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Elisabeth on Free Will, Preordination, and Philosophical Doubt

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Abstract

Elisabeth is widely known as a critic of René Descartes' account of mind-body interaction and scholarly interpretations of her view on the will most often pose the question about the freedom of the will in relation to bodily impulses such as the passions. This chapter takes a different perspective and focuses on the problem of the compatibility of free will and providence, as it is discussed in a sequence of six letters that Elisabeth and Descartes wrote between September 1645 and January 1646. The chapter focuses on this specific metaphysical problem in order to ask what Elisabeth's remarks on the topic can tell about her general philosophical method as well as about her particular philosophical worries. The chapter divides into three parts. The first part discusses Elisabeth's initial philosophical interest in the question of free will and providence, and recounts the arguments presented by her and Descartes. The second part discusses the philosophical foundation for Descartes' position and Elisabeth's criticism of this position. The final part compares Elisabeth's criticism of Descartes' account of the compatibility of free will and providence with her criticism of his account of mind-body interaction, which she develops in her three first letters to him, written in 1643. It is argued that at the core of both criticisms we find Elisabeth's search for answers based on reason and a dissatisfaction with Descartes' reliance on the incomprehensible nature of God as a basis for some of his philosophical arguments.

Keywords

Free will; providence; God; determinism; libertarian; mind-body interaction; René Descartes

In Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia's correspondence with René Descartes, questions related to the freedom of the will arise in at least three different philosophical contexts. First, in 1643, we have the famous discussion about mind-body interaction. In her very first letter, dated 6 May 1643, Elisabeth formulates the problem by asking Descartes to specify "how the soul of a human being (it being only a thinking substance) can determine the bodily spirits, in order to bring about voluntary actions" (AT 3, 661; S 62).¹ Here, and in the letters that follow, the problem under discussion is not the freedom of the will in itself, but its ability to cause bodily action, on the one hand, and to be affected by bodily sensations, on the other. The topic of the will reappears in 1645, when Descartes and Elisabeth discuss how the will and reason interact with the passions. Elisabeth is suffering from various psycho-physical ailments and the discussion that begins with her problems soon turns into a philosophical discussion about the nature of moral contentment. Here Elisabeth doubts "that one can arrive at true happiness [...] without the assistance of that which does not depend absolutely on the will" (AT 4, 269; S 100). This discussion leads into a third philosophical context and the specific metaphysical problem of how the free will can be compatible with divine providence.

Scholarship on Elisabeth's and Descartes' philosophical letters has mostly focused on the question of mind-body interaction and on the letters discussing the passions, including their moral significance and connection to a good life.²

¹ In this and future references I use AT followed by volume number as an abbreviation for Adam and Tannery (eds.) 1996, and S as an abbreviation for Elisabeth of Bohemia and Descartes 2007.

² For interpretations of Elisabeth's philosophical arguments see Nye 1996; Shapiro 1999; 2007; Tollefsen 1999; Wartenberg 1999; Broad 2002, 13–34; Alanen 2004; Brown 2006; Reuter 2013; 2019; Kolesnik-Antonie & Pellegrin (Eds.) 2014; Janssen-Lauret 2018. Most interpretations read the letters on moral philosophy in the light of Elisabeth's

The letters on the compatibility of free will and providence have received less attention. In this chapter I will focus on this specific metaphysical problem and ask what Elisabeth's remarks on the topic can tell us about her general philosophical method as well as about her particular philosophical worries. In the first section I discuss Elisabeth's initial philosophical interest in the topic and recount the arguments presented by her and Descartes. In the second section I discuss the philosophical foundation for Descartes' position and Elisabeth's criticism of this position. In the final section I compare Elisabeth's criticism of Descartes' account of the compatibility of free will and providence with her criticism of his account of mind-body interaction. I argue that at the core of both criticisms we find Elisabeth's search for answers based on reason and her dissatisfaction with Descartes' reliance on the incomprehensible nature of God.

1. The letters on providence and free will

Elisabeth raises the question of how the free will is compatible with providence in a letter of 30 September 1645. The correspondents have been discussing Seneca's *De vita beata* and in his letter of 15 September 1645, Descartes writes (in a Christianized neo-stoic vein) that "there is a God on whom all things depend, whose perfections are infinite, whose power is immense, and whose decrees are infallible" (AT 4, 291; S 111). He continues by referring to the third book of his recently published *Principles of Philosophy*, where he has argued for the infinity of the universe, and emphasizes that understanding the vast nature of the universe God has created helps putting human affairs in the right perspective (AT 4, 292; S 112). In her reply Elisabeth points out:

The knowledge of the existence of God and his attributes can console us from the mishaps which come to us from the ordinary course of nature and from the order He has established there, [...] But it cannot console us from those mishaps that are brought upon us by other men. For it seems to us that the will of these men is entirely free, as we have nothing but faith alone to persuade us that God cares to rule these wills and that He has determined the fate of each person before the creation of the world. (AT 4, 302; S 114.)

She is arguing that it is more difficult to console oneself from those mishaps that we attribute to the free will of another human being than it is to console oneself with mishaps brought about by natural causes, which she agrees can easily be attributed to God. It is, for example, easier to accept that a dear person dies from a severe illness than that the person is killed by an intentional act of violence. When interpreting Elisabeth's interest in the question of how free will is compatible with providence, it is important to be aware that the mishaps that disturb her mental and bodily health the most are exactly those that can be attributed to the wills of others. These events are most often political acts. Some of them – such as her brother's conversion to Catholicism in order to improve his position by marriage (AT 4, 335–336; S 127) and the beheading of her uncle Charles I of England (AT 5, 282; S 176)—are still to come when Elisabeth wrote this letter, but she is referring to the problems her house are facing throughout her correspondence with Descartes (e.g. AT 4, 209; S 89). When reading the correspondence, it is striking how often the events that disturb Elisabeth are human acts, not deaths by natural causes or other mishaps where nature alone is to blame. Elisabeth's remark is connected to the problem of theodicy, of how a good and all-powerful God can will evil things to happen,³ but must not be reduced to this problem alone. A large earthquake killing hundreds of innocent people is from the point of view of theodicy at least as problematic as the willful beheading of a single person, who might not have been in all respects innocent, but it is clear that Elisabeth is particularly disturbed by the latter kind of willful acts.

In the above quote Elisabeth claims that the mere *faith* that mishaps attributed to the free will of others are in accordance with God's intentions cannot console us. It is noteworthy that Elisabeth is attributing the capacity to console particularly to reason, not to faith. In this respect she is closer to a classical non-Christian stoicism than Descartes himself. When contrasting reason and faith she is also implying that *if we knew by reason*, and not only by faith, that the free acts of humans are part of providence (as we know concerning natural events), then we would be better able to console ourselves also in these cases, and Descartes' suggested treatments would perhaps be more effectual than they

early metaphysical inquiries. Elisabeth's and Descartes' letters on moral philosophy constitute an essential source also for scholars who focus on Descartes' part of the correspondence; see Normore 2019 and Svensson 2019 for recent accounts. Svensson's bibliography provides a comprehensive list of previous scholarship.

³ In a previous letter Elisabeth writes that she does "not know how to consider the injurious accidents that befall [her house] under any other notion than that of evil" (AT 4, 209; S 89).

have so far proved themselves. The problem with the moral and cognitive therapy Descartes recommends is thus not only that reason is unable to persuade the passions, but also that in those cases where this persuasion would be most needed—i.e. when we face intentional evil acts—reason does not have enough arguments to persuade, since reason is not able to convince us that this was in fact a natural event, which followed from the order that God has pre-established. It is a weakness in the argument presented by reason, so to say, not only in reason's capacity to govern the passions and the imagination *per se*.

In the letter quoted above, Elisabeth is implying that *if* reason had strong arguments that a mishap was due to the natural order ultimately instantiated by God (i.e. that we face natural causes), reason would be better able to govern the passions and console us. In a previous letter of 22 June 1645, when explaining why she has been unable to fully benefit from Descartes' therapeutic advice, Elisabeth writes:

I know well that in removing everything upsetting to me (which I believe to be represented only by imagination) from the idea of an affair, I would judge it healthily and would find in it the remedies [...]. But I have never known how to put this into practice until the passion has already played its role. (AT 4, 233–234; S 93)

This and similar passages are most often read as a criticism of Descartes' moral psychology and as a reminder about the fragility of reason (e.g. Shapiro 1999, 507, 514–515; Alanen 2004, 200). It is evident from this and subsequent letters written during the summer of 1645 that Elisabeth emphasizes the mind's dependence on the body to a greater extent than Descartes does in his letters from the same period. Mind-body dependence is underlined in particular when Elisabeth refers to diseases "that destroy altogether the power of reasoning" (AT 4, 269; S 100). I totally agree with interpretations emphasizing this aspect of Elisabeth's criticism, but her emphasis on the embodied conditions for thought must not lead us into thinking that her criticism of Descartes' position is only concerned with psychological abilities and their moral significance. Her first remark on free will and providence shows us that the question about the power of reason is not, in her view, only a question of reason's strength as a psychological capacity, but also a question about the strength of the arguments presented by reason.

Descartes answers Elisabeth's first letter on providence with his first attempt to reconcile it with free will. In a letter dated 6 October 1645 he writes that

all the reasons that prove the existence of God and his being the first and immutable cause of all the effects which do not depend on the free will of men, in the same way prove, it seems to me, that He is also the cause of all the effects that do depend on it. For we cannot demonstrate he exists except by considering him as a supremely perfect being. He would not be supremely perfect if something could happen in the world that did not come entirely from Him. (AT 4, 314; S 120)

Thus, those effects that depend on the free will of men must come entirely from God, otherwise we lose the grounds on which we have proved his existence. Elisabeth remains unconvinced and in her next letter, she continues:

[T]he reasons which prove the existence of God and that he is the immutable cause of all the effects which do not depend on our free will do not persuade me that he is just as much the cause of those which do depend on it. From his sovereign perfection it follows necessarily that he could be this cause, in other words that he could have never given free will to human beings. But since we feel ourselves to have it, it seems that it is repugnant to common sense to think it dependent on God in its operations as well as in its being. (AT 4, 322–323; S 123)

When defining the freedom of the will in his *Principles of Philosophy* (book I, §39), Descartes writes that this freedom "is so evident that it must be counted among the first and most common notions that are innate in us" (AT 8, 19; CSM 1, 205–206).⁴ Freedom of will remains beyond doubt even under the supposition of a supremely powerful deceiver, since the will does not lose its ability to give or withhold assent. For this reason, Descartes draws the conclusion that the freedom of the will is "as self-evident and as transparently clear as anything can be" (AT 8, 20; CSM 1, 206). This

⁴ In this and future references I use CSM followed by volume number as an abbreviation for Cottingham, Stoothoff and Murdoch (eds.) 1985.

paragraph from the *Principles* gives a strong epistemological foundation for Elisabeth's remark that we feel ourselves to have a free will: it is a feeling we cannot doubt and it is the most typical example of a clear and distinct idea. Elisabeth is, in other words, using a strong Cartesian argument in order to question Descartes' position on the compatibility of free will and providence.

In his next letter of 3 November 1645 Descartes defends his position by pointing out that the alternative would be the contradictory claim that God's power is both finite and infinite. He writes:

As far as free will is concerned, I confess that in thinking only of ourselves we cannot but take it to be independent. But when we think of the infinite power of God, we cannot but believe that all things depend on Him and, by consequence, that our free will is not exempt from this. For it implies a contradiction to say that God created men of such a nature that the actions of their will do not depend on His. For this is the same as saying that his power is at the same time finite and infinite: finite since there is something that does not depend on it at all, and infinite since He was able to create this independent thing. (AT 4, 332; S 125)

Elisabeth answers, in her final letter on this topic dated 30 November 1645, by pointing out that the position Descartes is defending is no less contradictory and here she formulates the problem explicitly as a paradox of reason. She writes:

I confess to you as well that even though I do not understand how the independence of the free will is no less contrary to the idea we have of God than its dependence is to its freedom, it is impossible for me to square them, it being as impossible for the will to be at the same time free and attached to the decrees of Providence as for divine power to be both infinite and limited at once. I do not see at all the compatibility between them of which you speak, or how this dependence of the will can have a different nature than its freedom, if you do not take the trouble to teach this to me. (AT 4, 336; S 127)

Descartes takes some trouble in his next letter, which is generally taken to be his most elaborate attempt to explain the compatibility of free will and providence (e.g. Ragland 2005, 172–173). Descartes tells a story about a king, who has forbidden dueling, but arranges things so that two feuding gentlemen meet under circumstances where they will most certainly fight. He continues:

[The king's] knowledge, and even his will to determine [the gentlemen] there in this manner, do not alter the fact that they fight one another just as voluntarily and just as freely as they would have done if he had known nothing of it, and it was by some other occasion that they had met. They can also justly be punished, since they violated the prohibition. (AT 4, 353; S 130.)

In a similar manner God, who has infinite pre-knowledge and power, is able to preordain all aspects of his creation without violating human freedom. According to Descartes, God "knew exactly what would be the inclinations of our will", since it was "He Himself who put them in us." In addition, God arranges all external circumstances. (AT 4, 353; S 130.) Still, we do act freely. Despite instantiating the inclinations of our will and arranging the circumstances in which we act, God does not, according to Descartes, "will thereby that our will be constrained to choose a certain way" (AT 4, 354; S 131). By claiming that our will is not constrained, Descartes indicates that it is not determined (see also Ragland 2005, 174). In order to explain how human actions can be both preordained and free, Descartes distinguishes between God's absolute and independent will, by which he wills that things happen as they happen, and his relative will, which is related to the merit and demerit of humans, and according to which he wills that humans obey his laws by their free will (AT 4, 354; S 131). We do not know if Elisabeth was satisfied with Descartes' final explanation, the discussion of this topic breaks off after Descartes' letter, but we can ask if she should have been, given the objections she had raised? In the next section I will discuss this question.

2. The philosophical foundations for Descartes' position and Elisabeth's criticism

C. P. Ragland's detailed interpretations of Descartes' views on freedom in general and the free will in particular are illuminating when we want to identify the philosophical foundation for Elisabeth's disagreement with Descartes.

Ragland argues that Descartes' position on freedom, including his view on free will and providence, is libertarian.⁵ By claiming that Descartes is a libertarian, Ragland claims that Descartes is not a compatibilist, who would find freedom compatible with determinism. In order to reconcile freedom and providence, Descartes therefore has to hold that divine preordination does not determine human actions, and his final attempt to answer Elisabeth's question, cited above, is one of the key passages that Ragland refers to in order to show that Descartes denies a compatibilist solution (Ragland 2005, 172–174). In order to defend his libertarian interpretation Ragland needs to consider some passages where Descartes seems to indicate that providence does indeed determine human actions. One of these is Descartes' first attempt to answer Elisabeth, where he claims that God is “the first and immutable cause of all the effects” which depend on the free will, as well as of those effects that do not depend on it, and that everything that happens “come entirely from Him” (AT 4, 314; S 120). Another passage where Descartes uses strikingly determinist language can be found in *The Passions of the Soul* (part 2, §145), where he warns—in a rather Stoic language—against desiring things that do not depend on us. He reminds us that “we should reflect upon the fact that nothing can possibly happen other than as Providence has determined from all eternity. Providence is, so to speak, a fate or immutable necessity” (AT 11, 438; CSM 1, 380). Ragland reconciles these passages with his interpretation of Descartes as a non-compatibilist libertarian by arguing that like Francisco Suarez before him, Descartes distinguishes providential predetermination based on God's superior pre-knowledge from determination understood as physical sufficient causal determination (Ragland 2005, 175).

The exact manner *how* God preordains free choices without determining them remains an open question, though, and at this point Descartes declares, as Ragland puts it, that “the reconciliation of freedom and providence is a mystery beyond our comprehension” (Ragland 2005, 180). This character of mystery is most explicitly formulated in *Principles* book I, §41, where, after having established the certainty of free will in §39 and the certainty of divine preordination in §40, Descartes attempts to reconcile them. First, he points out, we have to remember that “our mind is finite, while the power of God is infinite” (AT 8, 20; CSM 1, 206). From the finitude of our understanding it follows that we

may attain sufficient knowledge of [the power to preordain] to perceive clearly and distinctly that God possesses it [as established in §40]; but we cannot get a sufficient grasp of it to see how it leaves the free actions of men undetermined. Nonetheless, we have such close awareness of the freedom and indifference which is in us, that there is nothing we can grasp more evidently or more perfectly [as established in §39]. And it would be absurd, simply because we do not grasp one thing, which we know must by its very nature be beyond our comprehension, to doubt something else of which we have an intimate grasp and which we experience within ourselves. (AT 8, 20; CSM 1, 206.)

Thus, Descartes argues, it would be absurd to doubt that we have a free will, even if we cannot comprehend how it can simultaneously be preordained and free. His argument rests on the claim that due to his infinite nature, God and his attributes are necessarily beyond our finite understandings. Therefore it is sufficient to have a clear and distinct idea of divine preordination, on the one hand, and of the freedom of the will, on the other, in order to know that they are both true. Since God's infinite power necessarily transcends our understanding we cannot know how God has made it possible that these two apparently contradictory ideas are both simultaneously true.

I find it quite obvious that Elisabeth is dissatisfied with Descartes' mystery explanation. In her first letter on the topic of providence, she writes that “we have nothing but faith alone to persuade us that God [...] has determined the fate of each person before the creation of the world” (AT 4, 302; S 114) and she seems to hold on to this view throughout the exchange. As we can see from her second letter, she seems to agree with Descartes that we do have a clear and distinct idea of the freedom of will,⁶ but contrary to him she holds that we know about divine preordination by

⁵ According to Ragland, Descartes is a “moderate libertarian” and he distinguishes his own interpretation from what he calls “the ‘radical libertarian’ interpretation” (Ragland 2006, 75, 83). He attributes the latter position to, among others, Alanen 1999 and 2002.

⁶ In the letters discussing the relations between reason and passion Elisabeth emphasizes that bodily conditions may affect reasoning, see in particular the passages cited above (AT 4, 233–234; S 93; and AT 4, 269; S 100). It seems plausible to think that in these cases the freedom of the will is also impaired, but I do not think we should draw the conclusion that Elisabeth would claim that there are circumstances under which we can doubt the freedom of will. The will may lose its capacity to control the body and to cause voluntary action, but it does not lose its intrinsic freedom; see also Tollefsen 1999, 66; and Reuter 2019, 49–50.

faith rather than reason. In *Principles* I §40 Descartes writes that as “we have come to know God, we perceive in him a power so immeasurable that we regard it as impious to suppose that we could ever do anything which was not already preordained by him” (AT 8, 20; CSM 1, 206). Here his choice of the word “impious” (lat. *nefas*) indicates that our knowledge of God includes an element of faith, but in the next paragraph, when he attempts to reconcile preordination and freedom, he writes that we “perceive clearly and distinctly” that God possesses the power to preordain all our actions (ibid.). This transition from faith to clear and distinct knowledge is, I think, one of the aspects of Descartes’ argument that Elisabeth does not accept. Whereas Descartes conceives the contradiction between preordination and free will as an (apparent) contradiction between two clear and distinct ideas, Elisabeth sees it as a contradiction between faith and reason.

In her three letters on the topic Elisabeth holds on to the incompatibility of providence and free will, but she does not take a final stand on the evidence in favor of either of the two positions. We might expect that Elisabeth’s Calvinism inclines her to prefer divine preordination over free will, but this does not seem to be the case in her letters on the topic (see also Shapiro 2007, 25).⁷ From a theological point of view she does of course not deny providence – and we can understand her repeated worry that her letters might end up in the wrong hands – but in their correspondence Elisabeth and Descartes are explicitly discussing issues from a philosophical, not a theological, point of view.⁸ The whole discussion about providence started with Elisabeth’s request to have more than faith to rely on. Her Calvinist background might illuminate why she is more inclined to hold on to a deterministic conception of providence than Descartes, whose attempt to distinguish between divine preordination and determination had an established Catholic background (see Ragland 2005, 166–170), but the arguments she is presenting are significantly philosophical and she appears to be particularly dissatisfied with Descartes attempt to reconcile what reason conceives to be incompatible by referring to the incomprehensible nature of God. When perceiving the problem as a philosopher, she has a clear and distinct idea of the freedom of the will, and she seems to conceive it to be a more evident truth than her belief in providence, ultimately based on her Calvinist faith. As we see from her first letter on the topic, this has a practical bearing on her ability to console herself by reason: whereas it appears evident to reason that humans have free will, it is not evident that these free wills are part of divine preordination.

3. Elisabeth’s questioning of Scholastic and theological assumptions

We can read Elisabeth’s letters on free will and providence—as well as many of her other letters—as exercises of Cartesian doubt. She uses Descartes’ method against him and doubts everything that she does not find grounds to perceive clearly and distinctly. In the letters on free will and providence this means doubting everything except the freedom of the will. Frederique Janssen-Lauret has recently argued that Elisabeth’s criticism of Descartes explanation of mind-body interaction in their early correspondence of 1643 is significantly anti-Scholastic (2018, 180–183, 186), and I think that this perspective illuminates also Elisabeth’s critical perspective on Descartes’ attempt to reconcile free will and providence.

Janssen-Lauret focuses in particular on Elisabeth’s dissatisfaction with Descartes’ attempt in his second letter (21 May 1643) to explain mind-body interaction by comparing the mind’s power to move the body with the Scholastic notion of heaviness (2018, 179). Descartes holds that this notion is badly used when it is applied, as the Scholastics did, to the power that moves a body towards the center of the earth, but that it can still successfully illuminate how the non-extended mind can move the extended body without any contact between surfaces (AT 3, 667–668; S 66). Elisabeth remains unconvinced and in her third and last letter on this topic she uses Descartes rule that we should, as she writes, never form “judgments about that which we do not perceive well enough” against him and suggests that there are no undoubtable reasons to draw the conclusion he drew in his *Meditations*, that the soul is necessarily non-extended (AT 4, 2; S 72). She holds on to the position she articulated in her previous letter, that it would be easier for her to “concede matter and extension to the soul than to concede the capacity to move a body and to be moved by it to an immaterial thing” (AT 3, 685; S 68), and points out that though “extension is not necessary to thought, neither is it at all repugnant to it, and so it could be suited to some other function of the soul which is no less essential to it” (AT 4, 2; S 72). Among the benefits of attributing extension to the soul are, Elisabeth points out, that at the very least “it makes one abandon the

⁷ On Calvin’s view on providence see e.g. Schneewind 1998, 32–36.

⁸ Surrounded by the 30-years war, the Calvinist Elisabeth and the Catholic Descartes seem to agree to disagree about religious matters. See especially Descartes letter of January 1646, where he comments on Elisabeth’s complaints about her brothers conversion to Catholicism (AT 4, 351; S 129).

contradiction of the Scholastics, that it [the soul] is both as a whole in the whole body and as a whole in each of its parts” (ibid.).

Elisabeth is explicitly arguing against Descartes’ attempt to save his position by using Scholastic notions and analogies. She finds these notions confused and emphasizes that they must be doubted in a true Cartesian manner. Janssen-Lauret argues that Elisabeth’s criticism is ultimately based on a criticism of Descartes’ metaphysics of substances and principal attributes, according to which the soul, understood as a thinking substance, can have only one principal attribute, i.e. thinking. Janssen-Lauret argues against interpreting Elisabeth’s position as materialist and holds that her position is a revised dualism, according to which, as Elisabeth writes in her third letter, extension is neither necessary nor repugnant to thought (AT 4, 2; S 72; Janssen-Lauret 2018, 182).⁹ Janssen-Lauret characterizes Elisabeth as a “naturalistic dualist” and though I am less convinced than Janssen-Lauret that Elisabeth is asking in particular for more empirical research on the soul (Janssen-Lauret 2018, 183, 186–187),¹⁰ I do think that the characterization of Elisabeth’s position as “naturalistic” captures an important aspect of her thought, if we understand naturalistic to mean essentially non-theological. The non-theological aspect illuminates, I want to claim, a similarity between Elisabeth’s questioning of the compatibility of substance dualism and interaction in the early set of letters, and her questioning of the compatibility of free will and providence.

When explaining mind-body interaction in the Sixth Meditation, Descartes makes frequent references to God, who has instantiated this interaction. He is, in his own words, discussing “what God has bestowed on me as a combination of mind and body” (AT 7, 82; CSM 2, 57). God is necessarily involved in mind-body causation, making it possible, despite the fact that mind-body causation cannot be explained according to a model of transeunt efficient causation between bodies. Steven Nadler summarizes Descartes’ view in the following way:

Descartes’ answer is simply that God, in establishing the union of mind and body, has *ordained* that the body should, under certain conditions, occasion the mind to produce ideas; and has willed, moreover, that particular motions in the body should occasion the mind to produce particular ideas. (Nadler 1994, 50; my italics.)

Nadler is arguing against occasionalist interpretations of Descartes, according to which God is assumed to intervene in all causal events, being the true and only cause of my raising my arm as well as of one billiard ball moving another (ibid., 40–41). Instead, Nadler holds, Descartes claims that God has established the occasional causal relationship between mind and body once and for all, when he instantiated the mind-body union, and thus is “not required to act constantly to cause mental effects on the occasions of bodily motions” (ibid., 51). Nadler’s interpretation illuminates the close affinity between Descartes’ understanding of God’s ordination of mind-body interaction and his attempt to

⁹ According to Janssen-Lauret, if “one substance can genuinely possess two natures [instead of only one principal attribute], neither reducible to or equivalent to the other, Elisabeth can consistently hold that the soul is both conscious and extended, without endorsing materialism. Not only is she under no theoretical pressure to reduce thought to extension, she need not prioritise one of these attributes as the real, underlying principal attribute. In her case, raising the question of multiple natures is therefore compatible with a kind of dualism” (2018, 178). When characterizing what she means by “a kind of dualism,” Janssen-Lauret argues that “Elisabeth was not a Cartesian dualist in the strict sense,” but rather, as suggested by Jacqueline Broad (2002, 27), held a position akin to the one later developed by the English Platonist Henry More (2018, 185). Janssen-Lauret is rather fiercely arguing against what she characterizes as a materialist interpretation of Elisabeth’s position, and which she attributes to Tollefsen (1999) and especially Shapiro (2007). Unfortunately, her criticism is mostly attacking a straw man. Tollefsen too compares Elisabeth’s and Henry More’s positions, and does so prior to and in more detail than Broad and Janssen-Lauret (Tollefsen 1999, 72–73). Shapiro, on the other hand, is, quite like Janssen-Lauret, interpreting Elisabeth as searching for a middle road between Cartesian dualism and reductionist materialism à la Thomas Hobbes (Shapiro 1999, 507–508; 2007, 41–42). In her chapter in this volume, Lilli Alanen suggests that Elisabeth’s position on the relation between mind and body bears some similarity with the position later developed by Baruch Spinoza, and Janssen-Lauret’s discussion of one substance with several attributes does interestingly strengthen this line of interpretation, even if Janssen-Lauret does not mention Spinoza (and would perhaps consider his combination of attribute dualism and substance monism as too materialist).

¹⁰ Janssen-Lauret is quite right when emphasizing that Elisabeth had a keen interest in science (see also Sabrina Ebbersmeyer’s chapter in this volume), but we must keep in mind that for Elisabeth as for Descartes science was firmly anchored in mathematics, and I am not sure that Elisabeth would have preferred empirical a posteriori knowledge of the soul over a priori knowledge based on reason.

reconcile free will and divine preordination.¹¹ God's ordination of mind-body causation, as it is described in the Sixth Meditation, allows for the will to act as a cause, even if the exact manner in which the will is a cause transcends our finite comprehension. Since we know that God is capable of ordaining causation other than transeunt efficient causation, even if we do not know how he ordains it, we can assume that he is able to preordain events without causally determining them.

Now, as we know, Descartes' attempt to explain mind-body interaction in the Sixth Meditation is the immediate target of Elisabeth's very first letter, where she asks about "*how* the soul of a human being (it being only a thinking substance) can determine the bodily spirits, in order to bring about voluntary actions" (AT 3, 661; S 62; my italics). Her question is not the result of a careless reading of the Sixth Meditation, but rather due to the fact that she does not take divine ordination to be a sufficient explanation of mind-body causation. Elisabeth holds on to the question *how* throughout her three letters on mind-body interaction and in the last one she writes, with a slight tone of impatience, that she certainly does "find that the senses show me *that* the soul moves the body, but they teach me nothing (no more than do the understanding and the imagination) of *the way in which it does so*" (AT 4, 2; S 72; my italics)¹². She is not questioning the fact that God has created humans as sensing beings capable of voluntary action. She does trust her senses accompanied by divine creation as an answer to the *that* question, but the *how* question remains unanswered and here she does not take ultimately non-comprehensible divine ordination as an answer.

In a similar manner she remains unsatisfied with Descartes' attempt to use the non-comprehensible nature of God as a foundation for the compatibility of free will and preordination. It is Elisabeth's insistence on asking *how* which is, I think, the most significant feature of what might be called her naturalistic attitude. This can include asking empirical questions, as Janssen-Lauret emphasizes, but the distinction between questions that can be answered by reason and questions that can ultimately be answered only by faith in God's non-comprehensible nature is, I think, more fundamental. This distinction is essential to her perspective on mind-body interaction as well as on free will-providence compatibility. There is an evident parallel between the role played by sensation and experience in the early letters and the role played by faith in the letters on providence and free will. Elisabeth acknowledges that sensation tells her that there is mind-body interaction and she acknowledges that faith tells her about providence, but neither provides satisfactory explanations to the phenomena in question. In both cases reason is convinced only by philosophical arguments, not by faith or sensation.

4. Concluding remarks

It might seem surprising that someone emphasizing reason and the distinction between reason and faith to the extent that Elisabeth does in her correspondence with Descartes decides to become an abbess. Elisabeth had many practical reasons for her later choice of career as abbess of the Lutheran convent at Herford, but I do not think that we need to see her choice as overruling her earlier intellectual commitments.¹³ There are significant differences between the positions Elisabeth articulate in her letters to Descartes and the positions she later take in her letters to the Quaker Robert Barclay, written in 1676 and 1677, but I do think we can see her early and late letters as part of a consistent intellectual development. In her first letter to Barclay, dated in July 1676, Elisabeth confesses of her spiritual nakedness and emphasizes that all her happiness is rooted in acknowledging this lack and the fact that "whatsoever I have studied and learned heretofore is but dirt in comparison to the true knowledge of Christ" (S 188). In a later letter of March 1677 she adds that she agrees with him that "knowledge without [divine] light is uncertain" (S 204). She frequently refers to the precious gift of faith, including to the "great mountains in our way, which God in his infinite mercy will remove, in his due time" (S 192–193, also 196). The position Elisabeth articulates here is contrary to the position she articulates when

¹¹ There are many significant differences between mind-body causation (i.e. voluntary action) and body-mind causation (i.e. sensation), which is Nadler's main focus, but I overlook these differences since I think that Descartes believed that the role of God's ordination was more or less the same in both directions. On the differences see Nadler 1994, 44. He is discussing interpretations defended by Daniel Garber, in particular Garber 1992.

¹² Many scholars have pointed out that Elisabeth poses the *how* question in her early letters and also moves beyond this question in order to develop her own position, see in particular Shapiro 1999, 506; and Tollefsen 1999, 61. Here I want to stick to the *how* question in order to illuminate similarities between Elisabeth's philosophical attitude in her early letters and the letters on free will and providence.

¹³ For an account of Elisabeth's time as abbess at Herford, see Pal 2012, 254–265; and Miriam de Baar's chapter in this volume.

she searches for clear and distinct knowledge in her letters to Descartes, but I think it is contrary in a way that allows for a consistent development of thought.¹⁴

The position Elisabeth articulates in her letters to Barclay can be interpreted as the position of a fideist skeptic: she chooses faith in face of the ultimate uncertainty of knowledge based on reason. In her letters to Descartes, Elisabeth aims to avoid skepticism. She is in search for clear and distinct knowledge, though such knowledge is hard to find and she ends up doubting several claims that Descartes considers to be certain. In her third letter on mind-body interaction, she writes that she will “lose hope of finding certitude in anything in the world if you, who alone have kept me from being a skeptic, do not answer that to which my first reasoning carried me” (AT 4, 2–3; S 72). After this letter, she continues to question his arguments and it is not implausible to assume that he might in the end have been unable to save her from skepticism. Thus interpreted her fideist skepticism is a consistent outcome of her Cartesian doubt. Reading Elisabeth’s late position as that of a fideist skeptic does not imply that she would have abandoned all her scientific and philosophical interests, we know that she did not (see Pal 2012, 254–264), but rather that now she considered faith to be a more secure ultimate ground for certainty than reason. She revises her previous search for arguments based on reason and now she seems to find consolation in faith, but she can still hold on to her criticism of Descartes’ tendency to mix arguments based on reason and arguments ultimately based on the incomprehensible nature of God. God can provide the basis for certainty of faith, but not for certainty based on reason.¹⁵

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¹⁴ For an interpretation of Elisabeth’s letters to Barclay see also Sarah Hutton’s chapter in this volume. My account is indebted to hers.

¹⁵ I wish to thank Sabrina Ebbersmeyer, Sarah Hutton and Ruth Hagenruber, who invited me to present the first version of this paper at the conference *Elisabeth of Bohemia (1618-1680) – Life and Legacy* (18-20 May 2018, Paderborn University), and Marguerite Deslauriers, who invited me to present a later version at the panel discussion *Women in Early Modern Philosophy* (15 October 2018, McGill University). I am deeply indebted to my fellow participants at these events for their excellent comments. Additional thanks to the editors of this volume and to Frans Svensson for insightful comments on earlier written drafts.

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