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Early Modern Feminism and Cartesian Philosophy

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Introduction

In early modern Europe (c. 1500-1700) it was a common perception that men and women had different bodily qualities: men's bodies were hot and dry, while women's were cold and moist; men were strong and active, while women were weak and passive. According to French physician Marin Cureau de la Chambre, these different bodily temperaments gave rise to different dispositions in the minds of men and women. On account of being hot, a man was naturally inclined to be courageous, magnanimous, sincere, liberal, merciful, just, and grateful. Because he was dry, a man was also capable of having a strong resolve, and of being constant, patient, modest, faithful and judicious. By contrast, on account of being cold, a woman was

Weak, and consequently Fearfull, Pusillanimous, Jealous, Distrustfull, Crafty, apt to Dissemble, Flatter, Lie, easily Offended, Revengefull, Cruel in her revenge, Unjust, Covetous, Ungratefull, Superstitious. And from her being moist, it follows that she should be Unconstant, Light, Unfaithfull, Impatient, easily Perswaded, Compassionate, Talkative. (Cureau 1670: 26)

A woman's mind was especially susceptible to impressions from outside: it was credulous, changeable, and fickle. Though Cureau and others insisted that these

inclinations were proper and natural to the female sex—and thus constituted a woman’s “perfection” (when held in equilibrium)—it was generally thought that women *compared to men* were defective by nature, and that women were inherently lacking in the moral and intellectual competence of the male sex.

While these were popular views of the time, however, they were by no means uncontested or uncontroversial. The seventeenth century bore witness to a number of arguments in favor of the moral and intellectual equality of the sexes (for helpful overviews, see Clarke 2013; O’Neill 2011). Such arguments can be found in the works of Marie le Jars de Gournay, François Poullain de la Barre, Anna Maria van Schurman, Bathsua Makin, Margaret Cavendish, Mary Astell, Judith Drake, Gabrielle Suchon, Mary Chudleigh, and Damaris Masham, amongst others.

In this chapter I examine the influence of Cartesian philosophy on feminist thought of the seventeenth century. More specifically, I outline the impact of Cartesian epistemological, metaphysical, and ethical ideas on the arguments of the French thinker François Poullain de la Barre (1647–1723) and the English philosopher Mary Astell (1666–1731). My purpose is to highlight those aspects of Cartesian philosophy that were central to their feminist thought. In doing so, I propose to elaborate on—and, to some extent, sharpen and refine—previous statements on the subject of Cartesianism and feminism.

In the scholarly literature to date, it is an accepted view that Descartes’ method of doubt provided significant inspiration for early modern feminists. This is the famous method whereby Descartes doubted every belief that he could possibly doubt in order to obtain clear and certain knowledge. By analogy, he reasoned, it was better to demolish an old house built on weak foundations and construct a new building rather than try to repair the old one piece by piece. His process of “demolition” or

universal doubt famously came to an end with one certain and indubitable truth: that “*I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind” (Descartes 1984: 17). This insight, now known as the *cogito*, provided Descartes with a criterion of truth and certainty – “clarity and distinctness” – from which to re-build knowledge on secure foundations.

Though Descartes’ method was never intended to cast doubt on political or religious authority, its anti-authoritarian implications were obvious to a number of his near-contemporaries (see Israel 2001). Ruth Perry observes that Cartesian method enabled early modern feminists to call into question the aforementioned prejudices and preconceptions concerning female moral and intellectual inferiority. By gaining a familiarity with this radical method, and engaging in a “willful doubting of all previous knowledge,” Perry says (1985: 479), women became critically minded toward oppressive gender stereotypes of their time. The method of doubt thus provided a “powerful and revolutionary” mechanism by which women could be liberated (475).

Scholars also claim that Descartes’ philosophy of mind provided crucial support for the idea that “the mind has no sex.” According to Descartes, the mind is essentially a thinking substance. Simply by looking within myself, I can know that the essence of my mind is to think. I can also deduce that the essence of my body, a material thing, is to be extended in length, breadth, and depth. Furthermore, I can clearly and distinctly conceive of my mind, a purely thinking, non-extended thing, existing apart from my body, a purely extended, non-thinking thing. In Descartes’ view, it follows that the mind and body are two distinct substances, capable of existing independently of one another. Perry notes that in this period, “Once mind was separated from body, and elevated, nothing could be argued from physiology,” and

that “women’s reproductive capacity could no longer be held against them if all minds were created equal and rationality was the cardinal virtue” (1985: 473). Catharine Gallagher likewise points out that: “Many seventeenth-century women writers were inspired by Descartes’ dualism to assert their intellectual equality with men; for if, as Descartes argued, mind has no extension, then it also has no gender.” In her view, Cartesian philosophy instituted a “clean break” between mind and body (1988: 34). Erica Harth adds that “the mind has no sex” is a “rallying cry” for feminists in the period (1992: 81), and Marcelle Maistre Welch likewise asserts that “the mind has no sex” is “the bedrock of modern feminist philosophy” in this era, one that owes its origins to Descartes’ “dualism of mind and body” (Poullain 2002: 82, n. 27).

These common generalizations about Cartesianism and feminism face certain difficulties and limitations, however. First, it must be noted that in the context of Descartes’ wider project the method of doubt is, strictly speaking, a skeptical tool: it is an instrument to annihilate opinions rather than establish positive truths (Descartes’ doubting comes to an *end* with the *cogito*). So while the method of doubt is useful for the purposes of negative feminist critique, by itself it is unable to establish certain positive truths about women’s mental competence, or to suggest normative reasons why women should not be treated differently to men. To form the basis of a full-blooded feminist theory, this method requires supplementation with a theory of mind and an ethical or political standpoint.

Second, the supposedly Cartesian idea that “the mind has no sex” is hard to reconcile with Descartes’ explicit claim that the living human being is a *mind-body composite* (on this point, see O’Neill 1999: 240). In his *Meditationes de prima philosophiae* [*Meditations on First Philosophy*] (first published 1641), following an argument for the real distinction between mind and body, Descartes states that “I am

not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship” (1984: 56). To some extent, of course, he concedes that I *am* like a sailor in a ship: I can steer my body this way and that, and I can make certain choices and perform certain actions that prevent my vessel from coming to harm. But in other respects, I am *not* like a sailor: when a sailor’s boat hits the rocks, he does not intimately experience the damage. But when *my body* hits the rocks, I feel the impact deep within me: I am discomposed by sensations of pain, I experience the passions of fear and dread, and I am unable *not* to feel the pounding of my heart and the shortness of my breath. Such feelings and sensations overwhelm my ability to think clearly and rationally. As Descartes explains in his final work *Les Passions de l’âme* [*The Passions of the Soul*] (1649), the body influences the mind’s thought processes in disturbing and confusing ways. Cartesian philosophy does not therefore institute a “clean break” between mind and body, or posit a “separation” between the two substances. It holds that for any living human being, a mind will always be united to, and closely intermingled with, a particular body. For Descartes, then, the human mind *does* have a sex: it is tied, fused, joined, united, and closely connected to either a male or a female physiology.

In light of these points, several puzzles and questions arise about the Cartesian influence on feminist thought in this period. In particular, it is difficult to see how the mere assertion of a sexless mind could have mounted an effective challenge to the prevailing sexism of the times. In Cureau’s view, a woman’s natural temperament made her a slave to her bodily passions: it rendered her weak, feeble, inconstant, easily persuaded, and generally mentally incompetent. In her correspondence with Descartes about the mind-body union, Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia expresses a similar view about the immaterial mind’s inability to overcome her female bodily temperament. “I have a body imbued with a large part of the weaknesses of my sex,”

she says, “so that it is affected very easily by the afflictions of the soul and has none of the strength to bring itself back into line” (Elisabeth & Descartes 2007: 88). She raises a pertinent point: if women’s minds could still be so strongly influenced by their bodies, it is not clear that with the rise of Cartesianism, “nothing could be argued from physiology” or that “women’s reproductive capacity could no longer be held against them” as Perry says (1985: 473).

In the following discussion, I propose to address these difficulties by highlighting other influential aspects of Cartesian philosophy for feminist thought, such as Descartes’ views concerning error and judgment, his philosophy of the passions, and his ethical ideas concerning virtue. I suggest that the writings of Poullain and Astell are valuable for giving us a strong appreciation of the philosophical sophistication of Cartesian feminism in this era.

1. Poullain

François Poullain de la Barre is significant for being one of the first writers to follow through on the socio-political implications of Descartes’ philosophy. From 1673 to 1675, in three anonymous French works—*De L’Égalité des deux sexes* [*On the Equality of the Two Sexes*] (1673), *De L’Éducation des dames* [*On the Education of Ladies*] (1674), and *De L’Excellence des hommes* [*On the Excellence of Men*] (1675)—Poullain argues in favor of the equality of the sexes. Using Cartesian method, he challenges the prevailing prejudice that women are naturally morally and intellectually inferior and therefore ought to be treated as social inferiors to men. Significantly, he does not attempt a general demolition of opinions or a “willful doubting of all previous knowledge,” as Descartes does in the *Meditations*. Rather, in *On the Education of Ladies*, Poullain defines a state of general doubt as a “frame of

mind, a state of impartiality or of objectivity in which we lean neither to one side nor the other, suspending our judgment until doubt has been allayed” (2002: 175). In this respect, his method bears a resemblance to Descartes’s method of avoiding error, or his way of “rightly conducting one’s reason,” in his *Discours de la méthode* [*Discourse on the Method*] (1637) and the Fourth Meditation of the *Meditations* (both cited in Poullain 2002: 237). Poullain also emulates the methodological approach of Descartes’ followers Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole in their 1662 work *La Logique, ou l’art de penser* [*Logic, or the Art of Thinking*] (cited in Poullain 2002: 237).

In the aforementioned texts, each author recommends following certain useful rules of thinking in order to find truth. According to Descartes, error is the result of a dysfunctional relationship between the two mental faculties of the will and the understanding. The understanding is a passive faculty of perceiving ideas in the mind, whereas the will is an active faculty of affirming or denying, rejecting or accepting, whatever is presented to it. Error comes about when the intellect presents me with certain ideas, and my will leaps in and rashly affirms those ideas as true or false, without taking time for proper reflection. Error, in other words, is a result of hasty *judgments*. It is an outcome of the will “getting the jump on” the understanding, so to speak, rather than waiting for the understanding to determine its assent. To avoid error, I must attentively follow the right method of thinking: I must suspend or withhold my judgments about confused and obscure perceptions, and my will must affirm only those ideas that are clear and distinct (Descartes 1984: 40-1).

Along the same lines, in *On the Equality*, Poullain subjects certain sexist assumptions to “the rule of truth”: he resolves to “accept nothing as true unless it is supported by clear and distinct ideas” (Poullain 2002: 50). This method enables him

to challenge ill-founded prejudices—rash judgments, that is, “made without examination” (49, n. 2). Poullain critically examines the common prejudice that women have a native feebleness, that they do not have an aptitude for learning and study in the sciences, and that they are necessarily incapable of virtue due to their inconstancy, timidity, and credulity. In his view, these judgments fail to pass the test of verity. He allows that in early modern society, women are in a state of subjection to men. They are psychologically, intellectually, and financially dependent on men, and they are barred from access to all higher education and any public position that requires a sophisticated level of intelligence and skill. Consequently, as a matter of contingent fact, he says, women exhibit a certain dependence of mind, a seeming intellectual deficiency, and a timidity and reserve in their manner. But in his opinion, this is neither a natural nor a necessary state of affairs.

To demonstrate this point, Poullain highlights the fact that uneducated women often show more common sense than learned men. In their everyday lives, he says, ordinary women give countless examples that they are capable of reasoning about complicated things. History, moreover, has shown us that some women have been the supreme leaders of nations; others have acted as magistrates in various courts of law; and many have shown remarkable valor, bravery, and resolution in defense of their religion (Poullain 2002: 77). In short, he argues that popular generalizations about female incompetence can be readily contradicted by empirical evidence, and that women are perfectly capable of occupying public positions in society. If we were to judge that women’s current condition in society is natural or right merely because it *happens* to be the case, then this would be a hasty and potentially erroneous judgment. In keeping with Cartesian method, we must suspend or withhold such judgments.

For Poullain, Cartesian method is not only a negative tool of critique: the method of right thinking also features strongly in his arguments for the claim that women's intellectual deficiencies can be overcome. To deduce the truth, he says, requires only that the mind have a capacity for judgment; anyone who can exercise this capacity in one sphere of inquiry can easily apply it in another. In order to think clearly, a woman has only to apply her mind seriously to the objects before her, "to form clear and distinct ideas of them, to apprehend all aspects of them and their different relationships, and to pass judgment only on what is obviously verifiable" (Poullain: 2002: 85). Like Elisabeth, Poullain shows a keen awareness that a woman's bodily temperament might impede her capacity for reflective judgment, and so he is careful to explain the role of the body in the search for truth. To see this, we need only look to the original context of Poullain's famous marginal note, "l'esprit n'a point de sexe" (literally, "the mind has no sex whatsoever"; see Stuurman 2004: 94). In the passage in question, he aims to show that women are as capable as men of advanced learning. Toward that end, he says

It is easy to see that the difference between the two sexes is limited to the body, since that is the only part used in the reproduction of humankind. Since the mind merely gives its consent, and does so in exactly the same way in everyone, we can conclude that it has no sex (Poullain 2002: 82).

Shortly thereafter, Poullain affirms that "A woman's mind is joined to her body, like a man's, by God himself, and according to the same laws" (82). A woman's mind is intermingled with her body—a woman is thus subject to those feelings, sensations, and imaginings that are a natural consequence of the close association between these

two substances. But in this respect, Poullain emphasizes, a woman is no different to a man. In fact, apart from their reproductive organs, men and women have almost no relevant bodily differences: they have the same anatomy, the same brain functions, and the same sensory organs (83). According to his Cartesian physiology, the life, motion, and sensations of both sexes can be explained by the same mechanical principles (for details, see Stuurman 2004: 105-9).

Since the differences between men and women do not lie in their minds and bodies, Poullain says, the differences must be attributed to outside causal factors, such as education, religion, and other environmental effects. If a woman is to improve her mind, she must come to understand the contribution that her body—and the causal influences *on* that body—make to her perceptions and volitions. More specifically, Poullain proposes that the method of avoiding error can help women to overcome the confusing and disturbing influence of *their passions*. For Poullain, an understanding of the passions is the key to attaining self-knowledge and virtue. The passions are those feelings and emotions—such as wonder, love, hate, sadness, joy, and desire—that occur in the soul as a result of its intimate ties with the body. In the Fourth Conversation in *On the Education*, Poullain's mouthpiece Stasimachus tells us to pay attention to “what our interest is in the objects that excite our passions and what is the basis of this interest” (2002: 217). Once we have recognized those causes that excite our passions, we are in a better position to evaluate their worth and significance. Following such judgments, we might either move towards what is good for us, or turn away from what is bad. Likewise, in *On the Equality*, Poullain affirms that with experience and training we might learn “how we can yoke our will to them [i.e., the causes that excite our passions] or dissociate it from them” (2002: 84).

This last remark problematizes Martina Reuter's claim that Poullain rejects Descartes' notion of free will in favor of a concept of the free intellect (Reuter 2013: 66, 80). Here, like Descartes, Poullain suggests that agents are capable of overcoming the influence of their bodies through the exercise of free will: they might either "yoke" their will to the causes of their passions or "dissociate" it from them. The problem for women is that they are taught to accept everything they are told without question, and so their minds are "too easily carried away by appearances or custom or some other gushing stream" (Poullain 2002: 163). To counteract this, Poullain recommends that, for once in their lives, women stop to examine things seriously, to reflect carefully on their beliefs and desires, and to use their natural capacity for judgment to accept or reject those beliefs and desires accordingly:

Examine everything, judge everything, reason about everything—about what has been done, what is being done, and what you foresee will be done. But in all cases, don't let yourself be influenced by mere words nor by hearsay. You possess the power of reasoning: use it, and don't sacrifice it blindly to anyone (238).

To resist the mental slavery of custom, an agent must recognize that she herself is responsible for her chains, and that she submits of her "own *free will*" to her subjugation (182; my emphases).

2. Astell

In the late seventeenth century, strikingly similar ideas and arguments can be found in the writings of Mary Astell. There is no hard evidence that Astell had read Poullain's

works, but it's possible that she was familiar with translated excerpts in a popular English periodical, *The Gentleman's Journal*. In May 1692 and October 1693, this journal featured select passages from Poullain's works, titled "The Equality of Both Sexes, asserted by new Arguments" and "An Essay to prove, that Women may apply themselves to liberal Arts and Sciences." Following in Poullain's footsteps, Astell's first work, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* of 1694, is a call for the education of women so that they might become useful members of society; and in her 1697 sequel to this work, she puts forward a method whereby women might improve their minds through critical reasoning. Toward this end, Astell recommends Descartes' *Principia philosophiae* [*Principles of Philosophy*] (1644) and his *Passions of the Soul* (Astell 2002: 172, 218; see also 82) as well as Arnauld and Nicole's *Logic, or the Art of Thinking* (Astell 2002: 166, 184, 189).

Several views abound about the precise nature of Astell's intellectual debt to Descartes. Ruth Perry and Hilda Smith trace Astell's critique of male tyranny back to the Cartesian method of doubt. Perry says that "the key to Astell's [feminist] radicalism is radical doubt, not radical politics" (1986: 332), and Smith links Astell's feminist program with "a strong attachment to Cartesian doubt" (2007: 204) and "a philosophical doubt about all knowledge" (1982: 119). I think that these scholars are right to highlight Astell's deep mistrust of prejudices and preconceptions. In the second part of her *Proposal*, she advises her readers "not [to] give credit to any thing any longer because we have once believ'd it, but because it carries clear and uncontested Evidence along with it" (2002: 133). She suggests that we must "generously ... disengage our selves from the deceptions of sense," reject those ideas that do not stand "the Test of a Severe Examination and sound Reason," and remove "those Prejudices and Passions which are in our way" (136, 137, 191).

These remarks, however, must be placed in context. In Astell's wider schema, they are not part of a skeptical annihilation of opinions or a process of hyperbolic doubt, but rather a positive program for the moral and intellectual advancement of women. Like Poullain, Astell claims that women's intellectual deficiencies might be corrected through study and training. Unlike Poullain, however, she rarely points to empirical evidence or to counterexamples that undermine ill-grounded prejudices about women's abilities. Appealing to introspection rather than sensory observation, she simply asserts that "all may *Think*, may use their own Faculties rightly, and consult the Master who is within them" (2002: 168). In her longest work of philosophy, *The Christian Religion* (1705), Astell says that she is:

A woman who has not the least reason to imagine that her understanding is any better than the rest of her sex's. All the difference, if there be any, arising only from her application, her disinterested, unprejudiced love to truth, and unwearied pursuit of it, notwithstanding all discouragements, which are in every woman's power as well as in hers (2013: §401).

To establish that they are likewise capable of attaining truth, Astell urges her fellow women to look within themselves. She suggests that they familiarize themselves with their own natural logic. "I call it natural," she says, "because I shall not send you further than your Own Minds to learn it" (2002: 166). If they are unable to discern this natural capacity, then—sadly—they must be ranked among "the Fools and Idiots," or perhaps even among "the Brutes" (202, 81). But before they give up in despair, women should reflect again: can they reason about the management of a household, the course of a romance, or the design of a dress? If so, then this is

adequate performative evidence of their ability to reason. If we look carefully enough, Astell assures her readers, we will see that truth can be found “in our own Breasts” (167).

Patricia Springborg has referred to this last remark as Astell’s “restatement” of Descartes’ *cogito* (see Astell 2002: 167, n. 5). It’s not clear, however, that it plays the same role as Descartes’s assertion that “*I am, I exist*” is true whenever it is put forward by me or entertained in my mind. For Astell, the claim that “we all *think*, needs no proof” (2013: §229) is not the endpoint of a systematic doubt, or the hallmark of clarity and distinctness; it is the intuitive, self-evident starting point from which to show that women are capable of attaining virtue and knowledge. Astell further differs from Descartes by claiming that “we can’t Know the Nature of our Souls Distinctly” (Astell 2002: 173). In this respect, she follows the lead of her unorthodox Cartesian contemporaries Nicolas Malebranche and John Norris (see Broad 2015: 64-5). Instead of affirming a clear and distinct idea of the soul, Astell simply points to an internal awareness or immediate consciousness of a certain power or capacity in the mind—more specifically, its capacity for judgment.

Like Descartes, Astell also attributes false or erroneous judgments to the “headstrong and Rebellious” will (Astell 2002: 130). Instead of dutifully suspending its assent and regulating its actions according to the understanding, she says, the will rushes forward and hastily affirms ideas as true or false, without proper examination. She allows that her fellow women are particularly prone to making poor judgments. But this failing is due to custom and a limited education—it is an acquired rather than a natural defect. Women might correct this defect by following the Cartesian rules for thinking: by ridding themselves of prejudices, by thinking carefully in an orderly manner, from the simplest ideas to the most complex, and by learning to suspend their

judgments until clarity and distinctness win them over (135, 137, 159, 164). This is the context in which mistrust, doubt, and skepticism play an important role in Astell's work. "[I]f we would judge to purpose," she says, "we must free ourselves from prejudice and passion, must examine and prove all things, and not give our assent till forced to do so by the evidence of truth" (Astell 2013: §4). Women will benefit from recognizing that they have this "Natural Liberty" within them—a power of judging for themselves—which makes them capable of checking ill-grounded opinions, and adhering only to the truth (Astell 2002: 201).

What role, if any, does the body play in Astell's search for truth? Cynthia Bryson asserts that Astell was attracted to Descartes because "he clearly separates the gendered body from the nongendered 'disembodied mind,' which Astell identifies as the true 'self'" (Bryson 1998: 54). Nevertheless, while it is correct that, for Astell, the mind is the true self and that the mind and body are distinct substances (see Astell 2013: §§274, 229), like Descartes she too emphasizes that the mind and body are intimately joined in the human person. "Human nature is indeed a composition of mind and body," she says, "which are two distinct substances having different properties, and yet make but one person. The certainty of this union is not to be disputed, for everyone perceives it in himself" (§272). Following Descartes, Astell allows that in this lifetime the mind can never attain complete *separation* from the body or the bodily influences of the sensations, passions, and appetites (see Broad 2015: 85; O'Neill 1999: 242; Atherton 1993: 30).

In addition, Astell emphasizes that the body might be of "great service" in the search for truth, provided that we know how to employ it (2013: §305). One concern, of course, is that the bodily passions incline women to make poor moral judgments: "we are hurried on to sin and folly," she says, "by rash judgments arising from our

passions” (§248). The passions can thus prevent women from arriving at the true and the good. Even in the grip of strong and violent passions, however, women are never completely powerless; there is always some course of action they can take. A woman might permit the passion to continue until it has dissipated, for example, or she might divert it to another object: “tho we may find it difficult absolutely to quash a Passion that is once begun,” Astell says, “yet it is no hard matter to transfer it” (2002: 223). Over time, by cultivating her natural capacity for judgment, and regulating the will according to the intellect, a woman might obtain dominion over the passions—she might develop a habitual disposition to direct her passions in accordance with reason. This habitual disposition constitutes *virtue*, according to Astell. Virtue consists in the mind governing the body and directing its passions to worthy objects, in the right “pitch” or intensity, according to reason (214).

Astell’s approach to virtue and the passions strongly resembles that of Descartes in his *Passions of the Soul*. In this book, Descartes, too, advises that we can gain mastery over the passions, and meliorate their discomposing effects, by learning to judge what is truly good and truly evil. For him, the pursuit of virtue consists in a strong resolution always to do what we judge the best. Once we have learnt habitually to regulate our wills in accordance with reason, he says, we will come to direct our passions at the right objects in the right measure; we will attain virtue (for details, see Shapiro 2008). Poullain echoes these same points. In *On the Equality*, he says that virtue consists in a “firm and steadfast resolve to do what one thinks best, depending on the different situations” (2002: 108). In his view, women’s minds are more than capable of this steadfast resolve—their bodily differences to men are irrelevant in this respect. “The body,” he points out, “is merely the organ and instrument of this resolve, like a sword held ready for attack and defense” (108).

More than this, however, Poullain goes beyond Descartes' ethical ideas to develop a nascent theory of women's *rights*. He argues that happiness is the natural goal of all human actions, and so we all have a right to the means of achieving it. But true happiness cannot be achieved without clear and distinct knowledge about where that happiness lies: that is, in the pursuit of virtue. It follows that, for the sake of their virtue and happiness, women have "an equal right to truth" or a "right to the same knowledge" as men and should therefore be granted access to study and learning (Poullain 2002: 91, 94). "Since both sexes are capable of the same happiness," he says, "they have the same right to all the means of achieving it" (92).

Astell derives similar conclusions from her appropriation of Cartesian ethics. In particular, she holds that the exercise of freedom is a necessary precondition for the attainment of virtue and happiness. For her, true liberty "consists not in a power to do what we will, but in making a right use of our reason, in preserving our judgments free, and our integrity unspotted" (Astell 2013: §249). True liberty is a liberty of judgment—an act of the will in combination with the understanding—rather than the mere freedom to do as we will. This kind of liberty is a vital condition for moral responsibility. To be truly responsible for their choices and actions, women must identify with their choices and actions *as their own*, and not those that others have foisted upon them. On behalf of women, then, Astell defends "that most valuable privilege, and indefeasible right, of judging for ourselves" (§256), and the "just and natural" right of women "to abound in their own sense" (§3).

In sum, these Cartesian feminists mounted a sophisticated and surprisingly modern challenge to common sexist assumptions of their time. There is clearly some truth to the claim that Poullain and Astell, like other feminists of their era, used Cartesian method and the Cartesian concept of the mind to argue against the view that

women's bodies necessarily rendered them morally and intellectually incompetent. It is an over-simplification, however, to say that their core feminist insights owe their origins to the method of doubt or to the idea that "the mind has no sex." Poullain and Astell both appropriate Cartesian method for feminist purposes, but for them it is Descartes's method of right thinking, or of avoiding error, that is most salient. And while these thinkers embrace Descartes' notion of the mind as a non-extended thinking substance, they do not overlook the crucial role of the body in the avoidance of error. Their feminism is built on the insight that although minds and bodies are intimately conjoined, women nevertheless have the capacity to gain mastery over the disturbing influence of the bodily passions. For them, the equality of men and women does not lie in the fact that "the mind has no sex," but rather in the claim that men and women equally possess that crucial power or capacity needed to attain knowledge and virtue—the capacity for judgment.

[Word count: 5480]

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Further reading

- Broad, Jacqueline (2002) *Women Philosophers of the Seventeenth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, provides a book-length overview of women's engagement with Cartesian philosophy in the early modern era.
- O'Neill, Eileen (1998) "Disappearing Ink: Early Modern Women Philosophers and Their Fate in History," in Janet A. Kourany (ed.), *Philosophy in a Feminist Voice: Critiques and Reconstructions*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 17–62, offers a helpful survey of women's contributions to philosophical debate in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, suggesting explanations for why those contributions have been neglected.
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- Reuter, Martina, "Questions of Sexual Difference and Equality in Descartes' Philosophy," *Acta Philosophica Fennica* 64 (1999): 183–208, both offer positive evaluations of Descartes' philosophy from a feminist point of view.

Related topics

- "Feminist Methods in the History of Philosophy," by Moira Gatens
- "Western Religious and Theological Traditions," by Beverley Clack
- "The Enlightenment," by Susanne Lettow

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