

CHAPTER 17

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PRINCESS ELISABETH
OF BOHEMIA AS
A CARTESIAN

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ELISABETH Simmern van Pallandt, or as she is more commonly referred to, Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia,¹ is most well known for her extended correspondence with René Descartes² and for being the subject of the dedication of Descartes’s *Principles of Philosophy*. In that dedication, Descartes notes that “the outstanding and incomparable sharpness of your [Elisabeth’s] intelligence is obvious from the penetrating examination you have made of all the secrets of these sciences”, that she is “the only person I [Descartes] have so far found who has completely understood all my previously published works”, both metaphysics and geometry, that her “intellect is... unique in finding everything equally clear”, and finally that she exhibits “all the necessary conditions for perfect and sublime wisdom” (AT VIII.A.3–4/CSM I.192). Given his admiration for her, it is reasonable to think that Descartes saw Elisabeth not simply as a political patron but also as a philosophical ally, and so to think of Princess Elisabeth as a Cartesian. In this chapter I will examine this claim in more detail. After briefly outlining some salient details of Elisabeth’s biography, I will consider three different senses in which Elisabeth might be thought of as a Cartesian. First, I consider her role in the intellectual networks through which Descartes’s philosophy was disseminated throughout Europe. Second, I consider her own adoption of the philosophical ideas in Descartes’s philosophy, and in particular his metaphysics. And lastly, I consider her role in the development of Descartes’s ethics.

¹ She is also known as Elisabeth von der Pfalz. But there are a number of other women named Elisabeth, and related to her, who also held that title, as von der Pfalz, or “of the Palatine”, in this case, refers to an electorate of the Holy Roman Empire, one that held royal privileges.

² While Descartes’s side of the correspondence was published by Clerselier in Descartes (1657–67), Elisabeth’s letters were not discovered until the late nineteenth century, and then only in copies. Her letters were published in Foucher de Careil 1879. See Shapiro 2007 for more details on their provenance.

I conclude with an assessment of the degree to which Princess Elisabeth is properly understood as a Cartesian.

1. BIOGRAPHY

Elisabeth Simmern of the Palatine was born in Heidelberg on December 26, 1618, the eldest daughter of Frederick V, Elector Palatine, and Elizabeth Stuart, who had twelve other children (two of whom died in infancy). Her mother was the daughter of King James I of England, and the wedding of her parents was recognized as signaling the union of English and Continental Protestantism. Elisabeth's father became King of Bohemia in August 1620, as a result of the Defenestration of Prague, but he soon came to be known as the Winter King as he lost critical battles and then power after only one season. In early November, when it became clear Frederick was losing power, the family went into exile.³ Elisabeth's paternal grandmother, Electress Juliana von Stolberg, fled to Brandenburg with Elisabeth and her elder brother Charles Louis, where the children stayed until the late 1620s, being raised by their aunt Elisabeth Charlotte. In 1628, they and the rest of the family joined their parents, who had received shelter from Maurice of Nassau (Frederick's uncle) in The Hague.

Elisabeth and her siblings may have been tutored in The Hague by the humanist Constantijn Huygens for Elisabeth corresponded with him (Huygens 1914–17), and she was clearly schooled in courtly arts, but also in languages, logic, mathematics, politics, and the sciences. Elisabeth's father died in 1632, while fighting on behalf of King Gustav of Sweden. In 1633 Elisabeth refused an offer of marriage from the Catholic King Wladislav of Poland, because she would not have been able to retain her Protestant faith. The family remained in The Hague, largely supported by Charles I of England, Princess Elisabeth's uncle. The English Civil War (1640–51), which ultimately resulted in the beheading of Charles I, placed a very great political and financial strain on the family.

As early as 1634, Elisabeth seems to have organized a conversation on Truth between Descartes and John Drury, a Scottish minister who aimed to unite Protestants, at her mother's court in The Hague. Earlier that year, she also met with Anna Maria van Schurman to discuss the question of how to reconcile classical humanism with Baconian New Learning without being heretical.⁴ In 1639, Elisabeth can be seen playing a state role, sending condolences on behalf of her mother, and in 1640 she corresponded with Thomas Roe regarding the release of her brother from prison.⁵ Also in 1640, Edward

³ The events of this period are considered to be the beginning of the Thirty Years' War.

⁴ The conversation is described by Samuel Hartlib, a colleague of Drury, in his diary. See Pal 2012: 22–5. Pal also discusses Schurman's role in Elisabeth's education (Pal 2012: 72–7), as well as the role her mother's court at The Hague and Elisabeth played in developing an intellectual community of women in Europe. It would be interesting to trace the network Pal reveals to the network of Cartesian women discussed in Erica Harth 1992. Pellegrin (2014) makes some suggestions in this direction.

⁵ Creese (1993) includes many details regarding Elisabeth's state correspondence.

Reynolds, an English preacher famous for his sermons, dedicated his *A Treatise of the Passions and Faculties of the Soule of Man* to Elisabeth, and in 1643 we know that Elisabeth began a correspondence with Descartes. She also corresponded with Nicolas Malebranche, and there is evidence she also interacted with Leibniz and Francis Mercury van Helmont.⁶ In 1660,⁷ Elisabeth entered the Lutheran convent at Herford in Germany as adjutrix, and in 1667 she became abbess. There she remained intellectually active, and hosted Quakers as well as other religious minority groups.⁸ She died on February 8, 1680.

It is worth briefly mentioning Elisabeth's siblings who survived into adulthood. Charles Louis assumed control of the Palatinate at the end of the Thirty Years' War, and in that capacity restored the University of Heidelberg. Rupert became well known for his soldiering, but also for his chemical experiments and pioneering of an engraving technique. Maurice was an accomplished soldier until his death in 1654. Louise Hollandine was a painter, trained by Gerrit von Honthorst, until converting to Catholicism and entering the convent at Maubisson. Edward converted to Catholicism to marry Anne of Gonzaga; Henrietta married a Hungarian nobleman, but died shortly thereafter. Finally, the youngest sibling, Sophie, who conveyed some of the correspondence between Descartes and her elder sister, became Electress of Hanover, was a patron of G. W. Leibniz, who tutored her daughter Sophie-Charlotte, and was mother of George I of England.

2. INTELLECTUAL NETWORKS

Elisabeth was raised and educated largely in the exile court established in The Hague, and managed by her mother, Queen Elisabeth of Bohemia, and it seems that Queen Elisabeth wanted to make her court an intellectual center. As already noted, Cornelius Huygens, John Drury, and Anna Maria van Schurman were present, but so were André Rivet (a Huguenot theologian connected to Marin Mersenne), Marie du Moulin, Dorothy Moore, Samuel Sorbière, and no doubt many others (Pal 2012: 34–6).⁹ Elisabeth's correspondence with Descartes reveals her to have been well connected to intellectual circles in the Netherlands and in Germany, where she often spent time with her aunt, and to be interested in understanding and circulating Descartes's philosophy. This connectedness

⁶ In Malebranche 1961: 130–3, André Robinet maintains that these letters are no longer extant and summarizes their content as reported in Père André's biography of Malebranche. Van Helmont and Leibniz are reported to have been at Elisabeth's side near her death. Leduc (2014) discusses what we know of Elisabeth's interactions with Leibniz.

⁷ Coincidentally, in 1660 Charles II (son of Charles I, and king in exile during the Civil War after his father's death) was restored to the English throne.

⁸ The exchanges she has with William Penn and with Robert Barclay are somewhat lopsided—Elisabeth writes very little. See Penn 1695 and Barclay 1870.

⁹ See also Belgioioso 2014.

seems to be a natural extension of her upbringing. The question is whether this interest constituted an endorsement of Cartesianism or rather was indicative of Elisabeth's efforts to play a pivotal role in the circulation and discussion of ideas more generally, that is, in the Republic of Letters, in mid-seventeenth-century Europe. The intellectual networks that are revealed in the Elisabeth–Descartes correspondence can help address this question.

Elisabeth's side of the correspondence reveals her to be current about the state of the controversies surrounding Descartes's philosophy and the threat it posed to the hegemony of Aristotelianism and religious orthodoxy in Dutch universities. Elisabeth's letter of May 6, 1643, which opens the extant correspondence, indicates that she was working through the physics and physiology of Henricus Regius, as articulated in his *Physiologia sive cognitio sanitatis* (1641). At that point, Regius had taken up Descartes's physiology in a way that still received Descartes's support, though later they would have a falling out.¹⁰ Yet, Regius had already run into trouble with Gisbertus Voetius, who in 1642, as rector of the University of Utrecht, engineered a condemnation of Cartesianism and of Regius as anti-Aristotelian and contrary to theological orthodoxy. Indeed, Elisabeth seems to craft her letter in a way that both recognizes Regius as a disciple of Descartes and acknowledges that there may well be a gap between what Regius puts forward and Descartes's own views.¹¹ If she was not already aware of the tensions between Descartes and Voetius at the time of the 1643 correspondence, it is clear that Elisabeth became apprised of them, as she references them later in the correspondence. In her letter of August 1, 1644, in which she acknowledges Descartes's dedication of his *Principles of Philosophy* to her, she alludes to the controversy between Voetius and Descartes, and suggests that Descartes holds the upper hand. That she would be aware is not surprising, as Voetius was the mentor of Anna Maria van Schurman, whom she knew from her mother's court in The Hague, and with whom she remained sufficiently friendly to correspond, and later to house at the convent in Herford after she became abbess there.¹²

In Elisabeth's letter of June 22, 1645, she notes the conclusion of the matter in Descartes's favor, alluding to the judgment of the Academy of Groningen against Martin Schoock concerning his treatise against Descartes written at Voetius's request.¹³ Later in the

¹⁰ Regius was under attack by Professor of Theology Voetius at Utrecht, starting from 1642, precisely because of his Cartesianism, but received support from Descartes until the publication of Regius's *Fundamenta Physices* in 1646 led to a very public falling out. In Descartes's letters to Regius of 1641, we can already see Descartes taking issue with Regius's way of promulgating Cartesian ideas (see AT III.371–2/CSMK 181–2; AT III.454–5/CSMK 199; AT III.460/CSMK 200–1; and AT III.491/CSMK 491–2).

¹¹ Alphonse Pollot, a French diplomat, and gentleman in waiting to the Prince of Orange, who facilitated Elisabeth's writing to Descartes to discuss his *Meditations* (discussed in the next section), seemed himself attuned to the inadequacies of Regius's appropriation of Cartesian thought.

¹² Carol Pal notes that in conjunction with this dispute Elisabeth received a letter from Colvius, transmitting to her his letter to Descartes, pleading with him to end his dispute with Voetius, along with a letter on the astronomical findings of Anton Maria Schyrle von Rheita about five "planets" around Jupiter, along with the criticisms of John Pell and Gassendi. Descartes also received a similar package from Colvius. See Pal 2012: 47–8. See also AT VIII.B.97–8 for Elisabeth's letter to Colvius.

¹³ As becomes clear in Descartes's published responses in his Letter to Father Dinet and Letter to Voetius, what is most at stake for Descartes are the charges of atheism. See Verbeek (1992); Gaukroger (1995: 360–1); and Rodis-Lewis (1999: 163–72).

correspondence, in his letter of December 1646, Descartes notes the publication of Regius's *Fundamenta Physices* with a somewhat derisive remark suggesting that Regius has transformed what he learned from Descartes into a mistake, but he also makes clear that he expects Regius to offer a copy to Elisabeth. Descartes also displays an unequivocal confidence in Elisabeth's support in noting that "even if I am assured that most people did not lack the will to attack me, no one as yet has entered the lists against me" (AT IV.591/S 154). Elisabeth's reply affords Descartes an opening to outline his complaints against Regius's work in his letter of March 1647, and he transmits a copy of *Fundamenta Physices* to Elisabeth through her younger sister Sophie, along with Cornelis van Hogelande's *Cogitationes*, also published in 1646, which Descartes endorses. She indicates that she receives both these works, through her brother Philip, in her letter to Descartes of May 1647.

As the controversies continued, Elisabeth remained well informed. In his letter to her of May 10, 1647, Descartes informs her of a range of criticisms, including a charge of blasphemy, raised by the theologians at the University of Leiden, and in particular by a Regent, Jacobus Revius, and a professor, Jacob Trigland (or Triglandius). Elisabeth's letter in response (May 1647) indicates that others had shared Triglandius's charges with her, and she had been apprised of the defense raised on Descartes's behalf. It is clear that Elisabeth is herself a staunch supporter of Descartes, and her encouraging him to stay in the Netherlands must have been understood as explicit political as well as intellectual support (AT V.46–7/S 162).

Elisabeth is also current with developments in algebraic geometry and is well connected with mathematicians. Though she seems to have learned her geometry from Johan Stampioen's *Algebra ofte Nieuwe Stel-Regel* (1639),¹⁴ her solution to the problem of the three circles demonstrates a proficiency with the new algebraic method of solving geometric problems. Through Pollot, Descartes sends Elisabeth an initial introduction to his own solution in his letter of November 17, 1643, and in his next letter (November 29, 1643) he expresses his pleasure at the solution he received from her, which she had prepared prior to seeing his earlier letter.¹⁵ He writes that her solution conforms to his own method, and he proceeds to offer a set of stylistic principles for solving these problems to make the solutions more elegant and thereby to highlight the regularities afforded in the solution. As evidenced in her letter of December 27, 1645, Elisabeth advocates for the appointment of Frans van Schooten as a professor of mathematics and architecture at the University of Leiden, by speaking with one of the two curators she knows, De Wimenon, as the other, Bewen, is away. Descartes's side of the correspondence excited interest in others of talking with Elisabeth about geometry. We have a letter from John Pell from 1665 requesting her solution, and another from Pell to another mathematician discussing a J. Leuhenschloss and remarking, "You sent me an extract of Letters from Frankford, which speake of him as if he were a profound Cartesian. I hope he did not professe himselfe such, whilst the Princesse Elizabeth was at Heidelberg. Now shee

¹⁴ See Gaukroger 1995: 334–5 for an account of the quarrel between Stampioen and Descartes. See also Pal 2012: 45–6.

¹⁵ We do not have the letter with Elisabeth's solution to the problem.

is gone; he may, perhaps justly, say, that he understands Des Cartes better than any Hee or Shee in that University.”¹⁶

Through the correspondence, it becomes clear that Elisabeth leverages her networks to facilitate the circulation of Descartes’s physics and medicine. The letters earlier in the correspondence show her keeping abreast of current work in natural philosophy. In her letter of August 1, 1644, in which she acknowledges both her receipt of a copy of Descartes’s *Principles of Philosophy* and Descartes’s dedication of the work to her, she attests that “the most reasonable of our doctors in this country have confessed to me that they have not studied them [Descartes’s principles] at all, because they are too old to start a new method” (AT IV.132/S 83), and while it is not clear to which Dutch doctors she is referring, she presents herself as well connected. Her letter of May 24, 1645, shows her to be reading Kenelm Digby’s *Treatise on the Natures of Bodies* (1644), and she remarks on the inaccuracy of his presentation of Descartes’s views. She also alludes to having read Descartes’s letters to Johan Beverwyck. However, she takes a further step in arranging for Samson Jonsson to translate Digby into Latin so that Descartes can engage with him directly.

In 1646, Elisabeth leaves The Hague for Germany, first to Berlin and later to Crossen. There she begins to circulate and discuss Descartes’s works to a new audience, despite her frustration with what seems to her an intellectual backwater.¹⁷ She alludes to promising the Duke of Brunswick-Lunenburg a copy of Descartes’s works (November 29, 1646, IV.581/S 152). Elisabeth is pleased to finally have met a person familiar with Descartes’s writings—a medical doctor named Weis—with whom she discusses Bacon and to whom she gives a copy of Descartes’s *Principles* (February 21, 1647, AT IV.619–20/S 155–6), and she reports having had a substantive discussion with him (May 1647, AT V.49/S 163). In December 1647, Elisabeth acknowledges receiving the French translations of the *Meditations* and *Principles*, and it is clear she engages with those works again (see June 30, 1648, AT V.196/S 171).

The end of the correspondence is taken up with concerns and strategizing around how to engage with Christina of Sweden. Through Chanut, Descartes shared his correspondence with Elisabeth on virtue, as well as a draft of the *Passions of the Soul*, with Christina. He had also shared a copy of the *Principles* with her, though he notes that Christina has directed one of her people to read it to instruct her (February 22, 1649, AT V.283/S 177). While Descartes was clearly self-interested in pursuing a relationship with Christina, he was also aiming to ally two strong women, and their intellectual networks as well. He might also have been trying to facilitate provisions in the Treaty of Westphalia to benefit Elisabeth’s family.

¹⁶ British Library, additional mss 4364, Letter book of John Pell; 1655–8, f. 150. Thanks to Carole Pal for sharing her discovery and transcription of this manuscript with me. As Pal (2012: 46) points out, Elisabeth’s fame as a geometer fades, as Voltaire neglects to acknowledge her mastery of Descartes’s geometry in his Letter XIV, “On Descartes and Sir Isaac Newton”, where he claims that the geometry was understood only by Schooten and Fermat (Voltaire 2017: 49).

¹⁷ See for instance her April 11, 1647 letter in which she indicates that though she tried to discuss Descartes’s views with one of the doctors in Berlin, he wouldn’t listen (AT IV.630/S 159).

Elisabeth's promotion of Descartes's work through her own intellectual connections can be understood as a vehicle for promoting the interests of her family, and by extension herself. The establishment of an exile court at The Hague was an effort to preserve trappings of the political power that had been lost, and it could well have been a calculated play to seize intellectual capital and power by promoting the new philosophy and science of which Descartes was so emblematic. Playing that role need not require any authentic adoption of the Cartesian program, however. Nonetheless, in her letters to Descartes Elisabeth is genuinely engaged with the content of Descartes's philosophy. I turn now to consider the degree to which her philosophical engagement signals her endorsement of Cartesianism.

3. DESCARTES'S METAPHYSICS AND PHYSICS

Princess Elisabeth is most well known for her 1643 correspondence with Descartes on what we refer to as the mind–body problem. In her letter of May 6, 1643, which begins the exchange, she asks “how the soul of a human being (it being only a thinking substance) can determine the bodily spirits, in order to bring about bodily actions” (AT III.661/S 62). On the face of it, Elisabeth seems to be asking how the soul's ability to affect the body is consistent with Descartes's substance dualism. Gassendi, in his counter objections to Descartes's replies to the Fifth Objections, framed his concern in this way (see AT VII.13/CSM II.275). However, the brunt of Elisabeth's question is a bit different. She is willing to allow the metaphysical consistency of a thinking non-extended substance affecting a non-thinking extended substance, provided the nature of the causation involved in this interaction can be understood. She presents three possible alternatives, all of which require either physical contact or extension, and thus none of them are compatible with Descartes's dualism. She suggests that a better understanding of the substance of the soul rather than its action—thinking—will help in specifying the kind of causation in play.

Descartes's response seems to be a trial balloon. He aims to explain the union of mind and body by, first, identifying three primitive notions—which may or may not be coextensive with the principal attributes that constitute the natures and essences of substances—as the concepts through which we understand all things, and then by asserting that we ought to understand the way the soul acts on the body only through the primitive notion of the union. Elisabeth's question, he maintains, presupposes that we are to understand the interaction of soul and body through the primitive notion of body. The causal relationship between soul and body is more akin to the Scholastic explanation of heaviness, one understood through the primitive notion of the union, though in that context applied wrongly to bodies.

The trial balloon deflates quickly, for Elisabeth notes that this answer only raises a further question of why we ought not to generalize Descartes's own critique of the Scholastic account of heaviness to the case of the interaction of mind and body. She notes that she is

unable to comprehend, by appeal to the idea you once had of heaviness, the idea through which we must judge how the soul (nonextended and immaterial) can move the body; nor why this power to carry the body toward the center of the earth, which you earlier falsely attributed to the body as a quality, should sooner persuade us that a body can be pushed by some immaterial thing, than the demonstration of a contrary truth (which you promise in your physics) should confirm us in the opinion of its impossibility. (AT III.684/S 68)

Elisabeth's objection not only highlights the internal inconsistency of Descartes's appeal to a third primitive notion to address her question, it also demonstrates that her principal interest is less in the metaphysical consistency of dualism with mind–body interaction than in the causal mechanism that is to explain that interaction. Indeed, she concludes “it would be easier for me to concede matter and extension to the soul than to concede the capacity to move a body and to be moved by it to an immaterial thing” (AT III.685/S 68).

Descartes in his reply does not quite get her point, simply reiterating his claims about three primitive notions, and encouraging Elisabeth to use the third to understand the fact of the union of mind and body. But Elisabeth's final letter in this sequence, that of July 1, 1643, makes the point quite simply:

I also find that the senses show me that the soul moves the body, but they teach me nothing (no more than do the understanding and the imagination) of the way it does so. (AT IV.2/S 72)

Elisabeth wants to understand the nature of causation in mind–body interaction, rather than the metaphysical possibility of that interaction between two really distinct substances. Indeed, she suggests that the absence of a robust account of that causation puts the metaphysics at risk, noting that if we were to prioritize understanding the causal interaction, we might well be willing to suppose that the soul had some qualities of which we were unaware, yet which were nonetheless consistent with thought, that could serve in providing that account of causation which Descartes lacks.¹⁸

Elisabeth's intellectual priorities, then, lie within the domain of natural philosophy, and in particular accounts of causation and causal mechanisms. The issue of the details of mind–body interaction is not revisited in the later correspondence. However, scattered throughout her letters are comments regarding causal explanations of natural phenomena, as well as remarks concerning the mechanisms of medical interventions. Even in her letter acknowledging the dedication of the *Principles of Philosophy* to her, she proceeds to raise an objection to Descartes's account of the constitution of quicksilver (presented in *Principles* IV.20–7), as well as to his account of a magnet (at *Principles* 4.133ff, and in particular the discussion at *Principles* IV.146–51). Her objections are detailed,

¹⁸ For interpretations of this portion of the correspondence see: Agostini 2014, Alanen 2003, Broad 2002, Garber 1983, Mattern 1978, Shapiro 1999, Tollefson 1999, and Yandell 1997.

indicating that she was working through Descartes's explanations to ensure that they were internally consistent and adhered to common-sense assumptions about, for instance, the response of particles to the absence of pressure, or particles traveling the shortest distance they can, unless otherwise obstructed.¹⁹

In her letter of May 24, 1645, responding to Descartes's concern for her ill health, Elisabeth, in addition to appreciating his recognition of the impact of the English Civil War on her state of mind, remarks upon the purported beneficial effects of the Spa waters on health. She is both hopeful and skeptical, wanting some assurances regarding the explanation of the beneficial effects. Descartes reassures her about the waters, but he also advises her quite realistically to try to turn her attention to matters other than the Civil War. Equally, in her letter of October 10, 1646, she moves seamlessly from discussing Machiavelli to describing the properties of the water in a spring near Cheuningen—at Hornhausen—again skeptical about the claims regarding its curative powers and demanding proper causal explanations that exclude other possible causes. She returns to this topic in her letter of November 29, 1646, noting that she thinks it is the “composition of the water” rather than any miraculous properties that can explain whatever good it does (AT IV.580/S 151–2). Also in that letter, she raises doubts about her doctors' recommendation of bleeding and purges to treat her abscesses, noting that she is gaining weight, and so is likely on the mend. In her letter of August 23, 1648, she describes a “venomous pollen” that falls from the trees near Crossen and causes a redness of the skin, and on which none of the standard remedies seems to have worked, remarking that she recounts the episode in the hopes that Descartes might find “something to confirm some of your doctrines” (AT V.226–7/S 227). In all these cases, Descartes is quick to respond, and to put forward an opinion that reaffirms Elisabeth's explanatory instincts. Elisabeth's scientific interests are very much of a piece with Descartes's. She is suspicious of superstitious explanations of curative waters as well as skeptical of the medical treatments she is prescribed insofar as there is no good explanation for why they should work. She, like Descartes, is interested not only in observing natural phenomena, but in providing efficient causal explanations of what is observed.²⁰

Perhaps this shared commitment to efficient causal explanation is most clear in her commissioning from him, in her letter of September 13, 1645, a treatise on the *Passions*. The request comes near the end of their exchange on Seneca's *De Vita Beata*, and Descartes's articulation of the principles of his own moral philosophy. In this letter, Elisabeth is particularly concerned about the exigencies of public decision-making, which by their nature both must be made under conditions of imperfect knowledge and ought to serve the public good. For her, those decisions are inevitably colored by the accidents of the individual temperament and occurrent passions of the public official

¹⁹ Descartes takes these concerns seriously and expands this account in his response. See his letter of August 1644 (AT IV.135–8/S 84–5).

²⁰ Kolesnik-Antoine (2014) suggests that Elisabeth is an empiricist-Cartesian.

insofar as they effectively bias the evidence that is available in favor of one decision or another. She writes:

I would like to see you define the passions in order to know them better. For those who call the passions perturbations of the mind would persuade me that the force of the passions consists only in overwhelming and subjecting reason to them, if experience did not show me that there are passions that do carry us to reasonable actions. But I assure myself that you will shed more light on this subject when you explicate how the force of the passions renders them even more useful when they are subject to reason. (AT IV.289–90/S 110–11)

In the letters that follow, Descartes begins to respond to Elisabeth's request, and by April 1646 Descartes has drafted what would become the *Traité des passions de l'âme*, for in her letter of that date, Elisabeth provides Descartes with comments. While she finds his enumeration of the passions and the moral elements of the work quite good, she raises concerns about Descartes's physiological claims. Her remarks are not dissimilar from her comments on the *Principles*. Once again, she wants internal and explanatory consistency. She asks for more evidence to support the claims about the physiological changes proper to the passions, and, in particular, a way of reconciling the generalizations about physiology with the common-sense view that different people feel the impact of passions differently. She also asks how wonder, whose effects are found in the brain, can affect the heart as quickly as Descartes claims it does. Descartes responds to some of her queries and expands his account of the physiology of the passions in his letter of May 1646, but Elisabeth has shifted to political philosophy.²¹ He, notably, removes any claim that wonder impacts the heart in the *Passions of the Soul*, and indeed in PA a. 71 he notes that "this passion [wonder] has the following peculiarity: it is not observed to be accompanied, as the other passions are, by any change taking place in the heart or in the blood" (AT XI.381/V 57).

4. DESCARTES'S ETHICS

In May 1645, Descartes and Elisabeth begin an exchange that ultimately leads to Descartes's fleshing out his ethics, developing the *morale par provision* he sets out in Part 3 of his *Discourse on Method*. This exchange, however, is different from most philosophical discussions in that it begins with the very personal matter of Elisabeth's health. Descartes diagnoses Elisabeth's long-term low grade fever as due to sadness, quite reasonably occasioned by the direct threat of the English Civil War on Elisabeth's family interests, and, as Elisabeth puts it, Descartes has "the kindness to cure [her] body

²¹ Elisabeth, in her letter of April 25, 1646, requested Descartes to write a treatise on maxims of civil life (AT IV.406/S 134), about which Descartes demurs. She also requests that he comment on Machiavelli's *The Prince*, which he does in his letters of September and November 1646.

with [her] soul” (May 24, 1645, AT IV.208/S 89).²² Committed to his original diagnosis, he goes on in his next letter (May or June 1645) to remark how, though we might understand the limited harm a set of events brings to us, one can nonetheless be quite affected by sensing or imagining those events, and those effects can involve substantive physiological changes in one’s body. The antidote, according to Descartes, is “to turn her imagination from them so that she thinks of them only when practical matters oblige her to, and so that she considers only those objects which are capable of bringing her contentment and joy” (AT IV.219/S 92). Elisabeth’s insistence that this proposed remedy is all very well in theory but next to impossible in practice moves Descartes to suggest that they read Seneca’s *De vita beata* together (July 21, 1645, AT IV.253/S 96). Through his criticism of Seneca, Descartes returns to the ethics he laid out in the *Discourse* (August 4, 1645, AT IV.265–6/S 98–9), and he sets about explaining in greater detail the ways in which virtue, and its concomitant contentment, is within our own power.

The exchange can be challenging to follow, as Descartes continues to write, working out his view, before he receives Elisabeth’s responses. Perhaps as a result, Elisabeth’s own letters are less fully developed than her earlier ones concerning mind–body interaction. Nonetheless, Elisabeth does raise substantive concerns regarding the key point of Cartesian ethics from a number of perspectives. For Descartes, virtue consists in being resolved to execute what we have judged to be the best, where those judgments derive from our using our minds as well as we can—that is, following Descartes’s method. In so doing, Descartes maintains, we will rest content, and in particular have no basis for regret. First, Elisabeth challenges the view that virtue and contentment are solely up to us and the use of our will. For her, moral luck, and in particular the luck of having a bodily constitution that allows us to reason well, is a condition of being virtuous.²³ Second, she objects that reasoning well about practical matters requires having perfect knowledge of the value of things, a knowledge that would require an omniscience no human has. Especially when one’s actions impact others, as they do when one holds a public office, in lacking this perfect knowledge, one will always regret decisions that harm the public, even when confident one has judged the best one could, because one will question the valuations that guided those judgments.²⁴ Elisabeth, more than Descartes, recognizes that the evaluations that guide our practical decisions are colored not only by passions, but also by a natural temperament through which we see things. The ethics Descartes is proposing thus requires a way of identifying and circumscribing the role our passions and our temperament play in practical matters.²⁵

Descartes aims to provide these principles in his letter of September 15, 1645, noting that “only two things are required in order to be always disposed to judge well: one is the knowledge of the truth, and the other is the habit of remembering and acquiescing to this knowledge every time the occasion requires” (AT IV.291/S 111). He goes on to

²² For a discussion of this turn of phrase, see Shapiro 2018. The discussion there draws on Corneanu 2011.

²³ See her letter of August 16, 1645 (AT IV.269/S 100).

²⁴ Shapiro (2014) discusses Elisabeth’s views on regret in more detail.

²⁵ See Elisabeth’s letter of September 13, 1645 (AT IV.288–9/S 110).

enumerate the most important truths: there is a God on whom all things depend; the nature of the mind, as able to exist apart from the body, and so the immortality of the soul; the vast extent of the universe; and the interdependence of each of us, though independent, on each other. He also adds that it is important to recognize that the passions exaggerate goods to which they move us, that bodily goods endure briefly compared to those of the mind, that local customs ought to be examined, and that we must cultivate the proper epistemic habits in order to judge well. Elisabeth, in the response in her letter of September 30, 1645, returns to raising objections and pressing Descartes on his internal consistency. Our knowledge of God cannot console us from the “mishaps that are brought upon us by other men” insofar as we assume both those men and ourselves to be free (AT IV.302/S 114); knowledge of the immortality of the soul serves just as well to hasten our death; knowledge of the great extent of the universe is at odds with the particular providence of God;²⁶ and our interdependence with others simply brings her back to her point about the inadequacy of our knowledge of the value of things. These points are reiterated in her subsequent letter, of November 28, 1645, and in her letter of November 30, 1645, she presses Descartes on the lack of consistency in holding both that the human will is free and that we are dependent on God for everything.²⁷

It is nearly impossible to know whether and to what degree Elisabeth’s comments influence Descartes as he continues to develop his moral philosophy and moral psychology in the *Passions of the Soul*. Nonetheless, it is plausible that this exchange influenced the published work, and not least because Elisabeth commissioned it and Descartes was drafting it as they were corresponding. Descartes does remain committed to the primacy of self-mastery, holding in the *Passions* that “firm and decisive judgments concerning the knowledge of good and evil, which it has resolved to follow in conducting the actions of its life” are the best means of regulating the passions (PA 48, AT XI.367/V 46), and even going so far as to hold that “although each movement of the gland seems to have been joined by nature to each of our thoughts from the beginning of our life, one can nevertheless join them to others by habituation” (PA 50, AT XI.368–9/V 47; see also PA 44, 107, 136, and 211).²⁸ He also continues to recommend reflecting on divine providence as a way of regulating our desires (PA 145, AT XI.438/V 98). However, he also lends primacy to generosity, which is both a passion and a virtue, maintaining that it is “key to all the other virtues, and a general remedy for all the disorders of the passions” (PA 161, AT XI.454/V 109). In doing so, he does not simply recognize the way in which our passions (and dispositions) themselves can figure in the regulation of the passions. The definition of generosity itself (PA 153) holds that our recognition of ourselves as

²⁶ In her letter of November 28, 1645, she clarifies this point: God, in being incarnated for the point of glorifying creation, would seem to place humankind greater than our small part in the vastness of the universe would suggest.

²⁷ Descartes’s letter of January 1646 aims to respond to these objections.

²⁸ Descartes alludes to this principle in his letter of May 1646, in which he also responds to a number of Elisabeth’s questions raised in her letter of April 25, 1646. One would have expected Elisabeth to have some issues with it, but her letters to him are less frequent (the next is from July 1646), as she is clearly pressed by other business.

freely willing is itself a passion, and so can move us, shaping both our actions and our responses to the effects of those actions, to help us to achieve both virtue and contentment. This account of generosity can serve as an answer to Elisabeth's concerns about the unavoidability of regret.

5. IS PRINCESS ELISABETH A CARTESIAN?

It seems clear that Elisabeth's contemporaries thought of her as a Cartesian. Pell's remark identifies her as a Cartesian, and understandably so. Elisabeth not only read Descartes's works with care; she acted as an ambassador to disseminate the work which had been dedicated to her—the *Principles of Philosophy*—and to discuss it. And she used her connections both to mitigate disputes around Cartesianism and to promote individuals favored by Descartes. These actions suggest an endorsement of Cartesian philosophy.

Yet most of Elisabeth's letters to Descartes contain some kind of objection to Descartes's views. This would seem to suggest that Elisabeth disagrees with Descartes. Here it is important to distinguish between two distinct general areas of discussion in the correspondence: natural philosophy and ethics.²⁹

Elisabeth's objections in the domain of natural philosophy concern fine-grained details of the explanations of natural phenomena Descartes offers, be it in his *Principles*, in the draft of the *Passions of the Soul*, or even with regards to the interaction of mind and body. Elisabeth's objections always presuppose a commitment to the primacy of efficient causal explanation. She and Descartes agree that formal causal explanations provide little explanation at all insofar as the action of forms on bodies is wholly mysterious. Thus, in her correspondence with Descartes, she looks for correct efficient causal explanations of magnetism and the properties of mercury, as well as of the effects of various medical treatments on the workings of the body, and of the physiology of the body more generally. Indeed, she holds Descartes accountable to his own reasons for rejecting formal causal explanations as he tries to open a space for such explanations to suffice in accounting for the way our thoughts can affect our body. In this respect, then, Elisabeth is a Cartesian.

It is noteworthy that her brand of Cartesianism entails neither a commitment to metaphysical dualism nor a rejection of it. In the letters that open their exchange, Elisabeth certainly remains open to a mind that is immaterial and non-extended. She seeks only an explanation of such an entity's causal efficacy with regard to the body. Elisabeth's agnosticism about the metaphysics of mind perhaps explains her resistance to Descartes's ethics as he puts it forward in his letters to her. She is unconvinced by the view that our contentment is wholly in our power, provided simply that we are confident that we have acted on our best judgments, in a large part because she recognizes the

²⁹ It is also important to recognize that the correspondence positions us as witnesses to a real-time philosophical conversation, with all its messiness laid bare. See Alanen 2004.

limits on the power of our mind. Indeed, in light of the apparent inconsistency between human free will and the dependence of all things on God, it sometimes seems as if she would be willing to forsake human freedom for divine providence. Perhaps because she is willing to downplay the role of free will and self-mastery in our contentment, she is more interested in the way the passions influence our actions and in how we might regulate our passions not simply to facilitate virtue but also to minimize regret and so achieve a degree of contentment. In this regard, it is conceivable, if not likely, that she influenced Descartes's own thinking and so the moral psychology presented in the *Passions of the Soul*. While we know a bit about the reception of the definitions and physiology of the particular passions in that work,³⁰ we know less about the impact and uptake of Descartes's ethics. Descartes's ethics and moral psychology are thus less a part of Cartesianism as we currently conceive of it. Equally, it does not seem that Elisabeth was as proactive about circulating the *Passions* as she was about circulating Descartes's natural philosophy. In all these senses, though Elisabeth engaged with and contributed to Descartes's ethics, her Cartesianism does not extend that far.

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³⁰ See especially Le Brun (1698). It is also likely that others drew on this physiology. Spinoza, in the preface to Part V of his *Ethics*, inveighs against the basis of that physiology in the first part of the *Passions* (with its specious story of mind–body interaction), but also others, such as Charleton (1674), though mostly influenced by Gassendi, would no doubt have also read Descartes on the passions.

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