

# Correspondence between Descartes and Princess Elisabeth

René Descartes and Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia

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

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## Letters written in 1646

### Descartes writes in i.1646:

I can't deny that I was surprised to learn that you were upset—to the point where your health was affected—by an event that most people will regard as good, and that all the rest could, for several strong reasons, regard as excusable. All my fellow Catholics (who are certainly the majority in Europe) are obliged to approve what your brother has done, even if they saw in it some circumstances and apparent motives that could be condemned; for we believe that God employs various means to draw souls to him. An example of that would be provided by someone who enters a monastery for bad reasons and then leads there a life of great holiness. As for those of other faiths, if they speak badly of it [=? 'what your brother did'], we can reject their judgment; for in all affairs where there are different sides, it's impossible to please some without displeasing the others. If they bear in mind that they wouldn't belong to the church they *do* belong to if they or their fathers or their grandfathers hadn't left the Church of Rome, then they will have no reason to ridicule those who leave their church, or to accuse them of inconstancy.

As regards the wisdom of the times, it's true that those who have Fortune as a house guest are right to cluster around her, joining forces to prevent her from escaping; but those whose home she has fled do well to agree to go different ways, so that at least one of them may meet up with her even if not all can find her. . . . And because each of them (I gather) has many resources, including friends in various places, this makes them a more powerful search party than if they all followed the same path. Because of this, I can't think that the authors of this advice to your brother wanted

to harm your house. But I don't claim that my arguments could prevent you from feeling the indignation that you do feel. I only hope that when this letter reaches you, time will have lessened it; and I now drop the topic, because if I continued with it any longer I would be afraid of reawakening your indignation.

So I turn now to your problem about free will. I'll try through an illustration to explain how this is both dependent and free. Suppose that a king has forbidden duels, and knows for sure that two gentlemen, A and B, of his kingdom who live in different towns have a quarrel, and are so hostile to each other that if they meet nothing will stop them from fighting. If this king orders A to go on a certain day to the town where B lives, and orders B to go on the same day to the place where A lives, he knows for sure that they will meet, and fight, thus disobeying his ban on duelling. But this doesn't mean that he *compels* them to fight. He knew they would meet and fight in this way, and he may even have wanted them to do so; but that doesn't prevent their fighting from being voluntary and free—as much so as if their meeting had come about in some other way and he had known nothing about it. And it is as just to punish them for disobeying the ban as it would be if the king had not seen this coming. Now, what a king can do in such a case concerning certain free actions of his subjects, God with his infinite foresight and power does infallibly in regard to all the free actions of all men. Before he sent us into the world he knew exactly what all the inclinations of our will would be; it is he who gave us those inclinations; it is he who arranged the rest of the world outside us so that X objects would present themselves to our senses at Y times,

on the occasion of which he knew that our free will would determine us act in manner Z; and he willed that we should choose as we did, but he didn't will that our will should be *constrained* in making that choice. In this king—the one in my illustration—we can distinguish two different levels of volition: •one in which he willed that these gentlemen should fight, since he caused them to meet; and •the other in which willed that they not fight, because he forbade duels. And in the same way the theologians distinguish God's •absolute and independent will, in which he wills everything to happen as it does, from his •relative will, relating to the merit and demerit of men, in which he wants them to obey his laws.

[The word 'evil' as used below (and elsewhere in this text) should be explained. French has the adjectives *bon* and *mal*, 'good' and 'bad'; and it also uses those same words as nouns. English doesn't have a single noun equivalent to the noun *mal*. We can stretch things a bit and say 'He was thinking about all the goods in his life' meaning '. . . all the good things', but we can't get away with saying 'He was thinking about all the bads in his life'. In the present text, as in most English translations of early modern French, the noun 'evil' is made to play this role. Its meaning here is nowhere near as strong as its meaning in today's colloquial English. For example, one of the 'evils' of a gardening job might be a mildly sore back.]

To defend my statement that in this life we always have more good things than evil ones, against your objection concerning all the inconveniences of life, I have to distinguish two sorts of goods. **(1)** When we are thinking of the idea of goodness as a rule for our actions, we take the goodness to consist in all the perfection there can be in the item we are calling 'good', and we compare this perfection with a straight line, which stands out uniquely among the infinity of curves with which we compare evils. That is the notion of *good* that is at work when philosophers say:

*bonum est ex integra causa, malum ex quovis defectu*  
= the good comes from the whole cause, the evil from any defect whatsoever.

**(2)** But when we are thinking about the good and evil that may exist in a single thing, in order to discover what value to put on it (as I did when I spoke of the value we should put on this life), we must take the good to consist in whatever may be advantageous to us, and the evil to consist in whatever may be disadvantageous; the other defects that the thing may have are not taken into account. Thus, when someone is offered a job, he thinks about the *goods* he can expect from it, the honour and profit, and he thinks about the *evils* such as the trouble, the danger, the loss of time, and the like; and having weighed the evils against the goods, he accepts or turns down the job depending on which side of the balance goes down. Now, it was in sense **(2)** that I said that there are always more good than evil things in this life; and I said this because I think we should take little account of •events outside us that *don't* depend on our free will as compared with •events that *do* depend on it. Provided we know how to make good use of our will, we can make everything that depends on it good, and we can use those goods to prevent the evils that come from outside—however great they may be—from penetrating deeply into our souls, letting them get only as deep as the sadness that actors arouse in the soul when we see them portray some tragic story. But I admit that to reach that point we have to be very philosophical indeed. And yet I think that even those who go furthest in giving free rein to their passions really judge, deep down, that there are more good things than evil ones in this life, even if they aren't themselves aware of them. Sometimes when they are in great misery they call upon death to help them, but it's only to help them bear their burden. . . .and doesn't mean that they want to lose their life. And if there are some who

do want to lose it, and who kill themselves, that is due to •an intellectual error and not to •a well-reasoned judgment or to •an opinion imprinted on them by nature, like the one that makes a man prefer the goods of this life to its evils.

What makes me believe that

Someone who wants to •be prudent, and to act only for his own individual benefit, ought like anyone else to •work for others, doing all he can to bring pleasure to each

is the fact that we so often see things like this:

Someone who is generally regarded as energetic and prompt in •giving pleasure also •receives plenty of favours from others, even from people for whom he hasn't done anything; and the trouble he takes in bringing pleasure is outweighed by the benefits he gets from the friendships of those who know him,

He wouldn't have received these favours if he had been generally thought to be motivated by something other than altruism. . . . It's true that sometimes a person takes trouble to do good, and gets no reward; and that sometimes a person acts badly and profits by this. But that can't change the rule of prudence, which concerns what *usually* happens. For me •personally•, the maxim that I have chiefly obeyed in all the conduct of my life has been to •stay on the main road and to •believe that the most important clever trick is to have absolutely no wish to use clever tricks. In my view, the common laws of society, which all tend to get people to help—or at least not to harm—each other, are so well established that anyone who follows them honestly, without pretence or tricks, leads a happier, more secure life than those who follow their interests by other routes. The latter sometimes succeed, through other men's ignorance and fortune's favour; but they usually fail, and in thinking to establish themselves they bring themselves to ruin.

### Elisabeth writes on 25.iv.1646:

Starting just after your departure, my brother Philip's recent contract with the Republic of Venice has given me a much less agreeable occupation than the one you left me with; this is a business that needs more knowledge than I have, and I was asked to lend a hand with it only so that I could supply something better than that young man's impatience. [Philip, aged 17, had agreed to lead a regiment against the Turks on behalf of Venice and Poland.] This has prevented me, until now, from availing myself of your permission to put before you the obscurities that my own stupidity leads me to find in your treatise on *The Passions*. There aren't many of them. The order, definition, and distinctions that you give to the passions, and indeed all the **moral** part of this treatise, surpass everything previously said on this subject; I would have to have been •not merely stupid but• insentient not to grasp that.

But the **physiological** part is not so clear to the beginner, which is why I don't see how anyone can know which movements of the blood cause which of the five basic passions, because these passions are never alone. For example, love is always accompanied by desire and joy, or by desire and sadness, and as *it* grows stronger, so do *they*. [At this point there's a gap in the manuscript.] So how is it possible to observe the difference in pulse-rate, the digestion of food, and other bodily changes that serve to reveal the nature of these movements? Also, the difference that you note in each of the passions is not the same for all •physical• constitutions: mine is such that sadness always takes away my appetite. . . .

When you speak of the external signs of these passions you say that wonder, joined to joy, makes the lungs expand in irregular spasms, thereby causing laughter. Please add to that an account of •how• wonder (which in your description

seems to operate only on the brain) can open the orifices of the heart quickly enough to bring about this effect.

The passions that you record as being the cause of sighs are apparently not always the causes, since the same result can be produced by •habit or by •a full stomach. [If you don't understand the second of these, relax! You'll see that Descartes doesn't either.]

But I have much less trouble •understanding all that you say about the passions than in •practising the cures for their excesses that you prescribe. How can we foresee all the events—the countless events!—that may intrude into our lives? And how can we prevent ourselves from intensely wanting the things that necessarily favour human survival (such as health and the means to live) but that don't depend on our free will? As for knowledge of the truth, the desire for that is so *right* that everyone naturally has it. But one would need infinite knowledge to know the right value to put upon the goods and evils that customarily arouse our feelings, because •there are many more of them than a single person could imagine, and because •this would require a perfect knowledge of everything in the world.

You have told me the principal maxims for private life, so I will settle for hearing now the maxims for public [*civile*] life; though public life often requires us to depend on people who are so unreasonable that I have always found it better in these matters to steer by experience rather than by reason.

I have been interrupted so often in writing this that I'm forced to send you my rough draft by the Alkmaar letter-carrier, having forgotten the name of the friend to whom you wanted me to address my letters. I won't risk returning your treatise to you •along with this letter•, because I'm not willing to put into the hands of a drunkard such a great prize that has given me so much satisfaction.

### Descartes writes in v.1646:

I learn from experience that I was right to include *pride* among the passions; for I can't help being touched by it when I see your favourable judgment on my little treatise about them. [The point is: he can't help feeling pride, so he is passive in respect of this pride, so this pride is a passion.] I am not at all surprised that you have also noticed faults in it, as I had no doubt that there must be many. It is a topic that I have never before studied, and I have only made a sketch without adding the colours and flourishes that would be needed for it to be presented to eyes less perceptive than yours.

[In the light of **(3)** below, this is a good place to remember that for Descartes 'thoughts' (*pensées*) include all mental states and events, feelings included.] I didn't include all the principles of physiology that I used in working out the particular movements of blood accompanying each passion, because I couldn't properly derive them without explaining how all the parts of the human body are formed; and that is such a hard task that I am not yet up to it, though I am pretty well convinced of the truth of the principles presupposed in the treatise. The chief ones are as follows.

- (1)** The function of the liver and the spleen is to contain reserve blood, less purified than the blood in the veins.
- (2)** The fire in the heart needs constantly to be fed either by the juices of food coming directly from the stomach, or in their absence by this reserve blood (since the blood in the veins expands too easily).
- (3)** Our soul and body are so linked that the thoughts that have accompanied some movements of our body since our life began still accompany them today; so that if the same movements are re-aroused by some external cause, they arouse the same thoughts; and conversely the same thoughts produce the same movements.

(4) Our body's machine is constructed in such a way that a single episode of joy or love or the like is enough to send the animal spirits through the nerves into all the muscles needed to cause the different movements of the blood which, as I said, accompany the passions.

It's true that I found it hard to pick out the movements belonging to each passion, because the passions never occur singly; but they occur in different combinations, and I tried to observe the changes that occur in the body when passions change company. If love were always joined with joy, I couldn't know which of the two produced the heat and swelling that they make us feel around the heart; but love is sometimes also joined with sadness, and then the heat is still felt but not the swelling; so I judged that the heat belongs to love and the swelling to joy. Again, although desire almost always comes with love, they aren't always present with the same intensity: we may have much love and yet have little desire because we have no hope. When that happens we don't have the •diligence and •alertness we would have if our desire were greater—from which we can judge that •;these characteristics come from desire and not from love.

I quite believe that sadness takes away many people's appetite •as you report that it takes away yours•; but because I have always found that sadness increases *my* appetite I have based my account on that. Here is the reason, I think, why people differ this respect. For some people the first thing that upset them as babies was not getting enough food, while for others it was getting food that was bad for them. In the latter case, the movement of animal spirits that takes away the appetite has ever afterwards remained joined with the passion of sadness. Some similar cause will explain other cases of slight inter-personal differences in what movements accompany what passions.

It is true that wonder has its origin in the brain, and can't be caused solely by the condition of the blood, as joy and sadness can. Yet by means of the impression it makes in the brain, it can act on the body just like any other passion, and in a way more effectively because its element of *surprise* causes the promptest of all movements. We can move a hand or a foot at the same instant (near enough) as the thought of moving them occurs, because the idea of this movement that forms in the brain sends the spirits into the muscles appropriate for this result. In the same way the idea of a pleasant thing, if it takes the mind by surprise, immediately sends the spirits into the nerves that open the orifices of the heart. •And wonder works similarly•. By the surprise it involves, wonder simply increases the force of the movement that gives rise to joy, suddenly dilating the orifices of the heart so that blood flows into the heart from the vena cava and out again via the arterial vein, thus causing the lungs suddenly to inflate.

The same external signs that usually accompany the passions may indeed sometimes be produced by other causes. Thus, a red face is not always the result of shame; it may come from the heat of a fire or from exercise, and the so-called *risus sardonius* is nothing but a spasm of the nerves in the face. [You can look it up in the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary.] One may sigh sometimes out of habit, or out of sickness, but that doesn't prevent sighs from being signs of sadness and desire when they *are* caused by these passions. I had never heard of (or seen for myself) sighs being caused by a full stomach; but when that happens I think it's a movement that nature uses to make the alimentary juices pass more rapidly through the heart, thus speeding up the emptying of the stomach. . . .

As for the remedies against excessive passions: I agree that they are hard to practise, and indeed that they aren't



sufficient to prevent bodily disorders; but they may suffice to prevent the soul from being troubled and losing its capacity for free judgment. I don't agree that for this purpose one needs an exact knowledge of the truth on every topic, or even to have foreseen in detail all possible eventualities, which would doubtless be impossible. It is enough to have imagined in a general way how things might become *worse*, and to prepare oneself to bear that. I don't think that one can sin by desiring too intensely the necessities of life; the only desires that need to be regulated and thus limited are desires for evil or superfluous things. As for desires that tend only to good, it seems to me that the more intense they are, the better. Wanting to deal leniently with my own faults, I listed a certain *irresolution* as an excusable passion [see *Passions of the Soul* 170]; but I put a much higher value on the diligence of people who are swift and ardent in doing what they conceive to be their duty even when they don't expect much profit from it.

I lead such a retired life, and have always been so far from the conduct of affairs, that it would be . . . impudent of me to undertake to list *here* the maxims one should observe in a life of public service—like the philosopher who tried *in the presence of Hannibal* to teach his hearers how to command an army! I don't doubt that your maxim is the best of all, namely that in these matters it is better to be guided by experience than by reason, because we so seldom have to do with people who are as perfectly reasonable as everyone ought to be, so that one could judge what they will do simply by considering what they ought to do; and often the best advice is not the happiest. That is why one is forced to take risks and put oneself in the power of fortune, which I hope will always be as obedient to your desires as I am.

### **Descartes writes in v.1646:**

I have to confess that I made a glaring mistake in my treatise on the passions. In order to be lenient with my own slackness in practical affairs, I classified among the 'excusable emotions' of the soul a sort of irresolution that sometimes prevents us from doing things that our judgment has approved. I'm unhappy about this, mainly because I recall that you picked on this passage as showing that I don't disapprove of acting on this emotion in matters where I can see its utility. [This must refer to something the Princess said in conversation or in the missing bit of her letter on page 43.] I freely admit that it's a very good idea to take time to deliberate before tackling any important task; but once a project is begun and we are agreed upon the main aims, I don't see any profit in delaying matters by arguing about the details. If there is such a delay and the project nevertheless succeeds, any minor benefits we may have gained from the delay are entirely outweighed by the harm done by the usual effect of such delays, namely that they sap one of energy and enthusiasm, letting the project grow stale in one's mind. And if the project fails after such a delay, all the delay does is to show the world that we had plans which failed. Also, when we delay getting on with a project it often happens—oftener with good projects than with bad ones—that the project escapes, the opportunity is lost. That's why I am convinced that decisiveness and promptness are virtues that are very necessary for projects already begun. . . .

### **Elisabeth writes in vii.1646:**

[There is no philosophy in this letter. Elisabeth and her brother Philip are about to leave the Hague to spend several months in Berlin; this is 'prescribed' by her mother and

oldest brother, as a safety measure, in the light of the fact that her young brother Philip has openly killed a man who was thought to have been courting first their mother and then one of Elisabeth's younger sisters, and that Elisabeth has defended his action. She asks Descartes to visit her before she leaves, and continues:] Six months ·in Berlin· would be too long if I weren't sure that you will continue there the charity of letting me profit from your meditations by your letters. Without their help, the northern chill and the calibre of the ·only· people I would be able to talk with would extinguish the small ray of common sense that nature has given me and that •your method has shown me how to use. I am promised that in Germany I will have enough leisure and tranquility to study •it; and your writings are the greatest and (for me) the most satisfying treasures that I'm taking with me to Berlin. I hope you'll let me take the work on the passions, though it hasn't managed to calm the passions that our latest misfortune has aroused! . . .

[In Berlin Elisabeth lives in the household of her aunt, the widow of the last Elector of Brandenburg, making her the Dowager Electress of Brandenburg. When Descartes on page 59 refers to this household as 'the Court of the Electress', that seems to involve a double dose of politeness.]

### Descartes writes in ix.1646:

[From here on, 'prince' means 'monarch' or 'ruler', as it did not only in French and Italian but also in English. When Queen Elizabeth I was told by an adviser that she 'must' do something, she said: 'Must! Is *must* a word to be addressed to princes?']

Having read the book that you commanded me to give you my opinion of—namely, Machiavelli's *The Prince*—I have found in it many precepts that strike me as very good. For example:

- a prince should always avoid the hate and contempt of his subjects (chapter 19), and
- the love of the people is worth more than fortresses (chapter 20).

But there are many others of which I cannot approve. Where I find this author to be most lacking is in his not distinguishing sharply enough between •princes who have acquired a State by just means and •those who have usurped state power by illegitimate methods; and in his offering to *all* princes maxims that are suitable only for the usurpers. If the foundations of the house you are building aren't good enough to support high thick walls, you'll have to make the walls low and flimsy; and similarly, those who have gained power by crime usually have to continue in a criminal way, and couldn't remain in power if they took to virtue.

It's with regard to princes like that that he could ·truthfully· say (in chapter 3):

- They can't avoid being hated by many people.
- It is often better for them to do great harm than to do slight harm because slight offences merely arouse a desire for revenge, whereas great ones take away the power to exact it.

Then again:

- If they tried to do good, they would inevitably go to ruin among the great number of villains scattered through the world. (chapter 15)
- One can be hated for good actions no less than for bad ones. (chapter 19)

On these foundations he rests some very tyrannical precepts:

- Ruin a whole country in order to become master of it,
- Use great cruelty, provided this is done quickly and all at once.
- Try to appear benevolent, rather than actually being so.

- Keep your word only as long as it is useful to do so.
- Dissimulate.
- Betray.

Finally, he says that in order to rule, one must strip oneself of all humanity and become more ferocious than any animal.

Wanting to offer precepts like those, which ultimately *can't* provide any security to those to whom they are offered—what a terrible reason for writing a book! He agrees himself that princes can't protect themselves from the first fellow who is willing to risk his own life to take revenge on them. It seems to me that flatly opposite advice should be given to good princes, however recently they have come to power; and it should be assumed that their means of gaining power have been just. I believe that they nearly always *are* just, when the princes in question think that they are. The line between just and unjust isn't located in the same place for sovereigns as it is for individuals. It seems to me that in these matters God gives the •right to those to whom he gives the •power. Does this mean that the acquisition of power is *never* unjust? No, because the most just actions become unjust when those who perform them think they are.

A distinction must also be made between **(3)** subjects, **(2)** friends or allies, and **(1)** enemies.

**(1)** With regard to these last, a prince has a virtual licence to do anything that brings some advantage to himself or his subjects; and I don't think it wrong in such a case to use trickery as well as force—harnessing the fox to the lion! And my permissiveness about that goes even further, because I classify as 'enemies' all those who aren't friends or allies, because •one has a right to make war on such people when it is to one's advantage to do so, and because •when their behaviour makes them suspect and alarming, one has reason to be suspicious of them. But I rule out one type of deception, which is so directly hostile to society that I don't

think it is ever permissible, although our author approves it in several places and it is all too common; and that is pretending to be a friend of those one wishes to destroy, so as to improve one's chances of taking them by surprise. Friendship is too sacred a thing to be abused in this way; and someone who will be able to feign love for someone in order to betray him deserves to be disbelieved and hated by those whom he afterwards genuinely wishes to love.

**(2)** As for allies, a prince should keep his word to them strictly, even when it is to his own disadvantage; for no disadvantage can outweigh the benefits of a reputation for keeping one's promises; and a prince can acquire this reputation only on occasions when keeping his word costs him something. But in situations where he would be altogether ruined, the law of nations releases him from his promise. If someone is to be able always to keep his promises, he should be *very* careful in making them. And although it is a good thing to be on friendly terms with most of one's neighbours, I still think it best for a prince not to have strict alliances except with ones who are less powerful than himself. For however faithful to his treaties a prince intends to be, he shouldn't expect the same from others; he should reckon on being cheated whenever his allies see an advantage from cheating him; and those who are more powerful—unlike those who are less—can see cheating as advantageous for them whenever they wish.

**(3)** There are two kinds of subjects—great people and common people. I include under the label 'great' all those who can form parties against the prince. He needs to be *very* certain of their fidelity; if he isn't, he should employ all his efforts to bring them low, and if they show any tendency to rock the ship of state, he should treat them as he would his enemies; everyone who thinks about politics agrees with this. As for his other subjects, he should above all avoid being

hated and despised by them; and I think he can always do this, provided that

- His dealings with his subjects are scrupulously *just* by their standards, i.e. in accordance with the laws they are familiar with, not being too harsh in punishment or too lenient in pardoning.
- He doesn't put himself completely in the hands of his ministers; he leaves them to pronounce the most odious condemnations, and displays his own concern with everything else.
- He maintains his dignity, not waiving any of the honour and deference the people think due to him, but not asking for more.
- He restricts his public actions to important ones and ones that everyone can approve of, taking his pleasures in private and never at anyone else's expense.
- He is immovable and inflexible.

•About that last item: I don't mean that he should be inflexible when he is developing a practical plan in his own head. He can't see everything for himself, so he must ask for advice, and hear many people's reasons, before coming to a decision. But once he has announced his decision, he must be inflexible in holding to it even if this does him harm; for it can hardly be as harmful to him as the reputation of being shallow and irresolute.

So I disapprove of the maxim in chapter 15:

Because the world is very corrupt, someone who tries always to be a good man is bound to come to grief; if a prince is to remain in power he must learn to be wicked when the occasion demands.

Unless, by 'good man' he means 'man who is superstitious and simple'—e.g. one who wouldn't dare to give battle on the sabbath, one whose conscience could never rest unless he changed his people's religion! But if we think of a 'good man'

as one who does everything that true reason commands, then it is certain that the best thing is to try *always* to be a good man.

Again, I don't believe what is said in chapter 19:

One can be hated for good actions as much as for bad ones.

Mightn't one say that envy is a kind of hatred, and that this makes Machiavelli right about this? Well, that's not what he means, and even if it were, he would be wrong. Princes are not usually *envied* by the general run of their subjects but only by great people or by their neighbours—princes ruling over neighbouring realms—among whom the very virtues that cause envy also cause fear, which is why no prince should ever abstain from doing good in order to avoid *that* sort of hatred. The only hatred that can harm a prince is the kind that comes from the people's perceiving him to be unjust or arrogant. For we see that even someone who has been condemned to death doesn't ordinarily hate his judges, if he thinks he has deserved the sentence; and even someone suffering harm that he doesn't in the least deserve will put up with it if he thinks that the prince, who is responsible for it, has somehow *had* to act in this way and hasn't enjoyed doing so; for it is thought to be just that he should prefer the general good to that of individuals. There's a difficulty only when the prince has to satisfy two groups who don't agree about what is just, as when the Roman emperors had to appease both citizens and soldiers. In such a case it's reasonable for the prince to grant something to each side. He shouldn't try suddenly to bring •reason to people who aren't used to hearing it; rather, he must try to get •it into their heads gradually, by published pamphlets, the voices of preachers, or other means. Because ultimately the common people will put up with anything that they can be persuaded is just, and they are offended by anything they imagine to

be unjust. The arrogance of princes—i.e. the usurpation of some authority or rights or honours that the people think the prince isn't entitled to—is odious to the common people only because they see it as a kind of injustice.

Moreover, I do not share the opinion that this author expresses in his preface:

Just as a man who wants to sketch mountains must be down on the plain so that he can get a better view of their shape, so also to get a good sense of the duties of a prince one must be a private citizen.

For the pencil represents only things that are seen from afar; but the chief motives of the actions of princes often depend on circumstances so special that they can't be imagined by anyone who isn't himself a prince or hasn't long shared in a prince's secrets.

So I would make myself ridiculous if I thought that I—down on the plain!—could teach you anything on this topic. That is not my purpose. All I want my letters to do is to give you some sort of *divertissement* [French, = 'entertainment', 'distraction', 'pastime'] different from the ones that I imagine you will have on your journey to Berlin. I hope the journey will be a perfectly happy one; and no doubt it will be if you resolve to follow these maxims: **(i)** Your happiness depends on yourself. **(ii)** Don't be ruled by fortune; take every advantage that it offers, but don't be unhappy over those it refuses. **(iii)** In your thought, dwell on the reasons why what happens is a good thing (there are always plenty of those reasons as well as plenty going the other way). [Descartes states these in general terms, not as imperatives to one person.] The most unavoidable evils, I think, are the diseases of the body, from which I pray to God to preserve you.

[The foregoing letter is incomplete. It's known to have included a PS in which Descartes offered 'a code' in which he and the Princess could correspond secretly.]

### Elisabeth writes on 10.x.1646:

You are right to believe that •the *divertissement* that your letters bring me is different from •the others that I have had on my way here, because it gives me a greater and more lasting satisfaction. The latter •have not been negligible: they• have given me all that the love and caring behaviour of my near and dear could give me; but I regard all that as changeable, whereas the truths that the former—the time spent on your letters—leaves traces of in my mind that will *always* contribute to the contentment of my life.

[She apologises for not having Machiavelli's *The Prince* at hand; it was supposed to reach Berlin ahead of her; but it still hasn't arrived a month later. Then:] So all I can bring to mind of this author's •maxims is what a very bad memory can provide me with from a book that I haven't looked at for six years. But I recall approving of some of •them, not as being good in themselves but because they cause less harm than the maxims followed by a number of ambitious adventurers whom I know, who merely stir things up and leave the rest to chance. The maxims of this author all tend toward stability.

It seems to me as well [i.e. as a further point to be made in his defence] that his lessons on how to govern a state start from the •kind of• state that is the most difficult to govern, where the prince has recently usurped his power, or at least is thought by the people to have done so. For such a prince, his belief in the justice of his cause could serve to ease his conscience, but •it won't do him any other good•; it won't help to govern when the laws oppose his authority, the great undermine him, and the people curse him. When a state is in that condition, a great violence does less harm than a small one, because they are equally offensive to the people, and the small violence gives rise to a long war, whereas the

great violence destroys the courage and the means of the great people who can undertake such a war. Also, when violence comes promptly and all at once, it causes more astonishment than anger; and it is easier for the people to bear than a long chain of miseries that civil wars bring.

I seem to remember that he added—or rather, taught through the example of Cesare Borgia. . . .—that the prince should have these great cruelties performed by a minister whom he can afterward sacrifice to the people's hatred. It may seem unjust of the prince to bring about the death of a man who obeyed him; but in my view the man in question doesn't deserve any better treatment if he is so barbaric and unnatural that he is willing to be employed as executioner of a whole people—never mind what his reward was to be. Speaking for myself, I would prefer the condition of the poorest peasant in Holland to that of a minister who would be willing to obey such orders or of a prince who would see no alternative to giving them.

When this author speaks of allies, he supposes them also to be as evil as they can be, and supposes matters to have come to such an extreme that the prince's choice is between •letting his entire republic collapse and •breaking his word to 'allies' who keep *their* word only as long as it suits them to do so.

But if he is wrong to have made general maxims from very rare special cases, he is joined in his error by all the Church Fathers and ancient philosophers, who do the same thing. I think they did this because they *enjoyed* asserting paradoxes that they could later explain to their students. When this man says that you'll be ruined if you try always to be a good man, we need to think about what he means by 'good man'. I don't believe he thinks of a good man as one who follows the laws of superstition. [That isn't a good translation of the French *superstition*, but it's hard to avoid. The Princess is using the word in a

now-obsolete sense in which it means 'collection of religious traditions' (translated from the Petit Robert dictionary).] Rather, he takes a good man to be one who follows this law that everyone knows:

Treat others as you would like them to treat you.

A prince can hardly ever obey this in relation to any one of his subjects, because any of the subjects must be sacrificed whenever the public good requires this. No-one said that *virtue consists in following right reason* until you said it; people have made it a matter of more particular laws or rules; so it isn't surprising that they have failed to define it well.

As for the rule that you call attention to in his preface [see page 50]—namely, 'to get a good sense of the duties of a prince one must be a private citizen'—I find that to be false, but not with the implications about you that you take its falsity to have. I regard it as false in the sense that the author was not entitled to think it true, because he never knew anyone who saw clearly into everything that he undertook to do, *as you do*, and who was therefore able, from his position as someone private and retired from the world's confusion, to teach princes how they should govern. What you have written shows that you *are* able to do this.

As for myself, who have only the •title of 'prince(ss)', and not the •duties, all I work for is to apply the rule that you put at the end of your letter, trying to make present events and states of affairs as agreeable to me as I can. I don't have much difficulty in doing this, here in a house [see note on page 4] in which I have been cherished since my childhood and where everyone *conspires* to take care of me! These efforts sometimes distract me from more useful occupations, but I can easily put up with that because of the pleasure I get from being loved by those closest to me. And there you have the reason why I haven't before this had the leisure to tell you of the happy outcome of our voyage. . . .

[She reports on a side-trip—the only one so far—to Hornhausen, a place where the waters are supposed to have curative properties. She is sceptical about this: none of the tales she was told of wonderful cures seemed to her credible.

[The Princess also writes about ‘the code that you sent me’. She is polite about it but has two technical criticisms, of which the second is hard to grasp. So are her suggestions for a kind of code that ‘would be better’. [See note on page 50.]]

I have so little leisure to write here that I’m forced to send you this draft, in which you can see from the difference in pens all the times I have been interrupted. [It would have been normal, at that time and that social level, to write a letter and then have a secretary write out a clean copy which would be sent.] But I would rather appear before you with all my faults than give you reason to think that I . . . forget my friends when I am away from them. . . .

### **Descartes writes in xi.1646:**

You did me a great favour by writing to tell me how things went with your journey and to let me know that you have arrived happily in a place where, admired and loved by all around you, you seem to have as many goods as can reasonably be wished for in this life. ·I put it that way· because: given the condition of human affairs, we would be demanding too much from fortune if we expected so many favours from it that we couldn’t even *imagine* any cause for complaint! When there’s nothing present that offends the senses, and no troublesome bodily indisposition, it is easy for a mind that follows true reason to be contented. We can, consistently with that, still •bear in mind items that are not present and •do something about them ·if that is what they call for·. We merely have to try to be dispassionate about absent items that can cause us distress. This doesn’t go

against charity; ·quite the contrary·, for it is often easier to find remedies for evils that we examine dispassionately than to find them for evils that are making us *suffer*. But bodily health and the presence of agreeable items help the mind greatly by expelling all the passions that involve sadness and admitting the ones that involve joy; and, conversely, when the mind is full of joy this contributes greatly to •the body’s being in better health and to •present objects’ appearing more agreeable.

Indeed I even venture to think that inner joy has some secret power [*secrète force*] to make fortune more favourable. I wouldn’t want to say this to anyone who wasn’t intelligent, for fear of leading him into some superstition. But my only fear in saying it to *you* is that you will mock me for becoming so credulous! And yet I have countless experiences to confirm this opinion of mine. It has often happened—indeed this has been the usual case in my experience—that things I have done with a cheerful heart and with no inner reluctance have worked out well. Even in games of chance, where fortune alone rules, I have always enjoyed better luck when I had reasons for joy than when I was sad. And my ‘superstitious’ view also gets support from the authority of Socrates. What is commonly called Socrates’s ‘inner voice’ [*génie*] was surely nothing but his being accustomed to follow his inner inclinations, and his believing that his undertakings would go well when he had a secret feeling of cheerfulness, and badly when he was sad. It would indeed be very superstitious to carry this belief as far as Socrates is said to have done: according to Plato’s report, he would even stay at home whenever his ‘inner voice’ advised him not to go out. But with regard to the important actions of life, when the situation is so complex or obscure that prudence can’t tell us what to do, I think that •it is quite right for us to follow the advice of ‘the inner voice’, and that •it is beneficial to be strongly convinced that

we'll do well in the undertakings that we embark on without reluctance and with the freedom that ordinarily accompanies joy.

Where you are now, the things in your vicinity give you nothing but satisfaction; so I take the liberty of urging you to make your own contribution to the achieving of happiness. You can do this easily, I think, by fixing your mind solely on the things before you and never about practical matters except when the messenger is ready to leave. It is good, I think, that your books couldn't be brought to you as soon as you expected, because reading them is less apt to maintain gaiety than to introduce sadness. This is especially true of the book by the 'physician of princes', whose sole topic is •the difficulties that princes face in staying in power and •the cruel or treacherous actions that he recommends to them; so that private citizens who read his book have more reason to pity the condition of princes than to envy it.

You have noted his faults—and mine—perfectly. For it is true that what led him to lay down general maxims to justify particular actions that may be virtually inexcusable was his plan to praise Cesare Borgia. Since reading *The Prince* I have read his discourse on Livy, where I found nothing bad. His main precept—'Wipe out your enemies or else make them into your friends; *never* take the middle way'—is always the safest, no doubt, but when there's no reason to be fearful it isn't the most generous way to proceed!

You have put your finger on the *secret* of the miraculous spring, namely that many wretched people broadcast its virtues. Perhaps they are hired to do this by people who hope to make a profit from it. There is certainly no such thing as a cure for all illnesses; but many people have availed themselves of this spring, and those who come away feeling better speak well of it, while no-one mentions the others! Be that as it may, the purgative quality in one of the springs,

and the white colour, softness and refreshing quality of the other, prompt the thought that these waters pass through deposits of antimony or mercury, which are both bad drugs, especially mercury. That is why I wouldn't advise anyone to drink from them. The acid and iron in the waters of Spa are much less to be feared; and because they shrink the spleen and expel melancholy I value them both.

### **Elisabeth writes on 29.xi.1646:**

I am not used enough to getting favours from fortune to look for any extraordinary ones! It is enough for me that fortune doesn't very often send my way events that would give cause for sadness to the world's greatest philosopher. Since •nothing like that has come to me during my stay here, and •everything around me is quite agreeable, and •the country air isn't bad for my health, I'm in a condition in which I can try out your lessons concerning gaiety, though I don't expect to find in the conduct of my affairs the effects you have experienced in games of chance. The good luck you had in such games when you were in a good mood for some other reason apparently came

**what Elisabeth wrote next:** de ce que vous teniez alors plus librement toutes les parties qui font que l'on gagne ordinairement.

**'translation' done by blindly plugging in seemingly equivalent words:** from your holding more freely all the parts that ordinarily make one win.

**what she means:** [Not sure. Possibly this involves technical terms from a game of chance that no longer exists.]

But if I were to have occasion to do as I like, I would not put myself again in a hazardous state, if I were in a place where I had found such contentment as in the place I have come from. . . . As for the interests of our house, I long



ago abandoned them to destiny, because I came to see that prudence itself won't get anywhere with them unless we have some other support to bring to its aid. To succeed in that matter, one would need a more powerful 'inner voice' than Socrates's; for his couldn't save him from imprisonment and death, so it wasn't something to brag about! I have also observed that when I have followed my own inclinations the outcomes have been better than when I have let myself be guided by the advice of people wiser than I am. But I don't attribute this as much to the quality of my 'inner voice' as to the fact that I had looked more carefully than they did into what might harm and what might benefit me—*of course* I had, because the topic was harm or help to *me*! If you are trying to get me to assign some role to the hidden power of my imagination, I believe you are doing this so as to reconcile me to how people think and feel in this country, especially the learned ones, who are even more pedantic and superstitious than those I knew in Holland. It's because all the people here are so poor that no-one studies or reasons about anything but the bare means of life.

I have done everything I possibly could to stay out of the hands of the doctors, so as not to have their ignorance inflicted on me. And I haven't been ill, except. . . [and she mentions some small troubles, what the doctors prescribed, and her refusal to take any of their medicines. Then:] I am made especially wary of the medicines here because everyone uses chemical means to make 'supposedly medicinal' extracts, the effects of which are immediate and dangerous. [She reports differing opinions about why the springs at Hornhausen are (allegedly) effective, and says that she will follow Descartes's advice and have nothing to do with them.]

I hope never to need to follow the precepts of the 'physician of princes', because violence and suspicion go against my grain. Still, all I blame a tyrant for is his initial plan

to usurp a country and his first execution of it; after that, the path that establishes him in power, however harsh it is, will always lead to less public harm than would a monarchy contested by battle. [Elisabeth's uncle, Charles I of England, had by this time lost his throne through a notably destructive civil war. He was decapitated a couple of years later.]

. . . . After dealing with the letters that are to be written and the compulsory civilities towards the members of this household, I spend the little remaining time that I have on rereading your works, from which the development of my reason gets more help in one hour than I would get from a lifetime of reading other things. But there's no-one 'else' here who is bright enough to understand them. I have promised this old duke of Brunswick, who is at Wolfenbüttel, to give them—i.e. copies of your works—to him adorn his library. I don't think he will use them to adorn his clogged brain, as it is already crammed full of pedantry!. . . .

### **Descartes writes in xii.1646:**

Never have I found such good news in any of the letters I have been honoured to receive from you as I found in that of 29 November. For it leads me to think that you are now healthier and more cheerful than I have ever seen you being; and I believe that these are the two chief goods one can possess in this life—apart from virtue, which you have never lacked. [He mentions, as not very important, a small medical trouble, and approves of her keeping the Berlin doctors away from it. Although it can be uncomfortable, he says.] I consider it less as an illness than as a sign of health and a means of warding off other illnesses. . . . Our doctors have learned from experience certain remedies for it, though they advise against trying to get rid of it in any season except spring, when the pores are more open and so the cause can be

eliminated more readily. . . . If the discomfort persists till the spring, it will be easy to drive the illness away by taking some gentle purgatives or refreshing broths which contain nothing but known kitchen herbs, and by not eating food that is too salty or spicy. Being bled may also help a lot; but there is some danger in this remedy, and its frequent use shortens one's life, so I advise you against it unless you are already accustomed to it. The trouble is that if you are bled at the same time of year for three or four years in a row, you are almost forced to do the same each year from then on. You are quite right not to want to try any chemical remedies. It is useless having long experience of how good they are as remedies, for if you make the slightest change in preparing them, even when you think you are doing it just right, you can wholly change their qualities and make them into poisons rather than medicines.

It is almost the same with science in the hands of people who try to expound it without knowing it well: every time they think they are correcting or amplifying something they have learned, they change it into error. The proof of this can, I think, be seen in Regius's book, which has finally seen the light of day. I would make some comments about it here, if I thought he had sent you a copy; but it's so far from here to Berlin that I believe he will await your return

before presenting it to you; and I shall also wait before telling you my views about it. [Regius had been an admiring follower of Descartes, and it was her acquaintance with him that prompted Princess Elisabeth to approach Descartes. The book mentioned here, *Fundamenta Physica*, marked the beginning of a decisive and permanent falling-out of the two men.]

I'm not surprised that in the country where you are you find that all the learned people you meet are wholly preoccupied with scholastic views; I observe that throughout Europe—even in Paris—there are few learned men who are not like that! If I had earlier known *how* few they are, I might never have had anything published. Still, I draw some comfort from the fact that although I am certain that plenty of people would like to attack me, no-one has challenged me to an open debate. Indeed I receive compliments from Jesuit fathers, who I have always thought would have the most at stake in the publication of a new philosophy and would be least likely to pardon me if they thought they could reasonably find any fault in it.

I count among my obligations to you your promise to let the Duke of Brunswick have copies of my writings; because I am sure that before you moved into that neighbourhood I didn't have the honour of being known to him. . . .