

Princess Elisabeth & Me: A Feminist Doing Philosophy or Doing Feminist Philosophy?

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PRINCESS ELISABETH OF BOHEMIA: 26th December 1618 – 11th February 1680. Elisabeth was the eldest daughter of Frederick V, Elector Palatine and later king of Bohemia, and Elizabeth Stuart, daughter of James I of England and sister of Charles I. She is principally known for her correspondence with René Descartes, who dedicated his *Principles of Philosophy* to her.

FEMINIST: A feminist is someone who (a) recognises the fact of the patriarchy; (b) opposes the patriarchy; (c) and acts on their opposition so as to help end the patriarchy.

DOING PHILOSOPHY: To do philosophy is to engage in the activity of critically reflecting on the nature of reality and our conception of reality.

DOING FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY:

- (1) Critical reflection on the existence of the patriarchy, its wrongness, what equality would look like, and how to get there (cf. Srinivasan 2015).
- (2) “[Philosophy] as a mode of self-transformation and self-expression that stands or falls at one and the same time on its uniqueness—on, if you will, its originality, or particularity—and on its representativeness: that is, the degree to which its particularity can be taken as an instance of something universal.” (Bauer 2001).
- (3) The exposition of sexist blind spots in philosophy’s history and in contemporary philosophical practice (cf. Nussbaum 1994).
- (4) Critical reflection on the general nature of reality and our conception of reality, from a woman-oriented standpoint (cf. Carol Gilligan 1982).

CARTESIAN SUBSTANCE DUALISM: The world is made up of two kinds of thing each with a distinct essence: mind and body. The essence of mind is thought, and the essence of body is extension. All aspects of these two kinds of object can be understood in terms of modes of their essences: thought (different ideas), and extension (different shapes and locations).

ARISTOTLE’S FOUR CAUSES:

- (1) The material cause: “that out of which”, e.g., the stone from which the rock is made.
- (2) The formal cause: “the form”, “the account of what-it-is-to-be”, e.g., the rock at rest.
- (3) The efficient cause: “the primary source of the change or rest”, e.g., the push of the rock of a cliff.
- (4) The final cause: “the end, that for the sake of which a thing is done”, e.g., the pusher’s end (to knock someone on the head, say), and the rock’s end (to move towards the centre of the earth).

THE CHALLENGE FROM PRINCESS ELISABETH TO DESCARTES:

- (1) "I ask you please to tell me 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. For it seems that all determination of movement happens through the impulsion of the thing moved, by the manner in which it is pushed by that which moves it, or else by the particular qualities and shape of the surface of the latter. Physical contact is required for the first two conditions, extension for the third. You entirely exclude the one [extension] from the notion you have of the soul, and the other [physical contact] appears to me incompatible with an immaterial thing."
- (2) "I admit that it would be easier for me 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. For, if the first is achieved through *information*, it would be necessary that the spirits, which cause the movements, were intelligent, a capacity you accord to nothing corporeal. And even though, in your *Metaphysical Meditations*, you show the possibility of the second, it is altogether very difficult to understand that a soul, as you have described it, after having had the faculty and the custom of reasoning well, can lose all of this by some vapors, and that, being able to subsist without the body, and having nothing in common with it, the soul is still so governed by it."

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RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING:

- De Beauvoir, Simone (2012). *The Second Sex*. Vintage.
- hooks, bell (2000). *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. Pluto Press.
- Spelman, E. V. (1982). 'Woman as Body: Ancient and Contemporary Views'. *Feminist Studies*, 8 (1), 109-131.