

**A New Critical Edition and Complete English Translation of the Correspondence of René  
Descartes**

**1) Participant Information Sheet**

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## 2) Proposal

It is difficult to overstate the importance of René Descartes (1596–1650) to philosophy, even these days. Descartes always rates among the top two or three most important philosophers of the modern era, along with Immanuel Kant and David Hume. There is hardly any student of philosophy who has not read the *Meditations on First Philosophy*. And even those students and scholars, who prefer Kant and/or Hume, find it impossible to understand their favorite philosophers without making sense of Descartes, who forms the background to their philosophies. Philosophers are not alone in appreciating Descartes' works, historians of science and mathematics—intellectual historians in general interested in the early modern period, or how we came to be who and what we are at present—need to come to grips with this imposing figure. Now, when one goes beyond a first, superficial understanding of one of Descartes' primary works, whether the *Meditations*, *Discourse on Method*, or the *Passions of the Soul*, one begins to realize that the basis for many of Descartes' doctrines cannot be found in the primary works themselves. For that, one needs to consult his correspondence. To capture Descartes' thoughts on the supreme good and happiness, one must read his letters to Princess Elisabeth or Queen Christina (4 August 1645 or 20 November 1647); to understand what he thinks is the relation of God to his creation, one needs to read from his early letters to Marin Mersenne (15 April, 6 May, and 27 May, 1630); to capture his notions of “freedom of indifference” or of “principle of knowledge”, one needs to examine one of the letters to Denis Mesland (9 February 1645) and to Claude Clerselier (June or July 1646). Descartes' correspondence is absolutely crucial to the understanding of Descartes, the great philosopher, mathematician, and scientist.

Unfortunately, the standard edition of Descartes' correspondence (by Adam and Tannery) is over a century old; its second edition, almost fifty years old, improved upon the first edition significantly, but made it extremely difficult to use. And there is no complete English translation of the correspondence, just a one-volume selection of partial translations from the French and Latin (Cottingham *et al.*). A new historical-critical edition (displaying the best texts and all variants) and complete English translation of Descartes' correspondence is badly needed. Members of this research

team have been working on such a project for about a decade. They have demonstrated that they can produce an edition vastly superior, more informative and useful than the standard one. With this end in mind, they have constituted themselves into a new research team to finish the edition of the correspondence and to produce an English translation of it. They are confident that they will succeed in completing the task within four years, if they are awarded an ACLS Collaborative Research Fellowship, delivering volumes 2-4 to Oxford University Press during the length of the Fellowship and volumes 5-6 by the end of 2020.

### *Narrative Statement*

#### **Descartes' Correspondence**

Although many letters of Descartes' correspondence must be regarded as lost, a considerable number (about 800) survive in some form or another: as autograph manuscript (some 270), as contemporary copy, as contemporary printed text (in that case often based on the drafts kept by Descartes himself), or as quotations and abstracts in 17<sup>th</sup> century sources. The letters, written in Latin, French and a few in Dutch, are occasionally dated; the addressee is sometimes known; references to contemporary events and persons are at times clear. Before even beginning to use the letters, there are lots of questions to be answered, about biography and chronology, about the quality and reliability of the text, about historical events and circumstances, about scientific and philosophical context. Still, the importance of this vast body of letters is enormous. If they are properly ordered and edited and adequately annotated, they allow us to follow the evolution of Descartes' ideas, the details of his life, and the genesis of his treatises. They provide necessary background to the main works and make it possible to situate these in a wider intellectual and historical context; and, like the correspondences of Mersenne, Locke, Oldenburg, Leibniz and others, they are indispensable material for those who are interested in the various networks of philosophers and scientists that came to give rise to what is now called the scientific revolution.

### **The Edition to be Replaced: Adam and Tannery**

The modern standard edition of Descartes' works and correspondence was prepared by two French scholars, Charles Adam (1857–1940), a literary historian, and Paul Tannery (1843–1904), a historian of science and mathematics. It was published between 1897 and 1913 in 11 volumes, completed by a biography (written by Adam) and a volume of supplements and indices (the edition is usually referred to as AT).

Adam and Tannery managed to retrieve much unknown material, publishing almost 600 letters. Still, their edition is far from complete. It does not contain Descartes' correspondence with Constantijn Huygens (1596–1687), a collection of 141 autograph letters to and from Descartes. Not only does the Huygens correspondence span a large portion of Descartes' active life, but most of the letters are carefully dated (the complete collection was published by Leon Roth in 1926).

Adam, who was still alive when Roth published the Huygens correspondence, realized that this publication made it necessary to revise extensively the dates of many other letters. His conclusions, first published in the *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger* of 1933, found their way into a new edition of the correspondence, which he undertook together with Gérard Milhaud (8 vols., 1936–1963, referred to as AM). The edition is little known outside France, it is not a critical edition, and it does not contain any notes; all Adam and Milhaud added were very brief biographies of Descartes' correspondents. Moreover, the dating of the letters is still far from perfect.

In the 1960s, when the original AT edition was sold out, it was realized that a new edition of the works and the letters was necessary. However, it was believed that a new edition would take many years and would involve the collaboration of many specialists, but that something had to be done fairly quickly. Accordingly, a provisional solution was found. The original AT edition was reprinted photographically, with new supplements at the end of each volume, containing the letters published after 1913 — the letters from Roth's edition in photographic reproduction as well — and critical notes in which more recent scholarship was taken into account. The result is a labyrinth of texts and notes, which constitutes a nightmare even for specialists; old notes with erroneous information are kept and

new notes with contradictory information are placed in the supplements. Many imperfections remain in the new edition and letters discovered after 1970 are obviously not included, not even in the latest 1996 reprint.

### **English Translations**

Anyone who does not feel comfortable with French and Latin (and there are relatively few who do these days) is positively discouraged from using the AT or the out of print AM edition. Until recently the largest selection was the single volume by Anthony Kenny (*Philosophical Letters*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1970), in which “scientific” and mathematical letters were deliberately left out. The situation improved slightly with the publication of a selection of *Descartes’ Philosophical Writings* by John Cottingham *et al.* (2 vols., Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984–1985), which followed in 1991 with a one volume selection of the correspondence, an expanded version of the Kenny selection. Again, it should be emphasized that the selection by Cottingham *et al.* is limited to a small part of the letters (no more than 208 letters), most of them partially translated — in fact only those dealing with subjects that, from a modern point of view, are recognizably “philosophical” (and even these are often given in an incomplete form). Still, Cottingham *et al.* have given students of Descartes all over the world a tool that proves to be extremely useful, even if limited. It has stimulated a renewal of interest in Descartes’ works and especially in his correspondence. The same can be said of separate editions in English of individual correspondences, mainly that with Princess Elizabeth (e.g. *The Correspondence between Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes*, ed. and trans. Lisa Shapiro, 2007), or of separate texts (*The World and other Writings*, ed. and trans. Stephen Gaukroger, 1998), not to mention editions and translations of other relevant source material (*Descartes’ Meditations: Background Source Materials*, ed. Roger Ariew, John Cottingham, Tom Sorrell, 1998). Each and any of those publications fulfill an obvious need of students, teachers and scholars in philosophy, history of philosophy, and history of science, but their very success shows how welcome a complete translation of the correspondence would be.

## **The Project: A New Critical Edition of the Correspondence with Complete Translation**

If the above shows how necessary English translations have become, it is also a demonstration of the importance of a good critical edition; indeed, a good translation presupposes a reliable text. That a new international edition and a complete English translation of all of Descartes' letters supplied with superb analytical and historical notes is necessary is hardly controversial: it will be welcomed by all historians of philosophy, science, medicine, and mathematics and can be expected to give new impetus to studies on Descartes, not only as a philosopher, but also as a physicist, a medical theorist, and a mathematician. Indeed, the correspondence disproves the general view of Descartes as an armchair philosopher. In a letter to his Parisian friend Marin Mersenne Descartes describes an experiment in support of his conclusion that boiled water freezes quicker than unboiled water (AT II, 29). The passage never received a proper annotation by previous editors, possibly because this seemingly awkward idea is followed by Descartes' accusation of fellow scientists for being incompetent and biased conductors of experiments. In the 1960s however Descartes' observation, now known as the Mpemba Effect, was proved to be correct.

The new edition and translation of the letters should be accompanied by two additional tools: a calendar of Descartes' life and a biographical lexicon of Descartes' correspondents.

1. The *Calendar* will contain testimonies, documentary and archival material, contemporary letters (or fragments) on Descartes' life and contacts as well as reports on historical events that have been helpful either to explain references in the text of the letters or to justify their chronology. Texts in the calendar are primarily given in English translations; original sources are given in an appendix. Some samples of what is contained in the *Calendar* include the first known letter of the 11-13 year old René to his grandmother about his older brother Pierre (aged 15-18) or by Pierre about his younger brother René as well as the letter Descartes wrote to his aunt asking her to give the contents of a trunk he left with her to his valet, together with the inventory of the trunk drawn up by his aunt's lawyer. In the trunk were matching outfits in purple silk with yellow piping, etc., for master and valet. It confirms the image of Descartes as a courtier and belies the representations of him in somber Dutch clothing.

2. The *Biographical Lexicon* will contain biographies of Descartes' correspondents, his main contacts (and adversaries) and persons frequently referred to in the letters — brief biographical information on persons referred to in one or two letters is relegated to an explanatory note with the letter in question. Although in principle the entries of the Lexicon cover the subject's entire life (especially for figures not generally known and on whom there is little or no secondary literature), they concentrate on their philosophical or scientific importance and role in the biography of Descartes. Each entry is accompanied by bibliographical information on the subject's works, manuscript remains, and other correspondences, as well as secondary literature. This should be done in an economic way — the reader should not be referred to a great number of smaller articles all repeating each other. The already work done on this part of the project is substantial, and has led to great number of new insights into the lives of Descartes' contemporaries that are crucial for understanding his network. We were able to prepare, for instance, a stunning biography of Etienne de Villebressieu, of whom practically nothing was known. Villebressieu turns out to have been an internationally well known hydraulic engineer, a subject in which Descartes took an interest as well and whose advice was sought after by his Dutch friends.

Of course, the entire publication should be made accessible with a number of indices: of persons, places, works cited or referred to, and concepts. A concordance with AT should also be added to facilitate the use of the older literature.

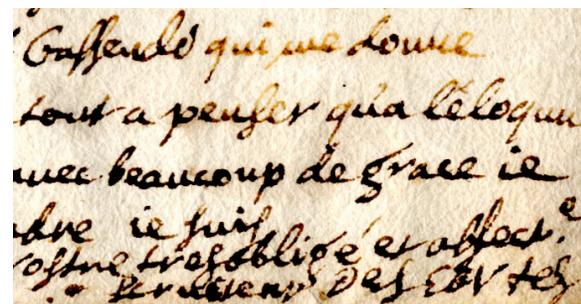
### **History of the Project**

The basis for this project was initiated by Theo Verbeek, professor of the history of modern philosophy at Utrecht University, who has written extensively on the philosophy of Descartes, his connections with Dutch scholars and his influence on University teaching in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In 2002 one of his students, Erik-Jan Bos graduated with a thesis aiming at a reconstruction of the correspondence of Descartes and the Utrecht professor of medicine Henricus Regius (1598–1679), using the disputations supervised by Regius at Utrecht University to redate much of that

correspondence, a large part of which survives in the form of fragmentary quotations by others. Verbeek and Bos subsequently prepared a pilot edition of one year of the correspondence (1643), which was printed as part of the collection of the Utrecht Research Institute of Philosophy (2003). Apart from setting right quite a number of facts, establishing new dates for 13 out of 68 letters and giving a new text for 6 letters on the basis of a rediscovered manuscripts, the format adopted in this volume proved revealing.

The reactions to the pilot edition *1643* were highly encouraging. This gave Oxford University Press the confidence that an edition of the entire correspondence along more or less the same lines would fulfill the need of many scholars all around the world as well as satisfy the high standards of reliability, accuracy, and scholarship they adopt for all their publications. The 1643 volume prepared the way for a further project on Descartes' correspondence as vehicle of scientific communication and debate, part of which could also be used for making a start with a new critical edition of Descartes' correspondence.

Since 2003 Erik-Jan Bos retrieved and relocated many letters of Descartes. One of his discoveries concerned an autograph letter of Descartes to Mersenne in the library of Haverford College (PA), which was completely unknown and shed an important light on the genesis of one Descartes' main works, the *Meditations* (1641). This discovery attracted worldwide mass media attention in 2010, not only because of its intrinsic importance, but also because the administration of



Descartes to Mersenne, 27 May 1641 (signature)

Haverford College decided to restore the letter to its original owner, the *Institut de France* in Paris. Moreover, it inspired Google for their first *Search Stories* video (Erik-Jan Bos: A Letter from an Old Friend, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=18TknKGC7tY&noredirect=1>), which has been viewed more than 400,000 times (August 2015). Whereas the discovery of unknown letters is a rarity, the comparison between the texts published in AT and their source material provides better texts on

numerous occasions. For instance, in a letter to a Dutch mathematician of 1633, Adam and Tannery accidentally omitted a few lines from a mathematical demonstration, thus rendering the passage incomprehensible and forcing subsequent readers to draw wrong conclusions (see AT I, 276, ll. 8-16).

In 2010 the project entered a new phase when Ariew, Bos and Verbeek decided to collaborate in completing the critical edition, and providing a complete English translation of Descartes' letters, a move that was warmly welcomed by Oxford University Press. Ariew, professor in the history of early modern philosophy at the University of South Florida, is an international well known Descartes specialist and has considerable experience in translating seventeenth century philosophical texts, having published selections and translations of the works of Descartes, Leibniz, Pascal, Montaigne, and others (see his bibliography). Ariew, Bos, and Verbeek constituted themselves into a new research team that formally started in Summer 2011, upon receiving a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (Scholarly Editions and Translations, Ariew and Bos as co-principal investigators). The cross-Atlantic collaboration is now essential to the project: as translator Ariew studies all texts meticulously, thus providing the final check to the output generated by Bos and Verbeek; from their side, Bos and Verbeek, experienced as they are in careful proof reading of translated Cartesian texts, serve as the ideal audience for Ariew's drafted translations. Assisted by modern technology, they have created a virtual workplace, but they also meet personally at least twice a year.

To date, more than 50% of the letters of Descartes' correspondence have been processed, that is, their text was established on the basis of the most authentic sources, their date was either confirmed or newly established, a critical apparatus containing the main variants (if any) was composed and the necessary analytical and historical notes and commentaries were added. For the commentaries and the notes the team have assured themselves of the collaboration of Carla Rita Palmerino (who specializes in early modern physics at Nijmegen University), Delphine Bellis (who specializes in Descartes' optics, on a post-doctorate appointment at Nijmegen University), Sébastien Maronne (a specialist in the history of mathematics at the University of Toulouse III), and Rudolf Rasch (a specialist in musicology, Utrecht University). The primary editorial work is done by Erik-Jan Bos. Biographical

and historical information for the biographical lexicon and the calendar was collected and processed by Theo Verbeek. Roger Ariew prepares the English translations and reviews the biographical, historical, and analytical materials. The work is coordinated in close collaboration by Ariew, Bos, and Verbeek, who all take equal credit for the final product, such as laid down in the contract with OUP.

Although much has been done, much remains to be done. We expect that by the summer of 2016, 70% of the letters will have been processed. An estimate based on the experience of the past years suggests that, if funded by the ACLS, the two years (July 2016 – July 2018) would be sufficient to finish the bulk of the scholarly edition and English translation. (See the **Research Plan**, below.)

### **Method**

Given the fact that a new edition of Descartes' correspondence would be a second generation edition, it should be used to give new impetus to Cartesian scholarship. Accordingly, much care should be given to analytical notes and historical commentaries and to correcting the still imperfect chronology of the correspondence. For all letters one should go back to the sources and, if there is more than one, decide which one should be the copy text. A choice of the text variants from those other versions should be given in a critical apparatus. Manuscript sources are personally collated anew, except when high resolution color scans of letters without difficult passages are available. Printed sources are equally examined afresh, and, if necessary, several copies of a single edition are collated.

In a new critical edition the letters must be arranged chronologically, the text of each letter would be headed by its author as well as the addressee, together with a specification of the date of the letter and the place from where the letter was sent, as well as the place where the addressee was living, followed by a short reference to the source(s) and the main previous editions. The main arguments (or problems) concerning the identity of the correspondent should be briefly summarized, as well as for the date of the text and the choice of the copy text. There must be two apparatuses at the bottom of the page: one of text variants, keyed to the line numbers, and the other containing brief analytical and historical explanatory notes, keyed to references in the main text.

An English translation is to be given on the page facing the original text for all French, Latin, and Dutch letters — additional material cited in the notes is immediately translated into English. More elaborate discussions of central or frequently recurring issues should be placed after the text and its translation. The aim of these longer notes would be to provide information that would be relevant to users of the edition.

### **Final Product and Dissemination**

A new edition of Descartes' correspondence conceived along the lines described above potentially remains a major reference for at least fifty, if not a hundred, years. After consulting its own experts, Oxford University Press has reacted most favorably to this proposal and has accepted the project for publication. In our talks with OUP, the publisher has expressed its preference for publishing the critical edition and the translation in 6 volumes, while a potential extra volume will contain indices and the concordance with the earlier AT edition. The choice for a paper edition may be regarded as a “conservative” choice, and rightly so: for a paper edition can, so to say, look after itself, whereas there is as yet no experience with the long term (20–50 years) conservation of digital editions. However, once the paper edition has been realized, OUP will also make the edition digitally available on-line.

Since the publication of the pilot edition *The Correspondence of Descartes: 1643*, the text of the letters and the annotation have been set in XML markup, based upon TEI guidelines, which allows us to use the same data set both for a paper edition and a digital edition. It is important to note that OUP has agreed that the data will become freely available for the public five years after publication of the paper edition.

A separate publication of the translations (of the whole correspondence or of particular correspondences) for the general public is anticipated.

### 3) Bibliography

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- Bos, E.-J., "Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia and Descartes' letters (1650–1665)," *Historia Mathematica* 37 (2010): 485-502.
- Bos, E.-J., and Th. Verbeek, "Conceiving the Invisible. The Role of Observation and Experiment in Descartes's Correspondence, 1630–1650", *Communicating Observations in Early Modern Letters (1500–1675). Epistolography and Epistemology in the Age of the Scientific Revolution*, ed. D. van Miert (London/Savigliano: The Warburg Institute/Nino Aragno Editore, 2013), 161-77.
- Carraud, V., « Beaucoup de temps et d'attention » : note sur les éditions récentes de la correspondance de Descartes," *Dix-septième siècle* 247 (2010): 355-62.

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- Verbeek, Th., *Descartes and the Dutch. Early Reactions to Cartesian Philosophy 1637–1650* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992).

#### 4) Research Plan

Up to July 2016. Working on the early correspondence. Volume 1 (1619-1637) is finished and will be sent to OUP by December 2015. Volume 2 (1637) is almost finished. It will be sent to OUP by December 2016. We will be working on Volume 3 (1638-1639), which is expected to be at OUP by December 2017. Thus, by the official start of the project, we will have drafts of the critical-historical edition of the letters from 1619 to the end of 1639 (which is 45% of all letters, including all *Calendar* entries for these years and *Biographical Lexicon* entries for people relevant to those dates) and first drafts of their translations. The team will meet that summer (whether virtually or in person) and put finishing touches on the edition and translation of the first three volumes.

July 2016 to December 2016. Send Volume 2 to the publisher. Work on the critical edition and English translation of the letters from 1640-1643, that is, volume 4. In December, Ariew and Bos meet in Tampa to discuss the penultimate drafts of the critical-historical edition of the letters from 1640 to the end of 1643, first drafts of their translations, and final drafts of the editions and translations of the letters from 1619 to 1639.

January 2017 to February 2017. Finish the edition and translation of the letters from 1640 to the end of 1643.

March 2017 to June 2017. Work on the critical edition and English translation of the letters from 1644 to 1646. In April, Bos studies autograph manuscripts in the National Library of France (Paris) of the letters from 1645 to 1650. In June, Ariew, Bos, Verbeek meet in Utrecht to discuss the penultimate drafts of the critical-historical edition of the letters from 1645 to the end of 1646, first drafts of their translations, and final drafts of the editions and translations of the letters to 1644.

July 2017 to August 2017. Finish the edition and translation of the letters from 1645 to the end of 1647.

September 2017 to December 2017. Send Volume 3 to the publisher. Work on the critical edition and English translation of the letters from 1648 to 1650. In December, Ariew and Bos meet in Tampa to discuss the penultimate drafts of the critical-historical edition of the letters from 1648 to

1650, first drafts of their translations, and final drafts of the editions and translations of the letters from 1645 to 1647.

January 2018 to February 2018. Finishing the edition and translation of the letters from 1648 to 1650.

March 2018 to August 2018. We will produce final drafts of all materials. During a meeting in Utrecht in June, Ariew, Bos and Verbeek will discuss the final drafts and decide upon last revisions, as well as considering the suggestions/corrections by various Descartes specialists who have seen (parts of) the final drafts. The manuscripts for the final three volumes to be delivered to Oxford University Press at the end of 2018, 2019 and 2020, respectively.