Correspondence with Descartes

ELISABETH OF BOHEMIA

1618–1680

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Translated from the French with AI (Claude) and edited



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Correspondence with Descartes · Elisabeth of Bohemia (1618–1680)

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INTRODUCTION

In May 1643 Elisabeth, Princess Palatine (1618–1680), the twenty-four-year-old daughter of the exiled "Winter King" of Bohemia, wrote to René Descartes with a question he never fully answered: if the soul is a thinking thing with no extension at all, how can it move the body? Only bodies push bodies. Descartes replied, and for the next six years, until his death in Stockholm, the two wrote to each other about philosophy, health, grief and politics. This edition gives the whole exchange, her letters and his replies in order, so that each objection can be read beside the answer it provoked.

Elisabeth's objections matter because they go to the weak points of Descartes' system and push him to say things he says nowhere else. On the mind–body problem she will not accept that the union of soul and body is simply felt, and suggests it would be easier to grant the soul some extension than to understand how an unextended thing moves matter. When he prescribes reason as a cure for her illness and melancholy, and proposes that they read Seneca's *On the Happy Life*, she asks how virtue can make us happy when the body, illness and fortune can take reason itself away, and how God's providence can leave room for free will. Her questions about the passions led directly to his last book, *The Passions of the Soul*. And when she asks what he thinks of Machiavelli's *Prince*, a princess from a dispossessed ruling house presses the philosopher on the ethics of power.

The letters are courtly in form and personal in substance: Elisabeth writes of her brothers, her family's lost lands and her exile in Berlin; Descartes of his quarrels with the theologians of Utrecht and Leiden, his journeys to France and his invitation to the court of Queen Christina of Sweden. The two letters of November and December 1643 work through a problem in geometry, finding a circle that touches three given circles.

1643–1644

The union of soul and body
Elisabeth asks how an immaterial soul can move the body;
Descartes answers with a third "primitive notion," and they
trade solutions to a problem in geometry.

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES, 6/16 MAY 1643

ELISABETH III 660 I have learned, with much joy and much regret, of your intention to come and see me a few days ago. I was touched equally by your charity in being willing to share yourself with an ignorant and unteachable person, and by the misfortune that deprived me of so profitable a conversation. Monsieur Pollot has greatly heightened this latter passion by repeating to me the solutions you gave him to the obscurities contained in Monsieur Regius's physics. I would have learned them better from your own lips, as I would also the answer to a question I put to that professor III 661 when he was in this town, and for which he referred me to you for the satisfaction required.[1] Shame at showing you so disorderly a style has kept me until now from asking this favor of you by letter.

But today Monsieur Pollot has given me such assurance of your kindness toward everyone, and toward me in particular, that I have driven every other consideration from my mind except that of taking advantage of it. So I ask you to tell me how the human soul, being only a thinking substance, can determine

1 Alphonse Pollot (Elisabeth spells him "Pallotti"), Descartes' friend at The Hague. Henricus Regius, a physician and professor at Utrecht, whose Cartesian physics had caused controversy there.

the spirits of the body to perform voluntary actions. For it seems that every determination of motion comes about through the impulsion of the thing moved, by the manner in which it is pushed by the thing that moves it, or else through the particular quality and shape of the surface of the latter. Contact is required for the first two conditions, and extension for the third.[2] You exclude extension entirely from the notion you have of the soul, and contact seems to me incompatible with an immaterial thing. That is why I ask you for a more specific definition of the soul than the one in your *Metaphysics*: that is, a definition of its substance, separated from its action, from thought. For although we suppose them inseparable, like the attributes of God (which is nevertheless hard to prove in the mother's womb and in deep fainting fits), we can acquire a more perfect idea of them by considering them separately.[3]

III 662 Knowing you to be the best physician for my own soul, I lay bare to you so freely the weaknesses of its speculations. I hope that, observing the oath of Hippocrates, you will supply remedies for them without making them public. I ask you to do so, as also to bear with these importunities from[4]

Your affectionate friend, always at your service, Elisabeth. Monsieur Descartes. 6 May.

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH, 21 MAY 1643

Descartes answers with three primitive notions and says the soul's power to move the body was once misattributed to heaviness.

DESCARTES III 663 Madame,

The favor with which Your Highness has honored me, in letting me receive her commands in writing, is greater than I would ever have dared to hope. It also makes up for my shortcomings better than the favor I had passionately wished for,

2 The "spirits" are the animal spirits, the fine fluid that Descartes held to flow through the nerves and move the muscles.
3 That is, the *Meditations* (1641).
4 The Hippocratic oath binds physicians to keep secret what they learn from their patients.

which was to receive them by word of mouth, III 664 had I been admitted to the honor of paying you my respects and offering you my most humble services when I was last at The Hague. For I would have had too many marvels to admire at once. Seeing more than human discourse come from a body so like those that painters give to angels, I would have been enraptured in the way that, it seems to me, those must be who come from earth and newly enter heaven. This would have made me less able to answer Your Highness, who has no doubt already noticed this failing in me when I previously had the honor of speaking with her. Your clemency chose to relieve it by leaving me the traces of your thoughts on paper. I have reread them several times and grown used to considering them, and I am truly less dazzled by them now. But I admire them all the more, for I notice that they not only seem ingenious at first sight but appear more judicious and solid the more one examines them.

And I can say truthfully that the question Your Highness raises seems to me the one that can most reasonably be asked of me, in view of the writings I have published. For there are two things in the human soul on which all the knowledge we can have of its nature depends: one is that it thinks; the other is that, being united to the body, it can act and be acted upon along with it. I have said almost nothing of the latter, and have applied myself only III 665 to making the former well understood. This was because my principal aim was to prove the distinction between the soul and the body, and only the former could serve that aim, while the other would have been a hindrance. But since Your Highness sees so clearly that nothing can be concealed from her, I shall try here to explain how I conceive the union of the soul with the body, and how the soul has the power to move it.

THREE PRIMITIVE NOTIONS

Descartes names the basic notions of body, soul and their union, each understood only through itself.

DESCARTES First, I consider that there are in us certain primitive notions, which are like originals on whose pattern we form all our other knowledge. And there are very few such notions. After the most general ones, of being, number, duration, etc., which apply to everything we can conceive, we have, for the body in particular, only the notion of extension, from which follow those of shape and motion. For the soul alone, we have only that of thought, which includes the perceptions of the intellect and the inclinations of the will. Finally, for the soul and the body together, we have only that of their union, on which depends the notion of the soul's power to move the body, and of the body's power to act on the soul by causing its sensations and passions.[5]

I consider also that all human knowledge consists only in distinguishing these notions well, and in attributing each of them only to the things to which it belongs. For when we try to explain III 666 some difficulty by means of a notion that does not belong to it, we cannot fail to go wrong. The same happens when we try to explain one of these notions by another, for, being primitive, each of them can be understood only through itself. And because the use of the senses has made the notions of extension, shapes and motions far more familiar to us than the others, the principal cause of our errors is that we usually want to use these notions to explain things to which they do not belong. We do this when we try to use the imagination to conceive the nature of the soul, or when we try to conceive the way the soul moves the body on the model of the way one body is moved by another.

That is why, since in the *Meditations* that Your Highness has deigned to read I tried to convey the notions that belong to the

soul alone, distinguishing them from those that belong to the body alone, the first thing I must explain next is how to conceive those that belong to the union of the soul with the body, without those that belong to the body alone or to the soul alone. For this, it seems to me, what I wrote at the end of my Reply to the Sixth Objections may be of use. We can look for these simple notions nowhere but in our own soul, which has them all within it by its nature, but which does not III 667 always distinguish them sufficiently from one another, or else does not attribute them to the objects to which they should be attributed.[6]

Thus I believe that we have hitherto confused the notion of the power by which the soul acts in the body with the notion of the power by which one body acts in another. We have attributed both, not to the soul, for we did not yet know it, but to the various qualities of bodies, such as heaviness, heat and the others. We imagined these qualities to be real, that is, to have an existence distinct from that of the body, and consequently to be substances, even though we called them qualities. And to conceive them, we have used sometimes the notions that are in us for knowing the body, and sometimes those that are in us for knowing the soul, according as what we attributed to them was material or immaterial. For example, in supposing that heaviness is a real quality, of which we know nothing except that it has the power to move the body in which it is toward the center of the earth, we have no trouble conceiving how it moves this body, or how it is joined to it. And we do not think this happens through a real contact of one surface against another, for we find by experience in ourselves that we have a particular notion for conceiving this. I believe we misuse this notion when we apply it III 668 to heaviness, which, as I hope to show in the Physics, is

5 Primitive notions: basic concepts that cannot be explained through any others and through which all our other concepts are formed.

6 The *Meditations* were published with sets of objections from other thinkers and Descartes' replies; the sixth set is the last.

nothing really distinct from the body. Rather, this notion was given to us for conceiving the way the soul moves the body.[7]

I would show that I do not sufficiently know Your Highness's incomparable mind if I used more words to explain myself, and I would be too presumptuous if I dared think my answer ought to satisfy her entirely. But I shall try to avoid both faults by adding nothing more here, except this: if I am capable of writing or saying anything that could please her, I shall always count it a very great favor to take up my pen, or to go to The Hague, for that purpose; and there is nothing in the world so dear to me as being able to obey her commands. But I can find no occasion here for observing the oath of Hippocrates that she enjoins on me, since she has communicated nothing to me that does not deserve to be seen and admired by everyone. All I can say on this subject is that, since I value infinitely the letter of yours that I have received, I shall treat it as misers treat their treasures. The more they value them, the more they hide them; and, grudging the sight of them to the rest of the world, they place their supreme contentment in looking at them. So I shall be very glad to enjoy alone the good of seeing it; and my greatest ambition is to be able to call myself, and to be truly, etc.

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES, 10/20 JUNE 1643

Elisabeth finds the comparison with heaviness unhelpful and says she could more easily grant the soul extension.

ELISABETH III 683 Monsieur Descartes,

Your kindness appears not only in showing me and correcting the defects in my reasoning, as I had hoped, but also in the fact that, to make the knowledge of them less painful to me, you try to console me for them with false praise, at the expense of your own judgment. Such praise would have been necessary to encourage me to work at the remedy, but for my upbringing. I was raised in a place where the ordinary manner of conversa-

7 Descartes' planned physics, which appeared as Parts II–IV of the *Principles of Philosophy* (1644).

tion has accustomed me to hearing praise from people incapable of giving it truly, and this has made me presume that I cannot go wrong in believing the opposite of what they say. It has also made the consideration of my imperfections so familiar to me that it now stirs in me only as much emotion as I need for the desire to be rid of them.

This makes me confess without shame that I have found in III 684 myself all the causes of error you point out in your letter, and that I cannot yet banish them entirely, since the life I am forced to lead does not leave me enough time at my disposal to acquire a habit of meditation according to your rules. Sometimes the interests of my house, which I must not neglect, and sometimes conversations and courtesies that I cannot avoid, so beat down this weak mind with vexation or boredom that it becomes useless for anything else for a long time afterward. This, I hope, will serve as an excuse for my stupidity in being unable to grasp, from the idea you once had of heaviness, the idea by which we are to judge how the soul (unextended and immaterial) can move the body; nor why this power of carrying the body toward the center of the earth, which you then falsely attributed to heaviness under the name of a quality, should persuade us that a body can be pushed by something immaterial, rather than the demonstration of a contrary truth (which you promise in your physics) should confirm us in the opinion that this is impossible. This is all the more so since this idea, being unable to claim the same perfection and objective reality as the idea of God, may have been invented out of ignorance of what truly moves these bodies toward the center. And since no material cause presented itself to the senses, people would have attributed the motion to its contrary, the immaterial. Yet I have never been able to conceive the immaterial except as a negation of matter, which can have no communication with it.

III 685 And I confess that it would be easier for me to concede matter and extension to the soul than to concede to an immaterial being the capacity to move a body and to be moved by it. For if the first were done by "information", the spirits that produce

the motion would have to be intelligent, which you grant to nothing corporeal. And although in your *Metaphysical Meditations* you show the possibility of the second, it is nevertheless very hard to understand that a soul as you have described it, after having had the faculty and habit of reasoning well, can lose all of it through some vapors; and that, though it can subsist without the body and has nothing in common with it, it is so governed by it.[8]

But since you have undertaken to instruct me, I entertain these views only as friends I do not expect to keep. I am confident that you will explain to me the nature of an immaterial substance, and the manner of its actions and passions in the body, as well as all the other things you have been willing to teach. I also ask you to believe that you cannot do this charity to anyone more sensible of the obligation she owes you for it than

Your most affectionate friend, Elisabeth. 10 June. Monsieur Descartes.

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH, 28 JUNE 1643

Descartes says the union is known through the senses and ordinary life, and lets her attribute extension to the soul.

DESCARTES III 690 Madame,

I am very much obliged to Your Highness because, having found that I explained myself badly in my previous letter about the question she was pleased to put to me, she still deigns to have the patience III 691 to hear me on the same subject, and gives me the opportunity to note the things I had left out. The chief of these seem to me to be the following. I had distinguished three kinds of ideas or primitive notions, each of which is known in its own particular way and not by comparing one with another: namely, the notion we have of the soul, that of the body, and that of the union between the soul and the body. After this, I should have explained the difference between these three kinds of

8 "Information" is the Scholastic term for the way a form, such as the soul, gives shape and life to matter.

notions, and between the operations of the soul by which we have them, and stated the means of making each of them familiar and easy to us. Then, having said why I had used the comparison with heaviness, I should have shown that, even if one wishes to conceive the soul as material (which is, properly speaking, to conceive its union with the body), one still recognizes afterward that it is separable from it. This, I believe, is the whole of the subject Your Highness has set me here.

HOW THE UNION IS KNOWN

The soul is known by pure intellect, body best with imagination, and their union through the senses.

DESCARTES First, then, I note a great difference between these three kinds of notions. The soul is conceived only by the pure intellect. The body, that is, extension, shapes and motions, can also be known by the intellect alone, but much better by the intellect aided by the imagination. And finally, the things that belong to the union of the soul and the body are known [III 692] only obscurely by the intellect alone, or even by the intellect aided by the imagination; but they are known very clearly by the senses. That is why those who never philosophize, and who use only their senses, do not doubt that the soul moves the body and that the body acts on the soul. Rather, they consider the two as a single thing; that is, they conceive their union. For to conceive the union between two things is to conceive them as one. Metaphysical thoughts, which exercise the pure intellect, serve to make the notion of the soul familiar to us. The study of mathematics, which chiefly exercises the imagination in considering shapes and motions, accustoms us to forming very distinct notions of the body. And finally, it is only by living and engaging in ordinary conversation, and by refraining from meditating and from studying things that exercise the imagination, that one learns to conceive the union of the soul and the body.

I am almost afraid Your Highness will think I am not speaking seriously here; but that would be contrary to the respect I owe

her, and which I shall never fail to show her. And I can say truthfully that the principal rule I have always observed in my studies, and the one I believe has served me best in acquiring some knowledge, has been this: I have never spent more than a very few hours a day on the thoughts that occupy the imagination, and a very few hours a year on those that occupy the intellect [III 693] alone, and I have given all the rest of my time to the relaxation of the senses and the repose of the mind. I even count among the exercises of the imagination all serious conversations, and everything that requires attention. That is what made me withdraw to the country. For although in the busiest city in the world I could have as many hours to myself as I now spend on study, I could not spend them so usefully there, since my mind would be wearied by the attention that the bustle of life demands. I take the liberty of writing this here to Your Highness to show her how truly I marvel that, amid the business and cares that never fail those who combine a great mind with high birth, she has been able to devote herself to the meditations required to understand properly the distinction between the soul and the body. But I judged that it was these meditations, rather than thoughts requiring less attention, that made her find obscurity in the notion we have of their union. For it does not seem to me that the human mind is capable of conceiving very distinctly, and at the same time, both the distinction between the soul and the body and their union. To do so, one must conceive them as a single thing and at the same time conceive them as two, which is self-contradictory. And for this reason (supposing that Your Highness still had the arguments that prove the distinction of the soul and the body present to her mind, and not wishing to beg her to set them aside in order to represent to herself the [III 694] notion of the union that everyone always experiences in himself without philosophizing; namely, that one is a single person who has both a body and a thought, which are of such a nature that this thought can move the body and feel the things that happen to it), I previously used the comparison with heaviness and with the other qualities that we commonly ima-

gine to be united to certain bodies, just as thought is united to ours. And I was not concerned that this comparison limped in that these qualities are not real, as people imagine them, because I believed that Your Highness was already entirely persuaded that the soul is a substance distinct from the body.

But since Your Highness remarks 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 it without having matter, I beg her to feel free to attribute this matter and this extension to the soul; for that is nothing other than conceiving it as united to the body. And after conceiving this properly, and experiencing it in herself, she will easily see that the matter she has attributed to this thought is not the thought itself, and that the extension of this matter is of a different nature from the extension of this thought. For the first is fixed to a certain place, from which it excludes every other bodily extension, which the second does not do. And III 695 so Your Highness will still easily return to knowledge of the distinction of the soul and the body, even though she has conceived their union.

Finally, I believe it is very necessary to have properly understood, once in one's life, the principles of metaphysics, since it is they that give us knowledge of God and of our soul. But I also believe it would be very harmful to occupy one's intellect often in meditating on them, since it could not then attend so well to the functions of the imagination and the senses. The best course is to be content with keeping in one's memory and belief the conclusions one has once drawn from them, and then to spend the rest of the time one has for study on thoughts in which the intellect acts together with the imagination and the senses.

The extreme devotion I have to serving Your Highness makes me hope that my frankness will not displease her. It would have drawn me here into a longer discussion, in which I would have tried to clear up on this occasion all the difficulties of the question she raised. But I have just received some troublesome news from Utrecht, where the magistrates summon me to substantiate what I wrote about one of their ministers. Yet he is a man

who has slandered me most unworthily, and what I wrote about him in my just defense is only too well known to everyone. This news forces me to stop here, so as to go and consider how to extricate myself from this legal wrangling as soon as I can. I am, etc.[9]

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES, 1 JULY 1643

Elisabeth suspects the soul has unknown properties and still asks how an unextended soul moves the body.

ELISABETH [IV 1] Monsieur Descartes,

I fear that my esteem for your instructions and my desire to profit by them cause you as much inconvenience as the ingratitude of those who deprive themselves of them and would like to deprive the human race of them too. I would not have sent you a new effect of my [IV 2] ignorance before I knew you to be free of the effects of their obstinacy, had Monsieur Van Bergen not obliged me to do so sooner. He was courteous enough to wish to remain in this town until I could give him a reply to your letter of 28 June, which shows me clearly the three kinds of notions we have, their objects, and how one should use them.

I also find that the senses show me that the soul moves the body, but they do not teach me (any more than the intellect and the imagination do) the way it does so. For that reason, I think there are properties of the soul unknown to us that could perhaps overturn what your *Metaphysical Meditations* persuaded me of, by such good arguments, concerning the non-extension of the soul. And this doubt seems to be founded on the rule you give there in speaking of the true and the false, namely that all error comes from our forming judgments about what we do not perceive well enough. Although extension is not necessary to thought, it is not incompatible with it either, and so it could suit some other function of the soul that is no less essential to it. At the very least, it disposes of the contradiction of the Scholastics,

9 The minister is Gisbertus Voetius, theologian and rector of the University of Utrecht, whom Descartes had attacked in print in his *Letter to Voetius* (1643).

that the soul is whole in the whole body and whole in each of its parts. I do not excuse myself for confusing the notion of the soul with that of the body on the same grounds as ordinary people do; but this does not remove my first doubt. I shall despair of finding certainty in anything in the world unless you give it to me, since you alone have kept me from being IV 3 a skeptic, which is where my first reasoning was leading me.

Although I owe you this confession in order to thank you, I would think it very imprudent if I did not know your kindness and generosity, which equal the rest of your merits, as much from the experience I have already had of them as by reputation. You cannot show them in a more obliging way than through the clarifications and advice you share with me, which I prize above the greatest treasures that could be possessed by

Your most affectionate friend, always at your service, Elisabeth. 1 July. Monsieur Descartes.

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH, NOVEMBER 1643

Descartes sets out his method for the problem of the three circles, using several unknowns and right triangles.

DESCARTES IV 38 Madame,

I have learned from Monsieur Pollot that Your Highness has taken the trouble to work on the problem of the three circles, and that she has found a way to solve it by supposing only one unknown quantity. I therefore thought it my duty to set down here the reason why I had proposed several, and how I untangle them.[10]

In working on a geometrical problem, I always see to it that the lines I use to find the solution are, as far as possible, parallel or intersect at right angles. I use no theorems except these two: that the sides of similar triangles are in proportion to one another, and that in right triangles the square of the base is equal to the squares of the two sides. And I am not afraid to sup-

10 The problem, posed by Apollonius of Perga (3rd century BC), is to find a circle that touches three given circles.

pose several unknown quantities, so as to reduce the problem to terms that depend only on these two theorems; on the contrary, I prefer to suppose more rather than fewer.[11] For in this way I see more clearly everything I am doing, and in untangling them I find the shortest routes more easily and avoid superfluous multiplications. If instead one draws other lines and uses other theorems, it may happen by chance that the route one finds is shorter than mine; but almost always the opposite happens. And one does not see so well what one is doing unless IV 39 one has the proof of the theorem one is using present in one's mind. In that case one almost always finds that it depends on considering certain triangles that are either right-angled or similar to one another, and so one falls back onto the route I take.

For example, if one tries to solve this problem of the three circles with the help of a theorem that teaches how to find the area of a triangle from its three sides, one need suppose only one unknown quantity.[12]

For if A, B, C are the centers of the three given circles, and D the center of the one sought, the three sides of the triangle ABC are given. The three lines AD, BD, CD are made up of the three radii of the given circles, each added to the radius of the circle sought. So, supposing x for this radius, one has all the sides of the triangles ABD, ACD, BCD, and consequently one can have their areas, which, added together, are equal to the area of the given triangle ABC. By this equation one can arrive at knowledge of the radius x, which alone is required for solving the problem. But this route seems to me to lead to so many superfluous multiplications that I would not undertake to untangle them in three months. That is why, instead of the two oblique lines AB and BC, I draw the three perpendiculars BE, IV 40 DG, DF. Positing three unknown quantities, one for DF, another for DG, and another for the radius of the circle sought, I have all the sides of the three right triangles ADF, BDG, CDF. These give me three

11 "Base" here means the hypotenuse.

12 The theorem known as Heron's formula.

equations, since in each of them the square of the base is equal to the squares of the two sides.

Having thus formed as many equations as I have supposed unknown quantities, I consider whether from each equation I can find one of them in fairly simple terms. If I cannot, I try to achieve it by combining two or more equations through addition or subtraction. And finally, when that is not enough, I merely examine whether it would not be better to change the terms in some way. For by making this examination skillfully one easily comes upon the shortest routes, and one can try an infinite number of them in a very short time.

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

AD = $a + x$, BD = $b + x$, CD = $c + x$; and, setting AE = d, BE = e, CF = f, DF or GE = y, DG = FE = z, AF = $d—z$ and FD = y, BG = $e—y$ and DG = z, CF = $f + z$ and FD = y.

IV 41 Then, setting the square of each of these bases equal to the square of the two sides, I have the following three equations:

$aa + 2ax + xx = dd—2dz + zz + yy$,

$bb + 2bx + xx = ee—2ey + yy + zz$,

$cc + 2cx + xx = ff + 2fz + zz + yy$,

and I see that from any one of them alone I cannot find any of the unknown quantities without extracting the square root, which would complicate the problem too much. That is why I turn to the second means, which is to combine two equations. I immediately notice that, since the terms xx, yy and zz are alike in all three, if I subtract any one of them from another, whichever I like, these terms will cancel out, and so I shall have no unknown terms left except x, y and z, all simple. I also see that if I subtract the second from the first or from the third, I shall have all three terms x, y and z; but that if I subtract the first from the third, I shall have only x and z. So I choose this last route, and I find

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

or else z = (cc − aa + dd − ff + 2cx − 2ax)/(2d + 2f),

or else 1/2d − 1/2f + (cc − aa + 2cx − 2ax)/(2d + 2f).

IV 42 Then, subtracting the second equation from the first or from the third (for it comes to the same thing), and putting in place of *z* the terms I have just found, I have from the first and the second:

aa + 2*ax*—*bb*—2*bx* = *dd*—2*dz*—*ee* + 2*ey*,

or else 2ey = ee + aa + 2ax − bb − 2bx − dd +

dd − df + (ccd − aad + 2cdx − 2adx)/(d + f)

or else y = 1/2e − bb/2e − bx/e − df/2e + (ccd + aaf + 2cdx + 2afx)/(2ed + 2ef).

Finally, returning to one of the first three equations, and putting in place of *y* or *z* the quantities equal to them, and the squares of these quantities for *yy* and *zz*, one finds an equation in which only *x* and *xx* are unknown. So the problem is plane, and there is no need to go further. For the rest serves neither to cultivate nor to refresh the mind, but only to exercise the patience of some laborious calculator. Indeed, I am afraid I have made myself tedious to Your Highness here, because I have dwelt on writing out things she no doubt knew better than I, and which are easy, but which are nevertheless the keys to my algebra.[13] I most humbly beg her to believe that it is my devotion to honoring her that led me to do so, and that I am,

Madame, Your Highness's most humble and obedient servant, Descartes.

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES, 21 NOVEMBER 1643

Elisabeth sends her own solution to the three-circles problem and thanks him for his lesson.

ELISABETH IV 44 Monsieur Descartes,

If I had as much skill in following your advice as I have desire to do so, you would already see the effects of your charity in the progress I would have made in reasoning and in algebra. As it is, I can show you only my mistakes in them. But I am so used to showing you my mistakes that, like old sinners, I have lost all shame about it. That is why I had planned to send you my solu-

13 A "plane" problem is one that can be solved with ruler and compass alone.

tion of the problem you gave me, using the method I was taught long ago. I meant to do so as much to oblige you to tell me its shortcomings as because I am not so well versed in your method. For I could tell that my solution had shortcomings, since I did not see it clearly enough to draw a theorem from it. But I would never have found the reason without your last letter, which gives me all the [IV 45] satisfaction I asked for, and teaches me more than I would have learned from my tutor in six months. I am very much indebted to you for it, and I would never have forgiven Monsieur Pollot if he had acted according to your instructions. Even so, he would hand the letter over to me only on condition that I send you what I have done. So do not take it amiss that I give you a superfluous trouble, since there are few things I would not do to obtain these effects of your goodwill, which is infinitely esteemed by

Your most affectionate friend, always at your service, Elisabeth. 21 November. Monsieur Descartes.

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH, NOVEMBER 1643

Descartes praises her solution and shows how to turn it into a general theorem.

DESCARTES Madame,

The solution Your Highness was pleased to do me the honor of sending me is so exact that nothing [IV 46] more could be desired in it. I was not only struck with astonishment on seeing it, but I cannot refrain from adding that I was also delighted, and felt some vanity in seeing that the calculation Your Highness uses is entirely like the one I proposed in my *Geometry*.[14] Experience had taught me that most minds that find it easy to follow the reasonings of metaphysics cannot grasp those of algebra, and conversely, that those who easily understand the latter are usually incapable of the former. I know of no mind but Your Highness's to which all things are equally easy. It is true that I already

14 *La Géométrie* (1637), published with the *Discourse on Method*, which set out Descartes' algebraic method in geometry.

had so many proofs of this that I could not doubt it in the least. I only feared that she might lack the patience needed to overcome the difficulties of calculation at the start. For that is a quality extremely rare in excellent minds and in persons of high rank.

Now that this difficulty is overcome, she will take much more pleasure in the rest; and if she substitutes a single letter for several, as she has very often done here, she will not find the calculation tedious. This can almost always be done when one merely wants to see what kind of problem one has: that is, whether it can be solved with ruler and compass, or whether one must use some other curved lines of the first or second kind, etc., and what route leads to the solution. That is usually all I trouble myself about [IV 47] with particular problems. For it seems to me that the remainder, which consists in looking for the construction and the proof by means of Euclid's propositions while concealing the algebraic procedure, is only an amusement for minor geometers, and calls for little in the way of mind or learning. But when one wants to carry a problem through to the end, in order to make of it a theorem that serves as a general rule for solving many others like it, one must keep to the end all the same letters one posited at the beginning. Or, if one changes some of them to make the calculation easier, one must put them back afterward, at the end. For usually several of them cancel each other out, which cannot be seen once they have been changed. It is also good in that case to see to it that the quantities denoted by the letters bear, as far as possible, similar relations to one another. This makes the theorem more elegant and shorter, because whatever is stated of one of these quantities is stated in the same way of the others. It also prevents one from going wrong in the calculation, because letters signifying quantities that have the same relation must be distributed in the same way; and when this is not the case, one recognizes one's error.

Thus, to find a theorem that teaches what the radius is of the circle that touches three circles given in position, one should not, in this example, assign the three letters *a, b, c* to the lines AD, DC, DB, but to the lines AB, AC and BC. For each of these lat-

ter bears the same relation as the others to the [IV 48] three lines AH, BH and CH, which is not true of the former. And by following the calculation with these six letters, without changing them or adding others, along the route that

Your Highness took (for it is better, for this purpose, than the one I had proposed), one should arrive at a very regular equation, which will yield a fairly short theorem. For the three letters *a, b, c* are arranged in it in the same way, and so are the three *d, e, f*.

But since the calculation is tedious, if Your Highness wishes to try it, it will be easier for her to suppose that the three given circles touch one another, and to use throughout the calculation only the four letters *d, e, f, x*, which, being the radii of the four circles, bear a similar relation to one another. First of all, she will find

AK = (dd + df + dx − fx)/(d + f), and AD = (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, because the one is [IV 49] found by means of the triangle AHC, as the other is by the triangle ABC. Then, finally, she will have this equation,

from which one derives, as a theorem, that the four sums produced by multiplying together the squares of three of these radii make twice the six produced by multiplying two of these radii by each other and by the squares of the other two. This is enough to serve as a rule for finding the radius of the largest circle that can be described between the 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 shall have 576 for *ddeeff*, and 36*xx* for *ddeexx*, and so on for the others. From this I shall find

x = − 156/47 + √(31104/2209)

unless I have made a mistake in the calculation I have just done. Your Highness can see here two very different procedures in one and the same question, depending on the different aims one sets oneself. For when I want to know what kind of question it is, and by what approach it can be solved, I take the perpen-

dicular or parallel lines as given, and assume several other unknown quantities, so as to make no superfluous multiplication and to see the shortest routes more clearly. When, on the other hand, I want to complete it, I take [IV 50] the sides of the triangle as given, and assume only one unknown letter. But there are many questions in which the same route leads to both, and I have no doubt that Your Highness will soon see how far the human mind can reach in this science. I would consider myself extremely fortunate if I could contribute anything to this, being moved by a very particular zeal to be,

Madame, Your Highness's most humble and obedient servant, Descartes.

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH, JULY 1644

Writing from France, Descartes advises her on health: trust in the body's soundness and avoid sad thoughts.

DESCARTES [V 64] Madame,

My journey could not be attended by any misfortune, since I was fortunate enough, while making it, to be remembered by Your Highness. The most gracious letter that gives me proof of this is the [V 65] most precious thing I could receive in this country. It would have made me entirely happy, had it not told me that the illness Your Highness had before I left The Hague has still left her with some lingering trouble in the stomach. The remedies she has chosen, namely diet and exercise, are in my view the best of all—after, however, those of the soul, which undoubtedly has great power over the body, as the great changes that anger, fear and the other passions excite in it show. But the soul does not guide the spirits directly by its will to the places where they can be useful or harmful; it does so only by willing or thinking of something else. For our body is so constructed that certain movements follow naturally in it from certain thoughts: we see that blushing follows from shame, tears from compassion, and laughter from joy. And I know of no thought better suited to preserving health than a strong conviction and firm belief that the

architecture of our bodies is so sound that, once we are healthy, we cannot easily fall ill unless we commit some notable excess, or the air or other external causes harm us; and that, when we have an illness, we can easily recover by the force of nature alone, especially while we are still young. This conviction is undoubtedly much truer and more reasonable than that of certain people who, on the word of an [V 66] astrologer or a physician, persuade themselves that they must die at a certain time, and by that alone become ill, and quite often even die of it, as I have seen happen to various people. But I could not help being extremely sad if I thought Your Highness's indisposition were still continuing. I prefer to hope that it is quite gone; and yet the desire to be certain of this gives me an extreme longing to return to Holland.

I intend to leave here in four or five days to go on to Poitou and Brittany, where the business that brought me here lies. But as soon as I have been able to put it somewhat in order, I wish for nothing so much as to return to the places where I was fortunate enough to have the honor of sometimes speaking with Your Highness. For although there are many people here whom I honor and esteem, I have not yet seen anything here that could keep me. And I am, beyond anything I can say, etc.

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES, 1 AUGUST 1644

Elisabeth thanks him for dedicating the Principles to her and raises questions about quicksilver and magnetism.

ELISABETH [IV 131] Monsieur Descartes,

The gift that Monsieur Van Bergen has given me on your behalf obliges me to thank you for it, and my conscience accuses me of being unable to do so as it deserves. Even if I had received from it only the benefit that comes to our age—which owes you everything that earlier ages paid to the inventors of the sciences, since you alone have demonstrated that there are any—how high will my debt rise, I to whom you give, along with instruction, a share of your glory, in the public testimony you

give of your friendship and your approval of me? The pedants will say that you have been forced to build a new ethics to make me worthy of it.[15] But I take it as a rule for my life, since I feel I have reached only the first degree of what you approve there: the desire to inform IV 132 my intellect and to follow the good it knows. It is to this will that I owe my 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 learned doctors in this country have admitted to me that they did not study them, because they are too old to begin a new method, having used up the strength of their body and mind in the old one.

But I fear you will rightly retract the opinion you had of my understanding when you learn that I do not understand how quicksilver is formed, so full of agitation and so heavy at the same time, contrary to the definition you gave of heaviness. And even though the body E, in the figure on page 225, presses on it when it is beneath, why should it still feel this constraint when it is above, any more than air does on coming out of a vessel in which it was compressed?

The second difficulty I found is how these particles, twisted into shells, can pass through the center of the earth without being bent or deformed by the fire there, as they were at the beginning when the body M was formed. Only their speed could save them from this, and you say, on pages 133 and 134, that they do not need it to travel in a straight line, and consequently that it is the least agitated parts of the first element that flow in this way through the globules of the second.[16] I am likewise surprised that, on leaving the poles of the body M, they take so long a detour and pass along the surface of the earth to return to IV 133 the other pole, since they could find a shorter path through the body C.

15 The gift is the *Principles of Philosophy* (1644), which Descartes dedicated to Elisabeth with high praise of her virtue; Van Bergen was the acquaintance who delivered it.

16 Descartes' screw-shaped "channeled" particles, which in the *Principles* account for magnetism.

I set out here only the reasons for my doubts about your book. Those for my admiration are countless, as are those for my obligation, among which I also count the kindness you showed in sending me your news and giving me precepts for preserving my health. The former brought me much joy, telling me of the success of your journey and your continued intention to return; the latter brought me much benefit, since I already feel their good effect in myself. You have not shown Monsieur Voetius the danger of being your enemy as clearly as you have shown me the advantage of your goodwill; otherwise he would flee that title as eagerly as I seek to deserve that of

Your most affectionate friend, always at your service, Elisabeth. 1 August. Monsieur Descartes.

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH, AUGUST 1644

Descartes answers her questions on the weight of quicksilver and the path of the magnetic particles.

DESCARTES [IV 136] Madame,

The favor Your Highness does me in not taking it amiss that I dared to show in public how much I esteem and honor her is greater, and puts me more in her debt, than any I could receive from anyone else. And I do not fear being accused of having changed anything in ethics in order to express my view on this subject; for what I wrote about it is so true and so clear that I am sure no reasonable person will fail to acknowledge it. But I fear that what I put in the rest of the book may be more doubtful and more obscure, since Your Highness finds difficulties in it.

The one concerning the heaviness of quicksilver is very considerable, and I would have tried to clear it up, except that, not having yet examined the nature of this metal enough, I was afraid of saying something contrary to what I may learn later. All I can say about it now is that I am convinced that the small parts of air, of water, and of all other terrestrial bodies have many pores through which the very subtle matter can pass; and this follows well enough from the way I said they are formed.

Now it is enough to say [IV 137] that the parts of quicksilver and of the other metals have fewer such pores, to make it understood why these metals are heavier. For example, even if we granted that the parts of water and those of quicksilver were of the same size and shape, and that their movements were similar, it is enough to suppose that each part of water is like a small, very soft and very slack cord, while those of quicksilver, having fewer pores, are like other small cords that are much harder and more tightly wound. This suffices to make it understood that quicksilver must weigh much more than water.

As for the small particles twisted into shells, it is no wonder that they are not destroyed by the fire at the center of the earth. For since that fire is composed of the very subtle matter alone, it can indeed carry them along very fast, but it cannot make them collide with other hard bodies, which is what would be needed to break or divide them.

Moreover, these shell-shaped parts do not take too long a detour in returning from one pole to the other. For I suppose that most of them pass through the interior of the earth, so that only those that find no passage lower down return through our air. And this is the reason I give why the power of the magnet does not appear to us as strong in the whole mass of the earth as in small lodestones.

[IV 138] But I most humbly beg Your Highness to forgive me if what I write here is very muddled. I do not yet have the book whose pages she has kindly indicated, and I am continually traveling; but I hope in two or three months to have the honor of paying my respects to her at The Hague. I am, etc.

1645

Illness, Seneca and the happy life
Descartes prescribes for Elisabeth's fever, and they read Seneca's On the Happy Life together; she presses him on the passions, providence and free will.

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH, 18 MAY 1645

DESCARTES [IV 200] Madame,

I was extremely surprised to learn from Monsieur Pollot's letters that Your Highness has been ill for a long time, and I am vexed with my solitude, since it is the reason I did not learn of it sooner. It is true that I am so withdrawn from the world that I learn nothing at all of what goes on in it. Even so, the zeal I have for Your Highness's service would not have allowed me to go so long without knowing the state of her health, even if I had had to go to The Hague expressly to inquire, were it not that Monsieur Pollot, who wrote to me in great haste about two months ago, had promised to write again by the next post. And since he never fails to tell me how Your Highness is, as long as I received no letters from him I supposed that you were still [IV 201] in the same state. But I have learned from his latest letter that for three or four weeks Your Highness had a low fever accompanied by a dry cough; that after she had been free of it for five or six days the illness returned; and that nevertheless, at the time he sent me his letter (which was nearly two weeks on the way), Your Highness was once again beginning to feel better. In this I recognize the signs of an illness that is very serious, and yet one that, it seems to me, Your Highness can remedy so surely that I cannot refrain from writing to her with my opinion of it. For

although I am not a physician, the honor Your Highness did me last summer in wishing to know my opinion about another indisposition she had at that time makes me hope that she will not take my freedom amiss.

The most common cause of a low fever is sadness; and Fortune's stubbornness in persecuting your house continually gives you causes for vexation so public and so conspicuous that one need not conjecture much, nor be deeply versed in affairs, to judge that this is where the chief cause of your indisposition lies. And it is to be feared that you cannot be entirely rid of it unless, by the strength of your virtue, you make your soul content in spite of the blows of Fortune.[1] I know well that it would be imprudent to try to persuade someone to be joyful when Fortune sends her new causes of displeasure every day, and I am not one of those IV 202 cruel philosophers who want their wise man to feel nothing. I also know that Your Highness is not so much affected by what concerns her personally as by what concerns the interests of her house and of the people she loves—which I regard as the most lovable of all the virtues.[2] But it seems to me that the difference between the greatest souls and those that are base and common consists chiefly in this. Common souls give themselves up to their passions, and are happy or unhappy only according as the things that befall them are pleasant or unpleasant. The others, by contrast, have reasonings so strong and so powerful that, although they too have passions, and often even more violent ones than ordinary people, their reason nevertheless always remains the master, and makes even their afflictions serve them and contribute to the perfect happiness they enjoy already in this life. For, on the one hand, they consider themselves immortal and capable of receiving very great contentment; on the other, they consider that they are joined to mortal and fragile bodies, which are subject to many infirmities and cannot fail to perish within a few years. So they

1 Elisabeth's family, the Palatine house, had lost its lands and its crown early in the Thirty Years' War and lived in exile.

2 An allusion to the Stoics, whose sage was to be free of all passion.

do indeed do everything in their power to make Fortune favorable to them in this life, but they nevertheless think so little of it in comparison with eternity that they regard its events almost as we regard those of plays. And just as the sad and lamentable stories we see performed in a theater often give us as much enjoyment as the cheerful ones, even IV 203 though they draw tears from our eyes, so these greatest souls I am speaking of find satisfaction within themselves in everything that happens to them, even the most distressing and unbearable things. Thus, when they feel pain in their body, they practice bearing it patiently, and this test they make of their strength is pleasing to them. Thus, when they see their friends in some great affliction, they feel compassion for their suffering and do all they can to deliver them from it, and do not even fear exposing themselves to death for this purpose, if need be. But meanwhile the testimony of their conscience—that in this they are doing their duty and performing a praiseworthy and virtuous action—makes them happier than all the sadness that compassion brings them makes them afflicted. And finally, just as the greatest prosperity Fortune can bring never intoxicates them or makes them more arrogant, so the greatest adversities cannot cast them down, or make them so sad that the body to which they are joined falls ill from it.

I would fear that this style might seem ridiculous if I used it in writing to anyone else. But since I regard Your Highness as having the noblest and most elevated soul I know, I believe she must also be the happiest, and that she truly will be, provided she is pleased to cast her eyes on what is beneath her. Let her compare the value of the goods she possesses, which can never be taken from her, with those of which Fortune has stripped her, and with the misfortunes by which it persecutes her in the person IV 204 of her relatives: she will then see what great reason she has to be content with her own goods. The extreme zeal I have for her is why I have let myself be carried away into this discourse, which I most humbly beg her to excuse, as coming from someone who is, etc.

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES, 24 MAY 1645

Elisabeth admits that her illness comes from grief over her family's troubles and asks about the Spa waters.

ELISABETH [IV 207] Monsieur Descartes,

I see that the charms of the solitary life do not take from you the virtues required for society. As for the generous kindness you have for your friends, and show me in the care you take of my health, I would be sorry if it had led you to make the journey here, now that Monsieur Pollot has told me you judged rest necessary for your health. And I assure you that the physicians, who saw me every day and examined all the symptoms of my illness, did not find its [IV 208] cause, nor prescribe remedies as beneficial as those you have prescribed from afar. Even if they had been learned enough to suspect the part my mind played in the disorder of my body, I would not have been frank enough to admit it to them. But to you, Sir, I admit it without scruple, confident that so candid an account of my failings will not cost me my share in your friendship, but will confirm it all the more, since you will see from it that I need it.

Know, then, that my body is imbued with a good many of the weaknesses of my sex. It feels the afflictions of the soul very easily, and has not the strength to recover along with it, being of a temperament prone to obstructions and living in an air that contributes greatly to them. For people who cannot take much exercise, it does not take a long oppression of the heart by sadness to obstruct the spleen and infect the rest of the body with its vapors. I imagine that this is the source of the low fever and dry cough, which have not yet left me, although the warmth of the season and the walks I take are restoring my strength a little. That is why I am agreeing to the physicians' advice to drink the waters of Spa a month from now (they are brought all the way here without spoiling), having found by experience that they clear obstructions. But I will not take them before I know your

opinion, since you are kind enough to want to cure my body along with my soul.[3]

IV 209 I will also go on to confess to you that, although I do not place my happiness in anything that depends on fortune or on the will of men, and would not consider myself absolutely unhappy even if I never saw my house restored or my relatives out of misery, I cannot view the harmful events that befall them under any notion other than that of evil. Nor can I view the useless efforts I make on their behalf without a kind of disquiet, which is no sooner calmed by reasoning than a new disaster produces more. And I think that if my life were entirely known to you, you would find it stranger that a sensitive mind like mine has survived so long, amid so many adversities, in so weak a body, with no counsel but that of its own reasoning and no consolation but that of its conscience, than you find the causes of this present illness.

I spent the whole of last winter on business so vexing that it kept me from using the freedom you granted me to put to you the difficulties I would find in my studies, and gave me other difficulties, from which I would have needed even more stupidity than I have to extricate myself. Only a little before my indisposition did I find the leisure to read the philosophy of Sir Kenelm Digby, which he wrote in English, and from which I hoped to draw arguments to refute yours, since the summary of the chapters showed me two places where he claimed to have done so. But when I reached them I was quite astonished to see that he had understood nothing at all of what he approves in your view of reflection, nor of what he denies in your view of IV 210 refraction. He makes no distinction between the motion of a ball and its determination, and does not consider why a soft body that yields slows the one, while a hard body merely resists the other.[4] For part of what he says about the motion of the heart he

3 Spa, a town in the Ardennes (in present-day Belgium), famous for its mineral springs.

4 Sir Kenelm Digby (1603–1665), English courtier and natural philosopher; his *Two Treatises* (1644) discuss Descartes' views.

is more excusable, if he has not read what you wrote about it to the physician of Louvain. Dr. Jonson has told me that he will translate these two chapters for you; and I think you will not be very curious about the rest of the book, because it is of the same caliber as that English priest who calls himself Albanus, and follows his method—although it contains some very fine meditations, and one can hardly expect more from a man who has spent most of his life pursuing designs of love or ambition. I shall never have any design stronger or more constant than that of being, all my life,[5]

Your most affectionate friend, always at your service, Elisabeth. 24 May. Monsieur Descartes.

On rereading what I tell you about myself, IV 211 I see that I am forgetting one of your maxims, which is never to put anything in writing that could be misinterpreted by uncharitable readers. But I trust Monsieur Pollot's care so completely that I know my letter will be safely delivered to you, and I trust your discretion enough to know that you will put it beyond the risk of falling into the wrong hands by burning it.

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH, MAY OR JUNE 1645

Descartes advises turning the imagination away from troubles and tells how he outgrew his own inherited illness.

DESCARTES IV 218 Madame,

I could not read the letter Your Highness did me the honor of writing to me without feeling extreme distress at seeing that so rare and so accomplished a virtue is not accompanied by the health, or the prosperity, it deserves. I readily conceive the multitude of troubles that continually present themselves to her. They are all the harder to overcome because they are often of such a nature that true reason does not bid us oppose them directly and try to drive them away. They are enemies within the

5 The physician of Louvain is Vopiscus Fortunatus Plempius, with whom Descartes debated the heart's motion in 1638; "Albanus" was the pen name of Thomas White, an English Catholic priest and friend of Digby.

household: since one is forced to live in their company, one must be constantly on guard to keep them from doing harm. And I find only one remedy for this, which is to divert one's imagination and senses from them as much as possible, and to use the intellect alone in considering them when prudence obliges one to do so.

IV 219 It seems to me that one can easily observe here the difference between the intellect and the imagination or the senses. For it is such that I believe the following. Suppose a person had every other reason to be content, but continually saw tragedies performed before her in which every act was calamitous, and occupied herself only in considering objects of sadness and pity that she knew to be feigned and fictitious, so that they merely drew tears from her eyes and moved her imagination without touching her intellect. I believe, I say, that this alone would suffice to accustom her heart to contract and to heave sighs. As a result, the circulation of the blood would be slowed and made sluggish, and the coarsest parts of the blood, sticking to one another, could easily obstruct her spleen by becoming entangled and lodged in its pores; and the subtlest parts, keeping their agitation, could affect her lungs and cause a cough that in the long run would be much to be feared. Conversely, suppose a person had countless real causes for displeasure, but took such pains to turn her imagination away from them that she never thought of them except when the necessity of her affairs obliged her to, and spent all the rest of her time considering only objects that could bring her contentment and joy. Besides the fact that this would be of great use to her in judging more soundly the things that mattered to her, since she would look at them without passion, I have no doubt that this alone would be capable of restoring her to health, even if her spleen and lungs IV 220 were already in a very bad state because of the poor temperament of the blood that sadness causes. Especially if she also made use of medical remedies to dissolve the part of the blood that causes obstructions. For this I judge the waters of Spa to be very suitable, above all if Your Highness, while taking them,

observes what physicians usually recommend: namely, that one must entirely free one's mind of all kinds of sad thoughts, and even of all kinds of serious meditation on the sciences, and occupy oneself only in imitating those who, looking at the green of a wood, the colors of a flower, the flight of a bird, and such things as require no attention, persuade themselves that they are thinking of nothing. This is not wasting time but using it well; for meanwhile one can find satisfaction in the hope that by this means one will recover perfect health, which is the foundation of all the other goods 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 in this matter it is not so much the theory as the practice that is difficult. But the extreme favor she does me in letting me know that she is not displeased to hear my views makes me take the liberty of writing them just as they are. It also gives me the liberty of adding that I have found in my own experience that an almost identical illness, and even a more dangerous one, was cured by the remedy I have just described. For I was born of a mother who died, a few days after my birth, of a disease of the IV 221 lungs caused by certain sorrows, and I had inherited from her a dry cough and a pale complexion. I kept these until I was over twenty, and they led all the physicians who saw me before that time to condemn me to die young. But I believe that the inclination I have always had to look at things from the angle that could make them most agreeable to me, and to make my chief contentment depend on myself alone, is the reason this indisposition, which was almost natural to me, gradually passed away entirely.[6]

I am much obliged to Your Highness for being pleased to tell me her opinion of the book by Sir Kenelm Digby, which I shall not be able to read until it has been translated into Latin; Monsieur Jonson, who was here yesterday, told me that some people intend to do this. He also told me that I could send my letters for Your Highness by the ordinary messengers, which I would not

6 In fact his mother, Jeanne Brochard, died in 1597, some thirteen months after his birth, following the birth of another child.

have dared to do without his word. I had put off writing this one because I was waiting for one of my friends to go to The Hague to deliver it to her. I infinitely regret Monsieur Pollot's absence, because I could learn from him the state of your health. But letters sent for me to the Alkmaar messenger never [IV 222] fail to reach me. And just as there is nothing in the world I desire so passionately as to be able to serve Your Highness, so there is nothing that could make me happier than to have the honor of receiving her commands. I am, etc.[7]

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES, 22 JUNE 1645

Elisabeth says she cannot keep her mind from her troubles and envies his freedom.

ELISABETH [IV 233] Monsieur Descartes,

Your letters always serve me as an antidote to melancholy, even when they do not instruct me, for they turn my mind away from the disagreeable objects that come upon it every day and make it contemplate the good fortune I have in the friendship of a person of your merit, to whose counsel I can entrust the conduct of my life. If I could also make it conform to your latest precepts, there is no doubt that I would quickly cure myself of the illnesses of the body and the weaknesses of the mind. But I confess that I find it difficult to separate from the senses and the imagination things that are continually presented to them in conversation and in letters, which I cannot avoid without failing in my duty. I do see that, if I erased from the idea of an affair everything that makes it vexing to me (which I believe is presented to me only by the imagination), I would judge it just as soundly, and would find remedies for it as promptly as [IV 234] I bring my affection to it. But I have never been able to put this into practice until after passion had played its part. There is something startling in misfortunes, even foreseen ones, which I can master only after a certain time; and in that time my body becomes so disordered that I need several months to restore it,

7 Alkmaar, a town in North Holland near Descartes' home.

and these months seldom pass without some new cause of trouble. Besides, I am obliged to govern my mind with care and give it agreeable objects, for the least idleness makes it fall back on the reasons it has to grieve; and I fear that, if I do not keep it occupied while I take the waters of Spa, it will become more melancholy. If I could profit, as you do, from everything that presents itself to my senses, I would amuse myself without taxing my mind. It is now that I feel the inconvenience of being somewhat reasonable. For if I were not reasonable at all, I would find pleasures in common with those among whom I must live, and so take this medicine with profit. And if I were as reasonable as you are, I would cure myself as you did. On top of this, the curse of my sex denies me the satisfaction a journey to Egmond would give me, to learn there the truths you draw from your new garden. Still, I console myself with the freedom you give me to ask for news of it now and then, as[8]

Your most affectionate friend, always at your service, Elisabeth. 12/22 June. Monsieur Descartes.

IV 235 I was very glad to learn that the Academy of Groningen has done you justice.[9]

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH, JUNE 1645

Descartes urges her to view misfortune from the side that shows its advantages.

DESCARTES IV 236 Madame,

I most humbly beg Your Highness to forgive me if I cannot pity her indisposition when I have the honor of receiving her letters. For I always find in them thoughts so clear and reasoning so firm that I cannot persuade myself that a mind capable of conceiving them is lodged in a weak and sickly body. However that may be, the knowledge Your Highness shows of the illness

8 Egmond-Binnen, a village near Alkmaar where Descartes was living.
9 The University of Groningen had ruled in Descartes' favor in his dispute with Martin Schoock, who had written an attack on him under Voetius' influence.

and of the remedies that can overcome it assures me that she will not fail to have the skill needed to use them as well.

I know well that it is almost impossible to resist the first disturbances that new misfortunes excite in us, and even that it is usually the best minds whose passions are the most violent and act most strongly on their bodies. But it seems to me that the next day, when sleep has calmed [IV 237] the emotion that arises in the blood on such occasions, one can begin to compose one's mind and make it tranquil. This is done by striving to consider all the advantages that can be drawn from the thing one had taken the day before for a great misfortune, and by turning one's attention away from the evils one had imagined in it. For there are no events so calamitous, or so absolutely bad in the judgment of the people, that an intelligent person cannot view them from some angle that will make them appear favorable. And Your Highness can draw this general consolation from the blows of fortune: that they have perhaps contributed a great deal to making her cultivate her mind to the degree she has. That is a good she should value more than an empire. Great prosperity often dazzles and intoxicates people so much that it possesses them rather than being possessed by them; and although this does not happen to minds of your temper, prosperity always gives them fewer occasions to exercise themselves than adversity does. And I believe that, just as there is no good in the world, except good sense, that can be called good absolutely, so there is no evil from which one cannot draw some advantage, if one has good sense.

I tried earlier to persuade Your Highness to be carefree, thinking that overly serious occupations weaken the body by tiring the mind. But I would not for that reason wish to dissuade her from the efforts needed to turn her thought away from objects that can sadden it; and I have no doubt that the [IV 238] diversions of study, which would be very laborious for others, may sometimes serve her as relaxation. I would consider myself extremely fortunate if I could help make them easier for her. I have a far greater desire to go to The Hague to learn the proper-

ties of the waters of Spa than to learn here those of the plants in my garden—far greater, too, than any concern I have for what is happening in Groningen or Utrecht, to my advantage or disadvantage. This will lead me to follow this letter in four or five days, and I shall be, all the days of my life, etc.

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH, 21 JULY 1645

Descartes proposes that they discuss Seneca's On the Happy Life by letter.

DESCARTES [IV 251] Madame,

The weather has been so changeable ever since I last had the honor of seeing Your Highness, and there have been days so cold for the season, that I have often felt uneasy and afraid that the waters of Spa might not be as healthy or as beneficial as they would have been in calmer weather. And since you have done me the honor of telling me that my letters might offer you some diversion while the physicians advise you not to occupy your mind with anything that strains it, I would be a poor steward of the favor you have been pleased to grant me, in allowing me to write to you, if I failed to take the first opportunities to do so.

I imagine that most of the letters you receive from elsewhere stir some emotion in you, and that even before reading them you are afraid of [IV 252] finding some unwelcome news in them, since the malice of fortune has long accustomed you to receiving such news often. But as for those that come from here, you can at least be sure that, if they give you no cause for joy, neither will they give you any cause for sadness, and that you can open them at any hour without fear that they will upset the digestion of the waters you are taking. For in this wilderness I learn nothing of what is happening in the rest of the world. And no thoughts come to me more often than those which set Your Highness's virtues before me and make me wish to see her as happy and as contented as she deserves. So I have no other subject for conversing with you than the means that philosophy teaches us for acquiring that supreme felicity which common

souls expect in vain from fortune, and which we can have only from ourselves.

One of these means, and one that seems to me among the most useful, is to examine what the ancients have written about it, and to try to go further than they did by adding something to their precepts. For in this way one can make these precepts entirely one's own, and prepare oneself to put them into practice. That is why, to make up for the deficiency of my mind, which can produce nothing of itself that I judge worthy of being read by Your Highness, and so that my letters may not be entirely empty and useless, I propose from now on to fill them with reflections drawn from my reading IV 253 of some book—namely, Seneca's *On the Happy Life*—unless you would rather choose another, or unless this plan is disagreeable to you.[10] But if I see that you approve of it (as I hope), and above all if you will be so kind as to share your remarks on the same book with me, then, besides doing much to instruct me, they will give me occasion to make my own more exact. And I shall work on mine all the more carefully, the more I judge that this conversation pleases you. For there is nothing in the world I desire more ardently than to show, in everything within my power, that I am,

Madame, Your Highness's most humble and obedient servant, Descartes. Egmond, 21 July 1645.

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH, 4 AUGUST 1645

Descartes distinguishes happiness from good fortune and gives three rules for contentment.

DESCARTES IV 263 Madame,

When I chose Seneca's book *On the Happy Life* to propose to Your Highness as a subject of conversation she might find agreeable, I considered only the reputation of the author and the dignity of the subject, without thinking about the way he treats it.

10 Seneca the Younger (c. 4 BC–AD 65), Roman Stoic philosopher and statesman. *De vita beata* (*On the Happy Life*) is one of his moral dialogues.

Having since considered that, I do not find it exact enough to deserve to be followed. But so that Your Highness may judge of it more easily, I shall try here to explain how it seems to me this subject ought to have been treated by a philosopher such as he, who, not being enlightened by faith, had only natural reason for his guide.

He says very well at the beginning that *vivere omnes beate volunt, sed ad pervidendum quid sit quod beatam vitam efficiat, caligant* (all men wish to live happily, but when it comes to seeing clearly what makes life happy, they are in the dark). But we need to know [IV 264] what *vivere beate* is. I would put it in French as *vivre heureusement*, "to live happily", except that there is a difference between *heur* and *béatitude*—between good fortune and happiness. Good fortune depends only on things outside us; that is why people to whom some good has come that they did not procure for themselves are thought more lucky than wise. Happiness, by contrast, consists, it seems to me, in a perfect contentment of mind and an inner satisfaction which those most favored by fortune do not usually have, and which the wise acquire without it.[11] Thus *vivere beate*, to live in happiness, is nothing other than to have a mind perfectly content and satisfied.

Considering next what *quod beatam vitam efficiat* is—that is, what the things are that can give us this supreme contentment—I observe that there are two kinds: those that depend on us, such as virtue and wisdom, and those that do not, such as honors, riches and health. For it is certain that a man of good birth, who is not ill and lacks nothing, and who in addition is as wise and as virtuous as another who is poor, sickly and malformed in body, can enjoy a more perfect contentment than he. Nevertheless, just as a small vessel can be as full as a larger one, even though it holds less liquid, so, if we take each person's contentment to be the fullness and fulfillment of his desires as regulated by reason, I have no doubt that the poorest, and those most ill-

11 "Happiness" renders *béatitude* (Latin *beatitudo*, the happy life), which Descartes here distinguishes from mere good fortune (*heur*).

favored by [IV 265] fortune or by nature, can be entirely content and satisfied, just as much as others, even though they do not enjoy as many goods. And it is only this kind of contentment that is in question here. The other kind is in no way in our power, so seeking it would be pointless.

Now it seems to me that each person can make himself content by himself, without expecting anything from elsewhere, provided only that he observes three things. The three rules of morality that I set out in the *Discourse on the Method* relate to these.[12]

The first is that he always try to use his mind as well as he can, to know what he ought or ought not to do in all the circumstances of life.

The second, that he have a firm and constant resolution to carry out everything that reason advises, without letting his passions or appetites turn him from it. It is the firmness of this resolution that I believe should be taken for virtue, although I do not know that anyone has ever explained it in this way. Instead, it has been divided into several species, which have been given various names because of the various objects to which it extends.

The third, that he consider that, while he conducts himself in this way, as far as he can, according to reason, all the goods he does not possess are all equally and entirely outside his power, and [IV 266] that by this means he accustom himself not to desire them. For nothing but desire, and regret or repentance, can prevent us from being content. But if we always do everything our reason dictates, we shall never have any cause to repent, even if events should later show us that we were mistaken, because the mistake is not our fault. And the reason why we do not desire, for example, to have more arms or more tongues than we have, while we do desire more health or more riches, is only that we imagine that these latter things could be acquired through our own conduct, or else that they are owed to our nature, and that

12 The provisional moral code set out in Part III of the *Discourse on the Method* (1637).

the same is not true of the others. We can rid ourselves of this opinion by considering that, since we have always followed the advice of our reason, we have left out nothing that was in our power, and that illnesses and misfortunes are no less natural to man than prosperity and health.

For the rest, not every kind of desire is incompatible with happiness; only those accompanied by impatience and sadness are. Nor is it necessary that our reason never be mistaken; it is enough that our conscience bear witness that we have never lacked the resolution and virtue to carry out everything we judged to be best. And so virtue alone is sufficient IV 267 to make us content in this life. Nevertheless, when virtue is not enlightened by the intellect, it can be false—that is, the will and resolution to do well can lead us to bad things when we believe them to be good—and so the contentment that comes from it is not solid; and because this virtue is usually set against pleasures, appetites and passions, it is very difficult to put into practice. The right use of reason, on the other hand, by giving a true knowledge of the good, prevents virtue from being false. By reconciling virtue with lawful pleasures, it makes its practice easy. And by making us know the condition of our nature, it so limits our desires that we must admit that man's greatest felicity depends on this right use of reason. Consequently, the study that serves to acquire it is the most useful occupation one can have, as it is also, no doubt, the most agreeable and the most delightful.

It follows, it seems to me, that Seneca ought to have taught us all the principal truths that we need to know in order to make the practice of virtue easier, to regulate our desires and passions, and so to enjoy natural happiness. That would have made his book the best and most useful that a pagan philosopher could have written. Still, this is only my opinion, which I submit to Your Highness's judgment; and if she does me the favor of telling me where I fall short, I shall IV 268 be very greatly obliged to her, and shall show, by correcting myself, that I am,

Madame, Your Highness's most humble and obedient servant, Descartes. Egmond, 4 August 1645.

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES, 16 AUGUST 1645

Elisabeth finds Seneca unmethodical and asks whether illness can take away the happiness that depends on us.

ELISABETH Monsieur Descartes,

In examining the book you recommended to me, I have found a good many fine periods and well-conceived maxims. They give me matter for pleasant meditation, but they do not instruct me in the subject the book treats, since they lack method, and the author does not [IV 269] even follow the method he had set himself. For instead of showing the shortest road to happiness, he is content to show that his riches and his luxury do not make him incapable of it. I felt obliged to write you this, so that you will not think I share your opinion out of prejudice or laziness. Nor do I ask you to go on correcting Seneca because your way of reasoning is more extraordinary, but because it is the most natural I have come across. It seems to teach me nothing new, except that I can draw from my own mind knowledge I had not yet noticed.

And so it is that I still cannot free myself of the doubt whether one can arrive at the happiness you speak of without the help of things that do not depend absolutely on the will. For there are illnesses that entirely take away the power of reasoning, and consequently the power of enjoying a rational satisfaction. There are others that diminish one's strength and prevent one from following the maxims that good sense has forged. They make even the most moderate person liable to be carried away by his passions, and less able to deal with the accidents of fortune that call for a prompt resolution. When Epicurus, in his attacks of the stone, struggled to assure his friends that he felt no pain, instead of crying out like ordinary people, he was leading the life of a philosopher, not that of a prince, a captain or a courtier. He knew that nothing would come to him from outside

to make him forget his role and fail to acquit himself of it according to the rules of his philosophy. IV 270 And it is on these occasions that repentance seems to me inevitable; knowing that erring is as natural to man as being ill cannot protect us from it. For we also know that we could have avoided each particular fault.[13]

But I am sure you will clear up these difficulties for me, and many others that do not occur to me just now, when you teach me the truths that must be known to make the practice of virtue easier. So do not, I beg you, abandon your plan of obliging me with your precepts, and believe that I value them as much as they deserve.

For a week now the bad temper of a sick brother has kept me from making you this request, by keeping me constantly at his side—either to get him, through the fondness he has for me, to submit to the doctors' rules, or to show him my own fondness by trying to divert him, since he is convinced that I am capable of it. I wish I were as capable of assuring you that I shall be all my life,

Monsieur Descartes, Your most affectionate friend, always at your service, Elisabeth. 16/6 August.

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH, 18 AUGUST 1645

Descartes reviews Seneca's first chapters and reconciles Epicurus, Zeno and Aristotle on the supreme good.

DESCARTES IV 271 Madame,

I do not know whether my last letters reached Your Highness, and I can write nothing on the subject I chose for the honor of conversing with you that I must not suppose you know better than I. Nevertheless I continue, believing that my letters will be no more troublesome to you than the books in your library. For since they contain no news that you have any interest in learn-

13 Epicurus (341–270 BC), Greek philosopher who held pleasure to be the end of life. Dying of kidney stones, he wrote to a friend that his joy of mind outweighed his pain.

ing promptly, nothing will prompt you to read them at times when you have business to attend to. And I shall consider the time I spend writing them very well employed if you give them only the time you feel like wasting.

SENECA CHAPTER BY CHAPTER

Descartes examines Seneca's definitions of the supreme good and finds them obscure.

DESCARTES I said earlier what it seemed to me Seneca ought to have treated in his book; I shall now examine IV 272 what he does treat in it. In general I notice only three things in it. The first is that he tries to explain what the supreme good is, and gives various definitions of it; the second, that he argues against the opinion of Epicurus; and the third, that he replies to those who object to philosophers that they do not live by the rules they prescribe. But to see more particularly how he treats these things, I shall pause a little over each chapter.

In the first, he rebukes those who follow custom and example rather than reason. *Nunquam de vita iudicatur*, he says, *semper creditur* (no one ever judges about life; everyone always takes it on trust). He does approve, however, of taking advice from those we believe to be wisest; but he wants us also to use our own judgment to examine their opinions. In this I very much agree with him. For although many people are not capable of finding the right road by themselves, there are few who cannot recognize it well enough when someone else shows it to them clearly. And however that may be, one has reason to be satisfied in one's conscience, and to be confident that one's moral opinions are the best one can have, when, instead of letting oneself be blindly led by example, one has taken care to seek the advice of the ablest people, and has used all the powers of one's mind to examine what one ought to follow. But while IV 273 Seneca strives here to adorn his style, he is not always exact enough in expressing his thought. For example, when he says *Sanabimur, si modo separemur à cætu* (we shall be cured, if only we separate

ourselves from the crowd), he seems to teach that it is enough to be eccentric to be wise—which, however, is not his intention.

In the second chapter he does little more than repeat in other words what he said in the first, adding only that what is commonly thought to be good is not.

Then in the third, after once again using many superfluous words, he finally states his opinion about the supreme good: namely, that *rerum naturæ assentitur* (one assents to the nature of things), that *ad illius legem exemplumque formari sapientia est* (to shape oneself by its law and example is wisdom), and that *beata vita est conveniens naturæ suæ* (the happy life is one in accord with its own nature). All these explanations seem to me very obscure. For by "nature" he surely does not mean our natural inclinations, since these usually lead us to pursue pleasure, which he argues against. But the rest of his discourse leads one to judge that by *rerum naturam* he means the order established by God in all the things there are in the world. Considering this order as infallible and independent of our will, he says that *rerum naturæ assentiri & ad illius legem exemplumque formari, sapientia est*—that is, that it is wisdom to acquiesce in the order of things and to do what we believe we were born for; or else, to speak as a Christian, that it is wisdom to submit to the will of God and to follow it in all our actions; and that *beata* IV 274 *vita est conveniens naturæ suæ*—that is, that happiness consists in following the order of the world in this way, and in taking in good part everything that happens to us. This explains almost nothing, and one cannot see well enough how it connects with what he adds immediately afterward, that this happiness cannot come about *nisi sana mens est*, etc. (unless the mind is sound)—unless he also means that *secundùm naturam vivere*, to live according to nature, is to live in accordance with true reason.

In the fourth and fifth chapters he gives some other definitions of the supreme good. They all bear some relation to the sense of the first, but none of them explains it sufficiently; and their very diversity shows that Seneca did not clearly understand what he meant. For the better one conceives a thing, the

more one is determined to express it in only one way. The definition in which he seems to me to have come closest is in the fifth chapter, where he says that *beatus est qui nec cupit nec timet beneficio rationis* (happy is he who, thanks to reason, neither desires nor fears), and that *beata vita est in recto certoque iudicio stabilita* (the happy life is founded on right and sure judgment). But so long as he does not teach the reasons why we ought neither to fear nor to desire anything, all this helps us very little.

In these same chapters he begins to argue against those who place happiness in pleasure, and he continues in the following ones. That is why, before examining them, I shall give my own view on this question here.

IV 275 I observe, first, that there is a difference between happiness, the supreme good, and the final end or goal toward which our actions ought to tend. Happiness is not the supreme good, but it presupposes it: it is the contentment or satisfaction of mind that comes from possessing it. By the end of our actions, however, one can understand either of the two. For the supreme good is undoubtedly the thing we ought to set ourselves as the goal of all our actions; and the contentment of mind that comes from it, being the attraction that makes us seek it, is also rightly called our end.

I observe, in addition, that the word *volupté*, "pleasure", was taken in a different sense by Epicurus than by those who argued against him. All his opponents restricted the meaning of this word to the pleasures of the senses; he, on the contrary, extended it to all the contentments of the mind, as one can easily judge from what Seneca and some others have written of him.

EPICURUS, ZENO AND ARISTOTLE

Descartes argues that the three ancient views of the supreme good can be reconciled.

DESCARTES Now there were three principal opinions among the pagan philosophers about the supreme good and the end of our actions: that of Epicurus, who said it was pleasure; that of

Zeno, who held that it was virtue; and that of Aristotle, who made it up of all the perfections, both of the body and of the mind. These three opinions can, it seems to me, IV 276 be accepted as true and reconciled with one another, provided they are interpreted charitably.[14]

For Aristotle considered the supreme good of human nature as a whole and in general—that is, the good that the most accomplished of all men can have—and so he was right to compose it of all the perfections of which human nature is capable. But that is of no use to us.

Zeno, by contrast, considered the good that each man can possess as an individual. That is why he too was quite right to say that it consists only in virtue, since virtue alone, among the goods we can have, depends entirely on our free will. But he represented this virtue as so severe and so hostile to pleasure, by making all vices equal, that only melancholics, it seems to me, or minds entirely detached from the body, could have been his followers.

Finally, Epicurus was not wrong, when he considered what happiness consists in and what the motive or end is to which our actions tend, to say that it is pleasure in general, that is, contentment of mind. For although the mere knowledge of our duty might oblige us to do good actions, it would not make us enjoy any happiness if no pleasure came to us from them. But because the name of pleasure is often given to IV 277 false pleasures, which are accompanied or followed by anxiety, vexation and repentance, many have believed that this opinion of Epicurus taught vice; and indeed it does not teach virtue. When there is a prize somewhere for shooting at a target, showing people the prize makes them want to shoot at it; yet they cannot win it unless they see the target. And those who see the target are not thereby induced to shoot unless they know there is a prize to be won. In the same way virtue, which is the target, is not much desired when it is seen all by itself; and contentment, which is the prize, cannot be acquired unless one pursues virtue.

14 Zeno of Citium (c. 334–262 BC), founder of the Stoic school.

That is why I think I may conclude here that happiness consists only in contentment of mind, that is, in contentment in general—for although some contentments depend on the body and others do not, there is none that exists anywhere but in the mind—but that, to have a contentment that is solid, one must follow virtue. That is, one must have a firm and constant will to carry out everything one judges to be best, and to use all the strength of one's intellect in judging well. I shall leave for another time the consideration of what Seneca has written on this. My letter is already too long, and there IV 278 is only enough room left in it for me to write that I am,

Madame, Your Highness's most humble and obedient servant, Descartes. Egmond, 18 August 1645.

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES, AUGUST 1645

Elisabeth comments on Seneca's treatment of Epicurus and asks how to strengthen the intellect for judging well.

ELISABETH Monsieur Descartes,

I think you will already have seen from my last letter, of the 16th, that yours of the 4th reached me. And I need not add that it has given me more light IV 279 on the subject it treats than everything I have been able to read or meditate on it. You know too well what you are doing, and what I am capable of, and you have examined too well what others have done, to be able to doubt this—even though, through an excess of generosity, you choose to be unaware of the extreme obligation I owe you for giving me so useful and agreeable an occupation as reading and considering your letters. Without your last letter I would not have understood Seneca's view of happiness as well as I think I now do. I attributed the obscurity of that book, as of most of the ancients, to their way of expressing themselves, which is quite different from ours, since the very things that are problematic among us could pass for hypotheses among them. And I attributed the lack of connection and order he observes to his design of winning admirers, by surprising the imagination, rather than

disciples, by informing the judgment: Seneca used witty sayings, as others used poetry and fables, to draw young people to follow his opinion. The way he refutes that of Epicurus seems to support this view. He admits of that philosopher: *quam nos virtuti legem dicimus, eam ille dicit voluptati* (the law we lay down for virtue, he lays down for pleasure). And a little earlier he says, in the name of Epicurus's followers: *ego enim nego quemquam posse iucunde vivere, nisi simul & honeste vivat* (for I deny that anyone can live pleasantly unless he also lives honorably). From this it clearly appears that they gave the name of pleasure to the joy and satisfaction of mind which Seneca calls *consequentia summum bonum* (what follows from the supreme good). And yet, throughout the rest of the book, he speaks [IV 280] of this Epicurean pleasure more as a satirist than as a philosopher, as if it were purely sensual. But I think all the better of him for it, since it has led you to take the trouble to explain their opinions and reconcile their differences better than they could have done themselves. You have thereby removed a powerful objection against the search for this supreme good, which none of those great minds were able to define, and against the authority of human reason, since reason did not enlighten those excellent men in the knowledge of what was most necessary to them and closest to their hearts. I hope you will go on, from what Seneca said or from what he ought to have said, to teach me the means of strengthening the intellect so as to judge what is best in all the actions of life. That seems to me the only difficulty, since it is impossible not to follow the right road once it is known. Please, too, be frank enough to tell me whether I am abusing your kindness by asking too much of your leisure, for the satisfaction of

Your most affectionate friend, always at your service, Elisabeth.

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH, 1 SEPTEMBER 1645

Descartes grants that illness can take away reason and weighs the pleasures of the mind against those of the body.

DESCARTES [IV 281] Madame,

Not being sure lately whether Your Highness was at The Hague or at Rhenen, I sent my letter by way of Leiden, and the one you did me the honor of writing to me was delivered only after the messenger who had brought it to Alkmaar had left. This prevented me from telling you sooner how proud I am that my judgment of the book you took the trouble to read does not differ from yours, and that my way of reasoning seems natural enough to you.[15] I am sure that, if you had had the leisure to think as much as I have about the things the book treats, I could write nothing about them that you would not have noticed better than I. But since Your Highness's age, birth and occupations have not allowed this, perhaps what I write may serve to save you a little time, and even my mistakes may give you occasions to notice the truth. For example, when I spoke of a happiness that depends entirely on our free will, and that all men can acquire without any help from elsewhere, you very rightly observe that there are [IV 282] illnesses which, by taking away the power of reasoning, also take away the power of enjoying a rational satisfaction of mind. And this teaches me that what I had said generally of all men should be understood only of those who have the free use of their reason, and who also know the road to take to arrive at this happiness. For there is no one who does not desire to make himself happy; but many do not know how, and often an indisposition in the body prevents the will from being free. The same happens when we sleep: the greatest philosopher in the world cannot keep himself from having bad dreams when his temperament disposes him to them. Yet experience shows that, if one has often had a certain thought while one's mind was free,

15 Rhenen, a small town near Utrecht, where Elisabeth's exiled family had a summer residence.

it still comes back afterward, whatever indisposition the body may have. Thus I can say that my dreams never present anything distressing to me; and there is no doubt that it is a great advantage to have long accustomed oneself not to have sad thoughts. But we can answer for ourselves absolutely only while we are our own masters, and it is a lesser thing to lose one's life than to lose the use of one's reason. For even without the teachings of faith, natural philosophy alone gives our soul hope of a happier state after death than the one it is in at present; and it makes the soul fear nothing more distressing than to be attached to a body that entirely takes away its freedom.

As for the other indispositions, which do not IV 283 entirely cloud one's judgment but only alter the humors, and make one unusually inclined to sadness, anger or some other passion, they undoubtedly cause distress. But they can be overcome, and they even give the soul matter for a satisfaction that is all the greater, the harder they were to conquer. And I believe the same of all external obstacles, such as the brilliance of high birth, the flatteries of the court, the adversities of fortune, and also its great prosperities, which usually do more than its misfortunes to prevent one from playing the role of philosopher. For when one has everything one could wish for, one forgets to think of oneself; and when fortune later changes, one is all the more taken by surprise the more one had trusted in it. In short, one can say generally that nothing can entirely take from us the means of making ourselves happy, provided it does not disturb our reason; and that it is not always the things that seem most distressing that do the most harm.

But in order to know exactly how much each thing can contribute to our contentment, we must consider what causes produce it; and this is also one of the chief pieces of knowledge that can serve to make the practice of virtue easier. For all the actions of our soul that acquire some perfection for us are virtuous, and all our IV 284 contentment consists only in the inner testimony we have of possessing some perfection. Thus we can never practice any virtue (that is, do what our reason persuades

us we ought to do) without receiving satisfaction and pleasure from it. But there are two kinds of pleasures: those that belong to the mind alone, and those that belong to the human being, that is, to the mind insofar as it is united to the body. These latter, presenting themselves confusedly to the imagination, often appear much greater than they are, especially before we possess them; and this is the source of all the evils and all the errors of life. For according to the rule of reason, each pleasure ought to be measured by the greatness of the perfection that produces it, and that is how we measure those whose causes are clearly known to us. But passion often makes us believe certain things to be much better and more desirable than they are. Then, when we have taken great pains to acquire them, and meanwhile lost the opportunity to possess other, truer goods, enjoying them makes us aware of their defects; and from this come disdain, regret and repentance. That is why the true office of reason is to examine the just value of all the goods whose acquisition seems to depend in some way on our conduct, so that we never fail to devote all our care to procuring for ourselves those that are in fact the most desirable. In this, if fortune opposes our [IV 285] plans and prevents them from succeeding, we shall at least have the satisfaction of having lost nothing through our own fault, and we shall still enjoy all the natural happiness whose acquisition was in our power.

Thus, for example, anger can sometimes arouse in us desires for revenge so violent that it makes us imagine more pleasure in punishing our enemy than in preserving our honor or our life, and makes us recklessly expose both for that purpose. Whereas if reason examines what the good or perfection is on which this pleasure drawn from revenge is founded, it will find none (at least when the revenge does not serve to prevent our being offended again) except that revenge makes us imagine we have some kind of superiority and some advantage over the person on whom we take it. And this is often only an empty fancy, which deserves no esteem in comparison with honor or life, nor

even in comparison with the satisfaction one would have in seeing oneself master of one's anger by refraining from revenge.

And the same happens with all the other passions. There is none that does not represent the good it tends toward with more luster than it deserves, and that does not make us imagine pleasures much greater before we possess them than we find them afterward, when we have them. This is why pleasure (*volupté*) is commonly condemned: the word is used only to mean IV 286 pleasures that often deceive us by their appearance, and make us neglect others that are much more solid but whose anticipation does not move us so much—as is usually the case with those of the mind alone. I say "usually", for not all pleasures of the mind are praiseworthy. They can be founded on some false opinion, like the pleasure one takes in speaking ill of others, which is founded only on the thought that one will be esteemed all the more, the less others are. And they too can deceive us by their appearance when some strong passion accompanies them, as can be seen in the pleasure that ambition gives.

But the chief difference between the pleasures of the body and those of the mind is this. The body is subject to perpetual change, and its very preservation and well-being depend on this change; so all the pleasures that concern it last hardly any time. For they arise only from the acquisition of something that is useful to the body at the moment one receives them, and as soon as it ceases to be useful to it, they cease too. The pleasures of the soul, by contrast, can be immortal like the soul itself, provided they have a foundation so solid that neither the knowledge of the truth nor any false persuasion destroys 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 the perfections, both of the body and of the mind, that can be acquired by IV 287 our conduct. Since we are usually obliged to deprive ourselves of some in order to have others, we may then always choose the best. And because those of the body are the least, one can say generally that it is possible to make oneself happy without them. Nevertheless, I am not of the opin-

ion that they should be entirely despised, or even that one should free oneself from having passions. It is enough to make them subject to reason; and once they have been tamed in this way, they are sometimes all the more useful the more they lean toward excess. I shall never have a more excessive one than the passion that carries me to the respect and veneration I owe you, and makes me,

Madame, Your Highness's most humble and obedient servant, Descartes. Egmond, 1 September 1645.

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES, 13 SEPTEMBER 1645

Elisabeth asks how one can value goods without infinite knowledge and asks him to define the passions.

ELISABETH [IV 288] Monsieur Descartes,

If my conscience remained satisfied with the excuses you offer for my ignorance, as remedies for it, I would owe it a great deal, and I would be free of repentance for having spent so badly the time in which I have enjoyed the use of reason. That time has been longer for me than for others of my age, since my birth and my fortune forced me to use my judgment earlier, in conducting a rather difficult life—one free both of the prosperity that might have kept me from thinking of myself and of the subjection that would have obliged me to rely on the prudence of a governess.

Yet I do not believe that this prosperity, or the flattery that goes with it, is absolutely capable of taking fortitude of mind away from well-born souls, or of preventing them from meeting a change of fortune like philosophers. But I am convinced that the host of accidents that take those who govern the public by surprise, without giving them time to examine the most useful expedient, often leads them (however virtuous they may be) to do things that afterward cause the repentance which you say is one of the chief obstacles to happiness. It is true that a habit of valuing goods by how far they can contribute to contentment, of measuring this [IV 289] contentment by the perfections that give

rise to pleasures, and of judging these perfections and pleasures without passion, will protect them from a great many mistakes. But to value goods in this way one must know them perfectly. And to know all those one is forced to choose among in an active life, one would need infinite knowledge. You will say that one is satisfied all the same when one's conscience testifies that one has taken every possible precaution. But that never happens when things do not turn out as one reckoned. For one always thinks afterward of things that remained to be considered. To measure contentment by the perfection that causes it, one would need to see clearly the value of each, and whether those perfections that serve only ourselves, or those that also make us useful to others, are preferable. The latter seem to be valued to excess by a temperament that torments itself for others, and the former by one who lives only for himself. And yet each of them supports his inclination with reasons strong enough to make him keep to it all his life. It is the same with the other perfections of body and mind, which a tacit feeling makes reason approve—a feeling that should not be called a passion, because it is born with us. So tell me, if you please, how far it should be followed (since it is a gift of nature), and how to correct it.

I should also like to see you define the passions, so that I may know them well. For those who call them perturbations of the soul would convince me that their force consists only in dazzling and subduing reason, if experience did not IV 290 show me that some of them move us to reasonable actions. But I am sure you will give me more light on this when you explain how the force of the passions makes them all the more useful when they are subject to reason.[16]

I shall receive this favor at Rijswijk, where we are going to stay, in the Prince of Orange's house, until this house here has

16 The Stoic definition, familiar through Cicero's *perturbationes animi* (*Tusculan Disputations*, Book IV).

been cleaned. But you need not change the address on your letters for that reason, to[17]

Your most affectionate friend, always at your service, Elisabeth. 3/13 September. Monsieur Descartes.

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH, 15 SEPTEMBER 1645

Descartes lists the truths most useful for judging well: God, the soul, the universe, and our place in the whole.

DESCARTES Madame,

Your Highness has noted so precisely all the causes that kept Seneca from setting out his opinion on the supreme good clearly, IV 291 and you have taken the trouble to read his book with such care, that I would be afraid of becoming tiresome if I went on here to examine all his chapters in order, and if this made me put off answering the difficulty you were pleased to put to me: how to strengthen the intellect so as to discern what is best in all the actions of life. That is why, without stopping now to follow Seneca, I shall try only to explain my own opinion on this matter.

Only two things, it seems to me, can be required in order to be always disposed to judge well. One is knowledge of the truth. The other is the habit that makes us remember this knowledge and assent to it whenever the occasion requires. But since God alone knows all things perfectly, we must be content to know those that are of most use to us.

Among these, the first and chief is that there is a God on whom all things depend, whose perfections are infinite, whose power is immense, whose decrees are infallible. For this teaches us to take in good part everything that happens to us, as sent to us expressly by God. And since the true object of love is perfection, when we raise our mind IV 292 to consider him as he is, we find ourselves naturally so inclined to love him that we draw joy

17 Rijswijk, a village near The Hague, where the Prince of Orange, Frederick Henry, had a residence.

even from our afflictions, thinking that his will is carried out in our receiving them.

The second thing we must know is the nature of our soul, insofar as it subsists without the body, is much nobler than the body, and is capable of enjoying countless contentments not to be found in this life. For this keeps us from fearing death, and so detaches our affection from the things of the world that we regard with nothing but contempt whatever lies in the power of fortune.

It can also help a great deal to judge worthily of God's works, and to have that vast idea of the extent of the universe that I tried to convey in the third book of my *Principles*. For if we imagine that beyond the heavens there is nothing but imaginary spaces, and that all these heavens are made only to serve the earth, and the earth only for man, we become inclined to think that this earth is our principal dwelling and this life our best. And instead of recognizing the perfections that are truly in us, we attribute to other creatures imperfections they do not have, so as to raise ourselves above them. Falling into an absurd presumption, we want a seat on God's council and a share with him in the task of governing the world—which causes endless vain anxieties and vexations. Once we have thus recognized the goodness of God, IV 293 the immortality of our souls and the greatness of the universe, there is yet another truth that seems to me very useful to know. It is this: although each of us is a person separate from others, whose interests are therefore in some way distinct from those of the rest of the world, we must nevertheless bear in mind that we could not subsist alone, and that we are in fact one of the parts of the universe—and more particularly still, one of the parts of this earth, one of the parts of this state, this society, this family, to which we are joined by our residence, our oath, our birth. And we must always prefer the interests of the whole of which we are a part to those of our own person in particular—but with measure and discretion. For we would be wrong to expose ourselves to a great evil merely to procure a small good for our relatives or our country; and if one

man is worth more on his own than all the rest of his city, he would not be right to be willing to sacrifice himself to save it. But if we referred everything to ourselves, we would not be afraid of doing others great harm whenever we thought we could gain some small advantage from it, and we would have no true friendship, no fidelity, and in general no virtue. Whereas, by considering ourselves as a part of the public, we take pleasure in doing good to everyone, and we are not even afraid to risk our life in the service of others when the occasion arises; indeed, we would be willing to lose our soul, if that were possible, to save others. So this consideration is the source and origin of all the most heroic actions IV 294 that human beings perform. As for those who expose themselves to death out of vanity, because they hope to be praised for it, or out of stupidity, because they do not perceive the danger, I think they are more to be pitied than prized. But when someone exposes himself to death because he believes it is his duty, or suffers some other evil so that good may come of it to others, he may not reflect that he does this because he owes more to the public, of which he is a part, than to himself as an individual; yet he does it by virtue of this consideration, which is present, though confusedly, in his thought. And we are naturally led to have it when we know and love God as we should. For then, abandoning ourselves entirely to his will, we strip ourselves of our own interests and have no other passion than to do what we believe pleases him. As a result we enjoy satisfactions of mind and contentments worth incomparably more than all the little passing joys that depend on the senses.

Besides these truths, which concern all our actions in general, we must also know several others that bear more particularly on each of them. The chief of these seem to me to be the ones I noted in my last letter: namely, that all our passions represent the goods they incite us IV 295 to pursue as much greater than they really are; and that the pleasures of the body are never as lasting as those of the soul, nor as great when we possess them as they seem when we hope for them. We must note this

carefully, so that when we feel ourselves stirred by some passion we suspend our judgment until it has calmed down, and do not let ourselves be easily deceived by the false appearance of the goods of this world.

To this I can add nothing else, except that we must also examine in particular all the customs of the places where we live, to know how far they should be followed. And although we cannot have certain demonstrations of everything, we must nevertheless take sides and embrace the opinions that seem most probable to us on all matters that come up in practice, so that when it is a question of acting we are never irresolute. For irresolution alone is what causes regret and repentance.

For the rest, I said above that besides knowledge of the truth, habit is also required in order to be always disposed to judge well. For since we cannot attend continually to the same thing, however clear and evident the reasons that once persuaded us of some truth may have been, we can later be turned away from believing it by false appearances—unless, IV 296 by long and frequent meditation, we have impressed it so deeply on our mind that it has become a habit. In this sense the Schools are right to say that the virtues are habits. For in fact we seldom go wrong for lack of knowing in theory what we should do, but only for lack of knowing it in practice—that is, for lack of a firm habit of believing it. And since, as I examine these truths here, I also strengthen the habit of them in myself, I am particularly obliged to Your Highness for allowing me to discuss them with her; and there is nothing on which I think my leisure better spent than on what allows me to show that I am,[18]

Madame, Your Highness's most humble and obedient servant, Descartes.

As I was sealing this letter I received Your Highness's of the 13th. But I find so many things to consider in it that I dare not undertake to answer it on the spot, and I am sure Your Highness would rather I took a little time to think about it.

18 The scholastic philosophers, following Aristotle, for whom a virtue is a *habitus* (Greek *hexis*), a settled disposition.

Egmond, 15 September 1645.

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES, 30 SEPTEMBER 1645

Elisabeth questions each of these truths, especially how God's providence fits with free human choices.

ELISABETH [IV 301] Monsieur Descartes,

Although your observations on Seneca's views about the supreme good would make reading him [IV 302] more profitable than I could ever make it on my own, I am not at all sorry to exchange them for truths as necessary as those that contain the means of strengthening the intellect so as to discern what is best in all the actions of life—on condition that you also add the explanation my stupidity needs concerning the usefulness of the kinds of knowledge you propose.

Knowledge of the existence of God and of his attributes can console us for the misfortunes that come to us from the ordinary course of nature and the order he has established in it—losing our property in a storm, our health through infected air, our friends through death. But it cannot console us for those imposed on us by other people, whose choices seem to us entirely free; for faith alone can persuade us that God takes care to govern wills, and that he determined the fortune of each person before the creation of the world.

The immortality of the soul, and the knowledge that it is much nobler than the body, can make us seek death as well as despise it, since we cannot doubt that we shall live more happily when free from the illnesses and passions of the body. And I am astonished that those who claimed to be persuaded of this truth, and lived without the revealed law, should have preferred a painful life to an advantageous death.

The great extent of the universe, which you have [IV 303] set out in the third book of your *Principles*, serves to detach our affections from what we see of it. But it also separates that particular providence, which is the foundation of theology, from the idea we have of God.

The consideration that we are a part of the whole whose advantage we must seek is indeed the source of all generous actions; but I find many difficulties in the conditions you prescribe for them. How are we to measure the evils we take on for the public against the good that will come of it, without those evils seeming greater to us, inasmuch as our idea of them is more distinct? And what rule shall we have for comparing things that are not equally known to us, such as our own merit and that of the people we live with? An arrogant nature will always tip the scales its own way, and a modest one will value itself at less than it is worth.

To profit from the particular truths you speak of, one must know exactly all these passions and all these prejudices, most of which go unnoticed. In observing the customs of the countries where we find ourselves, we sometimes come upon very unreasonable ones that must be followed to avoid greater drawbacks.

Since I have been here I have had a very tiresome experience of this. I hoped to profit from a stay in the country by spending the time in study, and I find here incomparably less leisure than I had at The Hague, because of the diversions of people who do not know what to do with themselves. And although IV 304 it is most unjust to deprive me of real goods in order to give them imaginary ones, I am forced to yield to the absurd laws of civility in force here, so as not to make enemies. Since I began writing this letter I have been interrupted more than seven times by these tiresome visits. It is only your excessive kindness that keeps my letters from being placed in the same category in your eyes, and that makes you want to strengthen the habit of your knowledge by sharing it with a person as unteachable as

Yours most affectionately, always at your service, Elisabeth. The last day of September. Monsieur Descartes.

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH, 6 OCTOBER 1645

Descartes prefers knowledge to cheerful illusion, defines the passions, and argues that God causes even free actions.

DESCARTES Madame,

I have sometimes put a question to myself: is it better to be cheerful and content, imagining the [IV 305] goods one possesses to be greater and more valuable than they are, and not knowing, or not stopping to consider, those one lacks? Or is it better to have more reflection and knowledge, so as to know the true value of both, and to become sadder? If I thought the supreme good was joy, I would not doubt that one ought to try to make oneself joyful at any cost, and I would approve the brutishness of those who drown their sorrows in wine or dull them with tobacco. But I distinguish between the supreme good, which consists in the exercise of virtue—or, what comes to the same thing, in the possession of all the goods whose acquisition depends on our free will—and the satisfaction of mind that follows from this acquisition. That is why, seeing that it is a greater perfection to know the truth, even when it is to our disadvantage, than to be ignorant of it, I admit that it is better to be less cheerful and have more knowledge. Besides, it is not always when we are most cheerful that our mind is most satisfied. On the contrary, great joys are usually subdued and serious, and only moderate and passing ones are accompanied by laughter. So I do not approve of trying to deceive ourselves by feeding on false imaginings. For all the pleasure that comes of them can touch only the surface of the soul, which meanwhile feels [IV 306] an inner bitterness on perceiving that they are false. And even if the soul could be so continually diverted elsewhere that it never noticed this, we would not on that account enjoy the happiness in question, because that must depend on our own conduct, and this would come only from fortune.

But when we can entertain different considerations that are equally true, some of which lead us to be content while others,

on the contrary, prevent us, it seems to me that prudence requires us to dwell chiefly on those that give us satisfaction. Indeed, since almost everything in the world can be seen from some side that makes it appear good, and from some other that makes us notice its defects, I believe that if we should use our skill in anything, it is above all in knowing how to look at things from the angle that shows them most to our advantage—provided we do so without deceiving ourselves.

Thus, when Your Highness notes the causes for which she may have had more leisure to cultivate her reason than many others of her age, if she will also be pleased to consider how much more she has profited than they have, I am sure she will find reason enough to be content. And I do not see why she prefers to compare herself with them in what gives her cause IV 307 to complain rather than in what could give her satisfaction. For the constitution of our nature is such that our mind needs a great deal of rest in order to spend a few moments usefully in the search for truth, and it would grow dull instead of sharper if it applied itself too much to study. So we should not measure the time we have been able to devote to our instruction by the number of hours we have had to ourselves, but rather, it seems to me, by the example of what we commonly see happen to others, since that is a sign of the ordinary reach of the human mind.

It also seems to me that we have no reason to repent when we have done what we judged best at the time we had to decide to act, even if later, thinking it over at greater leisure, we judge that we were wrong. We should rather repent if we had done something against our conscience, even if we later recognized that we had done better than we thought. For we are answerable only for our thoughts; and it is not in human nature to know everything, nor to judge as well on the spur of the moment as when we have plenty of time to deliberate.

For the rest, although the vanity that makes us think better of ourselves than we should is a vice that belongs only to weak and base souls, that does not mean that the strongest and most generous souls should despise themselves. We must do ourselves

justice, recognizing our perfections as well as our [IV 308] defects; and if propriety prevents us from proclaiming them, it does not on that account prevent us from being aware of them.

Finally, although we do not have infinite knowledge, so as to know perfectly all the goods we happen to have to choose among in the various circumstances of life, we should, it seems to me, be content with a moderate knowledge of the most necessary things, such as those I listed in my last letter.

In that letter I already stated my opinion on the difficulty Your Highness raises: namely, whether those who refer everything to themselves are more reasonable than those who torment themselves for others. For if we thought only of ourselves, we could enjoy only the goods that are ours in particular; whereas if we consider ourselves as parts of some other body, we also share in the goods common to it, without being deprived of any of those that are our own. It is not the same with evils. For according to philosophy, evil is nothing real, but only a privation. When we grieve over some evil that befalls our friends, we do not thereby share in the defect in which that evil consists; and whatever sadness or distress we may feel on such an occasion, it could never be as great as the inner satisfaction that always [IV 309] accompanies good actions—above all those that proceed from a pure affection for others, one we do not refer to ourselves, that is, from the Christian virtue called charity. Thus, even while weeping and taking great pains, we can have more pleasure than when we laugh and rest.

And it is easy to prove that the pleasure of the soul in which happiness consists is not inseparable from cheerfulness and bodily ease. Tragedies show this, for they please us all the more the more sadness they arouse in us; and so do bodily exercises such as hunting, tennis and the like, which are no less agreeable for being very strenuous. Indeed, we often see that it is the fatigue and effort that increase the pleasure. The contentment the soul receives from these exercises arises from their making it aware of the strength, or skill, or some other perfection of the body to which it is joined. But the contentment it has in weeping

when it sees some pitiful and tragic action represented on a stage comes chiefly from its seeming to itself to perform a virtuous action in having compassion for the afflicted. And in general the soul is pleased to feel passions stirred up in it, of whatever kind, provided it remains their master.

DEFINING THE PASSIONS

Descartes distinguishes passions from sensations, reveries and imagination.

DESCARTES But I must examine these [IV 310] passions more closely in order to be able to define them. This will be easier here than if I were writing to anyone else. For since Your Highness has taken the trouble to read the treatise I once sketched on the nature of animals, you already know how I conceive the formation of various impressions in their brain: some by external objects that move the senses; others by the internal dispositions of the body, or by the traces of previous impressions that have remained in the memory, or by the agitation of the spirits that come from the heart; or also, in man, by the action of the soul, which has some power to change the impressions in the brain, just as, in turn, these impressions have the power to arouse in the soul thoughts that do not depend on its will.[19] It follows that we can, in general, call passions all the thoughts that are thus aroused in the soul without the concurrence of its will—and so without any action coming from it—by the impressions in the brain alone; for everything that is not action is passion. But the name is usually restricted to thoughts caused by some particular agitation of the spirits. For those that come from external objects, or from internal dispositions of the body —such as the perception of colors, sounds and smells, hunger, thirst, pain and the like—are called sensations [IV 311] , some external, others internal. Those that depend only on what previous impressions have left in the memory and on the ordinary

19 Probably Descartes' unpublished *Treatise on Man*, the physiological part of his *World* (1633).

agitation of the spirits are reveries, whether they come in dreams or when we are awake and the soul, not determining itself to anything of its own accord, idly follows whatever impressions it finds in the brain. But when the soul uses its will to determine itself to some thought that is not only intelligible but imaginable, this thought makes a new impression in the brain; and that is not a passion in the soul but an action, which is properly called imagination. Finally, when the ordinary course of the spirits is such that it commonly arouses sad or cheerful thoughts, or others of the kind, we do not attribute this to passion but to the nature or temperament of the person in whom they are aroused. That is why we say that this man has a sad nature, that one a cheerful temperament, and so on. So there remain only the thoughts that come from some particular agitation of the spirits, and whose effects are felt as in the soul itself, that are properly called passions.

It is true that we hardly ever have any that do not depend on several of the causes I have just distinguished. But we name them after the principal one, or the one to which [IV 312] we chiefly attend. This is why many people confuse the sensation of pain with the passion of sadness, the sensation of titillation with the passion of joy (which they also call delight or pleasure), and the sensations of thirst or hunger with the desires to drink or eat, which are passions. For ordinarily the causes that produce pain also agitate the spirits in the way required to arouse sadness, and those that make us feel some titillation agitate them in the way required to arouse joy, and so on for the others.

We also sometimes confuse the inclinations or habits that dispose us to some passion with the passion itself, though the difference is easy to see. For example, when it is announced in a town that the enemy are coming to besiege it, the inhabitants' first judgment of the harm that may come to them from it is an action of their soul, not a passion. And although many of them make the same judgment, they are not equally moved by it: some are moved more, others less, according as they have more or less of a habit of, or inclination to, fear. Before their soul

receives the emotion in which alone the passion consists, it must make this judgment—or else, without judging, at least conceive the danger and imprint its image on the brain (which is done by another action, called imagining). By the same means it must determine the IV 313 spirits that go from the brain through the nerves into the muscles to enter those that serve to narrow the openings of the heart, which slows the circulation of the blood. As a result the whole body becomes pale, cold and trembling, and the new spirits coming from the heart to the brain are agitated in such a way that they can help form there no images other than those that arouse in the soul the passion of fear. All these things follow one another so closely that they seem to be a single operation. And so, in all the other passions, some particular agitation occurs in the spirits that come from the heart.

That is what I meant to write to Your Highness a week ago, and I intended to add a detailed explanation of all the passions. But finding it difficult to enumerate them, I was forced to let the messenger leave without my letter. And having meanwhile received the one Your Highness

GOD AND FREE WILL

Descartes argues that God is the total cause even of actions that depend on free will.

DESCARTES has done me the honor of writing to me, I have a new occasion to reply, which obliges me to put off this examination of the passions to another time, and to say here that all the reasons that prove the existence of God, and that he IV 314 is the first and immutable cause of all the effects that do not depend on human free will, prove in the same way, it seems to me, that he is also the cause of all those that do. For one cannot demonstrate that he exists except by considering him as a supremely perfect being; and he would not be supremely perfect if anything 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 raises us to a supernatural happiness. But philosophy alone

is enough to show that not the slightest thought could enter a man's mind unless God willed, and had willed from all eternity, that it should. And the distinction the Schools draw between universal and particular causes has no place here. The sun, for example, is the universal cause of all flowers, yet it is not on that account the cause of tulips being different from roses; and the reason is that their production also depends on certain other particular causes that are not subordinate to it. But God is the universal cause of everything in such a way that he is, in the same way, its total cause; and so nothing can happen without his will.

It is also true that knowing the soul is immortal, and knowing the felicities it will be capable of outside this life, could give those who are weary of this life reason to [IV 315] leave it, if they were assured that they would afterward enjoy all those felicities. But no reason assures them of this. Only the false philosophy of Hegesias—whose book was banned by Ptolemy because many had killed themselves after reading it—tries to persuade us that this life is bad. The true philosophy teaches, quite the contrary, that even amid the saddest accidents and the most pressing pains we can always be content, provided we know how to use reason.[20]

As for the extent of the universe, I do not see how considering it invites us to separate particular providence from the idea we have of God. For God is quite a different matter from finite powers. Since these can be exhausted, when we see them used for many great effects we have reason to judge it unlikely that they also extend to the smallest ones. But the greater we judge God's works to be, the better we perceive the infinity of his power; and the better we know this infinity, the more certain we are that it extends to all the most particular actions of human beings.

Nor do I think that by this particular providence of God, which Your Highness said is the foundation [IV 316] of theology, you

mean some change occurring in his decrees on account of actions that depend on our free will. For theology does not admit such change. When it obliges us to pray to God, it is not so that we may teach him what we need, nor so that we may try to persuade him to change something in the order established from all eternity by his providence—either would be blameworthy—but only so that we may obtain what he has willed from all eternity to be obtained through our prayers. And I believe all theologians agree on this, even the Arminians, who seem to be the ones who grant most to free will.[21]

I admit that it is difficult to measure exactly how far reason requires us to concern ourselves with the public. But then this is not a matter in which great exactness is necessary: it is enough to satisfy one's conscience, and here one may allow a good deal to one's inclination. For God has so established the order of things, and bound human beings together in so close a society, that even if each person referred everything to himself and had no charity for others, he would still usually exert himself on their behalf in everything within his power, provided he used prudence—especially IV 317 if he lived in an age whose morals were not corrupt. Moreover, just as it is a higher and more glorious thing to do good to others than to procure it for oneself, so it is the greatest souls that are most inclined to it and set least store by the goods they possess. Only weak and base souls value themselves more than they should; they are like small vessels that three drops of water can fill. I know that Your Highness is not of that number. And whereas these base souls can be induced to take trouble for others only by showing them that they will gain some profit for themselves, for Your Highness's own good one must point out to her that she could not long be

20 Hegesias of Cyrene (3rd century BC), a philosopher nicknamed "the death-persuader"; Cicero (*Tusculan Disputations* I.83–84) reports that King Ptolemy of Egypt forbade him to lecture on the subject.

21 Followers of the Dutch theologian Jacobus Arminius (1560–1609), who defended free will against strict Calvinist predestination and were condemned at the Synod of Dort (1618–1619).

useful to those she cares for if she neglected herself, and beg her to take care of her health. That is what is done by

Madame, Your Highness's most humble and obedient servant, Descartes. Egmond, 6 October 1645.

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES, 28 OCTOBER 1645

Elisabeth presses him on repentance, free will and particular providence, and on how passions can be both excessive and ruled.

ELISABETH [IV 321] Monsieur Descartes,

After giving such good reasons to show that it is better to know truths to our disadvantage than to be pleasantly deceived, and that only things admitting of different, equally true considerations should oblige us to dwell on the one that will bring us more contentment, I am surprised that you want me to compare myself with people of my age in a matter unknown to me rather than in one of which I cannot be ignorant, even though the former is more to my advantage. Nothing can make clear to me whether I have profited more in cultivating my reason than others have in the pursuits they cared about; and I have no doubt at all that, even after the time for rest my body required, I would still have had time left to advance beyond where I am. If we measured the reach of the human mind by the example of the common run of people, it would prove very limited indeed, because most of them use thought only in regard to the senses. Even among those who apply themselves to study, few use anything but memory, or make truth the aim of their labor. If there is something wrong in my not liking to consider whether I have gained more than these people, I do not think it is an excess of humility—which is as harmful as presumption, [IV 322] but not as common. We are more inclined to overlook our defects than our perfections. And by fleeing repentance for faults committed, as an enemy of felicity, we might run the risk of losing the wish to correct them—especially when some passion produced them, since we naturally love to be moved by the passions and to follow their impulses. Only the troubles that come from following

them teach us that they can be harmful. And this, in my judgment, is why tragedies please us all the more the more sadness they arouse: we know that it will not be violent enough to drive us to extravagant behavior, nor lasting enough to damage our health.

But this is not enough to support the doctrine in one of your earlier letters, that the passions are all the more useful the more they tend toward excess, when they are subject to reason; for it seems they cannot be both excessive and subject. But I believe you will clear up this doubt if you take 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 reasoning. I would not dare ask this of you if I did not know that you never leave a work unfinished, and that in undertaking to teach a person as stupid as I am, you prepared yourself for the inconveniences this brings you.

That is why I go on telling you that the arguments proving the existence of God, and proving that he is the immutable cause of all the effects that do not depend on man's free will, do not persuade me that he is [IV 323] also the cause of those that do. From his supreme perfection it follows necessarily that he could be, that is, that he could have given man no free will at all. But since we feel that we have it, it seems to me contrary to common sense to believe that it depends on him in its operations, as it does in its being.

If one is fully persuaded of the immortality of the soul, it is impossible to doubt that it will be happier after its separation from the body. The body is the source of all the displeasures of life, as the soul is of its greatest contentments. That is, unless one holds the opinion of Monsieur Digby. His tutor (whose writings you have seen) made him believe that purgatory is necessary, by persuading him that the passions which ruled over reason during a person's life still leave some traces in the soul after the death of the body. These torment it all the more because they find no means of satisfying themselves in so pure a

substance. I do not see how this squares with its immateriality.[22] But I have no doubt at all that, even though life is not bad in itself, it should be given up for a condition one knows will be better.

By that particular providence which is the foundation of theology, I mean the one by which God has, from all eternity, prescribed such strange means as his incarnation for a part of the created whole. That part is as insignificant compared with the rest as you represent this globe IV 324 to us in your physics. And he has done this in order to be glorified by it, which seems a very unworthy end for the creator of this great universe. But here I was putting to you our theologians' objection rather than my own. I have always thought it most inappropriate for finite persons to judge the final cause of the actions of an infinite being.

You do not think one needs exact knowledge of how far reason requires us to concern ourselves with the public good. Your reason is that, even if each person referred everything to himself, he would also be working for others, provided he used prudence. But this prudence is the whole, of which I am asking you only for a part. For if one possesses it, one cannot fail to do justice to others as well as to oneself. And it is the lack of it that sometimes makes a candid mind lose the means of serving its country, by sacrificing itself too lightly for the country's interest. It also makes a timid one perish along with his country, for want of risking his property and his fortune to preserve it.

I have always been in a situation that made my life of very little use to the people I love. But I have taken much greater care to preserve it since I have had the good fortune to know you, because you have shown me the means of living more happily than I did. All I lack is the satisfaction of being able to show you how deeply this obligation is felt by

Your affectionate friend, always at your service, Elisabeth. The Hague, 28 October. Monsieur Descartes.

22 The tutor is Thomas White, the "Albanus" of Elisabeth's letter of 24 May 1645.

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH, 3 NOVEMBER 1645

Descartes distinguishes two kinds of excess and holds that free will depends on God.

DESCARTES [IV 330] Madame,

I so rarely come across good reasoning, not only in the conversation of the people I see in this solitude of mine but also in the books I consult, that I cannot read the reasoning in Your Highness's letters without feeling an extraordinary joy. And I find it so strong that I would rather admit to being defeated by it than undertake to resist it. For although the [IV 331] comparison that Your Highness refuses to make in her own favor may well be borne out by experience, judging others favorably is nonetheless a most praiseworthy virtue. It also agrees so well with the generosity that keeps you from measuring the reach of the human mind by the example of the common run of people that I cannot help esteeming both extremely.

Nor would I dare contradict what Your Highness writes about repentance. It is a Christian virtue, which serves to make us correct not only the faults we have committed voluntarily but also those we have committed through ignorance, when some passion prevented us from knowing the truth.

And I readily admit that the sadness of tragedies would not please us as it does if we could fear it might become so excessive as to harm us. But when I said that there are passions which are all the more useful the more they tend toward excess, I meant only those that are wholly good. I indicated this by adding that they must be subject to reason. For there are two kinds of excess. One changes the nature of the thing and makes it bad instead of good, and so prevents it from remaining subject to reason. The other only increases its measure, and merely makes a good thing [IV 332] better. Thus boldness has rashness as its excess only when it goes beyond the limits of reason. But so long as it does not overstep them, it can still have another excess, which consists in being accompanied by no irresolution or fear at all.

These past days I have been thinking about the number and order of all these passions, so as to examine their nature more closely. But I have not yet digested my opinions on this subject well enough to dare write them to Your Highness, and I will not fail to do so as soon as I possibly can.

As for free will, I confess that when we think only of ourselves, we cannot help regarding it as independent. But when we think of the infinite power of God, we cannot help believing that all things depend on him, and consequently that our free will is not exempt from this. For it involves a contradiction to say that God has created human beings of such a nature that the actions of their will do not depend on his. That would amount to saying that his power is at once finite and infinite: finite, since there is something that does not depend on it; and infinite, since he was able to create that independent thing. But the knowledge of God's existence should not prevent us from being certain of our free will, since we experience and feel it in IV 333 ourselves. In the same way, the knowledge of our free will should not make us doubt God's existence. For the independence we experience and feel in ourselves, which suffices to make our actions praiseworthy or blameworthy, is not incompatible with a dependence of another nature, according to which all things are subject to God.

As for the state of the soul after this life, I know much less about it than Monsieur Digby does. Setting aside what faith teaches us about it, I confess that by natural reason alone we can indeed make many conjectures in our favor and have fine hopes, but no assurance at all. And the same natural reason also teaches us that we always have more goods than evils in this life, and that we must not give up the certain for the uncertain. So it seems to me to teach us that we should not truly fear death, but that we should also never seek it.

I do not need to answer the objection the theologians may make about the vast extension I have attributed to the universe, because Your Highness has already answered it for me. I add only this. If that extension could make the mysteries of our reli-

gion less credible, the extension that astronomers have always attributed to the heavens could have done the same. They have considered the heavens so large [IV 334] that, compared with them, the earth is no more than a point; and yet this is never raised as an objection against them.

For the rest, if prudence were mistress of events, I have no doubt that Your Highness would succeed in everything she might undertake. But all human beings would have to be perfectly wise, so that, knowing what they ought to do, one could be sure of what they will do. Or else one would have to know in detail the temperament of everyone one has any dealings with. And even that would not be enough, because they also have their free will, whose movements are known to God alone. We usually judge what others will do by what we would want to do in their place. So it often happens that ordinary and middling minds, being like the people they have to deal with, see further into their plans and succeed more easily in what they undertake than the most elevated minds do. For the latter deal only with people far inferior to them in knowledge and prudence, and judge affairs quite differently from them. This is what should console Your Highness when fortune opposes your plans. I pray God to favor them, and I am,

Madame, Your Highness's most humble and obedient servant, Descartes. Egmond, 3 November 1645.

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES, 30 NOVEMBER 1645

Grieved by her brother's conversion to Catholicism, Elisabeth still cannot reconcile free will with God's decrees.

ELISABETH [IV 335] Monsieur Descartes,

You have assured me that my reasoning did not seem wholly ridiculous to you, so you will have reason to be surprised that I have gone so long without taking advantage of what your replies give me. It is with shame that I confess the cause, since it has overturned everything your lessons seemed to have established in my mind. I believed that a firm resolution to seek happiness

only in the things that depend on my will would make me less sensitive to those that come to me from elsewhere. Then the folly of one of my brothers made me realize my weakness. For it has disturbed my bodily health and my peace of soul more than all the misfortunes that have befallen me so far.[23] If you take the trouble to read the gazette, you cannot be unaware of what happened. He fell into the hands of a certain kind of people who have IV 336 more hatred for our house than affection for their own worship, and he let himself be caught in their traps. He went so far as to change his religion and become a Roman Catholic, without the slightest pretense that might persuade even the most credulous that his conscience was at stake. I must watch a person I loved with all the tenderness I am capable of being left to the scorn of the world and to the loss of his soul (according to my belief). If you did not have more charity than bigotry, it would be improper to talk to you about this matter. And even your charity would not excuse me, were I not in the habit of telling you all my faults, as to the person in the world most capable of correcting me.

I likewise confess that I do not see how the independence of free will is any less contrary to the idea we have of God than its dependence is to its freedom. Even so, it is impossible for me to reconcile the two. It is as impossible for the will to be at the same time free and bound to the decrees of Providence as it is for divine power to be at once infinite and limited. I do not see the compatibility between them that you speak of. Nor do I see how this dependence of the will can be of a different nature from its freedom, unless you take the trouble to teach me.

As for contentment, I confess that present possession is much surer than expectation of the future, however good the reason it is founded on. But I find it hard to persuade myself that we always have IV 337 more goods than evils in life. More is needed to make up the former than the latter. A human being has more places for receiving displeasure than pleasure. There are count-

23 Her brother Edward (1625–1663) had converted to Catholicism in Paris in 1645 in order to marry Anne de Gonzague.

less errors for every truth, and so many ways of going astray for the one that leads down the right road. And a great many people have both the intention and the power to do harm, while few have both the intention and the power to be of service. In short, everything that depends on the will of others and on the course of the rest of the world can cause us trouble. And, by your own account, nothing but what depends absolutely on our own will is enough to give us a real and constant satisfaction.

As for prudence in matters of human society, I do not expect any infallible rule. But I would be very glad to see the rules you would give to someone who, while living only for himself, whatever his profession, would still be working for others as well. That is, if I dared ask you for more light after making such poor use of the light you have already given to

Your most affectionate friend, always at your service, Elisabeth. Monsieur Descartes.

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES, 27 DECEMBER 1645

Elisabeth reports her efforts for Frans van Schooten's candidacy at Leiden.

ELISABETH [IV 339] Monsieur Descartes,

Today the son of the late Professor Schooten handed me the letter you wrote me on his behalf, to keep me from committing myself to support his rival. I told him that not only did I have no intention of harming him, but that I was obliged to serve him as far as I can, since you tell me that you love him and are indebted to him. He then asked me to recommend him to the Curators. There are only two of them I know, Messrs.[24] de Wimenom and Bewen, [IV 340] and the latter is out of town. So I had someone speak at once to the former, who promises me to exert himself on behalf of Monsieur Schooten. There had been a plan to abolish this professorship altogether as superfluous, and that seems to

24 Frans van Schooten the Younger (1615–1660), mathematician and later editor of the Latin edition of Descartes' *Geometry*, was seeking his late father's mathematics post at Leiden. The Curators were the governors of Leiden University.

be the only difficulty he will have to overcome. His competitor counts for nothing beside him, except with a few scrupulous people who fear that he might introduce the errors of the Arminian religion into his mathematics lessons. If he had given me time to ask him to come back and see me to learn the outcome of my recommendations, I could have told him some things that I think would help him in his candidacy. But he was in such a hurry to leave that I had to follow him to the door to ask him whom I should approach on his behalf. I know that if he had regarded me simply as your friend, without thinking of the titles that embarrass those who are not used to them, he would have behaved differently. He would have understood that I could not act with merely ordinary care in a matter I know to be agreeable to you. And I beg you to believe that I will never miss an opportunity to show you, in deed, that I am truly,

Monsieur Descartes, Yours most affectionately, always at your service, Elisabeth. 27 December

IV 341 I am afraid you did not receive my last letter, of the 30th of last month, because you make no mention of it. I would be sorry if it had fallen into the hands of one of those critics who condemn as heresy every doubt raised about received opinions.

1646

The passions and Machiavelli
Elisabeth reads the draft Passions of the Soul; at her request
Descartes judges Machiavelli's Prince.

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH, JANUARY 1646

DESCARTES [IV 351] Madame,

I cannot deny that I was surprised to learn that Your Highness has been so vexed as to have her health affected by it. The cause is something most people will think good, and which several strong reasons can make excusable in the eyes of others. For all those of the religion to which I belong (who are, no doubt, the greatest number in Europe) are bound to approve of it, even if they saw in it circumstances and apparent motives that were blameworthy. We believe that God uses various means to draw souls to himself, and that someone who entered the cloister with a bad intention has sometimes afterward led a very holy life there. As for those of another belief, if they speak ill of it, one may reject their judgment [IV 352] ; for, as in all other matters on which there are various parties, it is impossible to please some without displeasing others. They would not belong to the religion they do if they, or their fathers, or their grandfathers had not left the Roman one. If they consider this, they will have no grounds to mock those who leave theirs, or to call them inconstant.

As for worldly prudence, it is true that those who have fortune in their house are right to stay close around her and join forces to keep her from escaping. But those from whose house she has fled do not do badly, it seems to me, in agreeing to fol-

low different paths. That way, if they cannot all find her, at least one of them may come upon her. Meanwhile, because each of them is thought to have several resources, having friends in various parties, this makes them more considerable than if they were all committed to a single one. This is what prevents me from imagining that those who gave this advice meant to harm your House by it. But I do not claim that my reasons can prevent Your Highness's hurt. I only hope that time will have lessened it before this letter is presented to you, and I would be afraid of reviving it if I dwelt any longer on this subject.

THE KING AND THE DUELISTS

A king who arranges for two quarreling gentlemen to meet illustrates how free will depends on God.

DESCARTES That is why I pass on to the difficulty Your Highness raises about free will, whose dependence and freedom I will try to explain by [IV 353] a comparison. Suppose a king has forbidden duels. He knows for certain that two gentlemen of his kingdom, who live in different towns, have quarreled and are so incensed against each other that nothing could stop them from fighting if they meet; and suppose, I say, this king gives one of them some commission to go on a certain day toward the town where the other lives, and also gives the other a commission to go on the same day toward the place where the first lives. He knows for certain that they will not fail to meet and fight, and so break his prohibition; but he does not compel them to do so. His knowledge, and even his will to bring them to it in this way, do not prevent them from fighting just as voluntarily and just as freely, when they come to meet, as they would have done if he had known nothing about it and they had met on some other occasion. And they can be punished just as justly, because they have broken his prohibition. Now what a king can do in this way with regard to some of his subjects' free actions, God, whose foreknowledge and power are infinite, does infallibly with regard to all human actions. Before he sent us into this world, he

knew exactly what all the inclinations of our will would be. It is he himself who put them in us. It is he, too, who arranged all the other things outside us, so that such and IV 354 such objects would present themselves to our senses at such and such times; and he knew that, on these occasions, our free will would determine us to this or that thing. He willed it so, but he did not for that reason will to compel it. One can distinguish in this king two different degrees of will. By one, he willed that these gentlemen should fight, since he brought it about that they would meet; by the other, he did not will it, since he forbade duels. In the same way, the theologians distinguish in God an absolute and independent will, by which he wills that all things should happen as they do, and another will which is relative, and which relates to the merit or demerit of human beings, by which he wills that his laws be obeyed.

I also need to distinguish two kinds of goods, in order to reconcile what I wrote earlier (namely, that in this life we always have more goods than evils) with Your Highness's objection about all the troubles of life. When we consider the idea of the good as a rule for our actions, we take it to be all the perfection that can be in the thing we call good. We compare it to the straight line, which is unique among an infinity of curves, and we compare evils to the curves. It is in this sense that philosophers commonly say that *bonum est ex integrâ causâ, malum ex quouis defectu*.[1] But sometimes we consider the goods and evils that can be in one and the same thing, in order to know how much we should value it, as I did when I spoke of the value we should place on this IV 355 life. We then take as good everything in it from which we can derive some benefit, and we call evil only what can cause us some harm. As for the other defects that may be in it, we do not count them at all. Thus, when someone is offered a post, he considers on one side the honor and profit he can expect from it, as goods, and on the other the trouble, the danger, the loss of time and other such things, as evils. And

1 "Good comes from a cause that is whole, evil from any defect whatever": a scholastic maxim, going back to Pseudo-Dionysius and cited by Thomas Aquinas.

comparing these evils with these goods, he accepts or refuses the post according to whether he finds the goods greater or less than the evils. Now what made me say, in this latter sense, that there are always more goods than evils in this life, is how little account I think we should take of all the things outside us that do not depend on our free will, compared with those that do depend on it. The latter we can always make good, when we know how to use them well. And by means of them we can prevent all the evils that come from elsewhere, however great they may be, from entering our soul any further than the sadness that actors arouse in it when they perform some very tragic events before us. But I admit that one must be very much a philosopher to reach that point. And yet I also believe that even those who let themselves be most carried away by their passions always judge, deep within, that there are more goods than evils in this life, even if they do not notice it themselves. They sometimes call on death to help them when they feel great pain, IV 356 but it is only so that it may help them carry their burden, as in the fable, and they do not for all that wish to lose their life. And if there are some who do wish to lose it, and who kill themselves, it is through an error of their intellect, not through a well-reasoned judgment. Nor is it through an opinion that nature has imprinted in them, like the one that makes us prefer the goods of this life to its evils.[2]

Why do I believe that those who do nothing except for their own advantage must, just as much as others, work for other people and try to please everyone as far as they can, if they want to use prudence? The reason is that we usually see that those who are thought obliging and quick to do favors also receive many good offices from others. They receive them even from people they have never obliged, and they would not receive them if they were thought to be of another temper. And the trouble they take in doing favors is not as great as the advantages they gain from the friendship of those who know them. For

2 Aesop's fable of the old man who, worn out by his load of wood, calls on Death, and when Death comes asks only for help in carrying it.

people expect from us only the services we can render conveniently, and we expect no more from others. But it often happens that what costs them little benefits us greatly, and may even be a matter of life and death to us. It is true that one sometimes wastes one's trouble in doing good and, conversely, gains by doing wrong. But that cannot change the rule of prudence, which relates only to what happens most often [IV 357] . As for me, the maxim I have observed most in the whole conduct of my life has been to follow only the main road, and to believe that the chief cunning is to refuse to use any cunning at all. The common laws of society all tend toward our doing good to one another, or at least doing one another no harm. They are, it seems to me, so well established that whoever follows them openly, without any dissimulation or artifice, leads a much happier and safer life than those who seek their advantage by other ways. These people, it is true, sometimes succeed through the ignorance of others and the favor of fortune. But it far more often happens that they fail, and that, thinking to make their position secure, they ruin themselves. It is with this candor and frankness, which I profess to observe in all my actions, that I also particularly profess to be, etc.

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES, 25 APRIL 1646

Elisabeth raises questions about the physiology and the remedies in his draft treatise on the passions.

ELISABETH [IV 404] Monsieur Descartes,

Ever since your departure, the treaty my brother Philip has concluded with the Republic of Venice has given me an occupation far less agreeable than the one you left me. It concerns a matter beyond my knowledge, and I was called upon only to make up for the impatience of the young man it concerned.[3] This has kept me until now from taking advantage of the permission you gave me to put to you the obscurities my stupidity

3 Philip (1627–1650), Elisabeth's younger brother, who had entered the service of the Republic of Venice.

makes me find in your treatise on the passions. They are few in number, however, since one would have to be incapable of passion not to see that the order, the definitions and the distinctions you give to the passions, and indeed the whole moral part of the treatise, surpass everything that has ever been said on this subject.[4]

But its physical part is not so clear to the ignorant. I do not see how one can know the various movements of the blood that cause the five primitive passions, since these never occur alone. For example, love is always accompanied by desire and joy, or by desire and sadness, and as it grows stronger, the others grow too,... and conversely. How, then, is it possible to discern the differences in the beating of the pulse, in the digestion of food, and in the other changes in the body that serve to reveal the nature of these movements? Moreover, the change you note in each of these IV 405 passions is not the same in all temperaments. Mine is such that sadness always takes away my appetite, even when it is mixed with no hatred at all and comes to me only from the death of some friend.

When you speak of the outward signs of these passions, you say that wonder, joined with joy, makes the lungs swell in a series of jolts, producing laughter. To this I beg you to add how wonder (which, according to your description, seems to act only on the brain) can open the orifices of the heart so quickly as to produce this effect.[5]

The passions you give as the cause of sighs do not always seem to be their cause, since habit and a full stomach also produce them.

But I find it even less difficult to understand everything you say about the passions than to put into practice the remedies you prescribe against their excesses. For how can one foresee all the accidents that may occur in life, which are impossible to

4 An early draft of what became *The Passions of the Soul* (1649), written for Elisabeth in the winter of 1645–1646.

5 "Wonder" renders Descartes' *admiration,* the passion of being struck by something new or unusual.

count? And how can we keep ourselves from ardently desiring the things that necessarily tend toward a person's preservation (such as health and the means of living), which nevertheless do not depend on his choice? As for knowledge of the truth, the desire for it is so right that it is naturally present in all human beings. But one would need infinite knowledge to know the true value of the goods and evils that usually move us. There are far more of them than a single person could imagine, and to do so one would have to know perfectly all the things in the world.

Since you have already told me the principal maxims concerning [IV 406] private life, I would be content to learn your maxims concerning civil life as well. Civil life, though, makes us dependent on people so unreasonable that until now I have always found it better to rely on experience rather than reason in matters that concern it.

I have been interrupted so often while writing to you that I am forced 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. For that reason I do not dare send your treatise back until I know it. I cannot bring myself to risk putting into the hands of a drunkard so valuable a piece, which has given so much satisfaction to

Your most affectionate friend, always at your service, Elisabeth. Monsieur Descartes. 15/25 April.

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH, MAY 1646

Descartes explains how he matched movements of the blood to each passion and declines to give political maxims.

DESCARTES [IV 407] Madame,

I recognize from experience that I was right to count glory among the passions, for I cannot help being touched by it when I see how favorably Your Highness judges the little treatise I have written on them. And I am not at all surprised that she also notices faults in it. I never doubted that there were a great many, since it is a subject I had never studied before. I have only made

the first sketch of it, without adding the colors and ornaments that would be needed to make it presentable to eyes less discerning than Your Highness's.[6]

Nor have I included in it all the principles of physics I used to work out which movements of the blood accompany each passion. I could not deduce them properly without explaining the formation of all the parts of the human body, and that is so difficult a task that I would not yet dare undertake it. Still, I have more or less satisfied myself about the truth of the principles I assumed in that treatise. The chief of these are, first, that the function of the liver and spleen is always to hold blood in reserve, less purified than the blood in the veins. Second, that the fire in the heart needs to be fed continually, either by the juice of food coming directly from the stomach or, failing that, by this reserve blood, because the other blood, which is [IV 408] in the veins, expands too easily; third, that there is such a connection between our soul and our body that the thoughts which accompanied certain movements of the body from the beginning of our life still accompany them now. So if the same movements are aroused again in the body by some external cause, they also arouse the same thoughts in the soul; and conversely, if we have the same thoughts, they produce the same movements. And finally, that the machine of our body is so made that a single thought of joy, or of love, or something similar, is enough to send the animal spirits through the nerves into all the muscles needed to cause the various movements of the blood that I said accompany the passions. It is true that I had difficulty distinguishing the movements that belong to each passion, because the passions are never alone. But since the same ones are not always joined together, I tried to note the changes that occurred in the body when they changed company. Thus, for example, if love were always joined to joy, I would not know to which of the two to attribute the warmth and the expansion they make us feel around the heart. But love is also sometimes joined

6 In the treatise, "glory" is the joy founded on self-love that comes from the praise, or the hope of praise, of others.

to sadness, and one then still feels that warmth but no longer that expansion. So I judged that the warmth belongs to love and the expansion to joy. And although desire almost always goes with love, the two are not always present in the same degree. Even when one [IV 409] loves greatly, one desires little if one conceives no hope. And since one then lacks the diligence and promptness one would have if the desire were greater, one can judge that these come from desire, and not from love.

I do believe that sadness takes away many people's appetite. But since I have always found in my own case that it increases mine, I had gone by that. I think the difference arises because some people's first cause of sadness, at the beginning of their life, was that they were not getting enough nourishment, while for others it was that the nourishment they received was harmful to them. In the latter, the movement of the spirits that takes away the appetite has ever since remained joined to the passion of sadness. We also see that the movements accompanying the other passions are not entirely alike in all people, and this may be attributed to a similar cause.

As for wonder, it has its origin in the brain, and so the temperament of the blood alone cannot cause it, as it often can cause joy or sadness. Nevertheless, through the impression it makes in the brain, wonder can act on the body as much as any of the other passions, or in a way even more, because the surprise it contains causes the quickest movements of all. One can move one's hand or foot [IV 410] almost at the very instant one thinks of moving them, because the idea of this movement, formed in the brain, sends the spirits into the muscles that serve for it. In the same way, the idea of a pleasant thing that takes the mind by surprise at once sends the spirits into the nerves that open the orifices of the heart. And wonder does nothing more here than increase, by its surprise, the force of the movement that causes joy. The orifices of the heart are thus suddenly dilated, and the blood that enters the heart through the vena

cava and leaves it through the arterial vein suddenly swells the lungs.[7]

The same outward signs that usually accompany the passions can also sometimes be produced by other causes. Thus redness of the face does not always come from shame; it can also come from the heat of a fire, or from exercise. And the laugh called sardonic is nothing but a convulsion of the nerves of the face. So too one may sometimes sigh from habit or from illness. But that does not prevent sighs from being outward signs of sadness and desire when it is these passions that cause them. I had never heard or observed that sighs were sometimes also caused by a full stomach. But when that happens, I believe it is a movement nature uses to make the juice of food pass more quickly through the heart, so that the stomach is relieved of it sooner. For sighs, by agitating the lungs, make the blood they contain flow down more quickly through the venous artery into the left IV 411 side of the heart. The new blood, made up of the juice of food, which comes from the stomach through the liver and the heart to the lungs, can then easily be received there.

As for the remedies against excesses of the passions, I readily admit that they are difficult to put into practice. I also admit that they cannot suffice to prevent the disorders that occur in the body, but only to keep the soul from being troubled and to let it keep its judgment free. For that, I do not think one needs exact knowledge of the truth of each thing, nor even to have foreseen in detail all the accidents that may occur, which would no doubt be impossible. It is enough to have imagined, in general, accidents more distressing than those that actually happen, and to have prepared oneself to bear them. Nor do I think one sins much by excess in desiring the things necessary to life; it is only desires for bad or superfluous things that need to be regulated. For desires that aim only at the good are, it seems to me, the better the greater they are. And although I tried to flatter my own failing by placing a certain languor among the excusable pas-

7 In the anatomy of the time, the "arterial vein" is the pulmonary artery, and the "venous artery" (mentioned below) is the pulmonary vein.

sions, I nevertheless think much more highly of the diligence of those who always set about with ardor doing the things they believe to be in some way their duty, even when they expect little fruit from them.

I lead so retired a life, and have always been so [IV 412] far removed from the handling of affairs, that if I undertook to set down here the maxims one should observe in civil life, I would be no less impertinent than the philosopher who tried to teach the duties of a general in the presence of Hannibal.[8] And I have no doubt that the maxim Your Highness proposes is the best of all: namely, that in this matter it is better to be guided by experience than by reason. For we rarely deal with perfectly reasonable people, as all men ought to be, so that we could judge what they will do simply by considering what they ought to do. And often the best counsels are not the most successful. That is why one is forced to take chances and put oneself in the power of fortune—which I wish may be as obedient to your desires as I am, etc.

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH, MAY 1646

Descartes retracts his indulgence toward irresolution and praises promptness in affairs already begun.

DESCARTES [IV 414] Madame,

I have the opportunity to give this letter to Monsieur de Beclin, who is a very close friend of mine and whom I trust as much as myself. This is why I take the liberty of confessing in it a very notable fault I committed in the treatise on the passions. There, to flatter my negligence, I placed among the excusable emotions of the soul a certain languor that sometimes prevents us from carrying out the things our judgment has approved.[9] What has troubled my conscience most about this is that I

8 The Peripatetic Phormio lectured on generalship before Hannibal at Ephesus, and Hannibal was unimpressed (Cicero, *On the Orator* II.75).

9 Beclin, a friend of Descartes who carried this letter by hand; little else is known of him.

remember Your Highness particularly noticed that passage, as though she did not disapprove of the practice in a matter where I cannot see that it is of any use. I readily admit that one has good reason to take time to deliberate before undertaking things of importance. But once an affair has begun and the main points are agreed, I do not see that there is any profit in seeking delays by haggling over the terms. For if the affair succeeds despite this, all the small advantages [IV 415] one may have gained by this means do less good than the distaste such delays usually cause can do harm. And if it does not succeed, all this serves only to let the world know that one had plans that failed. Besides, when the affair one undertakes is a very good one, it far more often slips away while its execution is postponed than when it is a bad one. That is why I am convinced that resolution and promptness are very necessary virtues in affairs already begun. And there is no reason to fear what we do not know; for often the things we most dreaded before knowing them turn out better than those we desired. So the best course here is to trust in divine Providence and let oneself be guided by it. I am sure Your Highness understands my thought very well, even though I explain it very badly, and that she will pardon the extreme zeal that obliges me to write this; for I am, as much as I can be, etc.

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES, JULY 1646

Before leaving for Germany, Elisabeth asks to see him once more and to keep writing.

ELISABETH [IV 448] Monsieur Descartes,

Since your journey is fixed for the 3/13 of this month, I must remind you of the promise you made me: to leave your pleasant solitude and give me the happiness of seeing you before my departure from here takes that hope away from me for six or seven months. That is the longest term that the leave granted by the Queen my mother and my brother, and the opinion of our

family's friends, have set for my absence.[10] But even that term would seem too long to me if I were not sure that you will continue the kindness of letting me profit from your meditations through your letters. Without their help, the cold of the north and the caliber of the people I might converse with would put out the small ray of common sense I have from nature, whose proper use I have learned through your method. I am promised enough leisure and tranquility in Germany to be able to study it, and IV 449 I am taking with me no greater treasures, nor any from which I expect more satisfaction, than your writings. I hope you will allow me to take the one on the passions, even though it was not able to calm those that our latest misfortune had stirred up.[11] It must have been your presence that brought the cure, which neither your maxims nor my reasoning had been able to apply. The preparations for my journey and my brother Philip's affairs, together with the courtesy I owed to my aunt's pleasures, have so far prevented me from giving you the thanks I owed you for the benefit of that visit. I beg you to accept them now from

Your most affectionate friend, always at your service, Elisabeth. Monsieur Descartes,

I am obliged to send this by the messenger, because his speed matters more to me at present than his reliability.

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH, SEPTEMBER 1646

Descartes gives his judgment of Machiavelli's Prince, rejecting its maxims for usurpers.

DESCARTES IV 486 Madame,

I have read the book on which Your Highness commanded me to write her my opinion, and I find in it several precepts that seem to me very good—among others, in chapters 19 and 20: *That a prince must always avoid the hatred and contempt of his sub-*

10 Her mother was Elizabeth Stuart, the exiled "Winter Queen" of Bohemia; her brother was Charles Louis, the Elector Palatine, Elisabeth's eldest surviving brother.

11 In June 1646 her brother Prince Philip killed a French officer, Jacques de l'Espinay, in a street fight at The Hague and had to flee.

jects, and that the love of the people is worth more than fortresses. But there are also several others that I cannot approve.[12] And I think the author's chief failing is that he did not distinguish sufficiently between princes who have acquired a state by just means and those who have usurped it by illegitimate ones. He gave to all, in general, precepts suited only to the latter. For when building a house whose foundations are so poor that they cannot bear high, thick walls, one is obliged to make the walls weak and low. In the same way, those who began by establishing themselves through crimes are usually forced to go on committing crimes, and could not maintain themselves if they wished to be virtuous.

It is with regard to such princes that he could say, in chapter 3: *That they cannot fail to be hated by many; and that they often gain more by doing a great deal of harm than by doing less, because slight injuries are enough to give the will to take revenge, while great ones take away the power to do so*. Then, in chapter 15: *That if they wished to be good men, they could not avoid being ruined among the great number of wicked people found everywhere*. And in chapter 19: IV 487 *That one can be hated for good actions as well as for bad ones*.

On these foundations he rests some thoroughly tyrannical precepts: for instance, that *one should ruin a whole country in order to remain its master; that one should commit great cruelties, provided it is done quickly and all at once; that one should try to appear a good man, but not really be one; that one should keep one's word only as long as it is useful; that one should dissemble and betray; and finally that, in order to reign, one should strip oneself of all humanity and become the fiercest of all animals*.

But it is a very poor subject for a book to undertake to give such precepts, which in the end cannot make safe those to whom he gives them; for, as he himself admits, *they cannot guard themselves against the first man who is willing to disregard his own life to take revenge on them*. Whereas, to instruct a good prince, even one newly come into a state, it seems to me that one should propose entirely contrary maxims, and suppose that the means

12 The book is Machiavelli's *The Prince* (written 1513, published 1532).

he used to establish himself were just. And in fact I believe they almost all are, when the princes who use them consider them so. For justice between sovereigns has different limits from justice between private persons, and it seems that in these cases God gives the right to those to whom he gives the strength. But the most just actions become unjust when those who perform them think them so.

One must also distinguish between subjects, friends IV 488 or allies, and enemies. For with regard to the last, one is permitted almost anything, provided some advantage is gained for oneself or one's subjects; and in this case I do not disapprove of coupling the fox with the lion and joining cunning to force. I even include under the name of enemies all those who are not friends or allies. For one has the right to make war on them when one finds it to one's advantage, and when they begin to become suspect and formidable, one has reason to distrust them.[13] But I make an exception for one kind of deceit, which is so directly contrary to society that I do not think it is ever permissible to use it, although our author approves it in several places and it is all too common in practice. That is, pretending to be the friend of those one wishes to destroy, the better to take them by surprise. Friendship is too holy a thing to be abused in this way. Anyone who has been able to feign love for someone in order to betray him deserves that those he later wishes to love truly should not believe a word of it, and should hate him.

As for allies, a prince must keep his word to them exactly, even when it is to his disadvantage. For it can never be so much to his disadvantage as the reputation of never failing to do what he has promised is to his advantage; and he can acquire that reputation only on occasions of this kind, where he stands to lose something. But in cases that would ruin him entirely, the law of nations releases him from his promise. He must also be very circumspect before promising, so that he can always keep his IV 489 word. And although it is good to be on friendly terms

13 An allusion to *The Prince*, chapter 18, where the prince is told to imitate both the fox and the lion.

with most of one's neighbors, I think it best nevertheless to have close alliances only with those who are less powerful. For whatever fidelity one intends to show, one must not expect the same from others, but reckon on being deceived whenever they find it to their advantage. Those who are more powerful can find it so whenever they wish, but those who are less powerful cannot.

As for subjects, there are two kinds: the great and the people. Under the name of the great I include all those who can form factions against the prince. He must be very sure of their loyalty; or, if he is not, all political writers agree that he must devote all his efforts to bringing them down, and that insofar as they are inclined to disturb the state, he must regard them only as enemies. But as for his other subjects, he must above all avoid their hatred and contempt. I believe he can always do so provided he observes justice exactly in their fashion (that is, according to the laws they are used to), without being too harsh in punishments or too indulgent in pardons. He must not leave everything to his ministers, but, leaving them only the task of the more odious condemnations, show that he himself takes care of all the rest; and also that he maintain his dignity so well that he gives up none of the honors and deference the people believe are due to him, but asks for no more. He should display in public only his most serious actions, or those that [IV 490] can be approved by all, keeping his pleasures for private, without their ever being at anyone's expense. And finally he should be immovable and inflexible—not in the first plans he has formed within himself, for since he cannot have his eye everywhere, he must ask advice and hear the reasons of many before deciding; but inflexible concerning the things he has shown he has resolved upon, even if they should be harmful to him. For they can hardly be as harmful as the reputation of being fickle and changeable.

Thus I disapprove of the maxim in chapter 15: *That since the world is very corrupt, one cannot avoid ruin if one always wishes to be a good man; and that a prince, to maintain himself, must learn to*

be wicked when the occasion requires it. Unless perhaps by a good man he means a superstitious and simple-minded man, who dares not give battle on the Sabbath day, and whose conscience cannot rest unless he changes the religion of his people. But if we take a good man to be one who does everything that true reason dictates to him, it is certain that the best course is to try always to be one.

Nor do I believe what is in chapter 19: *That one can be hated as much for good actions as for bad ones,* except insofar as envy is a kind of hatred; but that is not the author's meaning. And princes are not usually envied by the common run of their subjects. They are envied only by the great, or by their neighbors, in whom the same virtues IV 491 that arouse envy also arouse fear. That is why one must never refrain from doing good in order to avoid this sort of hatred. And there is no hatred that can harm princes except the kind that comes from the injustice or arrogance the people judge to be in them. For we see that even those who have been condemned to death do not usually hate their judges, when they think they deserved it. People also bear with patience evils they did not deserve, when they believe that the prince from whom they receive them is in some way forced to inflict them and regrets doing so; for they consider it just that he should prefer the public good to that of private persons. The only difficulty arises when one is obliged to satisfy two parties who judge differently of what is just, as when the Roman emperors had to please both the citizens and the soldiers. In that case it is reasonable to grant something to each. One should not try to bring all at once to reason those who are not used to listening to it; rather, one must try little by little to make them grasp it, whether by public writings, by the voices of preachers, or by other such means. For in the end the people will bear anything they can be persuaded is just, and take offense at anything they imagine to be unjust. The arrogance of princes—that is, their usurpation of some authority, rights or honors which the people believe are not due to them—is odious to the people only because they regard it as a kind of injustice.

IV 492 For the rest, I also do not share the author's opinion when he says in his preface: *That just as one must be down in the plain to see better the shape of the mountains when one wants to draw them, so one must be of private station to know well the office of a prince*. For a drawing represents only things seen from afar. But the chief motives of princes' actions are often such particular circumstances that, unless one is a prince oneself, or has long shared their secrets, one could not imagine them.

That is why I would deserve to be laughed at if I thought I could teach Your Highness anything on this subject. Nor is that my intention; I wish only that my letters might give her some kind of diversion different from those I imagine she has on her journey, which I wish may be perfectly happy. And no doubt it will be, if Your Highness resolves to practice those maxims which teach that each person's happiness depends on himself. They teach that one must keep oneself so far outside the dominion of fortune that, although one does not miss opportunities to retain the advantages it can give, one does not think oneself unhappy when it refuses them. And they teach that, since in all the affairs of the world there are many reasons for and against, one should dwell chiefly on those that help one approve of the things one sees happen. The things I regard as most unavoidable are the illnesses of the body, from which I pray IV 493 God to preserve you; and I am, with all the devotion I can have, etc.

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES, 10 OCTOBER 1646

From Berlin, Elisabeth partly defends Machiavelli and describes a miraculous spring.

ELISABETH IV 519 Monsieur Descartes.

You are right to believe that the diversion your letters bring me is different from the one I have had on the journey, since it gives me greater and more lasting satisfaction. On the journey I have found all the satisfaction that the friendship and affection of my relatives can give me; yet I regard these as things that could change, whereas the truths that your letters teach me IV 520

leave impressions on my mind that will always contribute to the contentment of my life.

I deeply regret not having brought by land the book you took the trouble to examine so as to give me your opinion of it. I let myself be persuaded that the baggage I was sending by sea to Hamburg would get here before us; and it is not here yet, although we arrived on 7/17 September last. That is why I can recall this author's maxims only as far as a very bad memory can supply them from a book I have not looked at for six years. But I remember that at the time I approved some of them—not because they are good in themselves, but because they cause less harm than the maxims followed by a number of reckless ambitious people I know, who aim only at stirring up trouble and leaving the rest to fortune; whereas this author's maxims all aim at establishing a stable rule.

It also seems to me that, in order to teach the government of a state, he takes as his case the state that is most difficult to govern: one where the prince is a new usurper, at least in the people's opinion. In that case, the prince's own opinion of the justice of his cause might give rest to his conscience, but not to his affairs, where the laws oppose his authority, the great undermine it, and the people curse it. And when the state is in such a condition, great acts of violence do less harm than small ones. The small ones offend just as much as the great, and give occasion for a long war; the great ones take away the courage and the means from the great men who might undertake [IV 521] such a war. Likewise, when the violence comes quickly and all at once, it stuns more than it angers, and it is also easier for the people to bear than the long train of miseries that civil wars bring.

It seems to me that he also adds—or rather teaches, through the example of Pope Alexander's nephew, whom he presents as a perfect statesman—that the prince should use for these great cruelties some minister whom he can afterward sacrifice to the people's hatred. And although it may seem unjust for the prince to put to death a man who has obeyed him, I find that people so barbarous and unnatural as to be willing to serve as executioner

of a whole people, for whatever consideration, deserve no better treatment. For my part, I would prefer the condition of the poorest peasant in Holland to that of a minister willing to obey such orders, or to that of a prince forced to give them.[14]

When the same author speaks of allies, he likewise supposes them to be as wicked as they can be, and affairs to be in such an extremity that one must either lose an entire state or break one's word to those who keep theirs only as long as it is useful to them.

But if he is wrong to make general maxims out of what should be practiced only on very few occasions, he sins in this no more than almost all the Church Fathers and the ancient philosophers, who do the same. And I think this comes from the pleasure they take in uttering paradoxes, which they can then explain to their pupils. When this man says that one is ruined if one always wishes to be a good man, I do not think he means that, to IV 522 be a good man, one must follow the laws of superstition. He means rather that common law: that we must do to each person as we would wish done to ourselves. This is something princes can almost never observe toward an individual subject, whom they must destroy whenever the public good requires it. And since, before you, no one has said that virtue consists solely in following right reason, but others have prescribed for it some more particular laws or rules, we should not be surprised that they failed to define it well.

I find the rule you point out in his preface false, because he never knew anyone as clear-sighted as you are in everything they undertake—someone who, living privately and withdrawn from the bustle of the world, would nonetheless be capable of teaching princes how they ought to govern, as is evident from what you write about it.

As for me, who am a princess in title only, my one study is to apply the rule you give at the end of your letter, trying to make present things as pleasant for myself as I can. Here I do not find

14 Cesare Borgia, in fact the son of Pope Alexander VI; in *The Prince*, chapter 7, he has his harsh governor Remirro de Orco executed to appease the people.

much difficulty in that, being in a house where I have been cherished since childhood and where everyone conspires to show me affection. Although this sometimes distracts me from more useful occupations, I easily bear the inconvenience, for the pleasure of being IV 523 loved by one's relatives. That, Sir, is why I have not had the leisure sooner to give you an account of the happy outcome of our journey—how it passed without any discomfort, with the speed I mentioned above—and of the miraculous spring you spoke to me about at The Hague.[15]

I was only a short league away from it, at Cheuningen, where we met the whole family of this house on their way back from it. The Elector wanted to take me there to see it; but since the rest of our company favored another amusement, I did not dare contradict them, and contented myself with seeing and tasting its water. It has several springs with different tastes, but only two are chiefly used. The first is clear, salty, and a strong purge; the other, slightly whitish, tastes like water mixed with milk and is said to be cooling. People speak of many miraculous cures they bring about, but I have not been able to learn of any from a trustworthy person.[16] They do say that the place is full of poor people—deaf, blind, lame, and people with curved spines—who proclaim that they were born so and found their cure at this spring. But since these are mercenary people, and they are dealing with a nation rather credulous about miracles, I do not think this should persuade reasonable people. Of the whole court of the Elector my cousin, only his Master of the Horse has benefited from it. He had a wound under his right eye, which cost him the sight on that side because of a small film that grew over the eye. The salt water of this spring, applied to the eye, dispersed the film, so that he can IV 524 now make out people when he closes his left eye. Besides, since he is a man of strong

15 The spring at Hornhausen, near Halberstadt, discovered in 1646 and famous for reported cures.

16 Here the Elector is Frederick William of Brandenburg, Elisabeth's cousin, at whose court in Berlin she was staying—not her brother Charles Louis.

constitution and poor diet, a good purge could do him no harm, though it did harm to several others.

I have examined the cipher you sent me and find it very good, but too long-winded for writing out a whole message; and if one writes only a few words, they would be discovered from the number of letters. It would be better to make a key of words in alphabetical order, and then mark some distinction between the numbers that stand for letters and those that stand for words.

I have so little leisure for writing here that I am forced to send you this rough draft, in which you can tell from the change of pen every time I was interrupted. But I would rather appear before you with all my faults than give you reason to believe I have a vice so foreign to my nature as forgetting my friends when they are absent—above all a person whom I could not stop caring for without also ceasing to be reasonable, such as you, Sir, to whom I shall be all my life,

Your most affectionate friend, always at your service, Elisabeth. Monsieur Descartes, Berlin, 30 September.

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH, NOVEMBER 1646

Descartes argues that inner joy favors good fortune and warns against the spring's waters.

DESCARTES [IV 528] Madame,

Your Highness has done me a very great favor in wishing me to learn from her letters of the success of her journey, and that she has arrived safely in a place where she is greatly esteemed and cherished by her relatives. There, it seems to me, she has as many goods as one can reasonably wish for in this life. For, knowing the condition of human things, it would be asking too much of fortune to expect so many favors from it that one could not, even in imagination, find any cause for vexation. When there are no present objects offending the [IV 529] senses, and no indisposition troubling the body, a mind that follows true reason can easily be content. And for that it need not forget or neglect distant things; it is enough that it try to have no passion

for those that might displease it. This is not contrary to charity, because we can often find remedies more readily for evils we examine without passion than for those that distress us. But health of body and the presence of agreeable objects greatly help the mind to drive out all the passions that partake of sadness and to admit those that partake of joy. And in the same way, conversely, when the mind is full of joy, this does much to make the body healthier and present objects seem more agreeable.

I even venture to believe that inner joy has some secret power to make fortune more favorable. I would not write this to people of weak mind, for fear of leading them into some superstition; but as for Your Highness, my only fear is that she will laugh at me for becoming too credulous. Nevertheless I have countless experiences, and with them the authority of Socrates, to confirm my opinion. The experiences are these. I have often noticed that the things I have done with a cheerful heart and without any inner reluctance usually turn out well for me—so much so that even in games of chance, where fortune alone rules, I [IV 530] have always found it more favorable when I had other reasons for joy than when I had reasons for sadness. And what is commonly called the genius of Socrates was no doubt nothing other than this: he was accustomed to follow his inner inclinations, and thought that what he undertook would turn out well when he had some secret feeling of cheerfulness, and, on the contrary, that it would turn out badly when he was sad.[17] It is true, however, that it would be superstitious to believe in this as much as he is said to have done; for Plato reports that he would even stay at home whenever his genius did not advise him to go out. But as for the important actions of life, when they are so doubtful that prudence cannot teach us what to do, it seems to me that we have good reason to follow the counsel of our genius. And it is useful to be strongly convinced that the things we undertake without reluctance, and with the freedom that usually accompanies joy, will not fail to turn out well for us.

17 Socrates' *daimonion*, the inner "divine sign" he said guided him (Plato, *Apology* and *Phaedrus*).

So I venture here to urge Your Highness, since she finds herself in a place where present objects give her nothing but satisfaction, to be pleased to contribute her own share as well in trying to make herself content. She can do so easily, it seems to me, by fixing her mind only on present things, and never thinking about affairs except at the hours when the courier is ready to leave. And I consider it a stroke of luck that Your Highness's books could not be IV 531 brought to her as soon as she expected. For reading them is less suited to sustaining cheerfulness than to bringing on sadness—especially that book by the Doctor of Princes. By representing only the difficulties princes have in maintaining themselves, and the cruelties or perfidies he advises them to commit, he gives the private persons who read him less reason to envy the princes' condition than to pity it.

Your Highness has noted his faults perfectly well, and mine too. For it is true that it was his intention to praise Cesare Borgia that led him to lay down general maxims to justify particular actions that can hardly be excused. Since then I have read his discourses on Livy, in which I noticed nothing bad. And his principal precept—to wipe out one's enemies entirely or else make them one's friends, without ever taking the middle way—is no doubt always the safest; but when one has no reason to fear, it is not the most generous.[18]

Your Highness has also seen very clearly the secret of the miraculous spring: there are many poor people who proclaim its virtues and who are perhaps paid by those who hope to profit from it. For it is certain that there is no remedy that can serve for all ills. But when many have used this one, those who have done well by it speak IV 532 well of it, and nothing is said of the others. Be that as it may, the purgative quality of one of these springs, and the white color, sweetness and cooling quality of the other, give reason to judge that they pass through mines of antimony or mercury. These are two harmful drugs, especially mercury, which is why I would not advise anyone to drink from them. The vitriol and iron in the waters of Spa are much less to

18 Machiavelli's *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livy* (1531).

be feared; and because both reduce the spleen and purge melancholy, I think well of them.

For Your Highness will allow me, if she pleases, to end this letter where I began it, and to wish her above all satisfaction of mind and joy. Joy is not only the fruit we expect from all other goods, but also often a means that increases the favors we have for acquiring them. And although I am not able to contribute to anything that concerns your service, except by my wishes, I nonetheless venture to assure you that I am, more perfectly than anyone else in the world, etc.

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES, 29 NOVEMBER 1646

Elisabeth doubts that joy brings luck and describes the physicians and learned men of Berlin.

ELISABETH [IV 578] Monsieur Descartes,

I am not so accustomed to fortune's favors as to expect extraordinary ones from it. It is enough for me when it does not very often send me accidents that would give cause for sadness to the greatest philosopher in the world. And since nothing of that kind has happened to me during my stay here, since present objects are all agreeable to me, and since the air of the country agrees well enough with my constitution, I find myself in a position to practice your lessons on cheerfulness. Even so, I do not expect it to have the effects on the conduct of my affairs that you experienced at games of chance. For the good luck you met with there, at times when you were otherwise disposed to joy, probably came from your then attending more freely to all the things that usually make one win.

But if I were free to dispose of my own person, I would not rest as easily in a precarious situation, now that I am in a place where I have found cause for contentment, as I did in the one I have come from. As for the interests of our house, I have long left them to destiny, seeing that prudence itself, unless it were helped by means other than those we have left, would waste its effort there. It would take a stronger genius than that of Socrates

to work at it with success; for since his did not save him from imprisonment or death, it has little to boast of. I have also observed that the things in which I followed IV 579 my own impulses have turned out better for me than those in which I let myself be guided by the advice of people wiser than I am. But I attribute this not so much to the good fortune of my genius as to the fact that, caring more than anyone else about what concerns me, I also examined better than those on whose judgment I relied the paths that might harm or help me. If you want me to give some share of it also to the occult quality of my imagination, I believe you say so to fit me to the temper of the people of this country, and particularly of the learned, who are even more pedantic and superstitious than any I knew in Holland. This comes from the fact that the whole population here is so poor that no one studies or reasons except to make a living.

I had all the trouble in the world keeping out of the doctors' hands, so as not to suffer from their ignorance without having been ill—except that the change of air and diet gave me, instead of the itch, some abscesses on my fingers. From this these gentlemen judged that there was still some bad matter hidden in me, too coarse to be evacuated that way, which had to be countered with purges and bleeding. But since I otherwise feel so well that I am visibly putting on weight, I resorted to stubbornness where reason was of no use to me, and have taken nothing up to now. I dread the medicines here all IV 580 the more because everyone uses chemical extracts, whose effects are quick and dangerous.

Those who have investigated the ingredients of the Hornhausen spring believe that the salt spring contains nothing but ordinary salt; as for the other, they do not agree at all. They also attribute the springs' effects (the Lutherans especially) more to a miracle than to the composition of the water. For my part, I shall take the safest course, as you advise, and not use it at all.

I also hope never to be in a position to follow the precepts of the doctor of princes, since violence and suspicion are contrary

to my nature. Though what I blame in tyrants is only the first design of usurping a country and the first undertaking. For afterward, the means that serve to establish them, however harsh, always do less harm to the public than a sovereignty contested by arms.

Nor does this study occupy me enough to cause me any distress. The little time left to me after the letters I have to write and the attentions I must pay my relatives, I spend rereading your works, from which I gain more in an hour for the cultivation of my reason than I would in a whole lifetime of other reading. But there is no one here reasonable enough to understand them, although I am bound by a promise to that old Duke of Brunswick at Wolfenbüttel to get them [IV 581] for him, to adorn his library. I do not think they will serve to adorn his catarrhal brain, already wholly taken up with pedantry.[19] Here I let myself be carried away by the pleasure of conversing with you, without considering that I cannot, without sinning against the human race, make you waste the time (which you employ for its benefit) in reading the trifles of

Your most affectionate friend, always at your service, Elisabeth. 29/19 November. Monsieur Descartes.

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH, DECEMBER 1646

Descartes advises on her minor ailment and reports that Regius's book has appeared.

DESCARTES [IV 589] Madame,

I have never found such good news in any of the letters I have previously had the honor of receiving from Your Highness as I found in this last one of 29 November. For it leads me to judge that you now have more health and more joy than I have ever seen you have before. And I believe that, after virtue, which you have never lacked, these are the two chief goods one can have in this life. I do not count that little complaint for which the physi-

19 Duke August the Younger of Brunswick-Lüneburg (1579–1666), founder of the great library at Wolfenbüttel.

cians claimed you would give them employment. For although it is sometimes a little troublesome, I come from a country where it is so common among those who are young, and otherwise in very good health, that I regard it not so much as an illness as a sign of health and a safeguard against other diseases. Experience has indeed taught our physicians sure remedies for curing it; but they do not advise trying to get rid of it in any season other than spring, because then, the pores being more open, the cause can be better removed. So Your Highness is quite right not to want to use remedies for it, especially at the onset of winter, which is the most dangerous time. And if this complaint lasts IV 590 until spring, it will then be easy to drive it away with a few mild purgatives, or cooling broths containing nothing but herbs known in the kitchen, and by abstaining from foods with too much salt or spice. Bleeding might also be very useful. But because it is a remedy that carries some danger, and whose frequent use shortens life, I do not advise Your Highness to use it unless she is accustomed to it; for when one has been bled in the same season three or four years in a row, one is almost obliged afterward to do the same every year. Your Highness is also quite right not to want to use chemical remedies. However long one's experience of their power, the slightest change made in their preparation, even when one thinks one is improving it, can entirely change their qualities and turn them from medicines into poisons.

Much the same is true of knowledge in the hands of those who want to peddle it without knowing it well; for in thinking to correct it or add something to what they have learned, they turn it into error. I seem to see the proof of this in Regius's book, which has at last come out. I would point out a few things in it here if I thought he had sent it to Your Highness. But it is so far from here to Berlin that I judge he will have waited for your return to present it to you; and I shall wait for it too, before telling you my opinion of it.[20]

I am not surprised that Your Highness [IV 591] finds no learned men in the country where she is who are not wholly prepossessed by the opinions of the Schools. For I see that even in Paris, and in all the rest of Europe, there are so few others that, had I known it beforehand, I might never have had anything printed. Still, I have this consolation: although I am sure that many have not lacked the will to attack me, no one has yet entered the lists. I even receive compliments from the Jesuit Fathers, whom I have always believed would feel the most concerned by the publication of a new philosophy, and would be the least likely to forgive me for it if they thought they could rightly fault anything in it.

I count among my obligations to Your Highness the promise she made to the Duke of Brunswick at Wolfenbüttel to get him my writings; for I am sure that, before you had been in those parts, I did not have the honor of being known there. It is true that I do not much seek to be known by many; but my chief ambition is to be able to show that I am, with complete devotion, etc.

20 His *Fundamenta physices* ("Foundations of Physics," 1646).

1647

Exile in Germany
From Berlin and Crossen, Elisabeth follows Descartes' quarrels at Leiden; he tells her of his new correspondence with Queen Christina.

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES, 21 FEBRUARY 1647

ELISABETH [IV 618] Monsieur Descartes,

I value joy and health as much as you do, though I prefer your friendship to them, as I do virtue; for it is chiefly from your friendship that I have both, together with the contentment of mind that surpasses even joy, since you taught me the means of having it. Nor could I have been wrong in the resolution I had taken not to use any remedy for the small complaint that remained, since it has met with your approval. I am now so thoroughly cured of those abscesses that I do not think I need to take medicines to purge the blood in spring. They have rid me well enough of bad humors, and spared me, I believe, the catarrhs that the cold and the stoves would otherwise have given me.

My sister Henriette has been so ill that we thought we would lose her. That is what kept me from answering your last letter sooner, since it obliged me to be constantly at her side. Since she has been better, we have had to accompany the Queen Mother of Sweden, every day in [IV 619] sleighs, and in the evenings at banquets and balls. These are very tiresome diversions for those who can give themselves better ones, but they are less tiresome when one takes part in them for and with people one has no

reason to distrust. That is why I am more accommodating here than I was at The Hague.[1]

I would nevertheless be happier to spend my time reading Regius's book and your views on it. I may not return to The Hague next summer; I cannot answer for it, though I have not changed my resolution, because it depends partly on the will of others and on public affairs. In that case I shall try to have his book sent to me by the ships that go from Amsterdam to Hamburg, and I hope you will do me the favor of sending me your views by the regular post. Every time I read your writings, I cannot imagine that you can really regret having had them printed, since it is impossible that they should not in the end be accepted and bring benefit to the public.

I have recently met here a single man who had seen something of them. He is a doctor of medicine named Weis, and very learned too. He told me that Bacon first made him suspicious of Aristotle's philosophy, and that your method made him reject it entirely and convinced him of the circulation of the blood, which destroys all the ancient principles of their medicine; which is why he admits that he accepted it reluctantly.[2] I have IV 620 now lent him your *Principles,* on which he has promised to give me his objections. If he finds any, and they are worth the trouble, I shall send them to you, so that you can judge the ability of the man I find the most reasonable among the learned of this place, since he is capable of appreciating your reasoning. But I am sure that no one could be reasonable enough to esteem you more highly than does

Your most affectionate friend, always at your service, Elisabeth. Monsieur Descartes.

1 Henriette Marie (1626–1651), Elisabeth's younger sister. The Queen Mother is Maria Eleonora of Brandenburg, widow of Gustavus Adolphus and mother of Queen Christina.

2 Francis Bacon (1561–1626), English philosopher and critic of Aristotelian science.

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH, MARCH 1647

Descartes plans a journey to France and complains that Regius has copied and distorted his work.

DESCARTES [IV 624] Madame,

The satisfaction that I learn Your Highness enjoys where she is makes me not dare to wish for her return, although I find it very hard to keep from doing so, especially now that I am at The Hague. And since I note from your letter of 21 February that you are not to be expected here before the end of summer, I intend to make a journey to France on my private affairs, planning to return toward winter. I shall not leave for two months, so that I may first have the honor of receiving Your Highness's commands, which will always have more power over me than anything else in the world.

I praise God that you now have [IV 625] perfect health. But I beg you to forgive me if I dare to contradict your opinion about not using remedies because the trouble you had in your hands has passed. For it is to be feared, for Your Highness as well as for your sister, that the humors which were purging themselves in that way have been checked by the cold of the season, and that in spring they may bring back the same trouble, or put you in danger of some other illness, unless you remedy it with a good diet, taking only foods and drinks that cool the blood and purge without any strain. For as for drugs, whether from apothecaries or from empirical healers, I have so poor an opinion of them that I would never dare advise anyone to use them.

I do not know what I may have written to Your Highness about Regius's book that gives you occasion to want to know what I observed in it. Perhaps I did not state my opinion of it, so as not to forestall your judgment in case you already had the book. But since I learn that you do not have it yet, I shall tell you candidly here that I do not think it deserves Your Highness's taking the trouble to read it. As regards physics, it contains nothing but my assertions put in bad order and without their true

proofs, so that they look like paradoxes, and what is put at the beginning can be proved only by what comes near the end. He has put in almost nothing at all that is IV 626 his own, and few things from what I have not had printed; but he has nonetheless failed in what he owed me. He professed friendship with me, and knew full well that I did not wish what I had written on the description of the animal to be divulged—so much so that I had refused to show it to him, excusing myself on the ground that, if he had seen it, he could not help speaking of it to his students. Yet he appropriated many things from it. Having found a way to get a copy of it without my knowledge, he transcribed in particular the whole passage where I speak of the movement of the muscles, and where I consider, for example, two of the muscles that move the eye. Of this he has two or three pages, which he has repeated twice, word for word, in his book, so much did it please him.[3] And yet he did not understand what he was writing; for he left out the main point, which is that the animal spirits that flow from the brain into the muscles cannot return through the same channels by which they came. Without that observation, everything he writes is worthless. And because he did not have my figure, he made one of his own that plainly shows his ignorance. I am told that he now has another book, on medicine, in the press, in which I expect he will have put all the rest of my writing, as far as he has been able to digest it. He would no doubt have taken many other things from it; but I have learned that he got a copy only when his book was nearly finished printing. IV 627 But just as he blindly follows what he believes to be my opinions in everything concerning physics or medicine, even when he does not understand them, so he blindly contradicts them in everything concerning metaphysics —a subject on which I had begged him to write nothing, because it does not serve his purpose, and because I was sure he could write nothing on it that would not be bad. But I obtained nothing from him, except that, having no intention of satisfying me

3 Descartes' unpublished writings on the animal body, related to his *Treatise on Man*.

in this, he no longer cared about disobliging me in other matters as well.

I shall nonetheless take to Princess Sophie tomorrow a copy of his book, whose title is *Henrici Regij fundamenta Physices*, together with another small book by my good friend Monsieur van Hogelande, who has done the exact opposite of Regius. Regius has written nothing that is not taken from me and is not, at the same time, against me; whereas the other has written nothing that is properly mine (for I do not even think he has ever read my writings carefully), and yet there is nothing in it that is not for me, in that he has followed the IV 628 same principles. I shall ask Madame L.[4] to have these two books, which are not large, put in with the first packets she is pleased to send by way of Hamburg. I shall add to them the French version of my *Meditations*, if I can get it before leaving here, for I was told some time ago that the printing was finished. I am, etc.

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES, 11 APRIL 1647

Elisabeth regrets his absence, condemns Regius's ingratitude and plans a stay at Crossen.

ELISABETH Monsieur Descartes,

I had not regretted my absence from The Hague until you wrote that you had been there, and I felt myself deprived of the satisfaction I used to have in your conversation while you stayed there. It seemed to me that I came away more reasonable each time. And although the peace I find here, among people who are fond of me and esteem me far more than I IV 629 deserve, surpasses all the goods I could have elsewhere, it does not come close to that one. Yet I cannot promise myself that within a few months, nor predict how many, since I do not see that Madame the Electress, my aunt, is inclined to allow my return, and I have

4 Sophie (1630–1714), Elisabeth's youngest sister, later Electress of Hanover. Cornelis van Hogelande was a Catholic physician at Leiden, author of *Cogitationes* (1646).

no reason to press her until the Elector,[5] her son, is with her, which, as he himself requests, will not be before September; and perhaps his affairs will oblige him to come sooner or to stay away longer. So I may hope, but cannot be sure, that I shall have the happiness of seeing you again at the time you have proposed for your return from France. I wish you the success you seek on this journey; and had I not experienced the constancy of your resolutions, I would still fear that your friends would make you stay there. Meanwhile I beg you to give an address to my sister Sophie, so that I may sometimes have news of you, which will be no less welcome to me for spending a long time on the road.

After Easter we shall go to Crossen, my aunt's estate on the borders of Silesia, to stay three weeks or a month. There the solitude IV 630 will give me more leisure for reading, and I shall devote it all to the books you have been kind enough to send me, for which I ask you to accept my thanks here. I was more eager to see Regius's book because I know he has put some of your work in it than for what is his own.[6] For besides going rather fast, he has made use of the help of Doctor Jonson, as he himself told me—a man capable of muddling him still further, having a rather confused mind of his own, and one who does not give him the patience to understand the things he has read or heard. But though I would excuse all the other faults of the said Regius, I cannot forgive him the ingratitude he shows toward you, and I consider him thoroughly contemptible, since your conversation could not give him better sentiments.

Monsieur Hogelande will surely have done well in what he has had printed, since he has followed your principles in it—principles I cannot get a single one of the learned men of Berlin to understand, so prepossessed are they by the Schools. And the man I named in my last letter has not seen me since I lent him

5 Elisabeth Charlotte of the Palatinate (1597–1660), Dowager Electress of Brandenburg and sister of Elisabeth's father; her son was Frederick William, Elector of Brandenburg.

6 Now Krosno Odrzańskie, in western Poland, on the Oder.

your physics, which is a sure sign that everyone here is in very good health, since he is one of the household physicians.

When I told you I did not want to use remedies for the abscesses I had in the autumn, I meant those that come from the apothecary; for cooling herbs that purge the blood are my food in spring, as I usually have no appetite for [IV 631] anything else in that season. I also intend to be bled in a few days, since I have fallen into a bad habit of it that I cannot change now without suffering headaches. I would be afraid of giving you one with this tedious account of myself, had your care for my health not led me to it. That care would also make me very vain, if I could find any other cause for it than the extreme kindness you have for

Your most affectionate friend, always at your service, Elisabeth. Berlin, 11/1 April.

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH, 10 MAY 1647

Descartes reports the Leiden theologians' charges of blasphemy and considers leaving Holland.

DESCARTES [V 15] Although I may find occasions inviting me to stay in France once I am there, none of them will have the power to keep me from returning before winter, provided life and health remain to me, since the letter I have had the honor of receiving from Your Highness gives me hope that you will return to The Hague toward the end of summer. But I can say that this is the chief reason that makes me prefer living in this country to living anywhere else. For as for the peace I came here to seek in the past, I foresee that from now on I shall not be able to have it as complete as I would wish. [V 16] Not having yet obtained all the satisfaction I ought to have had for the injuries I received at Utrecht, I see that they draw others after them, and that there is a band of theologians, men of the Schools, who seem to have formed a league to try to crush me with slanders. So, while they plot everything they can to harm me, if I were not

also on guard to defend myself, it would be easy for them to subject me to some affronts.[7]

The proof of this is that, over the last three or four months, a certain Regent of the Theological College at Leiden, named Revius, has had four different sets of theses disputed against me, in order to pervert the meaning of my *Meditations* and make people believe that I put very absurd things in them, contrary to the glory of God: for instance, that one must doubt whether there is a God, and even that I want people to deny absolutely, for a time, that there is one, and similar things.[8] But because this man is not able, and most of his students even mocked his slanders, my friends in Leiden did not so much as deign to warn me of what he was doing—until other theses were also produced by Triglandius, their first professor of theology, in which he put these words †††.[9] On which my friends, even those who are themselves theologians, judged that these people's intention, in accusing me of so great a crime as V 17 blasphemy, was nothing less than to try to have my opinions condemned as highly pernicious—first by some synod where they would be the strongest, and then to try to have the magistrates, who trust them, subject me to affronts as well—and that, to prevent this, I needed to oppose their designs. That is why, a week ago, I wrote a long letter to the Curators of the University of Leiden, asking for justice against the slanders of these two theologians. I do not yet know what answer I shall get. But I know the temper of the people of this country, and how much they revere—not probity and virtue, but the beards, the voices and the frowns of theologians—so that those who are most brazen and can shout the loudest have the most power here (as usually happens in all popular states), even though they have the least reason. So I expect nothing from it but a few plasters, which, not removing the cause of the trouble,

7 The quarrel of 1642–1645 with the theologian Voetius and the Utrecht authorities.
8 Jacobus Revius (1586–1658), Calvinist theologian and regent of the States' College at Leiden.
9 Jacobus Triglandius (1583–1654), Leiden theologian. The daggers mark a quotation omitted in the source; the next sentence shows it charged Descartes with blasphemy.

will only serve to make it longer and more irksome. Whereas I, for my part, think I am obliged to do my best to obtain full satisfaction for these injuries, and at the same time for those of Utrecht; and, if I cannot obtain justice (as I foresee it will be very hard for me to do), to withdraw altogether from these Provinces. But because everything is done very slowly here, I am sure more than a year will pass before that happens.

I would not take the liberty of entertaining Your [V 18] Highness with these small matters, if the favor you do me in wishing to read the books of Monsieur Hogelande and of Regius, because of what they have put in them that concerns me, did not lead me to believe that you will not be displeased to learn from me myself what touches me. Besides, the obedience and respect I owe you oblige me to give you an account of my actions.

I praise God that this doctor, to whom Your Highness lent my *Principles*, went a long time without coming back to see you, since that is a sign that there are no sick people at all at the court of Madame the Electress. And it seems that one enjoys a more perfect degree of health when health is general in the place where one lives than when one is surrounded by the sick. This physician will have had all the more leisure to read the book Your Highness was pleased to lend him, and will since have been better able to give you his judgment of it.

As I write this, I receive letters from The Hague and Leiden telling me that the meeting of the Curators has been postponed, so that my letters have not yet been given to them; and I see that a squabble is being turned into a great affair. It is said that the theologians want to be its judges—that is, to put me here under an inquisition more severe than that of Spain ever was, and to make me out to be the adversary of their religion. On which people would like me to use [V 19] the credit of the French Ambassador and the authority of the Prince of Orange, not to obtain justice, but to intercede and prevent my enemies from going further.[10] I believe, however, that I shall not follow this advice. I

10 William II of Orange, stadtholder since the death of his father Frederick Henry in March 1647.

shall ask only for justice; and if I cannot obtain it, it seems to me that the best course will be to prepare quietly for retreat. But whatever I think or do, and wherever in the world I go, nothing will ever be dearer to me than obeying your commands and showing with what zeal I am, etc.

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES, MAY 1647

Elisabeth urges him not to leave Holland and describes the country around Crossen.

ELISABETH [V 46] Monsieur Descartes,

Three weeks ago I was sent Professor Triglandius's impertinent corollary, with the addition that those who argued for you were not defeated by reason but forced into silence by the uproar that broke out in the University, and that Professor Stuart (a man of wide reading but very mediocre judgment) was planning to refute your *Meditations*.[11] I did think this would cause you the same distress as the slander by Voetius's student, but not a resolution to leave Holland, as you indicate in your letter of the 10th of this month. For it is unworthy of you to yield the field to your enemies, and it would look like a kind of banishment, which would do you more harm than anything the gentlemen [V 47] theologians can do against you. Slander counts for nothing in a place where those who govern cannot escape it themselves, nor punish those who commit it. The people there pay those heavy taxes solely for freedom of speech; and the theologians' freedom, being privileged everywhere, could hardly be restrained in a popular state. That is why it seems to me that you are right to be content if you obtain what your friends in Holland advise you to ask for, even though you should not follow their advice in making the request; the resolution you have taken on that point is more fitting for a free man, sure of his cause. But if you persist in your resolution to leave the country, I would also give up mine to return there, unless the interests of my house call me back; and I would rather wait here

11 Adam Stuart (1591–1654), Scottish-born professor of philosophy at Leiden.

until the outcome of the Münster treaties, or some other turn of events, brings me back to my homeland.[12]

Madame the Electress's dower estate is in a situation that suits my constitution well: two degrees nearer the sun than Berlin, surrounded by the river Oder, and the soil there is extremely fertile. The people there have already recovered from the war better than those here, even though the armies were there longer and did more damage by fire. There is now in some villages such a quantity of those flies called gnats that many men and animals have been suffocated by them or made deaf and blind. They come in the form of a cloud and go away in the same way. The inhabitants believe that this V 48 comes from witchcraft; but I attribute it to the extraordinary flooding of the river Oder, which lasted this year until the end of April, when it was already very hot.

Two days ago I received the books of Monsieur Hogelande and of Le Roy; but dispatches have kept me from reading anything except the beginning of the first. There I would greatly admire the proofs of the existence of God, had you not accustomed me to ask for them from the principles of our knowledge.[13] But the comparisons by which he shows how the soul is united to the body, and constrained to adapt itself to its form and to share in the good and evil that befall it, do not yet satisfy me. For the subtle matter, which he supposes to be enveloped in a coarser one by the heat of fire or of fermentation, is nonetheless corporeal, and receives its pressure or motion through the quantity and surface of its small parts—which the soul, being immaterial, cannot do.

My brother Philip, who forwarded those books to me, writes that two more are on the way; and since I have not sent for any, I think they will be your *Meditations* and your *Principles of Philosophy* in French. I am especially impatient for the latter, since

12 The peace negotiations at Münster, part of the Peace of Westphalia (1648) that ended the Thirty Years War; the restoration of the Palatinate to Elisabeth's family was at stake.

13 Le Roy is the French form of Regius's name (Hendrik de Roy).

you have added something to it that is not in the Latin. I think that will be in the fourth book, since the other three seem as clear as it is possible to make them.

V 49 The physician I spoke to you about before told me he had some objections concerning minerals, but that he would not dare send them to you before examining your principles once more. But his practice hinders him a great deal. The people here have an extraordinary faith in his profession; and were it not for the great filthiness of the common people and the nobility, I think they would need it less than any people in the world, since the air here is very pure. I am also healthier here than I was in Holland. But I would not want to have always been here, since there is nothing but my books to keep me from becoming utterly stupid. I would be entirely satisfied here if I could show you the esteem I have for the kindness you continue to have for

Your most affectionate friend, always at your service, Elisabeth. Monsieur Descartes.

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH, 6 JUNE 1647

About to leave for France, Descartes reports his new contact with Queen Christina through Chanut.

DESCARTES V 59 Madame,

Passing through The Hague on my way to France, since I cannot have the honor of receiving your commands there and paying you my respects, I think I am obliged to write these lines, to assure Your Highness that my zeal and devotion will not change, even though I change country. Two days ago I received a letter from Sweden from the French Resident there, in which he puts a question to me on the Queen's behalf. He has made me known to her by showing her my reply to another letter he had sent me earlier.[14] The way he describes this Queen, and the remarks of hers that he reports, make me esteem her so highly that it seems to me you would each be worthy of the other's conversation.

14 Pierre Chanut (1601–1662), French Resident at Stockholm; the Queen is Christina of Sweden (1626–1689).

There are so few others in the world [V 60] worthy of it that it would not be hard for Your Highness to form a very close friendship with her; and besides the contentment of mind you would have from it, this might be desirable for various reasons. I had written earlier to this friend of mine, the Resident in Sweden, in reply to a letter in which he spoke of her, that I did not find incredible what he told me of her, because the honor I had of knowing Your Highness had taught me how far people of high birth could surpass others, etc. But I do not remember whether that was in the letter he showed her or in another, earlier one. And since it is likely that from now on he will show her the letters he receives from me, I shall always try to put something in them that gives her reason to wish for Your Highness's friendship, unless you forbid me to.

The theologians who wanted to harm me have been silenced, but by flattering them and taking as much care as possible not to offend them, which is now put down to the times. But I fear these times will last forever, and that they will be allowed to take so much power that they will become unbearable.

The printing of my *Principles* in French is nearly finished; and since the dedicatory letter is to be printed last, I send a copy of it here to Your Highness, so that, if there is anything in it she dislikes and judges ought to be put otherwise, she may do me the favor of informing the one who will be, all his life, etc.[15]

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH, 20 NOVEMBER 1647

Descartes tells of sending Christina his letters to Elisabeth on the supreme good and his treatise on the passions.

DESCARTES [V 89] Madame,

Since I have already taken the liberty of informing Your Highness of the correspondence I have begun in Sweden, I think I am obliged to continue, and to tell her that I have recently received letters from my friend in that country. From them I learn that the Queen, while at Uppsala, where the country's university is,

15 The French *Principles* (1647) kept the Latin edition's dedication to Elisabeth.

wished to hear an oration by the Professor of Eloquence, whom he regards as the ablest and most reasonable in that university, and gave him as his subject the supreme good of this life. But after hearing the oration, she said that these people only skimmed the surface of such subjects, and that one would need to know my opinion.[16] To which he replied that he knew I was very reserved about writing on such subjects, but that if Her Majesty wished him to ask me for it on her behalf, he did not believe I would fail V 90 to try to satisfy her. Whereupon she very expressly charged him to ask me for it, and made him promise to write to me by the next post. So he advises me to reply and to address my letter to the Queen, to whom he will present it, and he says he guarantees it will be well received.

I thought I should not neglect this opportunity. Considering that, when he wrote this to me, he could not yet have received the letter in which I spoke of those I have had the honor of writing to Your Highness on the same subject, I thought that my plan in that regard had failed, and that it had to be approached from another angle. That is why I have written a letter to the Queen in which, after briefly setting out my opinion, I add that I omit many things. For, picturing to myself the number of affairs that arise in the government of a great kingdom, which Her Majesty attends to herself, I dare not ask her for a longer audience. But I add that I am sending Monsieur Chanut some writings in which I have set out my views on the same subject at greater length, so that, if she is pleased to see them, he can present them to her.

These writings that I am sending Monsieur Chanut are the letters I have had the honor of writing to Your Highness about Seneca's book *On the Happy Life*, up to V 91 the middle of the sixth, where, after defining the passions in general, I say that I find it difficult to enumerate them. After those, I am also sending him the little treatise on the passions, which I had considerable trouble having copied out from a very confused rough draft of it that I had kept. And I tell him that I do not ask him to present

16 Johann Freinshemius (1608–1660), German classical scholar, then professor at Uppsala and later Queen Christina's librarian and historiographer.

these writings to the Queen straight away, because I would fear failing in the respect I owe Her Majesty if I sent her letters I wrote for someone else, rather than writing to her herself whatever I may judge will please her; but that, if he sees fit to speak to her of them, saying that it is to him I sent them, and she then wishes to see them, I shall be free of this scruple. And I tell him that I am persuaded she may find it more agreeable to see what was thus written to another than if it were addressed to her, because she can be more assured that I have changed or disguised nothing out of consideration for her.

I did not think it appropriate to add anything more about Your Highness, nor even to mention your name, although he cannot fail to know it from my earlier letters. He is a most virtuous man and a great admirer of people of merit, so I have no doubt that he honors Your Highness as much as he ought. Yet he has spoken of you only rarely in his letters, V 92 even though I have written something about you in every one of mine. So I thought that perhaps he had scruples about speaking of you to the Queen, because he does not know whether it would please or displease those who sent him. But if from now on I have occasion to write to her directly, I will have no need of an interpreter. My aim this time, in sending these writings, is to try to get her to occupy herself more with these thoughts, and, if they please her, as I am led to hope, to give her occasion to discuss them with Your Highness. Whose servant I shall be all my life, etc.

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES, 5 DECEMBER 1647

Elisabeth thanks him for the French Meditations and urges him to write the Treatise on Erudition.

ELISABETH V 96 Monsieur Descartes,

A few days ago I received the French translation of your *Metaphysical Meditations*, which you sent me, and so I am bound to thank you for it in these lines. Yet I cannot express my gratitude for your kindnesses without asking for a new one: that you

excuse the trouble I give you in reading and answering my letters. They so often divert you from useful meditations toward subjects that could not seem worth your attention, were it not for a friend's partiality. But I have received so many proofs of your partiality toward me that I rely on it enough not to hesitate to tell you with what satisfaction I read this translation. It makes your thoughts all the more mine [V 97] now that I see them well expressed in a language I ordinarily use, although I believe I had understood them before.[17] My astonishment grows every time I reread the objections that were made to you. How is it possible that people who have spent so many years in meditation and study cannot understand things so simple and so clear? That most of them, while disputing about the true and the false, seem not to know how the two are to be told apart? And that Gassendi, who has the greatest reputation for learning, should have made objections less reasonable than all the others, the Englishman's excepted?[18]

This shows you how much the world needs the Treatise on Erudition that you once meant to write. I know you are too charitable to refuse something so useful to the public, and so I have no need to remind you of the promise you made about it to[19]

Your most affectionate friend, always at your service, Elisabeth. 5 December/25 November. Monsieur Descartes.

17 The French translation of the *Meditations* by the Duc de Luynes, with Clerselier's French version of the Objections and Replies, appeared in Paris in 1647.
18 Pierre Gassendi (1592–1655), French philosopher, wrote the Fifth Objections to the *Meditations*; "the Englishman" is Thomas Hobbes, author of the Third Objections.
19 A projected work on the reform of learning, which Descartes never wrote.

1648–1649

The last letters
The Fronde, the execution of Charles I and the Peace of Westphalia; Descartes leaves for Sweden.

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH, 31 JANUARY 1648

DESCARTES [V 111] Madame,

I received Your Highness's letter of 23 December almost as soon as the previous one. I confess I am at a loss as to how to answer that previous one, because in it Your Highness indicates that you wish me to write the Treatise on Erudition, of which I once had the honor of speaking to you. There is nothing I desire more zealously than to obey your commands. But I will set out here the reasons that led me to abandon the plan of [V 112] this treatise, and if they do not satisfy Your Highness, I shall not fail to take it up again.

The first is that I could not put into it all the truths that ought to be there without stirring up the scholastic philosophers too much against me, and I am not in a position to despise their hatred entirely. The second is that I have already touched on some of what I wanted to put in it, in a Preface placed at the front of the French translation of my *Principles*, which I think Your Highness has now received. The third is that I now have another piece of writing in hand which I hope may be more pleasing to Your Highness: the description of the functions of the animal and of man.[1] For the draft I had sketched of it twelve

1 The unfinished *Description of the Human Body* (1647–48), a reworking of the *Treatise on Man* that Descartes had drafted in the early 1630s.

or thirteen years ago, which Your Highness has seen, came into the hands of several people who copied it badly, and so I thought I was obliged to put it into cleaner form, that is, to redo it. I have even ventured (but only within the last eight or ten days) to try to explain in it how the animal is formed from the very beginning of its origin. I say the animal in general; for as for man in particular, I would not dare undertake it, since I lack enough experiments for that purpose.

For the rest, I regard what remains of this winter as the most peaceful time I shall perhaps V 113 have in my life, which is why I prefer to spend it on this study rather than on another that does not require so much attention. The reason I fear having less leisure hereafter is that I am obliged to return to France next summer and to spend the following winter there; my domestic affairs and several other reasons compel me to. I have also been done the honor there of being offered a pension on the King's behalf, without my having asked for it. This will not be enough to tie me there, but many things can happen in a year. Yet nothing could happen that would keep me from preferring the good fortune of living wherever Your Highness might be, if the opportunity arose, to that of being in my own country, or in any other place whatever.

I do not expect a reply for a long while yet to the letter concerning the supreme good, because it lay nearly a month in Amsterdam through the fault of the man to whom I had sent it to be forwarded. But as soon as I have any news of it, I shall not fail to let Your Highness know. It contained nothing new that deserved to be sent to you. Since then I have received some letters from that country, telling me that my letters V 114 are awaited; and from what they write me about this Princess, she must be extremely inclined to virtue and capable of judging things well.[2] I am told that the translation of my *Principles* will be presented to her, and I am assured that she will read the first

2 Descartes' letter to Queen Christina of 20 November 1647, sent through Chanut together with copies of his letters to Elisabeth on Seneca.

part with satisfaction, and that she would be quite capable of the rest if her affairs did not deprive her of the leisure.

I am sending with this letter a little book of small importance, which I am not enclosing in the same packet because it is not worth the postage. It was Monsieur Regius's attacks that forced me to write it, and it was printed before I knew it. They have even added some verses and a preface that I disapprove of—although the verses are by Monsieur Heydanus, who did not dare to put his name to them, as indeed he should not have. I am, etc.[3]

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES, 30 JUNE 1648

In veiled terms, Elisabeth reports a plan for her to travel to Sweden.

ELISABETH [V 195] Monsieur Descartes,

A swelling in my right arm, caused by a surgeon who cut part of a nerve while bleeding me, has kept me from answering sooner your letter of 7 May. It shows me a new effect of your perfect generosity, in the regret you feel at leaving Holland, where you could hope to let me enjoy the benefit of your conversation. That is truly the greatest good I expected there, and the only reason that made me think of ways of returning. A settlement of affairs in England would have helped me to do so as much as despair of seeing one in the affairs of Germany.

Meanwhile there is talk of the journey you once proposed. The Mother of the person to whom your friend gave your letters has received orders to bring it about, without anyone in her country knowing that the idea comes from further off than her own initiative. They chose the good lady badly for keeping a secret—she who never kept one.[4] Still, she carries out the rest of her commission with great eagerness, and would like a third

3 The *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet* (1648), Descartes' reply to a broadsheet by Regius; Abraham Heidanus (Heydanus) was a Cartesian minister and later theology professor at Leiden.

4 Elisabeth writes in veiled terms: the journey is to Sweden, the "person" is Queen Christina, her mother is the Queen Mother, Maria Eleonora, and the friend is Chanut.

person to rush there. He has no intention of doing so, but he has left it to the wishes of his relatives, which will doubtless favor the journey; and if they send the money needed for it, he is resolved to undertake it. For in this conjuncture he may perhaps have the means of doing some service there to those to whom he owes it, and he could come back with the good lady mentioned above, who does not intend to stay there either.[5] Only this V 196 has changed among the reasons that were written to you against the journey. The death of this woman (who is rather sickly), or her being obliged to leave before the reply from the other's relatives arrives, are the likeliest things to break it off. Three weeks ago I received a very obliging letter from the place in question, full of kindness and protestations of friendship, but it makes no mention of your letters, nor of what is said above. Indeed, the good lady was told of it only by word of mouth, through a special messenger.

I have not yet given you an account of my reading of the French version of your *Principles of Philosophy*. Although there is something in the preface on which I need your explanation, I will not add it here, because it would make my letter too long. But I intend to discuss it with you another time, and I trust that, in changing residence, you will always keep the same charity toward

Your most affectionate friend, always at your service, Elisabeth. Monsieur Descartes. From Crossen, 20/30 June.

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH, JUNE OR JULY 1648

From Paris, Descartes describes the first stirrings of the Fronde and reflects on fortune.

DESCARTES V 197 Madame,

I know well that the place and situation I am in can give me no opportunity V 198 of being useful in Your Highness's service. Even so, I would not be fulfilling my duty, nor answering my

5 The "third person" is Elisabeth herself, disguised by the masculine pronoun; the "relatives" are her family.

zeal, if, having arrived at a new residence, I failed to renew to you the offer of my most humble obedience. I have found myself here at a juncture of affairs that no human prudence could have foreseen. The Parlement, together with the other sovereign courts, now meets every day to deliberate about certain rules that they claim should be imposed on the management of the finances. This is now being done with the Queen's permission, so it seems likely that the affair will drag on; but it is hard to judge what will come of it. It is said that they propose to find enough money to continue the war and maintain large armies without oppressing the people for it. If they take this course, I am persuaded it will be the way to reach a general peace at last.[6] But until that happens, I would have done well to stay in the country where there is already peace. If these storms do not clear soon, I intend to return to Egmond in six weeks or two months, and to stay there until the sky over France is clearer. Meanwhile, keeping, as I do, one foot in one country and the other in another, I find my condition very happy, in that it is free.[7] And I believe that those who enjoy great fortune differ from others more in feeling their misfortunes more keenly than in enjoying more [V 199] pleasures. For all the contentments they can have are ordinary to them, and so do not touch them as much as afflictions, which come to them only when they least expect them and are not in the least prepared for them. This should serve as a consolation to those whom fortune has accustomed to her blows. I wish she were as obedient to all your desires as I shall be all my life, etc.

6 The Parlement of Paris; its assemblies of summer 1648 opened the Fronde. The Queen is Anne of Austria, regent for the young Louis XIV.

7 The Peace of Münster (January 1648) had ended the war between Spain and the Dutch Republic.

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES, JULY 1648

Elisabeth is glad the troubles in France will send him back and reports delays to her Swedish journey.

ELISABETH [V 209] Monsieur Descartes,

Wherever in the world you may be, the trouble you take to send me your news will always add to my satisfaction. For I am persuaded that it will always be to your advantage, and that God is too just to send you misfortunes so great that your prudence could not turn them to good account. So it is with the unexpected disorders in France, which preserve your freedom by obliging you to return to Holland; for otherwise the Court would have taken it from you, however much care you might have taken to resist. As for me, I receive [V 210] from them the pleasure of being able to hope for the happiness of seeing you again, in Holland or elsewhere.

I think you will have received the letter in which you were told of another journey, which was to be made if the friends approved it, since it was thought to serve them in this conjuncture. They have since asked for it and provided the necessary expenses. Nevertheless, those who are at the place where it was to begin have delayed from day to day the preparations it required, moved by reasons so weak that they themselves would not dare to admit them. And now so little time is given for it that the person in question will not be able to be ready. On the one hand, she will be blamed for having broken her word; on the other, her friends will think she lacked the will or the courage to sacrifice her health and her peace for the interest of a house for which she would even give up her life, if it were required. This vexes her a little, but it cannot surprise her, since she is well used to bearing the blame for others' faults (even on occasions when she did not wish to clear herself of it), and to seeking her satisfaction only in the testimony of her conscience that she has done her duty. Still, this diverts her [V 211] thoughts for a time from more agreeable matters. And you are right to say that those who

enjoy great fortune differ from others more in feeling their misfortunes more keenly than in enjoying more pleasures, because few of them give their pleasures true objects. (But if the object were to do good to the public, and particularly to people of merit, a condition that offered many means of doing so would also give more pleasures than those to whom fortune refuses this advantage could have.) Yet, even so, I would never ask for a greater advantage than to be able to show you in deed the esteem I have for your kindness toward

Your most affectionate friend, always at your service, Elisabeth.

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES, 23 AUGUST 1648

Elisabeth reports that the Swedish invitation has been withdrawn and describes a strange rash at Crossen.

ELISABETH [V 225] Monsieur Descartes,

In my last letter I told you about a person who, without having done anything wrong, was in danger of losing the good opinion, and perhaps the goodwill, of most of her friends. Now she finds herself released from this danger in a rather extraordinary way. The other lady, to whom she had sent word of the time she needed to join her, replies that she would gladly have waited for her, had her daughter not changed her mind, judging that people would take it ill for her to be approached so closely by people of a different religion.[8] In my opinion, this conduct does not match the praise your friend gives to the one who adopts it—at least if it is entirely her own, and does not come, as I suspect, from the weak mind of her mother. Since this affair has been under discussion, the mother has had with her a sister who draws her living from the party opposed to the house of the person mentioned above. Your friend could [V 226] clarify this for you, if you see fit to write him something about it. Or perhaps he will write to you of his own accord, since it is said that he has complete influence over the mind he praises so highly. I can add

8 Elisabeth was of the Reformed (Calvinist) faith; Sweden was Lutheran.

nothing to this, except that I do not count this incident among the misfortunes of the person to whom it happens. It spares her a journey in which the harm that would come to her (such as the loss of health and peace, together with the unpleasant things she would have had to endure from a rough nation) was quite certain, while the good that others might hope from it was very uncertain. And if there is an affront in this conduct, I find that it will fall back entirely on those who committed it, since it is a mark of their inconstancy and fickleness of mind; and everyone who knows of it also knows that she had no part in any of these whims.

As for me, I intend to stay here until I learn the outcome of affairs in Germany and England, which now seem to be at a crisis. Three days ago we had an amusing, though very unpleasant, adventure here. While we were walking in an oak wood—Madame the Electress, her suite, and I—all of a sudden a kind of measles broke out on us all over the body except the face, with no fever or other trouble besides an unbearable itching. The superstitious believed themselves bewitched; but the peasants told us that there is sometimes a certain poisonous dew on the trees which, falling as dust, affects passers-by in this way. And it is worth noting that all the different remedies that each of us imagined for so new an illness—baths, bleeding, cupping, leeches and purging—were of [V 227] no use at all. I tell you about it because I presume you will find in it something to confirm some of your doctrines.

I am entirely, Monsieur Descartes, Your most affectionate friend, always at your service, Elisabeth. From Krossen, 23/13 August.

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH, OCTOBER 1648

Back in Holland, Descartes finds nothing to envy in France and consoles her over the canceled journey.

DESCARTES [V 232] Madame,

I have at last had the good fortune to receive the three letters that Your Highness did me the honor of writing to me, and none of them fell into the wrong hands. But the first, of 30 June, was carried to Paris while I was already on the road back to this country. Those who received it for me waited for news of my arrival before sending it on, so I could not have it until today, when I also received the last one, of 23 August. From it I learn of an insulting piece of conduct that astonishes me, and I am willing to believe, with Your Highness, that it does not come from the person to whom it is attributed. Be that as it may, I do not think one should be sorry not to make a journey in which, as Your Highness very rightly observes, the drawbacks were certain and the advantages very uncertain. As for me, thank God, I have finished the one I was obliged to make to France. I am not sorry to have gone, but I am gladder still to have come back. I saw no one there whose condition seemed to me worth envying, and those who cut the most brilliant figure there seemed to me the most deserving of pity. I could not have gone at a better time for coming to appreciate fully the happiness of a quiet and retired life, and the wealth of the most modest fortunes. If Your Highness compares her condition with that of the queens and other princesses of Europe, she will find the same [V 233] difference as between those who are in port, where they rest, and those who are on the open sea, tossed by the winds of a storm. And even if one has been cast into port by a shipwreck, provided one does not lack the necessities of life there, one ought to be no less content than if one had arrived some other way. The unpleasant events that befall people engaged in active life, whose happiness depends entirely on others, pierce to the bottom of their hearts. That poisonous vapor, by contrast, which came down from the trees under which Your Highness was peacefully walking, will, I hope, have touched only the surface of the skin; and if the skin had been washed at once with a little brandy, I believe all the harm would have been removed.

For five months I have received no letters from the friend I wrote to Your Highness about earlier. In his last letter he told me

very precisely the reasons that had prevented the person to whom he had given my letters from answering me. So I judge that his silence comes only from his still waiting for that reply, or perhaps from some embarrassment at having none to send me, as he had imagined he would. I am also refraining from writing to him first, so as not to seem to reproach him for it in my letters. Even so, I often had news of him while I was in Paris, [V 234] through his relatives, who heard from him every week. But when they have told him that I am here, I have no doubt he will write to me and let me know what he has learned about the conduct that concerns Your Highness, since he knows that I take a great interest in it. But those who have not had the honor of seeing you, and have no very particular knowledge of your virtues, could not conceive how perfectly one can be, as I am, etc.

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH, 22 FEBRUARY 1649

Descartes consoles Elisabeth on the execution of Charles I and advises accepting the peace terms.

DESCARTES [V 281] Madame,

Among several pieces of bad news that I have received from various quarters at the same time, the one that touched me most keenly was Your Highness's illness. And although I have also learned of your recovery, it has left traces of sadness in my mind that cannot soon be erased. The inclination to write verse that Your Highness felt during your illness reminds me of Socrates, who, Plato says, had a similar desire while he was in prison.[9] I believe that this urge to write verse comes from a strong agitation of the animal spirits. It could entirely disturb the imagination of those whose brains are not well settled, but in steady ones it only warms them a little more and disposes them to poetry. And I take this rapture as a mark of a mind stronger and more elevated than the common run.

If I did not know yours to be such, I would fear that you would be extraordinarily afflicted to learn [V 282] of the dreadful

9 In Plato's *Phaedo* (60c–61b), Socrates in prison puts Aesop's fables into verse.

conclusion of the tragedies in England. But I trust that Your Highness, being accustomed to the blows of Fortune, and having recently found yourself in great danger of your life, will not be as surprised or as troubled to learn of the death of one of your relatives as you would be if you had not suffered other afflictions before.[10] And although so violent a death seems to have something more dreadful about it than the one we await in our beds, yet, rightly considered, it is more glorious, happier and gentler. So what particularly afflicts ordinary people in this should serve Your Highness as a consolation. For it is a great glory to die on an occasion that makes one universally pitied, praised and mourned by all who have any human feeling. And it is certain that without this trial, the clemency and other virtues of the late King would never have been so much noticed or so much esteemed as they are now, and will be in future by all who read his history. I am sure, too, that during the last moments of his life his conscience gave him more satisfaction than indignation—the only sad passion he is said to have shown—caused him distress. As for the pain, I do not count it at all. It is so brief that, if murderers could use fever, or one of the other illnesses that nature usually employs to remove men from the world, we would have reason to think them more cruel than they are when they kill with a blow of the axe. But I dare not dwell long on so grim a subject [V 283] ; I add only that it is far better to be entirely freed from a false hope than to be kept in it to no purpose.

As I write these lines, I am receiving letters from a place from which I had had none for seven or eight months. Among them is one written in her own hand by the person to whom I sent *The Passions of the Soul* a year ago, thanking me for it. Since she remembers, after so long, a man of as little account as I am, we may believe that she will not forget to answer Your Highness's letters, although she has taken four months to do so. I am told that she has instructed one of her people to study my *Principles*, so as to make it easier for her to read. I do not believe, however,

10 Charles I of England, Elisabeth's maternal uncle, was beheaded in London on 30 January 1649.

that she will find enough leisure to apply herself to it, although she seems to have the will. She thanks me in express terms for *The Passions of the Soul*, but makes no mention of the letters that accompanied it; and I am told nothing whatever from that country that concerns Your Highness. From this I can guess only one thing: since the terms of the peace in Germany were not as advantageous to your house as they might have been, those who contributed to that are unsure whether you bear them V 284 ill will, and for that reason refrain from showing you friendship.[11]

Ever since this peace was concluded, I have been uneasy at not hearing that the Elector, your brother, had accepted it. I would have taken the liberty of writing my opinion on it to Your Highness sooner, if I could have imagined that he was deliberating about it. But since I do not know the particular reasons that may move him, it would be rash of me to pass any judgment on it. I can only say, in general, that when it is a question of restoring a State occupied or disputed by others who hold power in their hands, it seems to me that those who have only equity and the law of nations pleading for them should never count on obtaining all their claims. They have much more reason to be grateful to those who get some part of it restored to them, however small, than to bear ill will toward those who keep the rest from them. And although no one can blame them for arguing their right as far as they can while those who have the power are deliberating, I believe that once the terms are settled, prudence obliges them to show that they are content with them, even if they are not. They should thank not only those who get something restored to them, but also those who do not take everything from them, so as to win the friendship of both, or at least to avoid their hatred; for this can be of great use afterward in maintaining oneself. Besides, there is still a long road from promises to their fulfillment. If those who have V 285 the power

11 The Peace of Westphalia (October 1648) restored the Lower Palatinate to Elisabeth's brother Charles Louis with a newly created electorate, but left the Upper Palatinate and the old electoral title to Bavaria; Sweden was among the negotiating powers.

come to terms among themselves alone, it is easy for them to find reasons to share out among themselves what they had perhaps been willing to give back to a third party only out of jealousy of one another, and to prevent whichever of them was enriched by his spoils from becoming too powerful. The smallest part of the Palatinate is worth more than the whole empire of the Tartars or the Muscovites, and after two or three years of peace, living there will be as pleasant as anywhere else on earth. As for me, since I am not attached to living in any particular place, I would have no difficulty in exchanging these Provinces, or even France, for that country, if I could find as secure a peace there—even if nothing but the beauty of the country drew me there. But there is no place in the world so harsh or so inconvenient that I would not think myself happy to spend the rest of my days there, if Your Highness were there and I were able to be of some service to you. For I am entirely, and without any reservation, etc.

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH, 31 MARCH 1649

Invited to Sweden, Descartes delays his departure so as to receive her commands.

DESCARTES [V 330] Madame,

About a month ago I had the honor of writing to Your Highness and telling you that I had received some letters from Sweden. I have just received more, in which I am invited, on the Queen's behalf, to make a journey there this spring, so as to be able to return before winter. But I have answered in such a way that, although I do not refuse to go, I believe I shall not leave here until around the middle of summer. I asked for this delay for several reasons, and in particular so that I might have the honor of receiving Your Highness's commands before I leave. I have already declared so publicly the zeal and devotion I have for your service that people would have more reason to think ill of me if they saw me indifferent to what concerns you than they will have if they see me carefully seeking occasions [V 331] to fulfill

my duty. So I most humbly beg Your Highness to do me the favor of telling me everything in which you judge I can be of service to you or to your family, and to be assured that you have as much power over me as if I had been a member of your household all my life. I also beg you to let me know what you would like me to answer if it should happen that someone remembers Your Highness's letters concerning the supreme good, which I mentioned in mine last year, and is curious to see them. I expect to spend the winter in that country and not to return until the following year. It is likely that there will then be peace throughout Germany; and if my wishes are fulfilled, I shall travel back by way of the place where you are, so as to be able to show more particularly that I am, etc.

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH, JUNE 1649

Descartes confirms that he will go to Sweden, encouraged by Chanut's praise of the Queen.

DESCARTES [V 359] Madame,

Since Your Highness wishes to know what I have decided about the journey to Sweden, I will tell you that I am keeping to my plan to go, provided the Queen continues to show that she wants me to. [V 360] Monsieur Chanut, our Resident in that country, passed through here a week ago on his way to France, and he spoke to me so favorably of this marvelous Queen that the journey no longer seems as long or as tiresome as it did before. But I shall not leave until I have once more had news from that country, and I will try to wait for the return of Monsieur Chanut so as to make the journey with him, because I hope he will be sent back to Sweden. For the rest, I would consider myself extremely fortunate if, while I am there, I were able to render Your Highness some service. I shall not fail to seek out occasions for it carefully, and I shall not be afraid to write openly everything I have done or thought on this subject. For I can have no intention that would be prejudicial to those whom I shall be bound to respect, and I hold as a maxim that just and honest ways are the

most useful and the safest. So I hope that even if the letters I write were seen, they could not be misinterpreted, nor fall into the hands of people so unjust as to take it ill that I fulfill my duty and openly profess to be, etc.

DESCARTES TO ELISABETH, 9 OCTOBER 1649

From Stockholm, Descartes gives his first impressions of Queen Christina.

DESCARTES [V 429] Madame,

I arrived in Stockholm four or five days ago, and one of the first things I consider part of my duty is to renew the offer of my most humble service to Your Highness, so that you may know that a change of air and of country can neither change nor diminish my devotion and my zeal. So far I have had the honor of seeing the Queen only twice; but I seem already to know her well enough to venture to say that she has no less merit, and more virtue, than fame attributes to her. Along with the generosity and majesty that shine in all her actions, one sees in her a gentleness and a goodness that bind all who love virtue and have the honor of approaching her to devote themselves entirely to her service. One of the first things she asked me was whether I had news of you, and I did not hesitate to tell her straight away what I thought of Your Highness. For, observing the strength of her [V 430] mind, I was not afraid that this would make her at all jealous—just as I am sure Your Highness cannot be jealous because I write to you freely what I think of this Queen. She is extremely devoted to the study of letters. But since, as far as I know, she has not yet seen anything of philosophy, I cannot judge what taste she will have for it, nor whether she will be able to spend time on it, nor, consequently, whether I shall be able to give her some satisfaction and be useful to her in anything. This great ardor she has for learning now leads her above all to cultivate the Greek language and to collect many ancient books; but perhaps that will change. And even if it does not change, the virtue I observe in this Princess will always oblige

me to put the usefulness of serving her above the desire to please her, so that it will not keep me from telling her frankly what I think. And if my opinions fail to please her, which I do not expect, I will at least draw this advantage from it: that I shall have done my duty, and that it will give me occasion to return all the sooner to my solitude. Outside it, I can hardly make any progress in the search for truth; and it is in this that my principal good in this life consists. Monsieur Freinshemius has persuaded Her Majesty to agree that I should never go to the Castle except at the hours she is pleased to give me for the honor of speaking with her. So I shall not have much trouble paying court, and this suits my temperament very well. After all that, V 431 though, even though I have very great veneration for Her Majesty, I do not believe anything could keep me in this country beyond next summer; but I cannot answer absolutely for the future. I can only assure you that I shall be all my life, etc.

ELISABETH TO DESCARTES, 4 DECEMBER 1649

In the last letter, Elisabeth rejoices in Christina's accomplishments and hopes he will return soon.

ELISABETH V 451 Monsieur Descartes,

Your letter of 29 September/30 October has wandered by way of Cleves. But old as it is, it is still most welcome, and a very obliging proof that your kindness toward me continues. It also assures me of the happy success of your journey, since its object is worth the trouble and you find even more marvels in the Queen of Sweden than her reputation proclaims. It must be admitted, though, that you are better able to recognize them than those who have so far taken it upon themselves to proclaim them. And I seem to learn more of them from the little you say than from all I have heard elsewhere.[12] Do not think, however, that so flattering a description gives me cause for jealousy. Rather, it gives me cause to esteem myself a little more V 452 than I did before it gave me the idea of so accomplished a person,

12 Cleves, a duchy on the lower Rhine then held by the Elector of Brandenburg.

who frees our sex from the charge of feebleness of mind and weakness that the gentlemen pedants used to lay on it. I am sure that once she has tasted your philosophy, she will prefer it to their philology. But I marvel that this Princess can apply herself to study as she does, and to the affairs of her kingdom as well—two such different occupations, each of which demands a whole person. The honor she did me, in your presence, of remembering me, I attribute entirely to her wish to oblige you by giving you occasion to exercise a charity you have shown yourself fond of on many other occasions. I owe you that advantage, as I shall also owe you the one of having some share in her approval, if I obtain it. And I shall be able to keep it all the better since I shall never have the honor of being known to Her Majesty otherwise than as you represent me. I feel myself guilty, however, of a crime against her service, since I am glad that your extreme veneration for her will not oblige you to stay in Sweden. If you leave this winter, I hope it will be in the company of Monsieur Kleist, with whom you will find the best means of giving the happiness of seeing you again to[13]

Yours most affectionately, always at your service, Elisabeth. Monsieur Descartes. 24 November/4 December. My last was of 10/20 November.

13 An envoy of the Elector of Brandenburg then at the Swedish court.