**The primitive notions and Elisabeth’s Objections**

**To Descartes’ Mind/Body Dualism**

What is Elisabeth’s main objection to Descartes?

In the letter of 6.5.1643, she asks

* How something immaterial and not extended – the mind – can move the body, for

*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 of those require* ***contact*** *between the two things, and the third requires that the causally active thing be* ***extended****.*

**What is the soul? What Elisabeth asks, is a more comprehensive definition of soul**

**1. One strategy to think about the union. A bit before Descartes**

Francisco Suárez, *On the Soul* (about 1572, but published in 1621 only), wrote that

(…) it is against common sense, that an instrument of inferior kind can naturally participate in the production of an effect of superior kind, and this applies mostly to the case of the possible interaction between something material with something immaterial. Actually, the theologians struggle to explain how, by his absolute power, God can act upon something immaterial via something material; how can this happen? See for instance St. Augustine, in *Super Genesim ad Litteram*, c.16: “It cannot be thought that any body can act upon the spirit (*spiritus*), as if the spirit, through the action of the body, were submitted to it. For, what acts upon something, is always more excellent (*praestantior*) than what is acted upon.

(*De anima*, disp. IX, q. 2, n. 8, ed. S. Castellote, Madrid 1991, p. 88 – also online, but Latin only)

An old problem, different solutions: Suárez for instance solved it as it follows:

*One must consider that human fantasy [a material power of the soul] and intellect [an immaterial power of the soul] are* ***rooted in one soul****; and from this, it derives that its activities have order and consonance. For instance, what is known by the intellect, is also known by the imagination. Consequently, I think that the passive intellect, in its own right, has no species* [of the external objects]*; nevertheless, the soul has, in its own right, the spiritual power to produce species of those things, which are known via the senses. Such species are produced in the passive intellect; imagination does not participate in such productive process, but plays almost the role of matter, as something which excites the soul, or as an exemplar. This makes that, in the very moment the soul is cognizing something via its imagination, via its spiritual power* [the intellect’s]*, it portrays, so to say, that very thing in the passive intellect.*

(*De anima*, disp. IX, q. 2, n. 12, ed. Castellote, p. 96)

In such scheme:

**Every time** any of my **material** powers (imagination, sight, touch, smell) is active (actually knowing something: tasting a cake, memorizing the dish of spaghetti my friend cooked yesterday, focusing on the yellow color of my colleague’s pull)

in the same moment (“statim”)

my **immaterial powers** (passive and active intellect) produce an immaterial “species” (likeness, or image as well) of that very same thing (the color yellow, the dish I ate yesterday, and so on)

and this, because of the harmony (***sympathia***) existing between the soul’s powers

What about Descartes? In *Meditation* *II*, he had defined himself as

*… une chose qui pense. Qu’est-ce que c’est une chose qui pense ? C’est-à-dire une chose qui doute, qui conçoit, qui affirme, qui nie, qui veut, qui ne veut pas, qui imagine aussi, et* ***qui sent****. Certes ce n’est pas peu si toutes ces choses appartiennent à ma nature.*

And in the reply to Elisabeth? (21.5.1643) He distinguishes between four basic notions:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| General notions | First primitive notion | Second p. notion | Third p. notion |
|  |  |  |  |
| number | extension | thought | Union of the first |
| shape | movement | perceptions | and the second  |
| duration | shape | understanding | primitive notions |

**NB:**

* *(…) the notion of thought (…) includes the notions of the perceptions of the understanding and the inclinations of the will;*
* the notion of the soul’s power to move the body and the body’s power to act on the soul in causing its sensations and passions depend on their union;
* Descartes seems to suggest that such basic notions are, somehow, thinkable as hermetically sealed compartments: for, when we use one of them to explain another kind of notion, we go wrong:

*When we try to explain some difficulty by means of a notion that isn’t right for it, we are bound to go wrong, just as we are when we try to explain – or define – one of these notions in terms of another, because each of them is* basic *and thus can be understood only through itself (…) the principal cause of our errors lies in our commonplace attempts to sue these notions to explain things that aren’t right for. For example, when we try to use imagination to conceive the nature of the soul, or when we try to conceive how the soul moves the body in terms of how a body moves a body.*

(D. to E., 21.5.1643)

Also, Descartes refers, as to an explanatory text, to a passage of his *Sixth Answers* to the Meditations:

(from AT VII, 440 – Latin text)

*When, on the basis of the arguments set out in these Meditations, I first drew the conclusion that the human mind is really distinct from the body, better known than the body, and so on, I was compelled to accept these results because everything in the reasoning was coherent and was inferred from quite evident principles in accordance with the rules of logic. (…) I attended to the ideas or notions of each particular thing which I found within myself, and I carefully distinguished them one from the other so that all my judgements should match them. I observed as a result that nothing whatever belongs to the concept of body except the fact that it is something which has length, breadth and depth and is capable of various shapes and motions; moreover, these shapes and motions are merely modes which no power whatever can cause to exist apart from body. But colours, smells, tastes and so on, are, I observed, merely certain sensations which exist in my thought, and are as different from bodies as pain is different from the shape and motion of the weapon which produces it. And lastly, I* *observed that heaviness and hardness and the power to heat or to attract, or to purge, and all the other qualities which we experience in bodies, consist solely in the motion of bodies, or its absence, and the configuration and situation of their parts. Since these opinions were completely different from those which I had previously held regarding physical things, I next began to consider what had let me to take a different view before. Etc.*

(En. tr. by J. Cottingham, *The philosophical works by Descartes*, vol. II, p. 296-7 [on moodle])