

# Correspondence between Descartes and Princess Elisabeth

René Descartes and Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis . . . . indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth. Longer omissions are reported on, between [brackets], in normal-sized type. This version aims mainly to present the *philosophical* content of the correspondence; though after the philosophical content stops, a continuing dramatic triangle—philosopher, queen, princess—is too interesting to pass up entirely. But much material has been omitted; it can be found in Lisa Shapiro’s informative edition (Chicago University Press, 2007). Titles and other honorifics are omitted; and Descartes will be made to use ‘you’ and ‘your’ where in fact he always used ‘your Highness’ and ‘she’ and ‘her’. Also omitted: the signing-off flourishes—usually (from Descartes) ‘your very humble and very obedient servant’ and (from Elisabeth) ‘Your very affectionate friend at your service’; and also, in some letters, a penultimate sentence whose only role is to lead into the closing flourish.—**Place:** Elisabeth writes from The Hague in all her letters (with one exception) through vii.1646, from Berlin through 5 xii.1647, and then from Crossen. All of Descartes’ letters are written from Egmond (Holland) except for two from France in vii.1644, one from The Hague in 6.vi.1647, one from Paris vi.1648) and one last letter from Stockholm. Strictly speaking, Descartes lived and wrote at different times in two small towns called Egmond-something.

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## Letters written in 1643 and 1664

### Elisabeth writes on 6.v.1643:

When I heard that you had planned to visit me a few days ago, I was •elated by your kind willingness to share yourself with an ignorant and headstrong person, and •saddened by the misfortune of missing such a profitable conversation. When M. Pollot [a friend of Descartes and of the Princess] took me through the solutions you had given him for some obscurities in Regius's physics, that increased my regret at missing you, because I'd have learned them better from you directly. And direct contact would have given me something else. When Professor Regius was here in The Hague, I put to him a question that he said would be better answered by you. I am shy about my disorderly writing style, which is why I haven't before now written to you asking for this favour.

[In her next sentence, the Princess relies on a theory about soul-on-body according to which the soul's thoughts are passed on to the 'spirits'—components of the body—which then cause overt bodily movements. See also note after the end of this paragraph.] But today M. Pollot has given me such assurance of your good-will towards everyone and especially towards me that I have overcome my inhibitions and come right out with •the question I put to the Professor, namely•:

Given that the soul of a human being is only a *thinking* substance, how can it affect the bodily spirits, in order to bring about voluntary actions?

•The question arises• because it seems that how a thing moves depends solely on (i) how much it is pushed, (ii) the manner in which it is pushed, or (iii) the surface-texture and shape of the thing that pushes it. [That version of (i) is a guess, based on the guess that *pulsion* should have been *impulsion*.] The first

two of those require *contact* between the two things, and the third requires that the causally active thing be extended. Your notion of the soul entirely excludes extension, and it appears to me that an immaterial thing can't possibly *touch* anything else. So I ask you for a definition of the soul that homes in on its nature more thoroughly than does the one you give in your *Meditations*, i.e. I want one that characterizes what it •is as distinct from what it •does (namely to think). It looks as though human souls can exist without thinking—e.g. in an unborn child or in someone who has a great fainting spell—but even if that is not so, and the soul's intrinsic nature and its thinking are as inseparable as God's attributes are, we can still get a more perfect idea of both of them by considering them separately. •In writing to you like this• I am freely exposing to you the weaknesses of my soul's speculations; but I know that you are the best physician for *my* soul, and I hope that you will observe the Hippocratic oath and supply me with remedies without making them public. [She is referring to an oath traditionally associated with Hippocrates, a pioneer of medicine in the 4th century BCE, which includes this: 'All that may come to my knowledge in the exercise of my profession or in daily commerce with men, which ought not to be spread abroad, I will keep secret and will never reveal.']

[The French word for the bodily 'spirits' referred to in that paragraph is *esprit*. That word can also mean 'mind', and is thus translated wherever that is appropriate in this version, e.g. in Descartes's reference to the Princess's 'incomparable mind' on page 3. When he or the Princess is writing about the mind in a weightily theoretical way—e.g. discussing inter-action between mind and body—they use not *esprit* but *âme*, usually translated by 'soul'. The link between *âme* and 'soul' will be preserved throughout this version; but remember that these uses of

‘soul’ have little if any theological content and are, nearly always, merely high-flown ways of saying ‘mind’].

### Descartes writes on 21.v.1643:

[He starts by praising the Princess’s favour of *writing* to him. When they have met, he says, he has been so dazzled by her combination of intelligence and beauty that he couldn’t converse well. He continues:] No doubt you have noticed this, and have kindly wanted to help me with this by leaving me the traces of your thoughts on paper. I have now read them several times and become accustomed to thinking about them, with the result that I am indeed less dazzled, but am correspondingly more admiring when I see that these thoughts seem ingenious at a first reading and appear increasingly judicious and solid the more I examine them.

In view of my published writings, the question that can most rightly be asked is the very one that you put to me. All the knowledge we can have of the human soul depend on two facts about it: **(1)** the fact that it thinks, and **(2)** the fact that being united to the body it can act and be acted on along with it.

[For ‘act’ French has *agir* and for ‘be acted on’ it has *pâtir*, for which there is no equivalent verb in English. The verb-pair

*agir*—*pâtir*

is linked to the English noun-pair

‘agent’—‘patient’

in a now-obsolete sense of ‘patient’, and to the noun-pair

‘action’—‘passion’

in a now-obsolete sense of ‘passion’, and to the adjective-pair

‘active’—‘passive’

with meanings that are still current.]

I have said almost nothing about **(2)**, focussing entirely on making **(1)** better understood. That is because my principal aim was to show that the soul is distinct from the body, and **(1)** was helpful in showing this whereas **(2)** could have been

harmful ·clouding the issue, distracting the reader·. But I can’t hide anything from eyesight as sharp as yours! So I’ll try here to explain how I conceive of the soul’s union with the body and how it has the power to move the body.

I start by focussing on the fact that we have certain *basic* notions that are like templates on the pattern of which we form all our other knowledge. There are very few of these. In addition to the most general ones—

**(1)** the notions of being, number, duration, etc.

—which apply to everything we can conceive, we have for the body in particular

**(2)** only the notion of **extension**, from which follow the notions of shape and movement;

and for the soul alone

**(3)** only the notion of **thought**, which includes ·the notions of· the perceptions of the understanding and the inclinations of the will;

and finally, for the soul and the body together

**(4)** only the notion of **their union**, on which depends the notion of the soul’s power to move the body and the body’s power to act on the soul in causing its sensations and passions.

I observe next that all secure, disciplined human knowledge consists only in keeping these notions well apart from one another, and applying each of them only to the things that it is right for. [Throughout this letter, phrases about a notion’s being ‘right for’ x translate French uses of *appartenir à*, literally meaning that the notion belongs to x.] When we try to explain some difficulty by means of a notion that isn’t right for it, we are bound to go wrong; just as we are when we try to explain ·or define· one of these notions in terms of another, because each of them is *basic* and thus can be understood only through itself. The use of the senses has made our notions of extension, shapes and movements much more familiar to us

than our other notions, and just because of that the principal cause of our errors lies in our commonplace attempts to use these notions to explain things that they aren't right for. For example, when we try to use the imagination to conceive the nature of the soul, or when we try to conceive how the soul moves the body in terms of how a body moves a body.

In the *Meditations*, which you were good enough to read, I tried to make conceivable (3) the notions that are right for the soul alone, distinguishing them from (2) the ones that are right for the body alone; so the first thing that I ought to explain now is how to conceive (4) the notions that are right for the union of the soul with the body, separately from (2) and (3). It seems to me that what I wrote at the end of my response to the Sixth Objections can help with that; for we can't look for these simple notions anywhere except in our soul, which naturally contains them all, though it doesn't always (i) distinguish them from one another or (ii) apply them to the objects to which they ought to be applied.

Thus, I think we have until now (i) confused the notion of •the soul's power to act on the body with •the body's power to act on other bodies, and have (ii) applied them (not to the soul, for we haven't yet known the soul, but) to various qualities of bodies—weight, heat, and so on—which we have imagined to be real, i.e. to have an existence distinct from that of the body •that has them•, and thus to be •substances though we have called them •‘qualities’.

[Descartes here uses 'real'—*réelles*, which comes from the Latin *res* = 'thing'—as a way of saying that we have imagined these •qualities to be •things. He is referring scornfully to a philosophical theory that implies things like this: When cold x is placed on red-hot y, some of y's heat passes over into x. It's not just that y cools by as much as x heats up, but the very same individual instance of heat that y has is acquired by x. This theory distinguishes three items:

- a concrete particular: the red-hot plate y
- an abstract universal: heat
- an abstract particular: the heat of y.

Descartes always rejected this theory of 'real qualities', saying that in treating an individual package (so to speak) of heat as being possessed first by y and then by x you are treating it as a thing, a substance.]

Trying to understand weight, heat and the rest, we have applied to them •sometimes notions that we have for knowing body and •sometimes ones that we have for knowing the soul, depending on whether we were attributing to them something material or something immaterial. Take for example what happens when we suppose that weight is a 'real quality' about which we know nothing except that it has the power to move the body that has it toward the centre of the earth. •How do we think that **the weight of a rock moves the rock downwards**? We don't think that this happens through a real contact of one surface against another •as though the weight was a hand pushing the rock downwards•! But we have no difficulty in conceiving how it moves the body, nor how the weight and the rock are connected, because we find from our own inner experience that we •already• have a notion that provides just such a connection. But I believe we are misusing this notion when we apply it to weight—which, as I hope to show in my *Physics*, is not a *thing* distinct from the body that has it. For I believe that this notion was given to us for conceiving how **the soul moves the body**.

If I make this explanation any longer I'll be doing an injustice to your incomparable mind, whereas if I let myself think that what I have written so far will be entirely satisfactory to you I'll be guilty of egotism. I'll try to steer between these by saying just this: if I can write or say something that could please you, I will always take it as a great honour to take up a pen or to go to The Hague [where Elisabeth was living at this time] for that purpose. . . . But I can't find here •in your letter• anything that brings into play the Hippocratic oath that you put to me, because everything in the letter deserves to be seen and admired by everyone. •Still, I will conform to the

oath! Your letter is infinitely precious to me, and I'll treat it in the way misers do their treasures: the more they value them the more they hide them, grudging the sight of them to rest of the world and placing their supreme happiness in looking at them. . . .

### Elisabeth writes on 10.vi.1643:

Your goodness shows not only in your (of course) pointing out and correcting the faults in my reasoning but also in your using false praise. . . .so as to make the faults less distressing to me. The false praise wasn't necessary: the life I live here. . . .has made me so familiar with my faults that the thought of them doesn't make me *feel* anything beyond the desire to remedy them.

So I am not ashamed to admit that I have found in myself all the causes of error the you mention in your letter, and that I can't yet banish them entirely. That's because the life that I am constrained to lead doesn't let me free up enough time to acquire a habit of meditation in accordance with your rules. The interests of my house (which I must not neglect) and conversations and social obligations (which I can't avoid), inflict so much annoyance and boredom on this weak mind ·of mine· that it is useless for anything else for a long time afterward. [By 'my house' she means the semi-royal family to which she belongs. Her father had been raised in 1620 from his semi-royal status to the title of King of Bohemia, then in a matter of months he lost his kingdom (to the Holy Roman Empire) and the other lands he had ruled (to Spain). He and some of his family took refuge in The Hague, where they were joined by Elisabeth and some of her siblings in the late 1620s. Her father died in battle (fighting on behalf of the King of Sweden) in 1632. The exiled fatherless family was in some ways politically engaged and politically prominent; it was not wealthy.] I hope that this will excuse my stupid inability to grasp ·what you

want me to grasp·. I don't see how

(1) the idea that you used to have about weight can guide us to

(2) the idea we need in order to judge how the (nonextended and immaterial) soul can move the body.

·To put some flesh on the bones of my difficulty·: I don't see why we should be persuaded that

(a) a body **can** be pushed by some immaterial thing by

(b) the ·supposed· power to carry the body toward the centre of the earth, the 'power' that you used wrongly to attribute to weight which you ·wrongly· took to be a ·real· quality;

rather than being confirmed in the view that

(c) a body **cannot** be pushed by some immaterial thing by the demonstration, which you promise in your physics, that

(d) the way weight operates is nothing like (b).

The old idea about *weight* may be a fiction produced by ignorance of what really moves rocks toward the centre of the earth (it can't claim the special guaranteed truthfulness that the idea of God has!). ·And if we are going to try theorising about the cause of weight·, the argument might go like this:

No material cause ·of weight· presents itself to the senses, so this power must be due to the contrary of what is material, i.e. to an immaterial cause.

But I've never been able to conceive of 'what is immaterial' in any way except as ·the bare negative· 'what is not material', and *that* can't enter into causal relations with matter!

I have to say that I would find it easier to concede matter and extension to the soul than to concede that an immaterial thing could move and be moved by a body. On the one side, if the soul moves the body through *information* [French word], the spirits would have to think, and you say that nothing of

a bodily kind thinks. On the other side, you show in your *Meditations* that the body could move the soul, and yet it is hard to understand that a soul (as you have described souls), having become able and accustomed to reasoning well, can lose all that because of some vaporous condition of the body; and that a soul that can exist without the body, and that has nothing in common with the body, is so governed by it.

But now that you have undertaken to instruct me, I entertain these views only as friends whom I don't expect to keep ·as friends·, assuring myself that you will explain the nature of an immaterial substance and the manner in which it acts and is acted on in the body, making as good a job of this as of all the other things that you have undertaken to teach.

### **Descartes writes on 28.vi.1643:**

I am very obliged to you for your patient willingness to hear me out on a subject which I presented so badly in my previous letter, giving me a chance to fill the gaps in that letter. The chief ones, it seems to me, are these two: **(1)** After distinguishing three sorts of ideas or basic notions each of which is known in its own special way and not by a comparison with the others—i.e. our notions of the soul, of the body, and of the soul's union with the body—I ought to have explained the differences among these three sorts of notions and among the operations of the soul through which we have them, and to have said how we make each of them familiar and easy to us. **(2)** After saying why I brought in the comparison with weight, I ought to have made clear that although one may wish to think of the soul as material (which strictly speaking is just to conceive its union with the body), that wouldn't stop one from realizing that the soul is separable from the body. I think that those cover everything

that you asked me to do in your letter.

First, then, I notice this big difference amongst these three sorts of notions: •The soul is conceived only by the pure intellect; •the body—i.e. extension, shapes and motions—can also be known by the intellect alone, but the knowledge is much better when the intellect is aided by the imagination; and finally the knowledge we get of •what belongs to the soul's union with the body is a very dark affair when it comes from the intellect (whether alone or aided by the imagination), but it is very bright when the senses have a hand in it. ['Dark' and 'Bright' translate adverbs related to the adjectives *obscur* and *clair*. To translate the latter as 'clear' is often wrong: it makes poor sense of many things that Descartes says using *clair*, most notably of his saying that pain is always *clair*, this being his explanation of what *clair* means! His famous emphasis on ideas that are *claires et distinctes* calls for ideas that are vivid and clear (in that order).] That's why people who never come at things in a theoretical way and use only their senses have no doubt that the soul moves the body and that the body acts on the soul. They regard soul and body as a single thing, i.e. they conceive their union. ·I equate those· because conceiving the union between two things is conceiving them as one single thing. Metaphysical thoughts, which exercise the unaided intellect, serve to familiarize us with the notion of the soul; and the study of mathematics, which mainly employs the imagination (in thinking about shapes and motions), accustoms us to form very clear notions of body. But what teaches us how to conceive the soul's union with the body is •the ordinary course of life and conversation and •*not* meditating or studying things that exercise the imagination.

Please don't think that I am joking; I have and always will have too much respect for you to do that. It really is true that the chief rule that I keep to in my studies—the rule that I think has helped me most in my gaining a bit of



knowledge—has been this:

I never spend more than a few hours a •day in the thoughts involving the imagination, or more than a few hours a •year on thoughts that involve the intellect alone. I give all the rest of my time to the relaxation of the senses and the repose of the mind.

[Descartes writes of giving time to the *relâche des sens* which could mean ‘resting the senses’ but probably means ‘resting in ways that involve the senses’.] I count among imagination-involving activities all serious conversations and anything that needs to be done with attention. This is why I have retired to the country. In the busiest city in the world I could have as many hours to myself as I now employ in study, but I couldn’t make such good use of them when my mind was tired by the attention I’d had to give to everyday life’s bustling tangles. I take the liberty of telling you this as an admiring tribute to your ability—in the midst of all the business and cares that come to people who combine great minds with high birth—to apply your mind to the •meditations needed to appreciate the soul’s distinctness from the body.

•I wrote as I did because• I judged that it was these •meditations, rather than those other intellectually less demanding thoughts, that led you to find obscurity in our notion of their union; because it seems to me that the human mind *can’t* conceive

the soul’s **(a)** distinctness from the body and its **(b)** union with the body,

conceiving them very clearly and both at the same time. That is because this requires one to conceive them as **(b)** one single thing and at the same time as **(a)** two things, which is contradictory. •When I wrote my letter• I thought you still had at the forefront of your mind the reasons which prove that **(a)** the soul is distinct from the body; and I didn’t want to ask you to push them aside so as to bring to the fore the

notion of **(b)** their union that everyone always experiences within himself without philosophizing—•simply• by knowing that he is a single person who has both body and thought whose natures are such that this thought can move the body and can sense what happens to the body. *That* is why in my letter I brought in a comparison with weight and the other qualities that we commonly imagine to be united to some bodies just as thought is united to our own. It was an imperfect comparison, because weight and those other qualities are not ‘real’ though we imagine them as being so [See note on page 3]; but I wasn’t troubled by that because I thought that you were already completely convinced that the soul is a substance distinct from body.

But since you remark that it is easier to attribute matter and extension to the soul than to credit it with the capacity to move and be moved by the body without having matter, please feel free to attribute this matter and extension to the soul—because that’s what it is to conceive it as united to the body. Once you have formed a proper conception of this and experienced it in yourself, you’ll find it easy to realize that

- the matter you’ll have attributed to a thought is not the thought itself, and
- the extension of this matter is of a different nature from the extension of this thought (because the former is pinned to a definite location which it occupies so as to keep out all other bodily extension, which is not the case with the latter).

So you won’t find it hard to return to the knowledge of the soul’s distinctness from the body in spite of having conceived their union.

[Four points about the above indented passage. •The switch from ‘soul’ to ‘thought’ is Descartes’s; you might like to think about why he switched.

•The passage may explain why Descartes has spoken of ‘attributing matter to the soul’ rather than, more naturally, ‘attributing materiality

to the soul'. Could the indented passage be rewritten so as not to need the concrete noun 'matter'? •What Descartes says about 'the extension of this matter' is what he would say about the extension of *any* matter. •Is Descartes implying that thoughts do have extension, though not the *Other extended things: Keep out!* kind of extension that bodies have?]

I believe that it is very necessary to have properly understood the principles of metaphysics •once in a lifetime, because they are what give us knowledge of God and of our soul. I also think that •someone's• frequently focussing his intellect on them would be very harmful, because it would unfit him for handling well the functions of the imagination and the senses. The best course, I think, is to settle for keeping in one's memory and one's belief-system the conclusions that one did once drawn from metaphysical principles, and then employ the rest of one's study time to thoughts in which the intellect co-operates with the imagination and the senses.

My great devotion to your service makes me hope that my frankness won't displease you. I would have written at greater length, trying to clear up all at once the difficulties you have raised, if it weren't that... [and then he reports on the distractions of a legal problem arising from a public dispute he has had with Gisbertus Voetius, a Dutch theologian who had attacked Descartes and arranged for a formal denunciation of his philosophy at the University of Utrecht, of which he was the head].

### Elisabeth writes on 1.vii.1643:

I gather that the high value I put on your teachings, and my desire to profit from them, haven't put you to as much trouble as you have had from the ingratitude of people who deprive themselves of your teachings and want to deprive the human race of them. I wasn't going to send you •my

last letter—new evidence of my ignorance!—until I heard that you were done with those obstinate dogmatists; but M. Van Bergen kindly agreed to stay on in town here until he could have •and take to you• a reply to your letter of 28 June—which gives me a clear view of the three kinds of notions we have, their objects, and how we should make use of them—and that obliged me to get on with it.

I find •from your letter• that the senses show me **that** the soul moves the body, but as for **how** it does so, the senses tell me nothing about that, any more than the intellect and the imagination do. This leads me to think that the soul has properties that we don't know—which might overturn your doctrine, of which I was persuaded by your excellent arguments in the *Meditations*, that the soul is not extended. This doubt seems to be supported by the rule that you give there for handling issues of truth and falsity, •saying• that all our errors come from our forming judgments about things that we don't perceive well enough. Although extension is not necessary to •thought, it isn't inconsistent with it either; so it may flow from •something else that the soul does that is no less essential to it •than thought is•. [In that sentence, 'flow from' is a guess. The original has *duire à*, which isn't French. The great Descartes editors Adam and Tannery conjecture *nuire à* = 'clash with', but that reverses what seems clearly to be the main thrust of what the Princess is saying.] At least it—the thesis that the soul is extended—pulls down the •self•-contradictory doctrine of the scholastics that the soul is entirely present in the whole body and entirely present in each of its parts. As for the thesis itself, I plead guilty to having confused the notion of the soul with that of the body for the same reason that the vulgar do; but this •acknowledgment of error• still leaves me with my initial doubt, •i.e. my thinking that perhaps after all the soul is extended•, and if you—who single-handedly kept me from being a sceptic—don't clear away this doubt

to which my first reasoning carried me, I'll lose hope of ever being certain of anything.

I *owe* you this confession. . . ., but I would think it very imprudent if I didn't already know—from my own experience and from your reputation—that your kindness and generosity are equal to the rest of your merits. You couldn't have matched up to your reputation in a more obliging way than through the clarifications and advice you have given to me, which I prize among the greatest treasures I could have.

### The letters of xi.1643:

[No reply by Descartes to the foregoing letter has been found.

[He sent to the Princess a certain problem in geometry; she gave a solution to it that Descartes was told about; he wrote at length, explaining why his own first solution was less elegant than hers was said to be; she sent own solution, which Descartes heralded as 'very like the one I proposed in my *Geometry*'; and he wrote at length about the advantages of elegance and economy in mathematical proofs.

[This evidently all happened in November 1643; some of the letters involved have been lost; the three that survive—two by him, one by her—are omitted from this version of the Correspondence.

[The next letter that we have was written half a year later, by Descartes. It responds to one by Elisabeth that we do not have.]

### Descartes writes on 8.vii.1644:

My voyage ·to Paris· couldn't involve any misfortune when I had the good fortune of making it while being alive in your memory. The very flattering letter ·from you· that testifies to this is the most precious thing I could have received in this

country. It would have made me perfectly happy if it hadn't told me that the illness you had before I left The Hague has lingered on in the form of stomach troubles. The remedies you have chosen—involving •diet and •exercise—are in my opinion the best of all. Well, they are the best (all things considered) *after* the remedies of •the soul, which certainly has great power over the body, as is shown by the big changes that anger, fear, and the other passions arouse in it. But when the soul conducts the animal spirits to the places where they can help or harm, it does this not by directly willing the spirits to go in those ways but by willing or thinking of something else. For our body is so constructed that certain movements in it follow naturally upon certain thoughts: as we see that blushes follows from shame, tears from compassion, and laughter from joy. I know of no thought more conducive to continuing health than a strong conviction that our body is so well constructed that once we are healthy we can't easily fall ill—unless we engage in some excess or are harmed by air pollution or some other external cause. [In that sentence 'a strong •conviction' translates Descartes's double phrase '*une forte persuasion et ferme créance*'; it isn't obvious what two concepts are involved in this.] Someone who is ill can restore his health solely by the power of nature, especially when he is still young. This •conviction is certainly much truer and more reasonable than the view of some people—I have *seen* this happen—who are influenced by an astrologer or a physician to think they must die in a certain amount of time, and are caused purely by this belief to become sick and even, often enough, to die. I couldn't help being extremely sad if I thought that you were still unwell; I prefer to hope that the illness is all over; but my desire to be certain about this makes me eager to return to Holland.

I plan to leave here in four or five days, to go to Poitou and Brittany where I must do the ·family· business that brought

me here. As soon as I have put my affairs in order, I'll be very anxious to return to the region where I have had the happy honour of occasionally speaking with you. There are many people here whom I honour and esteem, but I haven't yet seen anything to keep me here.

### Descartes writes in Latin in vii.1644

[This is a dedicatory letter to the Princess that Descartes put at the beginning of his *Principles of Philosophy*.]

The biggest reward I have received from my published writings is that you have been so good as to read them, for that has led to my being admitted into the circle of your acquaintance, which has given me such a knowledge of your talents that I think that it would be a service to mankind to record them as an example to posterity. I wouldn't lower myself to use flattery or to assert anything that hasn't been thoroughly scrutinized, especially in a work in which I shall be trying to lay down the foundations of the truth. And I know that your generous and modest nature will prefer the simple undecorated judgment of a philosopher to the polished compliments of those with smoother tongues. So I shall write only what I know to be true either through reason or from experience, and I shall philosophize here ·in this dedicatory letter· just as I do throughout the rest of the book.

[In this paragraph and the next, 'vice' means quite generally 'morally wrong behaviour'; it doesn't have built into its meaning *any* of the further associations that the word 'vice' tends to have these days.] There's a great difference between apparent virtues and true ones. . . . What I call 'apparent virtues' are •certain relatively unusual *vices* that are ·extreme· opposites of other better known vices, with the related virtues occupying a position intermediate between the two. Because •they are further from their

opposite vices than the virtues are, they are usually praised more highly ·than the related virtues are·. Here are some examples. (1) It more often happens that someone timidly flees from danger than that someone rashly throws himself into it; so •rashness is contrasted with the vice of timidity as if •it were a virtue, and is commonly valued more highly than true courage ·which is intermediate between timidity and rashness·. ·The same mechanism is at work when· (2) someone who is over-generous is more highly praised than one who gives liberally ·because his conduct is further from the vice of meanness than is the virtuous conduct of the merely liberal giver·. . . .

There is also a division within the true virtues, between ones that arise solely from knowledge of what is right and ones that come partly from some error. Examples of the latter class of virtues:

goodness that is a result of naivety,  
piety that comes from fear,  
courage that comes from the loss of hope.

Because such virtues differ from each other, they have different names; whereas the pure and genuine virtues that come entirely from knowledge of what is right all have the very same nature and are covered by the single term 'wisdom'. The person who is firmly and effectively resolved always to use his reasoning powers correctly, as far as he can, and to do whatever he knows to be best, is the person who is as wise as his nature allows him to be. And simply because of this ·wisdom·, he will have justice, courage, temperance, and all the other virtues—all interlinked in such a way that no one of them stands out among the others. Such virtues are far superior to the ones that owe their distinguishing marks to some admixture of vice, but they usually receive less praise because common people are less aware of them.

[The shift from 'come partly from *error*' to 'have some admixture of *vice*'

is not a product of this version; it is there in the original.]

The kind of wisdom I have described has two prerequisites: •the perceptiveness of the intellect and the •disposition of the will. If something depends on the will, anybody can do it; but •the same doesn't hold for intellectual perceptions, because• some people have much keener intellectual vision than others. Someone who is by nature a little slow in his thinking and •therefore• ignorant on many points can nevertheless be wise in his own way and thus find great favour with God; all that is needed is for him to make a firm and steady decision to do his utmost to acquire knowledge of what is right, and always to pursue what he judges to be right. Still, he won't rise to the level of those who are firmly resolved to act rightly and have very sharp intellects combined with the utmost zeal for acquiring knowledge.

That you have that kind of zeal is clear from the fact that you haven't been prevented from studying all the worthwhile arts and sciences by the diversions of the royal household or the customary upbringing that so often condemns girls to ignorance. And the outstanding—the *incomparable*—sharpness of your intellect is obvious from your probing examination of all the secrets of these sciences, and from your getting mastery of their details in such a short time. I in particular have even greater evidence of your powers in the fact that you are the only person I have so far found who has completely everything understood I have so far published. Many other people, including ones with high intelligence and great learning, find my works very obscure. In most cases, someone who is accomplished in metaphysics hates geometry, whereas those who have mastered geometry don't grasp what I have written on First Philosophy [= 'metaphysics']. I'm right to use the word 'incomparable': yours is the *only* intellect I have encountered that finds everything equally clear. [He adds some praise of the princess's youth and

beauty.] I see that everything required for perfect and sublime wisdom, both in intellect and in will, shines forth in your character. Along with your royal dignity you show an extraordinary kindness and gentleness which, though continually buffeted by the blows of fortune [see note on page 4], has never become embittered or broken. I am so overwhelmed by this that I want this statement of my philosophy to be offered and dedicated to the wisdom that I so admire in you—for philosophy is just the study of wisdom.

### Elisabeth writes on 1.viii.1644:

[This was written after the Princess had received a copy of the *Principles of Philosophy* including the foregoing dedicatory letter.]

I have to thank you for the presentation copy that M. Van Bergen gave me on your behalf, and my conscience tells me sternly that I won't be able to thank you adequately! If I had received from it only the benefit it brings to our century—this century which owes you everything that earlier centuries have paid to innovators in the sciences, since you alone have demonstrated that there are any—my debt to you would be big enough. But• what does my debt-level rise to when you have given me, along with your instruction, a share in your glory through your public declaration of your friendship and your approval? [The words 'that there are any' preserve the ambiguity of the French. The Princess may have meant 'that there are any innovations', but it seems likelier that she meant 'that there are any sciences'.] The pedants will say that you'll have to build a new morality in order to make me worthy of it! [She means '... to be worthy of your praise'.] But •no new morality is needed•. My life is guided by the rule:

Inform your intellect, and follow the good it acquaints you with.

I feel that I am only in the early stages of this process, but they win your approval there ·in your letter of dedication·. My attempt to follow this rule is what gives me my understanding of your works, which are obscure only to people who look at them very carelessly, or examine them by Aristotle's principles. For example, the intellectually ablest of our professors in this country have admitted to me that they haven't yet given any attention to your works because they are too old to start a new method, having exhausted their powers of body and the mind in the old one.

But I'm afraid that you will (rightly!) retract your high opinion of my ability to grasp things when you find out that I don't understand how quicksilver is constituted. ·My difficulty about that comes from the fact that· quicksilver is ·as agitated as it is and ·as heavy as it is, both at the same time. That conflicts with your definition of *weight* ·in *Principles* 4:20–23·. [She then refers to Descartes's account of quicksilver in 4:58 and challenges what she thinks is Descartes's explanation of a thing's lightness/heaviness in terms of what is below it, not of what is above it. This is a misreading of what Descartes wrote.]

The second difficulty that I encountered in trying to see how the particles that are twisted into the shape of shells can pass through the centre of the earth without being bent or disfigured by the fire that is there. . . . [This refers to Descartes's explanation of magnetism in 4:133, where he says that it depends on an unceasing 'vortex' of tiny screw-shaped particles that ·pass through correspondingly shaped passages through the centre of the earth, ·can't go back the way they came, and so travel halfway around the world and re-enter the passages that fit them.] The only way they could be saved from deformation would be by going very fast, but ·that explanation isn't open to you, because· you say in *Principles* 3:88. . . .that these are the least agitated parts of the first element which flow in this way through the globules of the

second. I am equally surprised that they take such a long route, along the surface of the earth, to get from one pole back to the other; they could have found a shorter route [and she indicates what it is, in terms of a diagram in *Principles* 4:59].

I'm presenting here only the reasons for ·my doubts about matters in your book; the reasons for ·my wonder are innumerable, as are also my reasons for being obliged to you—including your kindness in telling me of your news and in giving me rules for keeping healthy. The news—of the great success of your voyage, and of your continuing to plan to return—has brought me much joy, and the rules have brought me much profit, because I have already felt the benefit of them.

### Descartes writes in viii.1644:

The honour that you do me in not being displeased at my venturing to express in public how much I esteem and honour you is greater, and obliges me more, than any honour I could receive from any other source. I'm not afraid of being accused of having adjusted morality so as to make my views on this subject understood; because what I wrote about it is so true and so clear that I'm sure that every reasonable man accepts it. [The 'subject' in question is presumably morality.] But I'm afraid that what I have put in the rest of the book is more dubious and more obscure, since *you* find difficulties in it.

The difficulty about the weight of quicksilver is very considerable, and I would have tried to clear it up ·with some plausible conjecture· if I hadn't been afraid of saying something contrary to what I might learn later on when I had examined the nature of this metal more than I have up to now. All can say about it now is that I'm convinced that the little particles of air, of water, and of all the other

terrestrial bodies have many pores through which extremely finely divided matter can pass; and this follows well enough from how, according to me, these particles are formed. So I can explain why quicksilver and other metals are heavy by saying that their particles have fewer such pores. Suppose that •for purposes of argument• we admit that particles of water have the same size and shape as those of quicksilver, and move in a similar way, all we need for an explanation of how quicksilver is bound to be much heavier than water is to suppose that •each particle of water is like a little cord that is very soft and loose while the •particles of quicksilver, having fewer pores, are like other cords that are much harder and tighter.

As for the little •particles shaped like shells, it's not surprising that they aren't destroyed by the fire at the centre of the earth. That's because this fire, which is entirely made up of extremely finely divided matter, can quite well carry •them very fast but can't make them crash up against other hard bodies; and that is what would be required to break or to divide them.

As for your other difficulty: these shell-like particles *don't* take a long way around to return from one pole to the other. In my account, most of them pass through the centre of the earth! The only particles that return through our air are ones that can't find any passage through the centre. This is how I explain why the magnetic strength of the entire mass of the earth doesn't appear to us to be as strong as that of little magnetic stones.

If everything I write here is very confusing, I beg you to forgive me. You kindly indicated which pages of the *Principles of Philosophy* you were speaking about; but I am still travelling and don't have the book with me. I hope to have the honour of paying my respects to you in The Hague in two or three months.

### Descartes writes on 18.v.1645

I was extremely surprised to learn from letters of M. Pollot that you have been ill for a long time, and I curse my solitude, which led to my not knowing anything of this sooner. I really am so removed from the world that I don't learn anything about what is going on. Still, my zeal for serving you wouldn't have let me go so long without knowing the state of your health, even if I had to go to The Hague just to inquire about it, if it weren't for this:

M. Pollot sent me a quick note about two months ago, promising to send a follow-up letter by the next regular mail. When no such letter arrived, I supposed that your health was holding steady, because Pollot never neglects to send me news of how you are doing.

But I learned from his most recent letters that you have had a low-grade fever, accompanied by a dry cough, which lasted three or four weeks, and that after five or six days of remission this illness returned. Right at the time when he sent me that letter (which took almost fifteen days to reach me) you were beginning to get better once again, •as I learn from his even more recent letter•. I see in all this the signs of such a considerable illness (though you can certainly recover from it) that I cannot refrain from writing to tell you my view of the matter. I'm not a physician; but the honour you did me last summer of wanting to know my opinion about another illness that you then had makes me hope that you won't mind the liberty that I am now taking.

The most common cause of a low-grade fever is sadness; and fortune's stubborn *persistence* in persecuting your family gives you •sources of distress that are so public and so conspicuous that I don't have to conjecture very much or to be particularly experienced in social matters to judge that •they are the principal cause of your illness. [This refers to the

coming of civil war in England, which threatened the financial support that the English government had been giving to the shaky finances of Elisabeth's family; and also posed a threat to her uncle, Charles I of England, who did indeed lose his life over it four years later—see note on page 67.]

I would be afraid that you couldn't recover from this, if it weren't for the fact that you keep your soul content despite fortune's blows, doing this through the power of your virtue. I'm well aware that it would be unwise to try to cheer someone to whom fortune sends new occasions for grief each day. . . . I know also that you are much less affected by what concerns you personally than by what concerns the interests of your family and the persons you are care about—which I take to be the most lovable of all your virtues. What chiefly marks off the greatest souls from low-level vulgar ones, it seems to me, is that

vulgar souls give themselves over to their passions and are happy or sad purely according to whether what happens to them is agreeable or unpleasant;

whereas

great souls reason so powerfully that—although they too have passions, which are often more violent than those of the vulgar—their reason remains in command and brings it about that even afflictions serve them and contribute to the perfect happiness that they can enjoy ·not merely in the after-life but· already in this life.

Here is how they do it. They bear in mind •that they are immortal and capable of receiving very great contentment, and on the other hand •that they are joined to mortal and fragile bodies that are bound to perish in a few years; so they do whatever they can to make fortune favourable in this

life, but they value this life so little from the perspective of eternity that they give ·worldly· events no more consideration than we give to events on the stage. Just as the sad stories that we weep to see represented on a stage often entertain us as much as happy ones, so the greatest souls get an inner satisfaction from *all* the things that happen to them, even the most distressing and unbearable. When they feel pain in their bodies they try hard to put up with it, and this show of their strength is agreeable to them. Seeing a friend in some great trouble they feel compassion at the friend's ill fortune and do all they can to rescue him from it, and they aren't afraid of risking death if that is necessary for this purpose. But the sadness that their compassion brings doesn't afflict them, because they are *happy* over the testimony of their conscience, which tells them that they are doing their duty, acting in a manner that is praiseworthy and virtuous. In short, just as the greatest prosperity of fortune never intoxicates them or makes them insolent, so also the greatest adversities can't defeat them or make them so sad that the body to which they are joined falls ill.

If I were writing to anyone but you I would be afraid that writing in this style is ridiculous; but I regard you as the noblest and most upstanding soul I know, so I think you should also be the happiest; and you really *will* be so if you cast your eyes on what is right under you and compare the value of the goods that you have—which can never be taken away from you—with the value of the goods that fortune has snatched away from you and the losses that fortune has inflicted on you through your near and dear. Then you will see all the many reasons you have to be content with the goods that you have.



## Letters written in 1645

### Elisabeth writes on 24.v.1645:

I see that the charms of solitary life have left intact in you the virtues required for society! Your generous kindness for your friends, expressed to me in your concern for my health, might have led you to undertake a voyage to here. I would have been upset if that had happened, because M. Pollot has told me that you regard rest as necessary to your own good health. I assure you that you have done me good without making that journey: the doctors who saw me every day and examined all the symptoms of my illness didn't find its cause, or prescribe any remedies as helpful as those you have provided from afar. Even if they had known enough to suspect the part that my mind has been playing in the disorder of the body, I wouldn't have felt free to tell the doctors about that. But I have no hesitation in telling you, because I am sure that such a plain and open recounting of my faults won't deprive me of my share in your friendship, but would confirm it all the more by showing you that the friendship is something that I need.

So I tell you: My body is awash in many of the weaknesses of my sex; it is affected very easily by the troubles of the soul and doesn't have the power to restore itself when the soul is restored. . . . In people who can't get much exercise, it doesn't take long for sadness to obstruct the spleen and infect the rest of the body by its vapours. I imagine that that's the source of my low-grade fever and dry throat; I still have them despite the warmth of the season, though the walks I take bring back my strength a little. This is what made me agree to follow the doctors' advice to drink the waters of Spa here for a month. . . . as I have found by experience that they

get rid of obstructions. [Spa was a Belgian town famous for its hot springs.] But I won't take them until I know your view, since you have the kindness to want to cure my body along with my soul.

My confession continues. Although •I don't let my happiness depend on things that depend on fortune or on the will of men, and although •I don't regard myself as absolutely wretched when I don't see my family's affairs in order or see my near and dear free from misery, •I still don't know how to classify the harms that come their way as anything but *evil*, or how to avoid being disturbed by the useless efforts I make on their behalf. This disturbed state is no sooner calmed by reasoning than a new disaster produces another anxiety. If my life were entirely known to you, the causes of my present malady wouldn't seem as strange to you as the fact that a sensitive mind like mine has remained intact for so long amidst so many difficulties, in a body so weak, with no advice but that of its own reason and no consolation but that of its own conscience.

I spent all of last winter on tasks that were so arduous that they prevented me from taking up your invitation to present you with the difficulties that I find in my studies. . . . It was just before I fell ill that I found time to read the philosophy of Sir Kenelm Digby, written in English, where I was hoping to find arguments aimed at refuting your own, because the chapter summaries showed me two •places where he claimed to do so. But when I reached •them I was astonished to see how little understanding he has—as little as he has of *anything!*—of •what he approves in your account of reflection and of •what he denies in your account of refraction. He doesn't distinguish a •moving• ball's speed

from its direction, and doesn't think about why a collision with a soft body can only reduce the speed, while a collision with a hard body can only alter the direction. . . . Doctor Jonsson tells me that he will translate those two chapters for you. . . .

PS: I'm aware that in sending you this I am forgetting one of your maxims: never put in writing something that could interpreted unfavorably by uncharitable readers. But my trust in M. Pollot's care assures me that my letter will be safely delivered to you, and my trust in your discretion assures me that you will burn it so that it doesn't fall into evil hands.

### **Descartes writes in v or vi.1645:**

In reading the letter you did me the honour of writing to me, I couldn't help being very distressed to see that such a rare and perfect level of virtue isn't accompanied by the health and prosperity that it deserves. I can readily understand the multitude of distressing things that keep turning up in your life—things that are made harder to overcome by being of such a kind that true reason doesn't issue the command 'Oppose them directly or try to chase them away'. These are *domestic* enemies that you are forced to keep company with, and you have to be perpetually on guard lest they injure you. The only remedy that I know is to channel your imagination and your senses as far from them as you can, and think about them, when prudence requires you to, using only your intellect.

In this matter it is easy, I think, to see how the intellect differs from the imagination and the senses. •Consider someone who has every reason to be happy but who continually sees enacted before him tragedies full of disastrous events, and who spends all his time brooding on sad and pitiful objects.

Suppose that he knows that these are imaginary fables: they draw tears from his eyes and move his imagination, but don't touch his intellect at all. I think that this by itself would be enough gradually to constrict his heart and make him sigh in such a way that the circulation of his blood would be clogged and slowed down. The bigger parts of his blood, sticking together, could easily block the spleen, getting caught in it and stopping in its pores; while the more finely divided parts, being continually agitated, could affect his lungs and cause a cough which in time might be very dangerous. •Now consider someone who has countless genuine reasons for distress but who takes such trouble to direct his imagination that he never thinks about them except when some practical necessity forces him to, and who spends the rest of his time thinking about things that can give him contentment and joy. This will greatly help him by enabling him to make sounder judgments about the things that matter to him, because he'll look on them without passion. Furthermore, I am sure that this by itself could restore him to health, even if his spleen and lungs were already in a poor condition because of the bad condition of the blood caused by sadness. Especially if he also used medical remedies to thin out the part of the blood causing the obstructions. The waters of Spa are very good for this purpose, I think, above all if while taking them you follow the usual recommendation of physicians and free your mind from all sad thoughts, and even from all serious meditations on scientific subjects. Simply imitate people who convince themselves that they aren't thinking of anything when they are observing the greenness of a forest, the colours of a flower, the flight of a bird, or something else requiring no attention. This doesn't waste time; it uses time well, because one can content oneself with the hope that by this means one will recover perfect health, which is the foundation of all the other goods of this life.

I know that everything I write here is better known to you than to me, and that what's difficult in this matter is not the theory but the practice. Still, the great favour that you do me in showing that you aren't averse to hearing my views makes me take the liberty of writing them down just as they are, and of adding this: The remedy I have just suggested cured an illness of mine that was very like yours and perhaps even more dangerous. I was born of a mother who, a few days [actually, 14 months] after my birth, died from a disease of the lungs caused by distress. From her I inherited a dry cough and a pale colour which stayed with me until I was more than twenty, so that all the doctors who saw me predicted that I would die young. But I have always tended to look at things from the most favourable angle and to make my chief happiness depend upon myself alone; and I believe that this tendency caused the indisposition gradually to disappear completely—the indisposition that was almost part of my nature!

Thank you very much for sending me your opinion of Digby's book, which I shan't be able to read until it has been translated into Latin. M. Jonsson, who was here yesterday, informed me that some people plan to do this. . . . I'm really sorry that M. Pollot isn't here, because he could have told me about the state of your health. However, letters sent to me via the Alkmaar postman are always delivered to me; and just as there's nothing in the world that I so ardently desire as to be able to serve you, there's nothing that can make me happier than to have the honour of receiving your commands.

### **Elisabeth writes on 22.vi.1645:**

Even if your letters didn't teach me, they always do me good as the antidote to melancholy, turning my mind away

from •the unpleasant topics that daily invade it to •the happiness that I have in the friendship of a person of your merit, to whose advice I can commit the conduct of my life. If I could get myself to act in conformity with your most recent precepts, I'm certain that I would quickly cure myself of •my• illnesses of the body and weaknesses of the mind. But I confess that I find it difficult to keep my senses and imagination apart from the things that are continuously presented to them in conversation and in letters—things that I can't avoid without failing in my duty. I'm well aware that by removing from the idea of an event everything that makes it troublesome to me (which I believe is presented only by my imagination), I would judge this event sanely and find remedies for my troubled state of mind at the very onset of the feeling that I bring to it. But I have never been able to put this into practice until the passion has already played its role. When I encounter a misfortune that I can't get under my control until some time has passed, what happens is this: even if I saw the trouble coming, it somehow *takes me by surprise* and throws my body so far out of order that I need several months to restore it, and those months hardly pass without some new source of trouble •turning up•. I'm afraid that if I don't use my mind while taking the waters of Spa, it will become even more melancholy: not only do I have to govern it with care, giving it agreeable objects, but the least slackness makes it fall back onto the topics that afflict it. If I could profit as you do from everything that presents itself to my senses, I would have no trouble amusing myself. Right now I feel the disadvantage of being *a little bit rational*! •If I weren't rational at all, I would find pleasures in common with those among whom I must live, taking that medicine and getting some profit from it. And •if I were as rational as you are, I would cure myself as you have done. In addition, the curse of my sex deprives me of the contentment I would

have received from a voyage to Egmond, where I might learn of the truths you draw from your garden. Ah well, I console myself with the liberty you give me to ask from time to time for news of it.

PS: I learned with great joy that the Academy of Groningen did you justice. [See letter-end on page 7.]

### **Descartes writes in vi.1645:**

I can't feel sorry about your illness when I have the honour of receiving your letters—forgive me! I always notice in them such sharp thoughts and firm reasoning that I can't convince myself that a mind capable of conceiving them inhabits a weak, ill body. Be that as it may, the knowledge you exhibit of the illness and of •the remedies that can overcome it assures me that you won't fail to have the skill needed to employ •them.

I know that it's nearly impossible to resist the first upsets that new misfortunes arouse in us, and even that the best minds are usually the ones in which passions are the most violent and act most strongly on their bodies. But it seems to me that on the following day, when sleep has calmed the emotions that the blood carries in such circumstances, the person can begin to get his mind in order, calming it down. To do this, focus on thinking of all the •benefits you can get from whatever it was that you had taken to be a great mishap the day before, and turn your attention away from the •evils you had imagined in it. •This can be done•, because there are no events so disastrous, or so absolutely bad in people's judgment, that a lively-minded person couldn't look at them from an angle that would make them appear favourable. You can draw this general consolation from the misfortunes that have come your way: they may have contributed greatly towards your developing your mind to the point that you

have—and that's a good that you should value more than an empire! Great prosperity often dazzles and intoxicates in such a way that it possesses those that have it rather than being possessed by them. Although this doesn't happen to anyone with a cast of mind like yours, prosperity would still give you fewer openings for the exercise of your mind than adversity does. I believe that just as nothing in the world can be called 'good' without qualification except *good sense*, so there is no evil from which we can't draw some benefit if we have good sense.

I tried once to recommend a carefree attitude to you, thinking that occupations that were too serious would weaken your body in tiring your mind; but I wouldn't want that to include dissuading you from the efforts needed for turning your thought from objects that can sadden you. And I have no doubt that the diversions of study, though very difficult for others, could sometimes serve you as relaxation. I would regard it as a great good fortune for me if I could contribute to making these diversions easier for you. And I have much more •desire to go to The Hague to learn about the virtues of the Spa waters than to know here the virtues of the plants of my garden; and I am even less interested in what is happening at Groningen or at Utrecht, whether to my benefit or harm. •This will oblige me in four or five days to follow this letter.

### **Descartes writes on 21.vii.1645:**

Since I had the honour of seeing you, the weather has been so unsettled, and some days have been so unseasonably cold, that I have often been worried and afraid that the waters of Spa weren't being as healthy or helpful as they would have been in milder weather. Since you have done me the honour of indicating that my letters could provide you with

some diversion while the doctors are recommending you not to occupy your mind with anything that might agitate it, I would be making a poor use of the favour you have done me in allowing me to write to you if I didn't take my first opportunity to do so.

I imagine that most of the letters you get from other sources are in some way upsetting, and that even before you read them you expect them to bring you some bad and disturbing news, since bad fortune has long accustomed you to receiving bad news from letters. But not so with letters from me: you can at least be sure that if they don't bring you good news they ·at least· won't bring you bad. You can open them at any time without fearing that they will interfere with your absorption of the waters that you are taking. Here in this seldom-visited place I learn nothing of what is happening in the rest of the world, ·so I can't bring you bad news from there·! And the most frequent kind of thoughts I have are ones about your virtues; these make me wish to see you as happy and as content as you deserve to be; so my only topic of conversation with you is •the means by which philosophy teaches us to become utterly happy, this being something that •vulgar souls vainly expect from fortune but that •we can obtain only from ourselves.

Of these •means, one of the most useful—it seems to me—is for us to examine what the ancients wrote about happiness; and to try to improve on what they said by adding something to their precepts, for that lets us •make these precepts completely *ours* and •dispose ourselves to put them into practice. Because my mind lacks the ability to produce unaided anything I think worthwhile for you to read, and because I don't want my letters to be entirely empty and useless, I propose from now on to fill them with thoughts that I will draw from reading one book, Seneca's *On the happy life* [Latin *De vita beata*], unless you would rather choose

another book or you don't like this plan. But if I see that you approve of it (as I hope you will), and especially if you'll agree to share with me your remarks about the same book, then as well as serving to instruct me your remarks will give me occasion to make my own thoughts more exact. And the more I judge that this exchange will be agreeable to you, the more care I'll take in developing my thoughts.

### Descartes writes on 4.viii.1645:

When I chose Seneca's *On the happy life* as the book to propose to you as an agreeable topic of discussion, I was going by the author's reputation and the importance of the subject matter, without thinking about *how* he treats it. I have since given some thought to this, and find that his treatment isn't rigorous enough to deserve to be followed. But to help you to judge this ·for yourself·, I'll try now to set out how I think this subject ought to have been treated by a philosopher like him—one who hadn't been enlightened by faith, and so had only natural reason as a guide.

He starts well, saying:

*Vivere omnes beate volunt, sed ad pervidendum quid sit quod beatam vitam efficiat, caligant.*

·All men want to live happily [*beate*], but when it comes to seeing clearly what a happy [*beatam*] life is they are in a fog·.

[Descartes now discusses how to translate *beatus* and its cognate adverb. He would be inclined to use *heureux*, he says, but that really means 'fortunate'—a pleasant state one can be in through sheer good luck. He explains:] This good fortune [= 'good luck'] depends only on things external to us; so someone to whom some good comes without his having done anything to get it is regarded as more fortunate than wise men are. In contrast with that, true beatitude [*béatitude*]

seems to me to consist in a *complete* contentment of the mind and an inner satisfaction. People who are the most favoured by fortune usually don't have this contentment, and wise people acquire it with no help from fortune. Thus, *vivere beate*, to live in beatitude, is nothing but to have a mind that is perfectly content and satisfied.

[In the indented translation of Seneca's sentence, 'happily' and 'happy' convey the general idea; but Descartes has now made them problematic. They're the usual translations of *heureusement* and *heureux*, which Descartes will use a lot; but he equates *heureux* with 'fortunate', and explains this with some care. For a while, the present version will avoid 'happily' and 'happy', using instead 'fortunate' and its cognates. Before long, though, we'll find Descartes using *heureux* in ways that clearly don't confine it to 'fortunate', and then 'happy' etc. will re-enter.]

When I think about what the things are *quod beatam vitam efficiat*, i.e. that can give us this utter contentment—that I call 'beatitude', I see that they are of two sorts: **(1)** those that depend on us, such as virtue and wisdom, and **(2)** those that don't depend on us, such as honours, riches, and health. Consider two men who are equally **(1)** wise and virtuous, and who differ in that **(2)** one of them is shapely, not ill, and affluent while the other is deformed, unhealthy, and poor; it is certain that the former can be more completely contented than the latter can. [In that sentence, 'shapely' translates *bien né*; see the note on that phrase on page 27.] Still, a small jug can be just as *full* as a larger one! Taking the contentment of each man to be

**what Descartes wrote next:** plénitude et l'accomplissement de ses désirs réglés selon raison,

**very literally translated:** the fullness and the satisfaction of his desires regulated according to reason,

**perhaps meaning:** how many desires he has and how well satisfied they are according to reason,

I don't doubt that the poorest people, least blest by nature and fortune, can be entirely content and satisfied just as others can, although they don't enjoy as many good things. That is the only sort of contentment that is in question here; trying for the other sort would be a waste of time, because it is not in our own power.

Now, it seems to me that each person can make himself content, unaided by anything external to him, provided he respects three conditions that are related to the three rules of morality that I presented in the *Discourse on the Method*.

**(1)** He should always try to use his mind as well as he can in order to know what he should do or not do in all the events of life.

**(2)** He should have a firm and constant resolution to do whatever reason advises, without being turned away from that by his passions or appetites. *Virtue*, I believe, consists precisely in sticking firmly to this resolution; though I don't know that anyone has ever explained the word in this way. . . .

**(3)** He should bear in mind that while he is living as much as he can under the guidance of reason, all the good things that he doesn't have are one and all entirely outside his power. This will get him into the habit of *not wanting them*. Why is it that we want to be healthier and richer than we are, but don't want to have more arms or more tongues than we have? It is because we know that we can't by our own efforts come to have more tongues or arms, while •we imagine that health and riches are achievable by our exertions or are owed to our nature—i.e. are things that it is not natural for us to lack. We can rid ourselves of •that opinion by bearing in mind that since we have always followed the advice of our reason we have left undone nothing that was in our power, and that sickness and misfortune are as natural to man as prosperity and health.

Nothing can impede our contentment except •desire and

•regret or repentance. ·I have explained how the person who lives by reason can be free of discontenting desires, and now I add that he can also be free of repentance·. If he always does whatever his reason tells him to do, then even if events show him afterwards that he has gone wrong, he will never have any grounds for repentance, because it was not his fault.

I should add that beatitude is not incompatible with every sort of desire—only with desires that are accompanied by impatience and sadness. Also, it isn't necessary ·for beatitude = utter contentment· that our reason should be free from error. All that is needed is for our conscience to testify that we have never lacked resolution and virtue to carry out whatever we have judged the best course. So virtue by itself is sufficient to make us content in this life. Nevertheless, because

virtue unenlightened by intellect can be false: i.e. our will and resolution to do well can carry us to evil courses that we think are good,

(1) the contentment that comes from such virtue is not solid, ·i.e. we can't depend on it to be durable·; and because

we ordinarily oppose this virtue to pleasures, appetites, and passions,

(2) it's very difficult to put it into practice. On the other hand, the right use of reason gives us a true knowledge of the good ·and thus (1) gives us solid contentment because· it prevents our virtue from being false; and because the right use of reason brings virtue into harmony with permissible pleasures, (2) it makes the practice of virtue quite easy. ·And it also contributes to virtue in a way that I haven't yet mentioned, namely·: by giving us knowledge of the condition of our nature, it restrains our desires in such a way that one must admit that •man's greatest happiness depends on this right use of reason and that therefore •the study that

leads one to it is the most useful occupation one can have. Certainly it is the most agreeable and delightful.

From all this it seems to me that Seneca ought to have taught us all the principal truths we need to know to make the practice of virtue easy and to regulate our desires and passions, and thus to enjoy a natural beatitude. That would have made his book the finest and most useful that a pagan philosopher could have written. Still, this is only my opinion, which I submit to your judgment; I'll be grateful if you tell me where I have gone wrong. . . .

### Elisabeth writes on 16.viii.1645:

In examining the book that you recommended to me I found a good many fine turns of phrase and well conceived moral pronouncements—giving me something to meditate on pleasantly, but not giving me instruction in the book's subject-matter, because there's no method to them, and the author doesn't stick to the method that he initially decided on. Instead of pointing out the shortest path toward beatitude, he settles for showing that *his* riches and *his* luxury don't preclude his reaching it! I have to tell you this, so that you won't think that I share your opinion through prejudice or laziness. Please continue to correct Seneca. I ask this not because your manner of reasoning is more extraordinary ·than others· but because it is the most natural that I have encountered and seems to teach me nothing new, allowing me instead to draw from my own mind items of knowledge that I haven't before been aware of.

Having said that, ·I have to confess to you that· I still can't rid myself of the doubt that one can arrive at the beatitude you speak of without help from things that don't absolutely depend on the will. ·At least one needs help from the *non*-occurrence of events that would make beatitude impossible.

For example, some diseases completely •remove the power of reasoning and thus the ability to enjoy the satisfaction that reason can give. Others •reduce one's power of reasoning and prevent one from following the maxims that good sense would have created, making even the most moderate man liable to be carried away by his passions, and less able to disentangle himself from chance events that require quick decisions. (When Epicurus in his kidney-stone attacks, rather than screaming like a common man, exerted himself to convince his friends that he wasn't in pain, he was leading the life of a •philosopher and not that of a monarch or soldier or courtier; and he knew that nothing would come to him from outside that would make him forget •his role and fail to rise above his circumstances according to his philosophy.) On these occasions •of passionate backsliding, repentance seems to me inevitable. We can't protect ourselves from it by reminding ourselves that moral failure is as natural to man as illness is; because we know quite well that it's true of each particular moral failure that *it* need not have happened.

But I'm sure you will clear up these points of difficulty for me, as well as some others that have slipped my mind just now, when you teach me the truths that must be known to facilitate the practice of virtue. Please don't forget your intention to honour me with your precepts; I assure you that I shall esteem them as much as they deserve. . . .

### **Descartes writes on 18.viii.1645:**

[This letter is not, of course, a reply to Elisabeth's letter dated two days earlier. Descartes's reply to that starts on page 24.]

I don't know whether you have received my last letter; and •anyway• on the topic on which I have the honour of conversing with you I can only write things that I think you already know better than I do. Still, I'll keep writing, in the

belief that you won't find my letters any more tiresome than the books in your library. . . . I shall regard the time I put into writing them as well spent if you give them only time that you feel like wasting.

I mentioned earlier what I thought Seneca ought to have discussed in his book. Now I'll examine what he does discuss. I observe only three general topics in it. **(a)** He tries to explain the supreme good, which he defines in various ways. **(b)** He argues against the views of Epicurus. **(c)** He replies to those who object that philosophers don't live in accordance with the rules they lay down. In order to see in greater detail how he treats these topics, I shall spend a little time on each chapter.

In the first chapter he reproaches those who follow custom and example rather than reason. 'When it comes to how to live', he says, 'people rely on mere •beliefs, never on •judgment.' [Descartes gives all his quotations from Seneca in Latin.] Nevertheless he approves of our taking the advice of the people we believe to be the wisest; though he would have us also employ our own judgment in examining their opinions. Here I am strongly of his opinion. For although many people are incapable of finding the right path on their own, nearly everyone can recognize it well enough when somebody else clearly points it out to him. If instead of letting ourselves be led blindly by example we carefully seek out the advice of the ablest people, and use all our mental powers to discover the right path, then however things may turn out, our consciences will be at peace and we'll have the assurance that our opinions on morality are the best we could possibly have. But Seneca, while he works to hone his eloquence here, is not always exact enough in the expression of his thought. For example, when he says 'we shall become wise provided we separate ourselves from the crowd', he seems to teach that all you need to become wise is to be wild



in your behaviour, which certainly is not his intention.

In the second chapter, he virtually repeats in different words what he said in the first; adding only the point that what is commonly judged to be good is not so.

[This correspondence has already contained several occurrences of *plaisir* = 'pleasure'. We are now about to encounter the first occurrence of *volupté* = 'pleasure'; there is really no other way to translate it. Descartes doesn't theorize about the difference between *plaisir* and *volupté*, but you'll see that there are reasons for wanting to keep them apart. In the present version, *plaisir* will be translated by 'pleasure', and *volupté* will be translated by 'pleasure<sub>V</sub>'.]

In the third chapter, after having again used far too many words, he finally gives his views on the supreme good: namely that

- it accords with the nature of things, that
- wisdom consists in conforming to nature's law and example, and that
- a happy [*beata*] life is one that accords with one's nature.

These definitions all seem very obscure to me. For undoubtedly by 'nature' he does not mean our natural inclinations, seeing that they ordinarily lead us to pursue pleasure, which he argues against; but the rest of his discussion makes me think that by 'the nature of •things' he means the order established by God in all the •things there are in the world. Considering this order to be infallible and independent of our will, he says that 'wisdom consists in agreeing with the nature of things and in conforming to nature's law and example'—i.e. wisdom is going along with the order of things, and doing what we think we were born to do; or rather, in Christian terms, wisdom is submission to the will of God, and following it in all our actions. And he says that 'a happy life is one that accords with one's nature'—i.e. happiness consists in following the order of nature and accepting in the right

spirit all that happens to us. This explains almost nothing, and does not make sufficiently clear the connection with what he adds immediately afterwards—that this happiness cannot come about 'unless the mind is healthy', etc.—unless he means also that 'to live according to nature' is to live in accordance with true reason.

In the fourth and fifth chapters, he gives some other definitions of the supreme good. They all bear some relation to the sense of the first definition, but none of them explains it well enough; and the differences amongst them seem to show that Seneca wasn't clear in his mind about what he wanted to say, for the better one conceives something the more resolved one is to express it in only one way. The best definition he has found is, I think, the one given in the fifth chapter, where he says that 'a happy [*beatus*] person is one who, thanks to reason, has neither desires nor fears', and that 'a happy life is one that is grounded in right and certain judgment'. But so long as he doesn't tell us the reasons why we ought to have no fears or desires, none of this helps us much.

In these same chapters he begins to argue against those who locate beatitude in pleasure<sub>V</sub>, and he continues that argument in the following chapters. So before examining them I'll state my position about this.

I note first that these are not equivalent:

- (1) beatitude
- (2) the supreme good
- (3) the final end or goal towards which our actions ought to tend.

For (1) beatitude is not (2) the supreme good, but presupposes it, being the contentment or satisfaction of the mind that results from possessing it. And (3) the end of our actions can be understood to be either one of those two. The (2) supreme good is surely what we ought to set ourselves as the

goal of all our actions, and the (1) resulting contentment of the mind—beatitude—is also rightly called our end, since it is what attracts us to seek the supreme good.

I note also that Epicurus understood the word ‘*pleasure<sub>V</sub>*’ in a different sense from those who have argued against him. All his opponents restricted the meaning of this word to the pleasures of the senses, whereas he extended it to *every* contentment of the mind. It’s easy to see this in what Seneca and others have written about him.

Now the pagan philosophers had three main views about (2/3) the supreme good and the end of our actions: that of Epicurus, who said it was *pleasure<sub>V</sub>*; that of Zeno, who held it to be virtue; and that of Aristotle, who made it consist of all the perfections—of body and of mind. It seems to me that these three views can be accepted as true and in harmony with one another, provided they are interpreted properly.

Aristotle was thinking of the supreme good of the whole of human nature in general, i.e. the good that can be possessed by the most accomplished of all men; so he was right to make it consist of all the perfections of which human nature is capable. But that ‘meaning’ is not useful to us.

Zeno, on the other hand, was thinking about the supreme good that each man can possess individually. So he had very good reason to say that it consists solely in virtue, because among all the goods we can possess virtue is the only one that depends entirely on our free will. But he represented this virtue as so severe and so opposed to *pleasure<sub>V</sub>* . . . that the only followers he could have, it seems to me, were depressed people or minds entirely detached from bodies!

Finally, Epicurus was thinking about what beatitude consists in and what the motive or end is to which our actions tend; so he wasn’t wrong to say that it is *pleasure<sub>V</sub>* in general, i.e. contentment of the mind. The mere knowledge of our duty might get us to do good actions, but this wouldn’t

cause us to enjoy any beatitude if we got no pleasure from it. But because we often give the name ‘*pleasure<sub>V</sub>*’ to false pleasures, which are accompanied or followed by worry, anxiety and repentance, many have believed that this view of Epicurus teaches vice. And indeed it doesn’t teach virtue. When there’s a prize for hitting a bull’s-eye, you get people to want to hit the bull’s-eye by showing them this prize; but they can’t win the prize if they don’t see the bull’s-eye, and seeing the bull’s-eye won’t induce someone to aim for it if he doesn’t know that there’s a prize to win. In the same way virtue, which is the bull’s-eye, doesn’t come to be strongly desired when it is seen in isolation; and contentment, which is the prize, can’t be acquired unless it is pursued.

That is why I believe I can conclude that beatitude consists solely in contentment of the mind—i.e. in contentment in general. ‘Adding ‘of the mind’ doesn’t narrow it down’, because although some contentment depends on the body and some doesn’t, there’s no contentment that isn’t *in* the mind. But in order to achieve solid [= ‘durable’] contentment we need to pursue virtue—i.e. to maintain a firm and constant will to do everything that we judge to be the best, and to use all the power of our intellect in judging well. As for what Seneca has written about this: I’ll consider that on another occasion, because this letter is already too long.

### Elisabeth writes in viii.1645:

I believe that you will have already seen in my last letter of the 16th [page 20] that your letter of the 4th [page 18] has reached me. That letter of yours shed more light on the subject it treats than everything ‘else’ that I have been able to read or meditate on concerning that subject; but there’s no need for me to say this, because . . . you must know it already, even though you over-generously want not to know

how extremely obliged I am to you for having given me an occupation so useful and so agreeable as that of reading and thinking about your letters. Without the last letter I wouldn't have understood as well as I think I do now what Seneca judges beatitude to be. I attributed the obscurity of that book (and of most of the ancients) to •their way of expounding things, which is so different from ours in that things that are problematic for us are taken for granted by them; and to •their doing so little to connect their points in an orderly manner, because what they are after is attracting admirers by surprising the imagination, rather than disciples by shaping the faculty of judgment. . . . The way he refutes the view of Epicurus seems to confirm this impression. About that philosopher he says 'What we say is a law for virtue he calls •a law• for pleasure<sub>V</sub>.' A little before that he has Epicurus's followers saying 'I deny that anyone can live pleasantly unless he is also living honourably'; which shows clearly that what they call 'pleasure<sub>V</sub>' is the joy and satisfaction of the mind that Seneca describes as *consequentia summum bonum* [= 'following from the supreme good']. And yet throughout the rest of the book he speaks of this Epicurean pleasure<sub>V</sub> as purely sensual, writing like a satirist rather than as a philosopher! But I wish him well, and have done so since you took up the cause •of these ancients•, explaining their opinions and reconciling their differences better than they could do. In doing this you refute a powerful objection **(1) against** the search for this supreme good, •namely• that not one of these great thinkers was able to define •it•, and **(2) against** the authority of human reason, namely that it hasn't enlightened these excellent personages with knowledge of what is most necessary to them and is closest to their hearts. I hope you'll continue with the topic of what Seneca said, or of what he should have said, so as to teach me how to strengthen my understanding in •making judgments about

what is best in all the actions of life. •This seems to be the only difficulty, because it's impossible not to follow the right road once one knows what it is.

### Descartes writes on 1.ix.1645:

[He opens with some remarks about late delivery of letters etc. Then:] This has kept me from expressing earlier how I rejoice in the fact that my judgment of the book that you have taken the trouble to read is not different from yours, and that my way of reasoning strikes you as quite natural. I'm sure that if you had had as much leisure as I have for thinking about these topics, I couldn't write anything that you hadn't •already• observed better than I; but because your age, birth and occupation haven't allowed you this, perhaps what I write can save you some time, with even my faults giving you opportunities for observing the truth.

When I spoke of a beatitude that •depends entirely on our free will and •can be had by anyone, without outside help, you make the good point that some illnesses deprive the sufferer of the ability to reason and thereby deprive him of the ability to enjoy the satisfaction of a rational mind. This shows me that when I generalized about all men I should have confined myself to men who have free use of their reason and know through that the path they must take to reach this beatitude. For everyone wants to become happy, but many don't know how, and often some trouble in the body prevents the will from being free. It happens also when we are asleep; because nobody, however philosophical, can prevent himself having bad dreams when his bodily condition takes him that way. But experience shows that if one has often had a certain thought while one's mind was at liberty, it returns later on, however indisposed one's body may be. Thus, I can say that my dreams never present me with anything

distressing; and it's certainly a great advantage to have long accustomed oneself to not having sad thoughts. But we are able to be absolutely responsible for ourselves only so long as we are in our own power, and it is less upsetting to lose one's life than to lose the use of reason. For even without the teachings of faith, natural philosophy alone makes us hope for •our soul to have a happier state after death than that it has at present. No fear is more upsetting to •it than that of being joined to a body that entirely takes away •its freedom. [This occurrence of *âme* = 'soul' is the first since page 18. Its occurrence here may owe something to the little touch of theology in 'happier after death'. See note on page 1.]

Then there are indispositions that don't entirely upset one's senses but merely alter the humours [supposed bodily fluids the balance of which controls the person's moods], inclining the person to an abnormal intensity of sadness or anger or some other passion. These certainly cause distress, but they can be overcome; and the harder they are to conquer, the more satisfaction the soul can take in doing so. And it's like that, I believe, with all external handicaps, such as the splendour of high birth, the flatteries of court, the hardships that fortune brings, and also the great prosperity that it may bring—which usually does more than misfortune does to make it difficult to live the life of a philosopher. When everything goes according to our wishes, we forget to think of ourselves; and when our fortune changes, we are the more surprised the more we trusted it. What it all comes down to is this: nothing can completely take away our power of making ourselves happy provided it does not disturb our reason; and the things that seem the most distressing are not always the ones that do the most harm.

But in order to know exactly how much each thing can contribute to our contentment, we have to know what its causes are, and this is also one of the principal items of

knowledge that can help to make virtue easier. For any action of our soul through which we acquire some perfection is virtuous, and all there is to our contentment is just our inner awareness of having some perfection. Thus we can't ever do anything virtuous—i.e. do what our reason convinces us that we should do—without getting satisfaction and pleasure from so doing. But there are two sorts of pleasures: ones that belong to the mind alone and ones that belong to the human being, i.e. to the mind in its union with a body. This second group, presented confusedly to the imagination, often appear to be much greater than they are, especially in advance of our actually having them; and this is the source of all the evils and all the errors of life. For according to the rule of reason, each pleasure should be measured by the size of the perfection that produces it; that's how we measure those whose causes are clearly known to us. But often passion makes us believe that certain things are much better and more desirable than they are; then, when we have taken much trouble to acquire them, and in the process lost the chance of possessing other more genuine goods, *having* them brings home to us their defects; and that leads us into dissatisfaction, regret and repentance. And so the true function of reason is to examine the real value of all the goods whose acquisition seems to depend in some way on our conduct, so that we never fail to devote all our efforts to trying to secure the ones that are in fact the most desirable. If, in such cases, fortune opposes our plans and makes them fail, we shall at least have the satisfaction that our loss was not our fault; and we'll still enjoy all the natural beatitude whose acquisition was within our power.

Anger, for instance, can sometimes arouse in us such violent desires for revenge that it will makes us imagine more pleasure in punishing our enemy than in preserving our honour or our life, and will make us risk both honour and

life in the attempt to get revenge. If instead reason examines what the good or perfection is on which the pleasure of revenge is based, all it will find—unless the revenge serves to prevent future offences—is that the pleasure comes from our imagining that we have some kind of superiority. . . . over the person on whom we are getting revenge. And this is often only an empty and pointless imagining, which is worthless in comparison with honour or life, or even with the satisfaction to be had from seeing our mastery of our anger when we abstain from revenge.

The same is true of the other passions. They all aim at goods that they represent more glowingly than they deserve, and they make us imagine pleasures to be much greater than they turn out to be when we actually have them. That's why pleasure<sub>v</sub> is commonly disparaged—the word is used to refer only to the pleasures that frequently deceive us by their appearance ·in our imaginations· and make us neglect other much more secure pleasures, such as the pleasures of the mind commonly are, which are not so impressive in anticipation. I say 'commonly' because not all pleasures of the mind are praiseworthy: they •can be based on some false opinion (for example, the pleasure we take in *slander*, which is based solely our believing that the lower others are valued the higher we ourselves will be valued), and they •can deceive us by their appearance when they're accompanied by some strong passion—for example the pleasure arising from ambition.

But the main difference between the body's pleasures and the mind's comes from the body's being subject to perpetual change, on which indeed its preservation and well-being depend. Because of this, the pleasures that concern the body last a very short time, because each of them •arises from the acquisition of something that is useful to the body *at that moment* and •stops as soon as this something stops

being useful. The pleasures of the soul, on the other hand, can be as immortal as the soul itself, provided they have such a secure foundation that they can't be destroyed either by knowledge of the truth or by any false belief.

The right use of reason in the conduct of life is to examine and consider without passion the value of all the perfections—those of the body and of the mind—that we can acquire through our conduct, so that we'll always choose the best (because very often we *do* have to choose). The body's pleasures are minor affairs; one can say generally that there's a way to make oneself happy without them. Still, I don't think they should be altogether despised, or even that we should free ourselves altogether from having passions. It is enough to subject one's passions to reason; when they have been *tamed* in that way, it sometimes happens that the more they tend towards excess the *more* useful they are! I will never have a passion more excessive than the one that leads me to the respect and veneration that I owe to you.

[Descartes's curious 'the more they tend' etc. is just a lead-in to the next sentence, which is part of his flowery signing-off ceremony at the end of the letter. These ceremonies are omitted from the present version, except for this one which is partly retained because, as we shall see, Elisabeth took the 'the more they tend' clause seriously.]

### Elisabeth writes on 13.ix.1645:

I would be much obliged to my conscience if it would accept the excuses you offer for my ignorance—as though they were remedies for it! That would let me off from repenting for having made such a bad use of the time during which I have had the use of reason. That has been a longer time for me than for others of my age—•longer to the extent that my birth and fortune have forced me to use my judgment •earlier than most, in order to lead a life that is (i) very

trying, **(ii)** free of the wealth and other advantages that could prevent me from thinking of myself and also **(iii)** free of the ·parental· discipline that would have obliged me to rely for that on the prudence of a governess. [Elisabeth is naming three facts (of course *she* doesn't number them) about her life that favour her living and thinking *en philosophe* = like a philosopher. In **(ii)** she seems to mean 'that could prevent me from thinking for myself about my own welfare', and in **(iii)** she speaks of relying 'for that' on a governess, meaning: letting a governess decide what would be in her interests.]

All the same, I don't think that either wealth and other advantages, or the flatteries that come with them, are guaranteed to be able to remove from a well-built soul its strength of mind and to prevent it from receiving its changes of fortune philosophically. [In that sentence, 'well-built' translates *bien né* which seems to mean 'well-born', but doesn't; or anyway it doesn't carry any implication of rank or social level, as 'well-born' did back in the day when it was in common usage. For a person or soul to be *bien né* is for him or it to be basically, congenitally *sound*.] But I'm convinced that the swarm of events that take governing officials by surprise, not giving them time to investigate what it would be best to do, often lead them (no matter how virtuous they are) to do things that they repent of later on—and that's what you say is one of the principal obstacles to beatitude. It is true that they will be protected from a number of faults by

- (1)** a habit of evaluating good things according to how they can contribute to contentment,
- (2)** measuring this contentment according to the perfections that give birth to the pleasures, and
- (3)** judging these perfections and these pleasures without passion.

But to evaluate good things in this way, one must know them perfectly; and to know all the good things among which one must choose in the course of an active life, one would need to have an infinite amount of knowledge. You will say that

a person is sure to be satisfied when •his conscience tells him that he has taken every possible precaution. But when things have gone wrong for someone, •that won't happen, because he'll keep changing his mind about the things that remain to be considered, ·so that he can't in this way get the secure satisfaction that constitutes beatitude·. In order to **(2)** measure contentment according to the perfection causing it, he would have to see clearly the value of each perfection, ·so as to answer questions like this·:

As between •perfections that are useful only to him and •ones that increase *his* usefulness to others, which are preferable?

It seems that the former are highly valued by people who live only for themselves, and the latter by people who have, to excess, a temperament that gets worked up on behalf of others. But a person with either of these kinds of inclination backs it up with reasons that are strong enough to keep him on that track throughout his life. And it's like that with other perfections of the body and of the mind that reason endorses because of an unstated *feeling*. Don't call this feeling a 'passion', because we were born with it. So please tell me exactly how far we should follow this feeling, this gift of nature, and how to correct it. [•The French word *sentiment* can mean 'feeling' or 'opinion'. It seems clear that in this paragraph, 'feeling' is right. •As for the passage 'Don't. . . born with it': if we were born with it, it wasn't caused in us from the outside, so we aren't passive with respect to it, so it isn't a passion.]

I would also like to see you define the passions, so that I can know them better. ·I need that help, because sometimes in my thinking about them I get stuck. For example·, those who call the passions mental 'disturbances' would convince me that the passions get their power simply from overwhelming reason and making it submit, if I didn't know from experience that some passions lead us to perform reasonable

actions. But I'm sure you will give me more light on this subject when you explain how passions that are subject to reason are more useful if they are more powerful. [The Princess was probably wrong to think that this Descartes was soberly advancing that thesis. See the note on page 26. Descartes didn't address this topic in his reply to this letter. Only after Elisabeth raised it again, more loudly (see page 36), did he respond, on page 38, doing so in a manner that drains the thesis of all interest.]

[The Princess reports that she with her family is about to move to Riswyck—specifically, into the house of the Prince of Orange—while their house in The Hague is being cleaned.]

### Descartes writes on 15.ix.1645:

[This letter is a follow-up to the letter of 1.ix replying further to the Princess's letter of viii. Hence Descartes's remark about deciding to 'defer' his answer to one of her questions.]

You have so accurately observed all the causes that blocked Seneca from expounding clearly his opinion on the supreme good, and you have read his book with so much care, that I was afraid I would bore you if I went on examining his chapters one by one. And that ·same fear of boring you· made me defer replying to your question about how to strengthen one's understanding so as to discern what is the best in all the actions of life. ·Now I come to it·. So, without turning aside to follow Seneca any further, I will try simply to explain my own opinion on the topic.

In order to be always disposed to judge well, it seems to me, only two things are needed: •knowledge of the truth and •a dependable practice of remembering and assenting to this knowledge whenever the occasion demands. But because nobody except God knows everything perfectly, we have to settle for knowing the truths that are most useful to us.

(1) The first and chief of these is that there is a God

on whom all things depend, whose perfections are infinite, whose power is immense and whose decrees are infallible. This teaches us to accept with a good spirit everything that happens to us, as expressly sent by God. Moreover, since the true object of love is perfection, when we lift up our minds to think about God as he is we find ourselves naturally so inclined to love him that we even rejoice in our afflictions, through the thought that he wills that they should come to us.

(2) The second thing we must know is the nature of our soul: that it •doesn't need the body in order to stay in existence, •is much nobler than the body, and •is capable of enjoying countless satisfactions that aren't to be found in this life. This prevents us from fearing death, and moves us so far from caring about the things of this world that we regard as *negligible* anything that fortune can do to us.

(3) We can be greatly helped towards this ·frame of mind or condition of soul· by judging the works of God in the way they deserve and by having the capacious idea of the extent of the universe that I tried to make conceivable in the third book of my *Principles*. For if we imagine that

- beyond the heavens there is nothing but imaginary spaces, and that
- all the heavens are made only for the service of the earth and
- the earth is made only for man,

this ·has three bad effects on us·. •It inclines us to think that this earth is our principal home and that this life is the best life we will have. •Instead of knowing the perfections that we really *do* have, we get a sense of our perfections by comparing ourselves with other creatures to which we attribute imperfections that they *don't* have. •With preposterous self-importance we want to be in God's confidence and to join him in running the world—which causes an infinity

of pointless anxieties and frustrations.

(4) After acknowledging the goodness of God, the immortality of our souls and the immensity of the universe, there is one more truth that seems to me to be most useful to know, namely this:

Although each of us is a person separate from others, and therefore with interests that differ somewhat from those of the rest of the world, each of us ought still to think that he couldn't survive on his own, and that he is really one of the parts of the universe, and more particularly a part of this earth, of this state, of this society, of this family—to which he is joined by where he lives, by his oath of allegiance, by his birth. And the interests of the whole of which he is a part should always be put before his own individual personal interests.

In a measured and thoughtful way, however; for •it would be wrong for him to expose himself to a great evil in order to procure only a slight benefit for his relatives or his country, and •if he on his own is worth more than all the rest of his city, it would be wrong for him to sacrifice himself to save it. But someone who saw everything in relation to himself wouldn't shrink from greatly harming other men when he believed that this would bring him some small benefit. Such a person would have no true friendship, no fidelity—quite generally *no virtue*. On the other hand, someone who •considers himself a part of the community takes pleasure in doing good to everyone, and isn't afraid of even risking his life in the service of others when the occasion demands; indeed, he would be willing to lose his *soul*, if he could, to save others. So this way of •considering oneself—namely as a part of something larger—is the source and origin of all the most heroic actions men do. But let us be careful about what we identify as heroism. Someone who risks death for

reasons of vanity (he hopes to be praised) or out of stupidity (he doesn't see the danger) is to be pitied more than prized. Now think about someone who risks death because he thinks **it is his duty**, or suffers some other harm **in order to bring good to others**. It may be that when he thinks about it he doesn't think he did it because **he owes more to the public of which he is a part than to himself in particular**, but that **is** why he acted as he did, and this reason has become confused in his mind. A person is naturally drawn to have it—i.e. this thought of being part of a larger whole—when he knows and loves God as he should. For then, abandoning himself completely to God's will, he strips himself of his own interests and has only one passion—to do what he believes would be agreeable to God. This brings him satisfactions of the mind, contentments, that are worth incomparably more than all the transient little joys that depend on the senses.

(5) In addition to these truths that generalize over all our actions, we ought to know many other truths that concern more particularly each individual action. The chief of these, in my view, are the ones I mentioned in my last letter, namely:

- All our passions represent to us the goods that they incite us to seek as being much greater than they really are;
- The pleasures of the body are never as lasting as those of the soul, or as great when we have them as they appear when we are looking forward to them.

We should carefully take this in, so that •when we feel ourselves moved by some passion we'll suspend our judgment until it calms down and •we won't let ourselves easily be deceived by the false appearance of the goods of this world.

(6) I have only this to add, that we ought to examine in detail all the customs of the place where we are living, so as to see how far they should be followed. Although we can't have certain demonstrations of everything, we ought to make



choices and (in matters of custom) embrace the opinions that seem the most probable. Why? So that when there's a need for action we won't be irresolute; because nothing causes regret and repentance except irresolution.

Finally, just this: As I said before, if one is to be disposed always to judge well, one needs not only •knowledge of the truth but also •habit. •Here is why•. Suppose that in the past we have been convinced of some truth P by clear and evident reasons; we can't keep anything—e.g. those reasons—in mind continually; so in the course of time we might be led by false appearances to turn away from believing P; and our protection against that is by long and frequent meditation on P to imprint it in our mind so •deeply• that it turns into a •habit. In this sense the scholastics are right when they say that virtues are habits; for our failings are indeed usually due not to lack of •theoretical knowledge of what we should do but to lack of practical knowledge—i.e. lack of a firm habit of belief. . . .

PS: As I was finishing this letter I received yours of 13.ix; but I find in it so many things to consider that I won't venture to undertake replying right away; I'm sure you would prefer me to take a little time to think about them.

### **Elisabeth writes on 30.ix.1645:**

Although your observations on Seneca's views about the supreme good have made the reading of that more profitable for me than I could have made it unaided, I am not at all sorry to exchange them for truths as necessary as those that convey the means for strengthening the understanding so as to discern which is the best of all the actions one can take in life. •Well, anyway, I consent to this switch in the topic of our correspondence• on condition that you go on to give the explanation—required by my stupidity!—of the

usefulness of the items of knowledge that you set out. •Here are the difficulties I have that I hope will be resolved by your explanations•.

[The numerals in Descartes's letter, starting at page 28, are matched by the numerals in the next part of the Princess's reply. Neither these nor any other such headings occur in the original letters.] **(1)** Knowledge of God's existence and attributes can console us in the miseries that come to us from the ordinary course of nature and the order he has established there, such as losing goods through a storm, or health through an infection of the air, or friends through death. But it can't console us for the miseries that other men inflict on us. For it seems to us that the will of these men is entirely free, as we have nothing but bare faith to persuade us that God takes the trouble to rule these wills and that he has settled the fate of each person before the creation of the world.

**(2)** Knowing that the soul is immortal and much nobler than the body can make us not merely •regard death as negligible but outright •seek death, because we can't doubt that •after death• we will live more happily, free from the body's illnesses and passions. I'm astonished that people who claimed to be convinced of this truth •about the after-life•, and who lived without the revealed law •forbidding suicide•, preferred a painful life to an advantageous death!

**(3)** As for the great extent of the universe, which you have shown in the third book of your *Principles*, •knowledge of that serves to detach our affections from everything that we see in the universe; but it also separates our idea of •God from the •our idea of• particular providence, the providence that is the foundation of theology.

**(4)** The thought that we are part of a whole, and that interests of the whole are what we should aim to secure, is surely the source of all generous actions; but I find many difficulties in the conditions that you prescribe for such

actions. When someone tries to measure •the evils that he brings on himself for the sake of the public against •the good that will come to the public, how can the evil *not* seem greater to him just because he has a clearer idea of it? And what measure will we have for comparing things that aren't known to us equally well, such as our own merit and that of the people with whom we live? A naturally arrogant person will always tip the balance in his favour, and a modest one will value himself at less than he is worth.

(5) To profit from the particular truths of which you speak, we have to know exactly all the passions we feel and the prejudices we have, most of which are imperceptible.

(6) In observing the customs of the countries where we are, we sometimes come across very unreasonable ones that we have to follow in order to avoid even worse consequences.

Since I have been here •in Riswyck• I have experienced a very trying illustration of this truth. I was hoping to profit from this stay in the country by having more time for study, and in the upshot I have incomparably *less* leisure than I ever had at The Hague, because of the pastimes of people who don't know what to do with themselves. It is very unfair of them to deprive me of real goods so that I can give them imaginary ones, but if I am not to make enemies here I have to abide by the preposterous laws of civility that are established here. [Picking up her pen again:] Since I wrote that, I have been interrupted seven times by these annoying visits. . . .

### Descartes writes on 6.x.1645:

I have sometimes asked myself which of these is better:

- being cheerful and contented, imagining the goods one possesses to be greater and more valuable than they are, and not knowing or not stopping to think

about the goods one doesn't have;

- being sadder because one puts more thought and knowledge into knowing the real value of both •the goods one has and the goods one lacks•.

If I thought that joy was the supreme good, I would be sure that one should try to make oneself joyful, at any price, and I would approve the brutishness of those who drown their sorrows in wine or dull them with tobacco. But I distinguish •the supreme good—which consists in the exercise of virtue, i.e. having all the goods whose acquisition depends on our free will—from •the satisfaction of mind that follows this acquisition. Thus, seeing that it is a greater perfection to know the truth than to be ignorant of it, even when it is to our disadvantage, I say that it is better to be less cheerful and have more knowledge. And it's not always the most cheerful person who has the most satisfied mind; on the contrary, great joys are commonly sober and serious, and only slight and passing joys are accompanied by laughter. So I can't approve of trying to deceive oneself by feeding on false •imagination; for the resulting pleasure can touch only the soul's surface, leaving it to feel inner bitterness when it becomes aware of •their falsehood. A soul might indeed be so continually entertained that it never became aware of this; but that wouldn't amount to the enjoyment of beatitude, which is our topic, because beatitude must depend on one's own conduct whereas the former—the regimen of continual amusement—could come only from fortune.

But when we can have different equally true thoughts of which some lead to contentment and others prevent it, it seems to me that prudence tells us to dwell primarily on the ones that give us satisfaction. Indeed, since almost everything in the world can be looked at from one point of view that makes it appear good and from another that brings out its defects, I think that when something makes a call

on our skill it is primarily skill in looking at things from the angle that makes them seem most to our advantage, provided that this doesn't involve deceiving ourselves.

So, when you note [page 26] the causes that have allowed you more leisure to cultivate your reason than many others of your age, if you also consider how much you have profited from this compared with others, I'm sure you will have reason to be content. And I don't see why you would rather compare yourself with other women in a respect that gives you cause for regret than compare yourself with them in a respect that could give you satisfaction. The constitution of our nature is such that our mind needs a lot of rest so that it can usefully devote a few moments to seeking the truth; and if it is made to do too much study, rather than polishing the mind that will make it drowsy! So in thinking about how much time we have been able to use in instructing ourselves, our standard of comparison should be not •the number of hours we have had to ourselves, but rather (it seems to me), •what we see commonly happens to others, as an indication of the normal scope of the human mind.

It seems to me as well that there's nothing to repent of when we have done what we judged to be best at the time when we had to decide how to act, even if later, thinking it over at our leisure, we judge that we got it wrong. There would be more ground for repentance if we had acted against our conscience, even if later we came to realize that we had done better than we thought. All we are answerable for are our thoughts, and human nature doesn't provide for us to be omniscient, or always to judge as well on the spur of the moment as when there is plenty of time to deliberate.

And another point: The vanity that makes a man think better of himself than he deserves is a vice that only weak and base souls display; but this doesn't mean that the strongest and most noble souls have a duty to despise themselves! We

must do ourselves justice, and recognize our perfections as well as our faults. Propriety forbids us to boast of our good qualities, but it doesn't forbid us to be aware of them.

Finally: when we have to choose between goods in the various situations of our lives, we can't bring to the choice the perfect knowledge of the options that would have to be backed by infinite knowledge. We must, I think, settle for a modest knowledge of the most necessary truths—such as those I listed in my last letter.

In that letter I have already given my opinion on your question [page 27] as to which is more reasonable—•seeing everything in relation to oneself or •getting oneself worked up on behalf of others. If we thought only of ourselves, the only goods we could enjoy would be *ours* in particular; whereas if we consider ourselves as parts of some larger body, we share also in the goods that all its parts enjoy, without being deprived by that of any that are exclusively ours. It is not the same with the *evils*. According to philosophy, evil is not something real but only a privation [here = 'negation' or 'lack']. When we are saddened by some evil that has befallen our friends, we aren't sharing in the defect—the lack—in which this evil consists; and the sadness or distress we feel on such occasions, whatever its level, can't be as great as the inner satisfaction that always accompanies good actions. And this is especially true of actions that come from a pure affection for others with no reference to oneself, that is, from the Christian virtue called charity. So one can be •in tears •over some situation •while •working hard •to correct it •and yet be enjoying oneself more that when one is •laughing and •at one's ease.

It is easy to show that the pleasure of the soul that constitutes beatitude can be separated from cheerfulness and bodily comfort. This is proved by •theatrical• tragedies, which please us more the sadder they make us; and by bodily

exercises like hunting and handball and the like, which are pleasant in spite of being arduous—indeed the fatigue and exertion can often be seen to increase the pleasure. The soul gets contentment from these exercises because they call to its attention the strength, or the skill, or some other perfection of the body to which it is joined; whereas the contentment the soul gets from weeping at some pitiable and tragic episode on the stage arises chiefly from its impression that in having compassion for the afflicted it is performing a virtuous action. Quite generally, indeed, the soul enjoys feeling *any* passions arising in it, provided it remains in control of them.

But I must examine these passions in more detail so as to be able to define them. I can do that more easily in this letter than if I were writing to anyone else, because you have taken the trouble to read the treatise that I once sketched out concerning the nature of animals, so you know already how I think various impressions are formed in animals' brains—including the brains of human beings:

- by exterior objects that move the animal's senses,
- by the interior dispositions of the body,
- by the traces of previous impressions that remain in the memory,
- by the agitation of the spirits that come from the heart,

In man the brain is also acted on by the soul, which has some power to change cerebral impressions; and brain-impressions in general have the power to arouse thoughts in the soul that don't depend on its will. [What Descartes actually wrote attributed 'the power to arouse thoughts' etc. only to brain-impressions that were caused by the soul. That was certainly not his intention, as you'll see right away.] Consequently, the term 'passion' can be applied in general to all the thoughts that are thus aroused [= 'that are aroused by cerebral impressions'] in the soul without the concurrence of its will, and therefore

without any *action* of the soul itself; for whatever is not an action is a passion.

[Two points about that. •Descartes is assuming that the only way a soul can *act* is in or through an act of its will. •And he is relying on a general contrast that shows up in

active—passive

action—passion

and in corresponding pair of French verbs

*agir*—*pâtir*

of which only the former has an English equivalent. See note on page 2.]

But ordinarily the word 'passion' is confined to thoughts that are caused by some particular agitation of the spirits. Thoughts that come from external objects, or from internal dispositions of the body—such as the perception of colours, sounds, smells, hunger, thirst, pain, and the like—are called 'sensations', 'external' and 'internal' respectively. Those that depend solely on memory-traces of previous impressions and on the ordinary movement of the spirits are called 'dreams', whether they are real dreams in sleep or daydreams in waking life when the soul doesn't determine itself to anything of its own accord, but idly follows the impressions that happen to be in the brain. But when the soul uses its will to make itself have some thought that is not just intelligible but also imaginable, this thought makes a new impression in the brain; this is not a passion within the soul, but an action—and it is what is properly called 'imagination'. Finally, when the normal flow of the spirits is such that it regularly arouses sad or cheerful thoughts or the like, this is not attributed to 'passion' but to the 'nature' or 'temperament' of the person in whom they are aroused. . . . So there remain only the thoughts that come from some special agitation of the spirits, whose effects are felt as in the soul itself. It is these that are passions properly so called. Of course most of our thoughts depend on more than one of the causes I have just listed; but each thought is labelled according to

its chief cause or the cause we are chiefly concerned with. This makes many people confuse •the sensation of pain with the passion of sadness, and •tickling little pleasures with the passion of joy, which they also call pleasure<sub>V</sub> or pleasure [see note on page 22], and •sensations of thirst or hunger with the desires to drink and to eat, which are passions. This is because the causes that give rise to pain commonly also agitate the spirits in such a way as to arouse sadness, and those that produce a pleasurable sensation agitate them in such a way as to arouse joy, and likewise in other cases.

Sometimes an inclination or habit that tilts a person towards having a certain passion is confused with the passion itself, though they are easy to distinguish. For instance, when it is announced in a town that enemies are coming to besiege it, the inhabitants at once make a judgment about the evil that may result to them: this judgment is an action of their soul and not a passion. This judgment may be very similar in many of them, but they aren't all equally moved [*émus*] by it: some are more moved than others, depending on how great a general inclination they have towards fear. Their souls can receive the emotion [*émotion*] that constitutes the passion only after they have made this judgment, or without making a judgment have conceived the danger and imprinted an image of it in the brain (which is done by another action called 'imagining'); and by means of that image the soul acts on the spirits that travel from the brain through the nerves in the muscles, making them enter the muscles that serve to narrow the openings of the heart, thus slowing down the circulation of the blood. That results in the whole body's becoming pale, cold and trembling, and the fresh spirits returning from the heart to the brain are agitated in such a way that they can't form any images except those that arouse in the soul the passion of fear. These events follow one another so quickly that the whole thing seems like a

single operation. Similarly with all the other passions: there is always some special agitation in the spirits leaving the heart.

That is what I was going to write to you a week ago, and I planned to add a detailed explanation of all the passions. But I found it difficult to list them, so I had to let the postman leave without my letter. Having in the meantime received the letter you were kind enough to write to me, I now have more points to answer, and so I must postpone the examination of the passions. [Descartes now starts to answer the first three of the difficulties raised by Elisabeth, starting on page 30, and perhaps also to answer the fourth.]

(1) I must say at once that all the reasons showing that God exists and is the first and unchangeable cause of all effects that *don't* depend on human free will seem to me to show equally that he is also the cause of all the effects that *do* depend on it. For the only way to demonstrate that he exists is to consider him as a supremely perfect being; and he wouldn't be supremely perfect if anything could happen in the world that didn't come entirely from him. It's true that only **faith** can teach us what that grace is by which God raises us to a supernatural beatitude; but unaided **philosophy** shows us that not even the slightest thought could enter into a human mind without God's willing it to do so. . . . The scholastic distinction between universal and particular causes is irrelevant here. •Here's an example of it: The sun is the universal cause of all flowers, but isn't the •particular• cause of the difference between tulips and roses. But that is because the production of flowers depends also on other particular causes that aren't subordinated to the sun. •Obviously that is irrelevant to our present topic, because• God is the universal cause of everything in such a way that he is also the total cause—the sole cause—of everything; so nothing can happen without his will.

(2) It is also true that knowledge of the soul's immortality and of the felicities it will be capable of outside of this life could provide those who are weary of this life with reasons to leave it, if they were sure that they *really* would enjoy all those felicities in the after-life. But no reason assures them of this—only the *•false philosophy of Hegesias*, whose book maintaining that this life is evil was prohibited by Ptolemy, *•King of Egypt*, because many killed themselves after reading it! *•True philosophy*, on the other hand, teaches that even among the saddest events and the most pressing pains one can always be content so long as one knows how to use reason,

(3) As for the extent of the universe, I don't see how thinking about this tempts one to separate *•the idea of particular providence* from the idea we have of God. God is quite different from finite powers. They can be used up; so when we see that they are employed in many great effects, we have reason to think it unlikely that they also extend to lesser ones. But the greater we think God's works to be, the better we observe the infiniteness of his power; and the better known this infinity is to us, the more certain we are that it extends even to the most particular actions of human beings.

When you spoke of the 'particular providence' of God as being the foundation of theology [on page 30], I don't think you had in mind some change in God's decrees occasioned by actions that depend on our free will. No such change is theologically tenable; and when theology requires us to pray to God, our aim is not *•to inform him of our needs*, or *•to get him to change anything in the order established from all eternity by his providence*—either of these aims would be blameworthy—but simply to obtain whatever he has, from all eternity, willed to be obtained by our prayers. I believe that all theologians agree on this, including the Arminians,

who seem to be the ones who give the most respect to free will.

I acknowledge that it's hard to determine exactly how far reason ordains that we should go in devoting ourselves to the public good; but then this isn't something on which we need to be very exact; it is enough to satisfy one's conscience, and in doing this one can leave a lot of room for one's inclination. (4?) For God has so established the order of things and conjoined men together in so tight a society that even if each person thought of everything purely in terms of himself, with no charity for others, he would nevertheless in the ordinary course of events be doing everything he could *for them*—as long as he was a prudent person and lived at a time when morals were not corrupted.

Moreover, just as it's nobler and more glorious to bring benefits to others than to get them for oneself, so also it's the noblest souls who *•have the greatest inclination to do this* and who *•care least about the goods they possess*. Only weak and base souls over-rate themselves; they're like tiny vessels that a few drops of water can fill. I know that you are not one of those! Base souls can't be persuaded to take trouble for others unless they can be shown that they will reap some profit for themselves; but in order to persuade you to look after your health I have to point out to you that if you don't you can't long be useful to those you care about.

### Elisabeth writes on 28.x.1645:

[The magnificent opening sentence of this letter of Elisabeth's is too compact to be easy to take in. It is given in the original French at the end of this letter. In it she says that Descartes has given good reasons for two theses: (i) It is better to be downcast through knowing the truth than cheerful because one believes a falsehood. (ii) Where there are two ways of

considering something, of which one is painful to you and the other not, it is all right for you to settle for the unpainful one *only if* it contains as much truth as does the other. In the light of this, Elisabeth declares herself to be ‘surprised’ (and, she implies, shocked) by Descartes’s expressing a certain view about how she should think about herself, specifically, about what contrasts between herself and others of her age she should make room for in her mind. As between

- comparing herself with them ‘in respect of something unknown to me’ and
- comparing herself with them in ‘respect of something I can’t possibly be ignorant of,

he wants her to dwell on the former comparison because that ‘would be more to my advantage’. [See Descartes’s ‘And I don’t see why. . .’ etc. on page 32.] She continues:] Nothing could clarify for me whether I have profited more from developing my reason than others have from following their pursuits; and I am quite sure that I could have advanced further than I have while still allowing myself time for as much relaxation as my body requires. If our view of the scope of the human mind were based on the minds of people in general, we would credit it with a very narrow scope, because most people engage in thinking only about matters regarding the senses. And of those who *do* apply themselves to study, few •use anything but their memory or •have the truth as the goal of their labour. I don’t enjoy thinking about whether I have gained more than these people; if that shows something bad in my character, I don’t think it’s an excess of humility, which is just as bad as egotism though not as common. We are more inclined to disown our faults than our perfections. In fending off remorse for the mistakes we have made as if it were an enemy of our happiness, we could risk losing the desire to correct ourselves—mainly when some passion has produced the mistakes, because we naturally love to be

moved by our passions and to go with their movements. And it’s only when they move us to some downright bad state of affairs that we learn that they [mistakes? passions?] can be harmful. This is, in my judgment, what makes tragedies more pleasing the more they make us sad, because we know that the sadness won’t be strong enough to make us behave absurdly or lasting enough to spoil our health.

But this does *not* suffice to support the doctrine contained in one of your letters—that when the passions are subject to reason, the more excessive they are the more useful they are; [see note on page 26] because it seems ·to me· that the passions can never be both excessive and subject ·to reason·. But I believe you’ll clear this matter up in the course of describing how ·it comes about that· *this* particular agitation of the spirits serves to form all the passions we experience, and *how* it corrupts reason. I wouldn’t venture to ask this of you if I didn’t know that you never leave a work unfinished, and that in undertaking to teach a stupid person like me you are prepared for all the inconveniences that this brings you.

It is this that makes me press the point that the reasons showing that God exists and is the unchangeable immutable cause of all the effects that don’t depend on our free will don’t convince me that he is also the cause of the ones that do depend on it. From his supreme perfection it follows necessarily that he *could be*, i.e. that he could have never given free will to human beings. But since we feel ourselves to have it, it seems to me inconsistent with common sense to think that free will depends on God not only for its existence but also for its operations.

Someone who is convinced that the soul is immortal can’t doubt that it will be happier after it separates from the body (which is the origin of all life’s unpleasures, just as the soul is the origin of the greatest contentments), despite the opinion of Kenelm Digby, whose teacher. . . made him believe in the

necessity of purgatory, by convincing him that the passions that have dominated reason during a man's life leave traces in the soul after the body's death; and these ·remnants· torment the soul all the more because they find no means of satisfying themselves in such a pure substance.

I don't see how this squares with the soul's immateriality. But I haven't the least doubt that even though ·this· life is not bad in itself, it ought to be abandoned for a condition that we will find to be better.

By 'the special providence that is the foundation of theology' [see page 30, and Descartes's challenge on page 35], I mean the providence by which God has for all eternity prescribed such strange ways of going about things as

his own incarnation on behalf of a part of creation that is (according to your account of this planet in your physics) so inconsiderable compared with the rest,

doing this so as to be glorified by it! This ·glorification· seems to be a very unworthy purpose for the creator of this great universe. But in writing *that* I was presenting the objection of our theologians rather than my own, because I have always believed it very impertinent for finite persons to judge the purposes for which an infinite being acts.

You don't think that we need an exact knowledge of how much ·effort· reason says we should invest in the interests of the public [see page 35] because anyone who cares only for his own interests will also be working for others, if he brings prudence to bear on this.

**What Elisabeth wrote next:** *Et cette prudence est le tout, dont je ne vous demande qu'une partie.*

**What that means:** All I am asking of you is *a part* of this over-all prudence.

**What she is getting at:** ??

Because anyone who has that ·part· can't fail to do justice to others and to himself. It's because of the lack of it, sometimes, that **(a)** a go-ahead person too easily drops his own interests in favour of those of his country and thereby loses the means to serve his country; and **(b)** a timid person fails to risk his well-being and his fortune for the preservation of his country and thereby loses both himself and his country.

[Just to make sure that this extremely compressed sentence is understood: Elisabeth has presented two cases where a person would have been more useful to 'the public' if he had been *more* prudent. **(a)** A bold patriot throws his life away in defence of his country; with more prudence he would have played safe, and lived to do more good for his country. **(b)** A timid person passes up a chance to risk his all in defence of his country, and his country and he both go down; with more prudence he would have thought his way through to the conclusion that in his own interests this risk was worth taking.]

Because of my social rank, my life has always been quite useless to those I love; but I have been much more careful to keep myself alive since I came to have the good fortune to know you, because you have shown me how to live more happily than I did before.

·THE OPENING SENTENCE OF THE PRECEDING LETTER·

*Après avoir donné de si bonnes raisons, pour montrer qu'il vaut mieux connaître des vérités à notre désavantage, que se tromper agréablement, et qu'il n'y a que les choses qui admettent diverses considérations également vraies, qui nous doivent obliger de nous arrêter à celle qui nous apportera plus de contentement, je m'étonne que vous voulez que je me compare à ceux de mon âge, plutôt en chose qui m'est inconnue qu'en ce que je ne saurais ignorer, encore que celle-là soit plus à mon avantage.*



### Descartes writes on 3.xi.1645:

So seldom do good arguments come my way—in the conversations I have in this place that hardly anyone visits, and also in the books I consult—that I can't read the arguments in your letters without feeling an extraordinary joy. I find your reasoning so strong that, rather mounting a defence I would prefer to confess defeat at their hands. Although the comparison that you refuse to make—the one that is to your advantage, ·making you look good in comparison with others of your age—could be adequately confirmed by experience, the •virtue of judging others favorably is so praiseworthy, and fits so well with the •generosity that won't let you aim to measure the scope of the human mind by the example of the average person, that I'm bound to hold both •these virtues of yours in very high esteem.

Nor would I venture to contradict what you write about repentance. For this is a Christian virtue which serves to make us correct our faults—not only those committed voluntarily, but also those done through ignorance, when some passion has prevented us from knowing the truth.

I quite agree that the sadness of tragedies would not please as it does if we saw a risk of its becoming so excessive as to make us uncomfortable; ·and that is just one of the bits of evidence that excessive passions are deplorable. But when I said that some passions are more useful the more they tend to excess, I was talking of passions that are altogether good—as I signalled by adding that the stipulation that they be subject to reason. [In what follows, Descartes will still use the noun *excès* that has been translated as 'excess', but now it has to have its milder meaning, in which an *excès* of something is not necessarily bad.] There are, you see, two kinds of addition or surplus [*excès*]: •one that affects the thing qualitatively, turning it from **good to bad** and preventing it from remaining

subject to reason; and •another that affects the thing only quantitatively, augmenting it and turning it from **good to better**. Thus there are two ways of adding to courage: one turns it into recklessness and carries it past the limits of reason; the other, which remains within those limits, adds to courage ·a further virtue, namely· absence of irresolution and fear.

As for free will, I agree that if we think only of ourselves we can't help regarding it—our will—as independent; but when we think of God's infinite power we can't help believing that *everything* depends on him, our free will included. This thesis:

God has created men whose nature is such that the actions of their will don't depend on his will

is self-contradictory. It amounts to saying that God's power is both finite and infinite: •finite, because there is something that doesn't depend on it; infinite, because he was able to create that independent thing. But just as our knowledge that God exists oughtn't to block our confidence that we have free will (because we experience it and feel it in ourselves), so also our knowledge of our free will oughtn't to make us doubt the existence of God. The •independence we experience and feel in ourselves, which suffices to make our actions praiseworthy or blameworthy, is not incompatible with a •dependence of quite another kind, whereby all things are subject to God.

As for the state of the soul after this life, I am not so well informed as M. Digby! Leaving aside what faith tells us, I agree that unaided natural reason alone can't give us any certainty about this; we can of course make many favourable conjectures and have fine hopes. That same natural reason ·can, however, give us definite practical guidance in this area because it· teaches us •that we have always more goods than evils in this life, and that •we should never give up something

certain in order to get something uncertain; from which it seems to me to follow that although we should not seriously fear death, we should equally never seek it.

I don't need to reply to the objection that theologians may make about the vast extent that I have attributed to the universe, since you have already replied on my behalf. I will add only that if such a vast extent could make the mysteries of our faith less credible then so should the vast extent that the astronomers have always attributed to the heavens. *They* have always thought the heavens so large that the earth is a mere point by comparison; yet the objection is never made against them.

If prudence were mistress of events—i.e. if everyone were always perfectly prudent in everything he did—I've no doubt that you would succeed in everything you undertake; but all men would have to be perfectly wise before you could infer from what they ought to do what they will in fact do! To know how they will act you would at least have to know in detail the temperament of each person with whom you were to have any dealings; and even that wouldn't be enough, because they have—in addition to their temperament—their own free will, which can't be predicted except by God. Our judgments about the actions of others are normally based on what we ourselves would want to do if we were in their place; so it often happens that people with ordinary middle-level minds, being mentally similar to those they have to deal with, see further into others' purposes, and have less trouble succeeding in their undertakings, than people with more refined minds do; because the latter, dealing only with people with much less knowledge and prudence, make practical judgments in an utterly different way. You should be consoled by this fact when fortune is opposed to your plans. . . .

### Elisabeth writes on 30.xi.1645:

You may well be surprised that, after you indicated to me that my reasoning didn't strike you as entirely ridiculous, I have waited so long to get from my reasoning the advantage that your responses offer me. And I am ashamed to admit to you the reason why, because it has overturned everything that your lessons seemed to establish in my mind. I thought that by strongly resolving to seek beatitude only in things that depend on my will I would make myself less vulnerable to things coming at me from elsewhere; and now the folly of one of my brothers, Edward, has shown me my weakness. His folly has troubled my body's health and my soul's tranquility more than all the other misfortunes that have ever come my way. . . . My brother has fallen into the hands of a certain group of people who have more hatred for our house [see note on page 4] than affection for their own religion, and has let himself be caught in their traps to the point of changing his religion and becoming a Roman Catholic, without making the faintest attempt to behave in a way that might make the very credulous, at least, think he was doing this sincerely. I have to see someone whom I loved with as much tenderness as I am capable of abandoned to the scorn of the world and the loss of his soul (according to my belief). It would be wildly inappropriate for me to write about this matter to you, a Roman Catholic, if it weren't for two facts: you have more charity than bigotry, and it is my practice to tell you all my faults, as to the person in the world who is best able to correct them for me.

Something else I have to admit: although I don't *understand* the claim that

(i) the independence of our will doesn't clash with (ii) our idea of God any more than the (iii) dependence of our will clashes with (iv) its freedom,

I can't possibly reconcile these ·last· two, because it's as impossible for the will to be at once **(iv)** free and **(iii)** attached to the decrees of Providence as for divine power to be at once infinite and limited. I *don't* see •the compatibility between them of which you speak, or •how this dependence of the will can be of 'quite another kind' from its freedom, unless you'll be so good as to teach this to me.

With regard to contentment, I accept that the present possession of it is much more certain than the expectation—however well grounded—that one will have it in the future. But I'm having trouble convincing myself that 'we have always more goods than evils in this life', because

- more goes into make a good than into making an evil;
- more parts of ·the mind and body of· a person are receptive to unpleasure than are receptive to pleasure;
- there's an infinite number of errors for every truth;
- there are so many means to go astray for every one that takes us along the right path;
- so many people have the intent and the power to harm,

as against the few who have the intent and power to help.

Finally, *anything* that depends on the will of others and on how the world goes is capable of troubling us; whereas, according to your own view, we can't get a real and constant satisfaction except from what depends purely on our will.

As for prudence in matters concerning human society: I do not expect an infallible rule, but I would really like to see the rules you would give to someone who in living only for himself in his profession would nevertheless be working for others also. I hesitate to make this request for more light, after having made such poor use of the light you have already given me.

#### **Elisabeth writes on 27.xii.1645:**

[This short letter concerns someone whom Descartes had asked the Princess to support in his application for a university position.]

## Letters written in 1646

### Descartes writes in i.1646:

I can't deny that I was surprised to learn that you were upset—to the point where your health was affected—by an event that most people will regard as good, and that all the rest could, for several strong reasons, regard as excusable. All my fellow Catholics (who are certainly the majority in Europe) are obliged to approve ·what you brother has done·, even if they saw in it some circumstances and apparent motives that could be condemned; for we believe that God employs various means to draw souls to him. An example of that would be provided by someone who enters a monastery for bad reasons and then leads there a life of great holiness. As for those of other faiths, if they speak badly of it [=? 'what you brother did'], we can reject their judgment; for in all affairs where there are different sides, it's impossible to please some without displeasing the others. If they bear in mind that they wouldn't belong to the church they *do* belong to if they or their fathers or their grandfathers hadn't left the Church of Rome, then they will have no reason to ridicule those who leave their church, or to accuse them of inconstancy.

As regards the wisdom of the times, it's true that those who have Fortune as a house guest are right to cluster around her, joining forces to prevent her from escaping; but those whose home she has fled do well to agree to go different ways, so that at least one of them may meet up with her even if not all can find her. . . . And because each of them (I gather) has many resources, including friends in various places, this makes them a more powerful ·search party· than if they all followed the same path. Because of this, I can't think that the authors of this advice ·to your brother· wanted

to harm your house. But I don't claim that my arguments could prevent you from feeling •the indignation that you do feel. I only hope that when this letter reaches you, time will have lessened •it; •and I now drop the topic, because· if I continued with it any longer I would be afraid of reawakening your indignation.

So I turn now to your problem about free will. I'll try through an illustration to explain how this is both dependent and free. Suppose that a king has forbidden duels, and knows for sure that two gentlemen, A and B, of his kingdom who live in different towns have a quarrel, and are so hostile to each other that if they meet nothing will stop them from fighting. If this king orders A to go on a certain day to the town where B lives, and orders B to go on the same day to the place where A lives, he knows for sure that they will meet, and fight, thus disobeying his ban on duelling. But this doesn't mean that he *compels* them to fight. He knew they would meet and fight in this way, and he may even have wanted them to do so; but that doesn't prevent their fighting from being voluntary and free—as much so as if their meeting had come about in some other way and he had known nothing about it. And it is as just to punish them for disobeying the ban ·as it would be if the king had not seen this coming·. Now, what a king can do in such a case concerning certain free actions of his subjects, God with his infinite foresight and power does infallibly in regard to all the free actions of all men. Before he sent us into the world he knew exactly what all the inclinations of our will would be; it is he who gave us those inclinations; it is he who arranged the rest of the world outside us so that X objects would present themselves to our senses at Y times,

on the occasion of which he knew that our free will would determine us act in manner Z; and he willed that we should choose as we did, but he didn't will that our will should be *constrained* in making that choice. In this king—the one in my illustration—we can distinguish two different levels of volition: •one in which he willed that these gentlemen should fight, since he caused them to meet; and •the other in which willed that they not fight, because he forbade duels. And in the same way the theologians distinguish God's •absolute and independent will, in which he wills everything to happen as it does, from his •relative will, relating to the merit and demerit of men, in which he wants them to obey his laws.

[The word 'evil' as used below (and elsewhere in this text) should be explained. French has the adjectives *bon* and *mal*, 'good' and 'bad'; and it also uses those same words as nouns. English doesn't have a single noun equivalent to the noun *mal*. We can stretch things a bit and say 'He was thinking about all the goods in his life' meaning '... all the good things', but we can't get away with saying 'He was thinking about all the bads in his life'. In the present text, as in most English translations of early modern French, the noun 'evil' is made to play this role. Its meaning here is nowhere near as strong as its meaning in today's colloquial English. For example, one of the 'evils' of a gardening job might be a mildly sore back.]

To defend my statement that in this life we always have more good things than evil ones, against your objection concerning all the inconveniences of life, I have to distinguish two sorts of goods. **(1)** When we are thinking of the idea of goodness as a rule for our actions, we take the goodness to consist in all the perfection there can be in the item we are calling 'good', and we compare this perfection with a straight line, which stands out uniquely among the infinity of curves with which we compare evils. That is the notion of *good* that is at work when philosophers say:

*bonum est ex integra causa, malum ex quovis defectu*  
= the good comes from the whole cause, the evil from any defect whatsoever.

**(2)** But when we are thinking about the good and evil that may exist in a single thing, in order to discover what value to put on it (as I did when I spoke of the value we should put on this life), we must take the good to consist in whatever may be advantageous to us, and the evil to consist in whatever may be disadvantageous; the other defects that the thing may have are not taken into account. Thus, when someone is offered a job, he thinks about the *goods* he can expect from it, the honour and profit, and he thinks about the *evils* such as the trouble, the danger, the loss of time, and the like; and having weighed the evils against the goods, he accepts or turns down the job depending on which side of the balance goes down. Now, it was in sense **(2)** that I said that there are always more good than evil things in this life; and I said this because I think we should take little account of •events outside us that *don't* depend on our free will as compared with •events that *do* depend on it. Provided we know how to make good use of our will, we can make everything that depends on it good, and we can use those goods to prevent the evils that come from outside—however great they may be—from penetrating deeply into our souls, letting them get only as deep as the sadness that actors arouse in the soul when we see them portray some tragic story. But I admit that to reach that point we have to be very philosophical indeed. And yet I think that even those who go furthest in giving free rein to their passions really judge, deep down, that there are more good things than evil ones in this life, even if they aren't themselves aware of them. Sometimes when they are in great misery they call upon death to help them, but it's only to help them bear their burden...and doesn't mean that they want to lose their life. And if there are some who

do want to lose it, and who kill themselves, that is due to •an intellectual error and not to •a well-reasoned judgment or to •an opinion imprinted on them by nature, like the one that makes a man prefer the goods of this life to its evils.

What makes me believe that

Someone who wants to •be prudent, and to act only for his own individual benefit, ought like anyone else to •work for others, doing all he can to bring pleasure to each

is the fact that we so often see things like this:

Someone who is generally regarded as energetic and prompt in •giving pleasure also •receives plenty of favours from others, even from people for whom he hasn't done anything; and the trouble he takes in bringing pleasure is outweighed by the benefits he gets from the friendships of those who know him,

He wouldn't have received these favours if he had been generally thought to be motivated by something other than altruism. . . . It's true that sometimes a person takes trouble to do good, and gets no reward; and that sometimes a person acts badly and profits by this. But that can't change the rule of prudence, which concerns what *usually* happens. For me •personally•, the maxim that I have chiefly obeyed in all the conduct of my life has been to •stay on the main road and to •believe that the most important clever trick is to have absolutely no wish to use clever tricks. In my view, the common laws of society, which all tend to get people to help—or at least not to harm—each other, are so well established that anyone who follows them honestly, without pretence or tricks, leads a happier, more secure life than those who follow their interests by other routes. The latter sometimes succeed, through other men's ignorance and fortune's favour; but they usually fail, and in thinking to establish themselves they bring themselves to ruin.

### Elisabeth writes on 25.iv.1646:

Starting just after your departure, my brother Philip's recent contract with the Republic of Venice has given me a much less agreeable occupation than the one you left me with; this is a business that needs more knowledge than I have, and I was asked to lend a hand with it only so that I could supply something better than that young man's impatience. [Philip, aged 17, had agreed to lead a regiment against the Turks on behalf of Venice and Poland.] This has prevented me, until now, from availing myself of your permission to put before you the obscurities that my own stupidity leads me to find in your treatise on *The Passions*. There aren't many of them. The order, definition, and distinctions that you give to the passions, and indeed all the **moral** part of this treatise, surpass everything previously said on this subject; I would have to have been •not merely stupid but• insentient not to grasp that.

But the **physiological** part is not so clear to the beginner, which is why I don't see how anyone can know which movements of the blood cause which of the five basic passions, because these passions are never alone. For example, love is always accompanied by desire and joy, or by desire and sadness, and as *it* grows stronger, so do *they*. [At this point there's a gap in the manuscript.] So how is it possible to observe the difference in pulse-rate, the digestion of food, and other bodily changes that serve to reveal the nature of these movements? Also, the difference that you note in each of the passions is not the same for all •physical• constitutions: mine is such that sadness always takes away my appetite. . . .

When you speak of the external signs of these passions you say that wonder, joined to joy, makes the lungs expand in irregular spasms, thereby causing laughter. Please add to that an account of •how• wonder (which in your description

seems to operate only on the brain) can open the orifices of the heart quickly enough to bring about this effect.

The passions that you record as being the cause of sighs are apparently not always the causes, since the same result can be produced by •habit or by •a full stomach. [If you don't understand the second of these, relax! You'll see that Descartes doesn't either.]

But I have much less trouble •understanding all that you say about the passions than in •practising the cures for their excesses that you prescribe. How can we foresee all the events—the countless events!—that may intrude into our lives? And how can we prevent ourselves from intensely wanting the things that necessarily favour human survival (such as health and the means to live) but that don't depend on our free will? As for knowledge of the truth, the desire for that is so *right* that everyone naturally has it. But one would need infinite knowledge to know the right value to put upon the goods and evils that customarily arouse our feelings, because •there are many more of them than a single person could imagine, and because •this would require a perfect knowledge of everything in the world.

You have told me the principal maxims for private life, so I will settle for hearing now the maxims for public [*civile*] life; though public life often requires us to depend on people who are so unreasonable that I have always found it better in these matters to steer by experience rather than by reason.

I have been interrupted so often in writing this that I'm forced to send you my rough draft by the Alkmaar letter-carrier, having forgotten the name of the friend to whom you wanted me to address my letters. I won't risk returning your treatise to you •along with this letter•, because I'm not willing to put into the hands of a drunkard such a great prize that has given me so much satisfaction.

### Descartes writes in v.1646:

I learn from experience that I was right to include *pride* among the passions; for I can't help being touched by it when I see your favourable judgment on my little treatise about them. [The point is: he can't help feeling pride, so he is passive in respect of this pride, so this pride is a passion.] I am not at all surprised that you have also noticed faults in it, as I had no doubt that there must be many. It is a topic that I have never before studied, and I have only made a sketch without adding the colours and flourishes that would be needed for it to be presented to eyes less perceptive than yours.

[In the light of (3) below, this is a good place to remember that for Descartes 'thoughts' (*pensées*) include all mental states and events, feelings included.] I didn't include all the principles of physiology that I used in working out the particular movements of blood accompanying each passion, because I couldn't properly derive them without explaining how all the parts of the human body are formed; and that is such a hard task that I am not yet up to it, though I am pretty well convinced of the truth of the principles presupposed in the treatise. The chief ones are as follows.

- (1) The function of the liver and the spleen is to contain reserve blood, less purified than the blood in the veins.
- (2) The fire in the heart needs constantly to be fed either by the juices of food coming directly from the stomach, or in their absence by this reserve blood (since the blood in the veins expands too easily).
- (3) Our soul and body are so linked that the thoughts that have accompanied some movements of our body since our life began still accompany them today; so that if the same movements are re-aroused by some external cause, they arouse the same thoughts; and conversely the same thoughts produce the same movements.

(4) Our body's machine is constructed in such a way that a single episode of joy or love or the like is enough to send the animal spirits through the nerves into all the muscles needed to cause the different movements of the blood which, as I said, accompany the passions.

It's true that I found it hard to pick out the movements belonging to each passion, because the passions never occur singly; but they occur in different combinations, and I tried to observe the changes that occur in the body when passions change company. If love were always joined with joy, I couldn't know which of the two produced the heat and swelling that they make us feel around the heart; but love is sometimes also joined with sadness, and then the heat is still felt but not the swelling; so I judged that the heat belongs to love and the swelling to joy. Again, although desire almost always comes with love, they aren't always present with the same intensity: we may have much love and yet have little desire because we have no hope. When that happens we don't have the •diligence and •alertness we would have if our desire were greater—from which we can judge that •;these characteristics come from desire and not from love.

I quite believe that sadness takes away many people's appetite •as you report that it takes away yours•; but because I have always found that sadness increases *my* appetite I have based my account on that. Here is the reason, I think, why people differ this respect. For some people the first thing that upset them as babies was not getting enough food, while for others it was getting food that was bad for them. In the latter case, the movement of animal spirits that takes away the appetite has ever afterwards remained joined with the passion of sadness. Some similar cause will explain other cases of slight inter-personal differences in what movements accompany what passions.

It is true that wonder has its origin in the brain, and can't be caused solely by the condition of the blood, as joy and sadness can. Yet by means of the impression it makes in the brain, it can act on the body just like any other passion, and in a way more effectively because its element of *surprise* causes the promptest of all movements. We can move a hand or a foot at the same instant (near enough) as the thought of moving them occurs, because the idea of this movement that forms in the brain sends the spirits into the muscles appropriate for this result. In the same way the idea of a pleasant thing, if it takes the mind by surprise, immediately sends the spirits into the nerves that open the orifices of the heart. •And wonder works similarly•. By the surprise it involves, wonder simply increases the force of the movement that gives rise to joy, suddenly dilating the orifices of the heart so that blood flows into the heart from the vena cava and out again via the arterial vein, thus causing the lungs suddenly to inflate.

The same external signs that usually accompany the passions may indeed sometimes be produced by other causes. Thus, a red face is not always the result of shame; it may come from the heat of a fire or from exercise, and the so-called *risus sardonicus* is nothing but a spasm of the nerves in the face. [You can look it up in the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary.] One may sigh sometimes out of habit, or out of sickness, but that doesn't prevent sighs from being signs of sadness and desire when they *are* caused by these passions. I had never heard of (or seen for myself) sighs being caused by a full stomach; but when that happens I think it's a movement that nature uses to make the alimentary juices pass more rapidly through the heart, thus speeding up the emptying of the stomach. . . .

As for the remedies against excessive passions: I agree that they are hard to practise, and indeed that they aren't



sufficient to prevent bodily disorders; but they may suffice to prevent the soul from being troubled and losing its capacity for free judgment. I don't agree that for this purpose one needs an exact knowledge of the truth on every topic, or even to have foreseen in detail all possible eventualities, which would doubtless be impossible. It is enough to have imagined in a general way how things might become *worse*, and to prepare oneself to bear that. I don't think that one can sin by desiring too intensely the necessities of life; the only desires that need to be regulated and thus limited are desires for evil or superfluous things. As for desires that tend only to good, it seems to me that the more intense they are, the better. Wanting to deal leniently with my own faults, I listed a certain *irresolution* as an excusable passion [see *Passions of the Soul* 170]; but I put a much higher value on the diligence of people who are swift and ardent in doing what they conceive to be their duty even when they don't expect much profit from it.

I lead such a retired life, and have always been so far from the conduct of affairs, that it would be . . . impudent of me to undertake to list *here* the maxims one should observe in a life of public service—like the philosopher who tried *in the presence of Hannibal* to teach his hearers how to command an army! I don't doubt that your maxim is the best of all, namely that in these matters it is better to be guided by experience than by reason, because we so seldom have to do with people who are as perfectly reasonable as everyone ought to be, so that one could judge what they will do simply by considering what they ought to do; and often the best advice is not the happiest. That is why one is forced to take risks and put oneself in the power of fortune, which I hope will always be as obedient to your desires as I am.

### **Descartes writes in v.1646:**

I have to confess that I made a glaring mistake in my treatise on the passions. In order to be lenient with my own slackness in practical affairs, I classified among the 'excusable emotions' of the soul a sort of irresolution that sometimes prevents us from doing things that our judgment has approved. I'm unhappy about this, mainly because I recall that you picked on this passage as showing that I don't disapprove of acting on this emotion in matters where I can see its utility. [This must refer to something the Princess said in conversation or in the missing bit of her letter on page 43.] I freely admit that it's a very good idea to take time to deliberate before tackling any important task; but once a project is begun and we are agreed upon the main aims, I don't see any profit in delaying matters by arguing about the details. If there is such a delay and the project nevertheless succeeds, any minor benefits we may have gained from the delay are entirely outweighed by the harm done by the usual effect of such delays, namely that they sap one of energy and enthusiasm, 'letting the project grow stale in one's mind'. And if the project fails after such a delay, all the delay does is to show the world that we had plans which failed. Also, when we delay getting on with a project it often happens—oftener with good projects than with bad ones—that the project escapes, 'the opportunity is lost'. That's why I am convinced that decisiveness and promptness are virtues that are very necessary for projects already begun. . . .

### **Elisabeth writes in vii.1646:**

[There is no philosophy in this letter. Elisabeth and her brother Philip are about to leave the Hague to spend several months in Berlin; this is 'prescribed' by her mother and

oldest brother, as a safety measure, in the light of the fact that her young brother Philip has openly killed a man who was thought to have been courting first their mother and then one of Elisabeth's younger sisters, and that Elisabeth has defended his action. She asks Descartes to visit her before she leaves, and continues:] Six months ·in Berlin· would be too long if I weren't sure that you will continue there the charity of letting me profit from your meditations by your letters. Without their help, the northern chill and the calibre of the ·only· people I would be able to talk with would extinguish the small ray of common sense that nature has given me and that •your method has shown me how to use. I am promised that in Germany I will have enough leisure and tranquility to study •it; and your writings are the greatest and (for me) the most satisfying treasures that I'm taking with me to Berlin. I hope you'll let me take the work on the passions, though it hasn't managed to calm the passions that our latest misfortune has aroused! . . .

[In Berlin Elisabeth lives in the household of her aunt, the widow of the last Elector of Brandenburg, making her the Dowager Electress of Brandenburg. When Descartes on page 59 refers to this household as 'the Court of the Electress', that seems to involve a double dose of politeness.]

### Descartes writes in ix.1646:

[From here on, 'prince' means 'monarch' or 'ruler', as it did not only in French and Italian but also in English. When Queen Elizabeth I was told by an adviser that she 'must' do something, she said: '*Must!* Is *must* a word to be addressed to princes?']

Having read the book that you commanded me to give you my opinion of—namely, Machiavelli's *The Prince*—I have found in it many precepts that strike me as very good. For example:

- a prince should always avoid the hate and contempt of his subjects (chapter 19), and
- the love of the people is worth more than fortresses (chapter 20).

But there are many others of which I cannot approve. Where I find this author to be most lacking is in his not distinguishing sharply enough between •princes who have acquired a State by just means and •those who have usurped state power by illegitimate methods; and in his offering to *all* princes maxims that are suitable only for the usurpers. If the foundations of the house you are building aren't good enough to support high thick walls, you'll have to make the walls low and flimsy; and similarly, those who have gained power by crime usually have to continue in a criminal way, and couldn't remain in power if they took to virtue.

It's with regard to princes like that that he could ·truthfully· say (in chapter 3):

- They can't avoid being hated by many people.
- It is often better for them to do great harm than to do slight harm because slight offences merely arouse a desire for revenge, whereas great ones take away the power to exact it.

Then again:

- If they tried to do good, they would inevitably go to ruin among the great number of villains scattered through the world. (chapter 15)
- One can be hated for good actions no less than for bad ones. (chapter 19)

On these foundations he rests some very tyrannical precepts:

- Ruin a whole country in order to become master of it,
- Use great cruelty, provided this is done quickly and all at once.
- Try to appear benevolent, rather than actually being so.

- Keep your word only as long as it is useful to do so.
- Dissimulate.
- Betray.

Finally, he says that in order to rule, one must strip oneself of all humanity and become more ferocious than any animal.

Wanting to offer precepts like those, which ultimately *can't* provide any security to those to whom they are offered—what a terrible reason for writing a book! He agrees himself that princes can't protect themselves from the first fellow who is willing to risk his own life to take revenge on them. It seems to me that flatly opposite advice should be given to good princes, however recently they have come to power; and it should be assumed that their means of gaining power have been just. I believe that they nearly always *are* just, when the princes in question think that they are. The line between just and unjust isn't located in the same place for sovereigns as it is for individuals. It seems to me that in these matters God gives the •right to those to whom he gives the •power. Does this mean that the acquisition of power is *never* unjust? No, because the most just actions become unjust when those who perform them think they are.

A distinction must also be made between **(3)** subjects, **(2)** friends or allies, and **(1)** enemies.

**(1)** With regard to these last, a prince has a virtual licence to do anything that brings some advantage to himself or his subjects; and I don't think it wrong in such a case to use trickery as well as force—harnessing the fox to the lion! And my permissiveness about that goes even further, because I classify as 'enemies' all those who aren't friends or allies, because •one has a right to make war on such people when it is to one's advantage to do so, and because •when their behaviour makes them suspect and alarming, one has reason to be suspicious of them. But I rule out one type of deception, which is so directly hostile to society that I don't

think it is ever permissible, although our author approves it in several places and it is all too common; and that is pretending to be a friend of those one wishes to destroy, so as to improve one's chances of taking them by surprise. Friendship is too sacred a thing to be abused in this way; and someone who will be able to feign love for someone in order to betray him deserves to be disbelieved and hated by those whom he afterwards genuinely wishes to love.

**(2)** As for allies, a prince should keep his word to them strictly, even when it is to his own disadvantage; for no disadvantage can outweigh the benefits of a reputation for keeping one's promises; and a prince can acquire this reputation only on occasions when keeping his word costs him something. But in situations where he would be altogether ruined, the law of nations releases him from his promise. If someone is to be able always to keep his promises, he should be *very* careful in making them. And although it is a good thing to be on friendly terms with most of one's neighbours, I still think it best for a prince not to have strict alliances except with ones who are less powerful than himself. For however faithful to his treaties a prince intends to be, he shouldn't expect the same from others; he should reckon on being cheated whenever his allies see an advantage from cheating him; and those who are more powerful—unlike those who are less—can see cheating as advantageous for them whenever they wish.

**(3)** There are two kinds of subjects—great people and common people. I include under the label 'great' all those who can form parties against the prince. He needs to be *very* certain of their fidelity; if he isn't, he should employ all his efforts to bring them low, and if they show any tendency to rock the ship of state, he should treat them as he would his enemies; everyone who thinks about politics agrees with this. As for his other subjects, he should above all avoid being

hated and despised by them; and I think he can always do this, provided that

- His dealings with his subjects are scrupulously *just* by their standards, i.e. in accordance with the laws they are familiar with, not being too harsh in punishment or too lenient in pardoning.
- He doesn't put himself completely in the hands of his ministers; he leaves them to pronounce the most odious condemnations, and displays his own concern with everything else.
- He maintains his dignity, not waiving any of the honour and deference the people think due to him, but not asking for more.
- He restricts his public actions to important ones and ones that everyone can approve of, taking his pleasures in private and never at anyone else's expense.
- He is immovable and inflexible.

•About that last item: I don't mean that he should be inflexible when he is developing a practical plan in his own head. He can't see everything for himself, so he must ask for advice, and hear many people's reasons, before coming to a decision. But once he has announced his decision, he must be inflexible in holding to it even if this does him harm; for it can hardly be as harmful to him as the reputation of being shallow and irresolute.

So I disapprove of the maxim in chapter 15:

Because the world is very corrupt, someone who tries always to be a good man is bound to come to grief; if a prince is to remain in power he must learn to be wicked when the occasion demands.

Unless, by 'good man' he means 'man who is superstitious and simple'—e.g. one who wouldn't dare to give battle on the sabbath, one whose conscience could never rest unless he changed his people's religion! But if we think of a 'good man'

as one who does everything that true reason commands, then it is certain that the best thing is to try *always* to be a good man.

Again, I don't believe what is said in chapter 19:

One can be hated for good actions as much as for bad ones.

Mightn't one say that envy is a kind of hatred, and that this makes Machiavelli right about this? Well, that's not what he means, and even if it were, he would be wrong. Princes are not usually *envied* by the general run of their subjects but only by great people or by their neighbours—princes ruling over neighbouring realms—among whom the very virtues that cause envy also cause fear, which is why no prince should ever abstain from doing good in order to avoid *that* sort of hatred. The only hatred that can harm a prince is the kind that comes from the people's perceiving him to be unjust or arrogant. For we see that even someone who has been condemned to death doesn't ordinarily hate his judges, if he thinks he has deserved the sentence; and even someone suffering harm that he doesn't in the least deserve will put up with it if he thinks that the prince, who is responsible for it, has somehow *had* to act in this way and hasn't enjoyed doing so; for it is thought to be just that he should prefer the general good to that of individuals. There's a difficulty only when the prince has to satisfy two groups who don't agree about what is just, as when the Roman emperors had to appease both citizens and soldiers. In such a case it's reasonable for the prince to grant something to each side. He shouldn't try suddenly to bring •reason to people who aren't used to hearing it; rather, he must try to get •it into their heads gradually, by published pamphlets, the voices of preachers, or other means. Because ultimately the common people will put up with anything that they can be persuaded is just, and they are offended by anything they imagine to

be unjust. The arrogance of princes—i.e. the usurpation of some authority or rights or honours that the people think the prince isn't entitled to—is odious to the common people only because they see it as a kind of injustice.

Moreover, I do not share the opinion that this author expresses in his preface:

Just as a man who wants to sketch mountains must be down on the plain so that he can get a better view of their shape, so also to get a good sense of the duties of a prince one must be a private citizen.

For the pencil represents only things that are seen from afar; but the chief motives of the actions of princes often depend on circumstances so special that they can't be imagined by anyone who isn't himself a prince or hasn't long shared in a prince's secrets.

So I would make myself ridiculous if I thought that I—down on the plain!—could teach you anything on this topic. That is not my purpose. All I want my letters to do is to give you some sort of *divertissement* [French, = 'entertainment', 'distraction', 'pastime'] different from the ones that I imagine you will have on your journey to Berlin. I hope the journey will be a perfectly happy one; and no doubt it will be if you resolve to follow these maxims: **(i)** Your happiness depends on yourself. **(ii)** Don't be ruled by fortune; take every advantage that it offers, but don't be unhappy over those it refuses. **(iii)** In your thought, dwell on the reasons why what happens is a good thing (there are always plenty of those reasons as well as plenty going the other way). [Descartes states these in general terms, not as imperatives to one person.] The most unavoidable evils, I think, are the diseases of the body, from which I pray to God to preserve you.

[The foregoing letter is incomplete. It's known to have included a PS in which Descartes offered 'a code' in which he and the Princess could correspond secretly.]

### Elisabeth writes on 10.x.1646:

You are right to believe that •the *divertissement* that your letters bring me is different from •the others that I have had on my way here, because it gives me a greater and more lasting satisfaction. The latter •have not been negligible: they• have given me all that the love and caring behaviour of my near and dear could give me; but I regard all that as changeable, whereas the truths that the former—the time spent on your letters—leaves traces of in my mind that will *always* contribute to the contentment of my life.

[She apologises for not having Machiavelli's *The Prince* at hand; it was supposed to reach Berlin ahead of her; but it still hasn't arrived a month later. Then:] So all I can bring to mind of this author's •maxims is what a very bad memory can provide me with from a book that I haven't looked at for six years. But I recall approving of some of •them, not as being good in themselves but because they cause less harm than the maxims followed by a number of ambitious adventurers whom I know, who merely stir things up and leave the rest to chance. The maxims of this author all tend toward stability.

It seems to me as well [i.e. as a further point to be made in his defence] that his lessons on how to govern a state start from the •kind of• state that is the most difficult to govern, where the prince has recently usurped his power, or at least is thought by the people to have done so. For such a prince, his belief in the justice of his cause could serve to ease his conscience, but •it won't do him any other good•; it won't help to govern when the laws oppose his authority, the great undermine him, and the people curse him. When a state is in that condition, a great violence does less harm than a small one, because they are equally offensive to the people, and the small violence gives rise to a long war, whereas the

great violence destroys the courage and the means of the great people who can undertake such a war. Also, when violence comes promptly and all at once, it causes more astonishment than anger; and it is easier for the people to bear than a long chain of miseries that civil wars bring.

I seem to remember that he added—or rather, taught through the example of Cesare Borgia. . . .—that the prince should have these great cruelties performed by a minister whom he can afterward sacrifice to the people's hatred. It may seem unjust of the prince to bring about the death of a man who obeyed him; but in my view the man in question doesn't deserve any better treatment if he is so barbaric and unnatural that he is willing to be employed as executioner of a whole people—never mind what his reward was to be. Speaking for myself, I would prefer the condition of the poorest peasant in Holland to that of a minister who would be willing to obey such orders or of a prince who would see no alternative to giving them.

When this author speaks of allies, he supposes them also to be as evil as they can be, and supposes matters to have come to such an extreme that the ·prince's· choice is between •letting his entire republic collapse and •breaking his word to 'allies' who keep *their* word only as long as it suits them to do so.

But if he is wrong to have made general maxims from very rare special cases, he is joined in his error by all the Church Fathers and ancient philosophers, who do the same thing. I think they did this because they *enjoyed* asserting paradoxes that they could later explain to their students. When this man says that you'll be ruined if you try always to be a good man, ·we need to think about what he means by 'good man'·. I don't believe he thinks of a good man as one who follows the laws of superstition. [That isn't a good translation of the French *superstition*, but it's hard to avoid. The Princess is using the word in a

now-obsolete sense in which it means 'collection of religious traditions' (translated from the Petit Robert dictionary).] Rather, he takes a good man to be one who follows this law that everyone knows:

Treat others as you would like them to treat you.

A prince can hardly ever obey this in relation to any one of his subjects, because any of the subjects must be sacrificed whenever the public good requires this. No-one said that *virtue consists in following right reason* until you said it; people have made it a matter of more particular laws or rules; so it isn't surprising that they have failed to define it well.

As for the rule that you call attention to in his preface [see page 50]—·namely, 'to get a good sense of the duties of a prince one must be a private citizen'—I find that to be false, ·but not with the implications about you that you take its falsity to have·. I regard it as false ·in the sense that the author was not entitled to think it true·, because he never knew anyone who saw clearly into everything that he undertook to do, *as you do*, and who was therefore able, from his position as someone private and retired from the world's confusion, to teach princes how they should govern. What you have written shows that *are* able to do this.

As for myself, who have only the •title ·of 'prince(ss)', and not the •duties·, all I work for is to apply the rule that you put at the end of your letter, trying to make present events and states of affairs as agreeable to me as I can. I don't have much difficulty in doing this, here in a house [see note on page 4] in which I have been cherished since my childhood and where everyone *conspires* to take care of me! These efforts sometimes distract me from more useful occupations, but I can easily put up with that because of the pleasure I get from being loved by those closest to me. And there you have the reason why I haven't before this had the leisure to tell you of the happy outcome of our voyage. . . .

[She reports on a side-trip—the only one so far—to Hornhausen, a place where the waters are supposed to have curative properties. She is sceptical about this: none of the tales she was told of wonderful cures seemed to her credible.

[The Princess also writes about ‘the code that you sent me’. She is polite about it but has two technical criticisms, of which the second is hard to grasp. So are her suggestions for a kind of code that ‘would be better’. [See note on page 50.]]

I have so little leisure to write here that I’m forced to send you this draft, in which you can see from the difference in pens all the times I have been interrupted. [It would have been normal, at that time and that social level, to write a letter and then have a secretary write out a clean copy which would be sent.] But I would rather appear before you with all my faults than give you reason to think that I . . . forget my friends when I am away from them. . . .

### **Descartes writes in xi.1646:**

You did me a great favour by writing to tell me how things went with your journey and to let me know that you have arrived happily in a place where, admired and loved by all around you, you seem to have as many goods as can reasonably be wished for in this life. ·I put it that way· because: given the condition of human affairs, we would be demanding too much from fortune if we expected so many favours from it that we couldn’t even *imagine* any cause for complaint! When there’s nothing present that offends the senses, and no troublesome bodily indisposition, it is easy for a mind that follows true reason to be contented. We can, consistently with that, still •bear in mind items that are not present and •do something about them ·if that is what they call for·. We merely have to try to be dispassionate about absent items that can cause us distress. This doesn’t go

against charity; ·quite the contrary·, for it is often easier to find remedies for evils that we examine dispassionately than to find them for evils that are making us *suffer*. But bodily health and the presence of agreeable items help the mind greatly by expelling all the passions that involve sadness and admitting the ones that involve joy; and, conversely, when the mind is full of joy this contributes greatly to •the body’s being in better health and to •present objects’ appearing more agreeable.

Indeed I even venture to think that inner joy has some secret power [*secrète force*] to make fortune more favourable. I wouldn’t want to say this to anyone who wasn’t intelligent, for fear of leading him into some superstition. But my only fear in saying it to *you* is that you will mock me for becoming so credulous! And yet I have countless experiences to confirm this opinion of mine. It has often happened—indeed this has been the usual case in my experience—that things I have done with a cheerful heart and with no inner reluctance have worked out well. Even in games of chance, where fortune alone rules, I have always enjoyed better luck when I had reasons for joy than when I was sad. And my ‘superstitious’ view also gets support from the authority of Socrates. What is commonly called Socrates’s ‘inner voice’ [*génie*] was surely nothing but his being accustomed to follow his inner inclinations, and his believing that his undertakings would go well when he had a secret feeling of cheerfulness, and badly when he was sad. It would indeed be very superstitious to carry this belief as far as Socrates is said to have done: according to Plato’s report, he would even stay at home whenever his ‘inner voice’ advised him not to go out. But with regard to the important actions of life, when the situation is so complex or obscure that prudence can’t tell us what to do, I think that •it is quite right for us to follow the advice of ‘the inner voice’, and that •it is beneficial to be strongly convinced that

we'll do well in the undertakings that we embark on without reluctance and with the freedom that ordinarily accompanies joy.

Where you are now, the things in your vicinity give you nothing but satisfaction; so I take the liberty of urging you to make your own contribution to the achieving of happiness. You can do this easily, I think, by fixing your mind solely on the things before you and never about practical matters except when the messenger is ready to leave. It is good, I think, that your books couldn't be brought to you as soon as you expected, because reading them is less apt to maintain gaiety than to introduce sadness. This is especially true of the book by the 'physician of princes', whose sole topic is •the difficulties that princes face in staying in power and •the cruel or treacherous actions that he recommends to them; so that private citizens who read his book have more reason to pity the condition of princes than to envy it.

You have noted his faults—and mine—perfectly. For it is true that what led him to lay down general maxims to justify particular actions that may be virtually inexcusable was his plan to praise Cesare Borgia. Since reading *The Prince* I have read his discourse on Livy, where I found nothing bad. His main precept—'Wipe out your enemies or else make them into your friends; *never* take the middle way'—is always the safest, no doubt, but when there's no reason to be fearful it isn't the most generous way to proceed!

You have put your finger on the *secret* of the miraculous spring, namely that many wretched people broadcast its virtues. Perhaps they are hired to do this by people who hope to make a profit from it. There is certainly no such thing as a cure for all illnesses; but many people have availed themselves of this spring, and those who come away feeling better speak well of it, while no-one mentions the others! Be that as it may, the purgative quality in one of the springs,

and the white colour, softness and refreshing quality of the other, prompt the thought that these waters pass through deposits of antimony or mercury, which are both bad drugs, especially mercury. That is why I wouldn't advise anyone to drink from them. The acid and iron in the waters of Spa are much less to be feared; and because they shrink the spleen and expel melancholy I value them both.

### **Elisabeth writes on 29.xi.1646:**

I am not used enough to getting favours from fortune to look for any extraordinary ones! It is enough for me that fortune doesn't very often send my way events that would give cause for sadness to the world's greatest philosopher. Since •nothing like that has come to me during my stay here, and •everything around me is quite agreeable, and •the country air isn't bad for my health, I'm in a condition in which I can try out your lessons concerning gaiety, though I don't expect to find in the conduct of my affairs the effects you have experienced in games of chance. The good luck you had in such games when you were in a good mood for some other reason apparently came

**what Elisabeth wrote next:** de ce que vous teniez alors plus librement toutes les parties qui font que l'on gagne ordinairement.

**'translation' done by blindly plugging in seemingly equivalent words:** from your holding more freely all the parts that ordinarily make one win.

**what she means:** [Not sure. Possibly this involves technical terms from a game of chance that no longer exists.]

But if I were to have occasion to do as I like, I would not put myself again in a hazardous state, if I were in a place where I had found such contentment as in the place I have come from. . . . As for the interests of our house, I long



ago abandoned them to destiny, because I came to see that prudence itself won't get anywhere with them unless we have some other support to bring to its aid. To succeed in that matter, one would need a more powerful 'inner voice' than Socrates's; for his couldn't save him from imprisonment and death, so it wasn't something to brag about! I have also observed that when I have followed my own inclinations the outcomes have been better than when I have let myself be guided by the advice of people wiser than I am. But I don't attribute this as much to the quality of my 'inner voice' as to the fact that I had looked more carefully than they did into what might harm and what might benefit me—*of course* I had, because the topic was harm or help to *me*! If you are trying to get me to assign some role to the hidden power of my imagination, I believe you are doing this so as to reconcile me to how people think and feel in this country, especially the learned ones, who are even more pedantic and superstitious than those I knew in Holland. It's because all the people here are so poor that no-one studies or reasons about anything but the bare means of life.

I have done everything I possibly could to stay out of the hands of the doctors, so as not to have their ignorance inflicted on me. And I haven't been ill, except. . . [and she mentions some small troubles, what the doctors prescribed, and her refusal to take any of their medicines. Then:] I am made especially wary of the medicines here because everyone uses chemical means to make 'supposedly medicinal' extracts, the effects of which are immediate and dangerous. [She reports differing opinions about why the springs at Hornhausen are (allegedly) effective, and says that she will follow Descartes's advice and have nothing to do with them.]

I hope never to need to follow the precepts of the 'physician of princes', because violence and suspicion go against my grain. Still, all I blame a tyrant for is his initial plan

to usurp a country and his first execution of it; after that, the path that establishes him in power, however harsh it is, will always lead to less public harm than would a monarchy contested by battle. [Elisabeth's uncle, Charles I of England, had by this time lost his throne through a notably destructive civil war. He was decapitated a couple of years later.]

. . . . After dealing with the letters that are to be written and the compulsory civilities towards the members of this household, I spend the little remaining time that I have on rereading your works, from which the development of my reason gets more help in one hour than I would get from a lifetime of reading other things. But there's no-one 'else' here who is bright enough to understand them. I have promised this old duke of Brunswick, who is at Wolfenbüttel, to give them—i.e. copies of your works—to him adorn his library. I don't think he will use them to adorn his clogged brain, as it is already crammed full of pedantry! . . .

### **Descartes writes in xii.1646:**

Never have I found such good news in any of the letters I have been honoured to receive from you as I found in that of 29 November. For it leads me to think that you are now healthier and more cheerful than I have ever seen you being; and I believe that these are the two chief goods one can possess in this life—apart from virtue, which you have never lacked. [He mentions, as not very important, a small medical trouble, and approves of her keeping the Berlin doctors away from it. Although it can be uncomfortable, he says,] I consider it less as an illness than as a sign of health and a means of warding off other illnesses. . . . Our doctors have learned from experience certain remedies for it, though they advise against trying to get rid of it in any season except spring, when the pores are more open and so the cause can be

eliminated more readily. . . . If the discomfort persists till the spring, it will be easy to drive the illness away by taking some gentle purgatives or refreshing broths which contain nothing but known kitchen herbs, and by not eating food that is too salty or spicy. Being bled may also help a lot; but there is some danger in this remedy, and its frequent use shortens one's life, so I advise you against it unless you are already accustomed to it. The trouble is that if you are bled at the same time of year for three or four years in a row, you are almost forced to do the same each year from then on. You are quite right not to want to try any chemical remedies. It is useless having long experience of how good they are as remedies, for if you make the slightest change in preparing them, even when you think you are doing it just right, you can wholly change their qualities and make them into poisons rather than medicines.

It is almost the same with science in the hands of people who try to expound it without knowing it well: every time they think they are correcting or amplifying something they have learned, they change it into error. The proof of this can, I think, be seen in Regius's book, which has finally seen the light of day. I would make some comments about it here, if I thought he had sent you a copy; but it's so far from here to Berlin that I believe he will await your return

before presenting it to you; and I shall also wait before telling you my views about it. [Regius had been an admiring follower of Descartes, and it was her acquaintance with him that prompted Princess Elisabeth to approach Descartes. The book mentioned here, *Fundamenta Physica*, marked the beginning of a decisive and permanent falling-out of the two men.]

I'm not surprised that in the country where you are you find that all the learned people you meet are wholly preoccupied with scholastic views; I observe that throughout Europe—even in Paris—there are few learned men who are not like that! If I had earlier known *how* few they are, I might never have had anything published. Still, I draw some comfort from the fact that although I am certain that plenty of people would like to attack me, no-one has challenged me to an open debate. Indeed I receive compliments from Jesuit fathers, who I have always thought •would have the most at stake in the publication of a new philosophy and •would be least likely to pardon me if they thought they could reasonably find any fault in it.

I count among my obligations to you your promise to let the Duke of Brunswick have copies of my writings; because I am sure that before you moved into that neighbourhood I didn't have the honour of being known to him. . . .

## Letters written in 1647–9

### Elisabeth writes on 21.ii.1647:

I value cheerfulness and health as much as you do, although I value even more highly •your friendship and also •virtue. For it is mainly from your friendship that I draw joy and health, combined with a satisfaction of the mind that surpasses even joy, because you have taught me *how* to become happy and healthy. My decision to use no remedies for the little ailments that remain with me has met with your approval; so I couldn't possibly fail to stick to it. Right now I am so thoroughly cured of those abscesses that I don't see any need for me to take medicines to purge my blood in the spring, having discharged enough of the bad humours from my body [see note on page 25] and protected it (or so I believe) from the rushing around of blood that the cold and the room-heaters would have otherwise given me.

[She has been slow to reply to Descartes's last letter, she reports, because she had first to attend to her youngest sister who was gravely ill, and then to attend •outings and festivities and balls in honour of the Swedish Queen Mother. Tiresome as •all this is for someone who has better things to do, Elisabeth remarks,] it is less tiresome when one does it for, and with, people whom one has no reason to distrust. That's why I go along with people's plans and wishes here more thoroughly than I used to at The Hague.

Still, I would prefer to be able to spend my time reading Regius's book and your views about it. If I don't return to The Hague this summer (as I want to, but it isn't entirely up to me. . . .), I'll try to have the book sent to me by sea via Hamburg, and I hope that you will do me the favour of sending me your views on it by ordinary post. Whenever

I read your writings I can't imagine how you can actually regret having had them published, because it's impossible that they won't eventually be received by, and be useful to, the public.

A little while ago I met a man—the only one!—who has read some of your writings. His name is Weis; he is a physician, and also very learned. He told me that Bacon first made him suspicious of the Aristotelian philosophy and that your method made him reject it entirely. It also convinced him of the circulation of the blood, which destroyed all the principles of ancient medicine; and he admits that this made him regret having to accept your position. I have just lent him a copy of your *Principles*, and he promised to tell me his objections to it. If he finds any, and they are worth the trouble, I'll send them to you so that you can judge the capability of the person I find to be the most reasonable of the scholars here, since he is capable of approving your reasoning.

### Descartes writes in iii.1647:

Learning how contented you are in Berlin, I don't allow myself to wish for your return; though it is hard for me not to, especially right now when I am in The Hague. [He writes of having to go to France on personal business, and returning to The Hague towards winter, in the hope of seeing the Princess then.]

I praise God that you now are in perfect health, but please pardon me if I take the liberty of contradicting your opinion that you shouldn't use remedies because the trouble you had with your hands is gone. For you as well as for your sister it

is to be feared that the humours that were discharged in that way [presumably meaning: ‘as you have described’] were stopped by the winter cold and that in spring they will bring back the same trouble or put you in danger of something else—if you don’t remedy them by a good diet, taking only food and drink that refreshes the blood and purges without any effort. As for drugs, whether from apothecaries or from empirics, I hold drugs in such low esteem that I would never risk advising anyone to use them. [A more up-to-date translation of *soit des apothicaires, soit des empiriques* might be: ‘whether from pharmacists or from quacks’].

I don’t know what I can have written to you about Regius’s book that prompted you to want my comments on it—perhaps ‘I said’ that I wasn’t expressing any opinion about the book because I didn’t want to get in the way of *your* judgment, in case you already had a copy of it. But now I gather that you don’t yet have it, so I’ll tell you straight out: I don’t think that reading it will be, for you, worth the trouble. It contains nothing on physics except for theses of *mine*—given in the wrong order and without their true proofs, so that they appear paradoxical, and what comes at the beginning can be proved only by what comes towards the end. Regius has put into his book almost nothing of *his own*, and very little from any source except my published work. But he has failed to fulfill his obligation to me. ‘Here is the background to that remark’:

He knew very well that I wanted my writings involving the description of animals *not* to be made public. ‘Indeed, I wanted this so intensely that’ I declined to show these writings to him, with the plea that if he saw them he wouldn’t be able to keep from telling his pupils about them.

And yet this self-described ‘friend’ of mine got his hands on several things from my unpublished work, arranged behind

my back to have them copied, then inserted them, in detail, into his own book. I had a whole section dealing with the movement of the muscles, taking as an example two of the muscles that move the eye. Regius must have liked this material, because he includes two or three pages from it, word for word, *twice*! Yet he hasn’t understood what he wrote, for •he has omitted the main point, namely that the animal spirits that flow from the brain to the muscles can’t return through the same passages; if that isn’t pointed out, everything he writes is worthless. Also, •because he didn’t have my diagram, he produced one of his own, which clearly shows his ignorance. I’m told that he now has another book on medicine in the press. That will include all the rest of my book, I expect, or as much as he could assimilate. . . . Just as he blindly follows what he believes to be my views regarding physics and medicine, without understanding them, so he blindly contradicts me on all metaphysical questions. I had urged him not to write on these topics, because they aren’t relevant to his subject and I was sure that anything he wrote about them would be bad. . . .

Nevertheless, I’ll have a copy of his book sent to you; it’s title is *The Foundations of Physics* by Henricus Regius. I’ll include with it another book—a small one—by my good friend M. de Hogelande. [This book, dedicated to Descartes, was entitled (in Latin) *Thoughts by which it is demonstrated that God exists, and that the soul is spiritual and can be united with the body.*] He does just the opposite of Regius: everything Regius writes is taken from me and yet is **against me**; whereas nothing Hogelande writes is really mine (indeed I don’t think he has ever read my books thoroughly), and yet he is always **for me** in that he has followed the same principles. I shall. . . .add to the parcel the French version of my *Meditations* if I can get a copy before leaving here. . . .

**Elisabeth writes on 11.iv.1647:**

I didn't regret my absence from The Hague until you wrote me of your being there and I felt myself deprived of the satisfaction that used to fill me when I had conversations with you during your visits. When I came away from conversation with you, it always seemed to me that I was a better thinker ·than before·; and although the tranquility that I experience here—among people who are fond of me and value me much more highly than I deserve—surpasses all the goods that I could have anywhere else, it is nowhere near ·the effect on me of· conversation with you. [Elisabeth explains family reasons why she doesn't know how soon she can return to The Hague, and begs Descartes to stay in touch. Then:]

After Easter we will go to Crossen, the home of my aunt, on the border of Silesia, for three or four weeks. [In fact, she was still in Crossen when this correspondence ended, thirty months later.] The solitude there will give me more leisure to read, and I will spend it all on the books you have been good enough to send me—for which, thank you! I wanted to see Regius's book more •because I knew it contained material of yours than because of any interest in his. ·Two complaints about the work·: •He goes a little too fast. •He has availed himself of help from Doctor Jonsson (as I gathered from what Dr Jonsson told me); and *he* is capable of making Regius even more muddled; because he [Jonsson] has a mind that •is confused in itself and •doesn't give him the patience to understand the things he has read or heard. But even if I excused all this Regius's other faults, I couldn't pardon his ingratitude towards you; and I take him to be entirely *lâche* [sometimes = 'cowardly', but here = 'slack', 'low'], because talking with you hasn't changed his mind.

M. Hogelande will surely have had good success with his book, because in it he has followed your principles—which I

couldn't get even one of the learned people of Berlin to take in, so preoccupied are they with the scholastics. The one I mentioned in my last letter hasn't seen me since I lent him your physics. This is a sure sign that everyone around here is well, since he is one of the household's physicians.

When I told you that I wasn't willing to use any remedies for the abscesses I had in the fall, I meant remedies from the apothecary. [See note on page ??.] As for herbs that refresh and purge the blood—I use them as food in the spring, a season during which I usually have no appetite for anything else. I am scheduling a bleeding for myself a few days from now, because this has become a bad habit that I can't change without getting trouble from headaches. I would be afraid of giving *you* a headache with this tiresome account of myself, if your concern for my health had not brought me to it.

**Descartes writes on 10.v.1647:**

Although I may find pressing reasons for remaining in France when I am there, no reason will be strong enough to keep me from returning here ·to Holland· before winter, so long as I still have my life and health. That is because the letter I had the honour of receiving from you leads me to hope that you will return to The Hague towards the end of the summer. Indeed I may say that this—the prospect of sometimes seeing you—is the chief reason why I would rather live in this country than in any other. I used to look to Holland for *personal peace*, but I can see that from now on I won't be able to get that, or anyway not as completely as I want; because I haven't yet received proper redress for the insults I suffered at Utrecht, and I see that further insults are on the way. A troop of theologians, scholastic types, seem to have formed a league in an attempt to crush me by their slanders. They are scheming to their utmost to try to harm me, and if

I didn't keep up my guard they would find it easy to injure me in various ways.

Evidence for this? A few months ago a certain professor at the College of Theologians in Leiden, named Revius, raised objections against me in four different theses, aiming to distort the meaning of my *Meditations* and get people to believe that in that work I said things that are quite absurd and contrary to God's glory—e.g. that we ought to •doubt that there is a God, and that people should for a while •deny outright that there is a God, and things of that sort. But this man is not clever, and even his own students—most of them—were making fun of his slanders. For this reason, my friends in Leiden didn't take the trouble to warn me of what he was doing. But then some other theses were published by Triglandius, their leading professor of theology, in which he included these words:

•*Eum esse blasphemum, qui Deum pro deceptore habet, ut male Cartesius.*

•'Anyone who holds God to be a deceiver is a blasphemer; and that is what Descartes wickedly does,'

When this happened, my friends—even the ones who are themselves theologians—concluded that what these people intended, by accusing me of such a serious crime as blasphemy, was nothing less than **(1)** to try to get my views condemned as utterly wicked by some Synod where they would have the most votes, and then **(2)** to try to get the judges (who trust them) to come down hard on me. [Roughly speaking, the hope would be that the Synod would put Descartes in disgrace and then the judges would put him in prison.] To block this scheme, my friends thought, I would have to act against it. That is why I wrote a long letter last week to the Governors of the Leiden Academy, asking for justice against the slanders of these two theologians. I don't know how they will reply to this letter; but what I expect is some soothing ointment to

spread on the wound, and because this will leave the cause of the injury untouched it will make it worse and longer lasting. I base this on what I know of the Dutch character. What these folk revere in a theologian is not honesty and virtue but beard, voice and frown. Here, as in all democratic states, the greatest power is possessed by those who know how to raise their voices and are shameless about doing it, even if they have the least reason for their position. For my part I think I am obliged •to do my best to get full satisfaction for these insults and also, by the same token, for those of Utrecht. If I can't get justice—which I foresee will be very hard to do—I'll be obliged •to get right out of these provinces [i.e. Holland]. But everything is done so slowly here that I'm sure it will take more than a year for this to happen.

I wouldn't have taken the liberty of discussing these trivial matters with you if you hadn't paid me the compliment of wanting to read what M. Hogelande and Regius said relating to me in their books. This made me think that you wouldn't be displeased to have a first-hand account of my activities, apart from which I am obliged by the duty and respect that I owe you to give you such an account.

I praise God that the doctor to whom you lent a copy of my *Principles* has taken so long to return the book, showing that no-one is ill at the Court of the Electress [see note on page 47]. •This is good news regarding you in particular, because •we seem to enjoy more nearly perfect health when we are living where there is generally good health than when we are surrounded by sick people. This physician will have had that much more leisure to read the book that you were good enough to lend him, and you'll be better able to tell me his opinion of it.

While I am writing this, letters come in from The Hague and Leiden informing me that the meeting of the Governors was postponed, so that they haven't yet been given my letters;

and I can see that a fleeting fuss is being turned into a big *affair*. I am told that the theologians aim to be the judges in the affair, i.e. to subject me to a Dutch inquisition that would be harsher than the Spanish inquisition ever was, and to make me the adversary of their religion. My informants want me to use of the good offices of the French ambassador and the authority of the Prince of Orange, not to obtain justice but to intercede and prevent my enemies from doing worse things; but I don't think I shall follow this advice. [In the upshot, he did. Two days later he wrote to the acting French ambassador, asking him to get the Prince of Orange to intercede on his behalf.] I shall simply seek justice, and if I can't get it then I believe the best course of action will be for me make quiet preparations for a retreat.

### **Elisabeth writes in v.1647:**

Three weeks ago someone sent me the absurdly wild accusation by Professor Triglandius [see page 59]. The same person added that •the people who argued on your side were not defeated by reason but silenced by the tumult aroused in the academy, and •that Professor Stuart (a man who has read a lot but with very mediocre judgment) was working on a plan to refute your metaphysical *Meditations*. I thought that this would upset you; . . .but I didn't think it would make you resolve to leave Holland, as you said in your last letter, because it would be beneath your dignity to give ground to your enemies, and your leaving would appear as a kind of banishment. This would garner more prejudice against you than the theologians could generate; because slander isn't very important •in a country• where those who govern can't protect themselves from slander or punish slanderers. That is the high price that the Dutch pay just for freedom of speech. •Mightn't it be possible, even in Holland, for the

speech of theologians to be treated as a special case and kept within bounds? No• The speech of theologians •is a special case! It• is privileged •everywhere, so it can't be restrained •in a democratic state. So it seems to me that you have reason to be satisfied if you get what your friends in Holland advise you to ask for. . . ., and your decision to settle for that is better suited to a man who is free and sure of his case—•better suited, that is, than would be a retreat into some other country•. But if you stay with your •other• decision, namely to leave the country, I'll rescind my intention to go back there—unless the interests of my family call me back. I'll just stay here, waiting to see whether. . . .political developments take me back to my own country.

This estate that the Electress inherited is in a place that suits my health pretty well: two degrees south of Berlin, surrounded by the River Oder, and •on• land that is extremely fertile. The people here have recovered from the war better than the people in Berlin, although the armies spent longer here and did more damage by arson. Some of the villages around here are beset by flies in such large numbers that quite a few men and animals have died or become deaf and blind. They arrive in the form of a cloud and leave in the same way. The locals think this comes from a spell! I attribute it to the unusual flooding of the Oder, which this year lasted until the end of April, when the weather was already very warm.

Two days ago I received the books of M. Hogelande and Regius, but some news came in that prevented me from getting further than the beginning of the former. I would have greatly valued its proofs of God's existence if you hadn't accustomed me to demand proofs based on the principles of our knowledge. But the comparisons by which he shows how the soul is united to the body and is constrained to accommodate itself to the body's form so as to share in the

harms and helps that come to the body, still doesn't satisfy me. [Why 'But... ', and why 'still doesn't'? Perhaps she means: 'Unlike the theological proofs, which would have looked good to me if you hadn't taught me better, the mind-body stuff doesn't look good to me now and wouldn't have done so if I had seen it before you began teaching me.'] The trouble is that the finely divided matter that he supposes to be wrapped in lumpier matter by heat from fire or from fermentation is nevertheless corporeal, so that how it moves and what forces operate in it depend on facts about how many parts it has and what their *surfaces* are like; and that can't be true of the soul, which is immaterial.

My brother Philip, who brought me those two books, told me that two more are on the way; and since I haven't ordered any, I think that these will be your *Meditations* and *Principles of Philosophy* in French. I am especially eager to get the latter, because in it you have added some material that isn't in the Latin. I think it must be in Part 4, since the other Parts seemed to me to be as clear as they could possibly be.

The physician I mentioned to you before has told me that he had some objections concerning minerals, but that he wouldn't risk sending them to you until he had re-read the whole work. His practice is a big obstacle to his doing that. The people around here have an extraordinary faith in his profession. The air here is so pure that I think they would have less need of his profession than people in the ·wider· world do, if only they—commons and nobles alike—weren't so *dirty*! My health is better here than it was in Holland. But I wouldn't want to have been here always, because ·around here· there is nothing but my books to prevent me from becoming completely stupid.

### Descartes writes on 6.vi.1647:

As I pass through The Hague on my way to France, since I can't have the honour of receiving your orders and paying my respects, I think I ought to write you a few lines to assure you that my zeal and devotion won't change as I move around. Two days ago I received a letter from Sweden; it was from France's Resident [= 'top diplomatic official'] there, asking me something on behalf of the ·Swedish· queen. (She knows about me because he showed her my reply to a previous letter of his.) His account of this queen and of conversations with her has given me such a high opinion of her that it seems to me that she would be worthy of conversation with you, as you are with her. There aren't many people anywhere of whom that is true; so it would be no bad thing if you formed a very close friendship with her. There are various reasons why this would be desirable, quite apart from the contentment of mind that you would both have from it. [He further praises the Queen and the Princess, and says that he will, through letters to the French resident to be shown to the Queen, try to nudge her towards wanting Elisabeth as a friend] if you do not forbid me to do so.

The theologians who were trying to harm me have been silenced, but this was done by means of flattery and by taking all possible care not to offend them. It was said that this came about because of the temper of the times, but I fear that these times will last for ever and that the theologians will be allowed to grab so much power that they will be intolerable.

The printing of the French version of my *Principles* has been completed. The dedicatory letter has yet to be printed, so I'm enclosing a copy of it. If there's anything in it that doesn't please you and that you think should be expressed differently, I would be glad of the favour of a warning.



**Descartes writes on 20.xi.1647:**

Since I have already taken the liberty of informing you of the correspondence I have begun to have with Sweden, I think I ought to continue ·with that· and tell you that not long ago I received letters from my friend in that country, ·Hector-Pierre Chanut·. [He reports that Chanut told him this: The Swedish Queen heard a formal lecture from a notable Swedish academic, on a topic assigned by her, ‘The supreme good in this life’. She didn’t think well of it, and told Chanut that she needed to know what his, Descartes’s, opinion of it would be. He told her that Descartes wasn’t forthcoming on such topics, but would probably respond to a direct request from the Queen, who thereupon told Chanut to pass on just such a request, which he did. Then:] I thought I oughtn’t to pass up this opportunity. Considering that when he wrote this letter Chanut couldn’t yet have received the one I wrote him about the letters I had written to you on the same topic, I concluded that I had failed in my plan ·of attracting the Queen’s attention in that way·, and decided that I should take another tack. So I wrote a letter to the Queen in which, after having briefly laid out my opinion, I added that I omitted many things, because I wasn’t willing to ask for more of her time (I was, I explained, thinking about the number of matters that come up for the attention of a monarch who is running a great kingdom). I added further that I am sending Chanut some writings in which I have laid out my thoughts on this topic at greater length, so that if she wished to see them he could show them to her.

The writings I am sending to Chanut are the letters I had the honour of writing to you concerning Seneca’s *De vita beata* up to half-way through the sixth letter, where, after having defined the passions in general, I write that I find it difficult to enumerate them. [What he sent starts in this version on

page 18 and ends on page 34. Although he doesn’t mention this to the Princess, he sent her letters too, presumably without her permission.] I am also sending him the little treatise on *The Passions*, which I had transcribed from a very confused draft of it that I had kept (getting that done was a tiresome task!). And I’m telling him that I am *not* asking him to present these writings to her Majesty straight away. [He explains: it might seem disrespectful to show her letters written to someone else; on the other hand, this procedure could at least reassure her that she wasn’t reading something that had been tailored to fit her opinions. It is left to Chanut to decide whether and how to handle these matters.]

I’ve decided that it wouldn’t be appropriate to include anything more about you, or even to state your name, though Chanut must know it from my earlier letters. . . . I think he may have been reluctant to talk about you to the Queen because he doesn’t know whether this would please or displease those who have sent him [i.e. the French government, whose ambassador he is]. . . . But if at some later time I have occasion to write to her about you, I won’t need a go-between. The aim I have this time in sending these letters is to give her an opportunity to consider these thoughts, and if they please her, as I’m given to believe she may, she would be well placed to exchange views with you about them.

**Elisabeth writes on 5.xii.1647:**

As I received the French translation of your *Meditations* a few days ago, I have to write you these ·few· lines to thank you. [She launches into a long and floridly humble/complimentary introduction to what she wants to say, namely that she has read the French version of the *Meditations* with great satisfaction. She continues:] Your thoughts are more *mine* than they were, now that I see them well

expressed in a language that I use regularly—though I *thought* I had understood them before!

Each time I reread the objections that were brought against you, my wonder increases at how it is possible

- that people who have spent so many years in meditation and study can't understand things that are so simple and so clear;
- that most of them dispute over the true and the false without knowing how to distinguish them; and
- that Gassendi, who has such a good reputation for knowledge, made the least reasonable objections of all (second only to the Englishman [Hobbes]).

This shows you how much the world needs the *Treatise on Learning* that you once planned to write. I know that you are too charitable to refuse something so useful to the public. . . .

### Descartes writes on 31.i.1648:

[We don't now have the letter of 23.xii that Descartes mentions]

I received your letter of 23 December at almost the same time as the earlier one, and I admit that I'm in a quandary about how I ought to respond to that earlier letter—specifically, to the part of it in which you indicate your wish that I might write the *Treatise on Learning* about which I once had the honour of speaking to you. There is nothing that I wish for more intensely than to obey your commands; but I will tell you the reasons why I dropped the plan of writing this treatise; and if they don't satisfy you then I'll certainly take it up again.

(1) I could not put into it all the truths that ought to be there without stirring up the opposition of the scholastics; and as things stand, I can't treat their hatred as completely negligible. (2) I have already touched on some of the points that I had wanted to put into this treatise, in a preface to the

French translation of my *Principles*, of which I believe you have now received a copy. (3) I am now working on another manuscript, which I hope you will like better—a description of the **functions** of animals and of man. I am doing this because the draft of the work that I made a dozen years ago (you have seen it) fell into the hands of some people who copied it badly, and I thought I should create a clean copy—i.e. rewrite it. ·Indeed, I am taking it further·: just in the last eight or ten days I have risked trying to explain how animals **develop** from the beginning of their existence. I say 'animals' in general, for I wouldn't be so bold as to tackle such a thing for man in particular, because that would require more empirical data than I have.

And then there's the fact that I regard the remainder of this winter as perhaps the most tranquil time I shall ever have; which makes me prefer to spend my time on this work instead of some other requiring less concentration. Why will I have less leisure after this winter? Because I'm obliged to return to France next summer and to spend the following winter there; I am forced into this by personal affairs and several other matters. Also, I have been honoured by the offer of a royal pension (I didn't ask for one). This won't tie me down ·to France·, but much can happen in a year. Anyway, nothing could possibly happen that would prevent me from preferring the happiness of living where you live (if I could do that) to that of living in my own country or in any other place at all.

My letter ·to Queen Christina· about the supreme good was held up in Amsterdam for almost a month (not my fault), so I don't expect a reply for some time. As soon as I hear anything relating to it I shall let you know. It didn't contain anything new that was worth sending to you. I have already received some letters from Sweden telling me that my letters are awaited. Judging by what I am told about this monarch,

she must be strongly inclined to virtue and have very good judgment. I am told that she will be presented with the ·French· version of my *Principles*, and I am assured that she will read the first part with satisfaction and that she would be quite capable of reading the rest, if affairs of state allow her the leisure to do so. . . .

### **Elisabeth writes on 30.vi.1648:**

The inflammation of my right arm, caused by the mistake of a surgeon who cut part of a nerve in bleeding me, prevented me from responding sooner to your letter of 7 May. [She continues with a narrative that might be easier to follow if we had—as in fact we do not—the 7.v letter of Descartes's to which she refers. The present letter refers in veiled terms to various travels and diplomatic and political goings-on in which the status and future of her exiled royal family may be involved; and to the mother of Queen Christina of Sweden ('the mother of the person to whom your friend has given your letters'; in this letter, no-one is referred to by name or title). The latter has been living in Germany and is planning a visit to Sweden, where she is expected to help in making Descartes's stay there a success. She wants a certain 'third person' (presumably counting herself and Descartes as the first two) to travel with her, and Elisabeth says of this third person that 'he' will go if his family allows it and covers the costs; but it is known that the 'third person' was in fact Elisabeth herself. (We learn from Elisabeth's next letter that her proposed trip to Stockholm was thought of as possibly helping the prospects of her 'house', i.e. her family of semi-royalty in exile, and in the letter after that we learn that it was in some way an important aspect of this visit that Elisabeth should arrive in Stockholm at the same time as the Swedish queen's mother.) After this, Elisabeth winds up:]

I haven't yet reported to you on my reading of the French version of your *Principles of Philosophy*. Greatly as I need you to explain something in the Preface, I shan't go into it now because that would make my letter too long; I'll ask you about it at another time. . . .

### **Descartes writes in vi or vii.1648:**

[Descartes writes that he has landed in the middle of a mess that nobody could have predicted. The French *Parlement* is at odds with the monarchy (Louis XIV was still a minor) about the handling of taxes and other financial matters. The turmoil is apt to continue for a long time, Descartes says; but he sees a prospect that out of this will come a French army that may be able to establish 'a general peace'. He continues:] But it would have been good if while waiting for the general peace to happen I had stayed on in ·Holland·, the country where the peace has already been made. And if these clouds don't dissipate soon, I plan to head towards Egmond in six or eight weeks and to stay there until the French sky is calmer. Meanwhile, having one foot in each country, I find my condition a very happy one in that it is free. And I believe that rich people differ from others not •in getting more enjoyment from pleasant things but •in suffering more from unpleasant ones. That is because any pleasures they can have are, for them, commonplace, so that they don't affect them as deeply as do bad things that happen, which take them by surprise. This should console those for whom fortune has made calamities commonplace.

### **Elisabeth writes in vii.1648:**

Wherever you go in the world, the trouble you take to send me your news will give me satisfaction. That is because I am

convinced that whatever happens to you will always be to your advantage, and that God is too just to send you troubles so great that your prudence couldn't draw something good from them. The unexpected turmoil in France, for example, has preserved your liberty by requiring you to return to Holland. [She adds something implying that if Descartes had stayed in Paris he would have been in trouble with some French authority, however careful he was to keep out of trouble.] And I get advantage from the French troubles too: namely, I get from them the pleasure of being able to hope for the good fortune of seeing you in Holland or elsewhere.

[The journey that Elisabeth is about to mention is the one *she* was to have made to Sweden. The 'friends' who approved and funded it are Elisabeth's mother and brothers; and 'those who are at the place where this journey must begin' seem to be her hosts at Crossen, her aunt the dowager Electress of Brandenburg and the latter's son the Elector. So Elisabeth's immediate family circle (1) want her to go to Sweden, and pay for this journey; more distant relatives (2) sabotage the efforts to prepare for it; and she expects that the immediate family circle will (3) accuse her of cowardice and selfishness in not making it. To get the hang of this letter you have to understand that in it Elisabeth is angry, with old intra-family hurts and resentments coming up to the surface.]

I think you will have received the letter that spoke of another voyage that was to have been taken if friends approved, thinking that it would be useful at this point in time. They have now (1) asked for the journey to be made, and have provided the necessary funds. And yet those who are at the place where this journey must begin have (2) day after day prevented the necessary preparations from being made, for reasons so weak that even they are ashamed to say what they are. So that now there is so little time for this that the person in question [i.e. Elisabeth] can't be ready in time to arrive in Stockholm with the Swedish queen's mother. She now has a double burden to bear. On one hand, it goes

against her grain to fail to do something she has undertaken to do. On the other, her friends will think that she wasn't willing—didn't have the courage—to sacrifice her health and her repose in the interests of a house for which in fact she would even give up her life if it were required. That upsets her a little; but it can't *surprise* her because she is quite used to being blamed for the faults of others. . . ., and to seeking her satisfaction only in her conscience's testimony that she has done her duty. Still, events like these sometimes turn her thoughts away from pleasanter topics. Although you are right to say that the very rich differ from others more in •their greater sensitivity to the unpleasures that come their way than in •their greater enjoyment of pleasures (because few of them have pleasures that are *about* anything solid), I would never ask for any greater pleasure than to be able to tell you how much I value your good will towards me. [In the middle of this signing-off ceremony, the Princess adds a comment on the pleasures of the rich:] But if a rich person wanted to benefit the public, especially persons of merit, he would have plenty of ways of doing this and would get more pleasure than can be had by people who are poor, and are therefore denied by fortune this advantage of doing good to others.

### Elisabeth writes on 23.viii.1648:

[In a code adopted for this paragraph in this version,

person<sub>E</sub> is Princess Elisabeth,

person<sub>QM</sub> is the mother of the Swedish Queen Christina.

The need for this arises from Elisabeth's again not referring to anyone by name or title.]

In my last letter I spoke to you of a person<sub>E</sub> who, through no fault of her own, was in danger of losing the good opinion and perhaps the good wishes of most of her friends. Now she is delivered from this danger in a rather extraordinary way.

She had asked this other person<sub>QM</sub> for the time needed to join her; and that person<sub>QM</sub> now responds that she would have delayed her visit ·so as to synchronize the two proposed visits· if her daughter hadn't changed her mind ·about allowing the first person<sub>E</sub>'s visit· because she had come to think it would look bad to allow such close contact with followers of a different religion. This way of treating the person<sub>E</sub> in question seems to me not to square with the praise that your friend [Chanut] lavishes on the person who makes use of him; unless it is not entirely hers but comes—as I suspect it does—from her mother, who may have let herself be bullied into it by a sister of hers •who has been with her ever since this matter was first broached, and •who is supported by—owes her means of livelihood to—a party that is opposed to the house of the person<sub>E</sub> mentioned above. If you see fit to write to your friend [Chanut] about this, he could clarify things for you; or perhaps he will write to you of his own accord, since it's said that he dominates the mind that he praises so much. There's nothing more I can say about all this, except that I don't count this episode among the misfortunes of the person<sub>E</sub> to whom it has happened, because it has saved her from a journey of which •the bad side (including the loss of health and rest, combined with the upsetting things she would be bound to undergo in a brutish nation) was very certain, whereas •the good that others would have hoped for was very uncertain. . . .

As for me, I intend to stay on here until I learn the state of affairs of Germany and England, which seem now to be in crisis. Three days ago there was an episode that was both funny and nasty. The ·dowager· Electress and we her attendants were walking through an oak wood, and we were suddenly overcome by a sort of *measles* over the whole body except for the face, and without fever or other symptoms except for an unbearable itch. The superstitious

believed they were under a spell, but the peasants told us that sometimes there's a certain poisonous dew on the trees, which in drifting down as vapour infects passers-by in that way. And I should add that none of the different remedies that each imagined for this new illness—baths, bleeding, cupping glasses, leeches, and laxatives—did the slightest good. I am telling you this because I presume that you'll find in it something to confirm some of your doctrines.

### Descartes writes in x.1648:

At last I have had the pleasure of receiving the three letters that you have done the honour of writing to me, and they haven't fallen into bad hands. [The possibility of 'falling into bad hands' explains the oblique no-names style of the past few letters; Descartes mentions it here because it could have been the cause of delay in the letters' reaching him.] [He explains the delay in delivery of the first of the three letters, that of 30.vi, a delay which had the result that] I didn't see it until today, when I also received your latest letter, the one of 23.viii, which tells me of an amazing insult ·to which you have been subjected·. I want to believe, as you do, that it didn't originate with the person to whom it is attributed [Queen Christina]. Be that as it may, I don't think there is anything distressing about the cancellation of journey of which (as you rightly point out) the drawbacks would be unavoidable and the advantages very uncertain. As for me, by the grace of God I completed my business in France and am not sorry that I went; but I am all the happier to have returned ·home to Egmond·. I saw no-one whose condition seemed a fit subject for envy, and the people who had the most flashy appearance struck me as being fit subjects for pity. I couldn't have picked a better time for ·going to France and, while there·, being made aware of how blessed it is to have a tranquil and retired life

and how rich one is made by not having much money! If you compare •your situation with •that of the queens and the other princesses of Europe, you'll find the same difference as there is between •those who are peacefully in a harbour and •those who are on the open sea where they are shaken by the winds of a tempest. Even if one is forced into the harbour by the failure of one's ship, that shouldn't be less satisfactory than it would be to get there in some other way, as long as there is no shortage there of the necessities of life. People who are in the thick of things, and whose happiness depends wholly on others, are subject to distressing events that go right in to the depths of their heart; whereas that poisonous vapour that came down from the trees where you were peacefully walking touched only the surface of your skin, or so I hope. Any harm that it did would have been fixed, I think, by washing your skin, within an hour, with a little alcohol.

It's five months since I had any letters from the friend that I wrote to you about [Chanut]. In his last letter he gave me a carefully detailed account of the reasons that had prevented the person to whom he had given my letters [Queen Christina] from responding to me, so I judge that he has been silent only because he has been waiting for this response, or perhaps because he is a little embarrassed at not having it to send me as he had imagined he would. . . . When he learns that I am here •at home in Egmond•, I'm sure he will write to me here, and that he will give me—within the limits of his knowledge—an understanding of the Swedish treatment of you; for he knows that I take great interest in this.

### **Descartes writes on 22.ii.1649:**

Of several pieces of distressing news have come to me recently from various quarters, the news of your illness

affected me most deeply. [Descartes seems to have learned of this from a letter by Elisabeth that we don't now have.] And although I have also learned of your recovery, some traces of sadness linger in my mind and can't be quickly erased. So you wanted to compose verses during your illness! That reminds me of Socrates, who (according to Plato) had a similar desire when he was in prison. I believe this poetic mood results from a strong agitation of the animal spirits [see note on page 1]. In someone who doesn't have a serenely stable mind, this agitation could completely disorient the imagination; but in someone with a more stable mind it merely warms things up a little and creates a desire to compose poetry. I take this tendency to be the mark of a mind that is stronger and nobler than that of the ordinary person.

If I didn't know that your mind is like that, I would fear that you must have been extremely grieved on learning the fatal conclusion of the tragedies of England. [Princess Elisabeth's uncle, Charles I, was executed in London on 9.ii.1649. At that time the family circle back in The Hague (Elisabeth was still in Crossen) included five of Charles's relatives: a son, a daughter, a sister, and two nieces.] But I am confident that you, being accustomed to the assaults of fortune and having recently had your own life in great danger [this presumably refers to the illness mentioned at the start of this letter], would be less surprised and distressed to learn of the death of a close relative than you would if you hadn't previously suffered other afflictions. Such a violent death seems more horrible than the death that comes in one's bed, but looked at in the right way it is **(1)** more glorious, **(2)** happier and **(3)** gentler •than most deaths•; so the features of it that especially distress ordinary people should provide consolation for you. **(1)** There is great glory in dying in a set-up which ensures that one is universally pitied, praised and missed by everyone with any human feeling. And it is certain that if the late king hadn't had

·and triumphantly passed· this test ·of his character·, his mercifulness and other virtues would never have been as well known they are and will be in the future by everyone who reads his story. **(2)** I'm sure also that the satisfaction he felt in his conscience during the last moments of his life was greater than the unhappiness caused by the resentment which is said to be apparently the only sad passion that afflicted him. **(3)** As for pain, I don't enter that into the profit-loss calculation at all, because the pain is so brief. . . . But I don't want to go on at length about this mournful topic, and shall add only this: it is much better to be entirely free from a false hope than to be pointlessly immobilised by it.

As I write these lines, letters arrive from a place I hadn't heard from for seven or eight months. In one of them the person to whom I had sent the work on *Passions* a year ago [Queen Christina] writes in her own hand to thank me for it. Her remembering a man as unimportant as I am, after so much time, suggests that she won't forget to reply to your letters, although she hasn't done so for four months. I'm told that she has asked some of her people to study my *Principles*, so as to help her to read it. But I don't think she'll have the leisure to get down to it, although she seems willing to do so. She thanks me for the work on *Passions*, referring to it explicitly, without mentioning the letters that went with it. I don't hear from Sweden *anything* about your affairs. I can only guess that since the conditions of the peace in Germany are less favourable to your house than they might have been, those who have contributed to it think that you may be hostile to them, which makes them reluctant to show friendship to you. [This refers to the Peace of Westphalia, concluded a few months earlier, which ended several decades-long European wars and redrew some national boundaries. As one part of this, our princess's 'house' got back some of the territory it had previously ruled, but far from all. 'Those who had contributed to it' included the Swedes.]

Ever since this peace treaty was concluded it has bothered me that I haven't known whether your brother the Elector had accepted it, and I would have taken the liberty of writing to ·him, through· you giving •my opinion about that, if it weren't inconceivable that he would consider •this in his deliberations. But since I know nothing about the particular reasons that may be moving him, it would be rash of me to make any judgment. All I can offer is a general point. It seems to me that:

When there's an issue about the restitution of a state that is occupied or disputed by others who have the operative power, those whose cause is supported only by justice and the law of nations ought never to count on succeeding in all their claims. They have much better reason to think well of those who get some part of the state to be given to them, however small the part, than to be hostile to those who keep the remainder away from them. No-one could find fault with their pressing their claims as hard as they can while those who have the power are deliberating about this; but once ·the deliberation is over and· conclusions have been reached, prudence requires them to indicate that they are satisfied, even if they aren't; and to thank not only those who caused something to be given to them but also those who didn't take everything from them, ·i.e. those who got the remainder·.

The point of this is to acquire the friendship of both parties, or at least to avoid their hate, because such friendships may be a big help to their survival later on. And there's another consideration: there is still a long road from the making of a promise to the keeping of it. Suppose that those who have the power didn't really want to allow this claimant *anything*, and did so only because of jealousies amongst themselves. . . . ·They might overcome those jealousies sufficiently to be

willing to grab this last bit, and· it would be easy for them to find reasons to divide it up among themselves. The smallest part of the territory that your house used to rule is worth more than the whole empire of the Tatars or the Muscovites, and after two or three years of peace a stay there will be as agreeable as one in any other place on earth. For me, who am not attached to living in any one place, I would have no difficulty in exchanging Holland or even France for that territory, if I could find there an equally secure peace, even if what drew me to it ·in the first place· was only the beauty of the country. [In this paragraph, ‘the territory that your house used to rule’ replaces *le Palatinat*. Elisabeth could be called a ‘Palatine princess’, but the history and geography of ‘Palatinates’ is far too complex to be explained here. Think: a part of southern Germany including Heidelberg, which is in the part that was restored to Elisabeth’s brother, the Elector.]

### **Descartes writes on 31.iii.1649:**

[Descartes reports that Queen Christina has invited him to go to Stockholm this spring so as to get back home before winter. He has replied that he doesn’t decline the invitation, but that he doesn’t think he will go until mid-summer. He has several reasons for this, of which the main one is that he wants time to receive the Princess’s orders before he sets off for Stockholm. He isn’t worried about appearances: he has been so public about his devotion to the Princess that his reputation would suffer more from seeming to neglect her than from looking for every opportunity to be of service to her. He continues:] So I humbly beg you to •do me the favour of instructing me in everything with respect to which you think I can be of service to you or yours, and •to rest assured that your power over me is as if I had been your house servant all my life. ·One specific request·: If the Queen remembers your letters about the supreme good, which I

mentioned ·to her· in my letters last year, and if she asks to see them, what should I say in reply? I reckon on spending the winter in that country and not returning ·home· until next year. There will probably be peace by then in all of Germany; and if my desires are fulfilled I will make my route back home go through wherever you will be at that time.

### **Descartes writes in vi.1649:**

[This replies to a letter from Elisabeth that we do not have.]

Since you wish to know what I have decided regarding the voyage to Sweden, I’ll tell you that I still plan to go there if the Queen goes on indicating that she wants me to. M. Chanut, our Resident in that country, passing through here eight days ago en route for France, spoke to me so glowingly of this marvellous queen that the voyage now seems shorter and easier than it did before! But I shan’t leave until I get news from that country one more time, and—hoping that Chanut will be sent back to Sweden—I’ll try to wait for his return so as to make the voyage with him. The only other thing is this:

I would count myself extremely lucky if I could be of service to you while I am there. I shall certainly look for opportunities to do so, and I shan’t hesitate to write and tell you quite openly whatever I may do or think on this matter. I’m incapable of having any intention that would be detrimental to those whom I’ll be obliged to respect, and I observe the maxim that just and honest ways are also the most useful and secure. So even if my letters are seen, I hope they won’t be interpreted badly, or fall into the hands of people who are unjust enough to hold it against me that I do my duty.



**Descartes writes on 9.x.1649:**

[Descartes reports to the Princess on his first few days in Stockholm. He has met Queen Christina only twice, but already thinks that ‘she has as much merit as she is reputed to possess, and more virtue’. She asked him about Princess Elisabeth and he replied warmly, but does not think that his friendship with her will make the Queen jealous. He isn’t sure how long he will remain at the Swedish court. Finally this:] M. Freinshemius has secured her Majesty’s approval for my going to the castle only at the times when it pleases her to give me the honour of speaking with her. So it won’t be hard for me to perform my courtly duties, and that suits my temperament very well.

**Elisabeth writes on 4.xii.1649:**

[Princess Elisabeth praises Queen Christina; praises Descartes for being able to discern, as others couldn’t, *how* talented the Queen is; and declares that she is not made jealous by Descartes’s affection for the Queen. She speaks of her as someone ‘who defends our sex from the imputation of imbecility and weakness that the pedants would have given it’, and admiringly wonders how Christina can carry out her royal duties while also engaging in serious study.]

[There is no record of Descartes’s replying to this letter. It turned out that Queen Christina wanted her philosophy sessions—i.e. was pleased ‘to give me the honour of speaking with her’— in the mornings before the sun was up, in an ice-cold Swedish winter. This may have contributed to Descartes’s falling ill, probably with pneumonia. He died of it in Stockholm about two months after Elisabeth wrote her last letter to him.]