

# Henry Oldenburg

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Henry (né Heinrich) Oldenburg was a diplomat, one of the first Secretaries of the Royal Society of London, and the founder of its journal, the *Philosophical Transactions*. His correspondence was truly vast. It includes letters to and from such figures as John Milton, Thomas Hobbes, Robert Boyle, Christiaan Huygens, John Wallis, Robert Hooke, Giovanni Cassini, Gottfried Leibniz, Isaac Newton, Antonie van Leeuwenhoek, John Locke, Edmond Halley, and many, many more. This includes, of course, Spinoza, who wrote more letters to Oldenburg than any other of his correspondents. Their exchange runs from 1661 until 1677, with a hiatus between 1665 and 1675.

Oldenburg obtained a Master of Theology in 1639 at the *Gymnasium Illustre* in Bremen, where he likely acquired competence in Greek, Latin, and Hebrew. He then became a tutor to young Englishmen, traveled throughout the continent, and acquired fluency in Dutch, French, Italian and English. He was sent by the Bremen Senate as envoy to Oliver Cromwell in 1653, and there in England met his lifelong friend Robert Boyle, to whose nephew he would later serve as tutor. On 15 July 1662, the Royal Society obtained its first charter from Charles II, with Oldenburg and John Wilkins as the two named secretaries. He remained Secretary, and editor of the *Philosophical Transactions*, until his death.

Oldenburg first met Spinoza in 1661. He writes in Ep. 1 that at Rijnsburg they had talked, inter alia, “about God, about infinite Extension and thought, [and] about the difference and agreement of these attributes” (Ep. 1; IV/6). He served as mediator in Spinoza’s and Robert Boyle’s brief correspondence and would throughout their communications recount the latter’s experiments to Spinoza (cf. Ep. 14; IV/70-1) and keep him up to date with scientific treatises (cf. Eps. 25, 29).

In their early correspondence, Oldenburg is puzzled by central aspects of Spinoza’s system. Of the doctrine that no substance can be produced by anything else, he says that “we can hardly grasp how this could be true”; he wishes Spinoza to express it “more straightforwardly.” (Ep. 3; IV/11) Perhaps the most famous exchange between the two is Spinoza’s description of the coherence of nature and the place of human beings in it, where he uses the example of the “worm in the blood.” (Ep. 32; IV/170a-174a) Oldenburg reports that he does “not sufficiently follow” parts of it. (Ep. 33; IV/176-7)

Though Oldenburg expressed great initial interest in the TTP (Ep. 31; IV/167), his later letters, after he had read it, are more cautious. While he thinks Spinoza is “far from trying to harm true religion” (Ep. 61; IV/272), he nonetheless expresses approval of Spinoza’s (perhaps, it must be said, only imagined by Oldenburg) intention to “clarify and soften” some of the things written in that treatise (Ep. 71; IV/304). Upon further clarification, he accuses Spinoza of “build[ing] on a fatal necessity of all things and actions” (Ep. 75; IV/311a), which he thinks will destroy virtue and render rewards and punishments meaningless (Ep. 77; IV/324). His last letter to Spinoza (Ep. 79), dated 11 February 1676, continues in these criticisms of the TTP. We do not have Spinoza’s reply; the two died, six months apart, in 1677.

## **Bibliography**

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