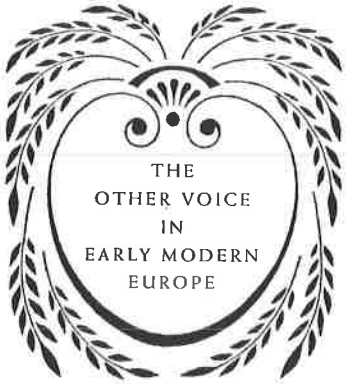


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*and*
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# THE CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN PRINCESS ELISABETH OF BOHEMIA AND RENÉ DESCARTES

*Edited and Translated*
*by Lisa Shapiro*

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## DESCARTES TO ELISABETH

AT 4:263

*Egmond, 4 August 1645*

Madame,

When I chose Seneca's *De vita beata* as the book to propose to your Highness as an agreeable topic of discussion, I did so only on the basis of the reputation of the author and the dignity of the subject matter, without thinking of the manner in which he treats it. Having since considered this manner, I do not find it sufficiently exact to merit following it through. But in order that your Highness can judge of it more easily, I will here try to explain in what way it seems to me that this subject ought to have been treated by a philosopher like him who, not having been enlightened by faith, had only natural reason as a guide.

He says very well at the beginning that *Vivere omnes beate volunt, sed ad pervidendum quid sit quod beatam vitam efficiat, caligant.*[58] But it is necessary to know 264
what *vivere beate*[59] means; I would say in French, to live happily [*vivre heureusement*], if there wasn't a difference between good fortune [*l'heur*] and true happiness [*beatitude*].[60] This good fortune depends only on those things that are external to us; so those to whom some good comes without their having done anything to try to attain it are deemed more fortunate [*plus heureux*] than sages. On the other hand, true happiness consists, it seems to me, in a perfect contentment of the mind and an internal satisfaction that those who are the most favored by fortune ordinarily do not have and that the sages acquire without fortune's favor. Thus, to live *beate*, to live happily, is nothing but to have a mind that is perfectly content and satisfied.

Considering, after this, what *quod beatam vitam efficiat* means, that is to say, what those things are which can give us this sovereign contentment, I note that they are of two sorts: those which depend on us, such as virtue and wisdom, and those which do not depend on us at all, such as honors, riches, and health. For it is certain that a wellborn man who is never ill, who lacks noth-

58. "All men want to live happily, but as to seeing clearly what brings about a happy life, they are in a fog." This sentence is the first of Seneca's dialogue.

59. Since Descartes is here attempting to interpret the Latin, I shall leave *beate* untranslated.

60. *L'heur* here adverts to good fortune, and so *heureux* is best rendered in this letter as "fortunate" in keeping with this. *La béatitude* is the sovereign felicity Descartes adverts to in his previous letter, or "sovereign contentment" below. I translate it here as "true happiness." In keeping with this I will translate its adverbial form *en béatitude* as "happily." In later letters, however, Descartes uses *heureux* to mean "happy" in concert with achieving the sovereign good. Other uses of the term are ambiguous, and many certainly include both being happy and fortunate.

ing, and who with all this is as wise and virtuous as another who is poor, unhealthy, and deformed can enjoy a greater contentment than the latter can. All the same, as a small vessel can be just as full as a larger one even though it contains less fluid, so too, taking the contentment of each for the fullness and fulfillment of desires regulated according to reason, I do not doubt that
265 those poorer and more disfavored by fortune or nature can be fully content and satisfied just as well as others, even though they do not enjoy as many goods.[61] It is only this sort of contentment that is here in question. For since the other sort is not at all in our power, seeking it would be superfluous.

So it seems to me that each person can make himself content by himself and without waiting on something from elsewhere just so long as he observes three things, which are related to the three rules of conduct that I set out in the *Discourse on the Method*.[62]

The first is that he always try to make use of his mind as well as he can, in order to know what must be done, or not done, in all the events of life.

The second is that he have a firm and constant resolution to execute all that reason advises him to do, without having the passions or appetites turn him away from it. It is the firmness of this resolution that I believe ought to be taken to be virtue, even though I know of no one who has ever explained it in this way. Instead it has been divided into many types, to which diverse names have been given in accordance with the diverse objects to which it extends.

The third is that, while he so conducts himself as much as he can in accordance with reason, he keep in mind that all the goods he does not
266 possess are, each and every one of them, entirely outside of his power. By this means, he will accustom himself not to desire them at all. For there is nothing but desire and regret or repentance that can prevent us from being content. But if we always do all that our reason tells us, we will never have any grounds to repent, even though events afterward make us see that we were mistaken. For our being mistaken is not our fault at all. What makes it the case that, for example, we do not desire to have more arms, or better, to have more tongues than we have, but that we do desire to be in better health or to have more riches, is only that we imagine that these latter things can be acquired by our conduct, or even that they are due to our nature, and that the same is not true of the others. We can strip ourselves of this opinion in

61. Interestingly, Moderata Fonte, in her *Worth of Women*, 85, uses a similar metaphor to argue that women are just as capable as men of achieving virtue.

62. See the "provisional moral code consisting of just three or four maxims" Descartes outlines in part 3 of the *Discourse* (AT 6:22ff., CSM 1:122ff.).



considering that, since we have always followed the advice of our reason, we have omitted nothing that was in our power, and that maladies and bad fortune are no less natural to man than prosperity and health.

For the rest, all sorts of desires are not incompatible with true happiness; only those that are accompanied by impatience and sadness are. It is also not necessary that our reason never be mistaken. It suffices that our conscience testifies that we have never lacked resolution and virtue to execute all the things that we have judged to be the best. Thus, virtue alone is sufficient to 267
render us content in this life. Nevertheless, when virtue is not made clear by the intellect, it can be false. That is to say, our will and resolution to do well can carry us toward bad things, even though we think them good. The contentment that comes from such virtue is not solid, and, since we ordinarily oppose this virtue to pleasures, appetites, and passions, it is very difficult to put into practice. On the other hand, the right use of reason, giving us a true knowledge of the good, prevents virtue from being false. In making virtue accord with licit pleasures, reason makes practicing virtue quite easy; and in giving us knowledge of the condition of our nature, it restrains our desires in such a way that one must admit that the greatest felicity of man depends on this right usage of reason and, by consequence, that the study that serves in acquiring it is the most useful occupation that one can have, as it is also without doubt the most agreeable and the most sweet.

From all this it seems to me that Seneca ought to have taught us all the principal truths we are required to know to facilitate the practice of virtue and to regulate our desires and passions, and thus to enjoy a natural and true happiness. This would have made his book the best and the most useful that a pagan philosopher could have written. All the same, this is only my opinion, which I submit to the judgment of your Highness, and if she does me such a favor as to alert me to what I am missing, I would owe her a great 268
obligation and will show in correcting myself that I am, Madame,

Your Highness's very humble and very obedient servant,

Descartes.

## ELISABETH TO DESCARTES

AT 2:268

*The Hague, 16 August 1645*

M. Descartes,

In examining the book that you recommended to me, I found quite a few nice parts and sentences well conceived to give me a subject for an

agreeable meditation, but not for instructing me in what it treats. For they
269 are written without method, and the author does something other than he set out to do. Instead of demonstrating the shortest path toward true happiness, he contents himself with revealing that his riches and his luxury do not preclude his reaching it. This I am obliged to write to you, so that you will not think that I am of your opinion by prejudice or by laziness. I demand nothing other than that you continue to correct Seneca. I do so, not because your manner of reasoning is most extraordinary, but because it is the most natural that I have encountered and seems to teach me nothing new, but instead allows me to draw from my mind pieces of knowledge I have not yet apprehended.[63]

It is for this reason that I do not yet know how to rid myself of the doubt that one can arrive at the true happiness of which you speak without the assistance of that which does not depend absolutely on the will. For there are diseases that destroy altogether the power of reasoning and by consequence that of enjoying a satisfaction of reason. There are others that diminish the force of reason and prevent one from following the maxims that good sense would have forged and that make the most moderate man subject to being carried away by his passions and less capable of disentangling himself from the accidents of fortune requiring a prompt resolution. When Epicurus was struggling to convince his friends that he felt no pain from his kidney stones, instead of crying like the vulgar, he was leading the life of the philosopher and not that of a prince or a captain or a courtier. For he knew that nothing could come to him from outside that would make him forget his role and cause him to fail to rise above his circumstances according to
270 his philosophy.[64] On these occasions regret seems to me inevitable, and the knowledge that to err is as natural to man as it is to be sick cannot protect us. For we also are not unaware that we were able to exempt ourselves of each particular fault.

But I assure myself that you will elucidate these points of difficulty for me, as well as many others, of which I am not aware at this moment, when you teach me the truths which must be known to facilitate the exercise of virtue. Do not forget, I pray you, your plan to honor me with your precepts and believe that I esteem them as much as they deserve it.

63. Elisabeth here seems to be referring to the Platonic model of knowledge as recollection as presented in his dialogue *Meno*.

64. Elisabeth is here no doubt referring to the death of Epicurus: he died of kidney failure after trying for two weeks to pass kidney stones. It is unclear where Elisabeth would have read of this story. Montaigne alludes to it in his essay *On the Resemblance of Children to Their Fathers*. See *The Complete Essays*, trans. M. A. Screech (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 858–87.



It has been eight days since the bad humor of a sick brother prevented me from making this request of you, since I have had to stay near him every day, either to make him, through the fondness he has for me, abide by the rules set by the doctors, or to show him my fondness by diverting him, because he is persuaded that I am capable of diverting him. I hope to divert you also in assuring you that I will be all my life, M. Descartes,

Your very affectionate friend at your service,

Elisabeth.

## DESCARTES TO ELISABETH AT 4:271

*Egmond, 18 August 1645*

Madame,

Even though I do not know if my last letters were delivered to your Highness, or if I can write anything on the subject on which I have the honor of engaging you that I don't have to think you understand better than myself, I will all the same not fail to continue, in the belief that my letters will not be any more tiresome to you than the books in your library. For although they contain no news that you have an interest in knowing promptly, nothing forces you to read them when you have some business to attend to. I will take the time I put into writing them as very well spent if you give them only the time you want to waste.

I said in my previous letter what it seemed to me Seneca ought to have treated in his book. I will now examine what he does treat there. I note in 272
general only three things: the first is that he tries to explain what the sovereign good is and that he gives different definitions, the second, that he argues against the opinion of Epicurus;[65] and the third, that he responds to those who object that philosophers do not live in accordance with the rules they prescribe. But in order to see the particular way in which he treats these things, I will spend a little time on each chapter.

In the first, he takes to task those who follow custom and example more than reason. *In the matter of how to live,* he says, *people always rely on belief, never*

65. Epicurus (c. 341–271 BCE) was a major Hellenistic philosopher whose work enjoyed a substantial revival in the seventeenth century. His philosophy is characterized by a thoroughgoing materialist metaphysics, which maintains that the world is composed of indestructible atoms which move through empty space, as well as an apparently hedonistic ethics, for he maintains that happiness consists quite simply in pleasure. However, both Descartes below and Elisabeth in what follows interpret Epicurus as meaning by "pleasure" something more than sensual pleasure and akin to contentment.

*on judgment.*[66] He approves nonetheless of our taking the advice of those he believes to be the wisest. But he wants us also to use our own judgment to examine their opinions. In this I am strongly of his opinion. For even though most people are not capable of finding the right path for themselves, there are few who cannot recognize it well enough when someone else points it out to them clearly. No matter what happens, one has grounds to be satisfied in one's conscience, and to be assured that the opinions one has concerning morality are the best that one could have, when, instead of letting oneself be led blindly by example, one has taken the care to find the most able advice, and when one has employed all the force of one's mind to examine what path
273 one ought to follow. But while Seneca strives to hone his eloquence here, he is not always exact enough in the expression of his thought. For instance, when he says, *We will become wise insofar as we separate ourselves from the crowd,*[67] he seems to teach that it is sufficient to act extravagantly to be wise, but this is not his intention.

In the second chapter he does almost nothing but repeat, in other terms, what he said in the first. He adds only that what is commonly judged to be good is not so.

Then, in the third, after having again employed many superfluous words, he finally states his opinion concerning the sovereign good, which is that *it accords with the nature of things,*[68] and that *wisdom is conforming to its law and example*[69] [i.e., of nature], and that *the truly happy life is one in accordance with one's own nature.*[70] All these explications seem very obscure to me. For it is without doubt that by "nature" he does not understand our natural inclinations, seeing as they ordinarily carry us to pursue pleasure, and he argues against doing that. But what follows in his discourse makes me think that by "the nature of things" he means the order established by God in all things that there are in the world. Considering this order as infallible and independent of our will, he says that *wisdom is being in accord with the nature of things and conforming to its law and example,*[71] that is to say that it is wisdom to acquiesce to

66. The Latin Descartes quotes reads "Nunquam de vita iudicatur . . . semper creditur." Seneca, *De vita beata,* 1.4; *Seneca: Moral Essays II,* trans. J. W. Basore (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1932, 1965), 100–101.

67. The Latin Descartes quotes reads "Sanabimur, si modo separemur a coetu" (ibid., 1.5, 100–103).

68. The Latin reads: "rerum naturae assentitur" (ibid., 3.3, 106–7).

69. The Latin reads: "ad illius legem exemplumque formari sapientia est" (ibid., 3.3, 106–7).

70. The Latin reads: "beata vita est conveniens naturae suae" (ibid., 3.3, 106–7).

71. The Latin reads: "rerum naturae assentiri & ad illius legem exemplumque formari, sapientia est" (ibid., 3.3, 106–7).



the order of things, and to do what we believe ourselves to be born to do, or better, to speak as a Christian, that it is wisdom to submit to the will of God and to follow it in all one's actions. And *the good life is one in accordance* 274
*with one's own nature* is to say that true happiness consists in following in this way the order of the world and accepting the good part of everything that happens to us. This explains practically nothing, and it is not clear enough what the connection is with what he adds immediately after—that this true happiness cannot be achieved *unless the mind is healthy*[72]—unless he means also that *to live according to nature*[73] is to live following true reason.

In the fourth and fifth chapters, he gives some other definitions of the sovereign good, all of which have some relation to the sense of the first, but none of which explains it sufficiently. Through their diversity, they make it appear that Seneca has not understood clearly what he wanted to say. For the better one conceives of something, the more determined one is to express it in only one way. That formulation where he seems to me to have hit upon it best is in the fifth chapter, where he says that *a truly happy person is one who, by benefit of reason, neither desires nor fears*[74] and that *the good life is one grounded in right and certain judgment.*[75] But so long as he does not teach any of the reasons why we ought to neither fear nor desire anything, all this helps us very little.

In these same chapters he begins to argue against those who locate true happiness in pleasure, and he continues to do so in the following chapters. This is why, before examining them, I will state my view on this question.

I note, first, that there is a difference between true happiness, the sov- 275
ereign good, and the final end or goal to which our actions ought to tend. True happiness is not the sovereign good, but it presupposes it, and it is the contentment or satisfaction of the mind that comes from possessing it. But, by the end of our actions, we can understand either the one or the other. For the sovereign good is without doubt the thing which we ought to put forward to ourselves as the goal of all our actions, and the contentment of mind that comes from it is also rightly called our end, as it is what attracts us and so makes us seek the sovereign good.

Other than this, I note that Epicurus understood the word "pleasure" in a different sense than did those who argued against him. For all his adversaries restricted the signification of this word to the pleasures of the senses. He,

72. The Latin Descartes quotes reads: "nisi sana mens est" (ibid., 6.1, 114–15).

73. The Latin Descartes quotes reads: "secundum naturam vivere" (ibid., 7.2, 116–19).

74. The Latin reads: "beatus est qui nec cupit nec timet beneficio rationis" (ibid., 5.1, 110–11).

75. The Latin reads: "beata vita est in recto certoque iudicio stabilita" (ibid., 5.3, 112–13).

on the other hand, extended it to every contentment of the mind, as one can easily judge from what Seneca and some others have written about him.

So, there were three opinions on the sovereign good and the end of our actions among the pagan philosophers: Epicurus claimed that it was pleasure; Zeno[76] wanted it to be virtue; and Aristotle made it consist of all the perfections, as much those of the body as those of the mind. These three
276 opinions can, it seems to me, be received as true and in accord with one another, provided they are interpreted favorably.

For Aristotle considered the sovereign good of the whole of human nature in general, that is, that which the most accomplished of all men can have, and so he was right to have it consist of all the perfections of which human nature is capable. But that meaning is not useful to us.

Zeno, on the contrary, considered that which each man could possess on his own. This is why he too was quite right to say that the sovereign good consists only in virtue, for it is only virtue, among the goods we can have, which depends entirely on our free will. But he represented this virtue as so severe and so opposed to pleasure, in making all the vices equal, that it seems to me that only melancholic people or minds entirely detached from bodies were able to be among his followers.

Finally, Epicurus was not wrong, in considering what true happiness consists in and the motive or the end to which our actions tend, to say that it is pleasure in general. For even though the mere knowledge of our duty could oblige us to do good actions, this would not, all the same, make us enjoy any true happiness if we did not receive any pleasure from it. But because the
277 name "pleasure" is often given to false pleasures that are accompanied or followed by anxiety, trouble, and repentance, many have thought that this view of Epicurus teaches vice. And, in fact, it does not teach virtue. When there is a prize for hitting a bull's-eye, one makes people want to hit the bull's-eye by showing them this prize. Still they cannot win the prize if they do not see the bull's-eye. And those who see the bull's-eye cannot be induced to aim for it if they do not know that there is a prize to win. Similarly, virtue, which is the bull's-eye, does not come to be strongly desired when it is seen on its own; contentment, which is the prize, cannot be acquired unless it is pursued.

This is why I think I can conclude here that true happiness consists only in the contentment of the mind, that is, in contentment in general. For even though there are kinds of contentment that depend on the body, and others which do not depend on it all, there is, all the same, no contentment but that of the mind. However, to have a contentment that is solid, it is necessary

76. Zeno of Citium (c. 344–262 BCE) was the founder of the Stoic school of philosophy.



to follow virtue, that is, to have a firm and constant will to execute all that we judge to be the best and to employ all the force of our understanding to judge well. I reserve for another time a consideration of what Seneca wrote on this, because my letter is already too long, and I have only sufficient space 278
to write that I am, Madame,

Your Highness's very humble and very obedient servant,

Descartes.

## ELISABETH TO DESCARTES

AT 4:278

*The Hague, August 1645*

M. Descartes,

I believe that you will have already seen in my last letter of the sixteenth that your letter of the fourth was given to me. I have no need to add that that letter shed more light on the subject it treats than anything else I have 279
been able to read or meditate on about it. You understand too well what you do, what I can do, and have examined what others have done so well for me to be able to doubt it, even though through an excess of generosity you pretend to be unaware of the extreme obligation I have to you for having given me an occupation so useful and so agreeable as that of reading and considering your letters. Without the last one, I would not have understood so well as I think I do now what Seneca judges true happiness to be. I attributed the obscurity I found in the said book, as I do that in the books of most ancients, to the manner of explication and the scanty connection and order they observe. Their style is altogether different from our own. The things which are problematic to us pass for hypotheses to them, and they write with the idea of accumulating admirers by surprising the imagination, rather than disciples by shaping the faculty of judgment. In this way, Seneca makes use of nice words to attract the young to follow his views, as others do by means of poetry and fables. The way he refutes the view of Epicurus seems to confirm this impression. He attributes this to that philosopher: that which we say is a law for virtue, he says he does for pleasure.[77] A little before that he says that these followers claim: I hold in effect that one does not know how to live pleasantly without living also, at the same time, honorably.[78]

77. Elisabeth quotes the following passage: "nos virtuti legem dicimus, eam ille dicit voluptati" (*De vita beata*, 13.1, 130–31).

78. Elisabeth quotes this passage: "ego enim nego quemquam posse iucunde vivere, nisi simul et honeste vivat" (ibid., 10.1, 122–23).

From which it seems clear that what they call "pleasure" is the joy and satisfaction of the mind which Seneca counts as the consequences of the supreme
280 good. Nevertheless, throughout the book he speaks of this Epicurean pleasure more as a satirist than as a philosopher, as if it were purely sensual. But I want to be charitable to him, and this is caused by your having taken the care to explicate their opinions and reconcile their differences better than they themselves knew how to do. Thereby you refute a powerful objection against the search for this sovereign good that not one of these great thinkers was able to define, and also against the authority of human reason, for it has not enlightened these excellent personages at all with the knowledge of what is most necessary to them and is closest to their hearts. I hope that you will continue, with what Seneca said, or with what he should have said, in teaching me the means of strengthening the understanding, so as to judge the best in all the actions of life. For this seems to be the only difficulty, since it is impossible not to follow the good path when it is known. Have again, I pray you, the frankness to tell me if I abuse your kindness in demanding too much of your time in the satisfaction of

Your very affectionate friend, at your service,

Elisabeth.

AT 4:281

## DESCARTES TO ELISABETH

*Egmond, 1 September 1645*

Madame,

As I was uncertain whether your Highness was in The Hague or in Rhenen, I addressed my letter through Leiden, and that letter you have done the honor of writing me was delivered to me only after the postman who carried it to Alkmaar had left. This has kept me from expressing earlier how full of glory I am that my own judgment of the book that you have taken the trouble to read is no different from your own, and that my way of reasoning appears natural enough to you. I assure myself that if you had had the leisure to think about the things of which he treats as much as I have, I could not have written anything that you could not have noted better than I. But because the age, birth, and occupations of your Highness have not been able to permit this, perhaps then what I write will be able to serve to save you a little time, and my mistakes themselves can furnish you with occasions to note the truth.

When I spoke of a true happiness which depends entirely on our free will and which all men can acquire without any assistance from elsewhere, you
282 note quite rightly that there are illnesses which, taking away the power of



reasoning, also take away that of enjoying the satisfaction of a rational mind. This shows me that what I have said generally about all men should be extended only to those who have free use of their reason and with that know the path necessary to take to reach this true happiness. For there is no one who does not desire to make himself happy [*heureux*], but many do not know the means to do so, and often a bodily indisposition prevents the will from being free. Something similar also happens when we sleep, for the most philosophical person in the world does not know how to prevent himself from having bad dreams when his temperament disposes him to them. All the same, experience shows that if one has often had some thought while one has had a free mind, one returns to it often afterward, no matter what indisposition the body has. Thus, I can say that my dreams never represent to me anything upsetting. And without doubt, one has a great benefit from being accustomed for a long time to having no sad thoughts. But we are able to be absolutely responsible for ourselves only so long as we are in our own power, and it is less upsetting to lose one's life than to lose the use of reason. For even without the teachings of faith, natural philosophy alone makes us hope for our soul to have a happier state after death than that it has at present. No fear is more upsetting to it than that of being joined to a body that entirely takes away its freedom.

For the other indispositions, which do not altogether trouble the senses 283
but simply alter the humors and make one find oneself extraordinarily inclined to sadness, anger, or some other passions, they no doubt give trouble, but they can be overcome and even give the soul occasion for a satisfaction all the greater insofar as those passions are difficult to vanquish. I also believe something similar of all external obstacles, such as the brilliance of high birth, the flatteries of the court, the adversities of fortune, and also great prosperity, which ordinarily gets more in the way of our being able to play the role of philosopher than do misfortunes. For when one has everything one wishes, one forgets to think of oneself, and, afterward, when fortune changes, one finds oneself the more surprised the more one put one's trust in it. Finally, one can say generally that nothing can entirely take away the means of making ourselves happy so long as it does not trouble our reason, and it is not always those things that appear the most upsetting that are the most harmful.

But in order to know exactly how much each thing can contribute to our contentment, it is necessary to consider what the causes that produce it are, and this is also one of the principal pieces of knowledge that can serve to facilitate virtue. For all the actions of our mind which bring us some perfection are virtuous, and all our contentment consists only in our inner testimony of 284
having some perfection. Thus, we know of no exercise of virtue (that is to say, what our reason convinces us we ought to do) from which we do not receive

satisfaction and pleasure. But there are two sorts of pleasures: those which pertain to the mind alone and others which pertain to the human being, that is, to the mind insofar as it is united to a body. These latter ones, presenting themselves confusedly to the imagination, often appear to be much greater than they are, especially before we possess them; and this is the source of all the evils and errors of life. For, according to the rule of reason, each pleasure ought to be measured by the greatness of the perfection it produces, and this is how we measure those whose causes are clearly known to us. But often passion makes us believe that certain things are much better and more desirable than they are. Then, when we have taken great pain to acquire them and lost, in the meantime, the occasion to possess other truer goods, the enjoyment makes us know their defects and from this arises disdain, regret, and repentance. That is why the true duty of reason is to examine the just value of all the goods whose acquisition seems to depend in some way on our conduct, in order that we will never fail to employ all our care in trying to procure those which are, in fact, the most desirable. In regard to which, if fortune is op-
285 posed to our plans and prevents them from succeeding, we will have at least the satisfaction of having lost nothing by our fault, and will not fail to enjoy the natural true happiness which will have been in our power to acquire.

Thus, for example, anger can sometimes excite in us desires for vengeance so violent that it makes us imagine more pleasure in punishing our enemy than in protecting our honor or our life, and we will expose ourselves imprudently to losing both the one and the other for this end. On the other hand, if reason examines what is the good or the perfection on which this pleasure drawn from vengeance is founded, it will find none other there (at least when this vengeance does not serve to prevent the recurrence of what we take offense at) but that it makes us imagine that we have some sort of superiority and some advantage over those on whom we seek vengeance. This is often only a vain imagination, which does not merit being valued in comparison with honor or life, or even in comparison with the satisfaction one would have in seeing oneself master of one's anger in abstaining from seeking vengeance.

And something similar occurs with all other passions. For there are none which do not represent to us the good to which they tend more vividly than is merited and which do not make us imagine pleasures much greater before we possess them than we find them afterward, once we have them. Because of this we commonly blame pleasure, since we use this word only to signify
286 pleasures that often trick us by their appearance, and make us neglect other much more solid ones, which we do not so much look forward to and which are ordinarily those of the mind alone. I say "ordinarily," for all of the pleasures of the mind are not praiseworthy, since they can be founded on a false opinion, as is the pleasure we take in slander, which is founded only on the fact that we think we will be valued more, the less others are valued. They can also trick us by their appearance, when some strong passion accompanies them, as we see in the pleasure of ambition.



But the principal difference between the pleasures of the body and those of the mind consists in this: the body is subject to perpetual change, and even its conservation and its well-being depend on this change; so all the pleasures proper to it hardly last. For these proceed only from the acquisition of something that is useful to the body at the moment it receives them, and as soon as this something ceases to be useful to it, the pleasures also cease. On the other hand, the pleasures of the soul can be as immortal as can it, so long as they have a foundation so solid that neither knowledge of the truth nor any false belief can destroy it.

For the rest, the true use of our reason in the conduct of life consists only in examining and considering without passion the value of all perfections, those of the body as much as those of the mind, that can be acquired by our 287 conduct, in order that, being ordinarily obliged to deprive ourselves of some of them in order to have others, we will always choose the best. And since those of the body are the lesser, one can say generally that there is a way to make oneself happy without them. All the same, I am not of the opinion that we need to despise them entirely, nor even that we ought to free ourselves from having the passions. It suffices that we render them subject to reason, and when we have thus tamed them they are sometimes the more useful the more they tend to excess. I would have none more excessive than that which leads me to the respect and veneration I owe you and makes me be, Madame,

Your Highness's very humble and very obedient servant,

Descartes.

## ELISABETH TO DESCARTES

AT 4:287

*[The Hague] 13 September 1645*

M. Descartes, 288

If my conscience were to rest satisfied with the pretexts you offer for my ignorance, as if they were remedies for it, I would be greatly indebted to it, and would be exempted from repenting having so poorly employed the time I have enjoyed the use of reason, which I have had longer than others of my age, since my birth and fortune have forced me to exercise my judgment earlier than most, in order to lead a life that is very trying and free of the

prosperity that could prevent me from thinking of myself and also free of the subjection that would have obliged me to rely on the prudence of a governess.

All the same, neither this prosperity nor the flatteries which accompany it are, I believe, absolutely capable of removing the strength of mind of well-born minds and of preventing them from receiving any change of fortune as a philosopher. But I am persuaded that the multitude of accidents which surprise persons governing the public, without giving them the time to examine the most useful expedient, often lead them (no matter how virtuous they are) to perform actions which afterward cause them to repent. And, as you say, repenting is one of the principal obstacles to true happiness. It is true that a habit of esteeming good things according to how they can contribute
289 to contentment, measuring this contentment according to the perfections which give birth to the pleasures, and judging these perfections and these pleasures without passion will protect them from a number of faults. But in order to esteem these goods in this way, one must know them perfectly. And in order to know all those goods among which one must choose in an active life, one would need to possess an infinite science. You say that one cannot fail to be satisfied when one's conscience testifies that one has availed oneself of all the possible precautions. But this circumstance never arrives when one misses one's mark. For one always changes one's mind about the things that remained to be considered. In order to measure contentment in accordance with the perfection causing it, it would be necessary to see clearly the value of each thing, so as to determine whether those that are useful only to us or those that render us still more useful to others are preferable. The latter seem to be esteemed by those with an excess of a humor that torments itself for others, and the former by those who live only for themselves. Nevertheless each of these sorts of persons supports their inclinations with reasons strong enough to make them each continue all their lives in the same way. It is similar with other perfections of the body and of the mind, which a tacit sentiment makes reason endorse. This sentiment ought not to be called a passion because we are born with it. So tell me, if you please, just up to what point one must follow this sentiment (it being a gift of nature) and how to correct it.

I would also like to see you define the passions, in order to know them better.[79] For those who call the passions perturbations of the mind would persuade me that the force of the passions consists only in overwhelming
290 and subjecting reason to them, if experience did not show me that there are

79. This demand on Elisabeth's part can reasonably be seen as leading Descartes to write *The Passions of the Soul*. As subsequent letters reveal, Descartes responds by beginning to draft what will become that work. It was first published, in French, in 1649.



passions that do carry us to reasonable actions. But I assure myself that you will shed more light on this subject, when you explicate how the force of the passions renders them even more useful when they are subject to reason.

I will receive this favor in Riswyck in the house of the prince of Orange,[80] where we are moving, since this house is to be cleaned; but for this reason you have no need to change the address of your letters to

Your very affectionate friend at your service,

Elisabeth.

## DESCARTES TO ELISABETH AT 4:290

*Egmond, 15 September 1645*

Madame,

Your Highness has noted so exactly all the causes which have prevented Seneca from presenting his opinion regarding the sovereign good to us clearly, and your having taken the pain to read his book with such care 291
makes me fear making myself tiresome if I continue here to examine all his chapters in order. Your care in reading makes me defer responding to the difficulty it pleased you to propose to me concerning the means to strengthen the understanding in order to discern the best course in all actions of life. This is why, without ceasing now to continue with Seneca, I will try only to explain my opinion concerning this matter.

It seems to me that only two things are required in order to be always disposed to judge well: one is the knowledge of the truth, and the other is the habit of remembering and acquiescing to this knowledge every time the occasion requires. But since only God knows all things perfectly, it is necessary that we content ourselves in knowing those things that are most useful to us.

Among these, the first and the principal one is that there is a God on whom all things depend, whose perfections are infinite, whose power is immense, and whose decrees are infallible. For this teaches us to appreciate all the things that come to us, as they are sent to us expressly by God. Since the true object of love is perfection, when we elevate our mind to considering 292
God as He is, we will find ourselves naturally so inclined to love him that we will draw joy even from our afflictions, in thinking that His will is carried out as we receive them.

80. The prince of Orange and Stadholder of the Netherlands at this time was Frederick Henry. Frederick Henry was, incidentally, the brother of Elisabeth's grandmother Juliana. His son William II married Mary Henrietta Stuart, the daughter of Charles I of England.

The second thing it is necessary to know is the nature of our mind, insofar as it subsists without the body and is much more noble than it and capable of enjoying an infinite number of contentments which are not found in this life. For this prevents us from fearing death and detaches our affection from the things of the world so much that we regard all that is in the power of fortune only with contempt.

In this regard, what can also serve greatly is to judge in a dignified way the works of God, and to have an idea of the vast extent of the universe, as I have tried to present it in the third book of my *Principles*. For when we imagine that beyond the heavens there is nothing but imaginary spaces, and that all the heavens are made only for the service of the earth and the earth only for man, this makes us inclined to think that this earth is our principal home and this life our best. Instead of knowing the perfections that are truly in us, we attribute to other creatures imperfections they do not have in order to elevate ourselves above them. And entering into an impertinent presumption, we want to be counsel to God and to take charge with him of conducting the world, and this causes an infinity of anxieties and annoyances.

293 After having thus recalled the goodness of God, the immortality of our souls and the greatness of the universe, there is also one more truth the knowledge of which seems to me quite useful. This is that, even though each of us is a person separate from others and, by consequence, with interests that are in some manner distinct from those of the rest of the world, one must, all the same, think that one does not know how to subsist alone and that one is, in effect, one part of the universe and, more particularly even, one part of this earth, one part of this state, and this society, and this family, to which one is joined by his home, by his oath, by his birth. It is always necessary to prefer the interests of the whole, of which one is a part, to those of one's person in particular, though with measure and discretion. For one would be wrong to expose oneself to a great evil in order to procure only a small good for one's parents or one's country. If a man is worth more on his own than all the rest of his city, he would not be right to sacrifice himself to save it. But if one related everything to oneself, one would not fear harming other men greatly when one wanted to take something small for oneself. One would have no true friends, no faithfulness, and in general no virtue. On the other hand, in considering oneself as a part of the public, one takes pleasure in acting well toward everyone, and one does not fear even exposing one's life for the service of others when the occasion occurs. That is, one would lose one's soul, if one could, in order to save others. And
294 so this consideration is the source and origin of all the most heroic actions men do. As for those who expose themselves to death for reasons of vanity, because they hope to be praised, or of stupidity, because they do not appre-



hend the danger, I believe that they are more to be pitied than to be prized. But when someone does expose himself to death because he thinks it is his duty, or better, when he suffers some other evil in order to bring about good to others—even if he perhaps does not think upon reflection that he did it because he owes more to the public of which he is a part than to himself in particular—he does it all the same in virtue of this consideration, which is confused in his mind. One is naturally drawn to have it, when one knows and loves God as one should. For then, abandoning oneself completely to His will, one divests oneself of one's proper interests, and one has no other passion than that of doing what one believes would be agreeable to Him. In consequence of which one has satisfactions of the mind and contentments that are incomparably more valuable than all the little passing joys that depend on the senses.

Outside of these truths, which concern all our actions in general, it is necessary also to know several others, which relate more particularly to each one of them. The principal ones seem to me to be those that I noted in my last letter. That is, that all our passions represent to us the goods they incite 295
us to seek as much greater than they actually are, and that the pleasures of the body are never as lasting as those of the mind, or as large when we possess them as they appear when we hope for them. This we must note carefully, so that when we sense ourselves moved by some passion, we suspend our judgment until the passion abates, and so that we do not allow ourselves to be easily deceived by the false appearance of the goods of this world.

To this I cannot add anything else except that it is also necessary to examine in particular all the mores of the places where one lives in order to know just how far they must be followed. Even if we cannot have certain demonstrations of everything, we ought nevertheless to take a side and embrace the opinions which seem to us the most true, concerning all those things which come into play, in order that, when there is a question of action, we will never be irresolute. For it is irresolution alone that causes regret and repentance.

For the rest, I have said before that besides the knowledge of the truth, habituation is also required for being always disposed to judge well. For since we cannot always be attentive to the same thing—even though we have been convinced of some truth by reason of some clear and evident perceptions—we will be able to be turned, afterward, to believing false appearances, if we do not, through a long and frequent meditation, imprint it 296
sufficiently in our mind so that it turns into habit. In this sense, the Schools are right to say that the virtues are habits, for one rarely makes a mistake because one doesn't have theoretical knowledge of what to do, but only because one doesn't have practical knowledge, that is to say, because one doesn't have a firm habit of believing it. And so, while I here examine these

truths, I also augment my habit of believing them, I am particularly obligated to your Highness for permitting me this exchange, and there is no way that I could better employ my leisure than in expressing that I am, Madame,

Your Highness's very humble and very obedient servant,

Descartes.

When I ended this letter, I received that from your Highness of the thirteenth, but I found so many things to consider there that I dare not undertake to respond off the cuff, and I assure your Highness that I will much prefer to take a little time to think on it.

AT 4:301

## ELISABETH TO DESCARTES

*[Riswyck] 30 September [1645]*

M.Descartes

Even though your observations on Seneca's attitude toward the sover-
302 eign good have made me profit from reading that work more than I would have known how to on my own, I am not the least bit sorry to exchange them for truths as necessary as those which include the means of strengthening the understanding in order to discern which is the best of all the actions one can take in life, on the condition that you still add the explication my stupidity is in need of, that concerning the usefulness of those pieces of knowledge you set out.

The knowledge of the existence of God and his attributes can console us from the mishaps which come to us from the ordinary course of nature and from the order He has established there, such as losing one's well-being [*le bien*] in a storm, or health by an infection of the air, or friends through death. But it cannot console us from those mishaps that are brought upon us by other men. For it seems to us that the will of these men is entirely free, as we have nothing but faith alone to persuade us that God cares to rule these wills and that He has determined the fate of each person before the creation of the world.

The knowledge of the immortality of the soul, along with the knowledge that it is much more noble than the body, is as capable of making us seek death as of making us despise it, since we cannot doubt that we will live more happily exempt from the maladies and passions of the body. And I am surprised that those who claimed to be persuaded by this truth and lived without the revealed law preferred a painful life to an advantageous death.

The knowledge of the great extent of the universe, which you have
303 shown in the third book of your *Principles*, serves to detach our affections



from that which we see in it; but it also separates the particular providence, which is the foundation of theology, from the idea we have of God.

The consideration that we are part of a whole of which we must seek the advantage is, surely enough, the source of all generous actions; but I find many difficulties in the conditions which you prescribe for them. How is one to measure the evils that one brings upon oneself for the sake of the public against the good which will accrue to the public, without the evils' seeming greater to us inasmuch as our idea of them is more distinct? And which measure will we have for comparing those things that are not known to us equally well, such as our own merit and that of those with whom we live? A naturally arrogant person will always tip the balance in his favor, and a modest one will esteem himself less than he is worth.

In order to profit from the particular truths of which you speak, it is necessary to know exactly all the passions we feel and the prejudices we have, most of which are imperceptible. In observing the customs of the countries where we are, we sometimes find some very unreasonable ones that it is necessary to follow in order to avoid even greater inconveniences. Since I have been here, I have experienced a very trying illustration of this truth. For I was hoping to profit from this stay in the country by having more time to employ in study, and I have found here, without comparison, less leisure than I ever had at The Hague, because of the distractions of those who don't know what to do with themselves. And even though it is very unjust of them to deprive 304
me of real goods so that I might give them imaginary ones, I am constrained to abide by the impertinent established laws of civility so that I do not acquire any enemies. Since I began writing this letter I have been interrupted more than seven times by these annoying visits. It is an excess of goodness [on your part] which guarantees that my letters will not suffer a parallel predicament on your end and which obliges you to want to solidify my habit of receiving your thoughts by relaying them to such an unruly person as

Your very affectionate friend at your service,

Elisabeth.

## DESCARTES TO ELISABETH

AT 4:304

*Egmond, 6 October 1645*

Madame,

I have sometimes asked myself a question: whether it is better to be gay
and content, in imagining the goods one possesses to be greater and more 305
valuable than they are and not knowing or stopping to consider those one