



Imagining Oneself as Forming a Whole with Others: Descartes's View of Love

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I address two widespread misconceptions about Descartes's theory of love. Descartes defines love as a passion that 'incites [the soul] to join in volition to the objects that appear to be suitable to it' (AT XI: 387/Voss: 62). Several commentators assume joining in volition is an act of judgment, since forming judgments is the primary function of the will in the Meditations. However, I argue joining in volition is an act of imagining a whole one forms with an object of love. I draw on Descartes's account of volition in *The Passions of the Soul* to show forming images in one's mind qualifies as a volition, on his view. Second, commentators often assume joining in volition is an essential part of love. However, I argue joining in volition is not an essential part of love because love is not identical to joining in volition, and love does not necessitate the soul to join in volition.

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This paper addresses two common misinterpretations of Descartes's theory of love.¹ The first is that joining in volition is the act of forming a judgement about an object of love. Descartes defines love as 'an excitation of the soul, caused by the motion of the spirits, which incites it to join itself in volition [*l'incite à se joindre de volonté*] to the objects that appear to be suitable to it' (AT XI: 387/Voss: 62).² Several commentators draw on Descartes's theory of volition in the *Meditations* to explain the phrase 'join in volition.' Lilli Alanen writes, 'the passion of love inclines our soul, i.e., the will (the motive power of mind or soul) to judge that the object (represented as) causing it is good' (2019: 247). Deborah Brown writes that imagination 'present[s] to the will for its consent an idea of the self in union with another' (2006: 162). André Gombay compares the consent by which we join in volition with the assent by which we form beliefs, writing that Descartes 'must have come to think that love and belief resembled one another ... the same psychic mechanism was at work in them both' (2007: 93).³

Contrary to these views, I argue joining in volition is the act of imagining a whole one forms with the object of love. In *The Passions of the Soul*, Descartes's account of volition includes various acts of imagination, such as imagining objects one has never seen and imagining immaterial objects. I draw on this account of volition, as well as Descartes's own clarification of the phrase 'join in volition' to argue joining in volition is an act of imagining. Descartes maintains that there is a category of imagination—active imagination—that involves an effort of the mind to bring about particular thoughts. Joining in volition involves actively imagining a whole one forms with the object of love. Although Descartes does not provide many details about the content of this image, I draw on passages that explain the mind is able to form composite images from objects we have seen. This argument composes Section I.

The second misinterpretation is that joining in volition is an essential part of love. Several commentators make passing remarks in which they identify joining in volition and love.⁴ For example, Alexandre Matheron writes, '*nous nous joignons de volonté avec les choses—ou nous aimons les choses*' (1988: 434).⁵ Jean-Luc Marion states, '*L'amour se définit en effet comme la conjonction des objects (aimés) avec l'ego*' (1991: 209).⁶ Other commentators suggest joining in volition is an essential part of love, on Descartes's view. Alberto Frigo describes 'imagining a whole' as 'an essential element of the passion of love' (2016: 1106). Denis Kambouchner writes, 'To love an object—in other words, "to be joined with what we love in volition"—is (according to Art. 80) to consider or to represent ourselves as forming a whole with it' (2013: 25). Susan James states that according to Descartes, 'to love something is to regard oneself as united with it' (1997: 242).

I argue that joining in volition is not an essential part of love. I consider two ways that joining in volition could be an essential part of love. First, love could be identical to joining in volition. Second, love could necessitate the soul to join in volition. To address the first view, I argue that according to Descartes, passions are caused by sources outside the soul, such as external objects or the body. Volitions, however, are caused by the soul. Love is caused by the movement of animal spirits and the perception of an object that appears suitable for oneself. Since love is caused by sources outside the soul, love cannot be a volition. To address the second view, I argue love cannot necessitate the volition to join to objects of love, since only clear and distinct perceptions can necessitate volitions. Love incites the soul to join in volition to objects of love by strengthening

¹ In this paper, I am only discussing the passion of love. Descartes introduces a form of love called intellectual love in his correspondence with Chanut, which I will not discuss here. When I use the term 'love' throughout this paper, I am only referring to the passion.

² The Cottingham, Stoothoff, and Murdoch edition translates the phrase '*l'incite à se joindre de volonté*' as 'impels the soul to join itself willingly' (AT XI: 387/CSM I: 356). To avoid challenges in translation, I cite the original French when appropriate. Throughout the paper, I use Voss's recent translation of *The Passions of the Soul*, Shapiro's translation of the correspondence between Descartes and Elisabeth, and CSM translations for other texts.

³ See also Williston (1997: 430), Sharp (2011: 363), Brown and Normore (2019: chap. 7).

⁴ Beardsley (2005) is one of the few commentators who correctly points out love is distinct from joining in volition.

⁵ 'We join in volition with things—or we love things.'

⁶ 'Love is in effect defined as the conjunction of (loved) objects with the ego.'

thoughts of objects of love in the soul, but the soul is free to choose whether to join in volition to these objects. The freedom of the soul to join in volition raises questions about proper objects to which to join in volition. I offer three reasons for thinking one should join in volition to objects that increase the perfection of one's soul, as well as the body. This argument composes Section II.

I. THE VOLITION TO JOIN TO OBJECTS OF LOVE

A. IMAGINATION CAUSED BY THE SOUL

In Article 17 of *The Passions of the Soul*, Descartes distinguishes between passions and volitions, writing,

[Our thoughts] are principally of two genera—the first, namely, are the actions of the soul; the others are its passions. The ones I call its actions are all of our volitions, because we find by experience that they come directly from our soul and seem to depend only on it; as, on the other hand, all the sorts of cases of perception or knowledge to be found in us can generally be called its passions, because it is often not our soul that makes them such as they are, and because it always receives them from things that are represented by them. (AT XI: 342/Voss: 28)

This is a broad definition of passion that includes perceptions of external objects, perceptions of bodily states, such as hunger and thirst, and 'passions of the soul.' In Article 27, Descartes defines passions of the soul as 'perceptions or sensations or excitations of the soul which are referred to it in particular and which are caused, maintained, and strengthened by some movement of the spirits' (AT XI: 349/Voss: 34). Passions of the soul are what we typically think of as emotions and are the main topic of *The Passions of the Soul*. Descartes almost always uses the term 'passion' to mean 'passions of the soul,' and I will also use the term 'passion' in this way.

The account of volition in the passage above is also broad, comprising all thoughts that 'come directly from our soul and seem to depend only on it' (AT XI: 342/Voss: 28). Descartes provides several examples of thoughts that come from the soul, including the 'will to imagine something which does not exist' (AT XI: 344/Voss: 29), 'to imagine something we have never seen' (AT XI: 361/Voss: 42), 'to remember something' (AT XI: 360/Voss: 41), and to 'fix our attention to consider a single object for some time' (AT XI: 361/Voss: 42). One may be surprised at this varied list of volitions, since in the *Meditations*, volitions only include affirming, denying, pursuing, and avoiding objects presented by the intellect. One may be especially surprised to see that the 'will to imagine something' is a volition, since in the *Principles of Philosophy*, Descartes writes, 'Sensory perception, imagination, and pure understanding are simply various modes of perception' (AT VIII A: 17/CSM I: 204). It is not my aim to argue that Descartes's view of the will changed over time (though some commentators do).⁷ For my argument, I only need to show that Descartes classifies some acts of imagination as volitions.

Commentators often distinguish between passive and active imagination in order to make sense of Descartes's view of volition and imagination. Passive imagination is involuntary and caused by the body, while active imagination is voluntary and caused by the soul.⁸ In *The Passions of the Soul*, Descartes describes 'imagination that has only the body as cause' and 'imagination ... that is formed by the soul' (AT XI: 344/Voss: 29). Imaginations caused by the body include dreams and daydreams (AT XI: 345/Voss: 29). Imaginations caused by the soul 'depend principally upon the volition that makes it perceive them' (AT XI: 344/Voss: 29). Imaginations caused by the soul include 'when our soul applies itself to imagine something which does not exist—as to represent to itself an enchanted palace or a chimera' (AT XI: 344/Voss: 29) and 'when we will to imagine something we have never seen' (AT XI: 361/Voss: 42).

There are several examples of imaginations caused by the soul in the *Meditations*. In the *Second Meditation*, the meditator uses imagination to consider her essence, writing, 'I am not that

⁷ See for example Sepper (1996).

⁸ See Gaudemard (2018: 150), Fôti (1986: 640–41), and Graham (2013: 121–22).

structure of limbs which is called a human body. I am not even some thin vapour which permeates the limbs—a wind, fire, air, breath, or whatever I depict in my imagination’ (AT VII: 28/CSM II: 18). The meditator also imagines various changes that could occur to the wax before her, stating, ‘I am unable to run through this immeasurable number of changes in my imagination’ (AT VII: 31/CSM II: 21). In the *Sixth Meditation*, the meditator imagines a triangle; that is, she ‘see[s] the three lines with [her] mind’s eye as if they were present before [her]’ (AT VII: 72/CSM II: 50). When she imagines a chiliagon, she ‘construct[s] in [her] mind a confused representation of some figure’ (AT VII: 72/CSM II: 50). Finally, the meditator can ‘imagine a pentagon, by applying [her] mind’s eye to its five sides and the area contained within them’ (AT VII: 72/CSM II: 50).

In each of these examples, the meditator actively wills herself to form images in her mind. In the *Sixth Meditation*, Descartes writes that imagination differs from pure understanding because ‘imagination requires a peculiar effort of mind’ (AT VII: 73/CSM II: 51). The activity of the mind is expressed in Descartes’s use of the terms ‘form’ and ‘construct’ to describe the act of imagining shapes (AT VII: 72/CSM II: 50–51). The action of the mind causes the meditator to ‘depict’ and ‘see’ the images in her ‘mind’s eye.’ In the *Second Meditation*, Descartes states that ‘imagining is simply contemplating the shape or image of a corporeal thing’ (AT VII: 28/CSM II: 19), and in the *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, he writes that when we imagine something, we ‘make use ... of the intellect aided by images depicted in the imagination’ (AT X: 440–41/CSM I: 58). Hence, on Descartes’s view, active imagination involves an effort of the mind to form an image in itself.

B. LOVE AND ACTIVE IMAGINATION

In Article 79, Descartes defines love as ‘an excitation of the soul, caused by the motion of the spirits, which incites it to join itself in volition to the objects that appear to be suitable to it’ (AT XI: 387/Voss: 62). In the following article, he clarifies,

by the phrase ‘in volition’ I do not intend here to speak of desire, which is a passion by itself and has reference to the future, but of the consent [*consentement*] by which we consider ourselves from the present as joined with what we love, in such a way that we imagine a whole of which we think ourselves to be only one part and the thing loved another. (AT XI: 387/Voss: 62)

Given his account of active imagination, we know that imagining a whole composed of ourselves and the object of love involves an action of the mind to bring about an image of the whole. Commentators often assume the volition in love has to do with judgment, since judgment is the function of the will in the *Meditations*.⁹ However, as we have seen, some acts of imagination qualify as volitions in *The Passions of the Soul*. Since Descartes writes that joining in volition involves imagining oneself forming a whole with an object of love, I think the volition is best regarded as an act of imagination.

Descartes also mentions consent in the above passage. One may argue that his use of the term ‘consent’ suggests that joining in volition involves an act of judgment. For example, Alanen argues that in love, the intellect perceives an object as suitable for itself, and the will assents to the perception of the object as suitable (2019: 247). However, in the above passage, I do not see any reason to think ‘consent’ refers to an affirmation of the object as suitable. Rather, I think ‘consent’ refers to the act of imagining oneself as forming a whole with an object of love. This is supported by the fact that Descartes describes the consent as the means by which ‘we consider ourselves form the present as joined with what we love’ (AT XI: 387/Voss: 62). In the previous section, we saw that active imagination, on Descartes’s view, involves an effort of the mind. On my reading, ‘consent’ in the above passage refers to the effort the mind takes when it actively forms an image.

As further evidence of this, we can see that in Descartes’s descriptions of love, he does not discuss affirmation of the object’s goodness, but rather the act of considering oneself as forming a whole with the object of love. In his correspondence with Pierre Chanut, Descartes writes, ‘It is the nature

⁹ See, for example, Alanen (2019: 247), Brown (2006: 162), Gombay (2007: 93), Williston (1997: 430), Sharp (2011: 363), Brown and Normore (2019: chap. 7).

of love to make one consider oneself and the object loved as a single whole of which one is but a part' (AT XI: 611–12/CSMK III: 311). In *The Passions of the Soul*, he writes that 'in all [kinds of love] we consider ourselves as joined and united to the thing loved' (AT XI: 390/Voss: 357). Hence, on Descartes's view, the fact we imagine ourselves as forming a whole with objects of love plays a central role in what it means to join in volition, more so, I argue, than the affirmation that the object of love is good.

We have seen that the act of imagination consists in imagining a whole one forms with the object of love. One may wonder about the content of the image one depicts in one's mind when one imagines a whole one forms with an object of love. Descartes does not provide much detail about the whole one imagines oneself as forming with objects of love. We do know there is a wide diversity in the objects we can love, on Descartes's view: we can love other humans, flowers, birds, horses, God, our prince, country, and city (AT XI: 390/Voss: 64). When we join in volition to any of these objects, we consider ourselves as forming a whole with them. When an individual loves his prince or his country, for example, he 'should regard himself as only a tiny part of the whole which he and they constitute. He should be no more afraid to go to certain death for their service than one is afraid to draw a little blood from one's arm to improve the health of the rest of the body' (AT IV: 612–13/CSMK III: 311). The same reasoning applies to an individual who loves a flower, bird, or building. Descartes writes that such objects 'are not among the nobler parts of the whole which we and they constitute any more than our nails or our hair are among the nobler parts of our body' (AT IV: 612/CSMK: 311). Hence, regardless of the object, when we join in volition to it, we see ourselves as forming a whole with it.

However, this does not provide us with much clarity. What does it mean to consider oneself and a flower, bird, building, country, or other human as forming a whole? I argue that when one imagines oneself and an object as forming a whole, one imagines a composite of oneself and the object of love. In the *First Meditation*, Descartes provides a sense of what this composite might be like. He explains that we can form new images in our mind using images of bodies we have seen. For example, when we dream, our visions are 'like paintings, which must have been fashioned in the likeness of things that are real' (AT VII: 19/CSM II: 13). Similarly, when artists create beings such as sirens and satyrs, 'they cannot give them natures which are new in all respects; they simply jumble up the limbs of different animals' (AT VII: 20/CSM I: 13). Harry Frankfurt analyzes these passages by writing that the imagination 'merely rearranges elements that are given to [the mind]' in order to form 'composites' (2008: 77–78). The dreamer and painter combine images of objects they have seen. Similarly, one who joins in volition to an object combines images of oneself and the object of love.

The union of mind and body provides insight into the union we form with those we love. Both the mind-body union and union we form with those we love cannot be fully understood from a metaphysical point of view but are apparent in our everyday experiences.¹⁰ Concerning the mind-body union, Descartes writes, 'it is in using life and ordinary conversation and in abstaining from meditating and studying those things which exercise the imagination that we learn to conceive the union of the soul and body' (AT III: 692/Shapiro: 70). The mind, Descartes writes, 'does not seem ... capable of conceiving very distinctly, and at the same time, the distinction between the soul and the body and their union' (AT III: 693/Shapiro: 70). Similarly, the union we form with those we love may not be intelligible from a metaphysical view but is apparent in how we conduct our daily lives. For example, we care for and sacrifice our interests for those we love. Descartes writes that when one joins in volition to another, '[o]ne keeps for oneself only a part of one's care, a part which is great or little in proportion to whether one thinks oneself a larger or smaller part of the whole to which one has given one's affection' (AT IV: 611–12/CSMK: 311). A loving father, Descartes writes, seeks his children's good 'as his own or with even greater solicitude, because, representing to himself that he and they make up a whole of which he is not the best part, he often prefers their interests to his own and is not afraid of sacrificing himself in order to save them' (AT XI: 389/Voss: 63–64). Hence, similar to the mind-body union, the union we form with those we love affects our practical concerns, even though the union cannot be fully understood metaphysically.¹¹

¹⁰ See Simmons (2017) and Chamberlain (2019) for discussions on experiencing the mind-body union.

¹¹ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this idea.

At this point, one may wonder how we imagine ourselves as forming a whole with immaterial objects, such as God. Descartes himself recognizes that it is difficult to understand how we can love God, given that ‘nothing about God can be visualized by the imagination’ (AT IV: 607/CSMK: 308–9). Descartes argues that we can reach love of God by considering the qualities of God, such as God’s omniscience, omnipotence, and providence (AT IV: 608–9/CSMK: 309). Descartes describes the whole we imagine when we join in volition to God in the following passage: ‘For although we cannot imagine anything in God, who is the object of our love, we can imagine our love itself, which consists in our wanting to unite ourselves to some object. That is, we can consider ourselves in relation to God as a minute part of all the immensity of the created universe’ (AT IV: 610/CSMK: 310). Hence, whenever we join in volition to God, we imagine ourselves as a part of a God-created universe. We do not imagine God because, as we have seen, ‘nothing about God can be visualized by the imagination.’ Instead, we imagine something that is closely related to God, namely, the God-created universe.

Similarly, when we imagine our soul forming a whole with an object of love, we cannot imagine our soul itself, since our soul is immaterial.¹² Instead, we imagine something that can substitute the image of our soul. Since our soul is closely connected to our body, perhaps we can imagine our body as united with the object of love. In the *Meditations*, the meditator compares her soul to a vapor, breath, air, or wind, so perhaps one could imagine one’s soul as a vapor, breath, air, or wind, when one joins in volition to an object of love (AT VII: 27/CSM II: 18). On my view, there is not a particular image we have in mind when we join our soul in volition to others. Descartes himself writes, ‘Since objects differ from each other, there are different ways of uniting oneself to them or joining them to oneself’ (AT IV: 610/CSMK: 310).

II. THE PASSION OF LOVE

A. THE PASSIVITY OF LOVE

Several commentators argue that joining in volition is essential to love, on Descartes’s view. For example, Jean-Luc Marion and Alexandre Matheron suggest that love is identical to joining in volition.¹³ However, I argue that love is not identical to joining in volition, since love is a thought that passively comes to the soul, whereas volitions are caused by the soul.¹⁴

In *The Passions of the Soul*, Descartes describes love as an ‘excitation of the soul’ (AT XI: 387/Voss: 62). Excitations of the soul are thoughts that come to the soul and strongly affect it. We see this in Descartes’s definition of passions, in which he states that passions are ‘perceptions or sensations or excitations of the soul’ (AT XI: 350/Voss: 34). He then clarifies that passions are best described as excitations of the soul

not only because this name may be attributed to all the changes that take place within it, that is, to all the different thoughts that come to it, but in particular because, among all the sorts of thoughts it can have, there are no others which agitate it and shake it so strongly as these passions do. (AT XI: 350/Voss: 34)

In Section I, we saw that Descartes defines passions in a broad sense as thoughts the soul ‘receives’ (AT XI: 342/Voss: 28). Excitations fit into the broad category of passions because they ‘come to’ the soul. Since love is an excitation, love is a thought that comes to the soul. One might be surprised

¹² In the *Meditations*, Descartes writes, ‘it still appears ... that the corporeal things of which images are formed in my thought, and which the sense investigate, are known with much more distinctness than this puzzling “I” which cannot be pictured in the imagination’ (AT VII: 29/CSM II: 20).

¹³ Matheron writes, ‘nous nous joignons de volonté avec les choses—ou nous aimons les choses’ (1988: 434). Marion states, ‘L’amour se définit en effet comme la conjonction des objets (aimés) avec l’ego’ (1991: 209).

¹⁴ It should once again be noted that I am speaking specifically of the passion of love. Descartes also discusses a form of love called intellectual love, which arises from the soul itself. In his correspondence with Chanut, Descartes writes that we experience intellectual love when ‘our soul perceives some present or absent good, which it judges to be fitting for itself’ (AT IV: 601/CSMK: 306). Intellectual love could occur ‘in our soul even if it had no body’ (AT IV: 602/CSMK: 306). In *The Passions of the Soul*, Descartes makes a veiled reference to intellectual love, stating that he specifies emotions of love and hatred are ‘caused by the spirits not only to distinguish love and hatred (which are passions and depend on the body) from judgements which also bring the soul to join itself willingly to things it deems bad, but also to distinguish them from the emotions which these judgements produce in the soul’ (AT XI: 387/CSM I: 356). I consider intellectual love to be an emotion which is produced by judgements, specifically judgements about the goodness of objects.

that love is a thought, for Descartes. One might expect love to be a more complex state, such as a disposition to act. However, it is clear from the idea that love is an excitation, and excitations are thoughts, that love is a thought. Further, in his correspondence with Chanut, Descartes describes love as ‘nothing but a confused thought’ (AT IV: 602–3/CSMK III: 306). Hence, love is a thought that passively comes to the soul.

Passions come to the soul by a chain of events. The proximate cause of passions is the movement of animal spirits. Descartes writes, ‘the last and most proximate cause of the passions of the soul is nothing other than the agitation with which the spirits move the little gland in the middle of the brain’ (AT XI: 371/Voss: 50). Here, Descartes is referring to animal spirits, which are small particles that travel throughout the brain and muscles and can ‘move the body in all the various ways it can be moved’ (AT XI: 335/CSM I: 322). Animal spirits cause images to form on the pineal gland, causing the soul to ‘see’ these images (AT XI: 356/Voss: 38). Descartes writes that when ‘the understanding represents to itself some object of Love ... the impression this thought forms in the brain guides the animal spirits’ toward the stomach, causing ‘coarse,’ ‘abundant’ blood and animal spirits to flow to the heart and brain (AT XI: 404/Voss: 74). The animal spirits cause physical effects in the body. In particular, the spirits produce ‘a mild warmth ... in the chest’ and ‘[rapid] digestion of food ... in the stomach’ (AT XI: 402/Voss: 73).

Thoughts that come to the soul by means of the animal spirits are passively received by the soul. After Descartes defines passions as being ‘caused, maintained, and strengthened by some movement of the spirits,’ he writes,

I ... add that [passions] are caused, maintained, and strengthened by some movement of the spirits, in order to distinguish them from our volitions, which can be named excitations of the soul which have reference to it, but which are caused by it itself. (AT XI: 350/Voss: 34)

As we saw in Section I, Descartes distinguishes between volitions and passions (in the broad sense) based on whether the thoughts ‘come directly from the soul’ or the soul ‘receives’ them (AT XI: 342/Voss: 28). Here, we see that thoughts caused by the animal spirits are not caused by the soul itself. Since love is a thought caused by the animal spirits, it is not caused by the soul and is therefore not a volition.

The second-most proximate cause of passions is typically the perception of an object that seems important to our wellbeing in some way.¹⁵ Descartes writes that the ‘most common and principal causes’ of passions are ‘objects which move the senses’ (AT XI: 372/Voss: 51). These objects ‘move the senses ... in proportion to the different ways they can harm or profit us or, generally, be important to us’ (AT XI: 372/Voss: 51). Descartes bases his taxonomy of the passions on the way their objects appear important to our wellbeing. He writes, ‘when a thing is represented to us as good from our point of view, that is, as being suitable to us, this makes us have Love for it’ (AT XI: 374/Voss: 53). In his definition of love, Descartes writes that objects of love ‘appear to be suitable’ to oneself (AT XI: 387/Voss: 62). As we saw in Section I, Descartes presents a broad category of thoughts the soul ‘receives ... from things that are represented by them’ (AT XI: 342/Voss: 28). Here, we see the soul receives the thought of an object of love from an object outside itself, specifically an object that appears suitable. Descartes clarifies that passions in the narrow sense are received into the soul in the same manner as perceptions of external objects, writing, ‘[passions] may also be named sensations, because they are received into the soul in the same manner as the objects of the external senses’ (AT XI: 350/Voss: 34). Since love is received into the soul from perceptions of objects outside itself, love is a passion rather than a volition.

In his correspondence with Chanut, Descartes explicitly distinguishes between love and the volition to join to an object of love. He writes,

in love a mysterious heat is felt around the heart, and a great abundance of blood in the lungs, which makes us open our arms as if to embrace something, and this inclines the

¹⁵ I say ‘typically’ because Descartes maintains that love can arise from an ‘action of the soul,’ ‘by the temperament of the body alone,’ or ‘by the impressions haphazardly encountered in the brain’ (AT XI: 371/Voss: 51).

soul to join to itself willingly the object presented to it. But the thought by which the soul feels the heat is different from the thought which joins it to the object; and sometimes it happens that the feeling of love occurs in us without our will being impelled to love anything, because we do not come across any object we think worthy of it. (AT IV: 603/CSMK III: 307)

In this passage, Descartes directly states that there is a distinction between the passion of love—‘the thought by which the soul feels the heat’—and the volition to join to an object of love—‘the thought which joins it [the soul] to the object.’

B. THE INCITEMENT TO JOIN IN VOLITION

I have argued that love is not identical to joining in volition, since love passively comes to the soul. However, one may argue that even if love is not identical to joining in volition, love necessitates the soul to join in volition to objects of love and is therefore an essential part of love.¹⁶ However, I argue that love cannot necessitate joining in volition to objects of love, since love is a confused and obscure perception, and only clear and distinct perceptions can necessitate the will.

Descartes writes that love ‘incites [the soul] to join itself in volition to the objects that appear to be suitable to it’ (AT XI: 387/Voss: 62). Passions in general incite volitions, on Descartes’s view. He writes that passions ‘dispose the soul to will the things nature tells us are useful and to persist in this volition’ (AT XI: 372/Voss: 51–52). The ‘principal effect of all the passions,’ he states, ‘is that they incite and dispose [the] soul to will the things for which they prepare the body’ (AT XI: 359/Voss: 40–41).¹⁷ One of the ways passions incite volitions is by maintaining thoughts of their objects in the soul.¹⁸ Descartes writes that passions ‘are almost all accompanied by some excitation taking place in the heart, and consequently also throughout the blood and the spirits, so that until this excitation has ceased they remain present to our thought’ (AT XI: 363/Voss: 44). In Article 74, Descartes relates the passions’ ability to strengthen thoughts to the use of the passions, writing, ‘the utility of all the passions consists only in their strengthening thoughts which it is good that [the soul] preserve and which could otherwise easily be effaced from it, and causing them to endure in the soul’ (AT XI: 383/Voss: 59).

Passions incite volitions, but passions cannot necessitate volitions. Only clear and distinct perceptions can necessitate the will, and passions are ‘among the perceptions which the close bond between the soul and the body renders confused and obscure’ (AT XI: 350/Voss: 34).¹⁹ In *The Passions of the Soul*, Descartes asserts that the will is free (as he does in his earlier works), writing,

the will is by its nature free in such a way that it can never be constrained; and of the two sorts of thoughts I have distinguished in the soul, of which the first are its actions—namely its volitions—and the others its passions ... the former are absolutely in its power and can only indirectly be altered by the body. (AT XI: 359–60/Voss: 41)

As we have seen, passions ‘indirectly’ alter volitions by causing a movement of animal spirits that strengthens thoughts in the soul. However, these bodily movements cannot necessitate the soul’s volitions.

Love, then, incites the soul to join in volition to an object of love by strengthening the thought of the object. Descartes states that love ‘compel[s] the soul to dwell upon’ the thought of an object of love (AT XI: 414/Voss: 74), and in Article 120, he writes, ‘Love so engrosses the soul with the

¹⁶ As mentioned in the Introduction, commentators such as James (1997), Frigo (2016), and Kambouchner (2013) all suggest that joining in volition is part of what it means to love something for Descartes. They do not explicitly say that love necessitates joining in volition with an object of love, but this is one intuitive way in which joining in volition could be part of what it is to love something without being identical to love.

¹⁷ See also AT XI: 430/Voss: 92.

¹⁸ Several commentators offer detailed accounts of the way passions incite volitions. See Greenberg (2007), Brassfield (2012), and Jayasekera (2020).

¹⁹ There is debate in the secondary literature about the relation between the will and clear and distinct perceptions. Some commentators deny that only clear and distinct perceptions can necessitate the will. For more discussion on Descartes’s view of the will, see Jayasekera (2014), Kenny (1972), and Ragland (2006).

consideration of the object loved that [the soul] employs all the spirits in the brain to represent this image to it, and stops all movements of the gland not conducive to this effect' (AT XI: 417/Voss: 82). While love incites the soul to join in volition to objects of love, it cannot necessitate the soul to join in volition to objects of love, since the soul has free control over its volitions.

The soul's control over its volitions raises questions about when the soul *should* join in volition to objects of love. An account of what makes something a proper object to which to join in volition deserves more space than I am able to devote to it here. Several commentators maintain that proper objects of passions in general, on Descartes's view, are objects that are beneficial to the body. This would suggest that one should join in volition to objects that are beneficial to one's body. However, I argue that one should join oneself in volition to objects that increase the perfection of one's soul as well as the body. In what follows, I briefly explain the view that proper objects of passions are objects that are beneficial to the body. I then offer three reasons for thinking one should join oneself in volition to objects that increase the perfection of one's soul.

Descartes emphasizes the role that passions have in preserving the health of the body throughout *The Passions of the Soul*. He writes that the passions' 'natural use is to incite the soul to consent and contribute to actions which can serve to preserve the body or render it more perfect in some way' (AT XI: 430/Voss: 92).²⁰ Several commentators think of Descartes's view of passions as an extension of his view of sensations in the *Sixth Meditation*, where Descartes argues sensations provide us with information about which objects can be beneficial and harmful to the body.²¹ On this view, passions provide us with more nuanced information about the way objects can affect our body than sensations, since passions 'move the senses ... in proportion to the different ways [objects] can harm or profit us or, generally, be important to us' (AT XI: 372/Voss: 51). Love, then, provides us with information about which objects are suitable to our body, and we can use this information to pursue those objects. Patrick Frierson emphasizes love's role in the preservation of the body, writing that 'the function of love is broadly the same as the function of any passion, to promote action for the good of the body' (2002: 317).

I argue that one should join in volition to objects that increase the perfection of one's soul, as well as objects that are beneficial to one's body. My first reason for this view is that Descartes explicitly says the proper object of love is perfection in a letter to Princess Elisabeth. He writes, 'Since the true object of love is perfection, when we elevate our mind to considering God as He is, we will find ourselves naturally so inclined to love him that we will draw joy even from our afflictions, in thinking that His will is carried out as we receive them' (AT IV: 291–92/Shapiro: 111).

Second, Descartes places more value on the wellbeing of the soul than the body throughout his writings. After considering the usefulness of the passions to the body, Descartes states, 'This would suffice if we only had the body in us or if it were the better part of us, but inasmuch as it is the lesser, we must consider the Passions principally insofar as they belong to the soul' (AT XI: 432/Voss: 93). In a letter to Elisabeth, he writes, 'it is necessary to know ... the nature of our mind, insofar as it subsists without the body and is much more noble than it and capable of enjoying an infinite number of contentments which are not found in this life' (AT IV: 292/Shapiro: 112).²² In his discussion of the passions 'insofar as they belong to the soul,' Descartes states that love of 'truly good' objects increases the perfection of the soul. He writes that love of such objects 'is extremely good because, joining true goods to us, it perfects us to that extent' (AT XI: 432/Voss: 93–94). Love that is 'immoderate' can 'join us so perfectly to those goods that the Love we have for ourselves in particular makes no distinction between us and them' (AT XI: 432/Voss: 94). Hence, on Descartes's view, one should increase the perfection of one's soul, as well as preserve the wellbeing of the body, and joining in volition to 'truly good' objects increases the perfection of the soul.

Finally, the view that one should join in volition to objects that perfect the soul better accounts for the importance of love of God in Descartes's theory than the view that one should join in volition to

²⁰ See also (AT XI: 359/Voss: 40).

²¹ See for example Schmitter (2008).

²² See also AT IV: 286/Shapiro: 109.

objects that are beneficial for one's body. In his correspondence with Chanut, Descartes considers whether we are able to have the passion of love toward God. He concludes that love of God is the 'most delightful and useful passion possible' (AT IV: 608/CSMK III: 309). It is unclear how love of God could be beneficial to one's body. In fact, Frierson argues, 'love of God actually seems *harder* to justify than love for other things,' on Descartes's view (forthcoming: 5). However, it is plausible that love of God increases the perfection of one's soul.²³ A person who loves God is 'filled with extreme joy,' finds 'his life worth while,' 'no longer fears death, pain or disgrace,' and accepts goods and evils 'with joy' (AT IV: 609/CSMK III: 310). Joy, on Descartes's view, 'cannot fail to be good ... with respect to the soul' (AT XI: 434/Voss: 95). Since love of God increases the soul's joy, love of God perfects the soul.

CONCLUSION

The primary aims of this paper have been to correct two widespread misunderstandings of Descartes's view of love. First, commentators tend to assume that joining in volition involves an act of judgment, since judgment is the primary function of the will in the *Meditations*. I have argued that joining in volition is an act of imagining oneself as forming a whole with an object of love. Imagining a whole one forms with an object of love requires some effort of the mind to depict an image of a body one forms with the object of love. This image of a body is admittedly strange—it is a composite or 'jumbled up' image of oneself and the object of love.

Second, commentators often remark in passing that love is identical to joining in volition, on Descartes's view. I have argued that love cannot be identical to joining in volition because love passively comes to the soul from the animal spirits and seemingly suitable external objects, while volitions are caused by the soul. Other commentators argue that love necessitates joining in volition, yet I argued that since love is confused and obscure, it cannot necessitate a volition. While love incites the soul to join in volition to objects of love by strengthening thoughts of the object of love, the soul is free to choose whether to join in volition. Finally, I argued the soul should join in volition to objects that increase the perfection of the soul, as well as objects that are beneficial to the body.

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²³ See Svensson (2020) for an account of perfection in Descartes's ethics.

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