

Wilfrid Laurier University

## Scholars Commons @ Laurier

---

Philosophy Faculty Publications

Philosophy

---

1997

### Descartes on Love and/as Error

Byron Williston

Wilfrid Laurier University, [bwilliston@wlu.ca](mailto:bwilliston@wlu.ca)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholars.wlu.ca/phil\\_faculty](https://scholars.wlu.ca/phil_faculty)



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Williston, Byron, "Descartes on Love and/as Error" (1997). *Philosophy Faculty Publications*. 2.  
[https://scholars.wlu.ca/phil\\_faculty/2](https://scholars.wlu.ca/phil_faculty/2)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy at Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact [scholarscommons@wlu.ca](mailto:scholarscommons@wlu.ca).

# Descartes on Love and/as Error

*Byron Williston*

---

But if this medicine, love, which cures all sorrow  
With more, not only be no quintessence,  
But mixed of all stuffs, paining soul, or sense,  
And of the sun his working vigour borrow,  
Love's not so pure, and abstract, as they use  
To say, which have no mistress but their Muse,  
But as all else, being elemented too,  
Love sometimes would contemplate, sometimes do.<sup>1</sup>

One of philosophy's most enduring questions is inspired by Plato's *Euthyphro*: do we love something because it is lovable, or is it lovable because we love it?<sup>2</sup> Perhaps nowhere is this problem more intractable than in Descartes's theory of love. In his view love is the concrete attempt on the part of humans to develop an ethical reciprocity which ideally fulfils the need both to discover and to create value. The strict disjunction of the Platonic question is to this extent somewhat misleading because Descartes is genuinely challenged by the respective demands of both sides of the question. It would therefore be a mistake to fasten on one side of this distinction to the utter exclusion of the other.

But the temptation to do precisely this with Descartes is strong indeed. This is a temptation which extends even to ethical matters, in which Descartes seems loathe to subordinate the search for certainty to merely contingent practical demands. In addressing the problem of moral weakness he writes, for

For their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper, I would like to thank Ronald de Sousa, André Gombay, and Robert Imlay.

<sup>1</sup> "Love's Growth," *John Donne: The Complete English Poems*, ed. A. J. Smith (London, 1986), 69.

<sup>2</sup> Plato, *Euthyphro*, from *Five Dialogues*, tr. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis, 1981), 14. Ronald de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion* (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), 1, addresses this problem as the "antinomy of objectivity," which derives from the "plausibility of both alternative answers" to the question of the *Euthyphro*.

example, that “the strength of the soul is inadequate without knowledge of the truth.”<sup>3</sup> The call to live in the light of certain truths—moral or otherwise—is so persistent a theme for him that the burden of proof would seem to be on those who want to claim that this is nevertheless not so in certain areas. The bulk of this paper is thus devoted to showing that, despite some appearances, Descartes is not concerned overmuch with the problem of attaining certainty and avoiding error in love judgments. He wants us to see love as a complex psychophysical phenomenon which cannot be reduced to the desire to obtain true judgments about the world.

To focus the discussion I examine Irving Singer’s philosophy of love as presented in *The Nature of Love* and especially his hermeneutic distinction between “appraisal” and “bestowal,” a distinction which maps felicitously onto the Platonic disjunction as sketched above. Singer criticizes the Cartesian theory of love as excessively “appraisive,” that is, as relying too heavily on an objective standard as guarantor of the worth of beloved objects. I maintain on the contrary that this interpretation distorts what Descartes’s texts tell us. By arguing that the will, with no necessary input from the appraising intellect, is paramount in love judgments, I show that love for Descartes is largely an imaginative means of “bestowing” value which as such does not require either the guidance or the corroboration of objective criteria. The bestowal theory warrants, rather, the free subjective creation of value. The distinction which Singer uses to criticize Descartes is thus turned to Descartes’s favor.

I. Before getting to that argument, however, we need to examine the place which love as a specific passion has within the overall economy of the third *notion primitive*,<sup>4</sup> that is, the union of body and soul as distinct from the treatment of these elements as mutually separate. Passions are for Descartes a species of thought. In a general sense all “perceptions” are passions of the soul. They represent the world to the will which then acts in some way on them (“action” is taken as the other species of thought). Now of these perceptions generally considered, some are caused by the external objects of the senses<sup>5</sup> and some by the natural appetites and affections of the body.<sup>6</sup> There are, however, those perceptions “whose effects we feel as being in the soul itself....”<sup>7</sup> These are strictly speaking the “passions” of the soul; and despite our not always being able to locate their proximate cause,<sup>8</sup> they may be stimulated by the

<sup>3</sup> Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*, article 49 (*Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed. Adam and Tannery [rev. ed.; Paris, 1964-76], XI, 368; hereafter cited as *AT*); all references from *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, tr. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff and D. Murdoch (Cambridge, 1985), I, II and III.

<sup>4</sup> For Descartes’s reference to the *notions primitives*, see Letter to Elizabeth, 5.21.1643 (*AT*, III, 663).

<sup>5</sup> Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*, article 23 (*AT*, XI, 346).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, article 24 (*AT*, XI, 347).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, article 25 (*AT*, XI, 348).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

“fortuitous movement of the spirits,”<sup>9</sup> by intellectual judgments, or by external objects which “excite” the nerves.<sup>10</sup>

With external sensory perceptions (like hearing or sight) the object—what the perception is responding to—or remote cause of the perception is located outside us. With the internal sensations (like hunger) the object or remote cause is inside the body (recall Descartes’s claim in the Sixth Meditation that the heat we feel on placing our hand near the fire cannot reside in the fire itself<sup>11</sup>). On the one hand the locus and cause of both these classes of perceptions is entirely related to the body. On the other hand the “actions” of the soul (desire and will) have their locus and cause in the soul. But the passions have their locus inside the soul, their remote cause or object most often (but by no means always) outside the body (the charging lion which provokes either courage or fear) and their proximate cause in the bodily movements of the spirits.

A problem arises, however, regarding the lack of precision in some of the distinctions Descartes is making here. Most glaringly, perhaps, it is difficult to distinguish clearly the external sensory perceptions from the passions from what has been said so far. Both respond principally to external stimuli and result in “ideas” in the soul. To clarify this ambiguity, it is helpful to examine in turn two aspects of Descartes’s definition of passions of the soul, the first of which describes a mechanical difference between passions and the rest of the perceptions and the second what can loosely be termed a phenomenological difference.

Descartes maintains that the passions of the soul are “caused, maintained and strengthened by some particular movement of the spirits.”<sup>12</sup> All passions have their “last and most proximate cause” in this source.<sup>13</sup> Descartes tells us that this is meant to distinguish passions both from volitions—which as the source of free activity are uncaused—and from other perceptions. Unfortunately, Descartes does not explain here what the last and most proximate cause of these other perceptions could be if it is not the spirits. Stephen Voss has tried to vindicate Descartes on this score by asserting that the last and most proximate cause of sensory ideas is an activity of the nerves rather than the spirits.<sup>14</sup> Presumably, this does not mean that in the case of the passions, the nerves have no role whatsoever to play. In the case of a situation leading to the passion of fear, for example, the spirits will commonly do two things simultaneously: they will stimulate the nerves which make the body turn and run from the

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, article 26 (*AT*, XI, 349).

<sup>10</sup> For a succinct summary of the Cartesian perception types and their causes, cf. de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion*, 29.

<sup>11</sup> Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (*AT*, VII, 83).

<sup>12</sup> Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul* article 27 (*AT*, XI, 349).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, article 29 (*AT*, XI, 350).

<sup>14</sup> Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*, tr. Stephen H. Voss (Indianapolis, 1989), 35, n. 30.

threatening object; and they will stimulate the nerves of the heart to rarefy the blood in such a way that spirits which first cause, then maintain and strengthen the passion are continually sent to the brain (this is why we “feel” the passion as though it were in the heart). In both cases the nerves are necessary intermediaries.

However, with internal or external sensations, so goes the argument, the nervous connection between the brain and the various parts of the body is in the end responsible for the generation of sensory ideas. If Voss is right, in distinguishing the passions and the external sensations in this way Descartes would be saying that, for example, the nerves do not require the assistance of the spirits in causing a sensation of (say) yellow. But this explanation collapses on closer inspection. In the *Treatise on Man* Descartes maintains that although the nerves are sufficient for imprinting the movements of particular objects on the internal surface of the brain, such movements must at that point be transmitted by the spirits in determinate ways to the pineal gland.<sup>15</sup> With all perceptions, then, the spirits play a crucial role in the conversion of physical entities into mental ones, and Descartes is clear that this function *follows* that of the nerves in the causal sequence. Without the spirits there could never be ideas, properly speaking. Thus the nerves cannot be the “last and most proximate cause” of sensory ideas, as Voss maintains.

For this reason we must look with suspicion on Descartes’s attempt to distinguish passions from other perceptions in a purely mechanical manner. However, although the causal account of the distinction is not acceptable, Descartes’s mechanical distinction may still be tenable if we claim that with the passions there is somehow simply “more” spirit-activity than there is for the other perceptions. Thus Voss declares that the spirits “have only a bit part to play” in the formation of sensory ideas, whereas their role is paramount in the formation of the passions. This quantitative distinction is entirely too vague, however, and is in any case not borne out by the texts Voss cites.<sup>16</sup> We are therefore left to conclude that Descartes offers us no rigorous mechanical distinction between the idea types in question.

But a more promising avenue of inquiry remains open to us. According to Descartes, the passions and the sensations have distinct phenomenological “references.” We “refer” a passion directly to the soul and not to the stimulus (thus its locus is in the soul), whereas we “refer” an external sensory perception to the object stimulating the body and not to the mind where the idea is represented (thus its locus is in the external world). An internal sensation we “refer” to the body (thus its locus is the body).<sup>17</sup> This “referencing” is not meant to

<sup>15</sup> Descartes, *Treatise on Man* (AT, XI, 142-44).

<sup>16</sup> Voss, *The Passions of the Soul*, 35, fn 30. Voss cites the *Passions*, articles 12, 23, and 24 (AT, XI, 337, 346 and 347).

<sup>17</sup> For the three separate types of reference, cf. Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul* articles 23, 24, and 25 (AT, XI, 346-48).

carry very much scientific precision. We can, for example, confusedly imagine that a pain is “located” in the limb where we feel it, though strictly speaking a pain is a thought.

But such confused thinking is not illegitimate at a more fundamental level. For referencing, on Descartes’s understanding of it, seems to describe our immediate or visceral relation to the perception in question, a relation based on the exigencies of experience. The importance of our being aware of this relation is different for each of the perception types. In the case of external sensation the importance is epistemological—we are concerned to know the truth of the corporeal world in which we move. In the case of internal sensation the importance is functional—we need to know when our body is in danger or is expressing basic needs so that we may preserve it more efficiently. In the case of the passions, the importance is chiefly moral—we need to know how to enhance or perfect ourselves insofar as we are rational, though embodied, creatures.

Moreover, since external sensory perceptions almost always alert us to the existence of real objects in the world, they can be rendered less obscure through the application of mathematical and geometrical analysis. But the passions “are so close and so internal to our soul” that, even when severely disordered, they are not susceptible of correction in the same way.<sup>18</sup> In the end the information of the external senses, once linked up clearly and distinctly with the matter it represents, is our guide through the world of extension, whereas the passions never lose their rootedness in the mind as embodied, and never therefore relinquish their status as irreducibly “confused.” So the analysis of “referencing” not only helps us distinguish the passions proper from other perceptions, it is also Descartes’s best way of elucidating just what the passions are for us. The passions serve us, that is, solely to the extent that they cause us to want those things which nature has deemed useful for us *qua* compound substances.<sup>19</sup> Thus the passions are concerned specifically with the union of body and soul. They are in fact the highest and most complex function of this third *notion primitive*.

Now the passion of love has a distinguished place in this category. Descartes defines love thus: “Love is an emotion of the soul caused by a movement of the spirits, which impels the soul to join itself willingly [*de volont *] to objects that appear to be agreeable to it.”<sup>20</sup> Descartes says elsewhere that when we think of something as beneficial for us, we are drawn towards it and thus love it. Conversely, when we perceive something to be of potential harm to us, we are impelled away from it, and consequently hate it.<sup>21</sup> This picture is complicated

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, article 26 (*AT*, XI, 349).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, article 52 (*AT*, XI, 372). Cf. also articles 40 and 74 (*AT*, XI, 359 and 383).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, article 79 (*AT*, XI, 387).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, article 56 (*AT*, XI, 374).

considerably in that Descartes follows Augustine in dividing love into two types, the purely intellectual and the properly passionate. Descartes explains that intellectual, or rational, love is based on an assessment of the beloved's "objective" worth. The soul is drawn to join itself to such an object and to consider itself as part of the whole which is thus engendered. Moreover, so pure is this type of love, that it can exist in the soul even without the body.<sup>22</sup>

The other type of love, the passionate, is, as we have seen, the result of the union of body and soul. Although this kind of love is unavoidable insofar as we are incarnate, it is in fact nothing but a "confused thought."<sup>23</sup> Here the complexities associated with Descartes's views on the nature of love between persons begin to manifest themselves. For the union of body and soul has resulted in the emergence of ideas which are by definition not clear and distinct and which may *ipso facto* involve us in "erroneous" relations with the external world. When speaking of love, Descartes does not explicitly warn against "error," but he does caution us against any love which rests on a "bad foundation," which is "unjustified" and which "joins us to things which may be harmful or at least which deserve less consideration than we give them,"<sup>24</sup> thus invoking at least the possibility of checking our moral judgments against the world.

So moral error with respect to this passion involves us in actions which are less than ideally grounded in a knowledge of the true worth of the beloved object. Does Descartes then advise us to purge the body-soul union of its confused and irrational elements? If so, and given the ineluctable union of body and soul in this life, how is this to be accomplished? If not, then is Descartes committed to the view that confused love, even love which involves us in error, is morally permissible? It is in the context of these questions that I turn to Irving Singer's distinction between "appraisal" and "bestowal" and his critique of Descartes.

II. If, as Cicero tells us, love is the attempt to form a friendship inspired by beauty, then what of that love which sees and creates value in the non-beautiful but nevertheless beloved other? This is the dilemma which Irving Singer has, throughout his career, tried to come to grips with. Singer sees two strands of thought coming out of the history of philosophical reflection on love. The first, what he identifies as "appraisal," describes the broadly Platonic-Augustinian approach to love. Here, the beloved is idealized as the bearer of a purposive, transpersonal value like the Beautiful or the Good (the Ciceronian conception just alluded to). What is important about appraisive valuing is that it is always an evaluating in accordance with a publicly recognized, hence "objective" stan-

<sup>22</sup> Letter to Chanut, 1.2.1647 (*AT*, IV, 600).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul* article 142 (*AT*, XI, 435).

dard. The task of evaluating thus calls for the judgment of relatively impartial “experts” whose chief virtue is their knowledge of the moral facts. As the appraiser would have it, when it comes to love the question of the *Euthyphro* is easy to answer: we love solely because the object of our love is lovable.

The other strand, emerging chiefly from the Lutheran-Kantian tradition of thinking (but also extending, though less conspicuously, back to Plato), Singer terms “bestowal.” This refers to the spontaneous creation of value in the beloved, the attempt to see the latter as inherently worthy even in spite of that person’s possible failure to reflect a transpersonal ideal. This type of love, Singer writes, “supplements the search for human value with a capacity for bestowing it *gratuitously*. To one who has succeeded in cultivating this attitude, anything may be an object of love.”<sup>25</sup> Unlike appraisive valuing, therefore, which insists that the lover must strictly reflect an externally present and verifiable reality, bestowed value cannot be generated solely from outside. Singer therefore sees bestowal as the seminal value in love between persons as such. The chief problem with the tradition of appraisal is that it cannot articulate this human, all too human type of love. So the bestower’s answer to Plato’s question is as unambiguous as was the appraiser’s: something is lovable because we love it.

Descartes, according to Singer, sees love as strictly appraisive:

In this world ... the soul is always joined to the body which generally makes it necessary for rational love to be accompanied by love as a passion. For Descartes this only means that the body is disposed to further those interests of the soul which constitute intellectual love. At no point does Descartes suggest that the impulses or instincts of the body contribute to such love.<sup>26</sup>

Singer concludes from this that love for Descartes depends on knowledge of the truth,<sup>27</sup> that the function of human beings as lovers is not conceptually distinct from their function as knowers. As I stated at the outset, the sides of this problem are too abstractly separated in the Singer-Plato formulation, and this is the source of Singer’s occasional misrepresentations of various philosophers within the tradition. But the distinction itself is useful and can in fact be employed to enrich our understanding of Descartes’s position. The immediate problem to be addressed, therefore, is the claim that Descartes falls squarely

<sup>25</sup> Irving Singer, *The Nature of Love* (Chicago, 1984), I, 14. We might well question Singer’s extreme formulation of the theory of bestowal here. Judgments about moral objects are not made in a vacuum, and it is therefore unlikely that “anything” may be an object of love for the bestower or that the latter’s bestowing activity is utterly “gratuitous.” I owe this point to an anonymous reader at *JHI*.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 259.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 260.

within the camp of appraisal-philosophers; and this, I suggest, is misguided. From the fact that Descartes wants to subordinate bodily impulses to judgmental control (which he does), it does not necessarily follow that he subordinates the passion of love utterly to the demands of epistemic or moral certainty. In fact, it is precisely this inference I want to challenge. The fulcrum of my argument is a reading of Descartes on the freedom of the will.

III. There is an indisputably strong current of appraisal as a generally positive value in Descartes's thinking. To see this we need only look at his doctrine of the will. In the *Fourth Meditation* Descartes says that "(the will) consists simply in the fact that when the intellect puts something forward for affirmation or denial ... our inclinations are such that we do not feel we are determined by any external force."<sup>28</sup> However, Descartes goes on to say that, although not externally compelled, we are not merely indifferent to our possible alternative choices. Indeed, indifference is held to be the "lowest grade of freedom."<sup>29</sup> Instead, we are most free when we act according to knowledge of the true and the good. The intellect offers up the right choice after clear and distinct reflection and the will is then freely compelled to act on this choice, although we are in this case unconscious of being moved by outside forces. This is undoubtedly the paradigm of right action for Descartes: where knowledge according to clear and distinct ideas justifies and counsels the final assent of the will. The will is of course involved in the initial act of election, since it is responsible for evaluating objects in the first place, but in the end it is bound to assent to the determinations of the appraising intellect.

But should we think of the will as *always and only* guided by the light of clear and distinct ideas? There is another strain in Descartes's thinking on the will which emerges most conspicuously in a letter to Mesland of 1645 and which challenges to some extent the view expressed in *Meditation Four*. In clarifying to Mesland what he meant by "indifference" in the *Meditations* account of freedom, Descartes now asserts that he cannot find fault with those who see indifference, when properly defined, as a "positive faculty." According to this understanding, not only is the will able to move in a direction contrary to that prescribed by evident reasons, but in doing so it may even be expressing itself in an ideally free manner: "For it is always open to us to hold back from admitting a clearly perceived truth, provided we consider it a good thing to demonstrate the freedom of our will by doing so."<sup>30</sup> Descartes maintains further that freedom may consist precisely "in a greater use of the positive power which we have of following the worse although we see the better."<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (AT, VII, 57).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Letter to Mesland, 2.9.1645 (AT, IV, 173).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

Descartes's purpose in this letter is in fact to defend his original conception of indifference as the lowest grade of freedom, that state in which we are simply not moved by any of our possible courses of action. In contrast to this situation, being moved by objects which are contrary to reason is seen as a free use of a positive power. But by arguing that the will can be free both in refusing to assent to a clearly perceived truth or in pursuing a good which is clearly contrary to reason, Descartes seems to have compromised significantly the stark earlier view of the will as wholly subservient to reason. This single letter may not, of course, be sufficient to overturn the powerful metaphysic of the *Meditations*, but it does indicate quite clearly a new direction in Descartes's thinking on this question between 1641 and 1645.

Anthony Kenny disagrees with this interpretation of the letter to Mesland, asserting that it is of a single piece with the doctrine of the *Meditations*. Kenny argues that when Descartes claims it is always open to us to hold back from pursuing a clearly known good he does not mean that we can do this while we are in fact in apprehension of the true and the good. At the moment of such apprehension our will is compelled to assent to the perception of truth or goodness, an idea which is indeed in substantial accord with the earlier view.<sup>32</sup> Katherine Sherman notes that what Kenny overlooks is the reason this is so. If the will refused assent to a clear and distinct perception of the truth it would involve itself in a contradiction since Descartes defines a clear and distinct idea as one which appears only to the *attentive* mind and the ability to direct attention is precisely an act of will. The will cannot simultaneously hold attention and withdraw it. Thus in saying that a person can refuse assent to a clearly perceived truth, Descartes is only saying that by doing so such a person would simply cease having a clear and distinct perception of that truth.<sup>33</sup> The deeper problem for Descartes's account is how to explain the very possibility of the initial move from the apprehension of an evident truth to the subsequent withdrawal of attention from it without undermining the strong claim that we *must* assent to evident truths.

Kenny, claiming to echo Descartes, considers such a withdrawal of attention possible if we believe it to be a good thing to demonstrate our "perversity" in doing so. Kenny adds correctly that this notion was there in Descartes's thinking at least as early as the *Meditations*.<sup>34</sup> What Sherman herself overlooks, despite her focus on the *Passions*, is the question as to what could pos-

<sup>32</sup> Anthony Kenny, "Descartes on the Will," *Cartesian Studies*, ed. R. J. Butler (Oxford, 1972), 1-31.

<sup>33</sup> Katherine Sherman, "Descartes' Change of Mind," *Philosophical Forum*, 5 (1974), 557-71.

<sup>34</sup> Kenny, "Descartes on the Will," 18. The relevant passage from the *Meditations* is (*AT*, VII, 57). It should also be noted that Kenny disputes the 1645 dating of the letter to Mesland. His case on this point is convincing, but so long as the letter falls between the *Meditations* and the *Passions* (which it certainly does) my point here carries.

sibly provide the will with a compelling motive for rejecting a clearly and distinctly perceived truth in favor of one more obscurely perceived (or of none at all). I will return to this point below. Although we might object to the moralistic tone of Kenny's formulation, such an act of will would indeed appear strange if not perverse.

Nevertheless, I think an answer to Kenny can be found in Descartes's last significant articulation of the problem of the will in *The Passions of the Soul*, written in the winter of 1645-46 and published in 1649, a year before Descartes's death. Kenny's claim that Descartes's thinking on the problem of human freedom undergoes no real transformation in the later works is untenable in view of the fact that he, Kenny, ignores this text altogether.<sup>35</sup> In the *Passions* Descartes makes no reference to the view of the will as the ineluctable executor of the understanding's clearly and distinctly perceived ideas but instead further develops the position sketched in the letter to Mesland. So even though the latter position is present in the *Meditations*, it is significantly muted there; but this is not the case in the *Passions*, where it becomes the dominant position. It is therefore impossible to deny for Descartes a strong shift of emphasis on this point.

IV. In the *Passions* the will is seen as that faculty which undertakes the acts of bestowing and of holding assent. Consider the following statement, which connects the problem of free will to that of the love passion:

[I]n using the word "willingly" [*de volonté*] I am not speaking of desire which is a completely separate passion relating to the future. I mean rather 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 a part, and the thing loved to be the other.<sup>36</sup>

Here Descartes wants us to think about that assent by which we consider ourselves as committed, into the future, to a given course of action or judgment. This describes the ability to "take a stand" on something, to establish a connection with the object in question which is solidified and preserved by the act of assent itself and by the benevolent activity which follows from it.

Now insofar as commitment entails sticking to a single judgment in the face of possible alternatives, this view of the will seems to conflict—at least

<sup>35</sup> In a paper devoted to showing that Spinoza's conception of Descartes's "absolutist" doctrine of freedom is misguided, John Cottingham is guilty of the same oversight (despite the promising title of his paper) ("The Intellect, the Will and the Passions: Spinoza's Critique of Descartes," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 26 [1988], 239-57).

<sup>36</sup> Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul* article 80 (*AT*, XI, 387).

potentially—with the dominant one in the pre-1645 sources. That is, on this view it would be plausible to suppose that the will could establish and preserve its attachment to something even in the face of the intellect's opposing counsel. This may of course lead to "error" (nor is the reciprocity of the love-union which Descartes stresses in the previous citation by itself sufficient to eliminate the possibility of moral error: both parties may be deluded). Indeed, as Descartes makes clear in the *Reply to the Fifth Objection*, it is the most potent source of error. The will extends further than the intellect and so can attach itself to objects of which the intellect might not approve.

But it might also be the case that the intellect may simply not be able fully to "grasp" the object in question, "since in the case of any given object there may be many things about it that we desire but very few things of which we have knowledge."<sup>37</sup> The natural response to this sort of impasse, the one Descartes himself offers in the *Meditations*, is that we should simply suspend our judgment until such time as matters become clearer to us. But in many practical situations, this is neither possible nor desirable, as Descartes explains to Elizabeth:

[A]lthough we cannot have certain demonstrations of everything, we nevertheless ought to take a position and embrace the opinions that seem to us the most probable in regard to all the things in practice, so that whenever it is a question of acting we may never be irresolute—which is what causes regrets and repentances.<sup>38</sup>

We have seen that in the Mesland letter Descartes goes further than this in allowing for adherence to the merely probable not only as a provisional necessity but even in the face of demonstrably certain contrary truth claims. In both letters we see that Descartes thinks it imperative to take a position on important matters, whether "good" reasons for doing so are evident or not and this emphasizes clearly the role of the will as free causal agent. To this extent the will leads the intellect and its activity, driven by desire, is therefore requisite in order to pick out beloved objects in the first place. This ability freely to create an attachment to a beloved object and then to imaginatively fortify one's attachment to it is the *sine qua non* of bestowal as Singer understands it.

My point is that the latter view of the will is especially pertinent to an understanding of what it is to love someone and that "error" in this case is not a compelling worry for Descartes. Indeed it seems to me that this picture of the will as both (potential) discoverer of the beloved object and as that faculty which allows for sustained commitment to it can be seen respectively as the

<sup>37</sup> Descartes, *Objections and Replies* (AT, VII, 377).

<sup>38</sup> Letter to Elizabeth, 9.15.1645 (AT, IV, 295).

necessary and sufficient conditions for establishing the real value of the object. Much hangs, therefore, on which faculty—the will or the intellect—should *properly* qualify as the sufficient condition in the latter formulation, since the one we choose will be the ultimate arbiter in love judgments.

Descartes's "theory of association" helps clarify and buttress my claim that the will as free bestower is supreme in this respect. This theory also goes a long way toward accounting for the "perversity" involved in diverting attention from clearly and distinctly perceived truths by way of offering compelling psychological motivation for such an act. In a letter to Chanut, Descartes tells the story of a little girl whom he, Descartes, had loved when he was a child. This girl had a squint in her eyes which became for Descartes so attached to the love he felt for the girl that he could never thereafter see a person with a squint without feeling an upsurge of love.<sup>39</sup> Descartes is trying to address Chanut's question as to how we can love someone before knowing his or her real worth. Descartes's answer is rooted in the speculative physiological account he gives of the phenomenon of love in the *Passions*. (There Descartes describes the movement of blood and spirits which gives rise to love. Briefly, the thought of an object of love forms an impression in the brain which directs the animal spirits to the muscles surrounding the intestines and stomach. This then forces the alimentary juices to the heart, causing a great swell of heat there. These spirits are so powerful that they cause the soul to dwell upon the object of love. Descartes goes on to say that the first and formative experience we all had of love was in the womb where we "fell in love" with the "fuel" which nourished us. The soul wanted to join itself to this fuel because of the heat which it maintained in the body.<sup>40</sup>)

In the same letter to Chanut, Descartes maintains that notwithstanding the blind physiological compulsion to love as a matter of mere associative habit, we can control our love-judgments. He states flatly that a wise man will not merely submit to these physiological promptings but will reflect carefully on the real worth of the object in question. I do not want to gainsay the strongly appraisive tone of such claims, but I would suggest that Descartes is on the whole less worried about the sway of habitual associations than he is about a person being dominated by the barrage of conflicting bodily impulses. Through association, be it ever so imaginatively distorted, a person at least establishes authority over the body. In the case of love this authority is precisely what allows for the constancy of the will's attachment to a beloved object.

In speaking about Descartes's principle of association, Anthony Levi makes the following claim:

<sup>39</sup> Letter to Chanut, 6.6.1647 (*AT*, V, 50).

<sup>40</sup> Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul* article 102 (*AT*, XI, 404).

The ethical importance of the principle of association lies in the fact that we can both destroy and create associations between the passions and the movements of the spirits *par habitude* and therefore acquire an *empire très absolu* over the passions.<sup>41</sup>

Note that, according to Levi, the *primary* ethical import of our faculty of association is not that it allows us to dispense with erroneous judgments, but that it gives us *control* over the passions. The ability to manipulate associations is here seen as an end in itself as long as it allows us to establish control of the body. With all this talk of dominating the body it might be objected that I am just agreeing with Singer; but this is not so, for Singer's essential claim is that passionate love must, for Descartes, be subordinated to rational love, which always involves washing our judgments clean of all error.

The need to act determinately, however, is not synonymous with the need to act in truth, a point Descartes makes in addressing the problem of conflict among the passions:

it is true that very few people are so weak and irresolute that they choose only what their passion dictates. Most have some *determinate judgments* which they follow in regulating some of their actions. Often these judgments are false and based on passions by which the will has previously allowed itself to be conquered or led astray; but because the will continues to follow them when the passion which caused them is absent they may be considered its proper weapons and we may judge souls to be stronger or weaker according to their ability to follow these judgments more or less closely and resist the present passions which are opposed to them.<sup>42</sup>

Again, although Descartes goes on in this article to say that true judgments are in general to be preferred to false ones since they will give us less cause to repent, the focus is not on the need to supplant false judgments with true ones. Not at all: here what is crucial in the face of conflicting passions is to stick to one's chosen course, even if that course is "false." Precisely these judgments, *qua* actions of the soul, express the "natural" freedom of the will, "which can never be restrained" in making them.<sup>43</sup> This radicalizes Descartes's comment to Elizabeth (quoted above) that in order to avoid regrets and repentances we need to act resolutely. Now the need for resolute or determinate action is seen

<sup>41</sup> Anthony Levi, *French Moralists: The Theory of the Passions, 1585-1649* (Oxford, 1964), 280.

<sup>42</sup> Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul* article 49 (*AT*, XI, 368), my emphasis.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, article 41 (*AT*, XI, 359).

to extend even to those judgments and actions which are false. The search for truth here cedes pride of place to the imperative to oppose present passions on the strength of learned judgments, whether true or false. The latter task is only said to require “sufficient ingenuity in training and guiding” the passions.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, insofar as the holding of assent is based on past relations of will *and* bodily impulse, the body is never fully transcended in passionate love.

So Descartes thinks that the will’s “proper weapons” are the individual’s “often false” determinate judgments. But if these are themselves by definition the product of the body-soul union, how can Singer legitimately maintain that for Descartes the body’s only function in love is to contribute whatever it can to the interests of purely intellectual love, a kind of love which can presumably never be grounded in erroneous judgments?<sup>45</sup> Determinate judgments do not move the cognitive process up to the rarefied heights of the disembodied understanding. The love passion, even when successfully “controlled” through associative habit, remains a necessarily concrete phenomenon. It is not a case of the mind lording it over the body but of absent passions organizing and quelling present passions according to the demands of a relatively freely chosen value system.

As Singer sees it, love as bestowal cannot be delusional or mistaken. It is not a way of knowing the world but rather “an imaginative means of bestowing value which would not exist otherwise.”<sup>46</sup> The beloved is valued within a context which affirms his or her importance in spite of the assessment of appraisal. This is *not* to say that love as bestowal exists solely and obstinately to spite and oppose the calculations of the appraising mind; appraisal might very well corroborate a set of values freely bestowed. But the intellect is not the final court of appeal. Remembering that the will attached itself spontaneously to the object in the first place, we can say that the economy of love as a *passion*—and not simply as intellectual appreciation—is fully a determination of the will in its dual role as discoverer/holder of assent. The assent itself issues from the needs of a unified psycho-physical system and this system is the expression of a created individual identity whose preservation and enhancement must be furthered even at the cost of overriding competing truth claims. In the language of active and passive powers from Part I of the *Passions*, the will here is viewed as an initiating agent whose activity in setting up movements in the pineal gland does not, at any point in the cognitive process, require directive input from the understanding *qua* “patient.”<sup>47</sup>

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, article 50 (*AT*, XI, 369).

<sup>45</sup> Singer, *The Nature of Love*, II, 259.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 17.

<sup>47</sup> Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*, articles 1 and 2 (*AT*, XI, 328).

Even the feeling of benevolence for the beloved which love induces is largely a function of maintaining and enhancing the system. Once we have joined ourselves to the beloved—an act which involves a good deal of blindness to competing objects (including, possibly, “worthier” ones)—we will naturally be inclined to enrich imaginatively the value of the beloved:

as soon as we have willingly joined ourselves to some object, whatever its nature may be, we feel benevolent towards it—that is we also join to it willingly the things we believe to be agreeable to it: this is one of the principal effects of love.<sup>48</sup>

When we love something we want to join to it not those things which *are* good for it, but those things we *believe* to be good for it. How is it possible that this belief will not itself be coloured by the very love which provokes it, a love which, I have argued, has little regard for the demands of moral certainty? If it is so effected, the value of the beloved has been taken out of the community of objective value appraisers and placed in the grasp of the individual bestower.

Still, I resist the temptation to see Descartes’s philosophy of love as a justification of narcissism and to paint Descartes himself as a kind of proto-Proust. As we have seen in the conception of the will in the Fourth Meditation, the imperative to live in the light of clear and distinct ideas is never far from Descartes’s thinking. Furthermore, he makes reference in the *Passions* to the fact that the love relationship is a whole which has a value above the selfish interests of its members,<sup>49</sup> a point which should force on us the need to see the relationship, in part at least, from the outside. But the overwhelming focus of Descartes’s philosophy of love is on the role of the free bestower of value, and this is why I argue that passionate love, this-worldly love, is something more than a mere confusion which as such must be clarified and disembodied.

Descartes himself both invites this reduction and balks at it, a conflict which is encapsulated for example in the short passage he devotes to the passions in *The Principles of Philosophy*. There he asserts that in the case of joy for example “the act of imagination does not itself contain the feeling of joy” but that it does give rise to the movement of animal spirits which eventually results in the appropriate stimulation of the heart and the concomitant feeling of joy. He quickly adds that this whole process is preceded and determined by an act of judgment which affords us a purely “intellectual” experience of the passion. However, he almost immediately revokes the latter requirement when discussing the passion of sadness as well as those of love, hate, fear, etc., asserting that

<sup>48</sup> Letter to Chanut, 1.2.1647 (*AT*, IV, 600).

<sup>49</sup> Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*, article 80 (*AT*, XI, 387).

“the mind itself may perhaps not know of any reason why it should be sad.” This suggests that the process driving the animal spirits to the heart can be initiated in the absence of a command from the intellect or at least in the absence of a clear and distinct command from it. Descartes goes on to say that purely imaginative love and purely intellectual love are “quite different in kind.” Although they are often enough found together, he gives us no indication in this passage of which is worthier nor even if they admit of comparison.<sup>50</sup> Although Descartes eventually abandoned any concupiscent/benevolent distinction,<sup>51</sup> this passage indicates that even when he held something like it, he was not unambiguously advocating the subordination of the passion to the appraising intellect.

It is clear therefore that in the case of love the call to rid ourselves of error is, if not silenced, at least suppressed for Descartes. I do not claim that this is so for all the passions (it is certainly not for hatred). There may be degrees of allowable error for the various passions depending on their functional roles, the way they preserve and/or perfect the person. That question is beyond the scope of this paper; but we can safely say that although it is not always clear how Descartes thinks the balance should be struck, he would evidently agree with Donne that love is a “medicine” which “sometimes would contemplate, sometimes do.”

University of Toronto.

<sup>50</sup> Descartes, *The Principles of Philosophy* (AT, IXB, 317-18).

<sup>51</sup> Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, art. 81 (AT, XI, 388).