FLSF (Felsefe ve Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi)
FLSF (Journal of Philosophy and Social Sciences)
https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/pub/flsf

2024 Bahar / Spring 2024
sayı 37 / issue 37
s. 259-282 / pp. 259-282
ISSN 2618-5784

ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ / RESEARCH ARTICLE
DOI Number: 10.53844/flsf.1442537

INCREASING THE PROBABILITY OF GOOD ART: DESCARTES, AESTHETIC JUDGMENT, AND GENEROSITY

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ABSTRACT

Descartes' first book, the Compendium of Music *(1618), claims, among other things, that the purpose of art is to arouse emotions. By the end of the 1630s, however, he had come to believe that, because of the radically individual nature of perception, it is impossible to predict with precision what emotions will be aroused by what works of art. This article contends, however, that Descartes' abandonment of that project is a result of his using an inappropriate psychological model for such predictions. An appropriate model is developed in his last book,* The Passions of the Soul *(1649). Especially by attending to generosity and desire, the probability of predicting aesthetic judgments, by both perceivers and producers of works of art, is at least increased. In increasing it, Descartes' abandonment need not be total.*

Keywords: *Descartes,* Compendium of Music*,* The Passions of the Soul*, aesthetic judgment, generosity, desire, love*

İYİ SANATIN OLASILIĞINI ARTIRMAK: DESCARTES, ESTETİK YARGI VE YÜCE GÖNÜLLÜLÜK

ÖZ

Descartes ilk kitabı Compendium Musicae'da *(1618), birçok şeyin yanı sıra sanatın amacının duyguları uyandırmak olduğunu iddia eder. Ancak 1630'ların sonuna gelindiğinde algının tamamen bireysel doğası nedeniyle, hangi sanat eserinin hangi duyguları uyandıracağını kesin olarak tahmin etmenin imkânsız olduğuna inanmaya başlamıştı. Ancak bu makale, Descartes'ın bu projeden vazgeçmesinin, bu tür tahminler için uygun olmayan bir psikolojik model kullanmasının bir sonucu olduğunu ileri sürüyor. Uygun bir model, son kitabı olan* Ruhun Tutkuları*'nda (1649) geliştirildi. Özellikle cömertlik ve arzunun dikkate alınmasıyla hem algılayanların hem de sanat eseri üretenlerin estetik yargılarını tahmin etme olasılığı en azından artar. Bunu arttırırken Descartes'ın projesinden tamamen vazgeçmesi gerekmez.*

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Descartes,* Compendium Musicae*,* Ruhun Tutkuları*, estetik yargı, cömertlik, arzu, aşk*

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Makalenin geliş tarihi: 24.02.2024
Makalenin kabul tarihi: 22.04.2024

Submission Date: 24 February 2024
Approval Date: 22 April 2024

Introduction

Although he is not generally considered a thinker of aesthetics, there is a reasonably large literature on the topic in relation to René Descartes' philosophy.[1] There are also analyses of the literary and rhetorical techniques he deploys in his philosophy.[2] However, such discussions often focus on a single text—usually *Compendium of Music* (1618), *Discourse on Method and Essays* (1637), *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), or *The Passions of the Soul* (1649)—along with relevant correspondence, typically with Marin Mersenne and/or Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia. In doing so, I believe something is lost in terms of Descartes' aesthetic theory in relation to his philosophy's overall development. At the same time, pieces that do examine more than one of those major works are not always attentive to the changes in that philosophy's development. In particular, there is a frequent failure to attend to the difference between the psychological models in *The Passions* and in the earlier work.

This essay hopes to contribute to correcting both failings. It seeks to do so by looking, first, at the *Compendium* and letters to Mersenne and Elisabeth in order to lay out Descartes' early aesthetic theory and why he abandoned it. It then turns to what *The Passions* has to say about beauty as it relates generosity, especially in the latter's status as both a passion and a virtue. The essay

[1] In addition to the pieces discussed below, see for instance, Arthur W. Locke, "Descartes and Seventeenth-Century Music," *The Musical Quarterly*, vol. 21, no. 4, 1935, 423-431; William McC. Stewart, "Descartes and Poetry," *The Romanic Review*, vol. 29, no. 3, 1938, 212-242; Bertrand Augst, "Descartes's Compendium on Music," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 26, no. 1, 1965, 119-132; Henry Phillips, "Descartes and the Dramatic Experience," *French Studies*, vol. 39, no. 4, 1985, 408-422; Emmet T. Flood, "Descartes's Comedy of Error," *MLN*, vol. 102, no. 4, 1987, 847-866; Simon Critchley, *On Humour*, London: Routledge, 2002, chs. 1, 3; Larry M. Jorgensen, "Descartes on Music: Between the Ancients and the Aestheticians," *British Journal of Aesthetics* vol. 52, no. 4, 2012, 407-424; and R. Darren Gobert, *The Mind-Body Stage: Passion and Interaction in the Cartesian Theater*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013.

[2] Again, for instance, Daniel Brewer, "The Philosophical Dialogue and the Forcing of Truth," *MLN*, vol. 98, no, 5, 1983, 1234-1247; Stephen H. Daniel, "Descartes on Myth and Ingenuity/Ingenium," *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 23, no. 2, 1985, 157-170; Jean-Pierre Cavaillé, *Descartes: La Fable du Monde*, Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1991; Kevin Dunn, "'A Great City Is a Great Solitude': Descartes's Urban Pastoral," *Yale French Studies* vol. 80, 1991, 93-107; Catherine Labio, *Origins and the Enlightenment: Aesthetic Epistemology from Descartes to Kant*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004, ch. 1; Roger Ariew, "Descartes's Fable and Scientific Methodology," *Annales Internationales d'Histoire des Sciences*, vol. 55, 2005, 127-138; Jean-Luc Nancy, *Ego Sum: Corpus, Anima, Fabula*, Marie-Eve Morin (tr.), New York: Fordham University Press, 2016; and James Griffith, *Fable, Method, and Imagination in Descartes*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

concludes by arguing that the psychological model of *The Passions* allows it to address aesthetic issues that Descartes had earlier despaired of answering.

Aesthetic Judgment and Descartes' Abandonment

The *Compendium* opens with the claim that the aim of art is "to please and to arouse various emotions in us [*delectet, variosque in nobis moveat affectus*]."[3] However, the text focuses on sensory pleasure as distinct from emotions because at the time Descartes was, as Frédéric de Buzon puts it, "devoted" to Isaac Beeckman's "'physico-mathematical'" project.[4] Art's aim is achievable because "All senses are capable of experiencing pleasure [*delectationes*],"[5] but experiencing them requires two kinds of proportional relation: 1) between the object as a whole and the relevant sense organ and 2) among the object's parts, though this proportion also involves a relation to the sense organs. For 1), the object must not overwhelm the relevant sense organ, as gunfire does to the ears.[6] For 2), the parts of the object must be in arithmetic proportion ($a-b = c-d$) rather than geometric ($a/b = c/d$).[7] To achieve this second goal, those parts must present themselves neither in "too complicated or confused a fashion," which tires the senses, nor as too easily perceived, which bores the observer, because the senses are drawn to a pleasant object by "a natural desire [*naturale desiderium*]" that is "not quite" satisfied.[8]

In a letter twelve years later, Descartes cites this very point about desire and satisfaction in answer to Mersenne's question about whether we can "discover the essence of beauty" or 'the pleasant' (*l'agreable*).[9] His answer is that

[3] René Descartes, *Compendium of Music*, Walter Robert (tr.), Middleton, WI: American Institute of Musicology, 1961, 11; René Descartes, *Compendium Musicae*, in Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (eds.), *Œuvres de Descartes*, vol. 10, Paris: Léopold Cerf, 1897, 89.
[4] Frédéric de Buzon, "The *Compendium Musicae* and Descartes's Aesthetics," in Stephen Nadler, Tad M. Schmaltz, and Delphine Antoine-Mahut (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Descartes and Cartesianism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, 256. Here, I use 'biomechanical' instead of 'physico-mathematical'.
[5] Descartes, *Compendium of Music*, 11; Descartes, *Compendium Musicae*, 91.
[6] See Descartes, *Compendium Musicae*, 91.
[7] See Descartes, *Compendium Musicae*, 91.
[8] Descartes, *Compendium of Music*, 11, 12; Descartes, *Compendium Musicae*, 91, 92.
[9] René Descartes, "To Mersenne, 18 March 1630," Anthony Kenny (tr.), in John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny (trs.) *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 3, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, 19; René Descartes, "Descartes á Mersenne. [18 mars 1630.]," in Charles Adam and Paul

we cannot because these terms "signify simply a relation between our judgement [*iugement*] and an object," for two reasons.[10] First, individuals will judge both proportionalities 1) and 2) according to their own organs' capacities.[11] Second, their judgments will be informed by "ideas in our memory."[12] Because of the radically individual nature of these conditions, even if an object that "pleases [*plaira*] most people can be called the most beautiful without qualification," predicting what object will do so is impossible.[13] This impossibility is why de Buzon says that, over the course of his correspondence with Mersenne, Descartes "gives up any strict correlation between music and the passions" and in this way comes to regard the production of something most beautiful without qualification as "a matter of probability," not of certainty.[14]

Yet, this letter's introduction of judgment indicates a consideration of aesthetics beyond the biomechanical focus of the *Compendium*. Hence, Domenica Romagni takes this moment as introducing what she calls "the third-grade judgement of aesthetic valence."[15] She adopts this graded scale from the Sixth Set of Replies, where Descartes names biomechanical reactions to stimuli a "first grade of sensory response [*sentiendi*]," perceptions of light and color a second grade, and calculations about the geometric qualities of the object and its relation to the perceiver a third.[16] For Romagni, the second grade of perception is "*intrinsic*" and the third "*extrinsic to* the sensory content of the perception."[17] As a result of the habitual speed of this third grade, the responses "are experienced as *sensory*"[18] even though they depend, as Descartes puts it, on the intellect

Tannery (eds.), *Œuvres de Descartes*, vol. 1, Paris : Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1969, 132.

[10] Descartes, "To Mersenne, 18 March 1630," 19; Descartes, "Descartes á Mersenne. [18 mars 1630.]," 133.

[11] See Descartes, "Descartes á Mersenne. [18 mars 1630.]," 133.

[12] Descartes, "To Mersenne, 18 March 1630," 20.

[13] Descartes, "To Mersenne, 18 March 1630," 20; Descartes, "Descartes á Mersenne. [18 mars 1630.]," 133.

[14] de Buzon, "The *Compendium Musicae* and Descartes's Aesthetics," 263, 264.

[15] Domenica Romagni, "Cartesian Sensory Perception, Agreeability, and the Puzzle of Aesthetic Pleasure," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, vol. 30, no. 3, 2022, 450.

[16] René Descartes, "Sixth Set of Replies," in *Objections and Replies*, John Cottingham (tr.), in John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (trs.) *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 2, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, 295; René Descartes, "Responsio ad sextas Objectiones," in Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (eds.), *Œuvres de Descartes*, vol. 7, Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1969, 437.

[17] Romagni, "Cartesian Sensory Perception," 449. See also Romagni, "Cartesian Sensory Perception," 448.

[18] Romagni, "Cartesian Sensory Perception," 448.

alone.[19] Such claims to the extrinsic nature of geometric calculation and the speed at which it occurs has further evidence in the *Optics*, when Descartes notes that a "blind man holding the two sticks AE and CE … and knowing only the distance between his two hands … can tell from this knowledge, as if by a natural geometry, where the point E is."[20] Aesthetic judgments are similar to geometric calculations for Romagni in being extrinsic to the perception yet experienced as sensory because of the habitual speed with which they are made. She even suggests the possibility of "other kinds of judgements that fall into the third grade of perception (*e.g.* identity, persistence, etc.)."[21]

However, before extending Romagni's claims to a Cartesian aesthetic theory writ large, we should be careful about the psychological model at hand. As he explains to Elisabeth in 1643, up to that point (which includes the *Discourse*, *Meditations*, and *Objections and Replies*) he had said "almost nothing" about the union of soul (or mind) and body, preferring to focus on their distinction.[22] Let us focus on the version of this early model of the psyche as it is presented in the *Meditations*. There, the primary division of modes of thought is between ideas and thoughts that include "something more than the likeness" of a thing.[23] Ideas can be innate, adventitious, or invented, while the second kind of modes of thought is subdivided into "volitions or emotions [*volontates, sive affectus*]" (I take the disjunction as exclusive) and judgments.[24] The intellect perceives ideas with whatever clarity and distinctness it achieves, then represents them to the will for its "affirmation or denial or for pursuit or avoidance."[25] Together, these actions result in a judgment.[26]

[19] See Descartes, "Responsio ad sextas Objectiones," 438.
[20] René Descartes, *Optics*, in *Discourse and Essays*, Robert Stoothoff (tr.), in John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (trs.) *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 1, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, 170.
[21] Romagni, "Cartesian Sensory Perception," 450.
[22] René Descartes, "Descartes to Elisabeth, Egmond du Hoef, 21 May 1643," in Lisa Shapiro (ed. and tr.), *The Correspondence between Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007, 65.
[23] René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, John Cottingham (tr.), in John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (trs.) *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 2, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, 26.
[24] Descartes, *Meditations*, 26; René Descartes, *Meditationes de prima philosophia*, in Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (eds.), *Œuvres de Descartes*, vol. 7, Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1969, 37.
[25] Descartes, *Meditations*, 40.
[26] See Descartes, *Meditationes*, 37. To be clear, two of those rare times prior to 1643 when Descartes does engage the union of mind and body are in the Sixth Meditation and in the

Fourth Set of Replies. The union can only be taken up so late in the *Meditations* because the knowledge "that I have a body," that this body's sensations tell me things about it, "that various other bodies exist in the vicinity of my body, and that some of these are to be sought out and others avoided" are taught to us by nature defined as "nothing other than God himself, or the ordered system of created things" and so can only be trusted after establishing that "God is not a deceiver" (Descartes, *Meditations*, 55, 56). This fact about God can only be established, in the Third and Fifth Meditations, after establishing the *cogito* in the Second Meditation and after laying out how we err in our judgments in the Fourth. Thus, the possibility of discussing the union of mind and body in the *Meditations* demands previous and prioritized focus on the mind as distinct from the body.

For this reason, "imagination and sensory perception" are, in the *Meditations*, modally distinct from the thinking thing proper in that "I can clearly and distinctly understand myself as a whole without these faculties; but I cannot, conversely, understand these faculties without me, that is, without an intellectual substance to inhere in" (Descartes, *Meditations*, 54). At the same time, sensory perception is precisely how nature teaches us that "I am very closely joined and, as it were, intermingled [*arctissime esse conjunctum & quasi permixtum*] with [the body], so that I and the body form a unit [*unum quid*]," which is to say we feel bodily sensations and are not merely informed about them (Descartes, *Meditations*, 56; Descartes, *Meditationes*, 81). The agreeability (*gratae*) and disagreeability (*ingratae*) of those feelings "makes it quite certain that my body, or rather my whole self, in so far as I am a combination of body and mind [*sive potius me totum, quantenus ex corpore & mente sum compositus*], can be affected by the various beneficial or harmful bodies which surround it" (Descartes, *Meditations*, 56; Descartes, *Meditationes*, 81). This tension, between taking imagination and sense perception as modally distinct from the mind and taking mind and body as unified in a whole self, is why Descartes needs to explain, in the Fourth Set of Replies, that we can consider mind and body as "incomplete substances [*substantia incompleta*] when they are referred to a human being which together they make up [*quem componunt*]. But if they are considered on their own, they are complete [*completae*]" (René Descartes, "Fourth Set of Replies," in *Objections and Replies*, John Cottingham (tr.), in John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (trs.) *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 2, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, 157; René Descartes, "Responsio ad quartas Objectiones," in Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (eds.), *Œuvres de Descartes*, vol. 7, Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1969, 222). To the extent that Descartes changes his approach to this issue in the Fourth Set of Replies, it is to note that it requires a shift in focus to take up the unity of mind and body as opposed to taking up each of them as internally complete substances.

There is of course a tradition, and one with which I agree, of taking up precisely such moments to argue that the *cogito* was never the radical split between mind and body that the tradition has insisted. However, for brevity's sake, and because, as I will now hopefully show, the psychological models in the *Meditations* and in *The Passions* differ in ways that are important and interesting for a question of a Cartesian theory of art, I will leave this question at the level of stressing Descartes' emphasis in the *Meditations* and *Objections and Replies* on the focus one takes in addressing mind, body, and their union. For some of the important contributions to the tradition mentioned above, see Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Claude Lefort (ed.), Alphonso Lingis (tr.), Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968; Nancy, *Ego Sum*; and Jean-Luc Marion, *On Descartes' Passive Thought: The Myth of Cartesian Dualism*, Christina M. Gschwandtner

It is in *The Passions* that Descartes makes public his fuller thoughts on the unity of mind and body.[27] There, volitions (*volontez*) are actions of the soul while emotions (*émotions*), i.e., passions proper, are the type of passions most relevant here.[28] Volitions terminate in the soul or the body, with the latter resulting in memory, imagining, and attention.[29] The passions proper are best understood as emotions since they are perceptions caused by the body in a way that depends on the nerves, refer to our soul, can be aroused by either external objects or other causes, and are "caused, maintained and strengthened by some movement of the [animal] spirits."[30] An animal spirit is "a certain very fine air or wind" contained in the nerves.[31] What *The Passions* describes as actions of the soul is, then, closer to judgment in the *Meditations*, while what it describes as emotions is closer to the discussion in the *Compendium* and the letter to Mersenne.

The difference is important because, even though focusing on the distinction between and focusing on the unity of mind and body are each legitimate approaches, Descartes also writes to Elisabeth that focusing on both simultaneously is so difficult that he is unsure whether doing so is possible for the human mind since it would involving thinking of mind and body as "as one single thing and … as two, which is contradictory."[32] Similarly, in the same place in the Sixth Set of Replies that Romagni cites as evidence for aesthetic judgment as falling under the third grade, Descartes warns that only the first two grades

(tr.), Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018. On how this argument works in Merleau-Ponty and Nancy, see esp. Marie-Eve Morin, *Merleau-Ponty and Nancy on Sense and Being: At the Limits of Phenomenology*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022, chs. 1-3.

[27] See René Descartes, *Les Passions de l'âme*, in Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (eds.), *Œuvres de Descartes*, vol. 11, Paris: Léopold Cerf, 1909, a. 30.
[28] See Descartes, *Les Passions*, aa. 17, 22, 25.
[29] See Descartes, *Les Passions*, aa. 18, 42, 43.
[30] René Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*, Robert Stoothoff (tr.), in John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (trs.) *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 1, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, 339; a. 27. See also Descartes, *Les Passions*, aa. 21, 28.
[31] Descartes, *The Passions*, 330; a. 7.
[32] René Descartes, "Descartes to Elisabeth, 28 June 1643, Egmond du Hoef," in Lisa Shapiro (ed. and tr.), *The Correspondence between Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007, 70.

are to be taken up "if we wish to distinguish it [i.e., the sensory faculty; *sensum*] carefully from the intellect [*intellectu*]."[33]

The letters to Elisabeth are in response to her asking "how the soul … can determine the bodily spirits, in order to bring about voluntary actions [*actions voluntaires*]."[34] Descartes argues that there are three fundamental notions—of mind, of body, and of their union—and that her question conflates them.[35] As Daniel Garber explains, for Descartes Elisabeth is "trying to explain one notion, that of mind-body interaction, which pertains to the primitive notion of the union of mind and body, in terms of impact, which pertains to another primitive notion, that of extension or body."[36] Taking the mention of judgment in the letter to Mersenne as indicative of the psychological structure of the *Meditations* could lead to a similarly contradictory conflation. This possibility is especially the case in that the letter cites the *Compendium*, which claims the purpose of art to be not just pleasing the sense organs, but also arousing emotions. This dual purpose points to the fundamental notion of the union of mind and body. Nevertheless, Romagni's categorization of aesthetic judgment as a second kind of the third grade of sensation, a grade actually achieved by the intellect, is a helpful understanding of what aesthetic judgment is for Descartes.

From all of the above, we can claim that a beautiful object, at least from the *Compendium* to the *Meditations* and *Objections and Replies*, is one that I judge,

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[33] Descartes, "Sixth Set of Replies," 295; Descartes, "Responsio ad sextas Objectiones," 437.
[34] Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, "Elisabeth to Descartes, [The Hague] 6 May, 1643," in Lisa Shapiro (ed. and tr.), *The Correspondence between Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007, 62; Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, "Elisabeth á Descartes. [La Haye], 6/16 mai [1643].," in Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (eds.), *Œuvres de Descartes*, vol. 3, Paris: Léopold Cerf, 1899, 661.
[35] See Descartes, "Descartes to Elisabeth, 28 June 1643, Egmond du Hoef," 70-71.
[36] Daniel Garber, "Understanding Interaction: What Descartes Should Have Told Elisabeth," in *Descartes Embodied: Reading Cartesian Philosophy through Cartesian Science*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, 172. The question of focus addressed in note 26 above should help enhance or defend Garber's argument here against a possible critique from Lisa Shapiro, who says that "most commentators seem to take it that whatever is proper to the mind alone could be attributed to it, even if the mind were never joined to the body at all" (Lisa Shapiro, "What Are the Passions Doing in the *Meditations*?" in Joyce Jenkins, Jennifer Whiting, and Christopher Williams (eds.), *Persons and Passions: Essays in Honor of Annette Baier*, Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2005, 23). By stressing that Descartes' critique of Elisabeth concerns her using the wrong notion, it seems to me that Garber is noting that Descartes would have Elisabeth address the union of mind and body by focusing on the union as a union, rather than from the perspective of their distinction and internal completeness. In this way, focusing "what is appropriate to the mind alone" is, on Garber's reading, the very problem Descartes is trying to draw to Elisabeth's attention.

in terms both of my ideas of it as it presents itself to my senses and of my memories, to please me insofar as it does not overwhelm my sense organs and has parts in an arithmetical proportion to each other that is neither so easily perceived that it satisfies nor so confusedly presented that it tires my natural desire and that arouses various emotions in me. In its totality, this phenomenon is the aim in producing artworks, even if neither the pleasantness of the sensation nor the emotions aroused can be predicted precisely. The biomechanical focus of the *Compendium* as well as the letters to Elisabeth indicate that the psychological model with which Descartes is working is at least similar to that of the *Meditations* and *Objections and Replies*, and so is a model oriented on the distinction of mind and body. At the same time, the *Compendium* claims that the second aspect of the purpose of art is to arouse emotions, indicating a purpose aligned with the union of mind and body. Descartes' frustration with the merely probable production of beautiful objects seems to result, in other words, from his committing a similar mistake as Elisabeth. Like her, he is trying to use a psychological model oriented on the distinction of mind from body to address a concern more appropriate to one oriented on their union. The psychology of *The Passions*, in being oriented on that union, may open up a path to giving more precision to the probability in question.

The Cyclical Nature of Generosity and the Agitations of Desire

Descartes argues that the six primary passions are wonder, love, hatred, desire, joy, and sadness. All others are species or combinations of these.[37] For reasons of space, I will focus almost exclusively on the positive valences of the passions at hand (love, attraction, and generosity) rather than the negative ones (hatred, repulsion, pride, and abjectness), wonder and desire having no opposites.[38] For the same reasons, I also will not take up how aesthetic judgment relates to joy or sadness since that would demand engaging, at a minimum, what Descartes says in *The Passions* about tragedy.[39]

To begin, because they are caused, strengthened, and maintained by the animal spirits, the passions proper involve something different from both

[37] See Descartes, *Les Passions*, a. 69.
[38] See Descartes, *Les Passions*, aa. 53, 87.
[39] See Descartes, *Les Passions*, aa. 61, 91-95, 187.

volition and judgment.[40] Animal spirits are how the body can indirectly change a volition.[41] When something presents itself to the sense organs, the spirits' motions can cause an emotion that, in love, "impels [*incite*] the soul" to want (*volonté*) to be joined to the thing.[42] This incitement is different from the soul's active and direct change of volition.[43]

The things we love appear "agreeable [*convenables*]" to us.[44] When this appearance is aroused through reason, we "judge" them to be good, "i.e., beneficial to us," but the agreeable appearance can also be produced by a movement of the animal spirits when we imagine ourselves and the loved thing to be two parts of a whole.[45] Now, there is a non-essential difference between benevolent love, which "prompts us to wish [*incite á vouloir*]" for the object's well-being, and concupiscent, which "makes us desire [*fait desirer*]" to possess it.[46] This difference is non-essential for two reasons. First, it concerns effects rather than causes, meaning that concupiscent love remains a kind of love.[47] Second, concupiscent love entails wishing for the well-being of the object, or benevolent love, and benevolent love entails concupiscent.[48]

More important are the differences between affection, friendship, and devotion. Similar to the argument to Mersenne against discovering an essence of beauty, these kinds of love are categorized according to the relation of the esteem we have for the object against the esteem we have for ourselves.[49] Esteem is a species of wonder, wherein we wonder at a thing's grandeur.[50] Wonder is the only passion that can be incited without regard for the inciting thing's good for oneself.[51] What prompts it is simply "our first encounter with some object" such that either brain impressions represent it as "unusual and consequently worthy of special consideration" or the animal spirits' movement, strengthened by the impression of the object, both preserve the pineal gland in a particular place and

[40] See Descartes, *Les Passions*, aa. 37, 44-46.
[41] See Descartes, *Les Passions*, a. 34.
[42] Descartes, *Passions*, 356; Descartes, *Les Passions*, 387; a. 79. See also Descartes, *Les Passions*, aa. 36-40.
[43] See Descartes, *Les Passions*, aa. 31, 34, 41.
[44] Descartes, *The Passions*, 356; Descartes, *Les Passions*, 387; a. 79.
[45] Descartes, *The Passions*, 350, 358; aa. 56, 85. See also Descartes, *Les Passions*, a. 80.
[46] Descartes, *The Passions*, 356; Descartes, *Les Passions*, 388; a. 81.
[47] See Descartes, *Les Passions*, a. 81.
[48] See Descartes, *Les Passions*, a. 81.
[49] See Descartes, *Les Passions*, a. 83.
[50] See Descartes, *Les Passions*, a. 54.
[51] See Descartes, *Les Passions*, a. 56.

retain the sense organs in a position to continue to receive the impression.[52] As a result of this preservation and retention of attention given to the object, wonder makes us learn and remember.[53] In its specific form as esteem, it can be caused by a movement of animal spirits that strengthens the impression of an object so that the soul represents to itself the object's value. In this case, the esteem is a passion proper.[54] However, if our wonder at an object's grandeur is in accord with a rational assessment, "then our esteem … is dispassionate" and does not result from love.[55] So, we can have benevolent or concupiscent love for things other than ourselves insofar as we passionately wonder at their grandeur in relation to our passionate or dispassionate wonder at our own. Before addressing this relation in terms of affection, friendship, and devotion, however, we need to address self-esteem, the wonder that refers to "our own merit."[56]

There is only one justifiable reason to wonder at our own grandeur or merit: "the exercise of our free will and the control we have over our volitions [*volontez*]."[57] The knowledge of a "freedom to dispose of [one's] volitions" as the sole source of being praised or blamed and the feeling of "a firm and constant resolution to use [this freedom] well" constitute one's generosity, the passionate response to actions of the soul.[58] As a species of wonder, generosity is apt to prompt learning. Since the object being learned about is oneself, it reinforces the free will whose exercise, along with the control over volitions, initially incited the self-esteem. Because it reinforces a freely willed, resolutely well-used disposing of one's volitions such that one wonders at the grandeur of its exercise and of one's self-control as well as at its reinforcement via that esteem, generosity can be understood as habituating the soul to "dispose it to have certain thoughts," a habituation that is the acquisition of virtue.[59] Remembering that all forms of esteem are species of wonder and that wonder is one of the modes of thought called passions proper or emotions, which are caused by the body and refer to the soul, the dynamic of generosity's reinforcement demonstrates how "these habits can produce [thoughts] and in turn

[52] Descartes, *The Passions*, 350, 353; aa. 53, 70.
[53] See Descartes, *Les Passions*, a. 75.
[54] See Descartes, *Les Passions*, a. 149.
[55] Descartes, *The Passions*, 383; a. 150.
[56] Descartes, *The Passions*, 383; a. 151.
[57] Descartes, *The Passions*, 384; Descartes, *Les Passions*, 445; a. 152.
[58] Descartes, *The Passions*, 384; a. 153.
[59] Descartes, *The Passions*, 387; a. 161.

[*reciproquement*] can be produced by them."[60] That this reinforcement is a self-reinforcement shows how it is that to be generous is "to pursue virtue in a perfect manner" and "*serves as a remedy against all the disorders of the passions*."[61]

All told, the self-esteem of generosity emerges as a self-reinforcing cycle of passion and virtue. It begins as a passionate, wondering response to the resolute, free disposition to use our volitions well. As inciting a learning about ourselves in terms of this disposition, the wonder simultaneously reinforces it and removes itself, as self-esteem, from the realm of passions proper to become generosity. As removed from the realm of the passions proper, this generosity gives us more reason to passionately respond to our dispositions toward our volitions. As the cycle continues, the disposition become increasingly habitual, which is to say it becomes a virtue. In that habits have a reciprocally productive relationship to thoughts, the self-reinforcing cyclicality of generosity becomes even tighter. Indeed, this ever-tightening cyclicality explains the habitual speed of aesthetic judgment whereby it is, as Romagni has it via the Sixth Set of Replies, achieved by the intellect yet experienced as sensory.[62] Deborah J. Brown obscures this cyclicality in her more linear description of generosity as "first a passion of the soul and then, through habituation, a virtue as well."[63] Though she is far from alone in doing so,[64] I prefer to draw attention to Brown here because

[60] Descartes, *The Passions*, 387; Descartes, *Les Passions*, 453; a. 161.
[61] Descartes, *The Passions*, 384, 385; aa. 153, 156.
[62] See Romagni, "Cartesian Sensory Perception," 449.
[63] Deborah J. Brown, *Descartes and the Passionate Mind*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 188.
[64] Others who seem to impose a similar linearity on generosity include Lisa Shapiro, who finds that it opens up "a kind of teleological explanation of mind-body associations" (Lisa Shapiro, "Descartes' *Passions of the Soul* and the Union of Mind and Body," *Archive für Geschichte der Philosophie*, vol. 85, 2003, 246); Isabelle Wienand, who argues that it is "the ideal conjugation" of free will, reason, and beatitude (Isabelle Wienand, "Descartes' Morals," *South African Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2006, 185); and Catherine Malabou, who calls it "a way of overcoming the disruptions of the passions" (Catherine Malabou, "Go Wonder: Subjectivity and Affects in Neurobiological Times," in Adrian Johnston and Catherine Malabou, *Self and Emotional Life: Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, and* Neuroscience, New York: Columbia University Press, 2013, 18). Richard F. Hassing's description of it as a "virtue-passion" avoids imposing linearity, but still does not make clear its cyclicality (Richard F. Hassing, *Cartesian Psychophysics and the Whole Nature of Man: On Descartes's* Passions of the Soul, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015, 165). Shoshana Brassfield seems to want to make a strong distinction between generosity as a passion and as a virtue (Shoshana Brassfield, "Never let the Passions Be Your Guide: Descartes and the Role of the Passions," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, vo. 20, no. 3, 2012, 473). Similarly, generosity as a passion seems to disappear from Marguerite La Caze's account (see Marguerite La Caze, "The Encounter between Wonder and Generosity," *Hypatia*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2002, 11-13). Indeed, the only place I can find a

of the importance below of different aspects of her argument. As will be more clear below, generosity's self-reinforcing cycle between passion and virtue is crucial for an account of aesthetic judgment in *The Passions*.

Taking generosity as the self-esteem against which we measure our passionate esteem for other objects, and so our love for them as good, we have affection for objects we esteem as less valued or of less merit than, friendship for those we esteem equally to, and devotion to what we esteem more highly than ourselves. Thus, we have affection for "a flower, a bird, or a horse"; friendship with other human beings, "unless our mind is very disordered"; and devotion to God, "our sovereign, our country, our town, and even a particular person."[65] Given the kind of relation in affection, it seems like it must be concupiscent love, i.e., "for the possession of the objects," while friendship and devotion must be benevolent, i.e., in them one wishes the object well because one takes it "as other parts of himself."[66] Still, it should be remembered that benevolent love can entail concupiscent and vice-versa.

The concupiscence of affection seems to mean that it is aroused by a representation from the sense organs of the object as beneficial, measured against the internal sense that incites self-esteem. In that way, it incites the passion of attraction, the species of love that believes the object to be beautiful rather than good.[67] Because representations from the sense organs impact the soul "more strongly" than those from reason, attraction is "usually more violent than other kinds of love."[68] A beautiful object seems, then, to be an attractive one for which we have an affection, i.e., is an object at the grandeur of which we wonder but esteem less than we esteem ourselves, and whose beneficent-seeming presentation to the sense organs incites a violent will to be joined to the object so strong as to be considered a desire to possess it. However, attraction is not solely associated with objects of affection. To understand why involves looking at desire.

Descartes defines desire as "an agitation of the soul caused by the spirits, which disposes the soul to wish [*vouloir*], in the future, for the things it

similar emphasis on the cyclical quality of generosity is in Andreea Mitchell, "Descartes's Ethics: Generosity in the Flesh," *Epoché: A Journal for the History of Philosophy*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2022, 73-74.

[65] Descartes, *The Passions*, 357; a. 83.

[66] Descartes, *The Passions*, 357; a. 82.

[67] See Descartes, *Les Passions*, a. 85.

[68] Descartes, *The Passions*, 358; a. 85.

represents to itself as agreeable" and concludes from this definition that "we desire not only the presence of goods which are absent but also the preservation of those which are present."[69] We desire good and beautiful things alike. In attraction's desire, because of the violence of the impact of the object's representation, the agitation disposes the soul to wish for the object as "the greatest of all the goods [*biens*] belonging to mankind."[70] In this way, attraction need not be directed toward objects for which we have affection. Especially since concupiscent and benevolent love entail each other, friendship and devotion can also entail attraction, meaning that there are different species as well as degrees of desire, indeed "as many different species as there are different objects that we pursue."[71] Concerning affection, "the beauty of flowers moves [*incite*] us only to look at them, and that of fruits to eat them."[72] Friendship and devotion, though, involve those we esteem as equal to or grander than our self-esteem, so their attractions involve imagining perfections in someone "who we think capable of becoming a second self," i.e., is an attraction that combines concupiscent and benevolent love.[73]

In a generous person, this combination seems to be the result of another combination, of the "confused manner" in which the acquisition of the imagined second self is presented to the imagination with generosity's connection to humility.[74] On the one hand, the acquisition is presented confusedly in that we do not imagine needing "more than one other half" and the attraction we feel toward another person is more than we feel toward others "at that moment," which determine the soul "to feel toward that one alone all the inclination which nature gives it to pursue the good [*bien*] which it represents as the greatest we could possibly possess."[75] On the other hand, generosity is connected to humility in that its self-esteem is not a self-love.[76] First, generous people esteem themselves to be neither "much inferior" to those who are wealthier or more honored, intelligent, knowledgeable or beautiful, nor do they "have much more esteem for themselves than for those whom they surpass."[77] Second, this way of

[69] Descartes, *The Passions*, 358; Descartes, *Les Passions*, 392; a. 86.
[70] Descartes, *The Passions*, 360; Descartes, *Les Passions*, 396; a. 90.
[71] Descartes, *The Passions*, 359; a. 88.
[72] Descartes, *The Passions*, 360; Descartes, *Les Passions*, 395; a. 90.
[73] Descartes, *The Passions*, 360; a. 90.
[74] Descartes, *The Passions*, 360; a. 90.
[75] Descartes, *The Passions*, 360; Descartes, *Les Passions*, 396; a. 90.
[76] Contra Wienand, "Descartes' Morals," 186.
[77] Descartes, *The Passions*, 384; a. 154.

esteeming themselves means that they "do not prefer ourselves to anyone else" and in fact "esteem nothing more highly than doing good [*faire du bien*] to others."[78] When the attraction a generous person feels for another is strong enough to imagine that person as the other half of themselves, the attraction will, given that the generous person does not prefer themselves to others and esteems most highly doing good for or being beneficial to others, combine concupiscence and benevolence, if only for the moment. In such moments, the generous person resolutely finds in the other a second, equally generous self in the friend and, for that reason, one worth devoting themselves to insofar as the first person's humility causes them to, confusedly, imagine the other's equality as a superiority. The agitation of the soul that is this desire, the concupiscence of the generous person's attraction to another, disposes that person's soul for both the presence and the preservation of that other but, insofar as this person is generous, the desire is for a love as benevolent as it is concupiscent.

Of course, in a non-generous person, this dynamic of attraction for another is different from the passion of love proper since that person will not be properly humble, i.e., will not have the virtuous habit of esteeming themselves rationally and dispassionately. As a result, the dynamic has "stranger effects" than love proper and "provides writers of romances and poets with their principal subject-matter."[79] As Brown points out, there was an "increasing valorization of the heroic virtues, lauded by Roman historians and celebrated in romantic literature" when Descartes wrote *The Passions*,[80] which is one reason why he rejects magnanimity in favor of generosity,[81] though not so much as a break from as much as "a shift in emphasis within the traditional conception of virtue."[82] In inciting its strange effects, this subject-matter indulges the self-

[78] Descartes, *The Passions*, 385; Descartes, *Les Passions*, 448; aa. 155, 156.
[79] Descartes, *The Passions*, 360; a. 90.
[80] Brown, *Descartes and the Passionate Mind*, 192.
[81] See Descartes, *Les Passions*, a. 161.
[82] Brown, *Descartes and the Passionate Mind*, 191. Hassing makes a similar point, that generosity "eliminates a large class of the traditional triggers of spiritedness" (Hassing, *Cartesian Psychophysics*, 168). See also Wienand, "Descartes' Morals," 185-186. To some extent, Marvin B. Becker goes further in linking Cartesian generosity as a precursor to the rise of civil, and market, society and its notions of virtue in that "self-esteem was distinguished from aristocratic pridefulness" at the same time that "the idea of generosity, while considerably scaled down from its pretensions to grandiosity, munificence or extravagant display, did not altogether lose something of its archaic grandeur" (Marvin B. Becker, *The Emergence of Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century: A Privileged Moment in the History of England, Scotland, and France*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994, 16).

loving, concupiscent modes of self-esteem.[83] To that extent, any dispassionate, rational self-esteem in accord with one's true grandeur is overwhelmed by the violent desire to acquire the beautiful other.[84] If this person is not humble, their self-esteem becomes the vice-ridden aspect of pride.[85] If they are humble, it transforms into the abjectness that is pride's obverse.[86]

At this point, it looks as though Descartes' abandonment of precisely predicting art's arousal of the emotions has continued to the end of his career. If we cannot know how a given individual will biomechanically judge an object's aesthetic qualities, even less can we account for the memories and habituations that further inform that judgment. In other words, we cannot predict whether an individual will have been habituated into generosity, pride, or abjectness such that their concupiscent attraction to an artwork will combine with benevolent love or indulge their self-love.

The Non-satisfaction of Generosity and Inciting the Desire to Pursue the Good

Ironically, this same point seems to be where, in combination with the letter to Mersenne and the *Compendium*, an account of good artistic *production* can be found in Descartes' aesthetic theory. Even though the radically individual nature of aesthetic judgment made Descartes abandon his first book's project as concerns the perception of art, what *The Passions* claims about generosity can give guidance to the artist as to what products will incite what kinds of passions proper. In that way, *The Passions* opens up a possibility to identifying what qualifies as good art.

First, we should not forget generosity's cyclical movement as a passion and a virtuous habit or habitual virtue. It begins as a passion but, as a virtue, incites passionate wonder at one's grandeur once again. Thus, at least in principle, an attractive object can be produced that does not indulge the self-love of prideful or abject self-esteem, but rather incites that wondering reaction. Further, through its analysis of the relationships between the different modes self-esteem (generosity, pride, or abjectness) and kinds of love (affection, friendship, and devotion), the psychological model of *The Passions* lends more

[83] See Descartes, *Les Passions*, aa. 54, 157.
[84] See Descartes, *Les Passions*, a. 158.
[85] See Descartes, *Les Passions*, aa. 157, 204
[86] See Descartes, *Les Passions*, aa. 159, 205.

precision to the relationship of individual to object than Descartes believed possible in his correspondence with Mersenne.

We should also not forget that the *Compendium* claims both that art seeks to arouse emotions and that a beautiful object will not quite satisfy our desire. Descartes does not say how or what emotions might be aroused. However, combining the *Compendium* and *The Passions* on desire means that the spirit-caused agitation of the soul disposing it to wish for the acquisition and preservation of the beautiful object is never to be quite satisfied. Now, Brown understands the nuances of the satisfaction of desire and the self-esteem of generosity in that she distinguishes between "the satisfaction of all our desires principally" and "the satisfaction of having nothing to regret because we have acted from reason and a firm disposition of the will."[87] She believes that the satisfaction of not having anything to regret means that "there is nothing more or else one could or ought to have done."[88] Yet, attending to generosity's cyclical nature indicates that the very satisfaction of the desire of and for it is, at the same time, its non-satisfaction because generosity continually re-habituates us to virtuous acts and judgments.

Producing a beautiful object would mean, then, producing one that we desire but never fully either acquire or preserve. Producing a beautiful object that incites generosity would mean producing one that we desire insofar as our affection for it is involved in the impossibility of satisfying the desire to acquire and preserve what the attraction incites. In that way, the affection, the desire it incites, and the concupiscence connected to them seek to preserve the object insofar as doing so never quite satisfies them. It is to produce an object of friendship or devotion insofar as our concupiscent love for it combines most fully with a benevolent love that wishes the object well—here, insofar as it is a beautifully produced object.

Again, the generous person will esteem such an object against their rational, properly humble self-esteem. In describing esteem, Brown argues that its specific qualities mean that it opens onto a "calculus," whereby we master the passions by mastering esteem and master esteem by "mastering our self-esteem."[89] Such mastery demonstrates "the importance of examining the causes of the passions."[90] However, since even a generous person's disposition to use their will involves doing so "in circumstances we do not adequately know and

[87] Brown, *Descartes and the Passionate Mind*, 179.
[88] Brown, *Descartes and the Passionate Mind*, 179.
[89] Brown, *Descartes and the Passionate Mind*, 202.
[90] Brown, *Descartes and the Passionate Mind*, 202.

cannot control, … we must rely on the very passions that generosity allegedly helps us master."[91] For Brown, this psychological fact makes it difficult to "identify the passions that are morally or practically appropriate," even though "We need not go outside ourselves to find a standard of correctness for judging our passions."[92] By finding a tension in relying on passions that generosity is supposed to master, though, Brown again seems to obscure its cyclical nature as passion and as virtue. However, by arguing for a calculus of esteem, she notes a further precision to predicting aesthetic judgments introduced by the psychological model of *The Passions*, at least by generous people.

Brown's calculus and generosity's masteries then open onto a potentially different answer as to who "we recognize as the *généreux* among us."[93] She suggests "those we find in our community who have proved themselves of good judgement."[94] We might also, however, and building from Romagni's argument, recognize those who produce objects that incite the passionate beginning point of generosity without indulging the prideful or abject modes of self-esteem, that arouse its emotional onset of wondering at a resolute, free disposition to use one's volitions well without ever having the desire to acquire or preserve the object of this esteem being satisfied. If which products will incite such a passion cannot be precisely predicted, they can still be calculated within degrees of probability. Indeed, in its difference from the *Meditations*, the psychological model of *The Passions* itself increases the probability of accurate prediction. In this increased probability, it serves as a model for both producers and perceivers of aesthetic objects.

In other words, a further subdivision of what Romagni identifies as the third grade of sensory response can be made. Descartes notes only geometric assessments of the object as falling under this grade, while Romagni argues that aesthetic judgments must also fall under it. However, her focus is on the judgment of those who encounter an object aesthetically. With a fuller accounting of the psychological model of *The Passions*, we can see a model for the judgment of producers of aesthetic objects as well. The good artist, the generous artist, then, will use their aesthetic judgment not to produce (self-)indulgent art, but to produce beautiful objects that incite the desire to pursue the good. [95]

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[91] Brown, *Descartes and the Passionate Mind*, 205.
[92] Brown, *Descartes and the Passionate Mind*, 205, 208.
[93] Brown, *Descartes and the Passionate Mind*, 208.
[94] Brown, *Descartes and the Passionate Mind*, 208.
[95] I cannot fully justify this claim here, but I believe that, if this articulation of the good Cartesian artist holds, and especially keeping in mind the arguments about generosity in Brown, Wienand, and Becker described in note 82 above, then the Cartesian artist par excellence would seem to be James Joyce, at least as he author of *Ulysses*. I make this claim

Conclusion

Descartes abandons his early aesthetic attempts because he believes that predicting what objects might produce which reactions cannot be done with precision. However, the biomechanical focus of this early aesthetics indicates that he was working with a psychological model oriented on the distinction between mind and body, where they are complete substances in themselves, rather than one oriented on their unity.

An engagement with the mind and body as a unity appears most fully in *The Passions*, and so it presents a model of the psyche that differs from the earlier work. On that model, we properly and passionately esteem ourselves in wonder at the free disposition we have over our volitions, which incites a further learning about that disposition. This further learning removes the self-esteem from the realm of passions proper to emerge as the rational virtue of generosity, which then becomes another reason to passionately esteem ourselves, thus renewing the cycle of passion and virtue. At its most virtuous, we rationally measure our esteem for other objects against this self-esteem, a measurement that prompts the desire to either pursue or avoid them. The generous person will then pursue objects that are, rationally speaking, good.

Even if predicting what objects will incite such a cycle of passion and virtue cannot be done with precision, this psychological model does open up the possibility of a calculus for doing so. This calculus is involved with the fact that generosity's cyclical quality is, like desire in Descartes' early attempts at aesthetics, never fully complete or satisfied. Producing objects that incite a self-esteem that can lead to a non-satisfied generosity cycling between passion and virtue can then be taken as a way to pick up the question of Cartesian aesthetics where Descartes himself left off, now with what he considers a more appropriate psychological model at hand.

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not only because of the novel's famous puzzles, which indicate the non-satisfaction of desire, but also because of Richard Ellmann's assessment of Leopold Bloom: "The divine part of Bloom is simply his humanity—his assumption of a bond between himself and other created beings" (Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce*, new and rev. ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982, 362). In this way, Bloom can thus be read as virtuous, as heroically imitable in a non-archaic world, in his free disposition to use his volitions well, and so as inciting, insofar as he is the main character in a beautiful work of art (beautiful in part because of its puzzles), a passionate feeling of generosity in the reader. On the possibility of Descartes' influence on *Ulysses*, see Steven Bond, "The Occlusion of René Descartes in *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake*," *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 35, no. 4, 2012, 32-55.

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