The Review of Politics (2026), 1–20
doi:10.1017/S0034670526101120

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Descartes's Generosity: Self-Sufficiency as Ideal Sociability

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(Received 12 July 2024 UTC; revised 04 February 2026 UTC; accepted 05 February 2026 UTC)

Abstract

Descartes's account of generosity, his alternative to magnanimity, is the richest source of his thought on how individuals should interact with others. In response to recent scholarship emphasizing the beneficence of the generous person, I argue that this beneficence is best understood in terms of the awareness of self-sufficiency core to generosity. Understanding generosity as a universally available awareness of one's own freedom as the highest good explains the egalitarian judgments made by the generous person and her resulting beneficence. Exploring generous pity, veneration, and gratitude reveals that the generous person is alienated from others, and analyzing Descartes's self-presentation in *Discourse VI* shows the importance of isolation to beneficence. This suggests that Descartes does not view relationships as key to human flourishing, and moreover that scholars who describe generosity in terms of love and friendship should note that these concepts are austere and depersonalized in the case of the generous individual.

Keywords: Descartes; generosity; individualism; early modern political philosophy; autonomy

Introduction

Descartes is not typically known for his political or social[1] thought. However, in the *Passions of the Soul*, he introduces a virtue which is the foundation of both individual well-being and interpersonal beneficence: generosity. *Générosité* is an alternative to scholastic or Aristotelian magnanimity. In his time, the term

[1] I use the term social or sociable to mean relating to the interaction between human individuals.

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denoted congenital nobility[2] and, to a lesser extent, liberality and selflessness.[3] The combination of nobility and selflessness suggests some of the ambiguities of the concept, including the question of how a noble soul might interact with others. I bring together the two lines of scholarship on generosity in Descartes's thought to argue that, while his generous person is beneficent toward others, this beneficence would not result in robust interpersonal relationships and might even entail detachment from others. This characteristic of his ideal personal type suggests that he envisions human beings as creatures who do not find their highest fulfillment in relation to others.

Generosity is a window onto Descartes's practical or political thought in two ways. First, as Sarah Marquardt suggests, his choice to write on generosity (a concept which was already politically salient at the time), and to educate political leaders on generosity as an ideal virtue, can be seen as a kind of direct action on his political world.[4] Second, generosity reflects the Cartesian vision of human nature, first as an image of the human peak, and secondly as a relatively rare window into his views on how individuals ought to interact with each other. The evidence on this latter topic is so sparse that are several articles[5] and a book[6] devoted to Descartes's moral and ethical thought which do not discuss any practical details of how we should treat others. Fortunately, generosity provides one of the only glimpses of the best way to interact with others, and the role of human interaction in the lives of the greatest people, which must shape our understanding of a Cartesian politics.

The scholarship on Cartesian generosity typically emphasizes one of two aspects of the concept. One line of scholarship emphasizes the self-sufficiency, autonomy, and independence of the generous person. These scholars either do

[2] *Le Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*, 4th ed. (Paris: Brunet, 1762); Michael Moriarty, "Cartesian Générosité and its Antecedents," in *The Measure of Greatness: Philosophers on Magnanimity*, ed. Sophia Vasalou (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 147–75; Steven B. Smith, *Modernity and its Discontents: Making and Unmaking the Bourgeois from Machiavelli to Bellow* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016), 65.

[3] We see Elisabeth using the term to mean liberality or selflessness: René Descartes and Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, *The Correspondence between Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes*, trans. Lisa Shapiro, The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 115. Hereafter I refer to this text as *CED*.

[4] Sarah Marquardt, "The Long Road to Peace: Descartes' Modernization of Generosity in 'The Passions of the Soul' (1649)," *History of Political Thought* 36, no. 1 (2015): 56–60.

[5] Paul C. Santilli, "What did Descartes Do to Virtue?," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 26, no. 3 (1992): 353–66; John Cottingham, "Cartesian Ethics: Reason and the Passions," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 50, no. 195 (1996): 193–216; Leslie Armour, "Descartes and the Ethics of Generosity," in *The Bases of Ethics*, ed. William Sweet (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2001), 79–103; Isabelle Wienand, "Descartes' Morals," *South African Journal of Philosophy* 25, no. 2 (January 2006): 177–88; Lisa Shapiro, "Descartes on Human Nature and the Human Good," in *The Rationalists: Between Tradition and Innovation*, ed. Carlos Fraenkel, Dario Perinetti, and Justin E. H. Smith (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2011), 13–26; Frans Svensson, "Descartes as an Ethical Perfectionist," *Journal of Modern Philosophy* 2, no. 0 (February 26, 2020).

[6] Vance G. Morgan, *Foundations of Cartesian Ethics* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1994).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670526101120 Published online by Cambridge University Press

not explore the social elements of generosity,[7] or do not seek to account for Descartes's claims about the beneficence of the generous person.[8] The other line of scholarship focuses on the beneficence entailed by generosity, arguing that the generous person treats others well because she understands them as her (potential) equals. These scholars, citing some of Descartes's strongest claims about love and friendship, argue that generosity's social effects are best understood in terms of selfless love and friendship. Within this framework, Patrick Frierson,[9] Cécile Nicco-kerinvel,[10] and Alberto Frigo[11] focus on love and generosity, whereas Marquardt,[12] John Marshall,[13] Michael Moriarty,[14] and Deborah Brown and Jacqueline Broad[15] emphasize the egalitarian sentiments of the generous person. Aurélien Chukurian has related generous love and friendship to egalitarian sentiments,[16] and Andreea Mihali has emphasized the generous person's altruism.[17] This group of scholars privileges Descartes's high-level claims about generosity's social effects over his more specific descriptions of the generous person's thoughts and feelings about other people, and with the exception of Chukurian, Mihali, and Cécile Nicco-kerinvel, who all discuss specific passions of the generous person, these specifics are largely ignored.

This article aims to synthesize the strengths of these lines of scholarship, understanding the interpersonal beneficence of the generous person in terms of self-sufficiency. Putting beneficence in the context of self-sufficiency leads me to highlight the impersonal nature of that beneficence and the related isolation of the generous person, which is revealed by a careful examination of the passions

[7] Jean-Luc Marion, "Generosity and Phenomenology: Remarks on Michel Henry's Interpretation of the Cartesian Cogito," in *Essays on the Philosophy and Science of René Descartes*, ed. and trans. Stephen Voss (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 69; Lisa Shapiro, "Cartesian Generosity," *Acta Philosophica Fennica* 64 (1999): 269–70; Byron Williston, "The Cartesian Sage and the Problem of Evil," in *Passion and Virtue in Descartes*, ed. Byron Williston and Andre Gombay (Amherst, MA: Humanities Press, 2003), 320; Deborah J. Brown, *Descartes and the Passionate Mind* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 188; Gerhard Krüger, "The Origin of Philosophical Self-Consciousness," *New Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy* 7 (July 1, 2007): 257–58; Noa Naaman-Zauderer, *Descartes' Deontological Turn: Reason, Will, and Virtue in the Later Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 203.

[8] Richard F Hassing, *Cartesian Psychophysics and the Whole Nature of Man: On Descartes's Passions of the Soul* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015), 174.

[9] Patrick R. Frierson, "Learning to Love: From Egoism to Generosity in Descartes," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 40, no. 3 (2002): 324.

[10] Cécile Nicco-kerinvel, "La générosité et l'amour: Des passions politiques?," *Revue de Mmétaphysique et de Morale* 58, no. 2 (2008): 252.

[11] Alberto Frigo, "A Very Obscure Definition: Descartes's Account of Love in the Passions of the Soul and its Scholastic Background," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 24, no. 6 (2016): 1113.

[12] Marquardt, "Long Road to Peace," 75.

[13] John Marshall, *Descartes's Moral Theory* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), 152–53.

[14] Moriarty, "Cartesian Générosité and its Antecedents," 173.

[15] Deborah J. Brown and Jacqueline Broad, "The Social Dimension of Generosity in Descartes and Astell," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 60, no. 3 (2022): 413–14.

[16] Aurélien Chukurian, *De la morale cartésienne: Contentement, générosité et christianisme* (Paris: KIME, 2023), 354.

[17] Andreea Mihali, "Descartes's Ethics: Generosity in the Flesh," *Epoché: A Journal for the History of Philosophy* 27, no. 1 (2022): 56–57.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670526101120 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that the generous person experiences regarding other human beings. In the first section, I classify the thoughts and passions that the generous person has regarding other people into those based on self-sufficiency and those based on a judgment about human equality. In the second section, I argue that the generous person's treatment of others is best explained by self-sufficiency and resulting indifference to others. Furthermore, where her social thoughts and passions are better explained by a favorable view about the worth of others, this favorable view is founded on awareness that her own source of self-esteem is completely internal, and therefore universally available: so, the generous person's evaluation that others are her potential equals is rooted in her self-sufficiency. While both Marshall[18] and Mihali[19] recognize this, they underestimate the degree to which the intellectual apprehension of the freedom of the will at the core of generosity undermines connection to other people. The generous person's isolation becomes clearer upon examining the social effects of generosity, to which I turn in the third section. Descartes's descriptions of the social passions altered by generosity suggest that the generous person is highly detached from others, a quality which seems unlikely to promote robust interpersonal relationships. This detachment is not inconsistent with the universal benevolence of the generous person: indeed, an analysis of Descartes's descriptions of his own activity in *Discourse VI*, in the fourth section of this article, demonstrates how solitude might promote what he sees as the greatest beneficence.

Types of generous thoughts, and their impact on the passions

Initially, it seems that robust relationships with others might be a core feature of generosity, and by extension the good life as Descartes envisions it. Much of the longest section on generosity in the *Passions of the Soul* addresses how the generous person thinks about and treats others. Out of the nine articles in this section, the generous person's relationship to others is the main theme of four and a significant element in two more.[20] Generous people "never have contempt for anyone."[21] They are humble, not preferring themselves to anyone else; "disregarding their own self-interest, they are perfectly courteous, gracious, and obliging to everyone";[22] they have control over jealousy, envy, hatred, fear, and anger; and unlike the proud, they do not attempt to humble everyone else.[23]

[18] Marshall, "Morality as Generosity."

[19] Mihali, "Descartes's Ethics."

[20] The section spans articles 153–61. Articles 154, 155, 157, and 158 focus on the generous person's relationship to others, and articles 156 and 159 also address this theme. Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 1, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoof, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 384–88. Hereafter I refer to this collection as *CSM I*, and later to vol. 3 of this collection as *CSMK*.

[21] *CSM I*, 384.

[22] *CSM I*, 385.

[23] *CSM I*, 385–86.

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In other sections of the *Passions*, generosity limits envy,[24] corrects pity,[25] and increases gratitude.[26] The interpersonal effects of generosity are an important element of the virtue. In these summary remarks about generosity, strong claims are made about how well the generous person will treat others, and the lengths to which she will go to help them, even up to disregarding her own self-interest.

When we consider Descartes's remarks about the universal duty to others, it seems all the more plausible that the generous person would have robust relationships. He explains the duty human beings have to others in the language of parts and wholes, most clearly in his letters to Elisabeth. Explaining the most useful things for a person to know in order to judge well, he argues that everyone ought to think that, because individuals "do not know how to subsist alone," it is "necessary" to prefer the whole to the individual.[27] One should not prefer the interests of an individual to those of the whole, because the interests of the individual depend on the continued existence of the whole. On these grounds, one never "[harms] other men greatly" to get something "small," because that would be harming the whole, on balance.[28] One does not even fear risking one's life for others. Arguably, if one can only subsist in the context of the whole, risking one's life to preserve the whole reduces to risking one's life to preserve one's life.[29] Some commentators go further, and see in this passage (or other, similar, remarks about parts and wholes) an affirmation of altruism.[30] For Nicco-kerinvel[31] and Frigo,[32] however, these statements are more ambiguous. Descartes notes that one must prefer the whole to the part "with measure and discretion."[33] It is clear that an individual should not harm others "greatly" to get something small— but it is not clear what exactly a person should do in the service of others, or for what one should risk one's life, or what the limits are of one's power to help others. All people, and *a fortiori* the greatest people, should be beneficent, but it is not clear what that entails.

Descartes's fuller description of generosity can supply some specifics about the role and nature of interpersonal relationships in the generous person's life. In order to interpret this fuller description, it is helpful to make some distinctions about the thoughts and feelings of the generous person. Generosity improves the generous person's relationships to other people in two ways, and as a result we can divide the social passions that generosity alters into two categories. First, the generous person is less antagonistic to others because his hostile passions, including contempt, jealousy, envy, hatred, fear, anger, and pride, are less strong or even eliminated. Second, the generous person feels more

[24] *CSM I*, 394.
[25] *CSM I*, 395.
[26] *CSM I*, 397.
[27] *CED*, 112.
[28] *CED*, 112.
[29] *CED*, 112.
[30] Frierson, "Learning to Love," 322; Marshall, *Descartes's Moral Theory*, 139–40; Brown and Broad, "Social Dimension of Generosity," 416; Chukurian, *De la morale cartésienne*, 382.
[31] Nicco-kerinvel, "La générosité et l'amour," 252.
[32] Frigo, "A Very Obscure Definition," 1110–11.
[33] *CED*, 112.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670526101120 Published online by Cambridge University Press

positive passions about others, and is presumably therefore also more helpful to them: these passions include humility, pity, and gratitude. In addition to two kinds of passion that are altered in the generous person (hostile vs. beneficent), there are also two different kinds of thoughts that we can track in the generous person, accompanying these passions: a thought about self-sufficiency and a thought about equality. Keeping these categories in mind, we can better understand generosity's social effects.

The thoughts that accompany the reduction of hostile passions in the generous person primarily involve self-sufficiency, expressed as indifference to outcomes that depend on fortune. Generosity "consists in" the knowledge "that nothing really belongs to [the generous person] but [his] freedom to dispose his volitions" and the feeling "of a firm and constant resolution to use [that freedom] well."[34] This is what causes "a person's self-esteem to be as great as it may legitimately be."[35] The generous person values himself exclusively because of something that depends only on himself, his free will: this is the root of his self-sufficiency (as we shall explore in more detail in the next section). This self-sufficiency is key in reducing hostile passions like jealousy, envy, fear, and hatred. The generous person is not jealous or envious, because "everything they think sufficiently valuable to be worth pursuing is such that its acquisition depends solely on themselves."[36] Similarly, the generous person is not afraid of anyone, because he only wants what depends on himself, and has "confidence in [his] own virtue."[37] Finally, generous people are never angry, because "they have very little esteem for everything that depends on others, and so they never give their enemies any advantage by acknowledging that they are injured by them."[38] It is true that implicit in the line of thinking about anger is an acknowledgment that there might be some genuine danger from other people, because the generous person is reluctant to "give their enemies any advantage." However, the generous person comes to sight as mostly indifferent to others. Generosity prevents the generous person from having ill will towards other people, because he doesn't have anything to hope or to fear from them. Self-command breeds indifference to others, and someone who is indifferent is not hostile.

The generous person does not just think about his own self-sufficiency when he thinks about other people. He also thinks about how they are equal to him, at least potentially, because they also can use their free will well. This thought both reduces hostile passions and promotes friendly ones. The generous person does not feel contempt for anyone because "they do not have much more esteem for themselves than for those whom they surpass," even in qualities such as "intelligence, knowledge, or beauty," because none of these qualities seems important compared to "the virtuous will … which they suppose also to be

[34] *CSM I*, 384.
[35] *CSM I*, 384.
[36] *CSM I*, 385.
[37] *CSM I*, 385.
[38] *CSM I*, 384.

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present, or at least capable to be present, in every other person."[39] The generous person's exclusive focus on the will as the only legitimate source of esteem means that he thinks other people might be just as good as himself, and therefore he does not feel contempt for them. Similarly, he is able to master his hatred, because he has "esteem for everyone."[40] This thought about another person's potentially equal value is the egalitarian element of generosity, which seems to be another ground for the generous person's beneficence, aside from self-sufficiency.

The same kind of thought about equality also tends to accompany the passions that lead the generous person to feel more positively, or be more helpful, toward others. This relationship between thought and passion is most obvious in the cases of humility and friendship. Descartes links generosity to humility, writing that "the most generous people are usually also the most humble."[41] Humility is the result of reflecting on wrongs we did or could do and thinking that "we do not prefer ourselves to anyone else and we think that since others have free will just as much as we do, they may use it as well as ours."[42] Similarly, he claims that friendship is a kind of love we feel for those whom we esteem equally to ourselves, and for the most "noble and generous" people, "there is no person so imperfect we could not have for him a very perfect friendship, given we believe ourselves loved by him."[43] Because the generous person esteems other people for their actual or potential good will, he esteems them all equally, and therefore can be friends with anyone by whom he believes he is loved. Both self-sufficiency and egalitarianism, therefore, shape the generous person's orientation to other people.

Self-sufficiency and freedom

Self-sufficiency is more fundamental to the phenomenon of generosity than egalitarianism, and the passions the generous person feels towards others are best explained by self-sufficiency as opposed to egalitarian sentiments. Understanding how Descartes's radical conception of self-sufficiency relates to generosity provides a theoretical framework by which to understand the practical elements of generous sociability discussed below. Both the relationship between generosity and the freedom of the will and between generosity and what Descartes calls the "internal emotions" demonstrate the radical self-sufficiency of the generous person. As we have seen, free will is central to the concept of generosity. We noted above that, in introducing the concept of generosity, Descartes identifies "the exercise of the free will and the control we have over our volitions" as the only "thing in us which could give us good reason for esteeming ourselves."[44] This is because "we can reasonably be praised or blamed

[39] *CSM I*, 384.
[40] *CSM I*, 385.
[41] *CSM I*, 385.
[42] *CSM I*, 385.
[43] *CSM I*, 357.
[44] *CSM I*, 384.

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for only actions that depend on this free will" and because the free will "renders us in a certain way like God by making us masters of ourselves."[45] Here, there are actually two grounds of esteem relating to freedom: first, actions undertaken freely, which elicit praise or blame from others, and second, the will itself, which makes men "like God." This second ground of esteem is striking: it seems that the will, as it facilitates self-mastery, is the grounds for self-esteem.

Descartes's letters shed more light on free will as a source of value in itself. In a 1647 letter to Queen Christina of Sweden on the "sovereign good," he identifies the freedom of the will as the sovereign good on the grounds that it is a self-sufficient good, not dependent on anyone or anything else. The sovereign good for an individual "consists only in a firm will to do well and the contentment which this produces."[46] He chooses this definition of the sovereign good because "I can discover no other good which seems so great or so entirely within each man's power."[47] He rejects both the goods of the body and of fortune because they "do not depend absolutely upon us," and not even all the "goods of the soul" meet this criterion: knowledge is rejected as the supreme good because it is "often beyond our powers."[48] By a process of elimination, "there remains only our will, which is absolutely at our disposal,"[49] and this becomes the sovereign good. The argument here for the supremacy of the will as a good is not exclusively on the grounds of its goodness, but also on the grounds that it is the only thing "absolutely at our disposal": in this sense it seems that Descartes's decisive criterion for the highest individual good is that it must be possible for an individual to attain on her own. Therefore, he chooses the freedom of the will as the sovereign good (and so too is it the source of generosity).

It is still unclear, however, why the good will might bring contentment, and whether Descartes's praise of that contentment means the goodness of the good will depends on pleasure. This becomes clear when we consider his argument that "the good use of free will is what produces the greatest and most solid contentment in life" because "there is nothing that can make the soul content except its belief that it possesses some good."[50] Contentment depends on the belief that one possesses some good and, according to Descartes, free will itself is the noblest thing we can have. Its correct use is therefore the greatest good:

> Free will ... makes us in a way equal to God and seems to exempt us from being his subjects, and consequently its correct use is the greatest of all the goods we possess ... the peace of mind and inner satisfaction felt by those

[45] *CSM I*, 384.

[46] René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 3, *The Correspondence*, trans. John Cottingham et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 324. For a more complete discussion of Descartes's account of the sovereign good here as compared with his ancient interlocutors, see Jean-Paul Margot, "Soberano bien y felicidad," *Philosophica* 33 (2008): 73–88.

[47] *CSMK*, 324–25.

[48] *CSMK*, 325.

[49] *CSMK*, 325.

[50] *CSMK*, 325.

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> who never fail to do their best … is a pleasure incomparably sweeter, more lasting and more solid than all [others].[51]

Here Descartes goes much further than before in the level of self-sufficiency he seems to suggest is possible. We are happy because we think the freedom of the will is a great good, and in turn we rate the free will so highly because it makes us in some way equal to God and seems to free us from Him. In this sense, our happiness would be as self-sufficient as God's. This awareness of possessing a great good produces our greatest happiness, which is exemplified by "the peace of mind and inner satisfaction" of people who use their will well.

So while the goodness of the will does not follow from the pleasure that it provides, a correct understanding of the free will does provide the sweetest and most lasting pleasure, and the good use of the will is the greatest good that we can possess. However, Descartes does not suggest that the good use of the will makes us "like God," whereas he repeatedly suggests that the freedom of the will itself does: on these grounds I differ with Frans Svensson who locates the source of self-esteem primarily in the good use of the will,[52] and from Chukurian who insists that is on the basis of the good use of the will that Descartes compares human beings to God.[53] The good use of the will provides the greatest happiness and tranquility, but it seems that in the passage above and in his aforementioned description of generosity in the *Passions*,[54] only the freedom of the will (and not its good use) makes us "like God" and even "exempts us from being his subjects." Therefore, it seems that the will itself is for him the greatest source of self-esteem. In sum, generosity as the greatest legitimate self-esteem stems from the contemplation of the freedom of the will. If the greatest source of self-esteem is good because it can be attained self-sufficiently, this suggests that the generous person's self-sufficiency is core to her self-regard, the source of her virtue.

We can draw a tighter connection between what Descartes writes in his letters about this kind of self-sufficiency and what he writes in the *Passions* about generosity by turning to his discussion of the "internal emotions" in the *Passions.*[55] This discussion suggests that the generous person has a totally self-sufficient pleasure when she contemplates her own freedom, similar to the "peace of mind and inner satisfaction" enjoyed by those who use their will well. In Article 147 of the *Passions*, the "passions," which depend on animal spirits operating in the body, are distinguished from the "emotions," which are "are

[51] *CSMK*, 326.

[52] Frans Svensson, *Descartes's Moral Perfectionism* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2024), 115.

[53] Chukurian, *De la morale cartésienne*, 330–31.

[54] *CSM I*, 384.

[55] The internal emotions supply a theoretical framework by which to understand Descartes's account of self-perception, and they therefore clarify Descartes's account of dualism in the *Passions.* See Amy Morgan Schmitter, "Representation, Self-Representation, and the Passions in Descartes," *Review of Metaphysics* 48, no. 2 (1994): 331–57; Christopher Tilmouth, "Generosity and the Utility of the Passions: Cartesian Ethics in Restoration England," *The Seventeenth Century* 22, no. 1 (March 2007): 144–67; Williston, "Cartesian Sage;" Abel B. Franco, "The Function and Intentionality of Cartesian Émotions," *Philosophical Papers* 44, no. 3 (2015): 277–319.

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produced in the soul only by the soul itself."[56] While both passions and emotions affect the soul, the passions originate in the body and the emotions in the soul. I suggest that the contemplation of the freedom of the will triggers an internal emotion, generosity. Earlier in the *Passions*, Descartes specifies that the passions depend on the animal spirits "in order to distinguish them from our volitions."[57] This is because our volitions "may be called 'emotions of the soul which [seem to come from] it.'"[58] If volitions are emotions of the soul which seem to come from the soul, then it would follow that the perception of a volition (or the perception of the freedom of the will) would be an internal emotion.

We can see this more clearly in one of Descartes's examples of people experiencing internal emotions: the theatergoer.[59] His discussion of what happens when someone watches a play suggests that an internal emotion, joy, is triggered by an intellectual perception of the freedom of the will. When we go to the theater, we might feel "sadness ... joy, or love, or hatred, and generally any of the passions" due to a "diversity of objects which are presented to our imagination."[60] At the same time as we feel even sadness or hatred, however, we can also feel "a pleasure in feeling [these passions] aroused in us," which Descartes calls an "intellectual joy."[61] This intellectual joy "may as readily originate in sadness as in any of the other passions,"[62] so intellectual joy is not just opposed to sadness in this example, but actually depends on or originates from it. Two things can help us understand how a kind of joy can originate in sadness: a terminological shift that Descartes makes, and some of his comments in the next article.

Thinking first about terms, where we might expect Descartes to speak of *joie intérieure* in this article on "Des émotions intérieures de l'âme," instead we get *joie intellectuelle*.[63] His description of "intellectual joy" as an "interior emotion" suggests that the interior emotions are perceived with or are reactions to things perceived with the intellect, unlike passionate responses to plays and novels which are "presented to the imagination." It seems the interior emotions do not come from a perception of the world. Instead, they come from a perception of the self, as accomplished by the intellect. Indeed, Descartes first mentions intellectual joy when he describes joy as a passion, and there intellectual joy (which he calls an "emotion") occurs when "the intellect perceives that we possess some good, even one so different from anything belonging to the body as to be wholly unimaginable."[64] The faculty of the imagination, which represents and recombines sense perceptions, cannot grasp this kind of good. Therefore, it seems that

[56] *CSM I*, 381.
[57] *CSM I*, 339.
[58] *CSM I*, 339.
[59] This is the second of two examples, the first being a widower at a funeral. Both are compatible with my reading of the internal emotions, but the second is more straightforward.
[60] *CSM I*, 381.
[61] *CSM I*, 381.
[62] *CSM I*, 381.
[63] René Descartes, *Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, vol. 11 (Paris: J. Vrin, 1996), 441.
[64] *CSM I*, 361.

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when the theatergoer is feeling intellectual joy, she must be perceiving something using the intellect.[65]

What exactly is being perceived by the intellect is clearer in Article 148. Descartes explains that the internal emotions affect us more "intimately" than the passions and have more power over us as a result. Therefore,

> To this extent it is certain that, provided our soul has the means of happiness within itself, all the troubles coming from elsewhere are powerless to harm it. Such troubles will serve rather to increase its joy; for on seeing that it cannot be harmed by them, it becomes aware of its perfection.[66]

Here, both the cause of intellectual joy when watching a play and its relationship to self-sufficiency become clear. The person who feels intellectual joy has a pleasure in the perfection of her own soul: in particular, she feels pleasure at the idea that it is independent from troubles. Troubles seem to give the soul an opportunity to exercise its own strength or recognize its own power. This is how the internal joy of watching a play could originate in sadness: while the actions onstage might arouse our passions, an awareness that the passions cannot harm the soul would result in a reflection on its perfection and therefore cause intellectual joy.

Descartes uses the same image of the spectator at a play in his letters to Elisabeth, and here the link between intellectual joy and generosity becomes stronger. A letter from May 1645 shows the remove at which "greatest" souls experience life. He writes,

> The difference between the greatest souls and the base and vulgar souls consists principally in that the vulgar souls give themselves over to their passions ... [whereas great souls] have reasoning so strong ... that even afflictions ... contribute to the perfect felicity which they can enjoy already in this life.[67]

Here, the standard for greatness or strength of soul is a kind of independence from, or mastery over, the passions. We see the same strange assertion here as in Article 147 of the *Passions*, that "even afflictions" contribute to the happiness of the greatest people. Descartes explains this strange assertion with reference, again, to watching a play. The greatest souls "give events [in this life] no more consideration than we do events in comedies."[68] In the *Passions* the example of the play is literal: we feel intellectual joy when we watch a play. Here, watching a play is metaphorical: the great person goes through all of life as though she were

[65] For an account of the relationship between "internal" and "intellectual" emotions that is not inconsistent with my suggestion that generosity might be understood as an intellectual emotion, see Franco, "Function and Intentionality."

[66] *CSM I*, 382.

[67] *CED*, 87.

[68] *CED*, 87.

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watching a comedy. While Descartes does not use the term "internal emotions" in this passage, the psychological phenomenon seems similar. Even pain can be pleasurable for the greatest people, as when "they make an effort to support it patiently ... this show of their strength is agreeable to them."[69] At the same time, they are as detached from their own lives as a spectator is from the events of a play. It seems that the strongest people feel an intellectual pleasure in their freedom from their own emotions (similar, again, to the pleasure felt by those who possess the sovereign good). The greatest people are self-sufficient, then, in the sense that they are aware of their own emotional and intellectual independence from circumstance (which would not preclude an acknowledgment of a material need for things supplied by others and therefore a dependence on and relationship to the larger community, as suggested in Descartes's comments on seeing oneself as a part of a larger whole).

Descartes famously writes that generosity is a passion and a virtue: reading these letters, we might also understand it as an internal emotion, a joy at contemplating the freedom of the will, which provides the generous person with a subjective independence from circumstance. The first thing Descartes says in praise of generosity is that it gives us freedom from "vain desires," desires which do not depend wholly on ourselves for their fulfillment. Because intellectual joy (an internal emotion) is the pleasure one feels when contemplating one's own self-sufficiency, and because Descartes describes the greatest people as moving through life insulated by their pleasure at their own self-sufficiency, it seems that what generosity is, at its core, is a contemplation of this freedom, a self-sufficient good.[70]

Even if we accept the central importance of self-sufficiency to generosity, we must still explain the egalitarian judgments made by the generous person, which ground her benevolence to others. This is possible if we reason as follows: the generous person's judgment that others are equal to her depends on her awareness of her own self-sufficiency. Generous people, knowing that they are only to be praised or blamed depending on their free actions, and being resolved to use their freedom well, "readily come to believe that any other person can have the same knowledge and feeling about himself, because this involves nothing which depends on someone else."[71] Here, precisely because this virtue only requires the individual to sense her inner freedom, which is independent of circumstance, it could belong to anyone. For Descartes, freedom and therefore the potential for self-sufficiency is a constitutive element of the thinking human being. In this sense, the generous person does see others as her (potential) equals, but ultimately this egalitarian judgment depends on the generous person's awareness of her own self-sufficiency. The generous person is therefore not just radically self-sufficient—her self-sufficiency even explains her egalitarianism,

[69] *CED*, 87.

[70] For a broader historical discussion of the inwardness and self-sufficiency of the Cartesian self, see Charles Taylor, "Descartes' Disengaged Reason," in *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 143–58. Taylor's brief discussion of generosity glosses over its social elements.

[71] *CSM I*, 384.

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although the two initially might appear unconnected. Much of the recent scholarship on generosity as a political or social concept has focused on the fact that the generous person understands others to be his potential equals, but we have seen that the egalitarian elements of generosity are explained by the radical self-sufficiency of the generous person.

Practical social effects of generosity

If the generous person's awareness of her own freedom prompts awareness of the equal worth of other human beings, this might mean that she is moved by her awareness of what she has in common with them (freedom and self-sufficiency) to form close relationships with them, or it might mean that the kind of concern she has for others is shaped by her own awareness of the goodness of freedom and the limits of what she can control, which would distance her from others. If self-sufficiency leads to love for others, it is not clear if we should understand self-sufficiency in terms of love, or love in terms of self-sufficiency. By examining the specific passions that Descartes describes as being altered by generosity, this ambiguity can be resolved in favor of the latter.

Generosity seems to reduce hostility and aggression. As discussed previously, the generous person tends not to be jealous or envious of others, because she only values things that exclusively depend on herself. Similarly, she experiences less anger and fear because she is not attached to anything that depends on other people.[72] Descartes gives an example of the injurious behavior caused by these passions, writing that vain people (whom he contrasts with generous people) "attempt to humble everyone else" due to "hatred, envy, jealousy, or anger."[73] Not attempting to humble others is just one example of how the generous person does not harm others, but it seems to me a modest assumption that anger, fear, and jealousy might trigger other aggressive actions which are also avoided by the generous person.

However, generosity also actively improves the generous person's treatment of others: she is "always perfectly courteous, gracious, and obliging to everyone."[74] Generosity triggers and transforms other passions, including pity, veneration, and gratitude. These passions are all positive and directed at other people, the most concrete examples Descartes gives of the generous person's good conduct towards others. A closer inspection of these three passions shows that while the generous person might have genuine goodwill towards others, it is not clear that her generosity would cause her to connect with them. Previous treatments of these passions and the social passions of the generous person more generally have either been brief[75] or focused on other questions, such as the altruism of the generous person,[76] or the strictly political as opposed to more

[72] *CSM I*, 385.
[73] *CSM I*, 386.
[74] *CSM I*, 385.
[75] Mihali, "Descartes's Ethics," 58–59.
[76] Brown and Broad, "Social Dimension of Generosity," 411–17; Chukurian, *De la morale cartésienne*, 389–93.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670526101120 Published online by Cambridge University Press

broadly social implications of generosity,[77] but examining them here should show in more detail what it means to be "perfectly courteous, gracious, and obliging to everyone," and to what degree this promotes interpersonal connection.

The way in which pity is transformed reflects how the generous person can have "good will towards everyone,"[78] and yet be detached from the world: the generous person pities not the misfortune of others, but their inability to bear it with equanimity. Descartes defines pity as a kind of "sadness mingled with love or good will towards those whom we see suffering some evil we think they do not deserve."[79] This is true of both generous and weak people. The key difference between generous and weak pity seems to be the evil involved: weak people pity others when they suffer the "adversities of fortune," while generous people pity the "weakness of those whom they see complaining."[80] The latter do not pity the misfortunes of others, because they "think that no misfortune could be so great an evil as the timidity of those who cannot endure it with forbearance."[81] If the sovereign good is a freedom which results in a kind of detachment from outcomes that depend on fortune, this understanding of pity is not as confusing as it might initially seem: the generous person simply sees what is truly bad for weak people, which is not misfortune, but instead weakness itself.

We might draw three conclusions from this analysis of pity. First, here as elsewhere,[82] Descartes contrasts generosity not with selfishness, but with weakness. This contrast speaks to the decisive importance of self-sufficiency and self-mastery to generosity and reminds the English-speaking reader that the contemporary English usage of the term generosity might be somewhat misleading for understanding Descartes's virtue called generosity—it is misleading, for example, to contrast generosity to selfishness without giving additional context, as Frierson does.[83] Second, this account of pity suggests that the generous person might seek to benefit others by making them aware of their own freedom, so that they could endure evils with forbearance, if indeed what she pities is weakness and not misfortune. In order to become generous, we can "occupy ourselves frequently in considering the nature of a free will," and generosity is "a general remedy for every disorder of the passions."[84] We might view Descartes's discussion of generosity and the freedom of the will as exactly the sort of action that a generous person might take in order to help others. Third, the generous person and the pitied person disagree fundamentally about the nature of misfortune: they do not have a shared understanding of the pitied person's situation. As such, generous pity seems to alienate the generous person from others even as she regards them with concern or undertakes actions to aid them.

[77] Nicco-kerinvel, "La générosité et l'amour," 253–54.
[78] *CSM I*, 395.
[79] *CSM I*, 395.
[80] *CSM I*, 395.
[81] *CSM I*, 395.
[82] *CSM I*, 386, 389, 397, 400.
[83] Frierson, "Learning to Love," 330.
[84] *CSM I*, 388.

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Another social passion modified by generosity is veneration. Descartes argues that generous people feel veneration more appropriately. Veneration can be good or ill, and it is a kind of esteem mixed with an inclination to "submit" to something "with some fear in order to try to gain its favor."[85] Weak people vacillate between excessively "revering and fearing things which deserve nothing but contempt," and scorning things they ought to revere.[86] Generosity, on the other hand, can be the basis of a more constant and reasonable veneration. Through generosity "we are not reluctant to render to each person all the honor and respect due to him according to his position in the world."[87] In this case, the honor is for the venerated person's position in the world, and not for his freedom of the will or the good use of it, which Descartes has insisted is the only legitimate thing that the generous person truly esteems. We can imagine the generous individual, like Descartes in the *Discourse*, putting up with the imperfections of her country rather than attempting to change them,[88] but it seems unlikely this veneration would result in much beyond submission and obedience. Nicco-kerinvel argues that generosity could contribute to political stability by promoting an appropriate veneration for the sovereign: veneration seems to be a more political manifestation of generosity.[89] I agree that the practical effect would be to promote political stability, but obedience to the sovereign is not the same thing as active participation in politics. In any case, veneration would not seem to promote close interpersonal relationships, given the fear involved.

The last practical manifestation of generosity, gratitude, is a passion that Descartes calls "one of the principal bonds of human society."[90] Though gratitude is felt by one individual for another, it seems to be a basis for social organization that extends beyond the relationships between individuals. Gratitude, like veneration, would have a concrete, positive effect on the stability of society, and gratitude would seem to prompt the generous person to actively benefit other people. Gratitude "is based on an action which affects us and which we desire to reciprocate," and it is experienced more strongly by generous people.[91] It seems that generous people are grateful because they tend to believe that other people are strong like they are. Again, the generous are contrasted with the weak. Weak people are ungrateful and even "hate" their benefactors because, "lacking the will to return the favour or despairing of their ability to do so, and thinking that everybody is grasping like themselves and that no good is ever done without the hope of recompense, they think that they have deceived their benefactors."[92] Weak people do not want to return favors or think they cannot do so: generous souls would likely feel the opposite. Also, just as generous people tend to think that everyone could be generous like themselves, weak people assume that their own character is shared by everyone else. On these

[85] *CSM I*, 388.
[86] *CSM I*, 389.
[87] *CSM I*, 389.
[88] *CSM I*, 118.
[89] Nicco-kerinvel, "La générosité et l'amour," 254.
[90] *CSM I*, 397.
[91] *CSM I*, 397.
[92] *CSM I*, 397.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670526101120 Published online by Cambridge University Press

grounds, they do not think that other people have helped them out of any sort of goodwill, but only out of a hope to be repaid (hence they think they have deceived their benefactors, because the weak person knows he cannot return the favors). Again, a generous individual might think and feel the opposite. She might think that her benefactor did not act out of a wish to be repaid, and therefore she would feel truly grateful, and desire to reciprocate the benefit.

Unlike pity and veneration, both passions which entail either fear or a mismatch between the passions of the generous person and the passions of the other, appropriate gratitude involves an apprehension of similarity, and moreover is straightforwardly good for community life. This might be why Descartes calls it one of the principal bonds of human society. Even so, gratitude is simply repaying favors. Furthermore, if we understand the primary root of generosity, even the other-regarding elements of generosity, to be self-sufficiency, this reciprocity takes on a different tone. When a generous person is thinking that other people are as good as her, that thought is grounded on their equal potential for self-sufficiency, in which case they potentially will also be less antagonistic to others, just like the generous person. Therefore, when the generous person sees others as her equals, she is aware that they may be trustworthy. The thought is not just "I ought to treat others well" but also "others might treat me well." When contrasted with the weak person, it seems that the generous person is less suspicious of or hostile toward other people, and this is the ground of her beneficent behavior.

This interpretation of gratitude also provides a basis for a response to Frigo, Nicco-kerinvel, and Chukurian, who highlight the importance of friendship to understanding generosity. Friendship, the latter two scholars note, is for Descartes a kind of love felt for those we judge to be our equals, and Descartes links it to generosity.[93] Frigo goes even further, claiming that the friendship of the generous person would be universal.[94] I argue that the friendship that these scholars highlight is not inconsistent with the view that generosity is an isolating virtue. First, generous friendship is not actually universal: Descartes only claims that the generous person could be friends with anyone by whom he thinks he is loved.[95] Chukurian de-emphasizes reciprocity in generous friendship on the grounds that Descartes does not discuss reciprocity elsewhere,[96] but as we see here gratitude and reciprocity are a hallmark of generosity. Friendship, like gratitude, depends on the expectation of reciprocity. With this caveat, the generous person's friendliness is much more limited, and much more like gratitude as described above. Second, Descartes gives little description of friendship beyond placing it in his hierarchy of loves, and suggesting that friendship, as a kind of love, involves a concern for the loved object.[97] These passages are strong evidence of the beneficence of the generous person, but they do little to describe his relationships.

[93] Nicco-kerinvel, "La générosité et l'amour," 251, Chukurian, *De la morale cartésienne*, 374.
[94] Frigo, "A Very Obscure Definition," 1113.
[95] *CSM I*, 357.
[96] Chukurian, *De la morale cartésienne*, 377.
[97] *CSM I*, 357.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670526101120 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Beneficence and solitude

A skeptical reader might reasonably wonder if there is any additional evidence that the generous person is isolated. For this, we need to search beyond the *Passions*, because arguably Descartes's treatment of greatness is not limited to that work. There is some reason to think that Descartes's account of his own life and activity in the *Discourse on Method* can be understood as a depiction of an ideal human type. He calls the work "a history, or if you prefer, a fable."[98] These kinds of works are educational, and seem to motivate the reader to greatness: "the charm of fables awakens the mind, while ... histories uplift it and help to shape one's judgement if they are read with discretion."[99] Though he notes the dangers of reading these stories uncritically,[100] it seems that he hopes to "uplift" his readers by offering an autobiography as an ideal. Relatedly, Descartes defends his choice to publish his method, despite his many misgivings, in terms of a kind of universal beneficence and ambition to greatly benefit others which seems quite in line with his descriptions of the generous individual.[101] I argue we can add Descartes's account of his own life to the set of passages he wrote about greatness, considering that he presents himself as a model or ideal, and describes his own great ambition to benefit humanity. Here, I set aside the question of Descartes's historical relationships with other human beings, turning to these passages not as a description of Descartes himself, but as an instance of Descartes describing a great person (who happens to be himself, though perhaps a version of himself that only exists in a fable). I am not the first scholar to use Descartes's account of himself to shed light on generosity, but Mihali's treatment of this subject in the context of generosity does not go into detail.[102]

Descartes's accounts of pity and gratitude suggest that the generous person might help others in two ways: first, the generous person pities others not for their circumstances but for their inability to recognize their own freedom and therefore rise above those circumstances, which might indicate that the generous person would not seek to help others except possibly by making them aware of their own freedom. Second, the generous person is grateful and will return favors. In *Discourse VI*, Descartes seems to give a different account of his own activity on behalf of others. In describing what he will contribute to the "general welfare of mankind" (and therefore why he will publish his method, despite possible risks), he writes that the advances in natural science he hopes to usher in are good because they would facilitate:

> The maintenance of health, which is undoubtedly the chief good and the foundation of all the other goods in this life. For even the mind depends so much on the temperament and disposition of the bodily organs that if it is possible to find some means of making men in general wiser and more

[98] *CSM I*, 112.
[99] *CSM I*, 113.
[100] *CSM I*, 114.
[101] *CSM I*, 142.
[102] Mihali, "Descartes's Ethics," 63.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670526101120 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> skillful than they have been up till now, I believe we must look for it in medicine.[103]

In this passage, just as in several letters and the *Passions*,[104] Descartes acknowledges that strong sensations or ill health of the body can constrain the mind, rendering it unable to attain the highest levels of wisdom (and in some cases to think of anything but the pain it experiences). His most clear and succinct articulation of this principle might be in a 1641 letter to Hyperaspistes, in which he writes, "although when thriving in an adult and healthy body the mind enjoys some liberty to think of other things than those presented by the senses, we know there is not the same liberty in those who are sick."[105] In the end, his vision of the total freedom of the soul is complicated by this admission that the "mind depends" on the body.[106] Perhaps, then, in addition to educating others about the nature of the mind (as discussed above in the section on pity), Descartes's own generous beneficence might be expressed in his work as a natural scientist, improving medicine to remove the impediments to the good functioning of his own mind as well as the minds of all mankind. This might also suggest that the activities of the generous person extend to creating the conditions (such as relief from ill health) needed for others to be aware of their own freedom.

However, this philanthropic activity need not consist of robust relationships with individuals. On the contrary, Descartes's goodwill towards mankind as a whole seems to require that he not interact very much with men as individuals. Descartes discusses the reasons he previously chose not to publish his work, noting that the only sort of help a scientist could usefully accept would be from paid artisans, as opposed to "voluntary helpers, who might offer to help him from curiosity or a desire to learn, usually promise more than they achieve … [and might] wish to be rewarded … by compliments and useless conversation, which could not but waste a lot of his time."[107] If there were such a scientist, he goes on to explain, those who wished to help him should support him financially and "prevent unwelcome visitors from wasting his free time."[108] While Descartes demurs as to the public relevance of his own work, one cannot help but suspect that he is this scientist. If this is the case, it seems he regards those who might be most like him, individuals motivated by "curiosity and a desire to learn," primarily as potential impediments to his productivity (hence his preference for paid helpers). While this attitude might be regarded as one of Descartes's idiosyncrasies, in fact it is highly consistent with the character of the generous

[103] *CSM I*, 143.
[104] *CED*, 91–92, 107; *CSM I*, 345; *CSMK*, 189–90, 336.
[105] *CSMK*, 190.
[106] What this means for Descartes's account of the freedom of the will is beyond the scope of this article. My account of the centrality of self-sufficiency to the freedom of the will is not inconsistent with some bodily limitation to that freedom, as to be most self-sufficient does not require being perfectly self-sufficient: one can still recognize that he is joined by his body to a world of which he is only one part.
[107] *CSM I*, 148.
[108] *CSM I*, 148.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670526101120 Published online by Cambridge University Press

person described above: the highest level of philanthropic activity requires detachment from others (in this case, to accomplish practical ends as opposed to metaphysical meditations). Furthermore, the austere quality of the benefits of medicine aligns with our earlier description of the generous person, particularly the results of generous pity. Medicine is defended as a benefit to mankind not because it promotes men's flourishing or relieves their suffering, but because through medicine we can make men "wiser and more skillful" than ever before, releasing them from the indisposition of their bodily organs. Descartes's account of the goodness of medicine shares with generous pity a primary concern with the correct operations of the mind itself.

In sum, Descartes's account of his own action in the *Discourse* may supply some additional positive content to his conception of generosity. It suggests another way in which the generous person would seek to benefit all of mankind: indeed, along with generous pity, this might help us make sense of Descartes's comment about generosity in Article 156, that the generous person is "naturally led to do great deeds."[109] The undertaking of those deeds does not seem to prohibit and might even require detachment from others as individuals. While this does not necessarily mean that the generous person could not form interpersonal connections with others, this internal detachment from others would certainly shape the generous person's experience of those connections. Overall, then, generosity promotes concern for and action on behalf of others in the very broadest sense, but on an individual level the generous person still seems to primarily help others by harming them less, and certainly it does not seem to promote interpersonal connection.

Conclusion

Even generosity's social elements can be understood in terms of self-sufficiency, and the generous person's awareness of his own freedom grounds radical self-sufficiency and detachment from the happenings of the world. Descartes's examples of the generous person's positive, other-directed passions and his own account of his own choice to publicize his method suggest that, while the generous person is beneficent to others, this does not entail and might even discourage strong interpersonal relationships. This account allows us to bring together the two major lines of scholarship on Cartesian generosity, one emphasizing the generous person's self-sufficiency and another describing his beneficence toward others. To use the language of love and friendship when describing generosity is not incorrect, but if we are to speak of generosity in terms of universal love, we should know this love is austere and depersonalized.

We can draw two conclusions from my account of generosity: one about Descartes's conception of human nature, and another about rooting personal greatness in self-sufficiency. First, if generosity is the ideal for Descartes, it does not seem as though he views close relationships as important to the best possible human life. Secondly and relatedly, generosity has some drawbacks as a personal

[109] *CSM I*, 385.

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ideal. In generosity Descartes presents a means to reduce conflict, and perhaps even achieve great feats in the service of mankind, which is rooted in self-sufficiency and therefore universally available. The generous person has many virtues, including interpersonal ones. However, the isolation of the generous person might demonstrate the limitations of rooting greatness in self-sufficiency. If we rely on Cartesian generosity as "the key to all the other virtues,"[110] we might find ourselves rather self-sufficient, and very much alone.

[110] *CSM I*, 388.

Cite this article: Mary Jane Abramovitz, "Descartes's Generosity: Self-Sufficiency as Ideal Sociability," *The Review of Politics* (2026), 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670526101120

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