailed definitions of each. Descartes then turns to “the movements of the blood and spirits which cause the . . . passions” (§ 96, I.362; AT XI.401).<sup>5</sup> Here he offers a description of these movements and an account of why bodily movements lead to or accompany passions. This account is based on the principle that “our soul and body are so linked that once we have joined some bodily action with a certain thought, the one does not occur thereafter without the other” (§ 136, I.375; AT XI.428). As I will argue in the next section, this physiological account of the bodily origins of the passions is an important part of Descartes’s egoism. The second part of *The Passions of the Soul* ends with a description of “the function of the . . . passions” (§ 137, I.376; AT XI.429). Strictly speaking, this function is “to move the soul to consent and contribute to actions which may serve to preserve the body or render it more perfect” (§ 137, I.376; AT XI.430), but Descartes follows this account with a long digression on the effects of the passions on the soul. This digression ultimately turns to a brief description of “internal emotions which are produced in the soul only by the soul itself” (§ 147, I.381; AT XI.440). These emotions are not passions, though they have some affinity with them.

The last part of the *Passions* takes up “specific passions,” offering definitions and analyses of several derivative passions, such as vanity, fear, and remorse. For the purposes of this paper, the most important derivative passions are esteem and generosity (§§ 149-56). The

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<sup>5</sup> Strictly speaking, Descartes’s accounts of bodily movements are limited to the passions of love, hatred, desire, joy, and sorrow. Wonder has no initial bodily movements.

*Passions* concludes with two sections suggesting “a general remedy against the passions,” on which alone “all the good of this [embodied] life depends” (§§ 211-12).

Throughout the first two parts of the *Passions*, Descartes’s account of the passions is fundamentally egoist. Passions manifest concern for oneself, especially for oneself as embodied. This concern is evident in particular definitions of the passions, as we will see with respect to love in section 1c of this paper, and it is present in the two main issues treated in the second part of the *Passions*, the *bodily origin* and the *purpose* of passions. Passions have their *origin* in a concern for oneself, especially for one’s body, and their *purpose* is the furthering of one’s own good, especially the good of the body.

#### *b) The Egoist Origin and Function of the Passions*

The egoism of the passions emerges clearly in Descartes’s description of the causes of passions. “The objects which stimulate the senses . . . excite different passions in us . . . because of the various ways in which they may harm or benefit us” (§ 52, I.349; AT XI.372). This egoism is developed further in Descartes’s explanation of the physiological effects that accompany various passions (§§ 112-136). The bodily effects that accompany each passion are those that were present when the passion first arose. These original instances of each passion illustrate the crucial role of egoist concerns in exciting the passions. Love, for instance, arose “when our soul began to be joined to our body, . . . when the blood, or some other juice entering the heart, was a more suitable fuel than usual for maintaining the heat which is the principle of life. This caused the soul to join itself willingly to that fuel, i.e. to love it” (§ 107, I.365-6; AT XI.407-408). The soul loves a particular juice that is a suitable fuel for the heart because love is egoist in the sense that it is interested in one’s whole self, including one’s body. Fetuses and infants first love what is beneficial to them.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See too Matheron (436-37) and Beavers.

This explanation is not the whole story. Egoism also manifests itself in Descartes's account of the "function of the . . . passions explained here, insofar as they relate to the body" (§137, I.376; AT XI.429). An egoist origin need not imply an egoist function, so Descartes makes explicit the function of passions.

They are all ordained by nature to relate to the body, and to belong to the soul only in so far as it is joined with the body. Hence, their natural function is to move the soul to consent and contribute to actions which may serve to preserve the body or render it in some way more perfect. (§ 137, I.376; AT XI.430)<sup>7</sup>

The body is a self-regulating machine whose movements are directed towards the preservation of that machine. The passions move the soul to persist in and reinforce beneficial bodily movements. For example, the body has certain natural responses to danger, and the passions move the soul to recognize the danger and maintain activities necessary for the preservation of the body.<sup>8</sup>

The principal effect of all the human passions is that they move and dispose the soul to want the things for which they prepare the body. Thus the feeling of fear moves the soul to want to flee, that of courage to want to fight, and similarly with the others. (§ 40, I.343; AT XI.359)

The body's spontaneous response to danger is supplemented by a passion in the soul that disposes the soul to cooperate with the bodily instinct. Passions serve this important and fundamentally egoist function.

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<sup>7</sup> See too § 40 (I.343; AT XI.359), §52 (I.349; AT XI.372), and § 74 (I.354; AT XI.383). Although it emphasizes the egoist function of the passions, § 74 also mentions that passions can cause harm. This harm, however, is due to *improper* passions.

<sup>8</sup> See Marshall, 100f. for a similar discussion.

c) *Descartes's Egoist Account Applied to Love*

Although Descartes ultimately articulates a non-egoist conception of love, his initial definition of the passion of love is consistent with his egoistic treatments of the passions. He says, “when we think of something as good with regard to us, i.e. as beneficial [*convenable*] to us, this makes us have love for it” (§ 56, I.350; AT XI.372). He reiterates this later: “love is an emotion of the soul caused by a movement of the spirits, which impel the soul to join itself willingly to objects that appear agreeable [*convenable*] to it” (§ 79, I.356; AT XI.387).<sup>9</sup> This description fits well with Descartes’s general account of the passions. Love arises when the soul responds to a fuel suitable for the heart, and the function of love is broadly the same as the function of any passion, to promote action for the good of the body. It is fitting that love should be an attitude of the soul towards something that is good for us (that is, for our body). An egoist origin and egoist function fit an egoist description of the nature of love.<sup>10</sup>

Descartes offers two important caveats in his descriptions of the operations of the passions that are relevant to the issues discussed in this paper. First, he admits that passions can err. A passion errs when its aim is the good of the body, but the passion *in fact* leads to harm for the body. For example, fear might lead one to flee from an animal when the most effective response would be boldness. Thus there is an important role for correcting and transforming the

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<sup>9</sup> Both “beneficial” and “agreeable” translate the French “*convenable*,” which literally means “to fit well with.” Although it is fair to translate this with a term like “beneficial” that has egoist connotations, one could also use a more neutral term. Still, given Descartes’s description of the origin of love and his generally egoist account of passions, it is reasonable to interpret these definitions as outlining an egoist conception of love. Only the subsequent comments about self-sacrifice suggest a less egoist reading of *convenable*. For more, see Marshall, 137 and Genevieve Rodis-Lewis, *L'Œuvre de Descartes* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1971), 369.

<sup>10</sup> Contrast Matheron, 433-34.

passions to avoid these errors. Second, Descartes gives a short account of emotions that “are produced . . . by the soul itself” (§ 147, I.381; AT XI.440). This account seems to describe emotions that are not concerned with the body per se, and might thus open the possibility of genuine altruism. In Part Two, I show that Descartes has a conception of altruist love but that this love is neither an error nor merely an intellectual emotion.

## **Part Two: Descartes’s Account of an Altruist Passion of Love**

### *a) Altruist Love is no Error*

If Descartes just insisted that the only proper kind of love is egoist, he would have a consistent account of the passions. He might seem to run into trouble in the face of counter-examples, but he could explain those as mistaken passions. Descartes recognizes that passions can lead people to act against their own good (§ 74, I.354; AT XI.383). Moreover,

The passions almost always cause the goods they represent, as well as the evils, to appear much greater and more important than they are . . . . That is why we must use experience and reason in order to distinguish good from evil and to know their true value, so as not to take the one for the other or rush into anything immoderately. (§ 138, I. 377; AT XI.431)

On an egoist account of love, apparently selfless love can be explained as error. In the same way that one is mistakenly afraid of a caged lion, one might mistakenly love someone who is not useful. One might expect Descartes to give such an account of love, remaining consistent to his general egoist account of passions. But he does not.

After defining love in general, Descartes considers several examples of love. In particular, he distinguishes true love from love that is “merely desire mingled with other particular passions” (§ 82, I.357; AT XI.389). In this context, he introduces the example of a good father.

The love of a good father for his children is so pure that he desires to have nothing from them . . . . He



regards them . . . as other parts of himself, and seeks their good as he does his own, or even more so. For he imagines that he and they together form a whole of which he is not the better part, and so he often puts their interests before his own and is not afraid of sacrificing himself in order to save them. (§ 82, I.357; AT XI.389)

This paradigm case of love is other-regarding and can require self-sacrifice. Even if the father is concerned with some whole of which he considers himself a part, he is not egoist in the narrow sense defined in Part One. The father has concerns that are independent of and can even be contrary to the good of his own body and soul. And this altruistic love is not a result of errors in judgment but a proper form of the passion.<sup>11</sup> Even in his definition of love, Descartes explained that the phrase “willingly” (*de volont *) means “the assent by which we consider ourselves henceforth as joined with what we love in such a manner that we imagine a whole, of which we take ourselves to be only one part, and the thing loved to be the other” (§80, I.356; AT XI.387). This unity with others *could* be egoist, if one always considers oneself the greater part of the whole. But the selfless love of the good father introduces a non-egoist element as a proper expression of love. How can this proper altruist love be explained?

*b) Altruist Love is not Merely Intellectual*

One way to explain altruist love would be to deny that it is really a *passion*. Even if the father’s love is properly altruist, it might be merely intellectual. The distinction between intellectual and passionate love relates to passions “insofar as they belong to the soul” in the *Passions* (§ 139, I.377; AT XI.431), but Descartes discusses it in greatest detail in his Feb. 1 letter to Chanut. This letter was written after Descartes completed his first draft of the *Passions*,

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<sup>11</sup> Anthony Beavers has gone so far as to say that for Descartes, “the love of a father for his children epitomizes *perfect* love” (284, my emphasis). Although Descartes does not say this directly, Beavers is probably correct. At the very least, there is no plausible way to read Descartes as suggesting that this father’s love is an *error*.

but before its publication. Between the letter and the publication of the *Passions*, Descartes continued to work out his thoughts on love. The letter thus reflects provisional thoughts on love, which are revised by the time Descartes publishes the *Passions*. Still, it might seem to shed light on Descartes's notion of altruist love. In this letter to Chanut Descartes says,

I make a distinction between the love which is purely intellectual or rational and the love which is a passion. The first . . . consists simply in the fact that when our soul perceives some present or absent good, which it judges to be fitting for itself, it joins itself to it willingly, that is to say, it considers itself and the good in question as forming two parts of a single whole . . . All these movements of the will which constitute love . . . , in so far as they are rational thoughts and not passions, could exist in our soul even if it had no body . . . . But while our soul is joined to the body, this rational love is commonly accompanied by the other kind of love, which can be called sensual or sensuous. This . . . is nothing but a confused thought, aroused in the soul by some motion of the nerves, which makes it disposed to have the other, clearer, thought which constitutes rational love. (III.306; AT IV.601-603)

One might think that egoism – at least egoism focused on the body – is limited to the *passion* of love, and that the father has an *intellectual* love for his children. In this case, the tension between altruist love and egoism would not arise.

There are three main problems with this attempt to detach altruist love from the passion of love. First, it does not deal with an underlying problem of egoism. Even intellectual love, on Descartes's account, seems to be egoist in the sense that it is concerned only for oneself. In his description of intellectual love in the letter to Chanut, Descartes describes the object of love as something fitting [*convenable*]<sup>12</sup> for oneself (III.306; AT IV.601), and even refers to the love of God as “useful” [*utile*] (III.309; AT IV.608). Intellectual love differs from the passion in that intellectual love is focused on the good of one's soul, rather than the good of oneself as a union

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<sup>12</sup> See footnote 9 for a discussion of egoist connotations of the term *convenable*.

of soul and body. But the fact that love is intellectual solves the problem of egoism only if one can give an account of goods for the soul that coheres with self-sacrificial altruism.<sup>13</sup>

Second, even granting that intellectual love itself is not egoist, Descartes needs to show that it is reasonable to favor intellectual emotions over their passionate counterparts, given that people are embodied. Descartes grants that intellectual love is not focused on the body, and this has important implications for love and hatred considered “in so far as they belong to the soul” (§ 141, I.378; AT XI.434). But these observations would be decisive only “if we had no body . . . . But the bodily movements accompanying these passions may all be injurious to health” (§ 141, I.378; AT XI.434). The injury that intellectual emotions can do to the well being of one’s body requires moderation of those emotions. An intellectual love is proper for an embodied human being only when it is consistent with the good of the body.

Third, and most importantly, in the discussion of altruist love in the *Passions*, Descartes considers altruist love to be a proper expression of the *passion* of love. The love of the father for his children is offered as one example of “different *passions* [that] agree in that they partake of love” (§ 82, I.357; AT XI 389, my emphasis). This “love of a good father” is described almost immediately after Descartes carefully distinguishes “love and hatred (which are passions and depend on the body) from judgments which also bring the soul to join itself willingly to things it deems good” (§ 79, I.356; AT XI 387). Even if there might be some altruistic, intellectual love, the altruistic love of a father for his children is clearly described in the *Passions* as a passion.

In fact, however, the *Passions* includes no concept that correlates precisely with “intellectual love,” as that love is defined in the letter to Chanut. Descartes seems to have changed his mind about the distinction between intellectual and passionate love.<sup>14</sup> In the letter to

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<sup>13</sup> Such an account may be possible. The point is just that saying that love is intellectual does not deal with the tension but only shifts it to a new sphere.

<sup>14</sup> The differences between the accounts of love in the letter and in the *Passions* are very complicated, and a systematic treatment of these differences is beyond the scope of the paper. For the purposes of this paper, I limit

Chanut, intellectual love “consists simply in the fact that when our soul perceives some present or absent good, which it judges to be fitting [*convenable*] for itself, it joins into to it willingly” (III.306; AT IV.601). This love is not in any way dependent on the body. By contrast, the passion of love is a confused thought that is dependent on the body. For instance, one feels dryness of throat instead of recognizing the benefits of water, or one feels “a mysterious heat . . . around the heart” instead of the agreeableness of the object of love.

In the *Passions*, Descartes does not distinguish intellectual and passionate love explicitly. Instead, all forms of love involve thinking that something is good and considering oneself joined to that thing. Thus when Descartes defines the *passion* of love, he says, “love . . . impels the soul to join itself willingly to objects that appear to be agreeable [*convenable*] to it” (§ 79, I.356; AT XI.387), using language very similar to his definition of intellectual love in the letter. Of course, the passion of love is “caused by the movements of spirits” (Ibid.), and in that sense is similar to the passion described in the letter to Chanut. Moreover, there is at least a brief discussion in the *Passions* of “intellectual joy” as an example of an “internal emotion of the soul” that is “produced in the soul only by the soul itself” (§ 147, I.381; AT XI.440-41). These internal emotions do not depend on the body, and in that way they are similar to the intellectual love described in the letter to Chanut.

In the letter to Chanut, there are two differences between intellectual and passionate love. One difference is a difference in *content* – intellectual love is a clear recognition of good whereas the passion is a confused representation of bodily states. The other difference is a difference in *cause* – intellectual love is caused by the soul whereas the passion is caused by the body. In the *Passions*, the only difference is causal. For the purposes of this paper, what is essential is to recognize that the love of a father for his children is a modified *passion*, and not an emotion that is “produced in the soul only by the soul itself.” This is not only implicit in the

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myself to those differences that are particularly relevant for understanding the nature of the father’s love for his children.

placement of this discussion – after defining the passion of love, rather than in the section on “internal emotions” – but also explicit in Descartes description of the father love as one of “many different passions . . . that . . . partake of love” (§ 82, I.356; AT XI.388).

Although the love of the good father is a passion and thus caused by movements of animal spirits, both the letter to Chanut and the *Passions* allow intellectual considerations to play an indirect role in bringing about the passion of love. In the letter to Chanut, the intellect influences the passions when intellectual love gives rise to the passion of love “immediately” (III.307; AT XI.603). In the *Passions*, the intellectual “emotions” do not immediately give rise to their passionate counterparts, and they can even be conjoined with passions that are their opposites (see § 147, I.381; AT XI.441). But intellectual considerations can correct passions. Descartes describes, for instance, how imagination can indirectly “arouse or suppress” certain passions. By imagining lovable qualities in something, one can change the movement of animal spirits such that one comes to love that thing (see § 43-45, I. 344-45; AT XI.361-63). Even applying oneself “to consider reasons, objects, or precedents” (§ 45, I. 345; AT XI.363) can arouse certain passions. Finally, one of the most important “means of correcting” the passions is to “use experience and reason in order to distinguish good from evil and know their true value” (§ 138, I.377; AT XI.431; see too § 48-49, I.347-48; AT XI.366-68).

In the *Passions*, the use of reason is not a *replacement* of passions by intellectual emotions but a *correction* of them. Reason, experience, and imagination appeal to the egoist considerations that structure the function and operation of the passions. By reflecting on the fact that “there are many things harmful to the body which cause no sadness initially” (§ 138, I.377; AT XI.431), experience and reason contribute to shifts in animal spirits that correct passions. Eventually, this correction may lead to a radical transformation of the passion of love, but this transformation will flow from the egoist basis and function of the passions.

### **Part Three: Two Components of Altruist Love**

The altruist love of a father for his children is thus a passion, but one that has been corrected. This love has two fundamental components, and its transformation must involve both of these. First, the father “imagines that he and [his children] form a whole.” But second, and equally important if the love is to be truly altruist, the father imagines that “he is not the better part” of that whole (§ 82, I.357; AT XI.389). To explain how altruist love can be reconciled with Descartes’s account of the passions, both of these components must be explained. The first relates specifically to the passion of love. The second involves a standard of value, which implicates Descartes’s account of esteem. I will consider this second component first.

*a) Love, Value, and Esteem*

Descartes connects love and value. When explaining the extent to which love is good, Descartes explains that “when the things it [knowledge] brings us to love are truly good . . . love . . . can never be too great, and it never fails to produce joy” (§ 139, I.377; AT XI.432). Since love ideally attaches only to things that are truly good, any account of proper love must include an account of what is truly good. Egoism determines the value of things by their benefit to oneself. Thus egoist love is properly directed only at such things. To allow for a different conception of love, Descartes needs to show that a different standard of value can be proper.

Following his general definition of love, Descartes offers just such a standard when he distinguishes three sorts of objects and the love appropriate to each.

We may . . . distinguish kinds of love according to the esteem which we have for the object we love, as compared with ourselves. For when we have less esteem for it than for ourselves, we have only a simple affection for it; when we esteem it equally with ourselves, that is called ‘friendship’; and when we have more esteem for it, our passion may be called ‘devotion’. Thus, we may have affection for a flower, a bird, or a horse; but unless the mind is very disordered, we can have friendship only for persons . . . . As for devotion, its principle object is undoubtedly the supreme Deity . . . . In all [three kinds of love] we consider ourselves as joined and united to the thing loved, and so we are always ready to abandon the lesser part of

the whole that we compose with it so as to preserve the other part. In the case of simple affection this results in our always preferring ourselves to the object of our love. In the case of devotion, on the other hand, we prefer the thing loved so strongly that we are not afraid to die in order to preserve it. (§ 83, I.357; AT XI.390)

Here love is not based on egoism. Other people are often less useful than a strong horse, but they are always worthy of greater love. More importantly, love can require self-sacrifice. One may be able to reconcile affection with egoism, since someone who loves a horse looks out for its interest, but only when such care does not require self-sacrifice. But if love just is joining to something useful, other people (and even God!) should be loved the same way as horses. Since they may be more useful, one might sacrifice more, but one would never “prefer the thing loved so strongly that we are not afraid to die in order to preserve it.” Usefulness must not be the basis of love here. But then Descartes must have a non-egoist standard of value. The first task in explaining altruist love is defending this standard. This task constitutes the first section of each of the next three parts of this paper.

#### *b) Considering Oneself Part of a Whole*

Even if Descartes has a plausible standard of value that does not reduce to egoism, however, this will not be enough. Such an account shows only that we should *value* things independent of their usefulness. It does not prove that one should *love* them equally, since it does not show why one should love them at all. If love is proportional to esteem, then *if* one loves another, one’s love must be proportional to one’s esteem for the other. This does not show that it is reasonable to love others. Someone might limit love to animals, for instance, since love of them is not particularly costly. To get from esteem to love one must add the general principle that it is proper to consider oneself as part of a whole of which others are parts. Once one considers oneself part of a whole, the standard of value that one adopts determines the degree of concern for other parts. Only then will a non-egoist standard of value lead to a non-egoist love.

Thus any alleviation of the tension in Descartes's account of the passion of love must have two parts. It must justify a standard of value other than the egoist one, and it must explain why one should consider oneself part of a greater whole at all. The first requirement is necessary to make love non-egoist. The second is necessary to make non-egoist esteem into love. In both cases, to justify an altruist *passion* of love, the solution must *transform* rather than merely *override* the passion. In the next three parts of this paper, I consider three different ways to account for altruist love. In each case, I first defend a non-egoist standard of value and then argue for considering oneself to be part of a whole.

#### **Part Four: A Metaphysical Account of Altruist Love**

##### *a) Metaphysical Reasons for a Non-egoist Standard of Value*

Descartes does not offer a general theory of value,<sup>15</sup> but he does give an important *example* of something that should be esteemed. “I see only one thing in us which could give good reason for esteeming ourselves, namely, the exercise of our free will and the control we have over our volitions” (§ 152, I.384; AT XI.445). The source of a *person's* value is free will.<sup>16</sup> This value is not defended with egoist considerations.<sup>17</sup> Instead, Descartes says,

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<sup>15</sup> The closest Descartes comes to a general theory of value is a short but suggestive remark in his discussion of hatred: “there is nothing real which does not have some good in it” (§ 140, I.378; AT XI.433). This section follows the claim that love is proper “when the things [knowledge] brings us to love are truly good.” Descartes here seems to think that goodness is related to the reality of a thing, but he neither elaborates on nor argues for this claim.

<sup>16</sup> Much has been written on the nature of the free will in Descartes. In this paper, I avoid giving a detailed account of the nature of the free will except where such detail is necessary for the overall point of the paper.

<sup>17</sup> Descartes does come close to giving an argument for the utility of freedom as opposed to instinct at the end of the *Discourse* (see I.140; AT VI.57), but there it is primarily *reason*, not freedom, which is useful.



For we can reasonably be praised or blamed only for actions that depend upon this free will. It renders us in a certain way like God by making us masters of ourselves, provided we do not lose the rights it gives through timidity. (§ 152, I.384; AT XI.445)

There are two closely related justifications for basing self-esteem on free will. First, free will is the basis of all praise and blame. Second, it makes one like God by making one a master of oneself.

The first justification can be spelled out as follows: Others' esteem generally takes the form of praise. I am praised reasonably only for actions that depend on my free will. Thus, others' esteem of me (generally) depends on my free will. Hence, my value depends on my free will since value is the basis for esteem. The argument is weak. Even if sound, it only establishes that *others* value me for my freedom, which need not affect my *self*-esteem. Moreover, the fact that others value something has no obvious connection with it actually being valuable. And my free will is not even likely to be what is most valuable to others unless value is already non-egoist, since others might prefer that I be unfree and easier to control. Descartes adds the qualifier that this praise is reasonable, but it is not clear that this helps. It cannot be understood in an egoist sense, since my free will is as much a burden as a blessing to others. One might read it to mean that others esteem me on the basis of my true value. One important example of such a reading would be the Kantian point that freedom is a condition of moral responsibility, and hence that moral evaluation – the only evaluation that really matters – depends on the free will. But as an argument for what gives me ultimate value, this is at best incomplete, and at worst circular. If one distinguishes the claim that moral evaluation is the most important kind of evaluation from the claim that proper esteem is based on free will (to avoid making the argument circular), one is left with the need to defend both the connection of moral responsibility to freedom *and* the importance placed on *moral* evaluation as the only basis for “proper” esteem. Kant may have attempted these defenses; Descartes did not.

As an attempt to justify a standard of value, Descartes's first approach fails. The second justification, however, is more promising. Free will makes one "in a certain way like God, by making us masters of ourselves." This justification has an important practical dimension that I develop in Part Five. As a metaphysical argument, it is proper to consider this passage in relation to the metaphysical account of freedom in the *Meditations*. There Descartes explains that the freedom of the human will and the freedom of God are both infinite, whereas the human intellect is finite (Fourth Meditation, II.39; AT VII.56-57). The infinitude of the will may be an important justification for valuing the will above all finite things. This supposition is confirmed by the connection for Descartes between esteem and wonder, the general passion of which esteem is a variant. Wonder facilitates learning about things of which one is ignorant. It is healthy only insofar as it serves this function. If one wonders at something that is or should have been understood, wonder becomes dangerous. It can lead to astonishment, which incapacitates and "can never be other than bad" (§ 73, I.354; AT XI.383). But since freedom, like God, is infinite, it is never unworthy of wonder.<sup>18</sup> This justifies putting it in a special class of esteemed things. The metaphysical fact of the infinitude of the will confers on the will a value greater than that of any finite thing. In this way, the will is like God.

This account of self-esteem offers a metaphysical justification for a non-egoist standard of value. The free will is valued not because it is useful but because its infinitude makes us like God. But this account is far from sufficient to justify self-sacrificial love. It shows only that one's *own* will is worthy of esteem independent of its use. To get a more substantive altruism that requires genuine concern for other people, Descartes extends this standard to include people's esteem for others.

Those who possess this knowledge and this feeling about themselves readily come to believe that any other

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<sup>18</sup> Hence Mesnard rightly says, "in the instant [that free will is considered], it no less produces the impression of a marvelous discovery, so much does liberty spring up with a fresh power of spontaneous renewal" (180).

person can have the same knowledge and feeling about himself, because this involves nothing which depends on someone else. (§ 154, I.384; AT XI.446-47)

What is worthy of value in oneself is present in every other person. The same metaphysical arguments that justify ascribing value to one's own will justify ascribing value to the wills of others. Thus those who have proper self-esteem and hence proper esteem for others "esteem nothing more highly than doing good to others and disregarding their own self-interest" (§ 156, I.385; AT XI.448). On the basis of a new standard of value, Descartes justifies a thoroughly selfless passion.

There is still at least one remaining problem with this sort of metaphysical solution. It is not clear why one should alter one's *passions* on the basis of metaphysical truths about the absolute value of things. The nature and purpose of passions is egoist. While there may be knowledge that would affect our passions, this will be knowledge "that a thing is good *for us*" (Letter to Mesland, 2 May 1644, III.233; AT IV: 116, my emphasis). What matters from the standpoint of esteem and love is not the value of a thing in absolute terms, but its value *for oneself*. Even if the realization of the absolute equality of oneself with others might lead one to change one's *intellectual* evaluations and one's *intellectual* love, it would not change one's *passionate* evaluations (esteem) nor one's passionate love. And it is precisely a new conception of the *passion* of love that we seek to explain. Still, the sorts of metaphysical considerations outlined here can play an important role in cultivating passions, a role that will become more clear in Part Five.

#### *b) Metaphysical Reasons for Considering Oneself Part of a Whole*

The second step in justifying love is to show that one should consider oneself as united with others. Only if this can be defended can a new standard of value allow for self-sacrificial love. Can Descartes give a metaphysical argument in favor of considering oneself part of a whole?

Descartes's letter to Elizabeth of September 15, 1645 seems to give just such an argument. In this letter, Descartes claims that "in order to be always disposed to judge well only two things seem . . . necessary. One is knowledge of the truth; the other is practice in remembering and assenting to this knowledge whenever the occasion demands" (III.265; AT IV.291). He goes on to consider four "truths which concern all our actions in general," truths that are "most useful to us." The first three are clearly metaphysical or physical truths that bear on practical concerns.<sup>19</sup> They are independently established on metaphysical grounds, and Descartes draws ethical implications from them. The fourth, however, is not separately established on metaphysical grounds. Still, it seems to be a metaphysical principle on par with the other three. Descartes describes the fourth truth as follows:

Though each of us is a person distinct from others, whose interests are accordingly in some way different from those of the rest of the world, we ought still to think that none of us could subsist alone and that each one of us is really one of the many parts of the universe, and more particularly a part of the earth, the state, the society and the family to which we belong by our domicile, our oath of allegiance, and our birth. And the interests of the whole, of which each of us is a part, must always be preferred to our own particular person. (III.266; AT IV.293)

If it is simply a metaphysical truth that each person is a part of a whole of which others are also parts, one can justify a very expansive love. Love requires considering oneself as part of a whole of which others are also parts. If one really *is* a part of a whole, then this aspect of love is just a matter of acting in accord with the truth. This could make sense of why Descartes would consider it proper to love each other. And once it is established that love is appropriate, the

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<sup>19</sup> Specifically, the first three truths are (1) "that there is a God on whom all things depend," (2) "the nature of our soul . . . , that it subsists apart from the body and is much nobler than the body," and (3) truths about "the works of God," especially "the vast extent of the universe" (III.265-66; AT IV.291-92).

degree of love is fixed by the standard of value proposed earlier. Since others are equal in value to oneself, love of them can reasonably lead to self-sacrifice.

There are, however, serious problems with this metaphysical solution. Most importantly, Descartes simply fails to support his metaphysical claim that each person is in fact a part of a greater whole. Moreover, like the shift from relative to absolute value, the insight that one is part of a larger whole is not directly tied to the *passion* of love by these metaphysical arguments. Descartes's account of the passions seems to limit one's passionate *concerns* to oneself, and he does not explain how learning new metaphysical *truths* changes one's practical *concerns*. On their own, then, Descartes's metaphysical justifications for valuing others and for thinking of oneself as a part of a whole that includes others are not entirely satisfying.

### **Part Five: A Practical Account of Altruist Love**

Fortunately, Descartes has strong *practical* arguments that support his standard of value and his emphasis on self-sacrificial love. Even if metaphysical considerations are insufficient to direct one towards valuing free will above all things, there is a *practical* reason to consider free will as the source of my self-esteem, and this leads to valuing the free wills of others. And even if there is no metaphysical argument to show that one is essentially a part of a whole, there is a good practical reason to *consider* oneself a part of a whole. In both cases, the most rational way to increase self-satisfaction turns out to depend on adopting a non-egoist stance towards the world.

#### *a) Practical Reasons for a Non-egoist Standard of Value*

A properly egoist standard of value ascribes value only to what benefits oneself and ascribes value in proportion to the degree of this benefit. Descartes's practical argument shows that this egoist standard is ultimately self-defeating. His defense of this claim is related to the remark that we passed over earlier regarding why people should value free will above all else. Descartes

argued that free will makes people like God “by making us masters of ourselves.” Although this explanation might seem to do little more than explain what a free will is, in fact it highlights the crux of Descartes’s argument for valuing the free will. Because free will makes one a master of oneself, it is the foundation of control over one’s own circumstances.<sup>20</sup> Descartes elaborates this justification in his letters to Elizabeth with a twofold argument: first, valuing free will leads to the sweetest joys, and second, a properly selfish standard of value is harmful to oneself.

Descartes’s defense of the claim that valuing free will leads to the sweetest joys depends on his conception of self-satisfaction.<sup>21</sup> “A good done by ourselves gives us an internal satisfaction, which is the sweetest of all the passions” (§ 63, I.351-2; AT XI.377). The sweetness of this satisfaction is due to its deriving solely from oneself (§ 190, I.396; AT XI.471). Descartes adds, without defense, that the way in which one can be most content with oneself is through the pursuit of virtue (see e.g. III.262; AT IV.277), and that this contentment is sweeter than any

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<sup>20</sup> Marshall rightly draws attention to the fact that these practical considerations depend on the metaphysical “fact of our own agency and autonomy” (4). As he goes on to point out, however, although Descartes has a metaphysically weighty conception of human autonomy, “much of Descartes’s moral theory . . . can stand on [a] metaphysically thin interpretation of the *cogito*” (5). All that one needs to claim for practical purposes is that one’s volitions are under one’s control. This claim is neutral between various sorts of libertarian and soft determinist accounts of voluntariness, such that it is relatively uncontroversial.

<sup>21</sup> Further support for this line of argument is presented by Marshall (61ff.), Mesnard (180f.), and Jean-Mauric Monnoyer, *Les Passions de l’âme précédé de la Pathétique cartésienne* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1988), 109. Work showing the Epicurean basis of Descartes’s moral philosophy give a valuable broader perspective on the place of self-satisfaction in Descartes’s moral philosophy. In this regard, see especially Mesnard (153f.) and Martial Gueroult, *Descartes selon l’ordre des Raisons*, vol. II, *L’âme et le corps* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1968), 228f. (For an English translation, see Martial Gueroult, *The Soul and the Body*, Roger Ariew, trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 184f. Future references to Gueroult will include the French pagination followed by the English.)

suffering that may accompany it. “Whatever sadness or distress we feel on such occasions cannot be as great as the inner satisfaction which always accompanies good actions, and especially the actions which proceed from a pure affection for others that has no reference to oneself” (III.269-70; AT IV.308-309). Since this pleasure comes from virtuous actions untainted by self-interest, it is available only to those who overcome egoism.

The second argument, that a properly selfish standard of value is harmful to the self,<sup>22</sup> is discussed in more detail. In a letter to Elizabeth (Aug 4, 1645), Descartes reiterates an argument from his *Discourse on Method* (see I.123-24; AT VI.25-26) against ascribing value to everything that is beneficial to oneself:

[A person who wants contentment] should bear in mind that while he thus guides himself as far as he can, by reason, all the good things which he does not possess are one and all entirely outside his power. In this way he will become accustomed not to desire them. For nothing can impede our contentment except desire and regret or repentance; but if we always do whatever our reason tells us, even if events show us afterwards that we have gone wrong, we will never have the grounds for repentance, because it was not our own fault. We do not desire to have, for example, more arms or more tongues than we have, and yet we do desire to have more health or more riches. The reason for this is simply that we imagine that the latter . . . can be acquired by our exertions . . . We can rid ourselves of that opinion by bearing in mind that since we have always followed the advice of our reason, we have left undone nothing that was in our power; and that sickness and misfortune are no less natural to man than prosperity and health. (III.258; AT IV.265-66)

It is reasonable to desire something only if that thing is good *and* it is within one’s power to gain it.<sup>23</sup> Only one’s will is within one’s own power. Thus, only a good will can reasonably be

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<sup>22</sup> See too Marshall, 50-55.

<sup>23</sup> There is some ambiguity in the account here. Usually Descartes insists that what matters is what is within

desired. Limiting desire to what is good is uncontroversial within the broadly Aristotelian theories of motivation with which Descartes was familiar. Given enough flexibility in defining the good, this limitation poses no problem for the argument. The restriction of desire to what is within one's power is more troublesome. Descartes's examples above are intended to show that it reflects commonsense.

One might take issue with him here. As a *description* of how people *in fact* desire, it is simply not true that desire is limited to what is within one's control. Here Descartes can fall back on his account of error in passions. It is *reasonable* to desire only those things that are both good for oneself and that one can acquire through one's effort, since desire serves the egoist purpose of the passions only when one's desire can actually aid the body.<sup>24</sup> Passions are often misdirected, and desire for things the attainment of which is beyond one's control is an example of such misdirection.

In the long run, one benefits by valuing only things over which one has control. This does not immediately result in the loss of particular goods for oneself. Things useful to oneself either can be acquired through one's effort or they cannot. If they can, they will be valued and pursued. If they cannot, the failure to value them will not affect whether they will ultimately be possessed, so this failure has no negative consequences for oneself. Thus this new standard of value is consistent with the egoist purposes of the passions. Meanwhile, by valuing only things within one's own power, one is potentially free of frustrations and capable of the greatest levels of self-esteem, since it is possible to have everything that one values. Thus when Descartes considers that "contentment" which characterizes happiness, even "contentment that depends on the body,"

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one's own control. Sometimes, however, his account seems to depend on a slightly different claim, that anything not determined by fate is valuable. This latter claim would make it easier to support the value of God and of the free wills of others.

<sup>24</sup> This argument is the core argument for the self-defeating nature of an egoist pursuit of external goods.

For further support, see Mesnard, 156f.



he insists that “in order to achieve a contentment which is solid, we need to pursue virtue” (III.262; AT IV.277). One benefits most by pursuing only what one can achieve.

As it turns out, however, only one’s volitions are truly under one’s own control.<sup>25</sup> Other things are only derivatively under one’s control. For instance, whether or not I get a new car depends largely on how I decide to spend my money, and how I decide to spend my money is under my control. Although in some way it makes sense, therefore, to value external things, these things rightly have value only as objects of one’s volitions. If I decide to buy a car, do all that I can to buy a car, and ultimately fail, the value of my volition is not different than if I succeed (since only what is under my control is valued). The car itself has value only as it is incorporated into my volition, and its value is only the value of a volition with the acquisition of a car as its end. With respect to matters beyond our complete control, Descartes explains that “although we must consider their outcome to be wholly fated and immutable, so as to prevent our desire from occupying itself with them, yet we must not fail to consider the reasons which make them more or less predictable, so as to use these reasons in governing our actions” (I.380; AT XI.439). One must *consider* what ends are best and how best to achieve them, but *value* only the volitions that take these considerations into account.

The fact that all value derives from one’s control over volitions explains the highest virtue and ultimate source of self-esteem in Descartes’s ethics, generosity.

True generosity, which causes a person’s self-esteem to be as great as it may legitimately be, has only two components. The first consists in his knowing that nothing truly belongs to him but his freedom to dispose his volitions . . . The second consists in his feeling within himself a firm and constant resolution to use it

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<sup>25</sup> Gueroult (257-60/205-207) connects this limitation to ignorance. This is fair as far as it goes, but ignorance is not the only reason that we are limited. Human beings fall short of God in both knowledge *and power*. Lack of power limits us more than lack of knowledge.

well . . . . To do that is to pursue virtue in a perfect manner. (§ 153, I.384; AT XI.445-46)

Generosity causes us to hold in low esteem all the good things which may be taken away, and on the other hand to hold in high esteem the liberty and absolute control over ourselves which we cease to have when someone else is able to injure us. (§ 203, I.401; AT XI.481)

When a rational egoist learns that she controls only her volitions, she realizes that she best serves herself by ascribing value only to having the right volitions. And although egoist reasons support *adopting* this standard of value, the standard itself is at odds with egoism since it does not allocate value based on something's value *for oneself*. According to this standard of value, one no longer values health or wealth or power, even though these are good for oneself, but only good volitions, because these are things over which one has control.

Nonetheless, health and wealth and power do not entirely drop out of the new standard of value. One values good volitions, but what makes a volition good seems to be that it is properly oriented towards the acquisition of things that are “good” in the sense specified by the old, egoist standard of value. Descartes does not flesh out the criteria for what makes a volition “rational.” The account offered so far seems to imply that volitions can be rational or irrational only in an instrumental sense. Descartes may have believed this, but he leaves his notion of rationality unspecified, and he is not committed to any particular standard of rationality by his argument. He consistently says merely that one must “carry out . . . all things which one judges to be best” (III.345; AT V.83; see too III.262; AT IV.277; and I.384; AT XI.446), without specifying what actually *is* best nor even what is the best way to judge.<sup>26</sup> Whatever criteria Descartes applies for

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<sup>26</sup> One could fill out Descartes's account with a more particular theory of what it means for a choice to be rational. There are even some hints of such a theory in Descartes's account of the relationship between the understanding and the will in the *Meditations* (see II.38-41; AT VII.54-60; but see II.106, AT VII.149. See too *Principles* I.191; AT VIII.A.2-3.) and in his letters (see e.g. III.265-66; AT IV.291-92; and III.269). There are serious problems with making too much of either of these accounts, and to discuss them in detail is beyond the scope

evaluating volitions, however, what matters here is that the ascription of value only to good volitions is not itself egoist.

Unfortunately, merely knowing that one would rather have a different standard of value is different from actually having that standard.<sup>27</sup> If the argument outlined so far is sound, it shows

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of this paper. For now, it is enough to note that Descartes does not say anything that would favor, say, a Kantian reading of practical rationality over a rule-utilitarian or Clarkean moral realist one. Mesnard (161f.) gives a convincing explanation for *why* Descartes does not flesh out this standard, since Descartes seeks to offer a moral theory that is available to anyone and may have believed that any particular account of practical reason would be too narrow. For more on Descartes's moral theory in general, see the works mentioned in footnote 2. I thank Lynn Joy for helping me to clarify this point.

<sup>27</sup> Marshall (38, 51) raises considerations that seem to undermine this point, drawing attention to Descartes's letter to Mesland (May 2, 1644) and the *Discourse on Method*. These passages state, "For it seems to me certain that a great light in the intellect is followed by a great inclination in the will; so that if we see very clearly that a thing is good for us, it is very difficult – and, on my view, impossible, as long as one continues in the same thought, it is impossible to stay the course of desire" (III.233; AT IV.116) and "our will naturally tends to desire only what our intellect represents as somehow possible" (I.124; AT VI.25-26). The first passage poses no real threat to this reading. It implies only that given that one sees the benefit of a standard of value, one will desire it. This says nothing about the ease or lack thereof with which one acquires that standard. (In all fairness, Marshall does not use it in this way.)

The second passage is more problematic. The *Discourse* goes on, in fact, to suggest that what is really difficult about valuing only one's thoughts (in this work the emphasis is on thoughts rather than volitions) is realizing that only they are within one's control. Whatever we make of this passage, I would point out that the emphasis on possibility is conspicuously absent from Descartes's definitions of desire in the *Passions of the Soul* (in §57, I.350; AT XI.374-75; § 86, I.358-59; AT XI.392). He does believe that desiring things outside of one's control is irrational and hence misdirected. But he does not suggest in the *Passions* that proper desire – any more than proper love or

that a rational egoist would not *want* to be an egoist, since valuing anything other than volitions increases the potential for sorrow and loss of self-esteem. But a complete account of the shift from selfishness to generosity must include an explanation not only of why someone would *want* to shift, but also *how* such a shift is possible. Descartes gives only the beginning of such an explanation. He says,

There is, it seems, no virtue so dependent on birth as the virtue which causes us to esteem ourselves in accordance with our true value . . . . It is certain, however, that a good upbringing is a great help in correcting the defects of birth. Moreover, if we occupy ourselves frequently in considering the nature of free will and the many advantages which proceed from a firm resolution to make good use of it – while also considering, on the other hand, the many vain and useless cares that trouble ambitious people – we may arouse the passion of generosity in ourselves and then acquire the virtue. (§ 161, I.388; AT XI.453-54)

Descartes is not optimistic about people’s ability to acquire the best standard of value and the generosity that comes with it. It depends greatly on birth, and the most effective corrections occur early in one’s life. Thus while it is “certain” that defects of birth can be corrected, this correction comes from “a good upbringing.”<sup>28</sup> There is no suggestion that one can have similar

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proper esteem – is “natural” in any sense that implies that it is easy or universal. This may imply that “natural” even in the *Discourse* has a more subtle sense than Marshall suggests, or that Descartes changes his views on the ease with which certain considerations can determine the will.

For more on the relationship between reason, the will, and the passions, see too Mesnard, especially pp. 136f.

<sup>28</sup> Mesnard (pp. 161f.) seems to underestimate the limitations on the ability of one to become generous, suggesting suggest that by working hard enough, anyone can become generous. Genevieve Rodis-Lewis seems to share a similar view. See Genevieve Rodis-Lewis, *L’anthropologie cartésienne* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de

confidence in one's own efforts. Likewise, in § 50, Descartes says, "even those who have the weakest souls could acquire absolute mastery over all their passions," but only "if *we* employed sufficient ingenuity in training and guiding them" (I.348; AT XI.370, my emphasis). In both passages Descartes's optimistic hope in human potential does not extend to *self*-improvement. What is certain is the power of *education*. Now even if birth and upbringing were the only significant ways to bring about generosity, Descartes's ethics would have important implications for the raising of children. A rational parent whose selfishness is limited only by love for her children does well to teach generosity rather than selfishness to her children since this is in their best interest. Similarly, a government can rest assured that promoting a generous citizenry is ultimately in the best interests of the citizens themselves.

Fortunately, Descartes does not completely give up on selfish adults. "We may arouse . . . generosity in ourselves" (§161, I.388; AT XI.454). Like anything good according to an egoist standard of value, generosity might be beyond one's powers, but there are at least some suggestions about how to promote generosity in oneself. Among the most important of these is "considering the nature of the free will." Elsewhere Descartes adds that "frequent reflection upon divine providence" is helpful (§145, I.380; AT XI.438). Here metaphysical considerations supplement Descartes's practical argument, since they can *justify* a standard of value that one *wants* to have.<sup>29</sup> These considerations will not guarantee that one will adopt the new standard of value. The pursuit of it may lead to frustration and false hopes, but no more than the pursuit of other goods outside of our complete control. And since, unlike other goods, generosity is one that fully satisfies once acquired, it is the one that people should devote the most attention to

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France, 1990), 173-74; and *Descartes: textes et débats* (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1984), 620; but contrast Genevieve Rodis-Lewis, "Introduction," in Stephen Voss, ed. and trans., *The Passions of the Soul* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), xxiv.

<sup>29</sup> These metaphysical considerations can support the indirect manipulation of passions discussed by Descartes in § 45 of the *Passions* (I.345; AT XI.362-63). I discuss this indirect manipulation in section 2b.

pursuing. It is as possible to achieve as other goods and is more beneficial. Every selfish adult should at least try to become generous.

*b) Practical Reasons for Valuing Others*

In the last section, we saw that Descartes offers practical considerations rooted in egoism that should lead one to want to adopt a non-egoist standard of value. And we saw some suggestions for how this shift in standards can be effected. But the non-egoist standard of value that one might adopt is not sufficient to justify self-sacrificial love. To support an altruist conception of love, Descartes must defend a standard of value that ascribes equal value to oneself *and others*. Without this, as we saw in Part Three, all love devolves into mere affection. So what sorts of considerations can lead one from valuing one's *own* free will to valuing *others*?

There are two important parts of Descartes's argument here. First, he must show how someone who seeks to effect a shift from valuing what is good for oneself to valuing her free will ends up valuing not only her own will but the free wills of others. Second, he must make clear that the value of a free will does not depend on the use of that will. Without this second component, one would be left ascribing value, and hence love, in proportion to virtue. But this love would not provide for the kind of altruism that one finds in the father's sacrifice for his children. I will discuss the second problem first.

After emphasizing the role of valuing only good volitions, Descartes makes a subtle shift in his argument, suggesting that one value the mere "exercise of one's free will and the control we have over our volitions" (§ 152, I.384; AT XI.445). In the context of the particular passage in which it is discussed, what is important about this control is not the good use to which it is put, but the capacity itself, which makes us "in a certain way like God."<sup>30</sup> In his account of the esteem

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<sup>30</sup> This interpretation of what makes us "like God" is supported by the passages in the *Meditations* to which I drew attention in section 4a. Free will makes us like God, even if through lack of understanding we often use this

that generous people have for others, Descartes again emphasizes the mere *capacity* to do good.

[Generous people will] not have much more esteem for themselves than for those they surpass. For [wealth, honor, intelligence, etc.] seem to them to be very unimportant, by contrast with the virtuous will for which alone they esteem themselves, and which they suppose also to be present, *or at least capable of being present*, in every other person. (§ 154, I.384, AT XI.447, my emphasis)

What gives rise to one's esteem for others is the recognition in them of what one esteems in oneself. But this cannot be *actual* virtue, since many are not virtuous, so Descartes settles for the mere *capacity* for virtue.

Jean-Mauric Monnoyer<sup>31</sup> has argued that Descartes does not allow esteem on the basis merely of free will, but insists that the proper *use* of that free will is also necessary. Monnoyer has good reasons, both textual and philosophical, for this claim, and I will not discuss all of them here. Immediately after emphasizing the value of one's control over one's volitions, Descartes does go on to insist that one "ought to be praised or blamed for no other reason than *using* this freedom well or badly" (§ 153, I.384; AT XI.446, my emphasis). Monnoyer documents this emphasis throughout Descartes's writings and rightly draws attention to this strand of Descartes's thought. But especially when discussing esteem for others, Descartes allows for and even requires that mere free will is worthy of esteem. There is not much argument for this position, though the account in section 152 of the *Passions* suggests that Descartes conceives of the value of freedom as a condition for the possibility of a good will. There he connects the esteem for "the control we have over our volitions" with praise or blame properly taking "actions that depend on this free will" as their objects (I.384; AT XI.445). In a letter to Christina, Descartes hints at another, related argument. "Free will is the noblest thing we can have, since it makes us

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will improperly.

<sup>31</sup> Monnoyer, 111f.

in a way equal to God,” and “its correct use is the greatest of all goods we possess,” but “there is nothing that is more our own or that matters more to us” than freedom itself (III.326; AT V.85). The fact that the correct *use* of our freedom is the greatest good that we could possess implies for Descartes that the freedom that makes this correct use possible is itself what is noblest and should matter most to us. Freedom is valued for what one can make of it, but it is freedom that is valued.

This is not all that Descartes has to say about what one should value. As Monnoyer suggests, self-esteem cannot be based merely on the freedom that is *potentially* the highest good one can possess but also must depend on whether that highest good is *actualized*. Ultimately, Descartes does not sufficiently work out the relationship between esteem for the good will and for freedom itself. He emphasizes the first in his accounts of self-esteem, and the second in his accounts of esteem for others. But he does affirm, at least sometimes, that the free will is a sufficient ground for esteem, and there are at least some reasons for him to do so. More importantly for the purposes of this paper, his argument for love of others makes use of this ground for esteem.

Since it is possible (to some extent) and beneficial to become generous, any rational egoist will adopt this standard of value. But so far, the standard still ascribes value only to one’s own free will. Descartes’s transition from this to genuine valuing of others is a quick one. Once one comes to value one’s free will, and to value it precisely because it is free, one comes quickly “to believe that any other person can have the same knowledge and feeling [that only free will is valuable] about himself” (I.384; AT XI.446). This is all that Descartes explicitly says about this transition, but having considered the methods by which one comes to acquire generosity, we can say more. One becomes generous by “considering the nature of the free will.” This process of cultivating in oneself a new standard of value is not the same process as that by which one comes to desire that standard. It is through consideration of the nature of free will as such that one frees oneself from unhealthy commitments to what is merely a matter of chance. Metaphysics finds its



way into this practical argument. But as we saw in Part Four, the metaphysical argument is strongest at precisely the point where this practical argument is weak. On the basis of the metaphysical similarity between one's own freedom and the freedom of others, the metaphysical considerations that facilitate the shift from an egoist standard of value to valuing one's own free will lead one to value the free wills of others.

Of course, this process of teaching oneself to value one's free will might not be the only one. It is at least theoretically possible, and probably even psychologically possible, that one could learn to value one's own free will and not value the free wills of others. Descartes does not *prove* that valuing one's own free will leads to valuing others. But he gives a reasonable psychological description of the way in which one who pursues her own satisfaction comes to value others. Of course, this does not show that one must love others, since one can choose to have nothing to do with them. But insofar as one considers them part of a whole with oneself, they will be accorded the same value as oneself.

### *c) Practical Reasons to Consider Oneself Part of a Whole*

As we have seen, in his letter to Elizabeth of Sept. 15, 1645, Descartes draws attention to four "truths most useful to us." In Part Four, we saw how the fourth truth – that we ought to think of ourselves as parts of a greater whole – can be interpreted as a metaphysical justification for considering oneself part of a whole. There I argued that this justification is ultimately undefended and insufficient. This fourth "truth," however, can also be read as a *practical*, rather than a metaphysical, truth. In this context, it is important to notice that strictly speaking, the metaphysical assertion in Descartes's description of the fourth truth is that "each of us is a person distinct from others." To this metaphysical truth, Descartes adds the truth on which he focuses, that "we *ought* to think that . . . each of us is really one of the many parts of the universe" (III.266; AT IV.293, my emphasis). Given the metaphysical truth against which this is contrasted, one should *not* read this ethical truth to be a metaphysical one. It now becomes clear why the metaphysical argument in section 4b was so poorly defended. Descartes does *not* in fact mean to

claim that we actually *are* one of the many parts of the universe. Rather, his claim is that we ought to *think* of ourselves that way.<sup>32</sup>

So far, this ethical claim is no better defended than the metaphysical one. But in his next letter to Elizabeth (Oct 6, 1645), Descartes suggests a reason that we ought to consider ourselves part of a whole, even without a metaphysical ground for this belief.

If we thought only of ourselves, we could enjoy only the goods which are peculiar to ourselves; whereas, if we consider ourselves as parts of some other body, we share also in the goods which are common to its members. (III.269; AT IV.308)

Recall that “when the things that [knowledge] brings us to love are truly good . . . love can never be too great, and it never fails to produce joy” (§139, I.377; AT XI.432). Any recognized increase of good increases one’s joy, since “consideration of a present good arouses joy in us . . . when the good . . . is one that we regard as belonging to us” (§61, I.351, AT XI.376).<sup>33</sup> Thus

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<sup>32</sup> In this context, I favor Matheron’s interpretation of the nature of love over that of Voss (see Matheron, especially pp. 438-39). Voss claims that Descartes’s view of love commits him to an expanded ontology, such that we really are parts of a whole. I take Descartes’s explicit statement at the beginning of his fourth truth that “each of us is a person distinct from others” to be a rejection of the claim that we are substantially united with one another. Descartes does not claim that there is any inherent unity to the universe. I admit that there is a certain conflictedness in Descartes’s reflections in this regard since Descartes never escapes the tension between a metaphysics that teaches that we are all distinct and an ethics that requires that we consider ourselves part of a whole. What is clear, however, is that Descartes keeps his claims about love within the sphere of ethics, saying not that we are parts of a whole but that we ought to think that we are. Thus I am wary of interpreting these claims as ontological, however interesting that might be. Descartes just didn’t go that far. For other accounts similar to Voss’s, see Rodis-Lewis (1971), 409-410 and Marshall, 60, 77-78.

<sup>33</sup> See too III.141-42; AT II.628, where Descartes claims that people desire to have all perfections they can

insofar as someone considers herself as joined with others, she can enjoy not only “her own” good but also the goods of all those parts of the whole of which she now considers herself a part. The more she loves, the greater her joy.<sup>34</sup>

The obvious problem with this is that when one considers oneself joined with others, one unites with not only their goods but also their evils. And while greater good may bring greater joy, greater evil brings sadness, since “consideration of a present evil arouses sadness, when the . . . evil is one that we regard as belonging to us” (§61, I.351; AT XI.376). Since one may increase sadness as well as joy by loving others, it might seem that one should love only those whose goods outweigh their evils.

In his letter to Elizabeth, Descartes considers this problem and suggests that his account be understood in the context of the Augustinian doctrine that “with evils, the case is not the same [as with goods], because philosophy teaches that evil is nothing real, but only a privation” (III.269; AT IV.308). Since good is real and evil is not, when one considers oneself in relation to others, one adds the goods of all to find the total good. Evils are nothing and therefore have no effect on the good of the whole. When one joins with others one joins with *objective* good and no objective evil, since there is no such thing as objective evil. Moreover, since evil is not real, the pain that one suffers from sympathy with the evil endured by a friend is of a lower order than the joy that one shares with a friend blessed by good. “When we are sad on account of some evil which has happened to our friends, we do not share in the defect in which this evil consists; and whatever sadness or distress we feel on such occasions cannot be as great as the inner satisfaction which always accompanies good actions.” (III.269; AT IV.308). The subjective pain that comes

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conceive. See too Ferdinand Alquie, *La Decouverte Metaphysique de L'homme chez Descartes* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950), 294.

<sup>34</sup> Note that she is not simply sharing the joy of her friends. In fact, those whom she loves may not feel joy, since they may not recognize their good. This will not, however, prevent one who is generous from taking joy in their goodness. (I thank Patricia Blanchette for forcing me to clarify this distinction.)

from identifying with others is likely to be less than the subjective joy from joining with their goods.

Neither of these arguments is very persuasive since both lean on a strong metaphysical thesis about evil that Descartes does not defend. (Needless to say, they would have been more persuasive to some of Descartes's contemporaries.) Fortunately, Descartes presents a less metaphysically loaded version of this doctrine that coheres well with his general account of virtue. In his description of generous people, he explains that one who is virtuous values in her friends what she values in herself – the capacity for a good will (§ 154, I.384; AT XI.446-47). Since all people have this capacity, she never suffers great pains from her friends. Even when friends fail to use their wills for good, this failure can be explained from a lack of knowledge, not a failure of the will itself.<sup>35</sup> When a generous person considers herself joined with others, she considers the others to be (nearly)<sup>36</sup> equal to herself. Thus, her good is increased by being part of

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<sup>35</sup> One might be concerned that Descartes here undermines the possibility of holding others morally accountable. Descartes offers reflections that help make sense of this explanation of the moral evils of others, but to fully explain these goes beyond the scope of this paper. Even here, it is worth noting that Descartes's language in the passage need not imply that those who are generous always think of others in this often implausible way. What he says is that generous people are more "*inclined* to excuse than to blame them and to *regard* such wrongdoing as due . . . to lack of knowledge" (§ 154, I.384; AT XI.446, my emphasis). The use of terms like "inclined" and "regard" raises the possibility that Descartes is not claiming that one holds certain beliefs about the cause of others' wrongdoing, but that one *considers* them to be the result of ignorance. This would be similar to the way in which we consider ourselves part of a greater whole without believing in a metaphysical sense that we *are* part of a whole. (See too footnote 36.)

<sup>36</sup> There is some reason to hedge the degree of equality, since while others are merely capable of being virtuous, the generous person *is* virtuous. Descartes is ambivalent here, as is clear from his language in § 154: "they do not have *much more* esteem for themselves." He seems to want to say that they should esteem others equally, since only then can love between people be true friendship, but he recognizes a potential problem and so tempers his

the whole, and her joy can similarly increase. She may still feel some sadness at undeniable failures on the part of her friends, but every such sadness will be joined with the joy of knowing that her friend is capable of improving (and her sadness may inspire a commitment to help the friend improve). The only way to experience sadness unmixed with joy would be to believe that one's friend lacks a free will. In such a case, friendship is in fact not appropriate. The love characterized by equality should slip into mere affection.

By emphasizing the importance of the free will, Descartes gives strong practical reasons for considering oneself as joined with others and explains how an initially egoist standard of value will develop for practical reasons into one that values only the free wills of oneself and others. Thus he is able to provide a context within which egoism is transformed into non-egoist love.

### **Part Six: Towards Theology**

In his letters to Elizabeth and Chanut, Descartes suggests a further way that one may be led from egoism to love of others: through love of God.<sup>37</sup> Descartes gives metaphysical arguments for the existence of God, and when he discusses the truths most useful for ethical life, he begins with the existence and nature of God. For Descartes, there are two important practical implications of knowing God. First, one can “accept calmly all the things which happen to us as

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language.

Thus Descartes agrees that in some sense – which he does not specify – fully realized virtue is better than the kind of hobbling virtue that constitutes a partially realized capacity. But in support of the equality of people, he argues that even the most generous person finds in herself enough weakness and susceptibility to moral evil to consider herself more like those with a partially realized capacity for virtue than those with full and genuine virtue (see §155, I.385; AT XI.447). (For more, see the discussion of Mesnard in section 5b.)

<sup>37</sup> See too Rodis-Lewis (especially 1971, 410-11) and Alquié (1950, 280ff.).

expressly sent by God” (To Elizabeth, 15 Sept 1645, III.265; AT IV.291-92).<sup>38</sup> Second, knowledge of God leads to love of him: “since the true object of love is perfection, when we lift up our minds to consider him as he is, we find ourselves naturally . . . inclined to love him” (To Elizabeth, 15 Sept 1645, III.265; AT IV.291-92)

There are several ways to explain how knowledge leads to love in the case of God. Descartes suggests that it is merely an automatic transition. “We *find ourselves naturally* . . . inclined.” One can also understand this love as a natural extension of proper self-esteem. Once someone comes to respect herself for her freedom, the freedom of God conjoined with his greater power elicits greater respect. Or one can argue that since God is always perfect, considering oneself as joined with God will be prudent since one will share only in pure joy of the highest kind. In his letter to Chanut (Feb. 1647), Descartes gives a lengthy explanation of “the way to reach the love of God.” It is not necessary to dwell on the precise way in which one comes to love God.<sup>39</sup> What is important is that it flows somehow from knowledge of him.

If Descartes can establish that a rational individual will love God, he has an independent basis for loving others. Descartes ends his longest description of self-sacrifice in the service of others with a description of how such love is possible.

Once someone knows and loves God as he should, he has a natural impulse to think in this way; for then, abandoning himself altogether to God’s will, he strips himself of his own interests, and has no other passion than to do what he thinks pleasing to God. (To Elizabeth, 15 Sept 1645, III.267; AT IV.294, see too I.322; AT V.56)

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<sup>38</sup> See too the May 1646 Letter to Elizabeth (III.288; AT IV.415) and the *Passions*, § 145 (I.380; AT XI.438).

<sup>39</sup> See Matheron (441-45) for an account of the genesis of love of God. I do not entirely agree with Matheron’s account, but it shows the sort of account that one would have to give here. Dealing with all of the special complications that arise for Descartes’s notion of the love of God is beyond the scope of this paper.

Part of what it means to love God is that one desires what is pleasing to God. But God does not have “passions” in the sense that human beings do. God has no concern for a body, and hence no natural source of egoist concerns. As a result, God’s love is a purely intellectual love for all things in accord with their inherent perfections. Because one who loves God adopts God’s standard of value, such a person will not discriminate between one person and another. And Descartes adds, in a final appeal to self-interest, that one who loves God in this way “acquires a mental satisfaction and contentment incomparably more valuable than all the passing joys which depend on the senses” (III.267; AT IV.294).<sup>40</sup>

This account of how love of God inspires love of others reinforces but does not render superfluous the practical and metaphysical arguments for such love. Something like the practical argument for love of others may be necessary to motivate a passionate love of God. Moreover, one would expect passions that arise naturally from the creation of a good God to be capable of correction and improvement in different ways. In the case of the passions, as in the case of the understanding, not all corrections need proceed directly from contemplation of God. Just as an atheist can learn mathematics, an atheist can transform egoist love into self-sacrificial love, even if, as in the case of the understanding, God can play an important role in the ultimate correction and vindication of the passion of love. But there is another important role that the love of God plays in understanding the relationship between the passions in general and love of others.

Throughout this discussion, we have examined Descartes’s ethics from the standpoint of a person deciding what to do. We asked what would motivate someone who is normally egoist to love others in a way that ultimately may lead to self-sacrifice. We considered several justifications for this love. Throughout, however, we ignored the distinction between what would *seem* right to a particular human being and what is right *in fact*. There is a good reason

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<sup>40</sup> In this letter, Descartes’s argument is incomplete. In particular, the fact that God loves all people equally is assumed rather than defended.

why we ignored this distinction. Descartes does not discuss it in depth. But he offers an occasional hint that the *obligation* to love does not depend for its ultimate justification on our interest in it. In a letter to Elizabeth, he writes,

There is a difference between happiness, the supreme good, and the final end or goal towards which our actions ought to tend. For happiness is not the supreme good, but presupposes it . . . The end of our actions, however, can be understood to be one or the other; for the supreme good is undoubtedly the thing we ought to set ourselves as the goal of all our actions, and the resulting contentment of the mind is also rightly called our end, since it is the attraction which makes us seek the supreme good. (18 August 1645, III.261; AT IV.275)

Descartes clarifies this distinction in a later letter to Elizabeth:

I make a distinction between the supreme good – which consists in the exercise of virtue, or, what comes to the same, the possession of all those goods whose acquisition depends on our free will – and the satisfaction of mind which results from the acquisition. (6 Oct 1645, III.268; AT IV.305)

What is good about virtue is not satisfaction, but virtue itself. In his conversation with Burman, Descartes again hints at an explanation of good actions that does not depend on self-interest in any way. Burman asks whether “God could have commanded a creature to hate him, and thereby made this a good thing to do?” and Descartes responds, “God could not now do this: but we simply do not know what he could have done. In any case, why should he not have been able to give this command to one of his creatures” (III.343; AT V.160). What makes something a “good thing to do” is not, ultimately, whether it can be justified on human grounds. Something is good when God commands it. And this is not simply because loving God is so enjoyable. Even hatred



of God would be good, if God had commanded it.<sup>41</sup> This notion of “good” is clearly different from either the conception of goodness as “in my interest” or the conception of goodness as relating to an intrinsic quality of a thing – its reality. Here goodness depends on the will of God.<sup>42</sup>

A distinction emerges, if only briefly, between a theological notion of obligation and a notion of prudence as the result of a transformation of self-interest. It arises only briefly because Descartes’s account of love of God ultimately brings together the source of obligation and the source of greatest happiness. It is good to love others because God commands people to love each other. At some level, God’s command is the ultimate justification for any moral precept. Descartes is in this sense a voluntarist. At the same time, obedience to God, which proceeds from love of God, leads to the greatest joys of which people are capable. Moreover, this obedience is compatible with the structure of human passions because God ordains these passions to function as they do. The nature of human obedience to divine command and of people’s ability to share in the perfections of those they love make it possible to bring together an ethics of love that can lead to self-sacrifice, a theory of the passions rooted in egoism, and a moral theory rooted in theological voluntarism.

## **Part Seven: Conclusion**

At first, there seems to be a tension in *The Passions of the Soul* between an account of passions in general as ultimately egoist and an account of the passion of love in particular as involving self-sacrifice. Descartes has three related and mutually reinforcing ways of alleviating this tension. Metaphysical accounts of love are unsatisfying in isolation, but they play an important part in more practical accounts, both as foundational presuppositions – in the case of

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<sup>41</sup> Contrast Marshall, 120-121.

<sup>42</sup> Contrast T. Keefe, “Descartes’s ‘Moral Définitive’ and the Autonomy of Ethics,” *Romanic Review* 64 (1973): 85-98, especially p. 97.

the freedom of the will – and as part of a program of moral education. Supplemented in this way by metaphysics, practical arguments are promising sources both of a new standard of value rooted in the value of freedom and of the propriety of considering oneself united with others. These practical arguments provide powerful reasons for loving others, but they fail to fulfill every task called for by a Cartesian account of love. In particular, they do not take account of Descartes’s theological voluntarism. In this context in particular, Descartes’s theological explanation of love provides an invaluable supplement that reconciles his voluntarism with his account of love and the passions more generally.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> This paper began as a conversation with Dan Garber following a paper by Stephen Voss at the Midwest Seminar in Early Modern Philosophy. Since then, Dan Garber has offered constant encouragement and critique, and Stephen Voss generously let me see a revised version of his paper. Karl Ameriks and Lynn Joy also offered invaluable comments. This paper was originally presented at the philosophy colloquium at the University of Notre Dame, and thanks belong to all those who asked questions and offered suggestions after that presentation, and especially to my commentator Bob Roberts. The anonymous readers for this journal offered generous and much-needed recommendations, for which they deserve more thanks than I can possibly give here. Finally, I thank the University of Notre Dame and the Harvey Fellows Program for providing financial assistance during the completion of this project.