

THE PASSIONS OF THE SOUL

By Rene Descartes

From *The Passions of the Soul, Part One* (1649)

Article 41 *What is the power of the soul in respect of the body.*

But the will is so free by nature that it can never be constrained. And of two sorts of thoughts which I have distinguished in the soul, whereof some are her actions, to wit her wills; others, her passions, taking that word in its general signification, which comprehends all forms of apprehensions. The first are absolutely in her own power, and cannot, but indirectly, be changed by the body; as on the contrary, the last depend absolutely upon the actions which produce them, and they cannot, unless indirectly, be changed by the soul, except then when her self is the cause of them. And all the action of the soul consists in this, that she merely by willing anything can make the little kernel, whereunto she is strictly joined, move in the manner requisite to produce the effect relating to this will.

Article 43 *How the soul can imagine, be attentive, and move the body.*

So when one would imagine anything one has never seen, this will has the power to make the kernel move in the manner requisite to drive the spirits towards the pores of the brain by the opening of which this thing may be represented. So, when one would fix his attention some pretty while to consider, or ruminate on one object, this will holds the kernel still at that time, leaning ever to one side. So, finally, when one would walk, or move his body any way, this will causes the kernel to drive the spirits towards the muscles which serve to that purpose.

Article 45 *What the power of the soul is, in respect of her passions.*

Our passions also cannot be directly excited or taken away by the action of our will, but they may indirectly, by the representation of things which use[d] to be joined with the passions which we will have, and which are contrary to these we will reject. Thus to excite in oneself boldness, and remove fear, it is not enough to have a will to do so, but reasons, objects and examples are to be considered of, that persuade the danger is not great, that there is ever more security in defense than flight, that there is glory and joy in vanquishing, whereas there is nothing to be expected but grief and dishonor in flying and the like.

Article 46 *What is the reason that hinders the soul from disposing her passions totally.*

Now, there is a peculiar reason why the soul cannot suddenly alter or stop her passions, which gave me occasion to put formerly in their definition, that they are not only caused, but fomented, and fortified by some peculiar motion of the spirits. The reason is they are almost all coupled with some emotion made in the heart, and consequently in all the blood, and spirits too, so that till this emotion cease, they remain present in our thoughts just as sensible objects are present in them, while they act against the organs of our senses. And as the soul being very attentive on any other thing, may choose whether she will hear a little noise, or feel a little pain or no, but cannot keep herself from hearing thunder, or feeling fire that burns the hand so she may easily overcome the smaller passions, but not the most violent and strongest, until after the emotion of the blood and spirits is allayed. The most the will can do, while this emotion is in its full strength, is not to consent to its effects and to restrain divers motions whereunto it disposes the body. For example, if wrath makes me lift up my hand to strike, the will can usually restrain it. If fear incites my legs to fly, the will can stop them, and so of the rest.

Article 47 *Wherein consist those contestations which use[d] to be imagined between the superior and inferior part of the soul.*

And it is only in the repugnance of those motions, which the body by its spirits, and the soul by her will, endeavor to excite at the same time in the kernel, that all the contestations which use[d] to be imagined between the inferior part of the soul called sensitive and the superior which is reasonable, or else between the natural appetites and the will, consist. For there is in us but one soul only and this soul has no diversity of parts in it; the same which is sensible is rational, and all her appetites are her wills. The error committed in making her act two several parts, which are usually contrary one to another, proceeds merely hence, that her functions have not been distinguished from them [sic] of the body, to which only all that can be observed in us repugnant to our reason ought to be attributed so that there is here no other contestation, unless that the little kernel in the middle of the brain, being driven on one side by the soul, and on the other by the animal spirits (which are only bodies, as I laid down before) it happens oftentimes that these two impulses are contrary and that the strongest hinders the operation of the other. Now we may distinguish two sorts of motion excited by

the spirits in the kernel: some represented to the soul the objects which move the senses, or the impressions found in the brain, which use not any violence on the will; others do use violence, to wit, such as cause the passions, or motions of the body concomitant with them. And for the first though they often times hinder the action of the soul, or else be hindered by it, yet by reason that they are not directly contrary, there is not any contestation observed in them. It is only taken notice of among the last, and the wills which resist them. For example, between that violence wherewith the spirits drive the kernel to cause in the soul a desire of anything and that wherewith the soul beats it back by the will she has to avoid the same thing. And what chiefly makes this contestation appear is that the will, having not the power to excite the passions directly (as has been already said), is constrained to use art and fall on considering successively divers things, if but one whereof chance to be strong enough to alter the course of the spirits one moment, it is possible that which follows is not and so the others may immediately resume it again, because the disposition preceding in the nerves, heart and blood is not changed which makes the soul feel herself instigated almost in the same instant to desire and not desire the very same thing. From hence it was that occasion was taken to imagine two contesting powers in her. Yet there may some kind of contestation be conceived herein, that oft times the same cause which excites some passion in the soul excites also certain motions in the body whereunto the soul contributes not and which she stops or strives to stop as soon as ever she perceives them. As is then tried, when that which excited fearfulness causes also the spirits to enter into the muscles, that serve to stir the legs to run away and the will to be bold, stops them.

Article 48 *Wherein the strength or weakness of souls is known, and what is the misery of the weakest.*

Now it is by the successes of these contestations that every one may understand the strength or weakness of his soul. For those in whom the will can most easily conquer the passions, and stop the motions of the body that come along with them, have without doubt the strongest souls. But there are some who can never try their own strength, because they never let the will fight with her own weapons, but only with such as are borrowed from some passions to resist others. Those which I call her own weapons are firm and determinate judgments concerning the knowledge of good and evil according to which she has resolved to steer the actions of her life. And the weakest soul of

all is such a one whose will has not at all determined to follow certain judgments, but suffers itself to be swayed with the present passions which being often contrary one to the other draw it backward and forwards to either side, and keeping her busy, in contesting against herself, put the soul into the most miserable estate she can be. As then, when fearfulness represents death as an extreme evil, which cannot be shunned but by flight. If, on the other side, ambition represents the infamy of this flight, as a mischief worse than death, these two passions variously agitate the will, which obeying now the one and then the other, continually opposes its own self, and yields up the soul to slavery and misfortune.

The 49th Article *That the strength of the soul is not enough without the knowledge of truth.*

It is true, there are very few men so weak and irresolute, that they will nothing but what their present passion dictates to them. The most part have determinate judgments according to which they regulate part of their actions. And though oft times these judgments be false, and indeed grounded on some passions, by which the will has formerly suffered herself to be vanquished, or seduced, yet because she perseveres in following them then when the passion that caused them is absent, they may be considered as her own weapons, and souls may be thought stronger or weaker according as they do more or less follow these judgments and resist the present passions contrary to them. But there is a great deal of difference between the resolutions proceeding from some false opinion, and those which are only held up by the knowledge of the truth. Since following these last, man is sure never to acquire sorrow or repentance, whereas following the first, they are inseparably companions, after the error is discovered.

The 50th Article *That there is no soul so weak, but well managed, may acquire an absolute mastery over her passions.*

It will be commodious here to know that (as before has been said) although every motion of the kernel, seen to have been joined by nature to each of our thoughts even from the beginning of our life, they may yet be annexed to others by habits, as experience shows in words that excite motions in the kernel, which according to the institution of nature represent only to the soul their sound, when they are pronounced by the will; or by the figure of their letters when they are written and which yet never the less by a habit acquired by thinking what

they signify, as soon as ever their sound is heard, or their letters seen, use to make us conceive the signification rather than the form of our letters or the sound of their syllables. It is also convenient to know that although the motions, as well of the kernel as the spirits and brain, which represent certain objects to the soul, be naturally joined with those that excite certain passions in her, yet they may by habit be separated, and annexed to others very different; and moreover that this habit may be acquired by one action only, and requires not a long usage. As when a man at unawares meets with any nasty thing in a dish of meat which he has a very good stomach to, this accident may so alter the disposition of the brain, that a man shall never afterwards see any such kind of meat without loathing, whereas before he took delight in eating it. The very same thing may be seen in beasts, for although they have no reason, nor it may be any thought, all the motions of the spirits and the kernel, which excite passions in us, yet are in them, and serve to foment and fortify (not as in us the passions but) the motions of the nerves and muscles their concomitants. So when a dog sees a partridge, he is naturally inclined to run to it and when he hears a piece go off, this noise incites him naturally to run away. Yet nevertheless, we ordinarily breed up spaniels so, that the sight of a partridge makes them couch and the noise of a discharged piece makes them run to it. Now these things are profitable to know, to encourage every one to study the regulation of his passions. For since with a little art the motions of the brain in beasts who are void of reason may be altered, it is evident they may more easily in men and that even those who have the weakest souls, may acquire a most absolute empire over all their passions, if art and industry be used to manage and govern them.