

THE SOFT UNDERBELLY OF REASON

The Passions in the Seventeenth Century

EDITED BY STEPHEN GAUKROGER



The Soft Underbelly of Reason

A flood of literature on the passions came out of the seventeenth century, and *The Soft Underbelly of Reason* highlights the thinking of philosophers, theologians, artists and physicians with regard to the nature of passions. Stephen Gaukroger explains that although there were inevitable overlaps, the interests of each group were distinctive.

We come to understand that it was in terms of the contrast between reason and passions that fundamental questions about the nature of wisdom, goodness and beauty were pursued in the seventeenth century. We also see that it informed practical questions about self-understanding, about the behaviour marking out the philosopher, the statesman and the theologian, and questions about the understanding of psychopathological states.

Each of the essays in *The Soft Underbelly of Reason*, written by the most respected academics in their fields, provides both an insightful and valuable understanding on the different views of the passions in the seventeenth century. Those with an interest in the philosophy of the era, the history of medicine, and women's studies will find this collection a fascinating read.

Stephen Gaukroger is a Reader in Philosophy at the University of Sydney, and a Fellow of the Australian Academy of Humanities. He has written several books, including *Descartes: An Intellectual Biography*, *Cartesian Logic*, and *Arnauld: On True and False Ideas*.

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The editor would like to thank Her Majesty The Queen for permission to reproduce [Figure 4.1](#), from the Royal Library, Windsor; and the Institut de France (Musée Condé), for permission to reproduce [Figure 4.4](#).

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Introduction

Stephen Gaukroger

The question of the nature of the passions has traditionally been motivated by a number of quite distinct considerations, some of which have emerged as quickly as others have disappeared, with the result that what has been demanded from a ‘theory of the passions’ has changed over time. The treatment of the passions in late antiquity by the Alexandrian Church Fathers, for example, centred on a Christological problem about how Christ’s ‘agony in the garden’ was possible if he were God. This led to a study of the nature of the passions, with Athanasius attributing the agony in the garden to Christ’s body alone, and Clement distinguishing between bodily passions, which are necessary for the preservation of life, and passions of the soul. Such concerns are almost completely absent from philosophical discussions of the nature of the passions in the seventeenth century, but they had certainly formed one strand in Augustine’s account of the nature of the passions, whose influence on seventeenth-century discussions was immense.¹

We can also find a number of issues that had formed a core part of the discussion of the passions from antiquity up to the end of the early modern era, but which disappeared from such discussion only in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One such topic is the idea that a theory of the passions might provide a basis for a therapeutic practice directed, *inter alia*, to purging psychopathic states, the first modern treatment being Petrarch’s *De remediis*, a compendium of Stoic techniques for ‘healing the passions’.² Melancholia was the passion that received greatest attention in this tradition in the early modern era, because it was that imbalance of the humours associated with genius and profundity, and as well as treatises devoted entirely to it, the most famous being Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*, writers such as Montaigne and Descartes were particularly concerned with it.³ The

combination of physiology, psychology and ethics that underlay the treatment of melancholy was typical of the kinds of considerations that lay behind thinking about the passions, and they had always been associated with bodily conditions, bringing them under the purview of medicine and physiology, but they were also given ethical meanings, bringing them under the purview of moral psychology and theology. In the seventeenth century, for example, the Christian moral code still centred around the ‘seven deadly sins’—pride, envy, wrath, avarice, gluttony, sloth, and lechery—which, together with the occasional addition of ‘sadness’ (*tristitia*), made up not merely the cardinal sins but distinct and identifiable passions. Since such passions were virtually constitutive of sin—a feature which, because it effectively left out obligations to God, played an important part in the demise of the seven deadly sins in favour of the Ten Commandments as the basic moral code from the end of the sixteenth century onwards⁴—the passions, even characterized physiologically, and morality were closely articulated.

With the removal of psychopathology from philosophy into medicine, psychoanalytic theory, social theory, etc., what was required of a philosophical account of the passions became refocused accordingly. And this refocusing is very much a narrowing of focus. From the point of view of understanding seventeenth-century thought, it is of some importance that we be able to discern just what the parameters of the passions were in the early modern era. There are two especially important respects in which the early modern era appears to differ significantly from our own. In the first place, discussion of the passions in the work of moral and political philosophers, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as now, was restricted to treatment of those passions that are subject to self-control, whether this was encouraged by study and counsel or by law. Yet medical thought, which was often rather closely associated with philosophical thought in the early modern era (as it had been in earlier eras) also had to take account of those passions over which there is no self-control, ranging from hunger to delirium and mania, whether such passions be temporary or permanent. The notion of self-control has justifiably come to the fore in discussions of the passions, but we must not let that blind us to the larger provenance of the passions.

Second, although it is in terms of the contrast between reason and the passions that fundamental philosophical questions—the nature of wisdom, goodness and beauty—were explored in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the aim was not merely to describe the ‘human condition’. Philosophers also constructed an image of themselves as paradigmatic bearers of moral, aesthetic, and intellectual responsibility.

Their understanding of reason and the passions was intended to be authoritative—whatever individual philosophical quarrels there might be, the philosophical view was not simply one kind of opinion among others—and required the construction of a philosophical *persona* capable of bearing and displaying this authority: an authority which was, of course, very different from that borne and displayed by theologians and statesmen, whose claims on moral authority, for example, overlapped with those of philosophers. Here the question is not so much that of the relation between reason and virtuous action, but that of the relation between philosophy *per se* and the behaviour appropriate for the philosopher, or at least the philosophically educated: what kind of *persona* philosophy does or should shape or encourage. Perhaps the most familiar example of this is Stoicism, for the ‘Stoic’ attitude—indifference to calamity and misfortune—is one that is still readily familiar. It receives an elegant formulation in Philo of Alexandria, at the end of the Hellenistic era, when he sets out how the *persona* of the philosopher or sage is to be formed:

Every person—whether Greek or Barbarian—who is in training for wisdom, leading a blameless, irreproachable life, chooses neither to commit injustice nor return it unto others, but to avoid the company of busybodies and hold in contempt the places where they spend their time—courts, councils, marketplaces, assemblies—in short, every kind of meeting or reunion of thoughtless people. As their goal is a life of peace and serenity, they contemplate nature and everything found within her.... Thus, filled with every excellence, they are accustomed no longer to take account of physical discomforts or exterior evils, and they train themselves to be indifferent to indifferent things; they are armed against both pleasures and desires, and in short, they always strive to keep themselves above passions.⁵

But we must not forget that this was a question that was paramount throughout antiquity, and at least from Socrates onwards the philosopher took on or fostered a distinct *persona* and attitude which fitted him for everything from kingship (Plato) to the life of a beggar (Diogenes the Cynic), depending on the philosophical doctrine or school. This is particularly marked in the Hellenistic era, when *ataraxia*, peace of mind, was explicitly the aim of all the major schools, and where regulation of the passions played a major role for Epicureans and Stoics alike in attaining the state of mind, and corresponding behaviour, worthy of or appropriate to a member of their philosophical

school.⁶ This philosophical self-fashioning was pursued in a different way in the Christian era, and works like Montaigne's *Essays* and Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* show that it was alive and well in the early modern era. Philosophical self-fashioning has always turned on the understanding and regulation of the passions, and because of this they have a peculiar centrality, for they have not merely been one object of study among others for philosophers, but something which must be understood if one is to be 'philosophical' in the first place.

Despite the different motivations behind studying the passions and the correspondingly different demands placed on a theory of the passions, however, there are at least two core questions that can be identified in discussions of the passions from antiquity to the present. These are the determinants of human personality and human action, and the question of the nature of moral judgement. In both these questions, the central contrast is that between reason and the passions. This contrast took on a new significance in the early modern era because of the new significance given to the question of the control of the passions by the reason. The catalyst was the way in which Christianity took over and transformed the idea of self-control. Sexual continence is the form of self-control that marks out Christianity from other religious and cultural practices in which, as often as not, it was culinary taboos or occasionally control with respect to one of what came to be known in Christianity as the seven deadly sins (these had a long pre-Christian heritage), such as anger, that had been the focus, but there was also a strong sense that even the most mundane acts had a divine significance. Clement of Alexandria, for example, in his *Paedagogus*, describes 'how each of us ought to conduct himself in respect to the body, or rather how to regulate the body itself, and the focus of the discussion here—rules for daily behaviour—is something that we could describe in terms of etiquette.'⁷ The most developed form of such rules of etiquette, one in which their moral and religious significance is made very clear, is the remarkable series of short treatises on the subject put out by Erasmus between 1500 and 1530. These set out rules for how to behave in church, in bed, while at play, while eating; they cover dress, deportment and gestures, and recommend various facial expressions and demeanours, forbidding others.⁸ Here, self-control becomes a means for taking responsibility for oneself in a very detailed way, and this is crucial in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries because, as Delumeau has pointed out, the problem for both the Reformation and Counter-Reformation 'was how to persuade hundreds of millions of people to embrace a severe moral and spiritual discipline of the sort which had never actually been demanded of their forebears, and how to make them

accept that even the most secret aspects of their daily lives should thenceforth be saturated by a constant preoccupation with things eternal'.⁹ This programme of 'internalizing' Christianity cannot be ignored in looking at sixteenth- and seventeenth-century notions of the passions, for it was achieved through the idea of the exercise of self-control, which was construed explicitly in terms of the regulation of the passions by the reason.¹⁰

What we are dealing with here is not just a religious phenomenon, however, but something that has a more general political and cultural significance. Norbert Elias, for example, has shown how the civilizing process that we find so marked from the early sixteenth century onwards provides above all a prototype for the conversion of 'external into internal compulsion', and he takes as his key example French Court society, showing how the absolutist monarchy was able to hold the warrior nobility in check by divesting it of military functions, requiring virtually constant attendance at Court, and inculcating 'courtly values' in this class by forcing the nobles into a single site of recognition, where their standing was something wholly subject to the king's discretion.¹¹ Fostering particular modes of daily behaviour is something that has religious and political significance, and I believe that in those writers of the era who were concerned with pointing scientific activity away from what they saw as the barren disputes of the Scholastics towards a more productive form of scientific activity, we can find a similar concern to reform daily habits and practices in the direction of scientifically productive activity. It is a commonplace that the natural and mathematical sciences were being developed as the model for reason in the early modern era, taking over from law and history, among other disciplines, and as a consequence the passions were the antithesis of the canons of rational enquiry that the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries set up for themselves. This encouraged a fascination with, as well as an extensive literature on, the passions, in which they were redescribed, reclassified, explained away, reduced to physiology, used to account for the differences between men and women, used as a basis for a theory of pictorial expression, and so on. They are the 'dark side' of reason which must be understood if we are to have any comprehensive grasp of the scientific rationality of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. And with the natural and mathematical sciences as the new model for 'reason', so correlatively we can find attempts to regulate or dispense with the passions as a precondition for the successful practice of science. Bacon is a good case in point. His account of 'method' can be seen either as elaborating stringent procedures that individual scientists should follow, or as setting out the rules governing a new elite