

# Philosophical Letters

Or, Modest Reflections upon Some Opinions in Natural  
Philosophy, Maintained by Several Famous and Learned  
Authors of this Age, Expressed by Way of Letters

[Preface, 1.1, 1.35–37, 1.42, 2.2–4, 2.18, 2.21–22, 2.29, 4.32]

Margaret Cavendish

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## A Preface to the Reader

*Worthy readers*, I did not write this book out of delight, love or humor to contradiction; for I would rather praise, than contradict any person or persons that are ingenious; but by reason opinion is free, and may pass without a passport, I took the liberty to declare my own opinions as other philosophers do, and to that purpose I have here set down several famous and learned author's opinions, and my answers to them in the form of letters, which was the easiest way for me to write; and by so doing, I have done that, which I would have done unto me; for I am as willing to have my opinions contradicted, as I do contradict others: for I love reason so well, that whosoever can bring most rational and probable arguments, shall have my vote, although against my own opinion. But you may say, if contradictions were frequent, there would be no agreement amongst mankind. I answer; it is very true: Wherefore contradictions are better in general books, than in particular families, and in schools better than in public states, and better in philosophy than in divinity. All which considered, I shun, as much as I can, not to discourse or write of either church or state. But I desire so much favor, or rather justice of you, *worthy readers*, as not to interpret my objections or answers any other ways than against several opinions in philosophy; for I am confident there is not anybody, that doth esteem, respect and honor learned and ingenious persons more than I do: Wherefore judge me neither to be of a contradicting humor, nor of a vain-glorious mind for dissenting from other men's opinions, but rather that it is done out of love to truth, and to make my own opinions the more intelligible, which cannot better be done than by arguing and comparing other men's opinions with them. The authors whose opinions I mention, I have read, as I found them printed, in my native language, except Descartes, who being in Latin, I had some few places translated to me out of his works; and I must confess, that since I have read the works of these learned men, I understand the names and terms of art a little better than I did before; but it is not so much as to make me a scholar, nor yet so little, but that, had I read more before I did begin to write my other book called *Philosophical Opinions*, they would have been more intelligible; for my error was, I began to write so early, that I had not lived so long as to be able to read many authors; I cannot say, I divulged my opinions as soon as I had conceived them, but yet I divulged them too soon to have them artificial and methodical. But since what is past, cannot be recalled, I must desire you to excuse those faults, which were committed for want of experience and learning. As for school-learning, had I applied myself to it, yet I am confident I should never have arrived to any; for I am so incapable of learning, that I could never attain to the knowledge of any other language but my native, especially by the rules of art:

Wherefore I do not repent that I spent not my time in learning, for I consider, it is better to write wittily than learnedly; nevertheless, I love and esteem learning, although I am not capable of it. But you may say, I have expressed neither wit nor learning in my writings: Truly, if not, I am the more sorry for it; but self-conceit, which is natural to mankind, especially to our sex, did flatter and secretly persuade me that my writings had sense and reason, wit and variety; but judgment being not called to counsel, I yielded to self-conceit's flattery, and so put out my writings to be printed as fast as I could, without being reviewed or corrected: Neither did I fear any censure, for self-conceit had persuaded me, I should be highly applauded; wherefore I made such haste, that I had three or four books printed presently after each other.

But to return to this present work, I must desire you, *worthy readers*, to read first my book called *Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, before you censure this, for this book is but an explanation of the former, wherein is contained the ground of my opinions, and those that will judge well of a building, must first consider the foundation; to which purpose I will repeat some few heads and principles of my opinions, which are these following: First, that nature is infinite, and the eternal servant of God: Next, that she is corporeal, and partly self-moving, dividable and composable; that all and every particular creature, as also all perception and variety in nature, is made by corporeal self-motion, which I name sensitive and rational matter, which is life and knowledge, sense and reason. Again, that these sensitive and rational parts of matter are the purest and subtlest parts of nature, as the active parts, the knowing, understanding and prudent parts, the designing, architectonical and working parts, nay, the life and soul of nature, and that there is not any creature or part of nature without this life and soul; and that not only animals, but also vegetables, minerals and elements, and what more is in nature, are endued with this life and soul, sense and reason: and because this life and soul is a corporeal substance, it is both dividable and composable; for it divides and removes parts from parts, as also composes and joins parts to parts, and works in a perpetual motion without rest; by which actions not any creature can challenge a particular life and soul to itself, but every creature may have by the dividing and composing nature of this self-moving matter more or fewer natural souls and lives.

These and the like actions of corporeal nature or natural matter you may find more at large described in my aforementioned book of *Philosophical Opinions*, and more clearly repeated and explained in this present. 'Tis true, the way of arguing I use, is common, but the principles, heads and grounds of my opinions are my own, not borrowed or stolen in the least from any; and the first time I divulged them, was in the year 1653, since which time I have reviewed, reformed and reprinted them twice; for at first, as my conceptions were new and my own, so my judgment was

young, and my experience little, so that I had not so much knowledge as to declare them artificially and methodically; for as I mentioned before, I was always unapt to learn by the rules of art. But although they may be defective for want of terms of art, and artificial expressions, yet I am sure they are not defective for want of sense and reason: And if anyone can bring more sense and reason to disprove these my opinions, I shall not repine or grieve, but either acknowledge my error, if I find myself in any, or defend them as rationally as I can, if it be but done justly and honestly, without deceit, spite, or malice; for I cannot choose but acquaint you, *noble readers*, I have been informed, that if I should be answered in my writings, it would be done rather under the name and cover of a woman, than of a man, the reason is, because no man dare or will set his name to the contradiction of a lady; and to confirm you the better herein, there has one chapter of my book called *The World's Olio*, treating of a monastical life, been answered already in a little pamphlet, under the name of a woman, although she did little towards it; wherefore it being a hermaphroditical book, I judged it not worthy taking notice of.<sup>1</sup> The like shall I do to any other that will answer this present work of mine, or contradict my opinions indirectly with fraud and deceit.

## Section 1

### Letter 1

*Madam*, you have been pleased to send me the works of four famous and learned authors, to wit, of two most famous philosophers of our age, Descartes and Hobbes, and of that learned philosopher and divine Dr. More, as also of that famous physician and chemist Van Helmont. Which works you have sent me not only to peruse, but also to give my judgment of them, and to send you word by the usual way of our correspondence, which is by letters, how far, and wherein I do dissent from these famous authors, their opinions in *natural philosophy*. To tell you truly, *madam*, your commands did at first much affright me, for it did appear, as if you had commanded me to get upon a high rock, and fling myself into the sea, where neither a ship, nor a plank, nor any kind of help was near to rescue me, and save my life; but that I was forced to sink, by reason I cannot swim: So I having no learning nor art to assist me in this dangerous undertaking, thought, I must of necessity perish under the rough censures of my readers, and be not only accounted a fool for my labor, but a vain and presumptuous person, I undertake things surpassing the ability of my performance;

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<sup>1</sup>[Cavendish, *The World's Olio* (1655), Book 1, Part 2; the pamphlet has not been identified.]

but on the other side I considered first, that those worthy authors, were they my censurers, would not deny me the same liberty they take themselves; which is, that I may dissent from their opinions, as well as they dissent from others; and from amongst themselves: And if I should express more vanity than wit, more ignorance than knowledge, more folly than discretion, it being according to the nature of our sex, I hoped that my masculine readers would civilly excuse me, and my female readers could not justly condemn me. Next I considered with myself, that it would be a great advantage for my book called *Philosophical Opinions*, as to make it more perspicuous and intelligible by the opposition of other opinions, since two opposite things placed near each other, are the better discerned; for I must confess, that when I did put forth my philosophical work at first, I was not so well skilled in the terms or expressions usual in *natural philosophy*; and therefore for want of their knowledge, I could not declare my meaning so plainly and clearly as I ought to have done, which may be a sufficient argument to my readers, that I have not read heretofore any *natural philosophers*, and taken some light from them; but that my opinions did merely issue from the fountain of my own brain, without any other help or assistance. Wherefore since for want of proper expressions, my named book of *philosophy* was accused of obscurity and intricacy, I thought your commands would be a means to explain and clear it the better, although not by an artificial way, as by logical arguments or mathematical demonstrations, yet by expressing my sense and meaning more properly and clearly than I have done heretofore: But the chief reason of all was, the authority of your command, which did work so powerfully with me, that I could not resist, although it were to the disgrace of my own judgment and wit; and therefore I am fully resolved now to go on as far, and as well as the natural strength of my reason will reach: But since neither the strength of my body, nor of my understanding, or wit, is able to mark every line, or every word of their works, and to argue upon them, I shall only pick out the ground opinions of the aforementioned authors, and those which do directly dissent from mine, upon which I intend to make some few reflections, according to the ability of my reason; and I shall merely go upon the bare ground of *natural philosophy*, and not mix divinity with it, as many philosophers use to do, except it be in those places, where I am forced by the author's arguments to reflect upon it, which yet shall be rather with an expression of my ignorance, than a positive declaration of my opinion or judgment thereof; for I think it not only an absurdity, but an injury to the holy profession of divinity to draw her to the proofs in *natural philosophy*; wherefore I shall strictly follow the guidance of *natural reason*, and keep to my own ground and principles as much as I can; which that I may perform the better, I humbly desire the help and assistance of your favor, that according to that real and entire affection you

bear to me, you would be pleased to tell me unfeignedly, if I should chance to err or contradict but the least probability of truth in anything; for I honor truth so much, as I bow down to its shadow with greatest respect and reverence; and I esteem those persons most, that love and honor truth with the same zeal and fervor, whether they be ancient or modern writers.

Thus, *madam*, although I am destitute of the help of arts, yet being supported by your favor and wise directions, I shall not fear any smiles of scorn, or words of reproach; for I am confident you will defend me against all the mischievous and poisonous teeth of malicious detractors. I shall besides, implore the assistance of the sacred church, and the learned schools, to take me into their protection, and shelter my weak endeavors: For though I am but an ignorant and simple woman, yet I am their devoted and honest servant, who shall never quit the respect and honor due to them, but live and die theirs, also, *madam*, your ladyship's humble and faithful servant.

## Letter 35

*Madam*, that the mind, according to your *author's* opinion, "is a substance really distinct from the body, and may be actually separated from it and subsist without it"<sup>2</sup>: If he mean the natural mind and soul of man, not the supernatural or divine, I am far from his opinion; for though the mind moveth only in its own parts, and not upon, or with the parts of inanimate matter, yet it cannot be separated from these parts of matter, and subsist by itself, as being a part of one and the same matter the inanimate is of, (for there is but one only matter, and one kind of matter, although of several degrees,) only it is the self-moving part; but yet this cannot empower it, to quit the same natural body, whose part it is. Neither can I apprehend, that the mind's or soul's seat should be in the *glandula* or kernel of the brain, and there sit like a spider in a cobweb, to whom the least motion of the cobweb gives intelligence of a fly, which he is ready to assault, and that the brain should get intelligence from the animal spirits as his servants, which run to and fro like ants to inform it<sup>3</sup>; or that the mind should, according to others' opinions, be a light, and embroidered all with ideas, like a herald's coat; and that the sensitive organs should have no knowledge in themselves, but serve only like peeping-holes for the mind, or barn-doors to receive bundles of pressures, like sheaves of corn; For there being a thorough mixture of animate, rational and sensitive, and inanimate matter, we cannot assign a certain

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<sup>2</sup>[Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy* (1644), Part 1, §60; see also Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), Meditation 6.]

<sup>3</sup>[Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul* (1649), Article 31.]

seat or place to the rational, another to the sensitive, and another to the inanimate, but they are diffused and intermixed throughout all the body; And this is the reason, that sense and knowledge cannot be bound only to the head or brain: But although they are mixed together, nevertheless they do not lose their interior natures by this mixture, nor their purity and subtlety, nor their proper motions or actions, but each moves according to its nature and substance, without confusion; the actions of the rational part in man, which is the mind or soul, are called thoughts, or thoughtful perceptions; for though man, or any other animal hath but five exterior sensitive organs, yet there be numerous perceptions made in these sensitive organs, and in all the body; nay every several pore of the flesh is a sensitive organ, as well as the eye, or the ear. But both sorts, as well the rational as the sensitive, are different from each other, although both do resemble another, as being both parts of animate matter, as I have mentioned before: Wherefore I'll add no more, only let you know, that I constantly remain, *madam*, your faithful friend and servant.

## Letter 36

*Madam*, that all other animals, besides man, want reason, your *author* endeavors to prove in his *discourse of method*, where his chief argument is, that other animals cannot express their mind, thoughts, or conceptions, either by speech or any other signs, as men can do: For, says he, “it is not for want of the organs belonging to the framing of words, as we may observe in parrots and [mag]pies, which are apt enough to express words they are taught, but understand nothing of them.”<sup>4</sup> My answer is, that one man expressing his mind by speech or words to another, doth not declare by it his excellency and supremacy above all other creatures, but for the most part more folly, for a talking man is not so wise as a contemplating man. But by reason other creatures cannot speak or discourse with each other as men, or make certain signs, whereby to express themselves as dumb and deaf men do, should we conclude, they have neither knowledge, sense, reason, or intelligence? Certainly, this is a very weak argument; for one part of a man’s body, as one hand, is not less sensible than the other, nor the heel less sensible than the heart, nor the leg less sensible than the head, but each part hath its sense and reason, and so consequently its sensitive and rational knowledge; and although they cannot talk or give intelligence to each other by speech, nevertheless each hath its own peculiar and particular knowledge, just as each particular man has his own particular knowledge, for one man’s knowledge is not another man’s knowledge; and if there be such a peculiar and particular knowledge in every several part of one animal creature, as man, well may there be such in

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<sup>4</sup>[Descartes, *Discourse on Method* (1637), Part 5.]

creatures of different kinds and sorts: But this particular knowledge belonging to each creature, doth not prove that there is no intelligence at all betwixt them, no more than the want of human knowledge doth prove the want of reason; for reason is the rational part of matter, and makes perception, observation, and intelligence, different in every creature, and every sort of creatures, according to their proper natures, but perception, observation and intelligence do not make reason, reason being the cause, and they the effects. Wherefore though other creatures have not the speech, nor mathematical rules and demonstrations, with other arts and sciences, as men; yet may their perceptions and observations be as wise as men's, and they may have as much intelligence and commerce betwixt each other, after their own manner and way, as men have after theirs: To which I leave them, and man to his conceited prerogative and excellence, resting, *madam*, your faithful friend and servant.

### Letter 37

*Madam*, concerning sense and perception, your *author's* opinion is, that it is made by a "motion or impression from the object upon the sensitive organ, which impression, by means of the nerves, is brought to the brain, and so to the mind or soul, which only perceives in the brain"<sup>5</sup>; explaining it by the example of a man being blind, or walking in dark, who by the help of his stick can perceive when he touches a stone, a tree, water, sand, and the like, which example he brings to make a comparison with the perception of light; "for," says he,

Light in a shining body, is nothing else but a quick and lively motion or action, which through the air and other transparent bodies tends towards the eye, in the same manner as the motion or resistance of the bodies, the blind man meets withal, tends through the stick towards the hand; where it is no wonder that the sun can display its rays so far in an instant, seeing that the same action, whereby one end of the stick is moved, goes instantly also to the other end, and would do the same if the stick were as long as Heaven is distant from Earth.<sup>6</sup>

To which I answer first, that it is not only the mind that perceives in the kernel of the brain, but that there is a double perception, rational and sensitive, and that the mind perceives by the rational, but the body and the sensitive organs by the sensitive perception; and as there is a double perception, so there is also a double

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<sup>5</sup>Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy* (1644), Part 4, §189.

<sup>6</sup>Descartes, *Dioptrics* (1637), Discourse 1



knowledge, rational and sensitive, one belonging to the mind, the other to the body; for I believe that the eye, ear, nose, tongue, and all the body, have knowledge as well as the mind, only the rational matter, but subtle and pure, is not encumbered with the grosser part of matter, to work upon, or with it, but leaves that to the sensitive, and works or moves only in its own substance, which makes a difference between thoughts, and exterior senses. Next I say, that it is not the motion or reaction of the bodies, the blind man meets withal, which makes the sensitive perception of these objects, but the sensitive corporeal motions in the hand do pattern out the figure of the stick, stone, tree, sand, and the like. And as for comparing the perception of the hand, when by the help of the stick it perceives the objects, with the perception of light, I confess that the sensitive perceptions do all resemble each other, because all sensitive parts of matter are of one degree, as being sensible parts, only there is a difference according to the figures of the objects presented to the senses; and there is no better proof for perception being made by the sensitive motions in the body, or sensitive organs, but that all these sensitive perceptions are alike, and resemble one another; for if they were not made in the body of the sentient, but by the impression of exterior objects, there would be so much difference betwixt them, by reason of the diversity of objects, as they would have no resemblance at all. But for a further proof of my own opinion, did the perception proceed merely from the motion, impression and resistance of the objects, the hand could not perceive those objects, unless they touched the hand itself, as the stick doth; for it is not probable, that the motions of the stone, water, sand, etc., should leave their bodies and enter into the stick, and so into the hand; for motion must be either something or nothing; if something, the stick and the hand would grow bigger, and the objects touched less, or else the touching and the touched must exchange their motions, which cannot be done so suddenly, especially between solid bodies; But if motion has no body, it is nothing, and how nothing can pass or enter or move some body, I cannot conceive. 'Tis true there is no part that can subsist singly by itself, without dependance upon each other, and so parts do always join and touch each other, which I am not against; but only I say perception is not made by the exterior motions of exterior parts of objects, but by the interior motions of the parts of the body sentient. But I have discoursed hereof before, and so I take my leave, resting, *madam*, your faithful friend and servant.

## Letter 42

*Madam*, to conclude my discourse upon the opinions of these two famous and learned authors [Hobbes and Descartes], which I have hitherto sent you in several letters, I could not choose but repeat the ground of my own opinions in this present; which

I desire you to observe well, lest you mistake anything, whereof I have formerly discoursed. First I am for self-moving matter, which I call the sensitive and rational matter, and the perceptive and architectonical part of nature, which is the life and knowledge of nature. Next I am of an opinion, that all perception is made by corporeal, figuring self-motions, and that the perception of foreign objects is made by patterning them out: as for example, the sensitive perception of foreign objects is by making or taking copies from these objects, so as the sensitive corporeal motions in the eyes copy out the objects of sight, and the sensitive corporeal motions in the ears copy out the objects of sound; the sensitive corporeal motions in the nostrils, copy out the objects of scent; the sensitive corporeal motions in the tongue and mouth, copy out the objects of taste, and the sensitive corporeal motions in the flesh and skin of the body copy out the foreign objects of touch; for when you stand by the fire, it is not that the fire, or the heat of the fire enters your flesh, but that the sensitive motions copy out the objects of fire and heat. As for my book of philosophy, I must tell you, that it treats more of the production and architecture of creatures than of their perceptions, and more of the causes than the effects, more in a general than peculiar way, which I thought necessary to inform you of, and so I remain, *madam*, your faithful friend and servant.

## Section 2

### Letter 2

*Madam*, since I spake in my last of the adoration and worship of God, you would fain know, whether we can have an idea of God? I answer, that naturally we may, and really have a knowledge of the existence of God, as I proved in my former letter, to wit, that there is a God, and that he is the *author* of all things, who rules and governs all things, and is also the God of nature: but I dare not think, that naturally we can have an idea of the essence of God, so as to know what God is in his very nature and essence; for how can there be a finite idea of an infinite God? You may say, as well as of infinite space. I answer, space is relative, or has respect to body, but there is not anything that can be compared to God; for the idea of infinite nature is material, as being a material creature of infinite material nature. You will say, how can a finite part have an idea of infinite nature? I answer, very well, by reason the idea is part of infinite nature, and so of the same kind, as material; but God being an eternal, infinite, immaterial, indivisible being, no natural creature can have an idea of him. You will say, that the idea of God in the mind is immaterial; I answer, I cannot conceive, that there can be any immaterial idea in nature; but be it granted,

yet that immaterial is not a part of God, for God is indivisible, and hath no parts; wherefore the mind cannot have an idea of God, as it hath of infinite nature, being a part of nature; for the idea of God cannot be of the essence of God, as the idea of nature is a corporeal part of nature: and though nature may be known in some parts, yet God being incomprehensible, his essence can by no ways or means be naturally known; and this is constantly believed, by, *madam*, your faithful friend and servant.

### Letter 3

*Madam*, although I mentioned in my last, that it is impossible to have an idea of God, yet your *author* is pleased to say, that “he will not stick to affirm, that the idea or notion of God is as easy, as any notion else whatsoever, and that we may know as much of him as of anything else in the world.”<sup>7</sup> To which I answer, that in my opinion, God is not so easily to be known by any creature, as man may know himself; nor his attributes so well, as man can know his own natural properties: for God’s infinite attributes are not conceivable, and cannot be comprehended by a finite knowledge and understanding as a finite part of nature; for though nature’s parts may be infinite in number, and as they have a relation to the infinite whole, if I may call it so, which is infinite nature, yet no part is infinite in itself, and therefore it cannot know so much as whole nature: and God being an infinite deity, there is required an infinite capacity to conceive him; nay, nature herself although infinite, yet cannot possibly have an exact notion of God, by reason of the disparity between God and herself; and therefore it is not probable, if the infinite servant of God is not able to conceive him, that a finite part or creature of nature, of what kind or sort soever, whether spiritual, as your *author* is pleased to name it, or corporeal, should comprehend God. Concerning my belief of God, I submit wholly to the church, and believe as I have been informed out of the *Athanasian* creed, that the Father is incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible; and that there are not three, but one incomprehensible God; Wherefore if any man can prove (as I do verily believe he cannot) that God is not incomprehensible, he must of necessity be more knowing than the whole church, however he must needs dissent from the church. But perchance your *author* may say, I raise new and prejudicial opinions, in saying that matter is eternal. I answer, the Holy Writ does not mention matter to be created, but only particular creatures, as this visible world, with all its parts, as the history or description of the creation of the world in *Genesis* plain shows; For

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<sup>7</sup>More, *The Immortality of the Soul* (1659), Book 1, Chapter 4.

God said, let it be light, and there was light; let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters; and let the waters under the Heaven be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear; and let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit-tree yielding fruit after his kind; and let there be lights in the firmament of the Heaven, to divide the day from the night, etc.

Which proves, that all creatures and figures were made and produced out of that rude and desolate heap or chaos which the Scripture mentions, which is nothing else but matter, by the powerful word and command of God, executed by his eternal servant, nature; as I have heretofore declared in a letter I sent you in the beginning concerning infinite nature. But lest I seem to encroach too much upon divinity, I submit this interpretation to the church; However, I think it not against the ground of our faith; for I am so far from maintaining anything either against church or state, as I am submitting to both in all duty, and shall do so as long as I live, and rest, *madam*, your faithful friend and servant.

#### Letter 4

*Madam*, since your *worthy* and *learned author* is pleased to mention, that an “ample experience both of men and things doth enlarge our understanding,”<sup>8</sup> I have taken occasion hence to enquire, how a man’s understanding may be increased or enlarged. The understanding must either be in parts, or it must be indivisible as one; if in parts, then there must be so many understandings as there are things understood; but if indivisible, and but one understanding, then it must dilate itself upon so many several objects. I for my part, assent to the first, that understanding increases by parts, and not by dilation, which dilation must needs follow, if the mind or understanding of man be indivisible and without parts; but if the mind or soul be indivisible, then I would fain know, how understanding, imagination, conception, memory, remembrance, and the like, can be in the mind? You will say, perhaps, they are so many faculties or properties of the incorporeal mind, but, I hope, you do not intend to make the mind or soul a deity, with so many attributes, Wherefore, in my opinion, it is safer to say, that the mind is composed of several active parts: but of these parts I have treated in my philosophy, where you will find, that all the several parts of nature are living and knowing, and that there is no part that has not life and knowledge, being all composed of rational and sensitive matter, which is the life and

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<sup>8</sup>More, *An Antidote Against Atheism* (1653), Book 2, Chapter 2.

soul of nature; and that nature being material, is composable and dividable, which is the cause of so many several creatures, where every creature is a part of nature, and these infinite parts or creatures are nature herself; for though nature is a self-moving substance, and by self-motion divides and composes herself several manners or ways into several forms and figures, yet being a knowing, as well as a living substance, she knows how to order her parts and actions wisely; for as she hath an infinite body or substance, so she has an infinite life and knowledge; and as she hath an infinite life and knowledge, so she hath an infinite wisdom: But mistake me not, *madam*; I do not mean an infinite divine wisdom, but an infinite natural wisdom, given her by the infinite bounty of the omnipotent God; but yet this infinite wisdom, life and knowledge in nature make but one infinite. And as nature hath degrees of matter, so she has also degrees and variety of corporeal motions; for some parts of matter are self-moving, and some are moved by these self-moving parts of matter; and all these parts, both the moving and moved, are so intermixed, that none is without the other, no not in any the least creature or part of nature we can conceive; for there is no creature or part of nature, but has a comixture of those mentioned parts of animate and inanimate matter, and all the motions are so ordered by nature's wisdom, as not anything in nature can be otherwise, unless by a supernatural command and power of God; for no part of corporeal matter and motion can either perish, or but rest; one part may cause another part to alter its motions, but not to quit motion, no more than one part of matter can annihilate or destroy another; and therefore matter is not merely passive, but always active, by reason of the thorough mixture of animate and inanimate matter; for although the animate matter is only active in its nature, and the inanimate passive, yet because they are so closely united and mixed together that they make but one body, the parts of the animate or self-moving matter do bear up and cause the inanimate parts to move and work with them; and thus there is an activity in all parts of matter moving and working as one body, without any fixation or rest, for all is moveable, moving and moved. All which, *madam*, if it were well observed, there would not be so many strange opinions concerning nature and her actions, making the purest and subtlest part of matter immaterial or incorporeal, which is as much, as to extend her beyond nature, and to rack her quite to nothing. But I fear the opinion of Immaterial substances in nature will at last bring in again the heathen religion, and make us believe a god *Pan, Bacchus, Ceres, Venus*, and the like, so as we may become worshippers of groves and shadows, beans and onions, as our forefathers. I say not this, as if I would ascribe any worship to nature, or make her a deity, for she is only a servant to God, and so are all her parts or creatures, which parts or creatures, although they are transformed, yet cannot be annihilated, except nature herself be annihilated, which may be, whensoever the

great God pleases; for her existence and resolution, or total destruction, depends upon God's will and decree, whom she fears, adores, admires, praises and prays unto, as being her God and master; and as she adores God, so do all her parts and creatures, and amongst the rest man, so that there is no atheist in infinite nature, at least not in the opinion of, *madam*, your faithful friend and servant.

## Letter 18

*Madam*, your author denying that fancy, reason and animadversion are seated in the brain, and that the brain is figured into this or that conception: "I demand," says he, "in what knot, loop or interval thereof doth this faculty of free fancy and active reason reside?"<sup>9</sup> My answer is, that in my opinion, fancy and reason are not made in the brain, as there is a brain, but as there is sensitive and rational matter, which makes not only the brain, but all thoughts, conceptions, imaginations, fancy, understanding, memory, remembrance, and whatsoever motions are in the head, or brain: neither doth this sensitive and rational matter remain or act in one place of the brain, but in every part thereof; and not only in every part of the brain, but in every part of the body; nay, not only in every part of a man's body, but in every part of nature. But, *madam*, I would ask those, that say the brain has neither sense, reason, nor self-motion, and therefore no perception; but that all proceeds from an immaterial principle, as an incorporeal spirit, distinct from the body, which moveth and actuates corporeal matter; I would fain ask them, I say, where their immaterial ideas reside, in what part or place of the body? and whether they be little or great? Also I would ask them, whether there can be many, or but one idea of God? If they say many, then there must be several, distinct deistical ideas; if but one, where doth this idea reside? If they say in the head, then the heart is ignorant of God; if in the heart, then the head is ignorant thereof, and so for all parts of the body; but if they say, in every part, then that idea may be disfigured by a lost member; if they say, it may dilate and contract, then I say it is not the idea of God, for God can neither contract nor extend; nor can the idea itself dilate and contract, being immaterial; for contraction and dilation belong only to bodies, or material beings: Wherefore the comparisons betwixt nature and a particular creature, and between God and nature, are improper; much more betwixt God and nature's particular motions and figures, which are various and changeable, although methodical. The same I may ask of the mind of man, as I do of the idea in the mind. Also I might ask them, what they conceive the natural mind of man to be; whether material or immaterial? If material, their opinion is rational, and so the mind is dividable and composable; if immaterial,

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<sup>9</sup>More, *An Antidote Against Atheism* (1653), Book 1, Chapter 11.

then it is a spirit; and if a spirit, it cannot possibly dilate nor contract, having no dimension nor divisibility of parts, (although your *author* proves it by the example of light; but I have expressed my meaning heretofore, that light is divisible) and if it have no dimension, how can it be confined in a material body? Wherefore when your *author* says, the mind is a substance, it is to my reason very probable; but not when he says, it is an immaterial substance, which will never agree with my sense and reason; for it must be either something, or nothing, there being no medium between, in nature. But pray mistake me not, *madam*, when I say immaterial is nothing; for I mean nothing natural, or so as to be a part of nature; for God forbid, I should deny, that God is a spiritual immaterial substance, or being; neither do I deny that we can have an idea, notion, conception, or thought of the existence of God; for I am of your *author's* opinion, that there is no man under the cope<sup>10</sup> of Heaven, that doth not by the light of nature, know, and believe there is a God; but that we should have such a perfect idea of God, as of anything else in the world, or as of ourselves, as your *author* says, I cannot in sense and reason conceive to be true or possible. Neither am I against those spirits, which the holy Scripture mentions, as angels and devils, and the divine soul of man; but I say only, that no immaterial spirit belongs to nature, so as to be a part thereof; for nature is material, or corporeal; and whatsoever is not composed of matter or body, belongs not to nature; nevertheless, immaterial spirits may be in nature, although not parts of nature. But there can neither be an immaterial nature, nor a natural immaterial; Nay, our very thoughts and conceptions of immaterial are material, as made of self-moving matter. Wherefore to conclude, these opinions in men proceed from a vain-glory, as to have found out something that is not in nature; to which I leave them, and their natural immaterial substances, like so many hobgoblins to fright children withal, resting in the mean time, *madam*, your faithful friend and servant.

## Letter 21

*Madam*, your *author* endeavors very much to prove the existency of a “natural immaterial spirit,” whom he defines to be an “incorporeal substance, indivisible, that can move itself, can penetrate, contract and dilate itself, and can also move and alter the matter.”<sup>11</sup> Whereof, if you will have my opinion, I confess freely to you, that in my sense and reason I cannot conceive it to be possible, that there is any such thing in nature; for all that is a substance in nature, is a body, and what has a body, is corporeal; for though there be several degrees of matter, as in purity,

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<sup>10</sup>["Over-arching canopy or vault" (OED).]

<sup>11</sup>[More, *The Immortality of the Soul* (1659), Book 1, Chapter 5.]

rarity, subtlety, activity; yet there is no degree so pure, rare and subtle, that can go beyond its nature, and change from corporeal to incorporeal, except it could change from being something to nothing, which is impossible in nature. Next, there is no substance in nature that is not divisible; for all that is a body, or a bodily substance, hath extension, and all extension hath parts, and what has parts, is divisible. As for self-motion, contraction and dilation, these are actions only of natural matter; for matter by the power of God is self-moving, and all sorts of motions, as contraction, dilation, alteration, penetration, etc. do properly belong to matter; so that natural matter stands in no need to have some immaterial or incorporeal substance to move, rule, guide and govern her, but she is able enough to do it all herself, by the free gift of the omnipotent God; for why should we trouble ourselves to invent or frame other unconceivable substances, when there is no need for it, but matter can act, and move as well without them and of itself? Is not God able to give such power to matter, as to an other incorporeal substance? But I suppose this opinion of natural immaterial spirits doth proceed from chemistry, where the extracts are vulgarly called spirits; and from that degree of matter, which by reason of its purity, subtlety and activity, is not subject to our grosser senses; However, these are not incorporeal, be they never so pure and subtle. And I wonder much that men endeavor to prove immaterial spirits by corporeal arts, when as art is not able to demonstrate nature and her actions; for art is but the effect of nature, and expresses rather the variety, than the truth of natural motions; and if art cannot do this, much less will it be able to express what is not in nature, or what is beyond nature; as to “trace the visible” (or rather invisible) “footsteps of the divine counsel and providence,”<sup>12</sup> or to demonstrate things supernatural, and which go beyond man’s reach and capacity. But to return to immaterial spirits, that they should rule and govern infinite corporeal matter, like so many demi-gods, by a dilating nod, and a contracting frown, and cause so many kinds and sorts of corporeal figures to arise, being incorporeal themselves, is impossible for me to conceive; for how can an immaterial substance cause a material corporeal substance, which has no motion in itself, to form so many several and various figures and creatures, and make so many alterations, and continue their kinds and sorts by perpetual successions of particulars? But perchance the immaterial substance gives corporeal matter motion. I answer, my sense and reason cannot understand, how it can give motion, unless motion be different, distinct and separable from it; nay, if it were, yet being no substance or body itself, according to your *author’s* and others opinion, the question is, how it can be transmitted or given away to corporeal matter? Your *author* may say, that his immaterial and incorporeal spirit of nature, having self-motion, doth form matter into several figures: I answer,

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<sup>12</sup>More, *An Antidote Against Atheism* (1653), Book 2, Chapter 2.



then that immaterial substance must be transformed and metamorphosed into as many several figures as there are figures in matter; or there must be as many spirits, as there are figures; but when the figures change, what doth become of the spirits? Neither can I imagine, that an immaterial substance, being without body, can have such a great strength; as to grapple with gross, heavy, dull, and dead matter; Certainly, in my opinion, no angel, nor devil, except God empower him, would be able to move corporeal matter, were it not self-moving, much less any natural spirit. But God is a spirit, and immovable; and if created natural immaterials participate of that nature, as they do of the name, then they must be immovable also. Your *author, madam*, may make many several degrees of spirits; but certainly not I, nor I think any natural creature else, will be able naturally to conceive them. He may say, perchance, there is such a close conjunction betwixt body and spirit, as I make betwixt rational, sensitive, and inanimate matter. I answer, that these degrees are all but one matter, and of one and the same nature as mere matter, different only in degrees of purity, subtlety, and activity, whereas spirit and body are things of contrary natures. In fine, I cannot conceive, how a spirit should fill up a place or space, having no body, nor how it can have the effects of a body, being none itself; for the effects flow from the cause; and as the cause is, so are its effects: And so confessing my ignorance, I can say no more, but rest, *madam*, your faithful friend and servant.

## Letter 22

*Madam*, your *author* having assigned indivisibility to the soul or spirit that moves and actuates matter, I desire to know, how one indivisible spirit can be in so many dividable parts? For there being infinite parts in nature, they must either have one infinite spirit to move them, which must be dilated infinitely, or this spirit must move severally in every part of nature: If the first, then I cannot conceive, but all motion must be uniform, or after one and the same manner; nay, I cannot understand, how there can be any dilation and contraction, or rather any motion of the same spirit, by reason if it dilate, then, (being equally spread out in all the parts of matter,) it must dilate beyond matter; and if it contract, it must leave some parts of matter void, and without motion. But if the spirit moves every part severally, then he is divisible; neither can I think, that there are so many spirits as there are parts in nature; for your *author* says, there is but one spirit of nature; I will give an easy and plain example: When a worm is cut into two or three parts, we see there is sensitive life and motion in every part, for every part will strive and endeavor to meet and join again to make up the whole body; now if there were but one indivisible life,

spirit, and motion, I would fain know, how these severed parts could move all by one spirit. Wherefore, matter, in my opinion, has self-motion in itself, which is the only soul and life of nature, and is dividable as well as composable, and full of variety of action; for it is as easy for several parts to act in separation, as in composition, and as easy in composition as in separation; Neither is every part bound to one kind or sort of motions; for we see in exterior local motions, that one man can put his body into several shapes and postures, much more can nature. But is it not strange, *madam*, that a man accounts it absurd, ridiculous, and a prejudice to God's omnipotency, to attribute self-motion to matter, or a material creature, when it is not absurd, ridiculous, or any prejudice to God, to attribute it to an immaterial creature? What reason of absurdity lies herein? Surely I can conceive none, except it be absurd and ridiculous to make that, which no man can know or conceive what it is, viz. an immaterial natural spirit, (which is as much as to say, a natural no-thing) to have motion, and not only motion, but self-motion; nay, not only self-motion, but to move, actuate, rule, govern, and guide matter, or corporeal nature, and to be the cause of all the most curious varieties and effects in nature: Was not God able to give self-motion as well to a material, as to an immaterial creature, and endow matter with a self-moving power? I do not say, *madam*, that matter hath motion of itself, so, that it is the prime cause and principle of its own self-motion; for that were to make matter a God, which I am far from believing; but my opinion is, that the self-motion of matter proceeds from God, as well as the self-motion of an immaterial spirit; and that I am of this opinion, the last chapter of my book of philosophy will inform you, where I treat of the deistical center, as the fountain from whence all things do flow, and which is the supreme cause, author, ruler and governor of all. Perhaps you will say, it is, because I make matter eternal. 'Tis true, *madam*, I do so: but I think eternity doth not take off the dependance upon God, for God may nevertheless be above matter, as I have told you before. You may ask me how that can be? I say, as well as anything else that God can do beyond our understanding: For I do but tell you my opinion, that I think it most probable to be so, but I can give you no mathematical demonstrations for it: Only this I am sure of, that it is not impossible for the omnipotent God; and he that questions the truth of it, may question Gods omnipotency. Truly, *madam*, I wonder how man can say, God is omnipotent, and can do beyond our understanding, and yet deny all that he is not able to comprehend with his reason. However, as I said, it is my opinion, that matter is self-moving by the power of God; Neither can animadversion, and perception, as also the variety of figures, prove, that there must be another external agent or power to work all this in matter; but it proves rather the contrary; for were there no self-motion in matter, there would be no perception, nor no variety of creatures in their

figures, shapes, natures, qualities, faculties, proprieties, as also in their productions, creations or generations, transformations, compositions, dissolutions, and the like, as growth, maturity, decay, etc. And for animals, were not corporeal matter self-moving, dividable and composable, there could not be such variety of passions, complexions, humors, features, statures, appetites, diseases, infirmities, youth, age, etc. Neither would they have any nourishing food, healing salves, sovereign medicines, reviving cordials, or deadly poisons. In short, there is so much variety in nature, proceeding from the self-motion of matter, as not possible to be numbered, nor thoroughly known by any creature: Wherefore I should labour in vain, if I endeavored to express any more thereof; and this is the cause that I break off here, and only subscribe myself, *madam*, your faithful friend and servant.

## Letter 29

*Madam*, touching the state or condition of the supernatural and divine soul, both in, and after this life, I must crave your excuse that I can give no account of it; for I dare affirm nothing; not only that I am no professed divine, and think it unfit to take anything upon me that belongs not to me, but also that I am unwilling to mingle divinity and natural philosophy together, to the great disadvantage and prejudice of either; for if each one did contain himself within the circle of his own profession, and nobody did pretend to be a divine philosopher, many absurdities, confusions, contentions, and the like, would be avoided, which now disturb both church and schools, and will in time cause their utter ruin and destruction; For what is supernatural, cannot naturally be known by any natural creature; neither can any supernatural creature, but the infinite and eternal God, know thoroughly everything that is in nature, she being the infinite servant of the infinite God, whom no finite creature, of what degree soever, whether natural or supernatural, can conceive; for if no angel nor devil can know our thoughts, much less will they know infinite nature; nay, one finite supernatural creature cannot, in my opinion, know perfectly another supernatural creature, but God alone, who is all-knowing: And therefore all what is said of supernatural spirits, I believe, so far as the Scripture makes mention of them; further I dare not presume to go; the like of the supernatural or divine soul: for all that I have writ hitherto to you of the soul, concerns the natural soul of man, which is material, and not the supernatural or divine soul; neither do I contradict anything concerning this divine soul, but I am only against those opinions, which make the natural soul of man an immaterial natural spirit, and confound supernatural creatures with natural, believing those spirits to be as well natural creatures and parts of nature, as material and corporeal beings are; when as there is great difference betwixt

them, and nothing in nature to be found, but what is corporeal. Upon this account I take all their relations of daemons, of the genii, and of the souls after the departure from human bodies, their vehicles, shapes, habitations, converses, conferences, entertainments, exercises, pleasures, pastimes, governments, orders, laws, magistrates, officers, executioners, punishments, and the like, rather for poetical fictions, than rational probabilities; containing more fancy, than truth and reason, whether they concern the divine or natural soul: for as for the divine soul, the Scripture makes no other mention of it, but that immediately after her departure out of this natural life, she goeth either to Heaven or hell, either to enjoy reward, or to suffer punishment, according to man's actions in this life. But as for the natural soul, she being material, has no need of any vehicles, neither is natural death anything else but an alteration of the rational and sensitive motions, which from the dissolution of one figure go to the formation or production of another. Thus the natural soul is not like a traveler, going out of one body into another, neither is air her lodging; for certainly, if the natural human soul should travel through the airy regions, she would at last grow weary, it being so great a journey, except she did meet with the soul of a horse, and so ease herself with riding on horseback. Neither can I believe souls or daemons in the air have any common-wealth, magistrates, officers and executioners in their airy kingdom; for wheresoever are governments, magistrates and executioners, there are also offenses, and where there is power to offend, as well as to obey, there may and will be sometimes rebellions and civil wars; for there being different sorts of spirits, it is impossible they should all so well agree, especially the good and evil genii, which certainly will fight more valiantly than *Hector* and *Achilles*, nay, the spirits of one sort would have more civil wars than ever the *Romans* had; and if the soul of *Caesar* and *Pompey* should meet, there would be a cruel fight between those two heroic souls; the like between *Augustus's* and *Antonius's* soul. But, *madam*, all these, as I said, I take for fancies proceeding from the religion of the gentiles, not fit for Christians to embrace for any truth; for if we should, we might at last, by avoiding to be atheists, become pagans, and so leap out of the frying-pan into the fire, as turning from divine faith to poetical fancy; and if *Ovid* should revive again, he would, perhaps, be the chief head or pillar of the church. By this you may plainly see, *madam*, that I am no Platonic; for this opinion is dangerous, especially for married women, by reason the conversation of the souls may be a great temptation, and a means to bring Platonic lovers to a nearer acquaintance, not allowable by the laws of marriage, although by the sympathy of the souls. But I conclude, and desire you, not to interpret amiss this my discourse, as if I had been too invective against poetical fancies; for that I am a great lover of them, my poetical works will witness; only I think it not fit to bring fancies into religion: Wherefore what I have

writ now to you, is rather to express my zeal for God and his true worship, than to prejudice anybody; and if you be of that same opinion, as above mentioned, I wish my letter may convert you, and so I should not account my labor lost, but judge myself happy, that any good could proceed to the advancement of your soul, from, *madam*, your faithful friend and servant.

## Section 4

### Letter 32

*Madam*, since my opinion is, that the animate part of matter, which is sense and reason, life and knowledge, is the designer, architect, and creator of all figures in nature; you desire to know, whence this animate matter, sense and reason, or life and knowledge (call it what you will, for it is all one and the same thing) is produced? I answer: it is eternal. But then you say, it is coequal with God. I answer, that cannot be: for God is above all natural sense and reason, which is natural life and knowledge; and therefore it cannot be coequal with God, except it be meant in eternity, as being without beginning and end. But if God's power can make man's soul, as also the good and evil spirits to last eternally without end, he may, by his omnipotency make as well things without beginning. You will say, if nature were eternal, it could not be created, for the word creation is contrary to eternity. I answer, *madam*, I am no scholar for words; for if you will not use the word creation, you may use what other word you will; for I do not stand upon nice words and terms, so I can but express my conceptions: Wherefore, if it be (as in reason it cannot be otherwise) that nothing in nature can be annihilated, nor anything created out of nothing, but by God's special and all-powerful decree and command, then nature must be as God has made her, until he destroy her. But if nature be not eternal, then the gods of the heathens were made in time, and were no more than any other creature, which is as subject to be destroyed as created; for they conceived their gods, as we do men, to have material bodies, but an immaterial spirit, or as some learned men imagine, to be an immaterial spirit, but to take several shapes, and so to perform several corporeal actions; which truly is too humble and mean a conception of an immaterial being, much more of the great and incomprehensible God; which I do firmly believe is a most pure, all-powerful immaterial being, which doth all things by his own decree and omnipotency without any corporeal actions or shapes, such as some fancy of daemons and the like spirits. But to return to the former question; you might as well enquire how the world, or any part of it was created, or how the variety of creatures came to be, as ask how reason and sensitive corporeal knowledge was produced.

Nevertheless, I do constantly believe, that both sensitive and rational knowledge in matter was produced from God; but after what manner or way, is impossible for any creature or part of nature to know, for God's ways are incomprehensible and supernatural. And thus much I believe, that as God is an eternal creator, which no man can deny, so he has also an eternal creature, which is nature, or natural matter. But put the case nature or natural matter was made when the world was created, might not God give this natural matter self-motion, as well as he gave self-motion to spirits and souls? And might not God endue this matter with sense and reason, as well as he endued man? Shall or can we bind up God's actions with our weak opinions and foolish arguments? Truly, if God could not act more than man is able to conceive, he were not a God of an infinite power; but God is omnipotent, and his actions are infinite, supernatural, and past finding out; wherefore he is rather to be admired, adored and worshipped, than to be ungloriously discoursed of by vain and ambitious men, whose foolish pride and presumption drowns their natural judgment and reason; to which leaving them, I rest, *madam*, your faithful friend and servant.

Excerpts, notes, and modernized text by [Trevor Pearce](#).

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