The Freedom, Equality and Dignity of Human Reason: A Reconsideration of Cartesian Dualism

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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0-612-63745-X
This dissertation offers a new perspective on Descartes’ theory of mind-body dualism by situating it at the intersection of two trajectories of thought in the 17th century: Cartesianism and feminism. At the heart of my thesis is the proposition that any coherent understanding of human being requires the assumption that sustains Descartes’ dualism: freedom of the mind.

In order to demonstrate the importance of Descartes’ rationalist argument for human freedom of mind, I situate his work in the context of two other 17th century rationalists who argued for the emancipation of women: Marie de Gournay (1565-1645) and François Poulain de la Barre (1647-1723).

In The Equality of Men and Women (1622) Gournay articulates a new logic of human relations: one of perfect equality between men and women. On this basis, she contradicts two kinds of inequality: in women’s historical representation and in their access to education. These arguments, I argue, are strengthened in Descartes’ reformulation of mind-body dualism in his Meditations on First Philosophy.
Descartes’ dualism supports a theory of sexual equality by arguing an equality of the freedom of mind in the power of reason. The freedom of reason does not involve negating the passions or the body, as some critics contend. This is because embodiment is an innate idea of human reason and cannot legitimately be negated. It is also because the passion and virtue of generosity, the universal standard of human virtue, does not call for negation, but for rational understanding of our passions.

Generosity is the key to remedying the disorders of other passions, and, importantly, it is the basis of respect for other human beings. I argue that this respect does not merely amount to a recognition of the freedom of others, but it goes deeper than that: generosity is the basis for the promotion of human freedom.

Poulain de la Barre draws on dualism, freedom and generosity in order to articulate, like Gournay, a theory of complete sexual equality. He argues that ‘the mind has no sex.’ Writing in the 1670s, his work thus bridges Cartesianism and earlier 17th century feminism. On his view, every human freedom, both internal and external, ought to be afforded to women.
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Acknowledgements

Above all, this thesis is dedicated to my four parents, Pam, Kate, Richard and Nelson. This thesis is a labour, not just of my love, but of theirs. Their unconditional, unswerving love, support and understanding, but most of all their faith in me, is my strength. To them, I owe everything.

I want to thank my brother, James and my sister Michelle. James is my model for tolerance and good-humoured but compassionate insight. Michelle is an exceptional person, whose dynamism and resilience are an inspiration to me.

I thank my grandparents, Helen and Joe, and everyone in my family, for they have all wonderfully supported my academic career.

The depth of my gratitude to Mark Clamen is infinite and stands apart in a category of its own. Not only has Mark been inside of this journey with me, but in the times of blindness, Mark has seen through my own eyes, showing me how to recognize what I already obscurely knew. Mark’s exceptional intelligence, intuition and deep kindness have sustained me throughout.

I continue to be inspired by the courage, insight and support of Erin McCarthy, always a step ahead of me. The beautiful musical talents and passions of Stephen Ham have been a chief inspiration to my thinking and he has been an important person in my life during this time. I also owe thanks to Robert Cohen, for he too has been highly supportive of my choices.

I want to thank, especially, my supervisors, André Gombay and Ronnie de Sousa. André is to my mind the model of Cartesian generosity, and he has been a tremendously supportive presence for the duration of my PhD. I owe whatever knowledge I have acquired about Descartes, and much about the 17th century, to André. Ronnie de Sousa is a thoughtful, perceptive reader, a generous supervisor, and has offered much timely advice about the direction of my thinking.
Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used for primary sources frequently cited in this dissertation.

Works by Marie de Gournay


Works by René Descartes


Works by François Poulain de la Barre


At any moment now, we shall spit forth this life of ours. In the meantime, while we still draw breath, while we still remain among human beings, let us cultivate our humanity.

-Seneca, *On Anger*

Reason would overstep all its bounds if it undertook to explain...how freedom is possible.

- Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*

But in history, as in traveling, men usually see what they already had in their minds.

- John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women*

We must learn better
What we are and are not.
We are not the wind.
We are not every vagrant mood that tempts
Our minds to giddy homelessness.
We must distinguish better
Between ourselves and strangers.
There is much that we are not.
There is much that is not.
There is much that we have not to be.

- Laura Riding, from *The Why of the Wind*

In whatever form a slowly-accumulated past lives in the blood - whether in the concrete image of the old house stored with visual memories, or in the conception of the house not built with hands, but made up of inherited passions and loyalties - it has the same power of broadening and deepening the individual existence, of attaching it by mysterious links of kinship to all the mighty sum of human striving.

- Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth*
In the 17th century, Descartes established terms for a new understanding of human being, terms that immediately launched a debate known as the mind-body problem, or the problem of dualism. The problem is how to account for the unity of an individual human being if the human being is composed of two distinct substances: an immaterial mind and a material body that functions according to the newly instituted mechanical laws of nature. We are the inheritors of Descartes' dualist legacy. In common parlance we speak still of 'mind' over 'matter.' We do so, however, as if mechanism were not a long obsolete scientific model of nature. The 'immaterial mind' is a vacant metaphor caught, tenaciously, in the recesses of our language, even when no plausible contemporary account of the human brain underwrites this concept. The mind-body problem is thus an eroded figure of speech, inhabiting, like a ghost, the recesses of our vocabulary and grammar. Our inheritance of dualism is thus illegitimate and we must let it go.

This thesis argues the reverse. At the heart of my thesis is the proposition that any coherent understanding of human being requires the assumption that sustains Descartes' dualism: freedom of the mind. Human freedom, which inheres in reason, is the necessary possibility that is upheld in Descartes' argument for real distinction between mind and body.

In order to demonstrate the importance of Descartes' rationalist argument for human freedom, I situate his work in the context of two other 17th century rationalists who argued for the emancipation of women: Marie de Gournay and François Poulain de la Barre. In The Equality of Men and Women \(^1\) Gournay articulates a new logic of human relations, one of perfect equality between men and women. On the strength of her postulate of a rational soul

\(^1\) Égalité des hommes et des femmes (Paris, 1622).
that is separate from the human body, she contradicts the opinion that women are naturally inferior to men: on the contrary, both men and women have the same intrinsic worth as well as the same potential for intellectual and moral growth. On this basis, she contradicts two kinds of inequality: in women's historical representation and in their access to education. These arguments, I argue, are strengthened in Descartes' new and radical reformulation of mind-body dualism in his *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641).

Descartes' dualism supports a theory of sexual equality by arguing an equality of the freedom of human reason. This freedom of reason, I suggest, does not involve negating the passions or the body, as some critics contend, and this is for two reasons: first, the idea of embodiment is an innate, original idea of human reason and thus cannot legitimately be negated; second, Descartes suggests techniques for rational reflection on the passions through which we transform our passions into "internal emotions." This process of reflection deepens our understanding of their nature and role in our life, thus serving to increase our freedom. The highest expression of a successful, rational, virtuous and free human life is in Descartes' concept of generosity, articulated in *The Passions of the Soul* (1649). I argue that the passion and virtue of generosity is the universal standard of human virtue, for both women and men. As a passion, it is a feeling of legitimate self-esteem on the basis of the good use of one's free will. As a virtue, it is the key to remedying the disorders of our other passions, and, importantly, it is the basis of respect for other human beings. I argue that this respect does not merely amount to recognition of the freedom of others, but it goes deeper than that: generosity is the basis for the promotion of human freedom. I do not suggest that we find a social philosophy developed out of generosity within Descartes' thought, but instead that the logic of generosity indicates this direction of thought. For further developments on this front, we await the third philosopher in this study. Descartes thus does justice to Gournay's project
of establishing a theory of equality in an important theoretical way: by showing that each human being is free and equal to every other on the basis of reason alone and that the freedom of human reason is the basis of human dignity and respect.

The third philosopher in this inquiry is François Poulain de la Barre. He draws out the implications of Cartesian dualism, freedom and generosity in order to articulate, like Gournay, a theory of complete sexual equality. Writing in the 1670s, his work bridges Cartesianism and 17th century feminism. He published three consecutive egalitarian-feminist texts: *De l'égalité des deux sexes* (Paris, 1673), *De l'éducation des dames pour la conduite de l'esprit dans les sciences et dans les moeurs* (Paris, 1674) and *De l'excellence des hommes contre l'égalité des sexes* (Paris, 1675).

Poulain’s work draws out the ethical force of Descartes’ dualism: on its basis he offers an argument explicitly directed at resolving the problem of women’s servitude: he argues that ‘the mind has no sex.’ I examine these claims and I also suggest that Poulain draws out the potential inherent in the concept of generosity to support his own view that the opportunity for every human freedom, both internal and external, ought to be present in the lives of women. I conclude my discussion of Poulain by returning to Cartesian generosity, considering it together with Poulain’s own similar definition of virtue. I do this in light of another 17th philosopher of freedom who argued for women’s emancipation, Gabrielle Suchon. I briefly consider her arguments for freedom, as they serve particularly well to illustrate the importance, for women’s lives, of the rationalist framework of freedom that is under consideration in all three thinkers.

Gournay, Descartes and Poulain each support a rationalist account of human being. Rationalism, very broadly speaking, is defined in contrast to empiricism. A rationalist holds that reason, and not the senses, are the foundation of certainty in knowledge. The
rationalist/empiricist debate in the 17th century can be understood, as I will show, from the perspective of the problem of women’s servitude.

Historical details

Marie de Gournay (1565-1645)

Feminism in 17th century French thought was a widespread and active intellectual movement.2 Although it was not officially organized, “it was more than a handful of daring but isolated and exceptional individuals.”3 One of these figures was Marie de Gournay. She was a Parisian by birth and spent most of her life in the capital.4 Although she is still best known as the editor of Michel de Montaigne’s Essays, less recognized is the fact that she herself published a wide range of works.5 Gournay’s life and work had a vibrant intellectual context: she frequented some of the important Parisian salons and also held one of her own.6

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5 Gournay continued to write and publish until her death in July 1645. Her writing ranged across many fields: literary criticism, ethics, feminism, education, autobiography, poetry and fiction. Gournay published two editions of her collected works, which contained dozens of smaller works. She also contributed substantially to the editing and publication of Montaigne’s Essays, including numerous revised critical editions of his Essays during her lifetime. She was well known by her contemporaries, not least for her Paris salon in rue de l’Arbre sec, near what is now rue de Rivoli.

6 She was a guest at the salon of Marguerite de Valois, also known as La Reine Margot, who, after 15 years of exile from Paris, had returned and had established a court that “became the center of the intellectual elite of Paris.” She later participated in the salon of Madame des Loges, daughter of a wealthy Huguenot who had been steward to the Prince de Condé and the Roi de Navarre. Madame des Loges cultivated a liberal, tolerant atmosphere, receiving both Protestants and Catholics, Duc Gaston d’Orléans, Malherbe, Racan, Voiture, Balzac and Ménage. These salons prepared the way for the more famous salon of Madame de Rambouillet and her chambre bleue of l’Hotel de Rambouillet. In comparison with these salons, Marie de Gournay’s own salon was smaller in scope (and in financial resources), but she received, among others, La Mothe le Vayer and M. de la
She is identified as a précieuse in Somaize's *Grand dictionnaire des prétieuses* [sic] (1661), even though the term itself was not coined until after her death, in the early 1650s. I clarify its meaning here, not only because it was applied to Goumay, but because Poulain de la Barre also invokes the term. According to Carolyn Lougee, the term précieuse was originally invoked in order

... to "ridicule" the affectation of one group of young [intellectual] women in Paris...Gradually, however, the term came to be applied without pejorative connotations to more and more groups of women until by 1661...the term précieuse was commonly applied to all women in Parisian salons.

**René Descartes (1596-1650)**

A general overview of Descartes' life and works far exceeds the bounds of this introduction. References to the standard as well as the most recent biographies appear in my bibliography. The following anecdote can perhaps give some indication of the magnitude of Descartes scholarship. Early in the 20th century, the editor of the *Vocabulaire Philosophique*, André Lalande, assisted by members from the *Société française de philosophie*, ultimately decided to exclude from their dictionary any conceptual definition of Cartesianism because they could not agree on any terms.

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8 Lougee, 7. Her work argues that the function of 17th century French salons was to "propagate the culture, values, and manners which supplemented and legitimated acquired nobility... Thus, salons were the indispensable sociocultural adaptive mechanism by which the integration of the newly ennobled into the structures of orders was completed." Lougee, 212.

9 Lalande writes: "L'accord n'ayant pu s'établir entre les membres de la société ni sur la question de savoir si le terme cartésianisme doit s'appliquer au seul système de Descartes, ou s'étendre à tout son groupe, ni sur la question de savoir précisément ce qui, de la pensée de Descartes, est devenu la pensée commune de ses disciples..."
François Poulain de la Barre (1647-1723)

Comparatively little is known about the life of François Poulain de la Barre. According to the most recent discussions of Poulain, by Siep Stuurman, he was from an established bourgeois French family. At the age of 19 he “obtained his bachelor’s degree in theology at the Sorbonne. Shortly thereafter, he abruptly terminated his theological studies. He left the Sorbonne disgusted with Scholastic philosophy.”10 According to Siep Stuurman, only

...two things are known with certainty about his other activities in the 1660s. The first is that he for a time frequented the Académie des Orateurs, a debating society in which, among other topics, feminist issues were discussed. The second is that he attended the lectures of a Cartesian philosopher, probably Jacques Rohault, and quickly became converted to the new philosophy.11

In the 1670s, Poulain published the three consecutive works mentioned above. I leave all discussion of the nature of these works to my chapter on Poulain. From 1680 to 1688, according to Stuurman, despite his previous rejection of his studies, Poulain served as a village priest in northern France, perhaps out of necessity to earn a living.12 In 1688 he left the hamlet of Versigny and returned to Paris. Stuurman surmises that he left his position due to “trouble over doctrinal orthodoxy after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes.” Another probable motive is that he “wished to avoid collaboration in the forced conversion of Huguenots.”13 In 1689, he converted to Calvinism and shortly thereafter left Paris for Geneva, “where he was admitted as a habitant in December 1689, and married into a

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patrician family shortly thereafter.\textsuperscript{15} He lived in Geneva, teaching and writing, until his death in 1723 at the age of seventy-five.

It is most unfortunate that my thesis will not benefit from two imminent works on the subject of Poulain de la Barre. One is a book by Siep Stuurman on “Francois Poulain and the invention of modern equality.”\textsuperscript{16} The other is an English translation of his three feminist publications:\textsuperscript{17} in this translation, two of Poulain’s works will appear in English for the first time.\textsuperscript{18}

**Cartesianism and feminism in the 17\textsuperscript{th} century**

This thesis thus situates Descartes’ account of freedom at the intersection of two trajectories of thought in the 17\textsuperscript{th} century: Cartesianism and feminism. To date, there is just one book-length study of the connections between Cartesianism and feminism in the 17\textsuperscript{th} and 18\textsuperscript{th} centuries: Erica Harth’s *Cartesian Women: Versions and Subversions of Rational Discourse in the Old Regime* (Cornell University Press, 1992). As I take up at greater length in Chapter Four, however, I disagree with her underlying presuppositions about Descartes’ thought. Briefly, although Harth concedes that Descartes’ rationalism appeared to offer a new kind of intellectual opportunity to women in the 17\textsuperscript{th} century, in reality it was a philosophical trap. Harth claims that Cartesian rationalism conceals a masculine discourse under its guise of universality. As I argue, however, there is an unjustified equation in her work, between rationalism, dualism and objectivity, on the one hand, and masculinity, violence and disengagement from the body, on the other. In addition to my discussion in Chapter Four, I

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} In the series *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe*, edited by Albert Rabil Jr. University of Chicago Press. Forthcoming this year.
\textsuperscript{18} *De l’égalité des deux sexes* is the only one of the three that is currently in English translation.
take up one of these points in Chapter Two, on Descartes: I claim that Harth misinterprets the meaning of objectivity and detachment with regard to the passions. Her views, I suggest, are at least partly derived from another contemporary feminist critique of Descartes, in the work of Susan Bordo. Her work *The Flight to Objectivity* (SUNY, 1987) has been influential in contemporary feminist critiques of Descartes, and I suggest, after a review of her arguments, that the interpretation she offers is untenable. If this is so, it ought to be the cause of some concern, since Bordo’s work serves as a framework for numerous feminist critiques of Descartes’ dualism. The framework of contemporary feminist readings of Descartes ought to be revised, I suggest, and an important goal of this thesis is to offer such a revision.

To this end, a study of Poulain de la Barre is most useful, for it is clear that Descartes inspires Poulain’s radically egalitarian arguments for women’s freedom in all respects. Poulain understands and draws upon what I take to be the most important element of Descartes’ thought, the element that is at the heart of my thesis. I briefly consider this idea now, as an end to my introduction. Poulain clearly shows what is at stake in the rationalist arguments for freedom of mind: to uphold the position that the separation between the human and the natural is not a matter of degrees but an irreducible interval or gap. In his *De l’égalité des deux sexes* (1673), Poulain puts the idea this way:

> [Among the Scholastics] it is considered a crime or an error to cast in doubt what we came to believe before the age of discretion...And what they commonly teach serves to show that there is, between the beasts and ourselves only more and less. 19

Upon reaching the age of discretion, Poulain argues, no human being ought to be denied the freedom to act or judge independently, unconstrained by external agencies, on the principle

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19 François Poulain de la Barre, *De l’égalité des deux sexes* (Paris: Jean Dupuis, 1673/Paris: Fayard, 1984) 56. The edition I use here is that of Fayard, 1984 and henceforth all references to this work will be cited as *Egalité.*
that a human being has this irreducible power of free will that no degree of natural
determination can eradicate.

Poulain’s critique of Scholastic thought is based on that of Descartes. In his
arguments for the real distinction between mind and body, it is this divide that Descartes
seeks to uphold. It is this divide that preserves the freedom of human reason, and it is the
collapse of this divide that allows for the intrusion of sexism (and all forms of prejudice)
upon the dignity of human being.
Chapter One

Marie de Gournay: An early 17th century rationalist critique of sexism

Women are not at all in the wrong when they refuse the rules of life introduced into the world, seeing that it was men who established these rules without them.

Michel de Montaigne.¹

Introduction

In this chapter I argue that Marie de Gournay, in The Equality of Men and Women (1622), defines two kinds of sexism: intrinsic and extrinsic. She then identifies, as I show, the philosophical and psychological underpinnings of these sexisms. Following this, I discuss her response to sexism, which is comprised of two elements: first, she contradicts what she takes to be the theory of human nature underlying both forms of sexism, and this argument does some work towards dismantling extrinsic sexism; second, she suggests two remedies for the harm done. The first remedy is a proposal to see history with eyes of equity and thus rewrite it in an egalitarian spirit. The second remedy is her proposal that an equal form of education be available to both men and women. Education is an important way in which to combat intrinsic sexism. I conclude by briefly discussing in what way Gournay establishes the philosophical problems that are taken up by Descartes and Poulain.

Intrinsic Sexism

In the opening statement of Equality, Gournay identifies a form of sexism: men arrogantly give preference to their own sex.² The only reason that they have for asserting the "prestige of their masculine sex," says Gournay, is that it is something they "feel in their

¹ "Les femmes n'ont pas tort du tout quand elles refusent les règles de vie qui sont introduites au monde, d'autant que ce sont les hommes qui les ont faites sans elles." Montaigne, Œuvres complètes, edited by Albert Thibaudet and Maurice Rat, (Paris, 1967) 832.
² "cette orgueilleuse préférence que les hommes s'attribuent." Equality, 109/EHF, 113.
Men "confer superiority on the masculine sex," feeling that they ought to be recommended and given credit because of their sex. This feeling "in their heart" is one of both moral and intellectual superiority, defined in contrast to the inferiority of women in these qualities. Women are imputed to lack dignity, self-sufficiency and intellectual ability because they lack, by nature, the emotional stability, or in other words, the "temperament and organs" required for acquiring these characters. We get ahead of ourselves, however, and must remain for the moment with the question of men-in-themselves.

Men's feeling of moral and intellectual superiority over women is based, as far as Gournay can discern, on a feeling. It is a feeling that as men they are intrinsically worthy and smart. Whatever the nature of this feeling (or passion, to use a 17th century term that will become important to us in the Descartes chapter) may turn out to be, it means, at least, that they prefer themselves and the company of other men, particularly for engaging in those activities requiring intellectual and moral capacity. In some way, then, men connect their moral and intellectual status to their sexual status.

Men's belief in their intrinsic worth on this basis has a similar structure to the belief identified by Kwame Anthony Appiah, as "intrinsic racism." He argues that

...intrinsic racists...are people who differentiate morally between members of different races because they believe that each race has a different moral status [in itself]....Just as, for example, many people assume that the fact that they are biologically related to another person—a brother, an aunt, a cousin—gives them a moral interest in that person, so an intrinsic racist holds that the bare fact of being of the same race is a reason for preferring one person to another.

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3 Equality, 109/EHF, 109
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
I want to draw attention to one term in particular in this passage: biological. A group attributing superior moral status to itself on the basis of biological characters is intrinsically racist. In like manner, continues Appiah,

...some sexists are “intrinsic sexists,” holding that the bare fact that someone is a woman (or man) is a reason for treating her (or him) in certain ways.7

While sexism and racism are not the same kind of prejudice, they do at least converge in the presumption that biology is a legitimate basis for high self-esteem, even a feeling of inner superiority. The form of sexism that Gournay identifies in her opening statement can, on these terms, be construed as “intrinsic sexism.” After we examine the other form that she identifies, extrinsic sexism, we will then be in a position to see what is wrong with both kinds of sexism in light of her claim that a human being has a rational soul that is separate from his or her body.

Extrinsic Sexism

Whereas intrinsic sexism is a question of attributing inner moral status to oneself in virtue of biological characters, extrinsic sexism involves a differentiation between the sexes on the basis of moral and intellectual characteristics that are presumed to be entailed by the biological essence of sexuality. In other words, it is not simply a question of self-preference but of denigrating others. Moreover, the inferior qualities imputed to women are qualities that we find to be important measurements of human worth, qualities of virtue and intelligence. Gournay identifies this extrinsic sexism: women are said to lack dignity, self-sufficiency and

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7 Ibid.
intellectual ability because they lack, by nature, the emotional stability – the "temperament and organs" – requisite for acquiring these characters. Moreover,

...for some it isn't sufficient to confer superiority on the masculine sex; they also want to confine women to their indisputable and necessary place, namely at the distaff and the distaff alone.9

The distaff motif, as a quick glance through any history of feminism text will show, has a prominent place in this history. The image of the distaff, or needle, or spindle, or spinning wheel, symbolizes domestic isolation, social and intellectual ignorance, as well as lack of participation and contribution to culture.10

By what right, on what grounds, do men justify both their belief in natural superiority and the belief and the legitimacy of oppressing women by confining them to the spinning wheel? Nothing much, it turns out, as far as justifications go. "Who will believe," writes Gournay, "that those who want to improve and strengthen their own position out of the weakness of others, can improve and strengthen themselves by their own power."11 Who will believe, indeed, that men's self-declared rule is actually a tyranny of physical force? Men, she says, want to elevate and strengthen themselves on the weakness of others. If so, this truth is at once scandalous and banal, but as Isaiah Berlin observes, "there is no a priori reason for supposing that the truth, when it is discovered, will prove interesting."12 Perhaps the triviality of it all is a factor contributing to society's unwillingness to rationally scrutinize sexism. Whatever the case may be, Gournay identifies the problem, at least on one level, as the law of

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9 Ibid.
10 O'Neill explains the distaff image: "There is a long tradition of setting philosophy at odds with work "fitting for women." Diogenes Laertius reports that Theodorus attacked the ancient Cynic, Hipparchia, for not attending to her domestic duties by saying "Who is the woman who has left the shuttle so near the warp? Hipparchia replied, "I, Theodorus, am that person, but do I appear to you to have come to a wrong decision, if I devote that time to philosophy, which I otherwise should have spent at the loom?" Equality, 115.
11 Equality, 110/EFH, 114.
the strongest. This is reiterated by Poulain de la Barre and also, much later, John Stuart Mill.\textsuperscript{13}

For Gournay, however, the matter does not rest here: she realizes that to simply say that sexism is based on irrational brute force and the desire to dominate is not sufficient in order to properly dismantle it. One feels strongly about it, of course, and it is a deeply emotional issue. The point, however, is to irrevocably change minds and move beyond the logic of domination: this requires rational arguments. If it can be shown that at least one kind of sexism rests on untenable philosophical presuppositions, Gournay will have a foot in the door to emancipation.

\textbf{Refuting extrinsic sexism}

Intrinsic sexism is not a good initial candidate because, as we saw, it is a feeling in the hearts of men. Passions are more intractable than reasons, less susceptible to rational scrutiny than ideas. It is best, therefore, to begin with extrinsic sexism, and to argue that certain qualities of women are not associated with them by natural necessity: this is an easier subject of philosophical argument.\textsuperscript{14} As a start, Gournay discerns the ground upon which men have formed their prejudices about women: this ground is, in a word, hearsay. They "have heard it trumpeted through the streets" that women's intellectual and moral virtues are somehow naturally inferior to those of men. Moreover, men base social and moral rules on these prejudices.

\textsuperscript{13} I take up this theme again in my chapter on Poulain. See also John Stuart Mill, \textit{The Subjection of Women}, in \textit{On Liberty and Other Essays}, edited by John Gray. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) 476. Mill employs all of Poulain's arguments against sexual inequality, although Poulain is never mentioned by Mill.

\textsuperscript{14} In the chapters on Descartes and Poulain de la Barre, however, we learn how it is possible to engage in rational reflection on one's passion for power and thus experience a change of heart as well as a change of mind.
These men have not learned, however,

...that the foremost quality of an incompetent (malhabile) man is to support those things based on popular faith and hearsay.

Men's incompetence stems from their mistaking prejudicial opinions for knowledge. All that such concepts can amount to, however, are a facility for speaking well (éloquence) and for displaying their knowledge of fashionable words like dignity, self-sufficiency, intellectual capacity, temperament and organs.\(^\text{15}\) In other words, it is only customary for men to believe in women's inferiority. Mill argues, on this matter, that the "generality of a practice is in some cases a strong presumption that it is, or all events once was, conducive to laudable ends."\(^\text{16}\) Mill continues:

If the authority of men over women, when first established, had been the result of a conscientious comparison between different modes of constituting the government of society; if, after trying various other modes of social organization—the government of women over men, equality between the two, and such mixed and divided modes of government as might be invented—it had been decided, on the testimony of experience, that the mode in which women are wholly under the rule of men...was the arrangement most conducive to the happiness and well-being of both; its general adoption might then be fairly thought to be some evidence that, at the time when it was adopted, it was the best.\(^\text{17}\)

As both Mill and Gournay point out, however, the fair trial of different systems of government has not occurred. Even if experience of different systems did show that women were better off submitting to the rule of women, one would still need to be highly skeptical of a system of law that, "with a single word" managed to "defeat half of the human race."\(^\text{18}\)

\(^{15}\) Equality 109/EHF, 113.

\(^{16}\) Mill, 474.

\(^{17}\) Mill, 474-475.

\(^{18}\) Equality, 110/ EHF, 114.
How, then, does this "word" of women's inferiority, this common opinion and hearsay, justify itself?

Underlying this prejudice is the view that women's power of reason is weaker than that of men, and this belief is connected to the view that a woman's body influences her moral and intellectual characters. This brings us to the heart of the problem: it is a problem of theory upon which all of the practice has been based. The theoretical discourse on women in the late Renaissance (late 16th century) and very early modern (early 17th century) periods is largely Aristotelian and Scholastic, according to Ian Maclean. His research illuminates the problem that Gournay addresses, as we will see now.

Maclean has studied Renaissance views of women in all major intellectual fields of this period. In the fields of medicine, anatomy and physiology, he observes that although by the end of the 16th century, doctors are "convinced that the notion of woman has changed, and that by the removal of the taint of imperfection she has attained a new dignity," nevertheless, her "physiology and humours seem to destine her to be the inferior of man, both physically and mentally." Two aspects of Aristotelian thought "reinforce this notion of inferiority:"

The first is the metaphorical association of woman with mother earth, nutrition, fruitfulness and the fluctuations of the moon, which is deeply embedded in the substratum of ancient medical thought, and sometime explicit there. The implications of these metaphors – passivity, receptiveness, compassion, mutability – may account in part for the Renaissance view of female psychology. The second aspect is the primordial nature of sex difference. Sex difference is not only a

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20 Ian Maclean "Medicine, Anatomy, Physiology" in Feminism and Renaissance Studies ed. Lorna Hutson (Oxford University Press, 1999, 127-156) p.145. This metaphorical association of women with nature is connected with what Poullain de la Barre describes as the view that humans are only separated by degrees from nature, rather than by an unbridgeable gap (as I stated in my introduction). On this view, women are closer to nature than men and therefore less human.
feature of the higher animals; it is postulated in plants and stones. The difference is an example of the opposite of privation (the 'species privata'). Even after the arguments which make the female a deprived form of the male have been rejected, the difference of sex retains the associations of deprivation, and plays an important part in the infrastructure of Renaissance thought.21

This theory is therefore at the heart of extrinsic sexism. Like Descartes, Gournay sets out to attack first principles: two things are wrong, on principle, with this customary way of thinking. First is the erroneous assumption, she thinks, that biology is a basis for esteeming moral and intellectual worth. Gournay counters this with her claim that a human being is not essentially defined by his or sex, but by his or her power of reason, which power resides in the soul:

...the human animal is neither man nor woman, the sexes having been created not as ends in themselves but secundum quid, as the School says, that is to say, solely for the purpose of propagation. The unique form and differentia of this animal, consists only in the reasonable soul.22

In other words, sex is not equivalent to personal identity or destiny and not indicative of worth. This claim has a double virtue: it indicates that if it is wrong to judge a woman's worth by her sex, then a man is not justified to judge his own worth by his sex. The law of the strongest, fundamentally, rests on the presupposition that physical characters (greater strength) justify using that strength to gain the upper hand (and thus feel superior).

Second, extrinsic sexism underwrites the view that in principle, women cannot become fully human. Gournay writes:

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21 Ian MacLean (1999) 145.
22 Equality, 112/EHF, 121. Descartes will contribute to Gournay's claim with his argument for a real distinction between mind and body; his arguments will help us to see that we cannot make accurate judgments, especially about other human beings, using empirical information as one's source of certainty.
See how such minds compare the two sexes: in their opinion the height of ability which women can attain is to resemble the common run of men. It is as difficult to imagine that a great woman can call herself a great human being, as it is to grant that a man can rise to the level of a God.\(^\text{23}\)

These prejudices serve to reduce women to being, in principle, determined by organs and temperament, and this determination prevents them from acquiring the fundamental qualities of human being: dignity, capacity for self-sufficiency, intellectual ability. On this view, women cannot achieve the same successes as men, and full human being is a status held only by men. Women’s being is therefore only relative to that of a man. Gournay’s postulate of a rational human soul in distinction from sexual identity contradicts these principles: this postulate is the ground of her principle of equality, to which I now turn.

**The Principle of Equality**

Sexism is not uniquely attributable to men: women can also be sexists. Gournay claims that the usual response among most of “those who take up the cause of women against the arrogant way men confer superiority upon themselves” is to “pay them back in full.”\(^\text{24}\) Advocates for women respond by claiming “superiority for the women.”\(^\text{25}\) Presumably, both sexes can also be intrinsic and extrinsic sexists. Gournay understands, however, that this is merely to substitute one sexism with another. She seeks a way out of this logic of domination that, arguably, has governed the *querelle des femmes* since its putative beginning in France with Christine de Pisan’s defence of women against misogyny in *The City of Women* (1404).\(^\text{26}\) Gournay sees a way out of what she sees as a long-standing structure of prejudice


\(^{24}\) Equality, 109/EHF, 114.

\(^{25}\) Ibid.

\(^{26}\) For an excellent introduction to the development of the debate over the status of women in European history see Joan Kelly, “Early Feminist Theory and the Querelle des Femmes, 1400-1789,” (*Signs: Journal of Women*
and she sets herself apart, in her own eyes, by establishing new terms of evaluation: men and women are to be construed as equal to one another. Stuurman asserts that Gournay’s text is “probably the first resolutely egalitarian feminist treatise in European history.”27 Geneviève Fraisse notes that Gournay...maintained, even before Poullain de la Barre, that the notion of equality had to supplant the rhetorical games about the superiority or inferiority of one sex or the other.28

Gournay herself claims that her framework is original, and that it verifies and vindicates women’s privileges, which have hitherto been oppressed by the tyranny of men.29 Gournay sees herself as inaugurating a new discourse on relations between men and women. She writes:

I flee from all extremes and am content with the equality of women and men, for Nature is as much opposed to superiority as to inferiority, in this respect.30

As we have already seen, the only natural inequality between men and women that Gournay discerns is a difference in potential for physical strength; this difference has been used to establish a social system based on the law of force. Men gave the rule to themselves merely because they could manipulate the natural inequality of physical force. “Physical force,” however, is such a low virtue that while men surpass women in this respect, animals far

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surpass men in the same respect.” The natural power of reason, on the other hand, is perfectly equal between men and women and must be upheld as the only principle for measurement and comparison. To this end, yet another obstacle, apart from intrinsic and extrinsic sexism, stands in the way of freedom.

Gournay identifies this other obstacle to women’s emancipation as the fact that the power of reason has been corrupted. In men, it has been used as an instrument of force in the exercise of tyrannical laws (“with a single word they defeat half of the human race”). In women, reason has either been proscribed or else directed toward particular limited ends: the image of the distaff evokes the ways in which women’s reason has been enclosed. Thus, by instituting laws that either deny or severely restrict education for girls, as well as in their biased writing of history, men have used their reason against women, and women’s reason has been used against itself. I will take up these two themes, history and education, respectively: Gournay offers means by which reason can be renewed and used as a vehicle for enlightenment in these areas.

History

Gournay is not fundamentally skeptical about the potential for a renewal of reason. She is careful to distinguish the abuse of reason, by those men who “want to improve and strengthen their position out of the weakness of others,” from philosophical reason in itself. Reason need not be subservient to force and arguments can be grounded on a different kind of strength: not physical strength, but the strength of rationalism. To this end, it is a good practice to show that history has been written by a few men (for many men have promoted

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31 Equality, 112/EHF, 121.
32 Equality, 110/EHF, 114.
33 Equality, 110/EHF, 114.
women's emancipation) who accorded themselves the unique privilege of penmanship, thus preventing women from contributing to the invention of culture. Now that a woman, Gournay, is writing and communicating to the public, using a pen and not a sewing needle, she has the power to rewrite history. She outlines a method by which to rewrite history more equitably, to open up the possibility of new past futures. On the presupposition that women and men equally have a rational soul, it must be presumed that as long as there have been women, they too have thought and acted in ways worthy of notice or emulation.

**Historical Method: Part One**

Her method for interpreting history in order to bring women's accomplishments into view has two parts, the second building upon the first. The first is genealogical critique revealing that all laws grew out of the interests of men to preserve the integrity of their "family" circle that excluded women. Gournay sees the difference, however, between secular laws of men and either natural or divine laws. Breaking up the purported necessary connection between, on the one hand, the laws of men, and on the other hand, the natural laws of reason or divine laws, allows a space into which a new history may come into view. One example of this critique involves a reference to the creation story in the Book of Genesis: there are actually two versions and the first one is a story of perfect equality, upon which Gournay writes: "Man was created male and female, the Scriptures say, reckoning the two as only one."34 The second version of creation is just a little further on in Genesis (II 21-25):

> And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.
The presence of two creation stories in the same authoritative source, stories that stand in opposition to one another on the question of male-female relations, serves to call into question the assertion of the second, misogynist version.

Gournay gives other examples of laws instituted to preserve male power. One example is Salic Law, which deprives women of the crown. It exists only in France, and was invented at the time of Pharamond solely because of the wars against the Empire, whose yoke our Fathers shook off. At the same time the French have been well served by the creation of Regents who are as equally empowered as the Kings. For, without that, how many times might the State have been forfeited? 35

Another concerns the laws interdicting women from giving Sacraments.

[...] men have only forbidden them [women] to administer the other Sacraments so that the authority of men will always be more thoroughly maintained, either because these men share the same sex, or so that, rightly or wrongly, peace may be assured between the two sexes, by means of the weakening and disparaging of one. 36

Another crucial point here is that not only are these laws questionable in themselves, but other men have read history differently. With regard to the first creation story, for example, the one that bestows on all human beings the same creation and the same honour, Saint Basil was a man who endorsed this reading. 37 On this view, not only are sources open to readings that do justice to women, but they already exist, demonstrating that others, too, can be written. This leads us to the second part of Gournay's method, to which I now turn.

34 Equality, 112/EHF, 121.
35 Equality, 112
36 Equality, 113.
37 Equality, 112.
Historical Method: Part Two

Because God has bestowed the same creation and the same honour upon men women, it follows that

...in those who have the same Nature, their actions are likewise the same, and whenever their works are the same, they will be esteemed and valued the same in consequence.\(^{38}\)

Gournay contributes to the esteem and value of women in history by outlining a plan to rewrite history in pairs of men and women: this constitutes the second part of her method, attendant upon the breaking open of the laws. Her method thus has an initial negative critique, or, to anticipate a Cartesian move, an act of complete doubt about the certainty of our intellectual and social foundations. She follows this with an active practice of reconstructing Western intellectual history by reading with greater equity. For every male contribution in philosophy, religion, military victory and so on, she matches a female contribution. Gournay thus offers a method by which to practice a more egalitarian history of cultural accomplishment. To this end, Gournay has yet another obstacle to overcome: she must show that, against the evidence of history, women may not only spin threads, but play the lyre.

A life at the distaff or loom does not cultivate the mind, does not even require literacy, and certainly does not contribute to the progress of culture. Life at the lyre, symbol of writing, of spinning tales, on the other hand, does create and shape culture, for the lyre symbolizes the life of the mind.\(^{39}\) But must the distaff necessarily symbolize servitude? What would happen if the customary images associated with this word were replaced with other images evoked by another meaning of distaff? In its etymology, the distaff (la quenouille) symbolizes not

\(^{38}\) Ibid.

\(^{39}\) Ibid.
only a life of confinement, but a female lineage. In a positive sense, it means a female succession to the Crown, the female inheritance of power. Gournay says that Regent Queens, who, under Salic Law, take power in the absence or minority of Kings, are not merely stand-ins but have courageously served states, and without them, "how many times might the State have been forfeited?" 

Taking the meaning to a more figurative level Gournay's work evokes another positive image of the distaff: one not only spins threads into fabric, but words into stories. The work of spinning can, in this way, open the door to emancipation. As Hegel saw, even servile work can open the way to freedom, if, through one's work, one becomes conscious of what one truly is and what one is capable of. The work of spinning can be a source of self-transformation by becoming the work of writing. The distaff, once an instrument of women's servitude, is now an instrument of liberation because Gournay spins a new fabric of history with her own words. In other words, her framework is a means to bridge the traditional gap between weaving and writing (fîler ou écrire) and thus transcend the logic of domination that governs historical representation. 

Gournay offers many interesting examples in her new egalitarian outline of history, and their brevity is an invitation to readers to continue her project. One such illustrious example is that of Pythagoras and his family, an example showing that women were not behind, but literally surrounding, this great man. The sister of Pythagoras was Themistoclea, who taught philosophy and had her own brother as a disciple. His wife was the sage Thenao.


Equality, 112/EHF, 120.


There are far too many to list here: Gournay writes about the achievements of both men and women in every area of cultural production, and she also discerns the voices of those men in history who have been feminist and/or egalitarian in their work and outlook. The task she sets for contemporary readers of history is an enormous one.
His daughter was Damo to whom he entrusted his Commentaries, and the mission to teach his doctrines to others with all of the gravity and grace they merit.\textsuperscript{43} Gournay claims that for want of space of time, she can offer only what she sees as these more illustrious examples, that she must omit from her text the countless more ordinary achievements.\textsuperscript{44}

More generally, a key point about her method is that history is a concern for women engaging in philosophical inquiry, for it can seem that that the history of philosophy is overwhelmingly male. This creates perplexing questions. For instance, who should women emulate? Who are their philosophical kin? On what ground can they build their intellectual inheritance? Moreover, these questions extend not only to philosophy, but to all of the important culture-defining institutions (philosophy, theology, science, the arts, diplomacy) for they all appear to have histories of primarily male achievement.

Reading in pairs is a mode of operation in current feminist thought. Erica Harth, in Cartesian Women, refers to two examples of this practice, examples upon which she models her own study of the feminism in connection with Cartesianism in the 17\textsuperscript{th} century. Harth cites Natalie Zemon Davis who argues that feminist historians “should be interested in the history of both women and men” and not “be working only on the subjected sex any more than an historian of class can focus exclusively on peasants.”\textsuperscript{45} She also refers to Nancy K. Millers’ call for “reading in pairs” that the “gendered dialectic of discursive development makes an imperative.”\textsuperscript{46} The lineage of contemporary feminism in this regard thus can be traced back to Gournay’s initiative.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{43} EHF, 115
\item \textsuperscript{44} EHF, 116.
\item \textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
Education

Gournay writes:

Women surely achieve a high degree of excellence less often than men do, but it is a marvel that the lack of good instruction, even the abundance of bad speech and teaching, does not make matters worse by keeping them from achieving excellence at all. 47

Notice that Gournay does not say “lack of instruction,” but rather “lack of good instruction.” Women receive some form of instruction, but it is of a kind that does not allow them to achieve the degree of excellence that men enjoy. Their education may even “make matters worse” for them. This tells us two things: first, if women are being taught, then they are presumed to have a mind (thus showing that men’s actions – allowing women some kind of mental development – belie their words); second, their mind is directed toward ends that does not promote their independence and intelligence, but shut down these qualities.

Lisa Jardine discusses the issue of the ends intended for women’s education in the context of Renaissance Italy, and her claim here that learning can be like so much “fine needlepoint” for women reveals what is at issue in Gournay’s rather compact statement:

Within the humanist confraternity (sic) the accomplishment of the educated woman (the ‘learned lady’) is an end it itself, like fine needlepoint or the ability to perform ably on lute or virginals. It is not viewed as a training for anything, perhaps not even for virtue (except insofar as all these activities keep their idle hands and minds busy). As signs of cultivation all such accomplishments satisfactorily connote a leisured life, a background which regards the decorative as adding lustre to rank and social standing, and the ability to purchase the services of the best available teachers for such comparatively useless skills.48

47 Equality, 110/EHF, 117
Jardine’s point about women’s education as an “end in itself” is an important one, and I think expresses Gournay’s point, except that she uses it in a slightly misleading manner. The education of women’s minds is not an end in itself but only relative to the ends prescribed for women, ends such as domestic utility, or being beautiful and ornamental, a social asset to husbands, or producing offspring for society: in short, it is not an education purely for the sake of autonomy. Women’s education is not considered as a worthy goal in and of itself, for the sake of cultivating the mind.

If this is so, the question arises: why bother educating at all if rational intelligence is naturally impossible? Answering that question might uncover men’s reasons for wanting to keep women confined to limited roles in life.

Whatever the answer may be, the only plausible explanation for women’s deficiencies, according to Gournay, is not lack of rational nature but the poor education they receive. Education, conversation and experience – in short, a “well-rounded education” – the proper correctives to actual disparities in knowledge and virtue between men and women,⁴⁹ and even those born into the worst conditions can, through education, surpass those born into the most fortunate and favourable circumstances.⁵⁰ She offers some empirical evidence to show that education already does make a difference for women. She asks rhetorically whether there is

...a greater difference between men and women than among women themselves, depending on the education they have had, depending on whether they were reared in the city or in a village, or depending on their National origin?⁵¹

Implicit here is a critique of the constraints that prevent not only women, but other underprivileged groups of people, from striving for self-perfection. Later, we see how Descartes’ concept of generosity, a rational virtue that everyone can achieve, serves to

⁴⁹ Equality, 110/EHF, 117.
⁵⁰ Ibid.
⁵¹
remove the conceptual constraints preventing some people from developing their natural capacity for rational autonomy.

Another problem about education that is implicitly raised for us by Gournay’s discussion will return in the next chapters: although men have had the privilege of a better education, they nevertheless turned out to be tyrants, usurpers, oppressors. This does not speak well of the very nature of their education. The poverty of traditional education and the need for its renewal are central themes in both Descartes and Poulain de la Barre: they both share the view that education begins with self-knowledge, including rational reflection on the nature of the passions and whether they are playing a constructive or destructive role in one’s life: thus education can be an effective means to combat intrinsic sexism.

Descartes, and in his turn, Poulain de la Barre, develop all of the themes introduced by Gournay: the postulate of a rational soul and by consequence a redefinition of the idea of reason, revaluation of the significance of one’s history and a renewal in the meaning of education. Descartes’ arguments for the real distinction of mind from body and the intrinsic autonomy of the human intellect, as we will see next, offer support for Gournay’s egalitarian project.

51 Ibid.
Chapter Two

Descartes on the Freedom, Dignity and Equality of Human Reason

Introduction

In this chapter we see how Marie de Gournay’s principle of equality acquires new force in light of Descartes’ arguments for human freedom. Her principle, recall, holds that the form or essence of the human being is not sex. The property of sex has a unique quality: it serves to distinguish organisms, including human organisms, on the basis of their reproductive roles. A human being, however, is human in virtue of having a reasonable soul that allows him or her to reflect on the meaning of this sex. This rational principle grounds her critique of both intrinsic sexism, the feeling of inner superiority on the basis of sex, and extrinsic sexism, the view that the other sex is intrinsically inferior in intellectually and morally relevant ways.

The best way to understand Descartes’ egalitarianism is from the perspective of human freedom, specifically the freedom of human reason: this idea is at the heart of his rationalism. The freedom of reason is, on principle, equal in every human being and it is the basis of human dignity. I examine Cartesian freedom in two ways. First, as a rational postulate, freedom is presupposed in Descartes’ argument for the real distinction between mind and body. The second way of understanding freedom follows from the first: it is respect of freedom both in oneself and in all other human beings. The idea of respect falls under the concept of generosity, the key Cartesian virtue and a passion of the soul. As it is set in the context of Descartes’ last published work before his death, The Passions of the Soul (1649),

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1 Hereafter referred to as Passions.
the concept of generosity permits a study of the difficult relationship between freedom and the passions.

I. Structure of Descartes' Meditations on First Philosophy

The central arguments for mind-body dualism are situated in Descartes' Meditations, and human freedom is made theoretically possible by this argument. I will, therefore, be examining parts of the Meditations in considerable detail. Since Descartes was attentive to the connections between style and contents in his different works, I begin by considering three structural features of Descartes' Meditations as a whole that tell us something about freedom.

1. Descartes chooses the phrase "first philosophy" and not "metaphysics" for the reason that governs much of his thinking: to distance himself from Scholastic thought. He writes to Mersenne:

   Yesterday I sent my Metaphysics to M.de Zuylichem [Constantijn Huygens] to post on to you; but he will not do so for a week, since I have allowed him that length of time to look at it. I have not put any title on it, but it seems to me that the most suitable would be René Descartes' Meditations on First Philosophy because I do not confine my discussion to God and the soul, but deal in general with all the first things to be discovered by philosophizing. Descartes' letter to Mersenne reveals an important feature of his epistemology. While metaphysical treatises normally instruct the reader on the nature of God and the soul, viewed as endpoints of knowledge, in a movement from the sensible to the intelligible, Descartes is making an explicit choice to not adopt the traditional term "metaphysics." Geneviève Rodis-

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2 Hereafter referred to as Meditations.
3 Descartes uses the term "mind" and the term "soul" interchangeably. In the Synopsis to his Meditations, Descartes writes, with regard to the Second Meditation: "And it follows from this that while the body can easily perish, the mind or the soul of man, for make no distinction between them, is immortal by its very nature." AT VII 14/CSM II 10.
Lewis argues that Descartes, in fact, reverses the traditional order of knowledge that situated metaphysics after and above physics, treating the most general principles of being. What is first in traditional metaphysics is what lies beyond and outside of the human mind. For Descartes, "first" is best understood as a root. In his letter-preface to the French edition of the *Principles of Philosophy* (1647), Descartes explicitly uses this metaphor. He writes:

Thus the whole of philosophy is like a tree. The roots are metaphysics, the trunk is physics, and the branches emerging from the trunk are all the other sciences, which may be reduced to three principal ones, namely medicine, mechanics and morals. Metaphysics is, for Descartes, the ground of morals: this will translate, as we will see, into the idea that freedom of the will is the ground of generosity. Metaphysics depends on innate ideas about the material world, the immaterial world and human being: these are deeply implanted in the human mind, like seeds of knowledge. The first of these ideas is that of the infinite within oneself: this idea, we will see, is experienced as the infinite power of the will. Descartes calls his meditations not "metaphysical" but "first philosophy" in order to show that they contain the innate principles of the human mind for acquiring all other knowledge.

2. Descartes' *Meditations* draws upon a number of traditions in the genre of meditational literature. One of these is a tradition of Stoic origin: that is, it is both reflexive and reflective. In this genre of meditational writing, the author initiates a self-transformation through rational reflection and self-examination. In Descartes' *Meditations*, the reader, following the guidance of the narrating meditator, is invited to enact his or her own

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4 To Mersenne, 11 November 1640. AT III 235/CSMK III 157.
6 AT IXB 14/CSM I 186.
8 Rorty, 2.
transformation. According to Rorty, Descartes also draws on the Augustinian tradition of meditation. This tradition “stresses the activity of the will in rejecting error.”9 The meditational style thus gives emphasis to two of his important critiques: that of individuals’ reliance on authority for knowledge and that of dogmatic thinking.10

3. It is also important to consider the *temporal* dimension of the *Meditations* as a whole. I will take this up at greater length in my conclusion, for there is an important connection between freedom, reason and temporality in the *Meditations*, but we first need to get clear on the concepts involved. Suffice it to say for now, that, while we can understand the *Meditations* as a finite, historical account of one individual’s journey from doubt to certainty, there is another, more philosophically interesting, kind of temporality in operation: an infinite temporality.

With these structural features in mind, I now take up the idea of individual human freedom in Descartes’ thought.

**Individual Human Freedom**

I begin with a point that I reiterate from my general introduction: freedom can only be understood under the auspices of Descartes’ rationalism. Descartes outlines the nature and scope of his rationalism in a text to which commentators refer often in discussions of the problem of mind-body union. This text is a letter to the Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia in which he responds to her question of how an immaterial mind can possibly act on a material

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9 Rorty, 6.
10 Ibid.
body.11 To explain this, Descartes articulates four a priori postulates, one about being in
general, and three about human being in particular. These outline a rational blueprint for
human understanding. "First," he says,

...I consider that there are in us certain original notions (notions primitives) which
are as it were the patterns on the basis of which we form all our other conceptions.
There are very few such notions. First, there are the most general – those of being,
number, duration, etc. – which apply to everything we can conceive. Then, as
regards body in particular, we have only the notion of extension, which entails the
notions of shape and motion; and as regards the soul on its own, we have only the
notion of thought, which includes the perceptions of the intellect and the
inclinations of the will. Lastly, as regards the soul and the body together, we have
only the notion of their union, on which depends our notion of the soul’s power to
move the body, and the body’s power to act on the soul and cause its sensations
and passions.

I observe next that all human knowledge (science) consists solely in clearly
distinguishing these notions and attaching each of them only to the things to which
it pertains.12

11 A brief biographical note on Elisabeth is appropriate here. She corresponded with Descartes over the last
seven years of his life, from 1643 to 1650. An important dimension of their correspondence concerned the
problem of human freedom in light of the passions.

The following biography is offered by Lisa Shapiro in “Princess Elisabeth and Descartes: The Union of
Soul and Body and the Practice of Philosophy,” (British Journal for the History of Pkt(3), 1999; 503-520) 503:

Elisabeth was born at Heidelberg in December 1618, the daughter of Frederick V of Bohemia
and Elisabeth Stuart, daughter of James I of England. Her uncle was thus Charles I, who was
beheaded in the English Civil War. In November 1620 her father lost in battle not only the throne
of Bohemia but also his own land. The family went into exile, first in Germany and then in the
Hague. Elisabeth had several siblings, six brothers, the oldest of whom died when she was eleven,
and three sisters, perhaps the most famous of whom was the youngest, Sophie, who became
Electress of Hanover and corresponded with Leibniz, as did her daughter, Sophie Charlotte.
Elisabeth was the eldest of her siblings.

Elisabeth was taught etiquette, Scripture, mathematics, history, the sciences, jurisprudence, and
several languages including Latin and Greek. Perhaps as part of her schooling, she read the
Meditations in Latin (in 1642), and a meeting between her and Descartes was facilitated by Pollot.
Thence begins their contact with one another.

In 1667, Elisabeth entered a Protestant convent at Hertford in Westphalia, where she eventually
became abbess. As abbess she offered refuge to those whole religious beliefs were less than
orthodox, including Jean Labadie and his followers (including Anna Maria von Schurmann, a
friend of Elisabeth’s from Holland, who undoubtedly organized the Labadists stay), and William
Penn and other Quakers. Elisabeth died in February 1680.

12 AT III 665/ CSMK III 218.
Each kind of idea – mind, body, unified self and principles of mathematics – is known on the basis of an innate or unconditioned postulate. In the case of soul, for example, thought is not known by means of anything but itself. The soul on its own is known through the notion of thought, which includes two things together: intellect and will. On this view, the rational soul is unconditioned, or free, by virtue of being its own foundation. This means, importantly, that freedom of mind cannot be proved by anything outside of itself and especially in the present context, that the idea of mind cannot be known by means of the idea of body, which is known only through the idea of extension. It is important to recognize, too, that human embodiment is an original or innate idea of reason. This is significant because, as a rational human being, we cannot not think of ourselves as embodied: I return to this when I look at the passions of the soul.

Where and how does freedom inhere in the human mind?

In the Fourth Meditation, the meditator, in reflecting on the origin of human error, discerns two faculties in his or her mind: the intellect and the will. The intellect is experienced as passive because it can only "perceive the ideas which are subjects for possible judgements without affirming or denying anything." The meditator says that "I immediately recognize that in my case it [the intellect, or faculty of understanding] is extremely slight and very finite...." Theoretically speaking, if one were to employ only one's understanding in the conduct of life, one could become clever and adept at performing various tasks, but one would not be inventive, dynamic or discretionary in one's thinking since this would require the judging activity of the will. This mental division, of course, turns out to be an

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13 AT VII 56/CSM II 39.
14 Ibid. I have added the addition to the French version: "...without affirming or denying anything."
15 AT VII 57/CSM II 40.
impossibility on Descartes' framework, because the human mind is indivisible. It is, however, an interesting way in which to think about women's education. As Gournay describes it, only the passive half of women's minds are educated: in Descartes' theory of mind, this is an absurdity, for not only is a human mind whole and complete, but it is essentially defined by its active power of willing and reasoning.

The will is the active dimension of the human mind, having the power to affirm or deny perceptions of the understanding. Its active nature is connected to the fact that the meditator experiences the will as, in and of itself, free. The meditator says:

It is only the will, or freedom of choice, which I experience within me to be so great that the idea of any greater faculty is beyond my grasp; so much so that it is above all in virtue of the will that I understand myself to bear in some way the image and likeness of God...[whose will]...does not seem any greater than mine when considered as will in the essential and strict sense.

Freedom inheres entirely and solely in the will. It is in virtue of the will that the mind is capable of its dualist activities. The mind can take itself, its body and the world as matter for reflection and change, through intellectual activities such as reflection, introspection, retrospection and meditation. On account of free will, therefore, an individual is always in two places at once: both inside and outside of himself or herself. Subjective experience co-exists with objective scrutiny of experience in the form of remembering, or looking, or inspecting, or planning; in short, judging. It is judging that Descartes calls the activity of reasoning. Only those beings with a free will have the power of reason, which is an active collaboration between will and understanding in making judgements. In the Discourse on Method, Descartes calls reason the “power of judging well” and “of distinguishing the true

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16 AT VII 56/CSM II 39.
17 AT VII 57/CSM II 40.
from the false." In the Discourse on Method he also calls reason "good sense", a term which can be understood in two ways. In the first place, it shows his intention to replace the traditional idea of common sense: judgements should be based on reason not on opinion, the customary basis of common sense. In the second place, it shows that to reason and judge is an ethical activity, the basis both of our judgements of others and our self-assessment.

The way in which a person uses their reason is a basis for evaluating them. As Descartes says in Part One of the Discourse on Method, "it is not enough to have a good mind; the main thing is to apply it well. The greatest souls are capable of the greatest vices as well as the greatest virtues." In a rational human being, the good or bad use of the will reflects on moral and intellectual character. Descartes explains his view that the good use of our will the source of our worth in a letter to Queen Christina of Sweden:

Now free will is in itself the noblest thing we can have, since it makes us in a way equal to God and seems to exempt us from being his subjects; and so its correct use is the greatest of all the goods we possess; indeed there is nothing that is more our own or that matters more to us. From all this it follows that nothing but free will can produce our greatest happiness. Moreover, the peace of mind and inner satisfaction felt by those who know they always do their best to discover what is good and to acquire it is, we see, a pleasure incomparably sweeter, more lasting and more solid than all those which come from elsewhere.

On this view, only those beings in possession of a will, as well as the power to use it, can achieve self-sufficiency, or autonomy. It is these qualities – dignity or moral worth, self-sufficiency and intellectual ability – that women are said to lack, on Gournay's account, because they lack the proper "temperament and organs" requisite for acquiring these characters. Descartes' dualism contradicts this accusation in two important ways: he argues
that the mind is undivided, indivisible and distinct from body, and he claims that the mind is the seat of our intellectual and moral virtues. Descartes clearly articulates the latter claim in the *Principles of Philosophy*. The title of I, 37 is "The supreme perfection of man is that he acts freely or voluntarily, and it is this which makes him deserve praise or blame." As we will see, all human beings, on principle, act freely, and this is the free act of a mind distinct from the body.

**How do we know that our mind is free?**

Knowledge that one's mind is free is the first truth in the order of human understanding. Because freedom is experienced as the idea of the infinite, and because the mind's idea of its infinite activity is first in the order of human knowledge, freedom is the first truth, the principle of rational human being. To this end, the First Meditation shows that from a practical and subjective perspective freedom is presupposed and not subject to proof. Freedom cannot, essentially, be theoretically demonstrated: if so, it would no longer be freedom, because it would mean that the mind's activity could, in the final analysis, be encompassed within a theoretical system. In the First Meditation, the meditator begins with the following reflection:

> Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them. I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations....

The meditator makes a spontaneous and independent judgement: his or her framework of meaning may no longer be viable. This is the first act of freedom in the *Meditations*,

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21 AT VII 17/CSM II 12.
springing from an internal source, reason, which is "the power of judging well and of distinguishing the true from the false." This first sentence bears the essence of freedom: it just is the independent power each human being possesses to make reasoned judgements, and, specifically in the case of the First Meditation, to deny and doubt.

Descartes seeks to ground the natural light of human reason on nothing but itself, excluding all authority, even philosophy and religion. In doubting, the meditator brackets out, or suspends belief in, everything previously held to be true. Belief must be bracketed to the point where it is impossible to determine any truth whatsoever, about body, mind or world. When all belief is set aside, including belief in God, the meditator discovers something like a 'surplus' of the self, something that remains: the act of doubting. This is the first experience of independent thought, or autonomy of mind. It is comes about by descending into, then passing through, a state of complete, and self-imposed, uncertainty about who or what is determining one's existence. This allows the meditator to begin to grasp the meaning of autonomy, by experiencing the activity of thought with nothing grounding it, or governing it, with no meta-foundation. Logically speaking, freedom must be the first principle in a theory of the autonomy of human understanding.

Descartes captures the interconnection – indeed, the correlation – between freedom and reason in the Fourth Meditation with the expression libre arbitre, which is freedom of choice or free judgement. The greatest benefit of recognizing this power, Descartes tells the reader in his Synopsis of the Meditations, "lies in freeing us from all our preconceived opinions, and providing the easiest route by which the mind may be led away from the

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22 AT VI 2/CSM I 111.
23 Also important for instilling a sense of independence in the reader is the meditator's anonymity: as a voice that is at once universal and singular, the "I" invites each reader to walk the same path to autonomous reason, but on his or her own authority.
24 AT VII 57/CSM II 40.
Freeing oneself from what is tangible and at hand puts us in the position of being able to discern the truth. One ought, from a moral perspective, to enact this inner distancing, for, Descartes says “it is quite unworthy of a philosopher to accept anything as true if he has never established its truth by thorough scrutiny.”

On this view, a philosopher is the definition of a mature human being trying to be virtuous, for it is the mark of maturity, and also virtue, to use one’s power of reason in order to free oneself from prejudices, which are biased or partial perspectives on things. These perspectives are based on the senses, which are, says Descartes, “the ill-considered judgements” of childhood. To reason is thus to assume both one’s intellectual freedom, experienced as the power to judge and question the viability of one’s beliefs, desires, thoughts and one’s moral freedom, since a mature adult takes on the responsibility to question his or her prejudices.

Freedom is thus a first or original property of a human being. Before going any further with the analysis, however, we ought to eliminate one way in which freedom of mind is not first: that is, in a developmental sense. A child has very little freedom, because he or she has not developed the power of reason. As the narrator in Part One of Descartes’ Discourse on Method recognizes, a child is under the control of teachers, parents, pre-established customs and opinions, and the mind is formed long before one had any choice in the nature of its formation. As Simone de Beauvoir says,

The child’s situation is characterized by his finding himself cast into a universe which he has not helped to establish, which has been fashioned without him, and which appears to him as an absolute to which he can only submit. In his eyes,

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26 AT VIII A 39/CSM I 222.
27 AT VIII A 39/CSM I 222.
human inventions, words, customs, and values are given facts, as inevitable as the
sky and the trees. human inventions, words, customs, and values are given facts, as inevitable as the
sky and the trees. 28

Intellectual freedom thus begins only later in life, in recognizing the mental power to call
everything into doubt. This recognition marks the end of a certain form of bondage: that
which forces one to accept values and ideas imposed from without, and that prevents one
from assuming responsibility for ascertaining the truth, independently of any authority.

And yet, where does this knowledge of freedom come from? The answer, in brief, is
that freedom is the unconditioned presupposition of reason. As an inner principle of human
rationality, one always already has freedom, for as long as one is alive, whatever the
circumstances may be. Freedom is first experienced by an individual through rational
reflection (thus not empirically) without external assistance, as the power of doubt.

We can begin to examine the idea that freedom is the experience of one's own power of
reason by looking at the language that Descartes uses in his account of freedom. Lisa
Shapiro 29 speaks about Descartes' use of the language of "experience" as it relates to
freedom, and she observes that he consistently characterises our knowledge of our own
freedom as something we experience. The word he uses in French is expérimenter; in Latin it
is experior. In the Fourth Meditation, the meditator writes:

I experience that it [the will] is not restricted in any way...It is only the will or
freedom of choice, which I experience within me to be so great that the idea of any
greater faculty is beyond my grasp. 30

We experience and feel within ourselves our own free will or independence, and the
paradigmatic experience of freedom is the power of thought, in the form of denial. The
meditator, in the First Meditation, pretends that all of her "former opinions are utterly false

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30 AT VII 57; AT IX 45
and imaginary.” The kind of freedom of thought experienced in the First Meditation is an internal awareness, of a kind that precedes reflective knowledge.

The idea of an independent, internal freedom of thought as the core of human being, and of human dignity, is also a Stoic idea, and an important connection exists between the Cartesian and Stoic accounts of freedom. Freedom, as the independent power of thought, is thus not derived from experience. All of our knowledge proceeds from these innate ideas, which, as we saw above in the letter to Elisabeth, are like the blueprints of human knowledge. The freedom of thought is the first of these ideas. The account of freedom that best reveals its unconditioned nature is in the *Principles of Philosophy*, where Descartes writes:

But whoever turns out to have created us, and however powerful and however deceitful he may be, in the meantime we nonetheless experience within us the kind of freedom which enables us always to refrain from believing things which are not completely certain and thoroughly examined. Hence we are able to take precautions against going wrong on any occasion. In strictly attending to the order of the *Meditations*, one experiences a complete freedom of mind prior to any knowledge of body, God or the world. All other knowledge, even the idea of God, comes after one’s own act of free judgement. Hobbes is therefore correct, in his objection to the Fourth Meditation, to say that freedom of will is “assumed without proof.” Descartes replies that on “The question of our freedom, I made no assumptions beyond what we all experience within ourselves. Our freedom is very evident by the natural light.”

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31 AT VII 22/CSM II 15.  
33 AT VII 190/CSM II 133.  
34 AT VII 191/CSM II 134.
Descartes explains what he means by the term “natural light” in the Third Meditation, in which he posits three kinds of idea: innate, adventitious and invented. Descartes takes up the meaning of “nature” shortly thereafter, in an examination of the phrase ‘Nature taught me to think this’, by which he means a natural or “spontaneous impulse:” it is this conception of “natural” that he wants to banish from use in reasoning. Natural impulse is distinct from the natural light, where only the latter can reveal the truth, and cannot in any way be open to doubt.

An example of discovering truth by the natural light of reason is in the Second Meditation: the cogito argument’s conclusion that I exist, following from the fact that I am doubting, is such a truth. The natural light, then, is the faculty “or power for distinguishing truth from falsehood:” in other words, it is the power of reason. Reason is a source of reliable judgement, derived from “certain notions which are innate in me,” whereas natural impulse is blind and acquired from the senses, from external sources. All of the meditator’s previous beliefs have been based on what he calls this “blind impulse” that pushed him to believe that “there exist things distinct from myself which transmit to me ideas or images of themselves through the sense organs.”

The inner experience of freedom, on this view, is not an empirical sense of “experience,” but a rational one. One experiences, by an inner awareness, the fact of one’s own thinking. It cannot be proved outside of itself, and thus is the first cause of all, properly speaking, human activity. Individuals can, of course, act without awareness of the complete freedom of their thought, but the product of that thinking is not fully human thought, which requires guidance by the natural light of reason.

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Since lack of freedom is not a principle of human being, there is room for hope for those who do not yet have it. Even when others act only under the authority of another – teacher, husband, God – things can change, because the lack of freedom is only a contingent, and not a necessary, condition of human being. This leads to a consideration of the importance of teaching and education, which I take up later in discussion of Poulain de la Barre.

**What is the nature of this mind in which freedom inheres?**

We have learned that the mind has two faculties, understanding and willing, and that the mind conducts its reasoning through their active collaboration. We have seen, too, that the intellect is limited whereas the will is experienced as infinite. This does not imply, however, any divisions within the mind: his argument for its indivisibility is a key argument for mind-body dualism.

I now turn to Descartes’ arguments for mind-body dualism, where we see that although freedom cannot be demonstrated or deduced at a theoretical level, Descartes can show that freedom of mind (real distinction) is theoretically *possible* for all human minds: indeed, it is a necessary possibility. Freedom really is the entire form of the human mind, if form is what gives a thing its being and its particular reality. His arguments uphold a view of the mind as essentially free, indivisible and really distinct from body. Descartes describes the meaning of the Second Meditation in his Synopsis of the *Meditations*. He writes that the “mind uses its own freedom [which is practically presupposed] and supposes the non-

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36 AT VII 38/CSM II 26.
existence of all things...."37 The meditator forms a concept of his or her own soul "which is as clear as possible and is also quite distinct from every concept of body"38 and recognizes its essence as a thinking thing. According to John Carriero, the "general purpose of the Second Meditation,"

...is to show that the nature of the mind – and not simply the existence of the mind – is more easily known than the body. Descartes echoes this sentiment in the Fourth Replies, where he claims that he has shown in the Second Meditation that the mind can be understood "in a complete manner" or "as a complete thing" apart from the body.39

What does it mean to understand the mind 'in a complete manner' apart from the body? Carriero approaches this by arguing that Descartes offers a complete account of the nature of his (existing) mind while assuming that no bodies exist. This argument responds to the Aristotelian claim that the intellectual self can be known only remotely "through a process of abstraction from the senses."40

The first two moments in the Second Meditation’s treatment of mind are the cogito argument, in the third paragraph, and subsequently the determination of the mind’s essence. The meditator begins to develop a conception of his or her own mind by establishing his or her existence through the cogito argument:

So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, I am, I exist, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.41

Carriero argues that the cogito argument depends on two claims. In the first case, Descartes claims that the reliability of the perception of one’s own mental acts does not depend on any assumptions concerning the corporeal world, and, in particular, does not depend on the

37 AT VI 12/CSM II 9.
38 Ibid.
assumption that one has sensory organs that accurately inform one of the condition of the corporeal world. In the second case, Descartes claims that one can perceive one’s existence through perception of one’s mental acts. In view of these claims, the meditator makes a “striking break” with the Aristotelian tradition in the fourth paragraph of the Second Meditation, announcing not only that he or she will discover that he or she is, while still uncertain about the existence of his or her body, but also what he or she is. What he or she will discover is that his or her essence as a human being precedes any empirical determinations, and is not abstracted from these: he or she is, a priori, a thinking thing.

Carriero writes:

The conclusion that Descartes actually draws is...a good deal stronger [than the Aristotelian conclusion the soul is not identical with body]: he can find no grounds to locate the “I who am certain that I am” in a sensible, spatiotemporal order. From this, the Sixth Meditation builds its argument that “the mind is an incorporeal substance, really distinct from the body.” Descartes states that the human mind is really distinct from the body and from every other mind:

...from the fact that each of us understands himself to be a thinking thing and is capable, in thought, of excluding from himself every other substance, whether thinking or extended, it is certain that each of us, regarded in this way, is really distinct from every other thinking substance and from every corporeal substance.

The real distinction argument for dualism is, claims Marleen Rozemond, Descartes’ central innovation with regard to the mind-body relationship. Rozemond argues that Descartes has a new and strictly dualist theory of the mind-body connection, based on a distinction of

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40 Carriero, in Rorty (1986) 205.
41 CSM II, 17/AT VII 25.
42 Carriero, in Rorty (1986) 211.
43 Rozemond 2.
44 See the Principles of Philosophy I 60-62 for Descartes’ distinction between three sorts of distinction: real, modal and conceptual. AT VIII A 29-30/CSM I 213-214.
45 AT VIII A 28/CSM I 213.
Her reading of dualism best illuminates, in my view, why dualism matters as much as it does for Descartes. It is widely recognized—and Rozemond upholds the view—that positing a real distinction was necessary in order to simultaneously maintain the new mechanistic explanation of body and a mind free from, but capable of understanding, the new laws of nature. As Rozemond writes: "In sum, the approach I take is based on Descartes' aim to provide a metaphysics that accommodates mechanistic science and supplants Aristotelian scholasticism."46

I think that dualism is important for an even further reason: the salvaging of human freedom. A freedom separated from a mechanistically determined nature, from all sources of authority and from every other free cause, is the ground of Descartes' new metaphysics and theory of human nature. To understand this, we should heed a suggestion that Rozemond herself makes: in looking at dualism we ought to pay attention to the specific nature of each substance.

Rozemond meticulously argues that Descartes, deeply learned in the Aristotelian tradition and drawing on these conceptual resources, went to tremendous lengths to establish a new language and framework for dualism. Its highlight is the main conclusion of the Sixth Meditation where Descartes argue that that mind and body are really distinct.47 Drawing on the sceptical arguments from the First Meditation, in the Second Meditation, he doubts the existence of bodies, but he is certain that he exists and thinks. From these insights, he argues "that he has a clear and distinct perception of the mind as a thinking, unextended thing."48

The central argument of the Sixth Meditation is the following:

46 Rozemond xiv.
47 See the Principles of Philosophy I 60-62 for Descartes' distinction between three sorts of distinction: real, modal and conceptual. AT VIIIA 29-30/CSM I 213-214.
48 Rozemond 2.
Since I know that anything that I clearly and distinctly understand can be brought about by God just as I understand it, it is sufficient that I can clearly and distinctly understand one thing without another in order for me to be certain that one is different from the other, since they can be placed apart [seorsim pon] at least by God. And it does not matter by what power that happens, in order for them to be regarded as different. Consequently, from the very fact that I know that I exist, and that at the same time I notice nothing else at all to pertain to my nature or essence, except that I am a thinking thing, I conclude correctly that my essence consists in this one thing, that I am a thinking thing. And although perhaps (or rather, as I will soon say, certainly) I have a body, which very closely joined to me, nevertheless because I have on one hand a clear and distinct idea of myself, insofar as I am only a thinking, not an extended thing, and on the other hand a distinct idea of body insofar as it is only an extended thing, not thinking, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it.  

A very important purpose in this argument is to establish that mind and body are different kinds of substances, with different kinds of modes. This is crucial because, as Rozemond explains, "it allows him to assign to body only those modes that can be dealt with by mechanistic explanation." The mind, on the other hand, "is the incorporeal state of subjects that cannot be so understood. In this way he aims to provide metaphysical support for his view that mechanistic explanations can account for all the phenomena of the physical world." Rozemond argues that Descartes seeks to establish more than just separability – the view that mind can exist without body – but that, even further, one must clearly and distinctly understand one thing without the other. By itself, separability is not enough; it must actually obtain. This is because mere separability "is not sufficient to show that the mind is actually a substance that is not extended."

49 AT VII 78/CSM II 54, in Rozemond, 3.
50 Rozemond 4.
51 Rozemond 4.
52 Rozemond 6.
On Descartes’ theory, mind is a substance, that is a thing “that so exists that it needs nothing else in order to exist.” As a substance it has a principal attribute which is also known as its essence. This is explained in Principles I, 53. Here, Descartes writes:

There is one principal attribute for each substance, which constitutes its nature and essence and upon which all the other ones depend. Namely, extension in length, width and depth constitutes the nature of corporeal substance; thought constitutes the nature of thinking substance. For everything else that can be attributed to body presupposes extension, and is only some mode of an extended thing; and similarly anything we find in the mind, only one of the different modes of thinking. So for instance, figure can only be understood in an extended thing, motion in extended space; and imagination, sensation or the will only in a thinking thing. But on the other hand, extension can be understood without shape or motion, and thought without imagination or sensation and so on – as is obvious to anyone who attends to the matter.

It is the principal attribute that makes the substance what it is. A substance has only one principal attribute, and mind and body have two different principal attributes: thought is the attribute of mind, and extension is the attribute of body. On this view, mind is a different substance from body, and therefore the two are really distinct, marking a radical difference between the mental and the physical.

To the substance of mind he assigns modes including those that are free, active and uncaused. To the substance of body, on the other hand, Descartes assigns those modes that can be explained on a mechanistic model of nature. The functions of the body-machine, as articulated in the Sixth Meditation, are designed to ensure health and preservation of life.

Descartes thus writes:

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Rozemond 37.
There is nothing that my own nature teaches me more vividly than that I have a body, and that when I feel pain there is something wrong with the body, and that when I am hungry or thirst the body needs food and drink, and so on.\textsuperscript{55}

Furthermore, considered in itself, the human body functions as a kind of machine. Descartes writes:

\ldots I might consider 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, even if there were no mind 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.\textsuperscript{56}

In the Sixth Meditation the body thus functions as a self-preserving machine. Mind \textit{per se} is distinct from body as machine, and as a purely intellectual activity, it is distinct even from the contingent modes of thought, sensation and imagination. In the paragraph following the central argument of the Sixth Meditation (cited above) Descartes writes:

Further, I find in myself powers for special modes of thought, e.g. imagination and sensation; I can clearly and distinctly understand myself as a whole apart from these powers, but not the powers apart from myself – apart from an intellectual substance to inhere in; for the essential (\textit{formalis}) conception of them includes some kind of intellectual act; and I thus perceive that they are distinct from form in the way aspects (\textit{modos}) are from the object to which they belong.\textsuperscript{57}

If distinction obtains then freedom of mind also obtains, and the mind has an \textit{a priori} freedom. Unlike Aquinas and other scholastics who also argued that soul is independent of the body on the basis of the nature of intellectual activity, Descartes does not simply show the incorporeity of the activity of intellection (which would not necessitate real distinction). He aims, instead, to establish that the mind is an incorporeal substance that can be conceived as an undivided substantive unity. On this view, all minds can be conceived as equal.

\textsuperscript{55} AT VII 81/CSM II 56.
\textsuperscript{56} AT VII 84/CSM II 84.
containing, innately, the power of reason. If this is, as Descartes claims, the universal model of human being, then all human beings, regardless of sex, colour or any empirical determination, have absolute freedom of mind.

It would be absurd, on this view, to attribute only a modicum of understanding to women, understood as the capacity to be instructed toward certain prescribed ends, but not will and hence the power of reason and absolute freedom of choice. This is because a human being cannot have only one half of a mind. One has a mind, intrinsically free, or one has no mind at all.

What connection does the mind have to the human body? To others?

Individual freedom of mind is thus established as the principle of human being. One cannot ignore, however, the fact of human embodiment, for it is an innate idea of reason, a notion primitive. Moreover, one cannot overlook the fact that one lives in a world of other individuals. The mind is the seat of an individual’s worth, but how exactly? In a work I shall presently address, The Passions of the Soul, in Part Three, article 152, titled “For what reasons we may have esteem for ourselves,” Descartes writes:

I see only one thing in us which could give us good reason for esteeming ourselves, namely, the exercise of our free will and the control we have over our volitions.

For we can reasonably be praised or blamed only for actions that depend upon this free will. It renders in a certain way like God by making us masters of ourselves, provided we do not lose the rights it gives us through cowardice [lâchete]

Descartes says that we may lose the rights that freedom gives by making cowardly use of it.

What he is saying, and what I shall now take up, is the idea that while freedom constitutes our intrinsic human worth and is a natural right of human being, it is also an intrinsic gift.

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57 AT VII 78/CSM II 54.
This gift comes with an intrinsic obligation to use it courageously. We ought to feel a sense of inner worth based on how well use our will. Using it well is difficult because the characters of virtue are not simply given. The moral and intellectual virtues are acquired in the course of life. They are measured by kinds of accomplishment, things conceived of more or less in the light of reason and carried out to success or failure. They are measured by actions taken to the benefit or harm of oneself and others. In taking up these concrete dimensions of freedom, two important questions need to be addressed in the Cartesian context:

1) What kind of freedom does a human being have in relation to his or her own body?
2) What kind of freedom is permitted in face of other human beings, whom Descartes calls “free causes”?

We can begin to examine these concrete dimensions of freedom in the feminist context. Erica Harth, who discusses the connection between Descartes and women in the context of the 17th century, claims that Descartes does not adequately account for embodiment. On her view, Cartesian dualism helped to overturn earlier Aristotelian theories of mind that were sex-linked in the sense that soul is partially dependent upon body for its thoughts. Harth recognizes Descartes’ affirmation that bon sens or raison is naturally equal in each as a “positive ground for the assertion of sexual equality.” On Harth’s view, however, the positive associations stop at this point. She writes:

Cartesian rationalism, however, opened up a discursive trap. If an identical disembodied mind in men and women alike is made to be the principle of sexual equality, what can be made of embodied difference? ... [One] result of the rationalist reduction of equality to intellectual identity was women’s simultaneous

58 AT XI 445/CSM I 384. The last word of this text is, in the original French, lâcheté, CSM translates it as “timidity” but I think it is better translated as “cowardice.”
absorption into and exclusion from a universalising, sex-neutral rational discourse.60

In its entirety, Harth’s study of the impact of Cartesianism on conceptions of women in later 17th and 18th century thought is beyond the scope of my inquiry. This is a valuable resource for anyone wishing to undertake an inquiry into early modern feminism, and my introduction to 17th century feminism owes much to Harth’s groundbreaking work. There are, nevertheless, some problems with its interpretation of Descartes. I am especially concerned to discuss these in light of the fact that Harth’s is the only book length study to date on the connection between Cartesianism and 17th century feminism. Harth claims that Descartes’ rationalist discourse is a “trap” for women, that he denies the importance of embodiment. She charges Descartes with neostoicism (although she does not offer a substantial picture of either Stoicism or neostoicism). She claims, in addition, that his dualism “seemed to drain the thinking subject of all feeling and emotion connected to the body and to reduce the body to a mere machine.”61

I begin by establishing some preliminary points in refutation of this view. First, it is worth noting that the Stoics, according to John Stuart Mill, were the first, along with the Jewish law, who “taught as a part of morality that men were bound by moral obligation to their slaves.”62 This is affirmed in a passage from Seneca’s On Favours that I take up further ahead. Seneca writes:

The body...is what fortune hands over to a master, what he buys and sells. That inner part can never come into anyone’s possession. Whatever proceeds from it is free. For neither can we command everything from our slaves nor are they

60 Harth (1992) 9.
61 Harth (1992) 82.
compelled to obey us in everything. They are not obliged to carry out orders against the commonwealth, nor, if any crime is involved, to lend a hand.\textsuperscript{63}

Another work by Seneca, \textit{On the Happy Life}, is the subject of a fairly lengthy epistolary discussion between Elisabeth and Descartes. What Descartes draws from Stoicism, I think, is the principle of ineradicable human freedom that we can see in the above passage.

Second, Descartes does construe the body as a machine, as we saw in the Sixth Meditation: one purpose this serves is to offer a new framework for understanding the human body in which the functions of a male and female body are, on the whole, the same. In any case, the body's function, for Descartes, is not a measure of the intellectual or moral worth of a human being, and thus not a legitimate basis for blame or praise. The measure of worth, or dignity, lies in the human mind which is, in principle, free.

Third, in \textit{The Passions} although the principle of dualism is sustained throughout his treatise, and although freedom is presupposed in our capacity to control and alter them (if only indirectly), Descartes affirms the passions as a positive, even indispensable feature of human life. The last article of \textit{The Passions} is titled "It is on the passions alone that all the good and evil of this life depends." He says:

For the rest, the soul can have pleasures of its own. But the pleasures common to it and the and the body depend entirely on the passions, so that persons whom the passions can move most deeply are capable of enjoying the sweetest pleasures of this life. It is true that they may also experience the most bitterness when they do not know how to put these passions to good use and when fortune works against them. But the chief use of wisdom lies in its teaching us to be masters of our passions and to control them with such skill that the evils which they cause are quite bearable, and even become a source of joy.\textsuperscript{64}


\textsuperscript{64} AT XI 7488/CSM I 404.
So, far from despising the passions and advising their extirpation, a human life, to Descartes, is inconceivable without them.

This brings me to a fourth point that I want to make at the outset in this section, which is: the notion of mind-body union, like that of thought, is an innate, original notion in the human mind. I have already referred to the passage in Descartes’ letter to Elisabeth where he outlines his patterns, or what I call his “blueprints” for human knowledge. Mind-body union, like thought, is grasped through an *a priori* notion, and thus known by *inner experience*. Just as we have the innate capacity to think of the world in terms of notions such as being, number and duration, and to think of ourselves as thinking, so too we have an innate capacity to think of ourselves as embodied. As self-conscious, introspective beings, we are not only embodied, but we know *that* we are embodied. Having the capacity to reflect on our embodiment means that we can think *otherwise* than what is given to immediate experience, or in other words, that we can think of our passions from the perspective of the natural light of *reason*. This *a priori* concept of embodiment implies that we are free to strive to change our passions.

With these considerations in mind, I turn to an examination of the passions of the soul, leaving behind the realm of pure reason to enter the more complicated realm of embodied difference. The best way to understand the concrete dimensions of freedom in Descartes, and the questions concerning embodiment and self-other relations, is through Descartes’ concept of the passion and virtue of *generosity*, to which I now turn. I begin by considering the history of this concept in relation to Descartes’ use of it, and then I turn to a philosophical analysis of generosity. I suggest that Descartes shifts the social meaning of generosity, tied to a morality of chivalry, to a metaphysical meaning grounded on free will.

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65 AT III 665/CSMK III 218.
This new conception of rational virtue has a particularly modern ring to it, for it holds that human beings are not tied to the place in life to which they were born. Each human being has, in principle, the internal resources to make autonomous judgements about what is best, and the ability to strive for it.

**Historical view**

Let us begin with Descartes' definition of generosity, article 153, in the third of three sections in *The Passions of the Soul*:

True generosity, which causes a person's self-esteem to be as great as it may legitimately be, has only two components. The first consists in his knowing that nothing truly belongs to him but this freedom to dispose his volitions, and that he ought to be praised or blamed for no other reason than his using this freedom well or badly. The second consists in his feeling within himself a firm and constant resolution to use it well — that is, never to lack the will to undertake and carry out whatever he judges to be best. To do that is to pursue virtue in a perfect manner.66

Why does Descartes say *true* generosity and not simply "generosity"? Lisa Shapiro has correctly observed that we do not learn much from standard early modern definitions of generosity.67 Descartes' own definition is officially construed in French dictionaries as one way of interpreting the word. So his usage is in some way unique, and when Descartes writes "true generosity," he means to distinguish it from other kinds. Generally, in the early modern period, generosity is a social notion referring to someone of high rank, *de noble race*.68 It is also tied to the heroic ideal of *le génèreux*, one who has a great and noble soul, *a grande âme*, who values honour above all else.

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66 AT XI 446/CSM I. 384.
68 In *Le Robert*, dated to 1587.
The cultural context of generosity is discussed by Carolyn Lougee,⁶⁹ who analyzes what she calls the 17th century feminist critique of social stratification. Writers such as Madeleine de Scudéry, René Bary, Jacques du Bosc and Louis Lesclache and others circulated a vision of an expanded aristocracy, arguing the superiority of acquired nobility over inherited nobility or greatness of soul.⁷⁰ These challenges to the existing social hierarchy, argues Lougee, helped to redefine the relationship between nobility and virtue. Whereas hereditary nobility traditionally rested on the belief that noble birth conferred special virtue, feminist writers denied that this kind of juridical nobility in any way guaranteed the ethical character of its possessor.⁷¹

Although it was not only pro-woman advocates who refuted the concept of inherited nobility (for instance it was also expressed by opponents of nobility and even by aristocratic reformers), what set them apart was their advocacy of widespread ennoblement. The claim was that existing rank should not confer virtue; rather, existing or acquired virtue should confer rank. The right to ennoblement of all individuals of achievement, regardless of sex or social status, was an essential component of this call for change. Louis Lesclache wrote: “It is true that the path which leads to generosity is open to men in all sorts of conditions.” Even heroism was not confined to nobles of birth: “one need not exclude from this number those who are not illustrious by their birth, but who can become so by the greatness of their actions.”⁷² Historically, then, generosity is largely a hereditary notion, tied to the aristocratic rank of nobility, and the 17th critique focuses on the legitimacy of connecting virtue with the contingency of one’s inherited social status.

Descartes’ definition of generosity precedes the critiques discussed by Lougee, and it, too, opens up a new ground for generosity by placing free will at its centre, thus implicitly refuting the old definition. Lisa Shapiro\textsuperscript{73} and Jean-Marie Beyssade\textsuperscript{74} have argued that Descartes and Corneille share a conception of the generous person as one possessing tremendous strength of will. We can see this, for example, in their descriptions of the potentially destructive force of the will, and that it ought to be controlled by reason. Corneille’s heroes and heroines are either généreux or grands criminels, as their great will power can be either for good or for evil. Speaking of Cléopâtre in Rodogune, Corneille writes: all of her crimes are accompanied by a greatness of soul, which has something so elevated about it, that just as we detest her actions, at the same time we wonder at and admire their source.\textsuperscript{75} Descartes, in the Discourse on Method, also observes that the greatest souls are capable of the greatest vices as well as the greatest virtues\textsuperscript{76}

Corneille’s plays are philosophical, but they are not works of philosophy. It is the originality of Descartes to provide a rationalist philosophical framework for generosity and to transform, as Geneviève Rodis-Lewis argues, a notion of virtue that was largely connected to social rank into a universal one, grounded on his metaphysics of freedom.\textsuperscript{77} Generosity is, for Descartes, governed by the metaphysical concept of will, and it is the locus for moral assessment. His definition says that a generous person esteems himself or herself as highly as he or she legitimately can. For Descartes, there is only one just reason (juste raison) for evaluating ourselves and our self-worth, and that is the use we make of our free will: this is

\textsuperscript{73} Shapiro (1999) Especially 250-252.
\textsuperscript{74} Jean-Marie Beyssade, “Descartes et Corneille ou les démesures de l’ego.” (Laval théologique et philosophique, 47, 1 février 1991) 63-82.
\textsuperscript{75} Ian Maclean, Woman Triumphant: Feminism in French Literature, 1610-1652. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977) 265. In French it is this: ‘tous ses crimes sont accompagnés d’une grandeur d’âme qui a quelque chose si haut, qu’en même temps qu’on déteste ses actions, on admire la source dont elles partent.’
\textsuperscript{76} “Les plus grandes âmes sont capables des plus grands vices aussi bien que des plus grands vertus”.

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because we have power over our volitions. Only those actions that depend on our free will make us worthy of praise or subject to blame.

Furthermore, in having free will we resemble God, he says, in having the power of self-mastery, provided that we do not lose, through cowardice (lâchète) the rights (droits) that it gives us. Descartes shifts the ground of these legal terms, giving them a metaphysical status, therefore grounding the “legality” of generosity in the free will itself. Descartes preserves its characteristic associations of courage, liberality, abundance, nobility, greatness of soul, clemency, pity, compassion, but he shifts the ground of its meaning. In ascribing to generosity a rational metaphysical ground, rather than a legal or political ground, and in making it the “key to all the other virtues and a general remedy for every disorder of the passions,” it becomes a universal virtue, potentially open to all who make good use of their will. It is worth noting, in advance, that Poulain de la Barre’s definition of virtue is nearly identical to Cartesian generosity, and Poulain demonstrates its universality in a concrete way by explicitly speaking of it as a woman’s virtue.

I turn now to an analysis of generosity in its textual context, The Passions of the Soul. I assess its significance from two perspectives: first, the way in which it bears on the internal relation of an individual to his or her own body and passions; second, the respect that it entails in self-other relations.

How can an individual experience freedom in light of all the contingencies of embodiment, all of the accidents of life, and the layers of prejudice, belief, and feeling sedimented within the self from very early in life? The concept of generosity offers a way to think rationally about these matters. As a first step to understanding generosity, we need to

78 AT XI 454/CSM I 388.
understand something about Descartes theory of the passions in general, which requires us to look at the mind-body problem.

Descartes’ contemporary readers immediately saw the concept of mind-body union as philosophically problematic. Gassendi and Elisabeth recognised the same problem: it appears unintelligible that two distinct substances, one immaterial and indivisible, the other material and divisible, could act upon one another. The problem of interaction is connected with the fact Descartes insisted, from the outset, on maintaining both a thesis of dualism and a thesis of human unity. Obviously, from an experiential perspective, we know ourselves to be one whole person. But Descartes does not simply make that point: he posits close union as a

philosophical concept alongside strict dualism. He writes:

And even if we suppose that God has joined some corporeal substance to such a thinking substance so closely that they cannot be more closely conjoined, thus compounding them into a unity, they nonetheless remain really distinct.

That Descartes does suppose that God has closely conjoined mind with body is clearly stated in the Sixth Meditation:

Nature also teaches me, by these sensations of pain, hunger, thirst and so on, that I am not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship, but that I am very closely joined and, as it were, intermingled with it, to that I and the body form a unity.

It is important to recognize that different ideas of “unity” are in operation here, and thus we can distinguish between the unity of an individual human being, the unity of the individual’s mind alone, and the unity of a substance more generally. A whole human being cannot, itself, be a unity of substance. Only mind and body are substances, specifically because they each have one principal attribute (a chief mode to which all the others are referred), which constitutes its nature or essence (extension for body, thinking for mind). The union of mind
and body does not have a principal attribute, nor does it have the kind of unity possessed by
the mind alone, which is

...utterly indivisible. For when I consider the mind, or myself in so far as I am
merely a thinking thing, I am unable to distinguish any parts within myself; I
understand myself to be something quite single and complete.\(^79\)

Descartes claims, however, that the human being is also a unity. In a letter to Regius, he
conveys this position, in telling Regius what position he ought to take on the unity of human
being:

...whenever the occasion arises, in public and in private, you should give out that
you believe that a human being is a true \textit{ens per se} [an entity by itself] and not an
\textit{ens per accidens} [an entity by accident]\(^80\)

How, then, are we to make sense of Descartes' strong claim for dualism, in the real
distinction of mind and body, together with the strong claim for unity? There have been a
number of perspectives on the problem. Some, like Elisabeth and Gassendi, conceived of the
union as a problem of figuring out how two distinct substances can interact, and their
framework of understanding can be called "interactionism."

Others have sought a solution by arguing for a third substance: apart from mind and
body, "union" is posited as a third. The problem with this view, as Rozemond argues, is that
we cannot discern any place where Descartes speaks of a third principal attribute, which is
the necessary condition for something being called a substance. Thought and extension are
the principal attributes of mind and body, respectively, as discussed in the previous section.

But on the subject of the union, Rozemond concludes that the mind-body "composite" has
modes that are a subspecies of thought. Taken alone, the mind does not have certain modes.\(^81\)

\(^79\) AT VII 86/CSM II, 59.
\(^80\) AT III, 493/CSMK III, 206.
\(^81\) Rozemond 212. Her full claim is this: "He [Descartes] did not countenance a third principal attribute to which
sensations pertain instead of to thought, nor did he think that sensations proper were modes of both mind and
body. Instead he held that the mind-body composite is characterized by the fact that one of its parts, the mind,
Sensations are among these modes, thus maintaining just two types of modes, corresponding to the two principal attributes, hence only two substances.

Another perspective on the problem of unity is offered by Deborah Brown and Ronald de Sousa. They argue that Descartes’ notion of an individual human being’s unity in the ontology of everyday life is a *functional* concept. This seems right, at least in the context of the Sixth Meditation, where Descartes makes this claim:

> Nature also teaches me, by these sensations of pain, hunger, thirst and so on, that I am not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in ship, but that I am very closely joined and, as it were, intermingled with it, so that I and the body form a unit. If this were not so, I who am nothing but a thinking thing, would not feel pain when the body was hurt, but would perceive the damage purely by the intellect, just as a sailor perceives by sight if anything in his ship is broken. Similarly, when the body needed food or drink I should have an explicit understanding of the fact, instead of having confused sensations of hunger and thirst. For these sensations of hunger, thirst, pain and so on are nothing but confused modes of thinking which arise from the union and as it were, intermingling of the mind with the body.  

They, like Rozemond, argue that Descartes *sustains* metaphysical distinctness in his discussions of mind-body union. On their view, the way to sustain both dualism and union is to posit substantial union as a *functional* concept. To this end, they single out a passage in a letter to Mesland as being of tremendous importance. “Having defined what he means by ‘body’ in general”, they write, “Descartes asserts” the following:

> But when we speak of the body of a man, we do not mean a determinate part of matter, or one that has a determinate size; we mean simply the whole of the matter,

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82 Deborah Brown and Ronald de Sousa “Descartes on the Unity of the Self and the Passions” (unpublished manuscript, 2000).

83 AT VII 81/CSM 56.
which is united with the soul of that man. And so, even though that matter changes, and its quantity increases or decreases, we still believe that it is the same body, numerically the same body, so long as it remains joined and substantially united with the same soul; and we think that this body is whole and entire so long as it has in itself all the dispositions required to preserve that union." They suggest, "This passage contains the key to understanding Descartes's hylomorphism [the theory that physical objects are composed of matter and form]." On their view, the soul is the principle of individuation for the body: it is what makes a human body numerically the same through time and changes in its matter. We might also say that the soul is the principle of actualisation for the body: it is what makes (continually replaced) chunks of matter a human body. This is what Descartes's hylomorphism amounts to and why it is correct to speak of the union as a substantial one.85 On this account, the soul's function is to keep body and soul together over time. I find this hypothesis to be highly suggestive, especially the insight that substantial union has an important temporal dimension. The body changes over time, and the rational soul, as "principle of individuation" and "principle of actualisation," acts to perpetuate the integrity of body and soul over the course of one's life, steering the direction of desire. The soul can act as director of the passions, because it has an innate idea of its own embodiment. This means that the mind can, in principle, assess its own passions by means of self-reflection. On this view, it is plausible to suggest that the soul can assume responsibility, over time, for its integrity with the body and the passions. On this view, we can shift from a functional to a, broadly speaking, ethical perspective of unity, allowing us to respond to a difficulty articulated by Rozemond:

It is frustrating that Descartes does not give more of an account of the status of the mind-body composite, and that he does not commit himself to a clear, strong claim.

85 Rozemond 14.
about its unity. This is a serious problem, as we certainly tend to experience ourselves as unified entities with both corporeal and mental aspects. But Descartes's reticence makes sense philosophically, since his radical distinction between mind and body makes it very difficult to see how they are united to constitute a genuinely unified entity.\textsuperscript{86}

I suggest that in having the passion and virtue of generosity, the soul takes responsibility for the direction of the self's desire (and other passions, but especially desire, since it is the future-oriented passion). This is because generosity consists not only in knowing that one has a free will, but also in having the strength and the courage to make use of it, in order to accomplish what one judges to be best. Judging what is best would presumably require the capacity to distinguish better from worse passions in terms of their benefit or harm to ourselves and others. The mind is free, on the theory of real distinction, and on the presupposition of freedom, individuation can be construed as the mind's activity of making its passions truly its own by transforming them into human actions, that is, actions guided by the natural light of reason. On the principle of reason, each individual has the capacity to surpass determination by the passions. In this way, instead of being enslaved and passively beholden to them, the passions are potentially a source of free self-directed, human activity and thus a source of strength and joy.

The concept of generosity affords new insight into the meaning of mind-body union: it need not be construed as a static "unified entity", but rather as a form of inner integrity acquired over time, by internally transforming passions into "internal emotions", which involves coming to experience them "as proceeding directly from our soul and as seeming to depend on it alone."\textsuperscript{87}

\textsuperscript{86} Rozemond 213.
\textsuperscript{87} AT XI 342/CSM I, 335.
At this point, a few clarifying remarks are in order on the nature of the passions, as Descartes understands them. To begin with, his analysis, in *The Passions of the Soul*, retains the *Meditations*’ framework of mind-body dualism. In Part One, Descartes examines the functions of the “mechanism of our body”\(^{88}\) separately from those of the soul. As we know from the *Meditations*, the soul’s function is essentially to think, and thinking, in turn, can be either active or passive. The actions of thought are its *volitions*, while its passions are *perceptions*. Descartes posits both a *general* sense of passive perceptions, which includes all sensations, as well a *restricted* sense of perceptions: it is the latter perceptions that are “passions of the soul.” In Part One, article 27, Descartes defines them as

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\text{...those perceptions, sensations, or emotions of the soul which we refer particularly to it, and which are caused, maintained and strengthened by some movement of the spirits.}^{89}\]

Passions are special modes of thought that belong to the soul, when the self is considered from the perspective of embodiment. In Part Two, Descartes posits six original, or foundational, passions from which all the others are derived in an indefinite number of permutations and combinations, and these are: wonder, love, hatred, desire, joy and sadness.\(^{90}\) This is not the place to take up an analysis or critique of the legitimacy of positing these six passions: suffice it to say for now that no two philosophers or moral psychologists have exactly the same list. More importantly for our purposes is the *function* that Descartes attributes to them, as well as his reasons for their inevitable malfunctioning, hence the need for a moral psychology.

Wonder is the first of all passions and is the ground for all intellectual growth. The function of the five other passions is to “move the soul to consent and contribute to actions

\(^{88}\) AT XI 331/CSM I, 330 .  
\(^{89}\) AT XI 349/CSM I 338.  
\(^{90}\) AT XI 371/CSM I 349.
which may serve to preserve the body or render it in some way more perfect." All six passions, then, are natural and beneficial. The main problem with them, however, is their tendency to “almost always cause the goods they represent, as well as the evils, to appear much greater and more important than they are,” thus eliciting inappropriate responses. It is possible to treat and cure the passions, however, because Descartes presupposes that passions have a cognitive dimension, that they are at least partially based on how we represent the worth of things to ourselves. If they do have this cognitive dimension, then it is possible for the mind to alter those passions that are somehow harmful. To cure inappropriate passions, one must cultivate the desire only for those things that are important and of true worth: what things these are we shall see in a moment. Treating the passions is, of course, not a simple step-by-step plan, and Descartes recognizes the tremendous difficulty of altering our passions. Indeed, he concedes in Part One, article 45, that only indirect change is possible, because while we can change our thoughts, we do not have direct control over our bodies. Still, because we are rational beings, there is something we can do. Reason can acquire a measure of control over the passions, so as not be adversely affected by them. This is possible for the reason that I outlined earlier: mind-body union, like thought, is an a priori notion. Just as we have the innate capacity to think of the world in terms of notions such as being, number and duration, and to think of ourselves as thinking, so too we have the capacity to think of ourselves as embodied. Knowing that we are embodied means that it is possible to reflect on our embodiment, to think otherwise than what is given to immediate experience. The passions, in other words, can be thought of in terms of the natural light of reason.

91 AT XI 430/CSM I 376.
92 AT XI 431/CSM I 377.
93 AT XI 363/CSM I 345.
This brings us to the concept of generosity. Recall that Descartes defines it in Part Three, article 153:

True generosity, which causes a person's self-esteem to be as great as it may legitimately be, has only two components. The first consists in his knowing that nothing truly belongs to him but this freedom to dispose his volitions, and that he ought to be praised or blamed for no other reason than his using this freedom well or badly. The second consists in his feeling within himself a firm and constant resolution to use it well—that is, never to lack the will to undertake and carry out whatever he judges to be best. To do that is to pursue virtue in a perfect manner. Descartes defines it as one of the particular or "specific passions:" it is a kind of self-esteem, which is a kind of wonder we have at our own worth. Descartes holds that the only legitimate reason for assessing our worth, and for attributing praise or blame either to ourselves or to others, is the use we make of our free will. Descartes claims that "we can reasonably be praised or blamed only for actions that depend on this free will." An individual's moral worth is thus based on the good or bad use they make of their mind, their power of reason, and for no other reason. This is because free will is the thing that most truly belongs to us, the only thing we legitimately possess, and cannot be eradicated. Free will is the greatest and noblest quality of human being.

Desiring anything except that which depends on our own will is bound to cause some degree of frustration because some element of it will be outside of our control. This is most importantly the case with other human beings: the desire to dominate or possess or destroy others cannot be satisfied because we cannot take possession of another's freedom. Since freedom of the will means freedom of mind, which is distinct from the body, it is true that every single human being has this same inner worth. Furthermore, each individual must be

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94 AT XI 446/CSM I 384.
95 AT XI 443/CSM I 383.
96 AT XI 445/ CSM I 384.
judged according to the same rational standard: the use they make of their will. Both intellectual and moral worth thus have a universal, common measure.

A generous person knows these things, knows that freedom, both in oneself and in others, demands absolute respect, and feels equal to others in virtue of their free will. Descartes writes:

Just as they [generous people] do not consider themselves much inferior to those who have greater wealth or honour, or even to those who have more intelligence, knowledge or beauty, or generally to those who surpass them in some other perfections, equally they do not have much more esteem for themselves than for those whom they surpass. For all these things seem to them to be very unimportant, by contrast with the virtuous will for which alone they esteem themselves, and which they suppose also to be present, or at least capable of being present in every other person. 97

How can an equality of generous minds be achieved? How can we ensure that no individual lacks “the will to undertake and carry out whatever he judges to best,” where what is best is what depends on the good will alone?

The first step to take is to recognize that the strength and courage required for generosity, is not strength of body but strength of mind, and thus the most worthy and noblest people are not necessarily physically the strongest. This idea is a step towards combating what Gournay identified (later affirmed by Poulain as well) as the major reason for men’s historical domination of women: the law of the strongest. No remedy is quite as suitable for inequality as an education that teaches independence and strength of mind. Descartes explains how generosity may be acquired, and he explains that despite the many inequalities in birth and background, it is nevertheless certain

97 AT XI 446-447/CSM I 384.
...that a good education \textit{[institution]} is a great help in correcting any faults of birth. Moreover, if we occupy ourselves frequently in considering the nature of free will and the many advantages which proceed from a firm resolution to make good use of it – while also considering, on the other hand, the many vain and useless cares which trouble ambitious people – we may arouse the passion of generosity in ourselves and then acquire the virtue. Since this virtue is, as it were, the key to all the other virtues and a general remedy for every disorder to the passion, it seem to me that this consideration deserves serious attention.\textsuperscript{98}

Not only is generosity universally accessible to all who make good use of their free will, it is also the most important of all the virtues.

The second step toward an equality of generosity is to recognize that what we take to be natural differences in character are largely artificial in origin, that one's "nature" is greatly influenced by circumstances, and that individual character largely derives, not from being identified with a particular group, but from contingent circumstances. As a result, character is not only artificial, but usually quite idiosyncratic. The influence of circumstances on character is very great, on Descartes' view, and this could easily be understood as a central reason for inequalities.

As children, on Descartes' view, our characters and dispositions are established by associations made without our understanding or consent. We subsequently based our emotional evaluations of what was good and bad for us on these original experiences which become, in turn, the "prejudicial" ground of our understanding. Later on, we forget about the contingency of these early associations, and we come to regard what is contingent as necessary, as implanted by nature, making us view our evaluations as true and evident. Descartes explains that this principle of how thoughts and feelings come to be associated underlies everything that he has written on the passions. He says that "our soul and body are

\textsuperscript{98} AT XI 454/CSM I 388.
so linked that once we have joined some bodily action with a certain thought, the one does not occur thereafter without the other occurring too." What this shows is that each individual must have a slightly different set of dispositions, for "we do not always join the same actions to the same thoughts." Descartes offers a set of examples (of a somewhat odd nature) to explain the idiosyncrasies of personal character. He writes:

The strange aversions of certain people that make them unable to bear the smell of roses, the presence of a cat, or the like, can readily be recognised as resulting simply from their having been greatly upset by some such object in the early years of their life. Or it may even result from their having been affected by the feelings their mother had while pregnant...And the smell of roses may have caused severe headache in a child when he was still in the cradle, or a cat may have terrified him without anyone noticing and without any memory of it remaining afterwards; and yet the idea of the aversion he then felt for the roses or for the cat will remain imprinted on his brain till the end of his life. An individual's character and its history are idiosyncratic, and yet, once thought-feeling associations are forged, they become literally embodied, imprinted in our brain.

Descartes discusses this idea in the passion of love with reference to his own personal history. In a letter to Chanut, on the subject of love, Descartes writes:

I now pass to your question about the reasons which often impel us to love one person rather than another before we know their worth. I can discover two, one belonging to the mind and one to the body...I will speak only of the one in the body. It consists in the arrangement of the parts of our brain which is produced by objects of the sense or by some other cause. The objects which strike our senses move parts of our brain by means of the nerves, and there make as it were folds, which undo themselves when the object ceases to operate; but afterwards the place where they were made has a tendency to be folded again in the same manner by another object resembling even incompletely the original object. For instance,

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99 AT XI 428/CSM I 375.
100 AT XI 428/CSM I 376.
when I was a child I loved a little girl of my own age who had a slight squint. The impression made by sight in my brain when I looked at her cross-eyes became so closely connected to the simultaneous impression which aroused in me the passion of love that for a long time afterwards when I saw persons with a squint I felt a special inclination to love them simply because they had that defect. At that time I did not know that was the reason for my love; and indeed as soon as I reflected on it and recognised that it was a defect, I was no longer affected by it. So, when we are inclined to love someone without knowing the reason, we may believe this is because he has some similarity to something in an earlier object of our love, though we may not be able to identify it. 101

These kinds of associations, formed from "imprints" on our brain, tend to govern our attitude toward the world. It is difficult, however, to get a grasp on the obscure, confused origins of our passions. Thus, we should be careful in interpreting a statement like this one in Part Two, article 56 of the Passions: "when we think of something as good with regard to us, i.e. as beneficial to us, this makes us have love for it." 102 The apparent order of this statement is quite deceptive. Thought of what is good for us may lead to love, but the factors involved in our predisposition to have that thought in the first place are quite complex, even obscure and confused. Moreover, once we love something or someone, it is difficult to change this disposition, for soul and body are so linked that once a bodily action joins with a certain thought, both, subsequently, occur together.

Descartes recognizes that our inclinations to love are not originally in our power, and that it is much easier to see the ends of our love – who or what we love – than our love's nature and origin. To acquire freedom of one's heart, figuratively speaking, is far more difficult than acquiring freedom of mind, because the passions are never, originally, an effect

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101 To Chanut, 6 June, 1647. AT V 52/CSMK III 320.
102 AT XI, 374/CSM I 350.
of reason and freedom. Indeed, something would not be a passion if it were forged in our soul
only by knowledge and judgement.

The only thing that we all have in common, and under our own control, is the power
of reason. Change is possible, according to Descartes, because of his postulate that the mind
is inherently free. Mind cannot, therefore be reduced to the brain, which is, after all, an organ
of the body. The first step to getting love under one’s control is to recognize the difference
between rational and sensual love. Descartes explains this difference in a well-known letter to
Chanut on the subject of love. He tells him:

I make a distinction between the love which is purely intellectual or rational and
the love which is a passion. The first, in my view, consists simply in the fact that
when our soul perceives some present or absent good, which it judges to be fitting
for itself, it joins itself to it willingly, that is to say, it considers itself and the good
in question as forming two parts of a single whole.103

The challenge is to try to love those things or people that truly are fitting for oneself, that is
to say, conducive to intellectual, moral and spiritual growth. It is possible to achieve rational
love, says Descartes, because those movements of the will that constitute love, insofar as it is
a rational thought and not a passion, he says, could exist in our soul even if it had no body.
This means that it is possible to reflect on those passions that become “imprinted” on our
brain. Descartes’ early love for the little girl was essentially an action of his body on his soul,
and ever after, each time he perceived a similar girl, it triggered the same passion. Altering
this pattern requires drawing on the capacity, possessed by every rational being, for self-
reflection and thus for realizing that it is a pattern. In this way, love can be experienced not
simply as a sensual passion, which has something of a pathological nature about it, but also
as a rational or “internal” emotion. Only in this way is love, properly speaking, a human

103 To Chanut, 1 February, 1647. AT IV 601/CSMK III 306.
emotion. In this way, one at least knows *why* and *how* one is loving, and even if the "imprints" on the brain are permanent, it is nonetheless possible to alter one's *thoughts* about the love. It is possible, then, for rational and sensual love to co-exist. In fact, the two inevitably exist together, as we are not a soul alone, but a soul joined to a body, and so rational love

...is commonly accompanied by the other kind of love, which can be called sensual or sensuous. This is nothing but a confused thought, aroused in the soul by some motions of the nerves, which make it disposed to have the other, clearer thought which constitutes rational love.104

Because we have a free will, it is possible to *alter* the connections between sensual and rational love. It is important to note that the relationship between free will and passion is an *indirect* one, filtered through our system of representation. In the *Passions*, Part One, article 45, Descartes writes:

the passions, too, cannot be directly aroused or suppressed by the action of our will, but only indirectly through the representation of things which are usually joined with the passions we wish to have and opposed to the passions we wish to reject.105

Being able to arouse different desires by changing the way we *represent* them to ourselves – their relative benefit or harm- means that we can place them in a framework of *meaning* that we have, as far as possible, determined using reason. It is a *generous* person who recognizes the capacity that we, as rational beings, have to determine our own desires and, if necessary reframe them. A generous person judges what is *best*, and resolves to follow through on that judgement. On this view, virtue is contingent upon how successfully we manage to have the desires that we want, those that we autonomously and freely choose according to our

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104 AT IV 602/CSMK III 306.
105 AT XI 363/CSM 345.
understanding of what is best, which presumably means what is best for the cultivation of our humanity from an intellectual, moral and spiritual perspective.

The capacity to bring one’s passions under rational scrutiny, that Descartes posits in light of the mind’s freedom, has led Erica Harth to worry that Descartes is a neostoic, which is taken to mean negating the body and the passions. We have already seen that Descartes does not advise extirpation of the passions, but their proper guidance. There is, nevertheless, a legitimate concern in the imputation of neostoicism. The kind of internal freedom that Descartes advises, which involves bringing one’s sensual desires into accord with rational desires, could still be compatible with external servitude. In order for Descartes’ theory of freedom to adequately respond to the condition of women’s servitude, it must promote not just internal but external freedom. I do think that Descartes’ concept of generosity promotes both internal and external freedom, for, in order to have the will to take on and carry out whatever one judges to be best, one also needs the opportunity to do so.

Let us examine Harth’s discussion of neostoicism in Descartes. His neostoicism, she says,

...rests on the major epistemological premise that res cogitans has a reflexive capacity to disengage itself from the body (to which, we remember, it is attached, while nevertheless distinct) to view it and all that befalls it, and consequently, all accidents that befall res extensa with the bemused detachment of a spectator at the theater.106

She is correct to say that the mind is free, on Descartes’ account, and has this capacity for self-reflection. I do have difficulty accepting her description of the activity of self-reflection, in her use of the words “disengage” and “bemused detachment.” These impute a negative meaning to the power of reason, but we could easily replace them with the terms “impartiality” or “disinterestedness” and thus reveal an ethical sense of rationality. The very

106 Harth (1992) 74.
definition of prejudice is a partiality that prevents objective consideration of an issue or situation. Indeed, impartiality, objectivity and disinterestedness in reasoning are nothing less than the meaning of justice.

In the context of moral psychology, impartiality with regard to oneself is equally important as towards an external situation. Descartes does adopt the Stoic view that passions, especially the strong and disordering passions like anger, are distorted perceptions, and that they can be treated cognitively, through self-reflection. He does not share, however, the strong Stoic view that no passions are originally connected to the body, but only originate in the mind.\(^\text{107}\) In one of many letters to Elisabeth in which he advises her on how to deal with her melancholy (a letter, in fact, that Harth uses as “evidence” of Descartes’ “disengagement”), he tells Elisabeth that he knows how inappropriate it would be persuade joy on a person to whom fortune has much misery, and that he is not one of those cruel philosophers who wish their sages to be devoid of emotion.\(^\text{108}\) Nevertheless, he tells her, she has the internal resources to alleviate her own suffering. She can exercise her power of reason in order to reframe her melancholy, and she can find the courage to overcome her sadness. To this end, he offers, in this letter, a particular therapeutic technique. It is one of a number of therapeutic techniques that he develops in their correspondence, all of which involve some form of inner distancing. Here, he invokes the idea of an internal “stage-setting” of one’s feelings, which allows for reflection and self-assessment. It is this technique that Harth finds to be a form of violence and self-negation.

It seems to me, however, that most psychological cognitive therapies involve this kind of mental exercise, and that Harth must have motives for interpreting Descartes in this

\(^{107}\) The Stoics held that “emotions are conditions into which the ‘reasoning’ capacity itself may fall. They are evaluative responses to, or anticipations of, significant events in our lives; and they represent views held at the time by us in our ‘reasoning’ capacity itself.” See the Introduction to Seneca’s “On Anger” in Seneca (1995) 8.
manner that are separate from the true meaning of his ideas. Inner distancing does not entail "stoic" negation of the passions and the body. Descartes is not advising Elisabeth to build immunity against all that befalls those she loves, to their misfortunes or death, nor to negate her sadness and worries. What he does do is counsel her to recognize the fact of her own freedom, the fact that she need not be enslaved to any passion. Descartes tells Elisabeth that despite every misfortune, she can retain her strength of soul, her presence of mind, her judicious reason, which qualities will assist her to view them with a greater measure of impartiality and ultimately to better engage with her emotional difficulties. And I mention, once again, Descartes' last article in the Passions, in which he writes: "persons whom the passions can move most deeply are capable of enjoying the sweetest pleasures of this life.\textsuperscript{109}

Still, even if we accept that Descartes is not a neostoic in the way Harth claims that he is, a larger worry remains: is internal freedom compatible with external servitude? Descartes says that, based on the power of reason, each individual has the power to bring his or her sensual passions in line with rational emotions, and to desire having only those things that are within the realm of possibility. Conceivably, if one accepted Descartes' reasoning that free will is the only thing we truly possess, and that we ought to desire only those things that the rational will can control, one could be, as Isaiah Berlin puts it, a "morally autonomous slave."\textsuperscript{110} Is Descartes guilty of this charge? Is internal freedom adequate and complete, on his view, without external freedom of condition? I do not propose that Descartes has a social or political theory in which we can discover a positive view of external freedoms. What I want to know is whether generosity, based on internal freedom of will, logically demands external freedom. My intuition is that it does.

\textsuperscript{109} AT XI 488/CSM I 404.
Isaiah Berlin distinguishes two kinds of "negative" freedom: it could mean absence from frustration, or else absence of obstacles. In the latter sense, this means

...absence of obstacles to possible choice and activities- absence of obstructions on roads along which a man can decide to walk. Such freedom ultimately depends not on whether I wish to walk at all, or how far, but on how many doors are open, how open they are, upon their relative importance in my life, even though it may be impossible literally to measure this in any quantitative fashion. The extent of my social or political freedom consists in the absence of obstacles not merely to my actual, but to my potential choices - to my acting in this way if I choose to do so. Similarly absence of such freedom is due to the closing of such doors or failure to open them, as a result, intended or unintended, of alterable human practices, of the operation of human agencies; although only if such acts are deliberately intended...will they be liable to be called oppression. Unless this is conceded, the Stoic conception of liberty (true freedom - the state of the morally autonomous slave), which is compatible with a very high degree of political despotism, will merely confuse the issue.111

The Stoic conception of freedom, says Berlin, does not require opportunities to be made inherently available to every individual. A slave could be free, on a Stoic view, while still under absolute rule, with no external freedom.

Descartes' account of freedom does draw on Stoic elements, especially in his correlation of freedom with the power of reason. Let us briefly examine the one Stoic that Descartes explicitly discusses over the course of several letters to Elisabeth: Seneca.

Seneca discusses "Slaves and masters" in his letter On Favours and he poses the question of whether or not a slave can do his master a favour.112 He says:

110 Berlin (1969) xl
111 Ibid.
112 Seneca, On Favours Bk III, in Seneca (1995). Descartes and Elisabeth discuss "On the Happy Life", not "On Favours", but the passage I take up here brings to light the Stoic idea of freedom, with which to compare Descartes' account.
...to deny that a slave may sometimes do his master a favour is to ignore his rights as a man. What matters is the state of mind, and not the status, of whoever bestows it. No one is barred from being good. Virtue is open to everyone, admits everyone, invites everyone — freeborn, freedman and slave, king and exile. It does not have to choose the great house or the great fortune; it is content with the naked man....A slave can be just, he can be brave, he can have greatness of mind.\footnote{Seneca (1995) 256.}

This sounds very much like Cartesian generosity in the sense that virtue is universally accessible, regardless of external circumstances, to every human being. The problem with this view of virtue, freedom and reason as Berlin sees it is that a slave can remain a slave and still have “greatness of mind.” When Seneca further justifies this claim, however, we begin to discern something of great importance about this definition of freedom, something that Descartes also affirms. Seneca writes:

\begin{quote}
It is a mistake to think that slavery penetrates the entire man. The better part of him is exempt. Bodies can be assigned to masters and be at their mercy. But the mind, at any rate, is its own master, so free in its movements that not even this prison which shuts it in can hold it back from following its own impulse, from setting mighty projects in motion, from faring forth into the infinite to consort with the stars. The body, therefore, is what fortune hands over to a master, what he buys and sells. That inner part can never come into anyone’s possession. Whatever proceeds from it: is free.\footnote{Seneca (1995) 257.}
\end{quote}

These are important passages against which to measure and assess Descartes’ connection to Stoic freedom. Bestowing a favour is a free and virtuous act. On this view, anyone can be generous, and in acting generously, a slave retains the core of his or her freedom. Descartes endorses this aspect of freedom: he conceives of the will as infinitely free. This means that it cannot be eradicated, or even reduced, under any conditions. On Descartes’ view, freedom must be presupposed as the property of will of all rational beings. One thing this means is
that the essence of human freedom can be neither asserted nor denied on empirical grounds, that is, based on actual experiences.

This need not, however, be construed as resignation or quietude in the face of slavery, but as the strongest possible claim for the dignity of human being. The Stoic view, here, which is remarkably close to Descartes' own view, need not be taken to mean that external servitude and internal freedom are compatible in a good human life. It can, instead, serve to demonstrate the \textit{a priori} nature and irreducibility of human freedom. The minds of women and men, for Descartes, are grounded on a principle of real distinction, meaning that the mind is independent of diversities of location, temporal change, of all forms of bodily servitude. It is on this rational principle that we can base the claim, for example, that women's and girls' freedom can never be destroyed, even under the worst persecution, and that their merits and their capacities for truly human, rational action are equal to men.

A worry remains, however. On Descartes' view, the will should desire what reason judges to be best, and the generous individual conscientiously strives to carry out these projects to completion. Desire is a future-oriented passion, in Descartes' framework, and he defines it in the following way:

\begin{quote}
The passion of desire is an agitation of the soul caused by the spirits, which disposes the soul to wish, in the future, for the things it represents to itself as agreeable.\textsuperscript{115}
\end{quote}

This raises a new problem: what happens if, because of one's external servitude, one has no sense of any future opportunities? What if, without the possibility to project a future for oneself, one's life consists solely in maintaining itself in an endless present? A human life cannot be sustained as such merely by perpetuating itself, but must always surpass itself in striving for a future. If not, then, as Simone de Beauvoir writes, "...living is only not dying,
and human existence is indistinguishable from an absurd vegetation."\textsuperscript{116} Oppression, or external servitude, condemns individuals "to mark time hopelessly."\textsuperscript{117} If an individual has no sense of his or her own future, then what will motivate the desire to be generous? How, then, without external freedom, can one possibly experience inner freedom? Does freedom not perish if the will has no future desires? No ends that it can set for itself? No power to strive for what it judges to be best? No chance to exercise the mind's natural activity?

Descartes' concept of generosity addresses this problem, for a generous person fundamentally respects other human beings, recognizing that people are not things among other things, but are other subjects, that is to say, other free causes, who are worthy of respect, not contempt. We owe respect to free causes on the view that there is something fundamentally unknowable about them; they are irreducible to any particular framework of understanding. Free causes are those "which we judge capable of doing us good or evil, without our knowing which they will do."\textsuperscript{118} Moreover, those who have the passion and virtue of generosity know that freedom is intrinsic to the mind of every single human being. Generous people, says Descartes "readily come to believe that any other person can have the same knowledge and feeling" about himself or herself. They have a "virtuous will for which alone they esteem themselves, and which they suppose also to be present, or at least capable of being present in every other person."\textsuperscript{119} In knowing that freedom is not defined empirically, but is known by reason alone, a generous person does not judge others by their appearances: if they are in a condition of servitude, or perhaps if they are physically or mentally ill, they naturally want to help bring the other's freedom come to the surface. We help others because, in fact, our own freedom depends on the freedom of others. This is an

\textsuperscript{115} AT XI 392/CSM I 358.
\textsuperscript{116} De Beauvoir (1948) 83.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid.
important point. If an individual were alone in the world, the only free cause, the only subject, the only ego, it would entail his or her own loss of freedom. If one solitary ego were the totality of things, everything would be reduced to one single system of ideas. There would be nothing outside of the mind, and if one "I" constituted absolute being, there would be complete stasis. A static being enjoys no freedom. Minds therefore need the existence of other minds in order to be free. Descartes makes this point from an ethical perspective in a letter to Elisabeth. Descartes says that we ought to think that others matter, for...

...if someone saw everything in relation to himself, he would not hesitate to injure others greatly when he thought he could draw some slight advantage; and he would have no true friendship, no fidelity, no virtue at all.120

Because of this, one of the truths most useful for us to know, he tells her, is that...

...though each of us is a person distinct from others, whose interests are accordingly in some way different from those of the rest of the world, we ought still to think that none of us could subsist alone and that each one of us is really one of the many parts of the universe.121

On this view, generosity involves not only a respect and promotion of one's own internal experience of free will, but a respect for the freedom of others. This respect is not merely a libertarian respect that is content to leave others alone. On the contrary, Cartesian respect positively promotes others' freedom. It does so by showing how generosity can be acquired through education. Put in theoretical perspective, freedom must be promoted on rational grounds, on the logic of Descartes' own framework of notions primitives. The idea of embodiment, as we remember from earlier on, is an innate, original notion. The truth of embodiment demands that we recognize not only our inner freedom of thought, but also that

118 AT XI 454/CSM I 388.
119 AT XI 446-447/CSM I 384.
120 to Elisabeth, 15 September 1645. AT IV 293/CSMK III 266.
121 Ibid.
we are in the world together with other human beings who affect us, as we affect them. The quality of other people's lives affects our own.

The natural equality of freedom

Because freedom of judgement is intrinsic to the undivided human mind, and because mind is really distinct from body, we are able to understand why Descartes claims that free judgement is naturally equal in all human beings. As Sartre writes:

A man can not be more of a man than the others because freedom is similarly infinite in each one. In this sense, nobody has surpassed Descartes in demonstrating the connection between the spirit of the sciences (la science) and the spirit of democracy. This is because it would be inconceivable to found universal suffrage upon anything else but this faculty, universally shared, of saying no or saying yes.\textsuperscript{122} Descartes claims, in the First Part of the \textit{Discourse on Method} that each person is naturally equal in having the power of reason or good sense. He writes

[The] power of judging well and distinguishing the true from the false – which we properly call 'good sense' or 'reason' – is naturally equal in all people, and consequently that the diversity of our opinions does not arise because some of us are more reasonable than others, but solely because we direct our thoughts along different paths and do not attend to the same things.\textsuperscript{123}

The natural equality of the power to think transcends existential contingencies: the "different paths" that people follow, or the different objects of attention, have no bearing upon the capacity to acquire good sense. The \textit{Discourse} thus extends an invitation to each and every person, regardless of their circumstances, to engage in the search for truth, using the power of

\textsuperscript{122} Jean-Paul Sartre, "La liberté cartésienne." \textit{Situations Philosophiques}. (Paris : Gallimard, 1947 & 1990) 65. The translation is mine. Sartre writes: "Un homme ne peut être plus homme que les autres, parce que la liberté est semblablement infinie en chacun. En ce sens, nul n’a mieux montré que Descartes la liaison entre l’esprit de la science et l’esprit de la démocratie, car on ne saurait fonder le suffrage universel sur autre chose que sur cette faculté universellement répandue de dire non ou de dire oui."
their own mind to cultivate their naturally instituted power of reason. This universality is echoed in Descartes' posthumously published (and unfinished) philosophical dialogue, *The Search for Truth by Means of the Natural Light*. He introduces three friends, Eudoxus, Epistemon and Polyander, who have gathered to discuss philosophy in the garden at the country home of one of the three, Eudoxus, "a man of moderate intellect but possessing a judgement which is not corrupted by any false beliefs and a reason which retains all the purity of its nature." Epistemon "has a detailed knowledge of everything that can be learned in the Schools," while Polyander, (literally "everyman") "has never studied at all," although both Epistemon and Polyander have minds that "are among the most outstanding and inquiring of our time."

Echoed here is the optimistic tone of the *Discourse*, for, despite the educational disparity between Polyander and Epistemon, one need not conclude negatively on the powers and potential of their minds. The power to acquire truth is not contingent upon external circumstances, nor is it contingent upon external authority and tradition. It is equally open to anyone who makes the effort to use his or her own powers of reasoning. Descartes writes:

I hope too that the truths I set forth will not be any less well received for their not being derived from Aristotle or Plato, and that they will have currency in the world in the same way as money, whose value is no less when it comes from the purse of a peasant than when it comes from the bank. Moreover I have done my best to make these truths equally useful to everybody.

This citation speaks of truth as being both universal and timeless (Descartes often speaks of his truths as always having been available for discovery). These qualities alone, however, would not necessarily lead to a democratic inclusiveness in the search for truth. Descartes explicitly makes the second, democratic point: he seeks to make the truth "equally useful" to

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123 AT VI, 2/CSM I, 111. I translate "hommes" as "people", thus slightly modifying the CSM translation.
124 AT X 498/CSM II, 401.
everybody, and also to allow that like money, truth is truth, wherever and from whomever it comes.

Similarly, the *Discourse on Method* expresses reluctance to judge on the nature of people's capacities based on external differences. People may be, and are in fact, entirely different in their customs and habits. These sorts of empirical differences, however, ought not be the basis for judgement on inner differences, especially concerning the power of reason. Empirically derived differences do not constitute grounds for either the exaltation or the denigration of others. He tells us:

I have recognised through my travels that those with views quite contrary to ours are not on that account barbarians or savages, but that many of them make use of reason as much or more than we do. I thought, too, how the same man, with the same mind, if brought up from infancy among the French or Germans, develops otherwise than he would if he had always lived among the Chinese or cannibals; and how, even in our fashions of dress, the very thing that pleased us ten years ago, and will perhaps please us again ten years hence, now strikes us as extravagant and ridiculous. Thus it is custom and example that persuade us, rather than any certain knowledge. 125

Descartes' critique of the reliability of empirical information for acquiring certainty is widely recognised as part of his program for overturning Aristotelian science, but as this statement implies, his critique also opens up new possibilities for critiquing social discriminations. Another claim from the *Discourse* further adds to the view that, in terms of intellectual capacity, people ought not to judge, or be judged, on their appearance, specifically in the following passage, on their manner of expression:

Those with the strongest reasoning and the most skill at ordering their thoughts so as to make them clear and intelligible are always the most persuasive, even if they speak only low Breton and have never learned rhetoric.

125 AT VI 16/ CSM, I, 119.
The optimistic and inclusive spirit of Descartes’ statement is quite striking. I think that it is connected with the fact that Descartes adopts a rationalist rather than an empiricist perspective on the human mind. He expressly avoids any inferences from body and general appearance to the nature of the mind present in that body.

Descartes’ rationalism is reinforced by another important feature of his thought: his individualism. As evidenced in the above citations, truth is not the privilege of certain groups of people. Descartes is, in fact, rather suspicious of claims made by or about groups, remarking that “a single man is much more likely to hit upon them [truths] than a group of people.” Descartes’ theory of knowledge privileges the individual standpoint over that of the group, and I think that it is important to understand this “individualist” stance in order to discern the nature of Descartes’ egalitarianism. What is equal, and universally shared, between human beings, for Descartes, is the individually experienced power to conduct one’s own thinking, and it is just this power of reason and choice that Descartes calls freedom.

Each person has a free will, and Descartes writes:

It is only the will, or freedom of choice, which I experience within me to be so great that the idea of any greater faculty is beyond my grasp.

The freedom of human reason is naturally equal in all human beings. The basis of this claim can be called metaphysical, rationalist and a priori, in short, whatever distinguishes it absolutely from an empirical claim. Reason stands at an irreducible interval from the natural world, including the human body in itself, when considered as part of the physical world. The model of human being that sustains this freedom is dualist: mind is really distinct from body.

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126 A study of how rationalism and empiricism impact on views of human nature, as I have started to do in this thesis, merits much further reflection. For a start, one should consult Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze’s article the “Philosophy and the ‘Man’ in the Humanities, (Topoi 18: 49-58, 1999). Eze discusses the idea of the “savage” in early modern thought. He discusses the problem of how to judge racist views in light of central concepts in different philosophers’ works. Descartes is not mentioned as having any racist views, and I have not found any in his works.

127 AT VI, 16/ CSM I, 119.
The power or freedom of thought is the principle of human dignity. It is an a priori principle that applies to all human beings regardless of their actual circumstances. This is what makes it a principle of dignity, as well as one of hope, and clearly one of a fundamental kind of equality. This equality of freedom applies not only to well-functioning, able-bodied men and women, but to those who suffer mental disorders. Descartes refuses to accept Arnauld’s statement in the Fourth set of Objections, that “the power of thought appears to be attached to bodily organs, since it can be regarded as dormant in infants and extinguished in the case madmen.” He refuses to call reason “extinguished” in “madmen,” and instead speaks of it as “disturbed.” Moreover this

...does not show that we should regard it [thought] as so attached to bodily organs that it cannot exist without them. The fact that thought is often impeded by bodily organs, as we know from our own frequent experience, does not at all entail that it is produced by those organs. This latter view is one for which not even the slightest proof can be adduced.130

This is a very important point: an individual who lacks the use of his or her reason suffers a disturbance due to some physiological impediment, and it ought to be treated, for it “is less distressing,” Descartes writes in a letter to Elisabeth, “to lose one’s life than to lose the use of one’s reason.” This disturbance, however, in no way affects their intrinsic unconditional, unconditioned rationality, which is the essence of each one’s humanity. The category of “mad” is a category of the human, but it is a contingent one, not an essential one. A mad person must be accorded the respect and dignity worthy of a rational human being – on the hope that he or she might get better with treatment, or at the very least to preserve the dignity

128 AT VII, 57/CSM II, 40.
129 AT VII 204/CSM II 143.
130 AT VII 228/CSM II, 160.
131 To Elisabeth, 1 September 1645. AT IV 282/CSMK III 263.
of their ineradicable freedom. Every category of human being that is empirically distinct must be treated in the same way, on the premise of an absolute inner equality of freedom.

Descartes thus offers a theory of the absolute dignity, freedom and equality of human reason.

We turn now to Poulain de la Barre, where we learn about the concrete implications of Descartes' theory of freedom in the context of women's lives. Poulain de la Barre adopts Cartesian generosity as his own model of rational virtue for all human beings and it underlies his idea that virtue, happiness and knowledge ought not to have different ends for a man than for a woman.
Chapter Three

François Poulain de la Barre: Against Custom

Introduction

Freedom, knowledge and authority are the greatest advantages that a human being can have. These goods are also those that have been categorically denied to women on the view that they are not natural to them. The best way to contradict this view is to argue a different conception of "nature." Poulain sees this and he finds that Descartes' separation of human reason from nature, which entails a distinction of the rational human mind from its natural body, is the framework most conducive to dismantling sexism in all of its forms. The chief benefit of mind-body dualism is its postulate that freedom, in its principle and its origin, is nothing other than human reason. This postulate effects a change in the meaning of what is natural: knowledge derives from the natural light of reason, distinct from the body. The very meaning of mind is this natural power of reason. This allows for a conception of a universal natural human right to exercise freedom of mind, and this replaces the idea that freedom is a right of birth, sex, nationality, or any other contingent human quality.

On a rationalist postulate, each mind is naturally in a condition of freedom, and thus has the intrinsic capacity to cultivate knowledge and autonomy, or authority over oneself: this is the purpose of education. Without cultivating the mind, one cannot hope to acquire virtue and happiness. Moreover, virtue and happiness require external freedoms. Poulain insists that it is wrong to force a woman into a marriage or into a religious life, unless she so chooses. It is very difficult to achieve virtue when a life has been externally imposed upon one, for it is unlikely that one has assessed the nature and scope of one's own capacity for that vocation. Such an assessment of one's capacities, we have seen in Descartes, is a requirement of virtue.
In *De l'Égalité des Deux Sexes* (1673), Poulain de la Barre makes one central claim that serves as the guiding framework for his analysis of sexual inequality: women are not naturally inferior to men, but only customarily so. Poulain argues for this claim on the basis of his principle that the mind has no sex, which is, in turn, based on Descartes’ argument for the real distinction between mind and body. Poulain's principle establishes that men and women are equal in their reasoning power, considered independently of sexual identity. A number of important consequences follow from the principle that the mind has no sex: a transformation in the nature of education for girls; a change in the meaning of women’s virtue; a new idea of happiness; most importantly, a new understanding of women’s freedom. On Poulain’s logic, no freedom can be denied to women either in theory or in practice, for in order to have the chance for successful lives, women must be afforded the same opportunities given to men. They must be educated to have the internal freedoms of mind, heart, and conscience as well as the external freedoms of movement and choice of vocation.

I now turn to examine each of these claims: women’s presumed inferiority is a prejudice of custom, not a fact of nature; the mind has no sex; the idea of what constitutes women’s education, virtue, happiness and freedom must be revised.

There is a point worth noting at the outset concerning the writing style that Poulain adopts, which, while not a central theme in my discussion, is significant to Poulain’s project. I mention it now before turning to the claims under investigation. The tone, style and structure of his work are simple, unadorned and methodical. These characters are deliberately chosen with a view to redressing the lack of serious attention devoted to the problem of women’s social subordination. This can be explained by Poulain’s awareness that, ordinarily, men who

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1 Hereafter referred to as *Égalité*. 

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write about woman write in a mood of jest, or seduction (gallantry) or menace. Poulain states, in the first line of the preface to Égalité,

There is no more delicate matter than to explain the condition of women. When a man speaks to their advantage, one immediately imagines that it is out of gallantry or love. It is likely that the majority, judging this discourse by the title, will at first believe that it is the effect of one or the other, and so they should be delighted to know its true motivation and aim.²

Siep Stuurman observes that Poulain’s publicly expressed desire to not be perceived as defending women merely out of gallantry was in order to distinguish himself from others on this front, and that the issue of “gallantry” was a frequently invoked theme in the literature on women’s status. This differentiates his work, claims Stuurman, from most other works on this subject in the 1660s.³ Slightly earlier than this time, Descartes shares Poulain’s concern to avoid the attitudes traditionally attendant upon works addressed to, or about, women. One of the two prefaces to his Principles of Philosophy (1647), written as a new educational text to replace the traditional school texts based on Aristotelian thought, is a letter dedicated to Elisabeth. In it, Descartes praises her intelligence, and he writes the following:

It would ill become me to use flattery or to put forward any assertion which has not been thoroughly scrutinized, especially in a work in which I shall be trying to lay down the foundations of the truth. And I know that your generous and modest nature will welcome the simple and unadorned judgement of a philosopher more than the polished compliments of those with smoother tongues. I shall therefore write only what I know to be true either from reason or by experience, and in this introduction I propose to philosophize just as I do throughout the rest of the book.⁴

Poulain and Descartes thus share this spirit of seriousness. In the case of Poulain, his introductory caveat reveals his skepticism about getting a dispassionate hearing on the

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² Égalité. 9. All translations of Poulain are my own.
subject of women's servitude. The problem that Poulain addresses is so entrenched, so deeply rooted in the passions, that an equitable discussion is almost inconceivable. This, however, is what Poulain attempts to do. His work is an act of faith in the possibility that words can be a vehicle to enlightened reason rather than instruments of force.

**Nature vs. Custom**

Poulain unearths some traditional prejudices held about women, which, once exposed, allow him to argue that the real reason for women's social subordination is not any natural weakness, but instead, the result of established customs. His analysis predates Simone de Beauvoir's similar critique, nearly three hundred years later. De Beauvoir, writing from the perspective of her existentialist ethics and philosophy of freedom, casts an interesting light on Poulain's endeavor. On de Beauvoir's view, oppression occurs when men forcibly confine women, denying them the freedom to choose a path in life, because of a desire to assert and maintain power. Poulain has the same insight: servitude and oppression are not the natural condition of human being but imposed by force. De Beauvoir explains the unnaturalness of oppression in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. She argues that unless a person is a " naïve child"

...who hits stones or a mad prince who orders the sea to be thrashed, he does not rebel against things, but only against other men. The resistance of the thing sustains the action of man as it sustains the flight of the dove; and by projecting himself through it man accepts its being an obstacle; he assumes the risk of a setback in which he does not see a denial of his freedom...⁵

She continues:

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⁵ De Beauvoir (1948) 81.
Only man can be an enemy for man; only he can rob him of the meaning of his acts and his life because it also belongs to him alone to confirm it in its existence, to recognize it in actual fact as a freedom.\(^6\)

Obstacles are needed in order to acquire true freedom. Natural obstacles, challenges and resistances serve to *promote* freedom, not hinder it. Recognizing and achieving our own freedom, however, is insufficient: other people must recognize our freedom too. Poulain makes the same point in *Égalité*. He explains why women did not take part in developing the intellectual disciplines: first, men kept women at home to do housework and raise the children, jealous of any contact they might have with the outside world; second, many women *did* manage to acquire learned works and study them, often equaling or even surpassing men in their understanding. Men, however, who already held power in the public institutions of learning and business, neither recognized their achievements nor allowed them to participate. Gradually, lacking any colleagues or disciples of their own, all the enlightenment these women achieved perished uselessly along with them.\(^7\)

This analysis fits with de Beauvoir's view that oppression is the non-recognition or even the outright denial of another's freedom. One of the great *ruses* of oppression, she says, is to deny that freedom and reason are *natural* in women. Oppression, in this way, camouflages itself "behind a natural situation since, after all, one cannot revolt against nature." Poulain confirms that oppression does indeed employ this ruse by arguing that men certainly did not achieve their positions of power by any demonstration of superior reason. On the contrary, it was but chance, necessity or interest that engaged men in their various occupations.\(^8\)

\(^6\) De Beauvoir (1948) 82.

\(^7\) *Égalité* 25.

\(^8\) *Égalité* 27.
Common opinion

In *Egalité*, Poulain dismantles the concept of women’s natural inferiority, beginning with an empirical observation: in their present condition, women are very different from men, both in their social roles and in intellectual life. The inevitable reason given for why women are excluded from the kinds of work that men do, as well from contributing to the higher forms of knowledge, is that they are not capable of doing so, and this is because *elles ont moins d’Esprit que les hommes*. This reason, intellectual inferiority, is given not only by ordinary people, but by ‘expert’ scholars, and by women themselves.9

To set up his critique of custom, he begins by questioning the legitimacy of basing knowledge on ordinary sense perception. People are persuaded of many things for which they cannot give any reason, and this is because their persuasion is grounded on appearance, which is derived from empirical observation. In this claim, Poulain demonstrates his commitment to rationalist principles of knowledge. To this end, he offers some simple examples of erroneous empirically based judgements: people thought for a long time that the sun revolved around the earth; one thinks that it is the shoreline, rather than the ship, that recedes in the distance. Poulain claims, however, that people would believe the contrary if a different set of commonplace observations were familiar. The same logic applies to the social sphere. Shifting from the natural to the social, from sense perception to custom, Poulain argues that social custom is grounded on the assumption that what is apparent is natural. Each individual, says Poulain, tends to consider his or her country, religion, profession, compatriots, and neighbours as superior, merely because they are familiar with them, even when their faults are obvious. This error in judgement is especially problematic when trying to understand social inequality. Disparities that we easily observe in distribution of goods and conditions of daily life living lead many to judge that people simply are not equal. Poulain
wants to show that these are not natural, but what one is accustomed to believing. The task that Poulain has set for himself is an intricate one. He wants to demonstrate that the lack of freedom experienced by women – in all ways: physical, emotional, economic, intellectual and social – is not natural. The difficulty in doing this lies, I think, in our deeply felt intuition that since freedom is such an incomparable good, so entirely definitive of human being, that it is difficult to view those deprived of it as being, nevertheless, innately free. It is hard not to misperceive those who are much reduced in their freedom as participating in a kind of existential nothingness. Poulain, in seeking to clear away this prejudice, has taken on a formidable challenge.

Pushing things a little further, Poulain finds that the strongest reasons for affirming inequality can be reduced to an historical inference: things have always been thus, with regard to women, and therefore ought to remain so, for if women had been capable of the highest forms of knowledge, and of participating in the professions, men would have admitted them. ¹⁰

Poulain then analyses the reasons for this ubiquitous situation. He begins with a controversial sketch of a picture of society as he would like to see it: “it would be a pleasing thing”, he writes,

... to see a woman holding a professorial chair in rhetoric or in medicine; to see her marching in the streets followed by Commissaries and Sergeants, in the role of police officer; pleading before the courts as a lawyer; sitting in justice tribunals; heading Parliament; leading an army; giving battle, speaking as head of an Embassy before Republics and Princes. ¹¹

This is a surprising, perhaps even scandalous, vision of society. But why should this so? Why should this absolute freedom of vocation be construed as a novelty? Poulain seeks to discover

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¹⁰ I return to the problem of why women do not see themselves as free further on.
¹¹ Égalité 18
why women’s social subordination is so deeply entrenched and widespread, worldwide and throughout history. What it is about the present way of thinking that makes his sketch practically inconceivable? The depth and scope of misogyny is evident, and examples of servitude abound. Poulain reports that in China, women have their feet bound from the time of infancy, to prevent them from leaving their houses, in which they see nobody, except their husbands and children. All over the world, in Turkey, Italy, Asia, Africa and the Americas, men treat women in similar fashion. They are made to depend on men for everything, and are not permitted to cultivate their minds, to contribute to the invention of culture. Since they are forced to engage only in menial work and childcare, men have persuaded themselves that women exist solely for those reasons, and are incapable of anything else. Given this pervasiveness, it is extremely difficult to imagine that things could be otherwise.

Two things further complicate the problem: first, men in positions of either political or intellectual authority have never spoken out in defense of women. The ostensibly wisest legislators have never instituted laws to women’s benefit; the intellectuals have put forth no theories to advance the cause of women. Secondly, women’s inferiority is reinforced by women’s own toleration of their condition.

Overall, sexual inequality is sustained and perpetuated, in Poulain’s view, by two things: a false belief in the certainty of custom and habit, and men’s false belief in the equity (équité) of their own sex. Basing their judgment on the uniformity and constancy of men’s conduct, men surmise that they have always acted fairly, justly and according to reason, which they exclusively possess, as if some by some “secret instinct” instituted by nature, so there is no reason to change things.

There is good reason to change things: as Poulain will argue, customary practices are not grounded on reason and nature. Poulain claims that what we call “custom” in social

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11 Égalité, 18.
practices is actually the result of interest, and in particular, the interests of men to preserve the power they usurped in a forgotten past. Custom and feeling on the question of women’s status is thus based on an unsound – because immoral and irrational – principle. In its origin, sexual inequality derives from a dishonourable aspect of human nature: the passion for power. In order to understand inequality, therefore, we need to get clear on the distinction and connections between reason and the passions. Poulain takes on this project, and uses Descartes’ theory of the passions as the base for his historical conjecture on the origins of inequality, to which I turn in a moment.

As an introduction to Poulain’s historical reconstruction, it is worth noting that Descartes himself was subject to the wrath of those who feared a loss of their power in the universities if his philosophy were to become mainstream. In a letter to Father Dinet, head of France’s Jesuit order, Descartes pleads with him to address the scathing attack on his work by Dinet’s inferior, Bourdin, who taught at Descartes’ old college, La Flèche. Descartes writes:

But there remained a minority [of those who did not want Descartes to publish his entire philosophical system], namely those who prefer to appear learned rather than to acquire genuine learning, and who suppose that they have some reputation in the academic world because they have mastered the technique of acrimonious debate over scholastic controversies; and these people were afraid that once the truth was discovered all these controversies would collapse and that their own speciality would become wholly despised. Thus, fearing that if my philosophy were to be published the truth would be uncovered, but not daring to say openly that they that they were anxious for it not to appear, they seethed with hatred towards me.  

12 AT VII 575/CSM II, 388
Descartes experienced this intellectual persecution despite the fact that, very early in his career, he went into self-imposed exile from France to Holland (making very few—perhaps four—trips back to France before travelling to his final destination, Stockholm, to take up residence at the court of Queen Christina of Sweden), likely to avoid precisely this kind of situation. Not only Descartes, but Poulain, Gournay and Elisabeth were all exiles—Gournay at least in an intellectual and psychological sense—from their homes. Whether or not their exile was physical or psychological, chosen or forced, each one knew that freedom depended on being at a distance from home.

We can also understand the idea of exile and distancing on a figurative level. In this sense, freedom, as true insight and self-awareness, depends upon distance of both a psychological and a physical kind, a distancing that awakens the mind out of its prejudicial or dogmatic slumber. Poulain, takes up this insight in his imaginative reconstruction of the origins of inequality. In their blind passion for power, men lacked the inner distance necessary for rational self-reflection. Their lack of rational self-awareness was a crucial factor in their violations of women’s freedom. Poulain writes:

Men, noticing that they were the more robust of the two sexes, and that in sexual relations they had this physical advantage, imagined that everything belonged to their sex.\(^{13}\)

This feeling of superiority was nothing but a confused thought that force is equal to justice. From there, the degree of domination gradually increased until a few men had usurped absolute control, and Poulain observes:

It is customary for victors to hold the vanquished in contempt, seeing them as weaker than themselves. And as women seemed weakest of all, because the functions to which they had been assigned required less physical force, they came to be regarded as inferior to men. Some men contented themselves with this first

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\(^{13}\) Égalité, 21.
act of usurpation. Others, however, more ambitious, spurred on by the success of their victory, wanted to push their conquests further.\textsuperscript{14}

Poulain argues that men's self-preference and presumption of an exclusive hold on both reason and equity, is grounded on a passion for power. Here is the foundation and origin of inequality: ultimately, women have been subjugated by nothing but the law of the strongest (\textit{la loi du plus fort}).\textsuperscript{15} Thus, Poulain discerns the banal truth of inequality, as did Gournay: it is not reason, but the immature passion to own and control, that has allowed for the social subordination of women. Poulain summarizes this view in the following statement:

All of the reasons given by those who hold that \textit{le beau Sexe} is neither as noble nor as excellent as ours, are founded on men's belief that, being masters, it follows that everything is for them.\textsuperscript{16}

What is interesting in our present context is to examine the Cartesian foundations of Poulain's analysis in order to reveal the ethical force of Descartes' thought at work in Poulain's social critique. In the final analysis, men lack the virtue of generosity. Their rule by means of oppression also prevents women, in turn, from acquiring this virtue.

In a letter to Elisabeth, Descartes tells her that,

\begin{quote}
\ldots if someone saw everything in relation to himself, he would not hesitate to injure others greatly when he thought he could draw some slight advantage; and he would have no true friendship, no fidelity, no virtue at all.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

Ambition and lust for power can certainly be construed as qualities of selfishness, as attitudes by which, arguably, one imagines oneself to be the only human being in the world. As Descartes says, these passions preclude the possibility for genuine friendship, fidelity and virtue. Continuing in this Cartesian line of inquiry, it is customary, says Poulain, for those

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Égalité}, 23.
\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Égalité} 20.
\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Égalité}, 50.
\textsuperscript{17} To Elisabeth, 15 September 1645. AT IV 291/CSMK III 264.
who perpetrate violence to scorn and despise (*mépriser*), or be contumacious of, their victims. The term *mépriser* means either scorn or contempt. On Descartes' theory, contempt and scorn are different passions that derive from the same base: wonder mixed with hatred, and confidence or boldness.\(^{18}\) Wonder is the first all the passions: it is "a sudden surprise of the soul which brings it to consider with attention the objects that seem to it unusual and extraordinary."\(^{19}\) Hatred "is an emotion caused by the spirits, which impels the soul to want to be separated from objects which are presented to it as harmful."\(^{20}\) The passion of contempt "is the soul's inclination" to wonder at the "baseness or insignificance of an object"\(^{21}\) because we do not like it. Scorn (Descartes calls it *dédain*)

is our soul's inclination to despise a free cause in judging it so far beneath us that although by nature capable of doing good or evil, [we see it as] incapable of doing either to us.\(^{22}\)

Scorn gives us our first clue as to what is at stake in Poulain's analysis of men's attitude toward women. In scorning someone, we despise him or her as a "free cause." Now, on Cartesian terms, only another human being, or God, can be a free cause, because only humans and God have free will. Men's scorn, as well as their contempt and disdain, is connected somehow with women's natural free will. But why would one feel contempt or scorn (wonder, with hatred) at another's free will, and thus want "to be separated" from them? Desire for separation could mean, in the present context, the desire to not have another free cause in our proximity, to not consider them as our equal in freedom, but rather, as separated by being beneath and subjugated. Again, why so?

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\(^{18}\) AT XI 444, 455/CSMK I 383, 388.
\(^{19}\) AT XI 380/CSMK I 353.
\(^{20}\) AT XI 387/CSMK I 356.
\(^{21}\) AT XI 444/CSMK I 383.
\(^{22}\) AT XI 455/CSMK I 388.
Our first clue is in the remedy for contempt that Descartes proposes, which is generosity: a generous person does not feel contempt because he or she respects the free will of others. Generosity "prevents us from having contempt for others" because it makes us esteem ourselves and others on the sole basis of how the will, which is equal in each individual. Just as we can scorn only other free causes, so too we can only show respect or veneration for other free causes "which we judge capable of doing us good or evil, without our knowing which they will do." This is our second clue: both scorn and respect are connected with our lack of foreknowledge of others' actions, due to their innate freedom of will. But why, again would this be the case? Why would one feel a "sudden surprise of the soul," encounter as new and extraordinary, the free will of another? Why do we not like it? Because those who are scornful, on Descartes' framework, despise another's freedom, which must always appear to as extraordinary, novel and in some way beyond immediate reach.

Let us continue with Poulain's conjecture: the desire to dominate, on his view, cannot be satisfied except through violence and injustice. Acts of violence and injustice lead to contempt and scorn, which lead to the desire for further conquest, and so on: in other words, the desire to dominate is an insatiable one. Pascal expresses this when he writes: "That is my place in the sun. That is how the usurpation of the whole world began." Pushing this idea a bit further, what cannot be possessed, and thus deeply enrages a tyrant, is another human being's freedom. Another's freedom signifies that the "I", the ego, is not everything, cannot possess everything. Enraged, the tyrant seeks to subjugate the other's freedom. The truth of another's infinite freedom of mind is only obscurely intuited by the perpetrator, and is the source of the insatiable desire for further conquest. The other, although by nature capable of doing good or evil, is judged incapable of neither one. Underlying the passion of scorn is thus

23 AT XI 446/CSMK I 384.
24 AT XI 454/ CSMK I 388.
25 Pascal, Pensees 112.
an irrational judgement that another human being is less than human, that somehow their freedom can be eradicated. The desire to dominate, however, is doomed in advance to a certain kind of failure, for what is sought through acts of violence and injustice is fundamentally unattainable. What is sought is the destruction of another’s inner freedom, but this is impossible because inner freedom is infinite, where infinite means that it is ultimately not subject to quantification or qualification. The tangible aspects of an individual can be destroyed, and actual domination, oppression, and other acts of violence can be perpetrated. Nevertheless, something remains infinitely out of reach: this is the Stoic sense of freedom, presupposed not only in Descartes’ thought but in Poulain’s as well.

The kind of domination Poulain describes is, therefore, not governance through the strength of reason, but through the force of passion. Allowing oneself to be governed by appetites once one has matured into one’s powers of reason is, however, a travesty of natural justice. Because the mind is by nature free, subjugation violates the natural human right to use the power of reason. Not only does domination injure others, but it debases the perpetrator’s own dignity because he fails to govern himself by reason, fails to distance himself from his own passions. It is to act most ungenerously. On this logic of domination neither men nor women are free because both are dependent on external, contingent goods for their well-being. It must be replaced with a principle of perfect equality. Poulain offers such a principle, and I now turn to examine it.

The mind has no sex

Men have held absolute power not due to their superior minds, but through physical force fuelled by self-interest. Establishing this negative claim, however, is only the first step towards equality, towards the new principle of perfect sexual equality that “L’Esprit n’a
In order to show that women’s minds are not intrinsically inferior but only contingently so because of lack of opportunity, Poulain must first engage his readers in a reflective self-examination. What is needed is a disinterested attitude of impartiality and objectivity towards one’s own passions: Poulain gives the same advice to his readers that Descartes gave to Elisabeth, as well as to the readers of his *Meditations*. “I would not urge anyone,” he says,

... to read this book except those who are able and willing to meditate seriously with me, and to withdraw their minds from the sense and from all preconceived opinions.  

In the last chapter we saw that the practice of inner distancing is a much-criticized position in Descartes. Charles Taylor associates it with Descartes’ “new mode of rational mastery” and calls it a matter of “instrumental control.” He claims that this new notion of reason “does violence to our ordinary, embodied way of experiencing.” Poulain draws out, however, a positive meaning of detachment. For him, it signifies a state of indifference and disinterestedness. He argues that the ordinary, embodied way of experiencing is the source of men’s violence, due to a lack of disinterested self-reflection. Reason, in fact, has always been the weakest of human faculties. He writes:

In effect, when we sincerely consider all things human, in the past as well as the present, we find that all things are the same in one regard, which is that reason has always been the weakest [of human faculties]. It seems that all the histories were written solely in order to show what each one can easily see in their own time: since there have been men, force has always prevailed.

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26 Égalité 59.  
27 AT VII 9/CSM II 8.  
29 Taylor, 146.  
30 Égalité 17.  
31 Égalité 20.
Reason has been corrupted, as Gournay also claimed, by men’s passion for power and thus needs to be renewed, rescued from its dishonest use as an instrument of conquest. Purifying reason requires a deep reflection on the nature and origin of one’s passions and desires. Reason can be restored only by recognizing that freedom does not come from conquest over others but from knowing oneself. Reason’s renewal, for Poulain, is to be found in Descartes’ thought, the first sound and healthy (saine) philosophy that he has encountered.32

Being rational requires being disinterested, for only a stance of impartiality and objectivity with regard to oneself permits the judgement that there may be something more than what is visible from one’s current perspective, or desires, or inclinations. Disinterestedness is required in order to question one’s own subject position, to ask of oneself whether the ground of one’s desires is legitimate. These qualities are essential in order to achieve a distance from selfish bias and are thus a necessary element in true judgement.

Poulain recognizes, nevertheless, the difficulty of adopting such an attitude, especially on one’s own, and he proposes to guide his readers on how best to achieve a condition of objectivity. As a guide or a teacher, Poulain adopts Descartes’ first-person perspective: he speaks as an “I”, and in doing so sets the example to his readers to discover the truth on their own rational authority. Poulain offers, like the narrator of the Discourse on Method, a non-authoritative model for cultivating one’s reason. The narrator writes:

My present aim, then, is not to teach the method which everyone must follow in order to direct his reason correctly, but only to reveal how I have tried to direct my own. One who presumes to give precepts must think himself more skilful than those to whom he gives them.33

32 Égalité 59.
33 AT VI 4 /CSM I 112.
Moreover, in seeking out the views of individual men in order to discern the nature and origin of prejudice against women, Poulain follows the first rule in Descartes' method, which was,

... to never accept anything as true if I did not have evident knowledge of its truth: that is, carefully to avoid precipitate conclusions and preconceptions, and to include nothing more in my judgements than what presented itself to my mind so clearly and distinctly that I had no occasion to doubt it.34

Poulain thus begins by addressing the 'common man'. Adopting a rather pedestrian strategy, he sets out to interview the ordinary, perhaps uneducated, 'man on the street' in order to find out the general opinion on women. A democratic spirit underlies this strategy, and we have the sense that public opinion matters, that the way in which ordinary people think is relevant to the well-being of society. Addressing his work to the ordinary man indicates, too, Poulain's underlying optimism in the capacity of each individual to acquire virtue using his natural power of reason. Sustaining hope in the possibility of human reason is, however, a tremendous challenge: the results from his 'interviews' with individual men paint a dismal picture of the general view of women. He finds that on the whole, men think 'women were made for us', and that 'they are good for nothing but taking care of young children, and domestic work.'35 More spiritually inclined men tend to see intellectual and moral potential in women, but fundamentally, something will always reveal 'their Sex,' for the female sex is weak and lacking mental stability (fond d'esprit). Divine providence and the wisdom of men have thus rightly barred women's entry into the higher intellectual disciplines (les sciences) government, politics, and the professions. These opinions, on the whole, constitute one way of attacking women's reason, by deeming them incapable of distinguishing themselves by means of cultural production.

34 AT VI 18/ CSM I 120
There is only one conceivable way in which to surpass this logic of domination: by establishing a new theory of mind on rational principles, and the only rationalism that meets Poulain’s standards is Cartesian. Part Two of Égalité opens with a justification for why this so. He examines the opinions of intellectuals from the various disciplines, on the subject of women. He finds that, rather than being above common opinion, the misogyny of intellectual authorities is more deeply entrenched in prejudice. Passion and interest underlie the work of historians, jurists, poets and others. Historians, for instance, are unable to see history with “eyes of equity.”36 On one level, this is understandable, as intellectuals are ordinary men, carrying their prejudices with them into their professions. The problem, however, is at a deeper level: all of the disciplines are “steeped in the sentiments of the Ancients upon whose Authority their certainty is grounded.”37 The question is, their certainty about what? As Poulain shows in the case of philosophers, what is at issue is the meaning of “nature” and “reason.”

Philosophers have a greater degree of responsibility than other intellectuals. This is because, while appearance and resemblance suffice for poets and orators, and historians are content with the degree of certainty afforded by testimony, philosophers are supposed to be superior to these disciplines in their degree of understanding. Everyone relies on their objective and rational knowledge about such concepts as “nature” and “reason.” When others discover that philosophers share their prejudices, they feel justified in their beliefs. In this way, it is not difficult to see how prejudice becomes entrenched. On this view, philosophers must take the lead in changing the common view of women. Philosophers, unfortunately, are even more entrenched than other intellectuals in this morass of prejudice. Like other men, they carried a negative view of women with them into the Schools (les Écoles) Here, they

35 Égalité 17.
36 Égalité 53.
37 Égalité 47.
were not taught the means to doubt and clarify their prejudices that they had acquired long ago, without reflection. This is because the Scholastic conceptions of mind, body, nature and reason simply reinforced the current views of women's inferiority.

Poulain thus prepares the reader to make the transition to a Cartesian framework of understanding. He argues that Scholasticism does not properly distinguish mind from body, and that these ideas are known by the mind alone. Poulain especially singles out the key Cartesian notion of an irreducible gap, or interval, between the human and the natural: this interval, he says, is mistakenly construed by the Scholastics as merely a matter of degrees of separation. He writes:

And what they [les Écoles] ordinarily teach serves very well as proof that the difference between us and the beasts is only a matter of more and less. This is the core feature of Descartes' dualism: the essence of mind in itself is not an abstraction from sensibility. Its essence is thought, meaning that it is immaterial, intangible and the locus of both individual identity and reason's activity. The body in itself is the organ for understanding, and the bodies of all human beings have the same functions. Only this rationalist principle of mind, claims Poulain, can contradict sexism. He thus bases upon Descartes' real distinction argument a new principle of perfect equality: the mind has no sex (L'Esprit n'a point de sexe). An important principle immediately follows from this, which is that sexual difference is a difference of body alone, and that one's sex has but one natural significance: the capacity to reproduce. The mind assents to or denies this function as it sees fit, but beyond that, no value is inherent in sexual identity. Interestingly, Poulain shows no fear of confusion in sexual identity based on this radical principle that undercuts the

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38 Égalité 56
39 Égalité 56
40 Égalité 56
41 Égalité 59
naturalness of gender identity. This is evidenced in his second work, *De l'éducation des dames* (1674) in which he suggests that men ought to consider effeminacy as an admirable male character.

**Reason’s renewal through equal education**

An odd statement follows upon Poulain’s explanation of what distinguishes mind from body. He claims that no lesser amount of mind is needed to learn needlepoint and tapestry than to learn physics. What kind of a claim is this? There are two important points implicit in this claim: first, he is making a point about the nature of the mind engaged in the activity, that is, about the nature of mind in itself; second, in his juxtaposition tapestry/physics, Poulain is subtly accentuating the prejudice we have about the relative value of each activity. We will see that he, like Descartes, calls for a change in how we measure the worth of an individual’s actions.

On the first point, the human mind does not admit of ‘more’ or ‘less’ in degrees of completeness or reality. The mind is essentially whole, rational, active, indivisible and distinct from the body, considered separately from an individual’s actions. This consideration underlies Poulain’s principle that the mind has no sex, and it allows us to understand another crucial dimension of the nature/custom distinction: the sexual division of vocations and occupations is not natural but socially prescribed. I turn to this now, and I will return, below, to the second point about the value attributed to different vocations.

**The nature/custom divide in education.**

Although the power of reason is in principle equal in men and women, there is a sharp divide in its practice. In other words, the directions and applications of a woman’s
mind are very different from those of men. I suggest that we see Poulain’s analysis of women’s education as an important gloss on Descartes’ *Discourse on Method*. It is worthwhile, therefore, to reiterate Descartes’ opening statement:

[The] power of judging well and distinguishing the true from the false – which we properly call ‘good sense’ or ‘reason’ – is naturally equal in all people and consequently [this indicates] that the diversity of our opinions does not arise because some of us are more reasonable than others, but solely because we direct our thoughts along different paths and do not attend to the same things.  

Men and women learn to direct their thoughts along different paths, and to attend to very different things. This idea helps us to analyse one of the obstacles to women’s emancipation identified by Poulain (mentioned earlier): the fact that women themselves participate in their own subjugation. Sexual inequality persists because women themselves tolerate their condition, seeing it as natural. Poulain says that this because they either do not think properly about their own true nature, or, being born and raised in a condition of dependency, they see themselves as men see them. In other words, they see neither their own innate potential nor their intrinsic inner worth.

There is another very interesting element to Poulain’s analysis, however, that complicates the matter. On the presupposition that not only is the mind free and active (*L’esprit agit toujours*) but also that each individual desires and seeks happiness and self-perfection, we can see what follows. Far from not exercising their reason, women have always employed it in order to achieve self-perfection, self-esteem, dignity and happiness, using the means available to them. Seeing that men deprived them of the means to attract attention by the power of their minds (*se signaler par l’esprit*), they applied themselves

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42 AT VI 2/ CSM I 111. I translate “hommes” as “people”, thus slightly modifying the CSM translation.
43 Égalité 21
44 Ibid.
45 Égalité 58.
uniquely to cultivating the attractiveness of their appearance to men (*se sont jetés dans la bagatelle*). The means available to them, however, did not promote their independence of mind, nor could they possibly hold out the hope for real happiness, virtue and knowledge.

In *Égalité* Poulain offers this account of the typical ‘education’ of a young woman:

Dress, education, physical exercise, could not be more different for women than for men. A young woman is essentially raised to be fearful about everything: she is made to feel insecure when not under the wing of her mother, or under the eyes of a governess. She is afraid to be alone in the house, made to fear ghosts in its every corner. In the streets, even in church, there is something to fear if she is unaccompanied.

It is pressed upon a young woman that the thing of utmost concern is her appearance: to this she applies her entire mind. She is so often physically appraised by others, she hears so much talk on beauty, that it preoccupies her more than anything else. The compliments a girl is given if she is beautiful induce her to place her happiness in this end alone. Since she is offered no other subjects of conversation, she limits her life goals to the cultivation of her looks, her body, her capacity for charm and submissive devotion. Dancing, writing and reading are the height of a girls’ activities, and her library consists in little books of devotion. Her knowledge (*science*) is reduced to sewing. The mirror is her master and the oracle she consults. Balls, theatre, and fashion are the subject of women’s discussions, and they view their little circles as famous Academies, where they go to learn all the latest women’s gossip. If it does happen that a woman distinguishes herself from the commonplace by reading certain books, that she took great pains to acquire, in order to open her mind, she is often obliged to hide them. The majority of her companions, out of jealousy or otherwise, never fail to accuse her, and other women like her, of *vouloir faire les précieuses*.46

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46 Égalité 97
Poulain does not only look at women of high social standing but, in his egalitarian, democratic spirit, he also reveals the miserable life of a common woman (roturière), "constrained to earn a living through menial labour" and her mind,

...is even more useless to her As soon as she reaches an appropriate age, she is forced to learn some occupation suitable for women, and the necessity of working without cease in some mindless labour, prevents her from thinking of anything else. When a woman raised in this manner reaches marrying age, her prospects do not improve: she is either confined to a marriage not of her choosing, or she is cloistered in a convent, or otherwise she is forced to finish her life as she started it, in mindless, menial work.\(^\text{47}\)

Nowhere, says Poulain, do we find evidence of solid instruction in the knowledge that is imparted to women. On the contrary,

...it seems that society has made use of this sort of education for women in order to abase their courage, to plunge their minds into obscurity, and to fill them with nothing but vanity and foolish trivialities. Their so-called education serves, in fact, to smother all of the seeds of virtue and truth in them, rendering useless for any disposition toward great things. And it serves to extirpate the desire and ambition for the perfection that men strive for, by removing the means to achieve it.\(^\text{48}\)

In this remarkable analysis, we see that Poulain, long before Simone de Beauvoir, long before Nietzsche, is ruthlessly clear in his depiction of the deforming effects of social history and socialization on women, in his examination of the dreadful, self-reductive methods they have been constrained to use in order to obtain these trivial ends for which they have been taught to aim, in his portrayal of the social condemnation a woman faces in choosing other, more enlightened ends. Poulain does not write, however, with disdain or contempt for women, either for the conventionally artful, professionally feminine, or for the unenlightened labourers. Instead, he seeks to effect a change in women's education.

\(^{47}\) Égalité 98.
I want to draw attention, first, to the phrase “society has made use of this sort of education for women” in the above citation, and to discuss the idea of “use.” Women’s minds are capable of rational activity, and thus have a use, but these uses are proscribed. In the account, above, of a typical education, Poulain writes:

If it does happen that a woman distinguishes herself from the commonplace by reading certain books, that she took great pains to acquire, in order to open her mind, she is often obliged to hide them.⁴⁹

A woman must hide her reading, especially on intellectual matters. Geneviève Fraisse, in her study of the status of women shortly after the French Revolution, discusses this traditional question of what a woman’s education is for. As she observes, the purported danger of women being allowed to read, is that reading leads to writing.⁵⁰ Women who read more than “little books of devotion” as Poulain says, might want to do more, subsequently, than write private letters. They might try their hand at “novels, satires, political essays, texts that transformed a woman into a woman author,”⁵¹ in which case it would be no longer clear whether she were a woman at all. Reading is thus like a contagious disease, which if allowed to spread among women, would stop at nothing short than a contamination of society as men have established it. Women can speak, of course, but, as Poulain says, only among themselves, on trivial topics:

Balls, theatre, and fashion are the subject of women’s discussions, and they view their little circles as famous Academies, where they go to learn all the latest women’s gossip.

Under no circumstances should a woman’s reading and speaking go beyond these private, confined places. A woman’s speech, says Fraisse

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⁴⁹ Ibid.
⁵⁰ Égalité 98.
...should leave no trace and witness: private speech is at the furthest remove from writing, which endures, and from public speeches made before a crowd.

The point is clear: men feared that knowledgeable women might acquire a measure of power, that their education might lead to a profession, and thus to an impact on culture and society at large. The fear and subsequent prohibitions and strategy of exclusion is expressed by Erasmus: he endorsed private study for young women as a way of keeping them out of trouble by engaging not only their hands but their "whole soul". He wrote

The distaff and spindle are in truth the tools of all women and suitable for avoiding idleness... Even people of wealth and birth train their daughters to weave tapestries or silken cloths... It would be better if they taught them to study, for study busies the whole soul... It is not only a weapon against idleness but also a means of impressing the best precepts upon a girl's mind and of leading her to virtue.52

On this view, we see that women can indeed learn, but learning can be merely ornamental and aesthetic, another form of self-adorment. Literacy and learning can be just as much a trap for women as anything else, if it only amounts to fantasy and escape, and this is why he is critical of les précieuses. Although he endorses their presence, their aesthetic and intellectual activities, there is an aspect of pedantry in their activities that risks being an obstacle rather than a vehicle to emancipation. As Lisa Jardine points out in her analysis of women's education in Renaissance Italy, learning can be like so much "fine needlepoint" for women. As Lisa Jardine writes,

Within the humanist confraternity (sic) the accomplishment of the educated woman (the 'learned lady') is an end it itself, like fine needlepoint or the ability to perform ably on lute or virginals. It is not viewed as a training for anything, perhaps not even for virtue (except insofar as all these activities keep their idle hands and minds busy). As signs of cultivation all such accomplishments

51 Fraisse 11.
satisfactorily connote a leisured life, a background which regards the decorative as adding lustre to rank and social standing, and the ability to purchase the services of the best available teachers for such comparatively useless skills.53

This illuminates in a new way Descartes’ claim that “it is not enough to have a good mind; the main thing is to apply it well.”54 For Descartes, knowledge, although intrinsically worthwhile to acquire, is not necessarily liberating, nor does it automatically entail virtue: Descartes says that the “greatest souls are capable of the greatest vices as well as the greatest virtues.” In the case of women, it is possible that learning is no greater vehicle of liberation than needlepoint. In practical terms, a life immersed in books, could prove, ultimately, to be a life of fantasy with no application or significance.

Ultimately the problem, as Poulain takes it up, is that only certain kinds of learning are allowed, and thus certain directions of the mind are proscribed. Women’s reason and education are, in this way, instrumental: the ends of their learning are only for the purposes of pleasing men. As Poulain says, a woman “limits her life goals to the cultivation of her looks, her body, her capacity for charm and submissive devotion.” And why else would the mirror be “her master and the oracle she consults?” What is denied, on this framework of a proscribed, instrumental education, is the idea that a woman’s knowledge is of intrinsic worth. This view holds that a woman’s knowledge is ultimately for some other purpose, because a woman only exists for some purpose outside of herself. She must learn how to be beautiful, for another, she must behave with propriety, for another. Women learn not to produce knowledge but only to receive it, not to invent but to inspire, not to be geniuses but to be muses for genius and not to be lovers but merely beloved. Women’s happiness and virtue are entirely in the realm the empirical and thus the contingent. Her well-being is proportional to her good fortune of being looked upon favourably by a man. On Poulain’s

53 Jardines (Hutson, 1999) 69.
view, women feel happy and successful based on a certain kind of response they get about their appearance, certain behaviours they adopt. This shows, too, that both the mind and the passions undergo an education. Our passions are the bearers of our emotional history. Women are taught to fear precisely the kinds of qualities that constitute an independent, autonomous individual. Rather than deriving self-esteem from having a strong and focused will, they learn that this kind of personality is perceived as unacceptable.

On this view a woman is ultimately only a relative being and is thus denied the freedom to cultivate her full humanity. This returns us to Poulain, whose proposed Cartesian method of learning is antithetical to this entire outlook. As we know, for Descartes “nothing but free will can produce our greatest happiness” and its good use is our “the supreme good.” Descartes discusses this in his letter Queen Christina of 20 November, 1647. The supreme good of each individual consists in

... a firm and constant resolution to carry out to the letter all the things which one judges to be best, and to employ all the powers of one’s mind in finding out what these are. This by itself constitutes all the virtues; this alone really deserves praise and glory; this alone, finally, produces the greatest and most solid contentment in life. So I conclude that it is this which constitutes the supreme good. The good use of free will is Poulain’s governing principle for a radical new theory of women’s education. He proposes an educational method for the whole women, mind, body and emotions. As a genuine egalitarian, however, Poulain says that his educational plan is just as useful for men as for women.

In the fifth and final dialogue a conversation takes place between Eulalie and Stasimaque, on the subject of which philosophy is best to learn, and which texts should be on everyone’s reading list. Eulalie is the focus of a philosophical education unfolding over the

54 AT VI 2/CSM I 111.
55 AT V 82/CSMK III, 324-325
course of five dialogues that are hosted by a generous and highly accomplished woman, Sophie. Timandre is one of Sophie's relatives, while Stasimaque is her close friend, and author of the recently published *De l'Égalité des Deux Sexes*. The conversations, in which Stasimaque initiates Eulalie's philosophical education, take place in Sophie's home and garden. The following is the one of the final exchanges between Eulalie and Stasimaque, coming after she has fully absorbed the new, Cartesian way of thinking and is now ready to seek her own path in the world.

**Eulalie:**

Since you wish me to be capable of accounting for my conduct, I beg of you to tell me how I might respond when others ask me why I prefer the Cartesian Philosophy to all the other philosophies.

**Stasimaque:**

I propose that you tell them about our conversations on philosophy, as well as why I recommended that you read Descartes' *Discourse on Method*, his *Meditations*, his *Treatise on Man*, his *Treatise on the Passions*, his *Principles*, as well as the first volume of his letters to Queen Christina of Sweden and Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia. I thought that these letters, especially, would show you that Descartes did not judge women to be incapable of achieving the highest forms of knowledge.

You might then tell those who ask, that my aim, initially, was to save you the time and trouble of learning Latin and Greek, without which you cannot properly study Aristotle, Plato, or Epicurus. I thought that, instead, I ought to give you a French philosophy. Among those that we have, I know of no others that are more appropriate than that of Descartes. And to show you that I do not esteem him merely out of partisanship, I will tell you why and how it seems to me that his philosophy has all of the qualities and conditions that you could possibly hope for in a healthy philosophy (*une saine Philosophie*).
You remember, Eulalie, that we saw, in our conversations, how the truth has no greater enemy than prejudice, that we must absolutely purge all of our prejudices in order to be happy and to acquire genuine wisdom. We saw that nearly all of us have enough reason and good sense to find the truth, that our search for truth must begin within ourselves, and that we are justified in believing that we have found it when, in attending to things, we form clear and distinct ideas. We must therefore conclude that the best Philosophy is that whose Method and Principles conform most closely to these maxims. I know of none that conforms better than that of Descartes. No other gives a better account of the nature of prejudice, nor has any other fought more strenuously against it. His philosophy supposes that most people have enough good sense and reason to conduct themselves independently. It offers clear and distinct ideas of the nature of truth, reason, mind and body. And, whereas the Ancients only wished for this excellent knowledge, which formed the subject of our conversations, Descartes undertook to discover it. Moreover, he had such wonderful success in his search for truth that it appears the only thing those coming after him need concern themselves with is studying his thought.

And what is worthy of esteem in the execution of such a great project is that he conducted it with only those few principles I just outlined for you, when we were talking about the facility with which one can know oneself.

If what I say here is indeed the case, you will clearly judge, Eulalie, that I could easily continue with my praise of our Philosopher in order to justify both your choice and mine, and to show you that I was right in not recommending any Scholastic works for you to read. Those that I myself have read do not even speak of prejudice and of self-knowledge, as though these words were not yet in use, and that what they signified were not among those things that exist in the human mind.

At the same time, Eulalie, I assure you that I do not presume Descartes to be infallible, nor that every thought he advances is true and free of difficulty. I do not pretend that he ought to be blindly followed, nor do I think that others cannot discover anything as good, even better, than what he left us. I tell you only that I believe him to be one of the most reasonable philosophers among us, that his method is the most universal, the most natural,
and the most in conformity with good sense, as well as with the nature of the human mind. His is the most appropriate for discerning truth from falsity, even in Descartes’ own works.\textsuperscript{57}

The whole discussion is for Eulalie’s benefit, as it is her desire to acquire wisdom, and to this end she asks Stasimaque to teach her. He agrees, on two conditions: first, that she not show him that “blind deference that women ordinarily have toward those whom they consult”. Nothing displeases him more than that, he tells her. Eulalie should, on the contrary, approve only of those things of which she is convinced of their goodness. He asks her to consider what he tells her not as rules or precepts, but as “the history of the path I would follow if I were to recommence my studies.” Stasimaque advises Eulalie to mistrust him as if her were a man with the intention of catching her by surprise.

Second, he asks her to respond to three questions: Does Eulalie know \textit{what} she is, and what is the present state of her soul? 2) Does she know what she is asking when she asks to know the means for acquiring \textit{les plus belles connaissances}? 3) Does she feel capable of the greatest resolution of which a human being is capable? It is essential that the teacher knows these things about each pupil individually so that, together, teacher and student can examine exactly what direction is suitable to take.

Poulain sees Eulalie as a singular individual, capable of taking on a rational reflection on her own life and directing her mind toward a future of her choice. He specifically addresses her, and sees it as being of utmost importance to know her particular history. This brings me to an important point. Along with the view that the mind has no sex, Poulain holds, as Descartes does, that as a \textit{unified} human being, each individual is singular in their constitution, and cannot be reduced to a stereotype. Every human mind must be treated with the same respect and dignity. Every mind, moreover, means \textit{each} mind: Poulain understands

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{57} My translation, with several amendments and additions. \textit{Éducation}, Fourth Dialogue, 322-327.}
Descartes' principle of *notions primitives* and understands that both dualism and embodiment are made apparent to us via innate ideas. On this view, each mind is rational, but each human being is unique and must be according particular, not just general, respect and attention. Moreover, our individuality, including sexual individuality, is contingently developed, according to external circumstances, and particular character traits are not, in themselves, intrinsically worthy or unworthy, or necessarily attached to sex.

According to Poulain, the dispositions we receive upon birth are inherently neither good nor bad, and we often err in attributing to nature what comes from practice. We torment ourselves, says Poulain, in seeking the reason why we are each subject to certain faults and we each have a particular manner of conduct. This is because we have not observed the effects on each one of us of habit, practice, education, the external environment. That is to say, the effects of sex, age, fortune, employment, societal status. All of these conditions result in an infinity of styles of thought and passions, and they predispose each mind in an equally singular way to look differently at the same truths. On this view, even sex difference does not defines one's identity for sex is a feature of body, not of mind, and is only one of an indefinite number of factors that constitute one's character. There is no intrinsic worth or inferiority in physical nature, no greater or lesser nobility. There are strong and weak characters in both men and women, depending upon their life experiences. Being “a man” or “a woman” are otherwise arbitrary and contingent labels that are weighed down with much conceptual baggage.$^58$

If each individual is contingently formed as a whole human being, we are not justified in-group stereotyping; we must attend to each individual. Poulain puts the idea this way: temperament does not consist in an indivisible point. Just as no two people have an identical temperament, so too we cannot determine precisely in what manner each person differs from
the next and yet this does not prevent each individual, no matter how troubled, or unusual, or somehow out of the ordinary, from being as capable as the next. Presupposed here is the irreducible freedom and infinite potential for perfectibility of each individual.

On Poulain’s view, generalizations, stereotypes, about sexual difference (combined with a prejudicial tendency to view women as inferior, based on scholastic anthropology) are due to inattention to the particularity of individual women. On this view, error, and vice, come from not attending properly, and then making judgements on the basis of inattentive perception and observation of particulars. Generalization is an error, on his view, because it comes from not examining with enough precision everything to be remarked in individual women. This happens to those who, having a confused mind, do not sufficiently distinguish what belongs to each thing, and attribute to one that which belongs to another, merely because they find things together in the same subject. This is why people attribute the many differences from men that they see in women - in manners, societal functions, and capacities - to a general, confused idea of ‘women’s temperament’ without making the effort to clearly discern distinct causes for each thing.

Poulain is making a very important point about the nature of judgement. He is saying that to make a reasoned judgement about someone requires one to be finely attuned to particularity, to individuality. Generalizations and stereotypes are instances of crude, unrefined vision and judgement, and these are never distinct, never accurate. But he is making a further point of even greater ethical significance: temperament is not an “indivisible point”, it is not simply “there” to be pinned down. This is the element of freedom in each human being, the indefinite, ongoing becoming that constitutes a human being. He

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58 Egalité 96.
59 Ibid.
60 Egalité 93.
makes this point in *Education*, and it applies even to one’s own self: the process of understanding both oneself and others is never finished.

To be ethically rational in our assessment of others is to have, in the words of Martha Nussbaum, a "high type of vision of and response to the particular." This manner of judging is very much like aesthetic judgement, it is an ability that we seek and value in our greatest artists, and especially our novelists, whose value for us is above all practical and never detached from our questions about how to live. Fine conduct requires above all correct description; such description is itself a form of morally assessable conduct. "To ‘put’ things is very exactly and responsibly and interminably to do them."

As Descartes says in the *Discourse*, it is never enough to have a good mind. Rather, the point is to apply it well to the conduct of life. Reason, on this view, always requires attention to the particular. Poulain gives to Descartes' concept of clear and distinct ideas an ethical significance: those who discriminate by stereotyping have made judgements without clear and distinct ideas. His, like Descartes', is a philosophy of *each one*. A person’s character, emotional disposition, is not best understood according to an abstract framework (a theory, for instance, of women’s nature), but according to that person’s history, the course of her ordinary life, her conversations, her habits. Individuals have histories, or *stories*, and the only way to understand ourselves and others is to attend to them.

As Nussbaum writes:

The rich contextuality of good choice [judgement], and its attentiveness to particulars in all their contextual embeddedness, imply that we should not expect to be able to plunge in so near the end of a complex story and comprehend or assess everything. [A] good doctor will neither prescribe in advance of a full scrutiny of this patient’s history nor assess the work of a fellow doctor without

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62 Ibid.
making herself master of all the contextual material this doctor used in arriving at her choice...  

Poulain radicalizes this advice by applying it to the context of women's lives and education. He removes all of the instructions, interdictions and cautionary tales that are normally a part of women's education, telling his readers that they should do the reverse. He writes:

Observe everything, look at everything, listen to everything without scruple.
Examine everything, judge everything, reason about everything.

In the field of knowledge, Poulain removes all constraints for women, all demarcations of the licit from the illicit. He establishes a progression of knowledge, an order, based on the Cartesian method of the internal, indefinite construction of chains of ideas. Poulain's philosophy of education ruptured the structure of closure that governed women's education. This arises directly from Cartesian method: In learning how to reason according to Descartes' method, one learns how to approach any subject matter.

Poulain's focus on the central importance of education is not a 17th century anomaly, for this was the century of education: new schools, run by various religious orders, for both boys and girls, sprang up in Europe and the New World; new theories of education, even for girls, were published in France (by, for example, Fenelon, Fleury, Maintenon). The differences in male and female education, and their attendant theories, however, were striking: girls were taught to be submissive, domestic, devout, not to think, while boys were prepared for independence and professional careers. This led to girls' inability to even recognize their own servitude. Eulalie points out just how privileged are those afforded the opportunity to doubt, to exercise their free will: many young women, for example, do not even recognize the need to distinguish between truth and error. Proper instruction (in

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63 Nussbaum, 88.
64 Education, 311.
65 Bernard Magné. Introduction to Éducation, 6.
Cartesian method) is thus essential, for women cannot begin to cultivate their minds without first recognizing that they have a mind of their own, nor can they engage in the search for truth without realizing that truth is not necessarily what they presently live or see in front of them.

Poulain draws out and develops Descartes' idea of a universal method of education based on a view of singular individuality. Descartes too had a plan for educational reform that involved a complete overturning of Scholastic teaching, in both method and content. According to John Carriero66. Descartes saw his philosophy,

...as competing with that taught in the schools by Thomistic, Jesuit faculties like the one responsible for his own education at La Flèche. Indeed, one of Descartes' major ambitions was for his philosophy to replace the philosophy that was taught in the schools.

Formal schooling is not necessary for learning his new method of thinking and acquiring knowledge. Anyone who can buy this book and can read French,67 can educate themselves. He has obviated the need for specialized training in Scholastic Latin. In fact, those who have not been hindered by the prejudices embedded in Scholasticism (above all else, the view that the mind is partially dependent upon the body) are better candidates for his new educational system. Descartes' method is revolutionary, then, in two ways. First, by writing in the vernacular, access to the new method can reach a much wider readership, especially literate but under-educated women. Second, the method itself is a means to increase one's knowledge by degrees, to the highest degree possible for any person in this life, and the steps are laid out in the Discourse. Self-perfection is limited for each person only by the finitude of human existence and by the varying capacities of individual understandings. This contrasts

67 French is the original language of the Discourse and of the 1647 translations of both the Meditations the Principles of Philosophy.
with the view that women can reach only the level of the most common man (as Gournay stated), that true knowledge is the privilege only of men.

Descartes’ program has one core idea and starting point, one that Poulain also adopts: education begins internally, not externally. True knowledge must begin with the knower, the subject of knowledge. He explicitly states this in Rule Four of the *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, where he points out that he is not merely interested in developing new rules for the study of mathematics, but a method of far broader scope:

I would not value these Rules so highly if they were good only for solving those pointless problems with which arithmeticians and geometers are inclined to while away their time, for in that case all I could credit myself with achieving would be to dabble in trifles with greater subtlety than they.....But if one attends closely to my meaning, one will readily see that ordinary mathematics is far from my mind here, that it is quite another discipline I am expounding, and that these illustrations are more its outer garments than its inner parts. This discipline should contain the primary rudiments of human reason and extend to the discovery of truths in any field whatever. 68

Descartes’ innovation, and subsequently Poulain’s is to articulate a universal method of knowledge, and education for that knowledge, that applies to any subject matter, that can be adopted by any individual with a will to teach herself. Descartes also stresses the importance of how to teach. The Discourse and the Meditations offer, not a set of instructions, but a single, unnamed individual who serves as an example and a guide, opening the way to anyone who cares to follow it using their own mind. This is a very important point: the acquisition of knowledge is itself an act of freedom because one only learns by actively thinking through every step of the way, passive reception is not true reason.

68 AT X, 374/CSMK I, 17.
In like fashion, Poulain has written *Éducation*, so that women can instruct *themselves*. Its title does *not* mean that it is less useful to men, says Poulain, for the same reason that works written for men are equally useful for women: there is only one method to instruct both, as they are of the same species. He claims to be expanding the meaning of the term "education." Poulain takes it to normally refer to children, but he thinks it ought to include the teaching of teachers, and that ultimately his new method ought to be used as a new philosophy for the education of children, to ensure that they reach true maturity of mind. This point is especially significant in light of the fact that women have traditionally been educated not for independence but for further dependence, in a framework of closure, as if they were children.

Poulain wishes to remove all women (and all adults) from an infantile state of dependency. A teacher must herself know how to learn, and the nature of learning ought naturally to give rise to a desire and capacity to share the learning in a certain way. Teaching is showing: a teacher must show the pupil how to illumine her own mind, how to cultivate the seeds of truth within herself. And this must begin with the nature of the self. Teaching must never be dogmatic, but must cultivate freedom. Stasimaque tells Eulalie that she has the power of reason, that she must use it and never sacrifice it blindly to anyone. He does not allow Eulalie to call him her master: She tells Stasimaque that she wants to show him, "just as if to my master, the use I have made of the past two lessons he gave me." To which he responds, "Please do not use those words, as each one is here for herself or himself. I hate the word "master" for several reasons, and I do not wish to take on that quality with a beautiful person who is soon to be my teacher."

An important point to make is that Poulain addresses *all* women in his call for equality of freedom, not just exceptional individuals. In this Poulain seems to straddle the

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69 *Éducation, Avertissement*, ii.
ancien régime of absolute rule by monarchy and the future world of Enlightenment and democracy: his prefatory letter is addressed to an exceptional woman (a learned princess), who is to serve as a role model for a better future world for all women. But the dialogues themselves sketch out that future world, where an ordinary girl is initiated into knowledge, a life of the mind. Poulain wants to see ordinary women, doing everyday work of virtue and courage, as the true galerie des femmes fortes.

This is in the spirit of Descartes’ autobiographical but anonymous model of education— which includes everyone while neither about, nor addressed to, any individual in particular. Reason is construed as a faculty common to all human beings not just, in the case of women, a virtue of the odd exceptionally fine female minds. Unlike Gournay, Poulain does not follow the established practice in writing about women, of producing lists of famous and accomplished women in history. His form of argumentation is generally from reason, not from history. Perhaps Poulain recognized that arguing for equality from exceptional cases could turn out to be detrimental: Fraisse remarks that the endless discussions in this querelle literature of women who were exceptions—the heroines, the literary and political figures—were in fact an excellent means of establishing that the exception proves the rule that on the whole women are inferior to men in their brain, reason, creative activity. The opposition of exception and rule is grounded on the supposition that, as a rule, it means something in particular to be like or act like a man, or a woman. But, in keeping with his theory of socially constructed “natures”, Poulain refuses to go along with fixed gender types, arguing that men ought to consider adopting effeminacy as a positive character trait.

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70 Egalité 39. Poulain does not give a reference, but I take this expression to be a reference to Pierre Le Moyne’s La Galerie des femmes fortes (Paris 1647) a book recounting exceptional heroic deeds by women in history.
71 Éducation 38.
72 Stuurman (1997) 630.
73 Fraisse, 46.
Poulain takes up both Descartes’ inclusiveness and his emphasis on the role of the teacher, and further radicalizes Descartes’ principles of education by giving them a social context and a concrete reality: he addresses his work explicitly to girls and women. Poulain thus carries out the project that Gournay started – outlining the nature of and reasons for women’s actual inequalities – using Descartes’ philosophy. Poulain argues for a complete equality in intellectual and moral capacities, and after setting out his argument, in Egalité, he puts this argument into practice in the education of Eulalie.

In the Fourth Dialogue, the four characters discuss a core principle shared by both Poulain and Descartes: knowledge begins with self-knowledge. Stasimaque, on this view, is not Eulalie’s master, but one who directs her to look inward, at the nature of her soul, her body, her passions, her prejudices, and to strive for clarity and distinctness about herself and what she is capable of achieving. Moreover, her self-knowledge is never complete, for one may plumb, but never fully illuminate, the depths of one’s own soul. Self-knowledge is thus not a map of the mind, but is an activity, a form of desire for knowledge, which is never-ending. He adopts the Ancient definition of philosophy as love of wisdom, the desire to acquire reason and wisdom. As a philosopher, Eulalie is a lover of knowledge, not merely a collector and repository of information.

Eulalie opens the fourth discussion by telling her story of the previous day: last evening after the last (third) conversation held by the foursome chez Sophie, Eulalie goes home and goes up to bed earlier than usual, in order to reflect on what she has learned from Stasimaque up to this point. After attending for some time to her memory of their preceding discussion, she recounts having an experience akin to a blindfold being removed from her eyes. A thousand things that were obscure gain sudden clarity for her. Eulalie has now experienced herself as a thinking thing, engaging in reflection by herself, alone in her room. Solitariness is a necessary condition for one’s autonomy. Stasimaque remarks on the
difficulty of achieving genuine solitude, being alone with oneself, and true to oneself. But Eulalie has succeeded, and she has assimilated and internalized the essence of their discussion, so that her thoughts are not merely reminiscences of Stasimaque's teaching on how to conduct her thinking, but rather, they belong to her. Eulalie's account of experiencing a solitary joy of knowledge is radical, on the view that women's joy is traditionally purported to come from the transports of love with a man. Upon completing the review of her state of mind on the previous evening before going to sleep, she wishes for Stasimaque to tell her how she might progress from the point she has reached. He will not offer further guidance, however, until Eulalie has completed her story. He needs to know every detail of her current condition before making an assessment, and this includes the dream she had that night.⁷⁴

Eulalie offers her own interpretation of the dream, in which she identifies all of the people in it as real people that she actually knows. Stasimaque listens carefully and then suggests that she look at the symbolism and meaning of the dream more figuratively, and as it relates to her own inner thought processes and reflections. He suggests that the meaning of the dream lies not without, but within. The buried treasure, he tells her, is both a universal symbol for everyone, and particular to her, for it symbolizes self-knowledge. The treasure is

...a portable library, that we each carry within ourselves, and in which there is nothing but good sense and truth for those who have the key to it and know how to use it. It is the treasure of la science and wisdom, which consists in self-knowledge.⁷⁵

This dream is the culmination of a long process of creative, intellectual activity, signalling a deep level of absorption and assimilation of her new knowledge. The dream, furthermore, and the inner growth that it symbolizes, was not merely a spontaneous product

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⁷⁴ See Appendix 2. I include a translation of the dream.
⁷⁵ Éducation 212.
of imagination. The capacity for reason and intellectual growth is innate, and it is the role of education to guide individuals in the discovery of their inner "treasure."

This framework allows for a new perspective on Descartes' well-known call to use knowledge for the ends of human betterment. In Part Six of the Discourse on Method, he writes:

For they [his new principles] opened my eyes to the possibility of gaining knowledge which would be very useful in life, and of discovering a practical philosophy which might replace the speculative philosophy taught in the schools. Through this philosophy we could know the power and action of fire, water, air, the stars, the heavens and all the other bodies in our environment, as distinctly as we know the various crafts of our artisans; and we could use this knowledge – as the artisans use theirs – for all the purposes for which it is appropriate, and thus make ourselves, as it were, the lords and masters of nature. This is desirable not only for the invention of innumerable devices which would facilitate our enjoyment of the fruits of the earth and all the goods we find there, but also, and most importantly, for the maintenance of health, which is undoubtedly the chief good and foundation of all the other goods in this life.76

The practical application of reason is an integral part of it. Descartes calls for knowledge to bear on the real, to be conducive to greater understanding of nature as a whole, including human nature, to make progress for humanity. Moreover he calls upon all of the "best minds" to engage in this practical search for truth. He writes:

And I judged that the best remedy against these two obstacles [to the search for truth, which Descartes judges to be brevity of life or lack of scientific experiments] was to communicate faithfully to the public what little I had discovered, and to urge the best minds to try and make further progress by helping with the necessary observations, each according to his inclination and ability, and by communicating to the public everything they learn. Thus, by building upon the work of our

76 AT VI 62/CSM I 142.
predecessors and combining the lives and labours of many, we might make much
greater progress working together than anyone could make on his own.\textsuperscript{77}

True knowledge is inherently communal in nature, and is not an elite enterprise for the select
few: the search for truth serves to build community and cultivate humanity. The universality
of truth, in this sense, is in keeping with Descartes’ view of ownership and possession: for
him, as we saw in his account of virtue, the only thing that truly belongs to one is freedom of
the will. Ethically speaking, each one has the responsibility to control and become “as it
were, lords and masters” of our individual \textit{human} nature. This form of mastery does not
mean exploitation, but rather, understanding. The same thing, I think, applies to
understanding nature in general: Descartes seeks the sense of mastery, of well-being that
comes through true knowledge, which is not the same thing as usurpation or other forms of
violence.

Furthermore, knowledge should \textit{matter}, it should not serve to isolate or to detach one
from life, but should engage one more deeply with life: this is one way in which to
understand Descartes’ critique of the speculative philosophy. It also strengthens our
understanding of Poulain’s critique of \textit{les savants}, and his call to women to learn \textit{solid}
knowledge. Women’s education should be more than merely another occupation to keep
them busy.

But, as Sophie explains to Eulalie, sensual pleasures offer up only \textit{moments heureux} or
fortuitous moments that do not seem to truly belong to us. It is only intellectual and spiritual
pleasures that truly belong to us, and the joy we derive from searching for truth is an
enduring one, possessed without dependence upon anyone.\textsuperscript{78} Moreover, intellectual, spiritual

\textsuperscript{77} AT VI 63/CSMK 143
\textsuperscript{78} Éducation 19.
joy augments upon being communicated with others: paradoxically, what can most truly belong to us is also most susceptible to being shared: the search for truth.

Just as reason is natural to the mind, so too is joy, and if happiness requires virtuous knowledge, it is also true that true virtue and rationality require happiness and joy; these too are natural features of human being. In a letter to Elisabeth, he tells her that among all the sorts of desire we experience, only those accompanied by impatience and sadness are incompatible with beatitude.  

Poullain’s theory of women’s emancipation through reason and education draws out the ethical force of Descartes’ thought. I want to conclude this chapter by assessing the kinds and qualities of freedom made available to every human being on their shared theory of human nature. To help frame this discussion, I draw on the categories of freedom articulated by another, little known, 17th century French philosopher, Gabrielle Suchon, who argued for absolute freedom in every woman’s life. A brief introduction to her life and work is presented by Michèle Le Doeuff. Suchon was born in 1631 in Semuren-Auxois, a small town in Burgundy. She was forced to enter a convent, but eventually was able to leave, and devoted the rest of her life to philosophical work. Suchon published two books, a Traité de la morale et de la politique (1693) and Du célibat volontaire (1700). Both works were reviewed in Le Journal des Savants, and the second one was also noted in Les Nouvelles de la République des Lettres. LeDoeuff says that because of this latter review, Pierre Bayle and his circle would have had access to it, so that the eighteenth-century Encyclopedists may have known her work.

79 4 August 1645
80 Michele Le Doeuff. “Feminism is Back in France-Or is it?” (Hypatia 15.4, 2000, 243-255)
Her *Traité de la morale et de la politique* is a work in three volumes. The first volume is *la Liberté* the only one to which I refer in what follows. The second volume is *la Science*, and the third, *l'Autorité*. Suchon’s theory of freedom is based on the rationalist presupposition, shared by both Descartes and Poullain, that freedom and reason are correlative, in other words, that freedom inheres in human reason, distinct from the human body. This is the essence, or root of human freedom upon which she bases a detailed analysis of the many “branches” of freedom, internal and external. All of these, she argues, must be made available to women. She identifies the internal freedoms as freedom of mind (*liberté d’esprit*), freedom of heart (*liberté de coeur*) and freedom of conscience (*liberté de conscience*). The external freedoms are freedom in civil status (*liberté d’état et de profession*), freedom of vocation (*liberté d’une vocation*) and freedom of movement and location (*liberté de lieu*), in which she advises to women extensive travel to foreign lands as an important source of intellectual and moral growth.

Human freedom is infinite for as long as one lives, on Suchon’s account, as it is for Descartes. Its direct cause, its presupposed necessary principle, is reason. On her framework, the mind is free because it has reason, which is essentially dynamic, active and source of our capacity to change. This means that one has the capacity to reflect on one’s attitudes, beliefs, passions and prejudices. The essential and noblest quality of human being is thus the mind, divided into understanding and will. Freedom inheres in the will, for Suchon, and reason conducts freedom by its natural light. Reason, being free, is never static but always in movement, progress, change. In this temporal aspect, human freedom surpasses the freedom of Angels. For although angels were created free, like humans, they soon lost their freedom, for, once an angel chooses good or evil, it cannot turn back. A human being, on the other

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82 Suchon 46
hand, can free herself by making amends, by choosing differently next time. Human freedom is absolute to the point where, says Suchon, God must consult the free will of a criminal in order to absolve him or her.  

In order for us to achieve all of the internal freedoms, mind, heart and conscience, which are the most important ones, we require absolute freedom of external conditions as well. A pure mind and heart can have freedom, but it cannot last long if a person is prevented from taking charge of her own future, carrying out what she judges to be best. Freedom of conscience is impossible if is force to take on commitments that one did not plan or choose on one’s best knowledge (les engagements inconsidérés). If one is forced into obligations not of one’s own choosing, it is difficult to not commit errors. One must therefore have the freedom to choose one’s own status- married or single or celibate, and one’s own vocation, as well as the opportunity to see much of the world. Freedom of conscience requires that choices be made in accordance with our knowledge of what our own inner abilities and powers. Suchon is drawing out what is implied in Descartes’ definition of generosity, as well as already explicit in Poulain’s definition of virtue:

It is only our soul that is capable of virtue, which consists in general in the firm and constant resolution to do what we judge to be best, according to diverse occurrences. The body is, properly speaking, only the organ and instrument of this resolution, like a sword between the hands for attack or defense.

For Poulain, judging for the best also requires the freedom to choose one’s own external conditions of life. In Egalité, Poulain claims that every woman and man must have the

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83 Suchon 43.
84 Suchon 171.
85 Bien qu’une conscience pure et éclairée puisse posséder la liberté, elle ne serait pas de longue durée si par un bon règlement elle ne mettait ordre à l’avenir. Et comme cela ne peut se faire qu’en évitant tous les engagements inconsidérés dont l’on ne pourrait supporter les charges ni accomplir les obligations, il faut être fort circonspect et réservé lorsqu’il est question de choisir un état, parce que autrement l’on se mettrait dans une continue occasion de pécher, à quoi l’on ne serait pas exposé dans une vie plus conforme à son naturel, et moins chargée de règles et d’exercices (Suchon 171).
86 Egalité 94.
opportunity to independently choose a profession and that women must be allowed to pursue any vocation they so choose.

Le Doeuff observes that "servitude is also the name of a situation which makes you commit yourself unawares to positions you will not find bearable." Suchon thus serves to show what is at stake for human well-being in Descartes' and Poulain's respective and similar accounts of freedom. She writes:

Who can doubt that a woman, who is subject to the will of a husband, to governing a family, to the care of raising children and instructing servants, is exposed to the likelihood of committing numerous sins, if it happens that she is not suited to this vocation and that she cannot bear these responsibilities which are beyond her strength and capacity? [...] This is why each individual must rule herself according to her knowledge of her own capacities....

Suchon thus confirms that generosity requires both internal and external freedom and that is a universal standard of rational virtue for all human beings.

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87 Le Doeuff 249.
Chapter Four

Two contemporary feminist critiques of Descartes

Introduction

We are now in a position to address those contemporary feminist critique of Descartes that are outlined in the introduction. Since, as I have sought to show, Descartes' thought plays an important role in constituting the 17th century discourse of feminist thought, it is important to examine and understand some problematic views among 20th feminist thinkers who construe his work as a form of violence against women and the notion of 'femaleness.'

Before turning to this critique, however, it is very important to note that feminist scholarship on Descartes and Cartesianism is both tremendous in scope and varied in nature. In this thesis I have been looking at 17th century feminist thought that, by and large, sees reason and objectivity as valuable concepts with which to theorize emancipation. There is, in turn, a strain of 20th feminist thought that seeks to uphold the value of reason and objectivity. While it is beyond the scope of thesis, which is largely historical in nature, to address the views of 20th feminist rationalists as well as other feminist theories that take up Cartesianism, constructing such a lineage is an important future project. In what follows I have chosen to take up only two particular books that contain, in my opinion, especially problematic elements in their interpretations of Descartes.

With this caveat in mind, I now turn to these two book-length studies that have been influential. The first one is Susan Bordo’s *The Flight to Objectivity: Essays on Cartesianism and Culture* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987); the second one is Erica Harth’s *Cartesian Women: Versions and Subversions of Rational Discourse in the Old Regime* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992). I have already discussed Harth in Chapter Two but her reading, merits an independent consideration. This is because the importance of her contribution (the only serious book length study) to the understanding of feminism and Cartesianism in this period makes her misreading all the more problematic. I will begin with Bordo, however, as her work is prior to and influential upon that of Harth.

**Critique of *The Flight to Objectivity***

Bordo’s work is significant for two reasons: first, her reading of Descartes is a vehement attack on him; it thus serves to bring at least one common kind of interpretation into sharp focus. The second reason is that Bordo’s work has been a guiding framework for other feminist readings of Descartes, including that of Erica Harth: the problems with Bordo’s work thus raise serious problems for the viability of those works that uncritically adopt her ideas.

Let us take, to begin with, the method and major hypothesis about Descartes. Her interpretation, she says, is informed “by a psychocultural framework.”\(^2\) She views the “Cartesian epistemological ideals of clarity, detachment, and objectivity” as “serving an obsessive concern with purity and a corresponding desire to exorcise all the messier (e.g.

bodily, emotional) dimensions of experience from science and philosophy." She outlines her approach to reading of the Meditations in the following passage.

In my reading of the Meditations...I take the psychological (and often psychoanalytic) categories of "anxiety", "dread", "denial", "reaction-formation", and "escape" very seriously as hermeneutic tools, drawing freely on insights from classical psychoanalytic, object-relations, and cognitive schools of thought. These developmental insights are of unusual value in clarifying and deepening our understanding of the Meditations and of the Cartesian era.4

In applying these categories to the Meditations, says Bordo, we get a clear and deep understanding of Descartes. These "coalesce," she writes,

...into a narrative framework – a psychocultural "story" – [...] a "drama of parturition"; cultural birth out of the mother-world of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, and creation of another world – the modern.5

This "drama" reveals the
great Cartesian anxiety...over separation from the organic female universe. Cartesian rationalism, correspondingly, is explored here as a defensive response to that separation anxiety, an aggressive intellectual "flight from the feminine" into the modern scientific universe of purity, clarity, and objectivity. [...] The form of that philosophical flight, as I describe it, is a "re-birthing" and "re-imaging" of knowledge and the world as masculine.6

The above passages thus reveal the essential features of Bordo’s account. She sees Descartes’ ideas about objectivity, clarity, dualism, and generally his entire outlook on the human mind in relation to the world, as being a "philosophical flight" from the maternal natural world into the masculine world of knowledge and freedom. This flight is a negation of the body, the

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4 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
emotions, and everything else that is naturally female. Bordo attributes this to Descartes' separation anxiety.

There are several problems with Bordo's interpretation, which I would like to now to examine. Bordo overlooks Descartes' moral psychology, his account of the union between mind and body, and his study of the passions, in which he ascribes to them a central role in a good human life. This oversight shapes her whole interpretation, portraying Descartes as a neurotic and a misogynist neostoic. This oversight poses problems for her interpretation, since she claims to interpret the nature of his thought as a whole. There are, however, even greater difficulties than this. First, there is the question of her gender categorizations; second, what I see as her romanticization of Medieval and Renaissance thought on the nature of "female;" third, her argumentation that applies notions from contemporary psychology to 17th century culture; fourth, her endorsement of ad hominem arguments against Descartes' thought, based on the claim that he was psychologically motivated to write his philosophy due to "early maternal deprivation."7 As Emmanuel Eze writes, it is always a "nebulous effort" to determine "the always imperfect match between the hearts or intentions of individual men and women and their artistic or scholarly works."8

There is an imbalance in Bordo's work: she finds it unproblematic to employ a mother imagery in speaking of the world and the universe, but problematic to associate thought with masculinity. In continuing to associate nature with the female sex and reason with the male sex, she is simply perpetuating the logic of domination that has governed sexual relations in Western thought and discourse. Why should nature be thought of as female and reason be thought of as male? No justification is offered to this end. It is not made

clear, in her work, exactly why gendered modes of knowing, or gendered moralities, must be preserved. 

Descartes and Poulain offer an egalitarian perspective on virtue that does not concern itself with either sex or gender.

This brings me to another point: Bordo claims that there was no gender consciousness in the Renaissance and early modern periods, and it is thus surprising in her view that the terms “masculinity” or “femininity” would be used in connection with descriptions of science and knowledge. She writes: “The emergence of such associations, in an era which lacked our heightened modern consciousness of gender as an issue, is remarkable”10 This is, of course, untrue, as we have seen in the case of Gournay and Poulain. What is surprising is this inattentive reading, for there was awareness of gender as an issue, the years between 1550 and 1650 cannot justifiably be said to be a “particularly gynophobic century.”

Moreover, Bordo’s own “modern consciousness” is trapped in stereotypical ways of construing masculine and feminine. She construes the “feminine” qualities of sympathy, intuition and merging as positive human qualities and “masculine” clarity, distinctness and objectivity as destructive. As I have argued, Descartes and Poulain show that objectivity is an ethical stance and a requirement for impartial and fair judgements on oneself and on others.

Next, she associates a female organic universe with, to her thinking, all of the positive “epistemological values”12 of human being: receptivity, sympathy, union, intuition, personal response. This “female world-soul” was “murdered-by the mechanist re-visioning of nature,” the “mechanist flight from the female cosmos.”13 Bordo interprets both the Meditations and their cultural context as a kind of defence mechanism. What is obviously problematic is

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10 Bordo 105.
11 Bordo 108.
12 Bordo 102.
13 Bordo 100.
Bordo’s assumption and simple application of complicated, not to mention highly contested, psychological principles. She writes:

The conversion of nightmare into positive vision is characteristic of Descartes….But such transformations, as Descartes’s determinedly upbeat interpretation of his own famous nightmare suggests, may be grounded in defense—in the suppression of anxiety, uncertainty and dread. Certainly, anxiety infuses the Meditations, as I have argued through my reading of the texts. I have tried, too, to show that Cartesian anxiety was a cultural anxiety, arising from discoveries, inventions, and events which were major and disorienting.¹⁴

Bordo does not offer an analysis of the psychological notions she uses—she simply describes them and uses them. Although problematic, is not as great a concern as is her assumption that the Medieval and Renaissance worldviews somehow express a more authentic form of human existence, and that Descartes wrested somehow this away from us. She continues, from the quote above:

That disorientation, I have suggested, is given psychocultural coherence via a “story” of parturition from the organic universe of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, out of which emerged the modern categories of “self”, “locatedness,” and “innerness.” This parturition was initially experienced as loss, that is, as estrangement, and the opening up of a chasm between self and nature.¹⁵

It is not clear what justifies not only the positing of “the organic female universe” but attributing to it the positive human values. As we have seen, the Medieval and Renaissance views of women were far from favourable, based, as they were, on a Scholastic and Aristotelian account of human nature. If Gournay and Poulain are correct to claim that sexual relations were governed by laws of physical force, then this earlier time was a less than

¹⁴ Ibid.
¹⁵ Ibid.
authentic mode of human existence. To be fair, it is possible that Bordo is trying to articulate the idea that reason can easily be used as an instrument of force to further the interests of a particular group. Gournay and Poulain, however, make this point very clearly, and still do not attribute gender qualities to the mind.

It is worth being reminded, at this point, of Ian Maclean’s argument that two particular aspects of Aristotelian thought, which underlies Medieval and Renaissance notions of women, serve to reinforce the notion of female inferiority: The first is the metaphorical association of woman with mother earth, nutrition, fruitfulness and the fluctuations of the moon, which is deeply embedded in the substratum of ancient medical thought, and sometime explicit there. The implications of these metaphors — passivity, receptiveness, compassion, mutability — may account in part for the Renaissance view of female psychology. The second aspect is the primordial nature of sex difference. Sex difference is not only a feature of the higher animals; it is postulated in plants and stones. The difference is an example of the opposite of privation (the ‘species privata.’). Even after the arguments which make the female a deprived form of the male have been rejected, the difference of sex retains the associations of deprivation, and plays an important part in the infrastructure of Renaissance thought.\(^\text{16}\)

Against this picture, Poulain drew an important philosophical principle of equality from Descartes’ new mechanistic picture. Poulain understood that on Cartesian terms the human body is like a highly complex, competent machine that functions essentially the same way in men and women. Poulain drew the egalitarian conclusion from mechanism in the following description:

\(^{16}\) Ian Maclean (1999)145.
The most exact anatomy reveals no difference in the brain of women and men, which is the sole organ for knowledge, and through which the mind operates all of its functions. The sense impressions are received in equal fashion by men and women, are assembled and conserved for the imagination and memory in the same way. Women hear like us, through the ears; they see through the eyes; they taste with the tongue. There is nothing particular in the disposition of their organs unless one counts their greater delicacy, which is an advantage. External objects touch them in the same way; light through the eyes, sound through the ears. What, then, prevents women from applying themselves to consideration of themselves, from examining in which consists the nature of the mind, how many kinds of thought it has, how these thoughts can give rise to certain corporeal movements. They can consult the natural ideas given to them by God, starting with spiritual considerations, to order their thoughts, and they can do the science we call metaphysics.17

Another concern that I have with Bordo’s work is the influence that it has in feminist scholarship involving interpretations of Descartes and Cartesianism. It serves as a framework for, or at least appears in every bibliography of, feminist studies of the history of philosophy. Erica Harth is among these, and I turn now to her book, which is the only book length study, to date, that addresses the connections between Cartesianism and Feminism in 17th century France.

Critique of Cartesian Women

In Cartesian Women: Versions and Subversions of Rational Discourse in the Old Régime, (1992) Harth suggests that three women writers of the 17th century ought to be classified as published Cartesian critics. These three are Catherine Descartes, Anne de la Vigne and Marie Dupré. She claims that

17 Égalité 61.
...their writings display a critical attitude towards those features of Descartes' philosophy that were to have the greatest impact on the development of modern rational discourse: his dualism, mechanism and objectivity. 18

Harth claims to find these views in the works of these writers. It is important, in her view, to add these works to the history of Cartesianism. This is because, she says:

Much has been written about the hostile reaction to Descartes in the universities and schools. Very little is known [however,] about the critique that emanated from the salons [...] This critical questioning, both of the primacy of disembodied reason and of the value of objectivity, adumbrates what I will call a feminist alternative to the developing rational discourse. 19

Harth wishes to show, in looking at these critiques, that "the late twentieth-century feminist critique of Cartesian rationalism and objectivity has a history." 20 She says that, upon closer inspection "women who have been thought of as Cartesians since the seventeenth century turn out to have minds of their own." 21 These women, says Harth, developed an "alternative to the developing rational discourse." and she calls their alternative "feminist." Their alternative arose from their "critical attitude toward those features of Descartes' philosophy that were to have the greatest impact on the development of modern rational discourse: his dualism, mechanism and objectivity. She calls their perspective "feminist" because

their scattered and often obscurely framed comments, when carefully examined, become relevant to recent attempts to construct a feminist epistemology and science. With hindsight, we begin to understand that the late twentieth century critique of Cartesian rationalism and objectivity has a history. 22

18 Harth 66.
19 Harth 65.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 Harth 65.
This is where the problems begin. First, there is the matter of judging whether it is legitimate to claim that the writers in question expressed these criticisms. Eileen O’Neill has argued that it is not possible to conclude that these women did in fact hold these views. I refer the reader to her article for these arguments, and I begin at the point where O’Neill ends: if the critique of dualism, objectivity and mechanism cannot be adequately discerned in the various works of Catherine Descartes, Anne de la Vigne and Marie Dupré, then what does this tell us about Harth’s interpretation?

I suggest that Harth is projecting her own particular picture of Descartes into their writings and that this picture is significantly influenced by Bordo’s account. My concern begins with Harth’s uncritical reference to Susan Bordo. She suggests an explanation for the dearth of writings by “Cartesian women” in the 17th century: perhaps we can explain this absence, says Harth, by the “inevitable effacement of women behind what Susan Bordo has called the ‘Cartesian masculinization of thought.’” We have seen just how problematic Bordo’s line of thinking is, and it should be of concern to readers that Harth invokes this phrase uncritically. The problem with Harth’s work is that, although she shares the basic prejudices that Bordo has, these are far more hidden, because she attributes the criticisms of dualism, mechanism, objectivity and individualism, to the texts of the 17th century women that she analyzes.

Harth sees the feminist alternative as these 17th century women’s affirmation of a positive connection between gender and rationality, that their experience of femaleness somehow positively influences their way of thinking. She writes:

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24 Harth 66.
Gender—the primary category of their social difference, as they perceived it—was experienced by the cartésiennes as a connection, rather than an interference with, the object of rational inquiry.²⁵

Harth thinks that these women sought to sustain a positive connection between their “female” values of “empathic connection”, emotion, the body, and rational inquiry.²⁶

What concerns me is that Harth, like Bordo, simply assumes the equation between gender and particular values, not questioning in what way these associations came about and whether they are still viable. Harth, for instance, simply states that nature is “traditionally represented as female”, and simply points out that the new science is “androcentric.”²⁷ There is no critical analysis of these gender attributions.

There is the further problem, of Harth’s claim that Descartes is a neostoic, and that his dualism “seemed to drain the thinking subject of all feeling and emotion connected to the body and to reduce the body to a mere machine.”²⁸ Harth shares this view with Bordo, and it is not justified in light of Descartes’ theory on the passions. I have already discussed this in Chapter Two.

Harth claims that what proved problematic to Elisabeth and to several generations of Cartesian women was his objectivity. She says that he “positioned himself as if he were somewhere in outer space and pointed to truth and certainty for all to see.”²⁹

The ideal of objectivity is a major source of concern for feminist critics such as Bordo and Harth. This ideal is viewed as problematic in Descartes, for it is interpreted, ultimately as a form of violence and injustice: intellectual transcendence and distinction from body are interpreted as disembodied reason, detachment from nature, emotion and body, negation of

²⁵ O’Neill 247.
²⁶ Harth 106.
²⁷ Harth 6.
²⁸ Harth 82.
the particular in favour of the universal and especially, denial of the "feminine" nature by "masculine" reason. I think it is time to reflect on the resources offered by Gournay, Descartes and Poulain for overcoming these categories that are part of a logic of domination.

To this end, Poulain's historical reconstruction of the origins of inequality suggests a direction for our thinking. He suggests that reason gets identified by men, as that set of qualities belonging to men, qualities that were based on the exercise of force. It was very convenient to identify this version of reason as male. However, to say that reason became identified as male, according to men's interests, is not the same thing as saying that reason itself is a male attribute that has become universalized, to the detriment of women. This is to misunderstand the nature of reason and it perpetuates the logic of domination by categorizing men with reason, women with emotion. In fact, as Poulain construes it, men have called 'reason' what is in fact a mixture of unreasoned passions (lust, envy, ambition, jealousy, greed). The important thing to remember, however, is that the problem is not with reason per se, but in how it has been appropriated and misused. Poulain thinks, in fact, that reason has always been the weakest and most fragile of human faculties, that darkness, and not light, have generally prevailed in the history of humanity.

For Descartes and Poulain, neither reason nor nature are 'sexed.' This claim, however, need not be construed as a way of concealing reason's inherently "male" nature. This line of thinking is the wrong approach, for ultimately it does not safeguard freedom from empirical intrusions. On Descartes' view, reason, the power to think and apply thought to life, just is the meaning of human freedom. Reason is that infinite capacity within each individual to be active, to have a future, to change, to perfect himself or herself. This is not a male virtue, but a human virtue.

\[\text{Harth 72.}\]
Conclusion: Prolegomena to any future (rationalist) feminism

It is possible, I have argued, to see beyond the negative depictions of Descartes in contemporary feminist literature. Descartes' theory of the mind served to strengthen Gournay's principle of sexual equality. Poulain de la Barre, in turn, discerned a radical, transformative social dimension in Descartes' thought, drawing it out in his own theory of equality. Poulain identified what I hold to be at the heart of Descartes' Meditations: their expression of reason's unconditioned, dynamic and ethical nature. This returns us to a structural feature of Descartes' Meditations to which I referred at the beginning of Chapter Two: their temporal nature.

I suggest that Descartes' Meditations are not merely an invitation to disregard, once and for all, one's previous knowledge in order to learn a new system. In their most philosophically interesting sense, they are not simply a finite intellectual exercise which, once undertaken and completed, provides the meditator with certain, but static, knowledge. This would be antithetical to the spirit of openness in Descartes' thought. On his view, although it is the case that human understanding is finite, it is also the case that the limits of knowledge are indefinite, and the power of reason is infinite. Descartes articulates not a closed system, but an open method that calls for reason to hold itself in question and to renew itself in light of continually new conditions of life. Each human mind is intrinsically active and dynamic, capable of change, creation and invention. Kant understood this to be indicative of reason's autonomy. His view of reason as, on principle, an infinite activity captures Descartes' own view. The "satisfaction of reason," writes Kant,
...is only further and further postponed by the constant inquiry after the condition [under which necessity occurs]. Therefore, reason restlessly seeks the unconditionally necessary and sees itself compelled to assume it....

All human beings have, on principle, an inner freedom based on their rationality. This rationality is the capacity to change one's views (and those of others) through inquiry, experience and reasoning, to discover error and be able to search for truth. Reason, fundamentally, is the human capacity to change. Each human being possesses what Descartes calls infinite freedom, which we might also call infinite potential. To live out this capacity requires that external obstacles, both potential and actual, not be in the way.

Descartes' theory of freedom inspired much of Poulain's radical thinking, on equality, thinking that remains utopian to this day. In the late 17th century, well before the philosophical and political ideals of the French Revolution were articulated, before the advent of democracy, Poulain envisioned, among many other egalitarian ideas, a sovereign council composed half of men, half of women, whose sole concern would be the interests of women. He outlined societal rules advantageous to women, among them a veto on placing girls in convents against their wishes, and a strict limitation on marital authority, in order to prevent husbands from abusing their wives. Perhaps this Cartesian-inspired thinking can open the door to new readings of Descartes as an egalitarian thinker and a promoter of human freedom. In this way, new rationalist histories might be traced, beginning in the 17th century, histories of those who theorized on freedom and promoted women's emancipation. These

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2 Éducation 6.
3 Ibid.
histories would reveal to us that freedom is the true element of human being, just as air is the
element of birds, water the element of fish and earth the element of other animals.4

Poulain is an inspiring guide to writing past futures of the Enlightenment, for he is
both a rationalist and a deeply ethical thinker. Although he upholds the rationalist principle
that the mind has no sex, at the same time he understands human reason to be a fragile thing.
It is wrested out of the confusion, ignorance, passions and physical ailments to which, as
finite beings we are all subject. Finally, there is no contradiction in maintaining, at once, a
principle of rationalism and a recognition of reason’s vulnerability if we view rationalism as
a principle of hope and a guide for self-perfection. We might call it a rationalist fideism.

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4 Such a history might, for instance, begin with Gournay, through Descartes, Poulain, Suchon, tracing theories of
freedom right up to the 19th century in the works of Fourier, Constance Pipelet, John Stuart Mill and the Marquis
de Sade. Poulain’s work clearly influenced John Stuart Mill’s own arguments and he also has affinities with the
work of Charles Fourier. In fact, the originality attributed to Fourier by Geneviève Fraisse in her study of
women in the time of the French Revolution, is already present in Poulain. She writes that “Fourier’s
perspective is entirely original: women are no longer the obvious guilty party, willingly or unwillingly...[and] he
posits equality between the sexes as freedom first, and only later as identity.” Fourier, *Theories des quatre
Appendix 1

Poulain de la Barre’s Historical conjecture on the origins of inequality

I have translated a lengthy excerpt from this conjecture. One of its most interesting features is the resemblance that it bears to Rousseau’s second discourse on the same topic. A comparison of the two merits its own separate inquiry, but is clearly beyond the scope of my present study.¹ Poulain writes:

Men, noticing that they were the more robust of the two sexes, and that in sexual relations they had this physical advantage, imagined that everything belonged to their sex. The consequence was not significant for women at the beginning of the world. Things were in a very different state than they are today: there was no government, none of the high forms of knowledge (de science), no employment, no established religion. There was thus nothing regrettable (fâcheux) in ideas of dependence. I imagine them as I do children, and that any advantages won, each over the other, were like those acquired in a game. Men and women lived in simplicity and innocence, working equally in cultivating the earth, or in hunting, as savages still do today. Men pursued their own activities, and women pursued theirs. The one who acquired the most was also the most esteemed by others.

All of this changed, however, due to the inconveniences and effects of pregnancy. This diminished women’s strength for a period of time, and prevented them from working as before, rendering the assistance of their husbands absolutely necessary, and even more so

¹ In order, as well as to highlight its resemblance to Rousseau’s later Discourse on the Origin of Inequality Poulain’s title is conjecture historique, ou, comment les hommes se sont rendus les maîtres. Siep Stuurman observes that in his Excellence, Poulain depicts an original age of innocence of humanity that gradually turns into an “age of iron and servitude”; the passage strikingly anticipated Rousseau’s first discourse. Rousseau might have seen Poulain’s books when he was employed as a secretary by Madame Dupin to collect material for a book on the defense of the female sex. See Siep Stuurman, “Social Cartesianism: Francois Poulain de la Barre and the Origins of the Enlightenment.” (Journal of the History of Ideas, 1997) 631.
once the children were born. In this time, while families were limited to father, mother, and a few young children, a balance of esteem and preferential treatment was preserved. When the children grew up, however, and the father, the mother of the father, the children of the children, brothers and sisters, eldest and youngest siblings, all lived under a single roof, the ties of dependence were extended, making dependency a far more sensitive matter. The mistress of the house submitted to her husband, the son honoured the father, who in turn ruled over his children. And as it is difficult for brothers to always get along, we may judge that differences arose after a brief period of living together. The eldest, stronger than the others, refused to give way to them. Force obliged the younger brothers to bend to the will of the eldest, and the girls followed their mother’s example.

It is easy to imagine an increase in differentiation of functions within each home. Women, obliged to stay home and raise their children, took care of domestic matters; men, being freer and more robust, occupied themselves with matters outside the home, and after the death of father and mother, the eldest brother wished to dominate. The girls, accustomed to staying at home, did not think to leave. Some younger brothers, however, who were more discontented and proud than the others, refused to don the yoke, and were thus obliged to start their own group. Others of like mind got together with them to discuss their fortunes and woes, and soon became friends. Seeing that they all lacked possessions, they sought the means to acquire them, but since no goods were to be found except those already belonging to others, they seized what was closest to hand. Just to ensure their acquisitions, they also seized the owners, who happened, moreover, to be their former masters.

Upon this invasion, what had previously been a voluntary dependence in families ceased, giving way to enforced obedience to unjust usurpers, and women’s condition became much worse than before. Instead of marrying men who were of their own family, they were
forced to marry strangers who treated them as nothing but the most desirable of their conquered spoils.

It is customary for victors to hold the vanquished in contempt, seeing them as weaker than themselves. And as women seemed weakest of all, because the functions to which they had been assigned required less physical force, they came to be regarded as inferior to men.

Some men contented themselves with this first act of usurpation. Others, however, more ambitious, spurred on by the success of their victory, wanted to push their conquests further. Women, having learned to be more humane than men, were too humane to serve these unjust aims, and therefore were left at home. It was men, then, who came to be considered as being fittest for actions requiring force. In this state of affairs, things were held in esteem only insofar as they were deemed useful to the ends proposed for them: The desire to dominate had by this time become one of the strongest passions. Since this desire could not be satisfied, except by violence and injustice, and since men were already armed, it is not surprising that men favoured their own sex as most conducive to making more conquests. Men consulted only among themselves in order to establish tyrannical rule, because it was only men who were capable of executing it, and in this way the kindness and humanity of women was the cause of their being denied any part in the government of states.

The example of these self-appointed Princes was soon imitated by their subjects. Each man wanted to get the upper hand over his companions. Particular individuals started by exercising absolute domination in their own families.
Appendix 2: Eulalie's dream

O Hamlet, speak no more/Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul;

I imagined, in my dream, that I had set up house in a large, cosmopolitan city, where by rights of citizenship all of the inhabitants had access (if unequally) to the goods brought there for sale. These objects were extremely beautiful when first unpackaged, and yet, in passing from hand to hand, they were soon deteriorated and tarnished to such an extent that they became unrecognizable. Those who received them last, reduced to their worst condition, had the folly to esteem themselves happy and just as rich as the others, solely because they had managed to obtain them.

I was among these people, and as I was on my way to pick up my own goods in the market, I met, at a street corner, a beautiful Lady, of great majesty and sweetness, who took me by the hand and asked me where I was going. When she learned of my destination, she told me what a misfortune it was for me, to seek with such ardour, and place my happiness in, things of so little worth. All the while, she said, I was leaving behind in my own house a treasure of inestimable worth that legitimately belonged to me. This treasure, said the Lady, would give me infinitely more happiness and wealth than if I had in my power all of the goods of entire city's population.

Letting myself be guided by her, she led me to a garden on my own property, by way of a little path that nobody in our house had noticed, even though it was clearly visible. She ordered the man who accompanied her to dig up the earth, and then she showed me a treasure, the discovery which caused me such intense joy that I immediately awakened.
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