

English Women Philosophers and the Origins of Modernity¹

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In his recent book on the rise of modernity, Jonathan Israel argues that philosophers and philosophical ideas played a significant role in the transformation of opinions and attitudes across early modern Europe.² In the seventeenth century, Cartesian philosophy in particular was at the forefront of the formation of modern concepts and institutions. Many aspects of Cartesianism are now seen as typical of the ‘modern project’, including its challenge to ancient authority, the questioning of past prejudices and assumptions, its egalitarian conception of reason, and the privileging of the intellect over the passions. The rise of Cartesianism also marked the advent of the new mechanistic conception of the natural world, the rise of scientific objectivity, the separation of theology and philosophy, and a radical division between human beings and the rest of nature, including animals. To this list of ‘modern innovations’, we might also add that Cartesian philosophy played a modest role in promoting intellectual equality between the sexes. In 1673, a Frenchman named Francois Poulain de la Barre employed Cartesian ideas to argue that common opinions about the innate intellectual deficiency of women are based on unexamined prejudices rather than clear and distinct ideas. He maintained that there is no essential difference between the rational abilities of men and women (the soul itself, he says, ‘has no sex’); and therefore any defect in women’s reasoning capacities must be due to custom, rather than natural inferiority.

But what role, we might ask, did women *themselves* play in the general intellectual shift of the times? Did women thinkers make their own distinctive contribution to the origins of modernity, or were they mere passive spectators to the historical and intellectual upheavals of their time?

Over the past few decades, scholars have demonstrated that women philosophers did in fact play an active role in intellectual debates leading up to the Enlightenment.³ Some

¹ This paper is partly derived from my book, *Women Philosophers of the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). I would like to thank Steven Lestition for his helpful suggestions on several aspects of the discussion. I would also like to acknowledge the assistance of the Australian Research Council: I am grateful that I was able to complete this essay during my time as a research associate for the ARC-funded ‘Mindful Things’ project at Monash University, in April 2003.

² Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

³ For an overview of the key figures, see Eileen O’Neill, ‘Disappearing Ink: Early Modern Women Philosophers and their Fate in History’, in *Philosophy in a Feminist Voice: Critiques and Reconstructions*, edited by Janet A. Kourany (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 17-62.

historians have highlighted the impact of Cartesian philosophy on women's thought in seventeenth-century England.⁴ First, it is argued, women were inspired by the Cartesian assumption that those individuals who have never received a formal education are perfectly able to participate in philosophical discourse. According to Descartes, a true philosopher does not require an extensive library or a specialised training in Latin and Greek. Anybody can attain knowledge, so long as they rid themselves of all former prejudices, begin with self-evident ideas in the mind, and proceed from simple to complex ideas in an orderly, rigorous manner. In fact, he says, those individuals who are uneducated in traditional scholastic philosophy are the best fitted for the apprehension of truth, because their minds are the least clouded by prejudices. These sentiments were highly appealing to philosophically minded women who had received no education beyond the 'feminine accomplishments'. They provided the inspiration for women to engage in serious philosophical discussions, to initiate intellectual correspondences with learned men, and (in some cases) to publish their own philosophical treatises. In a 1645 letter to Descartes, Elisabeth of Bohemia praises the Cartesian way of reasoning because it 'is the most natural I have encountered and seems to teach me nothing new, save that I can extract from my mind knowledge I have not yet noticed'.⁵ Likewise, in a 1693 letter to the philosopher John Norris, English woman Mary Astell argues that 'though I can't pretend to a Multitude of Books, Variety of Languages, the Advantages of Academical Education, or any Helps but what my own Curiosity afford; yet, *Thinking* is a Stock that no Rational Creature can want, if they know but how to use it'.⁶

Descartes' challenge to custom and ancient authority also inspired women to formulate arguments in favour of women's higher education. Reason or 'commonsense', they argue, is equitably distributed among all human beings. If women appear to be intellectually deficient, then society must be blamed for preventing them from improving their minds. In her *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (1655), Margaret Cavendish remarks that 'through the carelesse neglects, and despisements of the masculine sex to the effeminate' women have become 'like worms that onely live in the dull earth of ignorance, winding our selves

⁴ See Margaret Atherton, 'Cartesian Reason and Gendered Reason', *A Mind of One's Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity*, ed. Louise M. Antony and Charlotte Witt (Boulder and Oxford: Westview Press, 1993); Ruth Perry, 'Radical Doubt and the Liberation of Women', *Eighteenth Century Studies* 18, no. 4 (1985): 472-93; Katharine M. Rogers, 'The Liberating Effect of Rationalism', in *Feminism in Eighteenth-Century England* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982); Hilda L. Smith, *Reason's Disciples: Seventeenth Century English Feminists* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982); and Hilda L. Smith, 'Intellectual Bases for Feminist Analyses: The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries', in *Women and Reason*, ed. Elizabeth D. Harvey and Kathleen Okruhlik (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992).

⁵ Elisabeth to Descartes, 16 August 1645; in John J. Blom (tr.), *Descartes: His Moral Philosophy and Psychology* (New York: New York University Press, 1978), 135.

⁶ Mary Astell and John Norris, *Letters Concerning the Love of God, Between the Author of the Proposal to the Ladies and Mr. John Norris: Wherein his late Discourse, shewing That it ought to be intire and exclusive of all other Loves, is further cleared and justified* (London: J. Norris, 1695), 2.

sometimes out, by the help of some refreshing rain of good education which seldom is given us'.⁷ Although Cavendish did not develop an explicit agenda for reform, many of her successors did. In 1694, Mary Astell issued a plea for the establishment of an all-female academic institute. In *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, she observes that 'Women are from their very Infancy debar'd those Advantages, with the want of which, they are afterwards reproached, and nursed up in those Vices which will hereafter be upbraided to them'.⁸ Yet a transformation in female manners could easily be effected through study and discipline. In the second part of the *Proposal* (1697), Astell expounds Cartesian rules of thought for the improvement of women's minds. Her method is borrowed from Descartes' contemporaries, Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole, the co-authors of the highly influential *Logic or the Art of Thinking* (1662). Like Arnauld and Nicole, Astell stresses the importance of reasoning from clear and distinct premises.

Astell's contemporary, Damaris Cudworth Masham, also argues in favour of the intellectual education of women. In her short treatise, *Occasional Thoughts in Reference to A Vertuous or Christian Life* (1705), Masham argues that if women are not educated, then the education of men will suffer. She warns that if men do not learn to regulate the bodily passions at an early age, whilst in the care of *their mothers*, then such passions will gain an irreversible ascendancy over the mind. Although Masham is no Cartesian, her argument appeals to the Cartesian notion that in the search for truth one must first learn to overcome childhood prejudices. Such prejudices, Masham says, can be easily circumvented if the early educators of men are given a proper education themselves. Similar sentiments are echoed in the works of Catharine Trotter Cockburn, Mary Chudleigh, Judith Drake, and other women writers of the time.

Seventeenth-century women embraced the new philosophy as a source of intellectual liberation. In their feminist treatises, they contributed to the popularisation of modern concepts in England by praising the ideal of intellectual equality between the sexes, the individual's own quest for truth, and the value of reason above the passions. In addition, we should not underestimate the personal influence that these women had on their more famous peers. While women might not have formulated the principles of modernity themselves, they played an invaluable role as the critics and interlocutors of men who *did*, men such as Locke and Descartes.

More recently, however, scholars have started to interpret the works of women thinkers independently of the views of canonical figures. Commentators have focussed on identifying women's independent theoretical positions, rather than on trying to fit their ideas into the

⁷ Margaret Cavendish, *The Philosophical and Physical Opinions, Written by her Excellency, the Lady Marchionesse of Newcastle* (London: J. Martin and J. Allestrye, 1655), sig. B2^v.

dominant masculine moulds.⁹ There has also been a growing emphasis upon examining those forgotten figures and ideas that shaped women's thought. To provide an accurate picture, scholars suggest, we must examine those philosophical movements that do not conform to modern stereotypes, or those influences that now appear alien to our conception of 'philosophy'. In this paper, I take a similar methodological approach to women's responses to the rise of modernity. On closer analysis, I argue, it is far from obvious that women thinkers wholeheartedly embrace the modern ideals of Cartesianism. In fact, women philosophers in England express a profound ambivalence toward the modern enterprise as a whole. Although they embrace some modern ideals, they are suspicious of the new mechanical conception of nature, the Cartesian divide between human beings and the natural world, and the primacy of philosophy over theology. In their writings, these women struggle to reconcile the 'new philosophy' with older principles derived from ancient and theological sources. Their critical approach, I maintain, can have implications for contemporary discussions on the topic of modernity.

Historical-intellectual background

First, it is necessary to examine the historical-intellectual background to early modern women's philosophy. As we have seen, women were not permitted to attend universities in late seventeenth-century England. Women who became philosophers were either self-taught or educated by men who took a personal interest in their intellectual development. This limited access to formal education had implications for women's writings: without great proficiency in Latin and French, female philosophers were dependent upon works written or translated into English. Margaret Cavendish, for example, had several opportunities to converse with Descartes himself in Paris. But, she says, 'I never spake to monsieur De Cartes in my life, nor ever understood what he said, for he spake no English, and I understand no other language, and those times I saw him ... he did appear to me a man of the fewest words I ever heard'.¹⁰ Similarly, in a 1693 letter to John Norris, Mary Astell says that she admires Nicolas Malebranche's views on the soul, but wishes that she 'cou'd read that ingenious Author in his own Language, or that he spake mine'.¹¹ Women's understanding of the new

⁸ Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Parts I and II*, ed. Patricia Springborg (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1997), part I, 10.

⁹ See, for example, Lisa Shapiro, 'Princess Elizabeth and Descartes: the Union of Soul and Body and the Practice of Philosophy', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 7, no. 3 (1999): 503-20; reprinted in Genevieve Lloyd (ed.), *Feminism and History of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 182-203; and my own 'Adversaries or Allies? Occasional Thoughts on the Masham-Astell Exchange', *Eighteenth-Century Thought* 1 (2003).

¹⁰ Cavendish, *Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, 'An Epilogue to My Philosophical Opinions', sig. B3^v.

¹¹ Astell and Norris, *Letters*, 149.

philosophy was typically derived from English translations, English philosophers, or their conversations and letters with Englishmen.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the group of English thinkers known as the ‘Cambridge Platonists’ exerted a strong influence upon early modern women’s philosophy. The Cambridge school is made up of several philosopher-theologians based at the University of Cambridge in the mid-seventeenth century. Although there is no univocal Cambridge-Platonist ‘philosophy’, there are distinctive unifying themes in the philosophical writings of the Cambridge men. On the one hand, the members of this group – including Henry More, Ralph Cudworth, John Smith, Nathanael Culverwell, and Benjamin Whichcote – embrace the modern ideals of reason and rationality. They encourage the individual’s own personal search for truth and enlightenment, and they advocate a ‘tolerationist’ moral approach, grounded in both reason and faith. In these respects, the Cambridge men were at the heart of the early formation of modern concepts and attitudes; they were also some of the first supporters of Descartes’ ideas, and among the earliest members of the Royal Society. But on the other hand, in all their works, the principal goal of the Cambridge Platonists is a *theological* one. The Cambridge philosophers tend to accept or dismiss a philosophical viewpoint solely in order to affirm the existence of a providential God, the spiritual world, and immaterial souls. Toward this anti-atheistic end, they are receptive to both ancient and modern writings. The theory of nature espoused by Cudworth and More, for example, draws on Plato, Plotinus, and Aristotle, as well as the views of Descartes and the new mechanical science. Cudworth and More, the most influential members of the group, are extremely suspicious of any philosophy that disassociates the material and the spiritual world. Although they are inspired by Descartes’ arguments for God and the immaterial soul, they are critical of other aspects of his views, such as his rejection of final causality in nature, the belief that animals have no souls, and his purely mechanistic account of nature. Henry More, in particular, was suspicious that, contrary to Descartes’ intentions, Cartesian mechanism might be used to advance the atheist’s cause: the construction of a mechanistic-materialist world-picture, completely devoid of any reference to God or spiritual substances.

English women philosophers thus received their intellectual education at the hands of some of the strongest *critics* of the new philosophy. What implications, we might ask, did this have for their reception of modern thought?

(i) *Margaret Cavendish (1623-73)*

Margaret Cavendish, the Duchess of Newcastle, shares the Cambridge Platonists’ general scepticism toward Cartesian metaphysics. Upon her marriage to William Cavendish (later the Duke of Newcastle) in 1645, Margaret Cavendish became an unofficial member of the famous ‘Newcastle Circle’, a group of philosophers and scientists based in Paris in the 1640s.

When the couple returned to England in the 1660s, Margaret Cavendish's reputation for extravagance and eccentricity made her something of an intellectual outcast. She published six books on philosophy between 1653 and 1668; she corresponded with two prominent thinkers, Joseph Glanvill and Walter Charleton; and she was the first woman to be invited to a session of the Royal Society. Yet no one really took her seriously as a philosopher. She had been told (she said) that 'no man dare or will set his name to the contradiction of a Lady,' and that most men would assume a female pseudonym, rather than openly criticise a woman. In the spirit of igniting debate, Cavendish sent her *Philosophical Letters* (1664) to the Platonist Henry More. If More read the work, he would have found that Cavendish develops her panpsychist form of materialism in *opposition* to his theory of nature. Nevertheless, there are also many similarities in their rejection of modern concepts: like More, Cavendish rejects the mechanical conception of nature, and the radical separation between humans and other natural things.

More's first major philosophical work, *An Antidote Against Atheism* (1653), is an attempt to refute atheism by providing arguments for the existence of God and the immateriality of the human soul. His strategy is to use the ideas of his materialist opponents so that they might accept his arguments, on the assumption that he who converses with a Barbarian 'must discourse to him in his own language'.¹² More says that if one accepts the tenets of mechanistic philosophy – that matter is passive, mindless, and incapable of self-motion – then one must concede that the chance motions of matter cannot account for the appearance of design and structural perfection in the natural world. There are some phenomena, More says, that can be explained only by the existence of spiritual substances, which, in turn, provide proof of God's providence in the created world. Hence More claims that all life, motion, and perception must be attributed to immaterial substances that pervade the material world. Toward this end, in *The Immortality of the Soul* (1659), he revitalises the neoplatonic doctrine of the World Soul, or the 'spirit of nature', which is 'A substance incorporeal, but without Sense and Animadversion, pervading the whole Matter of the Universe, and exercising a plastical power therein'.¹³ More claims that the bodies of human beings are capable of life and movement because they enjoy a 'vital congruity' with this part of the soul.

Though Cavendish is a strident critic of More's 'spirit of nature', she too rejects the mechanical conception of nature on teleological grounds. In her *Observations upon*

¹² Henry More, *An Antidote Against Atheism, Or, An Appeal to the Naturall Faculties of the Minde of Man*, with a new introduction by G.A.J. Rogers, facsimile reprint of 1655 second edition (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1997), 'The Preface', sig. B8^{r-v}.

¹³ Henry More, *The Immortality of the Soul; So farre forth as it is demonstrable from the Knowledge of Nature and the Light of Reason*, facsimile reprint of 1659 edition (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1997), 450.

Experimental Philosophy (1666), she argues that it is entirely implausible that ‘such a curious variety and contrivance of natural works’ should be produced by a senseless motion. She points out that one part moving another part through pressure could not produce all things ‘so orderly and wisely as they are in nature’.¹⁴ It is not probable that the parts of nature should move thus without knowing what they do: ‘for there can be no order, method or harmony, especially such as appears in the actions of nature, without there be reason to cause that order and harmony. And thus motion argues sense, and the well-ordered motion argues reason in nature, and in every part and particle thereof, without which nature could not subsist, but would be as a dull, indigested, and unformed heap and chaos’.¹⁵

Cavendish does not claim that the life and motion of natural things must be attributed to spirits or spiritual substances. Instead she maintains that the entire universe is composed of matter or material substance. There are, moreover, three different kinds or *degrees* of matter: rational, sensitive, and inanimate. The rational and sensitive kinds are animated and self-moving; they constitute ‘the life and knowledg of nature’. The inanimate or ‘grosser part of matter’, on the other hand, is incapable of moving itself. The sensitive can be distinguished from the rational in that the sensitive alone acts on the inanimate part of nature, helping it to move, while rational matter remains ‘subtil and pure’. In figurative terms, ‘Sense is only a workman, and reason is the designer and surveyor’.¹⁶ Every particular creature, Cavendish says, contains a thorough *intermixture* of these different kinds of matter; all matter is partly animate (sensitive and rational), and partly inanimate.

Cavendish’s views appear to be indebted to ancient philosophy. Eileen O’Neill highlights the striking similarities between Cavendish’s theory and the physical doctrines of the Stoics, namely Zeno, Cleanthes, and Chrysippus.¹⁷ First, the Stoics are also thoroughgoing physicalists. Unlike their predecessors, they do not appeal to incorporeal notions, such as form, to explain the functioning of the natural world. Everything, for them, is explicable in terms of two physical principles: ‘that which acts’ (known as ‘reason’ or ‘god’), and ‘that which is acted upon’ (known as ‘matter’ or ‘unqualified substance’).¹⁸ Reason permeates the entire cosmos, making the natural world alive and intelligent; it has the power to move itself, and the power to make matter cohesive. Reason and matter are related through ‘blending’ or total mixture. The two principles entirely interpenetrate one another;

¹⁴ Margaret Cavendish, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, ed. Eileen O’Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 73.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 207.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹⁷ See Eileen O’Neill’s ‘Introduction’ to Cavendish, *Observations*, xxiv.

¹⁸ Diogenes Laertius 7.134; in A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, translations of the principal sources, with philosophical commentary, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), vol. I, 44B, 268.

they are mutually unified and ‘mutually co-extended through and through [but] such that they each preserve their own nature’.¹⁹

Cavendish’s animate type of matter – that which bestows life, motion, and perception on every material thing – corresponds to the Stoic’s active principle; and inanimate matter corresponds to the passive.²⁰ Inanimate matter, by itself, does not have the capacity to initiate motion. It has life and motion, but only because it is united with animate matter. The animate and inanimate are related in the same way as the Stoic’s active and passive principles: take any particle of nature, according to Cavendish, and it will be composed of a blend of animate and inanimate matter. It follows that even the most basic constitutive parts of nature have some degree of intelligence, or some share of sense and reason – the theory known as panpsychism. In Cavendish’s philosophy, every human being, animal, vegetable, mineral, and element is endued with animate matter, ‘Life and Soul, Sense and Reason’.

Cavendish thus rejects the Cartesian view that animals are mere machines, devoid of reason, and incapable of experiencing sensations. Cavendish insists that human beings and animals share a common materiality; there is nothing distinctive about *Homo sapiens* to make them superior to the brute creation; in terms of their basic constituent substance, they are on an equal footing. Although animals do not have human rationality, they do have a reason of their own. It is ignorance that leads humans to think of themselves as superior to other parts of nature, when in reality the sharp distinction they make between species is untenable. These views bear a strong resemblance to those of Cudworth in his *True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678). In this work, Cudworth criticises those writers who believe that ‘the world and all things therein, were Created only for the Sake of Man ... by their own Self-love, their Over-Weaning, and Puffy Conceit of themselves’.²¹ In similar terms, in the *Observations*, Cavendish says that ‘man, out of self-love, and conceited pride, because he thinks himself the chief of all creatures, and that all the world is made for his sake; doth also imagine that all other creatures are ignorant, dull, stupid, senseless, and irrational’.²²

(ii) *Anne Conway (1631-79)*

¹⁹ Alexander on Chrysippus; in Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, vol. I, 48C, 290.

²⁰ There are, however, significant *differences* between Cavendish’s views and those of the Stoics. (i) Cavendish does not support the view that *pneuma*, the basic unifying principle in the universe, is God or a ‘designing fire’. (ii) Cavendish rejects the Stoic view that there is a single *hegemonikon* in human beings. (iii) Cavendish maintains that the material substance that constitutes the world is infinite in bulk and quantity. The Stoics maintain that the cosmos is finite, even though it is situated in an infinite void. (iv) Cavendish does not hold sophisticated views about ‘tensile motion’, as the Stoics did. (v) Finally, the Stoics maintain that the ability to use language is a hallmark of rationality, whereas Cavendish denies that this is so.

²¹ Ralph Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe: The First Part; Wherein, All the Reason and Philosophy Of Atheism is Confuted; And Its Impossibility Demonstrated*, facsimile reprint of 1678 edition (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Friedrich Frommann Verlag, 1964), 875.

²² Cavendish, *Observations*, 218-9.

Upon receiving his presentation copy of the *Philosophical Letters*, More wrote to Cavendish before he had even read her arguments. ‘Madam,’ he said, ‘I humbly crave Pardon for my boldness, and impatience that I offer so hastily and return thanks for so eminent a Favour, before I have well computed the value thereof, nor as yet fitly polished and adorned my Stile, by a longer converse with your Ladyships most Elegant and Ingenious Writings.’²³ Although More did not respond to Cavendish’s book, in private he encouraged his correspondent and friend, Anne Conway, to write a response.

Henry More was first introduced to Anne Conway in about 1650, and later became an intellectual mentor and one of her closest friends. Although Anne never received a formal tertiary education, she was tutored at home and her half-brother John Finch encouraged her interest in philosophy and theology. She is reputed to have learned Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, and to have studied the works of Plato and Plotinus in Latin. In about 1650, John introduced Anne to Henry More, his tutor at Christ’s College, Cambridge. Shortly thereafter, Conway and More began an intellectual correspondence. The content of their early letters is largely philosophical: More tutored Conway in Cartesian philosophy and encouraged her to be critical; her questions, in turn, enabled More to clarify certain ideas for his treatises. Despite More’s encouragement, there is no indication that Conway ever wrote a critique of Margaret Cavendish’s philosophy. Conway’s only systematic statement of her philosophical position is a short treatise, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, first published posthumously in Latin in 1690.

In this work, Conway maintains that there are three distinct types of substances: God, Christ, and the other ‘creatures’. These three can be distinguished from one another in terms of their capacity for change. God’s essence is to be immutable and eternal, whereas his creatures are mutable and temporal; they have an intrinsic power to change themselves either for good or bad. Christ, who is the first-born of all creatures, is both ‘God’ and ‘man’; he is capable of changing, but only for the good. Christ is a necessary intermediary between God and the created world ‘because otherwise a gap would remain and one extreme would have been united with the other extreme without a mediator, which is impossible and against the nature of things’.²⁴ Together these three species – God, Christ, and the other creatures – make up ‘that vast infinity of possible things’.²⁵ In Conway’s view, there is no real distinction between spiritual and bodily substances; spirit and body differ only *modally*: ‘body is nothing

²³ More to Cavendish, 9 June 1665; in *A Collection of Letters And Poems: Written by several Persons of Honour and Learning, Upon divers Important subjects, to the Late Duke and Dutchess of Newcastle* (London: Langly Curtis, 1678), 90-1.

²⁴ Anne Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, translated and edited by Allison P. Coudert, and Taylor Corse (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 24-5.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

but fixed and condensed spirit; and spirit is nothing but volatile body or body made subtle'.²⁶ There is no such thing as dead matter, and all material things have self-motion, life, and perception. 'Nature is not simply an organic body like a clock,' she says, 'which has no vital principle of motion in it; but it is a living body which has life and perception, which are much more exalted than a mere mechanism or a mechanical motion.'²⁷ For this reason, according to Conway, her position is best described as a form of 'anti-Cartesianism'.

Although Conway develops this philosophy in opposition to Henry More's dualist theory of soul and body,²⁸ she is strongly committed to the fundamental theological presuppositions of Cambridge Platonism. In particular, Conway develops her philosophy of nature by theorising about what God's attributes necessarily imply for his creation. We must see, she says, that 'since the goodness of God is a living goodness, which possesses life, knowledge, love, and power, which he communicates to his creatures', then it is not possible for any dead thing to 'proceed from him or be created by him, such as mere body or matter, according to the hypothesis of those who affirm that matter cannot be changed into any degree of life or perception'.²⁹ If matter is incapable of reason, then it is difficult to see how it can 'acquire greater goodness to infinity'.³⁰ On this view, matter would be a useless part of creation, a notion that would cast doubt on God's goodness and wisdom. Like the Platonists, Conway says that 'the divine power, goodness, and wisdom has created good creatures so that they may continually and infinitely move towards the good'.³¹ All creatures must have the capacity for motion, because otherwise they cannot move toward perfection.

Here Conway's position accords with the intellectualist theology of the Cambridge Platonists. Ralph Cudworth takes a typical intellectualist stance in his *True Intellectual System of the Universe*. An intellectualist, according to John Henry, maintains that God 'had no choice but to create the world in accordance with the moral demands placed upon Him by His own goodness and in accordance with the essential relationships inherent in the nature of things'.³² One of Cudworth's principal aims is to show that there are certain essential features in the world, or 'Something in its own *Nature, Immutably and Eternally Just, and Unjust*',³³ which is not subject to the divine will. In his 'Preface to the Reader', Cudworth says that he challenges those theorists who claim that God's will is 'in no way Regulated or Determined,

²⁶ Ibid., 61.

²⁷ Ibid., 64.

²⁸ For details, see Sarah Hutton, 'Anne Conway Critique d'Henry More: L'Esprit et la Matiere', *Archives de Philosophie* 58, no. 3 (1995): 371-84.

²⁹ Conway, *Principles*, 44-5.

³⁰ Ibid., 46.

³¹ Ibid., 32.

³² John Henry, 'Henry More Versus Robert Boyle: The Spirit of Nature and the Nature of Providence', in *Henry More (1614-1687) Tercentenary Studies*, ed. Sarah Hutton (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1990), 62.

³³ Cudworth, *True Intellectual System*, sig. A3^v.

by any *Essentiall and Immutable Goodness, and Justice*; or that he hath nothing of *Morality* in his *Nature*, he being onely *Arbitrary Will Omnipotent*'.³⁴ Likewise, for Conway, God is bound to create the world in accordance with his supreme benevolence and wisdom: he would not create something that had no chance of achieving perfection or salvation. All created beings therefore necessarily have life, motion, and perception – features that enable them to strive toward perfection and God, the highest spirit.

(iii) *Mary Astell (1666-1731)*

Although only four years separate the publication of Conway's *Principles* and Astell's first treatise, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, the two philosophers belong to completely different generations. Whereas Conway's early education was influenced by the rise of Cartesianism and the Platonic renaissance in mid-seventeenth century England, Astell's first foray into philosophy was in the late-seventeenth century, and her most common target is John Locke. Nevertheless, Astell and Conway both have Cambridge Platonism as a common source of inspiration. While Conway gained her philosophical education through a correspondence with More, Astell was educated by her uncle, Ralph Astell, a curate who was a student of Emmanuel College in the heyday of Cambridge Platonism. In 1693, Astell initiated an intellectual correspondence with the so-called 'last of the Cambridge Platonists', John Norris. (Until his conversion to Malebranchean occasionalism in 1688, Norris was a strong supporter of the Platonists' doctrines.) In her letters to Norris and her other early writings, Astell shares the Cambridge Platonists' theological premises: she maintains that God has granted reason to human beings for the sake of their spiritual welfare; like Cudworth and More, she opposes any form of 'atheistic' materialism in which the material world is entirely disconnected from the spiritual; and she upholds a providentialist interpretation of the natural world.

In the second part of her *Serious Proposal*, Astell argues that true virtue requires that women do not mindlessly repeat the words of devotion, but identify with them as their own. To be virtuous, women must inform themselves of the reasons behind their actions; if they do not understand the underlying principles of religion, then it is only by accident that they happen to be good. In chapter four, Astell outlines the role of the passions in the attainment of virtue. Her arguments are indebted to Descartes' theory of the passions in his later work, the *Passions of the Soul* (1649). But though she cites Descartes' text, her views are principally derived from Henry More's *Account of Virtue* (1690). In this work, More defines virtue as 'an intellectual Power of the Soul, by which it over-rules the animal Impressions or

³⁴ *Ibid.*, sig. A3^r.

bodily Passions'.³⁵ Likewise, in the *Proposal*, Astell asserts that virtue 'consists in governing Animal Impressions, in directing our Passions to such Objects, and keeping `em in such a pitch as right Reason requires'.³⁶ The passions, considered in themselves, are not a bad thing. After all, Astell says, God has made the passions part of human nature, and 'God being Infinitely Wise all his Judgments must be Infallible, and being Infinitely Good he can will nothing but what is best, nor prescribe anything that is not for our advantage'.³⁷ (This echoes More's view that God 'never wills anything but what is transcendently the Best'.³⁸) The passions are good for us, according to Astell, when they are those that 'right reason' disposes us to, or when they are inclined towards good in general. Consider, for example, the passion of 'love'. Astell supports More's definition of love as 'a motion of the Soul to joyn itself to that which appears to be grateful to it'.³⁹ This passion is well regulated, she says, when we have saved it for things of the greatest worth, such as our worship of God. Like More, Astell believes that the passions of 'esteem', 'veneration', 'love', 'desire', and so on, need not disturb us if they are directed toward our one true end: the glory of our maker.

In her theory of the passions, Astell finds support in the Platonists' conception of God as 'Infinitely Wise' and 'Infinitely Good'. This intellectualist theology is developed in Astell's letters to Norris, published as *Letters Concerning the Love of God* in 1695. In his time, Norris was famous as the English advocate of Nicolas Malebranche's unorthodox form of Cartesianism, known as occasionalism. According to the occasionalists, there is no real interaction between soul and body, only a perfectly harmonious *correlation* between the physical and intellectual worlds, orchestrated by God. On this view, material objects are never the true causes of our sensations; they are merely the 'occasions' for God to cause sensory perceptions in our minds.

In a 1694 letter to Norris, Astell rejects the occasionalist view that God is the only true efficient cause of our sensations. She objects 'First, That this Theory renders a great Part of GOD's Workmanship Vain and Useless' and 'Secondly, That it does not well comport with his Majesty'.⁴⁰ For the first, Astell argues that if external objects are not able to produce our sensations, then these objects cannot serve any relevant purpose. Yet, if this is so, then Norris's theory is contrary to the idea that an infinitely wise being creates nothing in vain: it would be unnecessary for God to give us the inclination to believe that material things cause

³⁵ Henry More, *An Account of Virtue: Or, Dr. Henry More's Abridgment of Morals, Put into English* [by Edward Southwell], facsimile reprint of 1690 edition (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1997), 11.

³⁶ Astell, *Proposal II*, 161.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 153.

³⁸ More, *Account of Virtue*, 28.

³⁹ Astell, *Proposal II*, 166. More's definition is 'a Passion of the Soul, by which it is excited willingly to join it self unto Objects which seem grateful thereunto' (*Account of Virtue*, 84 [48]).

⁴⁰ Astell and Norris, *Letters*, 278.

our sensations, when he himself causes them. An infinitely wise being, Astell suggests, would not permit such superfluous features in his design.

Astell's second objection is that Norris's theory is incompatible with God's supreme dignity. It would be beneath a perfect being to be constantly meddling in earthly events, when he could simply create an instrument to enact his will. Astell suggests 'Why therefore may there not be a *sensible Congruity* between those Powers of the Soul that are employed in Sensation, and those Objects which occasion it? Analogous to that vital Congruity which your Friend Dr. *More* ... will have to be between some certain Modifications of Matter, and the plastick Part of the Soul'.⁴¹ Astell supports the view that there is a natural efficacy in bodies to produce sensations in the soul. Against Norris, she suggests that there *is* a causal relation between our sensations and the things that occasion them. In so far as material bodies are connected to, or have a 'congruity' with, certain 'plastical powers' in the soul, they do in some sense cause our pleasure or pain. God's 'Servant nature', according to Astell, acts as a causal agent in the natural world, making material things necessary conditions, rather than mere 'occasions'.

Astell's objection owes its origins to Cambridge-Platonist arguments. In the *Immortality of the Soul*, Henry More claims that the union between soul and body cannot be explained in mechanical terms, but only in terms of a 'vital congruity' between the plastic part of the soul and the body. Likewise, in his *True Intellectual System*, Cudworth opposes those mechanical theories that render God an 'idle Spectator' in his creation, thus making 'his Wisdom altogether Useless and Insignificant, ... and not at all acting abroad upon any thing without him'.⁴² But he believes that 'it seems not so agreeable to Reason ... that Nature as a Distinct thing from the Deity should be quite Superseded or made to Signifie Nothing, God himself doing all things Immediately'.⁴³ Instead, he supports a theory of 'plastic nature', a spiritual intermediary between spirit and matter, which gives material things life and activity, when they would otherwise be dead and passive. This theory strikes a medium between mechanism and occasionalism: 'plastic nature' is 'a living Stamp or Signature of Divine Wisdom' in the created world, and yet it does not require God to exert a 'Sollicitous Care or Distractious Providence'.⁴⁴

There are also similarities between Astell's views and those of Anne Conway. Conway emphasises that every created thing has a spiritual dimension, and that every particle of matter has the ability to perfect itself. Though Astell does not espouse a thoroughgoing perfectionism or a monistic vitalism, she too highlights the spiritual *telos* of material things.

⁴¹ Astell and Norris, *Letters*, 280.

⁴² Cudworth, *True Intellectual System*, 148.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 150, 155.

Astell's criticisms of Norris rely on pointing out the final, as well as the efficient, causes of material things: their *purpose* in God's grand design. In her objections to Norris, she emphasises that God created material things for a reason; if his philosophy fails to account for the purposefulness of matter, it is therefore inadequate. Like Conway, she judges the worth of a metaphysical position according to its compatibility with the divine attributes of wisdom and goodness.

(iv) *Damaris Cudworth Masham (1659-1708)*

Astell's contemporary, Damaris Cudworth Masham, develops objections to Norris's occasionalism along similar lines. The daughter of Ralph Cudworth, Masham spent her childhood in the company of the Platonists at Christ's College, Cambridge. In about 1681, Masham met the empiricist philosopher John Locke, and later became his close companion and correspondent. Masham's early letters to Locke, from 1682 to 1689, demonstrate a strong familiarity with the doctrines of her father and his colleagues, Henry More and John Smith. She not only defends Smith against Locke's accusations of 'enthusiasm', but she also rejects Locke's alignment of the Cambridge school with naïve supporters of innate ideas.⁴⁵ Despite the strong influence of Lockean empiricism on her later thought, Masham never fully abandons these Platonist sympathies.⁴⁶ In a later correspondence with Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Masham defends her father's theory of plastic nature against Pierre Bayle's imputations of atheism; and in her two published works, *A Discourse Concerning the Love of God* (1696) and the *Occasional Thoughts*, Masham retains a number of the Platonists' theological presuppositions.

First, like Astell, Masham challenges Norris's occasionalist theory that matter is a substance completely disconnected from the spiritual world, and without causal power. In the *Discourse*, Masham argues that if material beings are causally inefficacious, and if it is God himself who represents the idea of material things to our minds, then our sensory organs must be completely superfluous. But if this is so, she says, then it is contrary to the idea that God is supremely wise, since a perfect being would have eliminated any arbitrary features from his design. For Masham, Norris denigrates 'the Wisdom of God, in framing his Creatures like the Idols of the Heathen, that have Eyes, and see not; Ears, and hear not, & c'.⁴⁷ These are also the grounds of Masham's objection to Leibniz's theory of pre-established harmony. In a 1704 letter to Masham, Leibniz says that he can find no intelligible way of explaining how the body

⁴⁵ See E. S. de Beer (ed.), *The Correspondence of John Locke*, 8 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976-82), letters no. 684, 687, 688, 695, 696, 699, and 1040.

⁴⁶ On this topic, see Sarah Hutton, 'Damaris Cudworth, Lady Masham: Between Platonism and Enlightenment', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 1 (1993): 29-54.

⁴⁷ Damaris Masham, *A Discourse Concerning the Love of God* (London: Awnsham and John Churchil, 1696), 31.

transmits or communicates anything to the soul, or vice versa. Instead he claims that there is an ‘adaptation of the soul to the body’, or a ‘system of pre-established harmony between substances’.⁴⁸ He claims that God created the soul so that everything must arise in it from its own inner nature, with a perfect conformity to the things outside it. The inconceivability of any other explanation, he says, and the admirable uniformity of nature, leads him to believe that the soul and the body follow their own separate laws, without bodies exerting any influence on the soul. In a letter to Leibniz, dated 3 June 1704, Masham criticises this non-interactionist account of soul-body relations. Masham says that Leibniz falls prey to the same objections as Malebranchean occasionalism. If occasionalism and the system of pre-established harmony are correct, she says, then the complex organisation of the body is merely superfluous and ‘lost labour’ – a notion which is inconsistent with God’s perfection.

In a later letter to Leibniz, Masham defends Cudworth’s theory of plastic nature on similar grounds. In 1705, the French scholar Pierre Bayle argued that Cudworth’s doctrine is atheistic in tendency because it suggests that the natural world can exhibit purpose independently of God. In response, Masham asserts that Bayle has completely misinterpreted her father’s philosophy. Cudworth does not say that the natural world is capable of producing excellent works, in separation from God. Rather, he says that the operations of plastic nature are ‘*essentially and necessarilie Dependent* on the ideas in the Divine Intellect’.⁴⁹ If there were no ‘Perfect Mind’ in the universe, capable of conceiving the original blueprint, then material things would be unable to produce excellent works. Although Masham does not actively support Cudworth’s theory of nature, she does support the intellectualist theology underlying his views. This theology is implicit in her criticisms of Norris and Leibniz, where Masham calls on the *divine intellect* in order to affirm a causal relationship between spirit and matter.

Conclusions

So what conclusions might we draw about women’s philosophical contributions to the genesis of modern culture? First, it is apparent that philosophical modernity was a problematic source of liberation for early women philosophers in England. On the one hand, these women were receptive to some of the modern ideals embodied in Cartesian thought. In particular, Descartes’ philosophy enabled women to participate in mainstream intellectual discourse, when philosophy had formerly been the sole province of educated men. But their philosophical views were conceived during a period of growing opposition to Cartesianism in

⁴⁸ Leibniz to Masham, May 1704; in *Leibniz’s New System and Associated Contemporary Texts*, tr. and ed. R. S. Woolhouse and Richard Francks (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 206, 203.

⁴⁹ Masham to Leibniz, 20 October 1705; in *Die Philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, ed. C. I. Gerhardt (Berlin: Georg Olms Hildesheim, 1960), vol. III, 371.

England; and these women also share the concerns of some of the earliest critics of the ‘new philosophy’, the Cambridge Platonists. Like the Cambridge men, Margaret Cavendish rejects the mechanistic conception of nature and the radical divide between humans and other natural things. Instead, she supports a Stoic-inspired theory of nature, in which all created beings have ‘life and soul, sense and reason’. Other women writers support the Platonists’ opposition to the separation of theology and philosophy. Anne Conway adopts Henry More and Ralph Cudworth’s conception of God as primarily wise, just, and benevolent, rather than ‘arbitrary will omnipotent’. These theological premises lead Conway to reject the Cartesian conception of ‘dead matter’, and to affirm the spiritual *telos* of all created things. Mary Astell embraces a similar intellectualist theology in her theory of the passions and her objections to Malebranchean occasionalism. Astell’s contemporary, Damaris Masham, opposes the philosophies of Norris and Leibniz on the same grounds: she rejects their non-interactionist theories of soul and body because they cast doubt on God’s supreme wisdom. In these respects, early modern women tend to support the old worldview, rather than emerging modern ideals.

So, we might ask, do women’s ideas have any relevance for recent debates about the value of modernity and the modern enterprise? Perhaps, at first glance, we might be tempted to dismiss early women’s philosophy as reactionary and conservative. If philosophy were still a handmaiden to theology (we might argue), then perhaps their views would hold some interest; but it seems that the concerns of these women have passed into oblivion. Nevertheless, I think that it would be a mistake to dismiss women’s philosophical views in this way. Jean-Michel Vienne observes that, although the Cambridge Platonists defend the old guard, ‘many of their questions are still our own, even if their solutions are no longer accepted’.⁵⁰ The same can be said of the women philosophers who were inspired by the Cambridge school. Recent philosophers argue that we have been led astray by the conceptions of mind and matter bequeathed to us by Descartes. In *The Rediscovery of the Mind* (1992), John Searle says that we have accepted, without question, the view that ‘if something is mental, it cannot be physical; that if it is a matter of matter, it cannot be a matter of spirit; and if it is immaterial, it cannot be material’.⁵¹ These unquestioned assumptions generate many current difficulties in philosophy of mind – such as the mind-body problem, the problem of emergence, and problems arising from the notion of ‘privileged access’. Such longstanding problems, it is argued, might recede if we look at mind and matter in a different way. The theories of women philosophers – as ‘old-fashioned’ as they might be – suggest alternative approaches to the traditional ontological categories. Cavendish, Conway, Astell, and Masham,

⁵⁰ Jean-Michel Vienne, ‘Introduction’ to *The Cambridge Platonists in Philosophical Context: Politics, Metaphysics, and Religion* (Dordrecht, Boston, and London: Kluwer, 1997), ix.

⁵¹ John Searle, *The Rediscovery of the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992), 14.

all had different responses to theorists of their time, yet each writer was critical of any theory which posited a radical separation between material and immaterial substances, or rendered matter causally impotent and ‘purposeless’. They do not see the categories of the ‘mental’ and ‘physical’ as radically distinct or oppositional. While their philosophy might not provide ready answers to contemporary problems, history has shown that they were right to recognise difficulties in the Cartesian conceptions of spirit and matter.

Women’s criticisms of Cartesian dualism might also be pertinent from a contemporary feminist perspective. Some feminists maintain that the Cartesian conception of rationality has had negative implications for women because men are associated with the superior categories of mind and reason, and femaleness is typically associated with the body and the non-rational. In *The Man of Reason* (1984), Genevieve Lloyd presents a feminist critique of the sex-specific characteristics of matter and reason. According to Lloyd, ‘Rational knowledge has been construed as a transcending, transformation or control of natural forces; and the feminine has been associated with what rational knowledge transcends, dominates or simply leaves behind’.⁵² Lloyd observes that Cartesian method, in particular, involves putting aside or transcending the senses and the body. Following the rise of Cartesianism, a distinction arose between a highly abstract mode of thought and our everyday, ordinary thought processes. This distinction appears against the backdrop of Descartes’ dualism, the theory that the soul and body are distinct substances. A true philosopher, according to Descartes, can attain clear and distinct thought only by detaching the mind from *the material body*. This new conception of rational thought, according to Lloyd, has had pernicious consequences for gender: women have become associated with the lesser type of reason and the body, men with superior reason and the mind. The new ‘modern’ approach to philosophy is thus built upon ‘the denigration of the “feminine”’.⁵³ Nevertheless, the contributions of female philosophers of the past reveal that the history of philosophy can have positive implications for women. Although these women are inspired by the popular Cartesian conception of ‘natural reason’, their reverence for reason does not entail an unquestioning acceptance of *dualist* theories of the soul and body. Early modern women often challenge those same aspects of Cartesian metaphysics now under scrutiny by feminist philosophers.

Finally, a study of women’s responses to modernity might also have implications for the historiography of philosophy in general.⁵⁴ Women’s philosophical concerns have so far received inadequate attention in historical-intellectual accounts of the early modern period. But feminist philosophers and historians of women’s philosophy are gradually redressing the

⁵² Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: ‘Male’ and ‘Female’ in Western Philosophy* (London: Methuen, 1984), 2.

⁵³ Lloyd, *The Man of Reason*, 107.

⁵⁴ Genevieve Lloyd considers this topic in her ‘Introduction’ to *Feminism and History of Philosophy*, ed. Lloyd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1-24.

imbalance. One thing we learn from women's incorporation into the history books is that their inclusion is rather disruptive for our conception of certain philosophers. Early modern women's philosophy tells us that the Descartes we discuss today is not necessarily the Descartes of the seventeenth century. For English women such as Cavendish and Conway, Descartes was first and foremost a mechanist, and someone who banished intelligence and spiritual substance from the natural world. This is not the well-known 'dualist philosopher' of the standard philosophical textbooks, and the subject of numerous feminist critiques. An examination of early women's philosophy therefore compels us to appraise the old philosophers from a new perspective. This might, in turn, provide us with a much richer understanding of the origins of modern culture.