

LETTERS BY EARLY MODERN PHILOSOPHERS

INTRODUCTION

Invited editor: Filip BUYSE*

Although the habit of letter writing is gradually disappearing today, “writing a message that is written down or printed on paper and usually put in an envelope and sent to somebody” flourished during the seventeenth century.¹ In this special issue we concentrate on some of these letters. In particular, we focus on the correspondence of early modern philosophers, in which what we consider today to be scientific topics are discussed.

There was at that time no question yet of a strict distinction between early science and philosophy, however. Philosophy, in fact, was often used as a synonym for science. Nevertheless, the upcoming *nuove scienze* challenged major philosophers such as Bacon, Descartes, Boyle, Locke and Spinoza to think about metaphysical questions in a new way. The result was the development of novel explanations for natural phenomena. These explanations were new because they differed from the qualitative, peripatetic natural philosophy that had dominated the western view of nature up until then. At the same time, though, such explanations were often inspired by antique philosophies such as the atomism of Democritus and his followers.

The result of what is often specified by the problematic term “Scientific Revolution” was the fragmentation of a once-dominant philosophy into numerous, distinct disciplines. Confrontation between different views led to friction and controversy. More concretely, philosophers adopted a variety of very different standpoints on new problems such as: the mind-body problem; the existence of vacuums and atoms; the doctrine of qualities; as well as scientific interpretations of Scripture. Some of these controversies are to be found in the letters discussed in this special issue.

Scientific controversies were, of course, also discussed in published volumes. However, philosophers discussed these topics in a different way in their correspondence. The language is different, the style is different, and even the content is different. We often find more attention to historical context, personal views, and personal motives, for example. Reading letters thus sheds new light on ideas explained elsewhere, and helps us to understand the motives which encouraged their authors in the first place. Letters are also often much more accessible than published works, such as is the case with Spinoza’s work. Finally, because of the colorful, personal touch, letters are often particularly fun to read.

At the same time as the invention of new philosophies, philosophers experimented with literary genres. Old styles were revitalized: Spinoza wrote his *Ethics*

* Centre d'Histoire des Systèmes de Pensée Moderne, Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, UFR de Philosophie, 17, rue de la Sorbonne, 75231 Paris Cedex 05, France, email: filip_buyse@yahoo.com

in the Euclidean *more geometrico*, Galileo his *Dialogo* and his *Discorsi* as platonic dialogues. And new scientific literary styles appeared: for instance, Boyle's scientific essays, inspired by the famous essays of Michel de Montaigne. In 1665, Henri Oldenburg started the publication of a scientific journal which still exists today: *The philosophical Transactions*. Letters, however, had been in circulation long before, and would continue to circulate long after the early modern era came to a close.

During this period, letters were not just a private matter between two people: the sender and the receiver. On the contrary, the sender often wrote within an international network such as the Royal Society of London, the Hartlib Circle, or the Circle surrounding Mersenne or Oldenburg. Sometimes the correspondence was indirect via a secretary or correspondent such as Diodati or Oldenburg, leading to exchanges within a correspondence. Sometimes writers used pseudonyms or wrote anonymously. Moreover, the fact that people actually wrote letters led to the foundation of new networks such as the *République des Lettres*; a term most likely introduced by Pierre Bayle in 1664. Lastly, letters were often published, something which was recognized by their authors, and which undoubtedly played a role in their composition.

Several fascinating aspects of these early modern exchanges are discussed in this special issue, which originated in a workshop on *Letters by Early Modern Philosophers* at the ISSEI 2012 conference in Nicosia, Cyprus. Sadly, one of our participants passed away shortly thereafter. During our workshop, Epameinondas Vampoulis presented an interesting paper entitled "The problem of the attribute of Extension in Spinoza's correspondence", and only a month later died. The workshop was probably his last, and for this reason we would like to dedicate this collection of articles to our friend who left us far too soon.

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References

¹ *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (Oxford: OUP, 2010), 884.