

# PUBLIC AND PRIVATE OBJECTIONS TO THE CARTESIAN THESIS OF MIND-BODY UNION: THE DIVERGENT REPLIES IN DESCARTES' LETTERS

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**Abstract.** The Latin edition of the *Meditationes* (1641) was followed by *Sets of Objections* and by Descartes' *Sets of Replies*. One of the recurring objections concerned the Cartesian claim which states that mind and body are both really distinct and unified substances. Arnauld (*Fourth Set of Objections*) and Gassendi (*Fifth Set of Objections*) made Descartes aware of the incoherence of these two claims made in Meditation II and VI. In these public disputes, Descartes uses certain arguments as well as rhetorical devices to defend his views. In a less public context such as the correspondence with Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, which starts in May 1643, Descartes continues to maintain his paradoxical theses. What one finds in these letters is that Descartes changes not only the tone, but also the content, of his arguments (e.g. the argument of the "three kinds of primitive ideas or notions").

The paper proceeds in four parts: (1) reconstructing the main arguments of the distinction and the union of the two substances in the *Meditations* as well as the main objections made by Arnauld and Gassendi; (2) examining Descartes' public replies to Gassendi as well as (3) Descartes' concessions to Elisabeth's questions; and finally (4) drawing the significance of this semi-private correspondence for the understanding of Descartes' elaboration of his philosophical views.

**Keywords:** Descartes, Elisabeth of Bohemia, Mind-Body Union, Passions of the Soul

## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to identify and reflect upon some of the key points in the correspondence between the French philosopher René Descartes and Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia. Held between 1643 and 1649, it contains approximately 60 letters. In many regards, this exchange should not be underestimated, for it deals with a wide range of philosophical, scientific, political and psychological topics as well as with personal issues. One issue is particularly worth investigating; it concerns the most famous Cartesian claim made in the *Meditations* [M], according to which mind and

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body are described as both really distinct and unified substances. The paper focuses on this much-debated issue, and more precisely, on the kinds of arguments Descartes elaborates in his replies to various objections and questions. Indeed, depending on addressees, Descartes deploys different argumentative strategies. Two series of questions will be considered: first, the objections of Arnauld and Gassendi against the Cartesian claims in the *Meditations*; and second, the clarifications demanded by Elisabeth at the very beginning of their correspondence, that is to say, May-June 1643. By comparing the replies Descartes gives publicly to his scholarly peers in the first edition of the *Meditations* in 1641 with those he submits to the careful reader Elisabeth in a semi-private correspondence in 1643, we wish to highlight the significance of this epistolary dialogue as a privileged medium to expose, explain, revise and develop philosophical arguments. Therefore the correspondence with Elisabeth is neither a philosophical text of marginal rank, nor merely biographical material. On the contrary, it serves as an indispensable source for a more subtle understanding of Descartes' elaboration of his philosophical views.

### 1. Descartes' arguments in Meditation II and VI

The study of misunderstandings in philosophy is often very useful. One famous example of a long and vexed misunderstanding in the history of modern philosophy is certainly what is known today as the mind-body problem. With respect to this issue, Descartes' solution to the problem plays a significant role inasmuch as he asserts two apparently incompatible claims regarding the mind-body relation. On the one hand, Descartes seems to endorse a substantial dualism, above all in M II and M VI, in claiming that mind and body have distinct essences and attributes. On the other, he asserts, albeit very briefly and perhaps ambiguously in M VI, that both substances compose a union. The first part of this paper presents the main arguments for each of these claims and anticipates the objections against Descartes' position.

#### 1.1. The distinction argument in the *Meditations* and Arnauld's objections

The term 'real distinction' (*distinctio realis*) is derived from scholastic terminology and designates a difference of nature between two or more substances.<sup>1</sup> Descartes adds in Article 60 of the *Principles of Philosophy* that the real difference between mind and body is confirmed by the attentive mind itself that "can clearly and distinctly understand one apart from the other" (AT VIII A, 28/CSMK 1, 213).<sup>2</sup> The vocabulary of traditional metaphysics appears in the *Meditations* at important places, such as in the title of the second edition of the *Meditations* (1642)<sup>3</sup>, and in the title of M VI, "The existence of material things, and the real distinction between mind and body"<sup>4</sup>. In M II, Descartes introduces the idea of distinction (although the idea of *real* distinction is introduced only in M VI) in order to establish the very first and indubitable principle of the *Cogito*. The evidence of the thinking I, qua *res cogitans*, resists against the hyperbolic doubt that is introduced in M I and maintained in M II through the artifice of the "malicious deceiver" (AT VII, 27)<sup>5</sup>. On the basis of this evidence, Descartes concludes that the body, qua *res extensa*, is different from the thinking I since the existence of bodies in general, including one's own body, fails the test of doubt and is not as immediately known as one's own mind.<sup>6</sup>

What remains open at the end of M II is whether the essence of the thinking thing, which the meditator does not yet know perfectly well, might not contain matter. One can conclude, as do Arnauld (AT VII, 199-200) and Gassendi (AT VII, 262-265) that no demonstration proves “a real distinction” between both substances in M II. Descartes has certainly established the immediacy of the *Cogito* over the body as well as the epistemic primacy of intellectual perception over sense perception. He has also taken pains to revise his argument on real distinction, which he had made in the fourth part of the *Discourse*.<sup>7</sup> However, he seems to have not sufficiently argued that the mind can exist without the body.<sup>8</sup> In his *Fourth Set of Objections*, sent to Mersenne in a form of a letter addressed “Ad virum Clarissimum Epistola” (see AT VII, 196), Arnauld draws this point to Descartes’ attention:

How does it follow, from the fact that he [Descartes] is unaware of nothing else belonging to his essence, that nothing else does in fact belong to it? I must confess that I am somewhat slow, but I have been unable to find anywhere in the Second Meditation an answer to this question. As far as I can gather, however, the author does attempt a proof of this claim in the Sixth Meditation, since he takes it to depend on his having clear knowledge of God, which he had not yet arrived at in the Second Meditation. (Arnauld, *Fourth Set of Objections*, AT VII, 199/CSMK 2, 140)

The fact that M VI completes the argument of the distinction on the basis of M III, IV and V, by establishing the existence of God and the Rule of Truth<sup>9</sup> does not however answer satisfactorily Arnauld’s observations in M II. In his objections to the demonstration of distinction in M VI (AT VII, 201-202/CSMK 2, 141-142), Arnauld argues that Descartes is evading the question. In particular Arnauld notices that Descartes cannot convincingly prove the real distinction between mind and body since his knowledge of the mind is not “complete and adequate” (AT VII, 201/CSMK 2, 141). Indeed, even if God guarantees the validity of our perceptions, “the ability clearly to perceive X without Y does not entail that Y is in reality distinct from X.”<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, if Descartes were able to prove successfully the thesis of the real distinction, it would make the task of proving the union argument even harder: he will have to explain how an exclusivist, platonic substance dualism can be compatible with an interactionist account of the relation between mind and body. The appeal to the principle of the “institution of nature”<sup>11</sup> in M VI enables Descartes to show that bodily movements are by nature concomitant with certain mental states.<sup>12</sup>

Arnauld also formulates objections to Descartes’ double claim of distinction and union (see AT VII, 203), as do the authors of the *Sixth Set of Objections* (AT VII, 420-421), and later on Regius (see Descartes’ reply from January 1642, AT III, 493). Gassendi and Elisabeth develop this critical point in detail, as we shall see. It concerns the explanation of the interaction between two essentially different substances. What follows illustrates how Descartes’ argument of substantial union is criticised, but especially how Descartes reacts to the letters of the French sensualist thinker and the attentive Princess of Bohemia.

## 1.2. The union argument in the *Meditations* and Gassendi's objections

The short and much commented passage in which Descartes introduces the notion of union between mind and body by means of a simile has certainly served to cultivate the misunderstandings, at least for French-speaking readers of the *Méditations Métaphysiques* (1647).

Nature also teaches me, by these sensations of pain, hunger, thirst and so on, that I am not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship, but that I am very closely joined and, as it were, intermingled with it, so that I and the body form a unit. If this were not so, I, who am nothing but a thinking thing, would not feel pain when the body was hurt, but would perceive the damage purely by the intellect, just as a sailor perceives by sight if anything in his ship is broken. (M VI, AT VII, 81/CSMK 2, 56)

The question at stake is how to understand the analogy between the mind-body relation and the sailor-ship relation: is it the fact that the mind is not only in command of the body, but also closely joined to it? Or does Descartes mean that the mind is not at all like a sailor and his ship, but only closely joined to the body? Descartes' initial formulation in the Latin edition is "non tantum... sed etiam" (not only, but also) became in the French translation "non seulement... mais" (not merely, but). The first inclusive reading ("not only... but also") seems to be the one that Descartes endorses.<sup>13</sup> If Descartes argued that the mind is only joined to the body, he would undermine the claim of M II, according to which the mind qua sailor is of different nature from the body. Moreover, M VI is also dedicated to proving the existence of bodies. Thus Descartes underlines the causal force of the body on the mind and reintroduces sense-based knowledge as a vital condition for our survival and well-being.<sup>14</sup> But precisely which of these positions does Descartes assert in the *Meditations*? Does he advocate a platonic conception of the body as a vehicle of the mind? Descartes seems to reject this instrumental relation inasmuch as he attributes a causal power to the body and repeatedly qualifies this union as real and non-accidental.<sup>15</sup> Does he defend a substantial monism in which extension is an attribute to thought? This position appears to be equally implausible, given that Descartes reaffirms the principle of real distinction in M VI (AT VII, 78/CSMK 2, 54).

According to Descartes, the doctrine of the union does not jeopardise the truth-claim of the real distinction between both substances. The fact that the body can affect the mind does not necessarily mean that the mind depends entirely upon the body. In other words, it would be wrong to infer from the observation of bodily alterations on the mind that the latter depends completely upon the former. One could also argue that Descartes is continuing his critique against a very enduring prejudice, which consists in believing that the mind does not have a life of its own. The repeated exercise of meditation<sup>16</sup> makes one aware that the union does not challenge the evidence and absolute freedom of the *Cogito*. However, as Gassendi writes, one question needs clarification in order to understand how two essentially different substances can interact with one another.

All this is quite right, but you still have to explain how that ‘joining and, as it were, intermingling’ or ‘confusion’ can apply to you if you are incorporeal, unextended and indivisible. [...] In a word, the general difficulty still remains of how the corporeal can communicate with the incorporeal and of what relationship may be established between the two. (Gassendi, *Fifth Set of Objections*, AT VII, 343-345/CSMK 2, 238-239)

How does Descartes explain mental and bodily causation? How can the will be put into bodily actions? How do substances communicate, since they have nothing in common? These are not only Gassendi’s questions, but also Elisabeth’s queries.<sup>17</sup> Descartes’ reactions to each of his correspondents differ in tone.

## 2. Descartes’ divergent reactions

In his reply, Descartes starts by blaming Gassendi for not providing genuine philosophical arguments. Although Descartes considers Gassendi to be a brilliant philosopher – yet not without a degree of irony<sup>18</sup> – he compares his opponent to a rhetorician.<sup>19</sup> By contrast, he admires in the young Princess Elisabeth, who is not a professional scholar, competence in philosophy and mathematics.<sup>20</sup> Descartes assumes that Gassendi had the intention to publish his objections and reacts correspondingly in his reply to Gassendi’s objections, published in the *Meditations*. According to Gassendi, Mersenne, who was collecting objections from renowned scholars, had neglected to inform him that his sets of critiques would be published.<sup>21</sup> Thus, we might conclude that Descartes’ polemical reaction is based upon a misconstrual. Indeed, he thought that Gassendi’s objections were a public letter, whereas the author of *Syntagma philosophiae Epicuri* was under the impression that his letter was only to circulate in a private circle. Descartes’ “mistake” is quite understandable, inasmuch as he considers scientific letters – in particular from Gassendi – to be a constitutive part of the *République des Lettres*.

The different ways in which Descartes treats his interlocutors Elisabeth and Gassendi may be due to at least two reasons. First, the obvious difference of social status: aristocrat versus commoner; and second the different philosophical styles: Elisabeth’s benevolent demands for clarifications versus Gassendi’s learned and sometimes polemical objections. If we apply both aspects to the mind-body issue, we cannot fail to notice that Descartes’ replies to Gassendi are more lapidary rejections, whereas his responses to Elisabeth are more worked-out and considerate explanations. However, if Descartes uses an ironical tone towards Gassendi by calling him “O Flesh”, he is actually responding to Gassendi’s apostrophe “O Mind”.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, one should not understand Descartes’ reactions with exclusive reference to the categories public/private. Indeed, both notions are not necessarily antithetical, for they refer to converging spheres. In the case of his apparently private letter to Clerselier, Descartes intends to make his refutations of Gassendi public and thereby reach a wide readership (see 2.1). In the case of his exchange with Elisabeth, Descartes uses her private requests as an occasion to develop his thoughts on the passions and eventually to publish his Treatise (see 2.2). Thus it seems to be more adequate to designate Descartes’ replies to both Gassendi and Elisabeth as semi-private.

### 2.1. Descartes' refutation against the scholar Gassendi

Descartes builds his refutation of Gassendi's objections upon the distinctions he had established in M II and VI, and he also insists upon the real distinction between mind and body from two different angles. First, from a metaphysical point of view, he reminds his readers of the undeniable difference between thinking substance and material substance. Second, from an epistemological perspective, Descartes underlines the fact that no corporeal element is perceived by the mind, as the mind contains only ideas and ideas are not material.<sup>23</sup> Even in the case of the faculty of imagination, which needs material support, no matter is integrated to the mind. Consequently, "those who think it [the mind] is extended are in error" (AT VII, 388/CSMK 2, 266). Gassendi's objections are thereby swept away.

Thus when you try to compare the intermingling of mind and body with the intermingling of two bodies, it is enough for me to reply that we should not set up any comparisons between such things, because they are quite different in kind [...] (*Fifth Set of Replies*, AT VII, 389-390/CSMK 2, 266)

As a follow-up to his objections written in haste during April 1641, Gassendi publishes in 1644 a detailed set of counter-objections to Descartes, known under the title *Instantiae*. Gassendi had already spread the manuscript of the *Instantiae*, very likely in the winter 1641.<sup>24</sup> The dissensions between Gassendi and Descartes illustrate important issues related to the semi-private character of scientific letters. Whereas Gassendi understood from Mersenne that his first objections from 1641 would not be published and he regarded the more elaborate *Instances* as perfectly legitimate<sup>25</sup>, Descartes resented the author of the *Fifth Set of Objections* for pretending *a posteriori* that his objections were conceived as a private letter<sup>26</sup> as well as for opening a public debate in form of a published book<sup>27</sup>. The author of the *Meditations* decides not to respond publicly to Gassendi's *Instantiae*<sup>28</sup> and chooses the medium of a semi-private letter written in French and addressed to Clerselier. This letter dated from 12 January 1646<sup>29</sup> serves as "a reply to a selection of the principal counter-objections produced by M. Gassendi against the preceding replies." Descartes publishes this letter in the French edition of the *Meditations* and integrates in his reply some objections to Gassendi (see AT IX, 202/CSMK 2, 269). The polemic tone of this letter<sup>30</sup>, however, represents a structured refutation of the main objections raised by Gassendi against the *Meditations*. Descartes adds to his counter-argumentation a critique *ad hominem*. Descartes accuses his opponent not only of conceptual weakness, but also of committing serious philosophical "errors" and even unforgiving "mistakes". For instance, in response to Gassendi's objection, according to which the distinction between thought and body could be false, Descartes first underlines Gassendi's equivocal understanding of the principle "my thought is not the rule of truth of things", and above all of the term "thoughts", since "thoughts" are defined in the *Meditations* as "clear and distinct perceptions". Second, Descartes tries to discredit Gassendi as a philosopher.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the opposition against Gassendi has become sharper:<sup>32</sup> Descartes' arguments remain fundamentally similar to the ones he had deployed in an earlier letter to Mersenne from July 1641 (see AT III, 391-397), though

he chooses a polemical tone in his letter to Clerselier from January 1646.<sup>33</sup>

Even though Gassendi's and Elisabeth's critical questions are formulated differently – and above all evaluated differently by Descartes – both point out the weaknesses of the union claim and prompt Descartes to react.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, Descartes will articulate in more detail the union claim that he had already introduced in his earlier work, but not sufficiently explained.<sup>35</sup> The correspondence functions as a privileged and safer space for exchanging arguments. For example, Descartes explains to Gassendi the interaction between mind and body by referring to the argument of “real accidents”<sup>36</sup>, which Elisabeth herself had produced in an earlier letter (see Elisabeth to Descartes, 10 June 1643; AT III; 685, 1-13). However, the two correspondents are not conceded the same rights. Elisabeth alone may attribute some material properties to the soul in order to understand the union better. Gassendi is not permitted to use the faculty of imagination to conceive the soul on the ground that it is only a thinking think.<sup>37</sup>

Descartes not only replies to Gassendi in a swift and polemical manner, he also raises an important methodological critique, wherein Gassendi is said to have mistaken a conception of the mind for the essence of the mind itself: “But you show that you have completely failed to understand any of this, since you confuse the question of what we may understand this substance to be with the question of what it really is [...]” (*Fifth Set of Replies*, AT VII, 387/CSMK, 2, 265). Gassendi's “doubts” (as they were formulated in the *Instantiae*)<sup>38</sup> might have been known to Elisabeth since (a) some of her critiques are reminiscent of Gassendi's and (b) the text was circulating in the United Provinces in 1642.

## 2.2. Descartes' concessions to Elisabeth

Because of his respect for Elisabeth, Descartes' reply is more detailed, but also more compelling: he cannot simply refer to the arguments he had developed in his *Meditations*. He feels obliged to provide her with a more intelligible account of the union argument. To this end, Descartes allows the Princess to imagine matter and extension in the mind, which is precisely what he had expressly refused to Gassendi! The question raised by Gassendi and Elisabeth points to a similar problem: both demand some further explanation regarding the possibility of contact between two really distinct substances. Motion being a mode of the extended matter only<sup>39</sup>, the incorporeal mind can neither be moved by bodies nor can cause movement in bodies. We have seen previously Descartes' rather short and abrupt reply to Gassendi. However, in Descartes' reply to Elisabeth's question of “how the soul, being only a thinking substance can determine the body to perform voluntary actions” (16 May 1643; AT III, 661)<sup>40</sup>, he quite easily admits that he did not expose the claim of substantial union sufficiently enough. Descartes acknowledges thus that he might have confused his readers by introducing too briefly the union argument within the context of his distinction argument:

For there are two things in the human soul on which all the knowledge we can have of its nature depends: one of which is that it thinks, and the other is that, being united to the body, it can act on and be afflicted with it. I

have said almost nothing about the latter [...] (Descartes to Elisabeth, 21 May 1643, AT III, 664, 23-28/Shapiro, 63-65; modified translation)

Descartes even goes as far as to “beg her to feel free to attribute this matter and this extension to the soul, for to do so is to do nothing but conceive it as united with the body” (Descartes to Elisabeth, 28 June 1643; AT III, 694, 19-21/Shapiro, 71). Again, it is precisely this possibility that he had firmly refused to Gassendi: “and we should not imagine that the mind has parts on the grounds that it has an understanding of parts in the body.” (*Fifth Set of Replies*, AT VII, 390, 9-10/CSMK 2, 266) The contrast between Descartes’ answer to Gassendi and to Elisabeth is particularly well illustrated in the following letter that Descartes writes to Elisabeth in June 1643:

In this way your Highness will not neglect to return easily to the knowledge of the distinction between the soul and the body, even though she has conceived their union. (Descartes to Elisabeth, 28 June 1643, AT III, 694-695/Shapiro, 71)

In this letter Descartes introduces experience as a didactic tool to help his pupil understand better the union argument, and also the complementarity of reason and experience as two forms of knowledge. In particular, sense-based experience is the most adequate medium through which to perceive the union. Within the framework of the dialogue with Elisabeth, Descartes admits his lack of precision with regard to the union argument and shows his willingness to elaborate on a solution to the problem.

Descartes provides further explanations to strengthen the union claim in order to give an account of the causal interaction between mind and body and thereby to satisfy Elisabeth’s demand for clarification. Our focus will be mainly on two of Descartes’ argumentative devices. The first is the argument of the primitive notions and the second is the argument of the sense-based experience.

“Primitive notions” or ideas (21 May 1643; AT III, 665/Shapiro, 65) are one example of Descartes’ didactic efforts to clarify his thought. Apart from general notions, such as number, duration and so on, humans are endowed with three innate notions, the notion of body, the notion of mind and the notion of their union. Each notion is *per se* intelligible and cannot be explained in terms of other primitive ideas.<sup>41</sup> Further on, Descartes takes the complicated example of the analogy of gravity to illuminate the interaction between mind and body in order to point out that we generally accept the fact that something incorporeal as gravity can act on an extended body (see Descartes to Elisabeth, 21 May 1643; AT III, 667, 7 – 668, 4)<sup>42</sup>. In other words, primitive notions as well as the argument of gravity, which Descartes also used in his *Sixth Set of Replies* (see AT VII, 441-442/CSMK 2, 297-298), serve to provide further arguments to make both claims of distinction and union more intelligible to Elisabeth. As expected, the analogy argument does not convince Elisabeth, given the fact that the scholastic explanation of gravity is proved to be wrong by Descartes himself! (Elisabeth to Descartes, 20 June 1643; AT III 684, 11-27)<sup>43</sup> Hence Descartes

deploys a second argument to prove the evidence of the union. *Prima facie*, the second argument seems paradoxical, if not ludicrous. Indeed, Descartes develops an anti-metaphysical point by suggesting that the irrefutable evidence for the union is in ordinary life:

And lastly, it is in using only life and ordinary conversations and in abstaining from meditating and studying those things which exercise the imagination that we learn to conceive the union of the soul and the body. (AT III, 692/Shapiro, 70)<sup>44</sup>

Descartes is well aware of the paradox of the argument,<sup>45</sup> according to which the unity is accessible to us only through sensations of pain and pleasure and through the passions of the soul. He recommends that the Princess refrain from philosophy and engage more in ordinary life. Daniel Garber rightly points out that Descartes is not telling Elisabeth that she might be ill-equipped to understand the philosophical argument of the union claim.<sup>46</sup> There are good reasons to think that Descartes is genuine about the argument according to which the evidence of the union between mind and body is only perceived through the senses. First, Descartes had already worked out a similar kind of argument in the *Discourse*: “the mind must be more closely joined and united with the body in order to have, besides this power of movement, feelings and appetites like ours and so constitute a real man” (DM 5; AT VI, 59, 14-16/CSMK 1, 141). Second, Descartes will demonstrate the concrete reality of the union by giving a detailed analysis of the phenomenon of emotions in his treatise *The Passions of the Soul* (1649). As John Cottingham aptly writes, “the resulting paradox in the Cartesian system, is that reason tells us one thing (the distinction), while experience tells us quite the opposite (the union), and yet both are correct.”<sup>47</sup> It is within the boundaries of the correspondence with Elisabeth that Descartes figures out this – for many untenable – position. This dialogue gives him the necessary room to reflect about the role of metaphysics for leading a good life.<sup>48</sup> For instance, the question of the conditions of a life of contentment is inaugurated in the letters of 1643. As we know, the issue of *beata vita* is discussed at length both in their correspondence in 1645 and in Descartes’ later *Treatise on the passions*. One could therefore identify these first letters of 1643 as valuable documents bearing witness to Descartes’ shift from metaphysics to moral philosophy.

### **3. Significance of the correspondence for Descartes’ elaboration of his philosophical views**

Elisabeth’s letter from 25 April 1646 is an eloquent illustration of the emphasis Descartes lays on moral philosophy. According to Elisabeth, *The Passions of the Soul*, which she had encouraged Descartes to write<sup>49</sup> and of which she had read the first draft (“le premier crayon”), has many laudable qualities. One of them is the moral dimension of Descartes’ analysis.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, the *Treatise*, which Descartes publishes in French in 1649, is also to an important degree the result of their intensive philosophical exchange.

In sharp contrast to his rhetorical and polemical replies to Gassendi published

in 1641, Descartes takes great care in answering each of Elisabeth's objections. This correspondence exhibits a more nuanced manner of thinking as well as a more complete reflection upon the union argument than Descartes could have offered in the *Meditations*. As it is clear from the very first letters in 1643, the philosopher is grateful to Elisabeth for identifying one of the main difficulties in his metaphysics, namely the compatibility of the union and distinction between mind and body.

But I judged that it was these meditations, rather than these thoughts which require less attention, that have made her [Elisabeth] find obscurity in the notion we have of their union; as it does not seem to me that the human mind is capable of conceiving very distinctly, and at the same time, the distinction between the soul and the body and their union, for to do so it is necessary to conceive them as one single thing and at the same time to conceive them as two, which is contradictory. (Descartes to Elisabeth, 28 June 1643; AT III, 693, 18-26/Shapiro, 70; modified translation)

He also admits to Elisabeth that one can better conceive the union from daily conversations.<sup>51</sup> The exchange is thus an essential complement to the theoretical refutations that Descartes had given to Gassendi to reaffirm both claims in the *Meditations*. For it is within his dialogue with Elisabeth that Descartes defines the union between mind and body through daily sense-based experience. A more private, intimate and tolerant dialogue follows the academic dispute. The argument of the primitive notions, of sense-based experience, as well as Descartes' concession to attribute matter to the mind for understanding the union better exemplify both his open-mindedness and his didactic skills.<sup>52</sup>

In the course of the later epistolary exchange,<sup>53</sup> Elisabeth, an eager and attentive reader of Descartes' writings,<sup>54</sup> prompts him to elaborate on the union argument in the *Treatise on the Passions*.<sup>55</sup> While presenting her the principles of this treatise he is working on, Descartes demonstrates on a physical- psychological level the "link between our soul and our body" (letter to Elisabeth from May 1646; AT IV, 408/Shapiro, 135). Temporally and conceptually situated between the *Meditations* and the *Treatise*, the correspondence with Elisabeth constitutes on the one hand a kind of antechamber, in which public polemics can be discussed in a confidential way. On the other hand, the correspondence is a sort of dark room, where Descartes reflects upon and develops his thoughts. The correspondence is a reliable laboratory of ideas<sup>56</sup> and as such, it cannot be put on the fringe of Descartes' canonical works. The letters reveal Descartes' willingness not only to submit parts of his treatise to the sagacity of Elisabeth's reading, but also to incorporate aspects of experience in his anthropology. Descartes' meditations upon the limits of metaphysics with regard to the evidence of the union seems to be suggested in this passage from a letter to Elisabeth from 28 June 1643:

From which it follows that those who never philosophize and who use only their senses do not doubt in the least that the soul moves the body and that the body acts on the soul. (AT III, 692/Shapiro, 69)

Descartes' use of the letters he writes and receives indicates a shifting understanding of the private and the public realms. He does not seem to comply with the *confidential*, *exclusive* and *undisclosed* dimension of private correspondence.

First, Descartes does not follow Elisabeth's request to keep their correspondence strictly *confidential*: "But I cannot find here a reason to observe the Hippocratic oath that she [Elisabeth] enjoins me to, since she communicated nothing to me that does not merit being seen and admired by all men." (Descartes to Elisabeth, 21 May 1643; AT III, 668, 15-19/Shapiro, 66-67) Later on in their correspondence, Descartes sends to Queen Christina of Sweden letters which he had originally written to Elisabeth on the philosophical topic of the supreme Good (see letter to Elisabeth, 20 November 1647; AT IV, 90-92).<sup>57</sup>

Second, in his letter to Chanut from 6 June 1647 (AT V, 51-58), Descartes does not limit the *exclusivity* of the letter to Chanut alone, but he appears to have other correspondents in view. In this philosophical letter, Descartes actually addresses his thoughts on the notion of the infinite ultimately to Christina;<sup>58</sup> Chanut has in this case both a messenger's role and a correspondent's (see Chanut to Descartes, 11 May 1647; AT V, 19-22).

Third, in the fictitious "Prefatory Letters" addressed to an unnamed friend, which serve as a Preface to the *Passions of the Soul*, Descartes wishes his private correspondence were the only context in which his thoughts would circulate. Thus, here we find Descartes adopting the use of the letters as a safer and more prudential medium through which to solve philosophical questions.

In fact I had composed it only to be read by a princess whose mental powers are so extraordinary that she can easily understand matters which seem very difficult to our learned doctors. [...] Lest you should doubt that I say, I promise to revise this work on the passions and add whatever I think necessary in order to make it more intelligible; then I shall send it to you, and you may do with it whatever you please. (AT XI, 324, 1-10/CSMK 1, 327; see also Descartes to Dinet, 1642, AT VII, 572-578)

Yet, at the end of the exchange, Descartes modifies his view and agrees to give the manuscript to the anonymous person: the *Treatise* should not remain *undisclosed* to the public. Thus, unlike the public/private dichotomy, the category of semi-private appears to describe more adequately a major part of his correspondence.

### Conclusion

Descartes' correspondence represents quantitatively as well as qualitatively an important part of his oeuvre.<sup>59</sup> His epistolary exchanges serve various purposes; *argumentative*: via Mersenne Descartes receives the objections of his peers in the form of semi-private letters and replies to them in a public manner (e.g. Arnauld's objections to the *Meditations*); *polemical*: Descartes' letter to Cleselier (ultimately addressed to Gassendi) serves as a public reply to the *Instantiae*; and *dialogical*: Descartes' correspondence with Elisabeth functions as a laboratory of ideas, which

Descartes develops further and publishes in his *Treatise* of 1649. As we know, Elisabeth's input contributes undoubtedly to the elaboration of *Les Passions de l'Âme*. By focusing on the union claim, this paper attempted to show how Descartes reacts to his various correspondents' requests in order to complete his argument in favour of the union and to articulate it with the distinction claim. Descartes explains his metaphysical views in letters that are at times virulent discussion (in the case of Gassendi) and at others constructive (as with Elisabeth). The epistolary exchange is a privileged space within which the self-defined solitary and retreated philosopher<sup>60</sup> can reply to his interlocutors' demands for clarification, and even adjust some of his fundamental claims, such as the union claim for example. Indeed, it is above all in his correspondence that Descartes perfects the articulation between the distinction and the union claim.

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## References

<sup>1</sup> See Descartes, R., *Principles of Philosophy*, I, §§60-64, AT VIII A, 28-31. Ariew, R., “Descartes and Leibniz as Readers of Suárez: Theory of Distinctions and Principle of Individuation”, in *The Philosophy of Francisco Suárez*, ed. B. Hill and H. Lagerlund (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 41-46.

<sup>2</sup> See *The A to Z of Descartes and Cartesian Philosophy*, ed. R. Ariew, et al. (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 86-87.

<sup>3</sup> The title of the second edition of the *Meditations* (Amsterdam, 1642) reads as follows: *Meditationes de Prima Philosophia, In quibus Dei existentia, & animae humane a corpore distinctio, demonstrantur.*

<sup>4</sup> “De rerum materialium existentia, & reali mentis a corpore distinctio” (AT VII, 71).

<sup>5</sup> The standard edition of Descartes' works cited in this paper is the Ch. Adam und P. Tannery edition [known as AT]: Adam, Ch. / Tannery, P., (ed.) *Oeuvres de Descartes* (Paris: Vrin, 1996), 11 vol. Citations are by volume number and page [e.g. AT VII, 162]. The AT references are followed either (1) by the editor name, volume and page number of the English edition provided by Cottingham, J./Stoothoff, R./Murdoch, D./Kenny, A. (transl.), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984-1991) [e.g. CSMK 2, 41]; or (2) by the editor name and page number of the English edition of the complete correspondence between Descartes and Elisabeth of Bohemia: Shapiro, L. (ed.), *The Correspondence between Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007) [e.g. Shapiro, 67].

<sup>6</sup> “But what shall I now say that I am, when I am supposing that there is some supremely powerful and, if it is permissible to say so, malicious deceiver, who is deliberately trying to trick me in every way he can? Can I now assert that I possess even the most insignificant of all the attributes which I have just said belong to the nature of a body? I scrutinize them, think about them, go over them again, but nothing suggests itself [...]” (M II, AT VII, 27/CSMK 2, 18)

<sup>7</sup> In the *Discourse on the Method* [DM] the *Cogito* argument serves also to demonstrate the real union between mind and body (AT VI, 33-38). See also Descartes' own comments on DM in the „Preface to the Reader” of the *Meditations* (AT VII, 7, 14-19/CSMK 2, 7).

<sup>8</sup> See “Preface to the Reader”: „I shall, however, show below how it follows from the fact that I am aware of nothing else belonging to my essence, that nothing else does in fact belong to it.” (AT VII, 8, 12-15/CSMK 2, 8)

<sup>9</sup> “First, I know that everything which I clearly and distinctly understand is capable of being created by God so as to correspond exactly with my understanding of it. Hence the fact that I can clearly and distinctly understand one thing apart from another is enough to make me certain that the two things are distinct, since they are capable of being separated, at least by God. [...]” (M VI, AT VII, 78, 2-6/CSMK 2, 54)

<sup>10</sup> Cottingham, J., “Mind and body”, in *A Descartes Dictionary* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993), 125.

<sup>11</sup> “For if nature is considered in its general aspect, then I understand by the term nothing other than God himself, or the ordered system of created things established by God.” (M VI, AT VII, 80, 21-24/CSMK 2, 56)

<sup>12</sup> As Lili Alanen shows, Descartes does not explain in M VI why these two states correspond. See Alanen, L., “The Intentionality of Cartesian Emotions”, in *Passions and Virtues in Descartes*, ed. B. Willinston and A. Gombay (New York: Humanity Books, 2003), 109.

<sup>13</sup> For a subtle close reading of the image of the sailor and the ship in the *Meditations*, see for instance Kolesnik-Antoine, D., “Comme un pilote en son navire...’ Arnauld lecteur de la VIème Méditation”, in *Union et distinction de l’âme et du corps: Lectures de la VIe Méditation*, ed. D. Kolesnik-Antoine (Paris: Kimé, 1998), 100-127, in particular 103-111.

<sup>14</sup> “My nature, then, in this limited sense, does indeed teach me to avoid what induces a feeling of pain and to seek out what induces feelings of pleasure, and so on.” (AT VII, 82/CSMK 2, 57) About the issue of the utility of feelings for the purpose of self-conservation, see Brown, D., “The Rationality of Cartesian Passions”, in *Emotions and Choices from Boethius to Descartes*, ed. H. Lagerlund (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 262-263.

<sup>15</sup> See Descartes' response to Regius in *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet* (Amsterdam, 1648). In his *Notae in Programma quoddam* Descartes asserts against the distorted claims of his former friend and pupil that the human is an essential union of two substances, “an entity consisting of a soul and a body” (AT VIII B, 351/CSMK 1, 299). See also Descartes' letter to Regius, mid-December 1641 (AT III, 460).

<sup>16</sup> One important source of the Cartesian practice of meditation is the spiritual exercise conceived by the founder of the Jesuit order, Ignatius of Loyola. Descartes was familiar with the *Exercises*, for they were part of the curriculum at the royal college of La Flèche. An important common point between Descartes and the Jesuit father is the first step to be taken: the *via purgativa*. For Loyola, it means the confession of sins and for Descartes, the liberation from prejudices – such as the belief that all knowledge is based upon the senses. See Hatfield, G., “Descartes' Meditations as Cognitive Exercises”, *Philosophy and Literature* 9 (1985): 41-58.

<sup>17</sup> About the high probability of Gassendi's influence via Sorbière upon Elisabeth's critical arguments, see Alexandrescu, V., “What Someone May Have Whispered in Elisabeth's Ear,” in *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. D. Garber, St. Nadler, vol. VI (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012), 1-27, here in particular, 10-19.

<sup>18</sup> Consider for instance the following passages: “In replying to you I shall therefore address not as the discerning philosopher that I know you are, but as one of those men of the flesh whose ideas you represent” (AT VII, 348, 8-10/CSMK 2, 241; modified translation) and “But now, as I come to an end, I recognise the true Gassendi, admire him as an outstanding philosopher, and embrace him as a man of intellectual honesty and moral integrity [...] I have, amongst other things, been delighted that such a celebrated writer has, in the whole course of

his long and careful essay, not managed to produce a single reasoned objection to my arguments, or even my conclusions which I have not been able to answer with great ease.” (AT VII, 390, 21 – 391, 5/CSMK 2, 267)

<sup>19</sup> “In fact you have not so much used philosophical arguments to refute my opinions as employed various debating skills to get round them.” (AT VII, 347, 19-22/CSMK 2, 241)

<sup>20</sup> See for instance Descartes’ Dedicatory Letter to Elisabeth in the *Principles*: “And the outstanding and incomparable sharpness of your intelligence is obvious from the penetrating examination you have made of all the secrets of these sciences, and from the fact that you have acquired an exact knowledge of them in so short a time.” (AT VIIIA, 3/CSMK 1, 192)

<sup>21</sup> See Rochot, B., Introduction to Gassendi’s *Disquisitio metaphysica: seu, Dubitationes et instantiae adversus Renati Cartesii Metaphysicam, & responsa* (Amsterdam: Johann Blaev, 1644), ed. and trans. B. Rochot (Paris: J. Vrin, 1962), VIII.

<sup>22</sup> About Gassendi’s apostrophizing Descartes with “Ô Mens” in his *Fifth Set of Objections*, see for instance following passages: “But stop here, O Mind, and let those ‘suppositions’, or rather fictions, finally depart.” (AT VII, 265, 1-2/CSMK 2, 185); “As regards the nature of the body, you have, O Mind, listed all the things we know: extension, shape, occupation of space, and so on. But what, after all your efforts, have you told us about yourself?” (AT VII, 275, 25 – 276, 2/CSMK 2, 192). Descartes’ ironical way of addressing Gassendi as “flesh” appears a few times. See for example following passages: “The things you say here, O best of Flesh, seem to me to amount to grumblings more than objections, and so they require no answer.” (AT VII, 358, 1-3/CSMK 2, 247); “In this long discussion between Mind and Flesh, Mind has disagreed with Flesh on many points, as was only to be expected.” (AT VII, 390, 20-21/CSMK 2, 267) Gassendi replies wittingly by reminding: “Tametsi enim carneum me dicas, non ideo facis exanimem; ut neque tametsi te mentalem geras, te idcirco facis excarnem. Quare et permittendum tibi, ut pro genio loquaris tuo; sufficitque, ut Deo propitio, neque ego sim plane caro sine mente, neque tu plane mens sine carne; et neque tu supra, neque ego infra conditionem hominis simus; quamvis tu, quod est humanum recuses; ego id a me alienum non putem.” (*Instantiae*, art. 1, 274b-275a, in: Gassendi, P., *Opera omnia* (6 vol.), ed. H. L. Habert de Montmor 1658, reprint Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 1964 (with an introduction from T. Gregory), vol. 3, 274b-275a; and also in the modern edition of the *Disquisitio*, ed. B. Rochot, 15-17.

<sup>23</sup> “Lastly you say that the ideas of God, an angel and the human mind are ‘corporeal or quasi-corporeal, since they are derived from the human form and from other things which are very rarefied and simple and hard to perceive with the senses, such as air or ether’. This is a thought which is worthy of you alone, O Flesh. [...] A true idea of the mind contains only thoughts and its attributes, none of which is corporeal.” (AT VII, 385/CSMK 2, 264)

<sup>24</sup> See Rochot, B., Introduction to *Disquisitio*, VII-XIII and AT IV, 59-62.

<sup>25</sup> Gassendi, P., *Instantiae*, ed. B. Rochot, 3 (Preface to Samuel Sorbière): “[...] neque te id latuit, qui significasti dixisse tibi Cartesium se, cum est publice conquestus de scriptis adversum se libris, qui non in lucem emitterentur, sed privatim lectitarentur, meum subnotare praesertim voluisse. Quod tu vero ipsum non legendi modo sed et evulgandi licentiam deposcis, [...]”

<sup>26</sup> Gassendi, P., *Instantiae*, ed. B. Rochot, 13 (art. 1, 274a): “[...] et dissentiendo a te, difficultates non publice, sed privatim significaram.”

<sup>27</sup> Gassendi, P., *Instantiae*, ed. B. Rochot, 5 (Preface to Samuel Sorbière): “Nam tametsi Epistola (alio fine scripta, quam ut fundamentum disputationis sterneretur) non sic digesta fuerit, ut quilibet Articulus specialis quaedam objectio, seu Dubitatio fieret (alias siquidem unamquamque sua conclusione, suisque probationibus, tanquam numeris absoluisset) nihilominus quia sic res tulit, et Cartesius me privatim monentem traduxit in publicum iurgium, enitendum est, quantum licet, ne res indecore procedat.”

<sup>28</sup> See the *Authors' Notes Concerning The Fifth Set of Objections*, published in the first French edition of the *Meditations* in 1647: "The *Fifth Set of Objections* which were sent to me did not seem to be the most important, and they were extremely long; but nonetheless I agreed to have them published in their appropriate place out of courtesy to their author. I even allowed him to see the proofs, to prevent anything being printed of which he did not approve. But since that time he has produced a large volume containing his original objections together with several new 'counter-objections' or answers to my replies. In this book [*Instantiae*] he complains of my publishing his objections, as if I had done so against his will, and says that he sent them to me only for my private instruction. Because of this, I am quite happy to oblige him now by removing his objections from the present volume, and this is why, when I learnt that M. Clerselier was taking the trouble to translate the other sets of objections, I asked him to omit the fifth set. But to prevent the reader having any cause to regret their omission, I should make clear here that I have recently re-read these objections together with the new counter-arguments in the lengthy volume which contains them, with the purpose of extracting all the points I judged to require an answer. But I have not been able to discover a single objection which those who have some slight understanding of my *Meditations* will not, in my view, be able to answer quite easily without any help from me." (AT IX, 198, 11 – 199, 20/CSMK 2, 268-269) As Rochot underlines (*Disquisitio*, XII) Descartes will attempt to exclude the *Fifth Set of Objections* from the Latin edition of the *Meditations*, which he was supervising before his departure for Stockholm in 1649 (see AT VII, IX).

<sup>29</sup> See AT IX, 202-217 and the recent edition of the *Lettre de M. Descartes à M. Clerselier* by J.-M. and M. Beyssade in Descartes, R., *Méditations métaphysiques* (Paris: GF-Flammarion, 2011), 424-434.

<sup>30</sup> See for instance the following caustic remarks in the Letter from M. Descartes to M. Clerselier Serving as a Reply to a Selection of the Principal Counter-Objections Produced by M. Gassendi against the Preceding Replies: "The most intelligent of my friends who have read the book [*Instantiae*] have assured me that they have found nothing in it to arrest their attention [...]" (AT IX, 203, 4-6/CSMK 2, 269); "For I think that those who have taken the trouble to make the selection must now judge, as I do, that all the objections which the book in question contains are based simply on a misunderstanding of certain terms or else on various suppositions that are false. But although all the points which they have noted are of this sort, they have in fact been so diligent as to add a number of observations which I have no recollection of having read in the book itself." (AT IX, 15-23/CSMK 2, 269-270); "It is by failing to take heed of this [the Cogito argument] that our author has gone astray and produced all the invalid arguments with which he has stuffed his book. He has simply made us false major premises whenever the mood takes him, as though I had used them to deduce the truths which I expounded them." (AT IX, 206, 11-16/CSMK 2, 271)

<sup>31</sup> See *Letter from M. Descartes to M. Clerselier...* : "Thus the most absurd and grotesque mistake that a philosopher can make is to want to make judgments which do not correspond to his perceptions of things. Yet I fail to see how our author could be cleared of having committed this blunder in most of his objections. For he is not prepared to allow each person to abide by his own perception, but claims that we should give more credence to the opinion or fantasies which he pleases to set before us, despite our complete lack of any perception of them." (AT IX, 208, 30 – 209, 9/CSMK 2, 273)

<sup>32</sup> About this issue, see Michael, E., Michael, F.S., "Two Early Modern Concepts of Mind: Reflecting Substance vs. Thinking Substance", *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 27 (1989), 29-48; Chédin, J.-L., "Descartes et Gassendi: le dualisme à l'épreuve", in *Descartes. Objecter et répondre*, ed. J.-M. Beyssade, J.-L. Marion (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1994), 163-184; Taussig, S. (ed.), *Gassendi et la Modernité* (Les styles du savoir 7), (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008).

<sup>33</sup> By contrast, B. Rochot (*Disquisitio*, XI) takes the letter from 1646 to be “fairly moderate”.

<sup>34</sup> See *Letter from M. Descartes to M. Clerselier...*: “There are two further questions which they add at the end: ‘how can the soul move the body if it is in no way material, and how can it receive the forms of corporeal objects?’ These questions simply give me the opportunity to point out that the author of the *Counter-Objections* was being quite unfair when, under the pretext of objecting to my views, he put to me large number of such questions which do not require to be answered in order to prove what I asserted in my writings. The most ignorant people could, in a quarter of an hour, raise more questions of this kind than the wisest men could deal with in a lifetime; and this is why I have not bothered to answer any of them. *These questions presuppose amongst other things an explanation of the union between the soul and the body, which I have not yet dealt with at all.*” (AT IX, 213, 3-17/CSMK 2, 275; our italics)

<sup>35</sup> See Descartes’ letter to Hyperaspistes from August 1641: “[...] sed contra, si quid liceat de re perspecta conijcere, cum experiamur mentes nostras corporibus ita esse adiunctas, ut fere semper ab iisdem patiantur [...]” (AT III, 423, 29 – 424, 2) A few lines further, Descartes speaks even of “quasi permistione”: “[...] nihil magis rationi consentaneum est, quam ut putemus mentem corpori infantis recenter unitam in solis ideis doloris, titillationis, caloris, frigoris et similibus, quae ex ista unione ac quasi permistione oriuntur, confuse percipiendis sive sentiendis occupari.” (AT III, 424, 7-12)

<sup>36</sup> See *Letter from M. Descartes to M. Clerselier...* (AT IX, 213, 24/CSMK 2, 275) and Descartes’ letter to Hyperaspistes: “Nam, quod mens realiter a corpore distincta nihilominus ei coniuncta sit, et a vestigiis in eo impressis afficiatur, aut etiam nova in ipsum imprimat, non difficilium potest intelligi, quam vulgo intelligitur accidentia realia (nempe ab iis, qui ipsa supponunt) in substantiam corpoream agere, quamvis ab ea toto genere sint diversa.” (AT III, 424, 19-25)

<sup>37</sup> See Descartes’ letter to Mersenne from July 1641: “[...] car notre imagination n’est propre qu’à se représenter des choses qui tombent sous les sens; et pour ce que notre âme n’a ni couleur, ni odeur, ni saveur, ni rien de tout ce qui appartient au corps, il n’est pas possible de se l’imaginer, ou d’en former l’image. Mais elle n’est pas pour cela moins concevable; au contraire, comme c’est par elle que nous concevons toutes choses, elle est aussi elle seule plus concevable que toutes les autres choses ensemble.” (AT III, 394, 23-31)

<sup>38</sup> About the reception of the *Instantiae*, see Rochot, XI; about the discussion of the Cartesian union claim in the *Instantiae*, see Fifth Doubt, art. 1, 405b (ed. B. Rochot, 611-613): “Bene dicis ea, quae hęc habeo, de unione Mentis cum corpore, esse praecedentibus similiae. Revera enim, ut praecedentia ejusmodi fuere, quibus non satisfeceris, sed solum vel id, quod fuit in quaestione, vel auctoritatem tuam opposueris [...] Sed fac me nihil objicere praeter dubia: ipsa tamen dubia objectiones sunt; et nisi objectiones dicas, forte quia scholastica forma proposita non sunt; ejusmodi tamen sunt, quae solvere sit opere-pretium.”

<sup>39</sup> On the three laws of nature, motion, inertia and conservation, see *Principles of Philosophy* II, §§37-40 (AT VIIIA, 62, 6 – 65, 19). See also Elisabeth’s reference to the law of motion in a letter to Descartes from 16 May 1643: “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 the other [physical contact] appears to me incompatible with an immaterial thing.” (AT III, 661, 11-19/Shapiro, 62)

<sup>40</sup> Elisabeth follows here Gassendi’s request for a clear definition of the soul. See Alexandrescu, V., (2012), 4-7.

<sup>41</sup> See Descartes to Elisabeth, 21 May 1643: “Although the use of the senses has given us notions of extension, of shapes, and of movements that are much more familiar to us than the

others, the principal cause of our errors lies in our ordinarily wanting to use these notions to explain those things to which they do not pertain. For instance, when we want to use our imagination to conceive the nature of the soul, or better, when one wants to conceive the way in which the soul moves the body, by appealing to the way one body is moved by another body. [...] So I believe that we have hitherto confused the notion of the power with which the soul acts on the body with the power with which one body acts on another [...]" (AT III, 666, 6 – 667, 7/Shapiro, 65-66)

<sup>42</sup> See Garber, D., "Understanding Interaction: What Descartes Should Have Told Elisabeth", *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 21 (1983): 20-21.

<sup>43</sup> See also Elisabeth to Descartes, 10 June 1643: "And even though, in your *Metaphysical Meditations*, you show the possibility of the second [ascribing to an immaterial being the capacity of moving a body and being moved by it], it is altogether very difficult to understand that a soul, as you have described it, after having had the faculty and the custom of reasoning well, 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/Shapiro, 68)

<sup>44</sup> About the experience of the union, see also Kambouchner, D., *Descartes et la philosophie morale* (Paris: Hermann, 2008), 77-114.

<sup>45</sup> See Descartes to Elisabeth, 28 June 1643: "I almost fear that your Highness will think that I do not speak seriously." (AT III, 692, 21-22/Shapiro, 70)

<sup>46</sup> Garber, D., (1983), 19.

<sup>47</sup> Cottingham, J., (1993), 126.

<sup>48</sup> See Cottingham, J., *Philosophy and the Good Life: Reason and the Passions in Greek, Cartesian and Psychoanalytic Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 96-103.

<sup>49</sup> Elisabeth to Descartes, 13 September 1645: „I would also like to see you define the passions, in order to know them better.“ (AT IV, 289, 25-26/Shapiro, 110)

<sup>50</sup> "[...] the order, definition, and distinctions you give to the passions, and indeed all the moral part of this treatise, surpass all that anyone has ever said on this subject." (AT IV, 404, 13-16/Shapiro, 133)

<sup>51</sup> About Elisabeth's influence on Descartes' philosophical views, see for instance Broad, J., *Women Philosophers of the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 14.

<sup>52</sup> Beyssade, J.-M., Beyssade, M., „Introduction“, in René Descartes, *Correspondance avec Elisabeth et autres lettres* (Paris: GF-Flammarion, 1989), 29-35.

<sup>53</sup> Apart from the *Discourse* and other philosophical works of Descartes, Elisabeth had also read his treatise on animals: she was for Descartes an ideal interlocutor, as he writes to her in a letter from 6 October 1645: "But it is necessary that I examine these passions more particularly to be able to define them, which will be easier for me here than were I to write to someone else. For your Highness, having taken the trouble to read the treatise I sketched out before concerning the nature of animals, knows already how I conceive diverse impressions to be formed in their brain." (AT IV, 310, 1-5/Shapiro, 118; see also there note 82)

<sup>54</sup> See Descartes' Prefatory Letter to the *Principles*: "I have even greater evidence of your powers – and this is special to myself – in the fact that you are the only person I have so far found who has completely understood all my previously published works." (AT VIII A, 3, 30 – 4, 2/CSMK 1, 192)

<sup>55</sup> See Elisabeth's letter to Descartes from 28 October 1645 (AT IV, 322, 18-26) and from 25 April 1646 (AT IV, 404, 8-16).

<sup>56</sup> About the correspondence as a laboratory of ideas, see in particular Armogathe, J.-R., "La *Correspondance* de Descartes comme laboratoire intellectuel", in *La Biografia intellettuale di René*

*Descartes attraverso la Correspondance*, ed. J.-R. Armogathe, G. Belgioioso and C. Vinti (Napoli: Vivarium, 1998), 5-22.

<sup>57</sup> On 20 November 1647 Descartes also writes long letters to Christina and to his friend Chanut.

<sup>58</sup> “Mais mon admiration s’est redoublée, *lorsque j’ai vu la force et le poids des objections que Sa Majesté a remarquées*, touchant la grandeur que j’ai attribuée à l’Univers. Et je souhaiterais que votre lettre m’eût trouvé en mon séjour ordinaire, pource qu’y pouvant mieux recueillir mon esprit que dans la chambre d’une hôtellerie, j’aurais peut-être pu me démêler un peu mieux d’une question si difficile, et si judicieusement proposée. Je ne prétends pas toutefois que cela me serve d’excuse; et *pourvu qu’il me soit permis de penser que c’est à vous [Chanut] seul que j’écris*, afin que la vénération et le respect ne rendent point mon imagination trop confuse, je m’efforcerai ici de mettre tout ce que je puis dire touchant cette matière.” (Descartes to Chanut, 6 June 1647; AT V, 51, 3-17; our italics)

<sup>59</sup> Almost half of the new AT edition (11 vol.) contains letters from and to Descartes.

<sup>60</sup> Descartes emphasizes the solitary character of his life throughout his work. See for instance his letter to Elisabeth, 9 October 1649 (AT V, 430, 21-25). Yet Th. Verbeek shows that Descartes was well introduced in high political and scientific circles in the United Provinces. See Verbeek, Th., *De Nederlanders en Descartes/Les Néerlandais et Descartes* (Amsterdam/Paris, 1996), 21. Elisabeth seems to perceive the interconnectedness between the private and the public in Descartes’ life, as she writes to Descartes in a letter from 24 May 1645: “I see that the charms of solitary life don’t take the virtues required for society away from you.” (AT IV, 207, 6-7/Shapiro, 88; modified translation)