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Revista de cercetare și intervenție socială

ISSN: 1583-3410 (print), ISSN: 1584-5397 (electronic)

Selected by coverage in Social Sciences Citation Index, ISI databases

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Revista de cercetare și intervenție socială, 2017, vol. 59, pp. 261-276

The online version of this article can be found at:

www.rcis.ro, www.doaj.org and www.scopus.com

Published by:

Expert Projects Publishing House



On behalf of:

„Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University,

Department of Sociology and Social Work

and

Holt Romania Foundation

REVISTA DE CERCETARE SI INTERVENTIE SOCIALA

is indexed by ISI Thomson Reuters - Social Sciences Citation Index

(Sociology and Social Work Domains)



Positive Thinking as a Moral and Existential Virtue

Sandu FRUNZA¹

Abstract

Positive thinking is a self-preservation principle specific to human nature. It represents a form of affirming the freedom of man as an individual and social being. Starting from the analysis of human condition from the perspective of *Cogito*, as it is developed in Descartes' philosophy, we gather that thinking is associated to an existential dimension that assumes a permanent association of ethics with authenticity. From the perspective of personal development, positive thinking is both a characteristic that differentiates man from animals, and a quality of the human being that can be cultivated as a moral and existential virtue. It guides the human being toward exiting from crisis and towards living a happy and authentic life. It is in the individual's power to choose to enhance the power of positive thinking in order to feel fulfilled and to live a better lie.

Keywords: positive thinking, social dimension, interpersonal dimension, authentic life, virtue, practical philosophy, Descartes.

The human mind and the animal body

In today's symbolic consciousness, as it is at the beginning of every century, optimism and pessimism meet at the horizon of hope. On one hand, the post-modern man is a man with a pressing feeling of crisis. On the other hand, he knows that there is no other solution than searching for ways to get out of the crisis. Exiting the current crisis – if it actually exists- means primarily an open attitude in front of science and philosophy. Today, the two fields of human creativity seem to not merge anymore. Apparently, science stands face to face with technological development, and philosophy settles with a secondary place in the soul shaping of some individuals with a certain degree of initiation in the field of reflexivity. In actuality, science plays a decisive role in instrumentalizing our

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lives and obtaining a certain level of comfort and quality of life. However, at the same time, it is situated on a shared path with philosophy and with all the efforts made for the personal development of the beings that are in search of a better life, more adequate in rapport to human condition. It is no coincidence that philosophy is situated in the academic area of human sciences. Philosophy, by using the data of philosophical traditions, reveals aspect of the postmodern man's condition. It emphasizes the complexity of the human condition structured through the interference of corporal dimension, social dimension, interpersonal dimension, spiritual dimension. Alongside these, for some human beings is added the religious dimension of a deep feeling of transcendence, acknowledged as part of religious practice. All these dimensions are brought by philosophy in the personal horizon, in the returning to self of the human being (Frunza, 2017a: 19; Frunza, 2017b: 284).

Thus, we find ourselves today near an ideal inspired by realizing a synthesis between knowledge and living in which – although we gave up on the integrative or totalizing spirit of a past philosophy – is formed a field of communication in which knowledge and reflexivity, connectivity and living interfere and support each other.

Because he is a thinking being, man is also a reflexive being, capable of reflection and scientific knowledge. Despite personally being the follower of a practical philosophy, applied to individual situations, I would like to remind Descartes' attitude toward science. The philosopher was so influenced by the scientific data of his time, that he had an ideal of constituting an integrative philosophy, in which all these data would be found. Descartes starts from the premise of the existence of two types of substances: the mental or spiritual substance and the physical or material substance. They are subjected to a superior order, which generates and imprints the structure and rhythm of the entire existence. In the case of the human being, the first substance is found in form of mind and soul (for Descartes the two terms designate the same human reality), and the second substance is found as a corporal reality. The presence in man of these two substances means that the human being is conceived as a dual form of the mind (of the soul) and the body. The two substances interfere without mistaking one for the other.

In this context, on one of his important routes of developing his philosophical preoccupations, Descartes ends up explaining the entire functioning of existence through the perspective of mechanics' principles. Thus, he describes a heavenly mechanic, he describes the principles of mechanics as they can be found in the functioning of the human body, but he also explains the entire nature and most of all, the animal world as a mechanism that functions according to an impulse instilled in them. Andrew Pessin signals the fact that one of the strangest explanations, from the perspective of the contemporary man, is the one concerning the functioning of animals as an automaton. He finds that for Descartes animals are

rather automatic constructions, because they lack reason entirely, feelings, sensations. Just as in the case of human beings body functions can be explained mechanically, the functions and behavior of animals can also be explained in a purely mechanical manner. From this type of interpretations, Pessin deduces that we are in front of a philosophy in which on one part there is a dualism present, and on another part a form of mechanicism. The dualistic dimension reveals that the world is composed from two types of substances: some mental – such as the mind or soul, and some of a physical nature – such as the other things made of matter. When we speak about the human being we notice that it is made from both types of substances: mental and physical. When we analyze the world of nature and animals it is revealed that they are made entirely of physical substances. The fact that man is the only thinking being gives it more than the statute of a special being, self aware and capable of situating in the center of the entire creation. Unlike animals, man is a thinking being. It can guide his way of thinking. While animals react purely mechanical, man can practice a positive thinking as a base for shaping his entire existence. Since it is the only being endowed with mind or soul, only in relation to it we can establish criteria, demands and moral behaviors. From the perspective of positive thinking, this association between the moral dimension and the thinking dimension is important, as they reunite in an existential rapport of great complexity. The ethical dimension is present only in beings that possess thinking especially since thinking have an existential character. Only the thinking being can make choices of a moral type. We cannot impose demands of a moral nature to animals because they are not in the position to make choices of any kind, therefore they cannot choose between options of actions that could be considered moral. To understand the ethical signification the interpreter gives to this Cartesian vision, we can bring into discussion both the critics from philosophers that in the Aristotelian tradition are used to differentiate between different forms of the souls, including a form of the animal's soul, and the critics that Descartes' vision can arouse from animal lovers. Of course, we can diminish in some sense the philosophers' critics. To do so we can address the opinions of interpreters that reveal that we must take into consideration that Descartes' analysis is more nuanced. First of all, it has the role of revealing the different qualities of man in rapport to animals, to which we can attribute human qualities only in a metaphorical form. Also, we can reduce the impact of theological critics by revealing that „the Christian tradition generally holds that Christ died to redeem humans, not animals” (Bracken, 2002: 112). At the same time, we must keep in mind findings such as the one of Andrew Pessin that shows that if animals are purely mechanical creatures, if they do not have conscience, if they cannot have mental actions, means that it does not matter in any way how we treat them, how we exploit them, to what ends we use them. For instance, we can reach non ethical conclusions that can make us postulate that if animals cannot feel sufferance, it does not matter to what treatments we subject them. They are simply mechanical means through which we reach our goals (Pessin, 2015: 81-83).

Fortunately, today we have a system of judiciary regulation and an animal ethic so strongly developed in the Western world that such an attitude towards animals cannot be practiced anymore. Beyond the ethical and judiciary forms that ensure the animal protection, the mentality of postmodern man entails the self-recovery of the human being in harmony with the other beings and with nature. Thus, the issues of environment protection and particularly animal protection do not mean only caring for nature, they also focus on man. The ethical attitude towards animals is one that has in its center both the human being and animals, in a complex relational system (Regan, 1983; Islam & Islam, 2015: 96; McDonough, 2016: 3). However, what gives man specificity is that while animals have only a body that acts mechanically, in the case of human beings the animal body is accompanied by the human mind, capable of thinking and capable of cultivating positive thinking as a moral and existential virtue.

More so, the construction pattern of ethical concepts is tightly connected to the fact that animal lovers tend to extend behaviors and emotions considered to be typically human to animals. For instance, it is very hard to look into the bright eyes of a cat that focuses her mischievous look on you and say that she does not own a complex communication system, even if it is nonverbal language. In a world where we give non verbal communication and deciphering body language such an important place it is difficult to say that such a behavior is not tightly connected to a way of communication between man and animal that implies for an animal lover a special type of conscious activity. Also, I believe it is extremely difficult to convince the owner of such a candid cat that the tender gestures with which she surrounds him are not a form of communication or to refuse the idea that just as he loves his cat, the cat also loves its owner. Many animal owners told me behaviors and stories about their animals, which they felt as love gestures. More so, some of them, a few to be honest, claimed that only a very small number of human beings loved them as deeply as their pet. Without being the follower of an interpretation in Descartes' style, who saw animals as simple automatons, I am tributary to the scientific data I have at my disposal and based on them, I argue that no other being known so far is the owner of a conscience, does not have a soul in the way we speak about man as being a self aware being, a thinking being, a being made of body and soul. Although the registry of sensitivity is important from the point of view of positive thinking, we must accept that for Descartes thinking is just an attribute of the being that possesses mind (soul), and animals do not have such quality. It is one of the essential aspects that differentiate human nature from all other beings. This is why we speak of positive thinking only in relation to the human being. Besides, it has been said about Descartes that „a *reason* for his dualism may be found in his commitment to mechanistic explanation in physics, together with the perfectly creditable belief that human intelligence could never be accounted for on the available mechanistic models” (Wilson, 1978: 160). Thus, the discussion about the statute of automaton of animals is

important not only for understanding the mechanical function of nature, but mostly to understand the different way of functioning of the human being, made from both body and soul (mind).

One of the problems Andrew Pessin notices is that if we accept that animals have a conscience, in the sense they possess what Descartes called mind, then we attribute them with a soul. This means that we consider them to be beings that have an immortal soul, similar to the immortal soul of the human beings. He states that Descartes' philosophy leads to the idea that if the mind is different from the body, then the destruction of the body does not lead to the destruction of the soul. At the same time, since the mind has a non physical nature, means that is not made from small parts that can be decomposed, it remains whole, a totality that lives on after the body has been destroyed. As a consequence, if animals have a soul, we must also have a doctrine that explains us what happens with the soul of animals after their body is dead. All these entitle the commentator of Cartesian ideas to say that if Descartes is not right when he says that animals are an automaton, if animals have a soul, than "they will enjoy the same immortality as human beings do" (Pessin, 2015: 89). If we do not attribute them the quality of having a soul, animals are simply bodies subjected to a series of mechanical principles, they are formed from physical substances. In other words, "If animals have no minds in the sense in which human beings have minds, they cannot be anything else but matter in motion" (Copleston, 1994: 136). And with death, they enter a process of immobility, of decomposition and disappearance as a functional totality, as an automaton.

I believe the philosophical reflections in bioethics have already produced enough arguments for the necessity of promoting an animal ethic, so much so that is relevant beyond the existence or the non existence of soul in animals. But I did not wish to speak about the soul of animals here. And I do not intent to invoke any argument that might limit animal lovers the affection they might feel from their pets or from animals in general. However, I must assert that although we are no longer preoccupied with the discussions about the automaton, we do have a special attraction as postmodern men for the theories of technological singularity. These face us with a new threat, that could come because a series of mechanical creations of man, but endowed with forms of superior artificial intelligence, could win an autonomy in rapport to man. More so, man's existential anguish is born from the possibility that these man-made intelligences could become so independent that they reproduce themselves, becoming more gifted with qualities than men and even function as a perpetuum mobile, in a sort of never-ending existence. The whole ideal of perfection and immortality that man has cherished for his own being seems to be at the base of this new imaginative construction, with a scientific fundament, but especially wrapped with a very powerful ideology of estrangement of man from himself. I can only decipher the entire imaginary related to technological singularity from the perspective of a strong feeling of non-authenticity

lived by the postmodern man, a feeling of failure and crisis (Kwak, 2016: 41; Hosu, Frunza, 2013: 240). All these negative forms of human experiences are maintained by a negative thinking transformed into a form of popular ideology, accessible to the masses, always on demand and always powered by them. On one side, it brings fascination in front of the human capacity of creation, including the capacity of the creator to make a creation that surpasses the creator. On the other side, it brings fear in front of the possibility of man losing his privileged place in the Universe, the fear of losing his statute, fear of losing his authenticity (Frunza, 2017c: 6; Grad, Frunza, 2016: 326; Gangloff, 2015).

From the perspective of personal development preoccupations, the dualism of Cartesian philosophy differentiates man from animal because man possesses a mind that takes him out from the world of bodies that act mechanically into the world of animals. As a thinking being, man can choose to promote a positive thinking through which he can influence his world, and especially to keep under control his own body. In this sense, Descartes' dualism can be resignified and used as an invitation to exceed the mechanical vision of the world and assuming by man his double nature: mind and body. This way I propose to take in Cartesian dualism, which says something similar to what Gabriel Liiceanu stated when he explained to us how important it is to take the risk of thinking with your own mind (Liiceanu, 2016). It truly is a madness that could make you feel the madness of living, of living authentically in a world that seems to favor the superficial, kitsch, estrangement and most of all the forgetting of self by man. The human being can find itself again by acting in response to the demand of thinking with its own mind.

The interpreters of Cartesian philosophy have revealed that any explanation related to this philosophy can begin from his most known statement: *ego cogito, ergo sum*, that can be placed in an explanatory horizon that makes out of the human being a being that thinks and can think itself. Even more, in this existential formula, man rediscovers himself not only in relation to Divinity, that offers man a set of simple and clear ideas, but also in a process of self knowledge and auto positioning in existence. In this sense, Janet Broughton reveals the importance of the Cartesian formula in which that "self-knowledge is pivotal in the sense that it is foundational: my knowledge of my own existence and my own mental states provides me with indispensable premises from which I infer my knowledge of everything else" (Broughton, 2008: 180). Moral, knowledge and thinking are tightly related to one another in the process of assuming by the individual his own existence. Which in Descartes' case first of all means assuming your own reasoning.

Given the existential signification of thinking, if we would depart from the negative way of thinking that postmodern man's existential anguishes generates, we would easily see that the fears he lives in rapport to various aspects of his personal life, of his community or global life are actually an expression of the fear

of inauthenticity. These types of crises are tightly related to his personal life and to his desire to live in an authentic manner. All these fears and crises are lived by the postmodern man as a state of failure. He acts as if his entire evolution has ended in an error, a false existence, that ran out of his control, that he does not feel as his own. The search for authenticity – brought by personal development as a field of reflection and action – is an antidote used by the postmodern man against this overwhelming feeling of failure of his cultural and existential project that he embraced.

The fear of inauthentic keeps us captive in a collective negative thinking. To leave the ground of such an ideological influence, we can only appeal to a life philosophy in which we give each individual the power to assume a positive way of thinking. A friend caught my attention on a joke that says: “Of course I sometimes talk to myself! From time to time I need an expert’s advices” (Antonesei, 2017). The auto ironic and playful attitude from these statements can be partly adopted as a way of refusing a feeling of crisis, a tragic feeling of life, and partly as a decision to return to your own thinking, which could also mean a return to your own being. Assuming essential decisions regarding his own life can only be made by that individual. He can ask for support, can be helped, influenced, empowered by persons from the outside, but the decision of assuming a positive thinking must be a personal commitment. More so, it means a continuous accountability of a life based on knowledge and personal development.

One of the ways of individual cultivation of positive thinking that John C. Maxwell brings into discussion, one of the most important contemporary masters in personal development and leadership, is the desire to learn. Escaping the negativity brought by crisis and failure in the individual’s life means, among other things, changing your way of thinking. Aside from the fact that we proceed to a reorientation of thinking from the negativity of failure to the teachings that we can adopt after a failure, we must adopt at least three patterns of thinking: 1) to non reach a state of self sufficiency in which we would believe that everything is known to us, that we have nothing to learn and thus refusing the opening to learn and perfect us: “If you can maintain a beginner’s mind-set to the end, your thinking will keep changing and you will keep growing” (Maxwell, 2013: 129) ; 2) to have a positive mental attitude: “Maintaining a consistently positive mental attitude will be your greatest ally in growing and learning” (Maxwell, 2013: 130). 3) to demonstrate continuous creativity: “Creativity is the ability to free yourself from imaginary boundaries, to see new relationships, and to explore options so that you can accomplish more things of value” (Maxwell, 2013: 130). Therefore, positive thinking means knowledge, action and creativity all together. It is not a simple psychological reaction in rapport to the outside world; it is an effort of situating in existence and knowledge.

The big lesson of positive thinking is that of assuming your own thinking and freedom. Unlike animals, that react purely mechanically, as an automaton, man is

a free being, who due to the fact that he is a thinking being can reflect on the options he has in life and can make choices. Good things can occur especially on the basis of good and reception of positive energies that it can put into motion. One of the masters of positive thinking said: Make a supreme effort to put only positive thoughts in your memory bank. Don't let negative, self-deprecatory thoughts grow into mental monsters. Simply refuse to recall unpleasant events or situations (Schwartz, 2007: 74). It is an important step in assuming an effort to think life under the sign of a benefit choice for its own being and for the social and professional environment in which it develops.

On God, the pleasures of the soul and provisional morality

When one says that Descartes „has a broad commitment to the idea that to understand reality, we must understand and develop the powers of our minds” (Broughton, 2008: 194), one has to consider that Cartesian philosophy plans to be an integral system of knowledge. It is built according to the image that the philosopher depicts as the tree symbol. One speaks about a symbolism of authenticity built on superposing two structures of the Christian imaginary: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life.

Starting from such a symbolic scheme to interpret existence, Descartes wrote: “all Philosophy is like a tree, of which Metaphysics is the root, Physics the trunk, and all the other sciences the branches that grow out of this trunk, which are reduced to three principal, namely, Medicine, Mechanics, and Ethics. By the science of Morals, I understand the highest and most perfect which, presupposing an entire knowledge of the other sciences is the last degree of wisdom” (Descartes, 2000b: 6). It is not a coincidence that Descartes uses the biblical metaphor of the tree of knowledge to reveal the way he sees the structured horizon of science. On one side, knowledge has an objective predetermination, and on the other side it is structured by the human mind, by the inner universe. It is about a knowledge transcendence that self consciousness brings to the reality of life with the means of the mortal being. The one who makes knowledge possible and guarantees the truth of clear and distinct ideas in Descartes is God. False and error can appear in the sphere of science as a result of human action. By using a mental pattern specific for the biblical representation it is argued that man is the source of fault and error.

By accepting that the human intellect is the one subjected to error, the philosopher also explains us what is the source of the error: “as my will extends further than my intellect, I do not close it between the same borders, I expand it even over the things I do not understand; and because it is indifferent in this regard, it strays easily from what is true and good, and thus I am wrong and I sin” (Descartes, 1992: 278). Therefore, the human will makes the mistake of surpassing the limits

the intellect can reach and thus distancing itself from reality. This tendency of the intellect to self transcend through ignoring the limits that are imposed to it appears to us as some sort of breaking an access rule to reality through clear and simple ideas. The ambiguity brought by human will, can lead to creating a series of relations and launching some ideas that step away from reality. Such an attempt to change reality is perceived as a wandering of the intellect. It is born from human imperfection lies under the sign of an inadequacy to reality. The inadequacy in rapport to the given of human condition is revealed by Descartes in the matter of individuals' moral life too. Man cannot change moral order, which is why the most adequate thing is to integrate in it.

The necessity of a provisional morality is required by the imperfect character of the human being. Therefore, man cannot oppose to the existent order, rather he must position himself in harmony to it, change himself by directing his passions, desires, in a direction according to moral principles (Vizureanu, 2000: 63). Here are the rules of a temporary moral, inferred by Descartes in full consistency with his knowledge method: 1) "The first was to obey the laws and customs of my country, and to adhere to the religion in which God by His grace had me instructed from my childhood, and to govern myself in everything else according to the most moderate and least extreme opinions, being those commonly received among the *wisest* of those with whom I should have to live." 2) "My second maxim was to be as firm and resolute in my actions as I could, and to follow no less constantly the most doubtful opinions, once I had opted for them, than I would have if they had been the most certain ones." 3) "My third maxim was to endeavour always to master myself rather than fortune, to try to change my desires rather than to change the order of the world, and in general to settle for the belief that there is nothing entirely in our power except our thoughts." 4) "Finally, as a conclusion to this moral code, I decided to review the various occupations that men have in this life, in order to try to select the best one. Without wishing to pass judgment on the occupations of others, I came to the view that I could do no better than to continue in the one in which I found myself, that is to say, to devote my life to the cultivation of my reason and make such progress as I could in the knowledge of the truth following the method I had prescribed for myself" (Descartes, 1990: 21-24). Descartes suggests these rules that help the individual to not enter in a conflict with himself and his community, in view of a life lived in harmony in the community.

Of all the aspects Descartes considers to be simple rules that must be respected for a good life we notice: respect for religious tradition; obeying the laws and traditions of the country; adopting balanced opinions and following them consistently as soon as they have been chosen; focusing efforts toward the change of personal behavior and those things that lie in personal strength to influence them; using all resources that life offers in order to cultivate truth, reason and the rational way to being. When we speak of reason, we must take into account a

concept of broadened rationality that starts from the symbol of the biblical tree, as Descartes accustomed us. When it is associated with reason, the provisional morality is tightly connected with the Christian perspective. From the perspective of a positive thinking philosophy, we resignify it under the sign of a minimal moral only because it is about an open moral that surpasses the strict boundaries of theological moral, even if it is permanently preoccupied to not enter a conflict with it. However, what brings closer provisional morality to a minimal ethics is that it rather means an attempt of personal integration in the system of moral rules than an evasion of the system of ethical values and the practices they imply. There is a strong relationship between cultivating values, performing ethical practices and cultivating truth. The entire process of knowledge has an ethical finality. Descartes “appreciated that the purpose of knowledge lies in the accomplishment of the “supreme good”, understood as an absolute will, that makes possible reaching happiness” (Aiftinca, 1990: 73).

Cultivating virtue is part of the Cartesian moral ideal. Unlike apparent virtues, Descartes considers that the real virtues are those who come from a real knowledge. Virtue becomes possible when the human being reaches wisdom because the intellect knows everything that is good, and the will is eager to follow it. Everyone who has an availability to learn and do every good they could possibly do in a situation can reach wisdom (Descartes, 2000a: 63-64). Thus, associated with knowledge and wisdom, positive thinking reveals itself to be one of the main virtues that can be cultivated by the human being.

The access to wisdom is open particularly because every human being is endowed with a common sense that orients it in the world of the knowledge of what should be done. We see that one of the most interesting passages that John Cottingham quotes and comments is from *Letter to Silhon in March or April 1648* in which Descartes wrote: “The philosophy I cultivate is not so cruel and sad as to outlaw the purpose of passion; on the contrary, I am aware that we can find the entire sweetness and joy of life” (Cottingham, 2000: 89). Descartes is not an ascetic in his moral. From this perspective all passions can be held under control by filtering them through the principles of provisional morality previously mentioned.

Therefore, although a book such as *The Passions of the Soul* is part of the works that might reveal the author as a precursor of psychology, it is mainly a moral philosophy book where his concern for the interaction between thinking and corporality, body and soul is central. This way, the Cartesian dualism finds the coherence of the unity of the human being on the field of a moral based on the analysis of the natural character of human passions. Thus, „The passions are not simply a harmful aspect of our nature that is to be mastered and suppressed; if properly channelled, they are the key to authentic human flourishing” (Cottingham, 1993: 142). They are created as being situated existences, in a certain way, beyond the good and moral evil. They are thought to be a naturally good thing, man

having the role to avoid their bad or misguided use through cultivating a natural form of a sense of measure, by avoiding any excesses. The good use of souls' passions gives them a kind of special power over the body. We might even say that there is a sort of a soul ascendant over the body, of thinking over corporality, although these are created as a type of different substances, even if they interfere in numerous ways.

We can state that passions are important in defining the human being, because we notice that in Descartes pleasure and love can be lived in a common spiritual registry in which "the most powerful attraction comes from the perfections we imagine in a person we think may become another self" (Descartes, 1984: 399). By realizing a permanent balance between the activity of the intellect and the one of will we can realize imaginative projections in which all virtues are objectified in the being of other. It is the way in which by using a closer language to current philosophies, the other is actually brought up from the passive world of objects and treated like a relational subject. Thus, love appears to us like instituting the other with the highest values we can imagine. In this registry, personal development means fulfillment through the pleasure that is produced by what we can institute in the other person. It contributes to the communities' cohesion and to the personal fulfillment under the sign of the good and the beautiful that we plant in the one next to us. The closeness of otherness, even of radical alterity, raises man to the virtues of soul that only reaching wisdom can make accessible. Personal development means fulfillment under the sign of dialogue and alterity (Grad, 2013; Kwak, 2016; Sandu, 2016). Such an investment in others appears like a constant concern of those who manifest themselves as leaders.

Discussing about the passions of the soul and the passions of the body, about apparent virtues and true virtues, Descartes is very tolerant towards human nature and is very confident in humans' capacity to establish a level of self-control that would protect him from falling in the sphere of vices and excesses. He stated: "Furthermore, the soul may have pleasures of its own. But, as for those it shares with the body, these depend entirely on the passions: so much so that those most capable of being moved by passion are those capable of tasting the most sweetness in this life. It is true that they may also taste the most bitterness, when they do not know how to use the passions and fortune is against them. But the greatest benefit of wisdom is that it teaches us to master the passions so thoroughly and to handle them so skillfully that the evils they cause are perfectly bearable, and can even, all of them, be a source of joy" (Descartes, 1984: 524). We assume from here that is in mans' power to manifest himself as a virtuous being, it is in his power to reach the wisdom to live a life with the least suffering possible, a good and beautiful life. Man can change the face of its world if he understands the importance of reaching the truth that must be at the base of moral and at the foundation of any decision concerning life together with others and his own interiority.

Conclusion

For the postmodern man, positive thinking is a moral and an existential value. Therefore, „the direction and regulation of the passions enables us to live a good life: ‘good’ both in the sense of being ethical and in the sense of being fulfilling, for the two are inseparable in Descartes’ account” (Gaukroger, 1998: 211). It is important to notice that one of the central preoccupations of Rene Descartes was developing a healthy way of life and thinking. He “considered that the possession of a true system of philosophy was of importance for human life” (Copleston, 1994: 52). In this respect there are different preoccupations of a scientific nature of the philosopher, that are placed in the field of cosmology, medicine, psychology, developing various types of machines that would constitute themselves as facilitating instruments for the performing activities of the human being (Scharfstein, 1989: 135). At the same time, he is interested not only in developing material instruments to enhance the quality of life, but also in a series of philosophical practices meant to help man to achieve a better understanding and knowledge of the world and cultivating a better attitude in rapport to existence and his own person. We mentioned that one of the basic premises of the knowledge system proposed by Descartes is that error is rooted in the human being. This does not mean that escaping from error and obtaining knowledge is rooted somewhere else but in man. They mean to be aware of the importance of thinking and of the possibility to change the way of thinking in defining the human being as it is and of its way of give a strong identity to its own life. All the more since Descartes thought that the entire knowledge proposed by him is guaranteed, through God’s benevolence, against any action coming from an evil imaginary demon that might make his voice heard (Wilson, 2003: 103). Offering a new profound opening of Descartes’ reason, Frederick Copleston stated that “One does not really know oneself, the self whose existence is affirmed in the *Cogito, ergo sum*, unless it is known as one term of the total relationship, self-God” (Copleston, 1994: 114).

Justin Skirry reveals that the human being is not a simple aggregation of two substances, one physical, the other mental, but that it need to be noticed that we have a „unity of mind and body as metaphysical parts so as to form one, whole and complete substantial human nature” (Skirry, 2005: 140). Even if Descartes considers that the bodies of men, same as animals are machines that function according to some mechanic laws (Bracken, 2002: 64), the Cartesian dualism insists on offering the human being a different statute from flies or ants. To Descartes, “The material world can be described in terms of matter, identified with geometrical extension, and motion. And all bodies, including living bodies, are in some sense machines. But man as a whole cannot be simply reduced to a member of this mechanical system. For he possesses a spiritual mind which transcends the material world and the determining laws of efficient causality which govern this world” (Copleston, 1994: 12). We have a unity of the physical

and the mechanical in the case of the machine that man presumably is. And this unity gives him the status of a special being. Descartes places the accomplishment of this unity under the sign of divine action.

Assuming thinking is an effort that leads to obtaining authenticity because it means a double process: a return to self and a search toward the exterior. Here we have a process of transcendence similar to the one described by Roger Scruton in his reflections on the philosophy of Heidegger: „I have to make myself responsible for my acts and my existence: this is the single answer that I have to undifferentiated anxiety, and it is my first glimpse of authenticity. I am more fully myself in recognising the call of something that is both integral to me, and yet which also points beyond me” (Scruton, 1995: 259).

In this context we can remind that from the perspective of an essential reading, Jean-Paul Sartre thought that any philosophy that is based on truth must start from the affirmation of the Cartesian *cogito*. There is no other possible starting point than this existential principle of thinking, on which is built every possible doctrine of subjectivity. „This is the absolute truth of consciousness confronting itself. Any theory that considers man outside of this moment of self-awareness is, at the outset, a theory that suppresses the truth” (Sartre, 40). Certainly, the Cartesian *cogito* is used here merely as a starting point for the construction of the existential subject. This can be clearly seen in Sartre’s statement according to which „that it is not only oneself that one discovers in the *cogito*, but also the existence of others. Contrary to the philosophy of Descartes, or of Kant, when we say “I think,” we each attain ourselves in the presence of the other, and we are just as certain of the other as we are of ourselves”(Sartre, 41).

The interpreters revealed that, “in a sense Descartes’ philosophy was an intensely personal enterprise” (Copleston, 1994: 152). It can be seen as an exploration of the way the individual finds himself in a universe he can make familiar for himself through knowledge. The entire Cartesian philosophy can be seen as a permanent initiation that the philosopher lived with his own life and his own posterity. We cannot ignore that although during his entire creation he was preoccupied to not enter in a conflict with the doctrine of the church, he ends up being convicted in posterity. Thus, Descartes’ writing are put in an index by the Church in 1663, and in 1691 is forbidden by royal decree the teaching of any part of his philosophy in the schools of France (Sorell, 2009: 95). At the same time, like it happened in the past, we recover Descartes today from the perspective of a personal philosophical experience that can be essential to us too. It can serve as a starting point for discovering the subject as a thinking being.

However, Descartes searches in all subjective experiences objective certainties. This objectivity is structured in Descartes according to the tree of knowledge we previously mentioned. The interpretation on the line of affirming the relational subject suggested by Sartre opens Descartes to philosophical approaches such as

relational ethics, even if in this case his philosophy is mostly used as a pretext for a new philosophical reasoning. This kind of interpretations can be put together with the philosophy of dialogue and reciprocity in Martin Buber (Buber, 1992; Grad, 2013) or with the perspectives of Emmanuel Levinas on alterity and acknowledging the other (Levinas, 2000; Muresan, 2005).

In relation to self and alterity, man holds an extraordinary power. Norman Vincent Peale describes it as a mental attitude that means a different pattern of thinking: "It's called positive thinking and it works wonders when you work at it" (Peale, 1990: 47). It is about a practical attitude synthesized by the author in three attitudes: „1. A monumental event can happen any day. Be ready for it. 2. Beyond positive thinking is positive believing. 3. A thought can ruin you. But a thought can also make you" (Peale, 1990: 19). It is about the power of positive thinking that can materialize as the power of a positive way of situating in existence. It is a way of life based on thinking and action that leads to a better life and happiness (Peale, 1990: 249; *Cojocar*, 2005).

Assuming reason is the beginning of freedom because in the Western world the act of thinking is an act of complete freedom. The western man has a life philosophy that entails that thinking makes us free. This statement becomes even truer when we associate it with knowledge and action to accomplish personal good and the good of others. We can remind ourselves that, for Descartes, thinking and freedom are so heavily associated that the philosopher argues the possibility of existence a reason independently from the physical support of the brain. This is about a victory of reason in rapport to corporality but it is also about affirming a philosophy of the reflexive subject. In the context of personal development, positive thinking represents a way of affirming the freedom to choose what is harmonious and positive, what takes us close to success and fulfillment, what bring communication and a fulfilled life with others. Thus, thinking, knowledge, communication and living are essential elements of the philosophy of personal development.

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