

# Mind, Body, and Morality

New Perspectives on  
Descartes and Spinoza

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## 3 The Gender of the Cartesian Mind, Body, and Mind-Body Union

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### 3 The Gender of the Cartesian Mind, Body, and Mind-Body Union

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In her first known letter to Descartes, Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia famously asks him to specify “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” (AT 3, 661; S, 62). Descartes answers by distinguishing between three primitive notions, pertaining respectively to the soul or mind, the body, and the mind-body union and he emphasizes that “all human knowledge consists only in distinguishing well these notions, and in attributing each of them only to those things to which it pertains” (AT 3, 665–66; S, 65). Descartes’ primitive notions did not satisfy Elisabeth (e.g. AT 4, 2; S, 72), but despite their limitations when it comes to explaining mind-body interaction, the three notions, and particularly the separate notion pertaining to the mind-body union, does help us understand how Descartes perceives of our lives as embodied individuals and has attained well deserved attention in recent research.<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter I take Descartes’ distinction between the three primitive notions as my starting point and ask what we can know about gender when we focus respectively on the notion of the mind, the notion of the body, and the notion of the mind-body union.<sup>2</sup> I will follow Descartes’ advice and keep the three notions separate, and I hope to show that his contribution to our understanding of gender lies exactly in showing that depending on which notion we choose, we achieve different kinds of knowledge, which cannot be reduced to each other.

Gender is not a term used by Descartes and his contemporaries. In his brief discussion of reproduction in *Description du corps humain*, Descartes refers to “les semences des deux sexes” (AT 11, 253) and in *De l’égalité des deux sexes* (1673), the Cartesian François Poulain de la Barre argues that “l’esprit n’a point de sexe” (Poulain 2011, 99). In these texts all bodily, social and mental relations between men and women are described as relations between “des deux sexes” and I will follow the praxis to translate the French *sexe* with the English sex when I discuss particular passages from the texts, but when abstracting from particular texts I use gender as a general term covering all

bodily, experiential, and social aspects of our lives as women and men. I have chosen this terminology because in twenty-first-century English the term “sex” has increasingly come to mean only biological features of gender.<sup>3</sup>

First, in section 1, I examine what we can know about gender through the notion of thought, pertaining to the mind alone. The section begins with a brief summary of pre-Cartesian views on whether the soul is gendered. In section 2, I focus on the primitive notion of body and examine Descartes’ treatment of gender in his anatomical writings. Finally, in section 3, I discuss what we can know about gender when it is examined through the third primitive notion of the mind-body union.

## 1. The Mind Has No Sex

The idea that women and men have similar rational souls can be traced to Plato’s famous discussion in *The Republic* V (454d-456b) and the idea has been a theological commonplace since Augustine, who grounds it in the doctrine of creation.<sup>4</sup> Augustine formulates the point in the following words:

No one doubts that the human being was made in the image of Him who created this being, not according to the body, nor according to any part of the soul, but according to the rational mind, wherein the knowledge of God can exist. The image of God does not remain except in the part of the soul in which it clings to the eternal reasons which it may contemplate and consider [ . . . ] and this, it is clear, not men only, but also women have.

(*De trinitate* XII.7.12; cited from Reuter, Grahn, and Paakkinen 2014, 650)

Despite bodily differences and the effects these differences have on the lives of men and women—not least on women’s position in society—both sexes have the same capacity to contemplate eternal reasons and to know God. The doctrine is taken up by Thomas Aquinas, who writes that “The image of God, in the principal sense of the image, namely the intellectual nature, is found both in man and in woman” (*Summa theologiae* I.93.4, ad 1; cited from Reuter, Grahn, and Paakkinen 2014, 652). But though Aquinas holds on to the idea that men and women share the same intellectual nature, he puts much emphasis on the imperfection of women’s corporeal nature, which makes them inclined to be led by their emotions rather than their reason. He writes:

[Aristotle] gives the example of women in whom, for the most part, reason flourishes but little because of the imperfection of corporal nature. Because of this they do not govern their emotions by reason

but rather are mostly led by their emotions. For this reason wise and brave women are rarely found, and so they cannot be called continent and incontinent without qualification.

(*Sententia libri Ethicorum* VII.5, n9; cited from Reuter, Grahn, and Paakkinen 2014, 652)

Here women are portrayed as on average inferior to men particularly in their practical reasoning, even though they have equal intellects including an equal ability to know God. The reason is their imperfect corporeal nature. Aquinas attributes this view to Aristotle, who claims in *Parts of Animals* (748a2–14) that the hot, thin, and pure blood of men is from a normative point of view better than the colder blood of women because it correlates with courage and practical wisdom.<sup>5</sup>

During the Renaissance, Thomism provided arguments for both sides in the *querelle des femmes* (debate over the worth of women), and in Descartes' own time the claim that the intellect has no sex was given a feminist Thomistic articulation by Marie le Jars de Gournay in her treatise *Égalité des hommes et des femmes* (1622). She writes:

[T]he human animal, when it is understood correctly, is neither man nor woman, the sexes having been made double, not simply, but *secundum quid*, to use Scholastic language, for the sake of propagation alone. The unique form and differentiation of that animal consists only in the human soul.

(Gournay 2002, 978)<sup>6</sup>

Here Gournay makes two important claims. First, she emphasizes that the difference between the sexes is not an essential difference in species, but only an accidental difference. Second, she emphasizes that the accidental difference is only for propagation and that there is thus no reason to suppose that it affects the rational soul, which is the unique form of a human being.<sup>7</sup>

Descartes never explicitly discussed whether the mind has a sex, but right at the beginning of *Discourse de la Méthode* he emphasizes that “the power of judging well and of distinguishing the true from false—which is what we properly call ‘good sense’ or ‘reason’—is naturally equal in all men” (AT 6, 2; CSM 1, 111) and it is quite clear from the context as well as most of his other writings<sup>8</sup> that he is here using “homme” in the generic sense including women. Descartes repeated praise for Elisabeth’s intellectual abilities, made public in the dedicatory letter prefacing *Principia Philosophiae* (AT 8, 1–3; CSM 1, 190–91), indicate that he did not recognize any principal differences between the intellectual abilities of men and women.

So, how can we according to Descartes know with certainty that reason is equal in all human beings? In order to answer this question we

must focus on the notion of thought, which pertains to the soul when it is perceived on its own. In the Second Meditation, where Descartes examines his own nature as a thinking thing, he writes: “But what then am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions” (AT 7, 28; CSM 2, 19). All these modes of thought belong to me as a thinking thing, but whereas the “fact that it is I who am doubting and understanding and willing is so evident that I see no way of making it any clearer”, sensory perceptions belong to me only insofar as I “*seem* to see, to hear, and to be warmed”.<sup>9</sup> The existence of bodily things and their properties, such as light, noise, and heat, is still under doubt, but sensory perceptions, when understood in “this restricted sense of the term [. . .] is simply thinking” (AT 7, 29; CSM 2, 19) and as such certainly belong to me as a thinking thing. At this point Descartes could have added that he *seems* to be gendered.

At the beginning of the Sixth Meditation Descartes returns to the question of the difference between the will and the pure understanding, which depend on the mind alone, and the imagination which “seems to be nothing else but an application of the cognitive faculty to a body which is intimately present to it” (AT 7, 72; CSM 2, 50). He explains that:

[T]his power of imagining, which is in me, differing as it does from the power of understanding, is not a necessary constituent of my own essence, that is, of the essence of my mind. For if I lacked it, I should undoubtedly remain the same individual as I now am; from which it seems to follow that it depends on something distinct from myself.

(AT 7, 73; CSM 2, 51)

Descartes’ argument is not very clear, but he seems to claim that the imagination depends on bodies both in the sense that it has bodies as its objects and in the sense that “if there does exist some body to which the mind is so joined that it can apply itself to contemplate it, as it were, whenever it pleases, then it may possibly be this very body that enables me to imagine corporeal things” (AT 7, 73; CSM 2, 51). Thus, the mind has to be joined to a body in order to be able to imagine other bodies. At this point Descartes has not yet shown that bodies exist, but he has shown that “they are capable of existing, in so far as they are the subject-matter of pure mathematics, since [he perceives] them clearly and distinctly” (AT 7, 71; CSM 2, 50). God is capable of creating what can be clearly and distinctly perceived. This potential existence of bodies is, according to Descartes, enough to show that the imagination depends on something else in addition to the mind taken on its own. The same is true for sense perception, by which we are able to perceive not only the mathematical characteristics of bodies, but also “colours, sounds, tastes, pain and so on” (AT 7, 74; CSM 2, 51).

I now turn back to the topic of gender and want to claim that from Descartes' point of view, gender, like the imagination and sensory perception, cannot be thought of without reference to a body. When we perceive the mind as distinct from the body, gender is thus, like the imagination and sensory perception, an accidental property, which "is not a necessary constituent [. . .] of the essence of my mind" (AT 7, 73; CSM 2, 51). The non-gendered character of the mind is, further, something the pure understanding perceives clearly and distinctly. In *Principia* Descartes writes that "we can easily have two clear and distinct notions or ideas, one of created thinking substance and the other of corporeal substance, provided we are careful to distinguish all the attributes of thought from the attributes of extension" (AT 8, 25–26; CSM 1, 211). When applying this claim to the question of gender, we can draw the conclusion, that when carefully distinguishing the attributes of thought, such as the will and the pure understanding, from attributes of extension—to which gender belongs—we can have a clear and distinct idea of ourselves as non-gendered thinking beings.

Finally we can also apply the distinction between the three primitive notions to the question of whether the mind has a sex. From Descartes' emphasis that we are mistaken "when we want to explain some difficulty by means of a notion which does not pertain to it" as well as "when we want to explain one of these notions by another" (AT 3, 666; S, 65) follows that it is a mistake to explain those modes of thought that belong to the mind alone by bodily features such as gender.

Interpreted in this way Descartes strengthens the doctrine that the mind has no sex. We saw above how Gournay, in her Aristotelian-Thomistic framework, argued that gender is an accidental property, and we can claim that the Cartesian notion of the mind as a thinking thing distinct from the body strengthens the claim about the accidental nature of gender.<sup>10</sup> The Cartesian approach was taken up and explicitly applied to the question of gender by Poulain de la Barre in his treatise on the equality between the sexes.<sup>11</sup> When the Cartesian method is correctly applied, it is, according to Poulain, "easy to see that the difference between the two sexes is limited to the body, since that is the only part used in the reproduction of humankind". In true Cartesian manner Poulain adds that "the mind is found to be equal and of the same nature in all men" when it is "[c]onsidered independently" (Poullain 2002, 82).

Descartes did, I claim, successfully provide the tools to show that when the mind is considered on its own it is non-gendered, but this argument is not in itself sufficient to refute the claim that women's bodily constitution affects their intellectual capacity. We have to return to that question in the context of the mind-body union, and before that we need to look at some length at what we can know about gender when we consider the body as a separate extended entity.

## 2. Gender and Formation of the Human Body

In his second letter to Elisabeth, when he elaborates on the difference between the three primitive notions, Descartes writes that “the body, that is to say, extension, shapes, and motions, can [. . .] be known by the understanding alone, but is much better known by the understanding aided by the imagination” (AT 3, 691; S, 69). Geometry and physics constitute the exemplary forms of knowledge about bodies, and, as is well known, Descartes attempts to use these forms of knowledge also in his explanations of living bodies and their generation.<sup>12</sup> In a letter to Mersenne from 20 February 1639, he writes that he has “spent much time on dissection during the last eleven years”, but “found nothing whose formation seems inexplicable by natural causes” (AT 2, 525; CSMK, 134), and in the posthumously published *Description du corps humain* he includes conception and generation among the phenomena that can be explained by such causes. I quote this passage at some length, since it is one of the very few places where Descartes explicitly discusses the relations between the sexes. He writes:

I specify nothing concerning the shape and the arrangement of the particles of the seed: it is enough for me to say that that of plants, being hard and solid, can have its parts arranged and situated in a particular way which cannot be altered without making them useless. But the situation in the case of seed in animals and humans is quite different, for this is quite fluid and is usually produced in the copulation between the two sexes, being, it seems an unorganised mixture of two liquids, which act on each other like a kind of yeast, heating one another so that some of the particles acquire the same degree of agitation as fire, expanding and pressing on the others, and in this way putting them gradually into the state required for the formation of parts of the body.

And these two liquids need not be very different from one another for this purpose. For, just as we can observe how old dough can make new dough swell, and how the scum formed on beer is able to serve as yeast for making more beer, so we can easily agree that the seeds of the two sexes, when mixed together, serve as yeast to one another.

(AT 11, 253; G, 186–87)

Descartes continues by explaining how the heat generated through this process makes “some of the particles to collect in a part of the space containing them, and then makes them expand, pressing against the others” (AT 11, 254; G, 187). This is how he explains the differentiation of the organs, beginning with the formation of the heart.

Descartes does not discuss the differentiation of male and female foetuses in *Description du corps humain*, but in some notes published as *Primae cogitationes circa generationem animalium* he makes a few remarks on the topic. The passage I want to discuss is not only posthumously published, but particularly unauthorized, because the editor of Descartes' *Opuscula Posthuma* (1701), where *Primae cogitationes* first appeared in print, tells us that it was erased in the manuscript (AT 11, 515). But even if Descartes (or someone else) was ultimately unsatisfied with this explanatory attempt and erased it, it deserves attention when we want to understand Descartes' thoughts on the gendered body.<sup>13</sup> The passage is troubling also because contrary to what Descartes indicates in his published writings, he here claims that the anatomical differentiation of male and female foetuses gives occasion to conclude why "men are more natively intelligent (*ingeniosi*)" (AT 11, 516). This is so because male foetuses are located in the womb in such a way that "the purest part of semen is able to pass higher up and thus gain more strength" (AT 11, 516). The location of the foetus also explains whether the penis develops outwards, as in the male, which is located with his back against his mother's spine, or inwards, as in the female foetus, which is located in the opposite direction (AT 11, 516).<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that Descartes is pointing at a correspondence between the sexual organ and intelligence: the same location of the foetus which favours the development of the male sexual organ also favours the development of intelligence. He is not claiming that there is any causal relation between the male sex and a more developed intelligence.

Before accusing Descartes for contradicting his view on everyone's equal capacity of reason, we need to keep in mind that in *Primae cogitationes* he is explicitly discussing anatomical features and *ingenium* refers exclusively to modes of thought that depend on the body, such as the imagination and memory, not to the pure understanding or the will, which depend on the mind alone. Interestingly, in the dedicatory letter to Elisabeth that prefaces *Principia*, Descartes praises both the resolution of her will, which is less remarkable since it is "within the capacity of everyone" and "the outstanding and incomparable sharpness of [her] native intelligence (*ingenii*)" which is "obvious from the penetrating examination [she has] made of all the secrets of [the] sciences, and from the fact that [she has] acquired an exact knowledge of them in in so short a time" (AT 8, 3; CSM 1, 191–92). Scientific knowledge, such as geometry and physics, depends on the imagination as well as the pure understanding. The dedicatory letter and *Primae cogitationes* both include modes of thought that depend on the body, such as the imagination, under the notion of *ingenium*, but in the dedicatory letter Descartes claims that at least one woman is more intelligent than most men. When we think of exceptional individuals, such as Elisabeth, in the light of Descartes'



anatomical and physiological writings we have to ask how their foetal development differed from that of ordinary people: perhaps the location of the foetus has been exceptionally beneficial for the development of those anatomical features required for an ingenious imagination and a particularly detailed memory. Since these cases are exceptional, we can think that they may occur in both sexes even if the ordinary anatomical development has the consequence that most women tend to be less intelligent than most men, as is claimed in *Primae cogitationes* (AT 11, 516).

When interpreting Descartes' view on the native intelligence of men and women, we must give the published dedicatory letter to Elisabeth more authority than his unpublished and even erased primary thoughts on the development of the foetus. The dedicatory letter is particularly interesting because Descartes praises Elisabeth's intelligence, which is able to shine despite "the customary education that so often condemns young ladies to ignorance" (AT 8, 3; CSM 1, 191), thus indicating that if women show less ability, this can be due to education rather than lack in native capacities. But it is still wise, I think, not to use the dedicatory letter as evidence against *Primae cogitationes*, but rather to acknowledge that the passages are compatible and both refer to *ingenium* as a native intellectual capacity, which includes the bodily capacities of imagination and memory, and which shows individual variation. This capacity must be distinguished from the "power of judging well [. . .] or 'reason' (*raison*)" (AT 6, 2; CSM 1, 111) of the *Discours*. The latter capacity belongs to the mind perceived on its own, it is natively equal in all humans, and, most importantly, all differences are differences in how well judgement or reason is applied. To judge or reason well is something we learn, most importantly by following Descartes' method, which should be used by Scholastic doctors and young ladies alike, in order to overcome their particular forms of ignorance. The equal power of judgement or reason is also in the opening passages of the *Discours* separated from a "quick [. . .] wit, [a] sharp and distinct [. . .] imagination, [and an] ample or prompt [. . .] memory" (AT 6, 2; CSM 1, 111–12). These are capacities that show individual variation and which are in the Latin texts considered part of the bodily grounded *ingenium*. In this and the previous section, where I have been discussing the mind and the body separately, it is important to keep the purely mental capacity of reason and the bodily grounded capacity of *ingenium* separate, but I will come back to the question of their relation in the next section, when I discuss the mind-body union.

Despite its questionable authority, the passage in *Primae cogitationes* is important because it illustrates Descartes' attempt to explain sexual differentiation by what he calls natural causes. Seen as empirical descriptions, the accounts are indeed imaginative and highly speculative, but I want to claim that they must be seen as hypotheses rather than as verified descriptions.<sup>15</sup> Descartes is aware that his account of generation is

not based solely on what we would call empirical observations. In *Primae cogitationes*, when he discusses the initial expansion of the semen, a process which is claimed to depend on heat, just as in the *Description*, he points out that the question whether the initial process of expansion takes “one or two days, perhaps only one hour” is “a factual question (*quaestio facti*)” which cannot be “solved by reason” (AT 11, 510). This remark strengthens the impression that Descartes is formulating a hypothesis, which he thinks still has to be tested. As many commentators have emphasized, Descartes did engage in detailed anatomical observations, including dissections of animal embryos,<sup>16</sup> but these dissections were necessarily “still pictures”. Even when Descartes was able to compare the development of organs in embryos of different age, these observations could not capture the actual processes of development. In order to describe these processes, Descartes uses reason and the imagination, and his emphasis on the location of the foetus must, I think, be seen in the framework of his hypothetical thinking. If we know the location of a foetus and the principles of its growth, then we are on more or less geometrical terms able to formulate a hypothesis of its development, but this hypothesis still needs to be tested against anatomical findings. Descartes was optimistic concerning the possibility to explain generation by natural causes, but we also know that he was reluctant to publish his anatomical writings (at least in part) because he thought that he had not yet “had the resources to make all the observations [he] should need in order to back up and justify [his] arguments” (AT 9, 17; CSM 1, 188), as he explains in the preface to the French translation of *Principia*. Descartes’ unpublished primary thoughts on the differentiation of the sexes is best read, I think, as his untested hypothesis and it is valuable because it tells us what kind of explanatory model he is looking for.

The first and foremost natural cause used in order to explain the development of the foetus is heat, which Descartes describes as the very fast motion of particles (AT 11, 7–10; CSM 1, 83–84). In addition there is location and density, which are both related to the arrangement of particles. All these belong to the attributes of bodies, which are in Descartes’ second letter to Elisabeth exemplified as “extension, shapes, and motions” and which can be best known by “the understanding aided by the imagination” (AT 3, 691; S, 69). Interestingly, we can note that contrary to what is the case with the seed of plants, where the rearrangement of the particles destroys the function of the seed, this is not the case with the seed of animals, where the proper function depends on heat—and thus on motion—rather than on the arrangement of particles.<sup>17</sup> This means that the differentiation of the sexes cannot be found in the seed, which is “an unorganised mixture of two liquids” (AT 11, 253; G, 187). Descartes emphasizes the similarity of male and female seed in *Description du corps humain* as well as in *Primae cogitationes*, where he writes that “the semen of both parents” must be “simultaneously mixed” in order to

produce successful generation (AT 11, 507). Descartes interestingly adds that the semen from both parents has to be equally strong, because if the semen from either parent is “so weak that it easily and without major resistance mixes and surrenders to the other” there is no generation of an animal but only of a tumour (AT 11, 508). By claiming that equal strength is required from the seed of both parents, Descartes emphasizes their equal role in generation.

Descartes’ account of generation is significantly different from the Aristotelian account, and this difference is essential when we want to understand how Descartes’ conception of gender as a trait of extended bodies differs from earlier accounts. In the *Generation of Animals*, Aristotle writes:

[T]he male and the female are distinguished by a certain capacity and incapacity, for the one who is able to concoct and form and ejaculate semen and who has the principle of the form is the male. [. . .] That which receives but is incapable of both forming and ejaculating is female.

(*Gen. an.* 765b9–15)

In her interpretation of Aristotle’s understanding of the biological difference between men and women, Marguerite Deslauriers identifies two main features: first, Aristotle distinguishes between the male ability to fully concoct semen and the female’s merely partial ability, and second, he holds that “the male has the principle of the form, which determines the shape and the functions of the offspring” (Deslauriers 2009, 216).<sup>18</sup> It is easy to see how Descartes alters both features. First, his claim about similarity, and particularly about the similar strength of the male and female semen, undermines the idea that there is a difference between the male and female abilities to concoct, and second, his location-based mechanical explanation of the differentiation and development of the human organs attempts to make any determining principle of form unnecessary.

Aristotle’s and Descartes’ accounts both rely on heat as fundamental for generation, but they understand the nature of heat and its role in generation differently. In Aristotle there is a “principle of natural heat” which is directly connected to the capacity of concoction and different in males and females (*Gen. an.* 4.1 766a31–36; Deslauriers 2009, 217–18). According to Descartes, on the other hand, heat is explained on purely physical terms as the fast movement of particles (AT 11, 7–10; CSM 1, 83–84). From his perspective Aristotle’s principle of natural heat is one of the obscure real qualities that physics must get rid of. In a letter to Mersenne, Descartes argues that “[h]eat, sound, and other such qualities [. . .] are only motions in the air” and “motion is not a *real quality* but only a *mode*” (AT 3, 649–50; CSMK, 217). By emphasizing that heat is mere motion and that motion itself is only a mode of extension,

Descartes undermines the possibility of a principle of natural heat, which is different in males and females and produce a qualitative difference in the male and female semen. The idea that heat is a mere mode does further strengthen the accidental nature of the differentiation of the sexes. The gender of the foetus is arbitrarily determined, depending on its location in the womb.

Descartes' mechanistic model does undermine the Aristotelian idea about qualitative differences between the sexes, but, as we have seen, his model does not exclude the possibility that there are anatomical differences between the sexes and that some differences can influence native intelligence. From Descartes onwards the question of intellectual difference or similarity between the sexes becomes an empirical question focusing on *ingenium* and other bodily conditions for thought. Among his followers we find those who, like Poulain de la Barre, argued that "a woman's brain is exactly the same as ours" (2002, 83), and those who, like Nicholas Malebranche, emphasized the difference in the delicacy in the brain fibres in men and women (1997, 130–31).<sup>19</sup> As we know, the discussion of whether there are cognitively significant empirical differences between the brains of men and women is still going on at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and there does not seem to be any easy empirical answer to the question.

Having now seen what we can know about gender when it is studied with the help of Descartes' second primitive notion, pertaining to the body alone, and leaving the resulting empirical questions unsolved, we now turn our attention to the third primitive notion, pertaining to the mind-body union.

### 3. The Gendered Mind-Body Union

To my knowledge, the only description of gendered experience connected to Descartes' corpus is Elisabeth's remark in a letter of 24 May 1645. She writes:

I have a body imbued with a large part of the weaknesses of my sex, so that it is affected very easily by the afflictions of the soul and has none of the strength to bring itself back into line, as it is of a temperament subject to obstructions and resting in an air which contributes strongly to this.

(AT 4, 208; S, 88–89)

Descartes does not comment on Elisabeth's reference to female weakness, but much of the discussion that follows in subsequent letters focuses on the mind's—and particularly the will's—ability to overcome and even restore bodily disturbances. I will come back to this discussion, but before that I examine what can be said about gendered experience from the

point of view of what Descartes has to say about bodily sensations. If we look at Elisabeth's reference to the weakness of her sex as a description of a bodily sensation, we can (without overlooking significant difference between these experiences) compare it to Descartes' discussions of the sensation of pain. In *Principia* Descartes uses pain as an example showing that a perception can be clear without being distinct. He writes:

[W]hen someone feels an intense pain, the perception he has of it is indeed very clear, but is not always distinct. For people commonly confuse this perception with an obscure judgement they make concerning the nature of something which they think exists in the painful spot [. . .], but in fact it is the sensation alone which they perceive clearly.

(AT 8, 22; CSM 1, 208)

Some paragraphs later, Descartes explains that in order to avoid error, we must withhold from making judgements about the exact nature of the source of our sensations. We must "merely judge that there is in the objects (that is in the things, whatever they may turn out to be, which are the source of our sensations) something whose nature we do not know" (AT 8, 34; CSM 1, 218). Now, we can read Elisabeth's reference to her female sex in two different ways. First, we can read her as referring to her sex as the source of the bodily weakness she is experiencing, and in that case her reference must be seen as the kind of obscure judgement Descartes is warning against. Her experience of weakness can be very clear, but it does not in itself give her grounds to judge that it is caused by her sex. Second, we can read her as referring to an intrinsically gendered experience of bodily weakness, where gender is experienced as an aspect of the sensation rather than as its cause. According to this latter reading, the experience of being (in this case) female can in itself be completely clear, but Elisabeth and her readers must not make any judgement about the exact nature of its source. We must not, for example, make the judgement that the experience of gender is caused by a particular anatomical feature.<sup>20</sup>

In her interpretation of the Cartesian mind-body union, Lilli Alanen points out that the "problem with the notion of the mind-body union is its hybrid nature" (2003, 62). Like the notions of the mind and the body, this third notion is claimed by Descartes to be primitive, but whereas the mind and the body have their respective "principal attributes through which the human mind can have clear and distinct knowledge" the notion of the mind-body union "is not simple but composite" (Alanen 2003, 62). Perceived from the perspective of clear and distinct knowledge this is a problem. As we have seen, sensations can be very clear, but they are rarely, if ever, distinct.<sup>21</sup> But, on the other hand, as Alanen continues by pointing out, the primitive and truly hybrid nature of the

mind-body union has the effect that our sensations and other bodily experiences are irreducible to either the mind or the body. The irreducible nature of sensations successfully blocks any attempt to identify pain with certain motions in the brain, for example. When we look at the gender of the mind-body union from this point of view, we see that the experience of gender escapes clear and distinct knowledge: in its composite nature it cannot be known through either of the two principal attributes, thought and extension. Gender is a genuine hybrid of mind and body, intrinsically present in our sensations of pain and pleasure, and cannot be reduced to either the mind, which when it is studied through the attribute of thought reveals itself to have no sex, or to the body, with its anatomical details, which can be studied through the attribute of extension and where the possible variation between the sexes ultimately becomes an empirical question. Gender is, as Alanen characterizes the mind-body union, “a brute fact of experience” (2003, 58) and as such an essential aspect of human existence.<sup>22</sup>

Descartes’ focus on the mind-body union as a primitive notion provides an excellent basis to criticize reductive explanations of gender, and particularly the explanatory model which has in later feminist terminology been called biological reductionism. But even if sensations cannot be reduced to their bodily causes, they do, according to Descartes, have them. The bodily causes of at least some modes of thought is why Poullain, who emphasizes the bodily nature of thought and even claims, in *De l’éducation des dames*, that “all the actions of the mind [. . .] depend on the participation of the body” (Poullain 2002, 213), has to claim that all bodily organs involved in thinking are similar in men and women, in order to be able to claim that minds are equal, not only when considered independently, but also as part of the mind-body union (Poullain 2002, 82–83).<sup>23</sup> Poullain can challenge the Thomistic claim about a bodily grounded moral incontinence in women only by arguing that all relevant bodily organs in men and women are identical. Descartes himself puts, as we saw in the first section, much emphasis on those modes of thought that are independent of the body and in his case the Thomistic claim can, I argue, be challenged also by looking at the distinction and relation between the modes of thought that depend on the body and those that do not. In other words, we have to look at the relation between the actions and passions of the mind, a topic which is, as we know, at the centre of Descartes’ correspondence with Elisabeth.

First, we must return to Elisabeth’s reference to the weakness of her sex and note that despite a superficial similarity, her remark is essentially different from Aquinas’ claim that in women “reason flourishes but little because of the imperfection of corporal nature”. She is referring to an imperfection of her corporeal nature, but she is not claiming that this bodily weakness affects her capacity to reason. She claims that due to its weakness, her *body* is “affected very easily by the afflictions of the soul

and has none of the strength to bring itself back into line” (AT 4, 208; S, 88). Her claim is not about how her body affects her soul, but about how her body is unable to prevent itself from being affected by the passions of her soul, and on these grounds she is questioning the therapeutic aspect of Descartes’ advice. However strong her mind, she doubts that it can cure her bodily symptoms (and therefore she still considers, as she explains to Descartes, to continue taking the waters of Spa in order to restore her bodily balance). In this letter Elisabeth is referring to effects on the body, but later on in the correspondence, she emphasizes—and gets Descartes to accept—that “there are diseases that destroy altogether the power of reasoning” and “others that diminish the force of reason” (AT 4, 269; S, 100).<sup>24</sup> Now she is discussing how the body can interfere with the soul and her example is interesting, not least from a gender perspective. She writes:

When Epicurus was struggling to convince his friends that he felt no pain from his kidney stones, instead of crying like the vulgar, he was leading the life of the philosopher and not that of a prince or a captain or a courtier. For he knew that nothing could come to him from outside that would make him forget his role and cause him to fail to rise above his circumstances according to his philosophy.

(AT 4, 269; S, 100)

Here Elisabeth’s point seems to be that when an intensive pain, such as that caused by kidney stones, diminishes the force of reason, the disturbance can still be overcome by someone who can focus solely on his or her reason, but not by someone who has to lead an active life and take external circumstances into account. She is using the example to explain her inability to focus solely on reason, but here she is identifying herself as a prince, not as a woman.<sup>25</sup> The difference between Epicurus and the prince, captain, or courtier is not a difference in gender or any other kind of bodily disposition, but in what kind of life they are leading. When it comes to the weakness of her body, Elisabeth finds it relevant to refer to her sex, but when it comes to reason’s ability to disregard bodily and other disturbances, it is not a question of bodily disposition as such, but of what kind of life one is leading.<sup>26</sup>

When Descartes replies to this letter, he also distinguishes between those bodily disturbances that entirely prevents “the will from being free” (AT 4, 282; S, 107) and “other indispositions, which do not altogether trouble the senses but simply alter the humours and make one find oneself extraordinarily inclined to sadness anger or some other passion” (AT 4, 283; S, 107). In the latter cases, the will and thereby also the capacity of making judgements, remains free. As is well known, Descartes holds that judgement consists of two components, a perception of the intellect and an act of the will (AT 8, 17–18; CSM 1, 204).<sup>27</sup> The role of the will is

crucial, because we can always avoid error if we assert only those perceptions that are clear and distinct. The mental capacity of intellect (*intellectus*) must not be confused with the bodily grounded capacity of native intelligence (*ingenium*), discussed in the previous section, but we can note that when Descartes defines judgement in *Principia*, the perceptions of the intellect include perceptions of the pure understanding as well as sensory perceptions and the imagination (AT 8, 17; CSM 1, 204), whereof the latter does, as we have seen, belong to the capacity of *ingenium*.

When we take the role of the will into consideration, we can draw the conclusion that even if Descartes' hypothesis in *Primae Cogitationes* turns out to be correct and women are natively less intelligent than men, he still attributes to us an equal ability to avoid error as long as we do not assert to what we do not perceive clearly and distinctly.<sup>28</sup> This conclusion is strengthened by what Descartes has to say about the equality of judgement and reason at the beginning of *Discourse de la Méthode*. As we saw in the previous section, he distinguishes "the power of judging well and of distinguishing the true from false" (AT 6, 2; CSM 1, 111), which is equal in all humans, from capacities of imagination and memory, which show great individual variation. He also points out that whereas the "greatest souls are capable of the greatest vices as well as the greatest virtues [. . .] those who proceed but very slowly can make much greater progress, if they always follow the right path, than those who hurry and stray from it" (AT 6, 2; CSM 1, 111). From this point of view we can argue against the Thomistic claim about women's moral incontinence by claiming that even if there is some cognitively relevant imperfection in women's nature, a woman is as able as a man to overcome her imperfection by applying her power of judging in accordance with the right method. Thus education, the task of learning how to use one's reason, becomes more essential than native abilities. If women appear morally incontinent, this is due to a lack of the right form of education.

Perceived from a historical perspective we might here identify a transition from the idea of women's moral incontinence to the idea of our inferior intellectual capacities. Malebranche was not the only Cartesian who held that there are intellectually significant differences in the brains of men and women, and it is not surprising that most twentieth-first-century feminists, who think that no modes of thought can be fully distinguished from matter, hold a position that is in fact very close to Poulain's. Today it is commonplace to argue that brain research has not been able to show any cognitively significant differences between men and women, and that differences between the genders must rather be seen as differences in education and socialization. These two claims constituted the backbone of Poulain's feminism.

When we consider Descartes' contribution to our understanding of gender, I think that his emphasis on the mutual independence of the three primitive notions is particularly important. He teaches us that we



can know different things about gender depending on which notion we choose and that the knowledge achieved through one notion cannot be reduced to any of the other notions. This perspective is philosophically important and it has a feminist potential particularly because it shows that the experience of gender cannot be reduced to ether anatomy or pure thought. But at the end of the day Elisabeth's initial question, quoted at the very beginning of this chapter, is still standing. As long as Descartes is unable to show how the soul is able to affect the body and vice versa, he is also unable to show how it is possible that bodily conditions can sometimes take away the freedom of the will, as he claims in his letter of 1 September 1645 (AT 4, 281–87; S, 106–09), but is under normal conditions able to make voluntary judgements independently of bodily modes of thought, such as the passions and the imagination.<sup>29</sup> He is facing a serious metaphysical problem here, and without a metaphysical foundation, a feminist argument based on the independence of the will remains as shaky as an argument based on empirical evidence supporting that there are no cognitively significant differences between the brains of men and women. It is no surprise that Poulain's argument, allowing for a bodily element in all modes of thought, has proved more long-lived.<sup>30</sup>

## Notes

- 1 My account is deeply indebted to the work of Lilli Alanen, particularly as it is articulated in Alanen 2003, 2004. See also Deborah Brown 2006 and Brown's chapter in this volume. I thank both authors for insightful discussions about the different aspects of the Cartesian mind-body union.
- 2 For discussions of Descartes' notion of gender, see also Hoffmann 1969; Clarke 1999; Reuter 2002; Heinämaa 2004.
- 3 It must be noted that my use of the term "gender" differs from gender as it is used in the so-called sex/gender distinction, where gender refers to experiential and/or socially constructed aspects of our gendered lives as distinguished from biological sex. I use gender as a term which is not distinguished from, but includes bodily sex as well as diverse experiential, cultural, and social interpretations of sex. For discussions of philosophical problems connected to the sex/gender distinction, see Gatens 1983; Heinämaa 1996; and for a discussion of why the distinction cannot be used when we interpret historical texts, see Laqueur 1990 and my critical remarks on some aspects of his interpretation in Reuter 2002, 113–15.
- 4 For discussions of Plato, Augustine, and Aquinas on gender, see Reuter, Grahn, and Paakkinen 2014, 641–54; and on the two latter also Paakkinen 2016, 20–86. Special thanks to Simo Knuuttila for helpful advice on the passages from Augustine and Aquinas included here.
- 5 For a discussion of this passage from *Parts of Animals*, see Deslauriers 2018. It is important to note, though, that despite identifying this *correlation* between male physiology and moral virtue, Aristotle did not claim that the moral incontinence discussed in *Politics* (1260a14) is *caused* by women's imperfect biological constitution, discussed in *The Generation of Animals* (765b9–766a37, 775a15–16), see Deslauriers 2009.

- 6 My translation. In the second edition from 1641 Gournay abandons her Scholastic language and simply emphasizes that the difference between the sexes is not a difference in species. Here she also writes that the unique form is the rational rather than the human soul. For both versions of the text, see Gournay 2002, 978.
- 7 For a detailed discussion of Gournay's Aristotelianism, see Deslauriers (Forthcoming).
- 8 The exception is the posthumous *Primae cogitationes circa generationem animalium*, which I will discuss in the next section.
- 9 See Mikko Yrjönsuuri's chapter in this volume for a detailed discussion of what Descartes actually means when he writes that one "seems to see".
- 10 Many scholars have argued that Descartes' thought and particularly his mind-body dualism contributed to the history of feminist thought by strengthening claims about the non-gendered nature of the mind in general and of reason in particular: see Hoffmann 1969; Perry 1985; Schiebinger 1989; Harth 1992; Atherton 1993; O'Neill 1999; Broad 2002, 2012, 2015; Stuurman 2004; Hutton 2005. I agree about the impact of the Cartesian approach, but I do not agree with Schiebinger, who contrasts the Cartesian influence with the futility of Gournay's Aristotelian argument. According to Schiebinger, however "brilliantly [Gournay and other Aristotelian feminists] stood Aristotle on his head, he was easily set upright again" (1989, 170). Gournay did not stand Aristotle on his head, but rather used some of his most fundamental principles in order to criticize misinterpretations of the Aristotelian heritage. On Gournay's use of Aristotelian principles, see Deslauriers (Forthcoming).
- 11 On Poulain's Cartesian feminism, see Stuurman 2004; Pellegrin 2011; Reuter 2013, 2017.
- 12 There is a growing scholarly literature on Descartes' notion of life and the problems he encounters in his attempt to explain life and particularly generation without recourse to teleological causes. I am unable to do justice to this literature here and only mention my direct influences, which are Gaukroger 2000; Detlefsen 2016.
- 13 On the history of the manuscript, see AT 11, 501–504. We do not know who erased the passage or why, but we can note that the passage begins by making a reference to the foetus' "sympathy of motion with the mother" (AT 11, 515). "Sympathy of motion" can be seen as one of those, as Stephen Gaukroger puts it, "offending sympathies and powers of the [Renaissance] naturalists" (2000, 384), which Descartes wanted to get rid of and it is more likely that the passage was erased because it mentions sympathy of motion than because of its claims about sexual differentiation as such. On Descartes' criticism of sympathetic and antipathetic influences, see *Principia* IV art. 187 (AT 8, 314–15; CSM 1, 279), and also Sutton 2000, 701–02. My interpretation of *Primae cogitationes*, including the translations from Latin, is indebted to Mikko Yrjönsuuri. Additional thanks to Juhana Toivonen and Miira Tuominen for discussions about the meaning of *ingenium*.
- 14 The idea that the female sexual organ is an inverted version of the male organ was a commonplace in Galenic medicine (Schiebinger 1989, 163–65; Laqueur 1990, 26). Descartes seems to adopt this view, but whereas the Galenic explanatory model was based on the balance between four qualitatively different elements, he tries to establish a mechanistic explanation, based on location.
- 15 There is an extensive scholarly literature on Descartes' scientific method in general and his uses of hypotheses in particular, to which I cannot do justice here. My immediate sources are Garber 1993; Detlefsen 2016.

- 16 See particularly the work of Annie Bitbol-Hespériès, who argues that in addition to his own observations, Descartes' accounts of generation were indebted to Fabricius of Aquapendente's treatises *De Ovi Pulli* and *De Formato Faetu* (Bitbol-Hespériès 2000, 358–61). Descartes mentions Fabricius' writings in the same letter to Mersenne (2 November 1646), where he mentions his dissections of embryos (AT 4, 555).
- 17 For a discussion of the similarities and differences between plants and animals as categories of living beings, see Detlefsen 2016, 145–53.
- 18 I compare Aristotle and Descartes in order to illuminate the difference in explanatory principles, but there was not a direct historical transition from the former to the latter. Accounts of generation in Descartes' time were dominated by Galen's model according to which women possessed their own colder and less active kind of seed rather than a similar, but less concocted from of seed, as Aristotle claims, see Maclean 1980, 36. This difference between Aristotle's and Galen's models is not relevant for the point I am making since both models hold that the seed produced by the female is weaker and less perfect.
- 19 Malebranche's position resembles a synthesis of Descartes praise of Elisabeth and his remarks in *Primæ cogitationes*: Malebranche defends a general difference between the sexes, but allows for individual variation that can be greater than the variation between the sexes (1997, 130). On Malebranche and women, see Broad 2012, 2015.
- 20 The first reading is probably a better contextual interpretation, since Elisabeth seems to refer to an established understanding of sexual difference in order to explain her experience, but the second reading makes it possible to spell out how Descartes' view makes it possible to criticize that model. For a discussion of this passage, see also Shapiro 2007, 42. Shapiro suggests that Elisabeth's reference to the weakness of her sex can be read as sounding a note of irony, by which she wants to question the plausibility of Descartes' neo-stoic advice. I come back to the question of what kind of weakness Elisabeth is referring to.
- 21 The question of whether Descartes thinks that sensations can ever be distinctly perceived is a point of disagreement among scholars. We saw above that in *Principia* art. 46 he writes that "an intense pain [. . .] is indeed very clear, but is not always distinct" (AT 8, 22; CSM 1, 208), and in art. 66 he holds, in the Latin text, that when we take great care in our judgements, sensations, emotions, and appetites can "be clearly perceived" (AT 8, 32; CSM 1, 216), whereas the French translation has it "connoissance claire et distincte" (AT 9, 55). Most scholars see this inconsistent terminology as a lack of a strict definition of the terms "clear" and "distinct" and hold that despite this terminological inconsistency, Descartes seems to think that sensations cannot in the strict sense be known distinctly since there is no principal attribute through which they can be known. See Alanen 2003, 64–70.
- 22 Following Maurice Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of Descartes, Sara Heinämaa has showed how this experience can be taken as the starting point for a phenomenological investigation of sexual difference, see particularly Heinämaa 2003, 2004.
- 23 For a discussion of Poulain's emphasis on bodily thoughts and how it differs from Descartes' view, see Reuter 2013, 79–80, 2017, 37–39.
- 24 The context of this letter, and of Descartes' reply, is a discussion about the relations between virtue and happiness, with a particular focus on the nature of the greatest good. I am here bracketing this context in order to focus exclusively on reason's and the will's ability to overcome bodily obstacles. For detailed discussions of virtue, happiness, and the greatest good, see particularly Calvin Normore's and Frans Svensson's chapters in this volume.

- 25 Many scholars, including myself, have wanted to identify a feminist element in Elisabeth's use of her female experience as a criticism of Descartes' dualism and neo-stoicism, see Harth 1992; Nye 1996, 1999; Wartenberg 1999; Reuter 1999; Broad 2002, 31–34. Though there is a feminist dimension to the claim that bodily experience must be taken into philosophical consideration, there are two problems with this interpretation. First, an emphasis on embodied experience can be used for feminist as well as anti-feminist purposes, as is showed for example by the passage from Aquinas I have been discussing. Second, recent decades of research on intersectionality (see, for example, Collins and Bilge 2016) has showed that experience is never constituted by only one aspect, such as gender, but by many intersecting aspects, including social standing, language, and religion. These latter aspects were all constitutive of Elisabeth's experience and in the passage discussed here social standing gains special significance.
- 26 See also Elisabeth's next letter, where she makes explicit reference to the demands of her own life (AT 4, 288; S, 109–10), and Brown's chapter in this volume, where she discusses the metaphysical implications of Descartes' account of the relevance of everyday experience.
- 27 I discuss the role of the will in Descartes' account of judgement and its connection to his claim that reason is equal in all humans in Reuter 2013; on the role of will in judgement, see also Alanen 2014 and Tomas Ekenberg's chapter in this volume.
- 28 Jacqueline Broad has argued that Malebranche's concept of freedom as the power to suspending assent allows for a similar feminist interpretation, despite his emphasis on differences in the brains of men and women. This feminist interpretation was developed particularly by the British philosophers Mary Astell and Mary Chudleigh, see Broad 2012, 2015.
- 29 For an excellent discussion of Elisabeth's criticism of Descartes' account of voluntary action, see Tollefsen 1999.
- 30 I thank my co-editor Frans Svensson for his excellent comments on an earlier version of this chapter as well as for his good judgement, generosity, and comradeship throughout our work on this volume.

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