

# Correspondence between Descartes and Princess Elisabeth

René Descartes and Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia

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

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## Letters written in 1645

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He starts well, saying:

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nothing can impede our contentment except •desire and

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

in your behaviour, which certainly is not his intention.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I note first that these are not equivalent:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Elisabeth writes in viii.1645:**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

of pointless anxieties and frustrations.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I have sometimes asked myself which of these is better:

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

about the goods one doesn't have;

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

active—passive

action—passion

and in corresponding pair of French verbs

*agir—pâtir*

of which only the former has an English equivalent. See note on page 2.] But ordinarily the word 'passion' is confined to thoughts that are caused by some particular agitation of the spirits. Thoughts that come from external objects, or from internal dispositions of the body—such as the perception of colours, sounds, smells, hunger, thirst, pain, and the like—are called 'sensations', 'external' and 'internal' respectively. Those that depend solely on memory-traces of previous impressions and on the ordinary movement of the spirits are called 'dreams', whether they are real dreams in sleep or daydreams in waking life when the soul doesn't determine itself to anything of its own accord, but idly follows the impressions that happen to be in the brain. But when the soul uses its will to make itself have some thought that is not just intelligible but also imaginable, this thought makes a new impression in the brain; this is not a passion within the soul, but an action—and it is what is properly called 'imagination'. Finally, when the normal flow of the spirits is such that it regularly arouses sad or cheerful thoughts or the like, this is not attributed to 'passion' but to the 'nature' or 'temperament' of the person in whom they are aroused. . . . So there remain only the thoughts that come from some special agitation of the spirits, whose effects are felt as in the soul itself. It is these that are passions properly so called. Of course most of our thoughts depend on more than one of the causes I have just listed; but each thought is labelled according to

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

·THE OPENING SENTENCE OF THE PRECEDING LETTER·

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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