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Work, Rest and Generosity:

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Everywhere we see evidence of the increasingly fast-paced nature of our society. More people are working at second and even third jobs, not just to survive, but in order to accomplish the various financial and personal goals they might have. Many of us find it hard to find time to visit with friends and family. Our holidays, both religious and secular, historically devoted to rest and contemplation, are increasingly given over to recreation. It seems as if we are literally trying to create ourselves anew *in order* to be able to return to work. We say to ourselves “I *have* to take a vacation or I’ll never make it through the fall!”

This scenario brings up questions about the nature of work and its meaning in our lives. What does it mean when work takes up all of our time and energies? Is there no need for rest and contemplation in the modern world, or is it more a matter of no space for it? In order to think about these issues, I turned to several of the essays by Yves Simon on the problem of work and the modern man. In *Work, Society and Culture*, Simon notes that the modern “ethic of the worker” leaves little room for contemplation and he suggests that the weakness of this ethic is “to be found in its tendency to identify useful activity with the exploitation of physical nature for human purposes.”¹ The only activities we are interested in are those aimed at changing the natural world to make it satisfy our human needs and desires. Simon’s suggestion brings to mind Rene Descartes who stands as one of the most compelling authors of the mastery of nature thesis. In the *Discourse on Method*, Descartes argues explicitly that if we use his method consistently we can learn to “use these objects [of the natural world] for all the purposes for which they are appropriate and thus make ourselves, as it were, masters and possessors of nature.”² Simon argues that both work and contemplation are inherently acts of

¹ Yves R. Simon, *Work, Society and Culture*, trans. Vukan Kuic (New York: Fordham University Press, 1971), p. 45.

² Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald Cress (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett, 1980), AT 62. Future references to the *Discourse* will be to this edition unless otherwise noted. All references to the *Discourse* will cite Adam & Tannery numbers.

generosity. Interestingly, Descartes argues that the “ripest fruit” of his philosophy is *generosity* which is the virtue that “serves as the remedy for all the disorders of the Passions.”³

In this paper I will use Simon’s understanding of the nature and the generosity of work, rest and contemplation along with Descartes’ theory of the science of human activity and generosity to examine the issue of work in our modern culture. To do this I will ask several questions. Of Simon I will ask: What are the natures of work, rest, and contemplation? Of Descartes I ask: What is the nature of the activity of the modern scientist and the generous person? And, what is the role of contemplation and rest in this world and how does this differ from the view expressed by Simon? The paper will have three sections. I will begin by examining Simon’s understanding of the metaphysics of work and rest as they apply to the actions of laborers, scientists and contemplatives. Next, I will examine Descartes’ understanding of the kind of work that is carried out by the modern scientist and then look at the various activities and passions of the human soul in order to understand where work, rest and contemplation might be found. Finally, I will argue that while Descartes’ language is familiar to our ears, his meaning seems to have taken what I will call a Copernican turn. The goal of work and its good and the goal of meditations, both scientific and theological, are all directed to the person in a way vastly different from the way they perfect the person in the traditional model explicated by Simon. Because of this turn, we will see that in the modern Cartesian world there really is no possibility for rest or play and certainly no room for contemplation.

To begin, then, in “Work and Workman” Simon poses the problem of how to identify what human endeavors qualify as work; e.g. is a scientist a worker?⁴ To answer this question he begins with an examination of the kind of work carried out by a day laborer, the clearest example of a worker. He uses the classic Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysics of action and rest to argue that work is characterized by two essential features. First, work “is a useful activity, whose end does not lie within itself, but in a result distinct from itself.”⁵ The good of work accrues to the product of the work. That is, the good of road building is found in the finished road. This means that work is an inherently generous activity. The worker “labors for his work rather than for himself.”⁶ In the terms of Aristotle’s causes, the worker gives his efficiency to the world by effecting a good therein. In the essay “Work and Wealth” Simon notes that the day laborer is primarily working to produce wealth, that is to attain the physical realities necessary and favorable for supporting and expanding his life.⁷ This shows the reciprocal nature of the relation between the

³ Rene Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*, trans. Stephen H. Voss (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett, 1989), article 156. Future references to *The Passions of the Soul* will refer to this edition by article number unless otherwise noted.

⁴ Yves R. Simon, “Work and Workman,” in *The Review of Politics* 2 (January 1940), pp. 63-86.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 65

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁷ Yves R. Simon, “Work and Wealth,” in *The Review of Politics* 2 (April 1940), p. 198.

worker and his work. The worker gives his efficiency to the world in his work and is rewarded for this activity by achieving some physical good that supports his life. When he plants seeds he makes the world more productive and is rewarded with food for his family. When he picks the fruits of nature's trees, even as he gathers food for his own table he accomplishes the task of dispersing the seeds of that tree such that others may grow. The *good* of work accrues primarily, then, in the product and the world, and only secondarily to the worker. Second, Simon argues that work is by its nature a moving activity, "intrinsically subjected to the laws of Becoming and Time."⁸ When we work, we are always adding some new aspect to an unfinished project. When the project is complete, the work ceases. Thus work is incompatible with rest. Work, then, changes the object to which it is applied and ceases when the desired change has been effected.

Simon then develops the characteristics of contemplation in the same tradition and in sharp distinction from work. Here he speaks about contemplation understood in its broadest sense. He is not speaking of theological contemplation as such or speculation but rather of any terminal activity of the soul, that is; any activity of the soul that is completed within itself and that pursues no goal beyond the activity. Both love and intellectual speculation are included in this category. Since contemplation is a terminal activity of the soul, while it achieves the greatest good, it is essentially useless. By useless Simon means, of course, any activity not ordered to an ulterior end.⁹ In contemplating his knowledge the knower gives himself up to the form of the thing known. He does not search for the concept or theory that follows from this formal determination, but simply accepts the object as it is; without limitation or change. The lover does not seek some good from the beloved beyond being with her. In true love the lover conforms his good with the good of the beloved to make himself *worthy* of the beloved. Simon argues that the generosity of contemplation "consists in [this] self-renouncement in behalf of the term known or loved."¹⁰ The goods of knowing and loving, then, accrue primarily to the agent who enjoys his unity with his object and secondarily results in the production of concepts or theories or in a multitude of loving and generous activities. Again we see a kind of reciprocity between the agent and the world. By giving himself over to the other, as known or as beloved, the agent achieves his own good, while by that same action a gift is given in the form of ideas and actions.

It becomes clear from this discussion, then, that all activity that seeks an end that is distinct from the activity itself is a form of work. Thus, Simon argues that mental activity which is for the sake of changing the world, is as decidedly work as is road building. The engineer who designs the road as well as the scientist who develops the chemicals that are used to complete it are each engaged in discursive mental activity for the sake of an end beyond their activities and are thus workers.

⁸ Yves R. Simon, "Work and Workman," p. 66.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 67.

In this understanding, even the “pure researcher” who is trying to solve a problem simply to know truth nevertheless engages in a kind of work. The achievement of that truth remains an end distinct from the activity that produces it for him. When he achieves that truth, he then rests in his contemplation of the good he has achieved.

It is important to note that new theories or concepts and good actions can result from both discursive or transitive actions of knowing and loving as well as from their immanent and contemplative counterparts. These transitive actions are for the sake of the truth they pursue or for the sake of the beloved with whom they seek to be united. They represent the struggle to know or to be joined with the beloved. Contemplative actions also may, in fact they regularly do, result in new ideas or an increase of love and good action. However, these effects remain beyond the goal of the action which was simply to know or to love. Such effects represent the accidental bounty that overflows the nature of contemplation. By this definition any action that is for its own sake, that achieves its good within the action itself is not work. Thus contemplation, rest, and simple play would all fall into this category.

To review, then, Simon argues that work in a broad sense encompasses all activity that is ordered to an end beyond itself. Such activity is in motion and results in a change in the object: theoretically, at least, this is a perfection of the object. When the object is perfected the work is completed. Rest is thus incompatible with all forms of work. Contemplation is a kind of motionless activity where the good of the action is achieved within the nature of the action itself. It pursues no end beyond itself. The contemplative, in the form of a knower or a lover, effaces himself to the form of the known object or to the goodness of the beloved and changes himself to know that thing as it is or to be good enough to be with the beloved as she is without changing the known or the beloved. The agent changes while the other remains unchanged. The generosity of contemplation is the giving up of oneself in the face of truth and of making oneself good in order to be worthy of love.

We will turn now to a brief examination of Descartes’ theory of the pursuit of science and his understanding of the generosity of this endeavor. In Descartes’ preface to the French translation of *The Principles of Philosophy*, he tells us that “the whole of philosophy is like a tree. The roots are metaphysics, the trunk is physics, and the branches, emerging from the trunk are all the other sciences...”¹¹ The most important of these sciences, he tells us, are mechanics, medicine and moral philosophy. The good of the tree is not the roots or the trunk though clearly the tree could not exist without them. The good is in the fruits that can be picked from this tree. He is clear in this discussion that the highest good that comes from this tree and that presupposes all the other sciences is moral philosophy.¹²

¹¹ John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch and Anthony Kenny, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985-1991), vol. 1, p. 186. All references to his *Principles of Philosophy* and his correspondence will cite page numbers and will refer to this edition unless otherwise noted.

¹² *Ibid.*

“By ‘morals’ I understand the highest and most perfect moral system, which presupposes a complete knowledge of the other sciences and is the *ultimate level of wisdom*.”¹³ Metaphysics is for the sake of physics and physics is for the sake of the “useful” sciences. This is consistent with his assertion in the preface to *The Passions of the Soul* where he tells us that his goal is to explain the passions, *not* as a moral philosopher, but rather as a physicist! It is *by means* of physics that we come to understand how to live a good life!

The question, then, is whether all the activities of the scientist and the moral person are what Simon would classify as work? Is all Cartesian activity for the sake of some end exterior to the action itself? Is there any place here for contemplation or for rest? To answer these questions we will briefly look first at Descartes’ discussion of the method of his science, primarily in the *Discourse on Method*. Then we will look at his discussion of the actions and passions of the soul. Here we will explore his ideas about the activities of meditation, veneration, and happiness.

In the *Discourse on Method*, Descartes sets himself in sharp contrast to Aristotle and the Scholastics. They were interested in speculative philosophy, knowledge for its own sake, where he is interested in practical philosophy.¹⁴ His philosophy is aimed at arriving at the knowledge of everything that is useful in life. Probably the most memorable passage where he articulates the mastery of nature thesis is in part six of the *Discourse*. The reason we would want to master nature, he tells us, is that we could invent an infinity of devices that would allow us to enjoy the fruits of the earth without pain and we could maintain our health which is necessary for all the other goods including wisdom.¹⁵ The highest wisdom as we saw is moral wisdom. Wisdom, then, is not good for itself or for the scientist as a knower but is good for his ability to make the world better for himself and for others. Wisdom is for the sake of change. All our scientific activity, then, meets Simon’s criteria for work; it means to change things in the world.

The next problem is to examine Descartes’ discussion of the soul where we can address the question whether there is any place for contemplation in Descartes’ theory of the activities of the soul. According to Descartes, all the functions of the soul are thoughts.¹⁶ Of these thoughts there are two broad categories; the passions which include perceptions and knowledge, and actions which include volitions and meditations.¹⁷

Descartes distinguishes between the passions of the soul and those of the body. In article 132 he discusses the usefulness of the six primary passions of the body. All the other passions are species or combinations of these six.¹⁸ These passions

¹³ Ibid., emphasis mine.

¹⁴ *Discourse on Method*, AT 62, p. 35.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ *The Passions of the Soul*, art. 17.

¹⁷ Ibid., art. 27.

¹⁸ Ibid., art. 69.

inform the soul of things useful or harmful to the body. In the end hatred or repugnance is the most important passion of the body since it is “more important to repel the things that harm and can destroy than to acquire those that add some perfection without which one can survive.”¹⁹ Thus the usefulness of the bodily passions is simply the preservation of life.

Descartes then turns to the usefulness of the passions of the soul. Here love is the most important passion, and he argues that the most immoderate love is extremely good if, of course, it inclines us toward things that are truly good. What this love does is to “join us so perfectly to those [true] goods *that the Love we have for ourselves in particular* makes no distinction between us and them...”²⁰ Because we love ourselves and our own good we join ourselves as intimately as possible to things that are good for us. We strive to possess those things. The usefulness of love is that it helps us achieve the things that are good for us. This is not loving the other above ourselves, but rather *for ourselves*. All the passions, as Descartes so clearly tells us, “dispose the soul to will the things nature tells us are useful and to persist in this volition...”²¹ All the passions of both the body and the soul are explicitly useful. They are clearly and completely directed to a good beyond themselves.

We turn now to the actions of the soul, its volitions and meditations. Are they also for the sake of an end external to them? The answer again is yes. We will begin with a brief discussion of volitions which, of course, make the clearer case. In article 29 he tells us that our volitions are excitations of the soul which are caused by the soul and which have reference to it.²² Clearly all volition is for the sake of some effect, and since volitions number among the thoughts of the soul, they are directed by what Descartes understands to be the teachings of nature to will things useful to us.²³ He tells us that the “whole action of the soul consists in this: merely by willing something, it makes the little gland to which it is closely joined move in the way required to produce the effect corresponding to this volition.”²⁴ Volitions produce effects. These effects are those things that are useful to us as a whole.

The more difficult problem, of course, is meditation where we might expect to find a kind of rest or contemplation. In fact in both joy and veneration, Descartes suggests just such a rest. However, further review reveals that these actions are as clear purposeful as the others. Clearly, if we are to take seriously Descartes’ discussion of his metaphor of the tree of philosophy, philosophical meditations that give us their metaphysical ground of science are *for the sake of* the various mechanical, medicinal and moral fruits. However, we would wonder about theological meditation. Surely it must be simply contemplative. Such does not appear, however, to be the case.

¹⁹ Ibid., art. 137.

²⁰ Ibid., art. 139, emphasis mine.

²¹ Ibid., art. 52, emphasis mine.

²² Ibid., art. 29.

²³ Ibid., art. 52.

²⁴ Ibid., art. 41, emphasis mine.

In a letter to Chanut, Feb. 1, 1647, Descartes takes up the question; “Does the natural light by itself teach us to love God?”²⁵ He answers in the negative, arguing that the way to reach the love of God is to consider what He must be. We begin by considering that God is a being that thinks and that we resemble him. We then consider that our own knowledge seems to grow by degrees to infinity. Now, since God’s knowledge is infinite, we might make the mistake of believing that we could become gods. But we are prevented from that “disastrous mistake” when we reflect on the infinity of his power. By such reflection we recognize His omnipotence and our own limitations. “If a man meditates on these things and understands them properly, he is filled with extreme joy.”²⁶ Meditation leads to the recognition of our place in the world. This recognition fills us with joy. Meditation is a means to joy! This would not be surprising except that he has just argued that, “*with regard to the present life*, this love itself is the most delightful and *the most useful passion* possible...”²⁷ If even the love of God is useful to us, clearly the meditation that achieves such love is doubly useful! There is no allusion here to any suffering that might follow from our love of God. The only issue at hand is that of usefulness here and now. Love, he argued in the *Passions* erases the distinction between ourselves and the beloved and the joy that necessarily follows from the immoderate love of a truly good being “represents to us what we love as a good that belongs to us.”²⁸ The meditation that allows us to love God would result in our recognition that *He belongs to us*. This is certainly no ordinary view of what it would mean to love God!

Descartes’ language takes a similar turn in his discussion of veneration in *The Passions of the Soul*, article 162. Here he tells us that veneration inclines us “not only to esteem the object it reveres but also to submit to it with a certain apprehension, in order to try to render it propitious.”²⁹ Now, we only revere beings whom we recognize to be free causes and whom we judge to be capable of doing us good or evil! And we do so in the hope that our veneration will result in a favorable response. Now surely God can do us good, and given his omnipotence, perhaps evil as well. Thus it would be with the hope that our veneration will effect a change in His action that we might submit to Him. Devotion is of a similar sort. According to Descartes, we are devoted to one “from which we expect only good.”³⁰ Devotion, then, is an attitude of expectation of our own good from another. To a God from whom we expect only good we give devotion. To one who might punish us we give veneration in hopes of mitigating our punishment. Devotion, veneration, meditation: all are actions that might appear to be contemplative but in fact are useful for achieving rather immediate and concrete goods.

²⁵ *Philosophical Writings*, vol. 3, p. 309.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, emphasis mine.

²⁸ *The Passions of the Soul*, art. 139.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, art. 162.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

Well then, what about happiness or joy? Is not happiness, the simple awareness of our unity with our beloved, a strictly contemplative action? In his discussion of happiness both in the *Discourse* and in a letter to Princess Elizabeth, he takes what appears to be a rather stoic view: our own happiness is within the power of our thoughts. He argues that happiness consists “in a perfect contentment of mind and inner satisfaction which is not commonly possessed by those who are most favoured by fortune, and which is acquired by the wise without fortune’s favor.”³¹ He argues that, “each person can make himself perfectly content by himself without any external assistance...”³² In order to do this, the person must satisfy three conditions. First he must use his reason to establish how he should act in each situation. Then he must have a “firm and constant” resolve to act as reason dictates without being diverted by the passions. Finally he must bear in mind that if he does these things the goods he does not possess “are one and all entirely outside his power.”³³ This suggests, certainly, a rest and a contentment within the limitations of one’s situation.

It is interesting to note however that in the *Discourse on Method*, to which he refers us in this discussion, Descartes states the last condition somewhat differently. “After having done our best regarding things external to us, everything that fails to bring us success, from our point of view, is absolutely impossible.”³⁴ The qualifier, “*from our point of view*” seems to add a different dimension. Beyond the fact that desires for impossible objects are fruitless and frustrating and thus not supportive of our contentment as is clearly suggested in both his letter to Elizabeth and *The Discourse*, there may be another reason to believe that only our thoughts are in our power. That is, if our thoughts are in our power, then we are free to direct them as we see fit. Thus, perhaps from another point of view the goal may not be so impossible after all.³⁵ As we know, Descartes was aware of the Copernican theory and the wealth of possibilities that arose because of it. If in fact our will is as unlimited as Descartes argues in both the *Meditations*³⁶ and in the *Passions*³⁷ then perhaps it is more useful for us not to limit our desires but rather to search for a different path by which to reach the desired goal. In fact, in a letter to Elizabeth written in May or June, 1645, Descartes advises her to do just that. He tells her to concentrate her thoughts on distracting her imagination and senses from the problems that are distressing her. By this maneuver, he suggests, she may be able to restore herself to health as he had done in a similar situation when he was in his twenties. Here he points out that he has “always had an inclination to look at things from the most favourable angle and make [his] principal happiness depend

³¹ *Philosophical Writings*, vol. 3, p. 257.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

³⁴ *Discourse on Method*, AT 25, p. 15.

³⁵ *Philosophical Writings*, vol. 3, p. 98.

³⁶ *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, AT 57, p. 83.

³⁷ *Passions*, p. 41.

upon [him]self alone...³⁸ This change of perspective along with the help of medical remedies, he suggests, would allow her to have hope that she would “recover perfect health, which is the foundation of all the other goods of life.”³⁹ He is not suggesting she should rest quietly in her condition but rather she should change her perspective in order to effect a cure.

This view of the world is again presented in his discussion of generosity. At the end of the second part of *The Passions*, he argues that we need not be limited by fortune. In effect, we are the masters of our own fortune. We have two remedies for dealing with what he terms our “less useful desires.” The first remedy is generosity. The second is to reflect on divine providence. We will begin with the latter. In our reflection on divine providence, he tells us that we “represent to ourselves that it is impossible that anything should happen otherwise than has been determined by this Providence for all eternity; thus it is like a fate or immutable necessity which must be opposed to Fortune, in order to destroy it, as a chimera arising only from error in our understanding.”⁴⁰ Divine providence is by immutable necessity opposed to fortune. We can consider to be possible those things that *do not depend* on us, *only* if we think they do depend on fortune and thus fortune could grant them to us. To give up fortune is, of course, to consider these things impossible. In this discussion he tells us that those things are impossible that have failed to happen in the past because a necessary cause for their happening was absent. By this account any future event would remain possible if the necessary cause were present. With fortune ruled out, there remain two possible causal agencies in this account; divine Providence and ourselves. In article 146 he notes that some things are willed by divine Providence to depend on our own free will and that we “ought to think that *from our point of view*, nothing happens which is not necessary and as it were fated, so that we cannot without error desire it to happen otherwise.”⁴¹ He goes on to argue that if it were the case that divine Providence has willed that we should be robbed if we choose to take a path that reason tells us is usually the safest path, we should yet follow our own reason. This suggests that since we do not know what divine Providence has decreed, we must always follow our own best judgment. By this account we would discard the idea of fortune because in believing things possible by it we may fail to act resolutely on our own best judgments. Further, we would not worry about divine Providence because we do not know its decree. Rather, we must concentrate on what is within our own power and use our reason to determine how to achieve what we desire. Then, he argues, for those issues that do not rest on our own power alone, we would still act resolutely and hope for the best. In article 144 he argued that the most serious error we commit is to “fail to distinguish sufficiently the things that depend entirely

³⁸ *Philosophical Writings*, vol. 3, p. 251.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

⁴⁰ *Passions*, art. 145.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, art. 146.

on us from those that do not..." This would suggest two changes in our thinking. First we will not struggle against those things that are done and finished, nor will we concern ourselves with things outside our power, including, of course, divine Providence. Second, we consider possible, perhaps by our own actions, those things that are not finished and done. One of the remedies for our useless desires, then, would be to distinguish clearly those desires that are truly vain and to conceive as possible those that are not.

Generosity, the other remedy for vain desires, is to act resolutely to achieve those things we judge to be good. It allows a man to think as highly of himself as it is legitimate to do.⁴² This generosity has two facets. The first is the understanding that nothing truly belongs to a man other than his free control of his volitions and that there is no reason for him to receive praise or blame "except as he uses [his will] well or badly."⁴³ The generous man recognizes that his true power is in the control of his own will and he deserves praise or blame insofar as he exercises this control. The second facet is in his feeling "a firm and constant resolution to use [his will] well, that is, never to lack the volition to undertake and execute all the things he judges best—which is to *follow virtue perfectly*."⁴⁴ That is, he recognizes his true power and he executes it resolutely to achieve all the goods he judges to be best. The good he judges to be best is, of course, his own good. This may sound little different from Aristotle's formulation that "the good of man is an activity of the soul in conformity with excellence or virtue"⁴⁵ Yet clearly Descartes places himself in sharp distinction to this ancient model.

How, then, is Descartes' notion of virtue different? Descartes describes his generous man as one who is both naturally "inclined to do great things" and who "undertake[s] nothing [he] does not feel [him]self capable of."⁴⁶ If our understanding of Descartes' theory of scientific activity and the soul is correct, the apparent tension between these two attributes is not so great. The generous man who recognizes his own power and executes it resolutely for his own good also recognizes that everything or almost everything that is not a finished issue may yet be open to achievement by the action of his will. He does not *feel* incapable of anything, really. He recognizes that he is truly powerful. In a letter to Queen Christina, dated 20 November, 1647, Descartes argues that "free will is in itself the noblest thing we can have, since it makes us in a way equal to God and seems to exempt us from being his subjects. And so its correct use is the greatest of all goods we possess..."⁴⁷

⁴² Ibid., art. 153.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., emphasis mine.

⁴⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Martin Ostwald (Indianapolis, Indiana: Bobbs-Merrill, 1985), I.7.

⁴⁶ *Passions*, art. 156.

⁴⁷ *Philosophical Writings*, vol. 3, p. 326

Descartes goes on to describe the generous man as “esteeming nothing more highly than doing good to other men.”⁴⁸ In doing so he would scorn his own interest. How can he scorn his own interest and at the same time be, as I have argued, pursuing with all resolution precisely his own interest? I would argue that if the recognition of and resolute execution of his will for the best end is always his goal, then it is the case that every action he exercises for the good of others in fact achieves his highest good, the exercise of his will. What is primarily at issue here is power and the exercise of power. The highest good is not knowledge or love, but rather it is the exercise of a powerful will!

Generosity, here, can be seen as having itself taken a Copernican turn. In Simon’s model of the generosity of work, the efficiency of the agent produces a gift in the world for which the agent is secondarily rewarded by the world. The act is for the sake of the perfection of the object in the world. The perfection of the laborer himself both as an agent and financially are by-products of the efficiency. Work is necessarily change and motion that only accidentally leads to perfection of the agent while it is inherently generous. It is not by accident that the best work reflects the good character of the worker. This good is seen in the world and is measured by external standards. For Descartes, however, the goal of the work, that is, the resolute exercise of the will for truly good action, is for the good of the agent himself primarily and the byproduct of this exercise would be the mass of good actions that occur in the world. This is not an expression of love for another, but is solely an expression of self-love. Cartesian generosity is not measured by any external standard, but is always and only a measure of self-esteem.

Similarly, with contemplation, rather than being an activity that perfects the agent directly by knowing the world as it is and by making himself good in order to be worthy of the beloved, Cartesian meditation and love are for the sake of changing the world to make it better for the knower and again changing the world in order to make it good enough for the lover. This is another Copernican turn. In Simon’s view of contemplation, we completely give ourselves over to the form of the thing known and make ourselves over to be good enough to be with the beloved. We change only ourselves leaving the known and the beloved unaltered; not because they are good for us, but because they are good in themselves and as they are. For Descartes the world can only be understood as it relates to the agent. There is no seeing the other as it is or loving the other because it is good in itself. We see the other and how it is good for us. We change it to make it useful to us. The goal is the good of the agent and all the good actions that he carries out are the accidental means to that end.

Perhaps, you might suggest, this is not such an important turn as a Copernican turn. I would argue otherwise. Let us look at the ancient model of work. There we work to accomplish a finite good in the world. We work until that goal is

⁴⁸ Ibid.

accomplished, then we rest. We necessarily rest because there is nothing more to do to complete the project. By this same action, we are led to reflect on and contemplate the good that we have achieved. We experience the joy that comes with accomplishment. By our actions, we have made ourselves worthy of the good that then comes to us from the world in the form of honor or money or goods. While it may be the case that the final good we desire is infinite, each particular good is clearly finite. We can see and rejoice in the reality of the mediate goods we achieve even as we continue the pursuit of our ultimate good. There are clearly defined and necessarily achieved rest stops along the way! In the Cartesian model, all this is different. If all action of my soul is for the sake of satisfying my desire for my own good and if my will and that desire is in fact infinite as Descartes argues, then it is the case that no particular work can ever satisfy that will. My work is as infinite as my will. Furthermore, because it is the case that, by my actions, I constantly open up new possibilities for the exercise of my will, the possibility for actions I should resolutely enact grows exponentially. The more I achieve, the more I can achieve and the more I can achieve, the more I must resolutely pursue. There is no room here for rest. By its very nature the process becomes increasingly frenetic. It is not without reason, so to speak, that Descartes regarded his work as infinite. By this account, as an unreflective Cartesian, I cannot, of course, rest on labor day or on any other day, for that matter.