

What did Elisabeth ask Descartes? A reading proposal of the first Letter of the Correspondence

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Abstract:

In May 1643 Elisabeth da Bohemia addressed a question to Descartes which inaugurated a six-year Correspondence, until his death. He dedicates his mature metaphysical work to the Princess (*Principles of First Philosophy*, 1644) and writes *Passions of the Soul* (1649) as one of the results of the dialogue with the philosopher of Bohemia. The silencing of the last hundred years of historiography on Elisabeth of Bohemia's legacy in this epistolary exchange caused distortions and, in some cases, underpinned the bias as a rule and as the history. One of the consequences of this distortion is the interpretation according to which her first question would consist of a critique of substantial dualism. In this study I suggest an interpretation of the nature of the first question, in order to clarify the philosopher's thinking and her role in dialogue, in a comprehensive way, without subscribing to the literary paradigm of the Cartesian soliloquy, and its bias.

Keywords: Elisabeth of Bohemia, René Descartes, epistolary exchange, theory of action, Prudence, *Conscientia*

Introduction

Elisabeth of Bohemia (1618-1680)¹ was an exiled Princess from the Thirty Years' War, who corresponded with René Descartes (1596-1649). This epistolary exchange is the reference document for the study of Elisabeth's philosophical thought and also for understanding how Descartes carries forward implications of his method that, until she pushed him to think about it, were not clear even to himself. The implications are both practical and psychological and are at the root of Descartes' last work, *Passions of the Soul* (1649), which he wrote based on his dialogue with the philosopher of Bohemia. The letters with Elisabeth challenge more than a hundred years of cultivation of the rationalist canon and still deserve a long path of historical-conceptual research. What is known is that the Correspondence (with some lost letters) was found in 1876 and published in 1879 (Ebbersmeyer, 2020, p. 4), and that it was only at the end of the 20th century that Elisabeth began to be removed from silencing, through the new philosophical historiography, marked by skepticism towards the canon.

Thanks to the work of some philosophers, such as Lisa Shapiro, Sabbrina Ebbersmeyer and Lilli Alanen, Elisabeth of Bohemia began to be studied on her own thought. This work is recent and has against it not only the literary desert that followed the silencing of the philosopher Princess, but the plethora of commentaries, theses, dissertations, books and essays on what Descartes replied to

¹ To know more about Elisabeth's life, see: de Lisa Shapiro, at Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy:

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/elisabeth-bohemia/> my entry at:

<https://www.blogs.unicamp.br/mulheresnafilosofia/2020/10/19/elisabeth-da-bohemia/> and Ebbersmeyer's entry below refereed.

the Princess. Elisabeth of Bohemia's fame in philosophy goes hand in hand with silencing and ignorance about what she thought and how she philosophically articulated her thinking, based on her reading of *Metaphysical Meditations* (1641) and her dialogue with Descartes.

In this work, I seek to face this epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007, p. 129). The objective is to offer an analysis of the tenacity of the issue made by Elisabeth, on May 6, 1643, who started the epistolary exchange with Descartes of more than 6 years. Elisabeth's question has been reconstructed at least four times in literature and, it will be clear, how one interprets what the princess of Bohemia asked Descartes governs and should govern the interpretation of the Correspondence as a whole. This also enable the treatment of this epistolary exchange as the *Eighth Objections and Replies*², because there are reasons to do so. *A fortiori*, this document should be recognized as the conceptual origin of the rationalist treatment of morality and politics, which Descartes was led to think based on Elisabeth's "finding". The nature of this "finding" is not assented in the literature available so far, so that the path proposed here aims to respond to this tension, in defense of an interpretation: Elisabeth questions Descartes about the practical nature of his foundationalist project and she does not criticize Cartesian ontology, nor does she criticize substantial dualism.

I will start from one of the philosopher's last letters and then analyze Elisabeth's position backwards: that is, from her 1648 Letter to the May 1643 Letter. The choice for this path aims to reconstruct the steps in order to offer an interpretation of the first question addressed to Descartes. I hope, in the end, to make it clear that this first question has a programmatic sense in the Correspondence; and this goes for the first Letter, too, the role of the Princess's perspective on the epistolary exchange. The study of epistolary material and the contribution of non-canonical figures to the history of philosophy in the early modern period makes the question of the very value of question analysis an idle one: the nature of questions occupies modern philosophical reflection and its method trope persistently. Even so, it is necessary to emphasize the meaning of this search, both with a view to the existing literature as well as to the studies and eventual misunderstandings or possible future regimentations.

On the one hand, it can be said that dissecting philosophical issues through the exercise of analysis is incurring an undue repetition. This would have been the mark of the practice of silencing not only Elisabeth, but also many women philosophers, in the last hundred years of historiography. On the other hand, doing this can and should be, I think, a way of identifying the relevance and potency of the philosopher's questioning, in its conceptual aspect. The reconstruction and analysis effort here consists in demonstrating why Elisabeth of Bohemia should be included in the modernist

2 Antonia Lolordo uses this name and I agree with this use, só, I'm using it here.

canon, and in the curricula. In doing so, the role of the philosophy of the Princess of Bohemia will become clear, and so, hopefully, the literature that considered a Correspondence as a soliloquy of Descartes shall be reconsidered.

From the expressive unity of the moral conscience to the origin of *Passions of the Soul* (July 1648 to 13 September 1645)

In one of her last letters, in July 1648, Elisabeth of Bohemia puts herself in the third person by formulating in a comprehensive way what she considers acting morally. She asserts that moral action is that through which conscience aims at “*seeking her satisfaction only in the expression that her conscience gives her of having done what she must*”³ (ATV, 210-211, p.173). This could be taken as a claim of what moral happiness consists in: satisfying one's conscience in the face of actions taken. She is not just referring to a “quiet conscience” but satisfied with her own accomplishments. Satisfaction comes later, as a reflection upon the acts themselves that must be pursued as much as on their performance; so, the conception of moral action can be reconstructed as one in which 1) there is a search for satisfaction of one's own conscience; 2) this satisfaction occurs when the acts themselves are done. Thus, Elisabeth introduces the satisfaction of self-awareness (a conscience that thinks and evaluates itself) as a constitutive element of morality, guaranteed by a reflexive diachrony: the acts performed, that which results from actions that are, in turn, conscious. Everything happens, therefore, as if morality had a self-referential dimension that not only establishes the search for satisfaction but also claims influence on the acts performed. As for these, they are not detached from the conscious infrastructure, neither on *departure* nor on *arrival*, that is to say, neither in the beginning of the acting process nor in the reflection upon what was done. Elisabeth would defend, thus, a unity from which the will to act is guided and on which rests the possibility of verification to attest that that action was a moral action.

The notion of “moral conscience”, there, follows a pattern of use of “conscience”⁴ by the philosopher, and, in this case, it is instantiated in the third person. In doing so, in 1648, Elisabeth no longer situates herself as a student, but as a philosopher in proper sense, offering a theory of morality not only consistent with Cartesianism, rather as a version elaborated throughout the dialogue. On this path, what is sought is the chain of reasons that lead Elisabeth to the formulation of moral action as an action that is both conscious and prudent. For, despite the irreducible presence of psychological traits inside of moral's approach, one should not lose sight of the fact that the

3 I'm using the Correspondence translation and edition by Lisa Shapiro.

4 In a forthcoming paper I explore the use of conscience as *conscientia*, by the Princess.

concern with objectivity and responsibility for one's actions, in front of others, in fact prevents one from taking the Elisabeth's philosophical thought as a psychology.

In this way, the satisfaction of conscience in face of one's own acts rests on a social measure, which determines the criterion of objectivity and responsibility for actions and presupposes practical knowledge. To this knowledge, however, there is not an assumption of a metaphysical frame; rather, an intrinsically social trait in the moral view as presented by the Princess. The satisfaction of one's own conscience relies on an irremediable observance of the context and related requirements from the position of power that she plays by being part of a family such as hers. This observance is considered from Descartes' assertion, in the Letter of September 1, 1645, claiming a connection between free will and knowledge of the path necessary to achieve true happiness (AT IV, 282, p. 106); for Descartes, both freedom and knowledge of what is best for one's own happiness depend exclusively on the exercise of one's own rationality, independently (and despite what goes on in the world), on what goes on within, at the passionate level. To this radically internalist version of rationalism, if one can say so, Elisabeth responds in three stages, on September 13, 1645, in the letter that, according to Lisa Shapiro (Shapiro, 2007, p.110, note 79), contains the root of *Passions of the Soul*, due to its programmatic tune.

The three steps are as follows: 1) Elisabeth establishes that social position obliges and may harm the exercise of free will: “...*my birth and my fortune have forced me to exercise my judgment earlier than most, in order to lead a life that is very trying and free of the prosperity that could prevent me from thinking of myself and also free of the subjection that would have obliged me to rely on the prudence of a governess*” (ATIV, 282, p. 110); 2) the knowledge of the correct path, or the good to be pursued, needs determination, since otherwise, access to an "infinite science" would be necessary, which would result in the impossibility of exercising freedom, because we have no way to know everything:

(“It is true that a habit of esteeming good things according to how they can contribute to contentment, measuring this contentment according to the perfections which give birth to the pleasures, and judging these perfections and these pleasures without passion will protect them from a number of faults. But in order to esteem these goods in this way, one must know them perfectly. And in order to know all these goods among which one must choose in an active life, one would need to possess an infinite science” (ATIV, 289, p. 110),

and finally 3) Elisabeth asks Descartes to explain why she has passions that drive her to reasonable actions. In the Letters that follow, from September 13, 1645 to July, 1648, on several occasions

Elisabeth reiterates that she is not interested in doing metaphysics. What I want to emphasize, in order to shed light on the intelligibility of the first question, however, is that the philosopher does not think of moral actions outside of a context and the positions of power at play in that context; in fact, the opposite occurs, from which it follows that power relations, in society, would entail different levels of responsibility, including at the moral level, according to her. It also follows that moving away from the demand for infinite science goes hand in hand with the recognition of a constructive or cooperative dimension with morality, including in the passionate domain. It also follows that one can think, from the Letter of September 13, 1645, that power relations, practical knowledge and the role of affections constitute the moral determination of actions that can satisfy the agent's conscience.

The most rational method for treating the mind (July 16, 1645 to May 18, 1645)

Between May 1643 and July 16, 1645 the Correspondence between Descartes and Elisabeth undergoes a change. From May 1643 to May 1645, Descartes and Elisabeth continued to discuss from what Descartes replies to Elisabeth in his first letter to her, where he suggests that she would be referring to his ontology, only, and she then engages in the discussion about mind and body interaction. On May 18, 1645 (ATIV, 200), Descartes writes to Elisabeth communicating his surprise at her state of health and then he moves himself toward a practical conversation in order to help his friend, the Princess. That is how Descartes turns to Seneca, and his “*Da Vida Beata*” as a possible reading for therapeutic effects, to treat Elisabeth's sadness. The philosopher then adds some critical notes to Seneca's Stoicism and goes so far as to say (August 1645 – ATIV, 263) that he indicated the neo-Stoic reading for his reputation rather than for any alignment with his program.

The problem with Stoicism, according to Descartes, is the admission of a heterogeneity between fortune and happiness. According to this critique, inasmuch as good fortune, to Seneca, depends on something external to us, those who are fortunate are so without having contributed in any measure to it, whereas, according to Descartes, the true happiness consists of “*a perfect contentment of the mind and an internal satisfaction that those who are the most favored by fortune ordinarily do not have and that the sages acquire without fortune's favor*” (ATIV, 264, p. 97). By placing happiness in the domain of subjectivity, Descartes in this same letter adds an observation to his provisional moral code as presented in the Third Part of the *Discourse on Method*, to which he resorts. The Provisional Moral Code contains three rules: 1) try to use the mind as well as possible, in order to know what should be done or what should not be done, in every event of life; 2) have a firm and constant resolution to execute all that reason advises him to do, without having the

passions or appetites turning him away from it. (Descartes takes this firmness as a virtue) and, 3) the good that one has is what one can possess and there are goods that cannot be possessed and one must be content with that when 1) is observed (ATIV, 265, p.98).

Descartes recognizes in this firmness, “*as no one has ever explained it in this way*”, a virtue; an exclusively rational and solitary decision. Elisabeth's reply, August 16, 1645, contains two aspects that illuminate the conception of morality in her thought. First, she asks Descartes to proceed by correcting Seneca, a philosopher she considers to think “without method”, since Descartes would provide the most natural method, insofar as he makes her “*draw from my mind pieces of knowledge I have not yet apprehended*” (ATII, 269, p. 100). She then establishes a distinction between a philosophical conception and an experience, using the example of the way a philosopher, Epicurus, dealt with his own kidney stones, as if to point out that this was not her perspective. This observation, at the end of this Letter, highlights the rejection that the Princess of Bohemia makes, both to the hypothesis of an infinite science (ATIV, 289) as an “infinite knowledge” (ATIV, 405, p. 134), in order to guide or determine the moral criterion of the actions themselves⁵.

In this Letter, Elisabeth questions not only Seneca's use, but Descartes' position of taking the firmness of reason as a sufficient virtue. She states:

“I do yet know how to rid myself of the doubt that one can arrive at the true happiness of which you speak without the assistance of that which does not depend absolutely on the will. For there are diseases that destroy altogether the power of reasoning and by consequence that of enjoying a satisfaction of reason” (ATIV, 269, p. 100).

To treat the disease, then, there is at least one remedy that has been interesting, namely, to find in one's mind pieces of knowledge that had not yet been apprehended. She intends, as she says at the end of the letter, that Descartes will continue to clarify her doubts, aiming enable the exercise of virtue. And this exercise would be aimed at the Princess's mind, in order to cure her of the kind of illness that impedes the fruition of reason. Elisabeth seems to relate her suffering to a weakness of the will. In doing so, she touches on a central element of the Cartesian project, which is the unicity of the mind; a unit such that it does not contain faculties because it does not admit discrete zones.

When the philosopher mentions the will, in the quotation above, she ponders about if there would be not another element, constitutive of the mind, which Descartes would not have

⁵ See note 64, p. 100, in Shapiro's edition.

considered. The most rational method for treating the mind, according to Elisabeth, requires two exercises of reflection: removing pieces of knowledge from the mind that had not yet been apprehended and pondering the eventual role of some other element, not absolutely dependent on the will. Elisabeth knows that when Descartes mentions "firmness of reason" he is not excluding, but including, the will. These reflections follow from one of the Princess' responses to Descartes, when the exchange of letters was still going on as a dialogue between student and teacher. In this period, the first two years of dialogue, the discussion is based on Descartes' interpretation that Elisabeth would be curious or interested in his ontology and in the nature of the interaction between mind and body. Until May 18, 1645, the princess engages in the discussion proposed by Descartes, although, as will become clear below, she has not at any time abdicated the issue that motivated her.

From the extension of the mind to moral actions (July 1, 1643 to May 6, 1643)

In the Letter of July 1, 1643, Elisabeth writes for the third time, in this Correspondence, to Descartes. The letter has three parts and, in the third and second, it can be observed that Elisabeth was clear about the unicity of the mental. Before dive into that, however, it is necessary to mention the discussion that was taking place, starting from Descartes' first reply, with which he introduces the theory of primitive notions: the primitive notion of the mind, the primitive notion of the body and the primitive notion of the union between mind and body. According to Descartes, Elisabeth would had made a mistake in expecting one primitive notion to carry out a movement proper and exclusively of the other. This theory, which in fact occupies the first two years of the epistolary exchange, from Elisabeth's point of view is not the decisive element or what seems to drive her philosophical inquiry. She engages in the discussion proposed by Descartes, that's for sure, but she insists on the same point until Descartes communicates that he has learned of the Princess' state of health. The 20th century canon focused on these first 2 years of the Correspondence, thus strengthening the soliloquy bias, as will become clear. If one looks at the Correspondence in its entirety, or if even these first two years are considered a dialogue rather than a soliloquy, the conclusions may be surprising.

Descartes responds to Elisabeth on June 28, 1643, presenting the theory of "primitive notions", which would be intelligible from the geometric paradigm of the "problem of the three circle". Says the philosopher:

"The Soul is conceived only by the pure understanding [l'entendement]; the body, that is to say, extension, shapes, and motions, can also be known by the understanding alone, but is much better

known by the understanding aided by imagination; and, finally, those things which pertain to the union of the soul and the body are known only obscurely by the understanding alone, or even by the understanding aided by the imagination; but they are known very clearly by the senses” (ATIII, 692, pp. 69-70).

In this remark Descartes aligns his ontology with epistemology, and does so in order to clarify to the Princess how he understands our mode of knowledge of mental things, if you can say so, and of non-mental movements, or movements proper to bodies (the mechanism) captured by the imagination. Then, he makes a distinction between the philosophical perspective and that of the imagination, and emphasizes that the former, not the latter, must be taken into account in the *Meditations* and suggests that Elisabeth had an obscure understanding of the relationship between soul and body. (ATIII, 694, p. 72). If Elisabeth's remarks are taken seriously, however, it becomes clear that if she was not referring to the sense of movement or action, at least she was clear about the status of the mental. This is exactly what is read in her answer, in the Letter of July 1, 1643, after considering the thesis on the three primitive notions.

*“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 in which it does so. 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 judgments about that which we do not perceive well enough”*. (AT, IV, 2-3 – emphasis mine).

By asserting that the senses teach her nothing, Elisabeth is aligned with a philosophical position and seems to respond to Descartes, telling him that she is not confusing notions. Rather, she makes considerations about the nature of mind and mentions eventual opacity of mental states. So she seems to exclude pure understanding, while denying that this unknown part belongs to the imagination (if it was imagination that she had in mind, there would be no reason not to mention it, instead of mentioning some “part unknown”). At the same time, she knows that considering some discreet zone is not allowed due to the unicity of the mind, hence the identification of that as “non-extended” - which is enough, for the economy of *Meditations*, at least. It is not by other reason that she referees to the *Fourth Meditation*, in order to point out that the problem she is interested in is that which responds by the assertion between true and false. She seems to align with Cartesianism

including taken profit from the theory of primitive notions, insofar she recognizes that the senses don't teach anything with respect to the nature of action, so much so that it is legitimate to infer that, for Elisabeth, knowledge has an important role in her question. Yet, Elisabeth says, in the same letter, that she is not aligned with the scholastic thesis *tota in toto et tota in singulis partibus*, with which Thomas (from Book VII of Aristotle's Physics, in the Summa Theologiae, Part I, Question 8, art. 2 and 3)) responds to the challenge of the spatial divisibility of God, with the defense of his total presence in the whole and in each part, through which the indivisibility of the soul would remain assured⁶. The search for an extension of mind in Elisabeth's letters, however it seems to make sense, depends on a step she does not take, in the distinction between extension and the body. She even mentions the scholastic notion in order to contrast with her own and to emphasize that this is not what she had in mind in her first question and that, therefore, she may have been wrong in confusing domains (a hypothesis she more verbally admits than in fact, as one can read, insofar as she maintains the same position), but did not, therefore, fall under a scholastic dogmatism. What happens is that Elisabeth ends the letter saying that it was Descartes, and only Descartes, who made her abandon skepticism. Therefore, if the inquiry aimed at seeking, in Elisabeth, an investigation into the extension of the soul, prospers, it will not have been from what she affirms in July 1643, and even less from an alignment with the Thomistic metaphysics.

As the reading progresses, the closer we come to Elisabeth's fundamental question, which, as I suggest, is the first. So far, it is worth noting once more, with respect to the aforementioned, that the Princess engages in the discussion of Cartesian ontology in the first two years, but this does not mean that she and Descartes were trying to clarify the same things or that they were, let's say, "on the same page". In this answer, she makes it clear that, although she may be wrong to have confused the domains of "notions", she understood dualism and the real distinction argument; as well as that she read the *Sixth Replies*. Then, in the June 1643 Letter, she seems to reformulate her question:

"I hope, as an excuse for my stupidity in being 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 [puissance] to carry the body toward the center

⁶ Schmaltz has a distinct interpretation of this passage. For him, Elisabeth would not be totally removed from the scholastic perspective, as, in this same letter, she states that extension is not necessary to thought, but that is why it is not repulsive to her, thus suggesting that the philosopher is somehow in search of an extension of the mind. This reading might be adequate if Elisabeth had not stated, a few sentences later, that 2) her "first doubt" remains open and she cannot free herself from it. See: Tad Schmaltz: *Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia on the Cartesian Mind: Interaction, Happiness, Freedom. In: Feminist History of Philosophy: The Recovery and Evaluation of Women's Philosophical Thought*, O'Neill and Marcy Lascano (Eds), pp. 155-173

of the earth, which you earlier falsely attributed to a 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, VII, 685, p. 68).

Here, Elisabeth may seem to concede that she was wrong, by confusing primitive notions. At the same time, the philosopher observes that the explanation derived from physics (here is the example of weight, as presented in the *Sixth Replies*) is not, nevertheless, the one adequate to her inquiry. Elisabeth's considerations show that she was not mistaken, exactly – even when conceding or pretending to had been so. For, in this same letter of June 10, 1643, she states: "*But I, nevertheless have never been able to conceive of such an immaterial thing as anything other than the negation of matter which cannot have any communication with it*". (AT, III, 685, p.68). And she continues:

“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. For, if the first is achieved through information, it would be necessary that the spirits, which cause the movements, were intelligent, a capacity you accord to nothing corporeal”. (Ditto)

Here it is worth noting Shapiro's observations, in a note of her translation, in which she suggests the possibility of a dialogue with the Aristotelian tradition or with an eventual intentional trait characteristic of the Stoic treatment of cognitive faculties (Shapiro 2007, note 12, p. 68). This path deserves attention. There is a possibility that Elisabeth had a philosophical expression more distant from Cartesianism (Lolordo 2019, p. 85 and Ebbesmeyer 2020, p. 4, suggest an Epicurean influence on the philosopher's thinking). However, the philosopher of Bohemia herself has her doubt based on the *Meditations*. That's what she says next:

*“And, even though, in your **Metaphysical Meditations**, you show the possibility of the second, it is altogether very difficult to understand that a soul, as you have described it, (...) can lose all of this by some vapors, and that, being able to subsist without the body, and having nothing in common with it, the soul is still so governed by it”*. (AT, III, 685, p. 68).

What Elisabeth is asserting here is that if the analogy with weight (as indicated by Descartes in the *Sixth Replies*) does not apply, as it would be the result of a confusion in the use of primitive

notions, still, she remains finding it difficult to understand the action of the body on the mind, and that is why she mentions the hypothesis of “loss of vapors”, which would be applicable if the soul were material, which she does not concede. It is worth remembering that her first question seems to lead to a difficulty in the opposite direction. Elisabeth does not seem satisfied with the mere assertion that there is a primitive notion of union. And this appears clearly in the hypothesis she mentions of the body ruling the mind. For Shapiro (1999, p. 503), there would be an affirmation of a materialist or non-Cartesian trait of Elisabeth; she would have suggested a candidacy originating from the movement that might not be thought, since, according to Descartes, she would have, incorrectly, sought in thought a somewhat unauthorized origin for her question (she would have had mixed primitive notions in a wrong way).

Elisabeth's problem with candidacies to replace pure understanding is that she does not intend to move away from Cartesianism. The opposite happens. It is because she conceives the oneness of mind that she seeks to discard the materiality of the mental, on the one hand, and the discussion itself about dualism, which, after the turn in Correspondence in July 1645, disappears from the dialogue, while the concern with the moral nature of actions is preserved by her and then on, by Descartes himself. This tells us something about what moved Elisabeth to seek an explanation after reading the *Metaphysical Meditations*. The point here is that the Princess philosopher's fundamental concern is of a practical nature in a strong sense, and not a further inquiry into theology or ontology.

Based on the above, one can read Elisabeth's first question, as well as the end of the first letter she addressed to Descartes, with a view informed by dialogue rather than soliloquy. Along these lines, we will be able to read what Elisabeth said and the reasons why she does it in a consistent relationship with all her letters throughout the Correspondence, although, from July 1645, in a more elaborated way, when a dialogue between pairs is finally established, after the letter of September 13, 1645.

Here, finally, is Elisabeth's first question:

“I ask you please to tell me how the soul of a human being (it being only a thinking substance) can determine the bodily spirits in order to bring about voluntary actions. For it seems that all determination of movement happens through the impulsion of the thing moved, by the manner in which it is pushed by that which moves it, or else by the particular qualities and shape of the surface of the latter. Physical contact is required for the first two conditions, extension, for the third. You entirely exclude the one [extension] from the notion you have of the soul, and other

[physical contact] *appears to me incompatible with an immaterial thing*". (16 de maio de 1643, ATIII, 661, p. 62).

The reader who came to this page may have already understood that this is a question about the origin of voluntary actions and not an ontological doubt. Elisabeth seems to say just this: how does the mind, being one and not material, give rise to moral actions? Then, she proceeds to discard the hypotheses she knows she cannot resort to, in order to found or give rise to what she seeks to know, namely, voluntary actions. Of course, one can interpret this question about the origin of the movement, or the origin of the motor relation in the mind-body direction. Or one might regard this question as a doubt about the way Descartes treats moral actions, considering his ontology; one can consider this a purely ontological question, or one can consider it a purely practical question. Until today, if I'm not wrong, there are four reconstructions of this first question and, according to what was presented above, only one of these reconstructions seems to fit as translation of what Elisabeth had in mind, especially if we consider the Correspondence as a *set*.

The first reconstruction to be considered is that of Daniel Garber, who deals with Elisabeth's question under the framework of the concept of movement. He proposes an interpretation according to which what is at issue is the conceivability of the motion between substances. According to Garber, Descartes' adequate reply to the Princess of Bohemia would have to be inspired not by the *Meditations* but by the *The World*. For Garber, Elisabeth's question is this: "*she wants Descartes to explain how a nonextended and incorporeal mind can literally make contact with and imple and extended body?*" (Garber 2001, p. 178). The consistent response to Elisabeth, by Descartes, would be a response anchored in the intelligibility of the mind and body interaction. For Lisa Shapiro, probably the first philosopher to investigate Elisabeth's thought, the question of the philosopher is focused on the problem of the union between mind and body. From the first letter onwards, the Princess of Bohemia would have made it clear that what is at stake is knowing how something immaterial and not extensive can move something material and extensive. Shapiro identifies Elisabeth's own philosophical position as neither materialist nor dualist, but rather aimed at "*finding 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*" (Shapiro, 1999, p. 505). For Sabrina Ebbersmeyer, Elisabeth of Bohemia asks Descartes this: "*how can one account for mind-body interaction under the conditions of Cartesian substance dualism?*" (Ebbersmeyer 2020, p. 5). According to the last two readings, the question of the Princess of Bohemia would be turned to a difficulty in Descartes' mechanism, which admits the movement of bodies exclusively by contact. A

fourth interpretation seems more in line with Elisabeth's thinking, and is suggested by Thomas Lennon. Accordingly, the question would have been as following:

“How it is that through volition the mind is able to move the body. The latter was explicitly raised as a problem for Descartes by Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia (to whom Descartes was soon to dedicate his Principles of Philosophy). Her concern was that the soul, or mind, seems incapable of affecting the body in order to bring about voluntary actions. According to Descartes, she argued, initiation of motion depends on contact with its cause, which itself must have properties depending on extension, whereas both contact and extension are precluded from the mind”. (May 6/16, 1643 – my emphasis – Lennon, 2008, p. 478)

These four reconstructions offer manifold answers or interpretations, as it may seem. What does not seem susceptible to disagreements, however, is that Descartes did not respond satisfactorily to Elisabeth. Although it is curious that there is agreement that Descartes did not answer the philosopher, his answers were the object of interest in historiography literature, as if he had been in a soliloquy, and it is also strange that this question was taken solely as a further discussion of the costs of abandoning Scholasticism as a metaphysical paradigm. Descartes responds in an unsatisfactory and unnecessary way (according to Garber), with the use of “primitive notions”: the primitive notion of mind, the primitive notion of body and the primitive notion of union between mind and body. The clarification of the interaction mechanism could be made by attributing to Elisabeth the error of borrowing notions from physics, that is, the notions of movement between bodies. By resorting to these "primitive notions" (which seem to stand in for an *ad hoc* hypotheses), Descartes provides no positive answer to Elisabeth's question. This diagnosis by Garber seems irrefutable, although his defense of “*how Descartes should have responded to Elisabeth*” (the subtitle of his paper) dispenses with a careful consideration of the whole of the epistolary exchange.

However, Garber draws attention to a crucial element: the asymmetry between mind and body and the sense of movement that mobilizes Elisabeth, which is the mind-body movement. Given that the philosopher Elisabeth discards the physical foundation of what is happening and, as we can read in the letter of September 13, 1645, she does not anchor herself in an inquiry of a metaphysical nature, it can be inferred that her first question is, in fact, as it is written, a question about the origin of moral actions. It is, therefore, a practical matter in the strict sense, if the Correspondence, and not only the first two years, is considered. It is on this path that the turning point in the exchange of letters must be understood from an inter-locution among equals, from May

1645 onwards, when Descartes informs, with surprise and regret, that he had learned of the health situation of the Princess of Bohemia.

A close look at the first letter, however, shows that there is no reason for this surprise. At the end of the first letter, after formulating her question, Elisabeth, before saying goodbye, makes a request to the philosopher.

*“Knowing that **you are the best doctor for my soul**, I expose t you quite freely the weaknesses of its speculations, and hope that in observing the **Hippocratic oath**, you will supply me with remedies without making them public, such I beg of you to do, as well, as to suffer the badgerings of”* (AT, III, 662 – my emphasis).

In a translation note (note 6, p. 62), Shapiro proceeds to clarify the historical sources of Hippocrates in order to establish that it was a well-known oath to both interlocutors. The Hippocratic Oath is not just a pact of good manners, which a supposedly shy princess would have to address to a philosopher. The Hippocratic oath is and was and has always been a pact concluded between patient and physician, which involves a therapy. This reading now proposed gains strength insofar as Descartes starts to dedicate himself to helping his friend, so that the hypothesis that he is trying to repair an inattention makes sense. As already presented above, Descartes then turns to Seneca and Elisabeth makes him search, in his own philosophy, for an answer. Whether in the *Fourth Meditations*, or in the considerations about the object that provides the criterion at the same time of satisfaction of conscience and moral responsibility, Elisabeth does not give up that the answer to her question is of Cartesian nature.

Conclusion: a promising reconstruction

One way to reconstruct the first question is to interrogate the philosopher's intention and another is to interrogate what she claims. If we observe what she takes as a moral action, in one of the last letters, namely: the satisfaction in the expression that the agent has before herself, given the fact of having acted correctly (AT,V, 210-211), we can see in this formulation an elaborated version of the question about the origin of moral actions, given that the driving relationship between bodies is not what explains morality (as she has already said, even in the Letter of June 10, 1643, to discard the weight analogy as in the *Sixth Replies*). By providing an internal and derivative relationship of a unity of mind, Elisabeth leads Descartes, throughout Correspondence and, with force, in *Passions of the Soul*, to seek, at the same time, the rule for acting prudently and the satisfaction of one's own

conscience. By introducing a logical and epistemological form of subjectivity, on the ground of the foundation of knowledge, and by proposing a non-scholastic ontological furniture, Descartes ended up being led, too, to consider the practical implications of his method in the domain of moral actions. And it was Elisabeth of Bohemia who led him to seek to formulate a theory of the passions “*of the soul*”, that is worth of mention. Therefore, the reconstruction of the first question is philosophically promising.

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