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POSITIVE THINKING AS AN EXPERIENCE OF PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: Positive thinking is one of the most valuable tools that postmodern man possesses for personal development and transforming community life. Positive thinking is based on the harmonious relation of the individual with himself, with the others, and with the surrounding reality. It comes at the end of a process of conscious change which the individual goes through in gradual steps, and becomes nuanced as thinking and personal practices develop. Our starting point is the role of thinking as laid out by Descartes. Descartes' conception of philosophy as a thought system points to the acquisition of virtue through knowledge of truth, by cultivating measure, and thus highlighting man as a thinking being. The entire effort of achieving knowledge, of acquiring wisdom, has a moral finality. Its fundament is the presence of God as the infinite instance that deems possible the free manifestation of the human person. As a thinking being, the human subject brings himself into existence. He certifies the reality of the world. Everything takes place on the horizon of the infinite self-existence represented by the philosophical idea of God. As a spiritual being, man can use thinking to shape his desires, to master his willpower, but most of all, to integrate himself in the process of conscious personal development.

Key Words: positive thinking, personal development, cogito ergo sum, idea of God, leadership, wisdom, inner life, Descartes.

1. The Cartesian cogito and the valorization of interiority

We live in a world whose exterior we perceive as threatening. Ours is an insecure way of living, of being in the present world, our only security provided by the growth of personal autonomy, through progress in science and technology, our dominion over Nature, and the control we hold over social relations. Among the reasons we might invoke to explain this existential state, I find as particularly important our dependency on the objects in our world. First and foremost, there comes our propensity for investing the world of objects with the projections and intersubjective relations we engage in with other beings, particularly with our fellow men. One such form of symbolic investment was described by Jean Baudrillard (Baudrillard, 1996). This could explain man's new, empathetic engagement with the outside world, his relation with the world of objects beyond the dichotomic position of conflict, as well his dependency on the varied categories of objects.

Escape from the captivity of objects, from the constraint of the radical exteriority of the objects embellishing our world, stems from the human need for reflection and interiorization, the return to the spiritualization of objects and the adequate valorization of human beings, in particular. Thus, our concern with the inner world is both a sign of value searching, but also of the imperative of authenticity seeking, of outlining unexplored depths, be they ignored or forgotten. Today, we increasingly notice that personal development is one of the most persuasive cultural trends by which the individual gains access to resources for exploring his inner life. Quite often, this internal force is fostered by individuals who yearn to become leaders (Frunză 2016a; Frunză 2017).

For its most part, personal development entails the individual's newly situated existence, based on a different valorization of life, which demands the adoption of a new way of thinking (Maxwell 2005; Peale 2003; Tracy 2011; Schwartz 2010). Thus, positive thinking becomes one of the most recommended and used instrument for transforming individual life and reconstructing interpersonal relations. Adopting a new way of thinking is a means of gaining access to one's inner reality, to the surprising resources of one's personal life, to the benefic energies that the individual can put into motion in order to increase the quality of his and others' lives. Thinking, thus, becomes an intrinsic value that each person can use as an almost infinite existential resource.

Let us recall how at a time when the Western world and its philosophy were being reconfigured, Rene Descartes proclaimed, in a heavy tone of metaphysical certainty: "I think, therefore I am." Convinced that this statement is necessarily true each time he utters it or thinks it, Descartes confesses: "I noted that, while I was trying to think of all things

being false in this way, it was necessarily the case that I, who was thinking them, had to be something; and observing this truth: *I am thinking, therefore I exist*, I was so secure and certain that it could not be shaken by any of the skeptics' even most extravagant suppositions, that I judged I could accept it without scruples as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking" (Descartes 1990, 130). The statement *I think, therefore I am* is fraught with an overwhelmingly existential meaning. Using doubt as a method of investigating reality, the philosopher ends up by doubting all forms of existence, leaving reason as the sole certainty of a situation beyond any doubt. In this vein, Thierry Gontier's statements regarding the rational reconstruction of the world point to the effort of man being able "to dominate himself, conducting his own life according to nature" (Gontier 1998, 17). For it to be self-coherent, this rational construct must be subjected to a methodical interrogation effort. Therefore, Descartes chooses doubt as the central principle for his investigative method. His presumption is the belief that method is needed for researching truth, as only method can lead to real science (Descartes 1992d, 146). Such a perspective eliminates the possibility of finding forms of solipsism or radical skepticism in Descartes' philosophy (Charles 2004). We, thus, arrive at a situation where "Descartes' doubt lets the unwavering certainty of my being subsist.... I have this knowledge of my own existence thanks to my thinking and only if I think.... Descartes' idealism begins in this intuition of the prime and absolute truth of my thinking: the examination of one's spirit's ideas will thus become the privileged path to any knowledge" (Gontier 1998, 21). Therefore, although the idea of God plays a very important part with Descartes, the foundation of knowledge is built on the human being and his reflexive nature. Without minimizing God's role in the formation of knowledge, Descartes places human reason at its base, and situates thinking at the foundation of philosophizing: "Here I discover what I need: it is thinking; only it cannot be separated from me. I am, I exist; that is certain. But for how long? As long as I think; because it might happen that if I stop any of my thinking, I might stop existing altogether. And now I do not admit anything but that which is necessary; thus, I am only a thinking object, that is, a spirit, an intellect, a piece of judgment" (Descartes 1992a, 254).

Descartes' shift of the entire process of knowledge from the face of divinity to that of man (defined by thinking), is determined by the revelation of the practical dimension of philosophy. Descartes shows that philosophy "signifies the study of wisdom, and that by wisdom is to be understood not merely prudence in the management of affairs, but perfect knowledge of all that man can know, as well as for conducting his life, preserving his health, and discovering all arts" (Descartes 2000b, 65).

With Descartes, the assumption of thought is an essential factor that predisposes man to a reflexive attitude tangent to human wisdom. Thought becomes the source of the revelation of nature, conceived of as

both the surrounding nature and human nature. To outline this shift of perspective, Hegel points out that Descartes basically redirected modern philosophy precisely by grounding all of philosophy on reason (Hegel 1964, 407).

Thinking shapes knowledge and human practice. Thus, it can be said that philosophy, which entails both wisdom and forming the ability to act according to the wisdom, is an instrument for transforming reality, particularly in the line of acknowledging and prompting the efforts of the human subject to shape the surrounding reality and his interior world. Thinking also brings along the moment of self-reflection, when all the ambiguities in man's life can become simple and clear, by appealing to the values brought forth by rationality.

The concern for a rational construction of the world, while keeping into account the practical dimension, is a constant of intellectual becoming and thought sedimentation, with Descartes. Speaking of the intellectual evolution of young Descartes, Constantin Noica, the philosopher, notices an extremely important aspect regarding the theories and practices of personal development: "if the teachings of the school displeased him, that did not mean that the young man lost hope or rejected all real teaching of the spirit. He will search for it across the world, will only find passing opinions, consistent with particular times and places; and then, left with nothing else to try, he will turn towards himself" (Noica f.a., 40). This initiatory search in the sphere of exteriority is an attitudinal dominant of individuals who try to find an authentic way to knowledge, communication and living. This is an important step in bringing to one's personal life what is significant to the inner life of the individual. It is fitting, at this point, to briefly recount the treasure parable I found described in Judaic cultural terms, along with the short interpretation provided by Sever Voinescu. Focusing on an essay by Mircea Eliade, he draws attention to the story of the rabbi who makes the discovery of his inner world after a long journey in the outside world and in his imaginary proximity. The story goes as follows: "It is said that rabbi Eisik of Cracow had a dream in which he was told to go to Prague, where under one bridge there was a buried treasure. Three times he dreamt the same dream, so the rabbi ups and goes to Prague. He found the bridge, but he could not get close, not to mention digging under, as the bridge was guarded by day and by night. As he was loitering by the bridge, he captured the attention of a sentinel, who started questioning him about his strange conduct. Rabbi Eisik replied: Look here, I dreamed three times that under this bridge there is a buried treasure that I should dig out. The sentinel laughed: "Oh, are you a fool? You are a grown man, how can you believe what you dream at night? Something similar happened to me too, but I would not even think of going where the dream was sending me. I had pretty much the same dream. I dreamt that in Cracow, in the house of a rabbi named Eisik, under the stove in the room where he sleeps, there is

a treasure. How could I possibly follow such crazy dreams, go to Cracow, search for the rabbi's house, find the stove and dig under? It is nonsense. It is just a dream". All of a sudden, to Rabbi Eisik, the meaning of the dream sank in. He returned home, dug under the stove in his bedroom and found the treasure" (Voinescu 2014). The story is in itself fascinating and the rabbinical way in which it is told by Mircea Eliade, sets it on the level of significations of the culturally accounted story of the journey to the exterior world taken by Descartes according to Constantin Noica. Thus, at the end of his wanderings through the world, he finds himself in the proximity of the treasure, or right on the spot, an inhabitant of the world of truth, affording inhabitation by those searching for the truth, as well as by truth itself.

Sever Voinescu's comment on the story mentions, among other things: "that it is known that sometimes one must leave one's home in order to understand that one's treasure awaits him at home. It seems like a consequence of the previous observation that sometimes you cannot find the treasure within unless you search without. But it is wisdom that sometimes a conversation with someone ignorant is needed, because in his ignorance, the latter unwittingly holds the major information that one's own destiny may depend on" (Voinescu 2014). I believe that reaching wisdom must be valorized not only in the context of the discussion suggested by the author, but also as the felicitous way of penetrating the world in view of Descartes' spiritual evolution. This effort to enter life, to gain wisdom from the real world, to make a detour to exteriority in order to discover reflexivity and interiority is, I believe, significant for what its proponents can learn from Descartes in terms of personal development.

2. Thinking and taking accountability of one's life

At this point, ignorance particularly interests us as the state of passivity in the face of knowledge, particularly in the face of self-knowledge. Personal development also implies, among other things, the courage of confronting one's ignorance and the ignorance of those around us. This confrontation requires assuming a self-reflexive attitude, self-knowledge and the personal effort to free oneself from the state of passivity in relation to the meaning of one's life.

Exiting the state of passivity, of ignorance, can be facilitated by the effort of reaching certainty through doubt and practicing the prime principle of assuming thought as a way of setting existence into motion, as an awareness of one's value and resources. Thought accountability is the beginning of wisdom. One of the reasons why Descartes talks about *cogito* is that "with this term he wants to express that the certainty I have about my own existence is the certainty of the fact that I am a spirit, and *cogitare* is the most suitable, and through it, the most general determination of

spirit" (Bartuschat 1998, 22).

Wolfgang Bartuschat outlined the centrality of three principles in Descartes' thought, from which he derives all other things: the thinking ego, God, and the extended world. There is a strong correlation between the *ego* and *Deus* principles, which in turn makes possible the existence of corporal objects in general (Bartuschat 1998, 10). Starting from this understanding of *ego*, one of the most significant perspectives from which we can draw lessons for our personal development is the philosopher's vision regarding the spirit-body duality. Using a premise that serves as proof that it was inspired by the Christian doctrine of the soul's immortality, Descartes promotes the idea of an independence of spirit in relation to corporality, of *cogito* in relation to biologic support, of thought in relation to the brain and its functions. Descartes never doubts the fact that man consists of both spirit and body. He wishes to outline that "the one who meditates, with a will to radical meditation, discovers within him a power that can be assigned to the spirit, for it cannot be understood as physicality. It is the power to fend off all the exterior things deceiving us, the exterior in its most powerful form, that of a *genius malignus*" (Bartuschat 1998, 21).

As a spiritual being, man is autonomous in relation to exteriority. He can engage a special power to train himself in the process of reality metamorphosis, even while there occurs a change of the self, a transformation of his inner world. Not even the intervention of an evil god can make him regress, when having such potential.

It is worth noticing that in Descartes, the principle of the evil demon is not theological. It does not have the moral consistency of the demon and it is not conceived as a being whose existence is defined through opposition to Divinity. Rather, it could be said, it is conceived as an entity opposed to another type of demon encountered within the philosophical experience, the inner demon mentioned by Socrates. While the inner demon appears to be the voice of the meditative consciousness, placing Socrates into the state of revealing the truth, the evil demon is conceived of as the misleading voice that denies existence, it is the temptation of the lack of knowledge, of illusion, in a clear state of opposition with the Biblical temptation of accessing the tree of knowledge. The evil demon can make us doubt our surroundings, it can induce in us the idea that although we effectively experience living, it, nevertheless, represents only an delusion, as in our senses delude us, including how we experience our own body. Yet, according to Descartes, while such radical doubt cannot lead to total nihilism, since the fact alone that we can think of non-existence and of the trials the evil demon subjects us to, is proof of our real existence, beyond the senses. This ontological experience is synthesized by the philosopher in his statement: *I think, therefore I am*.

This form of dualism is not meant to deconstruct the unity of the human being, but is part of the new vision, for "the Cartesian *cogito* is a

substance, a substance, above all, different from all others” (Deac 2004, 34). Thus, Descartes drifts away from the view of the soul entertained by the religious circles at the time. The doctrine of *cogito* is regarded as problematic from this point of view. As Ioan Deac notes, “The *cogito* created several problems ... because when introduced into Cartesian philosophy, it functioned as a new metaphysical principle, decreasing to some degree the absolute hegemony of the existing principle of divinity” (Deac 2004, 54). Well aware that although he uses the Christian premise for imagining the spirit, he has moved away from the theological doctrine of the soul at a very delicate moment in the relation between theology and philosophy (and not wanting to start a conflict with the Church), Descartes asks the Church representatives to correct him if they consider his philosophical teachings inadequate: “I claim nothing, but submit all my opinions to the authority of the church and the judgment of those more sage” (Descartes 2000c, 405). Let us recall that Galileo Galilei had been investigated by the Inquisition and condemned by the Catholic Church, in 1633, for propagating teachings that went against the Scripture. In this context, Descartes hesitated to publish his treaty *The World* and decided to publish only partially his scientific work. Even so, despite all precautions, Descartes was contested and even accused of heresy by the theologians at the time. Under the circumstances, we can assert that “Renouncing to consider and treat the ego merely as a soul, a passive object, and turning it into a principle, a substance, meant repositioning the principle of self-reflection at the centre of philosophy” (Deac 2004, 99). Thus, philosophical creativity opens up to new forms of reflection. The rational being is valuable to the extent to which it discovers itself to be an independent self that is not generated by, and has no direct bearing on, physical support. As in other doctrines establishing the relationship between the soul and the body and giving the soul a consistency beyond its relation to the human body, the Cartesian scheme of the human being is conceived of similarly. We must imagine the soul’s possibility to survive as an autonomous entity even if the body has been removed. Interestingly, Descartes’ interpreters always keep mentioning that the mind-body relationship reveals that the spiritual dimension also manifests itself independently of the thinking activity support, the latter associated with the activity of the brain. From this perspective, one must take into consideration that “Descartes does not deny that the human process of thinking can be associated with the processes of the brain (indeed, he spoke at length about the brain and the nervous system physiology); he insists, however, on the idea that the spirit cannot be identified by way of physical processes, because its nature is essentially different from the material area and is, indeed, a principle capable to exist without any physical support” (Cottingham 2000, 37).

Increasingly, the interpreters of Descartes’ philosophy feel inclined to consider that his dualism (whether expressed in the form of mind-body

dualism, or in the form of the two sources of passions, corporal emotions and soul emotions) should rather be regarded as a methodological consequence of the necessity to resort to simple, distinct, and clear ideas. Thus, Descartes' dualistic perspective becomes a philosophical alternative to dualistic thinking (Hamilton and Hamilton 2015; Albuquerque, Deshauer, Grof 2003). Therefore, his philosophical research touching on the fields of physiology, psychology, anatomy, and astronomy are useful in the development of alternative theories for epistemological investigations or particular psychological practices, even as they nuance just as many epistemological apertures. One of the important statements by which Descartes reveals "mans' nature, made from spirit and body" (Descartes 1992c, 300) is that the spirit does not merely inhabit the body, rather the two are joined. It is noteworthy that according to Gheorghe Brătescu, "it could be said that Descartes wrote *The Passions of the Soul* only with the wish to clarify for himself and others, the ways of union in the human being of the soul and the body" (Brătescu 1984, 18).

As John Cottingham noted, "The central point of his argument is not based on the idea that the spirit exists without body, but that it *can exist*" (Cottingham 2000, 54), in the sense that it can be conceived of as a separate, autonomous existence. In other words, "despite their being different, the spiritual self and the mechanical body are closely united, such that they constitute what Descartes called "the authentic human being"" (Cottingham 2000, 11). When using the metaphor of light associated with reason, Descartes does not apply a revealing type of metaphor. He does not use theological significations of the supernatural world and of the natural light. The philosopher associates knowledge to the logical, geometrical, mathematical opening of the universe. It is true that the divine intervention is inevitable, but it is done as a primordial act of signification in man, as the intellectual possibility to reach truth by way of reason.

Thus, self-consciousness is conceived of as a spiritual reality, rather than being conditioned by the physical world. It can be used for certain aspirations that do not necessarily hold it captive to the outside world. If in the case of the body, there is a predetermination of the human being – it can be shaped only from a physically given, self-consciousness, the spiritual dimension through which the conscious manifests itself holds a major shaping autonomy. As John Cottingham noticed, the philosopher went so far with the mind-body dualism as to establish "that we can doubt the body's existence, but not that of the mind and of self-consciousness" (Cottingham 2000, 40).

In the history of culture, besides the almost magical formula of "I think, therefore I am" there are others, too, that emphasize action, such as: "I act, therefore I am" (Cheung 2014, 507), or that establish through the shaping force of a relationship, such as "I love, therefore I am" (Stăniloae 1991; Frunză 2016b, 80-81). Each holds a spiritual dimension, lending the

human subject a special power. Each one of these ontological fixtures play the role of making the human being an active subject that participates in the reality, through dimensions that are his own in relation to all other forms of existence.

We should note that without appealing to a theological vision, when speaking of the immateriality of the spirit, Descartes sets it on stable ground and in coherence with his thought system. The consistency is supplied by the fact that "God, in Descartes' metaphysics, is the bridge between the subjective world of thought and the world of scientific truth" (Cottingham 2000, 41). Beyond the importance of constructing reality from the perspective of the ontological argument regarding God's existence, it is significant to consider how this perspective influences the understanding of man, of his condition in the world, as well as his horizon of knowledge. Herein we have the key to deciphering the universe that helps us understand that "by establishing that the positive idea my Spirit has about an infinite being cannot have other origins but an infinite being... God's existence allows us to establish that subjective certainty is, too, a criterion for the objective truth: the truth of science is thus absolute rather than dependent on the nature of my spirit" (Gontier 1998, 21). Descartes argues the existence of God based on his philosophical method, not for ecclesiastic reasons, but to ensure the consistency of his thinking system. The existence of God is assumed, on the one hand, as the principle of causality, and on the other hand, as resulting from the existence of perfection, a clear idea that cannot be annulled through any type of negation. Thus, by Descartes' argumentation, "there must be some other, more perfect being upon whom I depended and from whom I had acquired all that I possessed. For if I had been the sole being and had been independent of every other being so as to *have, of myself*, that small degree of *participation* in the perfection which I shared with the perfect being, I could have been able to *have of myself*, by the same reason, all the remaining perfection that I knew myself to lack, and so be myself infinite, eternal, unchanging, omniscient, in a word, to have all the perfections which I could observe in God" (Descartes 1990, 131). Man, knowledge, morality, find in their own way their fundament in God, "supremely good and the source of all truth" (Descartes 2000c, 90) as manifested through the human being.

3. Instead of conclusions: about the change of changes

From the perspective of the current situation of the human being, the certainty of a strong liaison between thinking and existence (Descartes 1992a, 252) is very important. However, it is necessary to fully value the influence that thinking can have over the way of existing. It means proceeding with the action of transforming reality based on the wisdom we can draw from the philosophy of *cogito*. It is important to notice that

rationality, as seen by Descartes, can include both what we distinguish as thinking and living: “By the word thought, I understand all that which so takes place in us that we of ourselves are immediately conscious of it; and, accordingly, not only to understand, to will, to imagine, but even to perceive, are here the same as to think” (Descartes 2000c, 82). Such understanding is based on the belief that soul “alone has the power of perceiving or of being conscious in any other way whatever” (Descartes 2000c, 83).

This reunification of thinking and living in the sphere of *cogito* makes philosophy (the thinking of wisdom) a platform for the possibility of the constantly changing way in which thinking shapes reality. From this wisdom, we can learn that if our inner world is orderly, it does not feel the terror of exteriority. Personal development can be associated with evading the pressure of exteriority. Descartes suggests philosophy is a tool for overcoming this fear of exteriority and returning to inner life. As regards the utility of philosophy, he points that “it embraces all that the human mind can know, we ought to believe that it is what distinguishes us from savages and barbarians, and that the civilization and culture of a nation is regulated by the degree in which true philosophy is nourished, and that, accordingly, having true philosophers is the highest privilege a state can enjoy. In addition, I should have shown that, regarding individuals, it is not only useful for each man to have intercourse with those who take up such study, but that it is incomparably better he should himself direct his attention to it” (Descartes 2000b, 66).

Considering the change of paradigm produced by Descartes’ philosophy, Robert Rowland Smith credits the former with the suggestion of a philosophy of awakening. The awakening is created as an existential dimension brought into philosophy by thinking, because “even if you would think you are dead, the fact that you think you are dead means you are alive, because thinking involves existing” (Smith 2013, 15). Choosing to live from the perspective of profound changes that positive thinking brings about as a rational choice of life’s values, is a Cartesian positioning under the sign of thinking. It suggests a sort of ongoing rebirth under the natural values of life. It suggests a renewal of the way of thinking.

Changing the way of thinking can be associated not only with awakening, but also with the idea of beginning a new life. Therefore, by assuming a new way of thinking we can enter a new life. The process of mind changing is not just a kind of “brainwashing”, it is a transformation with profound existential consequences. The way I think directly influences the way I exist and, hence, a sort of sacred succession of different ways to exist is established. Everything happens as though we died or our previous life ended and we were now living for our new way of positioning ourselves in life. It is a form of participation in sacredness similar to the one described by Mircea Eliade as the mystery of spiritual renewal occurring to an initiatory archaic script by which we live: “if *here*

on earth we know death, if we die countless times, to be reborn *for something else* – it means that man already lives here on earth something that does not belong to Earth, but participates in the sacred, divine lives, let us say *a beginning of immortality*, he approaches immortality more and more ... immortality must be seen as the limit, an ideal situation towards which man strides with all his being and which he tries to conquer through death and continual resurrection” (Eliade 1993, 245). That is why such an endeavor is likely to fascinate primarily young Christians in search of their spiritual completion, for they already have the mental patterns of their own spirituality regarding the radical change implied by living the old life and beginning a new existence, transfigured by their attachment to the values of Christ. However, death and the desire to overcome finitude is a general human desire. No one can come to grips with the idea that one may be stuck on the horizon *here*. There is a desire to transcend the current horizon, on towards an existence created as absolute transcendence. Man, as a finite being, yearns for the infinite deeply ingrained in his being. The beauty of personal development philosophy can be discovered by passing through the continually improved forms of existence during the journey taken by every individual within the horizon of his own life, a life lived as authentic human existence.

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