

## Elisabeth of Bohemia (1618–1680)

Princess Elisabeth was the daughter of Frederick V, briefly King of Bohemia, a region in the present-day Czech Republic, and Elizabeth Stuart, daughter of James I of England. She had an extended correspondence with Descartes, famously pressing him to explain how an immaterial mind can affect a material body.

### CORRESPONDENCE WITH DESCARTES

[The Hague] May 16, 1643

M. Descartes,

I learned, with much joy and regret, of the plan you had to see me a few days ago; I was touched equally by your charity in your willingness to share yourself with an ignorant and intractable person and by the bad luck which robbed me of such a profitable conversation. . . .

. . . 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,<sup>1</sup> in order to bring about voluntary actions. For it seems that all determination of movement is made by the impulsion<sup>2</sup> 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 that you have of the soul, and the other [physical contact] appears to me incompatible with an immaterial thing. This is why I ask you for a more precise definition of the soul than that you give in your *Metaphysics*,<sup>3</sup> that is to say, of its substance separate from its action, that is, from thought. For even if we were to suppose them inseparable, (which is all the same difficult to prove in the mother's womb and in great fainting spells), as are the attributes of God, we could, in considering them apart, acquire a more perfect idea of them.

Knowing that you are the best doctor for my soul, I expose to you quite freely the weaknesses of its speculations, and hope that in observing the Hippocratic oath,<sup>4</sup> you will supply me with remedies without making them public; such I beg of you to do, as to suffer the badgerings of

Your affectionate friend at your service,  
Elisabeth.

1. Gaseous substances thought to control movement by flowing through nerves from the brain to the muscles.

2. Pushing.

3. The *Meditations*.

4. Pledge taken by physicians, named for the Greek physician Hippocrates (c. 460–c. 370 BCE).