Descartes's *Letter to Voetius* *The Method of Philosophy and Morality*

Theo Verbeek

Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands

t.h.m.verbeek@uu.nl

Abstract

In the *Letter to Voetius* (*Epistola ad Voetium*, 1643) Descartes defends himself against the attacks on his philosophy by the Utrecht theologian Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676). Although much of that work is devoted to a discussion of particular questions and accusations, it also contains a few chapters of a more general nature, in which Descartes discusses the social, cultural, and moral dimensions of different types of learning.

Keywords

Descartes – Voetius – (political) authority – dialectic – passions – moral dimension to learning

1 Introduction

Despite the fact that most of Descartes's work and correspondence is available in modern editions, large parts of it remain underexplored or indeed completely unknown, sometimes because they do not add much of significance to what can be found in the major texts, sometimes also because they seem inherently unattractive. Among the latter figures Descartes's *Letter to Voetius* (1643): it is long, almost two hundred pages in the Adam/Tannery edition; it is in Latin and was never translated into English; it intervenes in a complex situation, details of which are hard to understand; and it contains much that has no bearing whatsoever on Descartes's general philosophy. I suppose most people would agree with Victor Cousin (1792–1867), the first and so far the

only one to publish a French translation (1826), that “il n’y a rien là de fort important pour nous.”¹

A long time ago, I republished, together with Han van Ruler and Régine Dugardyn, a large part of the Cousin translation.² We added an introduction and a few notes, and simply reprinted it, without caring too much about its accuracy. Even so, the context, which as part of the same project, we also reconstructed, showed that the text cannot be described as “... une réfutation de deux libelles, l’un de Voet lui-même, et l’autre d’un de ses écoliers” (Cousin). Indeed, *libelle* (‘pamphlet’) gives the wrong impression of the books in question, each of which counts several hundreds of pages.³ Moreover, Schoock (1614–1669), by 1643 almost thirty years old and a professor of philosophy at Groningen, can hardly be described as an *écolier*, apart from the fact, probably unknown to Cousin, that he started his career as a student and admirer of a close friend of Descartes, Henricus Renner (1593–1639). Finally, the *Letter to Voetius* is not simply a *refutation*. Descartes uses Voetius’s *Specimen* (1643) against Maresius instead of refuting it, and virtually ignores the arguments put forward in *Admiranda methodus* (1643). In fact, those who look for Descartes’s reaction to Voetius’s and Schoock’s way of thinking are better advised to consult Regius’s *Responsio* (1642).⁴

In the preface he contributed to the *Querelle d’Utrecht*, Jean-Luc Marion mentions a few points of interest, more particularly Descartes’s newly acquired and openly confessed confidence (the fact that his philosophy is *nova* is for the first time presented as a merit), but (apart from the laws of charity) he mentions

1 There is a complete French translation in Descartes, *Œuvres*, ed. Victor Cousin, 11 vols. (Paris: Levrault, 1824–1826), vol. 11. Moreover, there is the old Dutch translation: *Brief van René Des Cartes aen den vermaerden D. Gisbertus Voetius* (Amsterdam: Van Baerdt, 1643). More recently, the text was also translated into Italian, *Opere 1637–1649*, ed. Giulia Belgioioso (Milan, 2009). I am working myself on a new French translation for the edition of Descartes’s works and correspondence in the ‘Collection Tel’ (Paris: Gallimard), chief editors Jean-Marie Beyssade and Denis Kambouchner.

2 Descartes/Schoock, *La querelle d’Utrecht*, ed. Theo Verbeek (Paris, 1988).

3 *Epistola Renati Des-Cartes ad celeberrimum virum D. Gisbertum Voetium, in qua examinantur duo libri, nuper pro Voetio Ultraieci simul editi, unus de Confraternitate Mariana, alter de Philosophia Cartesiana* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1643). The two books that are examined are: Voetius, *Specimen assertionum partim ambiguarum aut lubricarum, partim periculosarum, ex tractatu nuperrime scripto pro Sodalitatibus B. Mariae inter Reformatos erigendis, titulo “Defensio Pietatis & sinceritatis etc.” excerptarum* (Utrecht: Van Waesberge, 1643) (the book has a complex publication history, so there are copies with a title page 1642); [Schoock], *Admiranda methodus novae philosophiae Renati des Cartes* (Utrecht: Van Waesberge, 1643).

4 Regius, *Responsio sive Notae in Appendicem ad corollaria theologico-philosophica Viri Reverendi et Celeberrimi D. Voetii*, Utrecht: Van Doorn, 1642. See J.A. van Ruler, *The Crisis of Causality: Voetius and Descartes on God, Nature and Change* (Leiden, 1995).

nothing on practical philosophy.⁵ Is there one at all? To be sure, the primary aim of the *Letter to Voetius* is to defend Descartes's honour and crush the authority of Voetius. Still, there is clearly a moral dimension in so far as, according to Descartes, the conflict provides illustrations of Voetius's "malignity, absurdity, iniquity, arrogance, obstinacy," which would be "the most hateful of vices."⁶ Voetius cannot be trusted; he is driven by lust for power.⁷ Nor does he behave like a Christian, let alone like a Christian minister because he completely, and given his position as a theologian and minister wilfully, ignores the laws of Christian charity.

2 Politics and Emotions

A political dimension comes in sight when Descartes discusses the basis of Voetius's authority. According to him, it is based on his interactions with 'the people,' which Descartes analyses in considerable detail. The Latin words for *people* used by Descartes are *turba*, *vulgus*, and *plebs*—the lower orders, the masses, in other words, all those who had no formal education. Not only are they impressed by what they believe to be 'eloquence' and 'learning' (despite the fact that they do not understand a word of it); they also prefer Voetius and the likes because, instead of being castigated for their own sins, they are encouraged to hate those of others, especially those for whom they already have an aversion, like the rich, the civil authorities, the people with a different faith.⁸ It is in this way that Voetius acquired his first reputation. Moreover, the particular type of learning (*doctrina*) of people like Voetius, not only intimidates the ignorant and the uneducated, but also reinforces certain vices and personality traits in themselves: "since these scholars find themselves very learned, having memorized many things written by others to whom they ascribe authority, they develop a stupid and pedantic [*paedagogica*] arrogance."⁹ If such a scholar becomes a professor or a teacher, he increases his authority because "the lower orders [*vulgus, plebei homines*] naturally respect those whom the magistrate elects for a public post as a teacher," particularly if these "express

5 Denis Kambouchner, "Une politique des passions," in Kambouchner, *Descartes et la philosophie morale* (Paris, 2008), 225–252; see also Delphine Kolesnik-Antoine, *Descartes: une politique des passions* (Paris, 2011).

6 *Letter to Voetius* vi, AT VIII-B, 79.

7 *Letter to Voetius* vii, AT VIII-B, 127–128.

8 *Letter to Voetius* iv, AT VIII-B, 48.

9 *Letter to Voetius* iv, AT VIII-B, 43.

themselves confidently, pretend at great learning, and are praised frequently and lavishly by their colleagues—three things one invariably finds in those fake scholars.”¹⁰ If such a scholar is also a minister, the problem may become even worse, especially if he fulminates, “not against the ordinary sins of the people [*plebis*], but against the adversaries of their religion, and the authorities,” and if by his style of preaching he “excites the most diverse emotions”¹¹—clearly, what Descartes has in mind is “prophetic preaching,” a type of preaching in which Voetius seems to have excelled.

To be sure, the primary target is Voetius, but given the fact there are others like him (although Descartes also insists Voetius is exceptional, if only to isolate him from his colleagues), the problem is more general because the laws of human nature are universal:

The sermons of the scholar I just described are liked by the people [*populus*]. Such is the nature of *all men* that they like not only the pleasant emotions but also, and even more, the sad emotions [*tristes animi affectus*].¹² That is the reason why in the theatre we have not only comedies but also tragedies and why in ancient times a spectacle was made of men and beasts mauling each other; *and that is also the reason why, as long as a preacher excites anger and hatred against others*, especially against the authorities, whom the lower orders already hate instinctively, or against those of a different religion, whom they already despise because they are the cause of the war, he does not have to say anything particular, nor anything valuable, nor indeed anything intelligible: provided he speaks with energy, with clamour, with great length, and uses a large variety of insults, expressions of humility, sarcasms, difficult words, the devout people [*devota plebs*] will drink his words with more zeal, more love, more praise than those of another who, although more eloquent, exhorts his audience, not to hate the vices of others, but to correct those in themselves. Indeed, the second reminds them of what they dislike, but the first only tells them what they want to hear. For the crowd [*turba*], *who are not evil but ignorant*, it must be a great consolation every now and then to be piously moved, to start a pious anger, and to become engaged in *a pious rebellion against the authorities*—and let us not forget that whatever they do under the impulse of such a man they find by definition pious. [...] As

10 Letter to Voetius iv, AT VIII-B, 45.

11 Letter to Voetius iv, AT VIII-B, 45–46.

12 Note that Descartes still speaks of *affectus* instead of *passio* (for the theoretical importance of that second term see *Passions*, art. 1).

a result, they will take him as their main leader and agitator [*ducem hortatoremque praecipuum*] if it comes into their mind to resist the authorities or to fight the adversaries of their religion. Indeed, whatever he wants them to do they will do it with passion.¹³

The primary danger to those impressed by such a preacher is individual and personal: "an emotion which causes anger [*iram*], or hatred [*odium*], or aggression [*rixas*] is always bad for those who experience it even if the occasion is legitimate." Since little is needed to make an evil passion habitual, "someone who, if only once, allows himself to be angered for a cause that is just, will be more easily disposed to it a second time, even if that second cause is not just."¹⁴ Moreover, there is also a social danger, because a preacher like Voetius provides those emotions (anger, hatred) with an essentially pious motive and, consequently, a religious justification. As a result, 'simple women' (*mulierculae*) will imitate that preacher and, back home, quarrel with their family and neighbours. The same preacher confronts his audience with difficult theological controversies. As a result, the men cannot avoid discussing them with "family or friends of a different religion, which in this country [the United Provinces] happens all the time, and become easily involved in disputes and confrontations, and, among the lower classes [*qui vilioris sunt sortis*], in fights."¹⁵ Ultimately, there is also a political risk:

No more than any other you [*Voetius*] are free from mistakes, nor is there any privilege that elevates you above the other ministers of your religion. Consequently, if you would have the right to criticize the magistrates in the presence of the people and on your own authority, the same right should be conceded to all. But given the fact that you can be mistaken and that there are as many minds as there are men, the result would be trouble and confusion.¹⁶ *And everybody knows too well that in such a powerful commonwealth, which consists of so many members and whose prosperity entirely depends on concord, one must do everything to prevent such a thing.*¹⁷

13 Letter to Voetius iv, AT VIII-B, 47–49 (italics added).

14 For hatred, see *Passions* art. 98, 103, et 108.

15 Letter to Voetius iv, AT VIII-B, 49–50.

16 *Quot homines tot sententiae* (Terence, *Phormio* or *the scheming parasite* II, 4, 454).

17 Letter to Voetius vii, AT VIII-B, 125 (my italics). The official motto of the United Provinces was *Concordia res parvae crescunt* (cf. Sallust, *Bellum Iugurthinum* 10, 6).

In sum, there are several reasons why Voetius and others of his kind are a social and political liability. First of all, their particular type of learning allows them to acquire authority; second, under their influence, the passions of the people can become habitual; third, they provide the people's natural feelings of aversion and hatred with a 'pious' dimension; fourth, this could ultimately lead to revolt and civil war, especially in a pluriform society. Still, Voetius might be an isolated case: "I don't know any other such preacher and I think one should not have fears as long as he remains alone, and does not have pupils who resemble him and will eventually preach themselves."¹⁸ However, that seems to be no more than an attempt to drive a wedge between Voetius and his colleagues. In fact, it is hard to see how the problem could not be general as long as theologians adopt the particular type of learning Descartes attributes to Voetius and as long as the interactions between people individually and between the people and the magistrate are essentially determined by the passions. In fact, Descartes identifies a 'theologico-political' problem.

3 Parallels in *Les Passions*

It must be underscored that Descartes is not interested in general solutions; indeed, it would be vain to look for a political philosophy, that is, a coherent and articulate system of rules and reasons to describe, understand, and justify political structures. As for him, it is enough that Schoock, a professor, and Voetius, a professor and a minister, are paid with public money; that ultimately they are civil servants; that the authorities have the means to fire them; and that, given the fact that someone like Voetius systematically undermines their authority, the price they pay for not firing them is loss of control.

Still, there is material for a general theory. Voetius's authority rests on a "crowd who, without being evil, are ignorant" (*turba non mala sed imperita*). Their ignorance probably explains why they are intimidated by Voetius's learning. The true problem, however, is that passions can become habitual and that bad and sad emotions (like fear and hatred) are as much liked as the more pleasant emotions (like love and joy). In the *Passions de l'âme* (1649) Descartes explains that:

... we naturally take pleasure in feeling ourselves aroused to all sorts of passions, even to sadness and hatred, when these passions are caused

¹⁸ Letter to Voetius iv, AT VIII-B, 50.

merely by the strange happenings we see presented on the stage, or by other such things which, as long as they are incapable of harming us in any way, seem to affect our soul by titillating it.¹⁹

We, all of us, take pleasure in sad passions, as long as they do not interfere with our feeling that we are intimately connected with a healthy body. As a result, the preacher who arouses passions *against others* is better liked than his colleague who draws attention to the sins of his audience. That a passion can become habitual can be explained by the fact that it is part of a *physiological* learning process, which, being subject to the laws of nature, can be controlled only with the help of knowledge and intellectual training. Presumably, therefore, the fact that the crowd is ignorant makes them more vulnerable in the sense that their ignorance allows mechanisms that are otherwise perfectly healthy and normal to develop into habitual reactions that are evil.

Furthermore, Voetius could acquire his authority thanks to a very particular type of learning, which, as it is described by Descartes, would be no more than a set of dialectical tricks, which have much appeal for, and are easily assimilated by people guided by the imagination like young boys, for example: *loci communes*, syllogisms, *distinctiones*, abstract notions, and isolated pieces of knowledge (*quaestiones*)—in sum, scholastic philosophy. Of course, Descartes has been critical of scholastic philosophy ever since the beginning of his career. In the *Letter to Dinet*, moreover, he already made an allusion to the undesirable social and political consequences of didactic practices: “if princes and magistrates [...] allow doubtful and controversial opinions to be aired, this is not because they want their subjects to become more quarrelsome, more rebellious, less controllable, and eventually less inclined to obey them and more eager to start a revolution, but because they believe that such disputes sometimes produce a truth.”²⁰ In the *Letter to Voetius*, however, this ‘infantile dialectic’ is described as a positive danger: it is bad for character, it kills *bona mens* and *ratio naturalis*, and it undermines the cohesion of society. Above all, it allows those who are not born for it to acquire a position of authority, which can then easily be misused to lend weight to personal prejudice and sow division among the population.

The question of learning forms the bridge with moral philosophy, the second branch of practical philosophy. In Pt 4 of the *Letter to Voetius*, Descartes makes a distinction between two types of learning, which he calls *eruditio*

19 *Passions of the Soul*, ii, art. 94, AT XI, 399–400/CSM I, 362; cf. Descartes to Elizabeth, 18 May 1645, AT IV, 202–203; 6 October 1646, AT IV, 309.

20 *Letter to Dinet* AT VII, 578.

and *doctrina*. Voetius has *doctrina*, that is, he knows “whatever can be learned from books”—he is *doctissimus*, but only in the sense that he knows a lot of things by heart. The alternative would be *eruditio*, an *eruditus* being the one “who with industry and care has polished his talents and manners” (*per eruditum autem intelligo illum tantum, qui studio et cultura ingenium moresque suos perpolivit*).²¹ In classical Latin as well as seventeenth-century French the words *doctrina/doctrine* and *eruditio/érudition* have almost identical meanings. In fact, one must go back to their roots to find some justification for Descartes’s distinction. The root of *doctrina* is *doceo* (‘to teach’), whereas that of *eruditio* is *eruo* (‘to draw out, bring out, elicit’). *Doctrina* therefore would be a piece of knowledge passed on by a teacher (*doctor*) to a student, whereas *eruditio* would be the result of a search for truth undertaken by the student.²² However, Descartes’s distinction also has a moral dimension. The *eruditus* improves not only his *ingenium* (innate talents) but also his *mores* (character and behaviour). Instead of packing his memory, he “reads, not any book, but only the best ones, and those repeatedly and frequently, he speaks with those who are already *eruditi*, and he unremittingly contemplates virtue and investigates truth.”²³ The *doctus* has filled his head with all kinds of readings without becoming any better or wiser (*non ideo sapientiores nec meliores evadunt*), given the fact that the books he prefers “never contain any complex reasoning [*rationum concatenatio*], and decide everything either by authority or at best by a few brief syllogisms.” As a result, “those who seek *doctrina* in this way give equal credit to the authority of all authors and distinguish them only along party lines—in sum, they gradually unlearn the right use of natural reason, which they replace by an artificial and sophistic one.” If, moreover, they often read ‘bad, frivolous, and polemical books’ (*improbis, nugacibus et contentiosis scriptis*), it is almost inevitable that they become evil, silly, and obnoxious (*maligni, insulsi et importuni*), even if they were good by nature.²⁴

21 Letter to Voetius iv, AT VIII-B, 42.

22 According to Lewis and Short (*A Latin Dictionary*), *doctrina* is instruction as well as the learning and knowledge *imparted* by teaching, whereas *eruditio* would be instruction as well the learning and knowledge *acquired* by instruction.

23 Letter to Voetius iv, AT VIII-B, 42–43.

24 Letter to Voetius iv, AT VIII-B, 43–44.

4 Learning, Freedom and Generosity

Descartes's rejection of *doctrina* and his promotion of *eruditio* closely follows the humanist critique of pedantry, especially by Montaigne, who associates *pédant* and *pédantisme* with any form of knowledge that does not contribute to a better life and is an obstacle to true wisdom.²⁵ However, Descartes goes beyond Montaigne by uncovering a subtle interplay between nature and culture: those who are good by nature (*natura*), may become 'evil, silly, and obnoxious' by education (*cultura*)—education can have a detrimental effect on someone's character and morality. Inversely, despite the influence of education "it must be admitted that nature greatly contributes to it"²⁶—education and culture are to a certain extent the result of a choice, which in turn is determined by 'nature,' that is, by personality. In other words, the study of books makes those who have a tendency to be good better and wiser, but those who tend to be bad more evil, if only because with a different personality we would read different books, use them differently, and from what we read retain different things, depending on our personality, our interests and our general outlook—like from the same flowers spiders draw poison and bees honey.²⁷ In any case, whereas the *docti* become almost inevitably 'arrogant, obstinate, and irascible' (*arrogantes, pertinaces, et iracundi*), the true *eruditi* "never pride themselves" on their learning, because, being aware of human frailty, they realise that there is much more that they do not know. Indeed, the true *eruditi*

... are *ingenui* and *dociles* [which for the moment I leave untranslated], always eager to embrace truths they do not know; being used to apply their genius to different problems [*ingenium ad varia flectere*], they are necessarily mild and gentle [*mites*], kind [*benigni*] and of refined manners [*humani*]. And since they understand that true *eruditio* does not depend only on books, they seek it also through private meditation or various employments [*vario negotiorum usu*], as well as the frequentation of excellent men, without sitting continually among their books. As

25 Montaigne, "Du pédantisme," in *Essais* i, 25.

26 *Letter to Voetius* iv, AT VIII-B, 44.

27 *Letter to Voetius* iv, AT VIII-B, 44. Proverbial expression, much favoured by Protestant theologians to justify their use of the classics—see, for example, Melanchthon writes, "Scio ex veteribus excerpti posse multa pugnancia cum nostris sentiis. Et excerpti pro suo adfectu quisque quod videtur commodum, ut ex iisdem floribus apes mella legunt, araneae venena." See his "De ecclesiae auctoritate et de veterum scriptis" (1539), in *Opera*, ed. K.G. Bretschneider/H.E. Bindseil, 28 vols (Halle: Schwetschke, 1834–1860), XXXIII, 634 (*Corpus reformatorum*).

a result, the ignorant have no idea of their learning [*doctrina*]; if they live as private men, they are either completely unknown, or seen simply as good husbands and sensible men, and in this way the greatest genius often remains unknown. If on the other hand they meddle with public affairs, others detect their wisdom and their good manners before long, but often see them as the effect of nature instead of culture [*ingenii cultura*].²⁸

There is a striking resemblance between this characterization of the *eruditus* and the description of the *généreux* in the *Passions de l'âme*. Indeed, the difference between *doctrina* and *eruditio* closely corresponds to that between haughtiness (*orgueil*) and generosity (*générosité*)—two ‘passions’ Descartes describes as each other’s opposite.²⁹ Generosity “causes a person’s self-esteem to be as great as it may legitimately be.” It is a combination of knowing and feeling: a generous person must *know* that “nothing truly belongs to him but the freedom to dispose his will,” and *feel* “a firm and constant resolution to use [that freedom] well.”³⁰ *Orgueil* on the other hand would be any form of self-esteem based on other and necessarily wrong reasons; it is always a vice, particularly in those who secretly know that their reasons are wrong.³¹ As compared to other seventeenth-century writers on *générosité* this is a remarkable move. The playwright Pierre Corneille (1606–1684), for example, still associates *générosité*, whose etymological meaning [*generositas*] is *nobility*, with aristocracy in the traditional sense: the key to generosity is honour (*honneur*) and glory (*gloire*), which in turn are associated with a noble birth and an exalted *social* position. According to Descartes, however, the key to generosity is freedom, which “renders us in a certain way like God by making us masters of ourselves, provided we do not lose the rights it gives us through cowardice [*lâcheté*].”³² By making freedom the basis of generosity Descartes gives it a ‘democratic’ twist because, whether of noble birth or not, we are born free, all of us—the condition of generosity is not an exalted *social* position but the fact that as free living beings we have an exceptional and exalted position in nature as a whole.³³ However, in

28 Letter to Voetius iv, AT VIII-B, 45.

29 “Que ses effets [that is, of *orgueil*] sont contraires à ceux de la *générosité*.” *Passions* iii, art. 158, AT XI, 449/CSM I, 385–386. Cottingham translates *orgueil* as *vanity*, which I think is not right.

30 *Passions* iii, art. 153, AT XI, 445–446/CSM I, 384.

31 *Passions* iii, art. 157, AT XI, 448.

32 *Passions* iii, art. 152, AT XI, 445/CSM I, 384. Cottingham translates *lâcheté* as *timidity*, which is not right.

33 See my article “Generosity” in *Emotional Minds: The Passions and the Limits of Pure Enquiry in Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Sabrina Ebbersmeyer (Berlin, 2012), 19–30.

order to be truly 'generous,' we must also *know* that we are free, *realise* that freedom confers rights as well as duties, and be *determined* to use it well. As a result, some knowledge is necessary, and that would imply that, after all, generosity cannot be universal—nobody is born generous, even though, in principle at any rate, everybody has all that is needed to become generous.

If we now return to the *Letter to Voetius*, it becomes clear that the characterization of the *eruditus* in many ways anticipates the theory of generosity in the *Passions de l'âme*. The true *eruditus* is *ingenuus* and *docilis*. The meaning of *docilis* is clear enough: he is *docilis* (literally able or indeed eager to be taught), because he wants to know new truths. The original meaning of *ingenuus* is *native, indigenous*, which clearly does not apply here. The secondary meaning, which in classical Latin is more frequent, is *free-born*, and by implication the properties of a free man: *noble, upright, frank, candid, liberal*—exactly what the *Passions* describe as the effect of generosity. In sum, not only is there a moral dimension to the two types of learning distinguished by Descartes; the type of learning he prefers is closely associated with what he later called generosity.

5 Conclusion

I come to my conclusion. Is there a practical philosophy in Descartes's *Letter to Voetius*? As to a political philosophy properly speaking, I believe one must say there is none indeed: even though all political philosophy originates in a particular situation, it necessarily claims generality insofar as it is philosophy, whereas the author of the *Letter to Voetius* is not primarily interested in a general solution—all he wants is that Voetius be fired as a professor and a minister. At best he presents a few political maxims, which however are unrelated to his general philosophy. But there is material for a political philosophy in the fact that, according to Descartes, social and political interactions are primarily determined by the passions. As a result, all political philosophy should be based on a theory of the passions—and the Cartesian theory of the passions did allow political philosophers like Velthuysen, the brothers De la Court, and Spinoza, to apply to politics a Machiavellian format. Finally, Descartes is probably the first philosopher to identify a theologico-political problem, even though there is among sixteenth and seventeenth-century political philosophers (Bodin, Hobbes, Spinoza) a widespread awareness of the fact that instead of being a factor of social cohesion (as it probably was in the Middle Ages) religion had become a politically disruptive force. As to moral philosophy the *Letter to Voetius* contains much of interest, not only because it contains extensive discussions of the passions, but also because, much more than the *Passions*

de l'âme, it establishes a link between virtue and knowledge, between morality and method: There is a moral dimension to the method of philosophy even in so far as it deals with questions that by themselves are morally indifferent. The philosopher (or the scientist) never simply acquires knowledge nor must his or her method be evaluated in terms of purely scientific results. The method of philosophy is morally relevant, not only insofar as it reflects an ultimately moral choice, in virtue of which the person who uses it can become a better human being (or can put his or her morality at risk), but also in so far as it defines the philosopher's position in society.