

Paulson, Michael G. *The Possible Influence of Montaigne's Essais on Descartes' 'Treatise of the Passions'* (New York: University Press of America, 1988). xxiii + 123 pp.

In this study, Michael Paulson seeks to promote greater scholarly attention to Descartes' *Treatise on the Passions*. He proposes to do so by considering what connections there may be between Montaigne's *Essais* and Descartes' *Treatise*.

The modest theses which Paulson defends is that *it is likely* that Montaigne's *Essais* were *one* of the resources upon which Descartes drew in composing the *Treatise*. Since he holds that "a negative influence can be as strong as, or stronger than, a positive one" (116), Paulson's thesis does not assert that Descartes did indeed make his own any of Montaigne's claims, and, since he does not claim to have conclusively shown that on any particular point the *Treatise* surely makes direct reference to the *Essais*, Paulson is only committed to showing that there is some evidence for, and no compelling evidence against, holding that the *Essais* influenced the *Treatise* in some fashion or other.

Paulson presents his case in an introduction, three chapters, and a brief conclusion. He also included two appendices. The first is composed of extracts from Descartes' November 23, 1646 letter to the Marquis of Newcastle in which Descartes objects to Montaigne's and Charron's view that there is more difference between one human being and another than there is between a human being and an animal. The second consists of Paulson's analysis of Montaigne's references to the passions in each of the three stages (1580, 1588, 1595) of composition of the *Essais*.

Paulson's introduction usefully surveys the state of several aspects of Cartesian scholarship. He points out that there is widespread recognition that the *Essais* played a significant role in Descartes' *Discourse on Method*. But no comparably detailed work has studied

what contribution the *Essais* made to the *Treatise*. In the following three chapters, Paulson aims to begin filling this lacuna.

Chapter One, accordingly, takes notice of general similarities in the way the two works under consideration treat the passions. Noting, but setting aside for his purposes, the differences between these two positions, Paulson shows that both authors (a) distinguish types and functions of the passions, (b) discuss their general effects, (c) look to reason or judgment to curb the excesses of passions, (d) hold, at least implicitly, that one passion can be fought and subdued by another passion, and (e) divided people into two groups, "weak souls" dominated by their own passions and "strong souls" who conquer their passions by force of will.

Paulson refines his analysis in Chapter Two by comparing what is said about each of the six "primitive passions" identified and described in the *Treatise* with what is to be found about them in the *Essais*. For all six of these passions discussed by Descartes, namely admiration, love, hatred or detestation, desire, joy, and sadness, one finds comparable passions either explicitly or implicitly recognized by Montaigne. But unlike Descartes, Montaigne does not distinguish this set of passions, Descartes' "primitive passions," from other passions which Descartes calls "composite."

In Chapter Three, Paulson completes his analysis by discussing those composite passions identified by Descartes which Montaigne with greater or lesser explicitness treats as well. these passions are: generosity, courage or hardiness, fear or cowardice, repentance, anger, and glory.

From these analyses of the way the passions are treated, both generally and singly, in the *Essais* and in the *Treatise*, Paulson can with reason conclude that "our examination of the data...shows a strong probability that Montaigne's *Essais* served as a source

for the *Traité des passions*" (116, my emphasis). the evidence he has adduced cannot however support his concluding sentence which claims that "owing to the striking similarities in concept and to certain affinities of style and *example*, we now *fully realize* the impact that the essayist had upon the works of René Descartes" (116, my emphasis). Before that realization can be gained much further, more precise research must be done.

In fairness, however, one should not dwell on this uncharacteristic exaggeration of Paulson's. What his research shows, and what he usually confines himself to claiming, is that the connections between the *Essais* and the *Treatise* deserve more careful examination than they have hitherto been given. What such an examination would bring to light remains to be seen.

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