

Correspondence between Elisabeth and Descartes (excerpts)

Elisabeth, Letter of May 6, 1643

M. Pollot has given me such assurance of your good-will towards everyone and especially towards me that I have overcome my inhibitions and come right out with the question I put to the Professor; namely:

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

The question arises because it seems that how a thing moves depends solely on (i) how much it is pushed, (ii) the manner in which it is pushed, or (iii) the surface-texture and shape of the thing that pushes it. The first two of those require contact between the two things, and the third requires that the causally active thing be extended. Your notion of the soul entirely excludes extension, and it appears to me that an immaterial thing can't possibly touch anything else. So I ask you for a definition of the soul that homes in on its nature more thoroughly than does the one you give in your *Meditations*, i.e. I want one that characterizes what it is as distinct from what it does (namely to think).

Descartes, Letter of May 21, 1643

In the *Meditations*, which you were good enough to read, I tried to make conceivable (3) the notions that are right for the soul alone, distinguishing them from (2) the ones that are right for the body alone; so the first thing that I ought to explain now is how to conceive (4) the notions that are right for the union of the soul with the body, separately from (2) and (3). It seems to me that what I wrote at the end of my response to the Sixth Objections can help with that; for we can't look for these simple notions anywhere except in our soul, which naturally contains them all, though it doesn't always (i) distinguish them from one another or (ii) apply them to the objects to which they ought to be applied.

Thus, I think we have until now (i) confused the notion of •the soul's power to act on the body with •the body's power to act on other bodies, and have (ii) applied them (not to the soul, for we haven't yet known the soul, but) to various qualities of bodies – weight, heat, and so on – which we have imagined to be real, i.e. to have an existence distinct from that of the body that has them, and thus to be •substances though we have called them •'qualities'.

Trying to understand weight, heat and the rest, we have applied to them •sometimes notions that we have for knowing body and •sometimes ones that we have for knowing the soul, depending on whether we were attributing to them something material or something immaterial. Take for example what happens when we suppose that weight is a ‘real quality’ about which we know nothing except that it has the power to move the body that has it toward the centre of the earth.

·How do we think that the weight of a rock moves the rock downwards? We don’t think that this happens through a real contact of one surface against another ·as though the weight was a hand pushing the rock downwards·! But we have no difficulty in conceiving how it moves the body, nor how the weight and the rock are connected, because we find from our own inner experience that we ·already· have a notion that provides just such a connection. But I believe we are misusing this notion when we apply it to weight which, as I hope to show in my Physics, is not a thing distinct from the body that has it. For I believe that this notion was given to us for conceiving how the soul moves the body.

Elisabeth, Letter of June 10, 1643

I don’t see how

(1) the idea that you used to have about weight

can guide us to

(2) the idea we need in order to judge how the (nonextended and immaterial) soul can move the body.

·To put some flesh on the bones of my difficulty: I don’t see why we should be persuaded that

(a) a body can be pushed by some immaterial thing

by

(b) the ·supposed· power to carry the body toward the centre of the earth, the ‘power’ that you used wrongly to attribute to weight which you ·wrongly· took to be a ·real· quality;

rather than being confirmed in the view that

(c) a body cannot be pushed by some immaterial thing by the demonstration, which you promise in your physics, that

(d) the way weight operates is nothing like (b).

... I have to say that I would find it easier to concede matter and extension to the soul than to concede that an immaterial thing could move and be moved by a body. ... you show in your Meditations that the body could move the soul, and yet it is hard to understand that a soul (as you have described souls), having become able and accustomed to reasoning well, can lose all that because of some vaporous condition of the body; and that a soul that can exist without the body, and that has nothing in common with the body, is so governed by it. But now that you have undertaken to instruct me, I entertain these views only as friends whom I don't expect to keep -as friends-, assuring myself that you will explain the nature of an immaterial substance and the manner in which it acts and is acted on in the body, making as good a job of this as of all the other things that you have undertaken to teach.