

WOMEN PHILOSOPHERS OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

JACQUELINE BROAD

Monash University



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge, CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

© Jacqueline Broad 2002

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2002

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Baskerville Monotype 11 / 12.5 pt *System* L^AT_EX 2_ε [TB]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Broad, Jacqueline.

Women philosophers of the seventeenth century / Jacqueline Broad.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 81295 x

1. Women philosophers. 2. Philosophy, Modern – 17th century. I. Title.

B105.W6 B76 2002 190'.82'09032 – dc21 2002067376

ISBN 0 521 81295 x hardback

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>page x</i>
Introduction	i
1 Elisabeth of Bohemia	13
2 Margaret Cavendish	35
3 Anne Conway	65
4 Mary Astell	90
5 Damaris Masham	114
6 Catharine Trotter Cockburn	141
Conclusion	166
<i>Bibliography</i>	168
<i>Index</i>	184

Elisabeth of Bohemia

Recent commentators have raised methodological questions about how women philosophers of the past can be incorporated into the philosophical canon.¹ One common and useful method of inclusion is to show that these women participated in the great intellectual debates of their time, and that they were perceptive critics of their famous male contemporaries. This is the usual approach taken to the philosophical writings of Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, the friend and correspondent of René Descartes. On the basis of her famous exchange of letters with Descartes (from 1643 to 1649), Elisabeth is celebrated as one of the first writers to raise the problem of mind–body interaction for Cartesian dualism. She is also remembered as the intellectual inspiration behind Descartes’ final treatise, *The Passions of the Soul* (1649), a work that developed out of their correspondence. In the preface to another text, Descartes commends Elisabeth for ‘the outstanding and incomparable sharpness’ of her intellect.² He describes her as ‘the only person I have so far found who has completely understood all my previously published works’.³ Today she is one of the best-known early modern women philosophers – despite the fact that she left no systematic philosophical writings of her own, and that her key philosophical contributions are in the form of letters. Other than her correspondence with Descartes, there are only a handful of letters from Elisabeth to other male thinkers, such as Nicolas

¹ Here I am thinking of Sarah Hutton, ‘Damaris Cudworth, Lady Masham: Between Platonism and Enlightenment’, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 1:1 (1993), 29–54; Sarah Hutton, ‘Like Father Like Daughter? The Moral Philosophy of Damaris Cudworth, Lady Masham’, presented at the South Eastern meeting of the American Philosophical Association in Atlanta, 28–30 December 1996; and O’Neill, ‘Disappearing Ink’, pp. 39–43.

² René Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985–91), vol. 1, p. 192.

³ *Ibid.*

Malebranche,⁴ Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz,⁵ and the Quaker Robert Barclay (1648–90).⁶

Nevertheless, historians of philosophy agree that there is also something limiting about the ‘add women and stir’ approach to women philosophers of the past. In the case of Elisabeth, this ‘assimilation’ method has meant that until recently the study of her own philosophical themes remained incomplete. Commentators examined the philosophical import of Elisabeth’s objections to Descartes, and acknowledged the impact that her queries had on Descartes’ subsequent writings;⁷ but their studies did not really proceed beyond the first year of the correspondence. As a consequence, there is the perception that Elisabeth’s sole philosophical contribution is a particularly astute re-phrasing of the mind–body problem.

More recently, scholars have started to draw out the implicit arguments, themes, and lines of development in the bulk of Elisabeth’s letters.⁸ In ‘Princess Elizabeth and Descartes: The Union of Soul and Body and

⁴ Nicolas Malebranche, *Oeuvres complètes de Malebranche*, edited by A. Robinet (Paris: J. Vrin, 1958–84), vols. 18–19. Elisabeth made contact with Malebranche through her sister, Louise, Abbess of Maubisson.

⁵ E. J. Aiton, *Leibniz: A Biography* (Bristol: Adam Hilger, 1985), pp. 90–1; and Robert Merrihew Adams, *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 192–3. Elisabeth met Leibniz at her sister Sophie’s court in Hanover in Winter 1678. He wrote to Elisabeth in the same year on the subject of the Cartesian ontological argument for the existence of God. He then visited Elisabeth on her sick bed at the Herford Abbey in 1680.

⁶ Colonel D. Barclay, *Reliquiae Barclaianae: Correspondence of Colonel D. Barclay and Robert Barclay of Urie and his son Robert, including Letters from Princess Elisabeth of the Rhine, the Earl of Perth, the Countess of Sutherland, William Penn, George Fox and others* (London: Winter and Bailey, 1870).

⁷ Daniel Garber, ‘Understanding Interaction: What Descartes Should Have Told Elisabeth’, *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 21, Supplement (1983), 15–32; Ruth Mattern, ‘Descartes’s Correspondence with Elizabeth: Concerning Both the Union and Distinction of Mind and Body’, in *Descartes: Critical and Interpretive Essays*, edited by Michael Hooker (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1978); R. C. Richardson, ‘The “Scandal” of Cartesian Interactionism’, *Mind* 91 (1982), 20–37; and Beatrice H. Zedler, ‘The Three Princesses’, *Hypatia* 4:1 (1989), 28–63.

⁸ Erica Harth, *Cartesian Women: Versions and Subversions of Rational Discourse in the Old Regime* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. 67–78; Albert A. Johnstone, ‘The Bodily Nature of the Self or What Descartes Should Have Conceded Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia’, in *Giving the Body Its Due*, edited by Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 16–47; Andrea Nye, ‘Polity and Prudence: The Ethics of Elisabeth, Princess Palatine’, in *Hypatia’s Daughters: Fifteen Hundred Years of Women Philosophers*, edited by Linda Lopez McAlister (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996); Andrea Nye, *The Princess and the Philosopher: Letters of Elisabeth of the Palatine to René Descartes* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999); Lisa Shapiro, ‘Princess Elizabeth and Descartes: The Union of Soul and Body and the Practice of Philosophy’, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 7:3 (1999), 503–20; Deborah Tollefsen, ‘Princess Elisabeth and the Problem of Mind–Body Interaction’, *Hypatia* 14:3 (1999), 59–77; and

the Practice of Philosophy', Lisa Shapiro traces the development of Elisabeth's thought throughout the correspondence, interpreting Elisabeth's letters to Descartes in light of Elisabeth's own independent position on the relationship between the soul and body. Shapiro's point is that Elisabeth takes a unique approach to substances, one that lies somewhere in between dualism and a strict monistic-materialism. Similarly, in her 'Polity and Prudence: The Ethics of Elisabeth, Princess Palatine', Andrea Nye argues that Elisabeth adopts an original *moral* position of her own. Then in her book, *The Princess and the Philosopher*, Nye claims that this moral outlook stems from Elisabeth's 'nondualist metaphysics of thinking body and material mind'.⁹ Both writers suggest that Elisabeth's famous objection can be seen as a symptom of her broader dissatisfaction with Descartes' dualist metaphysics.

In this chapter, I examine Elisabeth's criticisms of soul-body dualism in her correspondence with Descartes, also with the aim of highlighting Elisabeth's independent concerns. First, I emphasise that Elisabeth is a Cartesian in terms of her philosophical method and her application of Descartes' criterion of truth and certainty (clear and distinct ideas). In this sense, Elisabeth can be regarded as one of the earliest female disciples of Cartesian reason, and a precursor to feminists in her own time. I further demonstrate that this sympathy for Cartesianism extends to her broader metaphysics, and that many of Elisabeth's suggestions are *not* as anti-dualist, or as incompatible with Cartesian metaphysics, as Shapiro and Nye suggest. Nevertheless, I agree with these writers that women thinkers such as Elisabeth should be regarded as more than mere handmaidens to the great philosophical masters. If we are to examine their philosophical contributions, and see these women as more than surrogate men or 'men in petticoats',¹⁰ we must not lose sight of what is distinctive about *women's* thought. For this reason, I highlight the critical content of Elisabeth's letters, and especially those queries and objections she raises from a woman's point of view. On the basis of these letters, Elisabeth can be regarded as a precursor to modern feminist philosophers who give an equal role to the body and the emotions in their moral and metaphysical

Thomas E. Wartenberg, 'Descartes's Mood: The Question of Feminism in the Correspondence with Elisabeth', in Bordo (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of René Descartes*, pp. 190–212. See also Eileen O'Neill, 'Elisabeth of Bohemia (1618–80)', in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward Craig (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), vol. 111, pp. 267–9.

⁹ Nye, *Princess and the Philosopher*, p. xii.

¹⁰ Mary Astell, *The Christian Religion, As Profess'd by a Daughter Of The Church of England. In a Letter to the Right Honourable, T.L. C.I.* (London: R. Wilkin, 1705), p. 293.

writings. She also anticipates many of the metaphysical concerns of later seventeenth-century women philosophers in England.

I

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 members 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'.¹¹ In a letter to Alphonse Pollot, dated 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.'¹²

Although Elisabeth is chiefly remembered as a critic of Descartes, there are in fact strong Cartesian elements in her thinking. Her general approach to philosophy is in stark contrast to that of her scholastic friend, Anna Maria van Schurman (1607–78).¹³ The early relationship between these women can be seen as a microcosm of the 'ancient *versus* modern' debate that flourished in the seventeenth century. Elisabeth apparently first met Schurman at the University of Leiden.¹⁴ At the time, Schurman was known as one of the most learned women in seventeenth-century Europe. She was the first woman to study at the University of Utrecht, and the protégé of Descartes' adversary, the Aristotelian philosopher Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676). Schurman and Elisabeth engaged in a brief correspondence from around 1639, shortly after the publication in Latin of Schurman's *Dissertatio* (1638).¹⁵ In this work, Schurman appeals

¹¹ Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*, in *Philosophical Writings*, vol. 1, p. 192.

¹² Descartes to Pollot, 6 October 1642; in *Descartes: His Moral Philosophy and Psychology*, translated with an introduction by John J. Blom (New York: New York University Press, 1978), p. 105; and René Descartes, *Oeuvres de Descartes*, edited by Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, new edition (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1996), vol. III, p. 577.

¹³ On Schurman's feminism and philosophy, see Joyce Irwin, 'Learned Woman of Utrecht: Anna-Maria van Schurman', in *Women Writers of the Seventeenth Century*, edited by Katharina Wilson and Frank Warnke (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1989), pp. 164–85; Caroline van Eck, 'The First Dutch Feminist Tract? Anna Maria van Schurman's Discussion of Women's Aptitude for the Study of Arts and Sciences', and Angela Roothaan, 'Anna Maria van Schurman's "Reformation" of Philosophy', both in *Choosing the Better Part: Anna Maria van Schurman (1607–1678)*, edited by Mirjam de Baar, *et al.*, and translated by Lynne Richards (Dordrecht and London: Kluwer, 1996), pp. 43–54, 103–16; and Eileen O'Neill, 'Schurman, Anna Maria Van (1607–78)', in Craig (ed.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. VIII, pp. 556–9.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Godfrey, *A Sister of Prince Rupert: Elizabeth Princess Palatine and Abbess of Herford* (London and New York: John Lane, 1909), p. 58.

¹⁵ This work was translated into English as *The Learned Maid or, Whether a Maid may be a Scholar* (1659).

to Aristotelian principles in defence of the view that 'the study of letters is fitting for a Christian woman'. Like Voetius, Schurman follows the path of scholasticism.

Elisabeth, on the other hand, shares Descartes' mistrust of ancient authority and book learning. In one letter to Descartes, Elisabeth emphasises that she does not follow his views 'out of prejudice or indolent imitation', but because his way of reasoning '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'.¹⁶ 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 the Method*, Descartes asserts that all human beings, however dull or slow, possess a natural capacity for reasoning. He emphasises 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 he or she begins with self-evident ideas in the mind, and proceeds from simple to complex ideas in an orderly, rigorous manner.

Schurman, however, appreciates the value of studying historical texts and the methods of the ancients. In one letter to Elisabeth (7 September 1639), Schurman eulogises 'the livelier way the examples [of Tacitus] strike the senses and the imagination than do the precepts of philosophy'.¹⁷ Elisabeth, on the other hand, believes that human knowledge is limited because 'the greater part use their thought only with reference to the senses': 'Even among those who apply themselves to study, few use anything but their memory, and few take truth as the goal of their labour.'¹⁸ Like Descartes, Elisabeth believes that only the overthrow of preconceived opinions and detachment from the senses can lead to certainty. Perhaps in an effort to convert Elisabeth, in another letter, dated 26 January 1644, Schurman says 'It is true that I have high regard for the Scholastic Doctors':¹⁹

¹⁶ Elisabeth to Descartes, 16 August 1645; in Blom (tr.), *Descartes*, p. 135; and Descartes, *Oeuvres*, vol. IV, p. 269. There is no unabridged edition of the Descartes–Elisabeth correspondence in English. As a rule, I give references to the English translation first, and then to the original language.

¹⁷ Anna Maria van Schurman, *Whether a Christian Woman Should be Educated and Other Writings from Her Intellectual Circle*, edited and translated by Joyce L. Irwin (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 58.

¹⁸ Elisabeth to Descartes, 28 October 1645; in Blom (tr.), *Descartes*, p. 165; and Descartes, *Oeuvres*, vol. IV, p. 321.

¹⁹ Schurman, *Whether a Christian Woman*, pp. 66–7.

I do not wish to deny that they sometimes go astray through vain and dangerous speculations, which have brought upon them the censure of a number of learned people of our time. Nevertheless that ought not to prejudice either the solidity or the excellence of their ideas, which we are accustomed to admire in their works, when it is a question either of clarifying the secrets of philosophy or of sustaining the highest points of the Christian religion against secular skeptics and atheists. It would be hard to tell whether they have been more ingenious in conjuring up doubts and objections or more adept in resolving them; whether they have been more rash in undertaking lofty and difficult matters or more fortunate and capable in clearing them up... it is not strange that they have arrived at such a high degree of perfection, inasmuch as they have not scorned the legacy of their predecessors or the heritage of all past centuries.²⁰

Schurman's remarks are obviously directed against Cartesianism, a philosophy that *does* scorn the legacy of its predecessors. While Descartes' method of doubt is specifically designed to overthrow Aristotelian metaphysics, Schurman criticises those who set 'chaotic muddles of errors' against 'the brilliant light' of Aristotle.²¹ Her remarks about 'secular skeptics and atheists' also echo Voetius's claim that Descartes' writings controvert traditional theology.²² Schurman herself had a difficult personal relationship with Descartes, whom she first met in Utrecht in 1635. Descartes suspected that Schurman was too much under the influence of Voetius;²³ he once referred to her as 'the greatest pedant in the world';²⁴ and she was apparently insulted by Descartes' remark that reading the Bible in Hebrew was a waste of time. Possibly because of these differences, Elisabeth and Schurman lost touch after their brief correspondence. But in their later years, the two women shared a common interest in religious mysticism, and were reconciled in around 1670, when Elisabeth offered asylum to Schurman and her Labadist friends at the Herford Abbey.

Elisabeth's attitude toward Cartesian reason and the Cartesian approach to philosophy is not unusual for a woman of her time – it is Schurman who is the exception. Descartes' works taught women that a poor formal education need not prevent them from engaging in philosophy: his new method can be practised without an extensive library and a scholastic training; the only prerequisite is one's natural reasoning ability. From 1640 to 1660, this aspect of Cartesian philosophy had a notable impact on the celebrated French 'salons', those informal, female-led

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 67. ²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Around this time (1643 to 1644), Voetius publicly accused Descartes of slander.

²³ Descartes to Marin Mersenne, 11 November 1640; in Descartes, *Oeuvres*, vol. VIII, p. 388.

²⁴ Godfrey, *A Sister of Prince Rupert*, p. 116.

circles of intellectual discussion. In their day, the salon women – including Anne de la Vigne (1634–84), Marie Dupré (dates unknown), and Catherine Descartes (1637–1706), the philosopher’s niece – were known as ‘Cartésiennes’, or followers of Descartes. Today, however, scholars emphasise that the salon women are also highly critical of Descartes’ doctrines. In *Cartesian Women*, Erica Harth observes that their admiration of Descartes is always qualified: ‘their writings display a critical attitude toward those features of Descartes’s philosophy that were to have the greatest impact on the development of modern rational discourse: his dualism, mechanism, and objectivity’.²⁵ But while they might be critical of ‘broad trends of the new rationality’, they do not raise specific or detailed philosophical objections to Cartesian metaphysics.²⁶ Their writings are often in the form of poems, and their criticisms are couched in the language of metaphor, analogy, and allusion.

Elisabeth, on the other hand, raises precise queries from a distinctive philosophical position. In this respect, she is much closer to her English counterparts, Margaret Cavendish, Anne Conway, Mary Astell, Damaris Masham, and Catharine Trotter Cockburn.

II

Elisabeth’s letters raise queries 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 emphasises that ‘I am not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship’,²⁷ 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

²⁵ Harth, *Cartesian Women*, p. 66. See also Erica Harth, ‘Cartesian Women’, and Eileen O’Neill, ‘Women Cartesians, “Feminine Philosophy”, and Historical Exclusion’, both in Bordo (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of René Descartes*, pp. 213–31, and 232–57.

²⁶ Harth, *Cartesian Women*, p. 66. More recently, Eileen O’Neill argues that these women do not have even a ‘critical attitude’ toward Cartesian dualism. For her argument, see O’Neill, ‘Women Cartesians’, pp. 239–45.

²⁷ Descartes, *Meditations*, in *Philosophical Writings*, vol. 11, p. 56.

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'.²⁸ 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 of this latter'.²⁹ 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'.³⁰ 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 faints'.³¹

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.³² These three notions can be recognised 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'.³³ 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

²⁸ Elisabeth to Descartes, 6/16 May 1643; in Blom (tr.), *Descartes*, p. 106; and Descartes, *Oeuvres*, vol. III, p. 661.

²⁹ *Ibid.* ³⁰ *Ibid.* ³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Descartes to Elisabeth, 21 May 1643; in Blom (tr.), *Descartes*, p. 108; and Descartes, *Oeuvres*, vol. III, p. 665.

³³ Descartes to Elisabeth, 21 May 1643; in Blom (tr.), *Descartes*, p. 108; and Descartes, *Oeuvres*, vol. III, pp. 665–6.

the senses has rendered the notions of extension, figures, and movements very much more familiar to us than the others'.³⁴ 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 Ruth 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.³⁵

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.³⁶

³⁴ Descartes to Elisabeth, 21 May 1643; in Blom (tr.), *Descartes*, p. 108; and Descartes, *Oeuvres*, vol. III, p. 666.

³⁵ Mattern, 'Descartes's Correspondence with Elizabeth', p. 215. While Descartes does not uphold this conception of gravity, Mattern believes that Descartes' gravity analogy is useful because it enables him to maintain that the soul is both distinct from and united with the body.

³⁶ Elisabeth to Descartes, May 1647; in Nye, *The Princess and the Philosopher*, p. 122; and Descartes, *Oeuvres*, vol. v, p. 48.

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).³⁷ 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'.³⁸ In challenging Descartes thus, Elisabeth probably believes that Descartes holds this principle himself.³⁹ 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 goes from questioning soul-body interaction, to challenging Descartes' dualism. She says that

I admit it would be easier for me to concede matter and extension to the soul, than the capacity of moving a body, and being moved, to an immaterial being. If the soul's moving the body occurred through 'information', the spirits that perform the movement would have to be intelligent, which you accord to nothing corporeal. And although in your metaphysical meditations you show the possibility of the second, it is, however, very difficult to comprehend that a soul, as you have described it, after having had the faculty and habit of reasoning well, can lose all of it on account of some vapors, and that, although it can subsist without the body and has nothing in common with it, is yet so ruled by it.⁴⁰

Elisabeth's point about the vapours is regarded as crucial for understanding the development of her own independent position on the soul-body relationship.⁴¹ Two years later, the 'vapours' re-emerge in Elisabeth's

³⁷ On the causal likeness principle, see Richard Watson, *The Breakdown of Cartesian Metaphysics* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1987), especially pp. 50–2; Lois Frankel, 'The Value of Harmony', in *Causation in Early Modern Philosophy: Cartesianism, Occasionalism and Preestablished Harmony*, edited by Steven Nadler (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), pp. 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.

³⁸ Watson, *Breakdown of Cartesian Metaphysics*, pp. 50–1.

³⁹ A few modern commentators maintain that Descartes does in fact hold the causal likeness principle. But recently this view has been challenged by O'Neill, 'Mind-Body Interaction'.

⁴⁰ Elisabeth to Descartes, 10/20 June 1643; in Blom (tr.), *Descartes*, p. 112; and Descartes, *Oeuvres*, vol. 111, p. 685.

⁴¹ Shapiro 'Princess Elizabeth and Descartes', 505.

rejection of Descartes' neo-Stoic advice about overcoming depression. In the seventeenth century, the vapours were a medical condition where 'exhalations' in the stomach or spleen were supposed to rise up into the brain and produce a mental imbalance. More generally, the vapours are a 'depression of spirits, hypochondria, hysteria, or other nervous disorder' (*OED*). Those who are afflicted 'struggle, cry out, make odd and inarticulate Sounds or Mutterings, they perceive a Swimming in their Heads, a Dimness come over their Eyes, they turn Pale, are scarce able to stand, their Pulse is weak, they shut their Eyes, cry, shriek out, groan, foam at the mouth, and remain senseless for some time'.⁴² In the First Meditation, Descartes speaks of madmen whose brains 'are so damaged by the persistent vapours of melancholia that they firmly maintain that they are kings when they are paupers'.⁴³

The vapours are also a typically *female* ailment. In the literature of the time, they are known as 'Fits of the Mother', or 'Hysterick fits'.⁴⁴ The condition was once connected with the phenomenon of the 'wandering womb',⁴⁵ a theory that derives from the ancient Platonic view that the uterus has the power of self-movement. This 'wandering' was meant to explain why women were prone to be hysterical (the word 'hysteria' has its origin in the Greek word for uterus).⁴⁶ Although the theory was in decline in the seventeenth century,⁴⁷ and *men* were also thought to suffer from the vapours, stereotypical associations between women and the vapours persisted. Margaret Cavendish, in her *Grounds of Natural Philosophy* (1668), writes that 'those Diseases that are named the *Fits of the Muther*, the *Spleen*, the *Scurvy*' are common 'especially amongst the Females'.⁴⁸ Then in 1728, in an ironic verse on sexual temperament, Edward Young writes that 'Sometimes, thro' pride, the Sexes change their airs, My lord *has vapours*, and my lady *swears*'.⁴⁹

⁴² Anonymous, *An Account of the causes of some particular rebellious distempers: viz. the scurvy, cancers in women's breasts, &c. vapours, and melancholy, &c. weaknesses in women, &c. . . . by an eminent practitioner in physick, surgery and chymistry* (London: 1670), p. 34.

⁴³ Descartes, *Meditations*, in *Philosophical Writings*, vol. II, p. 13.

⁴⁴ Anonymous, *Account of the causes*, p. 33. ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁴⁶ On this topic and the ancient Aristotelian-Galenic theory of women's temperament, see Londa Schiebinger, *The Mind Has No Sex? Women in the Origins of Modern Science* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 160–88; and Merry E. Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 26–7.

⁴⁷ See John P. Wright, 'Hysteria and Mechanical Man', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 42 (1980), 233–47.

⁴⁸ Margaret Cavendish, *Grounds of Natural Philosophy: Divided into Thirteen Parts: With an Appendix containing Five Parts*, with an introduction by Colette V. Michael, facsimile reprint of 1668 edition (West Cornwall, CT: Locust Hill Press, 1996), p. 151.

⁴⁹ Edward Young, 'Satire III' in *Love of Fame, The Universal Passion. In Seven Characteristical Satires*, third edition (London: J. Jonson, 1730), p. 51.

In her 10/20 June 1643 letter, Elisabeth points out that the vapours prevent the soul from engaging in *purely intellectual thought*. She highlights the fact that when the soul and body intermingle, this is not just a disinterested exercise on the part of the soul: the soul can be so affected by the body that the soul radically changes its character – it can become *incapable* of pure intellection. This phenomenon is seemingly difficult to square with Descartes' real distinction between the unextended soul and the extended body. Why is the soul so enslaved by the body, when it could subsist separately and 'has nothing in common with it'?

Here, at first glance, Elisabeth appears to challenge what Margaret Wilson calls Descartes' 'robust' form of dualism, according to which there are no corporeal correlates of the operations of the pure intellect.⁵⁰ For the robust dualist, the understanding can operate independently of the brain, and the brain 'cannot in anyway be employed in pure understanding, but only in imagining or perceiving by the senses'.⁵¹ Presumably, if this type of dualism is plausible, then we ought to be able to detach ourselves from the senses and the imagination, even when we are hysterical or deluded; yet we cannot. Hence some scholars interpret Elisabeth as tentatively suggesting that the intellect is *contingent*, or *somehow depends upon*, the body. Lisa Shapiro notes that, throughout her letters, Elisabeth '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*'.⁵² Shapiro interprets Elisabeth as saying that 'in order to be autonomous... the mind depends upon the good health of the body'.⁵³

It is not obvious, however, that this 'dependence' that Elisabeth identifies between the intellect and body is incompatible with, or 'an alternative to', Descartes' own conception of the soul–body relationship. Here we must distinguish between different senses of the word 'dependence'.⁵⁴ On the one hand, there might be a *metaphysical* dependence between the soul and body, such that the existence of the pure intellect *absolutely requires* the existence of the body; and the soul could not exist unless the body does.⁵⁵ On the other hand, there might be a *causal* dependence,

⁵⁰ On Descartes' 'robust dualism', see Margaret Dauler Wilson, *Descartes* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 181.

⁵¹ Descartes, 'Fifth Set of Replies', in *Philosophical Writings*, vol. 11, p. 248.

⁵² Shapiro, 'Princess Elizabeth and Descartes', 505; my italics. ⁵³ *Ibid.*, 516.

⁵⁴ I am indebted to Rae Langton for raising this point about 'dependence'.

⁵⁵ On the distinction between metaphysical and causal dependence, see John Heil, *Philosophy of Mind: A Contemporary Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 42.

where in order to have clear and distinct ideas, the soul depends upon the proper functioning of the body. But in the second case, my clear and distinct ideas do not depend *for their existence* on something distinct from me; I could still have them even if I had no body at all. Elisabeth, I believe, points to a causal dependence between the soul and body, rather than a metaphysical one. In that case, her remarks are entirely consistent with Descartes' own view in the *Meditations* that the soul is susceptible to the causal influence of the body. 'If this were not so,' he says, 'I, who am nothing but a thinking thing, would not feel pain when the body was hurt, but would perceive the damage purely by the intellect, just as a sailor perceives by sight if anything is broken in his ship.'⁵⁶ But the soul's being susceptible to bodily distempers is very different to being 'in some *essential* way dependent on the body'.

In keeping with this interpretation, Descartes regards Elisabeth's comments as perfectly compatible with the soul-body distinction. In his reply to Elisabeth, dated 28 June 1643, he suggests that Elisabeth go ahead and attribute matter and extension to the soul, 'for that is nothing but to conceive it united to the body'.⁵⁷ When affected by the vapours, the soul is incapable of pure intellection. But this does not show that the soul is incapable of attaining pure understanding *full stop*; only that when the soul is so affected by the body, it is difficult to have access to the intellect.

Nevertheless, Elisabeth *does* diverge from Descartes in expanding on her suggestion that 'it is easier' to ascribe extension and materiality to the soul. In her third letter, dated 1 July 1643, Elisabeth points out that we can doubt the 'inextension' of the soul according to Descartes' own rule about truth and falsity in the Fourth Meditation: 'namely that all our errors occur from forming judgments about what we do not sufficiently perceive'.⁵⁸ Descartes believes that errors arise when my intellect has a confused rather than *clear and distinct idea* about something, and my will jumps to a hasty conclusion about it. But if 'I simply refrain from making a judgement in cases where I do not perceive the truth with sufficient clarity and distinctness, then it is clear that I am behaving correctly and avoiding error.'⁵⁹ Elisabeth points out that by the light

⁵⁶ Descartes, *Meditations*, in *Philosophical Writings*, vol. 11, p. 56.

⁵⁷ Descartes to Elisabeth, 28 June 1643; in Blom (tr.), *Descartes*, p. 115; and Descartes, *Oeuvres*, vol. 111, p. 694.

⁵⁸ Elisabeth to Descartes, 1 July 1643; in Blom (tr.), *Descartes*, p. 117; and Descartes, *Oeuvres*, vol. 11, p. 2.

⁵⁹ Descartes, *Meditations*, in *Philosophical Writings*, vol. 11, p. 41.

of this theory, and the difficulty in explaining how two utterly distinct entities can interact, Descartes ought to have refrained from affirming that the soul is unextended. He should have allowed that there might be certain 'unknown properties' in the soul. Elisabeth says that 'Although extension is not necessary to thought, yet not being contradictory to it, it will be able to belong to some other function of the soul.'⁶⁰ She accepts that the soul could exist without the body. But for her, that does not imply that extension is contrary to, or incompatible with, thought; it is possible that extension is a property of the soul.

In this respect, Elisabeth anticipates the views of the English Platonist, Henry More. Elisabeth later developed an interest in More's writings through her associate, Francis Mercury van Helmont, son of the chemist and physician Jan Baptiste.⁶¹ Some time between 1644 and 1648, van Helmont the younger entered the circle surrounding the Palatine family, and became particularly close to Elisabeth and Sophie. He was instrumental in helping Elisabeth to become the abbess at Herford, and went to England in 1670 on her behalf, to petition the English government for a promised pension. During this visit, van Helmont brought commendations to Henry More from Elisabeth.⁶² Earlier, in a letter to Descartes, More writes that 'the first moment I read your works, I at once decided in my own mind that your illustrious disciple, the Princess Elizabeth, must – in order to have entered so perfectly into the comprehension of your philosophy – be infinitely wiser than all the sages and philosophers of Europe put together'.⁶³ In 1671, More's friend Anne Conway sent Elisabeth a copy of his most anti-Cartesian work, *Enchiridion Metaphysicum* (1671).⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Elisabeth to Descartes, 1 July 1643; in Blom (tr.), *Descartes*, p. 117; and Descartes, *Oeuvres*, vol. 1v, p. 2.

⁶¹ For details on Francis Mercury van Helmont, one of the most widely travelled and best-known characters of the seventeenth century, see Allison P. Coudert, *The Impact of the Kabbalah in the Seventeenth Century: The Life and Thought of Francis Mercury van Helmont (1614–1698)* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

⁶² Henry More to William Penn, 22 May 1675; in William Penn, *The Papers of William Penn*, edited by Mary and Richard Dunn (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), vol. 1, p. 323. Elisabeth shared a correspondence with More's close friend, Anne Conway in the 1670s. Their exchange was probably initiated (or mediated) by van Helmont, who was physician to both Conway and Elisabeth. Elisabeth discusses Conway's conversion to Quakerism with her English correspondent, Robert Barclay.

⁶³ Quoted in Marie Blaze de Bury, *Memoirs of the Princess Palatine, Princess of Bohemia* (London: Richard Bentley, 1853), p. 202.

⁶⁴ Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *The Conway Letters: The Correspondence of Anne, Viscountess Conway, Henry More and Their Friends, 1642–1684*, revised with an introduction and new material, edited by Sarah Hutton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 337.

In his correspondence with Descartes (from 1648 to 1649), More – like Elisabeth – suggests that extension is a property of both material and spiritual substances. The notion of extended spirits, according to More, provides a better explanation of how God acts on the created world, and of how souls influence bodies (and vice versa). This notion also has greater religious merit than the concept of unextended souls; to affirm that souls and spirits are *nowhere* is dangerously close to atheism. In the *Immortality of the Soul* (1659), More claims that ‘it is plain that if a thing be at all it must be extended’ because ‘to take away all Extension is to reduce a thing onely to a Mathematical point, which is nothing else but pure Negation or Non-entity’.⁶⁵ For More, the distinction between spirit and matter is that spirit is essentially active, indivisible (or ‘indiscerpible’) and penetrable, whereas matter is passive, divisible and impenetrable.⁶⁶ Despite rejecting the Cartesian viewpoint, More is still very much a dualist.

Likewise, despite her claim that the soul is extended, it is not obvious that Elisabeth advocates a completely *non-dualist* philosophy, in which the soul is dependent on the body for its existence. Her later objections to the philosophy of another Englishman, Kenelm Digby (1603–65), confirm this picture. In 1645, Elisabeth read Digby’s book on the immortality of the soul: *Two Treatises: in the one of which, the nature of bodies, in the other, the nature of mans soule is looked into, in way of discovery of the immortality of reasonable souls* (1644).⁶⁷ In a letter to Descartes on 28 October 1645, Elisabeth challenges Digby’s claim that the soul is ‘tormented’ by passions after the body’s death. She believes that the soul will be much happier following its separation from the body, given that the body is the cause of all human suffering. Digby, on the other hand, believes that the passions ‘leave some traces in the soul’, even after the soul and body are separated. In purgatory, the soul is tortured by vestiges of repressed passions, and frustrated by its inability to satisfy them. These views, according to Elisabeth, are inconsistent with the soul’s *immateriality*. If the immortal soul is a purely incorporeal substance, completely disconnected from the body, then the body cannot continue to exert its confusing influence.

⁶⁵ Henry More, *The Immortality of the Soul; So farre forth as it is demonstrable from the Knowledge of Nature and the Light of Reason*, facsimile reprint of 1659 edition (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1997), ‘The Preface’, sig. a5^v.

⁶⁶ To complicate matters further, More holds that matter is made up of parts ‘indiscerpible’, or ‘of particles that have indeed real extension but so little, that they cannot have less and be anything at all, and therefore cannot actually be divided’ (*Ibid.*, ‘The Preface’, sig. a4^v)

⁶⁷ As befitting the granddaughter of James I of England, Elisabeth was proficient in both written and spoken English.

Once the self is no longer part of the soul-body hybrid, presumably it is capable of overcoming the passions and attaining a *purely* intellectual state.

Most of Elisabeth's suggestions, then, are consistent with the basic tenets of Cartesian dualism, especially the notion that the soul is capable of existing in separation from the body. But for Elisabeth, to explain how the two substances interact, we cannot rule out the possibility that the soul has certain affinities with the body, such as extension. According to her, this view is more plausible, because if the soul is an essentially unextended, thinking thing, then soul-body interaction is unintelligible; but it is absurd to suggest that the soul and body do not interact. In this sense, at least, Shapiro is right to regard Elisabeth as offering a distinctive alternative to Cartesian dualism. This alternative, moreover (or something approaching it), is one that later women philosophers in England, such as Cavendish and Conway, would regard as a first step toward a monistic theory of substance.

III

Descartes' response to Elisabeth's suggestion about extended souls is now lost. The subject of soul-body relations is not raised in their letters again until two years later, in the context of a discussion on Elisabeth's depression and Seneca's *De Vita Beata* ('The Happy Life'). One of Elisabeth's early objections to Cartesian dualism hinges on the striking and disturbing effects that bodily distempers have on clear thought in the soul. The feminine significance of 'the vapours' is confirmed in a 24 May 1645 letter from Elisabeth to Descartes.

In this letter, Elisabeth confesses that she herself suffers from the vagaries of her sexual temperament. 'Know then,' she says, 'that I have a body filled with a great many of the weaknesses of my sex; it very easily feels the afflictions of the soul and does not have the force to bring itself into harmony with the soul.'⁶⁸ The natural condition of her female body, and a general lack of exercise, according to Elisabeth, mean that 'it is not necessary for sadness to oppress the heart for a long time before the spleen becomes obstructed and infects the rest of the body by its vapours'.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Elisabeth to Descartes, 24 May 1645; in Blom (tr.), *Descartes*, p. 121; and Descartes, *Oeuvres*, vol. IV, p. 208.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

In his response, dated May/June 1645, Descartes suggests a remedy for Elisabeth's malady: diverting one's imagination and senses from subjects of displeasure, and using the understanding alone (more accurately, the intellect *and* the will) to focus on subjects of contentment and joy. In the seventeenth century, the imagination was believed to play a vital causal role in cases of hysteria.⁷⁰ In keeping with this, Descartes tells Elisabeth that the imagination and the senses tend to make us melancholy; they occupy the mind with objects of sadness and pity; they 'accustom [the] heart to contract and send out sighs; and in a consequence of this, the circulation of the blood being retarded and slowed, and the largest parts of the blood attaching themselves to one another, they would easily obstruct [the] spleen'.⁷¹ Descartes ignores Elisabeth's claim that her body 'does not have the force to bring itself into harmony with the soul'. He prescribes detachment from the senses and the imagination, in favour of the pure understanding.

Descartes' advice on this topic is in direct contrast to that of Malebranche, who says that the 'delicacy of the brain fibers' make women best suited to understanding the senses rather than seeking truth.⁷² Malebranche believes that women are incapable of overcoming their sexual temperament, and pursuing clear and distinct ideas. Descartes' attitude is more faithfully represented in the feminist views of François Poulain de la Barre (1647–1723), the author of *De l'Égalité des Deux Sexes* (1673). Poulain de la Barre recommends to women that 'there is nothing more proper to depress the Vapours' than the learning of true knowledge.⁷³ He points out that 'what temperament soever *Women* have, they are no less capable than we, of truth and studies';⁷⁴ they *are* capable of overcoming their bodily distempers and attaining knowledge.⁷⁵ Descartes accords with this viewpoint; but Elisabeth, surprisingly, has difficulty in accepting it.

⁷⁰ Wright, 'Hysteria and Mechanical Man', 244.

⁷¹ Descartes to Elisabeth, May/June 1645; in Blom (tr.), *Descartes*, p. 124; and Descartes, *Oeuvres*, vol. IV, p. 219.

⁷² Malebranche, *The Search After Truth*, pp. 130–1.

⁷³ François Poulain de la Barre, *The Woman as Good as the Man; Or, the Equality of Both Sexes*, edited with an introduction by Gerald M. MacLean (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), p. 117.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

⁷⁵ In a twist on this theme, in 1660 the courtier Samuel Sorbière tells Elisabeth that women are well suited to the search for truth because 'the softness of their constitution . . . is much more suitable to the actions of the mind than the dryness and hardness of ours' (quoted in Schiebinger, *The Mind Has No Sex?*, p. 167).

According to Elisabeth, there is something obstinate about the body that makes it impervious to the influence of the soul, and vice versa. In reply to Descartes (22 June 1645), Elisabeth says that 'I find difficulty in separating from my senses and imagination the topics continually represented there by the conversation and the letters I could not avoid without sinning against my obligations.'⁷⁶ She says that 'there is something that overtakes one in the passions', such that one is incapable of thinking clearly till the passions have subsided.⁷⁷ Instead, the friendship expressed in his letters is a far better 'antidote to melancholy'.⁷⁸

The same themes are elaborated in Descartes and Elisabeth's letters on Seneca's *De Vita Beata*. Descartes recommends this work in the hope that it will provide Elisabeth with a further means of attaining happiness. But he is disappointed with Seneca's lack of philosophical rigour, and decides to modify the Stoic viewpoint with his own precepts.⁷⁹ In his 'modernising' of Seneca (4 August 1645), Descartes suggests that beatitude or 'the happy life' can be attained by (i) using the intellect to determine what it is best to do; (ii) overcoming the passions by regulating the will according to reason; and (iii) ridding oneself of insatiable desires and pointless regrets. For Descartes, the happy life is ideally one of detachment from those functions of the soul associated with the soul-body composite, rather than the soul alone. He admits that there are pleasures that depend upon the body, but true and lasting contentment comes from the mind alone.

In response (16 August 1645), Elisabeth doubts that Descartes' precepts are a practical means for attaining the happy life. This is because 'there are maladies that completely deprive one of the power of reasoning, and consequently of enjoying a reasonable satisfaction; others diminish the force of reasoning and prevent one from following those maxims that good sense would institute'.⁸⁰ Here, as in her earlier letters on soul-body interaction, Elisabeth's point is that bodily indispositions can 'render the most moderate man subject to allowing himself to be

⁷⁶ Elisabeth to Descartes, 22 June 1645; in Blom (tr.), *Descartes*, p. 127; and Descartes, *Oeuvres*, vol. IV, p. 233.

⁷⁷ Elisabeth to Descartes, 22 June 1645; in Blom (tr.), *Descartes*, p. 127; and Descartes, *Oeuvres*, vol. IV, p. 234.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ For a recent analysis of Descartes' account of the passions, see Susan James, *Passion and Action: The Emotions in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

⁸⁰ Elisabeth to Descartes, 16 August 1645; in Blom (tr.), *Descartes*, p. 135; and Descartes, *Oeuvres*, vol. IV, p. 269.

carried away by his passions'.⁸¹ The will alone cannot help such a man achieve happiness: attaining the blessed life also depends upon the body and its fortunes. In the context of a discussion on the soul–body relationship, Elisabeth's point about the vapours does not constitute a formidable objection to Descartes' philosophy. But in the context of a discussion on moral theory, or 'how we should live', she offers a much stronger criticism.

For Elisabeth, the body cannot be ignored when discussing the conduct of *human beings*. To live amongst others, she suggests (30 September 1645), we must follow the dictates of the society in which we live, unreasonable though they might be.⁸² She also says (28 October 1645) that avoiding repentance for our faults, and suppressing the emotions, are not viable methods for achieving a balance between our own interests and those of others. Instead, it is much wiser to learn from our faults, and to be aware of our emotions, so that we can improve the moral character accordingly. This 'moral balancing', as Nye calls it, is an ongoing project throughout life, developed through trial and experience, not just by exercising one's reason.⁸³ In moral dilemmas in everyday life, prompt decisions must be made based on relationships between yourself and others; this, in turn, requires an honest perspective on yourself as an embodied, social creature – *a substantial union of both soul and body*. While disassociation from the senses and the imagination is necessary for attaining clear and certain knowledge, it is just not practical in our lives with others.

Elisabeth's views on the happy life are, moreover, consistent with Descartes' threefold theory of the 'primitive notions'. Two years earlier, Descartes tells Elisabeth that the way in which we understand the soul–body union is very different to the way in which we understand things that involve the soul and the body taken in isolation. He says that one learns to conceive of the soul–body union, not through the intellect, but 'by availing oneself only of life and ordinary conversations, and by abstaining from meditating and studying things that exercise the imagination'.⁸⁴ In his neo-Stoic advice on how to live in accordance with one's human nature, Descartes ought to have advised Elisabeth, as he did before, to look to common sense.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² For this exegesis on Elisabeth's 'ethics of polity', I am indebted to Nye, 'Polity and Prudence', pp. 81–7. Elisabeth's moral views are also explored in Wartenberg, 'Descartes's Mood'; and Johnstone, 'The Bodily Nature of the Self'.

⁸³ Nye, 'Polity and Prudence', p. 84.

⁸⁴ Descartes to Elisabeth, 28 June 1643; in Blom (tr.), *Descartes*, pp. 113–4; and Descartes, *Oeuvres*, vol. III, p. 692.

Queen Christina of Sweden (1626–89) also criticises the neo-Stoic viewpoint in her *Maxims* (c. 1670–80). Christina was first introduced to Descartes as someone with ‘a disposition marvellously detached from servitude toward popular opinions’.⁸⁵ Elisabeth says of Christina that she is pleased to have an idea that ‘acquits our sex of the imputation of imbecility and weakness pressed on it by Messieurs the pedants’.⁸⁶ Most famous for her association with Descartes (he moved to Sweden in 1650 at her invitation, and died there soon afterwards), Christina was never in fact a Cartesian.⁸⁷ In her youth, Christina was trained in the Stoic writings of Tacitus, Epictetus, and Seneca; and in her later years, she seems to have held a Stoic conception of the soul and body. In 1647, Christina corresponded with Descartes (*via* Hector-Pierre Chanut) on the subject of the passions and the sovereign good. But like Elisabeth, she regards the neo-Stoic moral approach as inapplicable in everyday life. One of Christina’s maxims is that ‘The passions are the salt of life; which without them would be insipid. That undisturbable tranquillity, so much boasted by philosophers, is dull and insipid; it is a fine chimera’.⁸⁸ With the same realism, she says ‘Passions are only triumphed over when they are weak’.⁸⁹

Descartes’ neo-Stoicism seems to be particularly unpalatable for women thinkers. On the one hand, Descartes’ rational philosophy is extremely liberating for women. If we can all reason clearly by training ourselves to overcome the confusing influence of the body, then women can also participate in the search for truth; if they learn to follow their reason, they can also endeavour to attain the blessed life. But, at the same time, prevalent social attitudes about ‘the weakness of the female sex’, and the natural temperament of the female body, impose certain limitations on the philosophical enterprise for women. These attitudes are reflected in Elisabeth’s remarks about the clouding and distorting effects that the body has on clear thought. A plausible and practical

⁸⁵ Chanut to Descartes, 1 December 1646; in Blom (tr.), *Descartes*, p. 200; Descartes, *Oeuvres*, vol. iv, p. 582.

⁸⁶ Elisabeth to Descartes, 4 December 1649; in Nye, *Princess and the Philosopher*, p. 167; Descartes, *Oeuvres*, vol. v, pp. 451–2.

⁸⁷ See O’Neill, ‘Women Cartesians’, pp. 235–6.

⁸⁸ Christina, Queen of Sweden, *The Works of Christina Queen of Sweden. Containing Maxims and Sentences, In Twelve Centuries; and Reflections on the Life and Actions of Alexander the Great* (London: Wilson and Durham, 1753), p. 35. On Christina’s philosophy, see Susanna Åkerman, *Queen Christina of Sweden and Her Circle: The Transformation of a Seventeenth-Century Philosophical Libertine* (Leiden: E. J. Brill); and Susanna Åkerman, ‘Kristina Wasa, Queen of Sweden’, in *A History of Women Philosophers*, edited by Mary Ellen Waithe (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), vol. 111, pp. 21–40.

⁸⁹ Christina, *The Works of Christina*, p. 39.

philosophy, she suggests, whether it be a method of thought or a way of attaining happiness, must take into account the soul–body union, or *human embodiment*, and not just the soul taken separately.

Recent feminist theorists, most notably Carol Gilligan, also stress the usefulness of a ‘different’ moral outlook, one that is based primarily on relationships with others, rather than an impartial and detached viewpoint. Gilligan’s empirical research suggests that this moral orientation is distinctive of women’s reasoning in moral situations.⁹⁰ They take a contextualist approach that recognises the needs of others, and the individual’s responsibility to meet those needs. Their focus is not on isolated individuals, but on *relations between individuals*, governed by care and concern. In constructing a moral outlook that emphasises human embodiment, Elisabeth’s ideas both reflect and anticipate such modern-day theories.

Princess Elisabeth is remembered as one of Descartes’ favourite students, and as someone whose criticisms prompted him to give serious and considered responses. She is a faithful disciple to Descartes to the extent that she embraces his egalitarian concept of reason, and extols the virtues of a natural logic, free from the shackles of a scholastic education. She also embraces his criterion of truth and certainty, and is a dualist to the extent that she affirms that the soul and body are distinct. But in other respects, her reputation as a critic of Descartes is well deserved. First, Elisabeth maintains that interaction between extended and non-extended substances is inconceivable, and, as a solution to this problem, she suggests that extension is an attribute of the soul. Second, in her discussion of Descartes’ moral theory in their letters, she emphasises the impracticality of recommending that the soul must strive to be detached from the body. Many of Elisabeth’s objections are, moreover, developed from a woman’s point of view. The vapours, a stereotypical female complaint, figure in one of her earliest objections to Cartesian dualism, and also provide the basis for her later rejection of Descartes’ neo-Stoic advice. Today’s feminist theorists share Elisabeth’s concerns about the soul–body dichotomy, and the practicality of a moral outlook based on impartiality and detachment. I now show that Elisabeth’s English female contemporaries also raise these concerns in their critiques of dualism.

⁹⁰ Carol Gilligan, *In A Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982).