


## The Cartesian test of modern love: imagination, free will and passions

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<https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/inge.88635>

Recibido: 07/09/2023 • Revisado: 05/09/2023 • Aceptado: 10/11/2023

**EN Abstract.** This article tackles the role of emotions in convincing on the dualism advanced by Descartes, closely following the constitution of love at the edge of *modus cognoscendi* and *modus volendi*. The following two questions inspire the reflection on love as a spiritual exercise and a constitutive emotion for (self) knowledge: Does love represent a core-emotion for Descartes that regains his Christian thinking at the edge of his metaphysical and epistemological project, apparently excused of any religious implications? What is Descartes's account of love and how does it (emotionally) change the sense and reception of passions? The Christian implications of love and devotion to God provide access to a so-called implicit political project engaged by Descartes's work, grounded on the loyalty and adoration of a sovereign anointed in the name of faith.

**Keywords:** Passions; Love; God; Ontology; Christianity; Early Modern Philosophy.

## ES La prueba cartesiana del amor moderno: imaginación, libre albedrío y pasiones

**ES Resumen.** Este artículo aborda el papel de las emociones para argumentar en favor del dualismo avanzado por Descartes, siguiendo de cerca el amor en su constitución en el límite del *modus cognoscendi* y el *modus volendi*. Las dos preguntas siguientes inspiran la reflexión sobre el amor como ejercicio espiritual y emoción constitutiva del (auto)conocimiento: ¿Representa el amor para Descartes una emoción central que recupera su pensamiento cristiano en el límite de su proyecto metafísico y epistemológico, aparentemente exento de cualquier implicación religiosa? ¿Cuál es el relato de Descartes sobre el amor y cómo cambia (emocionalmente) el sentido y la recepción de las pasiones? Las implicaciones cristianas del amor y la devoción a Dios dan acceso a un supuesto proyecto político implícito en la obra de Descartes, basado en la lealtad y la adoración de un soberano ungido en nombre de la fe.

**Palabras clave:** Pasiones; Amor; Dios; Ontología; Cristiandad; Filosofía Moderna.

**Summary:** I. Introduction: Is there a Cartesian theory on love? II. Love and Knowledge: from *modus volendi* to *modus cognoscendi*. III. The Cartesian Roots of Love: Framing the Limits of the Free Will. IV. Love, a Primitive Passion. V. Implying Christian Love in Descartes' Analysis. VI. Letters on Love, Correspondence on God. VII. Instead of Conclusions: Descartes' Christianity, Inherited from Aquinas and Augustine? References.

**Cómo citar:** Serban, Oana (2024). The Cartesian test of modern love: imagination, free will and passions, en *Ingenium. Revista Electrónica de Pensamiento Moderno y Metodología en Historia de las Ideas* 18, 27-40.

## I. Introduction: Is there a Cartesian theory on love?

There is nothing like a Cartesian pure interest in love. There are, however, signs in his theory on passions that love might be privileged, inheriting a Platonic challenge: is love the result of a property intrinsic to an object that qualifies it as lovable or objects become lovable if and only of someone loves them? At a first glimpse, the discussion should be framed both ontologically and ethically, but in fact, what we might call a Cartesian turn on the discourse of passions requires an epistemic background. Singer criticized Descartes's perspective on love for being too "appraisive" (Singer 1984, I, 14) and transforming love into a matter of meritocracy always consented by the intellect. The immediate problem to be addressed, therefore, is that love is possible only as intellectual love and even further, that the body has dispositions to react only to interests of the soul that are evaluated as being rational (Singer 1984, II, 259). Beavers reacts to such hypothesis, considering that we should not accept the hypothesis of a monolithically theory on love, but rather reflections on different "models of love" (Beavers 1989, 283), multifaced and epitomized between concupiscence and benevolence. Love would be, in these terms, not something exclusively rational, since the Cartesian account on passions involves mechanistic perspectives; nonetheless, reason should always assist desires, which are also embedded by love. However, the soul is capable to overcome the drives of passions if and only if reasons assist them: without serving the knowledge of the truth, passions, including love, would be nothing else then primitive modes of manifesting will in the mind-body compositum. At a first glimpse, the discussion on whether love is not so much a passion but an action – the topic of Descartes's letter to Chanut from February, 1647 – would count just in order to clarify the thesis according to which love is an intellectual nature. But in fact, the major outcome would depict a more broad and convincing approach on the role of will and imagination, as faculties of thoughts inferior to reason in the constitution of the thinking apparatus called *ingenium*, to contribute to a clear and distinct knowledge. And by this, Descartes would have win, at least for these two particular faculties, a proto emancipation that later, in the history of modern philosophy, only Kant was capable of, on another level, that of claiming the autonomy of the sensible and imagination as a liberated faculty. In what concerns my argument, it is far from my intention to argue that there is a Cartesian theory of love that the exegesis overpassed. Nonetheless, I am interested to explain that the Cartesian correspondence, once correlated with the *Treatise on the Passions of the Soul* puzzles a metaphysical basis for love and that love, as any other passion, is still related to *modus volendi*, not to *modus cognoscendi*. However, if in terms of *agape* and *eros*, love seems to be a passion like any other described by Descartes, because it offers a glimpse on the nature of the soul and its ontological dependency to God, I assume it is a privileged passionate construct and it contributes to the knowledge of God. It is not a modest conquest that committed by Descartes in his

*Treatise on the Passions of the Soul* when he argues that with the support of imagination, the love for God, understood as adoration, is represented into our mind as a whole from which human beings are a neglectable part. This particular representation reveals a particular understanding on the ontological difference through which, even in love, God reveals being something greater and much more perfect than I am. And by this, the love for God will contribute to adding new attributes to the objective reality of the idea of God which our intellect designs. Consequently, one of the main aims of this article is to put on the spotlight the fact that love is not trivial or a common concept raised by the Cartesian literature; on the contrary, this is a merely notion in the Cartesian philosophy that impacts one of the greatest desiderates of the modern philosophy, namely proving with certitude the existence of God or converting the demonstration of the ontological argument into the triumph of a well-guided reason in search of truth.

Nonetheless, whoever surfs the recent Cartesian exegesis will face twisted opinions on the possibility to claim the existence of a proper theory on love in Descartes's oeuvre: Tate considers that it is part of an implicit moral philosophy that Descartes wrote following his nostalgies for Stoicism, and that the trickiest part of this construction lies at the heart of the Cartesian thesis that intellectual emotions "affect the soul more strongly than passions" (Tate 2020, 5). Frigo tracks down the origin of a Cartesian theory on love at the bottom of the scholastic influences, saving love from the Thomistic vulgate and raising a modern theory on passions with a fundamental role in conceiving God (Frigo 2015, 1097). Doull advances the "there is nothing original in Descartes' description of the kinds of love, based on the difference in esteem we have for the beloved" (Doull 2001, 78), but there is something new in the manner in which the love for God raises awareness on the substantial dualism. Ultimately, a recent and challenging opinion comes from Agoff, who explains that although moral benefits might emerge from the love for God, which is exclusively intellectual, this passion constrains to accept the judgment that humans are joined with God in reality and that such love is constituted by a stripping of our private interests in favor of God's will (Agoff 2023). But let's see how love and knowledge intersected in Descartes's literature or how a metaphysical foundation of love is even possible.

## II. Love and Knowledge: from *modus volendi* to *modus cognoscendi*

When it comes about Descartes's vision on love, the *Treatise on the Passions of the Soul* represents, definitely, the primary source for such incursion and yet, it is, by far, not the only writing that provides both implications and effects, related to biological or psychological concerns of such privileged passion. The *Correspondence* reflects some polemical insights on the nature of love that tackles upon the modern roots of the discourse on passions. However, this *modern turn* owes its raise first, to an ambitious overcome of the Ancient tradition<sup>1</sup>, secondly, to an expression of an epochal exigency to address

<sup>1</sup> Descartes argues in the opening of the First Part of the *Passions of the Soul* that "the teachings of the ancients about the passions

a scientific – meaning a biological – approach to emotions that have been previously conceived as a contingent manifestation of the free will<sup>2</sup>, and thirdly, to a Cartesian revolution by itself, that assesses the origin of passions as being deeply rooted in the so-called *modus volendi*, which frames, alongside with *modus cognoscendi* and *modus percipiendi* the manners through which, based on the substantial dualism, our being is capable of producing ideas. For the purposes of the current research, I will not handle Descartes' critical reaction to the Ancient or scholastic tradition, but I will keep, however, some hermeneutical turns of his discourse on passions that hunt some vulnerabilities belonging to these previous traditions, enough to recover what might be conceived as a Christian, Cartesian vision. We will see that the modern reflexivity engaged by Descartes in the structure of the subject – whenever “the I” thinks, it represents itself, therefore “myself” is the evidence that inspires any cognitive incursion of the “I” – has a powerful consequence on the structure

of love: Descartes bridges, with a Christian tonality<sup>3</sup>, the self-love with the love for others, such as he treats correspondingly the self-hate with the hate of others, maintaining this canonical approach of passions that allow movements of the soul towards either an object that impules pleasure or satisfaction (*appetites*) or on object that inspires repulsion (*aversion*).

Moreover, as Malebranche<sup>4</sup> accused Descartes to engage the idea of God as an object of our mind just because he believes in God and therefore, only those who feel God in their hearts are capable to conceive God intellectually, in their minds, we are facing a resistance to the Cartesian approach of love, determined by this perceptual occasionalism. Is someone, who does not believe in God, truly capable to feel love and to understand the ontological and logical need of self-love as prior to the love of others? Strictly biologically and psychologically, Descartes would rather answer affirmatively<sup>5</sup>. Nonetheless, this question is even more constraining

are so skimpy and mostly so implausible that I can't hope to approach the truth except by leaving the paths they have followed” (I, 1).

<sup>2</sup> “The most glaring defect in the sciences we have from the ancients is what they wrote about the passions.”

<sup>3</sup> There is a question whether Descartes might be accused of feeling the love for God first as a Christian and later aiming to know the idea of God by following a well-guided reason. It is not the place here, in this article, to discuss the contingencies and intertwining between modern philosophy and secularism, and yet, in my opinion, one should pay attention to the fact that although Descartes immunized his writings from any theological reflection, without avoiding to mention that his *Meditations* will be a powerful instrument to convince atheistic audiences to reflect better on the existence of God, he often used Christianity as a nutshell for placing transcendence, free will and love for God in a plan prior to modern philosophical reflections. On the one hand, I consider that secularism and modernity should not be conflated, and especially for what we call early philosophical modernity, the tendency to reflect on God as an idea of our intellect, among others, such as the idea of mind, body or love, does not necessary impel to have this epistemic process as a ground in which secularism and later on atheism will be rooted in this order. On the other hand, it is my belief that Descartes defended the Christian religion even though he raised a series of meditations on the nature of our existence and that of God, excused from recourse to dogma and Christian beliefs. However, his letter to the Priests of the Faculty of Theology was not just a gesture to clarify and potential accusation of heresy, given the religious and political context at that time, but also a matter of consciousness through which a Christian individual delimited his love for God, which remained untouched, from a metaphysical and epistemic endeavor, meant to question how can we know the idea of God, not how can we adore God. The main Cartesian concern it is not faith, but knowledge, and yet, we shall not forget Malebranche's perspective that Descartes's intellectualism dropped an essential ingredient: the fact that we became aware of the idea of God existent in our soul as a consequence of being (prior) united with God himself directly, and not because an idea that represented to our intellect that union appeared. Therefore, the Christian tonality emerges from this pre-eminence, of feeling the spiritual union with God, as Christians, before converting the idea of God into a mental object worthy to be inspected both by a priori and a posteriori version of the ontological argument. At least in what concerns the main aim of this article, to bridge love and knowledge or to explain how the passion of love for God contributes to manufacturing the objective reality of the idea of God, we cannot dismiss what I called here a Christian tonality: we represent our union with God – through love as adoration as a whole from which we are a neglectable part – and the result is a clear thought on the perfection of God, someone greater than me, and with a superior nature or reality than mine. Once the love for God is introduced in the *Treatise on the Passions of the Soul*, I consider that we must accept that the tonality is very Christian: who else would address the adoration of God, if not a Christian? However, it is not blind adoration, as Descartes, of course, did here something more than Anselm: adoration without comprehension would be faith solely, and yet, Descartes argues that the love for God emerging from faith suggests the intellectual nature of this particular form of love and makes obvious how we represent the union of our soul with God and the nature of these two objects of our intellect – *res cogitans* and God. Otherwise, only in the *Treatise on the Passions of the Soul* this Christian tonality arises. There is no place for it in *Meditations*, as it is not the writing of a Christian who starts reflecting on God because of his faith and love, but that of a philosopher who reflects on who is responsible for the idea of perfection that my mind has in correspondence with my acknowledged imperfection and ontological limitations.

<sup>4</sup> On the relationship between soul and love, to be consulted Vieillard-Baron 1996, 453-472, especially 461-468.

<sup>5</sup> I target here what is merely biological, respectively psychological, as something correspondent to what is related to *res extensa*, respectively to *res cogitans*. Brown and Key (2020) consider that we can find in Descartes's writings the basis of a moral psychology grasping problematic notions such as consciousness, self-regulation and voluntarism, which “tend get overshadowed by the unpalatable aspects of his dualism of mind and body”; they even argue that we can identify two types of dualism, “a dualism of mind and body and a dualism of life and mind” (2020). Personally, I am not the partisan of supporting a Cartesian moral psychology. What I consider though being important is understanding that mental dispositions (e.g. feeling capable to love) are ultimately reducible to mental contents as ideas, and this is particularly why passions are related to free will and evolve from an emotional to an intellectual status (e.g. love for God as an emotional joy and an intellectual joy), and thus draws the attention on the subtle implications of the Cartesian dualism. Love, in this case, would be something like “things which are objects of pure understanding but only on things which can be imagined” (see AT VII 424-25). To be consulted, on this topic, and especially for questioning how we can solve the matter of passions expressing mental properties traceable by material properties and to what extent this might affect the understanding of the so-called “substance dualism”, Rodriguez-Pereyra 2008, 69-90. Steiner also questioned the relationship between Descartes's moral principles and his Christian faith: he argues that the former is grounded in the latter. The source of this argument finds the inspiration in *Discourse*, where Descartes states that the maxims of provisional morality are developed in the spirit of traditions and discovered “by God's grace” in the spirit of the religion in which he had the luck to be raised and educated. Steiner identifies some Christian tonalities in *The Passions of the Soul* as well: virtue is tied to the will habitually exercised as generosity, self-mastery and self-satisfaction. “Vain” desires are avoided – they are “vain” due to their reception in Christian terms, but it is reason which convinces us that there is an ontological difference between human and God, for which we shall perceive “the good in this life”. In fact, the Cartesian challenge is to accommodate the autonomy of reason

when we recall, in a Christian tradition, that first, “You shall love your neighbour as *yourself*” and secondly, that one should “Love the Lord, your God, with all your passion and prayer and intelligence” (Matthew 22:38–40). How would Descartes respond to these Christian precepts?

Some major problems related with the origin of love, as primitive passion, according to Descartes, will be further discussed along this analysis, in order to diagnose three major questions:

1. does love represent a core-emotion for Descartes, that regains his Christian thinking at the edge of his metaphysical and epistemological project, apparently excused of any religious implications?
2. what is Descartes’s account of love and how does it (emotionally) change the sense and reception of passions?
3. how is love capable of affecting intellectual operations in terms of error, prejudice or biased judgment, interfering with reason?

We may infer that any framing of *love* (and implicitly, *hate*) tutored by the vision from the *Passions of the Soul* should be coherently tracked by confronting it with Descartes’ considerations on the free will, from *Metaphysical Meditations*. Here, we find out that *voluntas limitibus circumscibitur*] (AT VII 56), meaning that, *The Fourth Meditation* testifies the lack of limits of the free will, with major implications for love, considered one of its multiple products. If we assume that (1) will extends beyond comprehension (*latius pateat voluntas quam intellectus*, AT VII 58), if we accept Descartes’ assumption that (2) whenever the free will extends the intellect more than it is capable of a comprehension, at a certain moment, an error occurs, and (3) love is extended will, then, (4) is love, by default, the passion that predisposes most often individuals to errors? It is one thing to feel love and it is rather another to understand love. We see that along his writings, Descartes distinguishes between *intellectual* and *passionate* love, he discerns different casual species of love (parental love, *eros*, *philia*, love for material objects or for honourable feelings), and yet, it seems that his major challenge is to fix the *object* that we get to know through love: we do not *conceive* the “properties” of the object that inspires love, we tend to *assign* properties to such an object just because we are capable of love, we resent love and we assume that because love is good by itself, then the object that we love is good at its turn. Therefore, in my opinion, there is an epistemic challenge related with the discourse on passions: what do we get to know when we suffer from passions or, to be more specific, what kind of *modus cognoscendi* can be capacitated by a *modus volendi*? Somehow, we will see that even this challenge turns the subject back to himself – as much as I love, I find

out something more about myself, more than just the idea that “I am a thinking (conscious) thing, that is, a being who doubts, affirms, denies, knows a few objects, and is ignorant of many,— [who loves, hates], wills, refuses, who imagines likewise, and perceives” (*The Third Meditation*). Now, in the *Passions of the Soul*, I am challenged to verify how much do I know about the object of my passions and how far can I go, within an epistemic act, in representing properties of that object? Before answering such inquiries, we owe a hermeneutical reconstruction on the nature and evolution of passions, especially of love.

### III. The Cartesian Roots of Love: Framing the Limits of the Free Will

Descartes inaugurates the *Passions of the Soul* by conceiving a theory that he defends, from the beginning, as being modern, since it overcomes vulnerabilities of ancient theories on passions and free will, and assumes that the insertion of the pineal gland will support a more coherent and systematic approach of passions from biological and psychological standpoints. Briefly, we must explain the genealogy of passions, understanding, first, the detachment of canonical interpretations.

To start with, I note that anything that happens is generally labelled by philosophers as a ‘passion’ with regard to the subject to which it happens and an ‘action’ with regard to what-ever brings it about that it happens (I, 1).

However, article 17 clarifies that since our soul is the only one that brings within us thoughts, we are constraint to investigate further what kind of thoughts are produced. Therefore, the two kinds of thoughts, *the actions* and *the passions* of the soul, differ from the following aspects. Actions are exclusively addressed as *volitions* or acts of the will, “because we experience them as coming directly from our soul with, apparently, no input from anything else” (I, 17), whereas perceptions or *items of knowledge* – it is very important such reference for the purposes of our current analysis to target the limits of a cognitive experience supported by a passionate framework – “can be called the soul’s ‘passions’ – taking this word in a very general sense – because they are often not actively made by our soul but rather passively received by the soul from the things that they represent” (I, 17). Furthermore, we should keep from Descartes’ observations the idea that volitions divide between actions of the soul that perform an interiority, and actions of the soul that orient the soul itself outside, aiming corporeal movements.

Our volitions in their turn divide into two sorts:

- actions of the soul that aim only at something in the soul itself, as when we will to love God or in any way to apply our mind to some object that isn’t material; and

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with the religious Christian teachings or, to be more precise, the have a liberated reason of any religious constrains and yet very consistent with Christian religious convictions. One of these particular tensions is raised, as Brown noted, in Steiner’s reading of Descartes’s *Treatise on the Passions of the Soul*: “True, God is the supreme good, but as Descartes writes to Queen Christina, we should not consider as good in relation to ourselves that which we cannot possess or lack the power to acquire—the implication being that the goodness of God is in this category. The good for all humans is the sum of goods related to the soul, body, and of fortune; but for each individual, the sovereign good consists in the good use of the will and the contentment that brings, even when knowing what to do, given complex and unpredictable circumstances, is sometimes beyond our reach” (Brown 2008, 175). See also Steiner 2004.

- actions of the soul that aim at some event in our body, as when we will to walk... (I, 18).

The First Part of the *Passions of the Soul* has the major responsibility to discern the complementarity between active and passive modes of our being. Article 19 stresses that albeit from the standpoint of our soul to want something reflects an action, whenever we look deeper, we observe a passion embraced by our soul, when it finds that it wishes something: “We can’t will anything without thereby perceiving that we are willing it – that’s for sure.” This whole inquiry is necessary in order to deduce the definition of passions, occasioned by the article 27 as:

perceptions, sensations or commotions of the soul which we relate particularly to the soul, and are caused, maintained and strengthened by some movement of the spirits (I, 27).

Now that a definition is properly obtained, we are challenged to understand the taxonomy of passions, not before clarifying to what extent this spectre of primitive and secondary passions owes their existence to different causes, that are more or less related with the biological particularities of individuals.

We know from article 39 that “a single cause can arouse different passions in different people”, because “brains are not all constituted in the same way” and therefore, they are not predisposed equally to the same reaction. In short, this is a brief explanation for the reason why some individuals react to threats by running, whereas others confront it, by all means. To one and the same incentive – *force*, let’s say – some of us will resent fear, while the rest of us will perform courage. This could be also a valid and yet, an incomplete explanation, devoted to our different reactions towards one the same person. Not all of us fall in love with the same person or with the same type of person: the blood moved by our heart impulses other nervous reactions from our brain depending on the manner in which our gland arouses inclinations or aversions towards a particular object – in case of *love*, a particular person. Consequently, it is normal to have different affective tastes – because we are predisposed to love, given our brain constitution, rather differently. However, in what concerns love, things become implicitly complicated when, in the First Part of the *Passions of the Soul*, more specifically in the article 40, way before introducing love and its specific operational definition, Descartes states that “the main effect of every human passion is to arouse the soul and make it will the body to move in the way the passion prepares the body for” (I, 40). So, this is enough to question if the feeling of fear, for example, determines running, then what kind of reactions (both corporeal and mental) could determine the feeling of love? Moreover, if we accept article 45, stipulating that soul has no decisive power alone in order to arouse or to suppress the actions of our will and therefore, this is why when danger is felt, some of us express fear and others perform a reasoning that leads to courage, thinking that “the danger isn’t great, that there’s always more security in defence than in flight, that we’ll gain glory and joy if we conquer, and nothing but regret and shame if we flee”, then what reasoning occur in our mind whenever we face the feeling of love?

This matter is problematic because at a first glimpse we might be tempted to say that if I feel love I can either be ashamed of my feelings – so I can retract any predisposal towards the object of my pleasant passion – or I can continue the “appropriation” of such object – although, we will see that such perspective objectifies too much the individual and therefore love becomes something selfish and even immoral. Article 47 announces that “each of us has only one soul at once, sensitive and rational too”. Descartes comes back to a convenient example – an instance when an object arouses fear and would normally impulse the subject to run or to withdraw from its front, so the spirits enter the muscles that serve to move our legs in flight, and yet, our will to be bold stops them from moving. We would be entitled to question the availability of this example in terms of love: if whenever I fear something I would normally run away to conserve my existence and yet it is something that convinces me to be brave, what happens when I feel love? Is it something that stops me to retract any opening towards the other, to pursue the object of my pleasant passion? Is there anything similar with courage, when we resent fear, that offers the subject a persistence in its passion, that could equally keep as connected with the object of our love regardless of any attempts to abandon this orientation? A possible explanation would be that fear becomes a passive feeling whereas courage involves an active movement of our soul and therefore, love should capacitate our beings more actively than passively. This presumptive explanation expects, however, some complications that do not delay to appear.

Article 50 explores the soul’s control on passions as long as it is well-directed. The French philosopher argues that passions must be subjected to a methodical conduct, following the same pattern applied to the conduction of reason, that needed a sustainable guidance towards its scope to fulfil the standards of clear and distinct knowledge, through evidence and certitude, which were an epistemic, respectively a metaphysical standard, for the cognitive Cartesian approach. There through, we might close the critical exposure of the First Part of the *Passions of the Soul* wondering: do we have a method for conducting passions and implicitly, should we have a method to subject passions to reason, meaning a method to love (without compromising, we would say, the desirable, focused activity of our reason)?

#### IV. Love, a Primitive Passion

The Second Part of the *Passions of the Soul* explores the so-called archaic, primitive, *fundamental* passions, depicted by Descartes by engaging both relative and absolute terms. Descartes’ framework of defining passions is quite utilitarian: he argues that any passion that arouses into our soul is corresponding to an object that is conceived as benefiting or harming the human being. In what concerns love, if we apply this large definition, then we should be able to answer to what extent love disposes our soul to develop actions that decide on the standards of utility of the object of our passion and how does it persuade our nature to persist in such volition of ap-

propriating useful objects. The first moral problem, that arises from this context, is that of considering any alterity that reflects the object of the pleasant passion identified as *love*, a useful object. On the one hand, any Kantian approach would condemn the Cartesian perspective for treating the human being mainly as a means, and not as an end by itself. On the other hand, it seems that beyond objects – meaning our beloved ones – love by itself is considered useful and therefore stimulates the subject to persist in the volition of maximizing potential benefits that arouse in us from love<sup>6</sup>. However, what is striking here is Descartes' attempt to retake a dilemma sketched by Plato in his *Euthyphro*: do we love something just because it has the property of being lovable or on the contrary, an object becomes lovable only when someone loves it?<sup>7</sup>

After wonder, esteem and contempt, Descartes introduces in the orderly list of the passions *love* and *hate* as correlated terms. Article 56 assumes that unlike previous passions that have been recognized as arousing in us appetites or aversions without any consideration on the nature of the object, love and hate pronounce themselves on such nature<sup>8</sup>:

When we think of something as good with regard to us, i.e. as beneficial to us, this makes us have love for it; and when we think of it as bad or harmful, this arouses hatred in us (II, 56).

Moreover, it is important to notice that love, such as any other passion, is subjected to a structural capacity of emotional feeling that belongs to the soul due to its indivisible nature. Descartes contradicts previous scholars that distinguished the concupiscible and *irascible* appetites of the soul, a contestation based on grounds occasioned by articles 30 and 47: the soul has powers – meaning *potentialities* – of being *affected*, in terms of desire or annoying, but, by far, passions should not be predicated strictly relating them with one or another. All these distinc-

tions have been listed in order to perform clearly and distinctly the table of basic passions, extensively discussed within further articles of the treatise, as it follows:

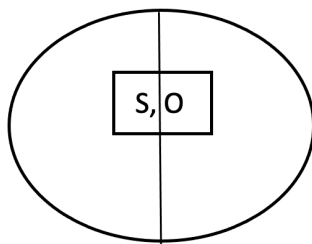
wonder (articles 70–73, 75–78), love (79–85), hatred (79–80, 84–85), desire (86–90), joy (91, 93–95), sadness (92–95)

Love and hate are explicitly analysed starting with article 79, where the free will appears to move the soul impelling a union with an agreeable object, which is always represented by a spirit. We observe here that such union is possible as long as the object of the passion is considered convenient. The commotion of the soul is the essence of the passion, whereas the reasoning conceived by the human mind, on the will to appropriate an object, remains only a judgement immune to the support of the body. Descartes explains:

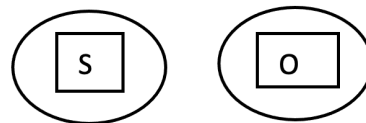
I am distinguishing love and hatred – which are passions, and depend on the body – from judgments that also bring the soul to join itself *de volenté* to things it deems good and to separate itself from ones that it deems bad, and also from the commotions that these judgments, with no help from the body, produce in the soul (II, 79).

Some implications arise from such a definition. First of all, the distinction between *volition* and *desire* should be conserved as clearly as possible. Desires predicate a future time, whereas free will connects with the present. Secondly, if we would have to represent the relationship between the subject and the object in terms of love and hate, we will have to perform a diagram that reflects the subject as part of a whole, when love is conceived, and a diagram that reproduces a self-contained subject that is separate, as a whole, from the object that arouses aversion, when hate is conceived.

S= Subject, O= Object



***Love***



***Hate***

<sup>6</sup> For authors such as Frierson, “this neglect of Descartes’s ethics is unfortunate, not least since ethical concerns sometimes influence his work in other areas. This influence is particularly evident in his account of the passions, which is presented in the context of a practical program of self-discipline and moral cultivation” (Frierson 2002, 313). In my opinion, it is too much to ask from Descartes an ethical project. We know from the *Principles of Philosophy* that philosophy is like a tree, with metaphysics as roots, physics as trunk and many sciences as branches, from which the main important ones are medicine, mechanics and morals (*Principles of Philosophy*, I.186; AT IX B.14). So, morals come at the end, whereas in the *Discourse on the Method* the morals secure a *provisional* project (see White 1968), grounded on a set of maxims, relevant for self-fashioning. It is never definitive, because in the spirit of the Cartesian modernity, the main goal for our becoming is the access to clear and distinct knowledge, that one can acquire regardless the level of morality.

<sup>7</sup> See Plato 1981, 14.

<sup>8</sup> There is also the possibility to question the capacity of an object to be repulsive because someone hates it, or on the contrary, to tackle of an object becomes repulsive only if someone hates it. These kind of dilemmas are rather grounding what de Sousa calls as “antinomy of objectivity” (1987, 1): each of the two alternative are equally plausible.

We conceive ourselves as bonded, connected with the person whom we love – “as joined with the thing we love”. From this expression – quite Christian, at a first glimpse – we have to deduce the effects of love. If I love someone and I consider such a person part of a whole from which I represent the other half, then if I want love to persist, I have to track down the good of such passion, respectively the good of whom I love. Article 81 reveals this inner tension: love would be the desire to maintain myself as part of a whole, and therefore, desiring the whole means desiring its other half, implicitly. The properties of the whole are conserved as long as the properties of the parts remain unchanged. Nonetheless, in order to have our alterity as a valid part of love as a whole, that alterity must exist and must be good – therefore, we want the good for whom we love.

Descartes considers this tension as a clash between benevolent love and concupiscent love, that are effects, and not inner causes of love, meaning that neither *concupiscence*, nor *benevolence*, have anything to do with the essence of love.

(i) When we have joined ourselves *de volonte* to x, whatever its nature may be, we feel benevolent towards it – that is, we also join to x willingly the things we think are agreeable to it: this is one of the principal effects of love. (ii) And if we judge that it would be beneficial to possess x, or to be associated with it in some manner other than *de volonte*, then we desire x; and this is another common effect of love (II, 81).

Furthermore, such concupiscent or benevolent attitudes can be assigned to very different passions that involve love in different capacities – one can love *possession* that frames love, another can love *disinterested*. Descartes distinguishes between

(A)an ambitious man’s passions for glory, (B) a miser’s for money, (C)a drunkard’s for wine, (D) a brutish man’s for a woman he wants to rape, (E)an honourable man’s for his friend or mistress, and (F)a good father’s for his children (II, 82).

Examples listed from A to D imply desire of *possessing* objects, not *affection* for such objects. Here we receive an answer to one of the previous problems that we claimed as originating into a Kantian paradigm: the dignity of the otherness is represented solely in disinterested love: therefore, if we would be challenged to represent the love of a parent, we will see that unlike what happens even in true love between two persons of opposite sex, a parent considers himself a part of a whole from which he is defi-

nately not “the better part”: he will be able to sacrifice himself for children, a sacrifice that also capacitates pure love of a honourable man for friends or for a mistress, says Descartes, but such contingencies are quite rare and hardly perfect. Consequently, there are not only types of love, depending on the tendency to appropriate the object of the passion or to cherish for itself. There are equally taxonomies of love that depend on the level of *esteem* that a subject has for himself and for the object that inspires his passion.

Descartes engages the three possible mathematical relationships<sup>9</sup> between terms – meaning equality, respectively inequality by its two orders of magnitude – in order to confront the relationship between self-esteem and the esteem for otherness, as it follows:

May it be:

$$E_{(o)=\text{esteem for the object that we love}}, E_{(s)=\text{self-esteem}}$$

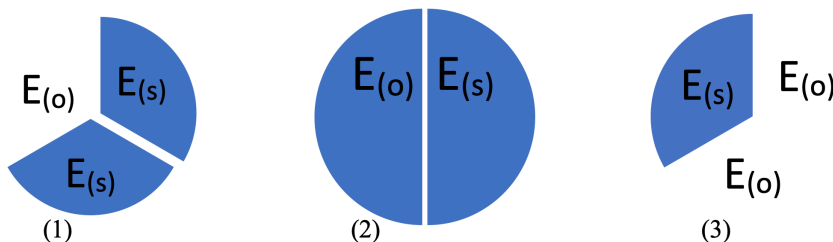
Therefore, if

1.  $E_{(o)} < E_{(s)} \Rightarrow$  Affection
2.  $E_{(o)} = E_{(s)} \Rightarrow$  Friendship
3.  $E_{(o)} > E_{(s)} \Rightarrow$  Devotion

The last example is relevant for our trigger to highlight Christian implications of Descartes’ reasoning on passion. The love for God and the love for country are equally examples of devotion: even though any of these three examples is possible only because the subject conceives himself as joining the object within a whole, Descartes states that such union is, however, transgressed by different capacities of union and sacrifice.

So we are always ready to abandon the lesser part of the whole that we compose with it so as to preserve the other part. In the case of simple affection, this results in our always preferring ourselves to the object of our love. In the case of devotion, on the other hand, we prefer the loved person in such a way that we don’t shrink from dying in order to preserve him... (II, 83).

There through, in terms of representing affection, friendship and devotion, we tend to see that any diagram conceived to reflect such a relationship between self-esteem and the esteem for the beloved object implies addressing a co-dependency of a privileged form of alterity that obliges me to think something about myself. This reflexivity is once again, reiterated, in a Cartesian manner: how much “the I” loves myself?



<sup>9</sup> To find out more about the manner in which mathematics represents a core domain that subordinates God to human beings – or to be more specific, the idea of God to our human intellect – see Vizureanu 2017.

One last thing is left in order to close the Second Part that exposes love and hate: their capacities to provoke attraction and revulsion, which are more deceptive. We shall keep in our attention only the idea that from this violent – meaning more connected to the senses, movement of soul, animated by our will – arise two forms of love, one addressed to the good things and one addressed to the beautiful things. The latter one is retained as attraction and should not be overlapped with the former or confused with desire – which, says Descartes, “we also often call love” (II, 85).

The matter of attraction becomes problematic by the article 90, when many inconsistencies and yet, curiosities, appear. First, Descartes introduces here the assumption that “the principal attraction comes from the perfections that one imagines in a person who one thinks could become a second oneself”. I assume that this imaginative act functions whenever we engage love: if we accept the definition prescribed by Descartes in article 80, then I cannot conceive myself as part of a whole joining my beloved one, unless I consider that he or she has the potential to be a second oneself. Here we encounter quite an altruistic and empathic Cartesian argument, and yet we have a problem concerning the accord between imagination and our nature. Descartes insists that “We see many persons of that opposite sex, but we don’t wish for many of them at any one time, because nature doesn’t make us imagine that we need more than one half!” (II, 90), by this, the French philosopher gaining the exclusivity of love. Our soul has, consequently, the capacity to be, what we understand nowadays in a modern and psychological paradigm, loyal. It means that the soul concentrates solely on one particular person that arouses our natural inclination to pursue it in terms of something which represents the greatest good that we might ever access. In the same time, Descartes limits the inclination to desire from the passion of love:

The inclination or desire that arises in this way from attraction is commonly called ‘love’; it is more usual to use that word in this way than to apply it to the passion of love described earlier [articles 56 and 79]. It has stranger effects than the passion does, and it is this inclination or desire that provides poets and writers of romances with their principal subject-matter (II, 90).

The fact that Descartes is quite sensitive towards literature is not something new: he engages notorious examples of fables and other narrative constructions whenever he targets the distinction between mental conditions of the subject (such as that between *amens* and *demens* from *Metaphysical Meditations*) or when he tracks obscure and confused ideas prescribed by imagination engaged in its role of *phantasia*, meaning a creative, not a reproductive faculty. What is important here is that even though imagination plays an important role in representing the relationship between the subject and the object of love, Descartes still needs to fulfil the standard of evidence – even though it will be, at its best, *an experimental evidence* – in order to keep the dualism as an ontological precondition even for the human capacity to love and to resent love. We find out from article 97 that “I observe that when love occurs on its own – i.e. not accompanied by any strong joy, desire, or sadness – the pulse has a regular beat, but is much fuller and stronger than normal; we feel a gentle warmth in the chest; and food is digested very quickly in the stomach, so that love is beneficial to health” (II, 97). In fact, depending on the passion that our soul conceives, our body reacts immediately correspondingly, as we can see from the following table, constructed only with the ambition to systematize the last part of this chapter.

Passion	Pulse	Chest	Digestion	Finality
<i>Love</i>	Regular beat but more intense than normal	Gently warmed	Quick	Love is beneficial to the health
<i>Hate</i>	Irregular, weaker and often quicker	Resents chills mingled with a sharp, piercing hearth	Stomach is inclined to reject food	Our body turns any fluid into a bad bodily fluid
<i>Joy</i>	Regular and faster than normal	Pleasant heat extended to external parts of the body	Loss of appetite – digestion is less active than usual	Health benefits because the blood has a better circulation
<i>Sadness</i>	Weak and slow	As if our heart would had tight bonds around it	Good appetite alternates with stomach pains	It is not mixed with hatred, and yet not convenient for health (it makes our body getting cold)
<i>Desire</i>	Agitates the heart quite violently	Engages an intense circulation	Nothing quite special	Senses are sharpened and muscles are contracting more, so we become more mobile

One should pay attention to the fact that this biological complexity that joins the psychological evolution of a subject that arouses love is not excused of irony, nor of sarcasm. Descartes creates quite an allegorical context to introduce through article 147 the inner commotions of the soul:

A husband mourns his dead wife, though he would be sorry to see her brought to life again. Perhaps his heart is oppressed by the sadness aroused in him by the funeral display and by the absence of a person to whose company he has been accustomed. And perhaps some remnants of love or of pity occur in his



imagination and draw genuine tears from his eyes. And yet despite all this he feels a secret joy in the innermost depths of his soul, and the commotion of this joy is so powerful that the sadness and tears accompanying it can do nothing to lessen its strength (II, 147).

Someone might cautiously mention here a biographical implicit reference, but I would not go much far with such personal assumptions related with Descartes' intimacy than suggesting that the love of a father for children is a tacit reference to his affection for Francine, who unfortunately passed away quite early, at age of 5. What would be worthy to speculate here is a principle of habitude and conviviality that, on long term, harms the pure love in terms of desire. One no longer deplores the absence of the person for the person itself, but the impossibility to join a whole that became a habitus. We cry at our beloved funeral just because our imagination represents to our soul a whole from which we used to a part for a long-term experience and therefore, tears are biological effects of remembering remnants of love and resenting pity – it is not clear if only pity for the dead one or self-pity as well.

## V. Implying Christian Love in Descartes' Analysis

The third part of the *Passions of the Soul* can be considered the most fertile for allowing Christian connections<sup>10</sup> and openings. Here, Descartes argues that self-esteem is an act of free will that commands our volition. What strikes in the article 152 is Descartes' idea that through self-esteem we become "masters of ourselves". Thus, should self-esteem be something alike self-love demanded by Christianity as precondition to love the other as oneself, and shouldn't this self-love be conjugated with generosity, not vanity (according to article 157), a perspective that turns the subject from any selfishness and keeps it on an altruistic pattern of empathy and cohabitation? We all know that to love yourself is not occasioning egocentrism – both in the ancient tradition – see the final part of *Alcibiades* – and in the Christian times, to know and love yourself means to recognize and love the divine element that lies within you. This hermeneutical turn is quite eloquent to attempt a Christian deconstruction of Descartes' vision on love and yet, it is not enough. Some pieces of this Christian passionate puzzle are occasioned by article 162, that restores veneration exclusively to free causes "that we think could do us good or evil, without knowing which they will do". In my opinion, here, the traditional, canonical concept inspired by the Christian world, of God, becomes somehow

compromised. First of all, we all consider that God is worshiped and hence, venerated. But we know for sure that given the ontological constraints of a perfect being, God is capable only of good. Hence, we do not find ourselves in the context in which we do not know if there is something good or bad that we could expect from God. We know with certainty that the disjunction is not sustainable – God is capable only of good.

Moreover, we know – given the hypothesis of the evil genius – that we cannot expect God to interfere in our cognitive process. It is our ontological weakness that allows the will to extend the judgment more than our intellect is prepared. And yet, as Descartes conceives article 162, it seems that veneration is not something easily predicable to God. A possible explanation for this would be Descartes' commitment with the exigence that God should be considered first and foremost from the standpoint of a mental object, given the objectual reality of the idea of God. This *realitas objectiva* is followed by a *realitas formaliter* that is necessarily proved as perfect actuality. This Cartesian turn of privileging the epistemic world in front of the ontological one, meaning that what is prior to me, in an ontological sense, delays to become an immediate object of mental introspection – it is the I that is eluded before the idea of God – is something that allows what Anselm aimed way before Descartes: a path to convince that veneration by itself is empty as long as faith does not seek understanding. That's why, on the other side, *veneration* is not equivalent with *devotion* in Descartes' vision. Pagans had venerated woods, springs, mountains, recalls Descartes in the same article, but this animist and immanent perspective never succeeded in arising more than anxiety or wonder. God calls for love because this transcendent metaphysical vision inspires love. Such perspective is quite similar with the Kantian one, that pleases to accept a subject who is fearful in front of God, once he understands his greatness through a sublime, comparative expression that convinces him that one should want the union to God and not the resistance to the gracious commands (see CPJ 144). We can, and we should – as Descartes further argues – to resent "deep humility before God" (III, 164). Potential sideslip from devotion could be either impiety or superstition – such as jealousy could dishonour love, in human order.

This descendancy, from the inadequate love for God, through idolatry, to the inadequate love for a human being, through jealousy is possible, for Descartes, in terms of altering the nature of the good occasioned by the object of passion. For example, jealousy depicts lack of love for someone, dou-

<sup>10</sup> I am quite aware that a possible objection raised to this approach might have at its heart the conviction that there are no Christian attitudes transgressing the *Passions of the Soul*, but rather entangled influences of Stoicism, that we might identify as a constant pattern of Descartes's writings. I do not deny the powerful Stoic expressions that play a fundamental role in providing a sense on time as duration, maturity as a process of self-development, judgment as a practice of resisting to yourself quite present in the third part of the *Discourse* and throughout the *Meditations*. I do consider that only in what concerns the *Meditations*, Stoicism is the philosophical alternative that Descartes has at his disposal for grounding the practice of meditation, excused of any Christian influence. It is my conviction that the finality of meditations is not *moral* – as it is for any Stoic – nor *spiritual* – as it is for any Christian – but *epistemic*. At the end of any meditation, I find out something new for my spirit. In *The Treatise on the Passions of the Soul*, however, more Christian attitudes than Stoic ones interfere: I anticipate partially the argument that I will expose in this section: when Descartes concludes on "the deep humility before God" (III, 164) that any individual should have, there is a Christian tone, as the purpose of the argument is not to reflect on an ontological difference, that would reveal God as a being more perfect than I am, but on a spiritual superiority that seeds humbleness into our soul. Otherwise, I must say that it is very comfortable to turn Descartes into a Marc Aurelius of his time, but I am not convinced that whenever it comes about meditations, their status as spiritual exercises, in the sense of Ignacio López de Loyola, should be excluded.

bled by lack of trust and completed by a perverted self-esteem. Moreover, Descartes argues that when it comes about a jealous husband on his wife, “properly speaking, what he loves is not her but only the good he imagines to consist in his having sole possession of her. And he wouldn’t be scared of losing this good if he didn’t think himself to be unworthy of it or his wife to be unfaithful.” Therefore, there is a major implication of this quite human example: no one can love God unless he/she considers himself/herself worthy to love, capable of self-love<sup>11</sup> and convinced that this persistence towards the love of God is something good by itself. At a first glimpse, the example of jealousy is quite rudimentary and shifts the discussion to another ontological level. In fact, it highlights the capacity of the subject to perform self-representations through each expression of love and explores the idea that being able to love God is conditioned by being capable to love yourself and another. The final part of the *Passions of the Soul* inventories collateral forms of love such as glory, gratitude and approval. We should hold the case of *approval* as a possible way to love heroes – of this world – or martyrs – of this world and the world beyond it – as we find out that “we’re naturally inclined to love those who do things we judge to be good even if we get no benefit from them” (III, 192). There is no immediate benefit for us from the saints’ actions, other than the example of their piety and capacity to sacrifice, but we love their gestures of total offering just because we judge them to be noble and good by themselves. We do not engage desire – we sometimes resent pity, whenever we find out about their suffering, and we always reflect “on their merits” – therefore, approval could be a sort of passion that inspires our love for ontological modes inferior to God and superior to us.

## VI. Letters on Love, Correspondence on God

The last part where we should seek any references that might indicate a Christian reading of passions, namely of love, attempted by Descartes, is represented by the impressive correspondence<sup>12</sup>. We would expect to find lots of references to such particular topic and yet, we might be surprised to find out that love is not a frequent topic.

I will expose the content of these problematic letters by addressing a particular topic that each of them tends to satisfy.

### The distinction between the theologian and philosophical approach on the possibility to love God

One of the letters on love was written to Pierre Chanut, the French Ambassador in Sweden, from 1<sup>st</sup> of February 1647 (AT V, 50). Descartes defines love through two species, one determining *intellectual* or *reasonable* love, the other one depicting a *passionate* love; they both correspond to the substantial dualism and imply differently the body and the mind in conceiving what is convenient, by engaging the free will, respectively what is easily subjected to possession, by engaging desire. These types of love, that are to be found together, shift from a confuse representation of the subject to a clear and distinct one: passionate love is like you would be thirsty and you would like to drink something – it is not clear what, whereas intellectual love is sharp and well defined, as a clarity of our heart<sup>13</sup>. From this point, Descartes answers to problem shared with Chanut: is there anything else than our nature – meaning our intellectual capacity and the natural light – that makes possible our love for God<sup>14</sup>? Descartes accuses that imagination cannot represent the ontological attributes of God – meaning that we can conceive, but we cannot represent God – and hence, we might be constrained to accept that the love to God can be only an intellectual one. Here is Descartes arguing that any abuse of imagination in the religious discourse keeps the individual away from the exercise of the natural light:

So I’m not surprised that some philosophers are convinced that the only thing that enables us to love God is the Christian religion, which teaches the mystery of the Incarnation in which God came down to our level and made himself like us; and that those who appear to have had a passion for some divinity without knowing about the mystery of the Incarnation haven’t loved the true God but only some idols to which they gave his name. . . . Despite all

<sup>11</sup> I intentionally skipped the analysis of the paragraphs 150 and 153 on self-love related to admiration and generosity because it seemed to me more relevant the framework prescribing types of alterities for love (self-love, the love for others and the love for God), not types of affects assigned to love. My purpose was to focus on the role of love in appropriating the idea of God as an intellectual object.

<sup>12</sup> The exegesis often presents the Correspondence as a corpus of letters belonging to a defender of “moderate passions”: “the correspondence is not an intimate soliloquy of a solitary intellectual controlling his moderate passions in an intellectual and spiritual sense” (Serban 2014, 104).

<sup>13</sup> “Car, comme en la soif le sentiment qu’on a de la sécheresse du gosier est une pensée confuse qui dispose au désir de boire, mais qui n’est pas ce désir même ; ainsi en l’amour on sent je ne sais quelle chaleur autour du cœur, et une grande abondance de sang dans le poumon, qui fait qu’on ouvre même les bras comme pour embrasser quelque chose, et cela rend l’âme encline à joindre à soi de volonté l’objet qui se présente. [...]”

<sup>14</sup> Defining love of God is problematic if we keep the referential for love as a quantifiable passion, emerging from the collision of two bodies. According to Boros, “This distinctively Cartesian understanding of love differs essentially in at least one point from the intuitive conception of love that goes under the heading of the *romantic*. According to Descartes, love is essentially measurable, and the explication of love in general – in both *Les Passions de l’âme* and the two most important letters to Chanut on love from 1 February 1647 and 6 June 1647 – is modelled on the third natural law of movement and on the rules given in the second part of *Principia philosophise*,<sup>11</sup> which are said to be suitable for specifying the kinds of joint movement of colliding bodies” (Boros 2003, 152). The definition of love slightly modifies, as Art. 79 states that love is emotional and can emerge from the movement of spirits: this is especially the main reason for which we have to address types of love, available for Descartes’s theory, as some of them are bodily constituted, whereas other are mentally constituted. In this case, the love for God comes from a being that affirms the coexistence of a simple corporeal nature and a simple intellectual nature, and goes after an ontological superior being that necessarily has to exist, and only as a spiritual substance, on which I have a clear and distinct idea, related to its intellectual nature. See also Marion 1992, 115-139.

this, I have no doubt that we can truly love God solely by the power of our nature<sup>15</sup>.

It seems that Descartes considers love – without *grace* – as the most useful and desirable passion that a mortal could aspire to, but that love of God is something depicting the mutual support of natural light and grace, something that is not up to a philosopher to clarify, but to a theologian. As philosophers, we can, at our best, argue that loving God depends on recognizing our intellectual simple natures within His nature and to understand that our finite thinking emanates from God. In fact, Descartes considers that beyond this intellectual appetite that we have towards God, we love “the infinity of His power”, “the extent of His providence”, “the infallibility of His decrees” and “the greatness of the created universe”<sup>16</sup>. We might be tempted to think that loving God involves, somehow, a distance reducible to an equality – as two human beings are engaged into a mutual love and while consuming it, such love seems to make them appear equal, this is not the case with the love for God. The ontological distance remains an evidence, and the love for God is, philosophically speaking, possible<sup>17</sup>. Furthermore, Descartes retakes the idea of representing oneself as a minor part of a whole that claims our *devotion*, meaning our capacity to sacrifice, to follow unconditionally and to love. If “it would be preposterous to risk the whole body for the preservation of our hair”, it wouldn’t be anything wrong to sacrifice ourselves for our ruler or for God: this capacity of devotion is possible not only for those who reach a certain level of education.

Every day we see examples of this love, even in persons of low condition who give their lives cheerfully for the good of their country or for the defence of some great person whom they love. From all this it is obvious that our love for God should be, beyond comparison, the greatest and most perfect of all our loves<sup>18</sup>.

What we could wonder, though, is to what extent the love for God is *innate*? We understand from Descartes that if should overpass any comparison, it should be, thus, sublime, but intellectual, and yet, what seems to appear here is a context to claim that

innate is not the love itself, but the capacity to feel love.

### The image of Descartes, the Christian

Some other problems related with the Cartesian perspective on love arise from his correspondence to Mersenne. Engaging *aymer/amare/amour*<sup>19</sup>, as parts of an essential human lexicon of passions (according to his letter written in Amsterdam, on November 20, 1629), Descartes remarks that the love for God is the noblest (according to the letter sent on July 27, 1638). His simple manner of framing types of love and its essential relevance for the human life convinced Mersenne that any Christian might hope that the *Principles of Philosophy* will support any attempt to disseminate the true religion. Descartes is praised to have written his philosophical Principles “for the greater glory of God and for the immense benefit of all mortals” (Mersenne to Voetius, December 13, 1642, AT III 602-604), supporting the spreading and understanding of Christianity (*ad majorem Dei gloriam et omnium mortalium ingentem fructum*). What strikes here is that Mersenne suggests that not only Descartes innovated a philosophy that brings God closer to the human thinking, but that he is “so Christian” and capable “to breath such a divine love”<sup>20</sup>.

What is worth to question here is whether or not Mersenne fall in the trap that any Christian interfering with philosophy should rather avoid, meaning confounding the discourse on God with the love for God. Is the epistemic Cartesian attitude towards God enough to call him a Christian? That remains an open question, that is problematic even for the largest spectre of modern philosophy.

As Michel Foucault would say, in modernity, I can be immoral and I can still have access to the truth<sup>21</sup>: no ascetic turn, no conversion, is expected from the subject. The construction of a method to rightfully conduct the intellect along its cognitive operations would be enough to think even the ontological attributes of God and to understand why, both *a priori* and *a posteriori*, we could demonstrate with certainty His existence. Therefore, a modern voice would argue that reaching God as a mental object is not enough in order to love God. And yet, he does not

<sup>15</sup> Online source at: [https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/cartes1619\\_4.pdf](https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/cartes1619_4.pdf), p. 193, last time accessed at December 1, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 194.

<sup>17</sup> “But philosophers usually don’t give different names to things that share the same definition, and the only definition of love that I know is that it is a passion that makes us join ourselves *de volonte* to some object, no matter whether the object is equal to or greater or less than us. So, it seems to me that if I am to speak philosophically I must say that it is possible to love God. [Descartes adds that he is sure Chanut loves Queen Christina, though he wouldn’t say so to her openly.]” *Ibid*, p. 195.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>19</sup> A challenging hypothesis belongs to Doull who considers that Descartes writes about *amour* in *the Passions of the Soul* in “the dispassionate manner of the physician” (Doull 2001, 78). At a first glimpse, as Boros (2003) said, nothing romantic here. And yet, Doull goes further questioning: “And what sort of love does Descartes have for Princess Elizabeth, and she for him? Geneviève Rodis-Lewis, in her biography of Descartes, speculates, ‘If one distinguishes concupiscent love from benevolent love by its effects, the first is ruled out because of Descartes’ and Elizabeth’s respect for each other’ (...) In a letter to his friend, Chanut, the French ambassador to Sweden, Descartes writes: ‘And if I asked you frankly whether you love that great Queen at whose Court you now are, it would be useless for you today that you had only respect, veneration and admiration for her; I would judge none the less that you have also a very ardent affection for her’ (1 Feb 1647, AT V, 611). That would seem to be more than ‘devotion.’” (Doull 2001, 78-79). But this could be just the effect of admiring a sovereign as a representative of God on earth, and this requires, in a Cartesian logic, for nothing more than devotion – that which is metaphysically grounded on the veneration of God and develops political effects in what concerns the respect for an anointed leader.

<sup>20</sup> “Secundo, video illiu; animum in omnibus suis responsionibus adeo congruere, adeo Christianum esse, et divinum amorem spirare, ut credere non possim illius Philosophiam non esse futuram magno verae religioni ornamento et auxilio.”

<sup>21</sup> However, an important perspective on this matter is raised by Williston, who considers that “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 judgements about the world.” (Williston 1997, 430)

refer to a *causa prima* without a religious designator: his *Meditations* concern the nature of God, that is an equal concern for the Fathers of the Faculty of Theology from Paris, as we find out from the Forward.

### The love of God as constrain to love death

In another letter, that Descartes sent to Bannius, in order to defend Boesset, in 1640, the French philosopher revisits arguments inspired by music: not any musical creation is able to inspire love or to be worthy of love. The major sext is rather violent. Love appears in this letter for three times. The first time it depicts the error committed by Bannius when he extended the last syllable of *mourir* by a major sext, until *trop aimable*. Three semitones less and Descartes says that the musical score would have been able to express love whenever it was the case and violence whenever something inhuman was at stake. Secondly, Descartes recalls that music should tackle upon those passions arousing love within our hearts. Thirdly, Descartes recalls that the act of death is suggested by a semitone and yet “for as the thought of death demands the breath to die, so also the thought of a being worthy of love demands its growth, and between two thoughts so different should not be a shorter distance” (AT III 829-834). That is why, music is something that tends to turn the spirit towards meditation, introspection, something that later on Hegel would explain in a more developed manner, coining that Romantic Art includes music alongside painting and poetry, all these being highly capacitated to add more content and to weaken the form of the Idea of Beauty.

### VII. Instead of Conclusions: Descartes' Christianity, Inherited from Aquinas and Augustine?

At the end of this analysis, what we know about the Cartesian vision on love is that it can be easily considered compatible with a Christian perspective. The love for God is conceivable only because God is represented as an infinite substance that configures an incommensurable whole from which, yet, I understand that I am a part. I am ontologically related to God and this is enough not to create anxiety, but joy and, more specifically, a particular type of love, namely *devotion*, which is incompatible with *veneration*. However, imagination is excluded from the comprehensive process of conceiving God's infinity, in order to avoid the trap of idolatry, as Descartes mentioned. Imagination is recovered whenever I am forced to represent my union with God and therefore, “the soul is required to represent God as an infinite thinking substance, of which the human soul constitutes a little particular aspect” (Vandenbussche 2017, 69). To be more specific, we use the natural light, our intuition and deductive reasonings in order to conceive the ontological attributes of God, but we engage the faculty of imagination in order to reduce God to an object that can acquire the passion of love as *devotion*. Once the union with God and our disproportionate forces or realities are represented, love is conceived in our soul as a *dis-*

*interested passion*. This would be the only type of love in which the threat that imagination could have falsified the object is removed. We do not represent lovable qualities of God, but *realities* (*forces* or *natures*) that are ontologically determined and become not only logical constraints for further representing any finite mode, but also matters of evidence. The love for God offers privileges that any other form of love cannot reach. It defies the Cartesian tendency to create a mechanistic, “biological account” of desire and passions (Beavers 1989, 287), it has the power to dislocate non-primary passions such as “fear of death, pain or disgrace”, since the individual feels that “nothing can befall him which God has not decreed”, it convinces us that free will is a benevolent gift from God and thus we feel that we love God from our freedom and last but not least, it seems to suggest that “love is the mean invented by humans to appropriate in an ideal manner the power that normally they cannot appropriate” (Matheron 1988, 443). Love is not something that goes after merits, but after willing. As Gombys argued, from Descartes we seem to learn that eating an apple and consuming a marriage are one and the same thing: *quia ita vis/ita judices* means that I do not want an apple that I like because it seems convenient, but rather because I want the apple I do believe that I might like it<sup>22</sup>.

Implicitly, it would not be a mistake to conclude that the love for God is one of the highest *modus volendi* that we might be capable of. In rest, we still have two major problems: how Christian remains Descartes in conceiving love after abolishing the *vulgate* from the Thomist tradition<sup>23</sup> and how could we answer to Spinoza's objection that the definition of love provided by Descartes is quite obscure (*admodum obscuram*)? It is clear that Descartes dislocates desire from the terms of truth love. It is a passion, it deals with the present, not with the future time of desires. Hence, this is a Thomistic ingredient: *praesentiae*. Nevertheless, the union of the subject with an object that comes from the present implies that it is not a physical presence at stake here. As Aquinas did in his *Summa Theologica* (Vol II, 709-10), Descartes conceives here love as a real union *in absentia et in praesentia*. Then, this Thomistic temporality joins, in Descartes argument, the precedent of Augustine's doctrine that the order of love corresponds to the order of charity: we love what is above us, ourselves and what is below us, meaning, all the ontological modes that depict something *supra nos*, *juxta nos* or *infra nos* (see *De Doctrina Christiana*, I, 23, 22). And this is exactly the same argument involved by Descartes when, assuming that love obliges the soul to represent a whole from which we are a part, we start to think proportionate belongings: what is *supra nos* inspires our sacrifice from love, what is *juxta nos* impels a balanced union and what is *infra nos* recalls that it is not us whom we should sacrifice. Augustine and Descartes proceeded alike considering God should be loved more than ourselves, and consequently, we should cherish ourselves more than any other inferior ontolog-

<sup>22</sup> “Je paraphrase : manger une pomme (en fait empoisonnée), faire un mariage (qui se trouve être désastreux), incendier le Parthenon, bombarder Hiroshima, massacrer un peuple : il n'y a rien qu'il n'est possible que nous voulions” (Gombys 1988, 450).

<sup>23</sup> See Frigo 2016, 2 and Alquié 1974, 362.

ical mode. Descartes insists – and here is reflected his modern tonality – that we should keep this order as an evidence as long as we are lucid subjects (only those who are confused and without control on their minds – *avoir l'esprit fort dérégulé* – might think otherwise). So, there is nothing obscure in these definitions and, to be more specific, Descartes committed no ambiguity as long as each type of love reflected an adequate definition to the nature of the involved object and the mood of the subject. A final remark, in closing this analysis, shapes the plea in favor of a Christian perspective of Descartes on love and its effects. The greatest proof of God's love for His creation appears when this *order caritatis* (the order of beings on an ontological scale) offers an *ordo caritas* (meaning a society, a country – *caritas patriae*, see Frigo 2016, 12). Love has political effects, and we get convinced of that just reading the letter sent to Princess Elisabeth on October 6, 1645:

For God has so established the order of things and conjoined men together in so tight a society that even if each person related himself wholly to himself, and had no charity for others, he would not ordinarily fail to work for them in everything that would be in his power, so long as he used prudence, and principally, if he lived in a time when mores were not corrupted (AT IV 316-7)

That's why love is mutual between God and the human being, keeping the proportions, meaning, the ontological powers of conceiving and resenting love. Even though the political thinking of Descartes remains an implicit project of his philosophy, it would be a challenging hypothesis to argue that if the human love for God might the purest and perfect love passion that we are capable of, then the love of God for ourselves was confessed beyond our creation through the reason of state.

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