

Elisabeth's criticisms of Descartes' dualism

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Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia made contributions to the philosophy of mind, physics, and political philosophy, and was in addition an influential figure in the politics of her time. She was one of the earliest and most important critics of Descartes' view of the mind, and is now best known for her correspondence with Descartes, which ran from 1643 (two years after the publication of the *Meditations*) until his death in 1650.

Elisabeth, in her letter of 5/6/1643, raises a crucial question for the substance dualist:

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

Elisabeth agrees with Descartes that the mind must be able to affect the body; otherwise we would have to deny that, for example, I sometimes perform certain bodily actions because of my desires and intentions. But it is hard to see how this could work on Descartes' view.

When any thing moves, Elisabeth suggests, this movement has to be explained in terms of one or more of three things:

‘(i) how much it is pushed, (ii) the manner in which it is pushed, or (iii) the surface texture and shape of the thing which pushes it.’

To see the plausibility of this, think of a billiard ball being set in motion. Surely the movement of such a ball can only be explained by (i)-(iii).

So, if the mind can cause the body to do things, it is natural to think that the mind must interact with the body in one or more of ways (i)-(iii). But none of these make much sense for the substance dualist. The first two, as Elisabeth says, seem to require contact; and, as she says, ‘it appears to me that an immaterial thing can't possibly touch anything else.’ The last requires extension; and Descartes denies that minds have extension. So what's going on?

In a letter written fifteen days later, Descartes replies as follows:

‘How do we think that the weight of a rock moves the rock downwards? We don’t think that this happens through a real contact of one surface against another, as though the weight was a hand pushing the rock downwards! But we have no difficulty in conceiving how it moves the body . . .’

Here Descartes is employing the view that weight is a ‘real quality’ which causally interacts with the rock — even though, as he notes, he does not think that this is the correct view of weight.

In reply, Elisabeth points out that Descartes himself denies that weight is a separate entity which causally interacts with the rock. Given this, how is the relationship between a rock and its weight supposed to be a guide to anything at all? This seems right on; one could hardly explain the relationship between mind and body in terms of the movements of fairies if one did not believe in fairies!

But one might think that we can improve on Descartes’ reply here. Even if he is wrong to rest so much on the example of weight and the rock, isn’t he right to point out that some causal interactions don’t fit any of Elisabeth’s conditions (i)-(iii), and hence that Elisabeth’s objections rest on a too-narrow understanding of causal relations? One might here point to the example of gravity. Surely the rock is caused to fall toward the earth by the earth’s mass. But it is not as though the mass of the earth is in contact with the rock. Could the relationship between the mind and the body be something like that?

Maybe. But in reply one might note that (i) gravity as involving action at a distance is a bit mysterious, and (ii) the case of minds and bodies really does not seem very much like the example of bodies drawn together by gravity.

Elisabeth correctly identified what is perhaps the central problem for substance dualism: the problem of giving a satisfactory explanation of the interactions between mind and body. As we will see, her view of the matter is one which has been shared by the vast majority of philosophers over the last century:

‘I have to say that I would find it easier to concede matter and extension to the soul than to concede that an immaterial thing could move and be moved by a body . . .’

To ‘concede matter and extension to the soul’ is just to deny that the soul is (in Descartes’ sense) an immaterial thing, and hence to deny Descartes’ substance dualism. The central challenge of much 20th century philosophy of mind, as we’ll see, was to come up with a satisfactory view of the mind which avoided Descartes’ conclusions.