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Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia
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Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia (1618 – 1680). Princess Elisabeth (Elisabeth Simmern van Pallandt) was born in Heidelberg, December 26, 1618 to Fredrick V, Elector of Palatine, and Elizabeth Stuart. Fredrick would become the “Winter King” of Bohemia, and after his short reign in 1620, the family lived exiled in The Hague. After Fredrick’s death in 1632 while fighting on behalf of King Gustave of Sweden in the Thirty Years’ War, the family fell into financial difficulties. We know very little about Elisabeth’s education, but we do know that she studied languages – Latin, Greek, French, English, and German – along with mathematics and natural philosophy. Elisabeth never married, although she received a proposal from King Wladislav of Poland in 1633. The King was a Catholic, and Elisabeth refused to convert from her Protestant faith in order to facilitate the marriage. In 1660, Elisabeth entered the Lutheran Convent at Herford and she became abbess in 1667. As abbess she sheltered various religious persons who faced persecution, such as Labadists, including Anna Maria van Schurman, and Quakers. Elisabeth had long suffered from illness, and she died in 1680. It is reported that Francis Mercury van Helmont and Leibniz were present at her death.

The only extant philosophical work of Elisabeth’s is the correspondence with Descartes. Elisabeth insisted that the correspondence be kept private, although Descartes did circulate some of it during his lifetime (most notably to Queen Christina of Sweden). Although Descartes’s part of the correspondence was published soon after his death, Elisabeth’s letters were not published until 1879. Elisabeth had a reputation for intelligence and philosophical and mathematical acumen that was unusual for a woman at the time. It is clear from her correspondence that she was known at the university of Leiden and may have studied there. In addition to her

correspondence with Descartes, it is believed that she had contact with Henry More and Nicolas Malebranche, as well as Gassendists, such as Samuel Sorbière.

The correspondence with Descartes covers a wide range of issues: mind-body interaction, the passions, free will and God's providence, the sovereign good, political rule, mathematics, and medicine. However, the correspondence is best known for the discussion of the mind-body problem. Elisabeth presses Descartes to give an account of how an immaterial mind can move a material body. Like Descartes, Elisabeth subscribes to the mechanical view of matter, according to which body is moved by impulsion or by the quality or shape of bodies. Given this view, she claims, it is difficult to see how minds could move body unless mind has some properties in common with body. Elisabeth seems to hold that mind must be extended in order to move body, and she argues that since she does not clearly and distinctly perceive extension to be incompatible with the essence of mind it is possible that it is so.

The discussion of the passions is also an important part of the correspondence, and led to Descartes's publication of *The Passions of the Soul*, which Descartes dedicated to Elisabeth. The discussion of the passions begins as a discussion of Seneca's *De vita beata*. Descartes claims that the passions, although they might be useful in some cases, are to be regulated by reason in order to ensure happiness and contentment. Elisabeth objects that sometimes misfortunes arise that make it impossible to control one's passions, and argues that this shows that happiness and contentment often depend upon things outside one's control. This leads to a discussion of the sovereign good, which Descartes takes to be virtue. He defines virtue as follows: "a firm and constant will to execute all that we judge to be the best and to employ all the force of our understanding to judge well (Descartes to Elisabeth, August 18, 1645). Elisabeth questions our ability to judge what is best, and wonders if our judgments are based on natural sentiments. To this, Descartes tells her that in order to judge well, we only need knowledge of three things: (1) God exists, (2) the mind is immortal, and (3) the vastness of the universe shows we are part of larger things. Elisabeth responds by showing that knowing these three things can equally cause

wrong judgments. She argues that knowledge of God does not console us from the evils caused by other free agents, the knowledge of the immortality of the soul might make us seek death, and that knowledge of the great extent of the universe might detach us from God rather than bring us closer.

The discussion of God's providence and free will shows Descartes trying to satisfy Elisabeth's worries that our freedom of will, which she takes as the ability to do otherwise that is evinced by our subjective feeling of freedom, is consistent with God's plan for the universe. Elisabeth presses Descartes to explain how God can be the total cause of a free action, and to better explain his compatibilist account.

For Further Reading

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