Paradoxical Freedom

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By

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

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INTRODUCTION

IS MAN THE MASTER OF HIS DESTINY?

When the opening bars of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony sound, one is overwhelmed by the agonizing feeling that it is “fate knocking at the door”, to use the composer's own words. In another masterful work bequeathed to humanity, one of Gauguin's many paintings depicting Tahitian women, we can read a triple question that the painter inscribed in order to better underline the urgency of his quest: “Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?” This, in truth, poses the very problem of the “human condition”: what can man do in the face of his destiny? “To be or not to be?” This is how Shakespeare put the terrible question.

The message that the artist sends to our sensitivity, the philosopher puts it in terms that appeal to our understanding: “Is man master of his destiny?” Mastery and destiny are two opposing terms that imply the contradiction of freedom and necessity. Hence the paradox if we consider the possibility for man to control his destiny: in other words, to control the unmanageable. As we can see, the problem posed is that of freedom. And the question that follows is whether one can be both free and determined. We are thus led to wonder whether human destiny proceeds from chance, from absolute determinism, from any predestination or even from fatalism.

Fatalism, from the Latin *fatum*, literally “what is said”, past participle substantivized of the verb deponent *fari*, to say, to speak, the root of which is found in *in-fans*, which does not speak yet, any child. So, if we consider the word in its etymological sense, it appears that the future is irremediably registered in the great book of fate. The fatalistic attitude is based on very simple observations. I did not choose to be born, nor to be born as I was born, with such chromosomes, such physical and intellectual dispositions, in such a family, such country, such social class, at such a time (see Job who cursed the day of his birth, wishing never to be born).

This conception is undoubtedly at the center of religion and beliefs. It can be predestination: “It is impossible for men to add a single cubit to their height”, says the Gospel, or even the *mektoub* which dominates Muslim beliefs: “it is written!” So, in spite of himself, whatever he does, Oedi-

pus will kill his father and marry his mother. It follows that according to fatalism, human intelligence and will are incapable of controlling the course of events and that consequently, the destiny of man, collective or individual, is already fixed, whatever may be attempted. This is why the philosophical fatalism, that of the Stoics, is based on a continuous chain of causes that man cannot modify, on the affirmation that the most different causes produce the same effects: that is, to speak in Kantian terms, the reign of absolute or unconditional and irrational necessity.

Under these conditions, chance, the character of that which does not correspond to any principle of determination, to any known cause, approaches an absolute or arbitrary necessity, that of *fatum*. Chance is indeed one of the elements of destiny. If there was no chance, "historical form of contingency" according to Le Senne, life would be as tedious as playing cards without it. But since there is chance, it may be that it takes the form of an accident, such as death or a broken leg, and thus it decides the destiny of man. Everything is free perhaps, everything is both given and imposed on the lottery of the universe, whether it is bad or good. In this case, as Epicureanism advocates, would it not be wise to let ourselves be carried away by the currents, without resistance and without false pride, while enjoying all the sweets that pass? If there is nothing we can do against our destiny, we had better know it.

But if man cannot fully control his destiny, it is not simply due to a series of accidents which befall him. The manifestations of chance, of course, are not inexistent. However, as Claude Bernard says, "when a phenomenon appears, it is because there is a determining condition for this manifestation of the phenomenon" (*Principles of Experimental Medicine*). By this, Claude Bernard gives to the word determinism, whose meaning was hitherto vague and confused, its precise epistemological meaning. It is not all by chance, and, moreover, man is subject to determinations which influence his destiny.

As a living being and as an organism, man is subject to a network of laws and causalities of a physical, physico-chemical and biological type. A certain number of determinations are imposed on him: the development of the embryo, the specific structure of the human body, growth and its stages, the functioning of organs and their disorders, aging and death. And, as Bergson explains in *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, the necessity, the inevitability of this determinism imposes itself on the intelligence, provokes various psychological reactions, even motivates metaphysical opinions or compensatory beliefs.

Added to this are hereditary data: every man, at birth, is endowed with hereditary equipment called the genetic code. Gender, ethnicity, and many family morphological factors are such data, as are certain pathogenic factors such as hemophilia.

In addition, one distinguishes the congenital data, determinations which extend from the fundamental characteristics of the temperament, while passing by the various manifestations or sequelae of fetal suffering, to the diseases of the parents (alcoholism, syphilis).

From birth, each individual has a certain number of well-determined innate automatisms, reflexes or instincts, which decide for him, so well that we could say of the unconscious, personal or collective, that it was a destiny. We immediately see the consequence for the question of freedom: does man have the possibility of choosing freely? No, Marx tells us: “It is not consciousness that determines life, it is life that determines consciousness”. We can therefore think that the choice is oriented by the contents of consciousness (images, models, ideas) which are brought to us by the socio-cultural context. A choice ultimately testifies more to a culture, a history, the state of a society, than a conscience. Psychology teaches us that the historical conditions of child and adolescent development shape the types of learned reactions and affective habits. According to psychoanalysis, it is the way in which we have experienced the situations of our past that determines most of our reactions, of our decisions, (of our character, Le Senne would say), even of what we take for our will.

Thus, the course of our individual life is a veritable fabric of complex causalities which, enclosing the conscious ego on all sides, lead us to think that freedom is only a subjective illusion. If we stick to these determinations, we make our existence a kind of necessity which, after the fact, appears again as a fatality (*fatum*).

But if absolute necessity reigns, man can only resign himself to submitting to his fate. And in this case, like Leibniz's analysis in the preface to his *Theodicy*, man is prone to two harmful attitudes. Either what he calls the *fatum stoicum*, according to which the refusal of fate has no other effect than to make us suffer it as an evil, or the *fatum mahumetanum*, which only engenders inaction “because if the future is necessary, what must happen will happen, whatever I do”. Now if fatalism, as we can see, is harmful for practice, it is ruinous for morality: it annihilates freedom and takes away all meaning from conduct. To refute this fallacy, and therefore condemn fatalism, Leibniz reasons absurdly: “I could say: if it is written in the archives of the Fates that the poison will now kill me, or harm me, it will happen, when I did not take this drink, and, consequently, I could

follow my inclination with impunity, however pernicious it may be". The fault of the fallacy is to say "that the event happens whatever we do; it will happen because we have done what leads to it, and if the event is written, the cause which will make it happen is written also". Finally, concludes Leibniz, "the connection of causes and effects, far from causing an unbearable fatality, rather provides a means of lifting it" (*Theodicy*, § 55). We can therefore see that if the notion of fatality overwhelms us, that of causality frees us.

So, paradoxically, it is through determinism that man can make himself master of his destiny. Indeed, if the laws of nature are immutable, their knowledge gives us power over it. And this is what man can and must base his will on. In this way, freedom, an abstract notion, will pass into the realm of facts: whenever man has the possibility of foreseeing the future, he must derive positive reasons for acting from it. For it is the knowledge of the conditions that makes us master of the event, since it suffices to change it, to modify some of these conditions, as the situation requires. In this way, turning the famous Baconian principle upside down, one would be slow to say that one obeys nature only to better control it. But make no mistake, forecasting is not prediction. While prediction chains us, prediction sets us free. Thus, the doctor who has established a diagnosis makes a prognosis. Now all disease, as we know, is a system of conditions; it is therefore sufficient for him to know the means of medicine, pharmacopoeia and surgery to be able to modify it as appropriate. To use Kantian terminology, it is no longer a question here of absolute or unconditional necessity as in the *fatum*, but of a hypothetical or conditional necessity. Knowledge becomes power and effective mastery of our destiny requires determinism.

But through what mediums can man achieve this much desired freedom? He must first understand that freedom emanates from his very personality. And it is according to the meaning that he will give to it, according to the direction that he will give it, that he will be able or not to choose the paths of his destiny.

The saint is precisely the one who leads an authentic life, who causes his truth to be transformed into life; he fully assumes his existence in a freedom that fulfills his person. We have often spoken of the faith of atheists, atheism and the weak vitality of believers. But how can we forget the tearing apart of man between the satanic influence which incites blasphemy, and the divine power, which, in the depths of consciousness, utters the fundamental refusal of Promethean man? It is indeed through holiness and faith that freedom and existence are reconciled. For in this very holiness,

man is tempted to invent his way and replace the will of God with his own will. It is the subtle ruse of what Fenelon called the *homo mendax*: "We want God to want what we want, so that we want our own will in his" (*Spiritual Letters*).

We can see here the importance that man's will assumes: "The true god appeared to me, and I named him will" writes Alain in his *Propos of May 25, 1921* (*Vigils of the Spirit*). The will appears in fact to be, by definition, the very affirmation of human freedom: if an act is determined, this excludes any notion of freedom, and therefore of will. Consequently, we do not see what the will would consist of if it is not a possibility to decide freely.

The freedom of the "subject" is implied in the voluntary act because this one is neither a thoughtless impulse, nor an automatism, nor a blind instinct, but a typically human possibility. The voluntary act indeed implies perseverance, reflection and the value of the goal, the transcendence of the present and of the Self. It is a unity of the Self, a desire to be, it requires first of all an available energy. It manifests itself at the level of the aims of the ego. On the one hand, it contributes to a confidence in the future, which implies an awareness of oneself, the possibility of compensating for a failure or an inferiority in a sector, the development of new habits, and, consequently, strengthening assertiveness. On the other hand, it proceeds from the revelation of the ideal goal, that is to say of a desire to be, of a promise of self-realization. Will is also manifested at the level of control and coordination: it arises from self-control, from "unwillingness", from the struggle against passions and passionate habits.

Ultimately, mastery of a destiny is halfway between passive adherence to ego and instant impulses, and active adherence to human ideals. Either man enjoys the absence of any external constraint, wants to satisfy his impulses, but then confuses will and desire. Either he devotes himself to learning self-control, but, as Descartes explains in his fourth *Metaphysical Meditation*, this freedom of indifference is the lowest degree of freedom. Either he considers indifference as the free being par excellence: this is the position adopted by Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. In availability, the man "tries" the action, without accepting the principles: it is "the free act", the murder committed voluntarily by Lafcadio in *The Cellars of the Vatican* by André Gide; it is Kirilov's suicide, analyzed by Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. In both cases, man acts to prove that his will is not determined, that he is capable of transcending *will* into *active will*. In fact, while the will acts *before* the determined representation of an end to be attained, the active will is a motive clearly conceived in the course of its

own life to modify it. lt can also be the intoxication of freedom-for-nothing that we find in *The Flies* by Sartre.

We could also evoke free will where the free being feels his power of choice; the re-creation of values allows him to personally discover universal ideals, but his freedom seems to fly away, at the same time as he acts for the ideals he defends and the principles he has accepted. Finally, is it not in freedom seen as a choice that man most asserts his will and becomes in a way the "master of the world" (Faustian conception which presided over the destinies of the West, and Nietzschean conception later, through the will to power?). Man then defines what he calls beautiful, true or just. He creates values and lives his creative power. This is the level of aesthetic creation.

Art is creation, as René Huygue explains to us in *Les Puissances de l'image, "a review of a psychology of art"*, the artist acting on the material *creates* something new, it is a fact. He becomes a demiurge and thus competes with the Creator. One will object that the artist devalues reality, that he is subject to history. However, it escapes it because he goes beyond it, transfigures it and recreates it. Through art, man fights against the inexorable flight of time: by *representing*, by fixing a landscape, an event, even by completely evading the contingencies of time, as Proust achieves by the process of affective memory, the man gains control over his destiny. Also, Malraux, at the end of *The Artistic Creation*, comes to a metaphysical conclusion: "The obscure determination of men to recreate the world is not in vain, because nothing becomes presence again beyond death, except recreated forms ... Humanism is not to say: "What I did, no animal would have done", it is to say: "I refused what the beast in me wanted, and became a man without the recourse of the gods "." As we can see, the entire history of art is in fact that of deliverance. Because, as Malraux explains in *The Imaginary Museum*, history attempts to transform destiny into consciousness, and the art of transforming it into freedom. As soon as he devotes himself to artistic creation, man begins, and fate ends, because "art is an anti-fate." (Malraux, *Psychology of Art*).

It is therefore not on contingency that we must base faith in our freedom. If the world were completely left to chance, if there was contingency in the laws of nature, human action would become a free bet and freedom would be a futile illusion. Human reason rejects chance as fatality. Founding the will of man on the constancy of laws, determinism truly exorcises fatalism and thereby affirms the effectiveness of human action which bears witness to our freedom.

If we consider action no longer in the domain of current practice, faith or art, but in the moral domain, the notion of freedom acquires its highest significance and the destiny of man. makes sense. According to Sartre, man is responsible for his destiny. Kant goes further; it is because man is responsible for his destiny that, at the same time, he is master of his destiny. It is the famous formula: “You must, therefore you can.”

Every man receives at his birth a skein of wool, and it is up to him to weave it in his own way: it is the dignity of man to transform his fate into his destiny.

PART ONE

THE PROBLEMS OF FREEDOM

CHAPTER ONE

HOW IS THE CHOICE POSSIBLE?

"Either ... or else": Kierkegaard suffered from choice. The choice is the "Alternative", it is the cruel dilemma. Choice, as the power and freedom to decide, signifies the absolute moment of freedom, that of suffering. Suffering from the paradox, because to choose is to renounce something, to choose is at the same time not to choose. The suffering of freedom is that of an inability to choose whatever is possible. To choose is to feel both incapable of choosing and obliged to choose. To choose is to suffer from a double impossibility: the impossibility of choosing and the impossibility of not choosing. The choice poses to me the problem of its possibility: how is the choice possible? That is to say at the same time: how did the one who chose get there? why did he decide? and: how to find the power to choose, when to choose is to give up?

If the choice strikes me as painful, it's hard for me to choose. Choosing is not hesitating between buying two or three kilos of potatoes for the evening. No, to choose is to measure the consequences of your choice, it is to be afraid. Afraid of making the wrong choice, afraid of making a mistake.

When I choose, I am in the same situation as this chimpanzee, who has been taught to distinguish a sound coming from the right and a sound coming from the left, who is used to showing that he can distinguish between the two types of sound by pressing a pedal (the one on the right, or on the left, as the case may be) and which, when the two sounds have been brought together until they coincide, goes crazy. My pain in choosing is that of an animal afraid of making a mistake. But the comparison stops there. Because if the animal goes "crazy", humans know they can avoid mistakes. If he's afraid of committing it, he is *willing to choose*. But where does he assume in himself this possibility of knowing how to choose? Could it be that there is a skill of choice, something like a technique of freedom?

It is significant that the famous passage from Descartes's *Meditation Fourth*, where it is a question of freedom of indifference, is precisely inserted in the problematic "The true and the false". The reason of it is that

choice is taking action knowingly. Choice, as a thoughtful action, needs a firm foundation to avoid error.

But if my understanding is certainly finished, it is perfectly healthy: the understanding in Descartes is always innocent. It only offers its representations to the decisions of my free will. Since "by the understanding alone I neither assure nor deny anything but I only conceive the ideas of things ... one can say that there is never any error in him." It is the will, as the "power to elect", that takes responsibility. But its nature is not in itself flawed. So where does the error in the choice come from? Not from the nature of my wanting, but from the misuse I make of it: it takes the responsibility of affirming a term of the alternative without having completely clarified and distinguished it. The fear of making a mistake in my choice was therefore the fear of misusing my will.

If it is hard to choose, it is because I lack will practice. It is because my subjectivity is a hindrance. Let us now make the hypothesis of an objective difficulty, that is to say which takes its source not in a possible error or failure on my part, but in an equality of reasons to choose both in the first and the second term of the alternative.

Equality of reasons, balance of values, of forces: it seems that I am in the presence of the formidable paradox. Thus, the paradoxical injunction to choose between the truth and the falsity of the proposition "I lie" results in an impossibility of choosing: now, the proposition is true, and I lie when I say "I lie", therefore I am not lying, therefore the proposition is false; but the proposition is false, and I am not lying when I say "I lie", therefore I lie, therefore the proposition is true. If I say it is true, I say it is false, and vice versa. The paradox puts the individual in an untenable position. The paradoxical injunction, as an extreme case of the inability to choose, brings up the initial problem of "how is choice possible?" in all its acuteness: paradox and paralysis.

In the *Tale of the Woman of Bath*, Chaucer tells the story of one of King Arthur's knights who, having met a young girl on his way, rapes her, and sees her fate handed over by the King to the queen's hands: either he will be condemned to death, or his life will be saved if he answers the question: "what do most women want?" a year and a day from then. When the day comes, he has not found the answer, but he meets a "witch as ugly as you can imagine." She tells him that she knows the answer to his question, but will only reveal it to him if he accedes to whatever desire she expresses; otherwise, he knows he will be beheaded. He chooses to have the witch's answer. It satisfied the people of the court: "most women want to exercise sovereignty over their husbands and act as they please in love."

The problem is, the witch asks the knight to marry her. Unable to overcome his loathing, he ends up getting one last choice: either he accepts her ugly and loyal, or she turns into a beautiful, but unfaithful maiden. Finally, *he chooses neither of the two solutions and rejects the very principle of choice*. At this time, not only will the witch turn into a beautiful young girl, but she will also be the most faithful of wives.

This tale, in addition to being interesting at the level of female psychology, is of significant implicit richness. It tells me that the woman will continue to exercise the same power over me, until the moment when I no longer feel *obliged to choose*, and thus put myself in more and more difficult situations, but where I will eventually reject the very necessity of choice. As long as the woman succeeds in imposing a double bind on me, in forcing me to choose, I will remain caught in *the illusion of possible choice*.

Condemned if I do this, condemned if I do that: there is no real alternative where one "should" choose the "right" solution. It is the very assumption that a choice is possible and that one must make it that is an illusion. Pushed to the limit, I realized that I could only get out of my untenable position by *causing a change in the system* of choice.

By dint of wanting to be able to choose, I made the choice of indifference to choice. While choice produces differences in value, indifference puts me in a state of neutrality in the face of values. As Descartes analyzes in his *Fourth Meditation*, "this indifference which I feel when I am not carried away to one side rather than another by the weight of no reason, is the lowest degree of freedom". I was looking for freedom in choice, but freedom to be determined without reasons is nonsense. Actually, we should not delude ourselves. We are all the freer as we have more reasons to make up our minds. The will can be both free and determined by reasons because the reasons which determine it derive their necessity from the presupposition of an end to be achieved, and therefore do not constitute a mechanical determinism in the manner of a previous causality. In other words, freedom determines itself, modifying external reality, but also the acting subject. There is not really a situation of indifference: I have made the *choice* of indifference.

As we can see, to choose is ultimately to choose either choice or indifference. It is from this choice that the mode of relationship between two attitudes becomes clear: aesthetics and ethics. As Kierkegaard sees it, the alternative is between choosing and failing to choose. For the ethicist, aesthetics is not evil, but indifference. Through choice, new qualifiers take on meaning: ethical, moral and immoral, amoral. Ethics means the first

and absolute choice of the good; moral conduct and immoral conduct are to be referred to goods and ills determined according to ethical standards; amorality means indifference proper to aesthetics. It is even only then that aesthetics can receive this qualification of indifference: no conduct is worth more or less than another. Before the ethical choice, in the spontaneity of the sensitive and imaginative life, the aesthetics is absolute in the sense that it is alone; it is in another sense that ethics is absolute; it is through self-choice that institutes another form of existence. With choice, it is about the modality of the real, while for aesthetics, it is about the modality of the possible. And while the possibility is multiple, reality constitutes the unity of ethics in the assertion of oneself as a being of will.

"And first, who do you want to be?": In his *Discourses* (III, XXIII), Epictetus introduces us to the heart of the question of philosophy. The very fact that this question is possible indicates the possibility of a *primary choice*. *Prohairesis* means choosing a profession. It is by the same act that I consciously choose this or that kind of life, as well as this or that profession: "First tell me who you want to be, then do what you have to do accordingly ...". These sovereign words undoubtedly ring a strange ring in an age which has almost completely unlearned the sovereign power of the freedom to want. The first of all the choices, the one with which the *Discourses* as well as the *Manual* opens, is the one which distinguishes between: *things which depend on us and those which do not depend on us*. The problem of choice is, as we sensed from the start, inseparable from the question of human power.

If the choice had appeared to us in all its impossibility, it is surely because it is fundamentally a choice of oneself. And this choice, as a power of beginning, is not it freedom itself? Freedom is indeed the vanishing point where power and will, the time of a spark, coincide. To want is the only thing in the world which is entirely in my power, which is, as Epictetus would have said, radically *εφημιν*. The exercise of the will is the operation of choice which, if it implies a prior *possibility*, does not suppose any *potentiality*, any power distinct from the will itself. The choice, as good will, is the divine in man, because like God, it implies the essence and the existence of the will confused: it is both the possibility of positing and the effective position, position, not of something, but of oneself as wanting something else. Whoever claims to have no "strength" to choose, that one does not want to choose: this bad reason is only a pretext and a sophism to disguise as weakness the vicious circle of his ill will.

So, it strikes me that the choice is to want. And wanting, not being conditioned by any *Posse*, has no conditions of possibility. This is what I

did not recognize when I was paralyzed by the paradoxical impossibility of choosing. To pose the problem of *being able* to choose is to repress the solution of *wanting* to choose.

To this somewhat aristocratic aestheticism of the power to do, by which men are unequalized and differentiated, let us oppose, in the manner of Jankélévitch, in *Le Je-ne-sais-quoi et le Presque-rien*, "the ecumenical ethism of wanting ". The problem of choice, being of the nature of the impossible-necessary, seemed insoluble. How difficult to be free! Freedom is indeed a burden, yet it is at the same time a problem: a responsibility (nobility obliges), but precisely insofar as it is my infinite power.

CHAPTER TWO

IS GENEROSITY JUST A VIRTUE OR DOES IT SHED LIGHT ON FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOM?

Generosity is not for everyone. At first glance, it takes on the traits of sought-after value, much more than it appears as an innate property, a quality among qualities. Generosity is not something you would immediately and obviously have. The problem of generosity is therefore resolved in the formulation of its paradoxical elements: both susceptible to being sought by those who do not have it, and possessed by those who do not have to seek it, it takes the double meaning of the word "virtue". The alternative is as follows: either virtue takes on the – metaphysical – meaning of a part of a being; or virtue signifies – from a moral point of view this time – quality no longer as an ontological property but as a desired good. How can generosity be a simple virtue while being based on the question of its own possibility?

Before asking what makes generosity possible, it is first necessary to clarify the concept itself, to understand it as it is simply a virtue. This is the subject of article 153 of the *Treatise on the passions of the soul*, where we find "what generosity consists of" according to Descartes. Generosity is analyzed and defined as this knowledge that man has of his nature which is "the free disposal of his will" and as this feeling of "never lacking will". To tell the truth, the relation of generosity to will – which appears in what precedes – is essential to define the nature of generosity itself: with the notion of generosity, it appears in fact that the fact of having the will and that of wanting to have it merge into one and the same virtue. As Descartes explains at the end of article 153, concluding with this definition of generosity: "that which is perfectly following virtue".

It is therefore a relationship to oneself that first accords with the notion of generosity. If there is a balance of power in the issue of generosity, it puts man at odds with himself, and not with others. This empire over oneself, this "absolute power over one's passions" as explained in Article 50, and to which any soul, however weak it may be, can achieve, constitutes

the condition of a relationship with others free from all hatred, any desire or even any dependence. The virtue of generosity is therefore expressed as follows: to be generous is first of all not to need others in order to esteem oneself, it is also to desire only the goods that we can acquire by ourselves, but it is finally, and above all, to acquire them, and not only to desire them. The generous man is thus truly a substance, a being capable of subsisting on his own (art. 159). He does not value his "qualities" (in the Pascalian sense); on the contrary, its independence vis-à-vis all qualities is affirmed as the very virtue of generosity, and this, not by impudence, but by the awareness that the value of all goods depends on the estimate that we do, the importance we give them.

Therefore, the fact that generosity is simply a virtue means that any value necessarily implied in a generous act, and only allowing esteem, is still essentially of the order of a fact. "All the same", because the axiological determination of a value prohibits it, at first glance, from any assimilation to the ascertained, the descriptive (the normative indeed seems to be the exact opposite); "Essentially", because the factual aspect of value is, quite exactly, virtue itself. This is understandable if one realizes the close correlation that exists between the concept of virtue and that of "good will", an abstract mixture that reveals the nature of generosity in all its reality. If there is an ethic of generosity, it is fundamentally because it can be made a metaphysics beforehand. What does (what one might tentatively call) this metaphysics of the infinite consist of, this is what the approach of generosity as simple virtue cannot reveal to us. For that, it would be necessary to seek the conditions of possibility.

What is the basis for the possibility of generosity? This is undoubtedly the essential problem underlying the key notion of "virtue", that is to say the problem of the "passage", of the relation between the "ethical" virtue of generosity and the "ontological" virtue of generosity. What makes it possible to understand the articulation of the moral and the ontological is undoubtedly a metaphysical principle. If we are to believe the teaching of Plato, in whom ethics and metaphysics are always closely linked, it will clearly appear that this symbiosis provides what we could determine as the principle of intelligibility of generosity. As the "Allegory of the Cave" in 504d of the *Republic* says: "There is something greater than justice and virtue". It is therefore necessary to determine more precisely this ultimate principle, this condition of possibility of generosity. Plato's text refers to a leitmotif of Platonic thought, but it must be understood that here this reference is absolute or, if you prefer, this text is canonical. It is about the Idea of Good, "the one from whom justice and other virtues borrow their utility

and their benefits." And we must not delude ourselves: what is right and what is good can perfectly possess, determine someone while the latter will remain ignorant of what makes something right or good. This means that the generous soul is unconscious of the ultimate principle which determines it, an "hypothetical principle", a universal principle which no longer supposes conditions, and which is determining for the generous being, not by the knowledge of it the latter may have, but by the desire that he necessarily has.

This desire for Good as the ultimate metaphysical principle of generosity, however, leaves aside the question of its own condition of possibility. The desire for Good does not explain everything. We still have to discern what makes it possible. Can one imagine a spontaneous desire within the framework of this problematic of generosity, and in this case, does not the virtue of generosity have implications at the level of the notion of freedom? Such is the preoccupation of Plotinus (*Ennead*, VI, 7; XIX, 8) in his reflection on the relation of Good to desire. Plotinus asks the question: "Shall we define good by the desirable?" The problem is not to know for the moment how the consciousness of the ultimate principle is profiled on the horizon of the notion of "end", but it is already a question here, if not of the definition of the generous soul by the desire for Good, in any case – and this is more fundamental – the question of why the generous soul desires. If Good determines desire, if the end is the meaning of spontaneity, can it then be that generosity is the necessity of a determination of the soul to do Good, and not the freedom to affirm the soul wanting to do it? As we can see, the issue of generosity sheds a fundamental light on the notion of freedom. The paradox is that freedom, according to Plotinus, is not strictly speaking the act of the generous soul, but of Good itself. To deny freedom to the One, to Good – because it is inferior to it – would be to impose necessity on it. In us, that is to say, more exactly, in those who have the privilege of having a generous soul, the principle of freedom is isolation by a recollection in ourselves, outside the multiplicity of things; but Good is absolutely solitary; it therefore has absolute freedom.

This radical freedom gives rise to a questioning of the status of generosity, and of the generous soul in particular, and to a reflection on the possibility of defining the latter with regard to its opposite: what would be (in this case) a soul not generous? Can it be that generosity is at the same time a virtue and something not "possessed" but desired, that generosity is a virtue and that at the same time it is absent, wanted, but not necessarily acquired? It is this tension between the will to do good and the fact of doing it, even more essential to generosity, that prompts us to think of the

latter as something to be acquired. As Descartes says in his *Treatise on Passions*, the real problem is that of knowing "how generosity can be acquired" (article 161).

To do this, it is necessary to seek the means likely to lead to this acquisition. They are two in number: free will, and the faculty of resolution, inseparable from free will, since its purpose is "to use it well", as Descartes says. Free will, as the faculty of realizing the freedom of Good (as we discovered it in Plotinus), appears in the form of possibility, which the resolution then actualizes. It is, in short, the consciousness that a generous soul has of itself. Free will confronts it with the possibility of its opposite, at the same time, i.e., ambition, selfishness, etc. So, it is the resolution and it alone – "a firm resolution"– that makes it possible to decide by opting for the good use of freedom, leaving aside at the same time the effects of a soul that is not generous. So, there needs to be a supplement to nature as we commonly meet it in order to constitute generosity in its full truth. It is thus clear that the possible defects present since the birth of a soul (not all are born equally noble and strong) are completely corrected only by "the right institution". We then understand Descartes' final consideration on generosity: "one can excite in oneself the passion and then acquire the virtue of generosity, which being like the key to all the other virtues and a general remedy against all disturbances of passions "(Article 161).

We see, through this formulation, the double meaning of the word "virtue" made apparent by the double determination of the concept of generosity: acquiring virtue forms a couple with the virtue of generosity. It is therefore no longer a question of asking whether generosity is simply a virtue, nor of seeking in the desire for Good or freedom, itself the condition for the possibility of generosity, but of seizing the uninterrupted movement which goes from the soul to generosity, from generosity to Good, finally from Good to the soul made virtuous by that very fact. Only this tension is important, which produces Good through generosity, and returns the soul to virtue. Whether it is a question of generosity or even, as it is said in Descartes' text, of "magnanimity", it is always a question of the soul, in its nobility or its grandeur, in its strength or in its quality. With these last two determinations, we find the initial primacy – analyzed from Article 153 of the *Treaty* – of the concept of "good will".

Finally, the issue of generosity does not oppose the notion of virtue and that of fundamental freedom, as if it were sending them back-to-back. To the traditional discrimination between the domain of morality and that of metaphysics, to the idea according to which virtue relates exclusively to ethics, morality, and freedom to ontology, metaphysics, is substituted