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### Princess Elizabeth and Descartes: The union of soul and body and the practice of philosophy

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## DISCUSSION

### PRINCESS ELIZABETH AND DESCARTES: THE UNION OF SOUL AND BODY AND THE PRACTICE OF PHILOSOPHY

Lisa Shapiro

It is difficult to talk about Elisabeth without subordinating her to her correspondent, Descartes. That is, it is difficult to talk about Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia as a philosopher *in her own right*.<sup>1</sup> This is, of course, largely due to the fact that all we have of her philosophical writing is her correspondence with Descartes. And in this correspondence, Elisabeth assumes the role of a reader of Descartes: she raises objections to and asks for clarification of Descartes's claims but does not seem to advance any philosophical program of her own. This is not to say that Elisabeth's comments do not influence Descartes. On the contrary, it seems to me quite certain that they do. In particular, her challenges move Descartes to think more carefully about the union of the soul and body, and it is at her request that he undertakes to write a work on the passions of the soul. Equally, we might tend to read Elisabeth's letters in this way – that is, as simply responsive to, and so

<sup>1</sup> Some biographical details about Elisabeth may be useful. What follows owes much to Beatrice Zedler's synthesis of various sources in her 'Three Princesses', *Hypatia*, 4, 1, 1989. In addition to the sources cited by Zedler, see Baroness Blaze de Bury, *Memoirs of the Princess Palatine, Princess of Bohemia* (London: Richard Bentley, 1853).

Elisabeth was born at Heidelberg in December 1618, the daughter of Frederick V of Bohemia and Elizabeth Stuart, daughter of James I of England. Her uncle was thus Charles I, who was beheaded in the English Civil War. In November 1620 her father lost in battle not only the throne of Bohemia but also his own land. The family went into exile, first in Germany and then in the Hague. Elisabeth had several siblings, six brothers, the oldest of whom died when she was eleven, and three sisters, perhaps the most famous of whom was the youngest, Sophie, who became Electress of Hanover and corresponded with Leibniz, as did her daughter, Sophie Charlotte. Elisabeth was the eldest of her siblings.

Elisabeth was taught etiquette, Scripture, mathematics, history, the sciences, jurisprudence, and several languages including Latin and Greek. Perhaps as part of her schooling, she read the *Meditations* in Latin (in 1642), and a meeting between her and Descartes was facilitated by Pollot. Thence begins their contact with one another.

In 1667, Elisabeth entered a Protestant convent at Herford in Westphalia, where she eventually became abbess. As abbess she offered refuge to those whose religious beliefs were less than orthodox, including Jean Labadie and his followers (including Anna Maria von Schurmann, a friend of Elisabeth's from Holland, who undoubtedly organized the Labadists stay), and William Penn and other Quakers. Elisabeth died in February 1680.

as interesting only for shedding some light on, Descartes's philosophy – because she herself seems to take that as her role. In her correspondence she consistently denigrates her own intellectual contribution to their exchanges, and she looks to Descartes as someone who can help her to remedy the weaknesses of her own mind. Or at least it seems that way at first.

Despite these considerations, it seems inappropriate to leave things at that – with Elisabeth as simply a student and reader of Descartes. For one, Descartes does not seem to share Elisabeth's opinion of herself. In the dedication of his *Principles of Philosophy*, he quite eloquently praises her as someone whose virtue 'springs solely from a comprehension of what is right' and within whom is to be found 'the keenest sort of intellect and greatest zeal for knowing the truth along with the firmest will to act rightly' (AT VIIIA 2–3; MM xv).<sup>2</sup> According to Descartes, only Elisabeth has understood equally well his geometry and his metaphysics, and for him this is evidence not simply of her value to him but also of the quality of her mind. He writes: 'I know of no mind but yours to which all things are equally evident, and which I therefore deservedly term incomparable' (AT VIIIA 4; MM xv). Moreover, thinking of Elisabeth as a kind of sounding board whose reflection helps Descartes to clarify his thoughts leaves her with little independent intellectual life. In fact, what she writes to Descartes reveals that she does have her own ideas about things.

The problem one has in wanting to take Elisabeth seriously as a philosopher is that there is nothing ready-to-hand in which she offers a systematic treatment of her philosophical position: we cannot turn to other works of hers – we cannot even turn to other correspondence – to get clear on what she herself thinks. What I would like to do here is see if we can't use her correspondence with Descartes to trace out a line of thought proper to Elisabeth *herself*. The line of thought in which I am particularly interested is that concerning the nature of the union of soul and body.<sup>3</sup> I want to look at how Elisabeth's own thought about this metaphysical question develops from the objection she is most famous for raising – that regarding the notion of the union available to Descartes given his dualist commitment of the

<sup>2</sup> I use the following abbreviations in parenthetical citations to Descartes's works and their translations. The translations of Elisabeth's letters are my own.

AT *Oeuvres de Descartes*, Adam and Tannery (eds), Vrin, 1996. 'AT' is followed by volume and page number.

MM *Principles of Philosophy*, Miller and Miller (trs), Kluwer, 1991, 'MM' is followed by page number.

CSMK *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Vol. III*, Cottingham, Stoothof, Murdoch and Kenny (trs), Cambridge, 1991. 'CSMK' is followed by page number.

<sup>3</sup> Andrea Nye, in her 'Polity and Prudence: the Ethics of Elisabeth, Princess Palatine' in *Hypatia's Daughters*, Linda Lopez McAlister (ed.), Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996, also aims to set out Elisabeth's own philosophical view. As the title suggests, she is concerned with Elisabeth's ethics, whereas I will be concerned with her metaphysics.

*Meditations* – to her later objections to his rather neo-Stoic advice about how she would do best to regulate her passions. In the course of this development, I will argue, Elisabeth traces out for us a unique philosophical position: she defends neither a reductionist materialism nor a substance dualism, but rather wants to find a way of respecting the autonomy of thought without denying that this faculty of reason is in some essential way dependent on our bodily condition. I think it is particularly interesting that Elisabeth is able to put forward her own position in a way that proves compelling in the context involving the passions, and in particular one involving her own passions and well-being. And so, once I have told a story about the evolution of Elisabeth's thoughts on the soul-body union, I want to conclude by reconsidering Elisabeth's practice of philosophy in this personal context and the lack of a systematic treatment of philosophical issues on her part.

### THE EARLY OBJECTION TO DESCARTES'S ACCOUNT OF THE UNION OF SOUL AND BODY

Perhaps the most well known part of Elisabeth's correspondence with Descartes is that in which she wonders how it is possible, given Descartes's dualist commitments, for him to still maintain that soul and body affect one another.<sup>4</sup> She writes:

tell me please how the soul of a human being (it being only a thinking substance) can determine the bodily spirits and so bring about voluntary actions. For it seems that all determination of movement is made either by the impulsion of the thing moved, or it is pushed either 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 from the notion that you have of the soul, and the other appears to me incompatible with an immaterial thing.

(16 May 1643; AT III 661)

Elisabeth is here asking Descartes just how, for him, soul and body can interact: How can something immaterial and non-extended move something material and extended?

Descartes's reply is less than satisfying. While he does point out that the

<sup>4</sup> There has been much attention to Elisabeth's contribution to Descartes's philosophical program in these letters. See Ruth Mattern, 'Descartes's Correspondence with Elisabeth: Concerning Both the Union and Distinction of Mind and Body' in Michael Hooker (ed.), *Descartes: Critical and Interpretive Essays*, Johns Hopkins UP, 1978; Daniel Garber, 'Understanding Interaction: What Descartes Should Have Told Elisabeth', *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 21, Supplement (1983). What I am interested in exploring here, however, is Elisabeth's own philosophical position.

interaction between soul and body should not be conceived as if it were between two bodies – implicitly suggesting that all the options Elisabeth considers for understanding the union turn on this misconception – the only alternative he presents is the kind of union the Scholastics maintain exists between the real quality of heaviness and bodies.

Elisabeth is quite rightly dissatisfied with this answer to her question. In her next letter, she writes that she is unable

to understand the idea through which we must judge how the soul (non-extended and immaterial) is able to move the body, that is, by that idea through which you have at another time understood heaviness; nor why this power to carry a body towards the center of the earth, which you falsely attributed to a body under the name of a quality, must now persuade us that a body can be pushed by something immaterial.

(20 June 1643; AT III 684)

And so she is left admitting that ‘it would be easier for me to concede matter and extension to the soul, than the capacity to move a body and be moved by it to an immaterial thing’ (AT III 685).

Focussing on these passages has led interpreters to take Elisabeth to be posing the mind-body problem in its interactionist form. She can seem to be asking simply: How is it possible for two really distinct substances to interact causally with each other? And it is not only these two letters which support this reading. In the last letter of this particular series – that of 1 July 1643 – Elisabeth concedes Descartes’s point (in his reply to her of 28 June 1643) that the senses show us that the soul moves the body (and presumably she will also concede that they show us that the body moves the soul), but she insists that they ‘do not teach us anything (no more than do the understanding and imagination) about the means by which it does so’ (AT IV 2). It is *this* question – that of *how* the soul is supposed to move the body – which concerns her.

However, Elisabeth’s questions of Descartes go beyond this problem of interaction. We can begin to see this by looking a little more closely at these three letters. In the letter of May 16, in which she originally asks about how we are to conceive the interaction of mind and body, Elisabeth assumes that Descartes *does* have an account of the way in which soul and body can interact with one another, and she asks for clarification on what he takes the soul to be. She takes it that, since she cannot get clear on how soul and body are supposed to interact, she must also be unclear about the way in which the soul and body are two distinct substances. She writes:

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

(AT III 661)

Thus, Elisabeth does not simply search for an account of the causal relation which stands between these two distinct substances. Rather, it seems she wants to arrive at an account of the way mind and body are able to affect one another by revisiting the question of the way in which soul and body are meant to be two really distinct things, and in particular that of what constitutes the mind as substance.

This concern about the nature of the Real Distinction between mind and body carries over into her next letter. There, Elisabeth tries to spell out her worry, and the examples she invokes to do so can help us begin to see her point. She contends, noted just above, that it is easier for her to entertain the idea of the soul's having matter and extension than it conceive of the interaction of an immaterial thing and a material one. And this would seem to imply that she can see only two alternatives to conceiving the relation between soul and body. On the one hand, one can be a substance dualist, as Descartes seems to be, and be left with an apparently intractable problem of interaction. On the other hand, one can be a reductionist materialist, perhaps like Hobbes, and claim that the 'activities' of our soul are just manifestations of a particular sort of bodily state. And indeed, seeing things in these terms is quite reasonable, for it is precisely the way much criticism of Cartesian dualism proceeds. But the way in which Elisabeth supports her contention could well suggest something more. She asks Descartes how he can account for the fact that the soul,

after having had the faculty and the custom of reasoning well, can lose all that by some vapors and that, being able to subsist without the body, and having nothing in common with it, it [the soul] is still so governed by it. (20 June 1643; AT III 685)

Elisabeth thus grounds her worry about the Real Distinction in the sorts of cases in which people who would otherwise have full use of their faculty of reason fall ill – they have a touch of the vapors, say – and thereby lose the ability to think clearly. Perhaps they become delusional, or are muddle-headed, or in some other way lose the capacity to see things as they are or to draw inferences properly. Elisabeth does not see how a substance dualist like Descartes could accommodate these sorts of phenomena. For it would appear, on a strong dualist line, that even if we do have a touch of the vapors we should still in principle be able to think clearly: the soul, after all, on that line, subsists completely independently of the body, and so it should be able to exercise its power of thought no matter what the condition of the body in which it finds itself. Elisabeth's thought is that this principle of independent subsistence is belied by the phenomena. However, in order to explain such cases, Elisabeth need not hold a reductionist materialist account of mind; she need not like Hobbes want to maintain that everything, including thought, is material and so explain these sorts of episodes in terms of some workings of the brain. Rather than taking Elisabeth to be promulgating such

a materialist line here, we might equally understand her to be struggling with a way to preserve the intuition behind Descartes's substance dualism – that is, the intuition that thought is not a mere matter of bodily motions – while at the same time acknowledging that this faculty of reason is still in some way dependent on the body. That is, she could be taken to be gesturing towards a third sort of alternative for understanding the relation between mind and body.

This latter reading can be supported by the next of her letters to Descartes. There, in her July 1 letter, she traces out this position as follows:

Even though extension is not necessary to thought, being not at all repugnant to it, it [that is, extension] could suit some other function of the soul, which is no less essential to it. (1 July 1643; AT IV 2)

Here Elisabeth seems to be toying with an idea that the soul could be distinct from body with regards to thought – extension does not determine our thought and so is not necessary to it – while at the same time being dependent on it in another way. But at this stage of the discussion, this is all Elisabeth can say, and though we do not have any record of Descartes's reply, we might imagine that he would not have understood what she is trying to say. There are many questions to ask: What other function does the soul have besides thought? How does extension, or body, particularly suit the soul's performing that function? What is the middle ground between being not repugnant and not necessary? Answers to these questions are needed if Elisabeth is to distinguish her position both from the reductionist materialist one and Descartes's own apparent strong dualist position of the *Meditations*.

At this point the record of this particular exchange between Descartes and Elisabeth stops. But we can see them resuming discussion on this topic almost two years later. And this time, I will argue, Elisabeth is able to articulate her position more fully. Interestingly their approach to this issue of the relation of soul and body and of the sense in which the soul is an independent thing is quite different. It is to this later exchange which I turn now.

### ELISABETH'S ILLNESS AND DESCARTES'S REMEDY: THE UNION OF SOUL AND BODY REVISITED

The exchange on which I will presently focus is often neglected, even by those who do take Descartes's and Elisabeth's correspondence seriously. I suppose this is because on its face it does not seem to be of any philosophical import. (Indeed Descartes's letter beginning the exchange is omitted from the CSMK collection of Descartes's philosophical correspondence.) In it Descartes and Elisabeth discuss her persistent illness of the Summer of 1645. I think, however, that in looking at this particular exchange we will

find Elisabeth and Descartes once again engaged in clarifying the relation between mind and body. But they do so not through a straightforward investigation of the metaphysical consistency of Descartes's position but rather through as consideration of the passions, the way in which they affect us, and our ability to regulate them.

The discussion begins with Descartes's letter of 18 May 1646. Descartes has learned that Elisabeth 'has had, for three or four weeks, a low-grade fever, accompanied by a dry cough, and that after having been delivered from [this indisposition] for five or six days, the illness returned' (AT IV 201),<sup>5</sup> and he proceeds to offer his diagnosis.<sup>6</sup> We can assume that Descartes does not think that whatever ails Elisabeth has a primarily physiological aetiology, for he does not tell her, as her physicians have, to visit the Spa, nor does he direct her toward any of the other purgatives and astringents that constituted the standard prescriptions of the day. He asserts rather that 'the most common cause of a low-grade fever is sadness' and suggests that the many crises that have befallen her house, and the publicity these events have been accorded, are the 'principle cause of your indisposition' (AT IV 201). Indeed, his diagnosis does make good sense, for apparently, at this time, one of Elisabeth's brothers had challenged either her mother's or her sister's suitor (the story varies depending on whose biography one reads) to a duel which was then suspended. The day after the duel had been scheduled, however, her brother stabbed the suitor in public; the problems associated with this incident only compounded Elisabeth's other family worries, for they had been exiled to the Netherlands from Bohemia upon her father Frederick's losses in war, and the repeated attempts to regain the realm had failed. Moreover, her uncle Charles I of England faced political problems (a civil war!) of his own, which in turn cut off the family's primary source of income. It is no wonder she should be distressed.<sup>7</sup>

Descartes prescribes for Elisabeth a typically neo-Stoic remedy. She ought, he suggests, to reflect on her soul, to take comfort in her own strength, and thereby to become happy. Even while he claims that he is 'not

<sup>5</sup> It is this letter which is missing from CSMK. The translations of this and subsequent passages from this letter are my own.

<sup>6</sup> He feels justified in doing so because Elisabeth had solicited and accepted his medical advice the summer before.

<sup>7</sup> Indeed, it is widely recognized that Elisabeth was plagued by family troubles. I have already mentioned the death of her eldest brother (see fn. 1 above). With the death of her father in 1632, when Elisabeth was 13, the family was left financially dependent on others. Despite support from the English and Dutch governments, they were always in debt. The English Civil War exacerbated an already bad financial situation, while at the same time undoubtedly causing great personal pain. And then there is the other incident which surrounds the correspondence under consideration here. Shortly before this period, in November 1645, another brother, Edward, renounced his Protestant faith to become a Catholic and marry Anne of Gonzaga. Elisabeth was clearly upset by this, as she writes to Descartes, himself a Catholic, to complain (see AT IV 335).

at all like those cruel philosophers, who want their sage to be insensible' (AT IV 201–2), thus distancing himself from the Stoics, he does seem to espouse other paradigmatically Stoic beliefs in his contrasting of vulgar and great souls (Elisabeth, of course, has a great soul, 'the most noble and elevated I know'). While the vulgar let themselves be carried away by the things they come across, those with great souls subject their feelings to reason, and if nothing else, gain strength, and even a sort of pleasure from their ability to support the misfortunes that may befall them.<sup>8</sup> And indeed these same great souls have so perfected their intellect that it is no longer swayed by any thought it may have arrived at solely by its involvement with the body to which it is joined.

What is Elisabeth's reaction to this diagnosis and prescription? It is very curious. Although Elisabeth does seem to appreciate Descartes's awareness of the stresses in her life – something her doctors are blind to – she is skeptical about his proposed remedy. But not in the way one expects. In light of what she had written two years earlier and the questions she had raised about the Real Distinction of soul and body, one expects Elisabeth to challenge the general validity of Descartes's neo-Stoic prescription. In particular, one expects her to take issue with the sort of dualist picture underlying his neo-Stoicism. Descartes's prescription presupposes that even while under the influence of the passions, we will be able to think clearly about our own worth. But, just as our ability to think clearly can be compromised by a touch of the vapors, so could it be by the physiological motions causing a passion such as sadness. And in so far as the physiology of the passions could compromise our reason in this way, Descartes's Stoic remedy would prove ineffective: while melancholic, we would not be able to think clearly enough to administer the remedy. But Elisabeth does not raise this sort of objection directly. Instead, she says something quite remarkable:

Know this, that I have a body imbued with a large part of the weaknesses of my sex, so that it [my body] very easily feels the afflications of the soul and has none of the strength to recover with it [my soul], being of a temperament subject to obstructions. (24 May 1645, AT IV 208)

<sup>8</sup> Those with great souls

have such strong and such powerful reasonings, that even while they have passions, and sometimes feel them even more violently than normal, their reason nevertheless always remains mistress, and makes it that even these afflictions serve them and contribute to the perfect felicity which they enjoy in this life. . . . The greatest of souls, of which I speak, have the satisfaction in themselves, of the things which happen to them, even the most unfortunate and insupportable. Thus, feeling the pain in their bodies they exert themselves to support it patiently, and this test that they make of their strength is agreeable to them. Thus, seeing their friends in some large affliction, they sympathize with their trouble, and do all that is possible to deliver them from it, and do not even fear exposing themselves to death, for this purpose, if it is necessary.

(AT IV 202f)

What is the significance of this remark? Why does Elisabeth introduce her nature as a female at this point? There are two ways of reading this remark. On the one hand, we might understand Elisabeth's remark as expressive of her internalization of a kind of sexist attitude. On the other hand, we might see a note of irony in what she writes. Each of these readings, however, seems to rest on an understanding of the soul-body union akin to the one Elisabeth gestured towards in the earlier exchange.

Let us first consider the reading which takes Elisabeth to have internalized a kind of sexism. There are reasons to take Elisabeth's remark in this way: I have already alluded to Elisabeth's own devaluation of her intellectual capacity; also, in a later letter, without provocation, she regrets that she cannot pay Descartes a visit because of the 'curse of my sex' (AT IV 234);<sup>9</sup> while most likely she offers her menses as a medical reason preventing her visit, her choice of expression suggests that here too she sees her biology as fating her to some evil. While such an interpretation might tempt us simply to dismiss the remark, it is worth considering the assumptions which underlie it. On this line, she seems to be maintaining that women are so closely tied to their bodies that they are subject to them, and thereby incapable, in virtue of their sex alone, of becoming fully rational. That is, Elisabeth wants to deny that Descartes's neo-stoic remedy will work *on her*. But in doing so, she is implicitly admitting that we can in principle regulate our bodily disposition just by using our faculty of reason, by thinking thoughts other than those we find ourselves having. Thus, she also implicitly admits that the soul has a sort of autonomy from the body: it can have these other thoughts at will. With her denial, however, Elisabeth seems to be suggesting that there are certain limits to or conditions on the soul's autonomy. In particular, she seems to suggest her very femaleness proves to be too chronic a condition to overcome; it is akin to a touch of the vapors. Thus, Elisabeth seems to be suggesting that she cannot manage to get beyond her biology and that she has an inability to maintain control of her emotions (the 'afflictions of the soul') through reason: her being a female – a bodily state, if you will – prevents her from achieving the Stoic contentment Descartes recommends to her. And so, while she accepts a certain aspect of Descartes's philosophical position – that the mind has a certain *autonomy* which allows it to maintain control over its own thoughts – she also wants to deny that *her* mind is fully autonomous, that she has that kind of control: she suggests that her bodily condition – simply being female – deprives it of that freedom.

This same point about the autonomy of the mind also emerges if we understand Elisabeth's remark here in the other way – as sounding a note of irony. Read in this way, Elisabeth is not so much denigrating herself as trying to point up what she may have assumed was a king of misogyny on

<sup>9</sup> Elisabeth to Descartes, 22 June 1645. It is remarkable just how enduring this expression has been.

Descartes's part. He does after all assume that whatever ails her rests in a certain emotional incontinence; she would never recover, he suggests, if only her reason would be master. Her response might then be an ironic one, meant to bring Descartes's own assumptions to the surface – that he offers the diagnosis he does because she is a woman, and that, in prescribing the remedy he does, he is suggesting that she effectively deny that she is a woman and be more like a man – for she is pointing out that she cannot help but be female. There is just as much textual evidence for this reading, for later in the letter, after running through a litany of the crises she has faced through the year, she states quite frankly that

if my life were entirely known to you, you would find it more strange that a mind as sensible as my own, has conserved itself for so long, through so many hardships, in a body so weak, without any advice besides that of its own reasoning, and without any consolation but that of its conscience, than you would find strange the cause of the present malady.

(24 May 1645; AT IV 209)

Her point here seems to be that she has had to maintain her sanity in the face of incredible difficulty, and that she has managed to do so should deflate Descartes's pop-psychology.<sup>10</sup> But in taking this line, she must still be read both as accepting the principle of the autonomy of the mind – the view that one has control over one's thoughts – and as insisting that this power of thought is in some way contingent on our bodily state. While on this reading, Elisabeth is maintaining that she *does* have her full faculty of thought, she still notes that this very fact is surprising. Her poor health and weak condition, might well have obscured or otherwise impeded her ability to reason. And in addition, she does not want to deny that her femaleness affects her thought: Her making a remark of this kind at all suggests that she is unwilling to deny that she is female and moreover that this fact of her embodiment figures in who she is and in her ability to reason.<sup>11</sup> What she does deny is that her femaleness is in any way *debilitating* to her power of thought.

No matter which of these readings of this passage we prefer, then, we can

<sup>10</sup> Despite the self-assurance that such an ironic tone of voice may reveal, it also seems clear that Elisabeth is less than confident: she presses the point of her own weakness, both physical and intellectual, again and again, in this letter and in others, and consistently chastises herself for failing to understand and for asking what she takes to be stupid questions. Such language could of course be simply polite deference to Descartes, a testament to her manners, rather than a reflection of her opinion of herself. For another somewhat equivocal statement of self-esteem on Elisabeth's part, see her later letter to Descartes of 4 December 1649: 'Do not think that such an advantageous description [of Queen Christina] gives me anything to be jealous about; rather it leads me to esteem myself a little more than I did before she gave me an idea of a person so accomplished, which liberates our sex from the imputation of imbecility and weakness which the pedants want to give it' (AT V 452). I do not think any part of my discussion rests on how we read Elisabeth's self-denigratory remarks.

<sup>11</sup> Neither does Elisabeth adopt the essentialist position. That is, she does not make the strong claim that she, because she is female, thinks differently.

see Elisabeth as adhering to a certain position on the relation of mind and body. On this position, the mind is autonomous: it has its own proper activity – thought – which allows us to have control over what we think. If we find ourselves burdened with many hardships, we need not dwell on them: we can think of other things. But Elisabeth also wants to suggest that the mind's being autonomous in this way, its ability to engage in this activity, is dependent on the condition of the body in which it finds itself. The difference between the two readings of Elisabeth's remark lies in the details of this dependence.

In order to assign Elisabeth this position, I have had to do a bit of interpretive work; Elisabeth's philosophical commitments lie beneath the surface of her remarks. But with what follows in this exchange, we can see Elisabeth herself coming to explicate this position, and so to read this whole exchange as a new effort on her part to clarify the relation between the soul and the body, both how they are distinct and the way in which the body does have a bearing on thought. That is, we can read Elisabeth as here working towards an intermediary position, one between the substance dualism she originally identified with Descartes's own and the materialism which she then seemed to take to be the only alternative to that dualism. In this regard, it is interesting that in her reaction to Descartes's Stoic advice, Elisabeth does not seem to even entertain the problem of interaction which concerned her in the earlier discussion, even though it would seem that that problem should still be alive: how can the thoughts we have affect our bodily state? Instead, the other problem – that of the relation between mind and body, and of the nature of the soul as substance – has come to the fore. Let us look at that ensuing discussion.

Descartes, in his response, quite pointedly insists upon the *general* application of his diagnosis and remedy. While acknowledging the particular pressures on Elisabeth, he wants to claim that everyone, men and women alike, though each may be affected by their peculiar circumstances, can and must maintain the mastery of reason. He says:

I can readily understand how many things continually distress Your Highness, and I know that they are more difficult to overcome when they are of such a kind that true reason does not command us to oppose them directly or try to remove them. They are domestic enemies with whom we are forced to keep company, and we have to be perpetually on guard lest they injure us.

(AT IV 218, CSMK 249)

He thus persists in pursuing his psychological diagnosis, and he repeats his neo-Stoic prescription, 'so far as possible to distract our imagination and senses from them, and when obliged by prudence to consider them [these difficulties], to do so with our intellect alone' (Ibid.). Descartes then proceeds to illustrate the effectiveness of his proposed remedy for *anyone*. Each person, he claims, has his own bodily disruption, whether to happiness

or to sadness or to some other affective state, and in order to overcome a poor disposition each needs only to avoid thinking of, say, sad things while making every effort to consider objects which would 'furnish contentment and joy' (Ibid.). He goes so far as to maintain that thinking such happy thoughts is alone 'capable of restoring [someone with such a poor disposition] to health, even if his spleen and lungs were already in poor condition because of the bad condition of the blood caused by sadness' (AT IV 219–20; CSMK 250). He even maintains that an application of this remedy to *himself* was enough to cure him of a disease he purports to have inherited from his mother, and so to foil the doctors who all believed that he would die young. Descartes thus seems simply to be reiterating his position. He does not respond directly to Elisabeth's observations about her femaleness, for he does not here argue that femaleness is not a chronic condition. Rather, he implicitly assimilates her femaleness to any other bodily 'condition' and propounds again his view that *all* bodily dispositions can be overcome by reason alone. And so Descartes still seems committed here to a strong separation of mind and body: our capacity for thought is in no way contingent or otherwise dependent on our physical condition for him.

The correspondence continues in this neo-Stoic vein; indeed Descartes proposes that they read Seneca's *De Vita Beata*, undoubtedly thinking that such a study will help Elisabeth overcome her illness. But Descartes finds the work less than rigorous, and Elisabeth is still skeptical about Stoicism. She, in turn, comes to frame her objection in a slightly different way. And here is where her insight about the nature of the soul-body union becomes explicit. The reformulated objection comes in response to Descartes's discussion of *la béatitude* – happiness or Stoic contentment. While Descartes is not particularly clear about the content of this concept, at its center is the notion of willing, the act of resolving to do something, for Cartesian virtue consists of nothing but 'a firm and constant resolution to carry out whatever reason recommends' (AT IV 265; CSMK 257–8). Elisabeth remarks upon this relation of will and reason as she raises her objection. She writes:

I still do not know how to rid myself of doubt that we can arrive at the happiness of which you speak, without the assistance of that which does not depend absolutely on the will, because *there are some diseases which altogether take away the power of reasoning, and by consequence that of enjoying a reasonable satisfaction, others which diminish its [reason's] force*, and prevent our following maxims that good sense would have forged, and which render the most moderate person subject to letting themselves be carried away by her passions, and less capable of untangling herself from the accidents of fortune, which require a prompt resolution.

(16 August 1645; AT IV 269; emphasis mine)

Elisabeth here is finally able to articulate the view I have argued is implicit in her raising the issue of her femaleness. For she here claims both that our faculty of reason essentially involves a kind of control over our thoughts and

that our physical condition can affect that faculty. This time, however, she frames her objection in more general terms: she objects that our bodily condition affects our ability to think otherwise, that is to will and to reason. Her point is not obscured by the consideration of whether her being female precludes her being fully rational.

In seeing Elisabeth's position laid out before us, we can begin to see the significance of her original questions to Descartes in her letters of 1643. There, recall, she asked Descartes to distinguish further the soul's activity from its substance, and to explain more clearly his concept of substance. Descartes, recall, ignored this question. Now we can see that she might have been driving at just this way of understanding the relation of mind and body. In this correspondence of the summer of 1645, Elisabeth points out that reason is intimately tied to our bodily condition: in order to think properly, we need to be in a state of good health. That is, while thought itself is an activity through which the mind demonstrates its essential autonomy from the body – through the mind alone, we determine our thoughts – still our capacity to engage in this activity, our rational faculty, depends on our being in a certain state physiologically. That is, the body enables the mind to be what it is. In making this sort of claim about the relation between mind and body, Elisabeth need not take up a reductionist materialist position; she need not claim that all our thoughts are just bodily states, and so maintain, that our thoughts are essentially beyond our control, determined by the causal laws governing material things; that is, she need not maintain that thought is entirely subject to the body. That our being in a certain sort of bodily state enables us to achieve rationality in this way need not compromise the *autonomy* of thought – the activity of thought – from the body. But in insisting that we determine our thoughts, neither need Elisabeth be committed to the kind of substance dualism that Descartes appears to espouse. For maintaining that thought is an autonomous activity does not require us to claim that it is an independent *substance*; we need not think of thought as an *entity subsisting in and by itself*. Elisabeth's insight, I take it, is to draw this distinction between autonomy and the sort of independence that makes something a substance.

It is interesting that Descartes concedes Elisabeth's point this time around:

You observe very truly that there are diseases which take away the power of reasoning and with it the power of enjoying the satisfaction proper to a rational mind. This shows me that what I said in general about every person should be taken to apply only to those who have the free use of their reason and in addition know the way that must be followed to reach such happiness.

(1 September 1645; AT IV 281–2; CSMK 262)

Descartes, in his initial response to Elisabeth, implicitly acknowledges that being female is no different than any other individual-specific bodily disposition, but at this point in the correspondence he was not yet clear on the

degree to which we can exert our will over our bodies: he claims he is not a Stoic while prescribing a pragmatically Stoic remedy. Perhaps his commitment to the even distribution of good sense to all human beings blinds him to Elisabeth's more general point, for in his second response, once Elisabeth has gone on from her own experience as a woman to home in on her philosophical position, he no longer endorses a strongly Stoic line, and he perhaps even tempers his substance dualism. It is interesting that in the *Passions of the Soul*, a work written at Elisabeth's request as a result of this portion of their correspondence, Descartes wants to distinguish the functions of the soul from those of the body, but he does not refer to them as two distinct substances. The line Elisabeth presses shows Descartes that in claiming that critical reflection is at the core of reason, he need not deny that the way we find ourselves in the world will very much affect our thought. Indeed, our embodiment might well be understood to be an integral part of reason itself, for if Elisabeth is right, our bodily health, our physiological integrity, enables us to exercise our own proper faculty of thought. This insight too gains expression in the *Passions*, for in that work more than any other of his, Descartes respects the fact that we are embodied – the passions all find their source in our bodies for him, and interestingly *générosité*, through which we are to remedy the disorders of our passions, has its own proper physiological state for him, for it is a *passion* as well as a virtue – while at the same time, in his consideration of the regulation of the passions, he adheres to the Stoic notion of the centrality of the will. This double aspect of the passions gains its first considered expression in the part of his correspondence with Elisabeth I have been discussing.

Through considering a more extended portion of their correspondence, I hope to have shown that Elisabeth is not merely a critic of Descartes but also has philosophical views of her own. I have argued that we can see in her correspondence with Descartes the development of a position of the nature of the human mind. First, in the early part of their correspondence, Elisabeth begins to carve out a logical space for an alternative metaphysics which is neither a substance dualism nor a reductionist materialism. Then, as she and Descartes turn to discuss how her passions affect her, she comes to articulate just what this metaphysics is. In her view, the mind is autonomous – we are agents in our thinking and determine our own thoughts. Nevertheless, in order to be autonomous in this way, the mind depends upon the good health of the body. In so far as the body enables the mind's proper functioning in this way, it is necessary to the mind. We might still want to ask questions about the nature of the union of mind and body on Elisabeth's account. On one front, we might want a more complete account of the way in which our bodily state enables our thought. What does it take to be a 'disease' which impedes our faculty of reason? How does Elisabeth ultimately – and rightly – distinguish between being a female and a genuine 'disease' which does affect our rationality? What is it about these 'diseases' which make us unable to think freely? Would she want to say that the passions are such diseases?

Or that perhaps only certain passions, such as deep melancholy or anger, are? We could accept the union as Elisabeth outlines it – accept that our bodily state is an enabling condition of thought – and ask where that leaves us: How does Elisabeth avoid a specious form of epiphenomenalism? That is, how is this understanding of the relation between mind and body supposed to explain our having the particular sensations, or perceptions, of things that we do have? What might Elisabeth have to say about the immortality of the soul, if she wants to insist that the body is an enabling condition of rationality?

These are all I think relevant and interesting questions to pursue, and doing so would involve engaging with Elisabeth as a philosopher in her own right. I cannot undertake to do this at all adequately here. However, I do want to make a few brief points. First, let me say right out that if Elisabeth does indeed want to maintain that the condition of the body enables the soul to be rational, I do not see how she can maintain that the soul is immortal, so long as it is to remain a rational soul in its immortality. Second, Elisabeth can avoid charges of epiphenomenalism. For in insisting that the mind is autonomous she need not claim that the mind is in a realm of its own – suspended causally from the body and the world. She might admit that the power we have over our thoughts does have causal efficacy; she might, for instance, subscribe to Descartes's psychotherapy as a cure for her physical maladies. In doing so, she will, of course, face a new challenge – that of explaining just how changes of mind can affect changes of body. And this question is related to that about how we come to have the particular sensations we do. It seems that there are several ways the answers to these questions could go. For one, it does not seem to me that an interactionist explanation is ruled out on this model as we are no longer faced with the problem of getting two really distinct substances to meet. But nor does it seem that such an interactionist resolution is the only way to go. Elisabeth might well prefer to adopt a more Aristotelian alternative to explain our perceptions and intentional actions. Finally, that Elisabeth does not fully articulate what counts as a bodily condition enabling rationality might count in her favor. For to do so would amount to defining what counts as a full-fledged human being, and that is surely a politically charged endeavor. In remaining silent, Elisabeth seems to err on the side of inclusion in the class of humans rather than exclusion, and so she manages to avoid struggles like those Locke has in considering monsters and changelings.

Rather than pursue these lines, however, I want to return to consider briefly Elisabeth's practice of philosophy. Does this investigation into this portion of her correspondence with Descartes give us any insight into why she never systematically presents a philosophical position? Is there an explanation of why Elisabeth *is* more able to articulate her philosophical position in the context she does? I am not sure that I have any answers to these questions, but I do want to consider them in light of Elisabeth's philosophical style.

## ELISABETH'S PHILOSOPHICAL STYLE

I remarked at the beginning of this paper that part of the difficulty in taking Elisabeth as a philosopher in her own right lies in the lack of a systematic presentation of her philosophical position. And I hope that the effort required to extract a positive philosophical position from her letters has borne out this claim. We might well ask ourselves why this is so. Why does she not promulgate a philosophical theory of her own? There are of course many sorts of answers one might try to give to this question – most obviously, one might offer a social-historical argument appealing to the opportunities available to women in the mid-seventeenth century: perhaps it was acceptable for them to correspond with the great (male) intellects of their time and not to write anything of their own. Presumably, one could also appeal to the details of Elisabeth's life and circumstances and come up with more personal reasons preventing her from writing her own work. In this regard, the context provided by the series of letters I have been considering may prove quite useful. But, while I think there is much to learn in pursuing these avenues, they are not the routes I want to take here. Instead, I want to ask another question: Why should we be bothered by the absence of any systematic presentation of a philosophical position on Elisabeth's part? Does her not having one make her any less of a philosopher?

It may well be true that Elisabeth's philosophical activity consists largely in her raising objections to what she reads. But there are two ways of raising objections. One way is to attend to details, to catalogue lists of inconsistencies and counter-examples. Certainly this way of practising philosophy is important and useful, for it is in response to these sorts of objections that a philosopher clarifies his or her position. Elisabeth is sometimes engaged in this sort of activity with respect to Descartes. In letters I have not considered here, she points to apparent inconsistencies in the physics he puts forward in the *Principles* (see her letter of 1 August 1644, acknowledging his dedication of that book to her), and she certainly draws on her wealth of practical experience in the later letters, taking Descartes to task for making being virtuous seem like an easy matter. And it can seem as if her appeal to the sorts of diseases which seem to take away our faculty of reason is an objection of the same order: Elisabeth might well be read as simply raising a counter-example to press Descartes to further articulate his own position. In so far as Elisabeth raises these sorts of objections, she should count as a philosopher, but it is easy to see how she might fade into the background as a thinker: her work is that of a helper, and she does not have a program of her own.

There is, however, another way of raising objections. The second sort of objection takes the same form as the first – it involves pointing up inconsistencies and invoking counter-examples – but it has a very different impact. These second sort of questions do not demand answers which serve to articulate the details of a position. Rather, they are incisive questions,

going straight to the assumptions on which the philosophical position rests. It is this sort of question – the incisive one – which typifies Elisabeth's philosophical style in the letters I have examined here. And this sort of question, while it need not involve putting forward theses of one's own as an alternative (though I have suggested that Elisabeth's questions do have a view in their background), serves a central role in the practice of philosophy as the systematic presentation of positive philosophical programs. These questions are more momentous; they force a philosopher either to take a stand, or to revise, his or her views. And insofar as these questions are challenging, they play a more direct role in the arrival at a position, and so the questioner deserves a bit more recognition. Indeed, often times the questioner is pressed to offer a coherent alternative to make the point come home, and so ends up being a philosopher in a positive sense.

Now, that Elisabeth is asking particularly incisive questions is not readily apparent, at least not to Descartes. For he initially treats her questions as though they were of the former kind: in his answers he sets about explaining his own view more thoroughly without ever calling into question his basic presuppositions. It is not until quite late in their discussion that he feels the force of her questions, and sets about reconsidering his position. But this is the nature of the incisive question: the person to whom such questions are directed must be in a frame of mind which allows them to reconsider the value of what is most dear to them.

These are two things I would like to note in this regard. The first is about the relation of Elisabeth's way of doing philosophy to her own self-conception. The second is about the appropriateness of both Elisabeth's insights and Descartes's arising in the context in which they do. First, often the very questions which challenge the presuppositions of a given problem are those which on their face seem most naïve. That is, they can seem like stupid questions; it can appear that one does not understand what is supposed to have been obvious, especially before the person to whom they are addressed feels their force. To persist in asking these naïve questions either requires an almost incredible degree of self-effacement – one needs to be completely comfortable with the possibility that one may look foolish – or an incredible degree of confidence – one needs to be sure that one is right in asking these questions. By considering both of these possibilities, I think, we can begin to understand Elisabeth's own self-devaluation: we might see her persistent self-effacement either as arising from her philosophical temperament or as said with some irony, and so revealing the confidence of one who is trying to get her correspondent to see her point.

Second, it seems appropriate to me that the insights Elisabeth and Descartes have about the union of soul and body arise out of a quite personal discussion of the emotions. For one, the passions are a topic suitable to the content of the insight. They, more than sensations, show us just how our bodies do affect us, and in particular affect our capacity to think clearly about things. The way we feel about things often does color our perceptions

and leaves us with certain prejudices. But equally, we can regulate our passions, and do so just by considering the reasons *not* to feel the way we do, and this very possibility of their being regulated in this way suggests that they do, at least most often, leave our faculty of reason intact. But sometimes, our emotions do get the better of us: anger and sadness are notorious for their ability to cloud our judgement. The passions thus provide just the right sort of context for Elisabeth's making the point she does about the soul-body union. They serve to illustrate her thesis about the relation between mind and body.

But also the personal nature of the discussion serves as an appropriate context for challenging one of Descartes's most fundamental tenets. The focus of their discussion is *not* Descartes's metaphysics but rather Elisabeth's depression. Descartes is trying to help Elisabeth to feel differently, and for him that requires that she sees things differently. Feeling differently, for him, involves taking stock of what we think and what we take to be important to us, and sometimes this involves asking ourselves hard questions, and being willing to answer them. For her part in this discussion, Elisabeth is willing to do just this, and her willingness to engage with him in these very personal matters I suspect goes some way towards her facilitating her own recovery. Equally, we might think that Elisabeth's own openness encourages a similar attitude in Descartes. He responds to her trust in his good will with an equal trust in hers, and so he is finally able to hear what she is trying to say. In this way, Elisabeth is not simply a reader of Descartes. She is a friend, and a good friend, as he is to her. And we might understand her as engaging Descartes philosophically, and displaying her own philosophical talents, in just this way. As a friend, she asks and presses him to answer the hard questions, directly engaging with one whose thoughts she finds interesting, challenging him to clarify his position. And it is as a friend that Descartes responds, for he in turn, if he does not always understand, still is receptive to her thoughts and so challenges her to articulate and clarify her own views about philosophical topics. This way of doing philosophy might not lend itself easily to a systematic presentation of one's view, but it still strikes me as both a legitimate and a good way of doing philosophy.<sup>12</sup>

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