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THE TREATMENT OF THE PASSIONS IN THE MORAL PHILOSOPHY OF RENÉ DESCARTES

Abstract: The article will examine the remedies proposed by René Descartes (1596-1650), in order to deal with unpleasant passions and their excesses, as highlighted in his last work, *The Passions of the Soul* (1649). In this work, Descartes attempts to reach the core of emotion and, with the help of physiology, to analyse it rationally. The aim of the French philosopher is deeply moral. The demand for a practical philosophy had occupied him since the Sixth Part of his emblematic *Discourse on the Method* (1637). In *The Passions of the Soul* this demand is satisfied. Our analysis shows that Descartes' ethics is one of action. Life requires decisions, regardless of their end result. With free will as the cornerstone of his ethical structure, Descartes will set up an educational system for regulating the passions. In dealing with this problem, Descartes opted for a «strategy of generosity». Generosity, the most important notion of Cartesian ethics and the primary remedy that Descartes suggests for useless desires, is a passion and turns into a virtue when passion becomes a habit.

Keywords: René Descartes, ethics, passions, will, treatment, generosity, happiness

I. CARTESIAN ETHICS BEFORE THE *PASSIONS OF THE SOUL*

In the Sixth Part of the *Discourse on Method* (hereafter *Discourse*, 1637), Descartes presents the reasons that prompted him to publish his work. Specifically, he states: «But as soon as I had

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acquired some general notions in physics and had noticed, as I began to test them in various particular problems [...] I believed that I could not keep them secret without sinning gravely against the law which obliges us to do all in our power to secure the general welfare of mankind. For they opened my eyes to the possibility of gaining knowledge which would be very useful in life, and of discovering a practical philosophy which might replace the speculative philosophy taught in the schools. Through this philosophy we could know the power and action of fire, water, air, the stars, the heavens and all the other bodies in our environment, as distinctly as we know the various crafts of our artisans; and we could use this knowledge – as the artisans use theirs – for all the purposes for which it is appropriate, and thus make ourselves, as it were,² the lords and masters of nature».³

The request to find a practical philosophy that will make man lord and possessor of nature is an idea which echoes earlier positions of Francis Bacon (1561-1626) and Galileo Galilei (1564-1642).⁴

² For Descartes, total sovereignty over nature belongs to God. Therefore, man as a finite being, the best he can achieve is to become «as it where» lords and masters of nature.

³ In this article the references to Descartes' works are as follows: I use the abbreviation AT, followed by the Latin number denoting the volume and the Arabic number denoting the page number, to refer to the edition of *Descartes's Oeuvres*, edited by Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (*Oeuvres de Descartes*, 11 volumes, Vrin in collaboration with the French National Center for Scientific Research (C.N.R.S.), Paris 1964-1974). The abbreviation CSM refers to the English translation by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Volume I and II* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1985), while the abbreviation CSMK refers to *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Volume III. The Correspondence*, translated by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch, A. Kenny, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1991). Finally, the abbreviation LS refers to *The Correspondence between Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes*, edited and translated by L. Shapiro, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2007. *Discourse*, Part Six, AT VI 62-63, CSM I 142-143.

⁴ Both in Francis Bacon's *Novum Organum* (1620) and Galileo Galilei's *Dialogo sopra I due massimi sistemi del mondo*, (1632).

Extended nature is now perceived as a machine, a mass of matter governed by the laws of motion, and science is presented as the technique of exploiting this machine. Therefore, philosophy, following the science of physics, should become practical.⁵ At the heart of this vision is Descartes' idea of utilizing the results of physical science in order to shape his moral philosophy. In the letter dated 15 June 1646 to Pierre Chanut (1601-1662), Descartes confesses that the results he extracted from his knowledge of physics were valuable in order to establish the foundations of his moral philosophy.⁶ He further admits this by stating that his intention is to study the passions as a physiologist.⁷ Thus, the declaration from the Sixth Part of the *Discourse*, includes not only the sovereignty over nature but also the sovereignty over human psychosomatic nature itself. The request to find a practical philosophy will be satisfied in Descartes' last work, *The Passions of the Soul* (hereafter *Passions*, 1649), where the French philosopher will develop the main part of his moral philosophy.

It is a given that Descartes understands that life requires decisions. Thus, in *Discourse* he formulates the so-called rules of provisional morality. These rules are small in numbers, so as to be remembered and observed more easily and are mentioned in the Third Part of the *Discourse*, immediately after the Second Part and the formulation of the four rules of the method. The rules of provisional morality are a set of practical rules, proposed by Descartes in order to offer some moral guidance, albeit temporary, precisely because of the urgency of action.

⁵ J. Russ, *Η περιπέτεια της ευρωπαϊκής σκέψης. Μια ιστορία των ιδεών της Δύσης, μετάφραση-σημειώσεις-επιμέλεια Κ. Σ. Κατσιμάνης, Τυπωθήτω, Αθήνα 2005*, σσ. 175-179.

⁶ AT IV 441, CSMK 289.

⁷ Descartes' letter of 14 August 1649, AT XI 326, which together with an earlier letter of the philosopher on 4 December 1648 and the two letters of an unknown sender to which Descartes replies, occupies the position of a preface to the *Passions of the Soul*.

«The first was to obey the laws and customs of my country, holding constantly to the religion in which by God's grace I had been instructed from my childhood, and governing myself in all other matters according to the most moderate and least extreme opinions – the opinions commonly accepted in practice by the most sensible of those with whom I should have to live [...] I thought too that in order to discover what opinions they really held I had to attend to what they did rather than what they said».

«My second maxim was to be as firm and decisive in my actions as I could, and to follow even the most doubtful opinions, once I had adopted them, with no less constancy than if they had been quite certain. In this respect I would be imitating a traveler who, upon finding himself lost in a forest, should not wander about turning this way and that, and still less stay in one place, but should keep walking as straight as he can in one direction, never changing it for slight reasons even if mere chance made him choose it in the first place; for in this way, even if he does not go exactly where he wishes, he will at least end up in a place where he is likely to be better off than in the middle of a forest. Similarly, since in everyday life we must often act without delay, it is a most certain truth that when it is not in our power to discern the truest opinions, we must follow the most probable. Even when no opinions appear more probable than any others, we must still adopt some; and having done so we must then regard them not as doubtful, from a practical point of view, but as most true and certain, on the grounds that the reason which made us adopt them is itself true and certain».

«My third maxim was to try always to master myself rather than fortune, and change my desires rather than the order of the world. In general I would become accustomed to believing that nothing lies entirely within our power except our thoughts, so that after doing our best in dealing with matters external to us, whatever we fail to achieve is absolutely impossible so far as we are concerned».

«Finally, to conclude this moral code, I decided to review the various occupations which men have in this life, in order to try to choose the best. Without wishing to say anything about the occupations of others, I thought I could do no better than to

continue with the very one I was engaged in, and devote my whole life to cultivating my reason and advancing as far as I could in the knowledge of the truth, following the method I had prescribed for myself. Since beginning to use this method I had felt such extreme contentment that I did not think one could enjoy any sweeter or purer one in this life. Every day I discovered by its means truths which, it seemed to me, were quite important and were generally unknown by other men; and the satisfaction they gave me so filled my mind that nothing else mattered to me».⁸

The problem we are encountering is that Cartesian affinity towards methodological thought runs the risk of “paralyzing” moral decisions which require action. Our analysis will show that a solution can be found and is the pedagogical transformation of generosity into a habit.

II. THE IMPORTANCE OF ACTION IN CARTESIAN PHILOSOPHY

Descartes dictates four rules to help us navigate our daily lives. And this is because he recognizes that there is a great distance between the theoretical issues and their practical application. The important thing in life is primarily to live. And to live means to judge and decide, it means to act. Indeed, the tension between the theoretical part of philosophy and its practical application preoccupied Descartes throughout his life, which can be seen in the entirety of his writings. In his letter to Mersenne dated February 27, 1637, Descartes points out to him that he is more interested in practice than in theory.⁹ And in the Fourth Part of the *Discourse*, the French philosopher will distinguish two types of certainties, moral and metaphysical, without further clarification.¹⁰ He speaks about the same certainties in the Fourth Part of the *Principles of Philosophy* (hereafter *Principles*, 1644), calling moral, that certainty which is

⁸ *Discourse*, Part Three, ATVI 23-28, CSM I 122-124.

⁹ AT I 349, CSMK 53.

¹⁰ *Discourse*, Part Four, ATVI 37-38, CSM I 130.

sufficient to regulate our morals: «moral certainty is certainty which is sufficient to regulate our behaviour, or which measures up to the certainty we have on matters relating to the conduct of life which we never normally doubt, though we know that it is possible, absolutely speaking, that they may be false».¹¹ Moreover, in the Third Article of the First Part of *Principles*, Descartes states that doubt should not be used in practical life.¹² But also, in the *Meditations on First Philosophy* (hereafter *Meditations*, 1641), Descartes talks about practical issues and about issues of knowledge.¹³ Also, at the end of the *Meditations*, he emphasizes that: «the necessity of practical matters does not always forgive the comfort of such careful consideration».¹⁴

Therefore, the complexity of situations precludes time-consuming analysis before action. In his letter to Hyperaspistes,¹⁵ Descartes expresses his desire to have as much certainty as possible regarding practical matters, but emphasizes that in such matters one need not seek or hope for such a thing.¹⁶ As he says in both the *Second and Seventh Replies*, it can take a long time (weeks or even months) to gain clear and distinct ideas on moral issues.¹⁷

Indeed, the circumstances in life force us to tend towards indecision, which may initially be of some use because it helps us to distance ourselves, but when it lasts longer than it should, it is very bad.¹⁸ If we want to arrive at the perfect moral judgment, a judgment that will spring from the knowledge of clear and distinct ideas, we will fall into indecision, and in the end, it is likely that we will make

¹¹ *Principles*, Part Four, ATVIII 316-318, CSM I 280-281.

¹² *Ibid*, Part One, ATVIII 5, CSM I 193.

¹³ *Meditations*, First Meditation, ATVII 22, CSM II 15.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, Sixth Meditation ATVII 90, CSM II 62.

¹⁵ This is the name of an anonymous commentator on the *Meditations*. For more information see *The Cambridge Descartes Lexicon*, (ed.) L. Nolan, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2015, pp. 384-386.

¹⁶ Letter to Hyperaspistes, August 1641, AT III 422, CSM I 188-189.

¹⁷ *Second Replies*, ATVII 131, CSM II 94 and *Seventh Replies*, ATVII 506, CSM II 344.

¹⁸ *Passions*, Part Three, Article 170, ATXI 459-460, CSM I 390-391.

no decision at all. Only free will is totally under our control, and no one can guarantee the final outcome of our actions, without this implying that we should regret what we decided to do, even if we find in hindsight that we failed.¹⁹ Every decision includes a judgment about something, and the function of judgment is produced by the cooperation of the mind and the will.²⁰ The problem, therefore, lies in the correct processing of the issues of our daily life. Since certainty has been established with the Cartesian Cogito of *Meditations*,²¹ there should be a body of certain truths which will be given to us whenever we try to form a judgment on a practical level. Descartes understands the need for these truths to exist, precisely because we are bound to make decisions at all times.

Thus, in his letter to Princess Elizabeth (Elisabeth Simmern van Pallandt, 1618-1680), Descartes formulates the view that two things are necessary in order to judge something correctly. Firstly, the knowledge of the truth and secondly, the exercise of memory and recourse to this knowledge whenever the circumstances require it. But since only God knows everything perfectly, we should know the most useful truths for us. The six truths are: 1. The existence of an almighty God, 2. The nature of our immortal soul, 3. The indeterminacy of the universe, 4. That we are parts of the universe, that no one can exist alone, and that always we should prefer the interests of the whole to the particular interests of our own person, 5. That the passions always present goods far greater than they really are, and that the pleasures of the body never last so long as those of the soul, and 6. When we are uncertain as to how we ought to act in matters of custom, to embrace the opinions that seem to us the most probable.²²

¹⁹ See Descartes' Letter to Elizabeth, 6 October 1645, AT IV 307, CSMK 269.

²⁰ *Meditations*, Fourth Meditation, ATVII 56, CSMII 39 and *Principles* I, Article 34, ATVIII 17, CSMI 204.

²¹ *Meditations*, Second Meditation, ATVII 25, CSMII 17.

²² ATIV 291-295, CSMK 265-267.

These truths come to «complement» the three rules dictated by Descartes to Elizabeth, which are related to the rules of provisional morality. For the French philosopher, everyone can feel satisfaction without any external help, as long as they follow three specific rules:

«The first is that he should always try to employ his mind as well as he can to discover what he should or should not do in all the circumstances of life. The second is that he should have a firm and constant resolution to carry out whatever reason recommends without being diverted by his passions or appetites. Virtue, I believe, consists precisely in sticking firmly to this resolution; though I do not know that anyone has ever so described it. Instead, they have divided it into different species to which they have given various names, because of the various objects to which it applies. The third is that he should bear in mind that while he thus guides himself as far as he can, by reason, all the good things which he does not possess are one and all entirely outside his power».²³

Thus, with the three new rules and the knowledge of a body of practical truths, we are able to act and make decisions in matters of a practical nature. Therefore, the first step in dealing with unpleasant passions and their excesses has to do with ourselves and letting go of any passive attitude in our daily life. But if we become energetic and adopt an attitude of life that is always resolute, how can we deal with our unpleasant passions and their excesses? Descartes' outlook is optimistic and is recorded in a letter to Jean de Silhon (1596-1667). There, the French philosopher tells his interlocutor that he has distanced himself from any strategy of stifling the passions.²⁴

²³ Letter to Elizabeth, 4August 1645, ATIV 265-266, CSMK 257-258.

²⁴ ATV135, CSMK 330. See also J. Cottingham, *Cartesian Reflections. Essays on Descartes's Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York 2008, p. 313.

III. THE TREATMENT OF THE PASSIONS

According to Descartes, the soul acts on the body and therefore on the passions, since the latter have a physical origin. This conclusion is formulated by the French philosopher saying that: «And the activity of the soul consists entirely in the fact that simply by willing something it brings it about that the little gland²⁵ to which it is closely joined moves in the manner required to produce the effect corresponding to this volition».²⁶ The will moves accordingly in cases where we want to imagine or retrieve something from our memory.²⁷ Why, in a similar way, should the will not deal with our negative passions, such as sadness, anger, etc.? Why should not the will be sufficient to induce the pineal gland to change the flow of the animal spirits so that these negative passions disappear or their positive opposites appear instead?²⁸

²⁵ Both the pineal gland and the animal spirits are two extremely important concepts of Cartesian physiology. In Article 31 of the *Passions* Descartes will state that: «We need to recognize also that although the soul is joined to the whole body, nevertheless there is a certain part of the body where it exercises its functions more particularly than in all the others [...] I think I have clearly established that the part of the body in which the soul directly exercises its functions is not the heart at all, or the whole of the brain. It is rather the innermost part of the brain, which is a certain very small gland situated in the middle of the brain's substance and suspended above the passage through which the spirits in the brain's interior cavities communicate with those in its posterior cavities». *Passions*, Part One, Article 31, ATXI 351-352, CSMI 340. Concerning the animal spirits, Descartes described them as «the most lively and finest parts of the blood, which have been rarefied by the heat in the heart, constantly enter the cavities of the brain in large numbers». *Passions*, Part One, Article 10, ATXI 334-335, CSMI 331-332.

²⁶ *Passions*, Part One, Article 41, ATXI 359-360, CSMI 343.

²⁷ *Ibid*, Part One, Article 42, ATXI 360, CSMI 343-344 and 43, ATXI 361, CSMI 344.

²⁸ Γ. Πρελορέντζος, «Ανατομία και έλεγχος των παθών της ψυχής στην ηθική φιλοσοφία του Καρτέσιου», *Αξιολογικά*, ειδικό τεύχος 1, Εξάντας, Αθήνα 1999, σ. 194.

The answer is complex, but not at all difficult to deduce. Descartes was a man of his time. Despite his difficult character,²⁹ he knew from his personal experience that the relationship between will and passion cannot be explained simply and mechanically. Besides that, Descartes himself admits that: «Our passions, too, cannot be directly aroused or suppressed by the action of our will, but only indirectly through the representation of things which are usually joined with the passions we wish to have and opposed to the passions we wish to reject».³⁰ This happens because «Each volition is naturally joined to some movement of the gland».³¹ So what is the critical element? That the passions are not under the direct control of the omnipotent will. And this happens precisely because their physical dimension naturally entails limitations. They are psychophysical events and consequently, our (initial) control capacity is sufficiently limited that the soul cannot completely appease its passions, which according to their definition «are those perceptions, sensations or emotions of the soul which we refer particularly to at, and which are caused, maintained and strengthened by some movement of the spirits».³² The best that the soul can do is to «overcome the lesser passions, but not the stronger and more violent ones, except after the disturbance of the blood and spirits has died down. The most the will can do while this disturbance is at its full strength is not to yield to its effects and to inhibit many of the movements to which it disposes the body».³³ This means that, even if our will seems to be subject to physical and physiological limitations, there is nevertheless the possibility of escaping our negative emotions. Passions can be eliminated by the power of our will but not immediately, not automatically. They can only be eliminated indirectly.³⁴

²⁹ During his stay in Holland, Descartes changed at least twenty-four addresses, not counting his temporary stays at friends' houses.

³⁰ *Passions*, Part One, Article 45, ATXI 362-363, CSMI 345.

³¹ *Ibid*, Part One, Article 44, ATXI 361-362, CSMI 345.

³² *Ibid*, Part One, Article 27, ATXI 349, CSMI 338-339.

³³ *Ibid*, Part One, Article 46, ATXI 363-364, CSMI 345.

³⁴ *Ibid*, Part One, Article 45, ATXI 362-363, CSMI 345.

But what is that way? What enables the «opening» for release from our unpleasant passions? Our ability to intervene in nature thanks to the effort and above all, thanks to habit: «Each volition is naturally joined to some movement of the gland, but through effort or habit we may join it to others».³⁵ Thus, for Descartes the correlations between a particular group of physiological events and a particular psychological response are not invariant: «although nature seems to have joined every movement of the gland to certain of our thoughts from the beginning of our life, yet we may join them to others through habit».³⁶ According to Cottingham, Descartes was the first to formulate the theory of conditioned response.³⁷ What does this mean practically? It means that, regardless of their physical condition, human beings have the unique privilege of being able to intervene in their own nature. Being now equipped with the scientific knowledge of our body's function and our psychophysiological reactions we are able to modify our predetermined mechanisms. In this way we need not instinctively obey what the passions dictate. Speaking of effort, Descartes means that since we can tame equine animals, humans, as rational creatures, can use our effort. It is possible, for example, that someone feels angry and wants to raise his hand and hit someone. However, he may not end up hitting them in the end, but rather postponing it, perhaps permanently.

What we really need to do according to Descartes is to change our nature and correct its defects. To acquire the habit of thinking about things from different angles and to understand that things may not be as the passions present them to us. In other words, mental training is required so that this ability becomes a «natural habit of mind». When we achieve this, we will have mastered our passions and become fully equipped and prepared to resist even the

³⁵ *Ibid*, Part One, Article 44, ATXI 361-362, CSMI 345.

³⁶ *Ibid*, Part One, Article 50, ATXI 368-370, CSMI 348.

³⁷ J. Cottingham, *Φιλοσοφία της Επιστήμης. Α': Οι ορθολογιστές*, μτφρ. Σ. Τσούρτη, (επιμ.) Α. Χρύσης, Πολύτροπον, Αθήνα 2003, σ. 267 and J. Cottingham, «Cartesian Ethics: Reason and the Passion», *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, vol. 50, no. 195 (1), Paris 1996, pp. 207-208.

fierce and sudden attacks of the passions. Of course, in some cases, the ability to separate our physiological reactions from our thoughts can be acquired all at once, without requiring any previous effort: «Thus, when we unexpectedly come upon something very foul in a dish we are eating with relish, our surprise may so change the disposition of our brain that we cannot afterwards look upon any such food without repulsion, whereas previously we ate it with pleasure».³⁸ But this is an exception and not the rule.

So, Descartes suggests effort and habit as therapeutic means. It is understandable, however, that the habit is the one preferred by the French philosopher, as what is important is to change our natural functions to our advantage. Why then does he suggest effort? Wouldn't it be enough to just talk about habit? The answer is negative, precisely because Descartes realizes that not all people have the same intellectual abilities. In Article 50 of the *Passions*, he mentions that: «For since we are able, with a little effort, to change the movements of the brain in animals devoid of reason, it is evident that we can do so still more effectively in the case of men. Even those who have the weakest souls could acquire absolute mastery over all their passions if we employed sufficient ingenuity in training and guiding them».³⁹

But who are the weakest souls? In Article 48, Descartes states: «The weakest souls of all are those whose will is not determined in this way to follow such judgments, but constantly allows itself to be carried away by present passions».⁴⁰ On the contrary, «the strongest souls belong to those in whom the will by nature can most easily conquer the passions and stop the bodily movements which accompany them. But there are some who can never test the strength of their will because they never equip it to fight with its proper weapons, giving it instead only the weapons that some passions provide for resisting other passions. What I call its “proper”

³⁸ *Passions*, Part One, Article 50, ATXI 368-370, CSMI 348.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, Part One, Article 48, ATXI 366-367, CSMI 347.

weapons are firm and determinate judgements bearing upon the knowledge of good and evil, which the soul has resolved to follow in guiding its conduct». ⁴¹ Therefore, even those who do not possess or cannot possess a rational will, and therefore cannot make firm judgments about what is good and what is not, by using their diligence are able to control their passions. Once again, the profoundly democratic character of Cartesian ethics is seen. Everyone has the means to be cured of their unpleasant passions because, «There is no soul so weak that it cannot, if well-directed, acquire an absolute power over its passions». ⁴²

Descartes builds a systematic «educational program of the passions». He observes that even the behavior of animals can be modified if familiar associations are changed through training. When a dog sees a partridge, it feels the natural urge to run towards it. When he doesn't hear a rifle, he instinctively moves away. It is possible, however, for dogs to be trained to stand still at the sight of a partridge and to run towards it at the sound of the rifle of the hunter's gun. ⁴³ Thus, through training psychological and physiological responses that initially seem involuntary can be shaped to follow a pattern. So, this means that we can all be educated, we can all overcome our hitherto unconquerable passions. ⁴⁴

However, in Article 46 Descartes tells us about the soul: «it can easily overcome the lesser passions, but not the stronger and more violent ones, except after the disturbance of the blood and

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, Part One, Article 50, ATXI 368-370, CSMI 348.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Descartes is not a pioneer in recognizing the importance of habit and training. Aristotle in the Nicomachean Ethics asserts that moral behavior is a matter of habit (ethos): «ἡ δ' ἠθικὴ ἐξ ἔθους περιγίνεται». Αριστοτέλης, *Ηθικά Νικομάχεια. Βιβλίο Β'*, 1103a14-17, εισαγωγή-μετάφραση-σχόλια Δ. Λυπουρλής, Ζήτρος, Θεσσαλονίκη 2002. However, as Cottingham mentions, «(for Descartes) the ebb and flow of our emotions is not simply a matter of our “mental” life, but are internally and inextricably linked to action-reaction patterns from the field of physiology». *Φιλοσοφία της Επιστήμης. Α': Οι ορθολογιστές, Ibid.*, pp. 269-270.

spirits has died down».⁴⁵ Therefore, it is practically impossible to do anything when our passions are very strong. However, even in this case, Descartes will suggest some remedies, some ways in which we can react.

The French philosopher's advice is simple. In any case, initially we should calm down. In a letter to his friend Alphonse Pollot (1602-1668) in his attempt to console him for the loss of his brother, Descartes also tells him about his own losses, those of his daughter and his father, who died in September and in October 1640 respectively. Closing the letter, he tells him: «I ask you merely to try to alleviate the pain little by little, by looking at what has happened to you from whatever perspective can make it appear more bearable, while at the same time taking your mind off it as much as you can by other activities. I am well aware that I am telling you nothing new here. But we should not despise good remedies just because they are in common use; and since I have myself made successful use of this one, I felt myself bound to include it in this letter».⁴⁶ Many of Descartes' letters to Elizabeth also move in the same context. Already in the spring of 1645, Elizabeth has expressed to her interlocutor the health problems she was facing. Descartes' first answer is given on May 18, 1645, when he learns from Pollot that Elizabeth is suffering from a fever, which is accompanied by a dry cough. He tells the princess that the cause of her illness is the sadness she feels because of the constant problems that plague her, talking to her about the power of great souls, but without proceeding with any practical advice.⁴⁷

In a new letter dated 24 May 1645, the princess thanks Descartes for his interest and accepts the fact that her illness stems from her sadness. However, she continues to be sick, and she cannot get rid of the unpleasant thoughts that torment her.⁴⁸ Realizing the

⁴⁵ *Passions*, Part One, Article 46, ATXI 363-364, CSMI 345.

⁴⁶ Letter to Pollot, mid-January 1641, ATIII 278-280, CSMK 167-168.

⁴⁷ ATIV 200-204, LS 85-88.

⁴⁸ AT IV 207-210, LS 88-90.

poor condition of the princess, Descartes in his new letter advises her to try to divert her imagination. First, he tells her that the healing waters of the springs of the Belgian town of Spa will do her good, and then he advises her to try not to think about her miseries, thinking of pleasant things and situations such as all the beautiful things that nature presents to us, accepting of course that in theory it is easy to say but in practice it is quite difficult. In fact, the French philosopher will also refer to his own case, saying that while he inherited from his mother a dry cough and a pale complexion, because he was inclined to always see things from the most favorable angle, he managed to overcome those of his weaknesses.⁴⁹ Essentially, Descartes tells Elizabeth that we should have the ability to turn our imagination away from the object of passion itself, and by giving his own example, he thinks that this kind of treatment is enough.⁵⁰ In a later letter, Descartes suggests to Elizabeth to imagine more difficult situations than the ones she is experiencing, so as to reduce the negative consequences of the current situations.⁵¹ For the French philosopher, even from bad situations we can get something. The good thing about misfortunes, if such a thing can be said, is that Elizabeth had the opportunity to use all her mental powers in order to get rid of the misfortunes and unpleasant feelings that caused her.⁵²

It is therefore undeniable that Descartes considers it always possible for one to turn to more favorable thoughts. However, this way does not always have such a direct effect, precisely because the

⁴⁹ Letter to Elizabeth, May or June 1645, ATIV 218-222, CSMK 249-251.

⁵⁰ In any case, Descartes maintained a sense of the fragility of his life, while for reasons that will not be analyzed in this study, he attached great importance to the science of medicine. For example, in his letter to Constantijn Huygens (1596-1687) on 4 December 1637 Descartes refers to the primary importance of medicine, a view he seems to have maintained at least until October 1645, when in his letter to the Marquess of Newcastle (William Canendish, 1592-1676), states that the maintenance of his health has always been the main purpose of his studies. AT I 648-650, CSMK 75-76 and AT IV 329, CSMK 275.

⁵¹ Letter to Elizabeth, May 1646, ATIV 411, CSMK 287.

⁵² Letter to Elizabeth, June 1645, ATIV 237, CSMK 253.

passions have a physical dimension. This is exactly what Elizabeth tells him in her letter dated June 22, 1645. She understands that Descartes managed to overcome his passions, but at the same time, she confesses to him that he cannot do the same, as her body is disturbed and needs several months to recover. What the princess cannot do is find a way to overcome her passions before they play their part.⁵³ Descartes comes back and suggests to Elizabeth two more therapeutic means, sleep and the study of good books.⁵⁴

The correspondence between Descartes and Elizabeth continues, in roughly the same spirit, regarding the topic of passions and ways to deal with them. However, in November 1646, Descartes comes up with a recapitulation of the ways he had suggested to the princess up until then, telling her what she must do. First, she should maintain the health of her body. Then she should have in her mind objects that give her pleasure and which can drive away sad passions, while, on the contrary, engaging happy ones. Finally, she should try not to have any passion for things that might displease her.⁵⁵ But here, Descartes tells the princess something else. He tells her about the secret power of inner joy: «And what is commonly called the “inner voice” of Socrates was undoubtedly nothing other than his being accustomed to follow his inner inclinations, and his believing that an undertaking would have a happy outcome when he entered upon it with a secret feeling of cheerfulness, but an unhappy outcome when he was sad [...] But with regard to the important actions of life, when their outcome is so doubtful that prudence cannot tell us what we ought to do, I think it is quite right for us to follow the advice of “the voice within”».⁵⁶

Of great interest is the escalation of the Cartesian treatment of unpleasant passions or their excesses in general. The first step is to reflect on the passion itself and evaluate it based on its usefulness.

⁵³ ATIV 233-234, LS 93-94.

⁵⁴ Letter to Elizabeth, June 1645, ATIV 236-238, CSMK 253-254.

⁵⁵ ATIV 528-532, CSMK 296-298.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

However, Descartes understands the difficulty of this particular practice and proceeds with an escalating proposal for the treatment of the passions. Recognizing their physical origin, he will first suggest remedies that concern the body and aim to calm it, while the passions are still in great turmoil. He will suggest to Elizabeth thermal baths, a good night's sleep, physical activities, reading a good book. So, the first thing we need to do is calm our body down. However, the main part of the Cartesian treatment of the passions concerns the case where our bodily agitation has subsided. There the cures are effort and habit. Since we have calmed down and the effervescence of the blood has subsided a little, we should think about different things from those that concern us, think pleasant thoughts, or, remember more difficult situations in order to overcome the present ones more easily. In other words, what we should do is to somehow cause ourselves feelings of joy, to see things from a different perspective, to understand that passions do not always present things to us in their true dimension and to change our predetermined psychophysical connections. In other words, to acquire the ability to think differently. However, we should in any case, accept our inner voice. Because ultimately, joy is not dependent on any particular thought because it is already within us. So, if we follow our hidden inclinations, our inner joy, we will succeed in life, in the same way that Socrates listened and faithfully followed the voice of his demon.

So, Descartes makes our inner voice a decision-making criterion. This inner joy of ours is independent of the content of the thoughts themselves. In Article 147 of the *Passions*, regarding the interior emotions of the soul Descartes states: «For example, when a husband mourns his dead wife, it sometimes happens that he would be sorry to see her brought to life again. It may be that his heart is torn by the sadness aroused in him by the funeral display and by the absence of a person to whose company he was accustomed. And it may be that some remnants of love or of pity occur in his imagination and draw genuine tears from his eyes. Nevertheless, he feels at the same time a secret joy in his innermost soul, and the emotion of this joy has such power that the

concomitant sadness and tears can do nothing to diminish its force». ⁵⁷ Therefore, whether the soul rejoices in something it judges to be good or mourns over something bad, it derives pleasure from the awareness of this perfection. ⁵⁸ Thus, the inner emotions of the soul, our inner joy, that hidden voice that we need to listen to, becomes both a healing tool and a criterion for making our daily decisions, and therefore acquires a more practical dimension.

At the same time, the French philosopher never abandons his orientation to the method, even if the latter is possibly modified. In the *Passions*, or better, in his moral philosophy, the method for Descartes becomes a pre-educational exercise. For an object with an unclear content, i.e., the passions, it is possible, after submitting them to the Cartesian criticism, that they can be rationally analyzed and overcome or even mitigated, as far as their negative versions and manifestations are concerned. Everything starts with understanding. If we understand who and where we are, we can also change our passions. In his letter to Chanut dated June 15, 1646, Descartes mentions the following: «Of course, I agree with you entirely that the safest way to find out how we should live is to discover first what we are, what kind of world we live in, and who is the creator of this world, or the master of the house we live in». ⁵⁹

IV. GENEROSITY: «A GENERAL REMEDY FOR EVERY DISORDER OF THE PASSIONS»

At the end of the Second Part of the *Passions*, Descartes proposes two more antidotes, two more remedies, which aim at getting ourselves into the habit of desiring only those things that depend on us, or otherwise, of having no useless desires. One antidote is the contemplation of the works of divine Providence and the realization that

⁵⁷ ATXI 440-441, CSMI 381.

⁵⁸ S. James, *Passion and Action. The Emotions in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1997, p. 197.

⁵⁹ ATIV 441, CSMK 289.

nothing of what it has pre-eternally ordained could have happened in a different way. In the next Article, the French philosopher continues his thought by saying that: «We must recognize that everything is guided by divine Providence, whose eternal decree is infallible and immutable to such an extent that, except for matters it has determined to be dependent on our free will, we must consider everything that affects us to occur of necessity and as it were by fate, so that it would be wrong for us to desire things to happen in any other way».⁶⁰

But the primary remedy that Descartes suggests for useless desires is generosity. What exactly does it consist in?

«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».⁶¹

From the definition of generosity, it follows that Descartes is probably trying to relieve the term of the meaning it had at the given time. While the term in 17th-century France originally had roughly the same meaning as it does today, French moral thinkers gave generosity a connotation of politeness in their attempt to elaborate a detailed «gentilhomme morality».⁶² Certainly, Descartes does not cease to consider that noble origin contributes more than any other virtue to the formation of generosity and that proper education corrects the shortcomings of humble origin.⁶³ But in any case, it proceeds to a new

⁶⁰ *Passions*, Part Two, Article 146, ATXI 439-440, CSMI 380-381.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, Part Three, Article 153, ATXI 445-446, CSMI 384.

⁶² S. Gaukroger, «Descartes' Theory of Passions» in Cottingham J. (ed.), *Descartes*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1998, p. 222.

⁶³ *Passions*, Part Three, Article 161, ATXI 453-454, CSMI 387-388. See also N. Naaman-Zauderer, *Descartes' Deontological Turn. Reason, Will,*

meaning of the notion. Dignity and appreciation are «shifted in». The brave no longer deserve to be valued for their deeds and martial virtues. They do not gain their fame in the public sphere, but act to maintain a sense of worth in their own eyes.⁶⁴

Descartes' criticism is probably not *sui generis* but was influenced by well-known texts of the time. As examples, we will mention Charles Louseau's (1564-1627) *Traite des Ordres (1610)* and *L'honnête homme ou l'art de plaire à la cour (1630)* by Nicolas Faret (1600-1646).⁶⁵ In any case, however, from a society torn apart by wars,⁶⁶ a new character seems to emerge, who does not derive his self-esteem from conquests and honors, but from his inner integrity. The fact that the only reason why we are worth valuing ourselves is the right use of our will is not only a philosophical but also an anthropological and social position. We should not value ourselves for the acquisition of any material goods or social status. In Descartes' moral anthropology the will and its right use is the only thing that should make us proud of ourselves.

Vanity and generosity consist simply «in the good opinion we have of ourselves – the only difference being that this opinion is unjustified in the one case and justified in the other – I think we can relate them to one and the same passion. This passion is produced by a movement made up of those of wonder, of joy, and of love (self-love as much as the love we have for the cause of our self-esteem)». ⁶⁷ Moreover, generosity has as its component element esteem. For Descartes, esteem as a passion «is the soul's inclination to represent to itself the value of the object of its esteem, this inclination being caused by a special movement of the spirits which are so directed in the brain that they strengthen the

and Virtue in the Later Writings, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2010, p. 200.

⁶⁴ C. Taylor, *Πηγές του εαυτού. Η γένεση της νεωτερικής ταυτότητας*, μτφρ. Ξ. Κομνηνός, Ίνδικτος, Αθήνα 2007, σ. 252.

⁶⁵ S. Marquardt, «The long road to peace: Descartes' modernization of generosity in the "Passions of the Soul"», *History of Political Thought*, Vol. 36, No.1, Imprint Academic Ltd, Exeter 2015, pp. 53-83.

⁶⁶ Perhaps it is no coincidence that the *Passions* were published a year after the end of the Thirty Years' War.

⁶⁷ *Passions*, Part Three, Article 160, ATXI 451-453, CSMI 386-387.

impressions having this effect».⁶⁸ Esteem, as a kind of admiration, is especially noteworthy when we connect it with our own self, that is, when it is our own merit for which we have esteem or contempt.⁶⁹ Therefore, for Descartes self-esteem in his definition of generosity comes from realizing that all we really possess is free will and from how we make proper use of this constitutional freedom.

So, we have seen what generosity consists of. But how can it be obtained? Descartes himself gives us the answer in the *Passions*: «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».⁷⁰ The first step in acquiring generosity is to understand what free will consists of and what is the importance of it. Acknowledging the fact that we are endowed with free will comes with a critical reflection on the things we take for granted. Thus, the primary exercise of free will occurs when we think about something other than what our senses «dictate» to us. After the experience of exercising free will complements the already acquired knowledge of this metaphysically given right, we will be able to understand the advantages that derive from our decision to use this great privilege of ours properly. At this point, something should be clarified. It seems really odd for Descartes to hold that the ambitious have concerns that beset them and therefore cannot make good use of their free will. But the French philosopher does not criticize ambition itself, which generally understood, is not considered something negative. Descartes refers to overly ambitious people, that is, those who cannot regulate their desire, as they do not sufficiently distinguish the things that depend on us, in other words, the things that depend on our free will.⁷¹ For Descartes, these kinds of desires are useless, because however good

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, Part Three, Article 149, ATXI 443-444, CSMI 383.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, Part Three, Article 151, ATXI 444-445, CSMI 383-384.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, Part Three, Article 161, ATXI 453-454, CSMI 387-388.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, Part Two, Article 144, ATXI 436-437, CSMI 379.

things are that do not depend on us, we cannot passionately desire them.⁷²

Therefore, in this way we can arouse within us the passion of generosity and subsequently, acquire the virtue of generosity.⁷³ The question is, how can the passion be turned into virtue? Indeed, for Descartes the passion of generosity becomes a virtue, when the passion itself turns into a habit. Generosity begins as a passion, which is motivated by considerations of free will, its value, and the advantages that follow from its right use. Constant reflection, constant repetition of these thoughts, will turn passion into virtue, into a natural habit. Therefore, to acquire the highest virtue of Cartesian ethics, generosity, we must, having awakened it in ourselves as a passion, acquire the habit of steadfastly adhering to our resolution to use our free will right, in other words, to acquire the habit of desiring virtue.⁷⁴ Thus, we will acquire the self-esteem that steels us against the passions. Generosity is about self-recognition and acceptance of one's intellectual power.

The generous man has succeeded in completely mastering his passions and desires, he never envies or despises any of his fellow men. Even if others commit faults, the generous man understands that they are mostly due to ignorance, so he does not reprimand but forgives, with modesty and virtuous humility. What makes him generous exists or is capable of existing in other people.⁷⁵ The purpose of the generous is to benefit others and put himself second, as he is inspired by a good intention for everyone.⁷⁶ For Descartes, always in moderation, the interest of the whole of which we are a part should be preferred to the particular interests of each individual.⁷⁷ The generous person, therefore,

⁷² *Ibid*, Part Two, Article 145, ATXI 437, CSMI 379-380.

⁷³ *Ibid*, Part Three, Article 161, ATXI 453-454, CSMI 387-388.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, Part Two, Article 148, ATXI 441-442, CSMI 381-382.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, Part Three, Articles 154-156, ATXI 446-449, CSMI 384-385. See also R. Davies, *Descartes. Belief, scepticism and virtue*, Routledge, London and New York 2001, pp. 49-50.

⁷⁶ *Passions*, Part Three, Article 187, ATXI 469-470, CSMI 395.

⁷⁷ Let us recall again the fourth of the six truths described by Descartes to Elizabeth in the letter of September 15, 1645. AT IV 291-295, CSMK 265-267.

knows that the good of society takes precedence, which will be realized through individual improvement and the realization of each person's intellectual potential.

Generosity is the final stage of the Cartesian treatment of the passions, and its acquisition is an “ode to effort.” A process of conquering each subsequent moment that will come precisely through faith in the procedure, through deep faith in our own self and its potential. If we acquire the permanent habit of desiring virtue, we will also acquire the self-esteem that empowers us to overcome the excesses of our passions. The moral character chooses to live virtuously because virtue is self-evaluative. And the crowning virtue of Cartesian ethics is generosity. The important thing is that all people can arouse passion and then acquire the virtue of generosity.⁷⁸ We can all become generous. And if we manage to conquer what, according to Geneviève Rodis-Lewis, is «the last fruit of Cartesian metaphysics»,⁷⁹ we will have found «the key to all the other virtues and a general remedy for every disorder of the passions».⁸⁰

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The *Passions* are primarily the passions of their creator. Mainly because Descartes expresses the anxiety of the modern subject to conquer certainties by first conquering himself. However, his last treatise, and despite his justifiable reluctance to talk about issues related to ethics, is the revelation of his soul. The revelation of a noble, but above all philosophical soul, to help her fellow human beings to conquer happiness. Through *Passions* Descartes shows us the way to live. Happiness is a deeply personal achievement and it depends solely on us and on our path in life. The cure of the unpleasant passions can only

⁷⁸ A. Oksenberg Rorty, «Descartes on thinking with the body», in: Cottingham J. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1992, p. 387.

⁷⁹ G. Rodis-Lewis, «Introduction», in *The Passions of the Soul*, translated by S. Voss, Hackett, Cambridge 1989, p. xvi.

⁸⁰ *Passions*, Part Three, Article 161, ATXI 453-454, CSMI 387-388.

come from our active behavior, from our unceasing effort, from our educational ability to finally conquer, the «Lydian stone» of Cartesian ethics, the virtue of generosity. It could be said that generosity poses a problem of responsibility to human existence itself. Happiness in Cartesian ethics is a matter of choice, and choice always carries the practical burden of responsibility. We have a responsibility to God who gave us the privilege of free will and we have a responsibility to our very existence to become generous. Descartes, with the study of the passions, introduces the modern subject to the problematic of emotions in a pioneering way. Admiration is considered by the Cartesian analysis as the pre-eminent passion of the modern subject. An era of constant changes, rearrangements and progress, an «age of admiration», which tries to know itself by looking into its future. Even in the study of the passions, however, Descartes never deviated from his basic principles. Everything is done within the framework of the method and rules that she dictates to us.

In one of the most famous portraits of Descartes, painted by Jan Baptist Weenix (1621-1660) between 1647 and 1649, the French philosopher is shown holding a book, on which he chooses to write the phrase *Mundus est fabula*. What does this mean? The subject has achieved certainty and established his rightful place in the world. But the world itself can change. The method exists and is applicable. But always the world itself and the phenomena that govern it can be explained in a different way, which will be based on some later observation. Everything is under consideration. Man may have the ability to become «lord and master of nature», yet he should maintain his humility. A humility that simultaneously indicates a belief in science and technical means. Because not only does the nature change, but the means by which we observe change also. This humility is also required by Cartesian ethics. Descartes' motto was *Bene vixit bene qui latuit* (*He who hid himself lived well*).⁸¹ He always promoted his ambitions subtly, with patience and humility without being swayed by the moments and emotions.

⁸¹ Ovid, *Tristia*, Part III, IV, 25

But what is it that makes a philosopher be or become a great philosopher? I believe that the great philosopher, beyond all others, has two abilities, two characteristics that make him great. The first is the one mentioned by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995). The criterion of great philosophers lies in their ability to create new concepts. These new concepts are not words, because words can be said by many, but new divisions of the reality.⁸² Indeed, a key feature of Descartes was his ability to create, or above all to reconstruct and enrich already existing notions. The second characteristic of great philosophers is their ability to never stop. And to transfer this feature with their pen in their writings. Descartes never stopped. Little of particularity, much of genius, the French philosopher was a tireless worker of his craft. An uncompromising and restless spirit from his youth, he served philosophy untouchably throughout his life, despite problems, adversities, sharp confrontations. His ethics have the same spirit. In the penultimate article of the *Passions*, Descartes will say: «Now that we are acquainted with all the passions, we have much less reason for anxiety about them than we had before. For we see that they are all by nature good, and that we have nothing to avoid but their misuse or their excess, against which the remedies I have explained might be sufficient if each person took enough care to apply them».⁸³ For the French philosopher we should live according to our human nature and accept our passions, analyze them, learn from them and avoid, not the passions themselves, but their excesses. Cartesian ethics is an ethics of action, and action never stops. To get to the point of becoming masters of our passions, we have to toil, we have to fall and get up again, we have to train. Descartes shows us the way to do it.

⁸² G. Deleuze-F. Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* transl. H. Tomlinson and G. Burchill, Verso, London and New York 1994, pp. 40-44.

⁸³ *Passions*, Part Three, Article 211, ATXI 485-488, CSMI 403-404.

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ALEKSANDROS AZAIZES

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TRETMAN STRASTI U DEKARTOVOJ FILOZOFIJI MORALA

Sažetak: U članku se ispituju lekovita sredstva koja Rene Dekart (1596-1650) predlaže kako bi se ophrvalo s neprijatnim strastima i njihovim preteranostima, onako kako je to opisano u njegovom poslednjem delu, *Strastima duše* (1649). U ovom spisu, Dekart nastoji da dosegne jezgro osećanja, te da ih, uz pomoć fiziologije, racionalno analizira. Cilj francuskog filozofa duboko je moralan. Zahtev za jednom praktičkom filozofijom obuzimao ga je još od šestog dela njegove paradigmatične *Rasprave o metodu* (1637). Taj zahtev ispunjen je u *Strastima duše*. Naša analiza pokazuje da Dekartova etika jeste etika čina. Život iziskuje odluke, bez obzira na njihov konačni ishod. Sa slobodnom volju kao kamenom temeljcem etičke strukture, Dekart će uspostaviti obrazovni sistem radi regulisanja strasti. U bavljenju ovim problemom, Dekart se opredelio za „strategiju velikodušnosti“. Velikodušnost, najvažniji pojam kartezijske etike i primarni lek koji Dekart preporučuje za beskorisne želje, jeste strast, a ona se u vrlinu pretvara kada postaje navikom.

Ključne reči: Rene Dekart, etika, strasti, volja, tretman, velikodušnost, sreća

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