

Descartes and the Passionate Mind by Deborah J. Brown. (Hardback) Pp 244, 2006. £50.
(Paperback) Pp 244, Cambridge University Press, 2008. £17.99.

This is a welcome book, long overdue, and important for the development of Cartesian scholarship as well as for contemporary accounts of mind, and of the emotions. A central argument made by Brown is that if we ignore Descartes's account of the embodied and socially-embedded agent, we cannot appreciate his account of the human mind. On his view, she argues, emotions are mental and physical experiences of a person, not cognitions of a disembodied being, or mechanistic activities of the body. Brown notes that "the mind of the *Sixth Meditation* may still be incorporeal, but its experiences of itself are not the out-of-body ones of a spectral observer. Fail to understand Descartes's conception of the human being, the mind *in corpore* rather than incorporeal, and one fails to understand Descartes's mind." (p 5). We cannot do justice to Descartes's conception of the human mind if we conflate this with the Cartesian metaphysics of mind as a disembodied immaterial substance.

Brown argues, in fact, that, for Descartes, the human mind is not only embodied, but necessarily so: "Were it not for the fact that we are bodies as well as minds, we would be deprived not only of the capacity for rational action, but also of the capacity to do science, to understand causality (both our own and God's) and to derive all the benefits we derive from social relations." (p 208). The importance of embodiment for rational action, science, causality, and social interaction are discussed below.

Rational action requires the presence of motivations that only the passions can give us, Brown argues. The purely rational agent would be the "pilot in the ship", merely aware of the dangers and opportunities arising in the body, but not motivated in the immediate and care-driven sense which makes us good at heeding our needs as embodied beings. Brown's discussion of this point is original: she suggests that even a pilot is still an embodied being, so cannot also be embodied by the ship. While I don't see that this reflects Descartes' intentions, her other analysis of this text refers to Descartes's own explicit understanding of the mind-body union as involving a *single experience*, what she refers to as "phenomenological

monism” (p 3), such that our nature is to aim for our own embodied well-being, that is, our survival and flourishing. This monist account is of a single experiential response to the environment involving the embodied and embedded mind, rather than the dual nature of mind and body usually understood to be at the core of Descartes’s thought.

Descartes’s science was thoroughly materialistic. Although Brown makes reference to the “rational and sensitive faculties” (i.e., p 83), a way of accounting for human capacities that Descartes rejected, she underscores his insistence that the body is not ensouled, and that many of our actions need not involve the soul at all, but only the organization of its biological parts. The scientific account of the emotions found in *The Passions* develops the ideas of his scientific treatises, rejecting the Scholastic understanding of the body as informed by souls of various kinds.

Descartes can be interpreted as holding that the phenomenology of interaction gives us sufficient grounds for understanding that causal interaction actually occurs. It is not a feature of experience that is grasped in terms of metaphysics. This point relates back to the “phenomenological monism” which Brown argues is central to understanding Descartes’s conception of the embodied human mind. We experience ourselves as an embodied being engaging with the world and it is through reference to this experience that we can understand causal relations.

Descartes develops an account (principally in *The Passions*) of emotional experience as dependent upon the interactions between ourselves and others, giving the emotions a thoroughly embedded character as well as an embodied one. We love and fear, desire and hope, in relation to others who affect us as members of our social groups. This interaction is grounded not just in the physical experience of being with others, as, for instance in the experience of loving, which Descartes says “is an emotion of the soul caused by the movement of the [animal] spirits which impels the soul to join itself willingly to objects that appear to be agreeable to it.” (*Passions*, art. 79), but also in the social character of this experience. In the case of love, Descartes describes this as a part/whole

relationship existing between ourselves and others. The size of our part relative to the whole depends upon the character of the love and indicates the value we place on such love. (*Passions*, art. 80 - 83).

Given the embodied and socially-embedded character of Descartes's human mind, Brown argues, we need to revise our understanding of Descartes's aims: "Many of the functions of the mind concern its relationship to the body and the world it inhabits, and when Descartes turns to the study of these, he turns not inward to his own consciousness but to the natural science of his day, mechanics, and to his own practical experience." (p 4). All actions are responses to engagements with the environment involving our health, our means of production, and our social world.

Brown provides an excellent summary of the discussions between Descartes and Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia regarding mind-body interaction and how to live a full and contented life when one is at the mercy both of fortune and of one's own passions. On the latter point, Descartes argues that our contentment in this life requires that we recognize what depends upon our will alone, and that we expect no rewards from life that do not. We must also recognize that all human beings are capable of exercising a free will and so would do so if they could. These thoughts will then guide our emotions rather than overcome them. They turn destructive emotions like envy and hubris into *generosity*, a virtuous emotion that infuses all others and leads to contentment. Brown's discussion of this account is both detailed and engaging, as is her discussion of *wonder*, the first of all emotions. *Wonder* opens us up to the world to receive what it has to offer us. Brown's discussion of Descartes's taxonomy of the emotions (the six basic emotions are wonder, love, hatred, desire, joy, and sadness) suggests a useful comparison with contemporary taxonomies that focus less on the social nature of emotional experience.

Part of Brown's project is to engage with contemporary views of the emotions. In particular, she engages with a cognitivism in the philosophy of emotion that cannot reconcile bodily feelings with meaningful states unless these feelings reduce to representations. Brown argues, instead, that, for Descartes, the

passions are modes of the mind strengthened by the animal spirits, which are themselves physiological responses to interactions with the environment, both natural and social. On this account, ours is a unified, multi-faceted emotional nature, involving both feelings and thoughts intertwined. Descartes's model of thoughts and emotional feelings this entwining gives rise to is, in many interesting ways, compatible with a neuroscientific understanding of emotions today.

Apart from her discussion of this important early account of the emotions, Brown's overarching thesis is that Cartesian scholarship has tended to cut Descartes's "Tree of Knowledge" off at the base of the trunk, leaving only the roots (the metaphysics of self, mind and body, and God), and ignoring the implications of his full corpus for his account of the human mind.

Although *The Passions* was written long after *The Meditations*, and after the provisional moral code presented in *The Discourse*, Descartes always had his sights set on developing an account of human experience. He knew early on that he would eventually use his metaphysics and his science to produce the branches of the tree, and that the fruit of it would be the *medicine*, the *mechanics*, and the *morals* that would contribute to human flourishing. Descartes grounds his concept of human flourishing in this mix of the morals and passions that constitute the human life. In *The Passions* he concludes that the pleasures of a human being "depend entirely on the Passions, so that the men they can move the most are capable of tasting the most sweetness in this life". (art. 212).

Descartes and the Passionate Mind is not an introduction to Descartes's account of the passions, but a detailed and well-argued engagement with this account, placing his ideas in historical context and relating his views to those of contemporary philosophical thought. There is plenty of room for agreement, disagreement, and further development, making this a book that ought be read by anyone who takes Cartesian scholarship seriously.