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On Generosity: The Integration of Practice and Rational in Descartes'

Morality

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Abstract

The concept of generosity occupies a central position in Descartes' later Morality, reflecting the integration of will, rational, and passions in moral practice. Based on an analysis of *The Passions of the Soul* and *Discourse on the Method*, this study systematically examines how generosity regulates passions, guides the exercise of will, and achieves the unity of rational, focusing on its practical implementation in moral practice. The study finds that generosity requires individuals to recognize the controllable scope of their own will, direct passions through rational, and ensure that actions conform to moral standards; simultaneously, it emphasizes equal benevolence toward others and humility before God, achieving the unity of thought, volition, and behavior. Generosity not only governs moral behavior but also provides a philosophical framework for harmonizing self and others, maintaining moral stability. This study argues that generosity is the core concept of Descartes' Morality and serves as an essential bridge between moral practice and first philosophy, offering significant insights for a deeper understanding of Descartes' philosophical system and moral thought.

Keywords: Descartes;generosity;rational

1. Introduction

Cartesian philosophy is renowned for its rationalism, with its metaphysical and epistemological inquiries long dominating scholarly attention, while morality has often been regarded as a subsidiary discipline. However, Descartes himself explicitly emphasized in *Discourse on the Method* that morality is "the highest of all sciences," highlighting the equal importance of moral practice and rational cognition. "Générosité" as a central concept in Cartesian morality, embodies the unity of will, rationality, and the regulation of passions. It not only reflects personal virtue but also serves as a key point of integration between philosophical thought and practical action. This paper aims to explore the concept of generosity, its practical mechanisms, and its contemporary implications, thereby revealing the profound value of Cartesian morality.

2.The Philosophical Connotation of Descartes' Concept of "Generosity"

The concept of "Generosity" in Descartes' morality constitutes the core of his later ethical thought and serves as an indispensable key to understanding his morality. The term originates from the French word "générosité", traditionally translated as "generosity." However, in a philosophical context, "générosité" extends beyond mere benevolent actions, emphasizing the individual's mastery over their own will and the rational exercise of judgment. Descartes explicitly presents generosity in *The Passions of the Soul*, linking it closely with the will, rational, virtue, and benevolence toward others (2016), generosity embodies the central tenet of Cartesian morality: moral practice depends not only on rational deliberation but also on the exercise of the will, through which the regulation of passions realizes individual virtue. For Descartes, the only faculty that humans can fully control is the free governance of their own will and the rational deployment of that will.

The intellectual origins of generosity can be traced back to Aristotle and the Stoic school. Aristotle's conception of generosity primarily emphasizes external honors and social status. he contends that a generous person should adopt different attitudes according to their social position, making this form of generosity predominantly a social virtue. In inheriting Aristotelian thought, Descartes removes the determining influence of external conditions and shifts the focus to the inner will and rational judgment, thereby transforming generosity into a virtue centered on intrinsic goodness. Meanwhile, the Stoicism emphasize self-governance and the rational control of passions; however, their notion of generosity is primarily concerned with the individual's path to personal perfection, often neglecting the welfare of society and others. Descartes transcends this limitation by proposing that the cultivation of generosity through self-perfection should simultaneously extend toward others, thus realizing a moral practice that moves from the self to the other. This extension from the individual to others renders generosity not only a form of personal moral cultivation but also an ethical responsibility.

In terms of its specific characteristics, generosity encompasses self-respect,

humility, and compassion, as well as the harmonious coordination of rational and passions. Self-respect entails that an individual fully comprehends the scope of their own will and consciously exercises it to form resolute determination. Humility enables the generous person to interact with others without arrogance arising from social status or external conditions, and without falling into detrimental self-deprecation due to personal shortcomings. Compassion involves recognizing that others' limitations and mistakes stem from cognitive deficiencies rather than deficiencies of will, thereby allowing for appropriate sympathy guided by benevolence and rational judgment. Through the rational governance of passions, the individual manifests virtue in action, achieving inner moral perfection. Generosity not only emphasizes personal cultivation but also stresses equal benevolence toward others. This outward extension from the self to others endows generosity with significant moral relevance in practical ethical life.

Descartes also holds that generosity is closely connected to the awareness of God. In moral practice, a generous person, by recognizing the freedom of their own will, understands the uncontrollable limits of the external world, and thus maintains humility and reverence toward God in their actions. With God at the top and the self and others on an equal level, this structure not only shapes an individual's self-understanding but also guides their behavior toward others, achieving a harmony between virtue and thought. This philosophical insight shows that Cartesian morality is not merely personal ethical cultivation, but an integrated system that combines reflection with practical action.

2.The Unity of Will, Passions, and Rationality

In Descartes' system of thought, passions are not merely emotional reactions; rather, they are the product of the interaction between rationality and the will. In *The "Passions of the Soul"*, Descartes categorizes passions into three types: bodily sensations (e.g., pleasure and displeasure), will-driven passions (e.g., determination and courage), and social-affective passions (e.g., compassion and affection). Each passion is morally neutral in itself, but its ethical value depends on whether it is

guided by rationality and the will (2016). The realization of generosity requires establishing a dynamic balance among passions, will, and rationality. The will serves as the foundation for the practice of generosity. Individuals must recognize their own capacities and limitations, restricting their actions to the scope that rationality can govern. Rationality provides evaluative judgment, the will determines the direction and intensity of action, and passions, as motivating forces, are guided into practice, thereby ensuring the stability of moral behavior (2022). This process can be understood as a unity: the interaction of rationality, will, and passions constitutes the fundamental mechanism of generous moral practice.

The will occupies a central position in Cartesian morality. Generosity requires that individuals, when exercising their will, accurately recognize their own capacities and limitations, avoiding actions that exceed the scope of what rational knowledge can govern. Rationality provides guidance for action, the will selects the direction and intensity of action based on rational judgment, and passions are regulated in the process to ensure that behavior aligns with moral standards. This logic can be divided into three stages: first, the rational stage, which evaluates the value and appropriateness of an action; second, the stage of the will, which determines whether to act and the degree of commitment; third, the stage of passions, which implements the judgments of rationality and will into practice, realizing moral behavior. Through this mechanism, individuals can maintain moral autonomy in complex social environments while follow to rational principles, achieving a unity of thought and action.

Regarding specific types of passions, emotions such as fear, anger, and affection can sometimes get in the way of moral behavior. For instance, without guidance from rational thinking, fear may cause people to avoid their moral duties or give in to outside pressures. When practicing generosity, rational judgment helps a person understand the true limits of what they fear, while the will decides how to act, allowing emotions to follow moral guidance. Similarly, anger might lead to revenge, but generosity encourages individuals to think carefully about who or what they are

angry at and what they are capable of, turning anger into positive actions or preventing harm to others. Affection and compassion, when guided by generosity, are lifted to a moral level; they are no longer just uncontrolled feelings, but acts of kindness directed by rational thought and the will.

Analyzing different types of passions can further reveal their role in moral practice:

Fear: Without guidance from rationality, fear may lead individuals to avoid responsibility. Under a state of generosity, rational analysis of the object of fear and its possible consequences allows fear to be transformed into cautious decision-making.

Anger: If left unchecked, anger can result in acts of revenge. Generosity requires individuals to evaluate the outcomes of their actions using rationality, turning anger into justified action or self-control, thereby avoiding harm to others.

Compassion: Without rational guidance, compassion can become excessive or uncontrolled. Within generosity, compassion is tempered by rationality, ensuring that actions reflect benevolence without straying from moral standards.

Love and courage: Guided by the will and rationality, these passions are integrated into the motivation for moral practice rather than mere emotional impulses (2012).

In terms of logic, the will, rationality, and passions work together in a continuous feedback loop: rationality helps evaluate goals and make moral judgments, the will decides what to do based on these judgments, and passions provide the energy that drives action. People constantly adjust their behavior in this process to keep their moral actions consistent and stable. For example, when facing social injustice or someone's wrongful behavior, generosity prevents a person from reacting with blind anger or revenge. Instead, they can use rational thinking to choose a response that is morally right, making their actions match their sense of virtue.

Based on this, Descartes highlights the main features of generosity. First, self-respect: a person recognizes the uniqueness and control of their own will and can

use rational thinking to form strong, determined intentions. Second, humility and compassion: a generous person does not become arrogant because of others' status, wealth, or mistakes, nor fall into harmful self-doubt because of their own limits; instead, they treat others with reason and goodwill. Finally, the balance of rationality and passions: rational thinking guides emotions so that actions follow moral standards (2022). This combined approach not only focuses on personal growth but also emphasizes social moral responsibility, showing the real value of generosity in everyday moral practice.

The heart of moral practice is turning generosity into real actions. This means knowing your own abilities and constantly practicing self-discipline. People should avoid doing things beyond what they can handle, so that their emotions don't lead them away from moral goals. At the same time, generosity means treating others with the same care and respect you give yourself, acting with goodwill toward everyone. In this process, rational thinking and the will are the main guides: rationality helps evaluate what is right, the will makes firm decisions and directs action, and passions provide the energy to act. This way, moral practice and philosophical ideas come together in everyday life.

In addition, generosity involves being humble before God. Descartes believes that our will and rational abilities are God's greatest gifts, and using them to develop virtue is a way of following God's intentions. A generous person does not let outside honors, wealth, or other people's opinions change their decisions. Instead, they make choices guided by their will and rational thinking, aiming to act in the most virtuous way. This approach not only helps a person grow morally but also keeps their actions steady and consistent, creating a full cycle of thought, will, and action. Practicing generosity means staying humble in self-control, decision-making, and actions, forming a kind of triangle: God at the top, with oneself and others on an equal level. Moral self-discipline and the unity of rational thinking and virtuous action are achieved within this three-part relationship.

3.The Integration of Generosity and Moral Practice

In Descartes' morality, generosity is the highest virtue, and its main goal is to bring moral actions and rational thinking together. It also works as a practical system, helping people combine their will, rational judgment, and emotions into steady, consistent moral behavior (2022). As we have seen, moral practice is not just about what we do—it is also about how our thoughts, will, and emotions work together. With generosity as a guide, people can turn their decisions and rational thinking into real actions, keeping their behavior moral even in complex social situations or inner struggles.

In real moral practice, generosity is not just about treating yourself and others equally; it also creates steady behavior through the way rational thinking, will, and emotions work together. Descartes points out that a generous person understands that we cannot fully control the world around us—the only thing we truly control is the freedom of our own will. So, the first step in moral practice is to clearly know your own abilities and keep your actions within what your rational judgment can handle. This helps people avoid being led off track by strong emotions or the unpredictability of the world. This idea reflects Descartes' advice in *Discourse on the Method*: "strive to overcome yourself, not fate," meaning that in a world we cannot control, we should focus on controlling our own actions and will.

The main task of generosity in moral practice is to regulate and guide passions. In *The Passions of the Soul*, Descartes discusses in detail the relationship between passions and the will, emphasizing that passions themselves are neither good nor bad—the key is whether they are guided by rationality and the will. Take compassion as an example: without rational guidance, compassion can become excessive, leading to misguided actions such as over-involvement or uncontrolled emotional responses. In moral practice guided by generosity, compassion is directed by rational thinking, allowing individuals to help others appropriately while maintaining control over their own will and judgment. The same applies to anger, fear, and affection; generosity requires individuals to use rational judgment to evaluate their emotions, and the will to decide the direction and intensity of their actions, ensuring that behavior remains

virtuous while also supporting stable social interactions.

The will plays an important role in turning generosity into real moral action. It is not just the ability to make free choices, but also the force that turns rational thinking into actual behavior. Descartes points out that a generous person can stick to their decisions and act morally, even when facing temptations or strong emotions. This can be seen as a three-part unity: rational thinking sets the standards, the will chooses what to do, and passions give the energy to act. Generosity comes from keeping all three in balance. By doing this, people can practice morality in their everyday lives, not just understand it as an abstract idea.

Furthermore, putting generosity into practice also depends on understanding both yourself and others. Descartes points out that we need to recognize the limits of our own actions and will, and also realize that others' limitations come from a lack of knowledge, not from a flaw in their character. This understanding helps people stay calm and kind when others make mistakes, and avoids the stress of being too hard on themselves. Generosity allows a person to keep a moral balance: not being too harsh or arrogant with themselves, and not being dismissive or overly controlling toward others. By following this approach, generosity spreads inner self-discipline into social life, making moral practice a balance between the individual and others, and between the individual and society.

Practicing generosity also involves seeking knowledge and constantly improving rational judgment. Descartes believes that virtue is not something we achieve instantly, but develops over time through practicing the connection between rational thinking and the will. In daily life, a generous person should think carefully about their abilities and the situation before acting, keeping their actions within what they can control and choosing the best option based on rational judgment. This helps strengthen the will and makes sure emotions are used properly in moral actions, showing how thought and behavior can work together. For example, when facing social injustice or someone else's wrongdoing, a generous person does not act out of blind anger or seek revenge. Instead, they use rational thinking to consider their own abilities and the

consequences of different actions, picking the response that best fits virtue and keeping their moral behavior steady and consistent.

The main goal of practicing generosity in moral life is to bring personal virtue and steady action together. This means not only acting morally, but also keeping thought, will, and behavior in harmony. Descartes emphasizes that by practicing self-discipline and using rational thinking, people can make the most moral impact within their abilities and bring their moral ideals into everyday life. This gives us a fresh way to understand Descartes: moral practice is not just an add-on to his first philosophy, but a clear example of how thinking and acting can work together in a philosophy focused on the individual.

Overall, Descartes' idea of generosity is at the center of moral practice. By balancing the will, rational thinking, and emotions, it helps turn personal virtue into real actions. Generosity allows people to act morally even in complicated social situations, and it brings together morality and rational thought in everyday life. This shows that Descartes' morality is not just abstract theory—it gives a practical guide for self-discipline, making wise choices, and acting virtuously. Through generosity, Descartes links thinking and acting, will and reason, and the individual with others, creating a complete moral system that still has lessons for us today.

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