

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

## **Introduction**

What is the role of the *Meditations on First Philosophy* program? Is the significance of the work found only in its foundational metaphysics and epistemology, or does Descartes offer the meditator more than the clear and distinct perceptions



sire for knowledge is regulated.<sup>3</sup>

After the Fourth Meditation, Shapiro writes that for the meditator:

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

Shapiro identifies generosity, with the meditators tempered concern in the Fourth Meditation to io



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

## Critique of Shapiro

Fourth Meditation, Shapiro writes that:

how great the advantages are that come from a firm resolution to use it well<sup>12</sup>

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

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

As you may notice, Shapiro has omitted the portion of the passage where Descartes states that \_\_\_\_\_ many vain and useless cares which trouble ambitious people. In omitting this portion, Shapiro can easily ascribe generosity to the meditator. But there is a two part epistemological aspect to this meditation on the will that is problematic for her account. While it is true that the meditator can have knowledge of the nature of free will *a priori* in the Fourth Meditation,<sup>13</sup> understanding the benefits and detriments of using it incorrectly can only be known *a posteriori*. The meditator examines her will in the Fourth Meditation and is able to arrive at conclusions regarding its nature without reference to experience; however she cannot meditate upon the vain and proper uses of the will when she has not established the existence of body yet, since these are observations of people. Thi-79(the )-67(mediah0i-71)-229(obsqe)4(re)7(n)-9(1.33



-esteem to be as great as it may legitimately be, has only two components. The first consists in his knowing that nothing truly belongs to him but this freedom to dispose his volitions, and that he ought to be praised or blamed for no other reason than his using this freedom well or badly. The second consists in his feeling within himself a firm and constant resolution to use it well - that is, never to lack the will to undertake and carry out whatever he judges to be best. To do that is to pursue virtue in a perfect manner. (153 AT XI; CSM I 384)

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

## **Conclusion**

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

## References and Further Reading

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