Correspondence between Descartes and Princess Elisabeth

René Descartes and Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis . . . . indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth. Longer omissions are reported on, between [brackets], in normal-sized type. This version aims mainly to present the philosophical content of the correspondence; though after the philosophical content stops, a continuing dramatic triangle—philosopher, queen, princess—is too interesting to pass up entirely. But much material has been omitted; it can be found in Lisa Shapiro’s informative edition (Chicago University Press, 2007). Titles and other honorifics are omitted; and Descartes will be made to use ‘you’ and ‘your’ where in fact he always used ‘your Highness’ and ‘she’ and ‘her’. Also omitted: the signing-off flourishes—usually (from Descartes) ‘your very humble and very obedient servant’ and (from Elisabeth) ‘Your very affectionate friend at your service’; and also, in some letters, a penultimate sentence whose only role is to lead into the closing flourish.—Place: Elisabeth writes from The Hague in all her letters (with one exception) through vii.1646, from Berlin through 5 xii.1647, and then from Crossen. All of Descartes’ letters are written from Egmond (Holland) except for two from France in vii.1644, one from The Hague in 6.vi.1647, one from Paris vi.1648) and one last letter from Stockholm. Strictly speaking, Descartes lived and wrote at different times in two small towns called Egmond-something.

First launched: October 2009

Contents

Letters written in 1643 and 1664

| Elisabeth writes on 6.v.1643: | Descartes writes on 21.v.1643: |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|---|
| 1                             | 2                             |
Letters written in 1643 and 1664

Elisabeth writes on 6.v.1643:

When I heard that you had planned to visit me a few days ago, I was •elated by your kind willingness to share yourself with an ignorant and headstrong person, and •saddened by the misfortune of missing such a profitable conversation. When M. Pollot [a friend of Descartes and of the Princess] took me through the solutions you had given him for some obscurities in Regius's physics, that increased my regret at missing you, because I'd have learned them better from you directly. And direct contact would have given me something else. When Professor Regius was here in The Hague, I put to him a question that he said would be better answered by you. I am shy about my disorderly writing style, which is why I haven't before now written to you asking for this favour.

[In her next sentence, the Princess relies on a theory about soul-on-body according to which the soul's thoughts are passed on to the ‘spirits’—components of the body—which then cause overt bodily movements. See also note after the end of this paragraph.] But today M. Pollot has given me such assurance of your goodwill towards everyone and especially towards me that I have overcome my inhibitions and come right out with •the question I put to the Professor, namely:

Given that the soul of a human being is only a thinking substance, how can it affect the bodily spirits, in order to bring about voluntary actions?

•The question arises because it seems that how a thing moves depends solely on (i) how much it is pushed, (ii) the manner in which it is pushed, or (iii) the surface-texture and shape of the thing that pushes it. [That version of (i) is a guess, based on the guess that pulsion should have been impulsion.] The first two of those require contact between the two things, and the third requires that the causally active thing be extended. Your notion of the soul entirely excludes extension, and it appears to me that an immaterial thing can’t possibly touch anything else. So I ask you for a definition of the soul that homes in on its nature more thoroughly than does the one you give in your Meditations, i.e. I want one that characterizes what it •is as distinct from what it •does (namely to think). It looks as though human souls can exist without thinking—e.g. in an unborn child or in someone who has a great fainting spell—but even if that is not so, and the soul’s intrinsic nature and its thinking are as inseparable as God’s attributes are, we can still get a more perfect idea of both of them by considering them separately. •In writing to you like this I am freely exposing to you the weaknesses of my soul’s speculations; but I know that you are the best physician for my soul, and I hope that you will observe the Hippocratic oath and supply me with remedies without making them public. [She is referring to an oath traditionally associated with Hippocrates, a pioneer of medicine in the 4th century BCE, which includes this: ‘All that may come to my knowledge in the exercise of my profession or in daily commerce with men, which ought not to be spread abroad, I will keep secret and will never reveal.’]

The French word for the bodily ‘spirits’ referred to in that paragraph is esprit. That word can also mean ‘mind’, and is thus translated wherever that is appropriate in this version. e.g. in Descartes’s reference to the Princess’s ‘incomparable mind’ on page 3. When he or the Princess is writing about the mind in a weightily theoretical way—e.g. discussing inter-action between mind and body—they use not esprit but âme, usually translated by ‘soul’. The link between âme and ‘soul’ will be preserved throughout this version; but remember that these uses of
Correspondence René Descartes and Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia 1643–4

‘soul’ have little if any theological content and are, nearly always, merely high-flown ways of saying ‘mind’.

Descartes writes on 21.v.1643:

[He starts by praising the Princess’s favour of writing to him. When they have met, he says, he has been so dazzled by her combination of intelligence and beauty that he couldn’t converse well. He continues:] No doubt you have noticed this, and have kindly wanted to help me with this by leaving me the traces of your thoughts on paper. I have now read them several times and become accustomed to thinking about them, with the result that I am indeed less dazzled, but am correspondingly more admiring when I see that these thoughts seem ingenious at a first reading and appear increasingly judicious and solid the more I examine them.

In view of my published writings, the question that can most rightly be asked is the very one that you put to me. All the knowledge we can have of the human soul depend on two facts about it: (1) the fact that it thinks, and (2) the fact that being united to the body it can act and be acted on along with it.

[For ‘act’ French has agir and for ‘be acted on’ it has pâtir, for which there is no equivalent verb in English. The verb-pair agir—pâtir is linked to the English noun-pair ‘agent’—‘patient’ in a now-obscure sense of ‘patient’, and to the noun-pair ‘action’—‘passion’ in a now-obscure sense of ‘passion’, and to the adjective-pair ‘active’—‘passive’ with meanings that are still current.] I have said almost nothing about (2), focussing entirely on making (1) better understood. That is because my principal aim was to show that the soul is distinct from the body, and (1) was helpful in showing this whereas (2) could have been harmful ·clouding the issue, distracting the reader·. But I can’t hide anything from eyesight as sharp as yours! So I’ll try here to explain how I conceive of the soul’s union with the body and how it has the power to move the body.

I start by focussing on the fact that we have certain basic notions that are like templates on the pattern of which we form all our other knowledge. There are very few of these. In addition to the most general ones—

(1) the notions of being, number, duration, etc.

—which apply to everything we can conceive, we have for the body in particular

(2) only the notion of extension, from which follow the notions of shape and movement;

and for the soul alone

(3) only the notion of thought, which includes ·the notions of· the perceptions of the understanding and the inclinations of the will;

and finally, for the soul and the body together

(4) only the notion of their union, on which depends the notion of the soul’s power to move the body and the body’s power to act on the soul in causing its sensations and passions.

I observe next that all secure, disciplined human knowledge consists only in keeping these notions well apart from one another, and applying each of them only to the things that it is right for. [Throughout this letter, phrases about a notion’s being ‘right for’ x translate French uses of appartenir à, literally meaning that the notion belongs to x.] When we try to explain some difficulty by means of a notion that isn’t right for it, we are bound to go wrong; just as we are when we try to explain ·or define· one of these notions in terms of another, because each of them is basic and thus can be understood only through itself. The use of the senses has made our notions of extension, shapes and movements much more familiar to us
than our other notions, and just because of that the principal cause of our errors lies in our commonplace attempts to use these notions to explain things that they aren’t right for. For example, when we try to use the imagination to conceive the nature of the soul, or when we try to conceive how the soul moves the body in terms of how a body moves a body.

In the *Meditations*, which you were good enough to read, I tried to make conceivable (3) the notions that are right for the soul alone, distinguishing them from (2) the ones that are right for the body alone; so the first thing that I ought to explain now is how to conceive (4) the notions that are right for the union of the soul with the body, separately from (2) and (3). It seems to me that what I wrote at the end of my response to the Sixth Objections can help with that; for we can’t look for these simple notions anywhere except in our soul, which naturally contains them all, though it doesn’t always (i) distinguish them from one another or (ii) apply them to the objects to which they ought to be applied.

Thus, I think we have until now (i) confused the notion of *the soul’s power to act on the body with* • the body’s power to act on other bodies, and have (ii) applied them (not to the soul, for we haven’t yet known the soul, but) to various qualities of bodies—weight, heat, and so on—which we have imagined to be real, i.e. to have an existence distinct from that of the body • that has them •, and thus to be • substances though we have called them • ‘qualities’.

[Descartes here uses ‘real’—réelles, which comes from the Latin res = ‘thing’—as a way of saying that we have imagined these ‘qualities to be • things. He is referring scornfully to a philosophical theory that implies things like this: When cold x is placed on red-hot y, some of y’s heat passes over into x. It’s not just that y cools by as much as x heats up, but the very same individual instance of heat that y has is acquired by x. This theory distinguishes three items:
- a concrete particular: the red-hot plate y
- an abstract universal: heat
- an abstract particular: the heat of y.

Descartes always rejected this theory of ‘real qualities’, saying that in treating an individual package (so to speak) of heat as being possessed first by y and then by x you are treating it as a thing, a substance.]

Trying to understand weight, heat and the rest, we have applied to them • sometimes notions that we have for knowing body and • sometimes ones that we have for knowing the soul, depending on whether we were attributing to them something material or something immaterial. Take for example what happens when we suppose that weight is a ‘real quality’ about which we know nothing except that it has the power to move the body that has it toward the centre of the earth. • *How do we think that the weight of a rock moves the rock downwards* •? We don’t think that this happens through a real contact of one surface against another • as though the weight was a hand pushing the rock downwards •! But we have no difficulty in conceiving how it moves the body, nor how the weight and the rock are connected, because we find from our own inner experience that we • already • have a notion that provides just such a connection. But I believe we are misusing this notion when we apply it to weight—which, as I hope to show in my *Physics*, is not a thing distinct from the body that has it. For I believe that this notion was given to us for conceiving how the soul moves the body.

If I make this explanation any longer I’ll be doing an injustice to your incomparable mind, whereas if I let myself think that what I have written so far will be entirely satisfactory to you I’ll be guilty of egotism. I’ll try to steer between these by saying just this: if I can write or say something that could please you, I will always take it as a great honour to take up a pen or to go to The Hague [where Elisabeth was living at this time] for that purpose, . . . But I can’t find here • in your letter, anything that brings into play the Hippocratic oath that you put to me, because everything in the letter deserves to be seen and admired by everyone. • Still, I will conform to the
Your letter is infinitely precious to me, and I'll treat it in the way misers do their treasures: the more they value them the more they hide them, grudging the sight of them to rest of the world and placing their supreme happiness in looking at them. . . .

**Elisabeth writes on 10.vi.1643:**

Your goodness shows not only in your (of course) pointing out and correcting the faults in my reasoning but also in your using false praise. . . .so as to make the faults less distressing to me. The false praise wasn't necessary: the life I live here. . . .has made me so familiar with my faults that the thought of them doesn't make me feel anything beyond the desire to remedy them.

So I am not ashamed to admit that I have found in myself all the causes of error you mention in your letter, and that I can't yet banish them entirely. That's because the life that I am constrained to lead doesn't let me free up enough time to acquire a habit of meditation in accordance with your rules. The interests of my house (which I must not neglect) and conversations and social obligations (which I can't avoid), inflict so much annoyance and boredom on this weak mind of mine that it is useless for anything else for a long time afterward. [By ‘my house’ she means the semi-royal family to which she belongs. Her father had been raised in 1620 from his semi-royal status to the title of King of Bohemia, then in a matter of months he lost his kingdom (to the Holy Roman Empire) and the other lands he had ruled (to Spain). He and some of his family took refuge in The Hague, where they were joined by Elisabeth and some of her siblings in the late 1620s. Her father died in battle (fighting on behalf of the King of Sweden) in 1632. The exiled fatherless family was in some ways politically engaged and politically prominent; it was not wealthy.] I hope that this will excuse my stupid inability to grasp what you want me to grasp. I don't see how

(1) the idea that you used to have about weight can guide us to
(2) the idea we need in order to judge how the (nonextended and immaterial) soul can move the body.

To put some flesh on the bones of my difficulty: I don’t see why we should be persuaded that

(a) a body can be pushed by some immaterial thing by
(b) the ·supposed· power to carry the body toward the centre of the earth, the ‘power’ that you used wrongly to attribute to weight which you ·wrongly· took to be a ·real· quality;
(c) a body cannot be pushed by some immaterial thing by the demonstration, which you promise in your physics, that
(d) the way weight operates is nothing like (b).

The old idea about weight may be a fiction produced by ignorance of what really moves rocks toward the centre of the earth (it can't claim the special guaranteed truthfulness that the idea of God has!). And if we are going to try theorising about the cause of weight, the argument might go like this:

No material cause ·of weight· presents itself to the senses, so this power must be due to the contrary of what is material, i.e. to an immaterial cause.

But I've never been able to conceive of 'what is immaterial' in any way except as ·the bare negative· 'what is not material', and that can't enter into causal relations with matter!

I have to say that I would find it easier to concede matter and extension to the soul than to concede that an immaterial thing could move and be moved by a body. On the one side, if the soul moves the body through information [French word], the spirits would have to think, and you say that nothing of
Correspondence René Descartes and Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia 1643–4

a bodily kind thinks. On the other side, you show in your Meditations that the body could move the soul, and yet it is hard to understand that a soul (as you have described souls), having become able and accustomed to reasoning well, can lose all that because of some vaporous condition of the body; and that a soul that can exist without the body, and that has nothing in common with the body, is so governed by it.

But now that you have undertaken to instruct me, I entertain these views only as friends whom I don’t expect to keep ·as friends·, assuring myself that you will explain the nature of an immaterial substance and the manner in which it acts and is acted on in the body, making as good a job of this as of all the other things that you have undertaken to teach.

Descartes writes on 28.vi.1643:

I am very obliged to you for your patient willingness to hear me out on a subject which I presented so badly in my previous letter, giving me a chance to fill the gaps in that letter. The chief ones, it seems to me, are these two: (1) After distinguishing three sorts of ideas or basic notions each of which is known in its own special way and not by a comparison with the others—i.e. our notions of the soul, of the body, and of the soul’s union with the body—I ought to have explained the differences among these three sorts of notions and among the operations of the soul through which we have them, and to have said how we make each of them familiar and easy to us. (2) After saying why I brought in the comparison with weight, I ought to have made clear that although one may wish to think of the soul as material (which strictly speaking is just to conceive its union with the body), that wouldn’t stop one from realizing that the soul is separable from the body. I think that those cover everything that you asked me to do in your letter.

First, then, I notice this big difference amongst these three sorts of notions: •The soul is conceived only by the pure intellect; •the body—i.e. extension, shapes and motions—can also be known by the intellect alone, but the knowledge is much better when the intellect is aided by the imagination; and finally the knowledge we get of •what belongs to the soul’s union with the body is a very dark affair when it comes from the intellect (whether alone or aided by the imagination), but it is very bright when the senses have a hand in it. [‘Dark’ and ‘Bright’ translate adverbs related to the adjectives obscur and clair. To translate the latter as ‘clear’ is often wrong: it makes poor sense of many things that Descartes says using clair, most notably of his saying that pain is always clair, this being his explanation of what clair means! His famous emphasis on ideas that are claires et distinctes calls for ideas that are vivid and clear (in that order).] That’s why people who never come at things in a theoretical way and use only their senses have no doubt that the soul moves the body and that the body acts on the soul. They regard soul and body as a single thing, i.e. they conceive their union. ·I equate those· because conceiving the union between two things is conceiving them as one single thing. Metaphysical thoughts, which exercise the unaided intellect, serve to familiarize us with the notion of the soul; and the study of mathematics, which mainly employs the imagination (in thinking about shapes and motions), accustoms us to form very clear notions of body. But what teaches us how to conceive the soul’s union with the body is •the ordinary course of life and conversation and •not meditating or studying things that exercise the imagination.

Please don’t think that I am joking; I have and always will have too much respect for you to do that. It really is true that the chief rule that I keep to in my studies—the rule that I think has helped me most in my gaining a bit of
knowledge—has been this:

I never spend more than a few hours a day in the thoughts involving the imagination, or more than a few hours a year on thoughts that involve the intellect alone. I give all the rest of my time to the relaxation of the senses and the repose of the mind.

[Descartes writes of giving time to the *relâche des sens* which could mean ‘resting the senses’ but probably means ‘resting in ways that involve the senses.’] I count among imagination-involving activities all serious conversations and anything that needs to be done with attention. This is why I have retired to the country. In the busiest city in the world I could have as many hours to myself as I now employ in study, but I couldn’t make such good use of them when my mind was tired by the attention I’d had to give to everyday life’s bustling tangles. I take the liberty of telling you this as an admiring tribute to your ability—in the midst of all the business and cares that come to people who combine great minds with high birth—to apply your mind to the *meditations* needed to appreciate the soul’s distinctness from the body.

I wrote as I did because I judged that it was these *meditations*, rather than those other intellectually less demanding thoughts, that led you to find obscurity in our notion of their union; because it seems to me that the human mind *can’t* conceive

the soul’s (a) distinctness from the body and its (b) union with the body,

conceiving them very clearly and both at the same time. That is because this requires one to conceive them as (b) one single thing and at the same time as (a) two things, which is contradictory. ·When I wrote my letter· I thought you still had at the forefront of your mind the reasons which prove that (a) the soul is distinct from the body; and I didn’t want to ask you to push them aside so as to bring to the fore the notion of (b) their union that everyone always experiences within himself without philosophizing—simply by knowing that he is a single person who has both body and thought whose natures are such that this thought can move the body and can sense what happens to the body. *That* is why in my letter I brought in a comparison with weight and the other qualities that we commonly imagine to be united to some bodies just as thought is united to our own. It was an imperfect comparison, because weight and those other qualities are not ‘real’ though we imagine them as being so [See note on page 3]; but I wasn’t troubled by that because I thought that you were already completely convinced that the soul is a substance distinct from body.

But since you remark that it is easier to attribute matter and extension to the soul than to credit it with the capacity to move and be moved by the body without having matter, please feel free to attribute this matter and extension to the soul—because that’s what it is to conceive it as united to the body. Once you have formed a proper conception of this and experienced it in yourself, you’ll find it easy to realize that

·the matter you’ll have attributed to a thought is not the thought itself, and

·the extension of this matter is of a different nature from the extension of this thought (because the former is pinned to a definite location which it occupies so as to keep out all other bodily extension, which is not the case with the latter).

So you won’t find it hard to return to the knowledge of the soul’s distinctness from the body in spite of having conceived their union.

[Four points about the above indented passage. ·The switch from ‘soul’ to ‘thought’ is Descartes’s; you might like to think about why he switched. ·The passage may explain why Descartes has spoken of ‘attributing matter to the soul’ rather than, more naturally, ‘attributing materiality
to the soul. Could the indented passage be rewritten so as not to need the concrete noun 'matter'? What Descartes says about 'the extension of this matter' is what he would say about the extension of any matter. Is Descartes implying that thoughts do have extension, though not the Other extended things: Keep out! kind of extension that bodies have?

I believe that it is very necessary to have properly understood the principles of metaphysics once in a lifetime, because they are what give us knowledge of God and of our soul. I also think that someone's frequently focussing his intellect on them would be very harmful, because it would unfit him for handling well the functions of the imagination and the senses. The best course, I think, is to settle for keeping in one's memory and one's belief-system the conclusions that one did once drawn from metaphysical principles, and then employ the rest of one's study time to thoughts in which the intellect co-operates with the imagination and the senses.

My great devotion to your service makes me hope that my frankness won't displease you. I would have written at greater length, trying to clear up all at once the difficulties you have raised, if it weren't that...[and then he reports on the distractions of a legal problem arising from a public dispute he has had with Gisbertus Voetius, a Dutch theologian who had attacked Descartes and arranged for a formal denunciation of his philosophy at the University of Utrecht, of which he was the head].

**Elisabeth writes on 1.vii.1643:**

I gather that the high value I put on your teachings, and my desire to profit from them, haven't put you to as much trouble as you have had from the ingratitude of people who deprive themselves of your teachings and want to deprive the human race of them. I wasn't going to send you my last letter—new evidence of my ignorance!—until I heard that you were done with those obstinate dogmatists; but M. Van Bergen kindly agreed to stay on in town here until he could have...and take to you...a reply to your letter of 28 June—which gives me a clear view of the three kinds of notions we have, their objects, and how we should make use of them—and that obliged me to get on with it.

I find...from your letter...that the senses show me that the soul moves the body, but as for...the senses tell me nothing about that, any more than the intellect and the imagination do. This leads me to think that the soul has properties that we don't know—which might overturn your doctrine, of which I was persuaded by your excellent arguments in the Meditations, that the soul is not extended. This doubt seems to be supported by the rule that you give there for handling issues of truth and falsity, saying that all our errors come from our forming judgments about things that we don't perceive well enough. Although extension is not necessary to thought, it isn't inconsistent with it either; so it may flow from something else that the soul does that is no less essential to it than thought is...[In that sentence, 'flow from' is a guess. The original has duire à, which isn't French. The great Descartes editors Adam and Tannery conjecture nuire à = 'clash with', but that reverses what seems clearly to be the main thrust of what the Princess is saying.] At least it—the thesis that the soul is extended—pulls down the self-contradictory doctrine of the scholastics that the soul is entirely present in the whole body and entirely present in each of its parts. As for the thesis itself, I plead guilty to having confused the notion of the soul with that of the body for the same reason that the vulgar do; but this acknowledgment of error still leaves me with my initial doubt, i.e. my thinking that perhaps after all the soul is extended..., and if you—who single-handedly kept me from being a sceptic—don't clear away this doubt...
to which my first reasoning carried me, I'll lose hope of ever being certain of anything.

I owe you this confession... but I would think it very imprudent if I didn't already know—from my own experience and from your reputation—that your kindness and generosity are equal to the rest of your merits. You couldn't have matched up to your reputation in a more obliging way than through the clarifications and advice you have given to me, which I prize among the greatest treasures I could have.

The letters of xi.1643:

[No reply by Descartes to the foregoing letter has been found.

[He sent to the Princess a certain problem in geometry; she gave a solution to it that Descartes was told about; he wrote at length, explaining why his own first solution was less elegant than hers was said to be; she sent own solution, which Descartes heralded as 'very like the one I proposed in my Geometry'; and he wrote at length about the advantages of elegance and economy in mathematical proofs.

[This evidently all happened in November 1643; some of the letters involved have been lost; the three that survive—two by him, one by her—are omitted from this version of the Correspondence.

[The next letter that we have was written half a year later, by Descartes. It responds to one by Elisabeth that we do not have.]

Descartes writes on 8.vii.1644:

My voyage to Paris couldn't involve any misfortune when I had the good fortune of making it while being alive in your memory. The very flattering letter from you that testifies to this is the most precious thing I could have received in this country. It would have made me perfectly happy if it hadn't told me that the illness you had before I left The Hague has lingered on in the form of stomach troubles. The remedies you have chosen—involving diet and exercise—are in my opinion the best of all. Well, they are the best (all things considered) after the remedies of the soul, which certainly has great power over the body, as is shown by the big changes that anger, fear, and the other passions arouse in it. But when the soul conducts the animal spirits to the places where they can help or harm, it does this not by directly willing the spirits to go in those ways but by willing or thinking of something else. For our body is so constructed that certain movements in it follow naturally upon certain thoughts: as we see that blushes follows from shame, tears from compassion, and laughter from joy. I know of no thought more conducive to continuing health than a strong conviction that our body is so well constructed that once we are healthy we can't easily fall ill—unless we engage in some excess or are harmed by air pollution or some other external cause. [In that sentence 'a strong conviction' translates Descartes's double phrase 'une forte persuasion et ferme créance; it isn't obvious what two concepts are involved in this.] Someone who is ill can restore his health solely by the power of nature, especially when he is still young. This conviction is certainly much truer and more reasonable than the view of some people—I have seen this happen—who are influenced by an astrologer or a physician to think they must die in a certain amount of time, and are caused purely by this belief to become sick and even, often enough, to die. I couldn't help being extremely sad if I thought that you were still unwell; I prefer to hope that the illness is all over; but my desire to be certain about this makes me eager to return to Holland.

I plan to leave here in four or five days, to go to Poitou and Brittany where I must do the family business that brought