

“On Generosity”¹

Translated by Donald Rutherford

Generosity, in the proper sense of the word, is the virtue which elevates us to do actions worthy of our kind, nature, descent, or origin, which is heavenly; for as St. Paul says, following a Greek poet whom he himself cites, we are of the kind or race of God, who is the source of all minds. Thus, it is in this sense that it is fitting for all human beings to be generous and to act according to the nobility of human nature, so as not to degenerate or to lower ourselves to the level of beasts. This has been very well expressed in these verses of Boethius, the Roman senator:

We are all born of the first rank
If we feel in ourselves our divine source.²

Thus, generosity, which ordinarily signifies the virtue of true nobility, is taken generally for the virtue by which we bring ourselves to do actions that are at once elevated and reasonable, for without the light of reason and justice, this elevation is only ambition and vanity.

It is necessary, therefore, that the truly generous person show by his actions that he possesses perfections and virtues which are difficult to practice and which are not encountered in common souls. He will have the courage of Pompey, who, embarking on a pressing affair at the risk of a shipwreck, said to those who wanted him to turn back, “It is necessary that I go, it is not necessary that I live.” He will have the moderation of Alexander, who seeing within his grasp the wife of Darius, perhaps the most beautiful woman in Asia, subordinated his passion to his glory. As for justice, of which I shall speak shortly, he has a duty to display this above all in his actions.

The generous person must respect without exception certain maxims suited for regulating his conduct. First, he must avoid all that is base and all that he would not want known by everyone. Second, when he is in doubt as to what to do, he will opt for that course of action which appears to be the furthest from any hint of sin or injustice. And just as he must act boldly when his comfort and even his life are at risk, so he must act cautiously when there is a danger of committing a crime, and in this alone he must be timid. Third, he will be suspicious of all that is most pleasurable and that the least man from the dregs of society, if he were in his place, would do as well as him. Fourth, he will be suspicious of all courses of action and all outcomes in which self-interest dominates, and he must act on the basis of a nobler principle. However, as false glory is often veiled by a mask that makes it resemble generosity, it is necessary to consider that every action that goes against justice, that is, against the public good, and in a word, all that is contrary to virtue,

¹ A critical edition of the French text can be found at A VI.4, 2718-23. Watermark dating indicates that the essay was likely composed during the years 1686-87.

² *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Bk. III.

is not glorious. All actions that would be justly blamed and even punished if they did not succeed, and that chance alone can justify, are never glorious, whatever success they might have. On the contrary, every action that will be praised even if luck does not favor it, is worthy of the person who seeks true glory.

Indeed, one can judge that the good we receive from glory lies only in our mind, for whoever is concerned with glory must never come to know himself from his fame; from which we can conclude that glory pleases us because it makes us form a favorable opinion of ourselves through the testimony of others, who contribute to our satisfaction. But if we know that these people are mistaken, and the conscience with which we are burdened forces us to confess inwardly our crimes and imperfections, what part could we take in this satisfaction, what pleasure could we find in these vain appearances, while the inward bitterness that fills the mind is mixed with it? It is for this reason that one has always valued more highly the praise of a few excellent men than that of a crowd of ignorant and vicious ones.

Above all, it is necessary to be wary of actions which appear glorious to corrupt men, but which are in fact detestable, on account of the evils they produce in the world, such as unjust and unnecessary wars, uprisings, and all that leads to murders, fires, and public destruction, for all these things can never be excused, except when they serve to avoid greater evils.

It remains, then, only to say something about justice, which is the soul of generosity. In the past this was the occupation of heroes: to punish the wicked and to protect the innocent. And what is recognized as unjust will never pass as generous.

But the principle of justice is the good of society, or more precisely, the general good, for we are all part of the universal republic of which God is the monarch, and the great law established in this republic is to procure as much good as we can for the world. This is certain, supposing there is a providence that governs all things, even though the springs of the mechanism are still hidden from our eyes. It is necessary, therefore, to assume that the more good a man has done, or at least tried to do with all his power (for God, who knows intentions, takes a genuine volition for the effect itself), the more happy he will be; and if he has done or even wanted to do great evils, he will receive equally great punishments as a result.

Faith is not needed to know this great maxim; it is enough to have common sense, for since in a complete or perfect body, such as, for example, a plant or an animal, there is a marvelous structure that demands that the author of nature has concerned himself with it and regulated the least of its parts, by all the more reason, the greatest and most perfect of all bodies, which is the universe, and the most noble parts of the universe, which are souls, will not fail to be well ordered, although this order might not be manifest to us, as long as we can envision only a part of it--just as seeing the pieces or fragments of some broken crystals of rock or of some disassembled artificial or natural machine, considered apart from and outside of their whole, does not allow us to know the regular shape or design of the entire body.

We are not born, therefore, for ourselves but for the good of society, just as parts are for the whole, and we must consider ourselves as only instruments of God, albeit living and free instruments, capable of agreeing with him according to our choice. If we fail to do so, we are like monstrosities and our vices are like diseases in nature, and without a doubt we are punished for them, so that the order of things may be redressed, just as we see that diseases weaken and that monstrosities are more imperfect.

From this we can judge that the principles of generosity are the same as those of justice or piety, whereas self-interest and self-love, when it is badly regulated, are the principles of cowardice. For, as I said at the outset, generosity leads us to the author of our kind or being, that is, God, insofar as we are capable of imitating him. We must act, therefore, in conformity with the nature of God (who himself is the good of all creatures); we must follow his intention, which commands us to procure the common good, insofar as it depends on us, since charity and justice consist only in this. We must respect the dignity of our nature, whose excellence consists in the perfection of the mind, or in the highest virtue. We must partake in the happiness of those around us, as in our own, seeking neither our pleasure nor our interest in what is contrary to the common happiness; and finally, we must consider what the public wants from us and what we ourselves would want if we were to occupy the place of others, for this is like the voice of God and the mark of vocation.

But if we scorn these great reasons of the public good for which we are made, by seeking our own advantage, particularly at the risk even of public misery, we could not be generous, whatever profession we might make of pursuing glory alone in our actions, and we could not even be happy, whatever success our ventures might have, for the laws of the universe are inviolable, and we must take it as demonstrated that there is no crime that will not be punished in proportion to the evils it has caused or which we must judge it could cause.