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this essay is a response to Gardner's argument in this chapter, the only source used is Gardner's book. All page references in the text are to Gardner's book.

Elizabeth of Bohemia and Rene Descartes

A Response by Audun Solli

In her article *Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia*,² Margaret Atheron's argues "we do not find Elizabeth putting forward any fully developed philosophical position"³. Instead, Atheron claims, Elizabeth "comments critically on the works of Descartes."⁴ The argument seems to be this: First, critical comments per se do not constitute a fully developed philosophical position. Second, the contents of Elizabeth's specific comments do not show that she has a fully developed philosophical position. Therefore, Elizabeth is not putting forward a fully developed philosophical position. Atheron seems to imply that Elizabeth is not really a philosopher because she is only asking critical questions to Descartes rather than advancing her own philosophy.

In this brief essay, I will argue that Atheron's thesis is false and that her argument is unsound. I will do so by presenting Elizabeth's criticism of Descartes's mind body dualism as it appeared in their letters in 1643. I then address the issue whether Elizabeth is putting forward a fully developed philosophical position in her correspondence. I argue that if we consider Descartes notion of the mind-body as a fully developed

² Atheron, Margaret (editor): *Women Philosophers of the Early Modern Period*, Hackett Publishing Company, United States of America, 1997.

³ *Ibid*, p. 10

philosophical position, then, since Elizabeth disagrees with his notion and provides reasons for her disagreement, we should conclude that Elizabeth has a fully developed philosophical position.

Atheron does unfortunately not define the difference between a mere philosophical position and a fully developed philosophical position. I will argue that Elizabeth has a fully developed philosophical position in that provides an argument for why the immaterial and non-spatial soul cannot effect the material body.

Elizabeth's criticism of Descartes's notion that the immaterial soul can cause the material body to move is as follows: (1) Every movement is caused by an impulsion of the thing that is moved. (2) This movement happens according to how the thing is pushed (by whatever moves it) or according to on the qualities or characteristics of the surface of whatever moves the thing. For example, (1) a stone can be moved if and only if something impels it to move. Regarding (2), the movement of the stone happens according to the way the stone is being pushed (for example by me kicking it.) Also regarding (2), the same movement depends on what the thing that moves the stone is, for example, whether it is a human or a duck. Elizabeth then goes on to argue that contact is required for condition (1) and (2) to be met. That is, impulsion can only take place if there is contact between that which is moved and whatever moves it, and something can only be moved if there is contact. Extension is one of the characteristics required by (2) for a thing to move or be moved. Descartes argues that the soul does not occupy space and have extension, and that an immaterial thing cannot have contact with any material thing.

⁴ Ibid, p. 10

If so, Elizabeth replies, souls (minds) cannot cause bodies to move or be “pushed”.

Descartes notes that Elizabeth’s questions are justified, which indicated that he recognizes her questions as legitimate philosophical questions. He goes on to in his correspondence to explain his dualistic notion of the mind and body. First, the body occupies space and time; it is material. He says mathematics, which principally is about considering movements and figures, has given him this notion of the body. Second, the immaterial soul is that which thinks. Understanding and the inclinations of the will compose thinking. Metaphysical thoughts have given to him this understanding of the soul. Third, there is a union between the body and the soul, which enables the soul to cause the body to move, and the body causes the feelings and passions of the soul. Descartes argues that this union is understood by refraining from using imagination and not to philosophize. It is experience and daily life that renders the notion of the union conceivable. In other words, meditation and philosophy make us understand what the material body and immaterial soul are and that they are separate, whereas our daily life, which includes the senses, teaches us that there is a union between the two. Elizabeth replies that she agrees, but that she still cannot see how the soul moves the body. She suggests a counter position: the soul has extension, which is what enables it to cause the body to move.

To Elizabeth’s question about how an immaterial thing (such as the soul) can cause something material (such as the body) to move, Descartes offers weight as an example of something immaterial that causes something material to move. He argues that the only thing we

know about weight is that it can move the body. This movement does not happen by means of contact, which is an answer to Elizabeth's argument that contact is required for condition (1) and (2) to be met. Descartes reasons that since weight is immaterial (just like the soul), and yet it cause the body to move, then it is possible for immaterial things to move material things. In this argument Descartes does not intend to say that weight and soul are the same; he wants to establish the principle that something immaterial can cause something material to move. Hence, his mind-body dualism is not refuted by Elizabeth's criticism⁵.

Atheron's thesis is that Elizabeth is not putting forward a fully developed philosophical position. Remember that Descartes says that Elizabeth's questions on his mind-body notion are justified. Descartes also says that it is philosophy (or, meditation as he calls it) which renders the distinction between the soul and the body conceivable, whereas it is in our daily life that we understand that there is a union between the two. By recognizing Elizabeth's as philosophical; Descartes is asserting that Elizabeth does philosophy. While this is not a proof Elizabeth has a fully developed philosophical position, it lends some support to it.

Although Atherton nowhere discusses if Descartes himself has fully developed philosophical position or not, I will assume in this essay that she assumes he does and that regards his notions of the soul and the body as a fully developed philosophical position. So, if Descartes position on the soul and body constitutes a fully developed philosophical position, and if Elizabeth argues for a position that is incompatible with

⁵ It is beyond the scope of this essay to argue whether Elizabeth's or Descartes's views on the soul and the body are sound.

his position and provides reasons why she disagrees with him, then the position Elizabeth is putting forward should also be considered as a fully developed philosophical position. Elizabeth argues for a position incompatible with Descartes's view on the mind-body causal interaction and the body and she provides reasons for this. Therefore, I conclude that Elizabeth has a fully developed philosophical position.

Let me summarize what I consider Elizabeth's argument to be. Elizabeth claims that something immaterial (like the soul) cannot cause anything material (like the body) to move. The reason for this is that contact is required for something to cause something else to move. Moreover, she claims that when something is causing something else to move, that first something must have extension. Elizabeth then argues that since Descartes excludes extension from the soul, and that something immaterial cannot have contact with something material, then Descartes's notion of the soul and body is incorrect. Although Elizabeth puts forward this position in letters where she asks Descartes to explain his notions so that she can be convinced, the letters show nonetheless that Elizabeth had a different view on the conditions for movement and the soul and mind-body interaction than Descartes. She not only is not convinced by Descartes explanations for his own position; she also argues for her own view that the immaterial soul cannot cause the material body to move. As such, I conclude that Elizabeth is a philosopher and that Atheron's theses that she is not is false.