

Abstract

ANXIETY AND THE FRACTURING OF THE SELF:

DESCARTES AND PRINCESS ELISABETH

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Descartes does not use the term ‘anxiety’ but it is quite clear from his exchange with Elisabeth that this is one of the subjects of their therapeutic exchanges aimed at improving the health of Elisabeth’s soul. It is clear both from the description of her symptoms that can be triggered by things as trivial as receiving letters for fear that they contain bad news, and from his proposed cures, both philosophical and medical. The exchange poses a dilemma for Cartesian dualism—if correct, it may not be a philosophy one can live by, and Descartes is enough of a Stoic to want to avoid that consequence. Elisabeth reveals in intimate detail her inability to square her Cartesian sympathies with her own experience of a mind “so ruled by” disruptive passions and the “weakness of her sex”. Hers is an experience of double dissociation—from her body, which she experiences as betraying her, and from others around her, the volatility of whose political fortunes is for her a relentless burden. At a superficial level, Descartes’ proposed cures can simply seem to entrench the dichotomies responsible for her experience of double dissociation. This paper explores this dilemma, Descartes’ subsequent turn towards a more integrated theory of the whole person, and the implications such a turn pose for the possibility of a Cartesian feminism.