


# Overcoming Emotions, Conquering Fate: Reflections on Descartes' Ethics

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## Abstract

This paper offers a reconstruction of Descartes' theory of the emotions, with special focus on the virtue 'générosité' which he proposed as the master virtue to help humans manage and control their desires so that they can achieve the highest level of happiness which transcends the unpredictability and arbitrariness of fate. It first provides an analysis of Descartes' notion of 'divine providence', 'vain desires', and 'regret'; then proceeds to offer an investigation of 'générosité' both as an emotion and as a virtue; and concludes with an examination of 'générosité' as a tool to master and control the emotions.

## Emotions in ethical deliberations

In the history of the Western philosophical tradition, with a few notable exceptions, of course, we find an abundance of ethical theories that aim to different extents at some degree of universality in moral deliberations as an exercise of the rational faculty. These ethical positions tend to rely on a sharp demarcation between reason and the emotions: rationality has usually received the elevated status as that which defines human beings, while the emotions and feelings seemed to signify a weakness, an incompleteness of the human condition which threatens not only our rationality but also the possibility of a moral life. The Stoics, for example, have defined the good life as one that is in complete control of the emotions, something understood to be 'excessive impulses which are disobedient to reason' (Pomeroy, 1999: 65A). Similarly for Kant, emotions were seen as inclinations enticing the will to act on motives other than that of duty as dictated by reason. Ethics has therefore been geared towards finding means to remedy the emotions so that they do not imperil human rationality. Such dichotomization of reason and emotions in moral deliberations has, however, come under scrutiny in the past few decades as a response to the question of whether a good life can really be achieved through the complete divorce from one's feelings or emotions such as love and joy. Also, more contemporary theorists of the emotions have argued that emotions are evaluative experiences closely related to one's beliefs and thoughts, hence to a certain extent a

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significant or even a crucial element of reason itself (Nussbaum, 2001; Solomon, 2007). Regarding the emotions as an evaluative experience seems to necessitate taking into account numerous particular factors such as personal history, cultural environments, social norms, all of which significantly contribute to the construction of one's personality, psychology, and mental states. An ethical theory that incorporates human emotions and its various evaluative components as an aspect that has important moral implications seems to answer more comprehensively to the demands for a richer understanding of the diversity in moral deliberations.

This paper is an attempt to dip into the rich resource of the history of Western philosophy in order to uncover a fine example of an ethics uncharacteristic of its time, which has as its basis a universality of the human condition yet at the same time centers around the rational use of human emotions as a tool in achieving the good life. By dipping into this tradition, I hope to shed some light on a rather unknown and obscure yet crucial aspect of an all-too-important figure in the philosophical canon – the ethical thoughts of René Descartes. My interest in this issue grew out of a curiosity not only in the role of the emotions in moral deliberations for the reasons mentioned above, but also in the fact that the father of modern rationalism and the mind–body dualism himself proposed an emotion, ‘generosity’ in particular, as the tool to achieve the greatest happiness that can be had in a good life in his last work, *The Passions of the Soul* (1649). This is even more surprising if we consider his proposal in the context of both the quest for knowledge in his time, when the development of the ‘New Science’ was at its peak, and his other works such as the *Discourse on the Method* (1637) which rely heavily on a mechanistic analysis of the physical world with the goal of becoming ‘lords and masters of nature’ (Descartes, 1985: 142–143). We find that Descartes’ moral thoughts remarkably reveal a dimension of human life over which humans have no direct control, but which is nonetheless a major obstacle in achieving the good life, namely, fate. It seems that in order to attain the good life and the highest happiness, it is not sufficient that humans become ‘lords and masters of nature’. *The Passions of the Soul* proposes a solution that would render humans ‘lords and masters of the emotions’ through the use of ‘generosity’ so that humans are not affected by things that are beyond their control. I will begin with a brief account of Descartes’ theory of the emotions, and proceed to an analysis of ‘vain desires’ which Descartes considers to be a deficiency of the emotions and hence the cause of human dissatisfaction. I will then examine his proposed remedies for such deficiency through the reflection of divine providence and through the development and use of ‘generosity’.

## A physiological account of the emotions

At this point, it might be useful to provide a brief account of Descartes’ physiological account of the emotions, or what he calls the ‘passions of the soul’. Descartes made clear in the Prefatory Letters of *The Passions of the Soul* that he intended to explain the passions ‘only as a natural philosopher, and not as a rhetorician or even as a moral philosopher’ (Descartes, 1985: 327), so some technicality might not altogether be out of order here.

Passions of the soul in the general sense are perceptions, which are a kind of thoughts. The passions of the soul in the restricted sense,<sup>1</sup> or the emotions, are perceptions that are caused by the body, are neural, and are ‘referred to the soul’<sup>2</sup> in similar ways that sensations such as heat are referred to external objects and appetites such as thirst or hunger are referred to the body. The passions are modes of the mind–body union which are caused by the movements or agitations of the ‘animal spirits’<sup>3</sup> through the arteries and nerves into the brain, thereby causing the ‘little gland’ or the pineal gland to move in certain ways corresponding to the different movements of the animal spirits. The soul or the mind feels and perceives this action, and further causes the animal spirits to enter the muscles in different ways, thereby generating actions in the body.

Despite the technicality, two important points need to be noted here. Firstly, the passions have a twofold function: they are an integral part of a ‘maintenance system’ of the body that aims to ensure the survival of the mind-body union.<sup>4</sup> They are naturally good, and they ‘dispose the soul to want the things for which they prepare the body. Thus the feeling of fear moves the soul to want to flee, that of courage to want to fight, and similarly with the others’ (Descartes, 1985: 343). Another function, more morally relevant, is that ‘[i]t is on the passions alone that all the good and evil of this life depends’ (Descartes, 1985: 404). Since the soul receives the passions ‘passively’ as a result of the movements of the animal spirits and the pineal gland, it requires the will to act on those passions in a way that would generate a proper response to them in order not to ‘overreact’. It is thus through the control and correct use of the passions alone that humans, as mind-body composites, can attain happiness and a good life. The difficulty in doing so, however, emerges in the second point: in theorizing about the emotions or the passions, Descartes is not considering humans in terms of their distinct substances. As moral beings, humans are neither merely *res cogitans*, or thinking things, nor *res extensa*, or extended things. As subjects of emotions, genuine human beings are necessarily mind-body composites whose interactions are not perceived as ‘pure thoughts of a mind distinct from a body’ (Descartes, 1991: 206) but as confused and obscure perceptions of mind and body united. The passions, as modes of the mind-body union, are not ‘clear and distinct’, but rather ‘confused and obscure’ thoughts (Descartes, 1985: 281) about which one cannot have absolutely certain, but only morally certain, knowledge that can be false. The mastery and correct use of the passions which alone leads to the moral development of a person therefore requires a process much more complex than a merely technical or physiological one.

## Controlling the passions

How exactly, then, are we supposed to go about controlling the passions? The key to the answer, I believe, lies in Descartes’ emphasis on the role of desire in human actions. Since the passions alone ‘cannot lead us to perform any action except by means of the desire they produce’ (Descartes, 1985: 379), the ‘chief utility of morality’ becomes a matter of controlling desires so that they conform to true knowledge rather than be swayed by errors. To Descartes, the error commonly committed with respect to desires is the failure to distinguish things that depend absolutely on us from things that do not depend on us in any way. Humans are, however, naturally inclined to have ‘vain desires’ or desires for things that do not depend on us as a response to the impetus of the mind-body union to preserve itself. Yet since desires are passions which the soul receives passively, they can only be controlled in an indirect manner through the training of the will, that is, by controlling the effects that such passions have on us and our reactions to them. Descartes proposes two remedies for vain desires: the first is through the use of ‘generosity’, and the second through ‘frequent reflection upon divine providence’ (Descartes, 1985: 380). As reflection upon divine providence seems to be a necessary condition for the development and use of ‘generosity’, and as Descartes’ account of vain desires rests upon a distinction between things that depend on us and things that do not, let us first take a look at what it means to reflect upon divine providence:

We should reflect upon the fact that nothing can possibly happen other than as Providence has determined from all eternity. Providence is ... a fate or immutable necessity, ... we can desire only what we consider in some way to be possible; and things which do not depend on us can be considered possible only in so far as ... we judge that they may happen and that similar things have happened at other times. (Descartes, 1985: 380)

Descartes’ second remedy seems to coincide in some aspects with the Stoics’ belief that in desiring something we consider the thing desired to be epistemologically possible, and that once we

realize that it is not, since God did not will it to happen, such knowledge is sufficient to terminate our desire for it. Yet Descartes' position seems somewhat more complex than the Stoics', as he recognizes not only that desires are future-directed, thus making their possibility not wholly predictable, but also that desires and other passions are not avoidable to the mind-body union in its attempt to protect and preserve itself. We must therefore be cautious in separating out what depends only on us, and direct our desires only to them. As for things that do not depend on us, although they are to be regarded as 'wholly fated and immutable' and thus not something we should direct our desires to, we must still consider the reasons that make them more or less predictable in order to use them as guidance for our actions. Consider Descartes' example:

... suppose we have business in some place to which we might travel by two different routes, one usually much safer than the other. And suppose providence decrees that if we go by the route we regard as safer we shall not avoid being robbed, whereas we may travel by the other route without any danger. Nevertheless, we should not be indifferent as to which one we choose, or rely upon the immutable fatality of this decree. Reason insists that we choose the route which is usually the safer and our desire in this case must be fulfilled when we have followed this route, whatever evil may befall us; for, since any such evil was inevitable from our point of view, we had no reason to wish to be exempt from it: we had reason only to do the best that our intellect was able to recognize... (Descartes, 1985: 380–381)

Descartes seems to suggest here that despite our disappointment due to the frustration of our desires, we can still gain satisfaction by following reason's dictates, which is our most valuable asset. What becomes apparent in the above example is that for Descartes, the acceptance of divine providence does not mean a complete surrender to fate without a rational consideration or decision. We still have to use our best ability in thinking or reasoning about possible outcomes by using past events as our source of information. Should our estimation of the future be wrong, we can still gain satisfaction from the fact that we have attempted to reason as best as we possibly could and have resolutely followed the dictates of reason in carrying out an action.

Although a 'complete satisfaction' can be attained by limiting desire only to things whose fulfillment is up to us only, it is also to be noted that such limitation or control is not as much directed towards the objects of our desire as it is to our reactions or responses to them. Reflection upon divine providence helps us in accepting that whatever happens, happens necessarily because it is the will of an omnipotent God who is supremely good. However, God's omnipotence does not guarantee that all our desires will be fulfilled. I propose that Descartes' second remedy of vain desires through the reflection upon divine providence serves to help us gain 'complete satisfaction' not merely by limiting what we desire, but much more importantly by controlling our passions that are related to sadness, which include regret, remorse, and repentance, all of which tend to arise when our desires are frustrated.<sup>5</sup> We may then see that the major obstacle to human satisfaction or happiness turns out not to be vain desires, but rather regret, remorse, and repentance,<sup>6</sup> which differ from desire in that these three passions arise through reasoning about alternative possibilities such as what might have happened had we chosen a different course of action.

Reflecting upon divine providence is a fitting remedy not because it terminates all of our desires, but because it reminds us that we could not have chosen otherwise, and thereby undercuts the basis of the concepts of regret, remorse, and repentance.<sup>7</sup>

What remains to be observed is that the control of the passions, especially of desire, by minimizing the possibility of regret, remorse, and repentance seems to be a remedy of the symptoms or the outcomes of vain desires more than of their cause, since it primarily addresses the effects of the frustration of our desires. Reflection upon divine providence alone does not prevent us from being affected by stimuli that may arouse desires. It is rather Descartes' first remedy, that of developing and using 'generosity', that addresses the causes of vain desires, to which I will now proceed.

## On ‘generosity’

‘Generosity’ is first and foremost a passion, an emotion, which through habituation becomes a virtue. The virtue of ‘generosity’ is both key to the other virtues and a remedy for the defects of the passions, which are crucial elements for one’s emotional well-being as well as moral development. It closely combines the highest power of the will with the disposition to use that will well.

Descartes defines ‘generosity’ as a legitimate self-esteem, which seems to a certain extent to echo Aristotle’s notion of megalopsychia or magnanimity. The main difference between the two seems to be Descartes’ affinity with the Stoics in holding that virtue is in no way dependent on fortune. In article 54 of *The Passions of the Soul*, Descartes mentions ‘magnanimity’ as a kind of esteem. In the history of ideas, magnanimity has been closely tied to the notion of legitimate self-esteem. Aristotle defined virtue or moral excellence as a habitual action according to the right reasons, which is the ground for legitimate self-esteem (Aristotle, 1999: 18). A magnanimous person esteems his own excellence which consists of the unity of the virtues (prudence, temperance, justice, and courage) and the proper use of the virtues according to the golden mean, neither too excessively nor too meagerly. Since magnanimous people gain satisfaction through themselves without having to rely on others, they tend not to be self-consumed but generous to others, and they tend not to take excessive pride in their own goodness. Such people, according to Aristotle, deserve the highest reward for humans, which is proper honor. Magnanimity is therefore deemed the ‘crown of the virtues’.

In mentioning ‘magnanimity’ as a kind of self-esteem in article 54, it is generally understood that Descartes subscribes to the ancient Greek’s definition of the virtues and the relationship between the virtues and self-esteem. However, in article 153, Descartes makes a sudden shift to the word ‘generosity’ to refer to such virtue. His definition has two components, as follows:

The first consists in 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. (Descartes, 1985: 384)

‘Generosity’ has, according to this definition, both a cognitive and a conative component. The cognitive component consists of knowledge of the will’s freedom and value, and the conative component of feeling within oneself a firm and constant resolution to use the will well in carrying out actions that one judges to be best (Brown, 2008: 190). On the surface, this definition does not seem to divert drastically from that of magnanimity to necessitate a change of terms, since magnanimity also includes in it the idea that only actions resulting from the use of a free will deserves legitimate esteem. The question remains as to what ‘generosity’ is supposed to convey that ‘magnanimity’ does not.

Brown (2008: 191) and Cottingham (1998: 99–100) have suggested that the significance of Descartes’ change of terms from ‘magnanimity’ to ‘generosity’ does not really lie in the difference in meanings. Rather, it depicts a genuine shift in emphasis in the ancient, traditional conception of the virtues. That is to say, the notion of *phronesis* or practical wisdom has acquired a level of importance distinctive from that in the ancient account, and it is in the second part of Descartes’ definition of ‘generosity’ above that this distinction becomes apparent – acting with a firm and constant resolution to use the will well. We may say, then, that Descartes’ notion of ‘generosity’ is a prominent example of the tendency in modern ethics to distance itself from the ancient emphasis on the unity of virtues and increasingly lean towards the conception that a decision based on a firm and resolute judgment is at the heart of the virtues. Although Descartes himself never undermined

the importance of knowledge in the development of the virtues, especially in his earlier works, his diversion to an increasing emphasis on a firm and constant resolution to use the will well can nevertheless be detected in *The Passions of the Soul*.<sup>8</sup> His justifications appear in many of the Letters which express that the value of our actions do not rest on a moral judgment based on pure knowledge as moral situations do not usually allow us to employ any knowledge more certain than probability.

The possibility of error in our reasoning is no ground for blame if we had carried out that action through the good use of the will, that is, by resolutely acting according to what we judge to be best. Consider the following letter to Princess Elizabeth:

It is also not necessary that our reason should be free from error; it is sufficient if our conscience testifies that we have never lacked resolution and virtue to carry out whatever we have judged the best course. So virtue by itself is sufficient to make us content in this life. (Descartes, 1991: 258)

As mind-body composites that perceive the passions only confusedly and obscurely, humans' quest for the good life is based on probability or 'moral certainty' rather than on 'absolute certainty'. Moral certainty is certainty which is 'sufficient to regulate our behavior, 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' (Descartes, 1985: 289). Absolute certainty, on the other hand, arises when we believe that 'it is wholly impossible that something should be otherwise than we judge it to be' (Descartes, 1985: 290). It rests on a metaphysical foundation – on God's omnipotence and the infallibility of the faculty he gave us for distinguishing truth from falsehood. Such absolute certainty, nevertheless, has no place in moral deliberation, for Descartes is here not considering humans as mere thinking things, but as genuine human beings, as mind-body composites. Since the passions, which are modes of this composite, can only be perceived confusedly and obscurely, any knowledge that we may derive from them can thus be at best morally but never absolutely certain. Yet for Descartes, such moral certainty is sufficient for moral deliberation.

Generosity is a type of esteem and love and joy directed at oneself. Through self-esteem, one comes to feel love and joy towards oneself. Unlike pride, generosity is legitimate self-esteem. The question that remains to be asked is: how can this legitimate self-esteem remedy the defects or the disorder of the passions? The passions of the soul, as stated earlier, are caused by actions in the body, i.e., the movements of the animal spirits and the pineal gland. Such a movement is naturally joined to a certain 'thought' (such as 'this dog is scary') and results in a certain passion (such as fear) which causes the soul to want the person to flee. A passion is defective when it causes an unreasonable overreaction. Such defect, says Descartes, can be fixed either by habitually attending the will to other thoughts so as to alter the movements in the body, or to habitually separate the movements from the thought and employing the will in joining them to others so as to produce a different passion. Such acts of habituation cannot be undertaken without the recognition of our own free will and the firm and constant resolution to use it well, in this case to control the unruly passions. In other words, generosity is required in fixing the defects of the passions. Moreover, when we have successfully applied the will to fix the disorders of the passions, we esteem ourselves in having done so (a thought), which in turn affects the movements in the body in ways that help strengthen and maintain the passion of generosity itself even further, and eventually transforming it into a virtue once it becomes a habit.<sup>9</sup>

Generosity is a remedy of the causes of vain desires in the sense that it helps restrict what we may esteem or value to only what is entirely up to us, namely our free will and our good use of it. A generous person therefore has no contempt, envy, fear, or anger towards others since such

emotions are closely tied to valuing things that are not entirely up to us. A generous person also has no vain desires since she does not esteem or value things that are not up to her. She does not regard herself as inferior or superior to anyone, is humble, since she recognizes the presence of free will in others as well.

## Emotions in Descartes' ethics

What, then, are we supposed to make of Descartes' ethics? What does it have to offer us? An obvious and blunt answer to this seems to be an opportunity to reevaluate the role of the emotions in moral reasonings, the inseparable relationship between reason and the emotions in attaining the good life, and the need to incorporate what might be seen as individual character traits into the realm of ethics. But this is not distinctive to Descartes alone. Rather, by positioning the passions or the emotions at the center of his ethical thoughts, Descartes seems to underscore the role of the body in ethical thinking. Although ultimately emotions are thoughts, they are not disembodied thoughts as they receive their impetus from the body. In order to comprehend diverse responses in moral situations, different specificities that contribute to the construction of the body may need to be taken into account. Furthermore, by acknowledging the difficulty in requiring absolute certainty in moral deliberations of humans as humans, and not merely as thinking, rational beings, Descartes' ethics fully recognizes not only the practical limitations of human beings, but also the unpredictability and arbitrariness of the world which bears upon them. An ethics that leaves room for human limitations and errors seems to be more realistic to the human condition and more favorable to the actual attainment of the good life. Finally, by proposing reflection upon divine providence and 'generosity' as remedies for the defects of the emotions, Descartes' ethics can be regarded as an 'inward turn', that is, from the ideal of being 'lords and masters of nature' to being lords and masters of our own emotions, of ourselves. The fact that *The Passions of the Soul* was Descartes' last work may reveal to us that conquering nature through the New Science did not necessarily bring about happiness or a good life. There are and will always be things that are beyond human domination, and they tend to cause the gravest unhappiness to those whose desire for control is directed outward. By attempting instead to conquer one's emotion, Descartes' ethics tends towards an ethic of active resignation rather than of dominance, an ethic of character rather than of pure reason. I would like to end this paper with a final quote from Descartes' letter to Chanut, dated June 15, 1646, which, I believe, best illustrates my last point: 'So instead of finding ways to preserve life, I have found another, much easier and surer way, which is not to fear death' (Descartes, 1991: 289).

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## Notes

1. Henceforth referred to as 'the passions'.
2. Although Descartes did not provide further explanations about the concept of 'referring' to something, Stephen H. Voss suggests that 'we "refer" our perception to an object just in case we spontaneously judge that the action causing our perception is within that object' (Descartes, 1989: 30).
3. In article 10 of *The Passions of the Soul*, Descartes defines the 'animal spirits' as 'the most lively and finest parts of the blood, which have been rarefied by the heat in the heart' (Descartes, 1985: 331).
4. For a detailed analysis of this issue, see Rorty 1992: 371–392.

5. See Descartes 1985: 402 (article 209), 392 (article 177), and 396 (article 191) for definitions of these passions respectively.
6. Descartes wrote to Princess Elizabeth in his letter dated August 4, 1645, that ‘nothing can impede our contentment except desire and regret or repentance; but if we always do whatever our reason tells us, even if events show us afterwards that we have gone wrong, we will never have any grounds for repentance, because it was not our own fault’ (Descartes, 1991: 258).
7. An unavoidable question that Descartes’ second remedy raises is whether humans can be said to have free will if every event is ascribed to God’s will. For an excellent discussion on this issue, see Brown 2008: 165–187.
8. See, for example, Descartes, 1985: 390 (article 170).
9. ‘[...] 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’ (Descartes, 1985: 388).

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