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Middle ages and modernity: Philosophy, science and spirituality of three women who left their mark

Zusammenfassung

Mittelalter und Moderne: Philosophie, Wissenschaft und Spiritualität dreier Frauen, die Spuren hinterlassen haben

In diesem Artikel sollen die Beiträge von drei Frauen aus verschiedenen Epochen wieder ins Bewusstsein gerückt werden, die vom intellektuellen Kanon oft übersehen werden: Roswitha von Gandersheim, Hildegard von Bingen und Elisabeth von Böhmen. Wir untersuchen zentrale Elemente ihres Denkens im Spiegel der Philosophie und Wissenschaft ihrer Zeit. Wir zeigen auf, wie Roswitha von Gandersheim kulturell verankerte Stereotype ihrer Zeit infrage stellte, und betrachten Hildegard von Bingens Einfluss auf den zeitgenössischen philosophischen und wissenschaftlichen Diskurs. Schließlich nehmen wir eine Neubetrachtung der Perspektive Elisabeth von Böhmens auf den kartesianischen Dualismus vor. Hierfür folgen wir dem methodischen und hermeneutischen Ansatz der philosophischen Archäologie Alain de Liberas, der darin besteht, die vielschichtigen Formulierungen, die in den großen Problemen der Philosophie eingebettet sind, freizulegen und die verschiedenen Diskurse sichtbar zu machen, die uns bis heute beeinflussen. Diese Analyse ermöglicht uns die Feststellung, dass es keine einheitliche Lesart der Geistesgeschichte gibt und dass die Beiträge dieser Frauen eine wertvolle intellektuelle Ressource für das Verständnis der zeitgenössischen Wissenschaft und Philosophie darstellen.

Schlüsselwörter
Roswitha von Gandersheim, Hildegard von Bingen, Elisabeth von Böhmen, Kartesianismus, Philosophie, Wissenschaft, Spiritualität

Summary

This paper seeks to recover the contributions of three women from different eras, often overlooked by the intellectual canon: Rosvita of Gandersheim, Hildegard of Bingen, and Elisabeth of Bohemia. The examination will encompass key elements of their thought, linked to the philosophy and science of their time. In the case of Rosvita, we will highlight how she challenged culturally ingrained stereotypes. Regarding Hildegard of Bingen, the focus will be on her contribution to the development of the philosophical and scientific fields. Finally, we will revisit Elisabeth of Bohemia's perspective on Cartesian dualism. To this end, we will follow the methodological and hermeneutical approach of Alain de Libera's philosophical archaeology. This approach involves uncovering the layers of formulations embedded in the 'great problems of philosophy' and revealing the various discourses that still influence us today. This analysis enables us to assert that there is no singular reading of the history of thought and that the contributions of these women represent a valuable intellectual resource for understanding contemporary science and philosophy.

Keywords
Rosvita of Gandersheim, Hildegard of Bingen, Elisabeth of Bohemia, cartesianism, philosophy, science, spirituality

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1 Introduction

In this article, we analyse the works of medieval and modern female philosophers and thinkers, as we seek to recover their thought as agents of philosophical, literary, scientific, and everyday knowledge to ensure that their epistemic capacities are neither silenced nor marginalised. We value their modes of writing, their self-perception, the education of their children, the tasks they undertook, and their reflections on philosophical issues.

Recovering the thought of these women is essential, as it demonstrates the reliability of their conceptual elaborations in the conception of new ways of viewing the world. In this regard, the concept of 'post-truth' is useful, understood as the deliberate distortion of a certain reality and the manipulation of beliefs and emotions to influence public opinion and social attitudes which in turn implies a conditioning of freedom. If reality is also the result of an ideological construction that seeks to impose itself, it becomes evident that in many cases an attempt has been made to establish a particular hegemonic narrative as the truth. Nonetheless, a considerable number of women acted from a place other than submission or silence which represented a cultural transformation in the times they lived in and in their posterity. They sought answers to their questions from various teachings, in the Bible, in the philosophical texts they had access to, in dialogue with their contemporaries, and in the observation of the people and nature surrounding them.

Thus, many of these women, at the beginning of their writings, devalued themselves and considered themselves unworthy because they were women. However, some individuals, such as Rosvita, recognised their value, despite being aware of the cultural stereotypes that were in place, which were detrimental to women. Rosvita, for instance, defended other women who had legitimate reasons for engaging in actions that were regarded negatively in order to ensure their survival. Similarly, other twelfth-century writers, such as Hildegard of Bingen, made significant contributions to the fields of philosophy and science. In the modern period, notable women such as Elisabeth of Bohemia, who questioned Descartes on central aspects of his philosophical arguments. We will address the work of these authors through Alain de Libera's methodology who in *La querelle des universaux* (2014) developed a hermeneutical strategy further explored in *L'archéologie philosophique* (2016). Our aim is to discuss issues by establishing nuances, distinctions, and clarifications regarding specific philosophical questions, identifying different 'archaeological layers' within them. De Libera's philosophical archaeology has a critical or deconstructive function that allows us to recognise that there was not a single, constant concern at any given time. Regarding the authors in question we can identify the relationship between freedom and thought (de Libera 2016: 21). This hermeneutic method, when dealing with a conceptual problem, unveils a comprehensive network of established itineraries, while also seeking to address those who have been forgotten. In this sense, the three writers from the German philosophical tradition analysed in this article have been integral to the construction of the philosophical foundation, although, in general, they were not included in the canon of philosophical studies. This view of conceptual history suggests that philosophical responses and reactions are constructions that, at specific moments, render some issues visible while others remain hidden. Our purpose is to elucidate the perspectives of Rosvita, Hildegard, and Elisabeth in order to envisage an alternative history of philosophy.

2 Rosvita of Gandersheim

Rosvita of Gandersheim (ca. 935–975 or 1002) referred to situations of injustice experienced mainly by women but also by men, analysing them in terms of disobedience to what was stipulated. She maintained a firm defence of women and through her grotesque and ironic narratives, denounced the martyrdom women were subjected to for refusing, for example, to engage in sexual relations with those who demanded it or for defending their faith against those who would not admit it. ‘Clamor Validus Gandeshemensis’ (the resounding voice of Gandersheim; translation S. B. V., C. D., R. P.), as she called herself, was a keen observer. She became a canoness, a position that differed from that of a nun because she only took vows of chastity and obedience, not poverty. By doing so, she retained her wealth and did not remain cloistered (Wailes/Brown 2013: 4). She learned Latin and Greek, and the arts of the trivium and quadrivium (language and the real arts, respectively). Her education enabled her to work as a narrator, playwright, historian, poet, hagiographer, and philosopher. His arguments were respected because, although they differed from what was expected, they did not contravene the Benedictine rule, whose interpretation was more flexible in Germania than in other monasteries.

Rosvita identified herself as part of a tradition of women involved in her life and education, thus she thanked Rikkardis and Gerberga for their corrections to her writings and for encouraging her to continue, contrary to the usual practice. She was educated at the abbey of Gandersheim. She lists the sources she read and on which she based her arguments to empower women: Terence’s *Comedies*, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Virgil’s *Aeneid* and *Eclogues* as well as Christian works such as Prudentius, Sedulius, Venantius Fortunatus, Boethius; and the *Martyrologies* and *Vitae Patrum*.

Her oeuvre comprises three books: the first one contains legends mostly written in dactylic hexameters, the second one is a series of dramas – a Christian alternative to Terence – mainly written as dialogues, and the third one comprises two historical pieces, the *Gesta Ottonis*, a history of the house of Otto I from 919–965, and the *Primordia coenobii Gandeshemensis*, a history of the foundation of the female abbey, parallel to the facts of the Holy Scriptures and the events that took place there between 846–919 (Berschin 2013).

Rosvita compares herself to a travelling woman for the hermeneutical journeys she undertakes. In them, she recounts practices of exclusion and oppression, which Fricker would later call “testimonial injustice” (Fricker 2017: 10). We can read this in Rosvita’s confessions of women (and men), where their voices are denied credibility. Silencing, ignorance, denial, or forgetfulness highlight the persistence of epistemic injustice as the reflective cognitive capacity of these women as knowers is annulled.

Rosvita’s first book was composed in her youth and contains eight legends: *Ascensio, Gongolf, Pelagio, Teófilo, Basilio, Dionisio, Inés,* and *María*. These narrate the lives of biblical figures, interventions of Providence, martyrdoms, and conversions, pacts with the devil (as in Faustus), and renunciations of God. The Virgin Mary, the feminine ideal, becomes relevant for the forgiveness of sins and as a mediator in spiritual development, rescuing souls sold to the devil.

In the ‘Preface to the Legends’, Rosvita expresses her position as a writer and sharply raises the issue of the truthfulness of narratives. Tavernini poses the question: “¿la veracidad de un relato, depende del hecho de que lo que narra haya sucedido, o de la verdad que reconoce en ellos quien quiere escribir?" [Does the truthfulness of a story depend on the fact that what it narrates actually happened, or on the truth the writer recognises in it?] (Tavernini 2000: 171; translation S. B. V., C. D., R. P.). This question is pertinent to our purpose as it confronts us with the philosophical issue linking truth, perspective, and freedom (Violante 2024). In this sense, Rosvita uses the events she read about to strengthen her narrative in defence of mistreated women. She acknowledges the difficulty of writing, admits mistakes she revises, and thus changes perspectives. By understanding that she does not possess the truth, she dares to publish and accept possible criticism:

"Hunc libellum parvo ullius decoris cultu ornatum sed non parva diligentia/ inlaboratum omnium sapientium benignitate offero expurgandum eorum/ dumtaxat qui errand non delectantur derogare sed magis errata corrigere […] Quamvis etiam metrica modulatio feminee fragilitati difficilis videatur et ardua / solo tamen semper miserentis superne gratis auxilio, non propriis viribus confisa/ huius carmina opusculi dactilicis modulis succinere apposui.
I offer this little book,/ small in stylistic merits, but not small in the efforts it took/to the good will of the wise/for correction and advice/at least to those who don't enjoy to rail/against authors who fail,/ but, rather, prefer to correct the work's flaws […] However difficult and arduous and complex/metrical composition may appear for the fragile female sex,/I, persisting with no one assisting/still put together my poems in this little work/not relying on my own powers and talents as a clerk/but always trusting in heavenly grace's aid." (Rosvita of Gandersheim quoted in Wilson 1998: 19)[1]

We will focus on her second book, written in rhymed prose, which includes six dramas, both ironic and tragic, the dramatisation of which has been considered an original contribution to medieval literature. These dramas are: *Gallicanus, Dulcitius, Sapientia, Abraham, Calimachus,* and *Paphnutius*. In these compositions, she ridicules men's ambition and power while depicting the abuse of women. Unlike the legends, where men predominate, women take centre stage in these dramas, though both men and women, regardless of the magnitude of their sin, cannot lose hope of being forgiven or pardoned. Despite imitating Terence's style, she declares in the 'Preface to the Dramas':

"Plures inveniuntur catholici cuius nos penitus expurgare nequimus facti/ qui pro cultioris facundia sermonis/ gentilium vanitatem librorum utilitati praeferunt sacrarum scrpturarum/ Sunt etiam alii sacris inherentes paginis/ qui licet alia gentilium spernant/ Terentii tamen fingmenta frequentius lectitant/ et dum dulcedine sermonis delectantur/ nefandarum notitia rerum maculantur/ unde ego Clamor Validus Gandeshemensis/ non recusavi ilium imitari dictando/ dum alii colunt legendo/ qui eodem dictationis genere/ quo turpia lascivarum incesta feminarum recitabantur/ laudabilis sacrarum castimonia virginum iuxta mei facultatem ingenio celebraretur.
Many Catholics one may find,/ and we are also guilty of charges of this kind,/who for the beauty of their eloquent style,/prefer the uselessness of pagan guile/to the usefulness of Sacred Scripture. There are also others, who, devoted to sacred reading and scorning the works of other pagans, yet frequently read Terence's fiction,/and as they delight in the sweetness of his style and diction,/they are stained by learning of wicked things in his depiction./Therefore I, the Strong Voice of Gandersheim, have not refused to imitate him in writing/whom others laud in reading,/so that in that selfsame form of composition in which the shameless acts of lascivious women were phrased/the laudable chastity of sacred virgins be praised/ within the limits of my little talent?" (Rosvita of Gandersheim quoted in Wilson 1998: 116)

This reference indicates how she perceived herself and affirmed her intellectual abilities.

1 Passages cited from Wilson's translations (1998).

In the narration of Thais's conversion, Rosvita incorporates teachings of the liberal arts following Boethius and conveys her knowledge about the disciplines of study in the tradition. The character Paphnutius tells his students that he is saddened by Thais, a prostitute, so he decides to help her, presenting himself to her dressed as a lover. However, Thais does not succumb to his desires; instead, she changes her life, dedicates herself to God, and enters a convent. There, they both reflect and purge their sins, enabling Thais to die without sin. Rosvita reflects on the salvation of the sinful woman, with Paphnutius playing a secondary role in Thais's repentance, as she remains firm and convinced of her change in life.

In *Dulcitius*, based on the hagiography of St. Ambrose, she analyses the story of the sisters Agape, Chionia, and Irene, who are brought before Emperor Diocletian. Because of their strong Christian faith, he sends them to Dulcitius, who tries to possess them. When he fails, he takes sexual pleasure with kitchen utensils and becomes blackened and ignored by the women, and is beaten brutally by palace guards. The women are martyred for staunchly defending their faith and for remaining virgins. These dramas draw on various legends from the early centuries of Christianity that reached Rosvita in the form of Late Antique texts. In this case, the narrative derives from the *Acts of Agape, Chionia* and *Irene*, preserved in a Greek manuscript (Guollet 1999: LXXIII–LXXIV; Ruiz Bueno 1962: 1032), as well as from Syriac texts that were translated into Latin in the sixth century.

These dramatisations deal with several themes. One of them is linked to the carnal and the descriptions of seductions. Repentance, redemption, and the conversion of impulsive, anxious, and overvalued men become relevant, and they must struggle with the devil to free themselves. In these accounts, Christian women surpass men in wisdom, especially pagans.

Another relevant theme is the body. In her six dramas about the martyrs, Rosvita purifies and consecrates it to virtue. In her narrative, she presents the consensual use of the body as a means of overcoming temptation without contradicting virtue. She revisits the concept of prostitution in *Maria* and *Thais*. She recognises the pleasure of the act and the right to decide for oneself, and accepts the actions of these women who have sex for money, as long as it is seen as "una opción moralmente pecaminosa, pero gratificante y rentable para una etapa de sus vidas" [a morally sinful but gratifying and highly profitable option for a stage of their lives] (Tavernini 2000: 191; translation S. B. V., C. D., R. P.). When analysing the anguish that women suffer, even those who are well-treated, Rosvita reflects on the power of the female body to lead many men to repentance and faith. In this way, she incorporates the mind-body relationship into an experiential, concrete framework of existence, and broadens the conception of human subjectivity.

Another drama deals with the holy virgins Fides, Spes, and Karitas, and how their mother, Wisdom, watches the torments they are subjected to. In the third scene, Wisdom delivers a profound lesson of Boethian arithmetic to Emperor Hadrian, calling him a fool for not knowing that knowledge comes from God, and for that reason she knows her daughters will not be swayed from the faith. The drama recounts the torments the young girls endure and their miraculous overcoming of them, ridiculing the powerful men. Ultimately, however, the girls die, opening a curious metaphorical reflection on the future of the theological virtues, Fides, Spes, and Karitas.

These characters highlight the ‘manly strength’ of women in overcoming various forms of harassment or intimidation. During these centuries, ‘manly strength’ in the Christian context was imposed as a model for virtuous women to emulate. However, in the fifteenth century, Christine de Pizan’s *Book of the Mutation of Fortune* presents an author who does not want to become a man, but rather a strong woman.

Rosvita emphasises that repentance restores people to a life of holiness through *imitatio Christi*, Christ who is neither man nor woman (Gal. 3:28–29), but who collaborates in redemption or intercession and who highlights the incarnate, humanised condition of God. The prostitute, the sodomite, and the adulteress are saved through repentance, but not all are. One, unable to repent, is condemned to eternal silence and when she attempts to speak, emits sensual sounds from the lower part of her back.

Rosvita writes philosophically and psychologically about the rejection of dishonour by women, and by some men. Her writing, filled with sensations, emotions, and reflections, demonstrates her liberation from the label of being a ‘weak woman’ by highlighting her intellectual capacity and asserting her identity as an author. This represents another aspect of her reflections on the human condition.

In this way, Rosvita was able to defend herself against the hostility that surrounded her; she had the freedom to recognise the merits of the women of her time, strengthening their intellectual capacities. Our reading portrays Rosvita as someone who values knowledge and is constantly revising it to avoid clinging to skewed truths.

3 Hildegard of Bingen

Hildegard of Bingen (1078–1179) authored an extensive body of work on a wide range of subjects. She acquired knowledge of Latin, theology, and medicine, and possessed a notable talent for interpreting and composing music. However, she is best known for her visionary work. From her institutional position in Church, she was able to challenge bishops, popes, and emperors. She founded two monasteries: Rupertsberg in 1150 and Eibingen in 1165, which diverged from the contemporary norm and offered freedoms not found in other female monasteries. There, the women wore the habit of the Benedictine order, although on certain festive occasions, they dressed in white with their hair loose and adorned with golden tiaras and flowers. Hildegard lived to the age of 81, was canonised in 2012, and was named a Doctor of the Church by Benedict XVI.

Her writings reveal the influence of several philosophers (Augustine of Hippo, the Church Fathers, Boethius, Isidore of Seville), as well as some women whom she mentions in *Scivias*. Her connections with Lucan, Seneca, and Galen were equally relevant, with the latter being an important influence in *Ordo virtutum*.

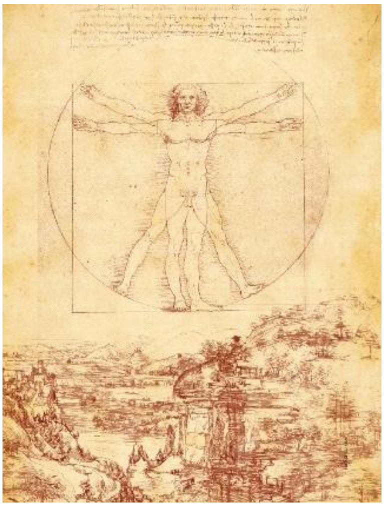
In her medical treatises, as in her other writings, Hildegard includes philosophical and theological perspectives that are distinct from male discourses and are expressed through her unique illustrations. Her work combines images, sensations, smells, sounds, tastes, colours, and reflections, while distancing itself from dogmatic transmission, which shows the inclusion of the sensitive, experiential dimension in her thinking. Hildegard did not simply reproduce concepts without inquiry, doubt, or reconsideration.

From her extensive oeuvre, we shall focus on the iconographic expression of her visions. Here, iconic signs take on new significance, recontextualised within a philosophical, theological, and political framework. For instance, let us compare *Vitruvian Man* with Hildegard's pictorial work:

Picture 1: Hildegard of Bingen: *Liber diuinorum operum*

Source: I, 2. XIII, f. 9r. Biblioteca Statale di Lucca, ms. 1942 (photograph taken by the authors).

Picture 2: Leonardo Da Vinci: *Vitruvian Man*



Source: Accademia Gallery, Venice. Date of access: 28 July 2025 at https://www.gallerieaccademia.it/en/study-proportions-human-body-known-vitruvian-man#:~:text=July%2027th%202025.-,STUDY%20OF%20THE%20PROPORTIONS%20OF%20THE%20HUMAN%20BODY%2C%20KNOWN%20AS,readings%20inherent%20in%20the%20drawing.

Picture 3: Hildegard of Bingen: *Image of the Universe*

Source: Scivias, I, 3 (photograph taken by the authors).

These images offer us a glimpse into Hildegard's vision of the universe. In the illustration on the left, we can observe the centrality of the human being, which the Sibyl of the Rhine as she is known, expressed uniquely. This image is similar to Leonardo da Vinci's depiction of the human figure, which was first documented by the Roman architect Vitruvius, in the first century BCE. Vitruvius established certain mathematical proportions to define the ideal human form. Leonardo used these measurements to design his illustration. In both images, the human figure is positioned at the centre of the universe within a circle and a square, symbolising the symmetry of the human body. The fact that Leonardo's sketch is commonly interpreted as an innovation that left behind medieval obscurantism and introduced the use of perspective – a feature considered innovative in relation to Christian religious expressions – obscures the fact that this image had already appeared in one of Hildegard's visions in the twelfth century. Georgina Rabassó explains:

"Toda cosmología tiene una dimensión estética. La perfección de la figura del universo, su belleza, la armonía de las esferas o la sympatheia de los cuerpos celestes son ideas que reelaboraban habitualmente los discursos cosmológicos medievales. La observación de los fenómenos naturales, junto con la reflexión física y metafísica acerca del universo creado, se muestran en los textos y las imágenes de las pensadoras como una cosmovisión que enmarca sus respectivos ideales estéticos, teológicos, antropológicos y políticos" [All cosmology involves an aesthetic dimension. The perfection of the figure of the universe, its beauty, the harmony of the spheres or the sympatheia of the celestial bodies constitute ideas that usually reworked medieval cosmological discourses. The observation of natural phenomena, together with physical and metaphysical reflection on the created universe, are shown in the texts and images of women thinkers as a worldview that frames their respective aesthetic, theological, anthropological and political ideals]. (Rabassó, 2017; translation S. B. V., C. D., R. P.)

In the *Liber divinorum*, Hildegard describes her second vision, demonstrating the subordination of creation to humanity. According to her, everything that emanates from God and His wisdom shines within man:

"But now, the circumference and the correct proportion of these elements are shown only in a wheel, though neither of these holds a complete likeness of the figure of the world in every detail, because it exists everywhere whole, round, and whirling. Rather, a globe that is whole and whirling better imitates the form of the world in its every part." (Hildegard of Bingen quoted in Campbell 2018: 55)[2]

"In the middle of the wheel there also appeared the image of a human being, whose crown reached above and whose feet stretched below the circle of strong, bright white air. The fingertips of the right hand were extended from the right side, and the fingertips of the left hand were extended from the left side, to that circle, marking it out from here to there in its circumference, because the image had its arms thus extended. Furthermore, facing these parts there appeared four heads as it were the head of a leopard and a wolf, and the head of a lion and a bear." (Hildegard of Bingen quoted in Campbell 2018: 49)

The content of Hildegard's visions reflects ways of life and thought, although it appears to have garnered less attention. Perhaps both Hildegard and Leonardo not only address the same subject – the human being – but also employ very similar frameworks. The previous illustrations show the interaction of man (soul and body) with the entire universe.

According to Hildegard's hagiography, she experienced these visions from the age of three, although in *Scivias* she mentions that they began at the age of five. She also claims never to have lost consciousness nor to have been in a state of ecstasy (Caviness 1998; Campbell 2013). In 1141, she had a vision in which she was instructed to write down her visions:

"Father, I am greatly disturbed by a vision which has appeared to me through divine revelation, a vision seen not with my fleshly eyes but only in my spirit. Wretched, and indeed more than wretched in my womanly condition, I have from earliest childhood seen great marvels which my tongue has no power to express but which the Spirit of God has taught me that I may believe [...]. But please give me your opinion in this matter, because I am untaught and untrained in exterior material, but am only taught inwardly, in my spirit. Hence my halting, unsure speech." (Hildegard of quoted in Campbell 2018: 27–28)

In *Scivias* and the *Liber divinorum*, Hildegard distinguishes between perceptive vision and spiritual vision, thus participating in a tradition that can be traced back to Origen. Such visions transcend the boundaries of discursive possibilities, and she acknowledges her hesitation by seeking the approval of Bernard of Clairvaux, an ecclesiastical authority. With male endorsement her works gained the necessary approval to be circulated, and the Synod of Trier acknowledged the authenticity of her visions.

In *Scivias*, Hildegard describes each vision in relation to Christian doctrine and Divine Majesty. She discusses why God permits sin, the Fall, salvation, the sacraments, the Final Judgement, and the return to Paradise, while also criticising ecclesiastical corruption.

The *Liber vitae meritorum* addresses the uniqueness of God, who gives life to the entire universe. It examines vices and virtues, symbolised by a bestiary and human figures, presenting a Dantean Purgatory filled with grotesque and terrifying torments. Around 1163, Hildegard began writing the *Liber divinorum*, containing ten cosmological visions. Like her earlier works, these combine the universe with human physiology: a continuous and cooperative construction and an order of the cosmos that finds the manifestation of nature and history in Christ.

2 Passages cited from Campbell's translation (2018).

Through her works, Hildegard demonstrated a level of reflection and creativity that has long been obscured in our understanding of the Middle Ages, despite her anticipation of many significant later ideas.

4 Elisabeth of Bohemia

Elisabeth was born in Heidelberg in 1618 as the daughter of Frederick V of Bohemia. Her family life, the responsibilities associated with her position and the political and economic vicissitudes she faced influenced Elisabeth's mood and intellectual development. She received an excellent education and, from a young age, had contact with a courtly circle that included renowned intellectual figures such as Huygens and Descartes himself. In fact, in 1642 Elisabeth read Descartes' *Metaphysical Meditations*, and this gave rise to one notable correspondence in the history of philosophy.

Elisabeth was thus a supporter of Descartes' innovative project for philosophical and scientific research and she was aware of the importance of the Cartesian turn in philosophy. In her letter to Descartes dated 16 August 1645, Elisabeth states that she finds his way of reasoning extraordinary: "It is the most natural I have ever encountered and seems not to teach me anything new, but instead enables me to draw from my mind fragments of knowledge that I have not yet grasped" (Elisabeth of Bohemia quoted in Shapiro 2007: 100; Descartes 1996 [1897–1913]: 4:269)[3]. In other words, Elisabeth adopted the Cartesian approach of using reason to distinguish truth from falsehood, thereby demonstrating her appreciation for independent reasoning.

However, elucidating Elisabeth's philosophical contributions is difficult, partly because they have mainly been preserved in her correspondence rather than in essays, treatises or pamphlets. This significantly limits access to her ideas. While efforts to introduce Elisabeth to the canon by demonstrating that she participated in relevant intellectual debates, made incisive critiques or influenced prominent male contemporaries are laudable, they risk eclipsing her genuine contribution and evading the task of uncovering it. In this sense, revisiting Elisabeth's work and understanding her ideas represents a recovery of her thought, as it is not simply a matter of improving our understanding of Cartesian philosophy, but of giving voice to a historically marginalised perspective, correcting an epistemic injustice and enriching the philosophical landscape. Thus, within this rediscovery, the discussion of Elisabeth and Descartes on the mind-body theory is both attractive and necessary. In this exchange, Elisabeth not only asks Descartes to clarify certain issues, but also reveals nuances related to metaphysics, physics, and moral philosophy. Furthermore, Elisabeth's approach to these issues reveals an intriguing complexity: she does not reduce philosophy to a purely theoretical realm but encourages Descartes to consider the subjective aspect of consciousness when discussing theoretical problems. In particular, Elisabeth highlights the role of subjectivity in concrete situations, thus enriching her critique and understanding the implications of the Cartesian system, while grounding it in the concrete human world. Thus, Elisabeth's

3 Passages cited from the correspondence between Elisabeth and Descartes are from Shapiro (2007). We have also provided the page and volume numbers from the Adam and Tannery edition of Descartes's *Ouvres*.

observations were not simply a paraphrase of the mind-body problem but conveyed a subtle perspective that is worth making explicit.

And although there were already followers of Descartes in the 17th century who were critical of certain aspects of Cartesian philosophy (Harth 1992: 66), Elisabeth seems to have interacted with Descartes in a different way, through direct and sometimes intimate dialogue, sharing the intention of freeing themselves from prejudice and considering each other to be intellectually exceptional individuals.

In this sense, Elisabeth initiated the discussion in her letter of 16 May 1643 by asking Descartes to clarify how the immaterial soul can make the material body act, as this relationship seemed not only contrary to the principles of Cartesian metaphysics (which define the soul as a thinking substance that is radically and essentially distinct from matter, whose essential feature is extension), but also incompatible with Descartes' theory of movement (Tollefsen 1999: 67). In her letter, Elisabeth writes:

> "So, I ask you please to tell me how the soul of a human being (it being only a thinking substance) can determine the bodily spirits, in order to bring about voluntary actions […]. You entirely exclude the one [extension] from the notion you have of the soul, and the other [physical contact] appears to me incompatible with an immaterial thing. This is why I ask you for a more precise definition of the soul than the one you give in your *Metaphysics*, that is to say, of its substance separate from its action, that is, from thought." (Elisabeth of Bohemia quoted in Shapiro 2007: 62; Descartes 1996 [1897–1913]: 3:660)

The request itself is not new, other critics have already questioned the inadequacy of Descartes' philosophical explanation of how mind and body interact. However, Elisabeth's request has a different tone: she accepts substance dualism but asks Descartes to go beyond what he said in the *Meditations*, where he describes the soul as an essence characterised by action and thought. In other words, she suggests that there is a characteristic of the soul beyond these two that could satisfactorily explain the interaction between body and mind.

In his reply, Descartes acknowledges that he was not clear in his explanation and that he did not focus on the soul's capacity to suffer with the body. He states that this was because his main interest was to demonstrate the difference between the soul and the body (based on acting and thinking). He offers Elisabeth the doctrine of primitive notions, which are original patterns from which all other knowledge is formed. We have certain notions of this kind relating to the body, such as that of extension, another for conceiving the soul, that of thought, "and finally, for the soul and the body together, we have only that of their union, on which depends that of the power which the soul has to move the body and the body to act on the soul, by causing its passions and sensations" (Elisabeth of Bohemia quoted in Shapiro 2007: 65; Descartes 1996 [1897–1913] 3:665). That is, to attain knowledge of the unity of soul and mind, we employ the notion of 'union.' However, Descartes advises to be careful in this regard, for in any case, the soul does not move the body in the same sense that bodies move each other. For Descartes, the union between mind and body is a basic and primary human experience that cannot be fully explained by science or philosophy in rational terms, even though it is, in fact, an obvious human experience.

Interestingly, Elisabeth is not concerned with understanding the nature of the soul, but with the medium through which the soul and the body influence each other. For her, it is more urgent to understand how the body can affect the soul, that is, how it is possible for the body to produce changes in the soul within the Cartesian system that she accepts. In this regard, she observes:

> "In your *Metaphysical Meditations*, you show the possibility of the second, it is altogether very difficult to understand that a soul, as you have described it, after having had the faculty and the custom of reasoning well, can lose all of this by some vapours, and that, being able to subsist without the body, and having nothing in common with it, the soul is still so governed by it." (Elisabeth of Bohemia quoted in Shapiro 2007: 68; Descartes 1996 [1897–1913]: 3:685)

In this passage, Elisabeth emphasises that the mind can lose its ability to reason in the face of certain bodily dispositions. This provides an interesting perspective on critiquing Descartes' dualist theory.

By maintaining her focus on the moral aspect of the discussion, Elisabeth reveals her deep interest in the relationship between metaphysics and moral philosophy searching for the key to understanding the interaction between mind and body in the latter. Hence, the question of how the body influences the soul, physical discomfort produces negative emotions, and why the mind is sometimes unable to restrain them, emerges as a different perspective on the original problem.

Although the conversation about the relationship between the soul and the body ended without reaching a satisfactory conclusion, Elisabeth resumed it from the perspective of moral psychology. The ensuing exchange between Elisabeth and Descartes evolved into a discussion about the relationship between the passions and the rational soul and the focus of the discussion took on a more humanistic tone.

The discussion on the passions, in turn, involved a reference to voluntary actions, in which the soul determines the body's actions, thereby seeming to maintain control and autonomy. This shift in the tone of the correspondence, particularly in the way Elisabeth challenges Descartes, suggests that the discussion extended beyond the metaphysical question. For the soul to be morally responsible, it must have control over the passions. That is to say, the task now was to establish the foundations for morality.

In this respect, when Elisabeth points out that the mind is sometimes unable to control the effects of the body on it or is overwhelmed by physical emotions to the extent that they obscure its ability to reason, she challenges the autonomy and control of the rational soul assumed in Descartes' metaphysical theory. Furthermore, she does so from an experiential, pragmatic, and psychological perspective, which makes Elisabeth's position even more intriguing. From this angle, the metaphysical explanation of mind-body interaction must account for the concrete, empirical limitations of the human being in order to adequately address the question of action. Although Elisabeth accepts the dualism of substances, she contends that the explanation of the interaction between soul and body cannot rest solely on abstract ontological distinctions. Rather, she argues that, to be adequate, the theory, must acquire a concrete dimension and consider the body as an important factor. A coherent explanation of the relationship between substances must consider the emotional and corporeal dimensions of the individual.

According to Descartes, the passions are caused by the body (as physical alterations) but also affect the soul. And, although these passions may be intense and unruly, the rational soul should be able to regulate them through reason and will. While passions are useful for human life, informing the soul of the body's needs and circumstances, the mind has the power to transform and direct them.

However, in the context of their conversation, Elisabeth expresses her scepticism regarding the soul's ability to control the passions and the significant influence that the body can exert over it.

> "It is for this reason that I do not yet know how to rid myself of the doubt that one can arrive at the true happiness of which you speak without the assistance of that which does not depend absolutely on the will. For there are diseases that destroy altogether the power of reasoning and by consequence that of enjoying a satisfaction of reason. There are others that diminish the force of reason and prevent one from following the maxims that good sense would have forged and that make the most moderate man subject to being carried away by his passions and less capable of disentangling himself from the accidents of fortune requiring a prompt resolution." (Elisabeth of Bohemia quoted in Shapiro 2007: 100; Descartes 1996 [1897–1913]: 4:269)

Drawing on her personal experience (various sorrows, anxieties, and physical pains resulting from the difficulties her family was facing), Elisabeth suggests that reason alone is insufficient for managing the passions. The intensity of the passions, particularly when dealing with a physical pain, poses a challenge to rationality and to the metaphysical distinction between the mind and the body.

Faced with these ailments, which affect both Elisabeth's body and soul, Descartes recommends a Stoic approach: seeking serenity through the exercise of reason and philosophical practice. He even encourages her to focus on pleasant thoughts and the beauty of nature, while setting aside serious meditations on science.

> "In this regard, I judge the waters of Spa very appropriate, especially if your Highness in taking them observes what the doctors usually recommend and clears her mind entirely of all sorts of unhappy thoughts, and even also of all sorts of serious meditations concerning the sciences. She should occupy herself by imitating those who convince themselves they think of nothing in looking at the greenery of a wood, the colours of a flower, the flight of a bird, and such things that require no attention. This is not to waste time but to employ it well." (Elisabeth of Bohemia quoted in Shapiro 2007: 92; Descartes 1996 [1897–1913]: 4:220)

He further adds that noble souls (like Elisabeth's) are not swayed by the things presented to them and, are not influenced by thoughts arising from the body's connection to the soul. These recommendations presuppose that the soul retains clarity of thought even when under the influence of the passions. However, as Elisabeth had already pointed out, our rational capacity can be affected and diminished by sadness or anguish. This implies that the Stoic remedy suggested by Descartes would not be entirely satisfactory. In this sense, the very ontological and abstract distinction asserted by Descartes cannot account for the real humanity in the nature of the soul. Elisabeth conveys this idea in her reflections: sorrow and unrest could render the living individual's soul incapable of applying the Cartesian remedy.

> "Know thus that 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." (Elisabeth of Bohemia quoted in Shapiro 2007: 88–89; Descartes 1996 [1897–1913]: 4:208)

It should be noted that Elisabeth does not deny the autonomy of the soul, which is capable of having other thoughts at will and, in a sense, may escape dark thoughts. But at the same time, she seems to accept that this autonomy is limited, because the body, with its passions and specific characteristics (such as its femininity), poses a challenge to the control and autonomy of the rational mind.

Thus, Elisabeth directs our attention to the importance of the physical condition of the individual body in understanding the nature of the soul. For Elisabeth, subjectivity is not confined to a rational soul that merely possesses a body. Although one might theoretically draw a clear metaphysical distinction between the soul and the body, maintaining that the subject is the soul and merely has a body, Elisabeth emphasises that, in practice, in our relationship with ourselves, the bodily aspect often exerts a decisive influence.

As Elisabeth illustrates through her own experiences, the mind has a certain degree of autonomy. When overwhelmed, the soul can escape through contemplating forests, birds, and flowers. Yet, while this activity is essential, it is constrained by the body it inhabits. While Descartes insists that this Stoic remedy is universally applicable to any soul, regardless of its bodily condition, Elisabeth proposes a more individualised perspective. According to Descartes, the soul is both obligated and capable of mastering the body and even healing it, as any bodily disposition can be overcome by reason. However, Elisabeth challenges this view with arguments drawn from her own subjective experience. In a sense, she humanises Cartesian theory.

In doing so, Elisabeth not only critiques and inspires Descartes but also demonstrates that philosophical explanations must account for real subjective experiences to be adequate. By highlighting the limitations of the soul's autonomy and control over the body, and by revealing her own personal experience, she calls into question the universal, impersonal, ascetic and detached discourse (and fundamentally masculine at its core) rationalist discourse that prevailed in modernity.

5 A few final words

Rosvita, Hildegard, and Elisabeth were three female authors who defied deeply entrenched cultural stereotypes. Each of them possessed diverse and, at times, varied forms of knowledge. They are connected by their reflections on the body and, perhaps more broadly, by their consideration of the experiential dimension in philosophical thought. This focus, however, does not diminish the importance of the soul as an integral part of human existence.

In this way, they demonstrate that women possess knowledge enabling them to engage in debates with men, often offering different perspectives. This helps us to move away from the label of the 'weak woman,' a stereotype that has frequently been ascribed to them. The authors' recognition of the significance of the body and its particularities invites us to consider the symbiosis between soul and body and the necessary attention to both. This perspective fosters self-knowledge within a framework of philosophical analysis that, in one way or another, challenges abstract universalism.

This examination of the works of these authors underscores that there is no single lesson in the history of thought, with various layers emerging in response to great philosophical questions. Revisiting their contributions enables us to engage in an exercise of epistemological vigilance, avoiding the perpetuation of epistemic injustices and allows us to critically analyse of the 'established truths' enshrined in philosophical canons.

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