

Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Spring 2017

Volume 43 Issue 3

- 383 Thornton Lockwood *The Political Theorizing of Aeschylus's Persians*
- 403 Rasoul Namazi *The Qur'an, Reason, and Revelation: Islamic Revelation and Its Relationship with Reason and Philosophy*
- 431 Leo Strauss *Machiavelli's The Prince and the Discourses: A Recently Discovered Lecture*, edited by Rasoul Namazi
- Book Reviews:**
- 461 J. A. Colen *On Human Nature*, by Roger Scruton
- 467 Jerome C. Foss *Rawls's Political Liberalism*, edited by Thom Brooks and Martha C. Nussbaum, and *The Cambridge Rawls Lexicon*, edited by Jon Mandle and David A. Reidy
- 475 David Fott *Cicero's Skepticism and His Recovery of Political Philosophy* by Walter Nicgorski
- 481 Steven H. Frankel *The Book of Job: A New Translation with In-Depth Commentary* by Robert D. Sacks
- 487 Lindsay Glover *The Second Birth: On the Political Beginnings of Human Existence* by Tilo Schabert; translated by Javier Ibáñez-Noé
- 493 Pamela Kraus *Cartesian Psychophysics and the Whole Nature of Man* by Richard F. Hassing
- 497 Haig Patapan *Modernity and Its Discontents: Making and Unmaking the Bourgeois from Machiavelli to Bellow* by Steven B. Smith
- 501 Nathan Pinkoski *The Form of Politics: Aristotle and Plato on Friendship* by John von Heyking
- 507 Linda R. Rabieh *Sophistry and Political Philosophy: Protagoras' Challenge to Socrates* by Robert C. Bartlett
- 513 Richard S. Ruderman *After One Hundred and Twenty: Reflecting on Death, Mourning, and the Afterlife in the Jewish Tradition* by Hillel Halkin
- 521 Antoine P. St-Hilaire *Brill's Companion to Leo Strauss' Writings on Classical Political Thought*, edited by Timothy Burns

Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

- Editor-in-Chief* Timothy W. Burns, Baylor University
- General Editors* Charles E. Butterworth • Timothy W. Burns
- General Editors (Late)* Howard B. White (d. 1974) • Robert Horwitz (d. 1987)
Seth G. Benardete (d. 2001) • Leonard Grey (d. 2009) •
Hilail Gildin (d. 2015)
- Consulting Editors* Christopher Bruell • David Lowenthal • Harvey C.
Mansfield • Thomas L. Pangle • Ellis Sandoz • Kenneth
W. Thompson
- Consulting Editors (Late)* Leo Strauss (d. 1973) • Arnaldo Momigliano (d. 1987) •
Michael Oakeshott (d. 1990) • John Hallowell (d. 1992)
• Ernest L. Fortin (d. 2002) • Muhsin Mahdi (d. 2007) •
Joseph Cropsey (d. 2012) • Harry V. Jaffa (d. 2015)
- International Editors* Terence E. Marshall • Heinrich Meier
- Editors* Peter Ahrens Dorf • Wayne Ambler • Marco Andreacchio •
Maurice Auerbach • Robert Bartlett • Fred Baumann • Eric
Buzzetti • Susan Collins • Patrick Coby • Erik Dempsey •
Elizabeth C'de Baca Eastman • Edward J. Erler • Maureen
Feder-Marcus • Robert Goldberg • L. Joseph Hebert •
Pamela K. Jensen • Hannes Kerber • Mark J. Lutz • Daniel
Ian Mark • Ken Masugi • Carol L. McNamara • Will
Morrisey • Amy Nendza • Charles T. Rubin • Leslie G.
Rubin • Thomas Schneider • Susan Meld Shell • Geoffrey
T. Sigalet • Nicholas Starr • Devin Stauffer • Bradford P.
Wilson • Cameron Wybrow • Martin D. Yaffe • Catherine
H. Zuckert • Michael P. Zuckert
- Copy Editor* Les Harris
- Designer* Sarah Teutschel
- Inquiries* ***Interpretation, A Journal of Political Philosophy***
Department of Political Science
Baylor University
1 Bear Place, 97276
Waco, TX 76798
- email* interpretation@baylor.edu

Richard F. Hassing, *Cartesian Psychophysics and the Whole Nature of Man*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015, 229 pp., \$90 (cloth).

PAMELA KRAUS
ST. JOHN'S COLLEGE
Pamela.Kraus@sjc.edu

From his earliest scientific treatise, it was clear that René Descartes intended to bring mechanical physics to bear on the understanding of human beings and the improvement of human life. The outline of the “nature and scope of knowledge,” in the very early *Rules for the Direction of the Native Intelligence* (Lat. *ingenium*), was only a first attempt to correct that intelligence by means of critical analysis, then to guide us to *bona mens*, a sound mind, and ultimately to human wisdom. Although he modified over time the terms in which he would pursue this task, the aim of improving life by increasing our self-understanding, and, consequently, our choices and actions, remained his goal. Yet that dimension of his thought has been obscured or ignored, in part owing to his intricate style of writing, in part to his untimely death, and in part to a preference for his provocative metaphysics on the part of many readers. Happily, Richard Hassing, attuned to Descartes’s practical intention, has set out to elaborate Descartes’s moral and, by extension, political thought, which is found in his last writing, *The Passions of the Soul*.

Hassing’s study is especially helpful in contrasting throughout Descartes’s alternative to the dominant views of his time, the Aristotelian account and its medieval successors, especially the Thomistic adaptation. Additionally, because Descartes effectively demolished the traditional views of soul and, thus, of the human being, Hassing shows that his work can be linked fruitfully to subsequent developments in moral thought and political anthropology, in which the self rather than the soul and the historicity of human life

predominate. He takes Descartes's work to be pivotal in this change, important for all who are concerned with moral and political philosophy. His own purpose is, then, also practical, insofar as he believes that Descartes thought incisively about religious belief and political fanaticism, and that, in this respect, we can learn from him about dangers that have continued to surface over time and plague us today, which he refers to as "political pathologies."

Hassing's focus is not on Descartes's physics entire, but on his physical principles insofar as they explain the human being, the bodily occurrences that shape life, perception, imagination, thought, and even judgment—"psychophysics." Descartes's scientific approach—he claims to explain the passions "only as a physicist"—delimits the mechanical conditions under which we live and provides a framework for correcting the erroneous opinions that have arisen by habit and been reinforced by misguided thinkers. Since the human being is, after all, not merely a machine, as Descartes admitted from very early on, the framework guides him in distinguishing those parts of human life that are explicable by mechanics from those that are not, and then in describing the "whole nature of man." This includes what Hassing refers to as the arena of "natural and moral-political philosophy."

The book is divided into eleven chapters, a conclusion, and an appendix. The first four chapters set the context, Descartes's earlier, partial accounts of the human being as a mind-body composite: his first attempt to apply new physical principles to the human body in the *Treatise on Man*; the versatility of speech, which defines humans over against animals, in part 5 of the *Discourse on Method*; and the remnant of natural teleology that appears in Meditation 6, the "teaching of nature."

The core of the book recounts and analyzes the main teachings found in the *Passions of the Soul*. Hassing's study of the particulars is careful, detailed, and learned. These qualities support him in addressing three ultimate questions about Descartes's thought: (1) What is the role of physics in the account of the passions? (2) What does Descartes mean by the phrase, "the whole nature of man"? And (3) does the "scientific apparatus" allow Descartes to account for the human being?

To the first question, Hassing answers that physics allows Descartes to provide a new, that is, seventeenth-century, mechanical account of our thoughts incorporated into a doctrine of soul. It replaces the long-standing view that the human mind and its powers are naturally related to external objects; that is to say, the assumption that objects possess the properties and

qualities, such as red or sour or hardness, that we experience them to have. The mechanical account identifies the known properties of bodies (shape, size, and motion) in contrast to what appears to the mind, that is, our various “thoughts,” a term used very widely in Descartes to include everything of which we are aware. It dismisses the notion that the mind is ordered to nature, to “forms,” whether sensible or intelligible, in things. Soul is not the activity of the living, sentient, cognitive being, involved in every aspect of life, but rather is a center of knowledge and experience, with its “principal seat” in the small pineal gland. Motions in this gland trigger associated thoughts in the soul, and from that gland the soul radiates through the body. This arrangement unmasks our perceptions, images, and feelings as epiphenomena; outfitted properly with accurate knowledge about them, we can correct our understanding of the world and of ourselves, and can navigate our experiences to good effect by skillful attention to them.

Second, Hassing considers the meaning of the phrase, “the whole nature of man.” He distinguishes three sorts of dualism in Cartesian thought. First is that soul and body are distinct substances, the metaphysical dualism that Descartes famously argues for in the sixth Meditation. Second is “epistemological dualism,” unearthed also in the sixth Meditation. The mind’s ability to act alone and know clearly and distinctly coexists with a kind of “knowing” that is connected to nature through undeniable feelings such as hunger and thirst. To these Hassing adds a third, what he calls “anthropological dualism,” which is properly found in the *Passions of the Soul*. The “whole nature” is a dualism between “our general biological nature,” which serves the good of the body, and “our particular, historical being transcending biology.” The latter is grounded in a sense of oneself that does not seem to derive from mechanical nature or from nature’s teaching, cannot be explained by either, and has value independent of them. Hassing’s discussion of esteem and scorn, along with the other “primitive” passions (*Passions*, art. 149), highlights the locus of those imagined goods that may cause us to compromise or harm bodily life, such as the motives for which we would fight to the death. Descartes’s account is meant to correct misleading motives, with important ramifications for religion and politics. The one thing of highest value, the culminating moment, is found in Descartes’s virtue of generosity, which “makes a man esteem himself as highly as he can legitimately esteem himself” (*Passions*, art. 153). The virtue makes us able to be true masters of our free volitions over against the constant bombardment of external causes. It has itself a double character: that of self-sufficiency and that of resolving always to use volitions well. Hassing then can show Descartes’s remedy for

certain recurring “pathologies” or fanaticisms, especially those involving *thumos*, which can be “redirected from warlike self-assertion and collective self-sacrifice to the defense of one’s own self-sufficient autonomy.”

Finally, in highlighting the limits of Descartes’s achievement, which Hassing has stressed throughout, he marks two of its deficiencies. First, Descartes’s discussion of esteem and scorn, what we perceive as great and small, provides no basis other than his own opinion about what is truly greatest. There is no external standard according to which we can measure it. Second, despite the fact that it has a “certain beauty,” the account of generosity is not clear and distinct, and because it is not, we are free to take it or leave it.

To say this, however, is just to say that there is no scientifically demonstrable or secure basis for evaluative judgments, including moral and political judgments. But that is an old thought, not particular to Descartes. What is particular to Descartes is the attempt to include both the relevant physical causes and undeniable experience, which cannot be explained by those physical causes, in his account of the human being. So it is for Descartes, as it will be for others following, such as Hume and Locke, that what passed heretofore for moral and political thought, the bases of which were also not demonstrably knowable, is accounted for now in terms of “experience” correctly understood and directed by means of a general critique of human nature and knowledge. Even the free will, however undeniably experienced, is not and cannot be clear and distinct. And it will be for Kant to attempt to provide a foundation other than physics or mere personal experience for morality.

Hassing makes no attempt in this volume to relate the three dualities to one another, or to point out where they intersect, though that would be very welcome, especially if the third duality is that of the whole nature of man. In the *Passions of the Soul*, the ego cogito is unmentioned although the knowledge of clear and distinct ideas is implicitly there among the volitions of the soul of the composite. That would seem to relegate clear and distinct knowledge to a departmental function of the human soul. And perhaps it would relegate the ego cogito of Meditations 2 and 6 to a functional construct, a name for one of the ways that mind’s attentive power can self-compartmentalize. Had he lived, Descartes may have moved to tackle the metaphysical issues his teachings in the *Passions* raise. As it is, he seems to have provided, instead, a functional account of the human soul as the only comprehensive one available to us.