

## Amour In Descartes' Thought And Life

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What is the first thing one thinks when the philosopher "Descartes" is mentioned? Too often the reply is "dualism". Descartes is universally recognized as that philosopher who radically distinguished *mind* from *body*, mind understood as 'thinking substance', body as 'extended substance'; he is understood to have maintained that thought pertains to his very nature, and cannot be separated from that nature. This is true of Descartes, even though it is not true to conclude that he held that he was a thinking thing and *only* a thinking thing.<sup>1</sup> But we tend to think of Descartes as regarding himself as bodiless, or at best as having some remote relation to his body. Insofar as this is the understanding we have of him, we dismiss his philosophy as obviously abstract and fantastic. However compelling intellectually its first indubitable proposition, "I think, therefore I am", its irrelevance to our own concerns is the chief impediment to taking Descartes seriously.

Descartes is a very rigorous philosopher who insists that what comes first is what must be known before something else can be known. It was his genius to recognize that *thought* precedes what is the object of thought, and thus that *mind* must be known before *body* can be known. He established this with such authority that the whole seventeenth century revolution in science was founded upon it. This persists in our own time, in the science now of the twenty-first century, even though we have become terribly confused about these matters and this order of priority of thinking over all else. If ever we needed the antidote of Cartesian reason, it is today when we wonder if the computers we create are really the paradigm of our thinking, or when we speculate that the mapping of the human genome might finally reveal who we really are. But to make Descartes relevant to such discussions, we must be convinced that his philosophy does have something to say not only about mind, not only about body (which is the object of natural science), but about our embodied selves. This paper addresses these matters as Descartes himself addressed them in the last few years of his life. It shows Descartes intimately engaged in his times, in life and friendship, and always in lively thought.

Its subject is *amour* as it appears in Descartes' thought, and also as it is exhibited in his relation to Princess Elizabeth of the Palatinate. As we shall see, these two love, as one of the passions which he writes about, and love as he experiences it and shares it with

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<sup>1</sup> He says this in Meditation II: "I am, then, in the strict sense only a thing that thinks; that is, I am a mind, or intelligence, or intellect, or reason words whose meaning I have been ignorant of until now." But this is preceded by the important statement: "At present I am not admitting anything except what is necessarily true." AT vii, 27.

Princess Elizabeth, are intertwined in an intriguing, compelling way. Descartes reveals himself tender, compassionate, gentle and loving to this very intelligent, passionate young woman. Descartes met her in 1643 -- she was 24, he was 47 -- at The Hague where with her mother and siblings she lived under the protection of the Dutch government, the family having been exiled from the Palatinate since the beginning of the Thirty Years War [1618-1648].<sup>2</sup> It is to answer her questions about her duty to her family, especially as this impedes her pursuit of a philosophical life, that he writes *The Passions of the Soul*, his final work.

To her earlier he had dedicated the *Principles of Philosophy*. His words on that occasion are not flattery -- he has learned how she abhors the compliments of courtiers<sup>3</sup> but the honest esteem of one who sees in her his true intellectual companion and soulmate:

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. Many other people, even those of the utmost acumen and learning, find them very obscure; and it generally happens with almost everyone else that if they are accomplished in Metaphysics they hate Geometry, while if they have mastered Geometry they do not grasp what I have written on First Philosophy. Your intellect is, to my knowledge, unique in finding everything equally clear; and this is why my use of the term 'incomparable' is quite deserved.<sup>4</sup>

The correspondence between Descartes and Elizabeth began in May, 1643, and continued until shortly before his death.<sup>5</sup> While she resided at The Hague he visited her occasionally from his country house in the village of Egmond, but not as frequently as she would have liked. After her disagreeable mother could take her no longer, Elizabeth removed to Berlin in the autumn of 1646, to the home of her childhood friend and cousin, Frederick William, the elector of Brandenburg, to live again with her Aunt Charlotte, the dowager electress. Descartes and Elizabeth never saw each other again, although it was Descartes' plan three years later that he would, on his return from Stockholm in the summer of 1650, visit her, perhaps even to join her scholarly enterprises at Heidelberg, the long war having finally been concluded with the Treaty of Westphalia, 24 October

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<sup>2</sup> The actions of her father Frederick, the Elector of the Palatinate, in accepting the throne of Bohemia from Protestant rebels precipitated that war. He was routed from his kingship in less than a year, stripped of his electorship in the Holy Roman Empire and all his territories, and fled to Holland under the protection of his uncle, the Prince of Orange.

<sup>3</sup> The opening paragraph of his first letter to her is effusive to an extreme, clearly the efforts of one untrained in the ways of the courtier. She writes back noting that false praise has an opposite effect on her from what is intended: "...my upbringing, in a place where the ordinary fashion of conversing has accustomed me to listen to people incapable of telling the truth, has made me always sure of the contrary of their discourses.." AT, iii, 683.

<sup>4</sup> *Principles of Philosophy*, Dedicatory Letter to Elizabeth, AT viiia, 1-4.

<sup>5</sup> His last letter to her is from Stockholm, 9 October 1649, and hers to him on 4 December 1649. He died of pneumonia in Stockholm on 11 February 1650.

1648. Elizabeth too had plans. Her brother, Charles-Louis, had returned to Heidelberg, the capital of his ruined kingdom, and immediately set to work to rebuild, re-establish, re-invent the Palatinate. He consulted Elizabeth concerning the re-opening of the University. She drew up a list of scholars to be invited to teach at Heidelberg, and Descartes was of course on her list, as was Spinoza.<sup>6</sup> Heidelberg succeeded, the University was restored, but her plans for Descartes and Spinoza did not materialize.

The correspondence was initiated by Elizabeth, following a visit to The Hague by Descartes expressly to see her. She was indisposed at the time, and wrote immediately to express her disappointment at missing his visit, especially in view of a question about his metaphysics which she with some urgency wanted to raise with him. Her question, as Descartes observes, is the one which most properly can be put, in view of his published work: how can the soul, being only a thinking substance, move the body by voluntary action? He begins, "There are two things about the human soul on which the entire knowledge of its nature depends. The first is that it thinks, the second that, being united to the body, it can act and be acted upon with it."<sup>7</sup> He grants that he has said almost nothing about the second, because his metaphysics rests on the first, and the distinction between soul and body. To discuss their union at the same time would have been a possible hindrance. But on the union depends all ethics and it is an essential part of his project to address that issue. The crucial matter is not to attempt to conceive the action of soul on the body after the manner of one body moving another body. It is in her reply that she gently rebukes him for his excessive compliments, which he never attempts again, and then makes her question more personal and of practical significance.

...the life I am constrained to lead does not leave me the disposition of enough time to acquire a habit of meditation according to your rules. So many interests of my house that I must not neglect, so many conversations and civilities that I cannot avoid, batter my feeble spirit with such bad feelings and boredom that it rendered it for a long time afterward useless for anything else.<sup>8</sup>

Her life at court, full of tedium and treachery, hypocrisy, the irritability and scorn of her mother who neglected the upbringing and discipline of her many unruly children<sup>9</sup>, was a source of great tribulation for Elizabeth, yet her sense of duty would not allow her to escape from responsibility for her family and kingdom. Her questions about the interaction of soul and body are not the abstract questions of an academic but the

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<sup>6</sup> Andrea Nye, *The Princess and the Philosopher*, Lanham, Maryland, 1999, 159.

<sup>7</sup> AT iii, 664; CSMK 217-8.

<sup>8</sup> AT iii, 684.

<sup>9</sup> Her mother, Elizabeth Stuart, daughter of James I, had squandered what was left of the family money, her eldest brother had died in a boating accident, her father helplessly looking on [he himself died of fever in 1632 on the battlefield], somewhat later her brother Edward will prove traitor to the Protestant cause by converting to the Roman Church to marry a Polish princess, her flirtatious sister Louise will bring down the wrath of her brother Philip on the head of her boastful lover (Monsieur Espinay boasted he had "succeeded" with both Louise and the Queen herself), murdering him on the street. The princes were frequently in brawls and other sorts of rowdiness, and her mother left all responsibility for the behaviour of her siblings with Elizabeth, blaming her for their failings. See Nye, 3, 5-7, and *passim*.

questions of a real woman immersed in affairs of family and state who is all the same scholarly and greatly attracted to the Cartesian philosophy.

In an effort to do better, although he can only do what a philosopher can do, Descartes replied more amply: there are three kinds of primitive ideas, "each of which is known in its own proper manner and not by comparison with any of the others": the soul conceived only by the pure intellect; body likewise known by the intellect alone, but much better by the intellect aided by imagination; and the union of soul and body, known only obscurely by intellect or even the intellect aided by the imagination, but very clearly by the senses. "It is the ordinary course of life and conversation, and abstention from meditation and from the study of things which exercise the imagination, that teaches us how to conceive the union of the soul and the body." Then he exhorts the Princess to follow his own example: "I can say with truth that the chief rule I have always observed in my studies, which I think has been the most useful to me in acquiring what knowledge I have, has been never to spend more than a few hours a day in the thoughts which occupy the imagination and a few hours a year on those which occupy the intellect alone. I have given all the rest of my time to the relaxation of the senses and the repose of the mind."<sup>10</sup> Although he admires her ability to devote time to the meditations needed to know the distinction of mind and body, that is the source of her present difficulties: "I think it was those meditations rather than thought requiring less attention that have made Your Highness find obscurity in the notion we have of the union of the mind and the body."<sup>11</sup> He continues:

I believe that it is very necessary to have properly understood, once in a lifetime, the principles of metaphysics, since they are what gives us the knowledge of God and of our soul. But I think also that it would be very harmful to occupy one's intellect frequently in meditating upon them, since this would impede it from devoting itself to the functions of the imagination and the senses. I think the best thing is to content oneself with keeping in one's memory and one's belief the conclusions which one has once drawn from them, and then employ the rest of one's study time to thoughts in which the intellect co-operates with the imagination and the senses.<sup>12</sup>

Her response is frank and inquisitive still: "I see that the senses show me that the soul moves the body, but they do not teach me really (any more than the Understanding or the Imagination) the way in which it does this." Moreover, without such an explanation it still seems possible to her that there might be properties of the soul, unknown to us, perhaps even extension. "Although extension is not necessary to thought, not being repugnant to it either, it could suit some other function of the soul not less essential to it."

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<sup>10</sup> To Elizabeth, 28 June 1643, AT iii, 692; CSMK 226-7.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 693; CSMK 227.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 695; CSMK 228.

She adds, "I despair of finding certainty in any thing of the world, if you don't give it to me, which is all that keeps me from the skepticism to which my first reasoning led."<sup>13</sup>

There is a break in the correspondence, and during that time Descartes did visit Elizabeth at The Hague. We do not know his answer to her suggestion, although it is clear enough what he should have answered, that 'mind' is precisely what 'body' is not, 'body' precisely what 'mind' is not, both opposed yet related to each other most remarkably 'body' as the wholly appropriate object for 'mind', possessing characteristics of no interest except in relation to a 'thinking thing', 'mind' with faculties wholly appropriate not to itself but to an 'extended thing'. He will be moved through the course of their correspondence to make explicit a stronger union of soul and body.

### A. Descartes As Physician And Psychotherapist

When the correspondence resumed in July, 1644, it is clear that there was a growing warmth between them. Descartes writes from France, where he has been on family affairs. He begins: "My journey could not be accompanied by any misfortune, since I have been so happy during it to have been in Your Highness's mind." He is aware that she has been ill, which he attributes more to her soul than to her body. No doubt, he observes, the soul has great power over the body, but not directly through its own volition. Rather only by willing or thinking something else. And the best thing to think about is the power of nature to heal itself, or keep itself from falling ill. He hopes, he says, she is no longer ill. "At the same time, the desire to be certain makes me want very much to return to Holland...As soon as I have put my affairs in order [he was about to visit Poitou on family business] I shall be very anxious to return to the region where I have been so happy as to have the honour of speaking from time to time with your Highness. Although there are many people here whom I honour and esteem, I have not yet seen anything to keep me here." He closes with these words, "And I am, already beyond all that I can say, etc."<sup>14</sup>

With the appearance of the *Principles of Philosophy* and its public testimony to Princess Elizabeth, Descartes declared to her and to the world her great worth in his eyes. "It would ill become me to use flattery or to put forward any assertion which has not been thoroughly scrutinized, especially in a work in which I shall be trying to lay down the foundations of the truth. And I know that your generous and modest nature will welcome the simple and unadorned judgement of a philosopher more than the polished compliments of those with smoother tongues. I shall therefore write only what I know to be true either from reason or by experience, and in this introduction I propose to philosophize just as I do throughout the rest of the book." The Dedication is in praise of her virtues and, as already noted, a candid admission that no one understood his work better than she.

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<sup>13</sup> To Descartes, 1 July 1643, AT iv, 1-3.

<sup>14</sup> To Elizabeth, 8 July 1644, AT v, 64-66; CSMK 237-8.

His admiration is sincere he had nothing to gain from Princess Elizabeth or her ill-fated House except her scholarly appraisal of his work, her intellectual collaboration in prompting its extension to matters pertinent to the union of soul and body, and the warmth of her friendship. His concerns about her health touch her, and there will be letters back and forth about her various illnesses. In May, 1645, he heard that she was ill again, this time gravely. For several weeks she had been having a low-grade fever. Descartes' assessment is again that the condition is psychosomatic. He writes: "The ordinary cause of a slow fever is *tristesse* [sadness, depression]." He attributes her depression to the continuing persecution of her House and the persons she cares about, and would find its cure in this: "...by the power of your virtue, you would make your soul content in spite of the disgraces of Fortune." Vulgar souls who give themselves up to their passions are only happy or sad insofar as the things that happen to them are agreeable or disagreeable; noble souls have arguments that are so strong and powerful that their reason, in spite of sufferings, remains the master.

For on the one side considering themselves immortal and capable of receiving very great contentments, and on the other side considering that they are joined to a mortal and fragile body, subject to many infirmities which cannot but perish in a few years, they do everything in their power to render Fortune favourable in this life, but nonetheless they esteem it so little, in regard to Eternity, that they almost think of events as we know them in the Comedies. And just as the sad and lamentable Histories which we see represented in a theatre, give us as much entertainment as the happy ones, even as they bring tears to our eyes, so those noble souls of which I speak have satisfaction in themselves from all things which happen to them, even the most vexing and insupportable.<sup>15</sup>

But Elizabeth takes his exhortations as male abstractions. She writes back: "Know then that I have a body imbued with a great part of the weaknesses of my sex, that it registers afflictions of the soul very easily, and does not have the strength to dismiss them." Then she adds,

I would confess to you that although I do not place my happiness only on things which depend on fortune or the will of men, or think myself absolutely unhappy when I see that my house will never be restored or my dear ones far from misery, I cannot consider the harmful accidents that befall them as other than evil, nor the efforts which I take for their service useless without much inquietude, which as soon as it is calmed by reason is aroused by yet another disaster.<sup>16</sup>

To his urging, she gives only more evidence of her suffering. He replies acknowledging her great trials, but still he knows only one remedy: "so far as possible to distract our imagination and senses from them, and when obliged by prudence to consider them, to do

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<sup>15</sup> To Elizabeth, 18 May 1645, AT iv, 200.

<sup>16</sup> To Descartes, 24 May 1645, AT iv, 207.

so with our intellect alone." She should free her mind from all sad thoughts, she should be "like people who convince themselves they are thinking of nothing because they are observing the greenness of a wood, the colours of a flower, the flight of a bird." He admits that all this is well known to the princess, and that it is not the theory but the practice which is difficult. Then he adds a very personal example: "I take the liberty of adding that I found by experience in my own case that the remedy I have just suggested cured an illness almost exactly similar...I was born of a mother who died, a few days after my birth, from a disease of the lungs, caused by some distress [*déplaisirs*]" From her he inherited a dry cough and a pale complexion, and the doctors thought he would come to an early death. But the condition was cured by his optimism originating in the habit of making his principal happiness to depend solely on himself.<sup>17</sup>

There is something perhaps a little neurotic in Elizabeth's reply as she adds a new dimension to the argument. "If I could follow your last advice, I do not doubt that I would promptly cure myself of the maladies of my body and the weakness of my spirit. But I confess that I have trouble separating sense and imagination from things which are continually represented in discussion and letter, because I do not know how to do it without sinning against my duty." His therapy of separating mind and body is for Elizabeth a sin against her obligations. She must live in this world, must confront it and deal with it. She cannot absent herself to his little cottage, walk in his garden and observe with him the "green of a wood, the colours of a flower, the flight of a bird". "This is when I feel the inconvenience of being a little rational. For if I were not at all so, I could find common pleasures with those with whom I must live ... And if I were as rational as you are, I would cure myself as you have done."<sup>18</sup>

Still he persists, and she resists.<sup>19</sup> With great patience and tenderness, he tries another tack. In his letter of 21 July 1645, noting that most letters Elizabeth receives likely arouse unpleasant emotion, declares that his will be different: "...if they do not give you any cause for joy, at least they will not make you sad... To entertain you, therefore, I shall simply write about the means which philosophy provides for acquiring that supreme felicity which common souls vainly expect from fortune, but which can be acquired only from ourselves." He proposes to read with her Seneca's *De Vita Beata*, "examine what the ancients have written on this question, and try to advance beyond them by adding something to their precepts."<sup>20</sup> Andrea Nye says aptly, "...a philosophical troubadour amusing his lady".<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> To Elizabeth, May or June 1645, AT iv, 218; CSMK 249-50.

<sup>18</sup> To Descartes, 22 June 1645, AT iv, 233.

<sup>19</sup> In his to her, June 1645, AT iv, 236, where he does not buy the argument that it is her duty to be sad. Then he visits her some four or five days later.

<sup>20</sup> AT iv, 251; CSMK 256.

<sup>21</sup> Nye, 49.

### B. From Psychotherapy To Philosophy

He does not wait for her to reply to his letter, since his intention is simply to bring to her some relief and happiness. He sends his assessment of Seneca on 4 August 1645. He has not found Seneca's work sufficiently rigorous. "I will try to explain how I think it should have been treated by such a philosopher, unenlightened by faith, with only natural reason to guide him." Seneca has said well that 'all men want to live happily', and Descartes interprets this to be a perfect contentment of mind and inner satisfaction not dependent on fortune, indeed commonly not possessed by those favoured by fortune. What things give supreme contentment? "It seems to me that each person can make himself content by himself without any external assistance, provided he respects three conditions, which are related to the three rules of morality of the *Discourse*:

1. Always apply his mind as well as he can to discover what he should or should not do in all circumstances of life;
2. Have a firm and constant resolution to carry out whatever reason recommends without being diverted or appetites. "Virtue, I believe, consists precisely in sticking firmly to this resolution..."
3. Bear in mind that while he guides himself as far as he can by reason, all good things which he doesn't possess are entirely outside his power. Thus he will become accustomed not to desire them. [Nothing can impede our contentment except desire and regret or repentance. When something is clearly outside our power, to be taller or handsomer for example, it is relatively easy to rid ourselves of the desire for such.]

Virtue is sufficient to make us content in this life. But virtue unenlightened by reason may be false. The right use of reason, giving us true knowledge of the good, prevents virtue from being false. Thus the greatest felicity of man depends on the right use of reason. This is what Seneca should have taught.

Elizabeth does not fully agree: "I do not know how to rid myself of the doubt that one could arrive at the happiness of which you speak without the assistance of what does not depend entirely on one's own will." What about those whose illness prevents them from reasoning at all, or others which diminish the power of reason? Her examples seem in some way to be describing herself. She has recovered but now she is nursing sick Philip, her headstrong brother who will not take his medicine without her. She ends with "I wish to assure you that I will be, all my life, your very affectionate friend at your service."<sup>22</sup> These difficulties which she brings to him might be simply her inadequacies and neuroses disguised as somehow universal human problems. But then, they might be more than that revealing inadequacies and lacunae in Descartes' thought. We shall see.

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<sup>22</sup> 16 August 1645, AT iv, 269-70.



Before her letter arrives another is on the way to her. He does not know whether his last letter reached her. "All the same I shall continue our correspondence in the belief that you will not find my letters any more tiresome than the books in your library." They contain no news, nothing urgent, so they can be read at her leisure. He turns now to what Seneca actually wrote, criticizing it chapter by chapter, giving as appropriate his own views. Seneca didn't distinguish carefully, but Descartes does, these three: happiness, the highest good, the final end at which our actions should aim. Happiness is not the highest good but presupposes it, for it is the contentment of the mind that comes from possessing it. The final end is both the highest good and its possession, therefore both happiness and the highest good. The ancients had three main views about the supreme good and the end of our actions: Epicurus, who said it was pleasure; Zeno, who insisted it was virtue; Aristotle who made it consist of all the perfections. Aristotle is thinking of human nature in general, the good which may be possessed by the most accomplished of men; Zeno is thinking of the supreme good which each person can possess, and he is right to say it is virtue, since that alone depends entirely on our free will; Epicurus, who considered happiness to be contentment of mind. And he is correct, but in order to achieve a contentment which is solid, we need to pursue virtue, that is to say, to maintain a firm and constant will to bring about what we judge to be the best, and to use all the powers of the mind to judge well. Thus Descartes draws together his three rules from the *Discourse* and the ancients.

Elizabeth's next to him, August 1646, assures him that she has received both his letters; and indicates here that she has understood Descartes' views as comprehending and reconciling the views of the ancients in a higher consideration. But in her letter of 13 Sept 1645, Elizabeth takes up Descartes' previous comments, to rebut them. "To evaluate goods adequately, it is necessary to know them perfectly; to be completely acquainted with all those among which we must choose in an active life would require an infinite science." What Descartes has said does not seem to capture her experience.

Then she asks the question which will result in Descartes' final work. "I would like to see you define the passions, in order to know them better, because those who call them disturbances of the soul would persuade me that their force only consists in dazzling and subjecting the reason if my experience didn't also show me that there are some that lead to rational actions." We are beginning to understand that between them there is no longer the relation of master to disciple, but a dialectic at work he, the metaphysician relentlessly presenting the consequences of that metaphysics of the separation of mind and body; she, the vibrant living womanly princess for whom "virtue is not a rational distance from emotion nor a stoic attitude of indifference to events. It is the proper handling of life."<sup>23</sup>

He certainly does not relent in the presentation of his position, altogether consistent with the metaphysics of the *Meditations* and indeed a deduction from it. This is most evident in his answer to her last letter, where she had asked how one could strengthen the understanding to discern what is the best in all the actions of life. Two things seem

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<sup>23</sup> Nye, 60.

necessary: knowledge of the truth; the other is practice in remembering and assenting to this knowledge whenever the occasion demands. Only God knows everything. We have to be content with knowing the truths most useful to us. First and chief there is a God on whom all things depend, whose perfections are infinite, whose power immense, whose decrees are infallible. *This teaches us to accept calmly all the things which happen to us as expressly sent by God*, that is, a firm belief in divine providence. The second thing the nature of our soul, that it subsists apart from the body, is much nobler than the body, is capable of enjoying countless satisfactions not to be found in this life. *This prevents us from fearing death, detaches our affections from the things of this world so that we look upon whatever is in the power of fortune with nothing but scorn*. Thirdly, there is the immensity of the universe, which would persuade us against the view that all the heavens are made only for the service of the earth, and the earth only for man, a firm antidote therefore to anthropomorphism. We cannot know final causes, and therefore have no sound argument for one outcome in history or nature rather than another. Finally, though each of us is a person distinct from others, whose interests are accordingly in some way different from those of the rest of the world, we ought still to think that none of us could subsist alone...each of us is really one of the many parts of the universe, ...the earth, the state, the society, the family. And the interests of the whole, of which each of us is a part, must always be preferred to those of our own particular person, with measure though since it would be wrong to expose ourselves to a great evil in order to procure only a slight benefit to our kinfolk or our country. "Once someone knows and loves God as he should, he has a natural impulse to think in this way; for then, abandoning himself altogether to God's will, he strips himself of his own interests, and has no other passion than to do what he thinks pleasing to God."<sup>24</sup> This is the philosophical and theological basis for the maxims he has proposed to Elizabeth.

It is clear from her response that she has no firm belief in the divine providence, for it cannot extend to what arises from free will: "But those [misfortunes] which are imposed on us by men, for which the decision seems to us to be entirely free, for these the existence of God would only console if we had faith that could persuade us that God takes the care to regulate the wills of men and that he has determined the fate of each person before the creation of the world." Further, the immortality of the soul "along with the knowledge that it is much more beautiful than the body, is capable of making us seek death as well as fear it...", again not a firm conviction in taking all elements of our lives as emanating from a benevolent God, as Descartes has indicated. Further, "The great extent of the universe...serves to detach our affections from what we experience in it; but it also separates us from that individual Providence which is the foundation of theology from the idea we have of God."<sup>25</sup> In his next to her and her answer, it is clear that she continues to dispute with him, sometimes seeming to play the devil's advocate. She is not the docile disciple but feisty and combative. One thing seems clear: abstract arguments where the conclusions are contrary to her experience do not satisfy her. And this even extends to basic Cartesian principles such as the infinite Divine power, the separation of soul and body, etc. She takes on all of them. He is too sanguine. If he urges 'prudence',

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<sup>24</sup> To Elizabeth, 15 September 1645, AT iv, 290.

<sup>25</sup> To Descartes, 30 September 1645, AT iv, 302-3.

she is moved by 'passion'. So he must explain the passions, or else he leaves his work unfinished.

### C. The Near Occasion Of The *Passions Of The Soul*

In late autumn of 1645, Elizabeth's brother Edward brought the cause of the whole House of the Palatinate to a sorry state. He married Anne de Gonzague of loose morals, but that was not the worst of it. She was a Polish princess and part of the marriage agreement was that he would convert to the Roman Church. To understand the implications for his family, indeed for the Protestant cause, a little historical account is called for. In 1613, Ferdinand, elector of the Palatine, had married the beautiful Elizabeth Stuart, daughter of James I, and united in that marriage the two sides of Protestant reform, Calvinism and Lutheranism. The Palatine court had been the first to sound the alarm of an alliance of the Empire, the papacy and Spain against the Protestants, and proposed a Protestant league of unite the reformers in Holland, England, French Huguenots and France. Then Frederick, urged by his maternal relatives of the House of Orange, accepted the Bohemian throne from Protestant reformers. The Holy Roman Empire and Philip of Spain were not willing to have the Bohemian throne go to the Protestants, and in less than a year defeated Ferdinand, dethroned him, stripped him of his electorship and all his territory. Thus was begun the Thirty Years War. Ferdinand died in 1632, and passed to his sons whatever leadership he still possessed in the Protestant cause. "Edward's conversion to Catholicism was no simple personal choice; it was an affair of state."<sup>26</sup> The household in The Hague was mortified and enraged at the treachery of Edward, and Elizabeth, in despair, wrote to Descartes, her faithful friend and confidant Her brother Edward has defected to the other side, "has fallen into the hands of certain sorts of people who have more hate for our house than affection for their religion, and has let himself be caught in their traps to the point of changing his religion to make himself Roman Catholic without giving the slightest indication that he was following his conscience." She sees him "whom I love with as much tenderness as I have for anyone" now universally despised and , according to her faith, having lost his soul. There is not for her any consolation in the thought that the Divine Providence was at work here. She still has trouble reconciling the independence of free will to its dependence on the will of God, and clearly in the case of her brother she cannot but blame him and those who conspired against her House. "I have trouble persuading myself that we have always more good in life than evil...there are so many ways to lose one's way for one which leads down the right path, there are so many persons with the design and power to do harm for a few who have either the one or the other to serve us." She knows her state of mind has not seemed to profit from his words, but still she asks for enlightenment from him "that is, if I dare to ask you for more light, after having so badly used that which you have already given to ..."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Nye, 78.

<sup>27</sup> To Descartes, 30 November 1645, AT iv, 335-7.

There was no answer to her letter, no comment or sympathy. Then on 27 Dec. a young man appeared at the door, with a short note from Descartes asking that she not favour a rival to the bearer, the son of Professor Schooten, for the post in mathematics at Utrecht. She writes to assure Descartes that not only will she not harm his chances, but will do all she can on his behalf. She spoke with one of the curators, Monsieur de Wimenom, who promised to work in his behalf, even though there is some plan to abolish the post altogether. The young Schooten rushed away before she had a chance to reassure him. Then she adds poignantly "I am afraid that you have not received my last letter of the 30<sup>th</sup> of November because you made no mention of it. I would be upset if it got into the hands of one of those critics who condemn as heresy any doubts one has about received opinion." Descartes' note was business-like and, in the light of her troubles with Edward, distant and cold.

Then a letter, Jan. 1646. It begins, "I cannot deny that I was not surprised to learn that Your Highness was annoyed, to the point where her health was affected, by an event which most people will consider to be good, and which the rest may overlook for several strong reasons." All the Catholics, the majority in Europe, will approve it; even if Edward's motives were not noble, still the Catholics will reflect that God employs even base motives to draw souls to Himself. The Protestants, if they speak badly of him, must reflect on such a judgment, for where there are two sides it is impossible to please the one without displeasing the other. They have no reason to ridicule one who leaves their church, given that they would not themselves belong to it if their forefathers had not left the Church of Rome.

It is a hard reply, but wholly in accordance with the principles he has stated to her over and over again. Then these words: "...it is true that those who have Fortune as a house guest are right to stay close to her, and to join forces in order to prevent her from escaping; whereas I think those whose home she has fled [Gloss --your house, Madame!] will do well to agree to follow various different paths so that at least one of them may meet her, even if not all can find her. [Gloss Edward has taken a different path] At the same time, because each of them is thought to have many resources, including friends in various places, this makes them more powerful than if all followed the same path." This is his answer to her claim that Edward has fallen in with certain people "who have more hate for our house than affection for their religion." He adds that he does not suppose that his arguments would prevent Elizabeth from feeling resentment, and only hopes that time has weakened her pique before this letter reaches her. He fears it would reawaken it if he discussed the matter at greater length. The response is not sympathetic, but it is practical and sensible. Perhaps he waited this long to respond because he knew her passions were aroused and what he might say would fall on deaf ears. Even now he takes a chance.

He returns to the problem of free will, giving an interesting analogy which really touches the issue: a king had forbidden duels while knowing with certainty that if A and B meet they will fight a duel. The king then orders A to go to a certain place where he knows B will be. Although he knows that they will engage in the duel, they engage freely. The subtext here is that in disobeying the king's command and engaging in the duel, they bring their private differences and hatred into relation to the king, which is

both better and worse than their antipathies outside the command, better because the king knows there is no cure for their mutual hatred until it is brought to a head, worse because A and B now know that their differences are not merely private but harmful to the kingdom itself.<sup>28</sup> Then Descartes turns to the problem of whether in this life we always have more good things than evil. Because on his principles we must count as worthless anything which does not depend on us ourselves, then whatever outside us that befalls us [as Edward's marriage, for example] is to be regarded as no more important than actors performing a drama before us. "...It is with this profession that I observe in all my actions, and with the profession in particular of being always, etc."

There is no extant correspondence between them for four months. Did he visit? Or was there an estrangement as there appears to have been in the letter he wrote. But he was at work on the *Passions*, the manuscript which he brought to her in early March, 1646. Perhaps his silence was simply necessary to him to do this serious work. It is a work inspired by her questions, her difficulties with his programme of living solely the life of the mind, turning away therefore from life and its problems. What he produces is far more developed than the assertion he made in *Meditations* of the union of soul and body in man, and comprehensive of the whole correspondence with her. This development in Descartes' thought is too little known, and clearly he owes a great deal to Elizabeth in its production.

#### D. The *Passions Of The Soul*

Early in his correspondence with Elizabeth, Descartes had referred to "three kinds of primitive notions", the mind, the body, and the union of the two.<sup>29</sup> In *Principles* II, Descartes gives the argument for our knowledge that the human body is closely conjoined with the mind, an argument analogous to the argument that material things exist:

By the same token, the conclusion that there is a particular body that is more closely conjoined with our mind than any other body follows from our clear awareness that pain and other sensations come to us quite unexpectedly. The mind is aware that these sensations do not come from itself alone, and that they cannot belong to it simply in virtue of its being a thinking thing; instead, they can belong to it only in virtue of its being joined to something other than itself which is extended and moveable namely what we call the human body.<sup>30</sup>

But Descartes first knows the substantiality of himself as a thinking thing. This is primary, and anything else he comes to know must be subsequent or it cannot be said to be known by him. He knows God in himself precisely as a thinking thing. Next, through

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<sup>28</sup> Cf *Romans* 7.

<sup>29</sup> To Elizabeth, 28 June 1643, AT iii, 691.

<sup>30</sup> *Principles*, Part Two, n. 2.

the mediation of God, he comes to know nature as unlike and opposite to himself as a thinking thing, nature also as substance and as such incorruptible. In nature, he finds the proper object for his scientific understanding. His relation to nature is to something to be known, not something in which he is immersed or in which he exists.

That he is a substance means that he "exists in such a way as to depend on no other thing for [his] existence." He is a finite substance, depending therefore on the sustaining concurrence of God, but self-subsistent nonetheless in the sense that he exists without need of any other created thing. But perhaps the pronoun "he" is improper here we do not mean the individual Descartes for it is of the nature of substance to be indestructible, and so to continue in existence unless annihilated by God: "... we need to know that absolutely all substances, or things which must be created by God in order to exist, are by their nature incorruptible and cannot ever cease to exist unless they are reduced to nothingness by God's denying his concurrence to them." [*Synopsis to Meditations*, CSM 2.10] Descartes will die, all temporal life having the germ of death within itself, but his substantiality endures, as does the substantiality also of body in general, *corpus in genere*: "...we need to recognize that body, taken in the general sense [extension] is a substance, so that it too never perishes..."<sup>31</sup>[*Ibid.*]

Yet Descartes also comes to know himself as man, a mind in a body, a body quite unique to himself, and thus different from those bodies he studies with his scientific understanding. He can study his own body, its anatomy and physiology, as he might objectively study other bodies; but its relation to him is nonetheless intimate -- it is truly his own, unlike other bodies which he can see and touch, but are not his very self. He knows himself as a man to be temporal and immersed in nature, encountering bodies via his body, bumping into them, experiencing them with his external senses. He knows hunger and thirst, pain and pleasure, via his internal senses. Even before he came to know these things, he experienced them. But it is only because he is a thinking substance who came to know nature in the manner sketched above that he can be said now to know these things.

What is the relation between these two senses of himself, his substantial, eternal thinking self, really distinct from body, and his temporal embodied self? Implicit in the doctrine that substance is incorruptible is the denial of substantial form, the principle of substantial change in the Aristotelian philosophy. And with this also the denial of generation and corruption. Change, even the apparent coming-into-being and passing-away, is simply the alteration of figure, size, shape and the transfer of motion from one part of matter to another. The common-sense world of everyday experience is reinterpreted as a scientific, mechanistic world. If it is inconceivable that a substance should come into existence without being created *de novo* by God, then what we seem to

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<sup>31</sup> *Synopsis* 2.10. It is not therefore 'indivisibility' which is the source of the incorruptibility of substance, since although *mens* is indivisible, *corpus in genere* is not. See AT vii, 13-14, CSM 2.10. Rather, it is simplicity in this sense, that accidents or modes of mind are not included in its essence, in contrast to particular bodies which are constituted precisely by their accidents. As for *corpus in genere*, it too is not constituted by its accidents, but rather that which sustains them, itself remaining incorruptible throughout these constant changes which constitute particular bodies.

see every day various so-called substances coming into existence by purely natural means -- is mistaken.<sup>32</sup>

There is, however, one exceptional case, for the human soul is "the true substantial form of man"<sup>33</sup> Descartes had always affirmed the substantial union of soul and body, the essential unity of the human being. This is one of the principal theses of the Sixth Meditation. "This body" which "by a particular right I call mine" is not such that I am "merely lodged in it like a pilot in his ship", which would be the condition of an angel if it were conjoined to a body. "If an angel were united to a human body", he writes "it would not have feelings like us, but would merely perceive the movements caused by external objects, and in that respect would differ from a genuine human being."<sup>34</sup> Descartes also says that the human body is "informed" by the soul: "The numerical identity of the body of a human being does not depend on that of its matter, but on its form, which is the soul."<sup>35</sup> Earlier he had called the soul "the true substantial form of man"<sup>36</sup>. As Geneviève Rodi-Lewis notes, "These statements...are not in any way a concession to the traditional vocabulary or a residual formula from previous ways of talking, ineptly tacked on to the surface of Descartes' dualism. On the contrary, they refer to the reality of a substantial form, the 'only' authentic example of the genre."<sup>37</sup> It is for this reason that only humans have true feelings, only they have sensory perceptions, which are useful, he says in *Principles* II, 3, not for instructing us about objects as they are in themselves but only to show us what is beneficial or harmful to man's composite nature. And for this reason that, whereas the behaviour of animals can be explained reductively, the behaviour of the human being cannot.<sup>38</sup>

Who or what is this individual human being Elizabeth, Descartes, whoever and how is she related to that individual thinking thing, the *cogito*, which can exist without a body? <sup>39</sup>We are much more acquainted with the *cogito*, the "I" which is substantially distinct from body, indivisible and therefore purportedly immortal, an ego which can be what it is whether it has senses or not, or whether the objects of those senses exist or not. But the individual human being, that unity of mind and a very particular body, with a history and definite relations to other bodies and other humans, is also introduced in the

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<sup>32</sup> Indirectly, AT iii, 505; CSMK 208. Note that an account of nature in terms of 'substantial forms' is not equal, indeed opposed to, the Christian doctrine of creation. It is part of Descartes' definition of "substance" as found in the *Synopsis* that if it is finite it is a "thing which must be created by God in order to exist."

<sup>33</sup> To Regius, Feb. 1642, AT iii, 439.

<sup>34</sup> To Regius, Feb. 1642, AT iii, 493.

<sup>35</sup> To Mesland, 1645 or 1646, AT iv, 346; CSMK 279.

<sup>36</sup> To Regius, January 1642, AT iii, 505; CSMK 208..

<sup>37</sup> "Descartes and the Unity of the Human Being" in *Descartes: Oxford Readings in Philosophy*, ed. John Cottingham, Oxford, 1998, 197-210, on 205. The passage continues: "...and this reveals the genesis of the classic error of the Aristotelians -- an anthropomorphic generalization, where everything is, as it were, 'animated' by little entities."

<sup>38</sup> "We observe in animals movements similar to those which result from our imaginations and sensations; but that does not mean that we observe imaginations and sensations in them. On the contrary, these same movements can take place without imagination, and we have arguments to prove that they do so take place in animals..." To Gibieuf, 19 January 1642, AT iii, 479; CSMK 203-4.

<sup>39</sup> Amélie Rorty asks this question in a remarkable article, "Cartesian Passions and the Union of Mind and Body" In *Essays on Descartes' Meditations* (ed. Amélie Rorty), Berkeley, 1986, 213-234.

Sixth Meditation. Much greater elaboration is given in the work inspired by Elizabeth's questions, *The Passions of the Soul*.

In all cases where there is something in the soul caused by the body, there is in Descartes' terminology a 'passion'. There are three elementary kinds of 'passion': perceptions of things external to the soul<sup>40</sup>; then perceptions we refer to our own body (bodily sensations), such as hunger, thirst, pain; finally, perceptions we refer to our soul - effects we feel as being in the soul itself, e.g. sadness, anger, joy, which are aroused sometimes by objects which stimulate our nerves and sometimes by other causes. Although all these are 'passions' with respect to the soul (the soul is in some sense passive and receptive with regard to them), we reserve the word for this third class, and this class is what Descartes undertakes to explain in *Passions of the Soul*. He defines them as "those perceptions, sensations or emotions of the soul which we refer particularly to it, and which are caused, maintained and strengthened by some movement of the spirits"<sup>41</sup>. [Part I, n.27]. We might note with him that to call them 'perceptions' does not mean that they are evident. Indeed, they are likely confused and obscure. Thus, it might be better to call them 'emotions' of the soul because, of all the kinds of thoughts which the soul may have, none agitate and disturb it so strongly as these passions.

But each of these three reveals something distinctive about the mind's relation to body. The first sort, perceptions, although they are "confused representations of their causes", show that the mind can be conjoined with its body in such a way that it can be affected and modified by extension. The second sort, bodily sensations, show that the mind is conjoined with one piece of extension in such a way that it permeates and penetrates every part of it, as though it were mixed with (*quasi permixtum* in the words of Meditation 6) its own body. Even though they too only confusedly represent the body's true condition, bodily sensations reveal that the relation of mind to body in us cannot be "as a pilot is in the ship". But they do not tell us, as does the third sort, the passions proper, that mind is the substantial form of the body, its true unity, that mind and body form a substantial union.<sup>42</sup> An angel, to use the earlier example, could 'see' the green of the wood, 'hear' the song of a bird, if it were somehow filtered through an angelic pineal gland to the angelic soul, but would not be transported by these perceptions; a Cartesian ego-cum-scientist could conduct his experiments, grow weary at his desk, stop his work for a light supper, but would not enjoy the work, rest or supper. Only a man or woman could be moved by laughter or tears, could temper his natural fear of the enemy with

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<sup>40</sup> These to be distinguished from perceptions of internal states, such as perceiving that we're thinking, or perceiving that we are willing, doubting, etc.

<sup>41</sup> These are the 'animal spirits', described in this passage from *Passions* I, 7: "Finally, it is known that all these movements of the muscles, and likewise all sensations, depend on the nerves, which are like little threads or tubes coming from the brain and containing, like the brain itself, a certain very subtle air or wind which is called the 'animal spirits'."

<sup>42</sup> Rorty, 520-21: "If we had only perceptions and bodily sensations, the mind might be merely mixed with the body ... Passions proper, passion-emotions, reveal that the mind, when quasi-permixed with the body, forms unified whole that can function well or ill as that whole, and not merely as a continuing, individuated mixture of two substances, mind and body."



devotion to king or country, blush or wonder or be amazed. For this reason Descartes adds: "It is on the passions alone that all the good and evil of this life depends."<sup>43</sup>

" It is on the passions alone that all the good and evil of this life depends." How could he have come to such a conclusion? Perhaps he knew this as he wrote his earlier works, but if so the reader would not have seen any evidence of it, would not have guessed it. It is not in any way inconsistent with his former works, is in every way a further development of the *Meditations*, but it is nonetheless surprising. What has transpired in the interval between the *Meditations* and the *Passions of the Soul* to have prompted this explicit development? It is clear in the correspondence with Princess Elizabeth that her difficulties had not been addressed in Descartes' earlier work, clear also that his answers did not seem to address her explicit questions. Has he been moved to these new thoughts by her insistent opposition to answers which would dismiss or diminish her passionate engagement with life? That is obvious in the course of their relationship and correspondence.

Elizabeth's demand is nothing less than a demand for a reconciliation of Cartesian reason and history, her history and the history of her people, the reconciliation of the universal and particular, of human and divine in short, making the Christian reconciliation concrete to herself. She is not satisfied to let go of either side: she is a scholar whom Descartes says has best understood his philosophy, but she is also completely engaged in her world. When pushed, she takes her place on the side of the human, the events of her time, the particular she is more attached to or persuaded of human freedom, the tragedy of her House, her own vexing family problems, than of the side Descartes holds out to her. She does not deny what he says, and opposes him only so far as the consequences appear to her to deny or diminish the other side which she brings before him, presents to him for the longed-for reconciliation.

Descartes for his part knew the union of soul and body in his idea of God: God would be a deceiver if we were not such a unity, just as God would be a deceiver if material bodies did not exist. Still, he would not deny that soul and body are separable.

I would say the same about the soul and the body and in general all the things of which we have distinct and complete ideas; that is, I say that their being inseparable involves a contradiction. But I do not on that account deny that there can be in soul and body many properties of which I have no ideas; I deny only that there are any which are inconsistent with the ideas of them that I do have, including the idea I have of their distinctness.<sup>44</sup>

Descartes knows the real distinction of mind and body in his own thinking, and on that distinction his whole science of nature is founded. On the one hand he knows the union, on the other the distinction. But he is not able to draw these two into relation, and he

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<sup>43</sup> *Passions* III, n. 212.

<sup>44</sup> To Gibieuf, 10 January 1642, AT iii, 478; CSMK, 203.

knows it too he says we can't think both sides at once. This philosophy is not therefore equal to a proper philosophical account of human institutions; ethical and political philosophy are outside the Cartesian philosophy of substance. Does Elizabeth's demand move him farther along in this dialectic? This much can be said: the *Passions of the Soul* is inspired by her, shaped by her questions and their correspondence, and draws together as far as he is able her position and his. In it for the first time he has been able to say perhaps he has come to know that "it is on the passions alone that all the good and evil of this life depend."

### Concluding Unscientific Postscript

As one might expect, Descartes writes about *amour* in the *Passions of the Soul* in the dispassionate manner of the *physicien*<sup>45</sup>. The passion of *amour* he defines as "an emotion of the soul caused by a movement of the spirits, which impels the soul to join itself willingly to objects that appear agreeable to it." [PA ii, n.79] He does not think that the distinction of 'benevolent love' and 'concupiscent love' is very helpful, since both benevolence, i.e. joining to the beloved the things we believe agreeable to it, and concupiscence, desiring to possess the beloved, are principal effects of love, present not inevitably but normally where there is love.<sup>46</sup> There is nothing original in Descartes' description of the kinds of love, based on the difference in esteem we have for the beloved. Simple affection is the esteem we have for those objects that we esteem less than we esteem ourselves, for example the love we might have for "a flower, or a bird, or horse"...or M. Grat, Descartes' little dog.<sup>47</sup> When we esteem the beloved as much as we esteem ourselves, then there is friendship (*amitié*). "They are so truly objects of this passion that there is no person so imperfect that we could not have for him a very perfect friendship, given that we believe ourselves loved by him and that we have a truly noble and generous soul." When the object of our love is esteemed more than we esteem ourselves, then there is 'devotion'. The principal object of devotion is God, but also perhaps our sovereign, country, town, or even some person for whom we have more esteem than ourselves.

And what sort of love does Descartes have for Princess Elizabeth, and she for him. Geneviève Rodis-Lewis, in her biography of Descartes, speculates, "If one distinguishes concupiscent love from benevolent love by its effects, the first is ruled out because of Descartes' and Elizabeth's respect for each other."<sup>48</sup> Yet Descartes says that both

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<sup>45</sup> He characterized his intention in that work as "explain[ing] the passions only as a *physicien* [physicist, natural philosopher], and not as an *orateur* or as a *Philosophe moral*." Second Prefatory Letter to *Passions of the Soul*, AT xi, 326.

<sup>46</sup> The ambitious man's passion for glory, the miser's passion for money, the drunk's for wine, might be almost exclusively concupiscent, as the father's love for his children or the honourable man's love for his friend might be almost exclusively benevolent. PA ii, 82.

<sup>47</sup> Descartes' little dog, Mr. Scratch, is mentioned in a letter to l'Abbé Picot, 28 Feb. 1648, quoted by Baillet. AT v, 133, note a.

<sup>48</sup> . In a letter to his friend, Chanut, the French ambassador to Sweden, Descartes writes: "And if I asked you frankly whether you love that great Queen at whose Court you now are, it would be useless for you to

benevolence and concupiscence are 'normally' present wherever there is love. Rodis-Lewis continues: "The second, which incites us to wish well on those we love, includes family affections and the attachment between two friends. But respect is equal between friends; it becomes devotion when one of them bows down to the other. 'Your devoted one' Descartes added to the usual formulas of politeness, and Elizabeth signed, 'Your very affectionate friend'." But Descartes uses precisely the same formula, 'Your very humble and very obedient servant' to his equals, to Huygens, Mersenne, to many people he corresponds with, even to a lawyer.<sup>49</sup>

The relationship between Descartes and Elizabeth has been the subject of some speculation ever since the nineteenth century editor, Foucher de Careil, speculated that there was something more than respect between them. G. Cohen suggests that the relationship was not altogether love or altogether friendship, but had "hidden tokens of affection" together with "refinement, which has the charm of love" as elements in it.<sup>50</sup> For anyone who has read the letters of medieval 'spiritual friendship', or of Heloise and Abelard, for anyone who has had the good fortune to engage in such a correspondence, bordering on the romantic but not explicitly so, there are elements in the letters between Descartes to Elizabeth which suggest a deepening familiarity, concern and openness between them. It could not be more than it is, however. As Descartes writes to Chanut: "It is true that the custom of our speech and the courtesy of good manners does not allow us to tell those whose condition is far above ours that we love them; we may say only that we respect, honour, esteem them, and that we have zeal and devotion for their service...But philosophers are not accustomed to give different names to things which share the same definition, and I know no other definition of love save that it is a passion which makes us join ourselves willingly to some object, no matter whether the object is equal to or greater or less than us."<sup>51</sup>

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day that you had only respect, veneration and admiration for her; I would judge none the less that you have also a very ardent affection for her." 1 Feb 1647, AT v, 611. That would seem to be more than 'devotion'.

<sup>49</sup> "Your devoted one" never appears in the Adam-Tannery edition. Perhaps Mme Rodis-Lewis has access to manuscripts which are not available to others. She is otherwise an excellent source of information and analysis on Descartes.

<sup>50</sup> *Les écrivains français en Hollande dans la première moitié du XVIIe siècle*, 1920, quoted in Rodis-Lewis, 246, n.4.

<sup>51</sup> To Chanut, 1 Feb. 1647, AT v, 610-11.