

Descartes: Judgment and the Passions

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Part VI of the *Discourse on Method* is an account of Descartes' deliberations about whether he should publish his physical treatise *Le Monde (The World)*¹. In failing to publish he would be "sinning gravely against the law which obliges us to do all in our power to secure the general welfare of mankind."² Refraining from publishing would keep hidden his notions in physics, which he thinks can lead to a practical philosophy that will bring about knowledge that is "useful in life." The practical philosophy's utility consists in its allowing humanity to invent "innumerable devices," enjoy trouble-free "the fruits of the earth," and rid the body and mind of "innumerable maladies," rolling back the boundaries of senescence. Humanity can, Descartes pronounces, "become lords and masters of nature." Two important questions then emerge: (1) What is the origin of this law that obliges one to help humanity, and (2) why should the "common good" consist in mastery of nature?

¹ All citations are referenced to volume and page number of both the Adam and Tannery edition (hereafter abbreviated as AT, *Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, 12 vols. Paris: J. Vrin, 1964-74), and the Cottingham, Stoothoff, Murdoch, Kenny translation (hereafter abbreviated CSM, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, 3 Vol.; vol. 1 and vol. 2 trans. Cottingham, J., Stoothoff, R., and Murdoch, D.; vol. 3 trans. Cottingham, J., Stoothoff, R., Murdoch, D., and Kenny A. (Cambridge University Press, 1985).

² AT-VI, 61 / CSM-I, 142.

Using Descartes' scientific method, as conceived in the *Discourse*, one seems unable to derive the answers to these questions; if Descartes thinks that they are derivable, he provides no evidence. In fact, all of Descartes' reasons for mastery involve a gratification of one's passions: to avoid death, reduce labor, and "enjoy the fruits of the earth." If Descartes could demonstrate that satisfying these passions is good, then he could reasonably say that mastery is desirable. Examining the *Discourse* alone fails to establish the goodness of the passions. Indeed, his scientific method demands an abstention from all passions, even the passion of curiosity and wonder. To see that Descartes thinks that satisfying the passions is good, his *Passions of the Soul*, especially the account of generosity in Book III of the *Passions* must be consulted. The following paper will attempt to show the relevance of his argument from the *Passions* to an understanding of the "humanitarian law" of the *Discourse*. In particular, the goal is to show that Descartes judges that the satisfaction of the passions is what is good, and that his desire to fulfill his own passions, most notably the passion of self-esteem, accounts for the origin of the humanitarian law, the judgment of "mastery," and indeed the publication of the *Discourse* itself.

In the *Discourse* there is scant evidence of any criteria that ought to steer one's judgments concerning good and bad. Although at the root of the "provisional morality" of Part III is the conviction that "...we need only to judge well in order to act well, and to judge as well as we can in order to do our

best...," judging "as well as one can" is not inevitably identical with judging correctly.³ In fact, if the maxims of the provisional morality are meant to be indicative of judgments concerning the good, then there is a clear disconnection between judging well, or as best one can, and judging on the basis of clear and distinct perceptions.⁴ Searching the *Discourse* for an account of how to judge well reveals instead a disconnection between one's judgments and knowledge, and our judging "as well as we can" and judging truly.⁵

Descartes' *Passions of the Soul* clarifies by intimating how and why proper judgments arise. One takes his bearings initially from the article in Part II entitled: "the strength of the soul is inadequate without knowledge of the truth."⁶ Contrary

³ AT-VI, 28 / CSM-I, 125.

⁴ Descartes' maxims are provisional and their formulation requires prudence. The maxims are what Descartes' judges as best relative to his plan of self-instructed truth seeking, "the sole basis of the foregoing three maxims was the plan I had to continue my self instruction." (AT-VI 27 / CSM124). Indeed, in the opening paragraph of Part III of the *Discourse* Descartes claims that he *formed* a provisional code, which suggest the need for prudence, that is, judging without a clear and distinct perception. Although, in the introduction of the *Discourse* Descartes claims that he will share some of the "moral rules" that he derived from the method devised in Part II of the *Discourse*. It is not clear these "moral rules" are identical with the "moral maxims." Possibly the principle of judging well, which appears to be the ground of the provisional morality, was derived from the method. To see a nice account of why the maxims of Part III cannot be derived from the method see Francis P. Coolidge, "The Insufficiency of Descartes' Provisional Morality." *International Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. XXXI, No. 123 (1991), Pages 275-293.

⁵ Judgments made where a clear and distinct perception is lacking requires the will to assent to a perception that is not known as certain. Indeed, Descartes claims in a letter that "knowledge is often beyond our powers; and so there remains only our will, which is absolutely within our disposal" (AT-V 83 / CSM-III, 325).

⁶ AT-XI, 367 / CSM-I, 347

to what one would think, this article fails to elucidate the nature of the truth. Descartes simply claims that there is "a great difference between the resolutions which proceed from some false opinion and those which are based solely on the knowledge of the truth."⁷ Similarly, strong souls, those that can easily conquer the passions, possess the "proper weapons," which are "firm and determinate judgments bearing upon the knowledge of good and evil, which the soul has resolved to follow in guiding its conduct."⁸ Descartes, however, fails to explain the nature of what is "good and evil" in the *Passions*. He does offer, however, in the concluding article, the definitive statement that, "it is on the passions alone that all the good and evil of this life depends."⁹

Descartes' universal claim does not suggest that all passions, in all forms, are good. Indeed, if one fails to manage passions then one's passions lead to an "enslaved and miserable soul."¹⁰ Descartes claims one must control the passions, know their true value, and pursue the proper passions. Indeed, the individual demonstrating this control is "capable of enjoying the sweetest pleasures of this life," while the evils of his life "are quite bearable, and even become "a source of joy."¹¹ This individual possesses what Descartes calls "true generosity."¹²

⁷ AT-XI, 368 / CSM-I, 347

⁸ AT-XI, 367 / CSM-I, 347

⁹ AT-XI, 488 / CSM-I, 404

¹⁰ AT-XI, 367 / CSM-I, 347

¹¹ AT-XI, 488 / CSM-I, 404

¹² For an interesting discussion on why the good of this life depends on the passions see Amélie Rorty, "Cartesian Passions and the Union of Mind and Body." *Essays on Descartes' Meditations*, (Berkeley 1986.) Rorty's article focuses on how the passions serve not solely the mind or body, but the mind-body composite. Her discussion of generosity focuses on how the passion of generosity counsels actions that are generous, while the bodily

In Part III of the *Passions* Descartes defines “true generosity” as follows:

Thus, I believe that true generosity, which causes a person’s self-esteem to be as great as it may legitimately be, has only two components. The first consist in his knowing that nothing belongs to him but this freedom to dispose his volitions, and that he ought to be praised or blamed for no other reason than 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.¹³

While containing the notions of “doing well” and “judging one’s best” from the *Discourse*, this definition does not obviate judgments that are self-interested, and/or harmful to others. According to Descartes, the practical judgments of the truly generous are guided by humanitarian principles; the generous excuse people for their wrong-doings, see others as equals, want to do good for others though it entails “disregarding their own self-interest,” perform great deeds, are perfectly courteous, gracious and obliging to everyone, and undertake only what they think within their capacity. All of these claims occur in Articles 156-162 of the *Passions*. Descartes supplies little, if any, justification for these conclusions. In fact, what justifications Descartes does offer actually weaken, rather

passions counsel actions that are not generous. For example, the passion of fear counsels fleeing a lion that is headed towards your village, and generosity counsels luring the lion away from the village. However, as she points out, Descartes fails to adequately explain how these decisions should be made, and must retreat to the use of will. Our concern is more with how the passion of generosity accounts for particular judgments within Descartes’ work.

¹³ AT-XI, 446 / CSM-I, 384

than strengthen his own conclusions; however, due to time constraints, I cannot more fully explicate this claim.

Recall that generosity requires a person to know that all that is in his power is his freedom to dispose his volitions, and to carry out what he judges to be best. The former is a kind of self-knowledge true of all souls, and potentially knowable by all souls. However, the latter requires making a judgment about what is good. These judgments lack clear and distinct perceptions, and consequently force the will to affirm what the mind thinks, but does not know, is good: “knowledge is often beyond our powers; and so there remains only our will, which is absolutely within our disposal. And I do not see that it is possible to dispose it better than by a firm and constant resolution to carry out to the letter all the things which one judges to be best...”¹⁴ Descartes’ advocating of humane principles, in all likelihood then, arises not from discovering the certain truth of these principles, but from his judgment concerning what is best. Descartes gives no evidence to suggest that he thinks one can know these truths with certainty. However, if knowledge is lacking, and there is only our will, why does Descartes adopt humanitarian principles?

The answer may lie in article 162 of the *Passions*, which claims that generosity can be acquired by “considering” (very often) the nature of one’s free-will, and the multitude of advantages that can arise from a firm resolution to use one’s will well.¹⁵ The former seems to give rise to the first component of generosity, acquiring the knowledge that all that is in one’s power is his free-will. In contrast, the second component of generosity, having a resolution to continuously carry out whatever one judges to be best, arises from reflecting upon the

¹⁴ AT-V 83 / CSM-III, 325

¹⁵ Descartes also claims that we should reflect upon the “vain and useless cares” of ambitious people.

advantages of using one's will to make judgments about, and carry out, what is best. Unfortunately, Descartes fails to delineate these advantages. Principles of compassion and respect for others cannot be cited as benefits, one seeks an explanation for these principles, which, in any event, do not always appear advantageous. Descartes implicitly states three advantages:

(1) The generous person acquires tranquility, "the satisfaction of those who steadfastly pursue virtue is a habit of their soul which is called 'tranquility' and 'peace of mind'."¹⁶

(2) Generous people make judgments based not on certainty, but on what they think to be best. These instances, according to Descartes, cause "a kind of joy which I consider to be the sweetest of all joys, because it depends only on ourselves."¹⁷

(3) Generosity, "causes a person's self-esteem to be as great as it may legitimately be."

¹⁶ AT-XI, 471 / CSM-I, 396 This consequence is not accidental. In a letter to Elizabeth, Descartes draws a distinction between the "supreme good" and happiness. ¹⁶ Happiness consists of the mind's contentment, resulting from possessing the "supreme good," where the supreme good is a firm will to do and carry out everything that one judges to be best, i.e., an early formulation of generosity. Descartes also states that "the end of our actions, however, can be understood to be one or the other; for the supreme good is undoubtedly the thing we ought to set ourselves as the goal of all of our actions, and the resulting contentment of the mind is also rightly called our end, since it is the attraction which makes us seek the supreme good."¹⁶ The "supreme good," that is generosity, is not sought for itself, but from a desire for happiness, that is, a desire for a contented mind. Generosity is then not an unchanging principle that the mind discovers a priori; instead, seeking mental contentment appears to be a natural human trait, and reason, once given this goal, can construct a way to bring about this end, namely, through generosity.

¹⁷ AT-XI, 471 / CSM-I, 396

All of these advantages satisfy self-interested passions: a desire for a tranquil soul, a desire for joy, and a desire for high self-esteem. Clearly, an individual would enjoy these advantages, and contemplating them may lead him to embody generosity, but in and of themselves, these advantages fail to explain why the generous person adopts humanitarian principles rather than other principles. When Descartes claims that one should consider the advantages that arise from judging what is best, he does not claim that one ought to consider what advantage others derive from these judgments. Furthermore, being generous maximizes a person's self-esteem. Most likely, what maximized his own self-esteem guided Descartes' judgments. If this is true, then Descartes advocates accepting humane principles, not on the basis of truth, but because they bring about a particular gratification. Descartes continually speaks as if all generous people would reach the same judgments that he did. However, these judgments are relative to Descartes' will, and as noted earlier, the definition of generosity does not obviate a person's making very different judgments. Proving otherwise would require Descartes to argue why *his* judgments necessarily maximize *all* peoples' self-esteem and why this is good, or why these principles have some deeper ontological foundation, such as accordance with natural law.

The relationship between Descartes' generous person and humanity bolsters this interpretation. The generous' judgments maximize their own self-esteem not only because they make judgments about what is best, but also because others esteem their judgments, which "is a reason for esteeming ourselves."¹⁸ ¹⁹ That is, the generous come to possess the

¹⁸ AT-XI, 482 / CSM-I, 401

passion of pride. Conversely, if people judge that a person's actions are wrong, even when the person being judged believes them to be right, some will experience a lowering of their self-esteem, while others self-esteem is not lowered. Descartes falls within the former category. Many claims in the *Discourse* substantiate this claim. In brief, (1) Descartes pursues metaphysics, he tells us in part III of the *Discourse*, to become worthy of his reputation, and (2) he publishes the *Discourse*, he tells us in part VI, since failing to publish might compel people to infer that his principles of physics were faulty, which would have created a disquiet, which is contrary to the perfect peace of mind that he was "seeking." These examples demonstrate that Descartes' self-esteem and contentment depended upon the way other people judged him. If Descartes could not only live up to his reputation, but could also supply humanity with a "great deed," then many people, thereby enhancing his own self-esteem, would esteem him. What then was Descartes' great deed that increased his self-esteem? One must only turn to the *Discourse*.

In Part I of the *Discourse*, Descartes avows that his education led him to think that "there was no knowledge in the

¹⁹ Lisa Shapiro draws the conclusion that judgments alone maximize a persons' self-esteem. She concludes her article with the following: "She (a generous person) will understand that there are things she can know as well as those she cannot. She will also understand that there are things she might have been able to adduce had time permitted, but that since she had to make a choice she could only do her best. And that she has done in making a reasoned choice at all. Insofar as she (a generous person) recognizes that she is a rational being and the limits of her reason, she esteems herself as highly as she legitimately can." Shapiro fails to consider how the maximization of self-esteem not only depends upon judgments, but also how these judgments relate to other people. Making this observation is critical, if we are to understand what maximizes Descartes' self-esteem. Lisa Shapiro, "Cartesian Generosity." *Acta Philosophica Fennica*, Vol 60 (1999), Pages 249-275.

world such as I had previously been led to hope for."²⁰ What kind of knowledge Descartes sought becomes clear in a letter to the Marquess of Newcastle, where he states that "the preservation of health has always been the principle end of my studies."²¹ As Part VI of *Discourse* reveals, Descartes thinks that he has discovered the knowledge that he sought; he discovered principles that would lead to continuous acquisition of "useful knowledge." Useful because the principles facilitate the invention of "innumerable devices," enjoying "the fruits of the earth," and rid the body and mind of an "innumerable diseases." Humanity can, Descartes pronounces, "become lords and masters of nature." Doing so could allow humanity to acquire the *highest* good, the maintenance of health, "which is undoubtedly the chief good and the foundation of all the other goods in this life."²²

Notice that Descartes understands medicine as the foundation of *all* the other goods in *this life*, while keeping in mind the *Passions* concludes by claiming that *all* the good and evil of *this life* depend upon the passions. Both statements are oriented towards *this life*. One is eclipsed from *knowing* the truth about the next life. Knowing such truths would require being "more than a mere man."²³ In this life, nature teaches one what is good and bad, and to satisfy the passions by pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain, but reason tells one how to best achieve this goal through generosity and science. However,

²⁰ AT-VI, 5 / CSM-I, 113. Parts I and VI of the *Discourse* make markedly clear that Descartes sought "knowledge that is useful in life," in contrast to "ancient speculative philosophy."

²¹ AT-IV, 329 / CSM-III, 275

²² AT-VI, 62 / CSM-I, 143

²³ AT-VI, 8 / CSM-I, 114. Descartes thinks that there is no reason to believe that the soul dies with the body. However, he does not speak about the "next life," or what kind of future the soul can expect to enjoy once freed from the body.

science trumps generosity. The generous, like everyone else, are subject to ailments of body and mind. Even though the generous person may not be disturbed by some ailments, owing to his willing to be above them, he cannot avoid being disturbed by diseases and ailments that diminish and may even extinguish his will.

Furthermore, science so conceived will close the gap between the tranquility of the few who are generous, and the many who are not generous. The generous person overcomes the passions by rising above them and controlling them with his will, but science allows the passions to be both controlled (i.e., modern medicine to treat depressions), and satisfied (reducing labor and increasing health), which aids in bringing about the "supreme good of society," or the "total aggregate of all the goods - those of the soul as well as those of the body and of fortune - that can belong to any human being."²⁴

The *Discourse* is designed to point out the "right" path, the path of science, to humanity. In an attempt to reach those who have not been corrupted by ancient philosophy, Descartes publishes the *Discourse* in French, the language of the people. He wants people to use their reason to make a practical judgment, to accept the path that he points out to them: "I expect that those who use only their natural reason in all its purity will be better judges of my opinions than those who give credence only to the writings of the ancients."²⁵ Consequently, one reason that Descartes writes the *Discourse* in an autobiographical manner is to present a path, instead of trying to dictate the right way. If he dictates what path he thinks people should follow, then people would likely not listen. Instead, he presents his life as a "fable" that some can follow if they chose. Descartes wants people to see, with their own

reason, that his project is worthy, which would only require reflecting upon the benefits of science, and the satisfaction of the passions that they would receive. After doing so, they can help Descartes carry out the project of mastery by donating the money necessary to carry out the "innumerable" experiments that would be required, "I am not so mean spirited that I would willingly accept from anyone a favor that I might be thought not to deserve."²⁶ Descartes' generosity, which maximizes his self-esteem, is the giving of science to humanity.

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²⁴ AT-V, 82 / CSM-III, 324

²⁵ AT-VI, 77 / CSM-I, 151

²⁶ AT-VI, 73 / CSM-I, 148-149