SAMUEL HARTLIB ON THE DEATH OF DESCARTES: A REDISCOVERED LETTER TO HENRY MORE

by

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This paper discloses the content of a previously overlooked epistle by the Anglo-Prussian intelligencer Samuel Hartlib to Henry More concerning the death of René Descartes. After a discussion situating the letter within the sequence of the More–Hartlib correspondence, an analysis of the rhetorical structure of the epistle is offered, followed by a brief assessment of Hartlib’s attitude towards Descartes, and the identification of his source concerning the news of the philosopher’s death. An account of the transmission of the letter via a nineteenth-century periodical is also provided. The text of Hartlib’s letter and an overlooked passage of Hartlib’s diary concerning Descartes’s death, which draws on the content of the More letter, are presented as appendixes.

Keywords: René Descartes; Henry More; Samuel Hartlib; networks; cartesianism; Johannes Hevelius

INTRODUCTION

René Descartes (1596–1650) died in Stockholm on 11 February 1650. In the days following, several letters and accounts were dispatched from eyewitnesses in Sweden, making the circumstances of his death known across western Europe.1 The news of Descartes’s death is thought to have first reached England by means of the London-based intelligencer Samuel Hartlib (ca. 1600–62) in either March or April 1650. The reaction of Henry More (1614–88), communicated to Hartlib from Cambridge on 5/15 April 1650, is well known:

I am half ashame’d to confess how sad your news of Des Cartes death made me... In his writings, he has discovered himself to be of such excellent accomplishments of minde, that he gained as much in my affections, as in theirs that have been most familiarly and intimately acquainted with his person, and consequently has left me an equall legacy of sorrow.2

Hartlib’s original letter to More informing him of Descartes’s demise—like all the rest of the intelligencer’s epistles to his Cambridge correspondent—has long been thought lost.3

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Yet although this fate may be true of the manuscript itself, I have recently discovered a publication of the text of Hartlib’s epistle in a London-based periodical, *The Gentleman’s Magazine* (April 1831). It is published below in an annotated edition. This letter is significant for several reasons. First, it provides the earliest known announcement of Descartes’s death in England. Second, it adds to our knowledge of the More–Hartlib correspondence, particularly concerning the practical circumstances of the correspondence between More and Descartes. Third, it offers a rare glimpse into the character and opinions of Samuel Hartlib. Finally, its mode of transmission testifies to the significance of the work of eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century antiquarians in preserving texts of manuscript material otherwise lost.

This article begins with a brief discussion situating the letter more broadly within the More–Hartlib correspondence, followed by an assessment of Hartlib’s own attitude towards Descartes, as well as an identification of the ultimate source of Hartlib’s report concerning the philosopher’s death. An account of the transmission of the letter is then provided, followed by the letter itself in Appendix 1. Appendix 2 presents an overlooked portion of Hartlib’s *Ephemerides* concerning Descartes’s death, which also bears a relationship to the letter to More.

**THE HARTLIB–MORE CORRESPONDENCE**

For a better appreciation of Hartlib’s letter and of his opinion on Descartes subsequently expressed in his *Ephemerides*, it is first necessary to sketch the background of Hartlib’s correspondence with More. Between November 1648 and July 1655, the London-based intelligencer received 24 letters from More, almost entirely concerned with Descartes, which indeed seems to have been the reason for the correspondence in the first place. Hartlib’s replies have not survived. As Charles Webster has emphasized in his masterful account of the More–Descartes correspondence, this epistolary exchange, carried on most intensively between December 1648 and April 1650, was motivated by competing interests. More was interested in Hartlib because of his epistolary access to Descartes, whereas Hartlib saw in More a potential addition to his networks and providential agenda of initiating a ‘general reformation’ of science and learning. For example, during 1648, Hartlib had attempted to secure a commitment by several fellows at Cambridge, including Benjamin Whichcote (1609–83), Ralph Cudworth (1617–88) and More himself, to assist in ‘forwarding the businesse’ of the Silesian educational reformer Cyprian Kinner (d. May 1649), mainly through the provision of a position at Cambridge. The implementation of Kinner’s proposed pansophical reforms would not end in the classroom, but would, Hartlib expected, create a domino effect ending in an apocalyptic ‘regeneration of all Christian Churches and Common-wealths’. Such grand-scale thinking, aimed at discovering the public utility of all knowledge, in service to an eschatological/providential scheme, was more or less typical of Hartlib. Yet it wearied many of his correspondents, particularly when paired with the intelligencer’s hectoring epistles often demanding information, favours and, not rarely, money. As Hartlib once admitted: ‘I have one fault (if it be a fault) to write commonly very largely, and it may be my friends think themselves excused, if they do not answer to all my particulars. But they shall not escape me so.’
Shortly before Hartlib began corresponding with More in late 1648, a fellow of Christ’s College, Thomas Smith (ca. 1624–61), had warned the intelligencer of the lukewarm attitude to his ideas that already reigned in Cambridge:

[The] truth is, most men of parts here have y’ thoughts so taken up wth Platonisme, or other high & æry speculations of Divinity or Philosophy y’ they will scarce vouchsafe to cast a glance on such a new invention [such as Kinner’s pedagogical innovations] for any thing which is not in y’ way or in y’ aime.12

And so it was to prove. With access to Descartes as his trump card, in the course of their epistolary exchanges Hartlib cajoled an uninterested More to support a succession of his ‘publicke-minded’ endeavours. Hartlib’s enthusiasm clashed with More’s studied lack thereof, and early in 1649 Hartlib attempted to provoke a positional commitment from More by passing on to him a letter by his young protégé, the English economist and projector William Petty (1623–87), which offered a scalding critique of Descartes’s philosophy. There, Petty suggested that the lack of utility of the Frenchman’s philosophy might be discovered

by Enquiring how much e Telescopes are mended, since the writing of his dioptricks; whether any man can foretell the weather by his discourse of Meteors. Of w disease hath hee found out the certaine cure by his consideration of animals; or w besides Notionall conjectures (though ingenious enough) hath hee produced: Or who, y’ hath followed his principles, hath drawne any new usefull or pleasant art or reall conclusion from them.13

Hartlib himself, although he was well aware of several practical applications of Descartes’s philosophy, at least partly shared Petty’s view. More returned a forceful rejoinder criticizing ‘experimental philosophers’ in March 1649. In contrast with Petty, More asserted that there was place for both public utility and philosophical speculation in early modern projection. However, the brief exchange of letters on this topic could illustrate just how far apart the agendas of the two men were.14

Thereafter it seems that More remained wary of the garrulous Hartlib, all the while knowing that it was only through the intelligencer’s networks that he had access to Descartes. Although in later letters More circumspectly praised aspects of several of Hartlib’s projects, in particular the Office of Address, he simultaneously confessed that Hartlib’s ‘high designes . . . seem little better to me then a theomachia [theomachia; a battle with or among the gods] or Gigantick interprise’.15 That is to say, short of being willed by God, More believed that Hartlib’s grand schemes had little practical hope of coming to fruition. After Descartes’s death, More had little to say to Hartlib about any subject. His letters became terse, and, so long as Descartes himself was not under discussion, the correspondence was prolonged only with great effort by the intelligencer.
allies: the Scottish minister John Dury (1596–1680) and the Moravian pedagogue Johann Amos Comenius (1592–1670). Hartlib in turn dismissed Descartes: ‘Hee also is too much bragging. For hee promises more in his general discourse than he dose perform.’ According to Hartlib, Descartes’s work was also superfluous; around 1642, the intelligencer declared that Dury’s theological juvenilia had anticipated not some but in fact all of Descartes’s philosophical principles. Most striking, however, is the sardonic opinion of Descartes that Hartlib recorded for posterity, in the form of a third-person entry in his Ephemerides, a logical diary and record of the intelligencer’s manifold undertakings. This comment amplified Hartlib’s privileging of ‘useful knowledge’ above Descartes’s ‘empty philosophizing’:

Albureth [sc. Hartlib] was glad when hee [sc. Descartes] went thither [sc. Sweden] only in this resp. that hee might make some Experim. vpon Cold. But the Pleurisy of wch hee dyd made hims. quite Cold. Now nothing remaines of him wch is so like to last a thous. y. as his Meditations yet vnpublished . . . . But if hee had beene endowed as well with Graces as with Gifts they might have last not only to a thous. y. but to all Eternity accord[in]g to that of the Ap[ost]le—but the greatest of them is Charity.

This statement, a great rarity from the intelligencer who has granted posterity remarkably few glimpses of his character or opinions, contrasts Descartes’s philosophy (gifts) with Hartlib’s own charitable projects of public reform (graces), implying that the former are pointless without the latter.

The foregoing discussion makes clear that Hartlib’s letter concerning the death of Descartes, as well as his subsequent Ephemerides entry, should be read and understood against a complex and dynamic backdrop of interpersonal tensions and radically divergent approaches to the application and role of philosophical knowledge.

HARTLIB’S LETTER ON THE DEATH OF DESCARTES

Hartlib’s letter is dated 16/[26] March 1649/[50]. Given the intellectual background outlined above, it is perhaps unsurprising that the letter begins not with the news of Descartes’s death but rather with reference to several miscellaneous items, evidently intended to display the breadth and charity of the intelligencer’s activities. First, Hartlib laments that More could not visit him while the latter was in London in January. This is not simply because Hartlib hoped to show him a ‘stately’ example of the Selenographia of the Danzig astronomer Johannes Hevelius (1611–87) intended for Oxford’s Bodleian Library, but so that More might also have glimpsed a recently acquired ‘Perspective Glasse’ from Rome. Hartlib then underlines his public-mindedness by stating that he will endeavour to furnish Cambridge University library not only with a copy of Hevelius’s book but also with some optical instruments from Augsburg.

It is only then that Hartlib comes to the ‘most sad and inixpected’ matter of Descartes. The subject is introduced through the prism of Hartlib’s networks, with the announcement that Hartlib had been bidden by his ‘friends at Amsterdam . . . not to urge any more accounts from Mons. d. Carts, in as much as hee was departed this world at Stockholme the 1 of Febr. styl. nov.’ Apart from mistakenly assuming that the date of Descartes’s death was Gregorian instead of Julian, Hartlib informs More that he had first heard of the death on the previous day (15/25 March 1649/50), almost six weeks after the incident.
After briefly relating the circumstances of the death, Hartlib attempts to orient More’s reception of the news within the parameters of his own intellectual strivings by informing More that Descartes had died of pleurisy, the same disease that had carried off Cyprian Kinner only months earlier. After this unsubtle reminder of More’s unfulfilled undertakings, and the common fate to be shared by all humanity, Hartlib outlines two rumours he had heard concerning Descartes, both of which emphasize the philosopher’s self-interest. Hartlib’s motivations for the inclusion of these rumours—which he had evidently heard over the course of many years, and which were themselves inherently unconnected with the fact of Descartes’s demise—might be explained as a riposte by the intelligencer to More’s studied lack of interest in Hartlib’s grand reforming schemes.

First, Hartlib states that the aim of Descartes’s philosophy was to make it possible ‘in nature to so order one’s health as that wee might live without sickness to a thous. y. and that hims. did not despaire to arrive at such a period.’ This rumour was not without foundation. In a 1637 letter to Constantijn Huygens (1596–1687), Descartes expressed his conviction that one’s life might be prolonged for up to a century by this method. By 1647, Descartes supposedly thought that 500 years might be possible. In Hartlib’s letter, the expectation had reached its zenith. Hartlib then connects this rumour with another, which concerned Descartes’s supposedly extravagant wealth, namely that he had amassed enough capital from property and by other means to secure for himself a ‘life-rent’ of the extravagant sum of 10 000 Dutch guilders per annum. On the heels of these striking examples of Descartes’s self-interest, Hartlib underscores his own selflessness by informing More of his resolve to collect and disseminate the unpublished works of Descartes for the benefit of the public.

It thus seems that Hartlib, intentionally or not, portrayed the death of the self-interested Descartes as a cautionary tale to More. Descartes’s folly was an example given by God ‘to teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts unto wisdome.’ Descartes had squandered his time with schemes that served the life of one man, instead of dedicating himself to the improvement of mankind via the circulation of ‘useful knowledge’.

The result, as far as Hartlib was concerned, was not a success, if success is determined by the measure of how far More moved towards contributing to Hartlib’s projects. Communicated alongside news of Descartes’s death, the rumours ‘did almost disturbe the solemnety’ of More’s sorrow. But they did not have an appreciable effect on More’s opinion of the nature of useful philosophy. As mentioned previously, More and Hartlib exchanged a few more letters, but the increasingly short and desultory responses emerging from Cambridge make it clear that More had little to say to Hartlib after Descartes’s death, and less interest in helping along Hartlib’s ‘Gigantick interprise’. More eventually decided he would ‘play the Descartes himself’ and eventually produced a series of fascinating, if sometimes paradoxical, criticisms of and engagements with Cartesian philosophy. As for Hartlib, his project to seed the millennium would end in failure. He died in penury at his Westminster home in 1662.
Descartes, and received his replies. This arrangement was practical, but it also seems to have been deliberately contrived by Hartlib. Hartlib himself got the opportunity to keep abreast of the entirety of the correspondence. Furthermore, it seems that at no point did More know precisely who delivered his letters to Descartes, or how they got to their intended destination. He was entirely dependent on Hartlib.

Initially, when Descartes was still based in The Netherlands, Hartlib employed the services of the English economist Benjamin Worsley (1618–77), then living in Amsterdam, to transmit letters to Descartes. In late 1649, however, after Worsley had relocated to England and Descartes to Sweden, Hartlib used Johann Moriaen (ca. 1591–1668), chymist and intelligencer in Arnheim, as his intermediary. Moriaen informed Hartlib of Descartes’s death in a letter of 11 March 1650, which was communicated along with a packet of other continental correspondence, as Moriaen’s oblique remark attests: ‘You [sc. Hartlib] will understand from elsewhere [sc. letters elsewhere in the packet] that Mr. Descartes has died, and wonder no more that he has not responded.’

As this passage indicates, Moriaen not only told Hartlib not to expect any further responses from the philosopher on account of his death, but he also transmitted a further enclosure by which Hartlib would receive more details. Although this additional document has not survived among the intelligencer’s papers, it is apparent that what Hartlib received was an extract from an anonymous letter written from Stockholm on 2/12 February 1650 concerning Descartes’s death. A version of this text, in the form of a Dutch extract, has been preserved among the correspondence of Dirck Rembrantsz van Nierop (1610–82) with Frans van Schooten (1615–60):

Copye uyt Stokholm den 2 Febrary 1650.

Gisteren morgen vroeg omtrent 4 uure is hier ten huyse van zyn Excellentie de Heer Chnunt, Franse Ambassadeur, overleden de Heer Des Cartes, die weynig dagen ziek gelegen heeft, zo ik verstaan hebbe, heeft mede het Pluris gehat; maar niet willende nemen nog gebruyken, zoude een heete koorse daar toe geslagen zyn, daar na heeft hy zig wel driemaal op een dag doen laaten, maar zonder operatie van zonderling bloet te laten. Haar Majesteyt beklaagde zyn afsterven zeer, wegens hy zoo een geleerde man was. Men heeft hem in was afgegoten. Hy heft niet gemeent hier te sterven, hebbende onlangs voor zyn doot geresolveert gehat met de eerste goede gelegenheit zig wederom naar Nederland te begeven &c.

That a version of this extract was indeed Hartlib’s ultimate source is suggested first by the fact that it agrees in all particulars with Hartlib’s report to More. Second, the dating of the extract according to the Julian calendar additionally explains Hartlib’s error in dating Descartes’s death: Sweden still employed the Julian calendar in 1650, but because
Hartlib’s intelligence derived from Moriaen in Amsterdam, where the Gregorian calendar was employed, Hartlib mistakenly assumed that the report was also ‘new style’. Third, the statement that ‘they have moulded him in wax’ (Men heeft hem in was afgoten) is clearly the source of Hartlib’s assertion that a replica of Descartes’s ‘whole effigies’, that is to say his whole body, was produced in Stockholm, and it was evidently understood by More in the same sense, who responded that Descartes deserved instead ‘a statue of gold’. It is unlikely to be true, however. In 1691 Descartes’s biographer Adrien Baillet wrote only of a wax ‘death-mask’ created by the Swedish court painter Valari. Because Baillet evidently had access to additional sources while preparing his account—many of which are today unavailable—it seems more likely that only a death-mask was prepared. Nevertheless, it seems clear that a version of this report was the ultimate source of Hartlib’s knowledge concerning the demise of Descartes.

TRANSMISSION HISTORY

Before presenting the text of the letter itself it is necessary to devote some space to its mode of transmission, which is unusual even for a document connected to the milieu of Samuel Hartlib. After More’s death in 1671, the original letter was probably inherited by Christopher Coleby (d. 1719), who was bequeathed More’s ‘whole study of Books whether printed or Paper Books’. It then fell out of sight until 1818, when the letter was acquired along with other papers concerning More by the Birmingham antiquarian William Hamper (1776–1831). In April 1831 Hamper arranged for the letter to be printed in The Gentleman’s Magazine, a respected literary monthly established in London in 1731. It is possible that he provided the transcription himself. In this publication, the epistle was prefaced by brief biographical notes on More, Descartes and Hartlib, as well as an editorial statement redolent with the prejudices of the time:

I publish the following Letter by favour of William Hamper, esq., F.S.A. in whose collection the original is preserved. It gives an amusing, not to say ridiculous picture of the opinions of the famous philosopher Des Cartes, on the duration of human life, and his somewhat Jewish conduct, in consequence, to provide for his future support by means of a life annuity.

On 3 May 1831, mere weeks after the publication of the letter, Hamper died suddenly in Birmingham. The fate of the original manuscript after this date is unknown. No letters from Hartlib to More were listed in the July 1831 sale catalogue of Hamper’s collections. It thus seems probable that the Hartlib correspondence was dispersed before auction, perhaps on account of attention generated by the publication of this letter. This was a contingency not at all excluded by Hamper’s will, which explicitly allowed his executors to dispose of the manuscripts both by public auction and by private sale.

Although the original must presently be considered lost, its content is, rather strangely, not entirely unknown. Indeed, the rediscovery of the text of the letter in The Gentleman’s Magazine clears up a long-standing historiographical mystery. In a speculative 1948 article on Hartlib and the origins of the Royal Society, Rosemary Syfret (1914–98) quoted the passage discussing Hevelius’s Selenographia from Hartlib’s letter to More but did not mention any of the Descartes material, and additionally neglected to document the reference properly. When Charles Webster chased up the matter in 1964 while
working on an article on More and Descartes, Syfret could no longer recall her source. However, in a letter to Webster she did reveal: ‘I’ve made my note [concerning the content of the letter] on a large sheet of paper, all by itself—so I would assume I had not found it in a collection.’\textsuperscript{39} From this comment and the orthography of the quotation as it appeared in her article—where several abbreviations are silently expanded—it is apparent that Syfret did indeed not have access to an original manuscript but instead only to the text of the letter as published in \textit{The Gentleman’s Magazine}.\textsuperscript{40}

The transmission of the text is something of a testament to the value of antiquarians, such as Hamper, in preserving texts of older manuscripts. Its discovery also reinforces the impression that a systematic examination of eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century periodicals might well bring to light other significant pieces of correspondence either thought lost or entirely unknown.

\textbf{CONCLUSION}

The rediscovery of Hartlib’s letter to Henry More announcing the death of Descartes is significant for several reasons. First, it provides the earliest known report of Descartes’s death in England. Second, it adds to our knowledge of the More–Hartlib correspondence, particularly concerning the practical circumstances of the correspondence between More and Descartes, which was effected through intermediaries such as Johann Moriaen in the United Provinces. Another issue that is highlighted by the letter are problems of dating and the accuracy of information when moving across Europe’s tapestry of confessional time zones. The relationship of the text of Hartlib’s letter to his entry concerning Descartes’s death in \textit{Ephemerides} also sheds light on a very different subject, namely Hartlib’s own sardonic appreciation of Descartes’s virtues as a philosopher and man of science. This is a precious insight into the character of an intelligencer who desired to live firmly in the shadow of the information he provided. Finally, the curious mode of transmission of the text of the letter testifies to the significance of the work of eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century antiquarians in preserving texts of manuscript material otherwise lost. Although it is not impossible that the original letter—hopefully as part of a broader batch of Hartlib and More’s correspondence—might one day be rediscovered, for the time being we must be content with the fascinating glimpse of the past that this rediscovered letter offers.

\textbf{APPENDIX 1. LETTER, SAMUEL HARTLIB TO HENRY MORE, 16/[26] MARCH 1649/[50]}

\textit{Editorial note.} The text given below is a character-true transcription of the letter as printed in \textit{The Gentleman’s Magazine}, April 1831, p. 304, inclusive of original editorial interpolations [in square brackets]. Explanatory notes have been added as appropriate.

London, the 16 of March, 1649

Sir— I should have taken it for a great favour, if you had bestowed upon mee a second visit, when you were last at London.\textsuperscript{41} For j suppose it would not have been impossible, but that wee should have agreed with Mr. Word concerning time and place, when and where to have entertained you with the rare Perspective Glasse w’ch hee
brought from beyond the Seas. But, to make amends, I shall never cease till I have obtained one of Hevelius' Selenographia for the Publique Library at Camb. as I have done already a most stately one for Oxf. Library, w'ch the Author sent lately to my hands, and w'ch I could have shew'n you, if I had had the happiness to have seen you once more before you went from hence. And that more and better observations may bee made, I shall in like manner endeavour that both the Univ. may bee endowed with those rare optical treasures from Augsburg.

Yesterday I received a most sad and inixpected answer from my friends at Amsterdam, bidding me not to urge any more accounts from Mons. d. Carts, in as much as hee was departed this world at Stockholme the 1 of Febr. styl. nov. in the French Ambassador’s house there. Hee refused to take any physick but when it was too late; hee was let blood thrice a day, but all in vain. The Q. doth hugely lament his death, and hath caused his whole effigies curiously to bee made in wax. Hee dyed of the same disease that Dr. Kinner, w'ch was a pleurisy. One that knew him pretty well, told mee lately some strange th' of him. For hee said that hee had acquainted some of his best friends with the whole designe of his life and studies, w'ch should mainly tend to give us at last a compleate Philosophy, with the prolongation of natural life. For, privately to his confiding friends he would not stick to assert that it was possible in nature to so order one’s health as that wee might live without sickness to a thous. y. and that hims. did not desaipre to arrive at such a period. And to accomplish the better his learned Designe, after he came from the Warres, he made choice of the Low c. as the freest Co'monw. where hee might live without controule and as hee pleased, having put the sum’e of 10 thous. gild[ers] or more upon life-rent, as they call it, whereby hee had a full subsistence as long as hee should live. I shall now enquire not so much after the truth of this story, as what hee hath left of those excellent gifts yet vnpublished which are likelier to last a thous. y. and preserve the effigies of his soule far better then any wax can doe that of his body. Thus beseeching God so to teach us to number our days that wee may apply our hearts unto wisdome, I subscribe myselfe alw. Sir, your very respective and faithful friend to serve you, SAM. HARTLIB.

For his worthy and much honoured Friend Mr. Henry More, Fellow of Christ's Coll. in Cambridge.

APPENDIX 2. ENTRY FROM HARTLIB’S EPHEMERIDES (1650), HP28/1/54A-B

[In margin: Cartes. Historia.] Cartes designe was to make a compleate Philosophy. In reference to this Scope imagining that it was possible in nature to p[ro]long ones life to a thous. y., after [fol. 54b] the Warres wherin hee had beene hee tooke all the Mony hee had got with his other estate amounting to 10 thous. gild[ers] or more vpon Life-rent. And having laid this foundation hee choose to live in the Low C. as a free Com[m]onw. where hee might live as hee list and to follow his studies, fancing that hee might live a thous. y. to p[er]fect his Philosophy. But hee found an Exceptio[n] to his Rule in Swede[n] at Stockh. where hee dyed the 1. of Febr. 1650. Alb[ureth] was glad when hee went thither only in this resp. that hee might make some Experim. vpon Cold. But the Pleurisy of wch hee dyd made hims. quite Cold. Now nothing remains of him wch is so like to last a thous. y. as his Meditations yet vnpublished as his Syst[em]a Mundi and the like esp. if the 1000. y. hold. But if hee had beene endowed as well with Graces as with Gifts they might have last not only to a thous. y. but to all Eternity accord[in]g to that of the Ap[ost]le—but the greatest of them is Charity.—Albur[eth]
NOTES


2 Sheffield, University Library, Hartlib Papers, 18/1/17a (More to Hartlib, 5/[15] April 1650). Material from the Hartlib Papers (hereafter HP), is cited following Mark Greengrass, Michael Leslie and Michael Hannon, The Hartlib papers (HRI Online Publications, Sheffield, 2013) (see http://www.hrionline.ac.uk/hartlib). All transcriptions have been checked and corrected or amended as necessary. I have excluded the original deletions from this transcription.


5 Cf. Mordechai Feingold, “‘And knowledge shall be increased”: millenarianism and the advancement of learning revisited’, Seventeenth Cent. 28, 363–393 (2013), at p. 379.


7 See further Charles Webster, The Great Instauration: science, medicine and reform, 1626–1660 (Duckworth, London, 1975); Feingold, op. cit. (note 5).


9 Cyprian Kinner, A Continuation of Mr. John Amos-Comenius School Endeavours. Or a Summary Delineation of Dr. Cyprian Kinner Silesian his Thoughts concerning Education . . . transmitted to Sam. Hartlib and by him published (Printed for R.L., London, [1648]), sig. A1r.


11 James Crossley (ed.) The Diary and Correspondence of John Worthington (2 volumes) (Chetham Society, Manchester, 1847–86), vol. 2, part 1, p. 137 (Hartlib to Worthington, 26 June/[5 July] 1656).

12 HP 15/6/22a (20/[30] November 1648). I have excluded deletions in this transcription.

13 HP 7/123/1b (Petty to [Hartlib], bef. March 1649). I have excluded deletions in this transcription.


17 HP 30/4/18b (Ephemerides, 1639).

18 HP 2/9/16a (Dury to Hartlib, n.d.). This extravagant opinion was not, however, shared by Dury himself.


Baillet, op. cit. (note 21), vol. 2, p. 459, estimates that Descartes enjoyed an income of between six and seven thousand livres per annum.


Whether the version received by Hartlib was also in Dutch is impossible to tell.

A slightly different English translation of the letter appears in the essay by Rienk Vermij, ‘Correspondence of Dirk Rembrantszoon van Nierop’, in the same volume, at p. 61. I thank Erik-Jan Bos for first bringing the letter to my attention, as well as his generous provision of a translation, which appears here in a slightly modified form.

See further Leigh T. I. Penman, ‘Omnium exposita rapinae. The afterlives of the papers of Samuel Hartlib’, Book Hist. 18. (In the press.)


Catalogue of the Valuable Library, Autographs and Manuscripts, of the late William Hamper, Esq. F.S.A. . . . which will be sold by Auction . . . on Thursday, July 21 (Richard Evans, London, 1831), p. 25, lot 492: ‘Dr. Henry More’s Literary Correspondence consisting of an extensive series of Letters, addressed to him by Edmund Eleys, William Stone, Dr. Henry Halywell, Henry Hynre, Richard Ward, N. Palmer, Giles Aleyen, Edward Fowler, Bp. of Gloucester, J. Davies, Walter Garrett, R. Mayo, Ann Mallett, John Covel, A. Conway, and Lady Anne Conway. Also some account of Dr. More’s Works, by the Rev. R. Ward, his friend and biographer, and a Copy of the Printed Life of Dr. Henry More.’ The lot was bought by the bookseller Thomas Thorpe, who sold it on to the Manchester antiquarian James Crossley (1800–83). In 1884 the manuscripts were purchased from Crossley’s estate by Armitage Robinson (1858–1933), who donated them to Christ’s College in 1887. The collection of letters and documents survives intact to this day (Christ’s College Library,
Cambridge, Mss. 20, 21); it is therefore very unlikely that the Hartlib letters were among the original lot as auctioned but went unmentioned in the catalogue description.


Letter from Rosemary Syfret (Oxford) to Charles Webster (Sheffield), 22 May 1964. I thank Charles Webster for allowing me to see a transcription of this letter, the original of which remains in his possession.


More visited London in January 1650, where he encountered Hartlib at Robert Gell’s home, but was ‘sory that my occasions would not permitt me to be so civill, as to see you at your house.’ See HP 18/1/40b, 18/1/11a (More to Hartlib, 30 December/[9 January] 1649/[50] and 5/[15] February 1649/[50]).

HP 28/1/43b (Hartlib’s Ephemerides, 1650): ‘One Woodward a Merch[ant] in Austin-friers hath caused to bee brought from Rome a very long Perspective of the best sort.’ The form ‘Mr. Word’ is probably a misconstrued abbreviation on the part of the original transcriber.

Johannes Hevelius, Selenographia, sive Lunæ descriptio . . . (Hünefeldt, Danzig, 1647).

Cf. HP 28/1/43b (Hartlib’s Ephemerides, 1650): ‘The 30. of Ian[uary] 1650 . . . Hevel[ius] Selen[ographia] sent to the Vniv[ersity] of Oxf[ord].’ The Bodleian copy is shelved at Arch. H c.12. Hartlib was indeed successful in acquiring a copy for Cambridge University Library the next year, which is shelved at R*1.8(B).

In December 1649 Hartlib acquired several optical instruments from the Augsburger Johann Wiesel (1583–1662), and in the letter from Johann Moriaen of 11 March 1650 (which also informed him of Descartes’s death) had received intelligence that assured him that further instruments would be available. See further Inge Keil, ‘Technology transfer and scientific specialization; Johann Wiesel, optician of Augsburg, and the Hartlib Circle’, in Samuel Hartlib and universal reformation (ed. Mark Greengrass, Michael Leslie and Timothy Raylor), pp. 268–278 (Cambridge University Press, 1994).

Johann Moriaen, whose name Hartlib kept from More. With the plural, perhaps Hartlib is also referring to the additional document he received on the subject together with Moriaen’s letter. See the discussion above.

On the falsehood of the date, see the discussion above.


Queen Christina of Sweden (1626–89).

On Kinner, see the discussion above.

On Descartes’s participation in the Thirty Years’ War see Desmond Clarke, Descartes: a biography (Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 52–66.

Descartes relocated to The Netherlands in early 1629. See Clarke, op. cit. (note 52), p. 34.

A near-anagram of ‘Hartlib’, and a pseudonym employed by the intelligencer in various capacities since the mid 1630s.

Probably a reference to Descartes’s barometrical experiments, which he indeed undertook in Sweden. See Clarke, op. cit. (note 52), p. 410.

Probably Descartes’s Le Monde, first printed in its entirety in 1677, is meant here.

St Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:13: ‘And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.’