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THE EARLY MODERN PERIOD: DIGNITY AND THE FOUNDATION OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS

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Introduction

In a key passage of her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Mary Wollstonecraft declares that ‘It is time to effect a revolution in female manners—time to restore to [women] their lost dignity—and make them, as a part of the human species, labour by reforming themselves to reform the world’ (Wollstonecraft 2008, 113). The restoration of women’s dignity, in her view, amounts to women being treated equally with men as members of the same species. She contends that women should be accorded the high rank or elevated status that comes with being human rather than part of ‘the brute creation’ (71–2, 76, 78–9, 98). More than this, for Wollstonecraft the restoration of dignity amounts to the recognition that women are not ‘bent beneath the iron hand of destiny,’ but have been granted free will for the purpose of reforming themselves through their own efforts (113). Dignity is, in an important respect, connected with women’s capacity for self-perfection through the free exercise of their will.

In this chapter, I show that a remarkably similar concept of dignity plays a significant role in defences of women prior to Wollstonecraft’s ground-breaking treatise. To support this claim, I examine a number of texts calling for the recognition of women’s dignity in the early modern era (c. 1650–1750), namely those of Mary Astell (1666–1731), Mary Chudleigh (1656–1710), the author known as Sophia (*fl.* 1739–40), and (to a lesser extent) François Poulain de la Barre (1648–1723). Their writings are valuable, I maintain, for shedding light on a distinctive pre-Kantian concept of human dignity as a moral ideal in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In recent times, the topic of dignity has been undergoing a substantial revival of interest among ethicists and political theorists, especially those concerned with the grounding of universal human rights. Historically speaking, dignity was once a term associated with inegalitarianism: it was accorded only to those with a high social or ecclesiastical rank, such as members of the nobility or the clergy, who were entitled to special treatment or special privileges on account of their status. The Latin word *dignitas* partly captures this traditional meaning: to have *dignitas* in ancient Rome was to warrant the respect and deference due to one’s special rank or office in civil society. But following Immanuel Kant’s *Groundwork to the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785) and the French ‘Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen’ (1789), there was a decisively egalitarian shift in thinking about dignity. That is to say, a new concept of dignity emerged that extended the elevated status once accorded to the nobility to all human beings in general. Wollstonecraft taps into this new egalitarianism when she observes how unjust it is that women ‘are treated as a kind of subordinate beings, and not as a part of the human species, when improveable reason is

allowed to be the dignified distinction which raises men above the brute creation, and puts a natural sceptre in a feeble hand' (2008, 71–2).

Recent theorists have drawn on the universalized concept of dignity in an effort to develop it into a robust foundation for human rights. Toward this end, Jeremy Waldron has put forward a conception of dignity as equalized rank (Waldron 2007; 2012). Like Wollstonecraft, he conceives of dignity as a noble status equitably distributed among all—a figurative 'sceptre' in everybody's hands, regardless of their birth, class, race, or sex. He claims that this equalization of dignity grants all human beings the historical privileges of noble rank, such as the right to bodily autonomy, the right to privacy, the right to religious freedom, the right to vote, and so on (2007, 231). By contrast, Michael Rosen (2012) appeals to a different egalitarian concept, one that retains salient aspects of the Kantian concept of dignity as intrinsic worth or 'value beyond all price.' Rosen conceives of dignity in terms of the inherent worth of every human being, by virtue of their possession of a certain moral capacity.

In the first part of this paper, I demonstrate that Wollstonecraft's predecessors advocate a hybrid concept of both dignity-as-rank and dignity-as-value. In the second part, I demonstrate how Cartesian metaphysics provides these early modern writers with vital philosophical support for their calls for women's dignity. In the third and final part, I show how this early modern concept of human dignity, founded on a blend of Christianity and Cartesian metaphysics, lies beneath these writers' calls for the rights of women. I conclude that if we look carefully at the historical concept of dignity underlying their calls for equality, it's possible to see that the history of women's rights prior to Wollstonecraft is much longer and more sophisticated than previously thought.

i. Dignity and the Order of Created Beings

In the first few pages of her best-known work, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (first published 1694), the English feminist Mary Astell says that she intends for her female readers to 'live up to the dignity of your Nature, and express your thankfulness to GOD for the benefits you enjoy by a due improvement of them' (Astell 2002, 57). By teaching women the principles of Christianity, she says, she hopes to form in their minds 'adequate conceptions of the End and Dignity of their Natures' (Astell 2002, 126). A few years later, in her longest work of moral theology, *The Christian Religion, as Profess'd by a Daughter of the Church of England* (first published 1705), Astell once again reminds her fellow women that God expects them 'to do what becomes us, and to avoid the necessary and intolerable effects of degenerating from the dignity of our nature' (Astell 2013, §94). Similar sentiments can be found in the writings of Astell's English contemporary Mary Chudleigh, also an ardent champion of women's education. In her address 'To the Reader' at the start of her *Essays Upon Several Subjects* (1710), Chudleigh says that 'My whole Design is to recommend Virtue, to persuade my Sex to improve their Understandings' because 'a greater Delight, a more transporting Satisfaction, results from a pure well-regulated Soul, from a Consciousness of having done Things agreeable to Reason, suitable to the Dignity of ones [*sic*] Nature' (Chudleigh 1993, 247–8). Only a few decades later, the anonymous English author known as

‘Sophia, A Person of Quality’ gave her 1739 treatise, *Woman Not Inferior to Man*, the pertinent subtitle *A Short and Modest Vindication of the Natural Right of the Fair-Sex to a Perfect Equality of Power, Dignity, and Esteem, with the Men*. Her arguments borrow freely from the arguments of seventeenth-century Frenchman Poulain de la Barre, the author of *De L’Égalité des deux sexes* [*On the Equality of the Two Sexes*] (1673).¹ But Sophia departs from Poulain by giving the notion of women’s dignity a central place in her title and in the main text itself. In her own work, Sophia’s design is to ‘exhort all my sex to throw aside idle amusements, and to betake themselves to the improvement of their minds, that we may be able to act with that becoming dignity our nature has fitted us to’ (1739, 61–2). In her follow-up treatise, *Women’s Superior Excellence Over Man* (1740), Sophia once again maintains that ‘to answer the end of their creation’ women ought to be permitted useful employments, especially since ‘it must be owned that we have an equal aptitude to sense and virtue with the Men, and consequently an equal right to dignity, power and esteem with any of them’ (1740, 1, 12).

As these statements indicate, these early modern defenders of women connect their views about women’s dignity with notions about the design or ‘end’ of women’s nature. Like Wollstonecraft, they also make reference to a woman’s place in the created order of beings compared to that of the lowly ‘brutes.’ They are particularly concerned to emphasize that, in terms of their inherent qualities, women are of a different nature to animals. Astell, for example, encourages her readers to avoid being mistaken for ‘useless and impertinent Animals,’ and she complains ‘that by the disuse of our Faculties we seem to have lost them if we ever had any; are sunk into an Animal life wholly taken up with sensible objects’ (2002, 76, 126). She adds that until women learn to choose and act according to rational principles, they ‘live not the Life of a Rational Creature but only of an Animal’ (129). Along similar lines, Chudleigh says that it is an acknowledged truth that the pleasures of the mind are greater and more satisfying than those that ‘owe their Original to the Animal Life’ (Chudleigh 1993, 246); hence, in her essay ‘Of Knowledge’ addressed ‘To the Ladies,’ she exhorts women to leave behind ‘the little mean concerns of the Animal Life’ (255). Sophia says ‘it would be putting ourselves upon the level with brutes, to descend to a compliance with the generality of their commands, since that alone would suffice to degrade us’ (Sophia 1739, 16).

The idea that human beings and animals occupy different levels or grades of being is a religious commonplace of the early modern period. In support of this view, writers often appeal to the Bible, especially to Psalm 8:5: ‘Thou hast made him a little lower than the Angels, and hast crowned him with Glory and Honour. Thou madest him to have dominion over the Works of thy Hands, and hast put all Things under his Feet.’ In his 1713 sermon on ‘The Natural Excellency and Dignity of Man,’ the Anglican theologian George Hickes examines the literal meaning of this passage from Psalms. His views are worth examining briefly for what they tell us about the Christian notion of dignity shared by Astell, Chudleigh, and Sophia.

On Hickee's interpretation, this biblical passage defines human dignity in comparative terms: the first sentence appeals to man's resemblance to the angels (and, by implication, to God), while the second emphasizes his elevation in rank over the inferior creatures. To adapt Edward Craig's phraseology, here human dignity is defined with appeal to both a Similarity Thesis and a Difference Thesis (Craig 1996). On the Similarity Thesis, insofar as human beings have immaterial, immortal souls, they are made according to the 'Image of God'; the soul is 'the Resemblance of God ... she bears the Characters and Impressions of his Essence' (Hickee 1713, 325). On the Difference Thesis, we fail to 'live up to the Dignity of our Nature' as a creature made in the Image of God if we simply follow our animal natures and live like brutes (341). The lower animals act out of necessity, they move by instinct alone, and they have no choice but to obey their appetites and sensations. Hickee concludes 'You may see what a great Value and Reverence we ought to have for our selves, as Men, created after the Image of God, and what great Obligations we have to live up to the Dignity of our Nature, and to avoid all those sensual Sins and Passions, which turn a Man into a Beast' (341).

In her *Christian Religion*, Astell makes very similar remarks about the source of human dignity. This is not surprising when we consider that Astell's writings are steeped in Anglican theological principles of the seventeenth century.² Above all, Astell says, it is the relation we bear to God that gives us 'a dignity which otherwise we have no pretense to. It makes us *something*, something considerable' (Astell 2013, §369). In a section titled 'We should live up to our dignity' (§236), she says that human beings are valuable creatures insofar as they are capable of aspiring after perfection. The way for us to attain perfection is to have 'a due sense of our dignity as rational creatures, and especially as members of Christ; and of the great and glorious things for which we were created' (§236). In turn, a certain choice or action 'may misbecome us either as it is beneath the dignity of our Christian calling, or of human nature in general' (§238). It is our duty, she says, to be sensible of our intrinsic worth, 'our high alliance even with the king of kings'; we must also recall our 'noble hopes, the birthright of every the meanest Christian' (§238). Chudleigh likewise appeals to the Similarity Thesis when she describes wise and virtuous agents as those who have 'endeavour'd to live up to the Dignity of their Nature, to make as near Approaches as 'tis possible to the divine Perfections' (Chudleigh 1993, 277). And Sophia appeals to the Difference Thesis when she says: 'We know we have reason, and are sensible that it is the only prerogative Nature has bestowed upon us, to lift us above the sphere of sensitive animals' (Sophia 1739, 2).

In sum, for these early modern thinkers, human dignity consists in possessing certain *intrinsic value* as a being endowed with god-like qualities, especially a capacity for perfection. This value cannot be lost or stolen or given away, human beings have it by virtue of their nature. But human dignity also derives from having a certain *rank* in the created order: it's the dignity that comes from having the high ontological status of a human being, rather than say a brute animal (or a plant or a rock).

One problematic feature of this hybrid notion of Christian dignity is that it is not an all or nothing concept, but rather a matter of degrees. Depending on their moral conduct or the conduct of others, human agents can have either a greater or a lesser degree of dignity-as-value and dignity-as-status: they might live up to the inherent dignity of their (human) nature, or they might fall beneath it; others might respect their dignified status, or others might trample on it. Bearing out this view, in the early modern period women are typically granted less dignity than men. They are ranked just slightly above the beasts and slightly below men in the created order. In her *Poems, and Fancies* (1653), Margaret Cavendish expresses this idea when she tells her female readers that, ‘though we be inferiour to Men, let us shew our selves a degree above Beasts; and not eat, and drink, and sleep away our time as they doe; and live only to the sense, not to the reason’ (Cavendish 1653, 161). Women had some degree of dignity, of course, by virtue of their inherent worth—but not as much as the men. Popular physiological theories of the time supported this idea. According to Galenic biology, women were thought to have different bodily qualities compared to men (see Cureau 1670, 24-40). Women’s bodies were cold and moist, while men’s were hot and dry. Women were incapable of controlling their bodies, they did not have the requisite power over their wills, to overcome the influence of passions, sensations, and appetites. Hence, they were less constant, less faithful, less intelligent, and so on. By contrast, on account of their different bodily temperament, men had greater moral and intellectual competence compared to women. Men were regarded as stronger, smarter, and capable of greater moral perfection (Cureau 1670, 16-24). And so, given these background assumptions, Christian dignity alone offers no obvious grounding for a feminist theory of equality. In the hierarchical ordering, men were seen as much more *like God*, while women bore a closer relation to the animals; men were granted *greater* dignity than women.

ii. Dignity and Cartesian Metaphysics

Early modern defenders of women find crucial weapons against these common views in the Cartesian metaphysics of the seventeenth century. Descartes’ philosophy marks a decisive shift in thinking about the differences between human beings and animals, on the one hand, and the similarities between human beings and God, on the other. According to his scholastic predecessors, animals had both sensitive and vegetative souls that accounted for the composition of their bodies, their growth and reproduction, and their day to day functioning, such as breathing, walking, digesting, and so on. In Descartes’ new metaphysics, however, animals belong to the realm of essentially extended things: all their behaviour—even the most impressive and seemingly rational—can be adequately explained by mechanistic physiology alone. Of course, according to his philosophy, most of the life and motion of *human beings* can be explained in terms of mechanical principles too. In his *Meditations on First Philosophy* (first published 1641), Descartes describes ‘the body of a man as a kind of machine equipped with and made up of bones, nerves, muscles, veins, blood and skin in such a way that, even if there were no mind in it, it would still perform all the same movements as it now does in those cases where movement is not under the control of the will or, consequently, of the mind’ (Descartes 1984, 58). The main difference between humans and animals, however, is that while there is only one principle of motion in animals, that which depends solely upon ‘the disposition of their organs and the continual flow of the [animal]

spirits' (162), in human beings there are *two* principles: a similar corporeal principle of motion, and a principle that depends upon the rational soul. To support these claims, in his *Discourse on the Method* (1637), Descartes appeals to behavioural and linguistic tests that show that animals do not act or speak from a capacity for rational judgment. These tests are designed to show that if animal behaviour were reasoned in a conscious, volitional sense, then animals would show linguistic adaptability to circumstances (as we do), or they would use reason to act in all the contingencies of life (as we do). Yet, according to Descartes, they do not. For this reason, he says, we simply need not posit the existence of a rational soul to explain the behaviour of animals. All their behavioural exhibitions can be explained with appeal to the mechanical dispositions of their bodily organs alone.

In Descartes' view, then, human beings differ from animals in terms of their possession of a rational soul, but most especially in terms of their capacity for reasoned judgement, an act of the will in combination with the understanding. In his Fourth Meditation, Descartes expands on his concept of the will as part of his method of avoiding error in the search for truth. In his view, the will is wholly free and unconstrained in the sense that it is not 'determined by any external force' (Descartes 1984, 40). By this, he means that it is wholly up to us (our internal power of choice) whether or not we affirm or deny, pursue or avoid, certain perceptions in the understanding. When we think carefully about the nature of the will as freedom of choice, according to Descartes, we must recognize that it is perfect in its kind, because it is not restricted in any way. In fact, 'it is above all in virtue of the will that I understand myself to bear in some way the image and likeness of God' (40). When we consider the will in its strict and proper sense, as the power 'to do or not to do something' (40), it is perfect and god-like. Human worth and value, on this view, amounts to having a will that is as perfectly free as it could be, even if it does not have the same efficacy and scope as the divine will. In the *Passions of the Soul* (first published 1649), Descartes reiterates this same point: the will, he says, 'renders us in a certain way like God by making us masters of ourselves' (Descartes 1985, 384).

Descartes' writings thus mark an important development in the Similarity Thesis of the early modern era, since he restricts humanity's close resemblance to God to *the capacity for free will* (Craig 1996, 24–5). This Cartesian viewpoint also marks a significant change in women's status in the metaphysical chain of being. As we have seen, prior to Descartes and the new science, women are typically ranked just slightly above the beasts and slightly below men in the created order. With the advent of Cartesian metaphysics, however, all human beings are placed on a par in terms of their intrinsic worth; their dignity-as-status and their dignity-as-value is equalized. Descartes' view thus leads to much greater egalitarianism between the sexes, because in terms of their capacity for free will, women are just as much *like God* as men, and just as far *above the beasts*. Human dignity becomes an all-or-nothing concept and, as members of the human species, women are permitted to have it all.

Early modern defenders of women use these Cartesian ideas to argue for the moral and intellectual competence of women. Descartes' influence is most evident in the writings of

Poulain and Astell, both of whom explicitly cite his works; but it can also be found implicit in the later works of Chudleigh and Sophia.

Though Poulain does not explicitly use the language of universalized dignity, he is the first writer to expand on the egalitarian implications of Descartes' metaphysics of mind. In *On the Equality*, Poulain observes that because 'the mind merely gives its consent, and does so in exactly the same way in everyone, we can conclude that it has no sex' (Poulain 2002, 82). Of course, he allows that women are subject to the disturbing influence of their bodies. A woman cannot avoid having those feelings, sensations, and imaginings that are a natural consequence of being so closely united and joined with a material substance. But women are still capable of using their faculties of mind—their free will and their intellect—in exactly the same way as men. If women want to improve their minds, to overcome bodily influences on their thinking, they must come to understand the contribution that their bodies make to their perceptions. Like Descartes, Poulain suggests that all agents are capable of overcoming these disturbing bodily influences through an exercise of free will: they might either 'yoke' their will to the causes of their passions or 'dissociate' it from them (84). He likewise affirms that virtue consists in a 'firm and steadfast resolve to do what one thinks best, depending on the different situations' (108). In Descartes' *Passions of the Soul*, this 'firm and steadfast resolve to do what is best' is known as *generosity*, a certain greatness of mind that enables individuals to see that their moral perfection lies entirely in their own power—the power of free choice (Descartes 1984: 384). While generosity or greatness of soul was once associated exclusively with those of noble birth, in Descartes' philosophy generosity is an excellence of character attainable by all human beings, by virtue of their equal possession of free will. Generosity is a justified form of self-esteem because it involves valuing ourselves upon something that is truly worthy—our 'absolute control over ourselves' (401).

Sophia repeats these points in her 1739 text, *Women Not Inferior to Man*, when she paraphrases Poulain's own words without acknowledgement. She says that women are capable of attaining the same moral perfection as men, because:

there is nothing but the soul capable of virtue, which consists in a firm resolution of doing that, which we judge the best, according to the dictates of reason and religion compared with the different occurrences we meet with in life. Now the mind is no less capable in women than in men of that firm resolution, which makes up virtue, or of knowing the occasions of putting it in practice. (Sophia 1739, 59)

Despite customary perceptions about the 'weakness' of women, she says, they are just as capable as men of overcoming the influence of their passions and pursuing virtue through an exercise of will. Astell likewise extols the importance of cultivating generosity or greatness of soul in her writings. In a 1714 letter to her friend Ann Coventry, Astell suggests that generosity is the virtue of those who 'make a Right use of their Liberty, endeavouring to do always what is Best' (Perry 1986, 371). She adds that although generosity 'is properly the Vertue of the Great', it is also 'not unsuitable to the lowest Rank of Rational Creatures' (370). In the second part of her *Proposal*, she urges her fellow women to cultivate a generous

disposition of mind and to acquire a ‘generous Resolution’ (Astell 2002, 122). She says that God has endowed human beings with certain principles that enable them to overcome the ‘Inconveniences’ of an earthly existence: ‘One of these is *Generosity*,’ she says, ‘which (so long as we keep it from degenerating into Pride) is of admirable advantage to us’ (141). This greatness of mind more truly ennoble a woman than ‘the highest title’ because ‘it consists in living up to the dignity of our Natures’ (111). Her message is that the exercise of free will is crucial for living up to the dignity of a human moral agent.

In her *Christian Religion*, Astell once again connects the virtue of generosity to the concept of Christian dignity, saying that ‘he who esteems human nature in general, and is sensible of the dignity of a Christian, and values both himself and others for this reason, has a truly great and generous mind’ (Astell 2013, §303). For Astell, it is vital that women learn to cultivate generosity—that they learn to esteem themselves upon the virtuous exercise of their will, rather than their beauty and wealth—so that they might avoid sinking beneath the dignity of their nature as human beings. She rejects the supposition that God created ‘our minds, after His own image, for no better purpose than to wait upon the body, while it eats, drinks, and sleeps, and saunters away a *useless life*.’ Rather, she says, it is evident he created our minds for a noble purpose, beyond the mere mechanical existence of ‘brutes’ (§107).

At the end of the century, strikingly similar ideas find expression in Wollstonecraft’s calls for the restoration of women’s dignity in her *Vindication*. Like Astell, Wollstonecraft casts scorn on the idea that women are bound by ‘the adamant chain of destiny’ (Wollstonecraft 2008, 102). In civil society, women are still relegated to the level of animals and treated as though they are creatures wholly ‘restrained by mechanical laws’ (115). They are not permitted to ‘exercise their own reason . . . or to feel *the dignity of a rational will* that only bows to God’ (102; my italics). But if, she says:

there were to be rational creatures produced, allowed to rise in excellence by the exercise of powers implanted for that purpose; if benignity itself thought fit to call into existence a creature above the brutes, who could think and improve himself, why should that inestimable gift, for a gift it was, if man was so created as to have a capacity to rise above the state in which sensation produced brutal ease, be called, in direct terms, a curse? (78–9)

Rather, women ought to be permitted the free exercise of their reason, so that this ‘might restore *lost dignity* to the character, or rather enable it to attain *the true dignity of its nature*’ (227; my italics). Here in Wollstonecraft we find echoes of the early modern writers’ robust moralized concept of dignity. Like the earlier thinkers, Wollstonecraft identifies women’s dignity with a distinctly human capacity for free will, and the ability to use this freedom to attain both moral and intellectual perfection.

iii. Dignity, Rights, and Self-Perfection

I will now show how this concept of dignity, founded on a blend of Christianity and Cartesian metaphysics, lies beneath the earlier writers’ calls for the rights of women. This is

significant, I think, for revealing that the history of women's rights as equalized human rights has a much longer trajectory than previously thought, in the century or so prior to Wollstonecraft. In her recent book, Eileen Hunt Botting observes that

Before the essays of French revolutionaries Nicolas de Condorcet and Olympe de Gouges on women's rights in 1790–91, philosophers debated the superiority or inferiority of women to men in the European *querelle des femmes*, but they did not typically express their views in the language of rights. (Botting 2016, 29)

In the early modern period, however, this pattern starts to shift. While references to women's *rights* are certainly not as numerous in early modern texts as late eighteenth-century treatises, the language of women's *dignity* is just as prevalent across both periods. By tracing the history of this cognate concept, it's possible to unearth frequent calls (both implicit and explicit) for the recognition of women's rights in the era. The concept of equalized dignity provides both a foundation for, and the content of, early modern calls for women's rights.

In his original 1673 work, Poulain argues 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 proper higher education (Poulain 2002: 91, 94).³ Other early modern writers build on Poulain's references to women's rights. In May 1692 and October 1693, selected passages from Poulain's *Equality* were published in English in *The Gentleman's Journal*. In an essay headed 'The Equality of Both Sexes asserted,' the English translator points out that because women's liberty is inalienable ('ne're to be alienated'), women 'may justly claim their Rights, notwithstanding Man's long possession' (Motteux 1692: 9). In her own works, as we have seen, Sophia frequently draws on Poulain's *Equality*. She, too, acknowledges 'the rights and liberties of *Women*,' and laments that women have been 'coaxed out of their natural right,' or that they are 'rob'd [*sic*] of their natural right' (Sophia 1740, 10, 5, 8). But Sophia goes one step further than Poulain by explicitly connecting women's rights to women's dignity.⁴ Sophia's texts are replete with references to 'that power and dignity we [i.e., women] have a right to share with them [the men],' the view that 'there is no science, office, or dignity, which women have not an equal right to share in with the men' (1739, 10, 55), and the notion that women have the 'right to an equal share of power, dignity and esteem with the Men' (1740, 86). In response to those men who would grant equality to women as a 'grace' (a favour), she asks: 'But where is the grace in granting us a share in what we have an equal right to? Have not the women an equal claim to power and dignity with the men?' (1739, 32).

On the one hand, then, Sophia regards dignity as the contents of women's rights; in her view, women have a right *to* dignity. But on the other, she sees these rights as *grounded* in women's equal ontological status alongside men in the created order. According to Sophia, the 'design of nature' has 'made all *Mankind* equal' in terms of their rational natures and their access to 'the goods of the mind' (Sophia 1740, 42, 83). This is what makes a woman's 'right of *Replevin* [i.e. of restoration]' continue 'inalienable,' in her view (83). Mary Astell implicitly follows this same logic of regarding equal human dignity as the basis for equal

rights for women. If we look at the use of rights rhetoric in Astell's work, we can see that underlying her concept of a 'right' or a 'birthright' is the same Christian-Cartesian concept of dignity. In her *Christian Religion*, in a section headed 'Everyone must judge for themselves', Astell says that 'to pretend to dictate to our fellow rational creatures ... is an assuming of His prerogative, and an usurpation upon their *just and natural rights*, who have as much *right* to abound in their own sense as we have to abound in ours' (Astell 2013, §3; my italics). Later in the same work, she says 'it were the utmost baseness to submit to their usurpation and tyranny, by parting with that most valuable privilege, and *indefeasible right*, of judging for ourselves where God has left us free to do so' (Astell 2013, §256; my italics). In these passages, Astell explicitly calls for a right to *judgement*. Within a Cartesian epistemological framework, as we have seen, a judgement is an act of the will in combination with the understanding. Like Descartes, Astell maintains that, in all human beings, the will is free to affirm or deny, pursue or avoid, the objects of the understanding, to avoid making erroneous judgements. In her view, it is undeniable that we experience this freedom within us. 'We are conscious of our own Liberty,' Astell says, 'who ever denies it denies that he is capable of Reward and Punishments, degrades his Nature and makes himself but a more curious piece of Mechanism' (Astell 2002, 148). God has granted us this freedom, moreover, so that we might attain perfection and move closer to him through our moral choices and actions. This moral capacity gives us *worth*, insofar as we are like God; and it gives us *status*, insofar as we are unlike the 'brute creation.' In short, according to Astell, it gives us dignity.

For Astell, then, human dignity provides a foundation for certain fundamental entitlements and protections; it grounds women's rights, in other words. According to Astell, as crucial protection against threats to their dignity—when others would degrade them or treat them like mindless animals, for example—women have a right stand up for themselves.

Wollstonecraft echoes these same sentiments when she says that 'the birth-right of man' is 'the right of acting according to the direction of his own reason' (2008, 236). This exercise of reason, in turn, enables human beings to live up to 'the true dignity' of their nature (236).

Conclusion

Wollstonecraft's early modern predecessors—namely, Astell, Chudleigh, and Sophia—spell out a distinctive notion of human dignity derived from a blend of Christianity and Cartesian metaphysics. They find crucial support for their convictions about women's high ontological status and inherent value in Descartes' writings. While Descartes' own distinctive Similarity Thesis concerning humanity's resemblance to God lends support to the Christian idea of women's dignity-as-value, his new Difference Thesis concerning human beings and animals provides further arguments in favour of women's dignity-as-status. An examination of early modern defences of women shows how the history of women's equal rights—as *human* rights—is much longer and richer than previously thought, but expressed more frequently in the language of dignity rather than the explicit language of rights. The early modern writers use the word dignity to convey something about women's high ontological status in relation to animals, and their inherent worth in relation to God's perfection, but like Wollstonecraft

they also use it to *demand respect* for that dignity—to underscore their calls for women’s rights.

1 On this topic, see Leduc 2015.

2 Astell also knew Hickee personally and engaged in a correspondence with him in 1705. For details, see Apetrei 2008.

3 In the original French, this reads: ‘Nous avons tous hommes & femmes, le même droit sur la vérité, puisque l’esprit est en tous également capable de la connoître. ... Puis donc que les deux Sexes sont capables de la même félicité; Ils ont le même droit sur tout ce qui sert à l’acquiescer’ (Poulain 1676: 128, 130).

4 In his original work, Poulain uses the word dignity (*dignité* in French) only once or twice, with exclusive reference to the privileged social office of a queen or statesperson.