

Elisabeth of Bohemia (1618-80): Correspondence with Descartes (1643)¹

Elisabeth was born at Heidelberg Castle on 26 December 1618, the eldest daughter of Elisabeth Stuart (the only daughter of James I of England), and Frederick V of Palatine, the exiled ‘Winter King’ of Bohemia. In 1620, Elisabeth’s family lost their fortunes and land, and was forced to live in exile in the Netherlands. Elisabeth was educated by Royal tutors at the Prinsenhof in Leiden where her family resided from 1623 to 1641. She also received some of her training from professors at the University of Leiden. Elisabeth had an extremely good education in Latin, logic, and mathematics, and demonstrated such an aptitude for languages that her family nickname was ‘La Grecque’. Her youngest sister, Sophie (1630–1714), later the Electress of Hanover, also expressed an interest in philosophy: she was the patron and correspondent of Leibniz, and her daughter, Sophie Charlotte (1668–1705), was also philosophically minded.

In their early life, Elisabeth and Sophie were fortunate to be part of a courtly circle that included several leading intellectuals of the day, such as Constantijn Huygens (1596–1648), Henri Regius (1598–1679), Francis Mercury van Helmont (1614–98), and Descartes. But the Palatine family was also beset with misfortune, and tragedies such as the 1649 beheading of Elisabeth’s uncle, King Charles I of England. As a consequence of these family troubles, Elisabeth seems to have suffered from depression—a common theme in her letters to Descartes. She remained single all her life, and once refused an offer of marriage because she would not convert to Catholicism. She was appointed coadjutrix of the Protestant Herford Abbey in 1661, and then abbess in 1667, remaining so until her death on 8 February 1680. In her final years, she offered asylum to mem-

bers of the persecuted religious sects, the Labadists and the Quakers.

Elisabeth expressed admiration for Descartes’ writings shortly after their first meeting at The Hague in about 1642. She visited Descartes at his home in Endegeest near Leiden, and from 1643 they wrote to one another for a period of seven years until Descartes’ death in 1650. Claude Clerselier first published Descartes’ letters to Elisabeth in 1657, but Elisabeth refused the publication of her letters to Descartes (she also refused to have them shown to Queen Christina of Sweden). In the nineteenth century, her letters were discovered in a library near Arnheim, The Netherlands, and published by Foucher de Careil in 1879. Among the surviving correspondence, there are 26 letters from Elisabeth to Descartes, and 33 from Descartes to Elisabeth. He dedicated his *Principles of Philosophy* to her in 1644, praising her great expertise in both metaphysics and mathematics. He says that “the outstanding and incomparable sharpness of your intelligence is obvious from the penetrating examination you have made of all the secrets of these sciences, and from the fact that you have acquired an exact knowledge of them in so short a time.”² In a letter to Alphonse Pollot (6 October 1642), Descartes says of Elisabeth that “I attach much more weight to her judgment than to those messieurs the Doctors, who take for a rule of truth the opinions of Aristotle rather than the evidence of reason.”³

Although Elisabeth is chiefly remembered as a critic of Descartes, there are in fact strong Cartesian elements in her thinking. She shares Descartes’ mistrust of ancient authority and book learning. In one letter to Descartes, Elisabeth emphasizes that she does not follow his views “out of prejudice or indolent imitation,” but because his way of rea-

¹ From Jacqueline Broad, *Women Philosophers of the Seventeenth-Century* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2003).

² Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*, in *Philosophical Writings*, I: 192.

³ Descartes to Pollot, 6 October 1642, in *Descartes: His Moral Philosophy and Psychology*, trans. John J. Blom (New York: New York University Press, 1978), 105; and René Descartes, *Oeuvres de Descartes*, eds. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris: J. Vrin, 1996), 3: 577.

soning “is the most natural I have encountered and seems to teach me nothing new, save that I can extract from my mind knowledge I have not yet noticed.”⁴ This attitude is distinctively Cartesian in its respect for the self-reliance of the individual, and faith in the natural abilities of the mind to attain truth. In his *Discourse on Method*, Descartes asserts that all human beings, however dull or slow, possess a natural capacity for reasoning. He notes that those individuals who are uneducated in traditional scholastic philosophy are the best fitted for the apprehension of truth, since their minds are the least clouded by prejudices. He claims that anybody can attain knowledge, so long as she begins with self-evident ideas in the mind and proceeds from simple to complex ideas in an orderly, rigorous manner.

Elisabeth raises questions about two principal claims in Descartes’ *Meditations*: the claim that the soul and body are distinct substances, and the claim that nevertheless the soul and body are “intermingled” in human beings. In the *Sixth Meditation*, Descartes argues that we can clearly and distinctly conceive of the unextended soul existing apart from the extended body, and therefore the soul and body are distinct. Nevertheless, he also emphasizes that “I am not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship” (*Meditations*, in *Philosophical Writings* 2: 56) but I am closely joined and connected to this body such that I feel pain when it is hurt, thirst when it is dehydrated, and so on. In the Descartes–Elisabeth correspondence, we are reminded that Descartes is also concerned with explaining the nature of the soul–body union in light of their real distinction. In her early letters, Elisabeth highlights perceived inadequacies in his explanations of this union. “I beseech you,” Elisabeth writes to Descartes on 6/16 May 1643, “tell me how the soul of man (since it is but a thinking substance) can determine the spirits of the body to produce voluntary actions.”⁵ How can an essentially thinking thing move or have an impact on an extended substance?

If every movement involves an impact between the mover and the moved, then it seems impossible for the mind to have any effect on the body: “For it seems every determination of movement happens from an impulsion of the thing moved, according to the manner in which it is pushed by that which moves it, or else, depends on the qualification and figure of the superficies [surface] of this latter.” Because the soul is neither extended nor capable of contact, it cannot meet the necessary conditions for impact. Elisabeth proposes that a solution might be found in a more precise definition of the soul, “a definition of the substance separate from its action, thought” (*ibid.*). Anticipating Locke, she suggests that it is difficult to show that the “soul” and “thought” are always inseparable, especially in the case of “infants in their mother’s womb and deep fairs” (*ibid.*). In his first reply of 21 May 1643, Descartes appeals to certain “primitive notions” that provide the foundations or the “models” for all our other knowledge.⁶ These three notions can be recognized by three different operations of the soul. Our notion of the soul is grasped only by the pure intellect, completely devoid of any sensory or imaginative input. The notion of the body as extension, figure, and movement, is understood through the intellect and the imagination; and those things that pertain to the soul–body union can be known clearly only by the senses. “All human knowledge,” Descartes says, “consists only in carefully distinguishing these notions, and attributing each of them only to the things to which they pertain. For when we wish to explain some difficulty by means of a notion that does not pertain to it, we cannot fail to make a mistake.”⁷ Elisabeth, according to Descartes, goes wrong in thinking of soul–body interaction in terms of the second primitive notion, rather than the third. The prejudices of our senses often lead us to think of soul–body interaction along the same lines as body–body interaction because “the use of the senses has rendered the notions of extension, figures,

⁴ Elisabeth to Descartes, 16 August 1645, in Blum (tr.), *Descartes*, 135; and Descartes, *Oeuvres* 4: 269.

⁵ Elisabeth to Descartes, 6/16 May 1643; in Blum (tr.), *Descartes*, 106.; and Descartes, *Oeuvres* 3: 661.

⁶ Descartes to Elisabeth, 21 May 1643; in Blum (tr.), *Descartes*, 108; and Descartes, *Oeuvres* 3: 661.

⁷ Descartes to Elisabeth, 21 May 1643; in Blum (tr.), *Descartes*, 108; and Descartes, *Oeuvres* 3: 665–66.

and movements very much more familiar to us than the others.”⁸ People get confused about the soul–body relationship, according to Descartes, because they think of causal interaction on the mechanical model of impact and resistance. Instead Descartes demonstrates how the soul might move the body, without extension or contact, through the illustrative analogy of gravity. When we think of gravity, he says, we have no difficulty in conceiving how it moves the body or is united to it—even though there is no impact between extended surfaces. When weight or heaviness moves a corporeal being—for example, by pulling it to the ground—this action does not involve touching. Gravity causes the body to move in a non–mechanical way, it is extended or diffused throughout the whole body, and yet it is a quality distinct from the body (capable of being separated from it). In this way, as Mattern observes, the gravity analogy gives us some way of conceiving how the soul and body are united, and how the soul can have a causal influence on the body, while still allowing that the two substances are distinct.⁹

In her 10/20 June 1643 response, Elisabeth says that Descartes’ gravity analogy does not solve the problem of soul–body interaction. Even if the old scholastic conception of gravity were correct, she says, this does not explain exactly how an immaterial thing moves a material thing. Four years later, Descartes sent Elisabeth a work by his friend, the Dutch physician Cornelis van Hogelande (1590–1662). In reply, Elisabeth says that she cannot support Hogelande’s analogy for the soul–body relationship either. While Descartes uses the gravity

analogy to explain the soul’s influence on the body (soul–body causation), Hogelande attempts to account for the body acting on the soul (body–soul causation). He draws on a comparison of “gross matter” enveloping a more subtle kind of matter by “fire or fermentation,” to explain the fact that the soul is constrained to suffer along with the body. Elisabeth says that this theory still does not solve the difficulty: the “subtle matter” is corporeal, and is therefore moved in the same way that any material thing is moved—by the pressure of parts on parts.¹⁰

The intuition behind Elisabeth’s rejection of these two analogies is the same: she adheres to the old scholastic concept of “causal likeness,” or the notion that the cause must be essentially similar to the effect (and vice versa).¹¹ This notion, that “like causes like” or that “like can only be caused by like,” has its origin in the intuition that “something cannot come from nothing.”¹² In challenging Descartes thus, Elisabeth probably believes that Descartes holds this principle himself.¹³ For Elisabeth, the problem is that if the unextended mind bears no essential similarity to the extended body (as Descartes claims), then it seems impossible for there to be causal interaction between them. Descartes’ gravity analogy is unhelpful because Elisabeth can conceive of the immaterial only as “the negation of matter,” and therefore incapable of engaging with the body. Likewise, the Hogelande analogy is unhelpful because the soul–body problem is about explaining how two utterly dissimilar entities can interact, not two like substances. Hence Elisabeth

⁸ Descartes to Elisabeth, 21 May 1643; in Blom (tr.), *Descartes*, 108; and Descartes, *Oeuvres* 3: 666.

⁹ Ruth Mattern, “Descartes’s Correspondence with Elizabeth: Concerning Both the Union and Distinction of Mind and Body,” in *Descartes: Critical and Interpretive Essays*, ed. Michael Hooker (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 215.

¹⁰ Elisabeth to Descartes, May 1647; in Andrea Nye, *The Princess and the Philosopher* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), 122; and Descartes, *Oeuvres* 5: 48.

¹¹ On the causal likeness principle, see Richard Watson, *The Breakdown of Cartesian Metaphysics* (Atlantic

Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1987), especially 50–52; Lois Frankel, “The Value of Harmony,” in *Causation in Early Modern Philosophy: Cartesianism, Occasionalism and Preestablished Harmony*, ed. Steven Nadler (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 197–216; and Eileen O’Neill, “Mind–Body Interaction and Metaphysical Consistency: A Defence of Descartes,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 25 (1987), 227–45.

¹² Watson, *Breakdown*, 50–51.

¹³ Some commentators maintain that Descartes holds the causal likeness principle. But recently this view has been challenged by O’Neill, “Mind–Body Interaction.”

goes from questioning soul–body interaction, to challenging Descartes’ dualism.

Elisabeth concludes that, if mind and body are completely different substances, there is no way for them to interact since they share nothing in common. This is especially problematic given Descartes’ mechanism; the behaviors of the human body are supposed to be explained completely by the size, shape, motion, and position of its parts interacting with other bodies in its environment. This problem, called the problem of interaction, is a serious challenge to Cartesian dualism.

Correspondence Between Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and Descartes

Elisabeth to Descartes, May 6, 1643

Today M. Palotti has given me such assurance of your goodwill toward everyone, and in particular toward me, that I chased from my mind all considerations other than that of availing myself of it. So I ask you please to tell me how the soul of a human being (it being only a thinking substance) can determine the bodily spirits, in order to bring about voluntary actions.

For it seems that all determination of movement happens through the impulsion of the thing moved, by the manner in which it is pushed by that which moves it, or else by the particular qualities and shape of the surface of the latter. Physical contact is required for the first two conditions, extension for the third. You entirely exclude the one [extension] from the notion you have of the soul, and the other [physical contact] appears to me incompatible with an immaterial thing.

This is why I ask you for a more precise definition of the soul than the one you give in your *Metaphysics*, that is to say, of its substance separate from its action, that is, from thought.

For even if we were to suppose them inseparable (which is however difficult to prove in the mother’s womb and in great fainting spells) as are the attri-

butes of God, we could, in considering them apart, acquire a more perfect idea of them...

Descartes to Elisabeth, May 21, 1643

I can say with truth that the question your Highness proposes seems to me that which, in view of my published writings, one can most rightly ask me.

For there are two things about the human soul on which all the knowledge we can have of its nature depends: one of which is that it thinks, and the other is that, being united to the body, it can act on and be acted upon by it.

I have said almost nothing about the latter, and have concentrated solely on making the first better understood, as my principal aim was to prove the distinction between the soul and the body. Only the first was able to serve this aim, and the other would have been harmful to it. But, as your Highness sees so clearly that one cannot conceal anything from her, I will try here to explain the manner in which I conceive of the union of the soul with the body and how the soul has the power to move it.

First, I consider that there are in us certain primitive notions that are like originals on the pattern of which we form all our other knowledge. There are only very few of these notions; for, after the most general—those of being, number, and duration, etc.—which apply to all that we can conceive, we have, for the body in particular, only the notion of extension, from which follow the notions of shape and movement; and for the soul alone, we have only that of thought, in which are included the perceptions of the understanding and the inclinations of the will; and finally, for the soul and the body together, we have only that of their union, on which depends that of the power the soul has to move the body and the body to act on the soul, in causing its sensations and passions.

I consider also that all human knowledge consists only in distinguishing well these notions, and in attributing each of them only to those things to which it pertains. For, when we want to explain some difficulty by means of a notion which does not pertain to it, we cannot fail to be mistaken; just as

we are mistaken when we want to explain one of these notions by another; for being primitive, each of them can be understood only through itself. Although the use of the senses has given us notions of extension, of shapes, and of movements that are much more familiar than the others, the principal cause of our errors lies in our ordinarily wanting to use these notions to explain those things to which they do not pertain. For instance, we try to use our imagination to conceive the nature of the soul, or we try to conceive the way in which the soul moves the body by conceiving the way in which one body is moved by another body.

That is why, since, in the *Meditations* which your Highness deigned to read, I was trying to make conceivable the notions which pertain to the soul alone, distinguishing them from those which pertain to the body alone, the first thing that I ought to explain subsequently is the manner of conceiving those which pertain to the union of the soul with the body, without those which pertain to the body alone, or to the soul alone. To which it seems to me that what I wrote at the end of my response to the Sixth Objections can be useful; for we cannot look for these simple notions elsewhere than in our soul, which has them all in itself by its nature, but which does not always distinguish one from the others well enough, or even attribute them to the objects to which it ought to attribute them.

Thus, I believe that we have heretofore confused the notion of the power with which the soul acts on the body with the power with which one body acts on another; and that we have attributed the one and the other not to the soul, for we did not yet know it, but to diverse qualities of bodies, such as heaviness, heat, and others, which we have imagined to be real, that is to say, to have an existence distinct from that of body, and by consequence, to be substances, even though we have named them qualities.¹⁴

¹⁴ As Descartes notes in the *Principles of Philosophy* I.51–52, because the substance of a body is the principle by means of which something is identified as this or that body, it cannot be known apart from the resulting body's

In order to understand them, sometimes we have used those notions that are in us for knowing body, and sometimes those which are there for knowing the soul, depending on whether what we were attributing to them was material or immaterial. For example, in supposing that heaviness is a real quality, of which we have no other knowledge but that it has the power to move a body in which it is toward the center of the earth, we have no difficulty in conceiving how it moves the body, nor how it is joined to it; and we do not think that this happens through a real contact of one surface against another, for we experience in ourselves that we have a specific notion for conceiving that; and I think that we use this notion badly, in applying it to heaviness, which, as I hope to demonstrate in my *Physics*, is nothing really distinct from body. But I do think that it was given to us for conceiving the way in which the soul moves the body....

Elisabeth to Descartes, June 10, 1643

The interests of my house, which I must not neglect, and some conversations and social obligations which I cannot avoid, beat down so heavily on my weak mind with annoyance or boredom, that it is rendered useless for anything else at all for a long time afterward: this will serve, I hope, as an excuse for my stupidity in being unable to comprehend, by appeal to the idea you once had of heaviness, the idea through which we must judge how the soul (nonextended and immaterial) can move the body; nor why this power to carry the body toward the center of the earth, which you earlier falsely attributed to a body as a quality, should sooner persuade us that a body can be pushed by some immaterial thing, than the demonstration of a contrary truth (which you promise in your *physics*) should confirm us in the opinion of its impossibility. In particular, since this idea (unable to pretend to the same perfection and objective reality as that of God) can be feigned due to the ignorance of that which truly

attributes, properties, or qualities. A substance is thus not some thing but rather the will that there be the differentiation of that thing vis-à-vis others.

moves these bodies toward the center, and since no material cause presents itself to the senses, one would then attribute this power to its contrary, an immaterial cause. But I nevertheless have never been able to conceive of such an immaterial thing as anything other than a negation of matter which cannot have any communication with it.

I admit that it would be easier for me to concede matter and extension to the soul than to concede the capacity to move a body and to be moved by it to an immaterial thing. For, if the first is achieved through information, it would be necessary that the spirits, which cause the movements, were intelligent, a capacity you accord to nothing corporeal.

And even though, in your *Metaphysical Meditations*, you show the possibility of the second, it is altogether very difficult to understand that a soul, as you have described it, after having had the faculty and the custom of reasoning well, can lose all of this by some vapors, and that, being able to subsist without the body, and having nothing in common with it, the soul is still so governed by it.

But after all, since you have undertaken to instruct me, I entertain these sentiments only as friends who I do not intend to keep, assuring myself that you will explicate the nature of an immaterial substance and the manner of its actions and passions in the body, just as well as you have all the other things that you have wanted to teach. I beg of you also to believe that you could not perform this charity to anyone who felt more the obligation she has to you as your very affectionate friend.

Descartes to Elisabeth, June 28, 1643

I ought to have explained the difference between these three sorts of notions and between the operations of the soul through which we have them, and to have stated how we render each of them familiar and easy to us. Then, after that, having said why I availed myself of the comparison with heaviness, I ought to have made clear that, even though one might want to conceive of the soul as material (which, strictly speaking, is what it is to conceive its union with the body), one would not cease to know, after that, that the soul is separable from it. That is, I

think, all of what your Highness has prescribed me to do here.

First, then, I notice a great difference between these three sorts of notions. The soul is conceived only by the pure understanding; the body, that is to say, extension, shapes, and motions, can also be known by the understanding alone, but is much better known by the understanding aided by the imagination; and finally, those things which pertain to the union of the soul and the body are known only obscurely by the understanding alone, or even by the understanding aided by the imagination; but they are known very clearly by the senses. From which it follows that those who never philosophize and who use only their senses do not doubt in the least that the soul moves the body and that the body acts on the soul. But they consider the one and the other as one single thing, that is to say, they conceive of their union. For to conceive of the union between two things is to conceive of them as one single thing.

Metaphysical thoughts which exercise the pure understanding serve to render the notion of the soul familiar. The study of mathematics, which exercises principally the imagination in its consideration of shapes and movements, accustoms us to form very distinct notions of body. And lastly, it is in using only life and ordinary conversations and in abstaining from meditating and studying those things which exercise the imagination that we learn to conceive the union of the soul and the body...

But I judged that it was these meditations, rather than these other thoughts which require less attention, that have made her find obscurity in the notion we have of their union; as it does not seem to me that the human mind is capable of conceiving very distinctly, and at the same time, the distinction between the soul and the body and their union, since to do so it is necessary to conceive them as one single thing and at the same time to conceive them as two, which is contradictory ...

But since your Highness notices that it is easier to attribute matter and extension to the soul than to attribute to it the capacity to move a body and to be moved by one without having matter, I beg you to feel free to attribute this matter and this extension to

the soul, for to do so is to do nothing but conceive it as united with the body. After having well-conceived this and having experienced it within herself, it will be easy for you to consider that the matter that you have attributed to this thought is not thought itself, and that the extension of this matter is of another nature than the extension of this thought, in that the first is determined to a certain place, from which it excludes all other extended bodies, and this is not the case with the second. In this way your Highness will not neglect to return easily to the knowledge of the distinction between the soul and the body, even though you have conceived their union.

Finally, though I believe it is very necessary to have understood well once in one's life the principles of metaphysics, since it is these that give us knowledge of God and of our soul, I also believe that it would be very harmful to occupy one's understanding often in meditating on them.

Elisabeth to Descartes, July 1, 1643

What you write there makes me see clearly the three sorts of notions that we have, their objects, and how we ought to make use of them.

I also find that the senses show me that the soul moves the body, but they teach me nothing (no more than do the understanding and the imagination) of the way in which it does so. For this reason, I think that there are some properties of the soul, which are unknown to us, which could perhaps overturn what your Metaphysical Meditations persuaded me of by such good reasoning: the non-extendedness of the soul. This doubt seems to be founded on the rule that you give there, in speaking of the true and the false, that all error comes to us in forming judgments about that which we do not perceive well enough.

Though extension is not necessary to thought, neither is it at all repugnant to it, and so it could be suited to some other function of the soul which is no less essential to it. At the very least, it makes one abandon the contradiction of the Scholastics, that [the soul] is both as a whole in the whole body and as a whole in each of its parts.

I do not excuse myself at all for confusing the notion of the soul with that of the body for the same reason as the vulgar; but this doesn't rid me of the first doubt, and I will lose hope of finding certitude in anything in the world if you, who alone have kept me from being a skeptic, do not answer that to which my first reasoning carried me.

Study Questions

1. For Elisabeth, why is there a problem with thinking that the soul can affect the body (also known as the "problem of interaction")?
2. According to Descartes, what are the three "primitive notions" that are the foundations for all of our subsequent knowledge?
3. How does appealing to "ordinary conversation" and relying on the senses explain the relation of body and soul in a way that is different from meditation and imagination?