The model of the theater in Descartes' writings

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ABSTRACT. — *Descartes did not write about theater as an art, but often referred to the theater as a paradigm of a possible relation between man and his passions. The position of spectator enables us to witness events that are representations and to take part in them in a fictional sense without having to be subject to the effects that are ordinarily created by the passions when they are experienced directly, as opposed to merely acted out or represented. Theater has no metaphysical meaning, and is not a symbol or image of the world, but merely serves as a model or example of a relation to the passions that can be intense, sometimes even more so than in real life, but that, in retaining the distance inherent to attending a performance, preserves the inner part of the soul, that is, its liberty. Theater (but also novel reading) exemplifies the essential possibility in Cartesian morality of converting passions into interior emotions, without resorting to rules or to discipline, but simply by adopting the position of a spectator. Seeing passions represented on a stage thus shows how it is possible for everyone to play with their passions and establish a strategic relation with themselves, without reduction or repression of affectivity and without one part of the soul having to bear the burden of dominating the others. Although Descartes' philosophy does not discuss theater as a specific activity, the presence of theater (and other games or fictions) within human activities can serve as an illustration of how the Cartesian subject extends to the realm of passions the relation of representation that characterizes the relation between the mind and all ideas, including the idea of itself. The subject can feel the pleasure of experiencing his passions as if he were at the theater, yet does not make a spectacle of himself.*

RÉSUMÉ. — *Descartes n'a pas fait de réflexion sur le théâtre en tant qu'art, mais il s'est souvent référé au théâtre comme paradigme d'un possible rapport de l'homme avec ses passions. La position de spectateur nous permet d'assister à des événements qui sont des représentations et à y prendre part fictivement sans en subir les effets ordinairement produits par les passions lorsqu'elles sont directement vécues et non pas seulement jouées ou représentées. Le théâtre n'a pas de signification métaphysique, il n'est pas le symbole ou l'image du monde, il sert seulement de modèle ou d'exemple d'un rapport aux passions qui peut être intense, quelquefois même plus intense que dans la réalité mais, gardant la distance inhérente au fait d'assister à un spectacle, préserve l'intérieur de l'âme, c'est-à-dire sa liberté. Le théâtre (mais aussi la lecture des romans) exemplifie la possibilité, essentielle dans la morale cartésienne, de convertir des passions en émotions intérieures, sans recourir à des règles ou à une discipline, simplement en se mettant dans la position de spectateur. Ainsi « voir représenter » des passions sur une scène montre aussi qu'il est possible à tout un chacun de jouer avec ses passions, d'instaurer un rapport stratégique avec soi-même, sans réduction ou répression de l'affectivité et sans qu'une partie de l'âme*

ait la charge de dominer les autres. Si la philosophie de Descartes n'a rien à dire sur le théâtre comme activité spécifique, la présence du théâtre (et autres jeux ou fictions) dans les activités humaines peut servir d'illustration de la façon dont le sujet cartésien étend à la vie passionnelle la relation de représentation qui caractérise le rapport de l'esprit aux idées de toutes les autres choses, y compris à l'idée de lui-même. Le sujet ressent le plaisir d'éprouver ses passions comme s'il était au théâtre mais ne se donne pas lui-même en spectacle.

"The world as theater," "all the world's a stage": these expressions and comparisons have been part of philosophy since the earliest Greek thinkers. Descartes turns to these ideas when he studies the passions of the soul and confides to Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia his reflections on morality, which are always connected to the role of the passions in human life and the use that man can make of them. But he does not make theater a symbol of the world, nor give a metaphysical meaning to this entertainment; he merely makes it one example among others (including novel reading, and physical exercise) of a possible means of experiencing the passions, which may be intense and even violent, without being subject to the effects that they generally cause in ordinary life. It is not therefore a question of the nature of the theater as art, nor of a metaphysics of the theater, but solely of the relation between the spectator of tragedies and the passions that are represented on the stage by means of characters played by actors. Descartes invites or encourages "man with his passions" to approach the position of the spectator and to experience the passions that affect him, in his life as a real man, as if these passions were merely performed in the theater, and so to experience them deeply and even intensely but with the knowledge that the events or actions that cause them are fictional or represented.

For Descartes, the position of the spectator is a paradigm for the possibility of a free and positive relation between man and his passions, which is not only recreational and entertaining, such as observing "the greenery of a wood, the colors of a flower, the flight of a bird,"[1] but educational in that it teaches or demonstrates the possibility of dissociating the affective substance of the passions from the actions or judgments to which they lead. The error that we ordinarily commit here is similar to that which we unfailingly commit when we assume that light is a property of so-called luminous bodies rather than an "impression" produced in the soul of the spectator by certain movements of material bodies.

1. Letter to Elisabeth, May or June 1645, in Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes, *The Correspondence between Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), trans. and ed. Lisa Shapiro, 92.

At the theater, we do not believe that people are really killing one another, or that the misfortunes that befall them are real misfortunes. At the theater, by the very fact of our position in the auditorium, we know that what we see on the stage is a representation of actions and events, and that we are witnessing actors playing roles and characters. The theater is the quintessential place of representation: where a performance is staged that is endlessly repeatable, of a play that would otherwise remain only in virtual form. At the theater, the act of representation actualizes and makes visible a virtual and potential existence. But it also presents spectators with passions that they experience through sympathy with the actors subjected to misfortunes, and converts emotions experienced "in the innermost depths of the soul" into represented emotions that cannot harm the spectator, who for this very reason is put in the position of observing and understanding that which escapes him when he experiences these passions in real life rather than seeing them represented on the stage. Theater—like the novel, but in a different way—embodies fiction, the pleasure involved in seeing fictions because they simulate passions that are troublesome and unpleasant in real life. Might it not, then, be simpler not to attend these tragic representations and to reject all forms of representation? Or might this attitude, advocated by both past and present opponents of fictional performances, not equate to "living without philosophizing" which, significantly, Descartes saw as "having one's eyes closed without ever trying to open them"? For to see the passions represented is also to face them, not directly but through the process of reflection that the position of spectator naturally makes possible, and that Descartes encourages us to imitate as if it were an exercise, an experiment, a practice, or a task. Here, seeing is a form of taking action, since the spectator who feels that he is susceptible to passions finds in himself a capacity to be moved by human situations that do not concern him directly, an active connection to men in general. The theater as a paradigm allowing one to represent oneself as a subject capable of feeling passions is an application of the Cartesian method of the search for comparisons, analogies, and models of representation, all as a means of gaining a better understanding of phenomena.

Therefore, for example, the undetectable parts of material bodies must be imagined on the model of their detectable, that is, their visible parts. The difference between the invisible and the visible is only a difference of scale, but by rights, and especially if one has the appropriate instruments, it should be possible to make everything in these bodies visible, and thereby knowable.[2] Let us take the example of the human body: from the descriptions of the *Treatise on Man* up to

2. See René Descartes, *The Principles of Philosophy*, trans. Valentine Miller and Reese Miller (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1982), Part IV, articles 201 and 203, 283–84 and 285–86.

his final writings on the description of the human body, Descartes returns to analogies comparing artificial machines and the human or animal body, a machine created by God. Why this paradigm of a machine? Purely because it makes visible the interior of the body, which is no different in nature to that which we see on the outside. The machine is the ideal example of a complex structure where the eye, guided by science, can distinguish the parts that make up the machine, and conclude on this basis that the functioning of the machine does not require a small controlling soul but simply the adjustment of the parts by one another, in such a way that they work together as a whole. The body is spread out before the eyes of the experimenter, as if on a dissecting table, its structure is unfolded in space, it is presented to the spectator as a diagram. We should also consider the use of engravings, the analysis of which shows that images are like diagrams whose function is to represent things, which they accomplish more effectively by distinguishing themselves from the originals rather than by resembling them. There is no resemblance between a watch and the body of a man or an animal, nor between a blind man's cane and the movement of light rays, but, perhaps because of this very lack of resemblance, the one can represent and allow understanding of the other. Theater is not an imitation of men's real lives, in fact it even seems to have a mythological dimension in Descartes' view (it involves dreadful, heroic, tragic deeds) allowing a sort of magnification of the passions that provides the spectator with the reflexive pleasure of seeing great (heroic) passions represented and of sympathizing with those who seem to be directly affected by them.[3] The simulation of reality (making real, creating the illusion that we are seeing something real) undoubtedly produces surprise or even fear, but does not elicit the pleasure of seeing that is also the pleasure of understanding. Inversely, by being aware that we are faced with a representation and not a doubling or copy of reality, by constantly keeping it in mind that we are at the theater and not in the world, and so by letting go, in a sense, of worldly interests, we are raised up or, at least, we can imagine ourselves to be raised up above our real condition and to be adopting, with regard to ourselves and the world in general, the perspective of a disinterested spectator, in the active sense of this term, which is very close to an attitude of generosity. The mythical character of the events that are performed on the stage of the Cartesian theater ("the strange adventures we see represented on the stage") also seems to emphasize the connection between the elevation of the soul and the instruction that the subject draws, by means of his own reflection, from the spectacle of "strange" things, that is, also in a sense strange or alien to him, a substantial being made of soul and body.[4]

3. René Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul and Other Late Philosophical Writings*, trans. Michael Moriarty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), article 187, 271.

4. Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, article 94, 233.

The references to the theater in the letters and the *Passions of the Soul* extend into the realm of morality the Cartesian search for that which we might already call objectivity: this objectivity is achieved by distinguishing, from as early as the *Treatise on Light*, the experience of light from that which produces it in the so-called luminous bodies; by seeking, among the ideas that are all equally modes of my thought, those that could not have been created by me; and by separating, from the emotions caused by passions, the pleasures that the spectating soul enjoys by itself and feels within itself.

If the comparison with the theater is intended to encourage the subject to consider the events that befall and affect him as if they were a play performed on a stage, and if Descartes' reflections here take on a Stoic attitude, nonetheless, even in this domain, the concept has above all a representational function. This is, within the context of a "physical" explanation of the passions, to allow the subject to create a representation of what he lives and experiences, to make it visible and, by doing so, to distinguish himself or at least distance himself from it.[5]

The reference to the theater, which seems to be made in passing, does not simply illustrate the possibility of dissociating the matter and even the obvious significance of emotion from the "pleasure in feeling ourselves stirred by all kinds of passions," a distinction of the utmost importance that leads to the astonishing breakthrough concerning the "interior emotions of the soul" in articles 147 and 148.[6] It also has a role or a practical use in demonstrating concretely that by attending a performance we naturally, without any effort or preparation, convert the immediate significance of the passions (especially feelings of sadness) into a reflective significance, and that we can therefore sense or feel passions without allowing ourselves to be led by them beyond what is actually experienced. The performance elicits and recreates the passion of admiration, the first of all the passions in Cartesian theory, the purest or most disinterested of the passions because it does not direct us to action and consists purely in the fact of being affected by the event itself, rather than by the meaning that it has in the eyes of men who are always more or less persuaded of the reality, importance, and seriousness of their own affairs. Of course, it is infinitely more difficult—Descartes in no way fails to recognize this—to see oneself and consider that which affects us as we see actors on the stage and feel pity for whatever happens to them. But

5. Letter to Elisabeth, October 6, 1645: "It is easy to prove that the pleasure of the soul in which true happiness consists is not inseparable from the gaiety and ease of the body, as much from the example of tragedies, which please us more the more they excite sadness in us, as from those of the exercises of the body, such as hunting, tennis, and other similar exercises, which do not cease to be agreeable even if they are very difficult. We even find that often fatigue and difficulty augment pleasure." Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes, *Correspondence*, 117–18.

6. Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, article 94, 233.

the reflective operation that the subject-as-spectator discovers in himself when viewing a performance is not different from that which helps him, or can help him, to overcome the adversity of "fortune." Our position as spectator, as a subject who ad-mires, or *wonders at,* that which unfolds before us as a spectacle, therefore proves, just as the step is a proof of movement, that there exists in each of us—this shift from oneself to the human in general is essential here—an ability to resist that which affects us without in any way ceasing to be affected, without becoming insensitive, which Descartes sees as the false figure of the "sage."

The ad-miration that the performance recreates and elicits implies that the subject has withdrawn from what he sees, and that when he sees himself undergo or suffer something, it is not only himself that he sees, but his human nature composed of body and soul, whose functioning, described in the sixth *Meditation*, is largely independent of man's free will. This is not a doubling into a self-as-subject and a self-as-object, but rather a separation within the soul itself, whose own means are determined judgments about good and bad, and the union of the soul and the body. This distinction and this union between the soul on the one hand—the soul alone but understood more as the will than as a thinking thing—and, on the other hand, the union of the soul and the body, the human assemblage whose actions and reactions must first be considered with reference to the institution of nature, give a basis and an epistemological and metaphysical foundation to the methodological artifice of the performance.

The soul acting as a spectator of what happens to the assemblage is not here the eye of the spectator of natural phenomena, but an ability to resist that which affects it through the body, a "show of [the soul's] strength."[7] The position of the spectator is here an active posture, the consequence of a determination of the will, and not the symbol or image of the rather cynical detachment of the man who observes men busying themselves around him as if they were ghosts or automata. The man who decides to consider the events that he experiences as if they were events represented on a stage, as things acted rather than real, converts the reality of the events that actually affect him into the unreality of a performance. As a result, these events, as in a performance, only reach the exterior of the soul, while its interior is maintained and preserved by the interior emotions that depend only on the soul itself, an affect of the soul by its own action, that is, by the activity of its reflection upon itself. For the performance to be not only entertaining or recreational but, in a broad sense, therapeutic, and for it to act on the soul as a remedy and not a simple diversion, the soul must make use of resources that belong to it alone, such as those produced by its reflection upon itself, and, of course, the soul

7. Letter to Elisabeth, May 18, 1645, Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes, *Correspondence*, 87, discussed at length below.

must also know this, which only philosophy can teach it. The soul must have an interiority, that is, a power, a strength of its own, that is incommensurable with the strengths and powers outside it.

The "substance" of the passions and of the emotions is the same. Descartes does not provide any example of an emotion that is not a passion, nor of a passion that is not accompanied by an emotion of the soul. So what is the difference between them? At the very least, the fact that most of the time the passions are presented as a spectacle, at least for the one who experiences them, but also for others: tears, cries, visible changes of expression, behavior, or movement, etc. The passions often occupy the central place on the stage in men's real lives. Conversely, the interior emotions are not manifested, and do not appear externally, not even for the subject who experiences them silently, as if privately, in his own sphere of belonging, as Husserl would put it. They give the subject a firm position and a steadfastness that allow him to distance himself or shelter himself from "fortune" and to imagine the consequences of fortune as if they were part of a performance. While comparing the relation of the subject to his passions with the relation of the spectator to a tragedy performed on a stage, Descartes does not specify the ontological status of that which affects the subject—it is important to note that he never says that it is apparent or illusory, or that the world is a dream, etc. The image of the performance—like that of the machine—offers an understandable and purely functional model of the world, understood as a theater of human affairs. It provides a representation that can become an activity or a practice, or again a relation to oneself that is not speculative but practical, an activity of transformation—changing one's desires—, an act of decision or resolution that may also lead to a technique of consolation, as Michaël Fœssel has tried to show in a recent book.[8] The title of the second chapter of this work, "Metaphor as method," is highly relevant to the subject at hand, since the performance is an image, a metaphor for the method that must be adopted in life in order to maintain one's freedom and the use of one's reason, which the passions can take away if they are experienced too closely. The method is not therefore correctional and repressive—mortification of the senses, prohibition of performance, scorn and contempt for the world—but instead consists above all of practicing one's diversion wisely so that one is not carried away by the course of events, as if by a current. This attitude assumes that we are never completely "embarked" on this current, and that we always retain, with the use of our reason, the possibility for diversion, by representing the world and the things that befall us as if we belong to this world as a performance rather than experiencing it without a representational distance.

8. Michaël Fœssel, *Le Temps de la consolation* (Paris: Seuil, 2015).

With, and by means of, the comparison with theater, Descartes undoubtedly seeks to persuade the reader of the *Passions of the Soul*, and Princess Elisabeth in the letters of 1645, that it is possible to establish a positive and just relation to the self and to others—including the throes of fortune—that does not depend on a knowledge of man's purposes, nor on an interpretation of the order of the world, nor on theology, and nor—but this perhaps amounts to the same thing—on a philosophy of history. In other words, a relation that does not aim to achieve a knowledge of one's origin and destination so much as provide the subject with self-contentment. Let us now turn toward these serious and profound texts in which Descartes seems to have expressed the essence of his reflections on morality.

1. Articles 94, 147, and 148 from the Passions of the Soul

Let us briefly recall what Descartes considers to be the only real drawback of the passions, which is, besides, connected to the way in which nature has placed them within us (for the good or the utility of the assemblage): they place an excessive value on that which befalls us and affects us, in the moment when these things arise.[9] We should be able (but it is not always possible), on the model of the stimulation of the senses, to feel emotionally moved by all passions without forming judgments about what these passions represent to us as being desirable, hateful, lovable, detestable, etc. However, it so happens that we have just this experience when we see tragedies performed on stage or when we read strange happenings in novels. The soul is stimulated by the emotions in relation to the actions that are seen or read about. We should—since it is a direction to follow rather than an injunction—be able to extend into real life the attitude that we have at the theater or when reading stories, an experience almost identical to that of the stimulation of the senses (the end of article 94) that consists of the fact of feeling the excitement produced in the nerves by exterior objects and at the same time—this simultaneity is essential, as in the example of the theater—of feeling that our body has the strength to resist it, thereby bearing witness to the soul of its proper functioning.

Descartes is not inviting us to take leave of the world, but rather, on the contrary, to observe it not only with our eyes, but also with our understanding, whose function is to examine the real value of goods. This attitude allows us to feel *ourselves* being emotionally moved, reflexively, instead of being moved by things or events

9. See, for example, the letter to Elisabeth of September 1, 1645: "there are none which do not represent to us the good to which they tend more vividly than is merited and which do not make us imagine pleasures much greater before we possess them than we find them afterward, once we have them." Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes, *Correspondence*, 108.

that take hold of the soul and do not allow it to feel itself being moved by what it is feeling. Descartes' reflections on the two forms of joy and love lead to the last two articles (147 and 148) of the second part of the *Passions of the Soul*, which are concerned with interior emotions, for which theater provides an example, and which are very different from passions. This is a very important distinction, for the passions and morality of course, but more fundamentally for the regime of subjectivity that we can call Cartesian. The principal function of morality, to control desire (article 144), is not a matter of creating rules that might impede the course of desire, but rather of providing objects worthy of being desired, which only understanding can do, by means therefore of knowledge. We must first know that things are good, or which things are good, in order to desire them, and then to desire them passionately. It is not a question of moderating our desires but of redirecting them toward things that we judge to be good. According to the famous formula of the fourth *Meditation*, from a great light in the intellect there follows a great propensity in the will. But it is not enough to know clearly what is good and bad in order to desire them, it is necessary for things that are worthy of being desired to enter into the soul as passions do, and to affect the soul as passions do (which come from the body). It is therefore necessary for the soul to experience the passions of which it is—the soul rather than the body—the cause. These affects issuing from a source other than the body are what Descartes calls interior emotions (article 147): they are not counter-passions (Descartes is not at all of the view that only a stronger passion can overcome a passion), or barriers, or brakes. Descartes has in mind a modification of the relation to oneself in which the soul affects itself in a kind of autonomous system of affectivity, a kind of closed circuit. It is not a question of elevation or purification, but of a different orientation of the soul, turned toward itself, not in order to remove itself from the world, but because it possesses within itself a source of affect that moderates and even transfigures the exterior source of affect (the passions). The interior emotions do not come into conflict with the passions, but their very presence is enough to resist the effects of the passions by creating within the soul an active source of emotion. Intellectual joy is not a joy produced by intellectual objects, but a joy produced by the possibility of representing to oneself what one is living and experiencing, instead of simply living and experiencing it. Like the concept of respect for Kant, intellectual joy results from the simple representation of the object of thought. In Kantian terms, it is not a pathological sentiment, but a sentiment produced by reason or reflection.[10]

10. For a more detailed analysis of this fundamental concept, I direct the reader to my book *L'Intelligence du sensible: Essai sur le dualisme cartésien* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), chapter 8, 301 ff.

2. The letter to Elisabeth of May 18, 1645 (Correspondence, 85–88)

The claim that common sense is shared equally, that there is an equality of intellectual spirit, and that people do not possess a greater or lesser faculty of thought, does not prevent Descartes from recognizing the qualitative difference between souls, or their variable degree of nobility. This is not, however, a fact of nature, and it is judged or gauged from the capacity of each soul to resist not so much the passions themselves, as the judgments that they "extort" from the soul. For the greatest souls are not those that do not experience passions—for on the contrary they do experience passions, and even more powerful ones than ordinary men—but they do not allow them to enter into the interior of the soul, they do not allow them to disturb and corrupt the free and rational judgments that we must make about the things with which we are faced.[11] The only danger of the passions is the risk of the interior of the soul being annexed by the exterior, which is expressed clearly in the common expression of being "besides oneself." The exterior, in this case, denotes things over which we do not have power: "fortune," in the very broad but not entirely negative sense that Descartes attributes to this term, which is often present in his writing. In theater, tragedy simulates fortune or destiny by presenting actions, and events, following an inexorable causal chain, and leading to an unavoidable end. The exterior is identified entirely with destiny, and vice versa. But since we witness these events as a spectator and not as an actor, we naturally keep our distance from this exteriority, we do not let it enter the innermost depths of the soul.[12] For this reason, we can enjoy all the passions that are represented, since they do not enter as they are into the soul—they are of course present there, but as representations. The performance brings tears to our eyes, but only our eyes, while the soul has the satisfaction of crying, of being touched by something that does not touch the soul itself, of feeling sympathy for other men with whom it, however, has no relation of self-interest, desire, or power; the satisfaction of experiencing a pure and disinterested affection for the other in general. Significantly, it is also the spectacle of friends in misfortune that Descartes evokes (after the patient suffering of bodily pain) as an example of this attitude of active disinterestedness that is the distinctive quality of the greatest souls. Their generosity (the word itself, but only the word, is absent here) is such that it can lead them to sacrifice themselves for their friends if necessary, and this makes it clear that Descartes does not offer the hypocritical advice of a "sage" to

11. See article 48 of the *Passions of the Soul*, which addresses this same question.

12. Denis Kambouchner, in his book that provides an excellent commentary of these questions, summarizes this as follows: "Every performance, we could say, has as its object not only the exterior, nor of course the interior, but the essential difference between the interior and the exterior." Denis Kambouchner, *L'Homme des passions,* vol. II (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995), 186.

exercise caution, but the authentic compassion that they feel does not, however, take the place of that which is, and must remain, in the innermost depths of the soul: not the relief of not being in the same situation as the unfortunate people (as the common, superficial explanation of pity would have it) but the testimony that they provide themselves of committing "a praiseworthy and virtuous" action. The selection of these three situations, which are very different in themselves (tragedy, bodily pain, and the misfortune of friends), brings out the paradigmatic function of theater in the relation of each person to themselves, to others, and to "fortune."

> Just as those sad and lamentable stories which we see represented on a stage often entertain us as much as the happy ones, even though they bring tears to our eyes, in this way the greatest souls of which I speak draw a satisfaction in themselves from all the things that happen to them, even the most annoying and insupportable. In this way, when they feel pain in their bodies they make an effort to support it patiently, and this show of their strength is agreeable to them; in this way, seeing their friends under some great affliction, they feel compassion at the friend's ill fortune and do everything possible to deliver the friend from it, and they do not fear even exposing themselves to death to this end if it is necessary. But, in the meantime, their conscience tells them that they fulfil their duty and that this is what makes an action praiseworthy and virtuous. This testimony makes them more happy, so that all the sadness their compassion affords them does not afflict them.[13]

If we transpose onto these situations a distinction that Descartes makes very elliptically in the fifth of the *Objections and Replies*,[14] we could say that the fact for the spectator of being coupled together with the passions and events represented on the stage is the fact itself, whereas the fact of knowing that it is a performance and that the emotions we feel, even very deeply, do not lead us to act (as in a dream) and are pure emotions, is a fact of understanding alone (like that of knowing that we are not dreaming).[15]

13. Letter to Elisabeth, May 18,1645, Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes, *Correspondence,* 87-88. A similar formulation with the same example of the theater is found in the letter to Elisabeth of October 6, 1645, 118: "the contentment that [the soul] has from crying upon seeing some pitiable and disastrous action represented in the theater comes principally from its seeming to it that it is doing something virtuous in having compassion for the afflicted. And generally, the soul is pleased in feeling itself moved by passions, no matter what nature they are, so long as it remains in control."

14. René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy: With Selections from the Objections and Replies*, trans. Michael Moriarty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 166–98.

15. "*ut, cum inter dormiendum advertimus nos somniare, opus quidem est imaginationis quod somniemus, sed quod nos somniare advertamus, opus est solius intellectus*,", *Œuvres de Descartes*, eds. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris: Vrin-CNRS, 1964–1974), vol. 7, 358. Our translation: ". . . as, when we are dreaming, we realize that we are dreaming; for then it is an effect of our imagination that we are dreaming, but it is a task that belongs only to the understanding, to make us aware that we are dreaming."

The "remedy" for the passions therefore consists in the practice of a game (this is an exercise and not of a point of doctrine) concerning or with our representations: for example, in this same letter Descartes couples together the fact for these great souls of *considering themselves* as immortal (not in terms of knowing themselves to be immortal, but as a position, almost a gamble, and in any case, an anticipation) with the fact of *considering* that they are joined to mortal, fragile bodies. This is not an encouragement to scorn or mortify the body, but to regulate the concern or care of which it is legitimately the object in proportion to the importance that is attributed to it (it is, we believe, the assumption of this power of evaluation that creates the grandeur of generous souls). In the *Passions of the Soul* Descartes would later return to this example and paradigm, which is clearly that of the generous man, notably in his relation to the events of fortune, from which he does not arrogantly turn away, but from which he almost naturally distances the interior emotions that, almost naturally, the action of understanding on the imagination engenders.[16] The desired result of this entirely intellectual action is to produce, without constraint or repression, a dynamic balance between sorrow, genuinely experienced sadness (pity for the misfortune of another, or friends), and the *interior* satisfaction of feeling oneself capable of feeling. It is this difference (which is not a substitution), between *feeling oneself* to be suffering or sad and *being* sad or suffering directly, that produces understanding within the imagination itself.

3. The letter of May–June 1645

This letter formulates, with a superior clarity, the difference between imagination and understanding with regard to the impact of events on the soul. In a sense, it is the opposite of the preceding letter: the performance (even when it is recognized as such) can be harmful to the health by making the spectator genuinely sad even though he knows that the events that are represented are false (fictional, played by actors). The presence of the soul in the body is such (as if mixed) that these unhealthy representations are capable of provoking an altered bodily state. Even though thoughts belong to the action of the soul, they can bring about bodily states. We can see that the union consists of a real action, that is, one capable of producing effects, of each part acting on the other. The value of this counter-example is to demonstrate that the relation between imagination and

16. Speaking of the pity felt by generous souls, Descartes writes: "the sadness involved in their pity has no bitterness; and like that which is caused by the dreadful deeds we see represented on the stage, it resides more in the outer part and in the senses than in the innermost part of the soul; which has, nonetheless, the satisfaction of thinking that it is doing its duty in feeling compassion for the afflicted." *Passions of the Soul*, article 187, 271.

understanding can be conceived as working in both directions and producing two opposite effects. At the theater, the imagination can let itself go, but within the limits that it is assigned by the understanding and within which it can play freely, as Kant would say. We are all the freer to "give free rein" to the senses and the imagination because we know that the understanding can at any moment take back control of the reins and take us in the intended direction. Descartes' fiction of the "evil genius" truly resembles a theatrical device.

Even though the imagination can give itself free rein, and the spectator can feel the most intense passions, he will remain conscious of himself, and will not let himself be carried away by the game that has become a reality. But it can happen that the imagination goes astray, that it no longer plays along with the game of the performance, that is gets overexcited and breaks the bounds that the understanding generally imposes on it at the theater. Therefore, "a person who otherwise has all sorts of reasons to be content, but who sees continually represented before [him] tragedies full of dreadful events, and who occupies [himself] only in considering these objects of sadness and pity[, e]ven though these events are feigned and fabulous, so that they only draw tears from [his] eyes. . ."[17] would make himself ill. Taken in all too deeply by the performance, the subject ceases to be a spectator, and his imagination, continually affected by sad or horrible things, can no longer perceive the message produced by the understanding.

We could draw some lessons from this for the present day, in which the relation between the virtual world and the real world tends to be inverted—with the virtual tending to be seen as more real than reality because of the intensity of the affects that it can produce in the spectator—but is the video game enthusiast a spectator? This is why—in the inverse situation—the wise man whose situation is the inverse of the one who has made himself ill through an excess of tragic performances (he has "an infinite number of true sources of displeasure" but has learned to turn away his imagination from them and to "consider only those objects which are capable of bringing [him] conte ntment and joy") would recover his health, which depends on the joy that is immanent in the union between body and soul, since sadness and disease are signs of the imbalance of this union.[18]

To conclude, we can ask whether the reference to the performance, and its function as a schema that imagines the relation of the generous man with the world, is not a natural consequence of the necessarily solitary character of the experience of the *cogito*. Man has within him something inalienable, his freedom.

17. Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes, *Correspondence*, 91.
18. Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes, *Correspondence*, 92.

In order to consider the world as a performance he must occupy a position outside it, he must, like Archimedes, possess a lever.

At the end of the first *Meditation*, Descartes concludes: "I therefore suppose that all I see is false." At the end of his moral reflection, Descartes could say: "I consider the events of fortune as tragedies represented on the stage, or as the strange happenings of a novel." The supposition allows us to consider things differently, taking us in the opposite direction to the natural attitude: instead of taking the spectacle for reality, as we do, for example, when we observe a rainbow, we will instead consider reality as if it were a spectacle. As if. This is the importance of the supposition: "let us suppose that we are asleep"; let us consider the events of our life and of the lives of others as if they belonged to a spectacle, and as if we were the spectators. But the aim of this is not to turn ourselves away from a world that afflicts us, on the contrary, it is to bracket our own small person and make an unusual, if not unnatural, effort to perceive it as an object, in order to better perceive the world. To see rather than to believe, we might say in summary.

The detachment (or disengagement) that the spectacle provides by its very nature, thanks to which we can feel all passions without being subjected to them, is perhaps the necessary condition for objectively regarding events and therefore gaining a more lucid view of them, because it is more distanced than the view that the actors have of the events. We cannot, therefore, say that the fact of considering the world as a spectacle is equivalent to not taking part in it. First, because the situations or roles of spectator and actor are by definition interchangeable: if other men are actors for me when I watch them living and acting, they are also spectators when they see me step onto the stage of the world, even if I am wearing a mask. Being a spectator is neither a profession nor a vocation, but a position in the world, or rather in relation to the world. But also, because the act of making oneself a spectator is a positive attitude and not a passive one, such as when we admire natural phenomena without knowing or seeking to know the causes for them. In seeing others, I see myself as one among these others, and this is, besides, the whole point of the "spectacle": allowing me to see myself as one among others, instead of comforting myself with the idea of the uniqueness of my being, or perhaps we should say of my "self," thinking here of Pascal. The transposition of lived passions into passions played out or represented on the stage (or in a novel) allows the spectator that I am, among others, to recognize in passions objective phenomena, that is, forms of behavior that men have in common. I then see myself as a man among men. But *who* sees the man that I am, myself and others alike? We must return to the distinction that we made at the beginning, not that between the soul and the body, which is a distinction of substance, but

between the soul on the one hand, and the union of the soul and the body on the other hand, a distinction between equally primitive concepts. But even though they are equally primitive, the concept of the soul precedes the other two, both lexically and epistemologically, for it is of course the soul that knows the body, but it is also the soul that knows man as being an assemblage of two substances. As Descartes says, in an enlightening sentence in his responses to Gassendi, "it is not the eye that sees the mirror rather than itself, but the mind that sees the eye, and the mirror, and itself."[19]

It is from the perspective of this invisible interiority in the world that the world and exteriority in general become visible, and that the soul, or the thinking thing, or the understanding, can make itself into a spectator of the world, not through a refusal to participate in it, but through the necessity of maintaining a distance so that the world can appear as world, that is, as radically exterior to me.

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19. Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 191: "*non esse oculum qui speculum videt magis quam seipsum, sed mentem quae sola, et speculum, et oculum, et seipsam quoque, agnoscit,*" *Œuvres de Descartes*, vol. 7, 367.