

# **An Analysis of the Relationship between the *Meditations* and the Passion of Generosity**

## **Introduction**

What is the role of the *Meditations on First Philosophy* in Descartes' philosophical program? Is the significance of the work found only in its foundational metaphysics and epistemology, or does Descartes offer the meditator more than the clear and distinct perceptions of God, mind, and body? To answer this question I suggest we ground our interpretation of the *Meditations* in Descartes' conception of philosophy. In the Preface to the French edition of the *Principles*, Descartes writes:

The whole of philosophy is like a tree. The roots are metaphysics, the trunk is physics, and the branches emerging from the trunk are all the other sciences, which may be reduced to three principal ones, namely medicine, mechanics, and morals. By 'morals' I understand the highest and most perfect moral system, which presupposes a complete knowledge of the other sciences and is the ultimate level of wisdom. (AT IXB 14; CSM I 186)

A surprising feature of this passage is that Descartes is working with the traditional notion of philosophy as being concerned with *sophia*, wisdom; he states more explicitly: "philosophy is nothing else but the study of wisdom" (AT VIIIA 4; CSM I 192). Despite Descartes' insistence on distancing himself with his Scholastic predecessors, he still remained connected with the Scholastics in the ancient tradition of seeking moral excellence, or virtue.<sup>1</sup> Descartes avers that ultimate wisdom is an understanding of a perfect moral system, and its attainment presupposes complete knowledge of metaphysics, physics, mechanics, and medicine. An engagement in these sciences fundamentally prepares the philosopher for the fruit of inquiry: an understanding of how to live a virtuous life.

Descartes' moral theory is scattered throughout his philosophical writings, but it is primarily found in his correspondence with Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia and *The Passions of the Soul*. In these writings we find Descartes' view to be that virtue is the supreme good (AT IV 305; CSMK 268) and is sufficient for happiness (AT IV 267; CSMK 258). Descartes tells

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<sup>1</sup> Cottingham, *Cartesian Reflections*, 232-236.

Princess Elizabeth that “to achieve contentment which is solid, we need to pursue virtue – that is to say, to maintain a firm and constant will to bring about everything we judge to be the best, and to use all the power of our intellect in judging well” (AT IV 280; CSMK 262). Descartes describes such an orientation as the passion of generosity. It consists in knowing that one’s sole possession is their free will and that this freedom is the sole criterion for praise or blame, coupled with a resolute feeling to use the will well (153 AT XI; CSM I 384). Descartes also indicates another type of generosity that is acquired after the passion, which is the virtue of generosity. This virtue is the key to all the virtues and is a general remedy for the passions, thus we may characterize generosity as being the cornerstone to Cartesian ethics.

Insofar as the *Meditations* provides the meditator with sound metaphysical views, which Descartes has characterized as the roots of philosophy, it is appropriate to investigate the possibility that the *Meditations* may have a significant role in guiding the meditator to virtue. To begin this inquiry I first examine Lisa Shapiro’s attempt to link the *Meditations* with Descartes’ ethical concerns by interpreting generosity as remedying the passions expressed in the *Meditations*. After critiquing Shapiro’s position I provide an alternative reading of generosity and its relationship to the *Meditations*. I will maintain that it is not until after the meditations have been completed, and the full inventory of clear and distinct perceptions attained that the passion of generosity can be excited in the soul.

### **Shapiro on Generosity and the Passions in the *Meditations***

In her investigative work “What Are the Passions Doing in the *Meditations*,” Shapiro writes that “the meditations are meant to transform the meditator’s *life*,”<sup>2</sup> that is, the meditations transform the meditator’s thoughts and *passions*, ultimately affecting her actions as well. Shapiro rightly calls our attention to the many expressions of passion in the meditations, especially in regards to the most significant one: the meditator’s *desire* for knowledge. Upon suspension of all her beliefs at the end of the First Meditation, the meditator is in *despair*; however at the end of the Sixth Meditation, the meditator is able to *laugh* off her doubts with ease despite not having truly refuted the skeptical arguments of the First Meditation. The meditator is still prone to error, and cannot reach the level of certitude in all her beliefs which she initially sought after. What is the cause of this drastic change in emotion? Shapiro suggests that in establishing the standards

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<sup>2</sup> Shapiro, *Passions*, 25.

for truth and falsity in the Fourth Meditation, the meditator's desire for knowledge is regulated.<sup>3</sup> After the Fourth Meditation, Shapiro writes that for the meditator:

The task can no longer be to be absolutely certain about everything, since some things will lie beyond his grasp. Rather, he is concerned to distinguish what he is capable of knowing from what he is not, and it seems that in drawing this distinction, he is able to temper his desire for knowledge: he now wants to know all he *can* know.<sup>4</sup>

Shapiro identifies generosity, with the meditator's tempered concern in the Fourth Meditation to only seek knowledge which is in her capacity to attain:

Generosity, as Descartes explains it, involves the recognition on each of our parts that we have a free will, paired with the resolution to use our will well. The meditator's diligence in following the method for avoiding error that he has discovered can be seen as exemplifying this resolve.<sup>5</sup>

As Shapiro conceives it, generosity is to recognize one's limits and capacities as a finite free being, coupled with a determination to use the will in the best way possible. Descartes describes that generosity will make "a man esteem himself as highly as he can legitimately esteem himself,"<sup>6</sup> Shapiro thus interprets this to mean that generosity is a "species of esteem"<sup>7</sup> and "is just a wonder at our own power."<sup>8</sup>

Shapiro contends that to attain generosity, one must first understand that one's sole possession is free will. She interprets this understanding as beginning in the Third Meditation with the wonder expressed towards God. In the Third Meditation, the meditator realizes an affinity she has with God: "the mere fact that God created me is a very strong basis for believing that I am somehow made in his image and likeness, and that I perceive that likeness, which includes the idea of God, by the same faculty which enables me to perceive myself" (AT VII 51; CSM II 35). Given this understanding of the meditator's similarity with God, Shapiro interprets that when the meditator stops to wonder at God at the end of the Third Meditation, she is in a sense directing wonder at herself as well. Here generosity begins to develop:

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>6</sup> Shapiro, *Cartesian Generosity*, 258.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 258.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 259.

The wonder at himself he feels through his wonder at God becomes precisely that wonder at one's own freedom that constitutes in part generosity. It is this generosity that allows him to see that he has no cause for complaint in how God has created him. And his coming to terms with his own nature as a finite thinking thing in this way ultimately leads him to remedy the excesses of his desire for knowledge. Once he understands himself properly, he cannot help but desire to know only that which he is capable of knowing.<sup>9</sup>

At the end of the Third Meditation generosity is incipient in the soul, and does not become fully present until the meditator realizes a further affinity between herself and God: the infinitude and freedom of both of their wills. Shapiro argues that this understanding of the nature of free will is attained in the Fourth Meditation<sup>10</sup>, and “it is the meditator's attention to his will, and the way in which it is disposed to respond to the ideas he has, which leads him to affirm the method for avoiding error.”<sup>11</sup>

The meditator comes to an understanding of how to arrive at truth and avoid falsity: she realizes that her will naturally assents to clear and distinct perceptions and that this is an inclination towards truth; she also notices that affirming what she does not completely understand leads to error. However this epistemic standing in regards to the will is not sufficient for generosity; the meditator must also be determined to use the will well, that is, to strive to judge according to what she understands best. Shapiro finds this second component of generosity in the meditator's assertion that “I shall unquestionably reach the truth, if only I give sufficient attention to all the things which I perfectly understand, and separate these from all the other cases where my apprehension is more confused and obscure. And this is just what I shall diligently do from now on” (AT VII 62; CSM II 43).

According to Shapiro, by adhering to the method for avoiding error the meditator exemplifies generosity, that is, the meditator has recognized the nature of herself as a willing thing and is acting according to this knowledge upon striving to affirm clear and distinct perceptions. This knowledge of self is arrived at in the Third and Fourth Meditation, and is what allows the passion of generosity to arise in the soul, assisting the meditator to complete the epistemological project she has embarked on. In what will follow I will challenge Shapiro's

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<sup>9</sup> Shapiro, *Passions*, 29-30.

<sup>10</sup> Shapiro, *Cartesian Generosity*, 260.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

suggestion that the meditator properly understands herself as a free being in the Third and Fourth Meditation, making it impossible for generosity to be active within the meditations.

## Critique of Shapiro

In her attempt to link generosity with the meditator's examination of her will in the Fourth Meditation, Shapiro writes that:

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"<sup>12</sup>

Here Shapiro tries to link the Fourth Meditation with Descartes' description in article 161 of Part Three of the *Passions* about the process of attending to free will in order to excite the passion of generosity. However she leaves out a fundamental part of this passage, Descartes actually states:

If we occupy ourselves frequently in considering the nature of free will and the many advantages which proceed from a firm resolution to make good use of it - *while also considering, on the other hand, the many vain and useless cares which trouble ambitious people* - we may arouse the passion of generosity in ourselves and then acquire the virtue. (AT XI 454; CSM I 388)

As you may notice, Shapiro has omitted the portion of the passage where Descartes states that we must also consider the "many vain and useless cares which trouble ambitious people." In omitting this portion, Shapiro can easily ascribe generosity to the meditator. But there is a two part epistemological aspect to this meditation on the will that is problematic for her account. While it is true that the meditator can have knowledge of the nature of free will *a priori* in the Fourth Meditation,<sup>13</sup> understanding the benefits and detriments of using it incorrectly can only be known *a posteriori*. The meditator examines her will in the Fourth Meditation and is able to arrive at conclusions regarding its nature without reference to experience; however she cannot meditate upon the vain and proper uses of the will when she has not established the existence of body yet, since these are observations of people. This *a posteriori* knowledge can only be attained after the meditations have been completed, because not only is it necessary for the meditator to establish the existence of body to have *a posteriori* knowledge, but she must also

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<sup>12</sup> Shapiro, *Cartesian Generosity*, 252.

<sup>13</sup> Although Descartes does not explicitly utilize the *a priori*/*a posteriori* distinction, I will impose it on him here to demonstrate this point.

distinguish the mind from the body, as well as establish that she can rely on her sensory faculties. All three of these requisites to *a posteriori* knowledge are arrived at in the Sixth Meditation.

As described earlier, generosity depends upon an understanding that one's sole possession is their free will. It is necessary to make the distinction between the substances of body and mind if one is to arrive at an understanding that the only thing which belongs to them is free will. Knowing that one's true possession is free volition cannot be acquired in the Fourth Meditation since the meditator is unsure of the existence of the material world. What is established in the Fourth Meditation is a method for arriving at truth. While this method relies on an understanding of the nature of the will, the metaphysical claim that *the only thing which belongs to the meditator is free will* cannot be made with the epistemic standing the meditator has in the Fourth Meditation. One must distinguish the mind from the body to understand the true nature of mind.

Descartes states that to possess generosity is to pursue virtue perfectly. But is the meditator concerned with virtue in the Fourth Meditation? We will see that the answer is clearly negative. While Shapiro does not elucidate what it means for generosity to be a virtue rather than a passion, it seems safe to say that under her interpretation just having the passion is virtuous. While she recognizes Descartes' remarks on generosity as a virtue she wants to emphasize its role as a passion.<sup>14</sup> But as indicated in a letter to Princess Elizabeth: "virtue unenlightened by the intellect can be false: that is to say, *the will and resolution to do well can carry us to evil courses*, if we think them good; and in such a case the contentment which virtue brings is not solid" (AT IV 267; CSMK 258; emphasis mine). If Shapiro is correct that generosity is "the recognition on each of our parts that we have a free will, paired with the resolution to use our will well,"<sup>15</sup> then this must mean that the meditator has an enlightened intellect; however this cannot be the case since at that stage in the meditations the meditator has not intuited the complete inventory of clear and distinct perceptions. It is impossible for the meditator to be pursuing virtue when she is ignorant of the nature of herself and the material world.

So what exactly is the passion that is aroused in the soul after this critical reflection on the nature of free will? I believe that Descartes is describing the passion of generosity in article 153 of Part Three of the Passions, not the virtue of generosity:

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 258.

<sup>15</sup> Shapiro, *Passions*, 28.

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 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. (153 AT XI; CSM I 384)

We can understand the first component as broken down into two parts due to the *a priori* and *a posteriori* reflection in the meditation on free will. The meditator can grasp the nature of free will *a priori*, and I do grant Shapiro that this occurs in the Fourth Meditation. The meditator is able through cognitive exercise and introspection to arrive at an understanding of herself as a freely willing thing and as I have contended previously, this is necessary to attaining the passion of generosity. However it is not sufficient to excite the passion of generosity given Descartes' remarks in article 161 that Shapiro has ignored. To know that one's use of the will is the sole criterion for praise or blame is based on *a posteriori* knowledge; it is attained through observing those who have used the will vainly and those who have reaped the benefits of a virtuous use of the will. The second component, the resolute feeling within herself to use her will as best as she can is naturally coupled with the first component; by beholding the clear and distinct perceptions and knowing the detriments of not acting in accordance with this knowledge, the meditator is emotionally charged towards using her will as best as she can.

## **Conclusion**

The meditations orient the meditator towards attaining virtue, by providing the meditator with the proper ontological views necessary to excite the passion of generosity. It may even be suggested that the frequent meditation on the nature of free will which excites the passion of generosity should occur right after the Sixth Meditation. Meaning that, the clear and distinct perceptions are not only epistemologically transformative, but ethically transformative as well.

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