



THE CORRESPONDENCE

AT 3:660¹

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES

[*The Hague*] 6 May 1643

M. Descartes,

I learned, with much joy and regret, of the plan you had to see me a few days ago; I was touched equally by your charity in willing to share yourself with an ignorant and intractable person and by the bad luck that robbed me of such a profitable conversation. M. Palotti² greatly augmented this latter passion in going over with me the solutions you gave him to the obscurities contained in the physics of M. Regius.³ I would have been better instructed

1. I provide the reader with the volume and page references from the Adam and Tannery edition of Descartes' *Oeuvres*. The page number indicates the beginning of the page.

2. Alphonse Pollot (1602–68), whom Elisabeth refers to as Palotti, was a gentleman-in-waiting to the prince of Orange. In his letter to Pollot of 6 October 1642, Descartes notes his happiness that Elisabeth has read and seems to approve of his *Meditations*, as well as his intention to visit The Hague to meet her (see *Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, 11 vols. [Paris: Cerf, 1897–1913; new ed., Paris: Vrin, 1964–7; reprint, Paris: Vrin, 1996, cited hereafter as AT] 3:577–78) This letter would seem to mark Descartes' attempt at this meeting. Pollot's relation to Descartes began in 1638 with an exchange, through Henricus Reneri, about Descartes' *Discourse on the Method*. Pollot, as suggested here, effected the introduction between Descartes and Elisabeth. He appears to have tutored Elisabeth in geometry (see Descartes to Elisabeth, November 1645) and often served as the courier of their correspondence (see Elisabeth's letter of 24 May 1645, below). Reneri (1593–1639), a French philosopher, was a professor of philosophy at the University of Utrecht.

3. Henri le Roy or Regius (1598–1679) was a Dutch physician who took up Descartes' physics and physiology and taught them as chair of medicine at the University of Utrecht, beginning in 1638. Elisabeth's remarks here suggest that she was tutored by Regius or at least read his *Physiologia sive cognitio sanitatis* (Utrecht: Roman, 1641). While at Utrecht, beginning in 1642, Regius was attacked as promulgator of Cartesian philosophy by Professor of Theology Voetius. He was supported by Descartes in these battles until 1646. At that time there was a public falling out between Descartes and Regius upon publication of Regius's *Fundamenta Physica*. Descartes' side of this dispute can be seen in the French preface to the *Principles* and the *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*. One can see trouble ahead in their earlier 1641 correspondence: see

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661 on these from your mouth, as I would have been on a question I proposed to that professor while he was in this town, and regarding which he redirected me to you so that I might receive a satisfactory answer. The shame of showing you so disordered a style prevented me, up until now, from asking you for this favor by letter.

But today M. Palotti has given me such assurance of your goodwill toward everyone, and in particular toward me, that I chased from my mind all considerations other than that of availing myself of it. So I ask you please to tell me how the soul of a human being (it being only a thinking substance) can determine the bodily spirits, in order to bring about voluntary actions. For it seems that all determination of movement happens through the impulsion of the thing moved, by the manner in which it is pushed by that which moves it, or else by the particular qualities and shape of the surface of the latter. Physical contact is required for the first two conditions, extension for the third. You entirely exclude the one [extension] from the notion you have of the soul, and the other [physical contact] appears to me incompatible with an immaterial thing.⁴ This is why I ask you for a more precise definition of the soul than the one you give in your *Metaphysics*, that is to say, of its substance separate from its action, that is, from thought.⁵ For even if we were to suppose them inseparable (which is however difficult to prove in the mother's womb and in great fainting spells) as are the attributes of God, we could, in considering them apart, acquire a more perfect idea of them.

662 Knowing that you are the best doctor for my soul, I expose to you quite freely the weaknesses of its speculations, and hope that in observing the Hippocratic oath,⁶ you will supply me with remedies without making them public, such I beg of you to do, as well as to suffer the badgerings of

Your affectionate friend at your service,
Elisabeth.

Descartes to Regius, May 1641 (AT 3:371–72, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, ed. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, and for vol. 3, Anthony Kenny, 3 vols. [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984–1991, cited hereafter as CSM or CSMK, respectively] 181–82), December 1641 (AT 3:454–55, CSMK 199), December 1641 (AT 3:460, CSMK 200–201), January 1642 (AT 3:491, CSMK 491–92).

4. For a clear statement of this claim, see the Sixth Meditation argument for the real distinction of mind and body (AT 7:78, CSM 2:54).

5. Elisabeth here seems to be referencing the discussion in the paragraph subsequent to that containing the real distinction argument (AT 7:78–80, CSM 2:54–55), wherein Descartes details the “faculties” of extended and intellectual substances.

6. While Foucher de Careil, following Cerselier's rendering of Descartes' response, has “serment de Harpocrates” here, AT change it to Hippocrates. AT's reasoning seems sound. Not only do they follow the manuscripts, but the Hippocratic oath would have been well known to both Descartes and Elisabeth. Fabricius alludes to it, and by 1643 his work had seen more than thirty editions, one even published in Leiden in 1643 with a commentary by Meibomius.

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH

AT 3:663

Egmond du Hoef, 21 May 1643

Madame,

The favor with which your Highness has honored me, in allowing me to receive her orders in writing, is greater than I would ever have dared to hope, and it is more consoling to my failings than what I had hoped for with passion, which was to receive them by mouth, had I been able to be admitted the honor of paying you reverence, and of offering you my very humble services when I was last in The Hague. For in that case I would have had too many marvels to admire at the same time, and seeing superhuman discourse emerging from a body so similar to those painters give to angels, I would have been delighted in the same manner as it seems to me must be those who, coming from the earth, enter newly into heaven. This would have made me less capable of responding to your Highness, who without doubt has already noticed in me this failing, when I had the honor of speaking with her before; and your clemency wanted to assuage it, in leaving me the traces of your thoughts on a paper, where, in rereading them several times and accustoming myself to consider them, I would be truly less dazzled, but I instead feel more wonder, in noticing that these thoughts not only seem ingenious at the outset, but also even more judicious and solid the more one examines them.

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I can say with truth that the question your Highness proposes seems to me that which, in view of my published writings, one can most rightly ask me.⁷ For there are two things about the human soul on which all the knowledge we can have of its nature depends: one of which is that it thinks, and the other is that, being united to the body, it can act on and be acted

Elisabeth's later letters show her familiarity with the medical establishment, and Descartes too had interests in medicine. Moreover, while Harpocrates, or Horus, the child, is the Egyptian god of silence, and was taken up as the god of secrecy by the Greeks and Romans, there is no oath associated with him. While Harpocrates is associated with a secret medical profession in certain monuments, this same secret is contained in the Hippocratic oath: "About whatever I may see or hear in treatment, or even without treatment, in the life of human beings—things that should not ever be blurted out outside—I will remain silent, holding such things to be unutterable [sacred, not to be divulged]." Translation by Heinrich Von Staden, "In a Pure and Holy Way: Personal and Professional Conduct in the Hippocratic Oath," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 51 (1996): 406–8.

7. At this point, Descartes had published the *Discourse on the Method*, with accompanying essays (1637), and the *Meditations*, along with *Objections and Replies* (1641, 1642). He says little in those works about the philosophical basis of mind-body interaction. Gassendi, in the Fifth *Objections*, had raised a similar question, though he met with a much less hospitable reply. See AT 7:343–44, 7:389–90, 9:213, CSM 2:238–39, 266, 275–76.



Crispyen Van den Queborne. *Elisabeth, Princess Palatine* (mid-seventeenth century). Engraving, 3 3/8 × 5 1/4 in. (NPC D18201). Courtesy National Portrait Gallery, London.

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upon by it.⁸ I have said almost nothing about the latter, and have concentrated solely on making the first better understood, as my principal aim was to prove the distinction between the soul and the body. Only the first was able to serve this aim, and the other would have been harmful to it. But, as your Highness sees so clearly that one cannot conceal anything from her, I will try here to explain the manner in which I conceive of the union of the soul with the body and how the soul has the power [*force*] to move it. 665

First, I consider that there are in us certain primitive notions that are like originals on the pattern of which we form all our other knowledge. There are only very few of these notions; for, after the most general—those of being, number, and duration, etc. —which apply to all that we can conceive, we have, for the body in particular, only the notion of extension, from which follow the notions of shape and movement; and for the soul alone, we have only that of thought, in which are included the perceptions of the understanding and the inclinations of the will; and finally, for the soul and the body together, we have only that of their union, on which depends that of the power the soul has to move the body and the body to act on the soul, in causing its sensations and passions.

I consider also that all human knowledge [*science*] consists only in distinguishing well these notions, and in attributing each of them only to those things to which it pertains. For, when we want to explain some difficulty by means of a notion which does not pertain to it, we cannot fail to be mistaken; just as we are mistaken when we want to explain one of these notions by another; for being primitive, each of them can be understood only through itself. Although the use of the senses has given us notions of extension, of shapes, and of movements that are much more familiar than the others, the principal cause of our errors lies in our ordinarily wanting to use these notions to explain those things to which they do not pertain. For instance, when we want to use the imagination to conceive the nature of the soul, or better, when one wants to conceive the way in which the soul moves the body, by appealing to the way one body is moved by another body. 666

That is why, since, in the *Meditations* which your Highness deigned to read, I was trying to make conceivable the notions which pertain to the soul alone, distinguishing them from those which pertain to the body alone, the first thing that I ought to explain subsequently is the manner of conceiving

8. *Agir et patir avec lui*: In English, it is difficult to bring out the parallel between active and passive, which preserves the tie to the passions of the soul that will figure prominently in the later correspondence.

those which pertain to the union of the soul with the body, without those which pertain to the body alone, or to the soul alone. To which it seems to me that what I wrote at the end of my response to the sixth objections can be useful;⁹ for we cannot look for these simple notions elsewhere than in our soul, which has them all in itself by its nature, but which does not always distinguish one from the others well enough, or even attribute them to the objects to which it ought to attribute them.

Thus, I believe that we have heretofore confused the notion of the power with which the soul acts on the body with the power with which one body acts on another; and that we have attributed the one and the other not to the soul, for we did not yet know it, but to diverse qualities of bodies, such as heaviness, heat, and others, which we have imagined to be real, that is to say, to have an existence distinct from that of body, and by consequence, to be substances, even though we have named them qualities. In order to understand them, sometimes we have used those notions that are in us for knowing body, and sometimes those which are there for knowing the soul, depending on whether what we were attributing to them was material or immaterial. For example, in supposing that heaviness is a real quality, of which we have no other knowledge but that it has the power to move a body in which it is toward the center of the earth, we have no difficulty in conceiving how it moves the body, nor how it is joined to it; and we do not think that this happens through a real contact of one surface against another, for we experience in ourselves that we have a specific notion for conceiving that; and I think that we use this notion badly, in applying it to heaviness, which, as I hope to demonstrate in my *Physics*, is nothing really distinct from body.¹⁰ But I do think that it was given to us for conceiving the way in which the soul moves the body.

If I were to employ more words to explain myself, I would show that I did not sufficiently recognize the incomparable mind of your Highness, and I would be too presumptuous if I dared to think that my response should be entirely satisfactory to her; but I will try to avoid both the one and the other in adding here nothing more, except that if I am capable of writing or saying something that could be agreeable to her, I would always take it as a great honor to take up a pen or to go to The Hague for this end, and that there is nothing in the world which is so dear to me as the power to obey her commandments. But I cannot find a reason to observe the Hippocratic oath that she enjoined me to, since she communicated nothing to me that does not

9. AT 7:444–45, CSM 2:299–300.

10. *Principles* 4.20–27 (AT 7A:212–16, CSM 1:268–70).

merit being seen and admired by all men. I can only say, on this matter, that esteeming infinitely your letter to me, I will treat it as the misers do their treasures: the more they value them the more they hide them away, and begrudging the rest of the world a view of them, they make it their sovereign good to look at them. Thus, it will be easy for me alone to enjoy the good of seeing it, and my greatest ambition is to be able to say and to be truly, Madame,

Your Highness's very humble and obedient servant,
Descartes.

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES

[The Hague] 10 June 1643

AT 3:683

M. Descartes,

Your goodwill appears not only in your showing me the faults in my reasoning and correcting them, as I expected, but also in your attempt to console me about them in order to make the knowledge of them less annoying for me. But, in detriment to your judgment, you attempt to console me about those faults with false praise. Such false praise would have been necessary to encourage me to work to remedy them had my upbringing, in a place where the ordinary way of conversing has accustomed me to understand that people are incapable of giving one true praise, not made me presume that I could not err in believing the contrary of what people speak, and had it not rendered the consideration of my imperfections so familiar that they no longer upset me more than is necessary to promote the desire to rid myself of them.

This makes me confess, without shame, that I have found in myself all the causes of error which you noticed in your letter, and that as yet I have not been able to banish them entirely, for the life which I am constrained to lead does not leave enough time at my disposal to acquire a habit of meditation in accordance with your rules.¹¹ Now the interests of my house, which I must not neglect, now some conversations and social obligations which I cannot avoid, beat down so heavily on this weak mind with an-

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11. Elisabeth here seems to be referring to what Descartes writes in the preface to reader of the *Meditations*, and in the postulates of the geometrical exposition of his philosophy in the Second Replies, where he requires that his readers "meditate seriously with me, and withdraw their minds from the senses and from all preconceived opinions" (AT 7:9, CSM 2:8; see also AT 7:162ff., CSM 2:114ff.). Doing so, however, requires that one be able to "expressly rid [one's] . . . mind of all worries and arrange for [oneself] . . . a clear stretch of free time," as the meditator does in the First Meditation (AT 7:18, CSM 2:17). It is this luxury Elisabeth cannot afford.

noyance or boredom, that it is rendered useless for anything else at all for a long time afterward: this will serve, I hope, as an excuse for my stupidity in being unable to comprehend, by appeal to the idea you once had of heaviness, the idea through which we must judge how the soul (nonextended and immaterial) can move the body; nor why this power [*puissance*] to carry the body toward the center of the earth, which you earlier falsely attributed to a body as a quality, should sooner persuade us that a body can be pushed by some immaterial thing, than the demonstration of a contrary truth (which you promise in your physics) should confirm us in the opinion of its impossibility. In particular, since this idea (unable to pretend to the same perfection and objective reality as that of God) can be feigned due to the ignorance of that which truly moves these bodies toward the center, and since no material cause presents itself to the senses, one would then attribute this power to its contrary, an immaterial cause. But I nevertheless have never been able to conceive of such an immaterial thing as anything other than a negation of matter which cannot have any communication with it.

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I admit that it would be easier for me to concede matter and extension to the soul than to concede the capacity to move a body and to be moved by it to an immaterial thing. For, if the first is achieved through *information*, it would be necessary that the spirits, which cause the movements, were intelligent, a capacity you accord to nothing corporeal.¹² And even though, in your *Metaphysical Meditations*, you show the possibility of the second, it is altogether very difficult to understand that a soul, as you have described it, after having had the faculty and the custom of reasoning well, can lose all of this by some vapors, and that, being able to subsist without the body, and having nothing in common with it, the soul is still so governed by it.

But after all, since you have undertaken to instruct me, I entertain these sentiments only as friends which I do not intend to keep, assuring myself that you will explicate the nature of an immaterial substance and the manner of its actions and passions in the body, just as well as you have all the other things that you have wanted to teach. I beg of you also to believe that you

12. I have here retained the French *information*. It is hard to determine what theoretical model Elisabeth is adverting to. On the one hand, it is tempting to think that she is invoking the Aristotelian doctrine that the soul is the form of the body and so informs the body. On the other hand, her concern with the intelligence of corporeal spirits suggests that she is referring to a Stoic account of cognitive faculties and intentional action. The Stoics explained the cohesion of bodies and their motions toward some end, as well as the rational faculties Descartes accords to the soul (and so, one might say, the information of substances), by appeal to that part of matter termed *pneuma*.

could not perform this charity to anyone who felt more the obligation she has to you as?

Your very affectionate friend,
Elisabeth.

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH

AT 3:690

28 June 1643, *Egmond du Hoef*

Madame,

I have a very great obligation to your Highness in that she, after having borne my explaining myself badly in my previous letter, concerning the question which it pleased her to propose to me, deigns again to have the patience to listen to me on the same matter, and to give me occasion to note the things which I omitted. Of which the principal ones seem to me to be that, after having distinguished three sorts of ideas or primitive notions which are each known in a particular way and not by a comparison of the one with the other—that is, the notion that we have of the soul, that of the body, and the union which is between the soul and the body—I ought to have explained the difference between these three sorts of notions and between the operations of the soul through which we have them, and to have stated how we render each of them familiar and easy to us. Then, after that, having said why I availed myself of the comparison with heaviness, I ought to have made clear that, even though one might want to conceive of the soul as material (which, strictly speaking, is what it is to conceive its union with the body), one would not cease to know, after that, that the soul is separable from it. That is, I think, all of what your Highness has prescribed me to do here.

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First, then, I notice a great difference between these three sorts of notions. The soul is conceived only by the pure understanding [*l'entendement*]; the body, that is to say, extension, shapes, and motions, can also be known by the understanding alone, but is much better known by the understanding aided by the imagination, and finally, those things which pertain to the union of the soul and the body are known only obscurely by the understanding alone, or even by the understanding aided by the imagination; but they are known very clearly by the senses. From which it follows that those who never philosophize and who use only their senses do not doubt in the least that the soul moves the body and that the body acts on the soul. But they consider the one and the other as one single thing, that is to say, they conceive of their union. For to conceive of the union between two things is

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to conceive of them as one single thing. Metaphysical thoughts which exercise the pure understanding serve to render the notion of the soul familiar. The study of mathematics, which exercises principally the imagination in its consideration of shapes and movements, accustoms us to form very distinct notions of body. And lastly, it is in using only life and ordinary conversations and in abstaining from meditating and studying those things which exercise the imagination that we learn to conceive the union of the soul and the body.

I almost fear that your Highness will think that I do not speak seriously here. But this would be contrary to the respect I owe her and that I would never neglect to pay her. And I can say with truth that the principal rule I have always observed in my studies, and that which I believe has served me the most in acquiring some bit of knowledge, is that I never spend more than a few hours each day in thoughts which occupy the imagination, and very
693 few hours a year in those which occupy the understanding alone, and that I give all the rest of my time to relaxing the senses and resting the mind; I even count, among the exercises of the imagination, all serious conversations and everything for which it is necessary to devote attention. It is this that has made me retire to the country. For even though in the most populated city in the world I could have as many hours to myself as I now employ in study, I would nevertheless not be able to use them so usefully, since my mind would be distracted by the attention the bothers of life require. I take the liberty to write of this here to your Highness in order to show that I truly admire that, amid the affairs and the cares which persons who are of a great mind and of great birth never lack, she has been able to attend to the meditations which are required in order to know well the distinction between the soul and the body.

But I judged that it was these meditations, rather than these other thoughts which require less attention, that have made her find obscurity in the notion we have of their union; as it does not seem to me that the human mind is capable of conceiving very distinctly, and at the same time, the distinction between the soul and the body and their union, since to do so it is necessary to conceive them as one single thing and at the same time to conceive them as two, which is contradictory. On this matter (supposing your Highness still had the reasons which prove the distinction of the soul and body at the forefront of her mind and not wanting to ask her to remove them
694 from there in order to represent to herself the notion of the union that each always experiences within himself without philosophizing, in knowing that he is a single person who has together a body and a thought, which are of such a nature that this thought can move the body and sense what happens to it), I availed myself in my previous letter of a comparison between heaviness and those other qualities which we commonly imagine to be united to some bodies just as thought is united to our own, and I was not worried that

this comparison hangs on qualities that are not real, even though we imagine them so, since I believed that your Highness was already entirely persuaded that the soul is a substance distinct from body.

But since your Highness notices that it is easier to attribute matter and extension to the soul than to attribute to it the capacity to move a body and to be moved by one without having matter, I beg her to feel free to attribute this matter and this extension to the soul, for to do so is to do nothing but conceive it as united with the body. After having well conceived this and having experienced it within herself, it will be easy for her to consider that the matter that she has attributed to this thought is not the thought itself, and that the extension of this matter is of another nature than the extension of this thought, in that the first is determined to a certain place, from which it excludes all other extended bodies, and this is not the case with the second. In this way your Highness will not neglect to return easily to the knowledge of the distinction between the soul and the body, even though she has conceived their union.

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Finally, though I believe it is very necessary to have understood well once in one's life the principles of metaphysics, since it is these that give us knowledge of God and of our soul, I also believe that it would be very harmful to occupy one's understanding often in meditating on them. For in doing so, it could not attend so well to the functions of the imagination and the senses. The best is to content oneself in retaining in one's memory and in one's belief the conclusions that one has at one time drawn from such meditation, and then to employ the rest of the time one has for study in those thoughts where the understanding acts with imagination or the senses.

The extreme devotion which I have to serve your Highness makes me hope that my frankness will not be disagreeable to her. She would have here received a longer discourse in which I would have tried to clarify all at once the difficulties of the question asked, but for a new annoyance which I have just learned about from Utrecht, that the magistrate summons me in order to verify what I wrote about one of their ministers—no matter that this is a man who has slandered me very indignantly and that what I wrote about him in my just defense was only too well known to the world—and so I am constrained to finish here, in order that I may go find the means to extricate myself as soon as I can from this chicanery.¹³ I am, &c.

13. See the Letter to Voetius, AT 8B.3–194. Parts of this very long letter are translated in CSMK 220–24. This letter, which was published in Latin and simultaneously in Flemish translation in May 1643, was written as a reply to the pointed published attacks on Cartesianism by Voetius. Voetius, as rector of the University of Utrecht, had earlier arranged for the formal condemnation of Cartesian philosophy at the university. For further reading on this dispute, see Verbeek and Marion, *La querelle d'Utrecht*; and Verbeek, *Descartes and the Dutch*. See also Descartes to Father Dinet, esp. AT 7:582ff., CSM 2:393ff., and the postscript of Elisabeth's letter of 22 June 1645 below.

AT 4:1

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES

[The Hague] 1 July 1643

M. Descartes,

I see that you have not received as much inconvenience from my esteem for your instruction and the desire to avail myself of it, as from the ingratitude of those who deprive themselves of it and would like to deprive the human species of it. I would not have sent you new evidence of my ignorance until I knew you were done with those of that mindset, if Sieur Van Bergen¹⁴ had not obliged me to it earlier, through his kindness in agreeing to stay in town, just until I gave him a response to your letter of 28 June. What you write there makes me see clearly the three sorts of notions that we have, their objects, and how we ought to make use of them.

I also find that the senses show me that the soul moves the body, but they teach me nothing (no more than do the understanding and the imagination) of the way in which it does so. For this reason, I think that there are some properties of the soul, which are unknown to us, which could perhaps overturn what your *Metaphysical Meditations* persuaded me of by such good reasoning: the nonextendedness of the soul. This doubt seems to be founded on the rule that you give there, in speaking of the true and the false, that all error comes to us in forming judgments about that which we do not perceive well enough.¹⁵ Though extension is not necessary to thought, neither is it at all repugnant to it, and so it could be suited to some other function of the soul which is no less essential to it. At the very least, it makes one abandon the contradiction of the Scholastics, that it [the soul] is both as a whole in the whole body and as a whole in each of its parts.¹⁶ I do not excuse myself at all for confusing the notion of the soul with that of the body for the same reason as the vulgar, but this doesn't rid me of the first doubt, and I will lose hope of finding certitude in anything in the world if you, who alone have kept me from being a skeptic, do not answer that to which my first reasoning carried me.

14. Antonie Studler Van Surck, sieur de Bergen (1606–66), was Descartes' banker in Holland and sometimes acted as intermediary for Descartes' letters. In particular he often served as intermediary in Descartes' correspondence with Huygens. Elisabeth might well have known him through this connection with Huygens, since she too corresponded with Constantijn Huygens (1596–1687), a noted humanist scholar and father of the mathematician and physicist Christian Huygens (1629–95). In addition, the sieur de Bergen was charged with the distribution of the *Principles* in Holland, while Descartes was in France in 1644.

15. See the rule arrived at and articulated in the Fourth Meditation: "If, however, I simply refrain from making a judgment in cases where I do not perceive the truth with sufficient clarity and distinctness, then it is clear that I am behaving correctly and avoiding error" (AT 7:59, CSM 2:41).

16. See for example, Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, q.76 a.8.

Even though I owe you this confession and thanks, I would think it strongly imprudent if I did not already know your kindness and generosity, equal to the rest of your merits, as much by the experience that I have already had as by reputation. You could not have attested to it in a manner more obliging than by the clarifications and counsel you have imparted to me, which I hold above all as one of the greatest treasures that could be possessed by

Your very affectionate friend at your service,
Elisabeth.

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH

AT 4:37

*Egmond, 17 November 1643*¹⁷

Madame,

Having learned from M. de Pollot that your Highness has taken the trouble to consider the problem of three circles,¹⁸ and that she has found the way to solve it by supposing but one unknown quantity, I thought that my duty obliged me to set out here the reason why I had proposed using several unknown quantities and in what way I solve for them. 38

In considering a problem in geometry, I always make it so that the lines which I use to find the solution to the problem are parallel or intersect at right angles as much as is possible; and I do not consider any other theorems but that the sides of similar triangles have a similar proportion between them, and that in right triangles, the square of the base is equal to the sum of the squares of the sides. I do not fear supposing more unknown quantities to reduce the problem to such terms so that it depends only on these two theorems. On the contrary, I prefer to suppose more of them than fewer. For, by this means, I see more clearly all that I do, and in solving for them I do better at finding the shortest paths and avoid superfluous multiplications. On the other hand, if one draws other lines and makes use of other theorems, even though it could

17. Verbeek et al., *Correspondence*, were able to date this letter more precisely from the covering note to Pollot. They also note that the British Library contains two manuscript copies of this and the subsequent letter in the papers collected by Thomas Birch (Add. 4278 [Birch], fols. 150r–151v and Add. 4278 [Birch], fols. 159r–160v. These contain the papers and correspondence of John Pell, and so indicate that Pell had copies made. In between the two copies is Pell's translation.

18. The problem here is to find the radius of a fourth circle whose circumference touches those of three given ones, or what is usually called Apollonius's problem. Elisabeth seems to have learned her geometry from a textbook (*Algebra ofte Nieuwe Stel-Regel*) written by Johan Stampioen, which Descartes had criticized. See Stephen Gaukroger, *Descartes: An Intellectual Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 334–35, 387. After setting this problem, Descartes was concerned that he had set the bar too high. See his letter to Pollot, 21 October 1643, AT 4:26.

still happen that by chance the path one finds is shorter than mine, all the same, it almost always turns out the other way. One does not see what one
 39 does as well, except if one has the demonstration of the theorem which one is using fully present to the mind. In this case one finds, almost always, that it depends on the consideration of some triangles that are either right triangles or similar to one another and thus one falls back on the path I take.¹⁹

For example, in considering this problem of the three circles, we need only suppose one unknown quantity, with the help of a theorem that shows us how to find the area of a triangle by its three sides. For if A, B, and C are the centers of three given circles, and D is the center of the one we are looking for, the three sides of triangle ABC are given, and the three lines AD, BD, and CD are composed of three radii of the given circles, joined to a radius of the circle we are looking for, so that, supposing x for this radius, we have all the sides of the triangles ABD, ACD, and BCD. [See fig. 1.]²⁰ By consequence we can have their areas which, added together, are equal to the area of the triangle given by ABC. And we can by this equation come to know the radius x , which alone is required for the solution of this question. But this route seems to me to lead to so many superfluous multiplications that I would not want to undertake to solve them in three months. This is why, instead of the two oblique lines, AB and BC, I take the three perpen-
 40 diculars BE, DG, and DF, and setting three unknown quantities, one for DF, one for DG, and the other for the radius of the circle I am looking for, I have all the sides of the three right triangles ADF, BDG, and CDF, which gives me three equations, for in each of these the square of the base is equal to the sum of the squares of the sides. [See figs. 2 and 3.]

After having made as many equations as I supposed unknown quantities, I consider whether, from each equation, I can find one in simple enough terms. If I cannot do so, I try to arrive at one by joining two or more equations by addition or subtraction. Finally, only if this does not suffice, I examine whether it would be any better to change the terms in some way. For, in making this examination skillfully, one easily comes upon the shortest paths and one can try an infinity of things in very little time.

Thus, in this example, I suppose that the three bases of the right triangles are:

$$AD = a + x,$$

$$BD = b + x,$$

$$CD = c + x.$$

19. Descartes is here reiterating the method he elaborates and demonstrates in the *Géométrie*, published as an essay accompanying his *Discourse on the Method*, in 1637.

20. These figures were inserted by Clerselier.

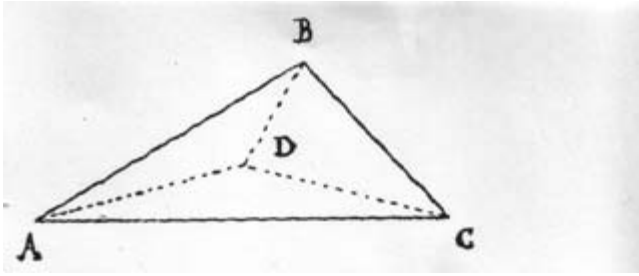


Figure 1

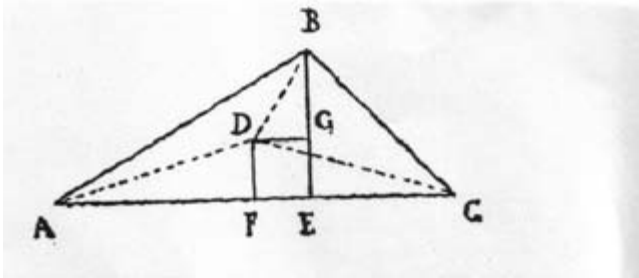


Figure 2

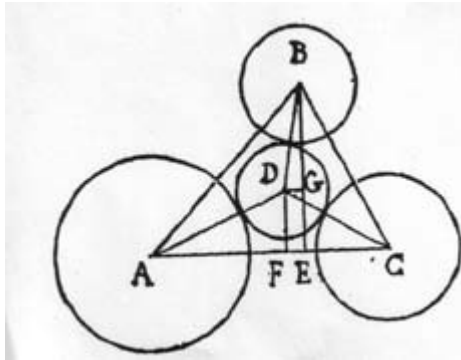


Figure 3

And making $AE = d$, $BE = e$, and $CE = f$,

$$DF \text{ or } GE = y, DG \text{ or } FE = z,$$

I have for the sides of the same triangles:

$$AF = d - z \text{ \& } FD = y,$$

$$BG = e - y \text{ \& } DG = z,$$

$$CF = f + z \text{ \& } FD = y.$$

Then, making the square of each of the bases equal to the sum of the squares of the two sides, I have the three following equations:

$$\begin{aligned}aa + 2ax + xx &= dd - 2dz + zz + yy, \\bb + 2bx + xx &= ee - 2ey + yy + zz, \\cc + 2cx + xx &= ff + 2fz + zz + yy,\end{aligned}$$

and I see that by one of these alone I cannot find any of the unknown quantities, without drawing the square root, which would complicate the question too much. This is why I come to the second way, which is to join two equations together, and I cannot but perceive that the terms xx , yy , and zz being similarly in all three equations, if I take away the one from the other, as I would like, they cancel one another, and so I would have no unknown terms other than x , y , and z on their own. I see also that if I take away the second from the first or from the third, I would have all these three terms, x , y , and z ; but that, if I take away the first from the third, I would have only x and z . Thus, I choose this last path and I find:

$$cc + 2cx - aa - 2ax = ff + 2fz - dd + 2dz$$

or better

$$z = \frac{cc - aa + dd - ff + 2cx - 2ax}{2d + 2f}$$

or better

$$1/2 d - 1/2 f + \frac{cc - aa + 2cx - 2ax}{2d + 2f}$$

- 42 Then, taking the second equation from the first or from the third (since the one reduces to the other) and replacing z with the terms I just found, I have from the first and the second:

$$aa + 2ax - bb - 2bx = dd - 2dz - ee + 2ey$$

or better

$$2ey = ee + aa + 2ax - bb - 2bx - dd + dd - df + \frac{ccd - aad + 2cdx - 2adx}{d + f}$$

or better

$$y = \frac{1}{2}e - \frac{bb}{2e} - \frac{bx}{e} - \frac{df}{2e} + \frac{ccd + aaf + 2cdx + 2afx}{2ed + 2ef}$$

Finally, returning to one of the first three equations, and in place of y or of z putting the quantities that are their equals, and the squares of these quanti-

ties for yy and zz , we find an equation where only x and xx are unknown. In this way, then, the problem is planar or of the second degree, and it is no longer necessary to go on. For the rest does not serve to cultivate or entertain the mind, but only to exercise one's patience for laborious calculations. Even so I fear that I have made myself boring to your Highness, because I stopped to write those things that she no doubt knew better than I and that are easy, but which are nevertheless the keys to my algebra. I ask her quite humbly to believe that it is the devotion with which I honor her which has carried me away, and that I am, Madame,

Your Highness's very humble and very obedient servant,
Descartes.

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES

AT 4:44

[The Hague] 21 November 1643

M. Descartes,

If I were as adept in following your advice as I have desire to be, you would already find the effects of your kindness in the progress I would have made in reasoning and in algebra, whereas at this time I can show you only faults. But I am so accustomed to showing them to you that like old sinners I have lost all shame. For this reason I had planned to send you the solution to the question you had given me, arrived at by the method they had taught me earlier, as much to oblige you to tell me what is missing as because I am not as well versed in your own method.²¹ For I well noticed that there were things missing in my solution, as I did not see it clearly enough to arrive at a theorem. But I would never have found the reason without your last letter, which gives me all the satisfaction that I demanded, and teaches me more than I would have learned in six months with my master. I am very much in your debt for it, and would never have pardoned M. de Palotti²² if he had used your solution in accordance with your order. All the same, he did not want to give it to me, except under the condition that I send you what I have done. Thus do not mind that I give you an unneeded inconvenience, since there are few things that I would not do to obtain the effects of your good will, which is infinitely esteemed by

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Your very affectionate friend at your service,
Elisabeth.

21. See above, note 18.

22. See Descartes to Pollot, November 1643, AT 4:43–44.

At 4:45

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH

*Egmond du Hoef, 29 November 1643*²³

Madame,

46 The solution which it pleased your Highness to do me the honor of sending²⁴ is so just that it is not possible to desire anything more, and not only was I surprised from astonishment at seeing it, but I cannot stop myself from adding that I was also filled with joy, and I was taken with a bit of vanity in seeing that the calculation which your Highness used is entirely similar to that which I proposed in my *Geometry*. Experience has taught me that most minds who have the facility to understand the reasoning of metaphysics are not able to understand that of algebra, and reciprocally that those who easily understand the latter are ordinarily incapable of other sorts of reasoning.²⁵ I see no one but your Highness for whom all things are equally easy. It is true that I have had proof enough of this already, so that I could not have any doubts about it, but I feared only that the patience that is necessary to overcome the difficulties at the beginning of the calculation was lacking in her. For this is a quality extremely rare in excellent minds and in persons of great station.

47 Now that this difficulty has been overcome, she will have much more pleasure in the rest, and in substituting but one letter in place of many, just as she has done here quite often, the calculation will not be tedious to her. One can almost always do this when one only wants to see the nature of a problem, that is, to see if it can be solved with a ruler and compass, or if it is necessary to employ some other curved lines of the first or the second kind, etc., and which is the path for finding the solution. I ordinarily content myself with doing just this with particular problems. For it seems to me

23. Verbeek, et al., *Correspondence*, 60, were able to date this letter more precisely from copies in the British Library.

24. We do not have a record of the letter in which Elisabeth relays her solution.

25. Descartes reiterates this view publicly in the dedicatory letter to his *Principles of Philosophy*: "I have even greater evidence of your powers—and this is special to myself—in the fact that you are the only person I have so far found who has completely understood all my previously published works. Many other people, even those of the utmost acumen and learning, find them very obscure, and it generally happens with almost everyone else that if they are accomplished in Metaphysics they hate Geometry, while if they have mastered Geometry they do not grasp what I have written on First Philosophy. Your intellect is, to my knowledge, unique in finding everything equally clear; and this is why my use of the term 'incomparable' is quite deserved" (AT 8A:4, CSM 1:192).

that what remains—seeking the construction and the demonstration by the propositions of Euclid, and couching the process in algebra—is nothing but an amusement for little geometers, who do not require much intelligence or much knowledge. But when one has some problem which one wants to solve, in order to arrive at a theorem which can serve as a general rule for solving other similar ones, it is necessary to retain all the same letters that one set out at the beginning just up until the end. Or better, if one changes some of them in order to facilitate the calculation, it is necessary to replace them at the end, because, ordinarily, most cancel one another out, which one cannot see when one has changed them.

It is also good to make sure that the quantities one denotes by letters have similar relations to each other, as much as is possible. This renders the theorem more elegant and shorter; for what is evoked by one of these quantities, is evoked in the same manner by the others, and this helps to prevent mistakes in calculations. For those letters signifying quantities that have the same relations, must distribute themselves in the same manner, and when this is missing, one notices one's error.

Thus, in order to find a theorem which shows what is the radius of the circle that touches three given by position, it is not necessary, in this example, to suppose the three letters a, b, c for the lines AD, DC, DB but for the lines AB, AC, and BC, for these last have the same relation to one another that the three AH, BH, and CH do, and the first set of three do not. In following the calculation with these six letters, without changing them or adding any others to them, along the path which your Highness has taken (for it is better for this than that which I had proposed), one should come to quite a regular equation and one which will furnish a short enough theorem. For the three letters a, b, c are there disposed in the same manner, as the three d, e, f . [See fig. 4.]

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Because the calculation of this is tedious, if your Highness has the desire to try it, it will be easier for her to suppose that the three given circles touch one another, and so to employ through the whole calculation only the letters d, e, f, x which, being the radii of the four circles, have a similar relation to one another. In the first place, she will find

$$AK = \frac{dd + df + dx - fx}{d + f}, \text{ \& AD} = \frac{dd + df + de - fe}{d + f}$$

where she can already notice that x is in the line AK as e is in the line AD, since it is found by the triangle AHC, as the other is by the triangle ABC. Then finally, she will have this equation:

49

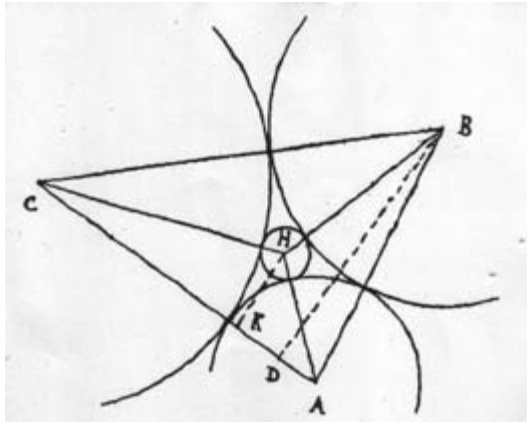


Figure 4

$$ddeeff + ddeexx + ddfxx + eeffxx = 2deffxx + 2deeffx + 2deeffx + 2ddeffx + 2ddefxx + 2ddefx.$$

From this one draws, as a theorem, that the four sums which are produced by multiplying together the squares of three of these radii are equal to double the six sums which are produced by multiplying two of the radii by one another, and by the squares of the two others. All of which suffices to serve as a rule for finding the radius of the largest circle that can be drawn between three given circles that touch one another. For if the radii of these three given circles are, for example, $d/2, e/3, f/4$, I will have 576 for $ddeeff$, $36xx$ for $ddeexx$, and so on for the others. From which I will have

$$x = \frac{-156}{47} + \sqrt{\frac{31104}{2209}}$$

if I am not mistaken in the calculation I just did.

Your Highness can see here two very different procedures for solving one problem, according to the different aims one has. For wanting to know the nature of the problem, and by what device one can solve it, I take as given perpendicular or parallel lines, and suppose more unknown quantities, with the aim of making no superfluous multiplications and seeing more clearly the shortest paths. On the other hand, in wanting to find the solution, I take as given the sides of the triangle and suppose but one unknown letter. But there are a number of problems where the same path leads to the satisfaction of both aims, and I do not doubt that your Highness will soon see just how far the human mind can reach with this science. I would count myself

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happy if I could contribute something to it, since I have a great zeal to be,
Madame,

Your Highness's very humble and very obedient servant,
Descartes.

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH

AT 5:64

Paris, 8 July 1644²⁶

Madame,

My voyage could not be accompanied with any misfortune since I was so happy as to make it with the good wishes of your Highness.²⁷ The very favorable letter, which gives me some indication of being so remembered,²⁸ is the most precious thing I could have received in this country. It would have made me happy if it had not informed me that the malady your Highness had before I left The Hague has left her with still some remains of this indisposition in her stomach. The remedies she has chosen—that is, those of diet and exercise—in my opinion are the best of all, after, however, those of the soul, which has, without a doubt, a great power over the body, as is shown by the great changes that anger, fear, and the other passions excite in it. But it is not by its will directly that the soul conducts the animal spirits to the places where they can be useful or harmful; it is only in willing or thinking of some other thing.²⁹ For the construction of our body is such that certain movements follow in it naturally from certain thoughts, as one sees that a redness of the face follows from shame, tears from compassion, and laughter from joy.³⁰

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26. Originally, Adam and Tannery, following Clerselier, dated this letter July 1647. Upon reflection on the whole body of the Descartes-Elisabeth correspondence, however, they redated it to July 1644. See AT 5:553. I follow AT's redating here, as have both Cottingham and Beysade. The argument is convincing, as the letter does fit with Elisabeth's reply of 1 August 1644. Moreover, Elisabeth was in Holland in 1644, but she was at Crossen in 1647. My one concern here is that Descartes' thinking about the passions in this letter seems quite developed, and he does not seem to start thinking about the passions seriously until their later correspondence in 1645. Still, Descartes does make mention of the expressions of the passions (what he focuses on here) in animals as early as 1637, in the *Discourse*, so the redating is still quite plausible.

27. Descartes was undertaking a trip to France to settle family matters in Brittany and Poitou, including his father's estate, but he also stopped in Paris, where he reinforced his ties to the intellectual community. See Geneviève Rodis-Lewis, *Descartes: His Life and Thought*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 152ff.

28. To my knowledge no copy of this letter is extant.

29. Descartes maintains this position in the *Passions of the Soul*. See a. 41 (AT 9:359–60).

30. Descartes discusses the expressions of the passions extensively in the *Passions*. See aa. 112–35 (AT 11:411–28).

I know of no other thought more proper to the conservation of health than a strong conviction and firm belief that the architecture of our body is so good that, once one is healthy, one cannot easily fall ill, unless one does something remarkably excessive, or else the air or other external causes harm us. When one has an illness, one can restore one's health solely by the power of nature, especially when one is still young. This conviction is without doubt much more true and more reasonable than that of certain men, who, under the influence of an astrologer or a doctor, make themselves believe that they must die in a certain amount of time, and by this alone become sick and even die often enough, as I have seen happen to different people.³¹ But I would not fail to be extremely sad if I thought that your Highness still suffered this indisposition. I prefer to hope that she is all through it, and at the same time a desire to be certain this is so makes me feel extremely eager to return to Holland.

I propose to leave here in four or five days in order to pass through Poitou and Brittany, where the business that brought me here is. But as soon as I can put those matters in a little bit of order, I wish nothing so much as to return to the place where I was fortunate to have the honor of speaking with your Highness sometimes. For, even though there are many people here whom I honor and esteem, I have all the same not yet seen any who can make me stay. I am more than any thing I can say, &c.

AT 4:131

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES

[*The Hague*] 1 August 1644

Mr. Descartes,

I am obliged to thank you for the present M. Van Bergen gave me on your behalf, though my conscience tells me that I will not be able to do so adequately.³² If I had received from it only the benefit brought to our century³³—this one here owing you all that the preceding ones have paid to innovators in the sciences, since you alone have demonstrated that there is such innovation—to what degree will my debt to you amount, I, whom you

31. See AT 3:15. There, in a letter to Mersenne of 29 January 1640, Descartes details the deadly effect on Hortensius of having his horoscope done.

32. Van Surck, sieur de Bergen, presented Elisabeth with a copy of Descartes' *Principles of Philosophy*, which Descartes had dedicated to Elisabeth, with effusive praise of her intellectual acumen. See AT 8A:1–4, CSM 1:190–92.

33. Adam and Tannery insert *siècle* into the gap in the MS. This suggestion does seem to fit with Elisabeth's sense here.

have given, with instruction, a part of your glory in the public testimony which you give me of your friendship and your approval? The pedants will say that you are forced to build a new morality in order to render me worthy of it.³⁴ But I take this morality as a rule of my life, feeling myself to be only at the first stage which you approve there, the will to inform my understanding and to follow the good it knows. It is to this will that I owe an understanding of your works, which are obscure only to those who examine them by the principles of Aristotle, or with very little care. Indeed, the most reasonable of our doctors in this country have confessed to me that they have not studied them at all, because they are too old to start a new method, having exhausted the power of the body and of the mind in the old method.

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But I fear that you will, with justice, retract your assessment of my ability to grasp things, when you find out that I do not understand how quicksilver is constituted, such that it is both as agitated as it is and as heavy at the same time, for that is contrary to the definition you have given of heaviness,³⁵ and even though the body E, in the figure on page 225,³⁶ presses upon it when it is underneath, why should it still feel this constraint when it is above, any more than air feels constrained in leaving a vessel in which it has been contained?

The second difficulty I found is that of getting those particles that are twisted into the shape of shells³⁷ to pass through the center of the earth without being bent or disfigured by the fire found there, as they were in the beginning in forming the body M. Only their speed can save them from it, and you say on pages 133 and 134³⁸ that, since speed is not at all necessary in order for them to travel in a straight line, these are the least agitated parts of the first element which flow in this way through the globules of the

34. Elisabeth is here referring to the distinction between apparent and true virtues that Descartes makes in his dedication of the *Principles*.

35. Descartes' account of heaviness appears in *Principles* 4.20–27. In article 22, he claims that lightness results from an excess of agitation of the particles of heavenly matter. Descartes discusses the nature of quicksilver in 4.58. It poses a problem for him because it is a heavy, non-transparent liquid, and he tries to explain these properties by claiming that quicksilver is both heavy and easily agitated. Elisabeth here is suggesting that his account of heaviness does not afford him this explanation, since, insofar as it is agitated it should be light rather than heavy.

36. See fig. 18 at AT 8:240.

37. Elisabeth is here discussing Descartes' account of a magnet in *Principles* 4.133ff. She here appeals to particles "twisted like the shell of snail," as Descartes describes them in *Principles* 3.90. Descartes also refers to them as "grooved particles," and it is this locution he employs in his discussion of the magnet.

38. *Principles* 3.88–90.

second. I am equally surprised that they take such a long route in leaving the poles of body M and pass along the surface of the earth in order to return to the other pole, because they could have found a shorter route through body C.³⁹

I represent to you here only the reasons for my doubts about matters in your book; the reasons for my wonder are innumerable, as are also those for my obligation, among which I count again the kindness you demonstrated in telling me of your news and in giving me the precepts for the conservation of my health. The former have brought me much joy, through the great success of your voyage and the continuation of the plan you have to return, and the latter much profit, since I have already felt the benefit of them. You have not displayed to M. Voetius⁴⁰ the danger he has in being your enemy, as you have to me the advantage of your goodwill; otherwise, he would as much shun the title, as I seek to deserve that of

Your very affectionate friend at your service,
Elisabeth.

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH

Le Crevis, August 1644

136 Madame,

The honor that your Highness does me in not being displeased that I dared to express in public how much I esteem and honor her is greater, and obliges me more, than any other honor I could receive from elsewhere. I do not fear being accused of having changed anything in moral philosophy in order to make my feelings on this subject understood. For what I have written on it is so true and so clear that I am sure that there is no reasonable man who does not subscribe to it. But I do fear that what I have put in the rest of the book is more dubious and more obscure since your Highness finds difficulties there.

That regarding the heaviness of quicksilver is very considerable, and I would have tried to clarify it if I did not fear saying something contrary to what I might be able to learn later, not having examined the nature of this metal enough. All I can say about it now is that I am convinced that the little particles of air, of water, and of all the other terrestrial bodies have several pores through which the very subtle matter can pass, and this follows well

39. Elisabeth here seems to be referring to Descartes' discussion in *Principles* 4.146–51.

40. Elisabeth adverts here to the controversy at the University of Utrecht. See above, note 13.

enough from the way in which I have said these particles are formed. Thus, it suffices to say that the particles of quicksilver and of other metals have fewer such pores in order to understand how these metals are heavy. For, for example, even if we were to admit that particles of water and those of quicksilver were of the same size and shape and that their movements were similar, to explain how quicksilver ought to be much heavier than water, it suffices to suppose only that each particle of water is like a little cord which is very soft and very loose and that those of quicksilver, having fewer pores, are like other little cords which are much harder and tighter. 137

As for the little particles turned into the shape of shells, it is not a marvel that they are not destroyed by the fire at the center of the earth. For this fire, being composed only of very subtle matter, can very well carry them very fast but cannot make them crash up against other hard bodies, which would be required to break or to divide them.

As for the rest, these shell-like particles do not take too long a route at all to return from one pole to the other. For I suppose that most of them pass through the center of the earth. In this way, only those that do not find any passage lower down return through our air. This is the reason that I give for why the magnetic strength of the entire mass of the earth does not appear to us to be as strong as that of little magnetic stones.

But I ask your Highness very humbly to pardon me if I have written nothing here but what is very confusing. I do not yet have the book in which she has deigned to mark the pages and I continue to be in the midst of traveling, but I hope to have the honor of making my bows to her in The Hague in two or three months. 138

I am, &c.

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH

AT 4:200

Egmond, 18 May 1645

Madame,

I was extremely surprised to learn from the letters of M. de Pollot⁴¹ that your Highness has been ill for a long time, and I rue my solitude, for it is the reason I did not know anything of this sooner. It is true that I am so removed from the world that I do not learn anything at all about what happens. But all the same the zeal I have for serving your Highness would not have let me

41. Pollot's letters to Descartes are not available. Descartes' reply indicates they were dated on or about 1 May 1645. For Descartes' reply see AT 4:204ff.

go so long without knowing the state of her health, even if I had to go to The Hague expressly to inquire about it, had not M. de Pollot, who wrote me very hastily about two months ago, promised to write me again by the next regular mail. Because he never neglects to send me news of how your Highness is doing, when I did not receive any letters from him, I supposed
 201 that you were still in the same state. But I learned from his last letters that your Highness has had a low-grade fever, accompanied by a dry cough, which lasted three or four weeks, and that after you had recovered from this for five or six days, the illness returned. However, at the time that he sent me his letter (which was almost fifteen days en route), your Highness was beginning to get better once again. In regard to all this, I note the signs of a quite considerable illness, but nevertheless one from which it seems that your Highness can so certainly recover that I cannot abstain from writing her my feelings on the matter. Thus, even though I am not a doctor, the honor that your Highness gave me last summer of wanting to know my opinion regarding another indisposition that she then had, makes me hope that the liberty I take will not be disagreeable to her.⁴²

The most common cause of a low-grade fever is sadness, and the stubbornness of fortune in persecuting your house continually gives you matters for annoyance which are so public and so terrible that it is necessary neither to conjecture very much nor to be particularly experienced in social matters to judge that the principal cause of your indisposition consists in these.⁴³

42. See Descartes to Elisabeth, 8 July 1644. Though Descartes claims he is not a doctor, there is a bit of dissimulation here. He is deeply interested in medical matters. Throughout his works he insists that he is concerned with the conduct of life, and in part 6 of the *Discourse*, he makes it clear that "the maintenance of health, which is undoubtedly the chief good and the foundation of all the other goods in this life," is a large part of this concern (AT 6:62, CSM 1:143).

Descartes was, however, committed to a mechanist account of the workings of the human body, still being worked out in the mid-seventeenth century, not only by Descartes himself, in his posthumously published *Treatise of Man*, but also by the likes of William Harvey in *De Motu Cordis*. As becomes clear in what follows, the competing medical theories were derived from Galenic medicine and sought to cure disease by rebalancing the humors. For discussion of Descartes' medical writings see G. A. Lindeboom, *Descartes and Medicine* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1979); and a recent annotated edition of Descartes' medical writings: *Ecrits physiologiques et médicaux*, ed. Vincent Aucante (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2000). For an interesting comparison with Descartes' prescription below, see the cures for melancholy in the Second Parturition of Robert Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. J. B. Bamborough and Martin Dodsworth. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). Burton's work was originally published in 1621 and revised through 1651.

43. Descartes is here referring to a cluster of events. Elisabeth's uncle, Charles I of England, was facing the English Civil War. The English and Dutch governments had helped to support Elisabeth's family since the death of her father in 1632. The Civil War thus exacerbated an already precarious financial situation as well as caused personal pain.

One would fear that you would not be able to recover from it at all, if it were not that by the force of your virtue you were making your soul content, despite the disfavor of fortune. I know well that it would be imprudent to want to cheer up a person to whom fortune sends new occasions for displeasure each day, and I am not one of those cruel philosophers who want their sage to be insensible.⁴⁴ I know also that your Highness is nowhere near as affected by that which regards her personally as by that which regards the interest of her house and the persons whom she cares about. I take this as the most lovable virtue of all. But it seems to me that the difference between the greatest souls and the base and vulgar souls consists principally in that the vulgar souls give themselves over to their passions and are happy or sad only according to whether those things that happen to them are agreeable or unpleasant; whereas the others [i.e., the great souls] have reasoning so strong and so powerful that, even though they too have passions, and often even more violent ones than most do, their reason nevertheless remains mistress and makes it such that even afflictions serve them and contribute to the perfect felicity which they can enjoy already in this life. Thus, on the one hand, considering themselves to be immortal and capable of receiving very great contentment, and, on the other hand, considering that they are joined to mortal and fragile bodies which are subject to many infirmities and which cannot fail to perish in a few years, they do nearly everything that is in their power to render fortune favorable in this life, but nevertheless they esteem this life so little with respect to eternity that they give events no more consideration than we do events in comedies. Just as those sad and lamentable stories which we see represented on a stage often entertain us as much as the happy ones, even though they bring tears to our eyes, in this way the greatest souls of which I speak draw a satisfaction in themselves from all the things that happen to them, even the most annoying and insupportable.⁴⁵ In this way, when they feel pain in their bodies they make an effort to support it patiently, and this show of their strength is agreeable to them; in this way, seeing their friends under some great affliction, they feel compassion at the friend's ill fortune and do everything possible to deliver the friend from it, and they do not fear even exposing themselves to death to this end if it is necessary. But, in the meantime, their conscience tells them

44. Descartes seems here to be trying to distance himself from neo-Stoic moralists such as Guillaume Du Vair. See Du Vair's *De la sainte philosophie* and *La philosophie morale des Stoïques* (1641), in *Oeuvres*.

45. Descartes continues to draw on this example, and even on this analogy with the theater. See also his letters to Elisabeth of May or June 1645 and 6 October 1646 below, as well as *Passions of the Soul* aa. 94, 147, 187.

that they fulfill their duty and that this is what makes an action praiseworthy and virtuous. This testimony makes them more happy, so that all the sadness their compassion affords them does not afflict them. Finally, just as the greatest prosperity of fortune never intoxicates them or makes them insolent, so too the greatest adversities are unable to defeat them or render them so sad that the body, to which they are joined, becomes sick.

I would fear that this style would be ridiculous if I were using it in writing someone else; but as I consider your Highness to be the most noble and the most upstanding soul I know, I believe that she should also be the most happy and that she will be so truly, if only it would please her to cast her eyes on that which is right under her and to compare the value of those goods she possesses, and which can never be taken away from her, with that of those goods which fortune has plucked from her and the losses with which fortune persecutes her in the person of those near to her. Then she will see all the many reasons she has to be content with her own goods. The extreme zeal that I have for her is the cause of my having let myself go on in this discourse, and I beg her very humbly to excuse it, as it comes from a person who is, &c.

AT 4:207

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES

[*The Hague*] 24 May [1645]

M. Descartes,

I see that the charms of solitary life have not destroyed in you in the least the virtues requisite for society. Such generous kindness as you have for your friends, and as you express to me with the concern you have for my health. But I would be annoyed if it had made you undertake a voyage here, since M. de Palotti has told me that you judge rest necessary to your good health. I assure you that the doctors, who saw me every day and examined all the symptoms of my illness, did not in so doing find its cause, or order such helpful remedies, as you have done from afar. Even if they had been smart enough to suspect the part that my mind plays in the disorder of the body, I would not have had the frankness to admit it to them at all. But to you, Monsieur, I do it without scruple, assuring myself that such a naive recounting of my faults would not in the least destroy the place I have in your friendship, but would confirm it all the more, because you will see from it that the friendship is necessary to me.

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

strongly to this. In people who cannot exercise much, it does not take a long oppression of the heart by sadness to obstruct the spleen and infect the rest of the body by its vapors. I myself imagine that the low fever and dry throat—which have not yet left me, even with the warmth of the season, and though the walks I take bring back my strength a little—come from this. This is what made me consent to follow the doctors' advice to drink the waters of Spa here for a month,⁴⁶ as I have found by experience that they get rid of obstructions (the waters are brought all the way here without going bad). But I will not take them at all before I know your view, since you have the kindness to want to cure my body with my soul.

I will continue by confessing to you also that, although I do not rest my felicity on things which depend on fortune or on the will of men at all, and although I do not judge myself to be absolutely wretched knowing I will never see my house in order or those near to me away from misery, I still do not know how to consider the injurious accidents that befall them under any other notion than that of evil, nor how to consider the useless efforts I make in their service without some sort of anxiety. This anxiety is no sooner calmed by reasoning than a new disaster produces another anxiety.⁴⁷ If my life were entirely known to you, I think the fact that a sensitive mind, such as my own, has conserved itself for so long amidst so many difficulties, in a body so weak, with no counsel but that of her own reason and with no consolation but that of her own conscience, would seem more strange to you than the causes of this present malady.

I spent all of last winter performing the most annoying tasks, which prevented me from taking advantage of the opportunity you gave me of presenting you with the difficulties I find in my studies. These tasks in turn give me other difficulties that I would need to be even more stupid than I am to rid myself of. I only found time just before my indisposition to read the philosophy of the chevalier Digby,⁴⁸ which he has written in English, from which

46. Spa is a town in Belgium, famed for the healing powers of its mineral hot springs. From as early as the sixteenth century its waters were being exported. Currently, they are commercially available under the "Spa" label.

47. With this remark Elisabeth begins her critique of Descartes' Stoic-informed ethics. She develops this critique, just as Descartes develops his ethics, in the letters which follow.

48. Sir Kenelm Digby (1603–65) published his *Two Treatises, in the one of which the Nature of Bodies, in the other the Nature of Man's soul is looked into, in way of discovery of the immortality of reasonable souls* in English in 1644 with Gilles Blaizot while in exile in Paris. It was published in London in 1645 and has been reprinted (New York: Garland, 1978). Elisabeth is referring to the first *Treatise*, on the nature of bodies, here. Descartes and Digby seem to have met in person, when Digby took a trip to Holland in 1641 especially to meet Descartes. In fall of 1642 Digby was arrested, and Descartes was apprised of this, as well as of his release, by Mersenne (see Descartes to Mersenne, 12 October 1642, AT 3:582, and 20 October 1642, AT 3:590).

I was hoping to draw arguments with which to refute your own, since the chapter summaries showed me two places where he claimed to do so. But when I got there, I was completely surprised to see that he had understood nothing as little as what he approves in your account of reflection. With respect to that which he denies in your account of refraction, he draws no distinction between the movement of a ball and its determination, and does not consider why a soft body that gives way slows down the former, and that a hard body can only resist the latter.⁴⁹ He is more excusable for part of what he says about the movement of the heart, as he has not read what you have written about it to the doctor from Louvain.⁵⁰ Doctor Jonson⁵¹ told me that he will translate these two chapters for you, and I think that you will not be curious about the rest of the book, because it is of the caliber and follows the method of that English priest who goes by the name Albanus⁵² (although the book does have in it some very nice meditations), and because one can hardly expect more from a man who has passed most of the time of his life following designs of love or ambition. I will never have stronger or more constant designs than that of being all my life, Your very affectionate friend, at your service,

Elisabeth.

49. Elisabeth is no doubt referring to chapter 13, *Of three sorts of Violent Motion: Reflexion, Undulation and Refraction*, of Digby's *Treatise on the Nature of Bodies*. The table of contents refers directly to Descartes' account and Digby's effort to refute it. Digby's attack is on Descartes' *Dioptrics*.

50. Digby discusses the movement of the heart in chapter 26 of the first *Treatise*. Adam and Tannery claim that the "doctor from Louvain" is Johan Beverwyck. For Descartes' exchange with Beverwyck, which he apparently shared with Elisabeth, see Beverwyck to Descartes, 10 June 1643, AT 3:682, and Descartes to Beverwyck, 5 July 1643, AT 4:3–6. Johan Beverwyck (1594–1647) was a Dutch physician who published a number of medical works in Dutch. Interestingly, he also wrote a catalogue of learned women, *Van de Uitnemenbeyt des vrouwelicken Geslachts* (Dordrecht, 1639), which included Anna Maria van Schurman, author of *On Whether a Christian Woman Should Be Educated*, of whom he was a great admirer.

51. Samson Jonsson (1603–61) was the chaplain to the court of Queen Elisabeth of Bohemia, Elisabeth's mother. He seems to have had some interest in physics and metaphysics as well, as Elisabeth, in her letter of 11 April 1647, suggests that Regius has availed himself of Jonsson's assistance in his *Fundamenta Physica*.

52. Thomas White, author of *Institutionum Peripateticarum ad mentem summi viri, clarissimique Philosophi Kenelmi Euitis Digboeii* (the second corrected edition was published in London in 1647, though Elisabeth must here be referring to the first edition). An earlier work of his, *De mundo dialogi tres, quibus materia, forma, causae* (Paris: Dionysium Moreaum, 1642), was sent to Descartes through Constantijn Huygens in late 1642. See AT 3:485 and a letter from Descartes to Huygens of 13 October 1642 (AT 3:578). Constantijn Huygens served as a tutor to Elisabeth and her siblings as well as consultant to the queen of Bohemia, Elisabeth's mother. Correspondence between Huygens and Elisabeth and members of her family can be found in *De Briefwisseling van Constantijn Huygens*, ed. J. A. Worp, 6 vols. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1911–17), vols. 3–6.

24 May
M. Descartes,

I realize now that in what I send you, I am forgetting one of your maxims, which is never to put anything in writing which can be interpreted badly by less charitable readers. But I have enough faith in the care of M. de Palotti that I know that my letter will truly be delivered to you, and in your discretion that you will destroy it by fire, because of the danger that it will fall into evil hands. 211

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH

AT 4:218

Egmond, May or June 1645

Madame,

I could not read the letter your Highness did me the honor of writing without being extremely affected at seeing that a virtue so rare and so accomplished was not accompanied by good health or the prosperity she merits. I easily conceive the many unpleasant things which are continually presented to her, and are all the more difficult to overcome, in that often they are of such a nature that true reason does not demand that one oppose them directly or that one try to chase them away. These are domestic enemies with which we are constrained to interact, and so we are obliged to stand on guard incessantly in order to prevent them from doing harm. I find for this but one remedy, which is to divert one's imagination and one's senses as much as possible and to employ only the understanding alone to consider them when one is obliged to by prudence.

One can, it seems to me, here easily notice the difference between understanding, on the one hand, and imagination or sensation on the other. Consider for instance a person who otherwise has all sorts of reasons to be content, but who sees continually represented before her tragedies full of dreadful events, and who occupies herself only in considering these objects of sadness and pity. Even though these events are feigned and fabulous, so that they only draw tears from her eyes and move her imagination without touching her understanding, I believe, I say, that this alone would suffice to accustom her heart to close itself up and to emit sighs. Following this, the circulation of the blood would be blocked and slowed, and the largest particles of the blood, attaching one to the other, could easily grind up the spleen by getting caught and stopping in its pores, and the more subtle particles, retaining their agitation, could alter her lungs and cause a cough, which in the long term would give good cause for fear. Now, on the contrary, consider a person 219

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who has an infinite number of true sources of displeasure, but takes great care to turn her imagination from them so that she thinks of them only when practical matters oblige her to, and so that she considers only those objects which are capable of bringing her contentment and joy. Not only would this be of great use to her in enabling her to judge more soundly those things which matter to her, since she would regard them without passion, but also I do not doubt that this alone would be capable of bringing her back to health, even
 220 though her spleen and lungs were already ill disposed by the bad temperament of the blood caused by her sadness. This would be especially the case if she also uses the medical remedies of the doctors to cure the part of the blood which causes the obstructions. In this regard, I judge the waters of Spa very appropriate, especially if your Highness in taking them observes what the doctors usually recommend, and clears her mind entirely of all sorts of unhappy thoughts, and even also of all sorts of serious meditations concerning the sciences. She should occupy herself by imitating those who convince themselves they think of nothing in looking at the greenery of a wood, the colors of a flower, the flight of a bird, and such things that require no attention. This is not to waste time but to employ it well. For one can, in doing this, satisfy oneself by the hope that by this means one will recover perfect health, which is the foundation of all the other goods that one can have in this life.

I know well that I write nothing here that your Highness does not know better than I, and that it is not so much the theory but the practice which is difficult in this matter. But the extreme honor that she does me in expressing that she is not averse to hearing my opinions leads me to take the liberty of writing them as they are. And I do so again here in adding that I have experienced in myself an illness nearly similar and even more dangerous,
 221 who died just a few days after my birth⁵³ of a disease of the lungs caused by some unhappiness, I inherited from her a dry cough and a pale color which stayed with me until I was more than twenty years old and which led all the doctors who saw me up to that point to condemn me to an early death. But I believe I have always had the inclination to regard things which present themselves to me from the most favorable perspective and to make my principal contentment depend on myself alone, and I believe that this inclination caused this indisposition, which was almost natural to me, to pass away little by little.

I have a great obligation to your Highness for giving me her opinion of the book of Chevalier D'Igby,⁵⁴ which I will not be able to read until

53. Descartes' mother actually died on 13 May 1597, fourteen months after his birth.

54. That is, Kenelm Digby, mentioned in Elisabeth's previous letter.

it is translated into Latin, which M. Jonson, who was here yesterday, said some people want to do. He also said that I could send my letters for your Highness through ordinary messengers, which I would not have dared to do without his having said so, and I have put off writing this one, as I was waiting for one of my friends to go to The Hague so that I might give it to him. I regret infinitely the absence of M. de Pollot, since I could have learned from him the state of your health, but the letters which are sent to me through the Alkmaar postman never fail to reach me. As there is no one in the world whom I desire to be able to serve with as much passion as your Highness, there is also nothing which could make me more happy than to have the honor of receiving her orders. I am, &c.

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ELISABETH TO DESCARTES

AT 4:233

[The Hague] 22 June 1645

M. Descartes,

Your letters, when they do not teach me, always serve me as the antidote to melancholy, turning my mind from the disagreeable objects that come to it every day to the happiness that I possess in the friendship of a person of your merit, to whose counsel I can commit the conduct of my life. If I could yet make my mind conform to your last precepts, there is no doubt that I would cure myself promptly of maladies of the body and weaknesses of the mind. But I confess that I find it difficult to separate from the senses and the imagination those things that are continuously represented to them in conversation and in letters, so that I do not know how to avoid them without sinning against my duty. I know well that in removing everything upsetting to me (which I believe to be represented only by imagination) from the idea of an affair, I would judge it healthily and would find in it the remedies as well as the affection which I bring to it. But I have never known how to put this into practice until the passion has already played its role. There is something surprising in misfortunes, even those that have been foreseen, of which I am mistress only after a certain time; my body becomes so strongly disordered that several months are necessary for me to restore it, and those months hardly pass without some new subject of trouble. Besides this, I must govern my mind with care, giving it agreeable objects, for the least laziness makes it fall back onto those subjects, all too readily available, which afflict it. I fear that if I do not use my mind at all while I am taking waters of Spa, it will only become more melancholy. If I were able to profit, as you do, from everything that presents itself to my senses, I would divert myself without difficulty. It is at this moment that I feel the inconvenience of being but a

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little rational. For if I were not so at all, I would find pleasures in common with those among whom I must live and so be able to take this medicine and have it do something. And if I were as rational as you, I would cure myself as you have done. In addition, the curse of my sex keeps me from the contentment a voyage to Egmond, where I might learn of the truths you draw from your garden, would have brought me. All the same I console myself with the liberty you give me to ask from time to time for news of it as

Your very affectionate friend at your service,
Elisabeth.

- 235 M. Descartes, I learned with great joy that the Academy of Groningen did you justice.⁵⁵

AT 4:236

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH

Egmond, June 1645

Madame,

I ask your Highness very humbly to pardon me, for I cannot feel sorry for her indisposition when I have the honor of receiving her letters. I always note in them thoughts so distinct and reasoning so firm that it is not possible for me to convince myself that a mind capable of conceiving them is lodged in a weak and sickly body. Whatever the case might be, the knowledge that your Highness demonstrates of the illness and of the remedies that can overcome it assures me that she will not fail to have the skill required to employ them.

- 237 I know well that it is nearly impossible to resist the first troubles that new misfortunes excite in us, and even that it is ordinarily the best minds in whom the passions are the most violent and act more strongly on their bodies. But it seems to me that the following day, when sleep has calmed emotions in the blood that occur in such circumstances, one can begin to get one's mind in order and make it tranquil. This is done by making an effort to consider all the benefits one can take from that thing which one had taken the preceding day for a great mishap, and by turning one's attention away from the evils one had imagined there. For there are no events so disastrous, or so absolutely

55. Elisabeth is here referring to the decision in favor of Descartes and against Martin Schoock in the matter concerning Voetius at Utrecht. Most at issue was a question of whether Descartes had ever been suspected of atheism. Descartes was most concerned to vindicate himself of this charge. For further details see AT 4:196ff.; Verbeek, *Descartes and the Dutch*, Gaukroger, *Descartes*, 360–61; and Rodis-Lewis, *Descartes*, 163–72.

bad in the judgment of people, that a reasonable person could not look at them from an angle which will make them appear favorable. Your Highness can draw this general consolation from the ill favors of fortune: that they have perhaps contributed a lot toward enabling her to cultivate her mind to the point that she has. This is a good that she should value more than an empire. Great prosperity often dazzles and intoxicates in such a way that it sooner possesses those that have it than is possessed by them. Even though this does not happen to those with minds of a temperament like your own, it would all the same furnish her with fewer occasions to exercise her mind than does adversity. I believe that as there is no good in the world except good sense which we can call absolutely good, there is also no evil from which we cannot draw some benefit, having good sense.

I have tried before to recommend carefreeness to your Highness, thinking that too serious occupations would weaken the body in tiring the mind, but I would not want this to dissuade her from those measures necessary for turning her thought from objects which can sadden her. And I do not doubt that the diversions of study, which would be very difficult for others, could serve her as a release. I would count myself happy if I could contribute to making these diversions easier for her. And I have even more desire to go to The Hague to learn about the virtues of the Spa waters, than to know here those of the plants of my garden, and much more than I care what is happening at Groningen or at Utrecht,⁵⁶ whether to my benefit or harm. This will oblige me in four or five days to follow this letter, and I will be all the days of my life, &c.

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DESCARTES TO ELISABETH

AT 4:251

Egmond, 21 July 1645

Madame,

Since I had the honor of seeing your Highness, the air has been so inconstant, and some days have been so unseasonably cold that I have often been worried and afraid that the waters of Spa would not be as healthy or useful as they would have been in more serene weather. Since you have done me the honor of telling me that my letters could serve as a kind of diversion for you, though the doctors recommend that you not occupy your mind with anything that might tax it, I would be a bad caretaker of the favor it has

56. See above, note 13. Descartes appealed the decision at Utrecht to the State of Groningen, which referred the matter to the University of Groningen.

pleased you to do me in permitting me to write you if I were remiss in taking the first occasion to do so.

I imagine that most of the letters you receive from others give you some distress and that before you even read them you dread finding in them some news that will upset you, since bad fortune has long accustomed you to receiving such bad news. Whereas for my letters, you can at least be assured that, even if they give you no cause for joy, they will also give you no reason for sadness. You can open them at any time without fearing that they will interfere with the digestion of the waters you take. As I learn nothing of what is going on in the rest of the world in this desert, and have no thoughts more frequently than those which, representing to me the virtues of your Highness, make me wish to see her as happy and as content as she deserves to be, the only subject I have with which to engage you is how philosophy teaches us to acquire this sovereign felicity which vulgar minds vainly expect from fortune, but which we can obtain only from ourselves.

One of the ways that seems most useful to me to acquire this felicity is to examine what the ancients wrote about it and to try to go beyond what they said by adding something to their precepts. For in this way one can make these precepts perfectly one's own and dispose oneself to put them into practice. So, in order to supplement the defect in my mind, which on its own can produce nothing I deem worthwhile for your Highness to read, and so that my letters are not entirely empty and useless, I propose to fill them henceforth with considerations which I will draw from the reading of a particular book, namely, Seneca's *De vita beata*,⁵⁷ unless you would rather choose another, or unless this plan is disagreeable to you. But if you approve of it (as I hope you will), and especially if it pleases you to share with me your remarks about the same book, then, besides the fact that they will serve to instruct me, they will give me occasion to make my own thoughts more exact. And I will develop my thoughts with more care the more I judge that this exchange is agreeable to you. For there is nothing in the world that I desire with more zeal than to demonstrate, in everything which is in my power, that I am, Madame,

Your Highness's very humble and very obedient servant,
Descartes.

57. Lucius Annaeus Seneca (5–65 CE) was a Roman philosopher with strong Stoic leanings, though he was also influenced by Epicurean doctrine. He also served as the tutor to Nero. When he came under suspicion of trying to overthrow Nero, he was sentenced to death by a method of his own choosing. He chose to open his veins.

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH

AT 4:263

Egmond, 4 August 1645

Madame,

When I chose Seneca's *De vita beata* as the book to propose to your Highness as an agreeable topic of discussion, I did so only on the basis of the reputation of the author and the dignity of the subject matter, without thinking of the manner in which he treats it. Having since considered this manner, I do not find it sufficiently exact to merit following it through. But in order that your Highness can judge of it more easily, I will here try to explain in what way it seems to me that this subject ought to have been treated by a philosopher like him who, not having been enlightened by faith, had only natural reason as a guide.

He says very well at the beginning that *Vivere omnes beate volunt, sed ad pervidendum quid sit quod beatam vitam efficiat, caligant*.⁵⁸ But it is necessary to know what *vivere beate*⁵⁹ means; I would say in French, to live happily [*vivre heurement*], if there wasn't a difference between good fortune [*l'heur*] and true happiness [*beatitudo*].⁶⁰ This good fortune depends only on those things that are external to us, so those to whom some good comes without their having done anything to try to attain it are deemed more fortunate [*plus heureux*] than sages. On the other hand, true happiness consists, it seems to me, in a perfect contentment of the mind and an internal satisfaction that those who are the most favored by fortune ordinarily do not have and that the sages acquire without fortune's favor. Thus, to live *beate*, to live happily, is nothing but to have a mind that is perfectly content and satisfied.

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Considering, after this, what *quod beatam vitam efficiat* means, that is to say, what those things are which can give us this sovereign contentment, I note that they are of two sorts: those which depend on us, such as virtue and wisdom, and those which do not depend on us at all, such as honors, riches, and health. For it is certain that a wellborn man who is never ill, who lacks noth-

58. "All men want to live happily, but as to seeing clearly what brings about a happy life, they are in a fog." This sentence is the first of Seneca's dialogue.

59. Since Descartes is here attempting to interpret the Latin, I shall leave *beate* untranslated.

60. *L'heur* here adverts to good fortune, and so *heureux* is best rendered in this letter as "fortunate" in keeping with this. *La béatitude* is the sovereign felicity Descartes adverts to in his previous letter, or "sovereign contentment" below. I translate it here as "true happiness." In keeping with this I will translate its adverbial form *en béatitude* as "happily." In later letters, however, Descartes uses *heureux* to mean "happy" in concert with achieving the sovereign good. Other uses of the term are ambiguous, and many certainly include both being happy and fortunate.

ing, and who with all this is as wise and virtuous as another who is poor, unhealthy, and deformed can enjoy a greater contentment than the latter can. All the same, as a small vessel can be just as full as a larger one even though it contains less fluid, so too, taking the contentment of each for the fullness and fulfillment of desires regulated according to reason, I do not doubt that
 265 those poorer and more disfavored by fortune or nature can be fully content and satisfied just as well as others, even though they do not enjoy as many goods.⁶¹ It is only this sort of contentment that is here in question. For since the other sort is not at all in our power, seeking it would be superfluous.

So it seems to me that each person can make himself content by himself and without waiting on something from elsewhere just so long as he observes three things, which are related to the three rules of conduct that I set out in the *Discourse on the Method*.⁶²

The first is that he always try to make use of his mind as well as he can, in order to know what must be done, or not done, in all the events of life.

The second is that he have a firm and constant resolution to execute all that reason advises him to do, without having the passions or appetites turn him away from it. It is the firmness of this resolution that I believe ought to be taken to be virtue, even though I know of no one who has ever explained it in this way. Instead it has been divided into many types, to which diverse names have been given in accordance with the diverse objects to which it extends.

The third is that, while he so conducts himself as much as he can in accordance with reason, he keep in mind that all the goods he does not possess are, each and every one of them, entirely outside of his power. By
 266 this means, he will accustom himself not to desire them at all. For there is nothing but desire and regret or repentance that can prevent us from being content. But if we always do all that our reason tells us, we will never have any grounds to repent, even though events afterward make us see that we were mistaken. For our being mistaken is not our fault at all. What makes it the case that, for example, we do not desire to have more arms, or better, to have more tongues than we have, but that we do desire to be in better health or to have more riches, is only that we imagine that these latter things can be acquired by our conduct, or even that they are due to our nature, and that the same is not true of the others. We can strip ourselves of this opinion in

61. Interestingly, Moderata Fonte, in her *Worth of Women*, 85, uses a similar metaphor to argue that women are just as capable as men of achieving virtue.

62. See the "provisional moral code consisting of just three or four maxims" Descartes outlines in part 3 of the *Discourse* (AT 6:22ff., CSM 1:122ff.).

considering that, since we have always followed the advice of our reason, we have omitted nothing that was in our power, and that maladies and bad fortune are no less natural to man than prosperity and health.

For the rest, all sorts of desires are not incompatible with true happiness; only those that are accompanied by impatience and sadness are. It is also not necessary that our reason never be mistaken. It suffices that our conscience testifies that we have never lacked resolution and virtue to execute all the things that we have judged to be the best. Thus, virtue alone is sufficient to render us content in this life. Nevertheless, when virtue is not made clear by the intellect, it can be false. That is to say, our will and resolution to do well can carry us toward bad things, even though we think them good. The contentment that comes from such virtue is not solid, and, since we ordinarily oppose this virtue to pleasures, appetites, and passions, it is very difficult to put into practice. On the other hand, the right use of reason, giving us a true knowledge of the good, prevents virtue from being false. In making virtue accord with licit pleasures, reason makes practicing virtue quite easy; and in giving us knowledge of the condition of our nature, it restrains our desires in such a way that one must admit that the greatest felicity of man depends on this right usage of reason and, by consequence, that the study that serves in acquiring it is the most useful occupation that one can have, as it is also without doubt the most agreeable and the most sweet. 267

From all this it seems to me that Seneca ought to have taught us all the principal truths we are required to know to facilitate the practice of virtue and to regulate our desires and passions, and thus to enjoy a natural and true happiness. This would have made his book the best and the most useful that a pagan philosopher could have written. All the same, this is only my opinion, which I submit to the judgment of your Highness, and if she does me such a favor as to alert me to what I am missing, I would owe her a great obligation and will show in correcting myself that I am, Madame, 268

Your Highness's very humble and very obedient servant,
Descartes.

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES

AT 2:268

The Hague, 16 August 1645

M. Descartes,

In examining the book that you recommended to me, I found quite a few nice parts and sentences well conceived to give me a subject for an

agreeable meditation, but not for instructing me in what it treats. For they
 269 are written without method, and the author does something other than he
 set out to do. Instead of demonstrating the shortest path toward true hap-
 piness, he contents himself with revealing that his riches and his luxury do
 not preclude his reaching it. This I am obliged to write to you, so that you
 will not think that I am of your opinion by prejudice or by laziness. I demand
 nothing other than that you continue to correct Seneca. I do so, not because
 your manner of reasoning is most extraordinary, but because it is the most
 natural that I have encountered and seems to teach me nothing new, but
 instead allows me to draw from my mind pieces of knowledge I have not
 yet apprehended.⁶³

It is for this reason that I do not yet know how to rid myself of the doubt
 that one can arrive at the true happiness of which you speak without the as-
 sistance of that which does not depend absolutely on the will. For there are
 diseases that destroy altogether the power of reasoning and by consequence
 that of enjoying a satisfaction of reason. There are others that diminish
 the force of reason and prevent one from following the maxims that good
 sense would have forged and that make the most moderate man subject to
 being carried away by his passions and less capable of disentangling himself
 from the accidents of fortune requiring a prompt resolution. When Epicurus
 was struggling to convince his friends that he felt no pain from his kidney
 stones, instead of crying like the vulgar, he was leading the life of the phi-
 losopher and not that of a prince or a captain or a courtier. For he knew
 that nothing could come to him from outside that would make him forget
 his role and cause him to fail to rise above his circumstances according to
 270 his philosophy.⁶⁴ On these occasions regret seems to me inevitable, and the
 knowledge that to err is as natural to man as it is to be sick cannot protect
 us. For we also are not unaware that we were able to exempt ourselves of
 each particular fault.

But I assure myself that you will elucidate these points of difficulty for
 me, as well as many others, of which I am not aware at this moment, when
 you teach me the truths which must be known to facilitate the exercise of
 virtue. Do not forget, I pray you, your plan to honor me with your precepts
 and believe that I esteem them as much as they deserve it.

63. Elisabeth here seems to be referring to the Platonic model of knowledge as recollection as presented in his dialogue *Meno*.

64. Elisabeth is here no doubt referring to the death of Epicurus: he died of kidney failure after trying for two weeks to pass kidney stones. It is unclear where Elisabeth would have read of this story. Montaigne alludes to it in his essay *On the Resemblance of Children to Their Fathers*. See *The Complete Essays*, trans. M. A. Screech (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 858–87.

It has been eight days since the bad humor of a sick brother prevented me from making this request of you, since I have had to stay near him every day, either to make him, through the fondness he has for me, abide by the rules set by the doctors, or to show him my fondness by diverting him, because he is persuaded that I am capable of diverting him. I hope to divert you also in assuring you that I will be all my life, M. Descartes,

Your very affectionate friend at your service,
Elisabeth.

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH

AT 4:271

Egmond, 18 August 1645

Madame,

Even though I do not know if my last letters were delivered to your Highness, or if I can write anything on the subject on which I have the honor of engaging you that I don't have to think you understand better than myself, I will all the same not fail to continue, in the belief that my letters will not be any more tiresome to you than the books in your library. For although they contain no news that you have an interest in knowing promptly, nothing forces you to read them when you have some business to attend to. I will take the time I put into writing them as very well spent if you give them only the time you want to waste.

I said in my previous letter what it seemed to me Seneca ought to have treated in his book. I will now examine what he does treat there. I note in general only three things: the first is that he tries to explain what the sovereign good is and that he gives different definitions; the second, that he argues against the opinion of Epicurus;⁶⁵ and the third, that he responds to those who object that philosophers do not live in accordance with the rules they prescribe. But in order to see the particular way in which he treats these things, I will spend a little time on each chapter.

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In the first, he takes to task those who follow custom and example more than reason. *In the matter of how to live*, he says, *people always rely on belief, never*

65. Epicurus (c. 341–271 BCE) was a major Hellenistic philosopher whose work enjoyed a substantial revival in the seventeenth century. His philosophy is characterized by a thoroughgoing materialist metaphysics, which maintains that the world is composed of indestructible atoms which move through empty space, as well as an apparently hedonistic ethics, for he maintains that happiness consists quite simply in pleasure. However, both Descartes below and Elisabeth in what follows interpret Epicurus as meaning by "pleasure" something more than sensual pleasure and akin to contentment.

on judgment.⁶⁶ He approves nonetheless of our taking the advice of those he believes to be the wisest. But he wants us also to use our own judgment to examine their opinions. In this I am strongly of his opinion. For even though most people are not capable of finding the right path for themselves, there are few who cannot recognize it well enough when someone else points it out to them clearly. No matter what happens, one has grounds to be satisfied in one's conscience, and to be assured that the opinions one has concerning morality are the best that one could have, when, instead of letting oneself be led blindly by example, one has taken the care to find the most able advice, and when one has employed all the force of one's mind to examine what path one ought to follow. But while Seneca strives to hone his eloquence here, he is not always exact enough in the expression of his thought. For instance, when he says, *We will become wise insofar as we separate ourselves from the crowd*,⁶⁷ he seems to teach that it is sufficient to act extravagantly to be wise, but this is not his intention.

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In the second chapter he does almost nothing but repeat, in other terms, what he said in the first. He adds only that what is commonly judged to be good is not so.

Then, in the third, after having again employed many superfluous words, he finally states his opinion concerning the sovereign good, which is that *it accords with the nature of things*,⁶⁸ and that *wisdom is conforming to its law and example*⁶⁹ [i.e., of nature], and that *the truly happy life is one in accordance with one's own nature*.⁷⁰ All these explications seem very obscure to me. For it is without doubt that by "nature" he does not understand our natural inclinations, seeing as they ordinarily carry us to pursue pleasure, and he argues against doing that. But what follows in his discourse makes me think that by "the nature of things" he means the order established by God in all things that there are in the world. Considering this order as infallible and independent of our will, he says that *wisdom is being in accord with the nature of things and conforming to its law and example*,⁷¹ that is to say that it is wisdom to acquiesce to

66. The Latin Descartes quotes reads "Nunquam de vita iudicatur . . . semper creditur." Seneca, *De vita beata*, 1.4; *Seneca: Moral Essays II*, trans. J. W. Basore (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1932, 1965), 100–101.

67. The Latin Descartes quotes reads "Sanabimur, si modo separemur a coetu" (*ibid.*, 1.5, 100–103).

68. The Latin reads: "rerum naturae assentitur" (*ibid.*, 3.3, 106–7).

69. The Latin reads: "ad illius legem exemplumque formari sapientia est" (*ibid.*, 3.3, 106–7).

70. The Latin reads: "beata vita est conveniens naturae suae" (*ibid.*, 3.3, 106–7).

71. The Latin reads: "rerum naturae assentiri & ad illius legem exemplumque formari, sapientia est" (*ibid.*, 3.3, 106–7).

the order of things, and to do what we believe ourselves to be born to do, or better, to speak as a Christian, that it is wisdom to submit to the will of God and to follow it in all one's actions. And *the good life is one in accordance with one's own nature* is to say that true happiness consists in following in this way the order of the world and accepting the good part of everything that happens to us. This explains practically nothing, and it is not clear enough what the connection is with what he adds immediately after—that this true happiness cannot be achieved *unless the mind is healthy*⁷²—unless he means also that *to live according to nature*⁷³ is to live following true reason. 274

In the fourth and fifth chapters, he gives some other definitions of the sovereign good, all of which have some relation to the sense of the first, but none of which explains it sufficiently. Through their diversity, they make it appear that Seneca has not understood clearly what he wanted to say. For the better one conceives of something, the more determined one is to express it in only one way. That formulation where he seems to me to have hit upon it best is in the fifth chapter, where he says that *a truly happy person is one who, by benefit of reason, neither desires nor fears*⁷⁴ and that *the good life is one grounded in right and certain judgment*.⁷⁵ But so long as he does not teach any of the reasons why we ought to neither fear nor desire anything, all this helps us very little.

In these same chapters he begins to argue against those who locate true happiness in pleasure, and he continues to do so in the following chapters. This is why, before examining them, I will state my view on this question.

I note, first, that there is a difference between true happiness, the sovereign good, and the final end or goal to which our actions ought to tend. True happiness is not the sovereign good, but it presupposes it, and it is the contentment or satisfaction of the mind that comes from possessing it. But, by the end of our actions, we can understand either the one or the other. For the sovereign good is without doubt the thing which we ought to put forward to ourselves as the goal of all our actions, and the contentment of mind that comes from it is also rightly called our end, as it is what attracts us and so makes us seek the sovereign good. 275

Other than this, I note that Epicurus understood the word "pleasure" in a different sense than did those who argued against him. For all his adversaries restricted the signification of this word to the pleasures of the senses. He,

72. The Latin Descartes quotes reads: "nisi sana mens est" (ibid., 6.1, 114–15).

73. The Latin Descartes quotes reads: "secundum naturam vivere" (ibid., 7.2, 116–19).

74. The Latin reads: "beatus est qui nec cupit nec timet beneficio rationis" (ibid., 5.1, 110–11).

75. The Latin reads: "beata vita est in recto certoque iudicio stabilita" (ibid., 5.3, 112–13).

on the other hand, extended it to every contentment of the mind, as one can easily judge from what Seneca and some others have written about him.

So, there were three opinions on the sovereign good and the end of our actions among the pagan philosophers: Epicurus claimed that it was pleasure; Zeno⁷⁶ wanted it to be virtue; and Aristotle made it consist of all the perfections, as much those of the body as those of the mind. These three
 276 opinions can, it seems to me, be received as true and in accord with one another, provided they are interpreted favorably.

For Aristotle considered the sovereign good of the whole of human nature in general, that is, that which the most accomplished of all men can have, and so he was right to have it consist of all the perfections of which human nature is capable. But that meaning is not useful to us.

Zeno, on the contrary, considered that which each man could possess on his own. This is why he too was quite right to say that the sovereign good consists only in virtue, for it is only virtue, among the goods we can have, which depends entirely on our free will. But he represented this virtue as so severe and so opposed to pleasure, in making all the vices equal, that it seems to me that only melancholic people or minds entirely detached from bodies were able to be among his followers.

Finally, Epicurus was not wrong, in considering what true happiness consists in and the motive or the end to which our actions tend, to say that it is pleasure in general. For even though the mere knowledge of our duty could oblige us to do good actions, this would not, all the same, make us enjoy any true happiness if we did not receive any pleasure from it. But because the
 277 name "pleasure" is often given to false pleasures that are accompanied or followed by anxiety, trouble, and repentance, many have thought that this view of Epicurus teaches vice. And, in fact, it does not teach virtue. When there is a prize for hitting a bull's-eye, one makes people want to hit the bull's-eye by showing them this prize. Still they cannot win the prize if they do not see the bull's-eye. And those who see the bull's-eye cannot be induced to aim for it if they do not know that there is a prize to win. Similarly, virtue, which is the bull's-eye, does not come to be strongly desired when it is seen on its own; contentment, which is the prize, cannot be acquired unless it is pursued.

This is why I think I can conclude here that true happiness consists only in the contentment of the mind, that is, in contentment in general. For even though there are kinds of contentment that depend on the body, and others which do not depend on it all, there is, all the same, no contentment but that of the mind. However, to have a contentment that is solid, it is necessary

76. Zeno of Citium (c. 344–262 BCE) was the founder of the Stoic school of philosophy.

to follow virtue, that is, to have a firm and constant will to execute all that we judge to be the best and to employ all the force of our understanding to judge well. I reserve for another time a consideration of what Seneca wrote on this, because my letter is already too long, and I have only sufficient space 278 to write that I am, Madame,

Your Highness's very humble and very obedient servant,
Descartes.

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES

AT 4:278

The Hague, August 1645

M. Descartes,

I believe that you will have already seen in my last letter of the sixteenth that your letter of the fourth was given to me. I have no need to add that that letter shed more light on the subject it treats than anything else I have 279 been able to read or meditate on about it. You understand too well what you do, what I can do, and have examined what others have done so well for me to be able to doubt it, even though through an excess of generosity you pretend to be unaware of the extreme obligation I have to you for having given me an occupation so useful and so agreeable as that of reading and considering your letters. Without the last one, I would not have understood so well as I think I do now what Seneca judges true happiness to be. I attributed the obscurity I found in the said book, as I do that in the books of most ancients, to the manner of explication and the scanty connection and order they observe. Their style is altogether different from our own. The things which are problematic to us pass for hypotheses to them, and they write with the idea of accumulating admirers by surprising the imagination, rather than disciples by shaping the faculty of judgment. In this way, Seneca makes use of nice words to attract the young to follow his views, as others do by means of poetry and fables. The way he refutes the view of Epicurus seems to confirm this impression. He attributes this to that philosopher: that which we say is a law for virtue, he says he does for pleasure.⁷⁷ A little before that he says that these followers claim: I hold in effect that one does not know how to live pleasantly without living also, at the same time, honorably.⁷⁸

77. Elisabeth quotes the following passage: "nos virtuti legem dicimus, eam ille dicit voluptati" (*De vita beata*, 13.1, 130–31).

78. Elisabeth quotes this passage: "ego enim nego quemquam posse iucunde vivere, nisi simul et honeste vivat" (*ibid.*, 10.1, 122–23).

280 From which it seems clear that what they call "pleasure" is the joy and satisfaction of the mind which Seneca counts as the consequences of the supreme good. Nevertheless, throughout the book he speaks of this Epicurean pleasure more as a satirist than as a philosopher, as if it were purely sensual. But I want to be charitable to him, and this is caused by your having taken the care to explicate their opinions and reconcile their differences better than they themselves knew how to do. Thereby you refute a powerful objection against the search for this sovereign good that not one of these great thinkers was able to define, and also against the authority of human reason, for it has not enlightened these excellent personages at all with the knowledge of what is most necessary to them and is closest to their hearts. I hope that you will continue, with what Seneca said, or with what he should have said, in teaching me the means of strengthening the understanding, so as to judge the best in all the actions of life. For this seems to be the only difficulty, since it is impossible not to follow the good path when it is known. Have again, I pray you, the frankness to tell me if I abuse your kindness in demanding too much of your time in the satisfaction of

Your very affectionate friend, at your service,
Elisabeth.

AT 4:281

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH

Egmond, 1 September 1645

Madame,

As I was uncertain whether your Highness was in The Hague or in Rhenen, I addressed my letter through Leiden, and that letter you have done the honor of writing me was delivered to me only after the postman who carried it to Alkmaar had left. This has kept me from expressing earlier how full of glory I am that my own judgment of the book that you have taken the trouble to read is no different from your own, and that my way of reasoning appears natural enough to you. I assure myself that if you had had the leisure to think about the things of which he treats as much as I have, I could not have written anything that you could not have noted better than I. But because the age, birth, and occupations of your Highness have not been able to permit this, perhaps then what I write will be able to serve to save you a little time, and my mistakes themselves can furnish you with occasions to note the truth.

282 When I spoke of a true happiness which depends entirely on our free will and which all men can acquire without any assistance from elsewhere, you note quite rightly that there are illnesses which, taking away the power of

reasoning, also take away that of enjoying the satisfaction of a rational mind. This shows me that what I have said generally about all men should be extended only to those who have free use of their reason and with that know the path necessary to take to reach this true happiness. For there is no one who does not desire to make himself happy [*heureux*], but many do not know the means to do so, and often a bodily indisposition prevents the will from being free. Something similar also happens when we sleep, for the most philosophical person in the world does not know how to prevent himself from having bad dreams when his temperament disposes him to them. All the same, experience shows that if one has often had some thought while one has had a free mind, one returns to it often afterward, no matter what indisposition the body has. Thus, I can say that my dreams never represent to me anything upsetting. And without doubt, one has a great benefit from being accustomed for a long time to having no 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.

For the other indispositions, which do not altogether trouble the senses but simply alter the humors and make one find oneself extraordinarily inclined to sadness, anger, or some other passions, they no doubt give trouble, but they can be overcome and even give the soul occasion for a satisfaction all the greater insofar as those passions are difficult to vanquish. I also believe something similar of all external obstacles, such as the brilliance of high birth, the flatteries of the court, the adversities of fortune, and also great prosperity, which ordinarily gets more in the way of our being able to play the role of philosopher than do misfortunes. For when one has everything one wishes, one forgets to think of oneself, and, afterward, when fortune changes, one finds oneself the more surprised the more one put one's trust in it. Finally, one can say generally that nothing can entirely take away the means of making ourselves happy so long as it does not trouble our reason, and it is not always those things that appear the most upsetting that are the most harmful.

But in order to know exactly how much each thing can contribute to our contentment, it is necessary to consider what the causes that produce it are, and this is also one of the principal pieces of knowledge that can serve to facilitate virtue. For all the actions of our mind which bring us some perfection are virtuous, and all our contentment consists only in our inner testimony of having some perfection. Thus, we know of no exercise of virtue (that is to say, what our reason convinces us we ought to do) from which we do not receive

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satisfaction and pleasure. But there are two sorts of pleasures: those which pertain to the mind alone and others which pertain to the human being, that is, to the mind insofar as it is united to a body. These latter ones, presenting themselves confusedly to the imagination, often appear to be much greater than they are, especially before we possess them; and this is the source of all the evils and errors of life. For, according to the rule of reason, each pleasure ought to be measured by the greatness of the perfection it produces, and this is 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 great pain to acquire them and lost, in the meantime, the occasion to possess other truer goods, the enjoyment makes us know their defects and from this arises disdain, regret, and repentance. That is why the true duty of reason is to examine the just value of all the goods whose acquisition seems to depend in some way on our conduct, in order that we will never fail to employ all our care in trying to procure those which are, in fact, the most desirable. In regard to which, if fortune is opposed to our plans and prevents them from succeeding, we will have at least
 285 the satisfaction of having lost nothing by our fault, and will not fail to enjoy the natural true happiness which will have been in our power to acquire.

Thus, for example, anger can sometimes excite in us desires for vengeance so violent that it makes us imagine more pleasure in punishing our enemy than in protecting our honor or our life, and we will expose ourselves imprudently to losing both the one and the other for this end. On the other hand, if reason examines what is the good or the perfection on which this pleasure drawn from vengeance is founded, it will find none other there (at least when this vengeance does not serve to prevent the recurrence of what we take offense at) but that it makes us imagine that we have some sort of superiority and some advantage over those on whom we seek vengeance. This is often only a vain imagination, which does not merit being valued in comparison with honor or life, or even in comparison with the satisfaction one would have in seeing oneself master of one's anger in abstaining from seeking vengeance.

And something similar occurs with all other passions. For there are none which do not represent to us the good to which they tend more vividly than is merited and which do not make us imagine pleasures much greater before we possess them than we find them afterward, once we have them. Because of this we commonly blame pleasure, since we use this word only to signify
 286 pleasures that often trick us by their appearance, and make us neglect other much more solid ones, which we do not so much look forward to and which are ordinarily those of the mind alone. I say "ordinarily," for all of the plea-

asures of the mind are not praiseworthy, since they can be founded on a false opinion, as is the pleasure we take in slander, which is founded only on the fact that we think we will be valued more, the less others are valued. They can also trick us by their appearance, when some strong passion accompanies them, as we see in the pleasure of ambition.

But the principal difference between the pleasures of the body and those of the mind consists in this: the body is subject to perpetual change, and even its conservation and its well-being depend on this change; so all the pleasures proper to it hardly last. For these proceed only from the acquisition of something that is useful to the body at the moment it receives them, and as soon as this something ceases to be useful to it, the pleasures also cease. On the other hand, the pleasures of the soul can be as immortal as can it, so long as they have a foundation so solid that neither knowledge of the truth nor any false belief can destroy it.

For the rest, the true use of our reason in the conduct of life consists only in examining and considering without passion the value of all perfections, those of the body as much as those of the mind, that can be acquired by our conduct, in order that, being ordinarily obliged to deprive ourselves of some of them in order to have others, we will always choose the best. And since those of the body are the lesser, one can say generally that there is a way to make oneself happy without them. All the same, I am not of the opinion that we need to despise them entirely, nor even that we ought to free ourselves from having the passions. It suffices that we render them subject to reason, and when we have thus tamed them they are sometimes the more useful the more they tend to excess. I would have none more excessive than that which leads me to the respect and veneration I owe you and makes me be, Madame,

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Your Highness's very humble and very obedient servant,
Descartes.

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES

AT 4:287

[The Hague] 13 September 1645

M. Descartes,

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If my conscience were to rest satisfied with the pretexts you offer for my ignorance, as if they were remedies for it, I would be greatly indebted to it, and would be exempted from repenting having so poorly employed the time I have enjoyed the use of reason, which I have had longer than others of my age, since my birth and fortune have forced me to exercise my judgment earlier than most, in order to lead a life that is very trying and free of the

prosperity that could prevent me from thinking of myself and also free of the subjection that would have obliged me to rely on the prudence of a governess.

289 All the same, neither this prosperity nor the flatteries which accompany it are, I believe, absolutely capable of removing the strength of mind of well-born minds and of preventing them from receiving any change of fortune as a philosopher. But I am persuaded that the multitude of accidents which surprise persons governing the public, without giving them the time to examine the most useful expedient, often lead them (no matter how virtuous they are) to perform actions which afterward cause them to repent. And, as you say, repenting is one of the principal obstacles to true happiness. It is true that a habit of esteeming good things according to how they can contribute to contentment, measuring this contentment according to the perfections which give birth to the pleasures, and judging these perfections and these pleasures without passion will protect them from a number of faults. But in order to esteem these goods in this way, one must know them perfectly. And in order to know all those goods among which one must choose in an active life, one would need to possess an infinite science. You say that one cannot fail to be satisfied when one's conscience testifies that one has availed oneself of all the possible precautions. But this circumstance never arrives when one misses one's mark. For one always changes one's mind about the things that remained to be considered. In order to measure contentment in accordance with the perfection causing it, it would be necessary to see clearly the value of each thing, so as to determine whether those that are useful only to us or those that render us still more useful to others are preferable. The latter seem to be esteemed by those with an excess of a humor that torments itself for others, and the former by those who live only for themselves. Nevertheless each of these sorts of persons supports their inclinations with reasons strong enough to make them each continue all their lives in the same way. It is similar with other perfections of the body and of the mind, which a tacit sentiment makes reason endorse. This sentiment ought not to be called a passion because we are born with it. So tell me, if you please, just up to what point one must follow this sentiment (it being a gift of nature) and how to correct it.

290 I would also like to see you define the passions, in order to know them better.⁷⁹ For those who call the passions perturbations of the mind would persuade me that the force of the passions consists only in overwhelming and subjecting reason to them, if experience did not show me that there are

79. This demand on Elisabeth's part can reasonably be seen as leading Descartes to write *The Passions of the Soul*. As subsequent letters reveal, Descartes responds by beginning to draft what will become that work. It was first published, in French, in 1649.

passions that do carry us to reasonable actions. But I assure myself that you will shed more light on this subject, when you explicate how the force of the passions renders them even more useful when they are subject to reason.

I will receive this favor in Riswyck in the house of the prince of Orange,⁸⁰ where we are moving, since this house is to be cleaned; but for this reason you have no need to change the address of your letters to

Your very affectionate friend at your service,
Elisabeth.

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH

AT 4:290

Egmond, 15 September 1645

Madame,

Your Highness has noted so exactly all the causes which have prevented Seneca from presenting his opinion regarding the sovereign good to us clearly, and your having taken the pain to read his book with such care makes me fear making myself tiresome if I continue here to examine all his chapters in order. Your care in reading makes me defer responding to the difficulty it pleased you to propose to me concerning the means to strengthen the understanding in order to discern the best course in all actions of life. This is why, without ceasing now to continue with Seneca, I will try only to explain my opinion concerning this matter.

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It seems to me that only two things are required in order to be always disposed to judge well: one is the knowledge of the truth, and the other is the habit of remembering and acquiescing to this knowledge every time the occasion requires. But since only God knows all things perfectly, it is necessary that we content ourselves in knowing those things that are most useful to us.

Among these, the first and the principal one is that there is a God on whom all things depend, whose perfections are infinite, whose power is immense, and whose decrees are infallible. For this teaches us to appreciate all the things that come to us, as they are sent to us expressly by God. Since the true object of love is perfection, when we elevate our mind to considering God as He is, we will find ourselves naturally so inclined to love him that we will draw joy even from our afflictions, in thinking that His will is carried out as we receive them.

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80. The prince of Orange and Stadholder of the Netherlands at this time was Frederick Henry. Frederick Henry was, incidentally, the brother of Elisabeth's grandmother Juliana. His son William II married Mary Henrietta Stuart, the daughter of Charles I of England.

The second thing it is necessary to know is the nature of our mind, insofar as it subsists without the body and is much more noble than it and capable of enjoying an infinite number of contentments which are not found in this life. For this prevents us from fearing death and detaches our affection from the things of the world so much that we regard all that is in the power of fortune only with contempt.

In this regard, what can also serve greatly is to judge in a dignified way the works of God, and to have an idea of the vast extent of the universe, as I have tried to present it in the third book of my *Principles*. For when 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 only for man, this makes us inclined to think that this earth is our principal home and this life our best. Instead of knowing the perfections that are truly in us, we attribute to other creatures imperfections they do not have in order to elevate ourselves above them. And entering into an impertinent presumption, we want to be counsel to God and to take charge with him of conducting the world; and this causes an infinity of anxieties and annoyances.

293 After having thus recalled the goodness of God, the immortality of our souls and the greatness of the universe, there is also one more truth the knowledge of which seems to me quite useful. This is that, even though each of us is a person separate from others and, by consequence, with interests that are in some manner distinct from those of the rest of the world, one must, all the same, think that one does not know how to subsist alone and that one is, in effect, one part of the universe and, more particularly even, one part of this earth, one part of this state, and this society, and this family, to which one is joined by his home, by his oath, by his birth. It is always necessary to prefer the interests of the whole, of which one is a part, to those of one's person in particular, though with measure and discretion. For one would be wrong to expose oneself to a great evil in order to procure only a small good for one's parents or one's country. If a man is worth more on his own than all the rest of his city, he would not be right to sacrifice himself to save it. But if one related everything to oneself, one would not fear harming other men greatly when one wanted to take something small for oneself. One would have no true friends, no faithfulness, and in general no virtue. On the other hand, in considering oneself as a part of the public, one takes pleasure in acting well toward everyone, and one does not fear even exposing one's life for the service of others when the occasion occurs. That is, one would lose one's soul, if one could, in order to save others.

294 so this consideration is the source and origin of all the most heroic actions men do. As for those who expose themselves to death for reasons of vanity, because they hope to be praised, or of stupidity, because they do not appre-

hend the danger, I believe that they are more to be pitied than to be prized. But when someone does expose himself to death because he thinks it is his duty, or better, when he suffers some other evil in order to bring about good to others—even if he perhaps does not think upon reflection that he did it because he owes more to the public of which he is a part than to himself in particular—he does it all the same in virtue of this consideration, which is confused in his mind. One is naturally drawn to have it, when one knows and loves God as one should. For then, abandoning oneself completely to His will, one divests oneself of one's proper interests, and one has no other passion than that of doing what one believes would be agreeable to Him. In consequence of which one has satisfactions of the mind and contentments that are incomparably more valuable than all the little passing joys that depend on the senses.

Outside of these truths, which concern all our actions in general, it is necessary also to know several others, which relate more particularly to each one of them. The principal ones seem to me to be those that I noted in my last letter. That is, that all our passions represent to us the goods they incite us to seek as much greater than they actually are, and that the pleasures of the body are never as lasting as those of the mind, or as large when we possess them as they appear when we hope for them. This we must note carefully, so that when we sense ourselves moved by some passion, we suspend our judgment until the passion abates, and so that we do not allow ourselves to be easily deceived by the false appearance of the goods of this world. 295

To this I cannot add anything else except that it is also necessary to examine in particular all the mores of the places where one lives in order to know just how far they must be followed. Even if we cannot have certain demonstrations of everything, we ought nevertheless to take a side and embrace the opinions which seem to us the most true, concerning all those things which come into play, in order that, when there is a question of action, we will never be irresolute. For it is irresolution alone that causes regret and repentance.

For the rest, I have said before that besides the knowledge of the truth, habituation is also required for being always disposed to judge well. For since we cannot always be attentive to the same thing—even though we have been convinced of some truth by reason of some clear and evident perceptions—we will be able to be turned, afterward, to believing false appearances, if we do not, through a long and frequent meditation, imprint it sufficiently in our mind so that it turns into habit. In this sense, the Schools are right to say that the virtues are habits, for one rarely makes a mistake because one doesn't have theoretical knowledge of what to do, but only because one doesn't have practical knowledge, that is to say, because one doesn't have a firm habit of believing it. And so, while I here examine these 296

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truths, I also augment my habit of believing them, I am particularly obligated to your Highness for permitting me this exchange, and there is no way that I could better employ my leisure than in expressing that I am, Madame,

Your Highness's very humble and very obedient servant,
Descartes.

When I ended this letter, I received that from your Highness of the thirteenth, but I found so many things to consider there that I dare not undertake to respond off the cuff, and I assure your Highness that I will much prefer to take a little time to think on it.

AT 4:301

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES

[Riswyck] 30 September [1645]

M.Descartes

302 Even though your observations on Seneca's attitude toward the sovereign good have made me profit from reading that work more than I would have known how to on my own, I am not the least bit sorry to exchange them for truths as necessary as those which include the means of strengthening the understanding in order to discern which is the best of all the actions one can take in life, on the condition that you still add the explication my stupidity is in need of, that concerning the usefulness of those pieces of knowledge you set out.

The knowledge of the existence of God and his attributes can console us from the mishaps which come to us from the ordinary course of nature and from the order He has established there, such as losing one's well-being [*le bien*] in a storm, or health by an infection of the air, or friends through death. But it cannot console us from those mishaps that are brought upon us by other men. For it seems to us that the will of these men is entirely free, as we have nothing but faith alone to persuade us that God cares to rule these wills and that He has determined the fate of each person before the creation of the world.

The knowledge of the immortality of the soul, along with the knowledge that it is much more noble than the body, is as capable of making us seek death as of making us despise it, since we cannot doubt that we will live more happily exempt from the maladies and passions of the body. And I am surprised that those who claimed to be persuaded by this truth and lived without the revealed law preferred a painful life to an advantageous death.

303 The knowledge of the great extent of the universe, which you have shown in the third book of your *Principles*, serves to detach our affections

from that which we see in it; but it also separates the particular providence, which is the foundation of theology, from the idea we have of God.

The consideration that we are part of a whole of which we must seek the advantage is, surely enough, the source of all generous actions; but I find many difficulties in the conditions which you prescribe for them. How is one to measure the evils that one brings upon oneself for the sake of the public against the good which will accrue to the public, without the evils' seeming greater to us inasmuch as our idea of them is more distinct? And which measure will we have for comparing those things that are not known to us equally well, such as our own merit and that of those with whom we live? A naturally arrogant person will always tip the balance in his favor, and a modest one will esteem himself less than he is worth.

In order to profit from the particular truths of which you speak, it is necessary to know exactly all the passions we feel and the prejudices we have, most of which are imperceptible. In observing the customs of the countries where we are, we sometimes find some very unreasonable ones that it is necessary to follow in order to avoid even greater inconveniences. Since I have been here, I have experienced a very trying illustration of this truth. For I was hoping to profit from this stay in the country by having more time to employ in study, and I have found here, without comparison, less leisure than I ever had at The Hague, because of the distractions of those who don't know what to do with themselves. And even though it is very unjust of them to deprive me of real goods so that I might give them imaginary ones, I am constrained to abide by the impertinent established laws of civility so that I do not acquire any enemies. Since I began writing this letter I have been interrupted more than seven times by these annoying visits. It is an excess of goodness [on your part] which guarantees that my letters will not suffer a parallel predicament on your end and which obliges you to want to solidify my habit of receiving your thoughts by relaying them to such an unruly person as

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Your very affectionate friend at your service,

Elisabeth.

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH

AT 4:304

Egmond, 6 October 1645

Madame,

I have sometimes asked myself a question: whether it is better to be gay and content, in imagining the goods one possesses to be greater and more valuable than they are and not knowing or stopping to consider those one

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lacks, or to have more consideration and knowledge in order to know the just value of the one and the other, and to become sadder. If I were to think that the sovereign good consisted of joy, I would not doubt at all that one should try to make oneself joyful, no matter at what price it comes, and I would approve of the brutality of those who drown their sorrows in wine or dull them with tobacco. But I distinguish between the sovereign good, which consists in the exercise of virtue, or what is the same thing, in the possession of all the goods whose acquisition depends on our free will, and the satisfaction of mind which follows this acquisition. This is why, seeing that it is a greater perfection to know the truth, even though it is to our disadvantage, than not to know it, I admit that it would be better to be less gay and to have more knowledge. It is not common that when one is more gay, one has a more satisfied mind. On the contrary, great joys are ordinarily somber and serious, and it is only the mediocre and passing ones that are accompanied by laughter. Thus, I do not approve of trying to deceive oneself in going over false imaginings. For all the pleasure arising in that way can only touch
 306 the surface of the soul, which, at the same time, feels an inner bitterness in perceiving that they are false. Even if it could happen that the soul is so continually diverted elsewhere that it never perceives they are false, it would not because of this diversion enjoy the true happiness which is in question, for this must depend on our conduct and could not come from fortune.

But as one can have different but equally true considerations, some of which some lead us to be content, and others on the contrary prevent us from being so, it seems to me that prudence demands that we dwell principally on those which give us satisfaction. Almost all the things in the world are such that we can regard them from a side which makes them appear good and from another which makes us notice defects. And I believe that if one must make use of one's skill in something, it is principally to know how to look at them from the angle which makes them appear most to our advantage, as long as this does not involve our deceiving ourselves.

So, when your Highness notes the causes which have allowed her more leisure to cultivate her reason than many others of her age, if it pleases her also to consider how much she has profited from this compared with others, I am assured she will have reason to be content. I do not see why she likes
 307 better to compare herself to those who give her cause to complain, than to those who can give her some 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 it will be numbed instead of polished if it is applied too much in study, and so we ought not to measure the time we were able to use in instructing ourselves by the number of hours we have to

ourselves. Rather, it seems to me, we should measure it by the example of what we see commonly occurring with others, as being a mark of the ordinary comportment of the human mind.

It seems to me as well that one has no reason to repent when one has done what one judges to be the best at the time that one had to be resolved to act, even if afterward, in rethinking the matter with more leisure, one judges that one was wrong. But one would sooner repent if one had done something against one's conscience, even if one discovered afterward that one did better than one would have thought. For we are responsible only for our thoughts, and human nature is such that we do not know everything or always judge so well off the cuff as when we have a lot of time to deliberate.

For the rest, even if the vanity, which makes one have a better opinion of oneself than one should, is a vice which belongs only to weak and base souls, this is not to say that stronger and more generous ones should despise themselves. But one must do justice to oneself in discovering one's perfections as much as one's faults. Even if decency prevents one from making them public, it does not prevent us from being conscious of them. 308

Finally, even if we do not have an infinite science so that we can know perfectly all the goods we must choose among in the diverse occasions of life, one must, it seems to me, content oneself in having a mediocre knowledge of those things most necessary, such as those which I enumerated in my last letter.

In it I already declared my opinion concerning the difficulty your Highness proposes, that is, whether those who relate everything to themselves are more reasonable than those who torment themselves for others. For if we think only of ourselves alone, we can enjoy only the goods that are particular to us. On the other hand, if we consider ourselves as a part of some other body, we participate as well in those goods held in common, without being deprived of any of those that are proper to ourselves. It is not the same with the evils. For according to philosophy, evil is nothing real but only a privation. When we become sad because of some evil that has befallen our friends, in doing so we do not participate in the defect in which this evil consists. And no matter what sadness or what pain we have on such an occasion, it cannot be so great as the interior satisfaction which always accompa- 309
nies good actions and principally those which proceed from a pure affection for others and which we do not relate to ourselves, that is, to the Christian virtue which we call charity. Thus, one can, even in crying and taking a great deal of trouble, have more pleasure than when one laughs or rests.

It is easy to prove that the pleasure of the soul in which true happiness consists is not inseparable from the gaiety and ease of the body, as much

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from the example of tragedies,⁸¹ which please us more the more they excite sadness in us, as from those of the exercises of the body, such as hunting, tennis, and other similar exercises, which do not cease to be agreeable even if they are very difficult. We even find that often fatigue and difficulty augment pleasure. The cause of the contentment the soul receives from these exercises consists in that they make it notice the strength, or the skill, or some other perfection of the body to which it is joined. But the contentment that it has from crying upon seeing some pitiable and disastrous action represented in the theater comes principally from its seeming to it that it is doing something virtuous in having compassion for the afflicted. And generally, the soul is pleased in feeling itself moved by passions, no matter what nature they are, so long as it remains in control.

310 But it is necessary that I examine these passions more particularly to be able to define them, which will be easier for me here than were I to write to someone else. For your Highness, having taken the trouble to read the treatise I sketched out before concerning the nature of animals,⁸² knows already how I conceive diverse impressions to be formed in their brain. Some are formed by exterior objects which move their senses, others by the interior dispositions of the body, or by the vestiges of the preceding impressions which remain in the memory, or by the agitation of the spirits which come from the heart, or in a human, by the action of the soul, which has some force for changing the impressions in the brain, as, reciprocally, these impressions have the force to excite thoughts in the soul that do not depend on its will. From all this it follows that one can generally call passions all the thoughts that are excited in the soul in this way without the concurrence of its will, and by consequence, without any action coming from it, but only from the impressions in the brain. For everything that is not an action is a passion. But one ordinarily reserves this word for the thoughts that are caused by some particular agitation of the spirits. Those that come from exterior objects or even the interior dispositions of the body, such as the perceptions of colors, sounds, odors, light, thirst, pain, and similar ones, are
311 called sensations, some external, some internal. Those which depend only on what the preceding impressions left in the memory and the ordinary

81. See above, note 45, for Descartes' other appeals to the theater.

82. It is unclear what work Descartes is referring to here. The *Principles* projects a treatise on animal physiology, but it is unlikely he would have something new to present to Elisabeth so soon after the publication of that work. In letters to Père Guillaume Gibieuf (19 January 1642, AT 3:479, CSMK 203–4) and to Mersenne (November or December 1632, AT 1:263, CSMK 40, and 20 February 1639, AT 2:525, CSMK 134) he refers to work he has done on animal physiology.

agitation of the spirits are dreams, whether they come while asleep or when one is awake, and the soul, determining itself to nothing on its own, follows nonchalantly the impressions found in the brain. But when the soul uses its will to determine itself to some thought which is not only intelligible but also imaginable, this thought makes a new impression in the brain, and this thought is not a passion in it, but an action which is properly called imagination. Finally, when the ordinary course of the spirits is such that it regularly excites thoughts that are sad or gay, or other similar ones, we do not attribute this to passion but to the nature or humor of those in which they are excited. This makes us say that this man is of a sad nature, this other of a gay humor, etc. There remain only those thoughts which come from some particular agitation of the spirits, and of which we sense the effects in the soul itself, which are properly called passions.⁸³

It is true that we hardly ever have any thoughts that do not depend on several of the causes that I just distinguished. But we denominate them in accordance with their principal cause or their principal aspect, and this makes many confuse the sensation of pain with the passion of sadness, and the sensation of tickling [*chatouillement*] with the passion of joy, which they also call voluptuousness or pleasure, and sensations of thirst or hunger with the desires to drink and to eat, which are passions. For ordinarily the causes of pain also agitate the spirits in the manner that is required for exciting sadness, and those that make us feel some tickling agitate them in the manner required for exciting joy, and so on for the others.⁸⁴

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We also sometimes confuse the inclinations or the habits that dispose us to some passion with the passion itself, though these are nevertheless easy to distinguish. For example, let's say that, in a town to which the enemies have just laid siege, the first judgment the inhabitants make of the evil that might come to them is an action of their soul, not a passion. Even if similar such judgments are made by several townspeople, they will not, all the same, be equally moved, but rather some will be more so, others less, according to whether they have more or less of a habit or inclination toward fear. Before their soul receives the emotion in which alone the passion consists, it is nec-

83. The discussion in *Passions of the Soul* aa.17–26 parallels Descartes' discussion here.

84. As Descartes notes in *Passions of the Soul* a.51, bodily motions are insufficient to distinguish passions from one another. In a.52 he rejects a taxonomy of the passions by their objects per se in favor of a system which distinguishes them by "the different ways they can harm or benefit us or, generally, be important to us" (AT 11:372). He then goes on, following on his point in the next paragraph here, to stipulate that the use of the passions, kept separate from the principle of their enumeration, is to "dispose the soul to will the things nature tells us are useful and to persist in this volition" (ibid.)

essary that it make this judgment, or better, without judging, that it conceive at least the danger and imprint the image of it in the brain (which is made by another action which we call imagining). It is also necessary that, by this
 313 same means, it determine the spirits which go from the brain via the nerves to the muscles, to enter into those muscles which tighten the openings of the heart. This tightening retards the circulation of the blood, from which it follows that the whole body becomes pale, cold, and trembling, and the new spirits which come from the heart to the brain are agitated in such a way that they cannot aid in forming any other images but those which excite in the soul the passion of fear. All of these things follow one another so closely that it seems that there is only one operation.⁸⁵ And so with the all the other passions there is some particular agitation in the spirits that come from the heart.

There you have what I was thinking of writing to your Highness eight days ago. My plan was to add a particular explication of all the passions, but having found it difficult to enumerate them, I was constrained to let the postman leave without my letter, and having in the meantime received that which your Highness has done me the honor of writing me, I had a new occasion to respond. I am thus obliged to leave to another time this examination of the passions, so that I might say here that all the reasons that prove
 314 the existence of God and his being the first and immutable cause of all the effects which do not depend on the free will of men, in the same way prove, it seems to me, that He is also the cause of all the effects that do depend on it. For we cannot demonstrate He exists except by considering Him as a supremely perfect being. He would not be supremely perfect if something could happen in the world that did not come entirely from Him. It is true that faith alone teaches us what grace is, by which God elevates us to a supernatural true happiness. But philosophy alone is sufficient for knowing that the slightest thought could not enter into the mind of man unless God wants and has wanted from all eternity that thought to enter there. And the distinction of the Schools between universal and particular causes has no place here. The sun, for example, is the universal cause of all the flowers, but the sun is not the reason that tulips differ from roses. The production of tulips also depends on some other particular causes that are not subordinate to the sun. But God is such a universal cause of everything that He is in the same way the total cause, and thus nothing can happen without His will.

85. In the *Passions of the Soul*, Descartes tries to separate these operations, treating separately the physiology proper to each passion (aa.96–106), the explanation for why certain physiological motions are associated with the passions they are (aa.107–11), and the expressions of the passions (aa.113–35).

It is also true that the knowledge of the immortality of the soul and of the felicities of which it will be capable outside of this life, could give reasons to exit this life to those who are weary of it, if they were assured that they would enjoy all these felicities afterward. But no reason so assures them, and there is only the false philosophy of Hegesias, whose book was prohibited by Ptolemy⁸⁶ and was the cause that many killed themselves after having read it, as it tried to argue that this life is evil. The true teaching, altogether on the contrary, is that even among the saddest accidents and the most pressing pains one can always be content, so long as one knows how to use one's reason.

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As for the extent of the universe, I do not see how, in considering it, one is invited to separate particular providence from the idea that we have of God. For God is completely different from finite powers. Finite powers can be used up, and seeing that they are employed to many great effects, we are right to judge that it is not likely that they will extend just as well to the lesser ones. But the more we judge the works of God to be greater, the more we notice the infinity of his power, and the more this infinity is better known to us, the more are we assured that it extends to all the particular actions of men.

I also do not believe that by this particular providence of God, which your Highness has said is the foundation of theology, you understand some change that comes to His decrees on the occasion of the actions that depend on our free will. Theology does not admit such a change. When it demands that we pray to God, this is not so that we may instruct him as to what we need, or so that we may try to move him so that he changes something in the order established from all eternity by His providence. Both would be blameworthy. It is only so that we might obtain what he has wanted from all eternity to be obtained from our prayers. I think that all the theologians are in agreement here, even the Arminians,⁸⁷ who seem to be those who defer the most to free will.

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I confess that it is difficult to measure exactly just to what degree reason ordains that we be interested in the public good. But also this is not a matter in which it is necessary to be very exact. It suffices to satisfy one's conscience, and one can in this matter give a lot to one's inclination. For

86. Hegesias of Magnesia (c. 300 BCE) was a rhetorician and historian. This story is related in Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations* 1.83.

87. The Arminians, or Remonstrants, a breakaway sect from Calvinist doctrine, formed by Jacob Arminius (1560–1609), held a doctrine that put the free will of man at the center of their theological position. The position was condemned at the Calvinist Synod at Dordrecht in 1619 and branded the "Remonstrant heresy."

God has so established the order of things and conjoined men together in so tight a society that even if each person related himself wholly to himself, and had no charity for others, he would not ordinarily fail to work for them in everything that would be in his power, so long as he used prudence, and principally if he lived in a time when mores were not corrupted. And aside from this, as it is a higher and more glorious thing to do good to others than to procure goods for oneself, so are the greatest souls those which have the most inclination to it and who take the least account of the goods they possess. Only the weak and base esteem themselves more than they ought and are like little vessels which three drops of water can fill. I know that your Highness is not among these. Whereas one can excite base souls to take pains for others only by making them see that they can draw a profit for themselves by doing so, it is necessary, for the interest of your Highness, to represent to her that she could not be useful to those for whom she cares for very long if she were to neglect herself, and to beg her to take care of her health. This is what does, Madame,

Your Highness's very humble and obedient servant,
Descartes.

AT 4:320

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES

The Hague, 28 October [1645]

321 M. Descartes,

Since you have given such good reasons demonstrating that it is better to know truths to our disadvantage than to be agreeably deceived, and that only in those cases which admit of different but equally true considerations ought we to rest with those which will bring us more contentment, I am surprised that you want me to compare myself to those of my age with respect to something unknown to me rather than with respect to something I can't possibly be ignorant of, even though the latter would be more to my advantage. There is nothing which could clarify for me whether I have profited more from cultivating my reason than others have in doing what they are moved to do, and I have no doubt that if I relaxed for as much time as my body requires, there would still be enough time to move me beyond what I am. If we measured the scope of the human mind by the example of the common people, it would be of very small extension, because most people use their capacity for thought only in matters regarding the senses. Even among those who apply themselves to study, there are few who use anything but their memory or who have the truth as the goal of their labor. So if there is a vice in my taking no pleasure in considering whether I have gained more

than these people, I do not think that it is an excess of humility, which is just as harmful as presumption, though not as common. We are more inclined to fail to recognize our faults than our perfections. In running from repentance for the mistakes we have made as if it were an enemy of our felicity, we run the risk of losing the desire to correct ourselves. The risk is particularly great when some passion has produced the mistakes, because we naturally love to be moved by our passions and to follow their movements, and only the inconveniences proceeding from this course teach us that such mistakes can be harmful. This is, in my judgment, what makes tragedies more pleasing the more they excite sadness, because we know that the sadness will not be violent enough to carry us to extravagances or lasting enough to corrupt our health.

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But this will not suffice at all to support the doctrine contained in one of your earlier letters—that the passions are the more useful the more they tend to excess, so long as they are subject to reason. It seems that the passions can never be both excessive and subject to reason. But I think you will elucidate this doubt in taking the trouble to describe how this particular agitation of the spirits serves to form all the passions we experience and in what way it corrupts reason. I would not dare to ask this of you if I did not know that you never leave a work imperfect and that in undertaking to teach a stupid person, such as myself, you are prepared for all the inconveniences that brings you.

It is this which makes me continue and say to you that the reasons which prove the existence of God and that he is the immutable cause of all the effects which do not depend on our free will do not persuade me that he is just as much the cause of those which do depend on it. From his sovereign perfection it follows necessarily that he could be this cause, and that he could have never given free will to human beings. But since we feel ourselves to have it, it seems that it is repugnant to common sense to think it dependent on God in its operations as well as in its being.

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If one is well persuaded that the soul is immortal, it is impossible to doubt that it will not be more happy after its separation from the body (which is the origin of all the displeasures of life, just as the soul is the origin of all great contentments), despite the opinion of M. Digby,⁸⁸ whose teacher⁸⁹ (whose works you have seen) made him believe in the necessity of

88. See above, note 48.

89. While he was at Oxford Digby was under the tutelage of Thomas Allen (1542–1632), the mathematician. Allen's works are all in manuscript form, so it is not clear how Descartes would have seen them. Allen was a colleague of Thomas Harriot (1560–1621). Harriot's *Artes analyticae praxis* was published posthumously in 1631, and Descartes might well have read that work. Elisabeth might be conflating the two here.

purgatory, by persuading him that the passions, which have held dominion over reason during the life of a man, leave some vestiges in the soul after the death of the body. These passions torment the soul all the more in that they find no means of satisfying themselves in a substance so pure. I do not see how this accords with its immateriality. But I have no doubt that even though life is not bad in itself, it ought to be abandoned for a condition which we will know to be better.

324 By that special providence which is the foundation of theology, I understand that by which God has for all eternity prescribed means so strange as His incarnation for a part of creation that is so inconsiderable compared with the rest, as you represent this world in your physics. He has done this in order to be thereby glorified, which seems a very undignified end for the creator of this grand universe. But I have here been presenting more the objection of our theologians than my own, having always believed it very impertinent for finite persons to judge the final cause of the actions of an infinite being.

You do not think that we need an exact knowledge of how much we should reasonably interest ourselves for the public, because insofar as each person relates everything to himself, he will also work for others if he is served by prudence. Of the whole of this prudence I only ask of you a part. For in possessing it, one could not fail to do justice to others and to oneself. A lack of prudence can cause a person at liberty sometimes to lose the means to serve her country because she abandons herself too easily for her interest, and a timid person to lose herself along with her country, for failing to risk her good and her fortune for her conservation.

I have always been of a condition which rendered my life quite useless to persons I love, but I seek its conservation with much more care since I have had the good fortune to know you, because you have shown me the means to live more happily than I did before. I am only lacking the satisfaction of being able to show you how much this obligation is felt by

Your affectionate friend at your service,
Elisabeth.

AT 4:330
DESCARTES TO ELISABETH

Egmond, 3 November 1645

Madame,

I encounter good reasoning so infrequently, not only in the conversations I have in this desert, but also in the books I consult, that I cannot read

what is in the letters from your Highness without drawing from them a feeling of extraordinary joy. I find your reasoning so strong that I would prefer to admit I am beaten than to undertake to resist it. For even though the comparison that your Highness refuses to make to her benefit can be verified well enough by experience, it is all the same a very praiseworthy virtue to judge favorably of others, and it accords so well with the generosity which prevents you from wanting to measure the capability of the human mind by the example of the common man, that I cannot fail to esteem extremely highly both the one and the other.

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I also would not dare to contradict what your Highness writes about repentance, seeing as it is a Christian virtue, and one which serves to make one correct oneself, not only of mistakes committed voluntarily but also of those made through ignorance, as when some passion interfered with our knowing the truth.

I know well that the sadness of tragedies would not please as it does, if we feared that it would become so excessive that we would be inconvenienced by it. But when I said that the passions are the more useful the more they incline toward excess, I meant to speak only of those which are altogether good, which is why I added that they must be subject to reason. For there are two sorts of excess, one which, insofar as it changes the nature of the thing and thereby makes something good bad, prevents it from remaining subject to reason; the other which, insofar as it augments only its quantity, thereby makes something good better than it is. Thus, an excess of daring is temerity when it goes beyond the limits of reason. But when it does not pass those limits, it can still have another excess, which consists in being accompanied by neither irresolution nor fear.

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I have thought over the past days of the number and order of all the passions, in order to be able to examine their nature in more detail. But I have not yet digested my opinions concerning this subject enough to dare to write them to your Highness, and I will not neglect to acquit myself of them as soon as it is possible for me.

As far as free will is concerned, I confess that in thinking only of ourselves we cannot but take it to be independent. But when we think of the infinite power of God, we cannot but believe that all things depend on Him and, by consequence, that our free will is not exempt from this. For it implies a contradiction to say that God created men of such a nature that the actions of their will do not depend on His. For this is the same as saying that his power is at the same time finite and infinite: finite since there is something that does not depend on it at all, and infinite since He was able to create this independent thing. But, just as the knowledge of the existence of God

ought not to hinder us from being assured of our free will, since we experience it and feel it within ourselves, so too that of our free will ought not to make us doubt the existence of God. For the independence that we experience and feel in us and that suffices for rendering our actions praiseworthy or blameworthy is not incompatible with a dependence that is of another nature, according to which all things are subject to God.

As for the state of the soul after this life, I have much less knowledge of it than M. Digby. For leaving aside what faith teaches us, I confess that, by natural reason alone, we can make many conjectures to our benefit and have some high hopes, but no assurance. And since the same natural reason teaches us also that we always have more goods in this life than evils, and that we ought never to leave the certain for the uncertain, it seems to me to teach us that we ought not to truly fear death, but also that we ought never to seek it out.

I do not need to respond to the objection that the theologians might make, concerning the vast extent that I attributed to the universe, since your Highness has already responded for me. I add only that, if this vast extent could render the mysteries of our religion less believable, the size that the astronomers have always attributed to the heavens ought to be able to do the same, since they have considered the heavens so great that the earth is, by comparison, only a point. And yet this objection is never leveled at them.

As for the rest, if prudence were mistress of events, I do not doubt that your Highness would achieve all she wanted to undertake. But all men would have to be perfect sages in order to for us be assured of what they will do given the knowledge of what they ought to do. Or we would need to know the particular humor of all those with whom we have something to work out. Even that would not be enough, since they have, apart from this, their free will, whose movements are known only by God. Since we ordinarily judge what others will do by what we would want to do if we were in their place, it often happens that ordinary and mediocre minds, being similar to those with whom they interact, penetrate better into their motives, and succeed more easily in what they undertake, than do those who are more refined. For the latter interact only with those who are greatly inferior in knowledge and in prudence and judge altogether differently than they do in these matters. This ought to console your Highness when fortune is opposed to your plans. I pray to God that he favors them, and I am, Madame,

Your Highness's very humble and very obedient servant,
Descartes.

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES

AT 4:335

The Hague, 30 November 1645

M. Descartes,

You must be surprised that, after you told me that my reasoning does not appear altogether ridiculous to you, I have waited so long to take advantage of your responses. It is with shame that I confess to you the cause, since it has reversed all that your lessons had seemed to establish in my mind. I thought that a strong resolution to seek true happiness only in things that depend on my will would render me less sensitive to those things that come to me from elsewhere, before the folly of one of my brothers apprised me of my weakness. His folly has troubled the health of my body and the tranquility of my soul more than all the misfortunes that have already come my way. If you take the trouble to read the newspaper, you could not fail to know that he has fallen into the hands of a certain group of people who have more hatred for our house than affection for their religion, and he has let himself be taken in by their traps to such a degree as to change his religion and make himself a Roman Catholic, without having made the least grimace which might have persuaded the very credulous that he did so for the sake of his conscience.⁹⁰ I must see someone whom I loved with as much tenderness as I know how to have, abandoned to the scorn of the world and the loss of his soul (according to my belief). If you did not have more charity than bigotry, it would be impertinent of me to speak with you on this matter. This would still not excuse me, if I were not in the habit of telling you all my faults, as if to that person in the world most capable of correcting them for me.

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I confess to you as well that even though I do not understand how the independence of our will is no less contrary to the idea we have of God than its dependence is to its freedom, it is impossible for me to square them, it being as impossible for the will to be at the same time free and attached to the decrees of Providence as for divine power to be both infinite and limited at once. I do not see at all the compatibility between them of which you speak, or how this dependence of the will can have a different nature than its freedom, if you do not take the trouble to teach this to me.

With regard to contentment, I confess that the present possession of it is much more assured than the expectation of it in the future, no matter

90. Elisabeth is here adverting to the conversion of her brother Edward to Catholicism. His conversion allowed him to marry Anne of Gonzaga, princess of Mantua, an alliance no doubt helpful to the exiled Palatine house. Elisabeth herself refused to convert in order to effect a marriage between herself and Wladislaw IV of Poland.

337 how good the reason on which that expectation is founded. But I am having trouble persuading myself that we will always have more goods in life than evils, since it takes more to make the former than to make the latter; that is, since man has more occasions on which to receive displeasure than pleasure, since it takes an infinite number of mistakes to get one truth, since there are so many means to go astray for every one which takes one along the right path, and since there are so many persons who have the intent and the power to harm and few who have either one or the other to help. Finally, all that depends on the will and the course of the rest of the world is capable of unsettling one. And according to your own belief, nothing but what depends absolutely on our will is sufficient to give us a real and constant satisfaction.

As for prudence in matters that concern human society, I do not expect an infallible rule, but I would be very pleased to see those you would suggest to one who, in living only for himself, in whatever profession he might have, would not leave off working for others also, if I dare to ask you to shed more light, after having so poorly employed that which you have already given to

Your very affectionate friend at your service,
Elisabeth.

AT 4:339

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES

[*The Hague*] 27 December [1645]

M. Descartes,

The son of the late Professor Schooten⁹¹ today gave me the letter⁹² you had written me in his favor, in order to prevent me from favoring his rival. I told him that not only had I no intention of harming him, but I was willing to help him as much as I could, since you had charged me to like him and be receptive to him. He then asked me to recommend him to the curators.⁹³

340 Knowing only two, M. de Wimenom and M. Bewen, and the latter being out of town, I spoke to the first, who promised to work for M. Schooten, even though he had intended to abolish this post as superfluous. This seems

91. Frans van Schooten (1615–60) was a candidate for a professorship in mathematics and architecture at the University of Leiden, a post left open by the death of his father. In 1643, Schooten became his father's assistant. Schooten had met Descartes in 1637 and was a great promoter of Cartesian geometry.

92. We do not have this letter.

93. Elisabeth is here referring to the University of Leiden. In 1645 there were three curators: Gerard Schaep, master of Kortenhoeve, Amelis Van den Bouckhorst, master at Wimmenum (Wimenom, above) and Cornelius van Beveren (Bewen, above), master at Strevvelshouck.

to be the only difficulty which he would have to combat, his competitor not being considered to be anywhere near him, except by a few scrupulous men who fear that he would introduce the errors of his Arminian religion into his lessons on mathematics. If he had given me the time to ask him to come see me so that he might learn the success of my recommendations, I would have had the means of informing him of some things which I think ought to serve him in his efforts. But he was in such great haste to leave that I was forced to follow him all the way to the door in order to ask him to whom I should address my recommendations for him. I know that if he had considered me only as your friend, without thinking of titles that embarrass those who are not accustomed to them, he would have acted otherwise, as then he would have certainly judged that in a matter that I know you to favor, I would act with more than ordinary care. I ask you to believe that I will never lose an occasion to show you in deeds that I am truly, M. Descartes,

Yours very affectionately at your service,
Elisabeth.

27 December

I am afraid that you have not received my last letter of the thirtieth of last month, since you have not made any mention of it.⁹⁴ I would be upset if it came into the hands of one of these critics who condemn as heresies all the doubts that can be raised about received opinions.

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DESCARTES TO ELISABETH

AT 4:354

Egmond, January 1646

Madame,

I cannot deny that I was surprised to learn that your Highness was annoyed to the point of having her health ill affected by a thing that most of the world would find good, and that many sound reasons would render excusable to others. For all those of my religion (who are, without doubt, the greater number in Europe) are obliged to approve of it, even if they were to see circumstances and apparent motives there that were blameworthy. We believe that God uses diverse means to attract souls to him, and though some enter the cloister with a bad intention, they still lead a very saintly life there afterward. As for those of another faith, if they speak ill of such a person, one

94. Presumably, she means that he did not mention it in the lost letter conveyed through Schooten.

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352 can take issue with their judgment, for, as in all matters involving differing parties, it is impossible to please some without displeasing others. If they consider that they would not be of the religion they are had they or their fathers or their grandfathers not left the Roman church, they will not have reason to mock or to call inconstant those who leave their church.

As regards the wisdom of these times, it is true that those who have fortune resting with them are right to remain near her and to join their forces together so that she does not escape. But those whose home she has fled are, it seems to me, not at all ill served in directing themselves to follow different paths, so that even if not everyone can find her, there will be at least someone who meets up with her. At the same time, since we think that each one of them has several resources, having friends in different places, they make a more considerable search party than if they were all to engage as one. This prevents me from imagining that the authors of this advice intended to harm your house by it. But I do not pretend that my reasons could abate the resentment of your Highness. I hope only that time will diminish it before this letter is presented to you, and I would fear refreshing it if I were to elaborate more on this subject.

353 This is why I move to the difficulty your Highness proposed concerning free will, the dependence and liberty of which I will try to explain by a comparison. If a king who has prohibited duels and who knows very certainly that two gentlemen in his kingdom, living in different towns, are quarreling and are so worked up against one another that nothing could prevent them from fighting one another if they were to meet; if, I say, this king orders one of them to go on a certain day toward the town where the other is, and he also orders the other to go on the same day toward the place where the first is, knowing quite assuredly that they would not fail to meet each other and to fight each other, and thus to violate his prohibition, he thereby does not compel them. His knowledge, and even his will to determine them there in this manner, do not alter the fact that they fight one another just as voluntarily and just as freely as they would have done if he had known nothing of it, and it was by some other occasion that they had met. They can also justly be punished, since they violated the prohibition. So what a king can do in this matter concerning the free actions of his subjects, God, who has infinite prescience and power, does infallibly concerning all those of men. Before He sent us into this world, He knew exactly what would be the inclinations of our will. It is He Himself who put them in us. It is also He who disposed all
354 the other things outside of us, in order to bring it about that such objects are presented to our senses at such and such a time, on the occasion of which he knew our free will would determine us to such and such a thing. And he wills

things this way, but he does not will thereby that our will be constrained to choose a certain way. As one can distinguish in this king two different degrees of will, the one by which he willed these gentlemen to fight one another, since he made it so they would meet, and the other by which he did not will it, since he prohibited duels, so do the theologians distinguish in God an absolute and independent will by which he wills that all things happen such as they happen, and another which is relative, and which is related to the merit or demerit of men, according to which he wills that they obey his laws.

I must also distinguish two sorts of goods to defend what I wrote before (that is, that in this life we always have more goods than evils) against your Highness's objection to me concerning all the inconveniences of life. When we consider the idea of the good to serve as a rule for our actions, we take it to consist in all the perfection that can be in that thing which we call "good," and we compare it to a straight line, which is unique among an infinity of curves to which we compare evils. It is in this sense that the Philosophers are accustomed to saying that *bonum est ex integra causa, malum ex quovis defectu*.⁹⁵ But when we consider the goods and the evils that can exist in one and the same thing to find out how we should value it, as I did when I spoke of how we should value this life, we take the good to consist in anything that one can find advantageous, and one calls evil only that from which one can receive some inconvenience. Thus, when one offers work to someone, he considers from one side the honor and the profit he can attain from it as goods, and from the other side the pain, the peril, the loss of time, and other such things as evils. Comparing these evils with these goods, according to which he finds the former greater or lesser than the latter, he accepts it or refuses it. So what made me say earlier that there are always more good things than evil ones in this life is that I think we ought to make very little of all the things which are outside of us and do not depend on our free will, in comparison with those which do depend on it. The latter we can always render good when we know how to use our free will well. We can prevent, by this means, all the evils that come from elsewhere, as great as they may be, from entering into our soul any further than does the sadness excited there by the comedians when they represent some very tragic events before us. But I admit that one must be very philosophical to arrive at this point. However, I also think that even those who let themselves be carried away more by their passions always judge, inside them, that there are more goods than evils in this life, even though they do not perceive them themselves. For even if they sometimes call death to their aid when they feel great pains, it is only insofar

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95. The good is from the whole entire cause, the bad from any defect whatsoever.

as it helps them to carry their burden, just as it is in the fable. But they do not want to lose their life for that. Or better, if there are some of them who do want to lose their life, it is by an error of their understanding and not by a well-reasoned judgment or by a belief that nature imprinted on them, as is that which brings it about that one prefers the goods in this life to its evils.

The reason I believe that those who do nothing that is not for their particular utility ought also, just as much as others, to work for others and try to bring pleasure to each, as much as is in their power, if they want to be prudent, is that one commonly sees that those who are deemed officious and prompt in bringing pleasure also receive a number of good favors from others, even from those who do not owe them anything. They would not have received these favors had they been thought by others to be of some other humor, and the pains they take in bringing pleasure are not as great as the conveniences afforded by their friendships. For others expect from us only the services we can perform easily, and we don't expect any more from others. But it often happens that what costs them little profits us a lot, and even can be worth our life. It is true that sometimes our efforts to do good aren't worth the trouble, and, on the contrary, that we gain in doing badly. But this cannot change the rule of prudence, which relates only to those things that happen most often. For me, the maxim that I have observed most
357 in all the conduct of my life has been to follow only the common path and to believe that the principal finesse is to avoid using finesse. The common laws of society, which all tend to make people treat each other well, or at least not to do any ill to each other, are, it seems to me, so well established that whoever follows them honestly, without any dissimulation or artifice, leads a much happier and more assured life than those who seek their own utility by other routes, though, in truth, they succeed sometimes through the ignorance of other men and by the favor of fortune. But it happens much more often that they fail and that in thinking to establish themselves, they ruin themselves. It is with this ingenuity and this frankness, which I profess to observe in all my actions, that I also profess particularly to be, &c.

AT 4:403

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES

[The Hague] 25 April [1646]

404 M. Descartes,

The treaty that my brother Philip just reached with the Republic of Venice has given me, since just after your departure, an occupation much less agreeable than the one you left me, concerning a matter which is beyond

my knowledge, and to which I am drawn only to quell the impatience of the young man it concerns.⁹⁶ This has prevented me up to now from exercising the permission you gave me to lay out for you the obscurities my own stupidity leads me to find in your *Traité des passions*. These are few in number, since one would have to be senseless not to understand that the order, definition, and distinctions you give to the passions, and indeed all the moral part of this treatise, surpass all that anyone has ever said on this subject.⁹⁷

But the part of it involving physics is not so clear to the ignorant, for I do not see how one can know the diverse movements of the blood which cause the five primitive passions, because they are never alone. For example, love is always accompanied by desire and joy, or by desire and sadness, and as it grows stronger, the others grow as well.⁹⁸ . . . How is it possible to observe the difference in the beating of the pulse, the digestion of meats, and other changes of the body that serve in discovering the nature of these movements? Also as you note, in each of the passions the motions are not the same for all temperaments.⁹⁹ Mine is such that sadness always takes away my appetite, as long as it is not mixed with some hate which comes only from the death of some friend.

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When you speak of the exterior signs of these passions you say that wonder, joined to joy, makes the lungs expand in an irregular way, thereby causing laughter.¹⁰⁰ I ask you to add in what way wonder (which, according to your description, seems to operate only in the brain) can open the orifices of the heart so promptly to bring about this effect.¹⁰¹

The passions you note as the cause of sighs do not always seem to be so, since custom and the fullness of the stomach produce the same effects.¹⁰²

But I find it much less difficult to understand all that you say on the passions than to practice the remedies you prescribe for their excesses. For how is one to foresee all the accidents that can come upon one in life, as it

96. Elisabeth's brother Philip had agreed to lead a regiment in a war against the Turks waged by a united Venice and Poland. This seems to have been negotiated by the Venetian plenipotentiary to the congress at Münster, the ambassador Contarini. See AT 4:670.

97. Descartes has clearly made significant progress on the *Passions* since his letter of 6 October 1645, and it seems as though he has now enumerated the passions much as he does in part 2 of that work.

98. See *Passions* aa.96–106. The ellipsis that follows indicates that there is a gap in the manuscript.

99. See *Passions* a.136.

100. See *ibid.*, a.124.

101. See *ibid.*, a.71f.

102. See *ibid.*, a.135.

is impossible to enumerate them? And how are we to prevent ourselves from desiring with ardor those things that necessarily tend to the conservation of man (such as health and the means to live), but that nevertheless do not depend on our free will? As for knowledge of the truth, the desire for it is so just that it exists naturally in all men. But it would be necessary to have infinite knowledge to know the true value of the goods and evils which customarily move us, as there are many more such things than a single person would know how to imagine. Thus, for this it would be necessary to know perfectly everything that is in the world.¹⁰³

406 Since you have already told me the principal maxims concerning private life, I will content myself with now hearing those concerning civil life, even though civil life often leaves one dependent on persons of so little reason that up to this point I have always found it better to avail myself of experience rather than reason, in matters that concern it.

I have been interrupted so often in writing you that I am constrained to send you my rough draft and to use the Alkmaar messenger, since I have forgotten the name of the friend to whom you wanted me to address my letters.¹⁰⁴ I do not dare return your treatise to you until I know it, since I am not willing to risk putting in the hand of a drunk such a great prize, which has given so much satisfaction to

Your very affectionate friend at your service,
Elisabeth.

AT 4:406

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH

May 1646 (A)

407 Madame,

I have found out by experience that I was right to number glory among the passions,¹⁰⁵ for I could not prevent myself from being moved in seeing the favorable judgment that your Highness made of the little treatise I wrote on them. I am also not at all surprised by the faults she pointed out therein, since I did not doubt in the least that there were a great many there, the

103. Elisabeth here seems to be taking issue with the remedies Descartes adverts to in *Passions* aa.138, 144–48. Given the content of Elisabeth's remarks here, it seems that at this point Descartes had shared with her a draft of part 2 of the *Passions*: Of the Number and Order of the Passions and the Explanation of the Six Primitives. He also had shared with her a section of what was to become part 1 of the work. It is not clear he has completed part 3.

104. See AT 4:390. Descartes, in a letter to a lawyer requests that correspondence be directed to M. Adam Spucker in Alkmaar.

105. See *Passions* aa.66, 204.

passions being a matter that I had never before studied and on which I have but drawn the first pencil sketch, without adding to it the colors and the ornaments which would be required to have it appear before eyes less clear-sighted than those of your Highness.

I have also not yet put in all the principles of physics which I made use of in enumerating the movements of the blood that accompany each passion, since I do not know how to deduce them without explaining the formation of all the parts of the human body. This is something so difficult that I would not yet dare to undertake it, although I myself am just about satisfied concerning the truth of the principles I supposed in this writing. These principles are: that the duty of the liver and the spleen is always to contain some reserve blood, less purified than what is in the veins; and that the fire in the heart needs to be continually fired, either by the juice of meats, which comes directly from the stomach, or, without that, by this blood that is in reserve, since the other blood which is in the veins expands too easily; and that there is such a link between our soul and our body that the thoughts which have accompanied some movements of the body, from the beginning of our life, still accompany them in the present, so that, if the same movements are excited a second time by some exterior cause, they excite in the soul the same thoughts, and reciprocally, if we have the same thoughts, they produce the same movements;¹⁰⁶ and finally, that the machine of our body is made such that a single thought of joy, or of love, or another similar one is sufficient to send the animal spirits through the nerves to all the muscles which are required to cause the different movements of the blood that I said accompany the passions. It is true that I had difficulty in distinguishing those that appertain to each passion, since they never occur alone. But nevertheless, since the same ones are not always joined together, I tried to observe the changes that happened in the body when they were changing company. Thus, for example, if love was always joined with joy, I would not know to which of the two ought to be attributed the heat and the dilation which they make us feel around the heart. But since it is also sometimes joined with sadness, and then we still feel this heat, and no longer this dilation, I judged that the heat appertains to love, and the dilation to joy. Even if desire were almost always with love, they are nevertheless not always together to the same degree. For even if one loves a lot, one desires little when one does not conceive any hope. And since one has none of the diligence and the

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106. See *ibid.* aa.44, 50, 107, 136, 211. In aa.136 Descartes identifies this as "the principle on which everything I have written about this [i.e., the passions] is based." AT 11:428. See also the letter to Chanut of 1 February 1647, AT 4:603–6, CSMK 306–8, and the letter to Elisabeth of 8 July 1647 below. Descartes does modify this principle slightly but importantly in aa.44, 50, and 211, as he there maintains that we can change these natural associations by habit.

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readiness then that one would have if the desire were greater, one can judge that it is from desire that those things come and not from love.

I believe very much that sadness takes away the appetite in many, but since I have always found that it augments it in myself, I have based my account on that. I think that the difference that occurs here comes from the fact that the first subject of sadness some people had at the beginning of their lives was that they did not receive enough food, and that others first felt sadness when the food they received was harmful to them. In the latter the movement of the spirits that destroys the appetite has ever since remained joined with the passion of sadness. We see also that the movements that accompany the other passions are not entirely similar in all men, and this can be attributed to a similar cause.

For wonder, even though it has its origin in the brain, and though the temperament of the blood alone cannot cause it, as it can often cause joy or sadness, all the same, it can, by means of the impression it makes in the brain, act on the body as much as any of the other passions, or even more in a certain way, because the surprise that it contains causes the quickest
 410 movements of all. And as one can move the hand or the foot almost at the same instant that one thinks of moving them, since the idea of this movement that is formed in the brain sends the spirits into the muscles which serve to achieve this effect, in this way, the idea of a pleasant thing which surprises the mind sends the spirits just as quickly into the nerves that open the orifices of the heart. Wonder, by its surprise, simply augments the force of the movement which causes joy. Since the orifices of the heart are dilated all of a sudden, the blood which enters into the lungs by the vena cava and leaves them by the arterial vein inflates them suddenly.

The same exterior signs that usually accompany the passions can also sometimes be produced by other causes.¹⁰⁷ Thus, flushing of the face does not always come from shame, but it can also come from the heat of the fire, or even because one is exercising. The laughter called sardonic is nothing else but a convulsion of the nerves of the face. Similarly one can sigh sometimes from custom, or from a malady, but this does not prevent sighs from being exterior signs of sadness or of desire, when passions cause them. I had never heard said or observed that they were also sometimes caused by the fullness of the stomach, but when this does happen I think it is a movement nature uses to make the juice of meats pass more promptly through the heart, so that the stomach is emptied sooner. For sighs, in agitating the lungs, make the blood they contain descend more quickly by the venous
 411 artery on the left side of the heart, so that the new blood, composed of the

107. See *Passions* aa.113–36.

juice of meats, which comes from the stomach through the liver and the heart just to the lung, can be easily received there.

For the remedies against the excesses of the passions, I admit that they are difficult to practice, and even that they cannot suffice for preventing disorders of the body, but only for making it such that the soul is not troubled and can retain its free judgment. In regard to which I do not judge it necessary to have exact knowledge of the truth of each thing, or even to have foreseen in particular all possible accidents, which would no doubt be impossible. But it is enough to have imagined in general things more troubling than those which have come, and to be prepared to suffer through them. I also do not think that one ever sins by excess in desiring those things necessary to life. It is only bad or superfluous desires that need to be regulated. For those which tend to the good are, it seems to me, all the better the greater they are. Even though I may have wanted to flatter my own failing in putting a certain sort of languor among the excusable passions, I nevertheless value much more the diligence of those who always carry themselves with ardor in doing those things which they believe to be in some way their duty, even if they do not hope for very much fruit there.

I lead a life so retired, and I have always been so distant from the management of affairs, that I would not be less impertinent than the philosopher who wanted to instruct on the duty of a captain in the presence of Hannibal¹⁰⁸ if I were to undertake to write here the maxims one ought to observe in civil life. I do not doubt that those your Highness proposes are the best of all: that is, that it is better to regulate oneself in this regard according to experience rather than according to reason, since we have rarely come across people who are as perfectly rational as all men ought to be, to the extent that one could judge what they will do solely by considering what they ought to do. Often the best advice is not the happiest. This is why one is constrained to take a chance and to put oneself in the power of fortune, which I hope is as obedient to your desires as I am, &c.

412

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH

AT 4:413

Egmond, May 1646 (B)

Madame,

414

The opportunity I had to give this letter to M. de Beclin, who is a very close friend, and whom I trust almost as much as myself, leads me to take

108. Hannibal (247–183 BCE), the Carthaginian general, was one of the great military leaders of antiquity. He commanded the Carthaginian forces against Rome in the Second Punic War.

the liberty to confess to a very glaring error I made in the treatise on the passions. To flatter my own negligence, I put among the number of the emotions of the soul that are excusable, a certain sort of languor which sometimes prevents us from executing those things which are approved by our judgment.¹⁰⁹ What gives me the most concern here is that I remember that your Highness noted this point in particular, as showing that I did not disapprove of having this passion in a matter where I cannot see its usefulness. I admit that we have good reason to take the time to deliberate before undertaking important matters, but once a project has begun, and when we are in accord with the main aim, I do not see that there is any profit in looking for delays in disputing over whether the conditions are right. If the project succeeds despite this, all the little advantages one might perhaps have acquired by this means are less serviceable than the disgust usually caused by these delays is harmful. If it does not succeed, all this will serve only to show the world that one had plans that have failed. Apart from that, it happens more often when the project one undertakes is very good than when the project is bad that the opportunity for it disappears while one puts off doing it. This is why I am persuaded that resolution and promptness are virtues very necessary for matters already begun. One does not have cause to fear what one does not know, for often things about which we have been the most apprehensive before knowing them turn out to be better than those we desired. Thus, the best thing in this case is to trust oneself to divine providence and to let oneself be led by it. I assure myself that your Highness understands my thought very well, even though I explain it very badly, and that she pardons the extreme zeal that obliges me to write this. For I am, as much as I can be, &c.

415

AT 4:447

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES

[The Hague, July 1646]

448 M. Descartes,

Since your voyage is delayed until the 3rd/13th of this month, I must remind you of the promise you made me to leave your agreeable solitude to give me the happiness of seeing you, before my departure from here makes me lose the hope of doing so for six or seven months. That is the longest term

109. See *Passions* a.170 on irresolution. Descartes there incorporates the point he makes here: that irresolution can benefit us in providing us with time to weigh a decision, but that when the time for action comes we must be decisive.

of seclusion that the Queen my mother, Monsieur my brother,¹¹⁰ and the sentiment of the friends of my house have prescribed for my absence.¹¹¹ But it would be again too long if I were not assured that you will continue there the charity of allowing me to profit from your meditations by your letters, since, without their assistance, the cold winds of the north and the caliber of people with whom I would be able to converse would extinguish the small ray of common sense that I take from nature and which I remember how to use by your method. They promise me that in Germany I will have enough leisure and tranquility to study it, and I will not bring there any greater treasure, from which I hope to take more satisfaction, than your writings. I hope that you will permit me to take the work on the passions, even though it was not able to calm those that the last piece of misfortune has excited. It must be that your presence brought the cure to them, since neither your maxims nor my reasoning had been able to. The preparations for my voyage and the affairs of my brother Philip, along with the polite kindness of attending to the pleasure of my aunt, have prevented me until now from giving you the thanks you deserve for the usefulness of your visit; I ask that you receive them now from

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Your very affectionate friend at your service,
Elisabeth.

M. Descartes,

I am obliged to send this letter by messenger, since its timeliness is more necessary to me at this moment than its security.

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH

AT 4:485

Egmond, September 1646

Madame,

486

I read the book about which your Highness commanded me to write her my opinion,¹¹² and I found there many precepts which seem very good

110. Charles Louis (Karl Ludwig) was the head of the Palatine house at this time, as Frederick, king of Bohemia, had died in 1632 and the oldest son, Frederick Henry, had died in 1629.

111. Elisabeth and her brother Philip were forced to leave Holland as Philip, with Elisabeth's knowledge, killed François d'Espinay in broad daylight in The Hague. D'Espinay, who already had a bit of a reputation as a ladies' man, apparently had been courting their mother, and then their sister, Louise Hollandine. Elisabeth was to go to stay with her aunt, the electress of Brandenburg, in Berlin.

112. Elisabeth seems to have made this specific request to comment on Machiavelli's *The Prince* in person, though it follows on her earlier effort to receive Descartes' thoughts on maxims for guiding civil life. See the letter of 25 April 1646. It is unclear in what language Descartes read

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to me, among them those in chapters 19 and 20: *that a prince must always avoid the hate and contempt of his subjects, and that love of the people is worth more than fortresses.* But there are several others of which I cannot approve. I think that what the author has missed most is that he has not drawn enough of a distinction between princes who have acquired a state by just means, and those who have usurped power by illegitimate means, and that he has given to all in general the precepts that are proposed only to these latter ones. For just as in building a house on foundations so bad that they cannot support high and thick walls, one is obliged to make those walls thin and low, so too those who have begun by establishing themselves through crimes are ordinarily constrained to continue to commit crimes and would not be able to maintain themselves in power were they to want to be virtuous.¹¹³

It is with regard to such princes that he could say in chapter 3 that *they will not fail to be hated by most, and that they often gain more benefit from doing more harm than from doing less, since light offenses suffice to engender the will to avenge oneself, and great ones destroy the power to do so.*¹¹⁴ Then, in chapter 15, he says that, *if they wanted to be good men, it would be impossible for them to avoid ruin among the great number of evil people found everywhere.*¹¹⁵ And in chapter 19 he writes that *one can be hated for good actions just as well as for bad ones.*¹¹⁶

On these foundations, he rests some very tyrannical precepts: *that one should ruin a whole country in order to become master of it; that one should exercise great cruelty, so long as it is done promptly and all at once; that one should try to appear to be a good man, but that one should not be one truly; that one should keep one's word only for so long as will be useful; that one should dissimulate; that one should betray; and finally that to rule, one should strip oneself of all humanity, and that one should become the fiercest of all the animals.*¹¹⁷

But it is a very sorry matter to make books that undertake to present such precepts, which, at the end of the day, cannot give any assurance to those to whom it offers them. For, as he himself admits, *these princes cannot guard themselves from the first person willing to risk his life to take revenge on them.*¹¹⁸ Instead,

The Prince. Adam and Tannery give good reason to think he read it in Italian. See AT 4:493. Descartes' paraphrasings and quotations are in French in this letter. For a contemporary English translation see Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ed. Quentin Skinner and Russell Price (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

113. The architectural metaphor is familiar from Descartes' *Meditations*, the First Meditation in particular, and the Replies to the Seventh Objections (of Bourdin). See AT 7:536–37, CSM 2:366–67.

114. See Machiavelli, *Prince*, ed. Skinner and Price, 9.

115. *Ibid.*, 54.

116. *Ibid.*, 68.

117. *Ibid.*, 30–34 (chap. 8) and 61–63 (chap. 18).

118. *Ibid.*, 69–70 (chap. 19).

in order to instruct a good prince, however newly he has come to power, it seems to me one should propose to him altogether contrary maxims; and it should be supposed that the means he used to establish himself in power were just, as in effect I believe they almost always are, when the princes who practice them think them to be. For justice between sovereigns has different limits than that between individuals, and it seems that in these cases God gives the right to those to whom he gives force. But the most just action becomes unjust when those who do them think them so.

One must also distinguish between subjects, friends or allies, and enemies. With regard to the last, one has permission to do almost everything, provided that one can draw from it some advantage for oneself or for one's subjects. And I do not disapprove, on this occasion, of coupling the fox with the lion, and joining artifice to force. I even include, under the name of enemy, all those who are not friends or allies, since one has the right to wage war on them when one finds it in one's interest, and since, when they start to become suspect or fearsome, one has a basis to distrust them.¹¹⁹ But I take exception to one kind of deception, which is so directly contrary to society that I do not think it is ever permissible to use it, even if our author approves of it in various places and it is all too common: it is to feign to be the friend of those one wishes to defeat in order to be better able to surprise them. Friendship is something too sacred to abuse in this way. Those who would be able to feign loving someone in order to betray him deserve that those whom they later want to befriend truly believe nothing of what they say and hate them.

As for allies, a prince ought to keep his word to them exactly, even when this is disadvantageous to him. For the reputation of always doing what he promises can never be more disadvantageous than useful, and he can only acquire this reputation through those occasions when he has something to lose. In those situations in which he will be completely ruined, the right of man frees him from his promise. He must also use great circumspection before promising, in order to be able always to keep his faith. And even if it is good to have friendships with most of his neighbors, I nevertheless think that the best thing is not to have any close alliances except with those who have less power. For no matter how loyal one intends to be, one ought not

119. Descartes here seems to be following Hugo Grotius's discussion of the just causes of war in book 2 of *On the Law of War and Peace*. That work was first published in 1625 in Paris. Grotius (1583–1645) pioneered natural rights theory. He was Dutch, though he received his doctorate of law from the University of Orleans in 1625. He lived in Paris in exile from 1625 to 1631. In 1635 he was appointed Sweden's ambassador to Paris, and in this capacity he helped to negotiate a treaty to end the Thirty Years' War. He was, however, recalled from that position in 1644, before a full peace was negotiated.

to expect the same from others, but to arrange one's affairs as if one will be cheated whenever one's allies find it to their advantage. And those who are more powerful can find it to their advantage when they want to, but not those who are less powerful.

As for subjects, there are two sorts of them: the great and the common people. I understand by the great all those who can form parties against the prince. Of their loyalty he ought to be very sure. Or if he is not sure, all those in politics are in agreement that he ought to employ all his care to abase them, and that insofar as they are inclined to cause trouble to the state, he ought to consider them only as enemies. But for the other sort of subjects, he above all ought to avoid their hatred and their contempt, which I think he can always do so long as he observes exactly their way of justice (that is to say, in accordance with the laws to which they are accustomed), without being too rigorous with punishment or too indulgent with pardons, and so long as he does not put himself completely in the hands of his ministers. Rather he should leave his ministers in charge only of the most odious condemnations and show himself to be concerned with the rest. Then also, he should retain his dignity sufficiently so that he does not forsake any of the honors and the deference the people believe are due him, but he should not demand any more. And he should perform publicly only the most important actions, or those which can be approved by all, reserving to keep his pleasures to himself, and never at anyone else's expense. Finally, he should be immovable and inflexible. I do not mean in the first plans, formed on his own, for since he cannot see everything for himself, it is necessary that he ask for advice and listen to the reasons of several people before being resolved. But he ought to be inflexible about those things he has shown himself to be resolved on, even if they are harmful to him. For they cannot be as harmful as the reputation of being light and variable.

Thus I disapprove of the maxim of chapter 15 which claims that, *as the world is very corrupt, it is impossible that one will not ruin oneself if one always wants to be a good man, and that a prince, in order to maintain himself, must learn to be wicked when the occasion requires it.*¹²⁰ That is, unless maybe by a good man, he means a superstitious and simple man who does not dare to go to battle on the Sabbath, and whose conscience can be at rest only if he changes the religion of his people. But thinking that a good man is he who does everything true reason tells him to, it is certain that the best thing is always to try to be one.

I also do not agree with what is said in chapter 19: that one can be hated just as much for good actions as for bad ones,¹²¹ unless envy is a species of

120. See Machiavelli, *Prince*, ed. Skinner and Price, 54–55.

121. *Ibid.*, 68.

hate. But this is not the sense of the author. And princes are not usually envied by most of their subjects; they are so only by the great, or by their neighbors, in whom the same virtues that cause envy also cause fear. This is why one should never abstain from acting well, to avoid this sort of hate. There is no hate that can destroy these princes but what arises from injustice or the arrogance which the people judge to be in them. One sees that even those who are condemned to death do not ordinarily hate their judges when they think their punishment deserved. One also suffers wholly undeserved evils with patience when one believes that the prince, from whom one has received them, is in some way constrained to inflict them, and that he was displeased to do so, since one judges that it is just to prefer the public utility to that of individuals. It is only difficult when one is obliged to satisfy two parties who judge differently what is just, as were the Roman emperors who had to keep both soldiers and citizens content.¹²² In this case it is reasonable to grant something to each, and one need not try to bring instantly to reason those who are not accustomed to listen to it. But it is necessary to try little by little, either by public writings or by the voice of preachers, or by some other means, to make them see reason. For in the end the people suffer all that one can persuade them is just and are offended by all they imagine to be unjust. The arrogance of princes, that is to say, the usurping of some authority or some rights or some honors the people do not think are deserved, is odious to them only because they consider it a kind of injustice.

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As for the rest, I am also not of the opinion of this author in what he says in the preface: *that as it is necessary to be in the plains to see the shape of the mountains when one wants to sketch them, so too one must be a private citizen in order to know well the duties of a prince.*¹²³ For the sketch represents only those things which are seen at a distance, but the principal motives and actions of princes are often such particular circumstances that one can imagine them only if one is a prince oneself, or perhaps if one has been party to their secrets for a very long time.

492

This is why I would deserve to be mocked if I thought myself able to teach something to your Highness on this matter. This is not my intent; I intend only that my letters give her some sort of distraction different from those that I imagine she is having on her trip. I hope that trip is perfectly happy, as without a doubt it will be if your Highness is resolved to practice those maxims which teach that the felicity of each depends only on oneself, and that it

122. Descartes is adverting to Machiavelli's own discussion of the Roman emperors Commodus, Severus, Antoninus Caracalla, and Maximinus in chapter 19. See *ibid.*, 68–70.

123. See *ibid.*, 4.

is very necessary to carry oneself outside the rule of fortune so that, while one does not miss the occasions to take the advantages it can give, one does not let oneself become unhappy when it refuses them. Since in all worldly affairs there are some reasons for and some against, one should consider principally those that make one approve of what happens. What I think are the most inevitable are the maladies of the body, which I pray God preserves you from, and I am with all the devotion that I can have, &c.¹²⁴

AT 4:495

DESCARTES TO SOPHIE¹²⁵*Egmond, September 1646*

496 Madame,

I count among the number of obligations I have to the Princess Elisabeth, your sister, that having asked me to write her, she wanted it to be sent through your Highness. Knowing how much she cherishes you, I hope that my letters will be less importunate as she receives them in the company of yours, and that they will give her more joy than they would have if they were sent all alone. Also this gives me the occasion to be able to assure you in writing that I am, &c.

AT 4:519

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES

Berlin, 10 October [1646]

M. Descartes,

You are right to believe that the diversion that your letters bring me is different from that I have had while away, since it gives me a greater and more lasting satisfaction. Although I've found in the latter all that the friendship and the caresses of those close to me could give me, I consider them as something which could change, while the truths that the former bring me leave impressions in my mind which will always contribute to the contentment of my life.

124. Adam and Tannery speculate that this letter is incomplete. There should be a postscript in which Descartes proposes a code for their continued correspondence. See Elisabeth to Descartes, 10 October 1646.

125. This letter accompanied the previous letter of Descartes to Elisabeth. There has been some dispute about whom it was addressed to; Clerselier indicates it was to Elisabeth's sister, Louise Hollandine. But Adam and Tannery remark upon a note inserted in one edition that states that Louise Hollandine denied the letters were addressed to her and asserted that they were addressed to Sophie, Elisabeth's youngest sister. Adam and Tannery give good reason to find this claim credible. Sophie would have been about sixteen years old. She would go on to correspond with Leibniz and other leading intellectual figures in her own right as the electress of Hanover.

I have a thousand regrets at not having brought by land the book you have taken the trouble to examine so that you might tell me your thoughts on it. I was persuaded that the baggage I sent by sea at Hamburg would be here sooner than we would be. It is not here yet, even though we arrived here 7/17 September. For this reason I can consider the maxims of this author only as much as a very bad memory can provide me of a book that I have not looked at once in six years. But I recall that I approved of a few, not because they are good in themselves, but because they bring about less evil than those used by a number of ambitious imprudent persons I know, who tend only to stir things up and leave the rest to fortune. Those of this author tend all of them toward stability.

It seems to me as well that to teach how to govern a state, he starts from the state which is the most difficult to govern, where the prince is a new usurper, at least in the opinion of the people. In this case, his own opinion of the justice of his cause could serve to ease his conscience, but it will not ease his affairs where the laws oppose his authority, the great undermine him, and the people curse him. When the state is so disposed, a great violence causes less evil than a small one, because the latter offends as much as the former and gives occasion for a long war, while the former destroys the courage and the means of the great ones who could undertake such a war. Also, since the violence comes promptly and all at once, it annoys less than it surprises and is also more supportable by the people than a long chain of miseries that civil wars bring.

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It seems to me that he added there, or better taught, by the example of the nephew of Pope Alexander whom he puts forward as a perfect politician,¹²⁶ that the prince should use a minister to perform these great cruelties, one whom he can afterward sacrifice to the hatred of the people. Even though it appears unjust of the prince to bring about the loss of a man who obeyed him, I find those persons who want to be employed as executioner of a whole people so barbaric and unnatural, no matter how great the compensation, that they do not merit any better treatment. As for me, I would prefer the condition of the poorest peasant in Holland to that of the minister who would want to obey similar orders or to that of the prince who would be constrained to give them.

When the same author speaks of allies, he supposes them, in a parallel way, to be as evil as they can be, and matters to be in such an extreme state that it is necessary either to lose an entire republic or to break one's word to those who keep it only so long as it is useful to them.

But if he is wrong to have made these general maxims from those cases which occur in practice on very few occasions, he errs equally in this with all

126. See *The Prince*, chap. 7, especially Skinner and Price, 24–29.

the Church Fathers and the ancient philosophers who do this as well. And I believe that this comes from the pleasure they draw from putting forward paradoxes that they can later explain to their students. When this man here says that one will be destroyed if one always wants to be a good man, I do not think he means that to be a good man it is necessary to follow laws of superstition. Rather he means this common law by which one should do unto others as one would like done to oneself: a law which princes are almost never able to observe with regard to one of their subjects, who must be sacrificed each time public utility requires it. Since, before you, no one has said that virtue consists in following right reason, but have only prescribed laws or more particular rules, one should not be surprised that they have failed to define it well.

I find that the rule you observe in his preface is false because the author has never known a person who sees clearly all that he sets about doing, as you do, and who by consequence, in private and retired from the confusion of the world, would nevertheless be capable of teaching princes how they should govern, as seems to be the case from what you have written.

For myself, who have only the title of prince, I study only so that I might apply the rule that you put at the end of your letter, and try to present events to myself in as agreeable way as I can. Here I do not encounter much difficulty, being in a house where I have been cherished since my childhood and where everyone conspires to take care of me.¹²⁷ Even though some of these efforts distract me sometimes from more useful occupations, I easily support this inconvenience through the pleasure there is in being loved by those closest to one. There you have, Monsieur, the reason that I did not have the leisure to give you sooner an account of the fortunate success of our voyage, since it has passed without a single inconvenience, with the promptness that I wrote of above, and of the miraculous spring¹²⁸ of which you spoke to me at The Hague.

I have only been to a little place away from here, to Cheuningen, where we met the whole family of the House, who were there. The elector¹²⁹ wanted to bring me to see the spring, but since the rest of our company preferred

127. Elisabeth is writing from her aunt's house in Berlin. Elisabeth Charlotte, her father's sister, had married George William of Brandenburg. It was here that she was brought, along with her brother Charles Louis (Karl Ludwig), by her grandmother Juliana upon the losses of her father, Frederick V, at White Mountain. They remained there for several years, until they were sent for in The Hague, where their parents had set up a court in exile.

128. The salt water of the springs at Hornhausen, about 180 km south of Berlin, were reputed to have curative powers. See also the letter of 29 November 1646 below.

129. Frederick William, elector of Brandenburg (1620–88). He became elector in 1640 and remained so until his death. He came to be known as the Great Elector.

another diversion, I did not dare to contradict them and satisfied myself by seeing and tasting the water, of which there are different sources with different tastes. Only two are generally used, the first of which is clear, salty, and a strong purgative; the other is a bit white, tasting of water mixed with milk, and is, or so they say, refreshing. They speak of a quantity of miraculous cures they have brought, but I wasn't able to hear of one from any person worthy of trust. They are right in saying that this place is full of poor people who claim to have been born deaf, blind, lame, or hunchback and found their cure in this spring. But since these are mercenary types, who find themselves in a nation that is rather credulous with respect to miracles, I do not believe that this should persuade reasonable people. In the whole court of the elector, my cousin, there was only his great esquire who discovered this curative power for himself. He had a wound under his right eye, from which he had lost the vision on one side, because of a little skin that had grown under this eye. The salty water from this spring, being applied to the eye, dissolved the aforementioned skin so much that he can now see people while closing his left eye. On the other hand, as he is a man of such a strong complexion and bad diet, a good purge could not harm him as it might many others.

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I examined the code that you sent me and found it very good, but too long to write a whole thought. And if one writes only a bit of a word, one would figure it out by the number of letters. It would be better to make a key of words by alphabet and then to mark a distinction between the numbers that signify letters and those that signify words.

I have so little leisure to write here that I am constrained to send you this draft, in which you can see from the difference in pens all the times I have been interrupted. But I prefer to appear before you with all my faults than to give you a basis for thinking that I have a vice so removed from my nature as that of forgetting my friends in absence, especially a person whom I would not know how to cease feeling affection for, without ceasing also to be reasonable, like you, Monsieur, to whom I will be all my life,

Your very affectionate friend at your service,
Elisabeth.

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH

AT 4:528

November 1646

Madame,

I received a great favor from your Highness in her wanting me to learn, through her letter, of the success of her voyage and that she arrived hap-

pily in a place where it seems to me that she has as many goods as one can reasonably hope to have in this life, since she is highly esteemed there and cherished by those near her. Knowing the condition of human affairs, it would be asking too much of fortune to expect so many favors from her that we could not even imagine finding anything to complain about. When there is nothing present that offends the senses, or any indisposition of the body that troubles it, a mind that follows true reason can easily content itself. For this it is not necessary that one forget or neglect things far away. It is enough that one try to have no passion for what can displease. And this does not go against charity, since one can often better find remedies for ills that one examines dispassionately than for those that afflict us. But as the health of the body and the presence of agreeable objects help the mind greatly in chasing away all the passions which participate in sadness and allow those which participate in joy to enter, so, reciprocally, when the mind is full of joy this serves well to make the body carry itself better and present objects appear more agreeable.¹³⁰

I even dare to think that interior joy¹³¹ has some secret power to make fortune more favorable. I would not write this to people who have weak minds, for fear of introducing them to some superstition, but with regard to your Highness I only fear that she will mock me for having become too credulous. All the same, I have an infinity of experiences, and with that the authority of Socrates, for confirming my belief.¹³² That is, I have often noticed that things I have done with a happy heart and without any interior repugnance have usually succeeded well for me. Even in games of chance, where fortune alone reigns, I have always had more favorable experiences when I have come to the game with reasons for joy than when I have done so with reasons for sadness. And what is commonly called the "daimon"¹³³ of Socrates was without doubt nothing else but that he was accustomed to following his interior inclinations and thought that the outcome of what he undertook would be happy when he had some secret feeling of gaiety, and, on the contrary, that it would be unhappy when he felt sad. It is true, however, that it would amount to being superstitious to believe as strongly in this

130. Descartes here reiterates the view he outlined earlier in his letter of May or June 1645, AT 4:218ff.

131. Descartes also writes of interior passions at *Passions* a.147, AT 11:440–41, though he does not there make the claim he does here.

132. See Plato, *Euthydemus* 277d–282e. There Socrates identifies wisdom with good fortune.

133. The word Descartes uses here is *genie*, the same word used in the French translation of the First Meditation: "Je supposerai donc qu'il y a, non point un vrai Dieu, qui est la souveraine source de verité, mais un certain mauvais genie" (AT 9:17).

as it is said he did. For Plato tells us of Socrates that he even remained in his lodgings when his daimon did not counsel him to go out.¹³⁴ But concerning the important actions of life, when they present themselves so unclearly that prudence cannot teach us what we ought to do, it seems to me that we have good reason to follow the advice of our "daimon" and that it is useful to have a strong belief that the things we undertake without repugnance and with the freedom which ordinarily accompanies joy will not fail to succeed for us.

So I dare here to exhort your Highness that, since she finds herself in a place where the objects before her give her only satisfaction, it is also in her interest to make her own contribution to the efforts to achieve her contentment. She can do this easily, it seems to me, by keeping her mind only on present things and by never thinking of business except in those hours when the courier is about to leave. And I think that it is a good thing that your Highness's books were not brought to her as soon as she expected. For reading them is not so likely to engender gaiety as to bring on sadness, especially reading that book by the Physician of Princes,¹³⁵ who represents only the difficulties princes have in maintaining themselves and the cruelty or perfidy he recommends they undertake, so that those who read it have fewer reasons to envy the condition of princes than to feel sorry for it.

531

Your Highness has noted perfectly well its faults and my own. For it is true that it was his plan to praise Cesare Borgia that led him to establish general maxims for justifying particular actions which could have been difficult to excuse. I have since read his discourses on Titus Livy where I noticed nothing evil.¹³⁶ His principal precept, which is to eliminate one's enemies entirely or else to make them one's friends, without ever taking the middle way, is without doubt always the surest. But when one has nothing to fear, this is not the most generous way to proceed.

Your Highness has also noted very well the secret of the miraculous spring,¹³⁷ in that there are many poor people who pronounce publicly on its virtues and who are perhaps hired by those who hope to make a profit from it. For it is certain that there is no remedy at all which can be used for all maladies. But of the many who have used that remedy, those who have found

134. See Plato, *Apology of Socrates*, 31d. Socrates here argues that his daimon, or inner voice, prevented him from taking part in public affairs, and he offers an account of how it was justified in doing so. It is not clear that this is Descartes' point. For one, Socrates claims that his daimon only forbade and never urged him to do anything, whereas Descartes' daimon does direct him to act. Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper, assoc. ed. D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 29.

135. That is, Machiavelli, author of *The Prince*.

136. Machiavelli, *Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livius*.

137. The spring at Hornhausen. See Elisabeth's letter of 10 October 1646.

532 themselves cured speak well of it, and no one talks about the others. In any case, the purgative quality in one of these springs, and white color, with the softness and refreshing quality of the other, makes me think that they pass through deposits of antimony or mercury which are two awful drugs, especially mercury. This is why I would not want to advise anyone to drink from them. The acid and the iron in the waters of Spa give much less reason to fear, and since they both shrink the spleen and chase away melancholy, I value these waters.

If your Highness will please permit me to finish this letter where I began it, I will wish her principally satisfaction of mind and joy, as they are not only the fruits which attend all other goods but also often a means for increasing the grace one has been given for acquiring them. Although I may not be capable of contributing anything to your service except my wishes, I dare nevertheless to assure you that I am more perfectly than is anyone else in the world, &c.

AT 4:533

DESCARTES TO SOPHIE ¹³⁸*November 1646*

Madame,

The letter that I had the honor to receive from Berlin makes me aware that I have a great obligation to your Highness, and considering that those letters I write and those I receive pass through such dignified hands, it seems to me that your sister imitates the divine sovereign, who has the habit of using the intermediary of angels to receive the submissions of men who are greatly inferior to them, and to make them aware of his commandments. Since I am of a religion which does not forbid me from invoking angels, I ask you to find it agreeable that I compare you to them and that I express here that I am with great devotion, &c.

AT 4:577

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES

[Berlin] 29 November [1646]

578 M. Descartes

I am not accustomed enough to favors of fortune to expect an extraordinary one; it is enough for me that she does not too often send me accidents

138. This letter accompanied the previous letter, from Descartes to Elisabeth, as Sophie served as messenger.

that would give cause for sadness to the greatest philosopher in the world. Since nothing similar has come to me during my stay here and everything around me is quite agreeable and the country air does not disagree with my complexion, I find myself in a state where I can practice your lessons concerning gaiety, even though I do not expect to find the effects you have experienced in games of chance in the conduct of my affairs. For the good luck you found then when you were inclined to joy from some other source apparently proceeded from your playing all your hands more freely, which usually makes one win.

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, seeing that even prudence would not be worth the trouble if it is not helped by other means. One would have to have a greater "daimon" than Socrates to succeed in that matter; for since he was not able to avoid either imprisonment or death, he has no reason to brag about it very much. I have also observed that those matters where I follow my own inclinations succeed better than those where I let myself be guided by the advice of those more sage than I am. But I do not attribute this as much to the felicity of my mind as to the fact that since I have more concern for that which affects me than anyone else, I have examined the paths that could harm or benefit me better than have those on whose judgment I rely. If you want me still to assign some role to the occult quality of my imagination, I believe that you do so in order to accommodate me to the humor of the folk of this country here and particularly to the learned who are even more pedantic and superstitious than those I knew in Holland. This comes from the fact that all the people here are so poor that no one studies or reasons except about what is required to live.

579

I have taken all the pains in the world to wrest myself from the hands of the doctors, in order not to suffer from their ignorance. And I haven't been ill, except that the change of air and diet has given me, instead of impetigo, some abscesses on my fingers. From these symptoms, these men judge that there is still some bad substance hidden away that is too large to pass through that region and which it is necessary to oppose with purges and bleeding. But feeling otherwise so well that I am noticeably gaining weight, I have used stubbornness when reason was useless and have taken none of their remedies. I am more apprehensive about the medicine here because everyone uses extracts from chemistry, the effects of which are immediate and dangerous.

580

Those who have searched for the ingredients of the spring at Hornhausen believe that the salty source contains only ordinary salt, and about

the other they do not agree at all. They (principally the Lutherans)¹³⁹ also attribute their effect more to a miracle than to the composition of the water. As for me, I will take the safest course, according to your opinion, and will not make use of it at all.

I also hope never to be in a state where I need to follow the precepts of the Physician of Princes, because violence and suspicion are things contrary to my nature. Even so, I blame the tyrants only for their initial plan to usurp a country and for the initial undertaking of it; for afterward the path which establishes them in power, however harsh it is, will always lead to less public harm than would a rule contested by battle.

This study also does not occupy me enough to leave me chagrined, for I use the little time left me after the letters I have to write, and the pleasantries I owe those close to me, to reread your works, from which I profit more in one hour in cultivating my reason than I would in my whole life with other readings. But there is no one else here who is reasonable enough to understand them, even though I have promised this old duke of Brunswick, who
584 is at Wolfenbuttel,¹⁴⁰ to give them to him in order to adorn his library. I do not believe that he will use them to adorn his feeble brain, as it is already thoroughly occupied with pedantry. I am here letting myself run on for the pleasure of entertaining you, forgetting that I am sinning against the human race by wasting your time (which you employ for its benefit) with the silliness of

Your very affectionate friend, at your service,
Elisabeth.

AT 4:588

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH

Egmond, December 1646

589 Madame,

Never have I found such good news in any of the letters I have heretofore had the honor of receiving from your Highness as I have in the last of 29 November. For that letter leads me to believe that you now are in better health and feel more joy than I have seen before. After virtue, which you

139. See above, note 128 and related text, where this spring is first mentioned. The area in which the spring is located lies in the heart of territory in Germany that became Lutheran, which may explain why Lutherans commented upon it when it became a phenomenon of some interest from March 1646 at least through the remainder of that year.

140. August, duke of Brunswick-Lunenbug, then duke of Wolfenbuttel in 1634 (1579–1666). He would have been sixty-six years old at this time.

have never lacked, I believe that these are the two principal goods we can have in this life. I do not put any stock in this little ailment the doctors have made up so that you might employ them. Though it might sometimes be a little uncomfortable, I come from a country where it is so common in those who are young and are otherwise quite healthy that I do not consider it so much an illness as a mark of health and a prophylactic against other maladies. Practical experience has taught our doctors certain remedies for curing this problem, though they do not advise that one take them in any other season but spring, since at that time the pores are more open and one can better destroy the cause. Thus, your Highness is very right not to want to use the remedies for this illness, especially at the beginning of winter, which is the most dangerous time. If this trouble lasts until spring, then it will be easier to chase it away with some light purgatives or with a refreshing broth to which there is nothing added but some herbs used in cooking, while refraining from eating meat that is too salted or otherwise spiced. Being bled may be of great use, but since it is a remedy involving some danger and the frequent use of it shortens one's life, I do not at all advise her to make use of it unless she is accustomed to it. When one is bled in the same season three or four years in a row, one is almost obliged thereafter to have it done every year at the same time. Your Highness also does very well in not wanting to use any of the remedies of the chemists. It is useless to have long experience with their power, as the least little change that one makes in their preparation, even when one thinks one is making things better, can entirely change their qualities and make what was once medicinal into something poisonous. 590

Almost the same thing can be said about science, when it is in the hands of those who try to apply it without knowing it well. For in thinking they are correcting or adding something to what they have learned, they change it into a mistake. I find evidence of this in the book of Regius, which has finally come out in print.¹⁴¹ I would note here some points about it, if I thought that he had sent a copy to your Highness. But it is so far from here to Berlin that I think he will have waited for you to return to offer it to you. And I will wait as well to tell you my views about it.

I am not surprised that your Highness does not find any learned men in the country where she is who are not entirely preoccupied with the opinions of the Schools. For I see that in Paris itself and all the rest of Europe there are so few others that, if I had known this beforehand, I would perhaps never 591

141. Henricus Regius, *Fundamenta Physica*. Recall that her study with Regius served as impetus to Elisabeth to begin to correspond with Descartes. See Elisabeth's letter to Descartes of 16 May 1643, note 3 above, and Descartes' letter of March 1647 below, as well as his letter to Mersenne of 5 October 1646 (AT 4:510–11, CSMK 295–96).

have had anything published. All the same, I have this consolation, that even if I am assured that most people did not lack the will to attack me, no one as yet has entered the lists against me.¹⁴² I have even received compliments from the Jesuit fathers, who I always thought were those most concerned with the publication of a new philosophy, and who would be the least likely to excuse me if they thought they had reason to find fault there.

I count among the number of obligations I owe your Highness, the promise she made to the duke of Brunswick, who is at Wolfenbuttel, to give him my writings. For I am sure that before you were where you are, I did not have the honor of being known there at all. It is true that I am not interested in being known to many people, but my principal ambition is to be able to express that I am with an entire devotion, &c.

DESCARTES TO SOPHIE¹⁴³

Egmond, December 1646

Madame,

The angels cannot leave more wonder and respect in the minds of those to whom they deign to appear than the letter I have had the honor of receiving, with that of your sister, has left in mine. Rather than diminishing the opinion I had, on the contrary, it assures me that it is not only the face of your Highness that merits being compared with that of angels. For just as painters can draw a model from your face with which to represent angels well, so too the graces of your mind are such that the philosophers have reason to wonder at them, and to judge them similar to those of these divine "daimons" who are drawn only to good actions and who do not fail to favor those who are devoted to them. I thus beg you to believe that it is with a very particular zeal that I am, &c.

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES

Berlin, 21 February 1647

M. Descartes,

618 I value joy and health as much as you do, although I prefer your friendship as much as virtue. For it is from your friendship that I draw joy and health, joined with the satisfaction of the mind which surpasses even joy,

142. Descartes is taking consolation that his works had not been entered in the *Index librorum prohibitorum*, the list of books prohibited by the Catholic Church. The censorship list was established in 1557 and not suppressed until 1966. Descartes' works were added to the list in 1663.

143. Again, this letter served to transmit the previous letter of Descartes to Elisabeth.

since it has taught me how to possess these things. I can no longer fail in my resolution to take no remedy at all for the little ailments that remain with me, since this resolution has met with your approval. I am at this hour so well cured of these abscesses that I do not think that there is any need for me to take medicaments to purge the blood in the spring, having discharged enough of the bad humors from my body and emptied it, or so I believe, of the fluxions that the cold and the stoves would have otherwise given me.

My sister Henriette¹⁴⁴ was so ill that we thought we had lost her. It is this that prevented me from responding sooner to your last letter, as I needed to be near her all the time. Since she is doing better, we have been obliged to attend the Queen Mother of Sweden,¹⁴⁵ every day in her train, and in the evenings at festivities and balls. These are very annoying distractions to those who are able to give themselves to better things, but they annoy less insofar as one does it for and with those people whom one has no grounds to resent. This is why I am more at ease here than I ever would be at The Hague.

619

I would be happier all the same to be able to spend my time in reading the book of Regius and your sentiments on it. If I do not return to The Hague in the coming summer (I am not yet able to determine whether I will, even though I have not changed my resolution, because whether I will depends in part on the will of others and public affairs), I will try to have the book sent to me by the ships which go from Amsterdam to Hamburg. I hope that you will do me the favor of sending me your sentiments on it by courier. Every time I read your writings, I cannot imagine how you can, in effect, regret having had them printed, since it is impossible that in the end they will not be received by and be useful to the public.

A little while ago I met one single man who has read some of your writings. He is a medical doctor named Weis, and he is very wise as well. He told me that Bacon¹⁴⁶ first made him suspicious of the Aristotelian philosophy and that your method made him reject it entirely and convinced him

144. One of Elisabeth's younger sisters, she was born in July 1626. In 1651 she was married to Sigismund Ragoczy, prince of Transylvania, who died that same year. Elisabeth seems to have been instrumental in negotiating this marriage.

145. Marie Eleanor of Brandenburg, daughter of the Elector Georg Wilhelm, and mother of Queen Christina of Sweden. In 1640, she moved to Denmark, and she remained in Brandenburg until 1648, when she returned to Sweden. She died in 1655.

146. Francis Bacon (1561–1626). In all likelihood Weis would have been influenced by Bacon's *Novum Organum*, first published in 1620, in which Bacon outlines a new method to replace that of the Aristotelians.

of the circulation of the blood,¹⁴⁷ which destroyed all the old principles of their medicine. This is why he admits that he consented to the new theory with regret. I have just presented him with 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 will send them to you, so that you can judge the capability of the one I find to be the most reasonable of the doctors here, since he has a taste for your reasoning. But I am sure that no one knows how to esteem you to a higher degree than does

Your very affectionate friend at your service,
Elisabeth.

AT 4:624

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH

The Hague, March 1647

Madame,

The satisfaction I see your Highness receives where she is makes me not dare to wish for her return, even if I have great trouble stopping myself from doing so, especially since now I find myself in The Hague. And since I note, from your letter of 21 February, that we cannot expect you here before the end of summer, I propose to make a trip to France to handle my private matters, and plan to return near winter. I will not leave for two months, so that before I go I can have the honor of receiving the commandments of your Highness, which will always have more power over me than anything else in the world.

I praise God that you now are in perfect health, but I beg you to pardon me if I dare to contradict your opinion that you should not use remedies, since the malady you had on your hands is gone. For I fear as much for your Highness as for your sister that the humors which have been purged were stopped by the cold of the season and that in spring they will bring back the same malady or put you in danger of some other malady if you do not remedy them by a good diet, using only meats and beverages which refresh the blood and which purge without any effort. As for drugs, whether from the apothecaries or the empirics, I hold them both in such low esteem that I would never dare advise anyone to use them.

I do not know what I could have written your Highness concerning the book of Regius that gives you occasion to want to know what I observed there. Maybe I did not give my opinion, in order not to prejudice your judgment in case you already had the book. But since I learn that you do not yet

147. Weis would have been so persuaded by part 5 of Descartes' *Discourse on the Method*.

have it, I will tell you here artlessly that I do not think that it is worth your trouble to read it. It contains nothing concerning physics, unless you include my claims, improperly ordered and without their true proofs, so that they appear to be paradoxes, and so that what is put in the beginning cannot be proven except by what is near the end. He has included almost nothing of his own, and few things that I have not published. But he has not neglected to omit what he owes to me, in that professing to be my friend and knowing well that I would not want what I have written regarding the description of animals to be divulged—so much so that I did not want to show it to him and excused myself by saying that he would not be able to prevent himself from talking about it with his disciples if I showed it to him—he has not failed to appropriate for himself several things from there. Having found a means to acquire a copy of it without my knowledge, he has transcribed the whole part where I talk about the movement of the muscles, where I consider, for example, two of the muscles which move the eye, from which there are two or three pages which he has repeated twice, word for word, in his book, it pleased him so much. All the same, he has not understood what he has written. For he has omitted the principal thing, which is that the animal spirits running from the brain to the muscles cannot return through the same channels by which they come. Without this observation all that he writes is worth nothing. And because he did not have my illustration, he made one that shows his ignorance clearly. They told me that he has at present yet another book on medicine¹⁴⁸ in press, where I expect he will have put all the rest of my writings insofar as he has been able to digest them. He without doubt would have taken many other things from them, but I know that he only got a copy when his own book was done being printed. But just as he blindly follows what he believes to be my opinions in all that regards physics or medicine, even though he does not understand them, so too does he contradict them blindly in all that concerns metaphysics. I have begged him to write nothing about metaphysics,¹⁴⁹ since this does not concern his topic at all, and since I was sure that he was not able to write anything on it that was not bad. But I have obtained nothing from him. For, not planning to satisfy me in this regard, he was no longer worried to disoblige me in other matters.

626

627

I will not fail tomorrow to bring to the P.S.¹⁵⁰ a copy of his book, whose title is *Henrici Regij fundamenta Physices*, with another little book of my good

148. *Ultrajectimi Fundamenta Medica* (Amsterdam: Theodorum Ackersdygium, 1647).

149. See Descartes to Regius, May 1641 (AT 3:371–72, CSMK 181–82), December 1641 (AT 3:454–55, CSMK 199), December 1641 (AT 3:460, CSMK 200–201), January 1642 (AT 3:491, CSMK 491–92).

150. No doubt P.S. adverts to the Princess Sophie, who was serving as intermediary in this portion of the correspondence.

friend M. de Hogelande,¹⁵¹ who has done the complete opposite of Regius. While Regius has written nothing which was not taken from me, and which, despite that, is against my views, the other has written nothing which is properly from me (for I do not think he has ever even read my writings well) and all the same he has written nothing which is not in my favor in
 628 that he has followed the same principles. I will ask Mme. L.¹⁵² to add these two books, which are not heavy, to the first packets it pleases her to send through Hamburg, to which I will add the French version of my *Meditations*, if I have it before leaving here, for it has already been long enough since they sent word that the printing is done.¹⁵³ I am, &c.

AT 4:628

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES

Berlin, 11 April 1647

M. Descartes:

I had not regretted my absence from The Hague until you wrote me of your being there and I felt myself deprived of the satisfaction that I would have surely had from your conversation during your stay. It seems to me that I always come away from your conversation more reasonable, and even though the repose that I find here, among those who have affection for me
 629 and who esteem me much more than I merit, surpasses all the goods I could have elsewhere, they do not even begin to approach those of your conversation. I am nevertheless obliged to stay here a few months. It is impossible to predict the number, since I do not at all see the electress, my aunt,¹⁵⁴ being in the mood to permit my return. I have no basis on which to ask her for permission before her son¹⁵⁵ is near her, which, according to him, will not be until September, though maybe his affairs will require him to come sooner or to stay longer. Thus, I can hope, but cannot be assured, that I will have the good fortune to see you again during the time you have proposed for your return from France. I hope that your trip will be successful, and if I had not

151. The book was dedicated to Descartes. See *Cogitationes, quibus Dei existential, item animae spiritualitas, et possibilis cum corpore unio demonstratur, nec non brevis historia oeconomiae corporis animalis preponitur atque mechanice explicatur* (Amsterdam: Ludovicus Elzevirium, 1646).

152. Perhaps Princess Sophie, or another sister, Princess Louise Hollandine.

153. See AT 4:563–64. The French edition of the *Meditations*, translated by the duke of Luynes and approved by Descartes, was published in 1647 in Paris by Jean Camusat and Pierre le Petit.

154. Elisabeth Charlotte, Electress Dowager of Brandenburg, widow of Elector Georg Wilhelm. She was the sister of Elisabeth's father, Frederick.

155. Friedrich Wilhelm, elector of Brandenburg, in December of 1646, had married Louise Henriette of Nassau, daughter of the prince of Orange, Frederick Henry.

experienced the constancy of your resolutions, I would fear that your friends would require you to stay there. I ask you in the meantime to give an address to my sister Sophie, so that I can have news of you from time to time, for such news does not cease to be agreeable to me, however long it takes to arrive.

After Easter, we will go to Crossen, the home of my aunt, on the border of Silesia, for a stay of three weeks to a month. There the solitude will give me more leisure to read, and I will employ it all on the books you have had the goodness to send me. For them I thank you. I had more desire to see the book of Regius for what is yours in it than for what is his. Other than the fact that he goes a little fast, he has helped himself to the assistance of Doctor Jonson,¹⁵⁶ as he himself said to me. This is capable of getting him into even more trouble, as he has a mind so confused in itself that he does not have the patience to understand the things he has read or heard. But even though I would excuse all the other faults of the aforementioned Regius, I would not know how to pardon him the ingratitude he shows you, and I take him to be altogether cowardly, since conversing with you has not given him other sentiments.

M. Hogelande will no doubt succeed with what he has published since he followed your principles, which I could not get even one of the doctors from Berlin to listen to, so preoccupied are they with the Schools. The one I mentioned in my last letter has not seen me at all since I gave him your physics. This is a sure sign that everyone here is well, since he is one of the house doctors.

When I told you that I did not want to use any remedies for the abscesses I had in the fall, I meant remedies from the apothecary, because I use those herbs which refresh and purge the blood as an aliment in the spring, as I do not usually have an appetite in this season for other things. I plan as well to be bled in a few days, because that has become a bad habit and I cannot change it without getting a headache. I would fear giving you a headache with this annoying account of myself, if your concern for my health had not brought me to it. It would make me quite vain if I could find any other cause but the extreme good will that you have for

Your very affectionate friend at your service,
Elisabeth.

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH

AT 5:15

Egmond, 10 May 1647

Madame,

Though I can find reasons why I would be pleased to stay in France while I am there, so long as I am alive and healthy there will nonetheless be

156. See above, note 51.