

## Week Two: Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia (1618 - 1680)

## Biographical details:

Elisabeth was raised in The Hague, in exile from her family's native Bohemia (roughly the area of the Czech Republic) when her father, The King of Bohemia, was overthrown after a very short reign during the Thirty Years War. She earned the nickname 'La Greque' from her siblings for her passion for studying. She outgrew tutors and engaged widely respected scholars with whom she developed intellectual rapport. Her interests ranged from languages to philosophy, science and mathematics. Early in her life she befriended Anna Maria van Schurman, a celebrated intellectual of the time, who became her mentor and friend for life. The court at The Hague became a meeting point for intellectuals throughout Europe, part of what is known as The Republic of Letters. This was an informal network for sharing and debating the ideas of the day. This was a time when Scholasticism (the medieval system of knowledge) was being disbanded and replaced with a new philosophy, science and mathematics. Descartes's philosophical approach was at the forefront of this revolution in thinking.

Elisabeth sought out an introduction to Descartes, having read his published works and wishing to discuss them further. They met only once, but corresponded for seven years, until Descartes's death in 1650. They discussed all his key ideas and, in particular, his account of the distinction between the mind and the body, which formed the basis for both his metaphysics and his empirical work.

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From the Correspondence:

Elisabeth: "So I ask you please to tell me how the soul of a human being can determine the bodily spirits, in order to bring about voluntary actions." p. 62: 661.

Descartes: Like "heaviness", which is in the body and has the power to move the body, so can we think of the soul as moving the body (neither moves the body by being another body, suggesting a different model for causal interaction.)

Elisabeth: You explain that "heaviness" is in the body and has the power to move the body, but this gives us no explanation of how an external immaterial thing can move the body. "I have never been able to conceive of such an immaterial thing as anything other than a negation of matter which cannot have any communication with it."  
p. 68: 684.

"I admit that 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....." p. 68: 685.

Key points:

Soul moving body: A purely immaterial soul should only be able to move the body through passing on information from one intelligent nature to another. But the body is not intelligent. Whether we can understand the body as “intelligent” is an area of current discussion and debate.

Body moving soul: It is clear that the body can interfere with the functioning of the mind, but if the mind is immaterial, then this seems impossible to explain.

Descartes: "...even though one might want to conceive of the soul as material (which, strictly speaking, is what it is to conceive its union with the body), one would not cease to know.. that the soul is separable from it." p. 69: 691.

We do just experience the mind and body as one thing if we do not philosophise and discover the distinction between their natures. Two levels of explanation may be needed here, the conceptual and the experiential.

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Elisabeth: Yes, I, too, find that I experience the union of mind and body, with my senses telling me that the soul moves the body, and the body interferes with the functioning of the mind, “but they [my senses] teach me nothing (no more than do the understanding and the imagination) of the way in which it does so.” p. 72: 2. The interaction is still not explained.

Her own view: “For this reason, I think that there are some properties of the soul, which are unknown to us, which could perhaps overturn what your *Metaphysical Meditations* persuaded me of by such good reasoning: the nonextendedness of the soul. This doubt seems to be founded on the rule that you give there, in speaking of the true and the false, that all error comes to us in forming judgements about that which we do not perceive well enough. Though extension is not necessary to thought, neither is it at all repugnant to it, and so it could be suited to some other function of the soul which is no less essential to it.” p. 72: 2.

Two interpretations: Lisa Shapiro suggests Elisabeth might hold a materialist conception of mind, given Elisabeth’s arguments for the dependence of mind on body. Frederique Janssen-Lauret argues that Elisabeth leans toward a Naturalistic Dualism. On that view, in contemporary terms, our accounts of physics and psychology leave us with some form of property dualism. It may be, however, that she is keeping an open mind, maintaining that there are properties of the soul that make it rational and free, unlike anything contained in the material body, while acknowledging the experience of mind-body interaction for which we have not yet discovered the explanation.

WEEK 3

CONCEPTS OF FREEDOM: no specific readings, just think about what you think it is.