

The Challenging Patient: Medicine in the Correspondence between Descartes and Princess Elisabeth

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While the majority of Descartes' medical writings detail the machinery and mechanics of the human body – its material parts, their organization, and their lawful operations – Descartes' correspondence with Princess Elisabeth highlights what is ultimately at stake in his medicine, namely, the health of the human being. Medicine is a significant theme in their correspondence, and their discussions on the topic are distinctively prescriptive: Descartes in the role of doctor and Elisabeth as patient. Descartes is genuinely concerned with Elisabeth's health, and when Elisabeth's own health is compromised by sickness, Descartes responds with diagnoses and remedies that concern the body *and* the soul and the relationship between the two in cases of illness and health for a human being. As he develops the theoretical and practical considerations that go into his medical advice, Descartes fills the roles of doctor and philosopher, and what emerges from his letters is a model of medicine that complements as well as distinguishes itself from other models of prescriptive medicine that belong to Descartes' medical philosophy. Meanwhile, for her part in the correspondence, Elisabeth takes the role of both patient and critic of Descartes' medicine. In this paper, I examine the medical model that Descartes advances in his correspondence with Elisabeth, comparing and contrasting it to other prescriptive models found elsewhere in his writings, and I argue that Elisabeth raises philosophically significant and compelling problems with Descartes' medical project when she questions the compatibility between, on the one hand, his medical goal and his recommended means to it and, on the other, some of his core metaphysical and epistemological commitments.

To characterize Descartes' medicine as a purely mechanistic model of medicine excludes what is at the very center of it, namely the relationship between soul and body. To be sure, Descartes' descriptions of the human body are the prominent feature of his work on medicine and an important part of his medical project; however, the object of Descartes' medicine is ultimately the human *being* and not merely the human *body*. In Descartes' philosophy, a human being is a composite of soul with body – but not just *any* body; it is a composite of a soul with a body having the particular organization and operations that make it a proper domicile for the soul.¹ When the human body functions properly as a *human* body, it is fit for union with a soul, but if it malfunctions, it risks separation and, thus, death for the human being. In this way, the health of the human being depends on the well-functioning of the body: when the human being's body functions properly, the human being is healthy. Accordingly, the goal of Descartes' medicine is to correct and maintain the organization and operations of the human body for the sake of preserving the life and health of the human being and avoiding death, i.e., the dissolution of the soul-body union upon bodily malfunction.

Descartes suggests different prescriptive means to that end. In some writings, he recommends being one's own doctor and pursuing what is pleasurable and avoiding what is painful. In others,

¹ Alison Simmons, "Sensible Ends: Latent Teleology in Descartes' Account of Sensation," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 39 (2001): 55.

he treats medicine as mechanics for the human being's bodily machine. He favors neither, but rather acknowledges that both of these models for prescriptive medicine have their limitations and lack the certainty he wants in medicine. In his correspondence with Elisabeth, Descartes puts forth yet another model when he prescribes to the Princess – whom he diagnoses with a fever and cough brought on by sadness – certain remedies of the soul.²

Elisabeth values Descartes' medical insights and wants his advice, yet, practically, she has difficulty following it. Moreover, she expresses theoretical concerns about the details and purpose of Descartes' medicine. In the first place, Elisabeth has an unsettled complaint against the metaphysics implicit in Descartes' medical diagnoses and remedies. Although Elisabeth never explicitly charges Descartes on this point, his medicine evokes soul-body interaction – the very kind of causal interaction that Descartes failed to explain satisfactorily to Elisabeth when she famously inquired into how his dualistic metaphysics could allow for it. Yet despite Descartes' difficulty in giving Elisabeth a clear and convincing account of *how* the soul and body of a human being interact, he is nonetheless committed to the idea *that* the soul and body have causal influence over one another. Granting that, Elisabeth still raises a serious problem for Descartes' medical endeavor when she pointedly remarks that by Descartes' metaphysical and epistemological principles concerning soul, body, and the soul-body composite, there is no advantage in seeking medical treatment over seeking death. Death, it would seem according to Descartes' philosophy, is a suitable remedy for a sick human being. I shall consider Descartes' two responses to this suggestion: (1) that we should fear death and not seek it, and (2) that the best medicine is preventative medicine according to the healthy regime he recommends. However, these considerations do not completely overcome the problem that Elisabeth raises. Her challenges significantly compromise Descartes' plan (as illustrated by his tree of knowledge in the Preface to his *Principles of Philosophy* – a work he dedicates to Elisabeth) to make medicine consistent with his philosophical system and to secure certainty in medicine.

² AT 5:65.

Malebranche on Knowing One's Own Mind

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“The most beautiful, the most pleasant, and the most necessary of all our knowledge is, undoubtedly,” Nicolas Malebranche tells us in the preface to his *Recherche de la vérité*, “the knowledge of ourselves.” Accordingly the aim of the *Recherche* is to provide a “science of man” to “teac[h] us what we are.” The largest part of this “science” is an inquiry into the “the mind of man in its entirety,” specifically the “nature of the [mind’s] faculties,” whose divisions, relations, and modes of exercise provide the blueprint for the book. Malebranche inherits most of his account of the faculties from Descartes, in terms of both the details about which basic faculties we have and how they work. The influence of Descartes also shows in Malebranche’s belief that a proper philosophical account of the faculties will provide each of us who works through it with the metaphysical self-knowledge necessary for overcoming the errors endemic to our fallen, human condition. He emphasizes this in the sixth and final book of the *Recherche*, where he states that the aim there is to take what has been learned about the mind in the previous five books and provide a method that will allow the willing reader to “render the mind as perfect as it can naturally be.” His “science of man” is thus of far more than theoretical interest: its goal is nothing less than our individual self-perfection, so far as that is possible through our own earthly efforts.

Given all this, it is quite striking that, as we work our way through the *Recherche*, we find Malebranche asserting that our prospects for metaphysical self-knowledge are actually quite poor. “The soul,” he claims in Book IV, “is only darkness to itself,” for we lack knowledge of our substantial essence or “archetype.” Malebranche agrees with Descartes that we do have knowledge of the archetype of bodily substance, which we grasp in the mind of God and on the basis of which can develop a deductive science that shows all the possible modifications bodies can undergo. With the mind or soul, however, we lack such archetypal knowledge, hence have no deductive knowledge of our own modes or possibilities. We only know these as we experience them directly, unmediated by any general concept of what we are.

This gives rise to two inter-related problems concerning the foundations of Malebranche’s project, which in this paper I explicate and propose solutions to. The first problem is that, if the model for his science of the mind is the deductive science of body, Malebranche would have to have seen this science – and the entire perfectionist project it serves – as a non-starter, lacking as he does an archetype of the mind analogous to that of body. This problem can be resolved, I argue, by seeing that Malebranche’s science of the mind is actually *not* modeled on that of the science of body. It is instead a practical, non-deductive science that aims to derive a canon of rules, the following of which will *bring about* a unity of the mind’s separately knowable faculties rather than *discovering* that unity in an archetype located in God

Such a practical science obviously requires that concepts of the mind’s constituent faculties can be grasped, however, even if there is no single, archetypal concept available from which these concepts may be deduced. And here the second problem becomes apparent: Malebranche’s view that the mind’s self-knowledge is limited to its immediate, particular experiences of itself

appears to render illegitimate *any* concepts of *general* faculties. This second problem may be resolved in one of two ways: the concepts of the faculties may be seen as *abstracted* from our immediate experience of ourselves, or they may be understood as *created* by us in our reflective self-encounter as we search after truth – but in neither case do they exist in God. I argue that the second of these is, though textually under-determined, philosophically more satisfying, and fits best with the practical, perfectionist science Malebranche offers.

In the course of my discussion of this second problem, I also address the related problem first brought out by Antoine Arnauld, and on which most contemporary discussion of Malebranche's theory of self-knowledge has focused, that he has no basis for making claims about our freedom and immortality. I show that the problem I am describing is wider in scope, for immortality and freedom are not faculties, even though the latter figures in a crucial way in defining the faculty of the will.

Hume on Contenance and Virtue

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Scholars with as varying interests and commitments as Rutherford and Darwall have noted that in spite of the general rebellion against Aristotelian doctrines in metaphysics and epistemology in the early modern period, for much of this period philosophical ethics retained fundamentally Aristotelian commitments. Some of these commitments, such as Aristotelian-brand teleological justifications for morality's normative force, eventually gave way to various sentimentalist and rationalist alternatives. But it's simply not true that the early moderns in general eventually came to reject all of the central elements of Aristotelian ethics. For instance, one of Aristotle's most famous, and most widely appropriated, doctrines is his distinction between 'mere continence' and 'true virtue'. That distinction runs roughly as follows. When placed in circumstances that would constitute a temptation for the morally average person, the merely continent person is indeed tempted, although she manages to successfully resist the temptation. True virtue, by contrast, is to be found in she for whom nothing but virtue holds any allure at all—she who, in similar such circumstances, would feel no temptation in the first place. The overwhelming majority of early modern philosophers not only accepted that there is a meaningful distinction to be drawn between these two characters, but also sided with Aristotle in thinking that the person who hears not the Syrens' call is the more praiseworthy of the two.

Here, as elsewhere, Hume is an exception. Unfortunately, the exceptional nature this aspect of Hume's moral theory has yet to be fully recognized or appreciated because it has been buried under a host of misguided objections. Hume's critics have claimed, variously, that Hume did not understand Aristotle's distinction between mere continence and true virtue, that he understood the distinction but did not fully appreciate its significance, that Hume failed to take stock of the grounds on which the Aristotelian makes this distinction, and/or that even if Hume claimed otherwise, there is in fact no place for such a distinction in Hume's moral theory and/or his philosophical psychology. All such objections, I'll argue, are misplaced. Hume understood Aristotle's distinction between 'mere continence' and 'true virtue' perfectly well. But he thought, and for good reason, that we can capture the moral significance of the difference between someone who acts in the face of temptation and someone for whom vice holds no allure *without* also committing ourselves to the further Aristotelian thought that the latter state is always morally preferable to the former.

I'll proceed as follows. In section one, I argue that any comparison between the moral praiseworthiness of the state that Aristotle calls 'mere continence' and that which he calls 'true virtue' must be framed in such a way that it is understood that agents fitting either description are, in some way, motivated by their moral commitments. The price of not doing so, I'll argue, is an unhelpful and misleading comparison that obscures central questions of moral psychology that must be addressed by any philosopher staking out a position in this arena. In section two, I address those of Hume's critics who claim that Hume either did not understand the old Aristotelian distinction, or worse still, did not have room for any such distinction in his moral psychology. These charges, I show, rest on misinterpretations of Hume's conception of virtue that no plausible reading of the canonical texts of the *Treatise* and EPM can sustain. In section

three, I turn to the more difficult charges that Hume did not fully appreciate the significance of, or grounds for, the Aristotelian distinction between ‘mere continence’ and ‘true virtue’. These are the more tricky charges to address on two counts. First, I’ll argue, the Aristotelian’s reasons for regarding a person who feels not the allure of temptation as always morally preferable to someone who acts in the face of temptation are rather more obscure than the Aristotelian supposes them. Second, many of the texts that most clearly show that Hume did in fact understand (although he rejected) this Aristotelian line of reasoning require some historical frame-setting of their own in order to be properly understood, such as Hume’s *Essays*. In the end, I’ll contend, Hume rightly sees moral comparisons between persons who act in the face of temptation and those who feels not the allure of temptation as comparisons that are properly made, *contra* Aristotle, *only* in situ, with regard to particular persons, their character traits, and their interactions.

Explanation, Newtonianism, and the Way of Ideas: Philosophical Method in the Scottish Enlightenment

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The large project of which this paper is a part aims to answer questions about the origin, content and implications of the philosophical methods represented in ‘British Empiricism’ in general and the Scottish Enlightenment in particular (and this itself follows from my recent Oxford UP book). In this paper I focus on the methods that Hume and Reid use to arrive at their conclusions about the origins of our ideas of qualities. Since Hume and Reid arrive at opposed conclusions about concept empiricism and the origins of ideas of primary qualities, one would infer that they used contrasting methods or started their inquiry from different sets of data. But in fact Hume and Reid both primarily draw--implicitly and explicitly--from Newton. My goal is to explain from which parts of Newton they draw, and assess how successful are their results if judged by empiricist, inductivist, Newtonian credentials.

In §1 I briefly explain what Newton says are his methods and what methods Newton uses. I frame the remainder of the paper in terms of the contrasting explanatory strategies Newton uses in the *Opticks* and the *Principia*. I also discuss Newton’s correspondence on the philosophy of mind as pertaining to his method.

In §2 & §3 I compare and contrast the methods Newton uses in these two books with the methods Hume and Reid describe as Newtonian and use in their philosophies of the mind. Hume appeals to Newton’s experimentalism (T Introduction 10); (ii) to Newton’s revocation of explanation by hypothesis (Abstract to Treatise, 646); and (iii) to experimentalism in the anatomical sciences, when Hume writes (with a nod to William Harvey) that his ‘method of inquiry’ is like an ‘anatomy of the mind’ (T 1.12, 325-6).

Reid appeals to very different features of Newton’s methods, including: (iv) to Newton’s judicious use of inductive explanation (Inquiry 127-8/69-70 & 132/75-6); (v) to the General Scholium’s prohibition on causes that are not both true and sufficient for explaining their appearances (Intellectual Powers 1.3, 51); and (vi) to Newton’s methodological limitations on natural philosophy (evidenced in Reid’s correspondence with Henry Home, Lord Kames).

In the next two sections I explain and assess the cases of Hume and Reid on behalf of their claims about the origins of our ideas in light of the Newtonian scientific context. In §4 I examine Hume’s argumentative techniques in support of his Copy Principle and his subsequent explanation of the origins of our primary quality concepts in terms of the operation of the laws of association on our impressions. In the paper I develop several broadly Newtonian problems with Hume’s case on behalf of the Copy Principle. Here is one example: Hume attempts to provide scientific, inductive support for the Copy Principle by describing facts related to the origin of concepts of color at Treatise 1.1.1.10. This *reductio* argument turns on his denial that ‘tis possible, by the continual graduation of shades, to run a colour insensibly into what is remote from it’. Not only is this claim not supported by a Newtonian method, but Newton’s own research in the *Opticks* shows Hume is incorrect.

In §5 I examine Reid's construction of his Sensory Deprivation Argument, and his conclusion that our concepts of primary qualities are not and cannot be created by the concatenations of our sensory impressions (Inquiry 125b/65). Instead, Reid argues for a circumscribed form of conceptual nativism according to which sensory experience cue our ideas through a process he calls 'natural suggestion'. In the paper I develop several Newtonian criticisms of Reid's case on behalf of the claim. Here is one example: A central feature of Reid's case on behalf of conceptual nativism is an elaborate 'crucial experiment'--a thought experiment. In it, an adult individual has just entered the world with the faculty of reason but without having ever used any of his senses. Reid argues that it is impossible such a person, when given successive sets of tactile sensations of various kinds and degrees, could come to acquire the concept of mind-independent extension. But I argue that the conclusion Reid attempts to infer from this thought experiment represents a violation of Newton's 'first rule of philosophizing' in the General Scholium--about the causal component in an explanation in natural philosophy (Newton 1999, 794-6).

I conclude with remarks about the nature of 'empiricism' in the British tradition.

Locke's Familiar Substratum

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John Locke's theory of substance is as reviled as any part of his philosophy. It has, however, been spectacularly misunderstood, subject to interpretations that neither he nor his contemporaries could ever have imagined. Read in the proper historical perspective, it becomes clear that his talk of substratum is intended only to distinguish between the properties of a substance and the substance itself, where the substance just is the individual thing (the gold, the wax) apart from its properties. This way of distinguishing between substance and accident distinction is a commonplace of scholastic discussions, and gets absorbed without much resistance in Gassendi and Descartes.

Consider, in this light, the opening, summary section of II.23:

The mind being, as I have declared, furnished with a great number of the simple ideas, conveyed in by the senses, as they are found in exterior things, or by reflection on its own operations, takes notice also, that a certain number of these simple ideas go constantly together; which being presumed to belong to one thing, and words being suited to common apprehensions, and made use of for quick dispatch, are called, so united in one subject, by one name; which, by inadvertency, we are apt afterward to talk of and consider as one simple idea, which indeed is a complication of many ideas together; because, as I have said, not imagining how these simple ideas can subsist by themselves, we accustom ourselves to suppose some *substratum* wherein they do subsist, and from which they do result, which therefore we call *substance*.

Our idea of substance is complex in two different respects. First, from the many simple ideas obtained through sensation and reflection, we notice in certain cases that "a certain number of these simple ideas go constantly together" (line 3). These are "presumed to belong to one thing" (line 3) and hence are given "one name" (line 5). At this first stage of the argument, then, the idea of a substance is just the complex idea of various simple qualities. But Locke thinks our idea of substance contains something more, "some *substratum* wherein they do subsist, and from which they do result, which therefore we call *substance*" (lines 7-8). So in addition to a complex idea of qualities that go constantly together, we have the idea of a substratum in which those qualities subsist.

Of all Locke's efforts to craft an English philosophical vocabulary that is not simply an Anglicized scholasticism, perhaps most unfortunate was this choice of the word 'substratum.' The seductive vividness of the term has contributed to the impression that Locke is discussing something lying beneath substance, insusceptible to any further inquiry. Quite to the contrary, Locke's various skeptical, sarcastic discussions are focused not on this sort of mysterious entity, but on our grasp of the thing itself – the gold or the horse – as distinct from its qualities. That is, the substratum *just is* the ordinary substance. Everything in §1 points toward this conclusion. To say that the substratum, and not the qualities, subsists of itself (lines 6-7) is to ascribe to the substratum the most familiar characteristic of ordinary substances. To say that the qualities subsist in the substratum, and result from it (lines 7-8), is to ascribe to the substratum the principal functions ascribed to ordinary substances.

Locke's expressions of skepticism regarding our knowledge of substances are quite commonplace. The idea is in Gassendi:

although it is granted that a common subject or substance exists, it nevertheless always remains veiled, nor can we either understand or say what sort of thing it is, except through what affects it and what lies open to the senses, its qualities. (*Syntagma* II.1.6.1, p. 372a)

It is also in the scholastics. Scotus holds that all we really have, with regard to substances themselves, is "a vocal disposition – just as someone blind is naturally able to syllogize about colors" (*In Meta.* II.2-3, n. 119). Nicole Oresme later mocks "the vulgar opinion of the philosophers" according to which "the substance is somehow covered up and buried by accidents" (*In De an.* I.4).

This reading of Locke explains why he sometimes says – as on the last line of II.23.1 above – that the accidents come from the substratum. It is not quite right, as some have thought, that the substratum is therefore the real essence of the thing. But that is close to being right, because the substratum, which just is the ordinary substance, *contains* the real essence. So inasmuch as a thing's intrinsic accidents flow from that real essence, they likewise flow from the substratum.

Inherence-Causation-Conceivability in Spinoza, or On the Delicate Art of Bullet-Biting

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In the current paper I examine and criticize one of the most fascinating and radical readings of Spinoza of the past few years. In his recent and neatly titled piece "Rationalism Run Amok: Representation and the Reality of Emotions in Spinoza" Michael Della Rocca suggests a strict identification of the relations of inherence, causation, and conceivability in Spinoza. In order to see the bold implications of this claim one need only realize that according to Della Rocca Spinoza holds that insofar as the sun is the (partial) cause of some states of the sunflower, the sunflower (partly) inheres in the sun. Furthermore, insofar as my grand-grand parents caused me I inhere in them (though we never co-existed at the same time). Crazy as these claims may seem I think there are weighty considerations that push Spinoza toward that corner, yet, in a considered view I do not think Spinoza accepted the view, nor should he accepted it. The mere oddity of Della Rocca's claim will play little, if any, role in my discussion below. Della Rocca provides powerful arguments to the effect that if we are to accept Spinoza's radical version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason, we should bite the bullet and accept the odd implications of Spinoza's view. While I have nothing but admiration for this willingness to read Spinoza in a consistent and uncompromising manner, I do think that some of Della Rocca's arguments are problematic. In this paper I will argue that the identity of Inherence-Causation-Conceivability is hardly consistent with some of the tenets of Spinoza's metaphysics, and for that reason it should be rejected. In the first part of the paper I will present the considerations and arguments that motivated Della Rocca's bold claim. In the second part, I will point out and examine several problems that result from Della Rocca's reading. In the third and final part I will suggest an alternative to Della Rocca's view and respond to the arguments he brings in favor of his position.