

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 1647–9

Elisabeth writes on 21.ii.1647:

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

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

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

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

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

Descartes writes in iii.1647:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Elisabeth writes on 11.iv.1647:

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

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

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

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

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

Descartes writes on 10.v.1647:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Elisabeth writes in v.1647:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Descartes writes on 6.vi.1647:

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

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

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

Descartes writes on 20.xi.1647:

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

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

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

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

Elisabeth writes on 5.xii.1647:

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

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

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

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

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

Descartes writes on 31.i.1648:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Elisabeth writes on 30.vi.1648:

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

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

Descartes writes in vi or vii.1648:

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

Elisabeth writes in vii.1648:

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

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

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

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

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

Elisabeth writes on 23.viii.1648:

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

person_E is Princess Elisabeth,

person_{QM} is the mother of the Swedish Queen Christina.

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

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

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

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

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

Descartes writes in x.1648:

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

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

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

Descartes writes on 22.ii.1649:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Descartes writes on 31.iii.1649:

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

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

Descartes writes in vi.1649:

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

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

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

Descartes writes on 9.x.1649:

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

Elisabeth writes on 4.xii.1649:

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

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