

# Victor Lange:

## The Good Life and the Body – Elisabeth on Descartes' Three Rules for Living

### RESUMÉ

Brevkorrespondancen mellem Elisabeth og Descartes er velkendt for sin diskussion af 'sind-krop problemet'. Dog angår en betydelig del af korrespondancen spørgsmålet om, hvordan man bør leve, og hvad der kendetegner det gode liv. Descartes' neo-stoiske (eller rationalistiske) synspunkt reflekteres tydeligt i de tre livsregler, han anbefaler Elisabeth at følge, især når hun står over for svære omstændigheder. Denne artikel viser, hvordan Elisabeths skepsis er funderet i en idé om kroppens etiske signifikans, hvor kroppen og visse kropslige tilstande er nødvendige for at leve godt. Udover at denne idé er af almen filosofisk interesse, så bidrager den også til den gamle filosofiske diskussion om, hvordan det gode liv opnås i praksis—i særdeleshed hvorvidt korrekt anvendelse af ens egen fornuft er tilstrækkeligt for at opnå et sådant, eller om eksterne faktorer (såsom kroppen eller ens politiske position) må inddrages. Nærværende artikel slutter med at foreslå, at Elisabeths bidrag kan anses som selvstændig filosofi, og at hun i sammenhæng hermed bør have status af filosof.

### ABSTRACT

The letter correspondence between Elisabeth and Descartes is well known for its discussion of the mind-body problem, yet in addition, a considerable part of the correspondence discusses how to live well and to reach the 'good life'. Descartes' neo-Stoic (or rationalistic) position on this topic is reflected in the three rules for living that he advises Elisabeth to follow, especially when she faces great challenges in life, though Elisabeth is sceptical to Descartes's advice. This paper shows how Elisabeth's scepticism is founded on considerations of the ethical significance of the body. According to Elisabeth, the body and certain states of it are necessary for living well. Aside from the basic philosophical interest in this view and the arguments Elisabeth provides for it, her view contributes to and informs a very old discussion in ethics about the conditions for living well. In relation to Elisabeth's contribution, this article ends by suggesting that her contribution could reasonably be seen as philosophy and that she could plausibly be attributed the status of philosopher herself.

### EMNEORD

Descartes, Elisabeth af Böhmen, etik, kroppen, det gode liv

### KEYWORDS

Descartes, Elisabeth of Bohemia, ethics, the body, the good life

## Introduction

The correspondence between Elisabeth and Descartes is widely known, and its philosophical importance has made Elisabeth one of the most central women thinkers in early modern philosophy (e.g. Alanen 2004; Shapiro 1999). However, despite both the interest in the correspondence and the role that Elisabeth plays in it, no work has (at least to my knowledge) been fully and explicitly dedicated to what seems to be a very important aspect of Elisabeth's philosophical position and contribution, namely that Elisabeth continuously stresses and elaborates on why the body is of ethical significance in both the theorising and pursuit of living well and reaching the 'good life'.

Different authors have provided analyses and interpretations that are closely linked to the work done in this paper. Jacqueline Broad (2004, 31) has presented an illuminating analysis of Elisabeth's view on the ethics of Stoicism and intellectualism as presented through Descartes's thoughts – yet no fully devoted analysis of Elisabeth's view on the ethical significance of the body is provided. In addition, Ariane Schneck (2019) has provided a very interesting account of Elisabeth's view on passions. Many of the discussions and results in her analysis clearly connect to the focus of this paper, yet Schneck's main emphasis is not Elisabeth's view on the body but her view on passions. At last, Dominik Perler (forthcoming) has provided an insightful discussion on Elisabeth's arguments against Descartes's so-called internalism. There are some overlaps between the results in Perler's article and the arguments presented in this paper. However, these overlapping results are reached through different paths: this paper puts a particular analytic focus on the body, while Perler considers other aspects of Elisabeth's position.

This paper attempts to contribute to the literature in two ways. First, as mentioned, my aim is to clarify how Elisabeth, throughout the correspondence, argues for the ethical importance of the body. Second, I hope that this clarification contributes to the more general project of extracting Elisabeth's own philosophical position and, by that support, the suggestion that Elisabeth herself should be viewed as a philosopher. To make these contributions, this paper focuses on the parts of the correspondence in which Elisabeth and

Descartes discuss ethical matters on how to reach the good life as well as how Elisabeth should face the more serious events in her life.<sup>1</sup>

In the aim of establishing a clear structure for the article, I have chosen to arrange the discussion around Descartes's 'three rules for living' (he presents these three rules as rules one should live by to reach the good life or true happiness). Descartes presents the three rules both in *Discourse on Method* and in the correspondence; this paper uses the formulations from the latter. I believe that structuring the discussion of this article around these three rules allows us to get a clearer and richer view on Elisabeth's ethical position since this structure enables us to distinctly discuss Elisabeth's view on the foundation of reason, virtuous decision making, and the value of things external to one's own reason. How Elisabeth disagrees with Descartes about the important ethical aspects of all three rules, a disagreement that is centred on the ethical relevance of the body, will hopefully become clear throughout this article.

The first section of the paper contextualises the abovementioned part of the correspondence in the broader discussion of the mind–body problem between Elisabeth and Descartes. The second section of the paper presents Descartes's first rule for living and focuses on Elisabeth's critique of it. Next, the third section moves to Descartes's second rule and clarifies how Elisabeth again makes several critical remarks relying on ethical perspectives on the body. Hereafter, the fourth section concerns Elisabeth's criticism of Descartes's third rule as implausible. Finally, the fifth section discusses some general matters. First, it discusses how we should place Elisabeth in the history of ethics. Second, it briefly discusses whether Elisabeth's contribution should be assessed as philosophy and whether she herself should count as a philosopher.

## 1. Preliminary Remarks

Before examining the specific discussion between Elisabeth and Descartes on the relationship between the body and the good life, it will be useful to contextualise this particular discussion in the broader conversation that they

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<sup>1</sup> This is a rather significant part of the correspondence (Adam & Tannery 1981–91, 4:200–336; Shapiro 2007, 85–127).

have.<sup>2</sup> In general, the correspondence between Elisabeth and Descartes is mostly known for its discussion of the mind–body problem (Adam & Tannery 1981–91; 3:661; Shapiro 2007, 62), beginning with Elisabeth asking Descartes to explain how the immaterial mind or soul can cause and influence physical or material movement.<sup>3</sup> Since Descartes advocates a version of substance dualism – by which the substances of the immaterial and non-extended mind (*res cogitans*) as well as of material and physical matter (*res extensa*) are distinct – the pressing question becomes how such categorically divided substances can interact. In discussing this problem, Elisabeth seems to argue for a more intimate relationship between the mind and the body than Descartes’s substance dualism suggests; it appears to her that the mind and the body do not seem so separated, as indicated by Descartes (Adam & Tannery 1981–91, 3:661, 3:685; Shapiro 2007, 68).

While Elisabeth and Descartes seem to leave the discussion of the mind–body problem rather early in the correspondence, they, in fact, continue this fundamental discussion, albeit in a new context. The new context is more personal than the former: Elisabeth is sick and exposed to severe stress given the situation of many of her family members. In relation to this, Descartes provides different therapeutic advice to Elisabeth on how to overcome and psychologically cope with her disease and family situation. As Shapiro (1999) points out, in this advice, the mind–body problem is still present as an underlying fundamental philosophical theme. By Descartes’s advice that Elisabeth should use her reason and structure her own cognition in a neo-Stoic fashion and by Elisabeth’s scepticism to his advice through her insistence on the body as ethically relevant for the good life, the correspondence still concerns the fundamental matter of the mind–body relation (even though the

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<sup>2</sup> The term ‘contextualisation’ is not meant as providing a historical context for Elisabeth and Descartes’s conversation. Other authors have done this (Bos 2009; Alexandrescu 2012). Instead, the contextualisation here concerns understanding Elisabeth’s particular view on the ethical significance of the body in the broader context of her philosophical discussion with Descartes.

<sup>3</sup> Tollefsen (1999) offers an interesting discussion on both Elisabeth’s criticism of Descartes and her own solution to the problem.

relation is discussed in an ethical or moral philosophical way and not as metaphysically oriented as in the beginning of the correspondence).

As already mentioned, I have chosen to clarify the discussion by using Descartes's three rules for living as an analytic framing method. I take Elisabeth to claim that the body is not adequately represented and theorised in Descartes's three rules, which seem to express an underlying neo-Stoic understanding of how to live, and Elisabeth is sceptic to such a position since it neglects the importance of the body.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Rule I

The first rule that Descartes states to Elisabeth could be outlined in the following way: use your reason (or mind) well such that you can figure out what you should do (Adam & Tannery 1981–91, 4:265; Shapiro 2007, 98).<sup>5</sup> Elisabeth does not directly disagree with this rule; she does not claim that one should follow any opposing rule or refrain from following the abovementioned rule. Instead, her replies to Descartes concern the underlying assumption on the relation between the reason of an individual and her body. The following section spells out Descartes's reflections to explain the practical implications of Rule I and how Elisabeth's position emerges out of her criticism of these reflections.

### 2.1 *The Bodily Foundation of Reason*

Recall that the personal occasion for this part of the correspondence is Elisabeth's sickness. Descartes's main therapeutic advice to Elisabeth is to use reason well. Among other things, he writes that:

[the great souls who live well] have reasoning so strong and so powerful that even though they too have passions and often even

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<sup>4</sup> Since this paper emphasises Elisabeth's position, the following sections run the risk of misrepresenting Descartes's thoughts. Of course, I hope that such misrepresenting does not occur at all and, if it does, that it is strongly limited.

<sup>5</sup> Notice that Descartes's first rule for living is not the same in his answer to Elisabeth as in his Discourse on Method (1637) (Adam & Tannery 1981–91, VI:22–24). In short, the imperative of the first rule in his Discourse is to follow the customs and religions of one's country. As we will see, this rule is significantly different from the one expressed in his correspondence with Elisabeth.

more violent ones than most do, their reason nevertheless remains mistress and makes it such that even afflictions serve them and contribute to the perfect felicity which they can enjoy already in this life. (Adam & Tannery 1981–91, 4:202; Shapiro 2007, 87)

Descartes trusts that a specific well-grounded use of reason can overcome almost all bodily states; in fact, he takes his own life to be evidence for this claim (i.e. he overcame a hereditary sickness by a specific ‘reason-based’ use of his mind) (Adam & Tannery 1981–91, 4:220; Shapiro 2007, 92). However, one might ask what it more specifically means to use reason well. A main element in Descartes’s advice concerns how an individual, in a given situation (e.g. during sickness), *interprets* the present events – what aspects of the events the individual focuses on. He writes:

[T]here are no events so disastrous or so absolutely bad in the judgement of people that a reasonable person could not look at them from an angle which will make them appear favourable.  
(Adam & Tannery 1981–91, 4:237; Shapiro 2007, 95)

Hence, using reason well means, to some extent, focussing on the positive aspects of events. In fact, such an optimistic interpretation style not only brings the mind to a calmer and more desirable state but also, according to Descartes, brings the body to a healthier state (Adam & Tannery 1981–91, 5:65; Shapiro 2007, 81). Further, in relation to incorporating such an interpretation style, Descartes advises Elisabeth to turn her focus to the goods in her reach instead of those out of her reach, which would also improve her physical condition (Adam & Tannery 1981–91, 4:203–4; Shapiro 2007, 87). As a consequence of this advice, Elisabeth should only think of what she herself can do, not about what other people do.

Considering what we have said above, an interesting question would be ‘What underlying background theory of the mind–body relationship does Descartes’s advice rely on?’ A reasonable answer would be that Descartes subscribes to a broader neo-Stoic ethical theory: reason is always in our power; no physical state can take it away from us, and if we use it well, we will be content and

immune to the strokes of fate.<sup>6</sup> As Alanen (2004, 207, 201) points out, Descartes seems to argue that reason is autonomous of the body and seems to think that reason and thinking are sufficient in pulling the body in a specific direction.

Elisabeth questions exactly this background theory of the autonomy of reason. A basic element in her criticism could be summed up in the following claim: reason itself (and the well functioning of it) is *dependent* upon elements outside of reason, namely the conditions of the body. To back up this criticism, Elisabeth points to the fact that “[t]here are diseases that destroy altogether the power of reasoning and, by consequence, that of enjoying a satisfaction of reason” (Adam & Tannery 1981–91 4:269; Shapiro 2007, 100). According to Elisabeth, the ‘cognitive consequences’ of such diseases remind us that a healthy body is a *necessary* condition for the presence and well functioning of reason; we need to be in a certain physical state to have a sense of reason (altogether) to use well. This is a counterclaim to Descartes and his neo-Stoic view: Elisabeth aims to show that reason depends on something *outside* of it, namely *the body*.<sup>7</sup> In effect, the relation could be summed up as follows: only under specific bodily conditions B, reason is autonomous of any other bodily conditions B\*. In other words, to be autonomous, reason is (somewhat paradoxically) dependent on specific bodily conditions.

Descartes seems to revise his position in light of Elisabeth’s criticism. He clearly states that Elisabeth correctly notes that some bodily conditions such as diseases take away reason from individuals and, hence, the opportunity for reaching the good life, i.e. the rational life (Adam & Tannery 1981–91, 4:282; Shapiro 2007, 106). Moreover, he agrees that since disease states can deprive an

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<sup>6</sup> However, one might also stress that Descartes’s general ethical standpoint contains elements that could be in tension with neo-Stoic ethics. First, Descartes insists that we should not be reserved and insensible to other people’s suffering; instead, we should be emotionally invested in it (Adam & Tannery 1981–91, 4:202; Shapiro 2007, 87). Second, he takes the virtuous life to be of pleasure; more precisely, the virtuous person enjoys the pleasure of the mind and action in accordance with reason (Adam & Tannery 1981–91, 4:285–7; Shapiro 2007, 108). These two aspects, on emotional investment and pleasure, might be viewed as being opposed to traditional neo-Stoic ethics.

<sup>7</sup> In fact, Elisabeth seems to argue for a broader claim: apart from our body, multiple factors external to our reason and our will are capable of unsettling us (Adam & Tannery 1981–91, 4:337; Shapiro 2007, 128) (see also Perler, forthcoming).

individual of reason, “perfect health [...] is the foundation of all the other goods that one can have in this life” (Adam & Tannery 1981–91, 4:220; Shapiro 2007, 92). These are significant modifications: Descartes admits that his (neo-Stoic-inspired) cognitive therapy, expressed in Rule I, is only appropriate for those individuals who actually have autonomous reason to begin with.

In light of what is said above, one might think of Elisabeth as ‘only’ a presenter of critique to Descartes – that is, that Elisabeth does not occupy a positive philosophical position herself. However, I take this to be misconceived; from her objections to Descartes, Elisabeth establishes her own philosophical position. Considering Elisabeth’s letters, it is reasonable to claim that she makes the following argument about the autonomy of reason and the implications for reaching the good life:

- (1) To reach the good life, one must live a life of proper use and exercise of reason and one’s will.<sup>8</sup>
- (2) The mere capacity of reason depends on some *bodily states* of the individual.
- (3) These bodily states that reason depends upon are influenced, constituted, and regulated by factors *external* to the will and reason of the individual herself.
- (C). The good life of an individual depends on factors external to that individual’s reason and will.

Having this argument in mind, why Elisabeth seems sceptic to Descartes’s therapeutic advice about using reason well as sufficient for improving her situation becomes clear. After all, her own position on the autonomy of reason gives much more room and importance to the body. It seems rather natural to be sceptic towards therapeutic and general ethical advice that reserves no importance to bodily states.

### 3. Rule II

Descartes’s second rule could be summarised as follows: always be firm and constant in your resolution to carry out what reason prescribes and let no feel-

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<sup>8</sup> Elisabeth does not state this claim explicitly but hints at it in different places (Adam & Tannery 1981–91, 4:269, 4:288; Shapiro 2007, 100, 109).



ings, passions, or appetites hinder you in doing this (Adam & Tannery 1981–91, 4:266; S, 98). Once again, Elisabeth does not directly disagree with Rule II; instead, she takes the body to be of much more importance in following the demands of Rule II than Descartes thinks. In Descartes’s further elaboration of Rule II, the body is often portrayed as a distracting factor for living well and reaching the good life.

### 3.1 Calculation Model vs. Embodiment Model

Interestingly, Descartes states that what he takes to be virtue is, in fact, the same as the prescription of Rule II, i.e. if a person is firm and resolute in carrying out commands by reason, then she is virtuous. However, this description of virtue does not tell us much about how the mind of a virtuous person works. Let us therefore spell out Descartes’s further elaboration of Rule II; this will clarify how Elisabeth’s position differs significantly.

Descartes explicates Rule II in two important ways. First, Descartes distinguishes between two types of *pleasure*<sup>9</sup> (Adam & Tannery 1981–91, 4:284–5; Shapiro 2007, 107–8). One type of pleasure is the pleasure of the mind *alone*. The pleasure of the mind rightly contributes to the perfection of our being, and it pulls us towards things or actions that contribute to our perfection. In contrast, there is the pleasure of the mind *as connected to the body*. Such pleasure does not come to the mind as an isolated substance but only appears pleasurable to our mind through our body. Pleasure of this type is dangerous for us in trying to reach the good life; according to Descartes, it ‘tricks’ us into thinking that some action or possession is of worth when it is not. In fact, because of this deceptive character, such pleasure is “the source of all the evils and errors of life” (Adam & Tannery 1981–91, 4:285; Shapiro 2007, 108).

Second, Descartes makes several comments on the proper role of *passions* in living the good life. Three aspects of passions seem especially important in relation to Rule II. First, like pleasure of the second type mentioned above, passions often make us blind; they pull us into acting in ways that hinder our own perfection (Adam & Tannery 1981–91, 4:285; Shapiro 2007, 108). Second,

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<sup>9</sup> As Alanen (2004, 207) points out, this dualism of pleasures corresponds well with Descartes’s general substance dualism: each substance has a related pleasure.

Descartes complementarily takes strong passions to be a trademark of what he calls the best minds: passions are not eradicated in such noble individuals; in fact, they are strongly present in them (Adam & Tannery 1981–91, 4:237; Shapiro 2007, 94). The first and second remarks may not make much sense collectively, yet Descartes makes a third remark that connects the previous two. He states that when we pursue to live well, we should not deprive ourselves of passions; instead, we should organise them under our reason (Adam & Tannery 1981–91, 4:287; Shapiro 2007, 109). If passions serve reason, they can be useful for living well even when they are strong and have a pull in us; the mark of the vulgar person is to be carried away by passions, while the mark of the virtuous person is to organise them under reason (Adam & Tannery 1981–91, 4:202; Shapiro 2007, 87).

With these clarifications in mind, we have a better grasp of Descartes's final understanding of how the virtuous mind works. Because Descartes emphasises reason or the rational faculty, we shall name his view on the virtuous mind the 'calculation model',<sup>10</sup> which has the following imperatives:<sup>11</sup>

(I) When one is making a decision, reason alone should be used to calculate what the right action is by examining the values and consequences involved in different options.

(I\*) Depending on what option is taken to be correct, passions should be organised in accordance.

(I\*\*) Only pleasures of the right option ought to be pursued.

It is clear that according to Descartes, we can solely, by operations of our rational faculty, come to act in accordance with virtue when facing different situations (Imperative (I)). Further, we should not be guided by passions or pleasures that have *not* been examined by reason (Imperatives (I\*) and (I\*\*)). With this in mind, the calculation model demands that an agent, when making a decision, *first* run her rational faculty and *hereafter* adjust her passions and

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<sup>10</sup> To my knowledge, Descartes does not explicitly name his position the 'calculation model'. Nevertheless, I heard Sabrina Ebbersmeyer use the expression at a seminar at the University of Copenhagen about Descartes's thoughts on decision making as presented in the correspondence.

<sup>11</sup> Of course, Descartes does not explicitly mention any of these imperatives as a part of his model; still, I take them to be adequate extractions of the views he expresses throughout the correspondence.

pleasures. This line of ordering manifests a hierarchical procedure in which rational investment should always precede passions and pleasures as the guiding element in decision making.

Elisabeth seems to disagree with this model. Concerning (I), she objects that if we, in fact, were to always carry out our decision making through rational calculation, we would have to be fully or at least significantly informed about what value and precise consequences each available option involves. However, to be informed at such a level seems to be unrealistic, according to Elisabeth. To know the value and goods involved in all available actions, we would have to rely on an 'infinite science', i.e. an impressive, expansive knowledge of all relations, goods, and values of different options of actions, a knowledge that would inform our decision-making (Adam & Tannery 1981–91, 4:289; Shapiro 2007, 110). Such knowledge is not in our possession; rather, making decisions under uncertainty and the lack of knowledge seems to be a fundamental condition of our lives.

In relation to the above critique, Elisabeth makes several interesting positive claims about the role of passions in decision making and virtuous action. Among other things, she states that her own experience shows her "that there are passions that *do* carry us to reasonable actions" (Adam & Tannery 1981–91, 4:290; Shapiro, 111 (my italics)). I take her to mean that some passions are actually capable of guiding us in a specific situation *before* any rational calculation has organised them in that particular situation. Such an interpretation would resonate well with some of Elisabeth's other remarks. For example, she notes that the passion or emotion of repentance seems crucially important in keeping our motivation for making ourselves better individuals running; without this feeling of regretting, we may not have the 'drive' to make improvement.

This view on the affective quality of repentance as important for self-improvement stands in contrast to Descartes's view on repentance. He indicates several places that a true virtuous person does not repent because this passion or emotion disturbs the peace of the soul and true happiness. Moreover, a fully rational person knows that she has nothing to repent if she has followed the judgement of action which she fully believes was right (Adam & Tannery 1981–91, 4:295, 4:306–9; Shapiro 2007, 113, 116–7). From these reflections, Elisabeth seems more favourable of some passions and their affective qualities in guiding

our lives (see Schneck (2019) for a more full analysis of Elisabeth's view on passions). Consequently, Elisabeth also appears to view the virtuous person as holding a set of different (embodied) dispositions of passions and emotions that can guide her under complex situations and uncertainty – and keep motivating her to self-improve. In all, Elisabeth seems to think that for us to act virtuously, our bodies must hold certain emotional dispositions to guide us.

Furthermore, as Shapiro (2007, 31–2) points out, Elisabeth stresses the importance of the body in an additional way, different from the one stated above. Both Elisabeth and Descartes are of the opinion that to make competent decisions, one must be clear-headed to some degree. In relation to this, Elisabeth points to the fact that to become clear-headed, we must work *through the body*. To understand this reading of Elisabeth, it is important to stress that she agrees with Descartes in two important respects. First, she agrees that passions and pleasures can blind our decision making. Second, she agrees that we should indeed carry out rational examinations of our passions and pleasures in the search for being virtuous and reaching the good life. In effect, this means that Elisabeth agrees with Descartes that we must regulate our passions and our pleasures (Adam & Tannery 1981–91, 4:289; Shapiro 2007, 110).

However – and this is the point of Shapiro (2004, 31) – Elisabeth seems to think (once again) that Descartes neglects the importance of the body, this time in relation to the regulation of passions. Descartes's solution to examining and re-evaluating our passions is purely cognitive: we should consider the reasons for and against a passion being appropriate. However, as we saw in the previous section, Elisabeth thinks that reason is dependent on bodily states. Following this, her explanation of why we are often blinded by our passions seems to be that such passions manifest themselves as certain bodily states of great force – the passions blind us through our body. Hence, to bring oneself to a calm, clear-headed state involves intervening on the physiological cause of our passions. Such intervention can be done through various means, e.g. both medicine and reasoning (Shapiro 2004, 31–2). Still, even if we choose to go with reasoning as the road to clear-headedness, this road is not the process of reason winning over the body as Descartes thinks. Instead, when we reason, we re-establish a physiological balance by laying out the alternative ways we could relate emotionally to a situation (our reasoning works through our body). If this is a correct interpretation of Elisabeth, then her view on the reason-based regula-

tion of passions emphasises the role of the body much more. According to her, our reason is not an independent part of our being; it is established, maintained, and put to work through our body.

With the above considerations in mind, it seems reasonable to claim that Elisabeth offers an alternative to Descartes's calculation model (Adam & Tannery 1981–91, 4:290; Shapiro, 111). This alternative could be called the 'embodiment model', and it could be outlined as follows:<sup>12</sup>

*Navigation.* Since individuals always work under uncertainty and limited information, one must (at least partially) be guided by embodied passion and pleasure in various situations.

*Regulation.* Since the way passions often blind individuals goes through bodily affective states, to regulate one's passions, one must regulate one's physiological state – either via medicine or via reasoning.

Notice how *Navigation* stands in opposition to the first imperative (I) in Descartes's calculation model and the procedural hierarchy which his model advocates. Moreover, notice how *Regulation* stresses that rational examination or reasoning is not always sufficient for regulating our passions properly; if reasoning works, it works through changing the physiological state of an individual (this opposes Imperative (I\*) and probably also (I\*\*)). In the end, Elisabeth appears to question the whole procedural hierarchy of the calculation model: that rational calculation must always precede all else, while passion, pleasure, and other bodily mechanisms must only follow accordingly. According to her, both when we are to navigate in complex situations and when we evaluate our passions, we must indeed (at least sometimes) work *through the body*. With this in mind, the embodiment model seems to be a natural outgrowth of Elisabeth's position on the bodily dependence of reason.

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<sup>12</sup> Notice the similarities between Schneck's (2019) analysis of Elisabeth's position on passions and the presentation of Elisabeth's position on the body as presented above. In short, Schneck convincingly argues that Elisabeth's view on passions should be seen as neo-Peripatetic. According to Schneck (2019, 756), Elisabeth argues both that humans sometimes cannot distance themselves fully from their emotions and that emotions, in fact, are often desirable as guiding forces in living well. These considerations clearly correspond to Regulation and Navigation.

#### 4. Rule III

Descartes formulates his third rule as follows: since reason tells us that all goods that are external to us are outside of our power, one should not desire any of such external goods; this will only hinder one in being content and, hence, reaching the good life. While much has been said about Elisabeth's take on the previous two rules, the following section will be shorter as many of Elisabeth's arguments relevant to Rule III have already been outlined. However, contrary to Rules I and II, with which Elisabeth did not directly disagree (rather, she thought the body was underrepresented in the further elaboration of the rules), Elisabeth seems to disagree directly with Rule III.

##### 4.1 *The Body as an External Good*

Let us begin by laying out Descartes's view on external goods; this will illuminate Elisabeth's position. The following two quotes from Descartes show his neo-Stoic-inspired perspective. Among other things, he writes:

[T]rue happiness consists, it seems to me, in a perfect contentment of the mind and an internal satisfaction [...] Thus, to live *beate*, to live happily, is nothing but to have a mind that is perfectly content and satisfied (Adam & Tannery 1981–91, 4:264; Shapiro 2007, 97)

Moreover, Descartes often refers to his view on true happiness or the good life as something that only depends on our own mind:

When I spoke of true happiness, which depends entirely on our free will and which all men can acquire without any assistance from elsewhere (Adam & Tannery 1981–91, 4:281; Shapiro 2007, 106)

As these quotes indicate, Descartes continuously highlights the mind, reason, and the will as the most important and, in many cases, sufficient factors in reaching the good life. However, as we saw already in Section 2, Elisabeth stresses that the body has to be in a certain state for reason to be intact at all. In light of this criticism, Descartes moderates his position; he agrees that the body does seem of worth and importance in relation to reason. He agrees that "there are illnesses which, taking away the power of reasoning, also take away enjoying the satisfaction of a rational mind" (Adam & Tannery 1981–91, 4:282; Shapiro 2007, 106–7) and concludes that "one can say generally that nothing

can entirely take away the means of making ourselves happy so long as it does not trouble our reason" (Adam & Tannery 1981–91, 4:283; Shapiro 2007, 107).

It seems rather clear that by stressing the importance of the body, Elisabeth pushes Descartes from a neo-Stoic position (claiming that no factors external to our mind or will are necessary for us to reach the good life) to a more moderate position in which he admits that we need to possess some external goods to reach the good life (most of all a body free of diseases depriving us of reason). In light of this, Elisabeth does not directly disagree with Descartes's fundamental view on true happiness or the good life as a life of virtue and contentment. Nonetheless, as mentioned earlier, she thinks that the body is underrepresented in Descartes's further theorising on what goods are needed to reach the good life.

From Elisabeth's critique of Descartes, her own position emerges, and it becomes clear that she does not share the basic Stoic intuition that nothing outside of our will is of value.<sup>13</sup> In all, as also stated in the argument of Part 2.1, I take Elisabeth to argue for the fundamental claim that the body is a necessary external good when reaching for the good life. With this in mind, Elisabeth appears to argue against Descartes's Rule III by reasoning of the following kind (i.e. a *reductio ad absurdum* structure):

- (1) Rule III commands that we do *not* desire any external goods.
  - (2) To have reason is a necessary good for reaching the good life.
  - (3) The body and the states of the body count as external.
  - (4) Reason is based upon the presence of certain bodily states and the absence of others.
- (C) Following this, Rule III is implausible.

Notice how closely linked Elisabeth's criticism of Descartes's view on the autonomy of reason (discussed in relation to Rule I) and her objections to Rule III are. One difference, as already said, is that while Elisabeth agrees with Rules

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<sup>13</sup> In several places, Elisabeth stresses that things outside of our will are of value; for example, she states that she cannot see how the situation of her family members should not be of substantial value despite their situation being external to her own will (Adam & Tannery 1981–91, 4:209; Shapiro 2007, 89).

I and II but stresses the underrepresentation of the body in the elaboration of the two rules, she seems to directly find Rule III implausible.

### 5. Elisabeth's Ethics of the Body

By using Rule I as our focus, we saw that Elisabeth's view on the autonomy of reason stresses that reason – or an intact, well-functioning rational faculty – depends upon something outside of it, namely the body. Since the good life is a life of reason, the body becomes an essential good of such a life, a good external to one's will. By considering Rule II, we saw that Elisabeth found Descartes's understanding of how we should come to act in accordance with reason as misconceived. In other words, Elisabeth seemed sceptical to the imperatives of the calculation model and its procedural hierarchy in which rational activity should always precede bodily activity. Elisabeth appeared to stress that both with respect to navigation in complex situations and when regulating our passions (with the goal of becoming clear-headed), we must (at least sometimes) work through the body. At last, we saw how Elisabeth seemed to find Rule III implausible since it neglects certain states of the body as a necessary good for reaching the good life.

Throughout this paper, I have presented Elisabeth as more than just a critical conversation partner for Descartes. I have read Elisabeth's criticism and questions as coming from a positively defined philosophical position – that is, a position that does not only define itself in opposition to another position (Descartes's position in this case). Elisabeth agrees with Descartes that the good life is a life of reason, rationality, and virtue, but she continuously stresses that you have to consider the body as a necessary condition or good for such a life despite it being outside of one's reason and will. Elisabeth's comments and arguments seem to sketch the contours of an 'ethics of the body', a rich reflection of what role the body plays in reaching the good life.

In relation to this ethics of the body, I take two more remarks to be important. First, Elisabeth's arguments on the body as an important external good in reaching the good life are relevant for a broader and very old ethical discussion, namely the discussion between what we could call 'ethical externalism' and 'ethical internalism'. In short, ethical internalism would be the position that claims that the good life or living well does *not* depend on any factors external



to a person's reason or will.<sup>14</sup> On the contrary, ethical externalism would be the position that claims that the good life or living well *does* depend on some factors external to a person's reason or will.<sup>15</sup> With these general positions sketched out, Elisabeth argues for ethical externalism through the ethical importance of the body. In fact, she also pushes Descartes to incorporate such externalistic elements in his own position by considerations of the body; otherwise, before Elisabeth's criticism, Descartes's position seemed to strongly aspire for ethical internalism. I think Elisabeth's arguments on the ethical importance of the body have contributed to this very general debate and provided ethical externalism with strong arguments.<sup>16</sup> Perler (forthcoming) draws the same conclusion; he also takes Elisabeth to argue (quite convincingly) against the internalistic view that happiness only rests on factors internal to the mind or will of the individual.<sup>17</sup>

Second, as mentioned in the first part of this paper, while Elisabeth and Descartes leave the mind–body problem as the explicit theme of their conversation, the problem is still present as an underlying dimension. In other words, it

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<sup>14</sup> Prominent Stoic figures like Seneca (*Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*) and Epictetus (*Encheiridion*) would be examples of such ethical internalism.

<sup>15</sup> Epicurus (*Principal Doctrines*) is an example of such ethical externalism; moreover, Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics*) is of such a position in some respects.

<sup>16</sup> Considering all of Elisabeth's criticisms of Descartes's three rules for living, it might seem appropriate to label Elisabeth's more general ethical position as that of being neo-Peripatetic. As already mentioned in footnote 12, Schneck (2019) offers a convincing argument that Elisabeth's view on passions is of such a neo-Peripatetic view. One could plausibly extend Schneck's claim and propose that because of Elisabeth's view on virtuous decision making (in relation to Rule II, discussed in Section 3) and her view on external phenomena as being of true value (in relation to Rule III, discussed in Section 4), Elisabeth is generally to be seen as neo-Peripatetic when it comes to ethical questions. Still, further discussion of this matter is beyond the scope of this article.

<sup>17</sup> As already mentioned, Perler's work and the above analysis share some similarities (Perler, forthcoming). However, Perler gives a slightly different definition of ethical internalism (which he simply calls internalism). He states it as the position that claims happiness as relying only on factors internal to the mind of the individual – contrary to this paper, which defines the position relative to living well or reaching the good life. Further philosophising whether internalism is defined relative to happiness or living well as well as whether the mind, the will, or reason are stressed in the definition might prove to be important. At last, as a general note, despite their similarities, Perler's analysis and this paper conceptualise both Elisabeth's and Descartes's positions and arguments in substantially different ways.

seems a rather natural consequence that Elisabeth stresses the body as deeply ethically relevant since she also argues for a closer relationship between the mind and the body in a general metaphysical perspective; on the contrary, Descartes argues for a substance dualism of separation.

Finally, some might think that Elisabeth's claims in the correspondence are too unsystematic to qualify for being philosophy or for her to count as a philosopher. A satisfying discussion of this controversy is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, as Hutton points out, whether to exclude or include something or someone as philosophy or a philosopher touches upon the more general discussion on what the criteria for qualifying as such precisely are (Hutton 2015, 7).

Following Alanen (2004, 205), the discussion between Descartes and Elisabeth seems to be of a deep Socratic nature – a conversation centred on and with the aim of self-improvement. In general, the discussion has the character of philosophy in the ancient Greek sense – philosophy as a dialogue on how to live (Hadot 2015, 89–93). In such a Socratic or ancient Greek perspective, some dialogue would (I assume) be an instance of philosophy if it had a certain reflective and conceptual character that was oriented around the question of how to live well. Further, a philosopher would simply be a person who participated in such dialogues and adjusted her life in accordance with it. In other words, such Socratic/Greek-inspired criteria would not demand any systematic theories and publications for someone to count as a philosopher.

Considering the substantial nature and engagement of Elisabeth's contributions throughout the correspondence, her writings would most probably qualify for being instances of philosophy if our criteria were that of the Socratic or ancient Greek view. Moreover, under such criteria, Elisabeth would most probably be included as a philosopher in her own right given her dedicated participation and valuable contribution to the old philosophical discussion on living well.

However, this is not to say that the arguments made in this article in any way prove that Elisabeth is to be seen as a philosopher herself. It is one question to discuss whether a contribution is philosophical and another to discuss whether an individual is to be seen as a philosopher. Moreover, the above Socratic or ancient Greek criteria seem to presuppose a very tight link between someone making a philosophical contribution and someone being a philosopher; none-

theless, this link might be controversial upon further discussion.<sup>18</sup> To sum up, this article has primarily aimed to show that Elisabeth exhibits a positive philosophical position on the ethics of the body in the correspondence. That she herself should count as a philosopher is only a derived suggestion of the article.

## Conclusion

I hope that this paper has clarified and highlighted an important philosophical contribution made by Elisabeth: that of emphasising and elaborating upon the ethical relevance of the body in the theorising of living well and reaching the good life. Moreover, I hope that this clarification has added considerable reasons for viewing the discussion between Elisabeth and Descartes as an instance of philosophy and perhaps viewing Elisabeth as a philosopher. Whether the interpretations of Elisabeth's thoughts made in this paper are reasonable and whether Elisabeth's thoughts themselves are philosophically plausible are, of course, open for further discussion. The core aim of this paper has simply been to highlight a philosophical contribution made by Elisabeth that seems to have been overlooked in important respects.

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<sup>18</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for emphasising these matters (i.e. the distinction between something counting as philosophy and someone counting as a philosopher as well as the possible controversy around the tight link between these two) and for pushing me to articulate the difference.

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