

## Princess Elisabeth and Descartes Correspondence **Elisabeth of Bohemia, Descartes**

*Readability: Moderate*

### *Possible Applications:*

- Philosophy of Mind (mind/body problem, souls, rationality)
- Ethics (happiness, the good life, rules for living)
- Women in philosophy (women and rationality, metaphilosophy)

### *Complimentary Texts/Resources:*

Lisa Shapiro, “Princess Elisabeth and Descartes: The Union of Soul and Body and the Practice of Philosophy”

Shapiro explicates Elisabeth’s underlying view and objections and shows how to frame the issues in the correspondence as feminist issues and issues about philosophy and its culture.

Andrea Nye, “Polity and Prudence: the Ethics of Elisabeth, Princess Palatine”

Nye explores Elisabeth’s ethical views, as discovered via the correspondence.

SEP article on Elisabeth:

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/elisabeth-bohemia/>

Women-philosophers.com on Elisabeth:

<http://www.women-philosophers.com/Elisabeth-of-Bohemia.html>

### *Editions:*

Free PDF from Jonathan Bennett’s Early Modern Texts:

<http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/pdfs/descartes1643.pdf>

Good, easy to read updating and trimming of the text; lots of other modern texts here, too.

The best edition is Shapiro’s book

<http://catalog.library.georgetown.edu/record=b5293305~S4>

Also available in Atherton’s *Women Philosophers of the Early Modern Period*:

<http://www.amazon.com/Women-Philosophers-Early-Modern-Period/dp/0872202593/>

But I think the particular selections Atherton makes—while perfectly good for the basic Phil Mind stuff—don’t do justice to the complexity here.

### *Thesis:*

Elisabeth is typically understood as offering an interactionist objection to Descartes’s dualism: if body (material) and soul/mind (immaterial) are really as distinct as Descartes claim, how it can be the case that one can act on the other? She approaches this problem from both directions.

## *Key Definitions:*

### *Summary:*

#### **1st exchange**

Elisabeth, 06 May 1643; Descartes, 21 May 1643

Elisabeth asks how an immaterial thing could move a material one, since moving (a material thing) requires pushing. Descartes totally misses the force of her question, instead provides some (helpful) ‘clarifications.’

Elisabeth, 10 June 1643

Elisabeth clarifies her objection, saying that Descartes’s own physics seems to preclude such an arrangement of soul-pushing-body, and correctly noting Descartes’s inapt metaphor of 21 May. She issues a big challenge, saying that, at this point, she’d be more apt to find the soul to be material than buy his interactionist position. She considers a solution here (information transfer) that undergrads sometimes try. She judges it won’t work. She also mentions, briefly, conditions of the body that interfere with the mind, a perennial favorite of an objection to Descartes, but she doesn’t explore it.

Descartes, 28 June 1643

Descartes backpedals and ‘explains’ his (somewhat condescending) 21 May letter, while apologizing. He then seems to claim that the body and mind are the same, despite being two substances. (This bit makes no damn sense.)

Elisabeth, 01 July 1643

Elisabeth twists the knife here, parlaying earlier success to show that the issues she’s illuminated with D’s view—which he hasn’t been able to clear up—lead to deeper (and very important) conclusions about (the falseness of) his system.

#### **2nd exchange**

Descartes, 8 July 1644 to Descartes August 1644

This exchange revolves predominantly around Descartes’s dedication of the *Passions* to her. There’s some stuff here on D’s view of virtue. E raises two difficulties, one of which is her fault for misreading, but both highlight how BONKERS Descartes’s scientific views look now.

#### **3rd exchange**

Descartes, 18 May 1645 to Descartes July 1645

Descartes writes to Elisabeth offering her health advice. The main value of this letter is that it strongly illustrates Descartes’s commitment to the dualism: the mind is separate from and can/should *regulate* the body. Elisabeth’s response first highlights the role that sex/gender

play here. She blames 'the weakness of her sex' for producing her inability to simply overcome the sad passions she's overwhelmed with. Descartes responds with more neo-Stoic stuff about the mind controlling the body, and the mind being able to regulate its own passions. Elisabeth gives an account of how her passions end up producing bodily problems; Descartes again recommends relaxation and 'a carefree attitude' to mend her mind and body.

Descartes, 21 August 1645, 04 August 1645

Descartes suggests they read Seneca's *On the Happy Life*, but immediately regrets the choice. Descartes immediately regrets this choice. He criticizes Seneca for inadequately distinguishing good fortune and true contentment, the latter of which depends only on the mind. (The bigger jug may hold more, but both can be equally full. That stuff.) Descartes also gives here three of the four maxims of his ethics. (He leaves off 'find a profession that suits your interests/talents.')

You'll see that his ethics is largely about doing what reason suggests, so it is crucially, also, epistemological. There's lots of weird and interesting stuff here.

Elisabeth, 16 August 1645

Elisabeth here resurrects some of her prior objections in a new guise. She reprises her interest in physical condition affecting mental condition from the 10 June 1643 letter. She gives several good examples. It's worth looking at. She ties this to Descartes's ethical claims, and particularly those about regret.

### *Class Activities:*

Discuss which of Shapiro's two-ways of reading E works best?