AGAINST PASSIONATE EPISTEMOLOGY:
DEFENDING PURE THOUGHT IN THE Meditations

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Abstract

A highly revisionary reading of Descartes' epistemology is beginning to emerge in the literature on Descartes' ethics. Some commentators have argued that Descartes ascribes to passionate epistemology, which claims that epistemic progress in the Meditations requires moral progress—in particular, the regulation of the passions. I argue that on a plausible understanding of the cognitive nature of the passions—namely, a motivationalist reading—the passions cannot and ought not do any major or minor epistemic work in the Meditations. Thus, while the presence of the passions in the Meditations is interesting and deserving of our attention, they do not require us to revise our canonical understanding of the Meditations as an exercise of pure thought. Furthermore, we need not abandon the standard claim that ethical practice emerges in the tree of philosophy only after metaphysics and epistemology have been established.

In the famous tree of philosophy passage (French Preface to the Principles, AT IXB: 14/CSM I: 186), Descartes implies that the highest branch and the fruit of the tree (ethics), is systematically related to the roots (metaphysics and epistemology), the trunk (physics), and the other branches of the tree (medicine and mechanics):²

¹I employ the following abbreviations for editions of Descartes' work: 'AT': Oeuvres de Descartes (cited by volume and page), Adam and Tannery (1996); 'CSM': The Philosophical Writings of Descartes (cited by volume and page), Cottingham et al. (1985); 'CSMK': The Philosophical Writings of Descartes (cited by page), Cottingham et al. (1991).
²Author's illustration. See Ariew (1992) and Morgan (1994) for in depth analysis of the tree of philosophy.
There are two interpretive camps on the systematic nature of Cartesian ethics. On the *epistemological reading*, the tree represents a strict epistemological order of discovery: one must first know metaphysics and epistemology before moving on to physics, mechanics, and so forth (Marshall 1998, 2–4, 72–74, 59–60; Morgan 1994, 204–211; Parvizian 2016, Rutherford 2004, 190). On the *organic reading*, however, all parts of the tree grow simultaneously from its roots. Ethics, then, is involved in metaphysics and epistemology (Shapiro 2008a, Rodis-Lewis 1987, Schmitter 2002, Morgan 1994).

There are a number of commentators who have—either implicitly or explicitly—argued that ethics is at the foundation of Descartes’ system (Boehm 2014, Naaman-Zauderer 2010, Rodis-Lewis 1987, Schmitter 2002, Shapiro 2005, 2008). One interpretation is particularly noteworthy. Lisa Shapiro (2005) has argued—or at least suggested—that the *Meditations* is designed to regulate the meditator’s passions through the acquisition of the passion and virtue of generosity in the Fourth Meditation. The meditator’s *epistemic progress* goes hand in hand with her *moral progress*.

Shapiro notes the revisionary implications of such a view. If correct, a
thorough re-interpretation of Descartes’ epistemology would be in order. The canonical view is that the meditator’s epistemic progress is a matter of pure thought, and that it does not depend on any faculties or content that have corporeal origins (e.g. sensations and passions). It is the meditator’s reliance on the natural light or the intellect—and of course corresponding affirmations of the will—which leads to scientia (see, e.g., Loeb 1990, Nelson 2005, Vinci 1998, Williams 1978). Call this Rationalist Epistemology. But if the passions—i.e. passive emotions or feelings that are (generally) practically oriented and have physiological origins—play an epistemic role in the Meditations, Rationalist Epistemology is more than suspect: “Knowing involves not only having one’s thoughts in order but also having one’s feelings in order” (2005: 30). Shapiro is suggesting that the passions have some intrinsic role in the meditator’s acquisition of scientia. Bracketing the details for now, call this Passionate Epistemology.

In service of the standard epistemological reading of Cartesian systematicity, Parvizian (2016) has argued that the meditator is not in an epistemic position to acquire and exercise generosity in the Fourth Meditation. But strictly speaking, Parvizian’s argument left untouched the catalog of passions expressed in the Meditations (Shapiro 2005; cf. Beardsley 2005, Schmitter 2002, 2005). An objector might concede that the meditator cannot acquire generosity, and consequently, that she cannot regulate her passions vis-à-vis generosity. But she may nonetheless push back: Can the meditator regulate her passions—vis-à-vis some other means—over the course of the Meditations? And are these regulated passions epistemically significant? In short, while Parvizian may have shown that moral virtue does not enter into the Meditations, the truth of Passionate Epistemology—and the nature of Cartesian systematicity with respect to ethics more generally—is still up in the air.

To be sure, Passionate Epistemology—understood as an independent philosophical thesis—requires further examination. However,
EPISTEMOLOGY—understood as a Cartesian thesis—must be ultimately rejected. Descartes’ fundamental epistemological commitments, coupled with the methodology of the Meditations precludes any real epistemic role for the passions in the Meditations. Admittedly, some minor concessions must be made. It is an obvious truth that the meditator must have some passions in order to make epistemic progress. For example, the meditator must have a desire—indeed a strong desire—for knowledge such that she is motivated to continue beyond the First Meditation, and not just throw her hands up and remain a skeptic. But that is not really interesting, for it does not put direct pressure on Rationalist Epistemology. Sure, the meditator must have a desire for knowledge, but that in no way entails that this desire is relevant to a given epistemic achievement. What would be interesting is if this desire (or any other passion) were essential to the success of a specific argument or cognitive exercise that terminates in scientia or even a mere conceptual clarification.

There are, broadly speaking, two interpretations of the cognitive nature of Cartesian passions: the motivationalist reading and the representationalist reading. The motivationalist reading claims that the passions are merely motivational in that they are purely affective states with no intentional content (Brassfield 2012, Greenberg 2007). The representationalist reading claims that the passions are motivational, but that they are also intentional as well: they have representational content (see, e.g, Alanen 2003, Brown 2006, Clarke 2005, Franco 2015, 2016, Hatfield 2007). I will not adjudicate between these readings. However, I will also not consider a representationalist reading of the meditator’s passions. This is because Descartes and his commentators are abundantly clear that the passions are obscure and confused, and on any plausible reading of what the passions represent (i.e. mostly bodily goods and harms), they simply cannot be relevant to the project of the Meditations. The best bet here is a motivationalist reading—indeed, this is the kind of reading Shapiro proposes. If Passion-
ATE EPISTEMOLOGY is true, then the passions must motivate the meditator in the right kinds of ways such that she makes epistemic progress.

In section 2, I explain Shapiro’s motivationalist reading of the passions in the Meditations. In section 3, I argue for the following conditional: if the passions are motivational, then PASSIONATE EPISTEMOLOGY is false.\(^3\) In section 4, I discuss some potential outliers, namely, the status of the meditator’s intellectual wonder and joy that is directed at her clear and distinct perception of God. In section 5, I offer my final response to Shapiro. As we will see, matters are complicated. Although Descartes has principled reasons to exclude the passions from the search for truth, Shapiro is right that having one’s passions in order is relevant to a particular kind of knowledge, namely, self-knowledge. But that self-knowledge—the legitimate self-esteem involved in the first component of generosity—can only be attained once the Meditations is dispassionately completed.

1 Against PASSIONATE EPISTEMOLOGY

The central Shapiro piece that I am responding to (2005), clearly assumes a motivationalist reading of the passions—nowhere does Shapiro claim that the passions represent, and every relevant function of the passions in the Meditations that she describes must be cashed out in terms of motivation. Admittedly, Shapiro does not make that fully explicit. To complicate matters, Shapiro now clearly ascribes to a representationalist reading of the passions (2012). But that is irrelevant for the counterargument at hand. I am already bracketing a representationalist reading of the meditator’s passions, as I assume that such a view simply cannot work. Moreover, even if Shapiro has abandoned the motivationalist reading, there are other commentators who do ascribe to a motivationalist reading. Thus, as applied to

\(^3\)I assume, for the purposes of this paper, that the following conditional is true: if the passions are representational, then PASSIONATE EPISTEMOLOGY is false.
the meditator’s passions, it deserves our attention.

1.1 The Motivationalist Reading

Let us first get a handle on the claim that the passions are merely motivational. The motivationalist reading claims that the passions are non-intentional, affective states. Their function is merely to motivate subjects. As Descartes writes in *Passions* II.52:

> I observe, moreover, that the objects which stimulate the senses do not excite different passions in us because of differences in the objects, but only because of the various ways in which they may harm or benefit us or in general have importance for us. The function of all the passions consists solely in this, that they dispose our soul to want the things which nature deems useful for us, and to persist in this volition; and the same agitation of the spirits which normally causes the passions also disposes the body to make movements which help us to attain these things. (AT XI: 372/CSM I: 349, cf. Passions I.40, AT XI: 359/CSM I: 343).

Descartes claims that the function of the passions is to dispose the soul to want the things which nature deems useful for the mind-body composite, and to also dispose the body to move in the appropriate ways so as to attain those things. As Sean Greenberg puts it, “the function of the passions is in some way to dispose the soul to contribute to actions that serve to preserve the body” (Greenberg 20087: 723; see also Radner 2003). The way in which the passions dispose the soul is by being *motivational* (Ibid. 715). How exactly that plays out will depend on the kind of passion in question. For example, fear motivates the soul to flee and courage motivates the soul to fight (*Passions* I.40, AT XI: 359/CSM I: 343).
Note that, on the motivationalist reading, the function assigned to the passions is similar, but slightly different than the one assigned to sensations in the Sixth Meditation (Greenberg 2007: 717-7). There, Descartes assigns a biological function to sensations: “the proper purpose of the sensory perceptions given me by nature is simply to inform [significandum] the mind of what is beneficial or harmful for the composite of which the mind is a part” (Sixth Meditation, AT VII: 83/CSM II: 57). Insofar as sensations inform, many have argued that sensations must have representational content (De Rosa 2007, Hatfield 2013, Simmons 1999; cf. Gottlieb & Parvizian). But given Descartes’ strict distinction between sensations and passions (Passions I.27, AT XI: 349/CSM I: 338-9), it seems that passions and sensations have distinct sub-roles that work in concert to preserve the health and well-being of the mind-body composite. The function of a sensation is to inform the soul of what is beneficial or harmful for it while the function of a passion is to motivate the soul to achieve what is beneficial or harmful for it.

1.2 PASSIONATE EPISTEMOLOGY in the Meditations

There are many nitty gritty details that must be addressed to unpack fully the motivationalist reading. But I think we have enough on the table to examine a motivationalist reading of the passions in the Meditations. As I see it, Shapiro needs to substantiate the following claim to defend PASSIONATE EPISTEMOLOGY:

**Epistemically Significant Passion:** There exists some passion, $P$, that directly motivates the meditator into a major epistemic achievement (e.g. the attainment of an item of scientia) or a minor epistemic achievement (e.g. a conceptual clarification).

Indeed, this is exactly what Shapiro aims to do. Let us turn, then, to her narrative of the meditator’s passions.
1.2.1 Shapiro on the Meditator’s Passions

Though many readers might have never noticed the meditator’s passions, a close reading confirms that the meditator expresses a range of passions throughout her search for truth. According to Shapiro, these are not disconnected expressions of passion. Rather, the trajectory of the meditator’s passions indicates that “the meditator changes how he feels about things over the course of the *Meditations*” (2005: 24); in particular, the meditator’s feelings about skepticism are transformed.\(^4\)

The First Meditation begins with the meditator’s *desire* [*cupiam*] (*Passions* II.86) to establish something stable and lasting in the sciences (AT VII: 17/CSM II: 12). In pursuing this desire for knowledge, the meditator engages the well-known series of skeptical arguments that ultimately undermine her body of beliefs. Faced with skepticism, the meditator is in a state of fear [*timet*] and apprehension [*vereor*] (AT VII: 23/CSM II: 15; cf. *Passions* II. 59, III.174).

At this point, the meditator must either choose to continue her pursuit of knowledge (and thus run the risk of embracing skepticism), or to abandon it and return to the “pleasant illusion” that her pre-meditative beliefs are well-founded (Shapiro 2005: 24). Either way, “there is ground for trepidation” (Ibid.). The meditator accepts the risk of the first option, but by the end of the Sixth Meditation skepticism no longer has a disruptive effect on the meditator’s emotional life. Instead, the meditator confidently *laughs* (*Passions* II.124-6) skepticism away: “the exaggerated doubts of the last few days should be dismissed as laughable [*risu dignae*]” (AT VII: 89/CSM II: 61). Shapiro contends that if we are to take the meditator’s passions seriously (i.e. not reduce their presence to stylistic accident or rhetorical flourish), this drastic change in passion requires some explanation (2005:

\(^4\)In what follows, I shall primarily focus on the passions immediately related to the meditator’s pursuit of knowledge, as these are directly relevant to Shapiro’s account of Motivationalist *Passionate Epistemology*. Shapiro, however, catalogs a variety of other passions that the meditator undergoes (2005: 15-8).
Here is an *epistemological explanation* that might tempt some readers: the meditator's laughter is merely a trivial symptom of her having defeated skepticism through proving the existence of mind, God, and body. This would fall in line with Descartes' general solution for regulating the passions, namely, to make the passions subject to true knowledge (see, e.g., *Passions* II. AT XI: 436/CSM I: 379). Shapiro contends, however, that metaphysical knowledge alone cannot render skepticism laughable, because there is a significant sense in which the meditator remains vulnerable to skeptical scenarios. Part of the reason why skepticism originally led the meditator to fear and apprehension was the possibility that she might have a defective nature. Yet in the Sixth Meditation, the meditator learns that she cannot fully rule out this possibility, for her constitution *qua* mind-body union is susceptible to sensory deception and even true errors of nature (AT VII: 85/CSM II: 59; AT VII: 88/CSM II: 61). Strictly speaking, then, the meditator fully armed with the inventory of Cartesian metaphysics can still intelligibly regenerate skeptical scenarios. Hence one might expect the meditator to despair once again when the possibility of deception and error is reconsidered at the end of the Sixth Meditation. Instead, we find that the meditator’s

Thoughts about the weakness of his own nature are no longer invested with the same passions. What once made him fearful now makes him laugh; he feels differently about things. (2005: 25)

Therefore an appeal to metaphysical knowledge alone cannot explain the meditator’s laughter.

### 1.2.2 Shapiro on the Meditator’s Generosity

Shapiro proposes the following explanation: the meditator feels differently about skepticism because she has regulated her desire for knowledge through
acquiring the passion and virtue of generosity. The desire for knowledge that initiated the First Meditation was actually excessive: the meditator hoped to “never make a mistake again” (2005: 26). This is evidenced by the meditator’s plan to “hold back my assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable just as carefully as I do from those which are patently false” (First Meditation, AT VII: 18/CSM II: 12). Thus, when the skeptical arguments reveal her weaknesses, the meditator despairs for she may be incapable of satisfying her desire for knowledge. But in the last line of the Sixth Meditation, we find the meditator acknowledging her limitations: “in this human life we are often liable to make mistakes about particular things, and we must acknowledge the weakness of our nature” (AT VII: 90/CSM II: 62). This indicates that the meditator has transitioned from desiring absolute certainty in all of her beliefs to desiring to know that which she can know, and this is the key to fully defeating skepticism.

Generosity is well-suited to this task because it is the “general remedy for all disorders of the passions,” in particular vain desires (Passions III.161, AT XI: 454/CSM I: 388). Shapiro has two reasons for reading generosity into the Fourth Meditation. First, the Fourth Meditation seems to exemplify Descartes’s proposed method for acquiring generosity:

According to Descartes, one ‘may excite in oneself the passion and then acquire the virtue of generosity’ just by frequently considering ‘what free will is and how great the advantages are that come from a firm resolution to use it well.’ (Shapiro 1999: 252)

Indeed, the Fourth Meditation seems to involve such considerations. Second, and more importantly, Shapiro reads the meditator as actually acquiring generosity. Descartes defines generosity as follows:

[T]rue generosity, which causes a person’s self-esteem to be as great as it may legitimately be, has only two components. The first consists in his knowing that nothing truly belongs to him
but this freedom to dispose his volitions, and that he ought to be praised or blamed for no other reason than his using this freedom well or badly. The second consists in his feeling within himself a firm and constant resolution to use it well—that is, never to lack the will to undertake and carry out whatever he judges to be best. To do that is to pursue virtue in a perfect manner. (Passions III.153, AT XI: 445-446/CSM I: 384)

Shapiro argues that, in the Fourth Meditation, the meditator acquires both components proper to generosity—“the recognition on each of our parts that we have a free will, paired with the resolution to use our will well” (2005: 28)—through learning the method for avoiding error, and then resolving to adhere to the method.

Descartes explains that generosity remedies vain desires by demarcating the things that are within one's power or freedom to acquire from those which are not, thus leading one to value only those things whose acquisition depends on one's capacities (Passions III.156, AT XI: 448/CSM I: 385). Shapiro suggests that we can see such a change effected in the now generous meditator. By the end of the Fourth Meditation, the meditator still seeks the truth about fundamental reality, but she will not despair if she cannot know something, for “it is in the nature of a finite intellect to lack understanding of many things, and it is in the nature of a created intellect to be finite” (AT VII: 60/CSM II: 42). Through recognizing her cognitive weakness and vulnerability to error, the meditator combats the influences of skepticism, and can even laugh at it. However, the meditator's laughter at the end of the Sixth Meditation is not only directed at the “hyperbole of skeptical arguments”, but also at

Himself and his own excesses. His earlier aspirations to absolute certainty amount to wanting a superhuman degree of knowledge, and that desire was indeed ridiculous (2005: 30).
Shapiro’s reading implies that generosity and the regulation of the passions contributes to both minor and major epistemic achievements, and thus if right, would substantiate Epistemically Significant Passion. By regulating the meditator’s excessive desire for knowledge, generosity effectively leads the meditator to reconceive the aims of her metaphysical and epistemological project (a conceptual clarification, and thus a minor epistemic achievement). If the meditator did not undergo this transformation—instead sustaining her excessive desire for knowledge—she would have failed in her search for truth. But more importantly, insofar as knowledge of free will and adherence to the method for avoiding error amounts to generosity on Shapiro’s view, generosity is essential to the meditator’s success. For it is through adhering to the method for avoiding error that the meditator attains scientia of the real distinction between mind and body and the existence of the material world—a major epistemic achievement (2008: 461). This is why Shapiro claims that generosity is the “key to Cartesian metaphysics and epistemology” (Ibid. 459).

Parvizian (2016) has argued that generosity cannot be acquired in the Fourth Meditation. But even if one accepts Parvizian’s argument, Shapiro’s general narrative of the meditator’s passions remains—in some sense—intact. The meditator’s passions still—at least prima facie—demand explanation.

2 If the Passions are Motivational, then Passionate Epistemology is False

I will raise two arguments against Shapiro’s general narrative. First, I will contend that the tempting epistemological explanation of the regulation of the passions that Shapiro dismisses in passing—namely, that metaphysical knowledge can account for the regulation of the passions—is actually the most plausible explanation (if one wants to take the passions seri-
ously). And once that explanation is fully fleshed out, it turns out that the passions—in particular, the desire for knowledge and the laughter at skepticism—are not doing any real epistemic work. Second, I will argue that even though the meditator may experience passions, she must ignore them given her commitment to the method of doubt.

2.1 The Epistemological Explanation Reconsidered

The fundamental regulation in the meditator's passions, according to Shapiro, is in reeling in the excessive desire for knowledge. This regulation allows the meditator to transition from being in a state of dread and fear in the face of skepticism, to eventually laughing it off:

At the beginning of the *Meditations*, the meditator seems to desire absolute certainty about everything. His hope appears to be to never make a mistake again. Thus, he does not find the distinction between opinions which are 'patently false' and those which are not 'completely certain and indubitable' significant in his quest for knowledge, for only if all his beliefs are true can he hope to go forward from them to further beliefs and ultimately to a body of knowledge. Yet by the end of the work, his desire seems to be for something subtly different. He is still seeking the truth, but he no longer demands to be assured that *all* his beliefs are true. In the last lines of the *Meditations*, the meditator is reconciled to the commonsensical notion that the will makes mistakes.

I contend that this is simply a false description of the meditator's initial desire for knowledge, and that this interpretive error is what leads to the more general claim that the passions are regulated. Shapiro explicitly ascribes the following desire to the meditator in the First Meditation:
**EXCESSIVE EPISTEMIC DESIRE:** The meditator has a desire to raise all of her beliefs to the status of scientia. (2005: 36)

Shapiro then explicitly ascribes the following desire to the meditator at the end of the Sixth Meditation:

**PROPER EPISTEMIC DESIRE:** The meditator has a desire for all relevant and possible scientia. (Ibid.)

While I see textual evidence for PROPER EPISTEMIC DESIRE throughout the Meditations (not just in the Sixth Meditation), there simply is no textual evidence for EXCESSIVE EPISTEMIC DESIRE, that is, a text where the meditator says she desires scientia about everything. Indeed, the initial premise of the Meditations is that the meditator pre-theoretically realized that most of her beliefs were false (First Meditation, AT VII: 17/CSM II: 12). Thus it would be odd for the meditator to then desire, in the First Meditation, to demonstrate that all of her pre-theoretical beliefs were actually true. Shapiro seems to be mistaking Descartes’ high—and seemingly excessive—standards for scientia in the First Meditation with EXCESSIVE EPISTEMIC DESIRE. That is:

**SCIENTIA STANDARDS:** A belief (or judgment) that p is scientia for a subject, S iff S believes that p, p is true, & S has absolute certainty that p.\(^5\)

Descartes does clearly ascribe—at least implicitly—to SCIENTIA STANDARDS in the First Meditation. The task of the Meditations, then, is not to regulate the desire for scientia, but rather to uphold faithfully SCIENTIA STANDARDS. What would constitute hard evidence for EXCESSIVE EPISTEMIC DESIRE would be texts that show a consistent tug and pull between EXCESSIVE EPISTEMIC DESIRE and SCIENTIA STANDARDS. That is, we would need at least a few cases where the meditator explicitly says: ‘I do have scientia in

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\(^5\)For a full account of my interpretation of scientia, in particular the nature of absolute certainty see (redacted).
my judgment that \( p' \) (where \( p \) is obscure and confused) but then she later realizes that her ‘judgment that \( p \) does not meet the standards of scientia’. If we were to see an abandonment of these specific kinds of epistemic mistakes, we might be able to say that the excesses in the meditator’s desire for knowledge are eventually trimmed down. But that’s simply not the case. While there is a question of how faithful the meditator is to Scientia Standards, that concern does not revolve around whether the meditator fails to do so because she has Excessive Epistemic Desire. Rather, it is about the scope of hyperbolic doubt, and whether Descartes sneaks anything in through the back door. There is no commentator (that I know of) who argues that the meditator initially desires scientia about everything in the face of skepticism, and that her purported task is to transform a pre-theoretical body of (allegedly) false beliefs into a systematic body of genuine scientia.

Once we see that Excessive Epistemic Desire cannot be attributed to the meditator, we can then recognize that Shapiro’s account of the meditator’s laughter at the end of the Sixth Meditation is equally, if not more problematic. Recall, Shapiro states that the meditator does not really defeat the skepticism of the First Meditation:

\begin{quote}
At the end of the Meditations the meditator admits that he does go wrong about many things; indeed, he recognizes that he is susceptible to ‘true errors of nature’ and that ‘the nature of man as a combination of mind and body is such that it is bound to mislead him from time to time’. Surely, so long as he is prone to these sorts of errors, error which are in principle unavoidable, he has not banished the specter of his skepticism. At the beginning of the Meditations it is just this possibility that he might go wrong unwittingly by his nature that leads him to despair.

Yet at the end of the work, the possibility of such mistakes no longer leaves the meditator in such a desperate state. One might say that his thoughts about the weakness of his own nature are
no longer invested with the same passions. What once made him fearful now makes him laugh; he feels differently about things. (2005: 25)

One can see clearly here why Shapiro claims that the passions are epistemically significant to the *Meditations*. It is because the meditator does not really defeat skepticism through any rational argumentation. As such, the meditator is still susceptible to the dread and fear she experienced at the end of the First Meditation. The only way of continuing forward is to change how she feels about skeptical scenarios, which is ultimately a matter of a change in her desire for knowledge (vis-à-vis a new understanding of self afforded to her by generosity).

But on any standard and plausible reading of what Descartes is doing, it is clear that he does think that he defeats skepticism through, in part, the acquisition of metaphysical knowledge. Indeed, in trying to find a role for the meditator’s passions, Shapiro implicitly undermines the entire stated project of the *Meditations*.

Allow me to explain. There are two theodicies in the *Meditations*: the *epistemic theodicy* of the Fourth Meditation, and the *sensory theodicy* of the Sixth Meditation. In the Fourth Meditation, Descartes’ task is to show that God does not deceive us about theoretical matters, that is, he is not the source of any of our false theoretical judgments. Descartes’ solution is to say that, although false judgments do obtain, their real source lies in us, not God. The privation of false judgments arises because of the disparity between the scopes of the intellect and will. This is standard fare.

But in the Sixth Meditation, Descartes is concerned with a different problem of deception: namely, a kind of deception in the senses that harms the mind-body composite. Consider *dropsy-style cases*. Dropsy is a token sensation that misleads a subject, $S$, in a way such that she is liable to harm her health and survival. For in dropsy $S$ feel thirsty when drinking would be harmful, and there are no internal phenomenal cues to detect that one
is not in normal circumstances. The reason why this is problematic, the thought goes, is because Descartes claims that God gave us sensations—*the best of all possible sensations*—which have the biological function of preserving our health (Sixth Meditation, AT VII: 87-8/CSM II: 60). Yet dropsy does not fulfill that function at all.

Descartes’ response here is both subtle and understudied. In this context, I cannot fully lay out the sensory theodicy. But the strategy, in principle, will be the same as the Fourth Meditation. According to Descartes, when sensations are considered at the *type-level*, we must admit that God gave us the best of all possible sensation types. But when considered at the *token-level*—as instantiated in finite mind-body composites—it is possible that a token sensation can be harmful to the mind-body composite. But this does not obtain due to any malicious intention on the part of God. Rather, it arises due to the finite and therefore imperfect *institution of nature* between brain impressions and sensations. An aberrant motion in the body can lead us to form a brain impression that, although normally corresponds to a health-conducive sensation, now gives rise to a harmful sensation (Sixth Meditation AT VII: 88-9/CSM II: 61). As such, the source of the error in dropsy is not God; rather, its possibility is inevitable because of the finitude of the mind-body composite.

What this shows is that Shapiro’s claim that dropsy-style cases regenerates skeptical scenarios is misplaced (and by saying that certain sensory errors are inevitable due to our design, it comes dangerously close to implying that Descartes never really rules out that God is a deceiver). But Descartes does have a response. Yes, mind-body composites can undergo dropsy. But God, being benevolent and non-deceptive, has given the mind-body composite epistemic and cognitive tools to detect when its sensory system is functioning normally, and when it is not.

The error in dropsy-style cases is two-fold. First, in dropsy, the thirst sensation tells the mind-body composite that it needs to drink. As such,
there is a kind of misleading evidence. Then, based on that evidence, the mind-body composite falsely judges that it needs to drink. While the first kind of error is in some sense unavoidable, it is still due to our finite nature (not God’s intended design). But more importantly, the second error is avoidable, for once the mind-body composite learns that she has such an affliction, armed with the Truth Rule (more below) she can be more careful about what judgments she makes based on her thirst sensations. The real error—i.e. falsity in judgments—is avoidable. As such, the laughter at the end of the Sixth Meditation is a symptom of the meditator’s epistemological and metaphysical accomplishments. She now knows that God exists and is not a deceiver, which implies that ‘it would therefore be a contradiction that anything should be created by him which positively tends toward falsehood’ (Second Replies, AT VII: 144/CSM II: 103; emphasis added). Once she realized this, engaging skeptical scenarios is a laughable affair.

2.2 The Method of Doubt and the Passions

According to Shapiro, part of the reason why the presence of the passions poses a challenge for Rationalist Epistemology is that the passions have—in part—physiological origins. As such, the presence of the passions in the Meditations may call us to challenge the standard view of a disembodied meditator who relies on the intellect alone:

   If the meditator were the disembodied thinking thing that Descartes’ dualism seems to suggest is possible, then he should not be feeling any passions at all. (2005: 20; see also 23)

It is important that we consider this possibility. All I have shown, up until now, is that the meditator’s passions do not undergo the regulation that Shapiro envisions. Nonetheless, I have left open that the meditator does experience passions, which still raises concerns for the metaphysics and epistemology of the Meditations.
However, I think this question is a bit misguided. One first needs to settle on Descartes’ method in the *Meditations*, as well as the scope of Descartes’ doubt, before asking why he offers descriptions of the passions. Without independent evidence, it is a backward explanatory order to take passing references to the meditator’s passions as indicating (or even seeming to indicate) fundamental epistemological commitments, and to then re-read Descartes’ entire epistemology. Descartes’ epistemology is not only laid out in the *Meditations*, but throughout much of Descartes’ work: the *Discourse on Method*, the *Principles of Philosophy*, and the *Objections and Replies*. We have a good sense of his epistemology. If we seek a textually based and systematic interpretation of the meditator’s passions, we first need to be clear about Descartes’ fundamental epistemological commitments, and then think about how those commitments are expressed and conveyed to the confused meditator.

I am not here to lay out what I take to be canonical Cartesian epistemology. But here are two important epistemological assumptions:

1. The scope of the doubt in the First Meditation is fully hyperbolic.

2. The ultimate source of *scientia* is clear and distinct perception, and the method for acquiring *scientia* is established by the Fifth Meditation.

What assumptions (1) and (2) entail is that, in the context of the *Meditations*, there is absolutely no kind of mental state—other than clear and distinct perceptions—that can serve as grounds for *scientia*. That is not to say that other mental states are not ultimately important in the life of the Cartesian mind, once the *Meditations* is completed. But the task of the *Meditations* is defeating hyperbolic doubt. Insofar as there is—for all intents and purposes—an evil genius deceiving the meditator, the meditator must suspend judgment about every kind of mental state other than clear and distinct perception. Indeed, this is required by the Truth Rule:
**Truth Rule:** A subject, \( S \), should not judge that \( p \) unless \( S \) is occurrently clearly and distinctly perceiving that \( p \). (Third Meditation, AT VII: 35/CSM II: 24; Fourth Meditation, AT VII: 60-1/CSM II: 41)

Keeping the **Truth Rule** in mind, taking the meditator’s passions seriously (at least epistemically seriously) generates unresolvable inconsistencies for Descartes. Recall, the motivationalist reading claims that the function of the passions is to motivate us to want what nature deems useful for the mind-body composite, and to dispose the body to move in the appropriate ways so as to attain those things. Bracketing the possibility of intellectual passions in the *Meditations* for now (we will consider them in section 4), the meditator is not justified in following through with the impulses of the passions. This is ultimately because the meditator does not know that she has a body until she is working through the Sixth Meditation. Indeed, throughout the *Meditations*, the meditator is constantly resisting the thought that her real nature consists in a corporeal thing. As such, the passions are a hindrance, not an aid to the meditator’s epistemic progress. They must be resisted.

Why, then, does Descartes describe the meditator’s passions while the meditator is merely a *res cogitans*? Is there an inconsistency there? Here, I think that Shapiro confuses an epistemic claim with a metaphysical claim, which (in part) gets the whole question of *Passionate Epistemology* up and running. Shapiro implies that **Rationalist Epistemology** requires that the meditator is disembodied:

**Disembodied Meditator:** Rationalist Epistemology is true iff the meditator is disembodied.

Conversely:

**Embodied Meditator:** Passionate Epistemology is true iff the meditator is embodied.
Both Disembodied Meditator and Embodied Meditator are false. For in actuality the meditator is embodied. The relevant question is whether the meditator knows this. We must distinguish, then, two claims:

**Metaphysical Claim:** The meditator, in actuality, is embodied.

**Epistemic Claim:** The meditator does not know whether she is embodied until the Sixth Meditation.

Once we distinguish these claims, we can explain why the meditator experiences the passions, and perhaps why Descartes references them. Skepticism about whether the body exists in no ways suppresses passive perceptions that the body induces. The meditator will still experience passions, for she is—albeit unkowningly—embodied. Nonetheless, her task is to ignore the passions and remain committed to the method of doubt.

### 3 Intellectual Wonder and Joy

Thus far, I have been assuming that the passions have physiological origins. That, in part, was a dialectical choice. The revisionary implications of **Passionate Epistemology** become live only when we’re speaking of passions that depend on the body. Indeed, almost all the passions Shapiro catalogs do have physiological origins. However, Descartes does recognize intellectual passions, passions that arises from purely mental, and not physiological changes. As such, one might argue that intellectual passions could contribute to the meditator’s epistemic progress, without generating any inconsistencies with Descartes’ system. Call this **Weak Passionate Epistemology**.

At the end of the Third Meditation, there are two passions that are expressed which should be read as intellectual in nature: namely, *wonder* and *joy*. At the end of the Third Meditation, the meditator has now worked through the cosmological argument. She now pauses to reflect:
I should like to pause here and spend some time in the contemplation of God; to reflect on his attributes, and to gaze with wonder and adoration on the beauty of this immense light, so far as the eye of my darkened intellect can bear it. For just as we believe through faith that the supreme happiness of the next life consists solely in the contemplation of the divine majesty, so experience tells us that this same contemplation, albeit much less perfect, enables us to know the greatest joy of which we are capable in this life. (AT VII: 52/CSM II: 36)

Amy Schmitter offers the most plausible reading of what’s going on here. Let us first examine wonder. Schmitter writes:

Wonder has a special status among the passions: it has no opposite, and it involves no change in the heart or in the blood. That is because ‘its object is not good or evil, but only knowledge of the thing that we wonder at’. Wonder, however, is useful, as are the other passions, for they all ‘strengthen and prolong thoughts in the soul which it is good for the soul to preserve and which otherwise might easily be erased from it’. But whereas the other passions make us take note of those objects that appear good or evil for the mind-body union, wonder can be directed at things ‘which merely appear unusual’. Indeed, wonder is useful particularly insofar as it ‘makes us learn and retain in our memory things of which we were previously ignorant’. The function of wonder, then, is to drive us from ignorance and towards the search for truth. Nor is its motivational force restricted to knowledge that has instrumental value for our preservation as human beings. (2002: 101)

The thought here is that meditator’s wonder is epistemically significant because it strengthens and prolongs—i.e. preserves—the meditator’s knowl-
edge of God. Let us make this precise:

**Preservation Through Wonder:** In the right circumstances, the wonder of a subject, $S$, directed at knowledge that $p$, is epistemically significant because it has a *preservative function*: it helps $S$ sustain occurrent awareness of knowledge that $p$, and helps $S$ retain the knowledge that $p$ in memory.

As for joy, Schmitter writes:

Intellectual love and joy are not subject to any confusion about their causes and effects (unlike the bodily passions), it seems they will always motivate and signal the increasing perfection of the thinking soul. And since knowledge, the acquisition of truth, must count as the primary end of the activities proper to the thinking soul, we thinkers should love knowledge. If we pursue knowledge and are (regularly) rewarded by joy, then we have as good evidence as we could want of our success at joining ourselves to real knowledge, and thus of our increasing perfection. So, a constant joy in the activity of thinking is a sign of the truth achieved thereby. Certainly, Descartes suggests time and again that clear and distinct perceiving brings us joy in proportion to their clarity and distinctness. The most dramatic avowal of this connection appears in the Third Meditation, where the narrator declares that the contemplation of God and of our dependence on God – a contemplation of the perfection of our soul that perfects it yet further – constitutes “the greatest joy of which we are capable in this life.” By joining ourselves to God in loving, devoted contemplation, we experience a joy that marks the truth of our perceiving.

The thought here is that the meditator's joy is epistemically significant because it is a marker that she is securing genuine knowledge. Let us make this precise:
**JOY RULE:** In the right circumstances, when a subject, S, experiences intellectual joy upon acquiring some perception that p, that joy is a marker of the truth and certainty of that perception that p, i.e. joy indicates the possession of a knowledge that p.

These are interesting proposals. However, while in a different context Descartes may be justified in ascribing to both PRESERVATION THROUGH WONDER and Joy Rule, the meditator cannot do so in the Third Meditation.

On PRESERVATION THROUGH WONDER: as far as the meditator is concerned, her memory may be defective. The meditator does not know that her memory is reliable until the end of the Sixth Meditation. While wonder may help preserve certain contents in memory, the meditator is not justified in relying on those memory reports at this point. Indeed, wonder does not come up anywhere else in the Meditations, and perhaps rightfully so. As for strengthening an occurrent clear and distinct perception of God at the end of the Third Meditation, it is not clear how this will work. Descartes claims that clear and distinct perceptions are fleeting *synchronic events*. And nowhere else does he claim that wonder can help us sustain a clear and distinct perception. Perhaps wonder can strengthen and prolong some kinds of mental states; but in a state of clear and distinct perception, it is exclusively the intellect that is engaged. Indeed, it is not even clear if the wonder directed at the idea of God is of a clear and distinct perception of God or the memory of the clear and distinct perception of God’s existence.\(^6\)

On the JOY RULE: The JOY RULE is epistemically dependent on the TRUTH RULE. However, in the Third Meditation the TRUTH RULE has yet to be established, even though it is entertained at the beginning of this meditation. It would be highly revisionary—and plainly false—to claim that the meditator’s initial guide to truth and certainty is whether she experiences intellectual joy while having a clear and distinct perception.

Again, this is not to say that PRESERVATION THROUGH WONDER and the\(^6\) citations
The Joy Rule may be epistemically significant in other contexts after one has completed the Meditations. But in the context of the Meditations they simply cannot be doing any real work. Weak Passionate Epistemology is false.

4 The Passions and Self-Knowledge

I submit that Passionate Epistemology is false. But matters are complicated. As stipulated, Passionate Epistemology is supposed to figure into the foundational epistemological and metaphysical work of the Meditations. Our task was to see whether acquiring scientia requires the meditator to have both her thoughts and feelings in order. While that is not the case, it is certainly true that post-Meditations, the regulation of the passions is epistemically significant in practical matters, and is relevant to the acquisition of a certain kind of self-knowledge. As Shapiro writes:

Part of knowing, for Descartes, is knowing who one is, and this self-knowledge essentially involves feeling a certain way toward oneself. This feeling of the passion of generosity, in turn informs one’s other thoughts. So, on this reading of the place of the passions in the Meditations, epistemology is not to be divorced from one’s affective life. Knowledge involves self-knowledge, which is emotionally laden. Knowing involves not only having one’s thoughts in order, but also having one’s feelings in order. (2005: 30).

Shapiro is on to something crucial here. However, I would modulate this claim by saying that moral (not theoretical) knowledge requires having one’s feelings in order. As Descartes tells us in his account of the generous person, the generous person understands that the only thing that truly belongs to her is the freedom to dispose of her volitions. She understands
her-self as a res volans (Brown 2006, Mihali 2011, Parvizian 2016). Understanding that a (virtuous) will is the only grounds for self-esteem is an epistemological achievement that requires—in part—a regulation of the passions. But that self-knowledge can only be attained once (amongst other things) the Meditations is dispassionately completed.

References


