

# Correspondence

Baruch Spinoza

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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 between brackets in normal-sized type.—Many of the letters have somewhat ornate salutations (e.g. ‘Most excellent Sir, and dearest friend’) and/or signings-off (e.g. ‘Farewell, special friend, and remember me, who am your most devoted. . .’); these are omitted except when there’s a special reason not to.—For a helpful and thoughtful presentation of the letters, see Edwin Curley (ed), *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1 for letters 1–28, vol. 2 for letters 29–84. **The editorial notes in the present version derive mostly from those two volumes, the material in vol. 2 having been generously made available by Curley, in advance of its publication, to the preparer of the version.**

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## Glossary

**affect:** A feeling, emotion, attitude, obsession; in Spinoza's usage always a damaging one, but not so on page 66, where the word is used by someone else.

**affection:** state, quality.

**Collegiant:** A Dutch sect of Quaker-like dissenters who were persecuted by the dominant Calvinist clergy. Spinoza attended some of their meetings.

**deist:** Someone who believes there is a God (opposite of 'atheist'), but whose theology is *thin* compared with Christianity—e.g. the deist doesn't think of God as intervening in the world.

**eminently:** This is a scholastic technical term meaning 'in a higher form'. To say that God has (say) perception 'eminently' is to say that he has perception in some higher form that doesn't involve his straightforwardly, in the ordinary sense, *perceiving* anything. The term is used by Boxel in letter 55, and mocked by Spinoza in 56

**fatal:** This word is used in connection with the idea of something's being absolutely and utterly bound to happen—the idea of this as somehow laid down in advance.

**magistrate:** In this work, as in general in early modern times, 'a magistrate' is anyone with an official role in government; and 'the magistrate' is the ruler.

**parhelia:** Two bright patches flanking the sun, sometimes called 'false suns'.

**philosophy:** In this correspondence the word usually points more to natural science than to what we would call 'philosophy' these days.

**positive:** This occurs where the Latin has *positivus*, which in letters 50 and 54 is contrasted with 'negative'. But in fact the main sense of *positivus*—except for one that is irrelevant here—contrasts not with 'negative' but with 'comparative'. The English 'positive' also is a grammatical technical term with that meaning: good-better-best, positive-comparative-superlative. Some of the letters involve Spinoza's view that 'sin is not something positive'; this goes with his saying that what we call 'sin' is really a **privation**. In his and others' usage a privation in x is **(i)** a lack of something that **(ii)** x ought to have or is normal or natural for things like x to have. Now, the statement that a privation is not something 'positive' could mean that

- (i)** a privation is a lack, a case of *not* having something—the concept of privation is *negative*; or that
- (ii)** a privation in x is x's lacking something that it *ought* to have; our notion of what x ought to have comes from our comparing x with other things that we regard as being of the same kind—the concept of privation is *comparative*.

In letters 19–20, 23–24, and 36 sense **(ii)** seems at least as fitting as sense **(i)**, though it could be that both are at work. Those five letters were originally written in Dutch, and *positivus* translates one or other of two different Dutch words; but there's reason to think that in each case the writer was thinking in terms of the standard scholarly language, Latin.

**principle:** In just two places in the correspondence, 'principle' is used in a sense, once common but now obsolete, in which 'principle' means 'source', 'cause', 'driver', 'energizer', or the like.

**salutary:** Usually it means ‘conducive to health’, but a secondary meaning, ‘conducive to salvation’, is what’s in play here.

**Schools:** A standard label for departments of philosophy (including physics) that were pretty entirely under Aristotle’s influence.

**vivid and clear:** The Latin phrase  
*clarus et distinctus*

is translated here by the phrase  
‘vivid and clear’.

The more usual translation for it and (in Descartes’s French works) for the French phrase

*clair et distinct*

has been ‘clear and distinct’; but this is demonstrably wrong for Descartes’s French and Latin. He only once takes the phrase apart to explain it:

‘I call a perception *claram* when it is present and accessible to the attentive mind—just as we say that we see something *clare* when it is present to the eye’s gaze and stimulates it with a sufficient degree

of strength and accessibility. I call a perception *distinctam* if, as well as being *clara*, it is so sharply separated from all other perceptions that every part of it is *clarum*. . . . A perception can be *clara* without being *distincta* but not vice versa. When someone feels an intense pain, his perception of it is *clarissima*, but it isn’t always *distincta* because people often get this perception muddled with something else. (*Principles of Philosophy* 1:45–6)

Of course he is not saying anything as stupid as that intense pain is always *clear*! His point is that pain is vivid, up-front, not shady or obscure. And for an idea to be *distincta* is for every nook and cranny of it to be vivid; which is not a bad way of saying that it is in our sense ‘clear’.—It’s reasonable to think that this also holds for Spinoza’s use of the phrase. The most common use of *clarus* is as meaning ‘bright’ or ‘vivid’ or the like, as in *clara lux* = ‘broad daylight’, though it can also mean ‘clear’ in our sense. But if Spinoza or anyone else used it in that sense in the phrase *clarus et distinctus*, then what is there left for ‘distinctus’ to mean?

## letters 17–33: written in 1664–1665

### 17. to Balling, 20.vii.1664:

Your letter of 26.vi has reached me safely. It has caused me no little sadness and anxiety, though that has greatly decreased as I consider the prudence and strength of character with which you scorn the blows of fortune—or rather of opinion—when they attack you with their strongest weapons. For all that, my anxiety increases daily, so I implore you to take the trouble to write to me at length.

As for the omens you mention—that when your child was still healthy you heard groans like those he made later when he was ill, shortly before he died—I should think that this was not a true groan but only your imagination. You report that when you sat up and set yourself to listen, you didn't hear them as clearly as before, or as afterwards when you went back to sleep. Surely this shows that those groans were only sheer imagination: when it was unfettered and free, your imagination was able to present certain groans more effectively and vividly than when you sat up to focus your hearing in one direction.

I can confirm this, and at the same time explain it, by something that happened to me last winter in Rijnsburg. One morning, as the sky was already growing light, I woke from a very deep dream to find that the images that had come to me in my dream remained before my eyes as vividly as if the things had been true—especially ·the image· of a black, scabby Brazilian whom I had never seen before. This image mostly disappeared when I diverted myself by fixing my eyes on a book or some other object; but as soon as I turned them away from that object without fixing them attentively on anything else, the same image of the same

black man appeared to me with the same vividness; and so it went, on and off, until the image gradually disappeared from my visual field.

I contend that what happened to me in my internal sense of vision is what happened to you in hearing; but the causes were different in such a way that yours was an omen and mine wasn't. You'll understand this clearly from what follows.

The effects of the imagination arise from the constitution either of the body or of the mind. To avoid being tedious, I'll prove this here by experience alone. We find by experience that

- fevers and other bodily changes are causes of madness, and that
- people whose blood is thick imagine nothing but quarrels, troubles, killings, and the like.

Experience shows us that the imagination can also be determined by the constitution of the soul alone: it follows the intellect's traces in everything it does, linking its images and words in the order the intellect gives them in its demonstrations; so that we can hardly understand anything unless the imagination picks up its traces and forms an image from them

So none of the effects of the imagination that come from corporeal causes can ever be omens of future things, because their causes don't involve any future things. But the effects of the imagination—i.e. the images—that have their origin in the constitution of the mind *can* be omens of a future thing, because the mind can be confusedly aware of something that hasn't yet happened; so it can imagine it as firmly and vividly as if something of that kind were present.

To take an example like yours: A father so loves his son that they are, as it were, one and the same. According to what I have demonstrated elsewhere, there must be in thought an idea of the son's essence, its affections, and its consequences. Because of this, and because the father's union with his son makes him a part of the son, the father's soul must necessarily participate in the son's ideal essence, its affections, and consequences (as I have demonstrated elsewhere at greater length).

Next, since the father's soul participates ideally in things that follow from the son's essence, he can sometimes imagine something of what follows from that essence as vividly as if it were present to him, especially if

- (i) the event that will happen to the son in the course of his life will be remarkable;
- (ii) it will be of a kind that can be imagined very easily;
- (iii) the time when this event will happen is not very remote; and
- (iv) his body is well constituted as regards health, and also free of all cares and troubles that disturb the senses externally.

It can also help if we think of things that for the most part arouse ideas like these. For example, if while we are speaking with a certain man we hear groans, it will generally happen that when we think again of that same man those groans will come into our memory.

This, dear friend, is my opinion about the problem you raise. I have deliberately kept this letter short so as to get you to write back to me at the first opportunity!

### 18. from van Blijenbergh, 12.xii.1664:

[Van Blijenbergh writes in a repetitive way. In this version, many repetitions are omitted without the use of ellipses to signal the omissions.]

Sir and unknown friend, I have now had the honour of reading through, frequently and attentively, your recently published treatise together with its appendix. [This refers to *Parts 1 and 2 of Descartes's 'Principles' and Metaphysical Thoughts.*] It would be more proper for me to tell others about the great solidity that I have found there and the satisfaction I have received from this reading; but I can't refrain from telling you that the more often I go through it attentively, the more it pleases me; I keep finding things that I hadn't noticed before. However, having no wish to seem a flatterer, I don't want to marvel too much at the author in this letter. I know what price in toil the gods exact for what they give.

You may wonder who this unknown person is who takes such a liberty in writing to you. He is someone who . . .

- . . . , driven only by a desire for pure truth in this short life, tries to plant his feet firmly in knowledge as far as the human intellect allows,
- . . . has no other goal in his search for truth than *truth*,
- . . . seeks to acquire through his studies neither honour nor riches but only truth and the peace of mind arising from it,
- . . . among all truths and sciences, takes pleasure in none more than in those of metaphysics (or at least in parts of it), and
- . . . finds his whole life's pleasure in devoting what free time he has to the study of it.

. . . In brief, he is someone whom you'll be able to know better if you are willing to oblige him so much as to help open and pierce through his tangled thoughts.

But to return to your treatise. Along with many things



that were very palatable to me I have also found some that didn't go down easily. Not knowing you, it wouldn't be right for me to object to them, especially given that I don't know how you feel about objections. So I send this letter ahead, to ask whether on these winter evenings you will have the time and the disposition to answer the difficulties I still find in your book.

Of course I don't want this to hinder you in your more necessary and more enjoyable pursuits, because what I want above all else is what you promised in your book, namely a fuller publication of your own views. . . .

So as to give this letter some content, . . . I shall present just one difficulty here. In both works you generally maintain—as your own opinion or to explain Descartes, whose philosophy you were teaching—the following:

Creation and preservation are one and the same thing; and this is so clear in itself that it is a fundamental axiom for anyone who has thought about it. God has created not only substances, but also the events in substances. For example, God not only •makes the soul exist longer and persevere in its state by his immediate willing or activity but also •stands in the same relation to the doings of the soul. Thus God is the cause not only of the soul's substance but also of the soul's every doing or trying.

From this it also seems to follow that either •there is no evil in what the soul does or tries or •there is such evil and God himself is the immediate doer of it. For example, Adam's soul wants to eat the forbidden fruit. According to the [indented] proposition above, that will of Adam's happens through God's influence—God brings it about not only that Adam wills but that he wills in this way—so that either •Adam's forbidden act is not evil in itself or else •God himself seems to do what we call 'evil'.

I don't see that you or Descartes solve this problem by saying that evil is a nonbeing, with which God does not concur. For in that case where did the will to eat come from? or the Devil's will to pride? As you rightly note, the will is not something different from the soul—it is this or that doing or trying of the soul. So there's as much need for God's concurrence for the one doing as for the other.

Next, every determination of our will was known to God from eternity (unless we ascribe an imperfection—namely, ignorance—to God). But how did God know those determinations except from his decrees? So his decrees are causes of our determinations, and it seems again to follow that either the evil will is not evil or that God causes that evil immediately.

The theologians' distinction between •the act and •the evil adhering to the act is irrelevant here, because God has decreed not only that Adam shall eat but also that he shall eat in such-and-such a way that is contrary to the command.

That is only one of the things I cannot penetrate in your treatise. . . . I expect from your penetrating judgment and diligence a reply that will satisfy me, and I hope to show you in the future how much you will thereby put me under obligation to you.

Be assured that I ask these things only from a desire for the truth, not from any other interest. I am a free person, not dependent on any profession, supporting myself by honest trade and devoting my spare time to these matters. . . .

### **19. to van Blijenbergh, 1.i.1665:**

I didn't receive your letter of the 12.xii (enclosed with another of 21.xii) until 26.xii, while I was at Schiedam. From it I learned of your great love for the truth, which is the sole

object of all your inclinations. Since I too aim at nothing else, this made me resolve •to agree to answer, as best I can, the questions you send now and will send, and also •to do everything on my part to bring us to a closer acquaintance and genuine friendship.

Of the things outside my power, there's none I value more than being allowed the honour of entering into a pact of friendship with people who sincerely love the truth; for I believe that such people are the only things outside our power that we can love tranquilly. Because their love for one another is based on the love each has for knowledge of the truth, it's as impossible to destroy it as not to embrace the truth once it has been perceived. Moreover, it is the greatest and most pleasant thing that can be found among things outside our power, because nothing but truth can completely unite different opinions and minds. You don't need me to go on about this; I have said this much only to show you how pleasant it is (and will be) to be given the opportunity to show my ready service.

To seize the moment, I shall try to answer your question, which turns on this:

It seems clearly to follow from •God's providence (which doesn't differ from his will) and from •his concurrence and continuous creation of things, that either there are no sins and no evil or God does those sins and that evil.

But you don't explain what you mean by 'evil'. As far as I can see from the example of Adam's determinate will, it appears that what you mean by 'evil' is *the will itself, considered as acting contrary to God's prohibition*. I agree that it would be a great absurdity to maintain either •that God himself produced things that were contrary to his will or •that they would be good despite being contrary to his will. But for myself I can't accept **(i)** that sins and evil are something

positive [see Glossary], much less **(ii)** that something might exist or happen contrary to God's will. On the contrary, I say that **(i)** sin is not something positive and also that **(ii)** when we say that we sin against God we're speaking inaccurately, or in a human way, as we do when we say that men make God angry.

For regarding **(i)**, we know that whatever exists, considered in itself and without relation to anything else, has a perfection that extends as far as the thing's essence does; for that's all essence is—•perfection•. Take your example of Adam's decision (or determinate will) to eat the forbidden fruit. That decision (or determinate will), considered only in itself, involves as much perfection as it expresses of essence. We can understand this from the fact that we can't conceive any imperfection in things except by considering others that have more essence. So we can't find any imperfection in Adam's decision if we consider it in itself, without comparing it with others that are more perfect. . . . Indeed, we can compare it with infinitely many other things—stones, logs, etc.—that are much more *imperfect* by comparison. And in fact everyone accepts this, for the things we detest in men we admire and enjoy animals—the warring of bees, the jealousy of doves, etc. We hate these things in men, but we judge animals more perfect because of them. From which it follows that sins, because they indicate nothing but imperfection, can't consist in something that expresses essence, as Adam's decision or its execution do.

As for **(ii)**, we can't say that Adam's will was in conflict with God's will, and was therefore evil because it was displeasing to God. Apart from the fact that it would imply a great imperfection in God if

- something happened contrary to his will, or
- he wanted something he didn't get, or
- his nature were so limited that, like his creatures,

he had sympathy with some things and antipathy for others

—apart from all that, it would be completely contrary to the nature of God’s will. His will doesn’t differ from his intellect, so it’s as impossible for something to happen contrary to his will as it would be for something to happen contrary to his intellect. That is, something that happened contrary to his will would have to conflict with his intellect—like a square circle!

So because Adam’s decision •considered in itself was not evil, and wasn’t strictly speaking contrary to God’s will, it follows that God *can* be its cause—indeed, according to the reasoning you call attention to, he *must* be—but not •considered as evil, for the evil that was in it was only a privation [see Glossary] of a more perfect state which Adam’s act deprived him of. [In a difficult passage Spinoza says, in effect, the following. The concept of *privation* is comparative; saying that Adam was ‘deprived’ of some perfection is merely saying that he comes out on the lower end of a comparison that *we* choose to make. What happens is that we have a general concept to cover all the individual things of some kind (e.g. all that have the shape of man), we think of them all as being equally capable of the highest perfection that we can square with such a concept; and when we find one whose acts are contrary to that highest perfection we say he is ‘deprived’ of it and is deviating from his nature. We wouldn’t do this if we hadn’t brought him under such a definition—such a concept—and fictitiously ascribed such a ‘nature’ to him. But ‘privation’ has no place in God’s thinking, because he doesn’t know things abstractly, doesn’t make such general definitions, attributing no more essence to things than the divine intellect and power endow give them. By this, in my opinion, the problem is completely solved.

But to make the path smooth and to remove every objection, I must still deal with these two difficulties:

- (1) Why does Scripture say that God wants the godless to repent, and why did he forbid Adam to eat of the tree when he had decided the opposite?
- (2) From what I say it seems to follow that the godless, with their pride, greed, despair, etc. serve God as well as the pious do, with their legitimate self-esteem, patience, love, etc. because they also follow God’s will.

(1) Scripture is intended mainly to serve ordinary people, so it continually speaks in a human fashion; the people can’t understand high matters. And that, I believe, is why all the things God has revealed to the prophets to be necessary for salvation are written in the manner of laws. And in this way the prophets wrote a whole parable:

First, because God had revealed the means to salvation and destruction, and was the cause of them, they represented him as a king and lawgiver. The means, which are nothing but causes, they called ‘laws’ and wrote in the manner of laws. •Salvation and •destruction, which are nothing but effects that follow from the means, they represented as •reward and •punishment.

The prophets ordered their words in terms of this parable rather than according to the truth. Throughout they represented God as a man—now angry, now merciful, now longing for the future, now seized by jealousy and suspicion, even deceived by the devil. So the philosophers and those who are above the law—i.e. who follow virtue not as a law but from love, because it is the best thing—should not be shocked by such words.

So the ‘prohibition’ to Adam consisted only in God’s revealing to Adam that *eating fruit from that tree caused death*, just as he reveals to us through the natural intellect

that poison is deadly to us. Why did he reveal that to him? To make him that much more perfect in knowledge. Asking 'Why didn't God also give him a more perfect will?' is as absurd as asking why he didn't give the circle all the properties of the sphere! This follows clearly from what is said above; I have also demonstrated it in the note to proposition 15 of *Descartes's 'Principles'*.

(2) It is indeed true that the godless express God's will in their fashion. But that doesn't make them comparable with the pious, because the more perfection a thing has, the more it has of godliness and the more it expresses God's perfection. So since the pious have inestimably more perfection than the godless, their virtue can't be compared with that of the godless. They lack the love of God that comes from knowledge of God and through which alone we are said—putting this in terms that *we* can understand—to be 'servants of God'. Because the godless don't know God they are nothing but a tool in the hand of the master, a tool that serves unknowingly and is consumed in serving; whereas the pious serve knowingly, and become more perfect by serving.

That is all that I can now say in answer to your question. I wish for nothing more than that it may satisfy you. But if you still find some difficulty, please feel free to let me know it, to see whether I can remove it. . . . I want nothing more than to know the reasons for it, so that the truth may finally become evident.

I wish that I could write you in the language in which I was raised [probably Spanish; this letter is written in Dutch]. Perhaps I could express my thoughts better. Please excuse it, correct the mistakes yourself, and consider me your devoted friend and servant. . . .

## 20. from van Blijenbergh, 16.i.1665:

When I first received your letter and read through it quickly, I intended not only to reply immediately, but also to criticise many things in it. But the more I read it, the less I found to object to in it. My pleasure in reading it was as great as my longing to see it had been.

I want to ask you to resolve certain other difficulties; but first I should tell you that I have two general rules according to which I always try to philosophise:

- the I-rule: the vivid and clear conception of my intellect, and
- the W-rule: the revealed word, or will, of God.

According to the I-rule I strive to be a lover of truth, according to the W-rule a Christian philosopher. Whenever my natural knowledge cannot—or cannot *easily*—be reconciled with God's word, this word has so much authority with me that I look with suspicion at the conceptions I have imagined to be clear, rather than putting them above and against the truth I think I find prescribed to me in that holy book. [He goes on at length about his relying on God's word because it comes from 'God, the highest and most perfect'.]

If I now judged your letter only by the guidance of my I-rule, I would have to grant a great many things (as I do, too) and admire your penetrating conceptions. But the W-rule causes me to differ more from you. Within the limits imposed by a letter I shall examine your conceptions under the guidance of each of these rules. [The W-rule comes into play on page 33.]

[A] Guided by the I-rule I have asked whether your doctrines

- that creation and preservation are one and the same, and
- that God makes not only things but also the motions and modes of things,

don't seem to imply

•that there is no evil or •that God himself does evil.

Either way, we seem to be caught in a contradiction; so I had recourse to you, who should be the best interpreter of your own conceptions.

In reply you say that you persist in holding that nothing can happen contrary to God's will. But then to the problem of whether God does evil, you say that sin is nothing positive [see Glossary], and also that we can only very improperly be said to sin against God. And in *Metaphysical Thoughts* you say that 'there is no absolute evil' and that this is self-evident. But any thing x, considered in itself and without relation to any other thing, involves perfection, which always extends as far as x's essence. So it clearly follows that because sins denote nothing but imperfections, they can't consist in something that expresses essence. [He continues with a longish and rather tangled repetition of things said in the previous letter, emerging with this:] If nothing happens contrary to God's will, and if only as much happens as essence has been given for, in what conceivable way can there be an evil, which you call the privation of a better state? How can anyone lose a more perfect state through an act determined by and dependent on God? It seems to me that you must maintain that either •there is an evil or •there can be no privation of a better state; because it seems to me to be a contradiction ·to deny both of these, i.e.· to say that •there is no evil and •there is privation of a better state.

You will say that this evil state still contains much good. But I still ask: That man whose imprudent act caused the privation of a more perfect state, and consequently is now less than he was before—can't he be called evil?

To escape the above reasoning, since some difficulties still seem to remain concerning it, you say that there is indeed evil, and that there was indeed evil in Adam, but that it is

not something positive, and is said only in relation to our intellect and not in relation to God's; and that this evil is a privation in relation to us, but a negation in relation to God. [The Glossary entry on positive/privation points to two ways of understanding this passage.][Van Blijenbergh is relying here, and in his next two quotations, on the note to proposition 15 of Part 1 of *Descartes's 'Principles'*.]

But let us look into two questions. **(a)** If what we call 'evil' is evil only in relation to us, does that mean that it isn't really evil? **(b)** Is it right to say that evil, on your account of what it is, is only a negation in relation to God?

**(a)** Granted that there's no evil in being less perfect than some other being; I can't have more perfection than God gave me. But if *through my own misdeed* I am now less perfect than I was before, then I must judge myself to be more evil than I was before. For I was brought to this state not by the creator but by myself. As you acknowledge, I had enough power to restrain myself from error.

**(b)** To answer this we must see how you conceive of man and make him dependent on God before all error, and how you conceive of the same man after error.

You describe him as having, before error, no more essence than the divine intellect and power gave him; which seems to mean that a man can't have more or less •perfection than God has endowed him with •essence. That makes him dependent on God in the way the elements, stones, and plants are. But if that is your opinion, I can't understand what is meant by this:

'Now, since the will is free to determine itself, it follows that we do have the power to contain our faculty of assenting within the limits of the intellect, and so can bring it about that we do not fall into error.'

Making the will •so free that it can restrain itself from error and also •so dependent on God that it can manifest neither

more nor less perfection than God has given it essence—doesn't this seem to be a contradiction?

And speaking of the man after his error you say that he has deprived himself of a more perfect state by a too hasty deed, namely by not restraining his will within the limits of his intellect. But it seems to me that here (as also in *Descartes's 'Principles'*) you ought to have shown in more detail the whole scope of this privation: what the man had before the privation and what he retained after the loss of that perfect condition (as you call it). You say what we have lost, but not what we have retained: 'So the whole imperfection of error will consist solely in the privation of the best liberty, and this is called error.' Let us examine both of these things you say—i.e. about the man before error and the man after error.

You hold that between our willings and our understandings there is an **order** such that we must not will things without first having a clear understanding of them. You affirm also that we have the power to keep our will within the limits of our intellect, and that if we do so we shall never err.

If you are right about all this, then the **order** in question must have been impressed on us by God. And it would be a contradiction in God if he impressed that order on us without wanting us to *have to* keep to it. And if we must practice the order placed in us, someone who lets his will go beyond the limits of his intellect must be someone to whom God didn't give enough power to conform to the order. . . .

Next point: if God has given us so much essence that we can maintain that order, as you say we can, and if we always produce as much perfection as we have essence, how can it be possible for us to transgress that order? How does it happen that we don't always restrain the will within the limits of the intellect?

[He now repeats all that at great length in slightly different words, and mixes in with it a question about how how we can •be utterly dependent on God for our existence and conduct while also •having free will.]

It seems to me now clear that evil, i.e. being deprived of a better state, can't be a negation in relation to God. [He takes 'x is a negation in relation to God' to imply that God doesn't know about x, and protests at length against the idea of God's not knowing about Adam's loss of perfection. He uses a good example:] God concurs with my act of procreation with my wife, for that is something positive, and consequently he has a clear knowledge of it. But there is evil involved in that act if contrary to my promise and oath I perform it with another woman. In the latter case, what would be negative in relation to God? Not my act of procreation in itself, because. . . . God concurs with that. So the evil that goes with the act must be only my performing it with a woman with whom such an act is not allowed. But is it really conceivable that God should know our actions, and concur with them, yet not know whom we engage with in those actions?

Consider the act of killing. The act itself. . . . is something God concurs with. What he doesn't know is •the evil associated with the act, namely• its effect of bringing about the destruction of one of God's creatures—as if he didn't know his own effects! (I fear that here I must be misunderstanding you, for you strike me as intellectually too sharp to commit such a grave error.)

Perhaps you'll reply that all those acts are simply good, with nothing evil about them. But then I cannot grasp what it is that you call evil, on which the privation of a more perfect state follows. Also the whole world would then be put in an eternal and lasting confusion, and we men would be made like the beasts.

You also reject the usual definition of *man*, but want to ascribe to each man only as much perfection of action as God has given him. But then why don't you maintain that the godless serve God with their acts as well as the godly do? Neither can perform actions more perfect than they have been given essence for. I don't think you answer this question well when you say [page 29]:

The more perfection a thing has, the more it has of godliness and the more it expresses God's perfection. So since the pious have inestimably more perfection than the godless, their virtue cannot be compared with that of the godless. . . because the godless, like a tool in the hand of the master, serve unknowingly and are consumed in serving. The pious, on the other hand, serve knowingly and become more perfect by their service.

But it's true of both that *that's the best they can do*—the godly display more perfection than the others because they have been given more essence than the others. . . . Why shouldn't those who do less, but still as much as God desires of them, please God as well as the godly?

You hold that

- when we imprudently do something that brings evil we become less perfect,

and also, it seems, that

- when we restrain our will within the limits of our intellect we become more perfect by serving.

Thus, •we are so dependent on God that we can't do either more or less than we have been given essence for, i.e. than God has willed; and yet •we can become worse through imprudence or better through prudence. This seems to me to involve a contradiction

On your account of man, it seems, the godless serve God with their actions as much as the godly do with theirs.

And in this way, we are made as dependent on God as the elements, plants, stones, etc. What use is our intellect to us? What use, then, is that power of restraining our will within the limits of our understanding? Why has that order been impressed on us?

Consider what we deprive ourselves of on your account of who we are and how we act. We deprive ourselves of

- anxious and serious meditation aimed at making ourselves perfect according to
- the rule of God's perfection and
- the order he has impressed on us;
- prayer and aspiration toward God, by which we have so often felt that we received extraordinary strength;
- all religion, and all the hope and the satisfaction that await us from prayer and religion.

For surely if God has no knowledge of evil, it is hardly credible that he will punish it. What reason do I have for not committing all sorts of knavery if I can get away with it? Why not enrich myself through abominable means?

You will say: because we must love virtue for its own sake. But how can I love virtue if that much essence and perfection hasn't been given to me? If I can get as much satisfaction from evil as from good, why should I make the effort to restrain my will within the limits of the intellect? Why not do what my passions lead me to? Why not secretly kill the man who gets in my way? See what an opening we give to all the godless, and to godlessness! We make ourselves like logs, and all our actions just like the movements of a clock.

Still working with my I-rule [see page 29], I want to discuss two other things you say in proposition 15 of Part 1 of *Descartes's 'Principles'*.

(a) You say that 'we can retain the power of willing and judging within the limits of the intellect'. But if that were true, then surely at least *one* man would be found whose conduct showed that he had that power. In fact, everyone

can find in himself that however hard he tried he can't reach that goal. Anyone who questions this should examine himself and see how often his passions master his reason, even when he exerts the greatest force against them.

But you will say:

If by suspending judgment and keeping my will within the limits of my intellect I can •once bring it about that I do not err, then why couldn't I •always achieve this when I work that hard at it?

I reply that if I put all my effort into it I can cover two leagues in an hour, but I can't do that always. Similarly with great diligence I can refrain from error once at least, but I don't have enough power to do that always. The first man, proceeding from the hand of that perfect craftsman, did have that power; but (and in this I agree with you) by under-using it or misusing it he lost it.

The whole essence of holy Scripture seems to me to consist in this, which is why we ought to hold it in very high esteem. It teaches us what our natural intellect so clearly establishes: we fell from our initial perfection because of our imprudence. What is more necessary than to reform that fall as much as possible? That is also the sole aim of holy Scripture, to bring fallen man back to God.

**(b)** You say that 'understanding things vividly and clearly is contrary to the nature of man'; from which you finally conclude that it is far better to •assent to things even if they are confused, and to be free, than to •always remain indifferent, which is the lowest degree of freedom. [Van Blijenbergh attacks this on the grounds that suspension of judgment when confused is •sure to be what God wants and also •what Descartes urged in his *Meditations*.]

**[B]** Guided by the W-rule [see page 29] I differ from you more than I do when I examine your views by the I-rule. It seems to me (tell me if I'm wrong) that you don't ascribe to

holy Scripture the infallible truth and godliness that I believe to be in it. You do say you believe that God has revealed the things to the prophets in holy Scripture, but if he did so in the imperfect way that you attribute to him, that would involve a contradiction in God. If he revealed his word and will to men, he did so for a certain purpose that he was open about. If the prophets had contrived a parable from the word they received, then either

- God willed that they should depart from his meaning in this way; in which case God was the cause of that error, and willed something contradictory; or
- God did not will it, in which case the prophets would not have been able to do it.

[He produces mild variations on this theme, for example:] If the prophets feigned a parable from the word given them, i.e. gave it a meaning other than the one God has willed that they should give it, God would surely tell them about it.

Also, I see very little evidence that God would have revealed his word in the way you maintain, i.e. that he would have revealed only salvation and destruction and decreed certain means to those ends, and that salvation and destruction are merely the effects of the means he decreed. If the prophets had received God's word in that sense, what reason would they have had to give it another sense? Anyway, why should we accept your view about this matter rather than that of the prophets—i.e. rather than accepting what the prophets said as accurately and literally presenting God's word? If you reply that otherwise that word would involve many imperfections and contradictions, I say: so you say! Who knows which opinion would involve fewer imperfections if they were both spread out and looked at fairly? Anyway, that supremely perfect being knew very well how much the people could understand, and therefore what the best way was to instruct them.



What can give an upright intellect more pleasure in this life than the contemplation of that perfect Deity? . . . I have nothing in my life that I would want to exchange for that pleasure. But I am deeply saddened when I see that my finite intellect lacks so much. I soothe that sadness with my hope—which is dearer to me than life—that I shall exist again and continue to exist, and shall contemplate this Deity more perfectly than I do today. When I consider this short and fleeting life in which I see that my death may occur at any moment, if I had to believe that I would have an end, and be cut off from that holy and glorious contemplation, I would be more miserable than any of the creatures who don't know that they will end. Before my death my fear of death would make me wretched, and after my death I would entirely cease to be and hence be wretched because I would be separated from that divine contemplation.

Your opinions seem to imply that when I come to an end here I will come to an end for eternity. Against this, God's word and will fortify me with his inner witness in my soul that after this life I shall, in a more perfect state, enjoy myself in the contemplation of that most perfect Deity of all. [He goes on in rapturous terms about how much that hope does for his happiness, whether or not what he hopes for will actually happen. After then speaking of his intense wish for it to happen, i.e. to have an after-life in which he can 'continue contemplating that perfect Deity', he says something that Spinoza will pick up on sharply on page 41:] If only I get that, it is a matter of indifference to me what men believe here, what they persuade one another of, and whether it is something founded on our natural intellect and can be grasped. . . .

But your view that our service is not pleasing to God would abolish those hopes. I cannot grasp why, if God takes no pleasure in our service and praise (if I may speak of him

in so human a way), why he should produce us and preserve us. But if I mistake your view in this, then please explain how.

I have delayed myself, and perhaps also you, too long with this. Seeing that my time and paper are running out, I shall end. . . .

I have busied myself recently with reflection on some of God's attributes. Your *Metaphysical Thoughts* has given me no little help with these. Indeed I have only paraphrased your views, which seem to me nothing short of demonstrations. So I am astonished to read in Meyer's preface that this is not •your opinion but •what you were obliged to teach your student whom you had promised to teach Descartes's philosophy. He says that you have a completely different view both of God and of the soul, particularly of the soul's will. I also read in that preface that you will shortly publish these *Metaphysical Thoughts* in an expanded form. I long to see that, and your published account of your own thoughts, for I expect something special from them. But it is not my custom to praise someone to his face.

This is written in sincere friendship, as your letter requests, so that we may discover the truth. Forgive me for having written more than I intended to. If I receive an answer to this, you will oblige me very much. As for being allowed to write in the language you were brought up in, I cannot refuse you, so long as it is Latin or French. But I ask to receive the answer to this letter in Dutch. I have understood your meaning in it very well, and perhaps in Latin I would not understand it so clearly. . . .

In your reply I would like to be somewhat more fully informed what you really understand by a negation in God.

**21. to van Blijenbergh, 29.i.1665:**

When I read your first letter, I thought our opinions nearly agreed. But from the second, which I received on 21.i, I see that I was quite mistaken, and that we disagree not only about the things ultimately to be derived from first principles, but also about the first principles themselves. I hardly believe that we can instruct one another with our letters because I see that no demonstration, however logically sound it may be, has weight with you unless it agrees with sacred Scripture as interpreted by you or by theologians known to you. If you believe that

God speaks more clearly and effectively through sacred Scripture than through the light of the natural intellect, which he has also granted us and (with his divine wisdom) continually preserves, strong and uncorrupted,

then you have powerful reasons for bending your intellect to the opinions you attribute to sacred Scripture. I myself could hardly do otherwise.

But as for myself, I clearly and straightforwardly confess that *I don't understand sacred Scripture*, though I have spent several years on it. And I am well aware that when I have found a solid demonstration I can't get into a thought-frame where I have doubts about it. So I am completely satisfied with what the intellect shows me, and entertain no suspicion that I have been deceived in it, or that Sacred Scripture can contradict it (even though I do not investigate it). For the truth does not contradict the truth, as I have already indicated clearly in *Metaphysical Thoughts*. (I can't cite the chapter because I don't have the book here with me in the country.) And even if I found that the fruits I have gathered from the natural intellect were false, they would still make me happy, because I enjoy them and seek to pass my life, not

in sorrow and sighing, but in peace, joy, and cheerfulness. By so doing, I climb a step higher. Meanwhile I recognise something that gives me the greatest satisfaction and peace of mind: that all things happen as they do by the power and immutable decree of a supremely perfect Being.

But to return to your letter, I am sincerely grateful to you for revealing at the outset your manner of philosophising. But I don't thank you for attributing to me the things you want to draw from my letter. What occasion did my letter give you for ascribing to me the opinions •that men are like beasts, •that they die and perish as beasts do, •that our works are displeasing to God, etc.? (On this last point we may differ very much, for you seem to think that God takes pleasure in our works, as someone who is pleased that things have turned out as he wished.) In fact I have said quite clearly that the pious honour God, and love God, and by continually knowing him become more perfect. Is this to make them like beasts? or to say that they perish like beasts? or to say that their works do not please God?

If you had read my letter more attentively you would have seen clearly that our disagreement is located in this alone:

my view: God **as God**—i.e. absolutely, ascribing no human attributes to him—gives to the pious the perfections they receive;

your view: God does this **as a judge**,

That is why you defend the impious, because in accordance with God's decree they do whatever they can, and serve God as much as the pious do. But that doesn't follow from my view, because I don't introduce God as a judge. So I value works by their quality, and not by the power of the workman; and ·I hold that· the wages that follow the work do so as necessarily as it follows from the nature of a triangle that its three angles equal two right angles. This will be understood by anyone who is aware that our highest

blessedness consists in love toward God, and that this love flows necessarily from the knowledge of God that is so greatly commended to us. Moreover, it's easy to prove this if one attends to the nature of God's decree, as I explained in the *Metaphysical Thoughts*. But it can't possibly be understood by someone who confuses the divine nature with human nature.

I had intended to end this letter here, so as not to bother you with matters that serve only for joking and laughter, but are of no use (as is clear from the devoted addition at the end of your letter). But not to reject your request entirely, I'll explain the terms 'negation' and 'privation', and will also briefly explain some things that are needed to clarify the meaning of my preceding letter.

Privation is not the act of depriving but only the pure and simple lack, which in itself is *nothing*. Indeed, it is only a being of reason—a way of thinking—in which we compare things with one another. We say that a blind man is deprived of sight because we easily imagine him as seeing, by comparing •him with others who do see or •his present state with his past state when he did see. When we consider this man in of these ways we say that seeing 'pertains to his nature', and so we say that he is 'deprived' of it. But when we consider God's decree and *his* nature, we can no more say that this man is 'deprived of vision' than we can say this of a stone. For at that time vision no more pertains to that man without contradiction than it does to the stone, since nothing more pertains to that man—nothing more is *his*—than what the Divine intellect and will attribute to him. So God is no more the cause of his not seeing than of the stone's not seeing, which is a pure negation.

Similarly, considering a man who is led by an appetite for sensual pleasure we compare his present appetite with •that which the pious have or with •that which he had at some

earlier time. We say that this man has been 'deprived' of a better appetite because we judge that at this time •when he is pursuing sensual pleasure• an appetite for virtue belongs to him. We can't do this if we attend to the nature of the Divine decree and intellect; for looked at in thnat way the better appetite no more pertains to that man's nature at that time than it does to the nature of the Devil, or of a stone. That is why, in that regard, the better appetite is not a privation but a negation—•not something the man is deprived of, but merely something he doesn't have•.

So privation is nothing but denying that a thing has something that we judge to pertain to its nature, and negation nothing but denying that a thing has something because it doesn't pertain to its nature. So clearly Adam's appetite for earthly things was evil only in relation to our intellect, but not in relation to God's. God knew the past and present of Adam, but that •contrast• didn't lead him to think of Adam as 'deprived' of the past state, i.e. to think that the past state pertained to his nature. If he had, he'd have been understanding something contrary to his will, i.e. contrary to his own intellect.

If you had perceived this properly, and also seen that I do *not* accept the 'freedom' that Descartes ascribes to the mind, . . . you wouldn't have found even the least contradiction in my words. But I see that I'd have done better in my first letter to reply in Descartes's words, by saying that

we can't know how our freedom. . . is compatible with God's providence and freedom, so that we can find no contradiction between God's creation and our freedom because we have no grasp of how God created things or (what is the same) how he preserves them.

(I did say this at various places in the *Metaphysical Thoughts*.) But I thought. . . that if I didn't reply with my own opinion I would be sinning against the duty of the friendship

that I was offering from the heart. But these things are of no importance.

Nevertheless, because I see that you don't yet understand Descartes's meaning, I ask you to attend to these two things:

(1) Neither Descartes nor I ever said that it pertains to our nature to contain our will within the limits of the intellect, but only that God has given us a determinate intellect and an indeterminate will, though we don't know why he created us; moreover, an indeterminate or perfect will of that kind not only makes us more perfect, but also is quite necessary for us, as I shall say in what follows.

(2) Our freedom doesn't consist in •contingency or in a certain •indifference, but in a manner of affirming and denying; so that the *less* indifferently we affirm or deny a thing, the *more* free we are. For example, if God's nature is known to us then

affirming that God exists follows necessarily from our nature,

just as

having three angles equal two right angles follows from the nature of a triangle.

But we are never more free than when we affirm something in such a way. Because this necessity is nothing but God's decree (as I show in the *Metaphysical Thoughts*), we can to some extent understand how we do something freely and are the cause of it although we do this necessarily and from God's decree. I say that we can understand this to some extent when we affirm something that we perceive vividly and clearly. But when we assert something that we don't grasp vividly and clearly, i.e. when we allow our will to wander beyond the limits of our intellect, then

•we can't in that way perceive that necessity and God's decrees, but

•we can •perceive• our freedom,

which our will always involves. . . . If we then struggle to reconcile •our freedom with •God's decree and continuous creation, we're confusing what we understand vividly and clearly with what we do not understand; so our struggle is in vain. It is enough for us, then, that we know that •we are free, that •this is possible for us despite God's decree, and that •we are the cause of evil (because no act can be called evil except in relation to our freedom).

These are the things that concern Descartes, which I mention to demonstrate that his position on this involves no contradiction. Now I turn to the things that concern me.

The chief advantage that comes from my opinion is •that accepting it leads to• our intellect's offering mind and body to God, free of any superstition. I do not deny that prayers are quite useful to us. •I'm not equipped to say anything about that• because my intellect is too weak to determine all the means God has to lead men to love him, i.e. to salvation. So this opinion of mine is far from being harmful; on the contrary, it is the only means of attaining the highest degree of blessedness for those who aren't in the grip of prejudice or childish superstition.

You say that I make men like elements, plants, and stones by making them so dependent on God, which shows well enough that you understand my opinion very perversely and confuse things that concern the intellect with ones that concern the imagination. If you perceived with a pure intellect what it is to depend on God, you certainly wouldn't think that things' dependence on God makes them dead, corporeal, and imperfect. Who has ever dared to speak so vilely of the supremely perfect Being? On the contrary, you would grasp that things are perfect •to the extent that they depend on God and •because they depend on God. So get our best understanding of this dependence and necessary-operation-through-God's-decree when we focus not on logs

and plants but on the most intelligible and perfect created things. . . .

I can't hide my astonishment at your asking: 'If God doesn't punish transgressions, what reason do I have for not committing all sorts of knavery?' (We're talking here about punishment of the kind a judge inflicts, not the kind of punishment that the transgression automatically brings with it.) Well, someone who abstains from knavery only through fear of punishment (I hope this isn't you!) does not in any way act from love and does not at all esteem virtue. As for myself, I try to abstain from those things because they are outright contrary to my individual nature, and make me wander from the knowledge and love of God.

Next, if you had •attended a little to human nature, •perceived the nature of God's decree as I explain it in the *Metaphysical Thoughts*, and •known how things ought to be deduced before one arrives at a conclusion, you wouldn't have said so boldly that my opinion makes us like logs, etc. Nor would you have attributed so many absurdities to me.

Winding up your application of your I-rule [see page 32] you say there are two things you cannot perceive. To the first I reply that Descartes provides all you need for drawing your conclusion: attend to your own nature and you'll find by experience that you can suspend your judgment. If you say that you don't find by experience that you have so much power over reason today that you can always continue this, Descartes would regard that as on a par with saying that you can't see today that as long as you exist you will always be a thinking thing. . . . That certainly involves a contradiction.

Regarding the second point, I agree with Descartes that if we couldn't extend our will beyond the limits of our very limited intellect, we would be very wretched: it wouldn't be in our power •to eat a piece of bread, •to take a step, •to *not* take a step; for all things are uncertain and full of danger.

Passing now to your W-rule [see page 33], I say that I think I don't attribute to Scripture the **truth** that you believe to be in it, but that I ascribe as much **authority** to it as you do, if not more; and that I am much more careful than others are not to attribute to it certain childish and absurd opinions. No-one can do this unless he either understands philosophy well or has divine revelations. So I'm not much moved by the explanations that ordinary theologians give of Scripture, especially if they are based on always taking Scripture absolutely literally. Except for the Socinians, I have never seen a theologian so dense that he didn't see that sacred Scripture often speaks of God in a human way and expresses its meaning in parables.

As for the contradiction you strive—in vain, I think—to show, I don't think you are giving 'parable' its common meaning. Who ever heard that someone who expresses his conceptions in parables 'departs from his own meaning'? When Micaiah said to King Ahab [1 *Kings* 22:19–22] that he had seen God sitting on his throne, with the heavenly hosts standing on his right and his left, and that God asked them who would deceive Ahab, that was certainly a parable by which the prophet expressed well enough the main thing he was supposed to reveal in God's name on that occasion (which was not an occasion for teaching lofty doctrines of theology). . . .

So also when the other prophets revealed God's word to the people, by God's command, they did it with parables—not as the means God demanded, but just as the best means of leading the people to the primary goal of Scripture. According to what Christ himself taught [*Matthew* 22:37–40], that goal consists in loving God before all else, and one's neighbour as oneself. Lofty speculations, I believe, have nothing to do with Scripture. I haven't—and I *couldn't*—learn any eternal attributes of God from sacred Scripture. . . .

The rest of your letter—•where you say ‘Finally that supremely perfect Being knew very well how much the people could understand’, •what you bring up against the example of the poison, and finally •what concerns the *Metaphysical Thoughts* and what follows—none of this is relevant to the present problem.

Meyer’s preface •shows what Descartes would still have to prove if he were to construct a real demonstration of free will, and •adds that I favour the contrary opinion, and how I favour it. In its proper time perhaps I shall show this, but not now.

I haven’t thought about my work on Descartes. . . .since it was published in Dutch. The reason for this would take too long to tell. So nothing more remains to be said.

## **22. from van Blijenbergh, 19.ii.1665:**

I received your letter of 28.i in good time, but occupations other than those of study have prevented me from answering before now. And since your letter was interlarded with touchy reproofs, I hardly knew what to think of it. In your first letter you firmly and heartily offered me your friendship, with a declaration that my first letter very pleasing to you and that future letters would be also. Indeed, I was amicably invited to raise freely any difficulties I might still have. That is what I did, rather extensively, in my letter of 16.1. In view of your request and promise, I expected a friendly and instructive reply; but what I received doesn’t sound very friendly. You say that •no demonstrations, no matter how clear they are, count with me, that •I don’t understand Descartes’s meaning, that •I mix corporeal and spiritual things too much, etc., so that we can no longer instruct one another by exchanging letters.

To this I reply, very amicably, that I’m sure you understand those things better than I do, and that you are more accustomed to distinguish corporeal from spiritual things, for you have already ascended to a high level in metaphysics, where I am a beginner. That is why I sought to win your favour, to get instruction. But I never thought that by making frank objections I would give occasion for offence. Thank you for the trouble you have taken with both letters, and especially the second. I think I have grasped your meaning more clearly there than in the first; but I still can’t assent to it unless the difficulties I think I find in it are removed. That should not—*cannot*—give you any reason for offence. It is serious intellectual malpractice to assent to the truth without having the needed grounds for assent. Even if your conceptions were true, I shouldn’t assent to them as long as I still find them obscure or have any reason for doubt, even if my doubts arise not from what you are saying but from the imperfection of my intellect. Because you know this only too well, don’t think ill of me if I again raise some objections, as I’m bound to do as long as I can’t grasp the matter clearly. This is because I want to discover the truth, not because I want to distort your meaning. So I ask for a friendly reply to these few words.

You say that no thing has more essence than the divine will and power give it. And when we attend to the nature of a man who has an appetite for sensual pleasure, and compare his present appetites with those of the pious, or with those he himself had at another time, then we say that that man is ‘deprived of’ a better appetite because we judge that the appetite for virtue belongs to him. We can’t do this if we attend to the nature of God’s decree and intellect; for in relation to *that* the better appetite no more pertains to the nature of that man at that time than it does to the nature of the devil, or of a stone, etc. For even though God knew the

past and present state of Adam, that didn't lead him to think of Adam as 'deprived' of his past state, i.e. that the past state belonged to his present nature, etc.

From these words it seems to me (though I am subject to correction) to follow that nothing pertains to an essence except what it has at the moment when it is perceived. That is, if I have an appetite for sensual pleasure, that appetite pertains to my essence at that time; and if I have no appetite for sensual pleasure, then that lack of appetite pertains to my essence at that time. It also follows that in relation to God there's as much perfection. . . .in my actions when I have an appetite for sensual pleasure as when I don't, when I engage in all kinds of knavery as when I practice virtue and justice. At every time I do only what my essence at that time leads me to do; and so according to your views God desires knavery in the same way that he desires the things you call 'virtue'.

[He now goes through all that again, this time saying that Spinoza is committed to this incredible conclusion regarding 'God, as God, and not as a judge'—picking up on something Spinoza says on page 35.]

You say that the pious 'serve God'; but all I can get from your writings is that •serving God is simply •doing what God has willed that we should do; and you ascribe *that* also to the godless and sensual. So where's the difference, in relation to God, between the service of the pious and that of the godless? You say also that the pious in serving God continually become more perfect. But I can't see what you mean by 'become more perfect' or what 'continually become more perfect' means. For the godless and the pious both receive their essence. . . .from God (as God, not as a judge). And they both carry out God's will in the same way, namely according to God's decree. So how can they be different in how they relate to God? For that 'continually becoming more perfect' flows not from the act but from the will of God, so

that if the godless become less perfect through their acts, that too flows not from their acts but only from the will of God. Both are merely carrying out God's will. So why should the pious continually become more perfect through his acts and the godless be consumed in serving?

[He now tackles Spinoza on the question of what perfection is, saying 'I am sure there's an error concealed here, either yours or mine'. All he can get from Spinoza's writings is that a thing is called more or less perfect in proportion to its having more or less essence; but on that basis there is no difference in perfection between pious acts and impious ones.]

You must forgive me if I ask whether killing is as pleasing to God as giving charity, whether in relation to him stealing is as good as being just. If you say 'No', why? If you say 'Yes', what reasons can there be for me to act in the way you call 'virtuous' rather than in the other way? What law or rule forbids me kill more than to give charity? If you say *the law of virtue* itself, I must confess that I can't find in your writings any law according to which virtue could be regulated or known. . . . The fact is that I can't grasp what you think virtue—or the law of virtue—is, so I don't understand why you say that we must act from love of virtue.

You say that you refrain from vice and knavery because they are contrary to your individual nature and would make you stray from the divine knowledge and love. But in all your writings I see no rule or proof of this; indeed, the opposite seems to follow from what you have written. You refrain from the things I call 'vice' because they are contrary to your individual nature, but not because they contain vice in themselves. You refrain from doing them as we refrain from eating food that our nature finds disgusting. Those who refrain from evils only because their nature finds them disgusting can't expect us to celebrate their virtue!

Nor can I see in your writings any basis for your statement that acts that I call 'knavery' would make you stray from the knowledge and love of God. . . . How can an action determined by God and dependent on him make you stray from the love of God? To *stray* is to be confused and independent, and on your view that is impossible. You hold that all our actions come from our essence, which comes from God; so how can we stray? I must be misunderstanding 'stray'. . . .

Here there are some further questions.

**(1)** Do thinking substances depend on God in a different way from how lifeless ones do? Thinking beings have more essence than lifeless ones do, but don't they both require God and God's decrees for their activities in general, and for such-and-such actions in particular? So aren't they dependent in the very same way?

**(2)** Because you do not grant the soul the freedom Descartes ascribed to it, what distinction is there between the dependence of thinking substances and that of those without a soul? And if they don't have freedom of the will, how do you conceive of their dependence on God, and of the soul's dependence on God?

**(3)** If our soul doesn't have that freedom, isn't our action God's action? isn't our will God's will?

I shall look forward to receiving, shortly, your answer to this letter. Perhaps in that way I can understand your meaning somewhat better and then we'll discuss these matters in person somewhat more fully. For after I have your answer I shall have to be in Leyden in a few weeks, and will give myself the honour of greeting you while I am there, if that is agreeable to you. . . .

PS: In my excessive haste I have forgotten to include this question: Can't we by our prudence prevent what would otherwise happen to us?

### **23. to van Blijenbergh, 13.iii.1665:**

This week I received two letters from you, the one of 9.iii serving only to inform me of the other of 19.ii, which was sent to me from Schiedam. In the latter I see that you complain of my having said that no demonstration is of any force with you, etc., as if I had said that with regard to my own reasonings because they didn't immediately satisfy you. That was far from my meaning. I had in mind your own words:

'Whenever my natural knowledge cannot—or cannot *easily*—be reconciled with God's word, this word has so much authority with me that I look with suspicion at the conceptions I have imagined to be clear, rather than putting them above and against the truth I think I find prescribed to me in that book.' [page 29]

[Spinoza shortens this, ending with '...rather etc.']. So I only repeated briefly your own words, and I don't believe that I gave the slightest reason for offence, especially because I brought that up to show the great difference between us.

Furthermore, because you had said at the end of your second letter [page 34] that your only wish was to persevere in your belief and hope, and that other things that we can persuade one another of concerning the natural intellect are indifferent to you, I thought and still think that my writing could be of no use, and that therefore it was more advisable for me not to neglect my studies—which I would otherwise have to set aside for so long—for the sake of things that can't be useful. This doesn't contradict my first letter because there I considered you as a pure philosopher; and even many who consider themselves Christians accept that a philosopher's only touchstone of truth is the natural intellect, not theology. But you have taught me otherwise and shown me that the foundation on which I intended to build our friendship was not laid as I thought.



...Having said enough to show that I have given you no reason for displeasure, much less to think that I can't bear contradiction, I now answer your objections again.

First, I say that God is absolutely and really the cause of everything that has essence, no matter what it is. If you can demonstrate now that evil, error, knavery, etc. are things that express essence, then I will grant completely that God is the cause of knavery, evil, error, etc. But I think I have shown well enough that what constitutes the form of evil, error, and knavery does not consist in something that expresses essence, and that therefore we can't say that God is the cause of it.

Nero's matricide, insofar as it comprehends something positive, was not knavery. Orestes performed the same external action, and with the same intention of killing his mother; but he is not blamed, or at least not as severely as Nero is. What, then, was Nero's knavery? It was his being—as his act showed—ungrateful, without compassion, and disobedient. None of these things expresses any essence, so God was not the cause of them, though he was the cause of Nero's act and intention.

Secondly, when we are speaking philosophically we must not use theological ways of speaking. For because theology has usually—and that not without reason—represented God as a perfect man, it is appropriate in theology to say that God desires something, that he finds sorrow in the acts of the godless and takes pleasure in those of the pious. But in philosophy we understand clearly that to ascribe to God those attributes that make a man perfect is as bad as ascribing to a man the attributes that make an elephant or an ass perfect. ... Speaking philosophically, we can't say that God 'desires' something or that something is 'pleasing' or a cause of 'sorrow' to him. Those are all human attributes that have no place in God.

Finally, I should like it noted that although

- the acts of the pious, i.e. those who have clearly the idea of God according to which all their acts and thoughts are determined,
- the acts of the godless. i.e. those who don't have that idea of God, but only confused ideas of earthly things by which all their acts and thoughts are determined, and
- the acts of everything there is,

follow necessarily from God's eternal laws and decree and continually depend on God—nevertheless they differ from one another not only in degree but also essentially. A mouse depends on God as much as an angel does, but a mouse isn't a kind of angel; sadness depends on God as much as joy does, but sadness isn't a kind of joy.

I think that answers your objections (if I have understood them; sometimes the conclusion you draw seems to differ from the proposition you undertook to prove). But this will be more evident if I apply these principles to answering your questions:

**(1)** *Is killing as pleasing to God as almsgiving?* I don't know (philosophically speaking) what you mean by 'pleasing to God'. If the question is 'Does God hate one and love the other?' or 'Has one done God an injury and the other a favour?', then I answer 'No'. If the question is 'Are men who kill and those who give charity equally good or perfect?' again I say 'No'.

**(2)** *Is stealing in relation to God as good as being just?* If 'good in relation to God' means that the just man does God some good and the thief does him some evil, I answer that neither the just man nor the thief can cause God pleasure or displeasure. But if the question is 'Are the two acts, considered as something real and caused by God, equally perfect?' I reply that looked at in that way they may well be.

If you then ask ‘Are the thief and the just man equally perfect and blessed?’ then I answer ‘No’. For I understand a ‘just’ man to be one who constantly desires that each person should possess his own. In my *Ethics*, which I have not yet published, I show that this desire necessarily arises in the pious from their clear knowledge of themselves and of God. [This is Spinoza’s first reference in the correspondence to his *Ethics* under that title.] The thief has no desire of that kind, which shows that he must lack the principal thing that makes us men, namely knowledge of God and of himself.

If you still ask what can move you to perform the act I call ‘virtuous’, I reply that I can’t know what way, of the infinitely many there are, God uses to determine *you* to such works. Perhaps he has imprinted a vivid idea of himself in you, and makes you—through love of him—forget the world and love all men as yourself. It’s clear that such a constitution of mind is contrary to all the ones we call ‘evil’; so they can’t exist in one subject. . . .

**(3)** *If there was a mind to whose individual nature the pursuit of sensual pleasure and knavery was not contrary, is there a reason for virtue that should move that mind to do good and refrain from evil?* This question presupposes a contradiction. It is like asking: If it agreed better with the someone’s nature to hang himself, would there be reasons why he should not hang himself? But suppose it were possible that there should be such a nature. Then I say (whether I grant free will or not) that if anyone sees that he can live better on the gallows than at his table, he would act very foolishly if he didn’t go hang himself. Someone who saw clearly that he would enjoy a better and more perfect life or essence by being a knave than by following virtue would also be a fool not to be a knave; for acts of knavery would be virtue in relation to such a perverted human nature.

As for the other questions that you have added at the end of your letter, since one could ask a hundred in an hour without ever coming to a conclusion on anything, and since you don’t press much for an answer, I shall leave them unanswered. For now I shall say only that I shall expect you at the time we arranged, and that you will be very welcome to me. . . .

#### **24. from van Blijenbergh, 27.iii.1665:**

When I had the honour of being with you, the time didn’t allow me to stay longer with you. Still less could my memory retain everything we discussed, although immediately on leaving you I collected all my thoughts in order to retain what I had heard. So in the next place I stopped at I tried to put your opinions on paper myself, but I found then that I hadn’t retained even a quarter of what was discussed. So you must excuse me if I trouble you again by asking about matters where I didn’t clearly understand your meaning or didn’t retain it well. (I wish I could do something for you in return for your trouble.)

**(1)** When I am reading your *Descartes’s ‘Principles’* and *Metaphysical Thoughts*, how am I to distinguish what is stated as Descartes’s opinion from what is stated as your own?

**(2)** Is there really error, and what does it consist in?

**(3)** What is your reason for holding that the will is not free?

**(4)** Why do you have Meyer say this in the preface?

Though he accepts. . . that there is a thinking substance in nature, he denies that it constitutes the essence of the human mind; instead he maintains that just as extension is determined by no limits, so also thought is determined by no limits. Therefore, just as the human body is

not extension absolutely, but only an extension determined in a certain way according to the laws of extended nature by motion and rest, so also the human soul is not thought absolutely, but only a thought determined in a certain way according to the laws of thinking nature by ideas, a thought which, one infers, must exist when the human body begins to exist.'

This seems to imply that just as the human body is composed of thousands of small bodies, so also the human mind is composed of thousands of thoughts; and that just as the human body when it disintegrates is resolved again into the thousands of bodies of which it was composed, so also our mind, when separated from our body, is resolved again into that multitude of thoughts of which it was composed. . . .

[He nags away at this, with details that we needn't concern ourselves with, since Spinoza gives them the back of his hand.]

(5) You maintained in our conversation and in your letter of 13.iii that from our clear knowledge of God and of ourselves there arises in us a constant desire that each should remain in possession of his own; you haven't explained *how* that knowledge has that result. . . . How does it proceed from the knowledge of God that we are obliged to love virtue and to omit those acts we call vicious? On your view killing and stealing contain something positive in them, just as much as giving charity does; so how does it happen that killing doesn't involve as much perfection, blessedness, and satisfaction as giving charity?

Perhaps you will say, as you do in your letter of 13.iii, that this problem belongs to the *Ethics*, and that you discuss it there. But until it is solved and the preceding questions are answered I can't clearly understand your meaning. . . .

## 25. from Oldenburg, 28.iv.1665:

I was delighted to learn in a recent letter from Serrarius that you are alive and well and remember your Oldenburg. But at the same time I complain greatly of my fortune (if I may use that word!) in being deprived for so many months of the enjoyable correspondence I used to have with you. The fault lies both with •a great deal of business and with •frightful domestic misfortunes. [We don't know what these were.] My great fondness for you and my faithful friendship will always remain steadfast and unshakable through the years. Boyle and I often talk about you, your erudition, and your profound meditations. We would like to see the fruit of your understanding published and entrusted to the embrace of the learned. We're sure you won't disappoint us in this.

There is no need for Boyle's essay on nitre and on solidity and fluidity to be published in Holland. It has already been published in Latin here, but there is no opportunity to send you copies. I ask you, therefore, not to allow any of your printers to undertake such a thing.

Boyle has also published a notable treatise on colours, both in English and in Latin, and at the same time an experimental history of cold, thermometers, etc., in which there are many excellent things and many new things. Only this unfortunate war prevents me from sending these books to you. [War had broken out again between the Dutch and the English a month earlier.]

Another notable publication is a treatise on sixty microscopic observations [Robert Hooke's *Micrographia*], in which many things are discussed boldly but philosophically (and on mechanical principles). I hope our booksellers will find a way of sending copies of all of these to your country. For my part, I am anxious to receive from you what you have done recently or are working on now.

**26. to Oldenburg, v.1665:**

A few days ago a friend of mine said he had been given your letter of 28.iv by an Amsterdam bookseller, who no doubt received it from Serrarius. I was extremely glad to learn that you were well and that you are as favourably disposed toward me as before. I have often asked Serrarius and Christiaan Huygens (who also told me he knew you) about you and your health. I also learned from Huygens that the very learned Boyle is alive and has published that notable treatise on colours in English. Huygens would lend it to me if I understood English.

So I'm pleased to learn from you that this treatise (as well as the other on cold and thermometers, which I hadn't previously heard about) has been given Latin citizenship and published. Huygens also has a copy of the book on microscopic observations, but I believe it is in English.

He has told me wonderful things about these microscopes, and also about certain telescopes, made in Italy, with which they could observe eclipses of Jupiter caused by the interposition of its satellites and also a certain shadow on Saturn which looked as if it were caused by a ring. These things make me astonished at Descartes's haste. He thought that Saturn's projections are planets, perhaps because he never saw them touching Saturn, and he said that the reason why these 'planets' don't move may be that Saturn doesn't rotate around its own axis. But this doesn't fit well with his principles; he could easily have come up with an explanation that did fit his principles if he hadn't laboured under a prejudice.

**27. to van Blijenbergh, 1.vi.1665:**

When I received your letter of 27.iii, I was about to leave for Amsterdam. So I left it at home, only half-read, intending to answer it on my return. I thought it was only about the first problem, but when I read it through I found that its content was quite different. Not only did it ask for a proof of things I had Meyer put in the preface to indicate to everyone my own opinions, not to prove or explain them, it also asked for proof of a great part of ethics, which as everyone knows must be based on metaphysics and physics. So I couldn't bring myself to satisfy you on this.

I wanted a chance to talk with you in the friendliest way, so that I might ask you to desist from your request, give you a reason for declining, and show you that those things won't help to solve your first problem, but that on the contrary most of them depend on the solution of that problem. You have thought that you can't understand my opinion regarding the necessity of things until you have answers to these new questions; but in fact those answers and what pertains to them can't be perceived unless one first understands that necessity. For as you know, the necessity of things concerns metaphysics, the knowledge of which must always come first.

However, before I could get the desired opportunity, I received another letter this week, under cover from my Amsterdam host, which seems to show more displeasure at the long wait. So I need to write these few lines to tell you briefly my resolution and intention. That I have now done. I hope that when you have weighed the matter you'll voluntarily desist from your request and still retain your good will toward me. For my part, I shall show in every way that I can or may that I am your well-disposed friend and servant, B. de Spinoza

**28. to Bouwmeester, vi.1665:**

I don't know whether you have completely forgotten me, but many things make me suspect that you have. First, when I was about to leave ·Amsterdam· I wanted to say goodbye to you, and since you had invited me I was sure I would find you at home. But I learned that you had gone to The Hague. I returned home to Voorburg, not doubting that you would at least visit us in passing. But you have returned home, God willing, without greeting your friend. Finally, I have waited three weeks, and in all that time I have no letter from you.

If you want to remove this opinion of mine, you can do so easily by a letter in which you can also indicate a way of arranging our correspondence, of which we once talked in your house. Meanwhile, I *beg* you, by our friendship, to pursue serious work energetically and with true enthusiasm, and to devote the better part of your life to the cultivation of your intellect and soul. You must do this *now*, while there is time, before •you complain that the time for that is past or •you are past.

I don't want you to be afraid to write freely to me, so I should tell you that I think you •have less confidence in your ability than you should and •are afraid of asking or suggesting something unbecoming a learned man. . . . Well, if you fear that I will communicate your letters to others who may then subject you to mockery, I give you my word that from now on I'll keep them scrupulously and won't communicate them to any other mortal without your permission. On these conditions you can begin our correspondence, unless perhaps you doubt my good faith. I don't believe for a moment that you do; but I want to learn your opinion about these matters from your next letter.

I also want some of the conserve of red roses that you promised, though for a long time now I have been better.

[This mention of a recognised medicine for catarrhal affections of the lungs is the first explicit evidence of the pulmonary disease that Spinoza died of a dozen years later.] After I left ·Amsterdam· I opened a vein once, but the fever didn't stop (though I was somewhat more active even before the bloodletting—because of the change of air, I think). But I have suffered two or three times from tertian fever. By good diet I have got rid of it; my only care is that it should not return.

As for the third part of our philosophy, I shall soon send some of it either to you (if you wish to be its translator) or to friend de Vries. I did decide to send nothing until I finished it, but it's turning out to be longer than I expected and I don't want to hold you back too long. I shall send up to about the 80th proposition. [This refers to the *Ethics*, though why 'our philosophy' is not clear. In its final form Part 3 has only 59 propositions; at the time of this letter Spinoza was evidently planning it as a three-part work, including material that eventually went into Part 4.] I hear much about English affairs [meaning: the war], but nothing certain. The populace go on suspecting all sorts of evils, and no-one knows why the fleet doesn't set sail. Indeed, there do seem to be things to be anxious about, and I'm afraid that our countrymen are going too far with their attempt to be wise and cautious. But the outcome will eventually show what they have in mind and what they are striving for. May the gods make things turn out well.

I would like to hear what people think there ·in Amsterdam·, and what they know for certain. But more than that, indeed more than anything, I would like to hear that you consider me, etc.

**29. from Oldenburg, 20.iv.1665:**

From your last letter to me [which we don't have] it is clear that you take our affairs seriously. You have obliged me and also

Boyle, who joins me in sending you thanks and will at the earliest opportunity repay your kindness and affection with every kind of service he can render. So will I.

[A paragraph criticising a 'busybody' who has insisted on doing a new translation into English of Boyle's *experiments and Considerations touching Colours*, although there is already one in print in which Oldenburg had a hand.]

Kircher's *Subterranean World* hasn't yet appeared here because of the plague, which makes most commerce impossible. [The 1665 bubonic plague killed about a fifth of London's population.] In addition we have this dreadful Anglo-Dutch war, which brings with it an Iliad of evils and almost banishes civilised behavior from the world.

Although our philosophical Society [described by Oldenburg on page 9] holds no public meetings at this dangerous time, some of its Fellows have been separately busy with experiments in hydrostatics, anatomy, mechanics and other subjects. Boyle has examined the origin of forms and qualities. . . .and has composed a treatise on this—undoubtedly an excellent one—which will soon go to press. [A large part of Boyle's *The Origins of Forms and Qualities According to the Corpuscular philosophy* can be found on the website from which this version of the correspondence comes.]

From what you have told me about your projected theological-political treatise I see that you are not so much philosophising as (to coin a word) theologising—recording your thoughts about angels, prophecy and miracles. But perhaps you are doing this philosophically. Anyway, I'm sure that the work will be worthy of you and badly wanted—by me in particular. These difficult times stand in the way of freedom of communication, but please don't be reluctant to indicate to me in your next letter what your plan is, what your target is, in this writing of yours.

Every day we expect news here of a second naval battle, unless your fleet has returned to port. The courage that you hint is debated among you is bestial, not human; obviously if men acted according to the guidance of reason they wouldn't tear one another to pieces in this way. But why am I complaining? As Tacitus wrote: There will be vices as long as there are men. But they don't go on continually, and during the breaks better things happen by way of compensation.

[Oldenburg announces a recent letter from astronomer Hevelius, reporting on his recent, current, and near-future work.]

What do your people think about Huygens's pendulums? I'm especially interested in the ones that are said to measure time so exactly that they could serve to determine longitudes at sea. Also, what is happening about his *Dioptrics* and his *Treatise On Motion*, both of which we have long been waiting for. I'm sure he isn't idle; I just want to know what progress he is making.

### 30. to Oldenburg, 1.x.1665:

#### Fragment 1:

I have seen Kircher's *Subterranean World* at Huygens's home. He praises Kircher's piety but not his ability! Perhaps this is because Kircher holds that pendulums won't help at all to discover longitudes (which is completely opposed to Huygens's opinion).

You want to know what people here think about Huygens's new pendulums. All I can tell you, so far, is that the craftsman who has the exclusive right to make them is giving up the work because he can't sell them. I don't know whether this is because commerce has been interrupted by the war or because he's trying to sell them at too high a price. . . .

When I asked Huygens about his dioptrics, and about his other treatise on parhelia [see Glossary], he replied that he is still investigating something in dioptrics but that when he has discovered it he'll publish that book along with the treatise on parhelia. But I believe that his thoughts at present are more on his voyage to France (he's preparing to settle there when his father returns) than on anything else.

What he says he is investigating in dioptrics is the question: 'Can the lenses in telescopes be arranged in such a way that the defect of one corrects the defect of the other, so that all the parallel rays passing through the lens will arrive at the eye as though coming together in a mathematical point?' This still seems to me impossible. Apart from that his dioptric only discusses spherical figures—judging from what I have seen of it and what I *understood* him to tell me.

As for the treatise on motion that you ask about, I think you are waiting for that in vain. It's too long now since he began to boast that •by calculation he had discovered rules of motion and laws of nature far different from the ones Descartes gives, and that •Descartes's rules and laws are almost all false. He still hasn't published any example of this. About a year ago he told me that everything he had discovered about motion by calculation he afterwards found had been proven in England by experiments. But I'm sceptical! Moreover, as regards Descartes's sixth rule of motion [in his *Principles of Philosophy* II.51] I judge that he and Descartes are both completely mistaken. . .

### Fragment 2

. . . I rejoice that your philosophers are alive and mindful of themselves and their republic •of philosophers•. I shall wait for news of what they do next when the warriors are sated with blood and stop for a rest. If that famous mocker •Democrites• were alive today he would surely die of laughter.

But these turmoils don't move me to laughter or even to tears; they cause me to philosophise to observe human nature better. I don't think it right for me to mock nature, much less to lament it, when I reflect that men like everything else are only a part of nature, and that I don't know how each part of nature •agrees with the whole and •coheres with the other parts. It's because I don't know all this that certain things in nature—things that I perceive in part and only in a fragmentary way, and that don't square with our philosophic mind—used to strike me as disorderly and absurd. But now I go along with everyone's living according to his own mentality: those who want to die for *their* good may do so, as long as I'm allowed to live for *the true* good.

I am currently working on a treatise giving my views about scripture. [This refers to the *Treatise on Theology and Politics*, though Spinoza may not yet be thinking of it as having a political component. It can be found on the website from which this version of the correspondence comes.] I am led to do this by the following considerations:

- (1) the prejudices of the theologians; for I know that they are the greatest obstacle to men's being able to apply their minds to philosophy; so I am busy exposing them and removing them from the minds of the more prudent;
- (2) the opinion the common people have of me; they never stop accusing me of atheism, and I have to rebut this accusation as well as I can; and
- (3) my desire to defend in every way the freedom of philosophising and saying what we think; the preachers here suppress it as much as they can with their excessive authority and aggressiveness.

I haven't heard of any Cartesian explaining the phenomena of the recent comets on the Cartesian hypothesis, and I doubt that they can be rightly explained on that hypothesis. . .

**31. from Oldenburg, 12.x.1665:**

You act as becomes a judicious man and a philosopher: you love good men, and you shouldn't doubt that they love you in return and judge your merits as they should. Boyle joins me in sending you warm greetings, and urges you to continue with your philosophising vigorously and precisely. Above all, if your work comes up with anything that might tell us the answer to that difficult question about how each part of Nature agrees with the whole of it, and what rules cover each part's cohering with all the other parts, we ask you most affectionately to communicate it to us.

I entirely approve your reasons for writing a treatise on Scripture, and I'm aching to see what you have written on that subject. Serrarius may soon be sending me a small parcel. You could, if you see fit, safely commit to him what you have already written, and be sure that we'll return it to you promptly.

I have glanced through Kircher's *Subterranean World*. His reasonings and theories don't speak well for his ability; but the observations and experiments that he reports testify to his diligence and his desire to deserve well from the republic of philosophers. So you see, I credit him with something more than piety, and you'll easily see what those who sprinkle him with that holy water are up to.

Writing about Huygens's treatise on motion, you indicate that Descartes's rules of motion are almost all false. I don't now have at hand the little book—*Descartes's 'Principles of Philosophy' demonstrated Geometrically*—that you published about this, and I can't recall whether you showed that falsity there, or whether to please others you simply followed Descartes's tracks. I wish you would finally reveal the fruit of your own talent, and entrust it to the philosophical world, to cherish and nourish. I remember

that somewhere you claimed that we can understand and explain very clearly many things that Descartes said surpass human understanding—indeed, things much more sublime and subtle than those. [Meyer makes this claim on Spinoza's behalf in his Preface to *Descartes' 'Principles. . .'*] What's stopping you, my friend? What are you afraid of? Try it. Get on with it. Finish it. It's a task of such importance! The whole chorus of real philosophers will be your advocate—you'll see. I venture to pledge my own loyalty, which I wouldn't do if I were unsure that I can honour my pledge. I can't believe that you intend to oppose the existence and providence of God in any way; and as long as those supports are intact, religion stands firm and any philosophical contemplations are easily either defended or excused. Don't delay any longer, then, and don't let the critics hold you back.

[Re a current dispute between two astronomers, Hevelius and Auzout, about whether what was seen recently was one comet or two: the issue is being adjudicated, Oldenburg says, and when there's a decision someone will tell him and he will tell Spinoza. He adds:] All the astronomers I know think that there were *two* comets, and I haven't heard anyone try to explain their appearance according to the Cartesian hypothesis.

If you learn anything more about Huygens's work, about the success of his pendulums in determining longitudes, or about his move to France, *please* tell me about it as soon as possible. Please tell me also what is being said among you about

- the chances of a peace treaty between the English and the Dutch,
- the plans of the Swedish army that has been sent to Germany, and
- the progress of the Bishop of Munster [who invaded Holland on behalf of the English].



I believe that next summer the whole of Europe will be involved in wars, and everything seems to be tending toward a change such as we've never seen before. Let us serve the supreme Deity with a pure mind, and develop a philosophy that is true, solid and useful.

Some of our philosophers, having followed the King to Oxford ·where he went to escape the plague·, meet there quite often to discuss the advancement of studies in physics. Among other things, they have recently begun to inquire into the nature of sounds. I believe they plan to conduct experiments to determine the relation between •the tension produced in a string by weights and •the pitch of the sound it makes. More about these matters at another time.

### **32. to Oldenburg, 20.xi.1665:**

I am most grateful to you and Boyle for your kind encouragement of my philosophising. I push ahead as well as I can, given my slender ability, never doubting your assistance and good will.

When you ask me for my views about our knowledge of how each part of Nature agrees with the whole to which it belongs and how it coheres with the other parts, I think you're asking why we think that each part of Nature agrees with the whole and coheres with the other parts. For I had said in my preceding letter that I *don't know* how they really cohere and how each part agrees with its whole; to know this I would have to know the whole of Nature and all of its parts. So I'll try to show the reason that compels me to affirm this. Let me warn you in advance that I don't attribute beauty or ugliness to Nature, or order or confusion; because it's only in relation to our imagination that things be called beautiful or ugly, orderly or confused.

When I say that ·two· parts cohere, all I mean is that the laws (= the nature) of one part adapts itself to the laws (= the nature) of the other, so that they are opposed to each other as little as possible. Concerning whole and parts, I regard things as parts of some whole to the extent that the nature of each adapts itself to the natures of the others so that they all agree with one another as far as possible. When they disagree with one another, to that extent each forms in our mind an idea distinct from ·our idea(s) of· the others, leading us to regard it as a whole and not as a part.

For example, when ·in our blood· the motions of the particles of lymph, chyle, etc. adapt themselves to one another in their sizes and shapes in such a way that they completely agree with one another and jointly constitute one fluid, to that extent—and *only* to that extent—the chyle, lymph, etc. are considered as parts of the blood. But when we think of the particles of lymph as being different in shape and motion from the particles of chyle, to that extent we think of ·each of· them as a whole and not as a part.

Suppose that living in the blood there's a little worm that can distinguish by sight the particles of the blood, of lymph, of chyle, etc., and can observe by reason how each particle, when it bangs into another, either bounces back or passes on a part of its motion, etc. It would live in this blood as we do in our part of the universe, and would regard each particle of the blood as a whole and not as a part. It couldn't know how all the parts of the blood are regulated by •the universal nature of the blood, and compelled by •it to adapt themselves to one another so that they agree with one another in a certain way.

Suppose there were no causes outside the blood that would communicate new motions to the blood, and no space outside the blood and no other bodies to which the particles of blood could transfer their motion, it is certain

that the blood would always remain in the same state, and its particles wouldn't change except in ways that could be explained in terms of •the nature of the blood alone, i.e. of •the relation of the motion of the lymph, chyle, etc. to one another.

Thus the blood would always have to be considered as a whole and not as a part. But because there *are* many other causes by which the whole nature of the blood is regulated in a certain way, and which in turn are regulated by the blood, the result is that other motions and other changes happen in the particles of the blood that follow not simply from

the relation of the motion of its parts to one another, but from

the relation of •the motion of the blood as a whole and of •its external causes to one another.

In this way the blood has the nature of a part and not of a whole. That is my view about whole and part.

Now, all bodies in nature must be conceived as we have here conceived the blood, for all bodies are surrounded by others and determined by one another to exist and produce an effect in a certain and determinate way, so that the ratio of motion to rest in the whole—i.e. in the whole universe—is always the same. From this it follows that every body. . . must •be considered as a part of the whole universe, •agree with the whole to which it belongs, and •cohere with all the other bodies. And since the nature of the universe is not limited (as the nature of the blood is) but is absolutely infinite, the variations of its parts that can follow from this infinite power must be infinite.

But when the whole is a substance, I think, each part has an •even• closer union with it. . . . Because it is of the nature of a substance to be infinite, it follows that each of its parts pertains to the nature of corporeal substance, and can't conceivably exist without the rest of the substance.

So you see why I think that the human body is a part of Nature, and how I think this can be so. But I think the human mind is a part of Nature too. For I maintain that Nature also has an infinite power of thinking which, just because it is infinite, is a representation of the whole of Nature, its thoughts proceeding in the same way as does Nature, which it represents. And I maintain that the human mind is this same power, considered not as as infinite and perceiving the whole of Nature but as finite and perceiving only the human body. For this reason I maintain that the human mind is a part of a certain infinite intellect.

But it would take too long to give detailed explanations and demonstrations of all these things and everything connected with them; and I don't think you expect me to do so now. Indeed, I'm not sure that I have properly understood you—perhaps the question I have answered is not the one you were asking. Please let me know.

You write that I hinted that Descartes's rules of motion are almost all false; if I remember rightly, I said that Huygens thinks this. The only rule that I said is false is the sixth, and I said that I think Huygens is also wrong about that. In that letter I asked you to tell me about the experiment your Royal Society has tried using this hypothesis. From your silence about this I infer that you aren't permitted to reply.

Huygens continues to be completely occupied with •polishing lenses. He has constructed a rather elegant instrument for this purpose, and he can also use it •as a lathe• for •making the lenses. But I still do not know what progress he has made with this, and to tell the truth I don't much want to, because I know from experience that no instrument can polish lenses as well, and with as little risk of error, as can be done by a free hand. I don't know anything for sure about the outcome of his work with pendulums, or about the timing of his move to France.

The Bishop of Munster, having foolishly gone into Frisia at the head of an army . . . , hasn't been able to accomplish anything; unless winter begins very early, he won't be able to leave Frisia without great losses. He wouldn't have risked this undertaking, I'm sure, if he hadn't been urged to it by some traitor. But this is all old stuff, and nothing in the last week or two has been worth writing about.

[Then some remarks about the Anglo-Dutch war and associated matters.]

I wrote this letter last week, but I couldn't send it because the weather prevented me from going to the Hague. That's the disadvantage of living in a village. Nearly all the letters I receive have taken a week or two to reach me; and there are often difficulties when I want to send a letter. So when I don't reply to you as promptly as I ought to, don't think that this comes from my forgetting you. . . . Please convey my warmest greetings to Boyle. . . .

### 33. from Oldenburg, 8.xii.1665:

Your philosophical account of the agreement of the parts of Nature with the whole, and their connection with one another is very pleasing, though I don't see how we can eliminate order and symmetry from nature, as you seem to do, especially since you yourself recognise that all its bodies interact in a definite and constant manner. . . . , always preserving the same over-all ratio of motion to rest. This seems to be a sufficient ground for true order.

But perhaps I don't properly understand you here, any more than I did in what you wrote about Descartes's rules. If you would explain to me thoroughly in what respect you judge that Descartes and Huygens are both mistaken about the rules of motion, you would please me very much and I would do my best to deserve this favour.

I wasn't present when Huygens performed his experiments here in London, proving his hypothesis. I am told that this happened, among other experiments:

Someone suspended a one-pound ball in the manner of a pendulum; it was then released, striking another ball suspended in the same way (but weighing only half a pound) at an angle of 40°; Huygens had done a brief algebraic calculation and predicted what the effect would be; and it was exactly as he had predicted.

A certain distinguished gentleman. . . , proposed many such experiments, which Huygens is said to have solved. After I have had a chance to talk to him I may be able to explain this matter to you more fully and precisely.

Meanwhile I urge you once again not to decline my request. And if you know anything about Huygens's success in polishing telescopic lenses, please don't be reluctant to share it with me. Now that—by the grace of God—the plague is less virulent, I hope that our Royal Society will return to London shortly and resume its weekly meetings. If anything notable happens there I will certainly tell you about it.

[After passing on warm greetings from Boyle, Oldenburg reports two biological matters. •Domestic animals that turned out to have grass in their windpipes. How could this happen, and how could they have lived for a while in that condition? •A girl who was reported to have milk in her blood.]

But I pass to politics. Here there is a rumour on everyone's lips that the Israelites will return to their native land after more than two thousand years away from it. Few here believe this, though many—Christians who think it would herald the second coming of Christ—desire it. . . . Until this news is reported by trustworthy men from Constantinople, to whom this matter is of the greatest concern, I can't trust it. But I'm eager to know what the Jews in Amsterdam have

heard about this matter, and how they are affected by this report. If it is true, it seems likely to lead to a world-wide crisis.

There seems to be no hope yet of peace between England and the Netherlands

Explain, if you can, what the Swede and the Brandenburger are up to.

P.S. Soon, God willing, I'll tell you what our philosophers think about the recent comets.

## Notes on the other correspondents

**Pieter Balling** (c. 1664–1669): A Mennonite and an enemy of dogmatism. He was the agent in Amsterdam of various Spanish merchants, knew Spanish well, and may have come to know Spinoza through that. He was the translator into Dutch of Spinoza's *Descartes' 'Principles'* and *Metaphysical Thoughts*, and perhaps of other works as well.

**Willem van Blijenbergh** (1632–1696): A grain broker by profession, but also an ardent would-be theologian and metaphysician. Spinoza's initial warm welcome to him would have been more cautious if he had known that van Blijenbergh had already published a work entitled

Theology and Religion defended against the views of Atheists, wherein it is shown by natural and clear arguments that God has implanted and revealed a Religion, that God wants to be worshipped in accordance with it. . . etc.

In 1674 he wrote another such book, including 'a refutation of Spinoza's *Treatise on Theology and Politics*—'that blasphemous book'. Spinoza's final letter to him (27) is notably gentle and temperate.

**Johannes Bouwmeester** (1630–1680): A close friend of Meyer and of Spinoza. Trained in medicine and philosophy at the University of Leiden, he was a fellow member with Meyer of the society *Nil volentibus arduum* [Latin: Nothing is difficult for the willing] and codirector of the Amsterdam theater in 1677.

**Hugo Boxel**: High-level bureaucrat and then governor of his native city Gorkhum.

**Robert Boyle** (1627–1691): Son of an Earl, and the leading British scientist of the period between Bacon and Newton. He

belonged to a group of Baconians that was later incorporated as the Royal Society. His reputation as a scientist is most securely based on work that led him to the law relating the pressure and volume of gases. He held that science was not only compatible with Christianity but encouraged an appreciation of God's works, and he wrote extensively against atheism.

**Albert Burgh**: Son of an influential member of the governing classes. When he converted to Roman Catholicism, his parents asked their friend Spinoza to intervene, which he did, though unsuccessfully.

**J. Ludovicus Fabritius** (1632–1697): Professor of philosophy and theology at the University of Heidelberg. The Elector Palatine, on whose behalf he wrote letter 47, was Karl Ludwig, brother of Queen Christina of Sweden, Descartes's patroness.

**Johan George Graevius** (1632–?): Professor of rhetoric in the university of Utrecht.

**Johannes Hudde** 1628–1704: A student at the University of Leyden in the 1650s; joined a research group that translated Descartes's *Geometry* into Latin and published it with three appendices, one by Hudde. Did significant work in mathematics, optics, and probability theory. Mayor of Amsterdam (1672–1702).

**Jarig Jelles** (?–1683): A spice merchant in Amsterdam, he entrusted his business to a manager and devoted himself to the pursuit of knowledge. He was one of those who persuaded Spinoza to publish his *Descartes's 'Principles'*, and he paid the cost of publication.

**Gottfried Leibniz** (1646–1716): The most distinguished European philosopher of the generation after Spinoza's.

**Lodewijk Meyer** (1629–1681): Studied philosophy and medicine at the University of Leiden, where he became an ardent Cartesian. After receiving doctorates in both subjects he practised medicine in Amsterdam and figured in the literary world—wrote poems and plays, assisted with an important dictionary, directed the Amsterdam theater.

**Henry Oldenburg** (c. 1618–1677): Born in Bremen, where he studied theology. Most of his adult life was spent in England, where he was occupied partly in diplomatic work, partly in teaching (one of his pupils being a nephew of Boyle), but mainly with the secretaryship of the Royal Society, a position he held from 1662 until his death.

**Jacob Ostens** (1625–1678): A Collegiant [see Glossary] and surgeon.

**G. H. Schuller** (1631–79): A medical practitioner in Amsterdam. Spinoza consulted him medically sometimes, including during his final illness; and Schuller was with Spinoza when

he died.

**Nicholas Steno** (1638–1687): Physician and research biologist; converted to Roman Catholicism in 1667.

**Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus** (1631–1708): A German Count who studied in Holland and served as a volunteer in the Dutch army. He had many scientific activities and interests, and is also credited with being the first European to find out how to make porcelain.

**Lambert de Velthuysen** (1622–1685): Studied philosophy, theology and medicine at the University of Utrecht, and practised medicine there. His liberal views in religion brought him into conflict with the dominant church, but he couldn't see his way to agreeing with Spinoza.

**Simon de Vries** (c. 1633–1667): An Amsterdam merchant and Collegiant [see Glossary]. When his death was approaching, de Vries wanted to make Spinoza his sole heir; Spinoza declined, because the money ought to go to de Vries's brother, though he did eventually accept a small annuity—half the amount offered—from the brother.