Women Philosophers of the Early Modern Period

✧ EDITED, WITH INTRODUCTION, BY

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Introduction

THE SEVENTEENTH AND EIGHTEENTH centuries—the early modern period—are noted for their remarkably high level of philosophical activity. What has been obscured, however, is the fact that women as well as men wrote and published philosophy during that time. Indeed, the standard course in the history of early modern philosophy that focuses on the canonical writers of the period perpetuates an erroneous impression that, at the time, only men were philosophers. Redressing the balance has been very difficult, because the majority of works by women have not been republished since they were originally written and they can be found only in a few research libraries or on microfilm. The purpose of this anthology is to make available to interested readers a selection from the writings of women philosophers of the period, and to make it possible to incorporate a study of their writings into history of modern philosophy courses.

The seven women whose work is included here were, in some ways, atypical of their female contemporaries. This was not a period in which women had a great deal of access to education. Any education girls received took place at home, and the sixteenth-century tradition of giving daughters of the aristocracy an extensive education was dying out. Of the women included here, only Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia seems to have

been the beneficiary of the earlier custom of providing an education for young women at home that went beyond basic accomplishments. The other women included in this anthology were largely self-educated, although some were able to take advantage of favorable conditions at home, such as fathers or brothers who supported their education. Only rarely was a woman able to acquire the training necessary to enter into philosophical discussion, whose full participation required a knowledge of Latin and French or English.

It also seems that each of these women felt herself to be unusual. Frequently they deprecated their own views as coming from a woman's pen. And almost universally those who responded to their work felt called upon to remark upon the author's gender. The prevailing expectation was that women would not write philosophy, and it was probably no accident that so many of the women who did write and publish philosophy came from the nobility or even royalty. Class status undoubtedly made it easier for them to get their views a hearing. Perhaps it is also unusual that only one of these women, Catherine Trotter Cockburn, was the mother of a large family. The others were either childless or had only one child. In an age before birth control, most women could not expect to be so little troubled by maternal duties.

But although there were factors that in general worked against women participating in intellectual endeavors, there were others that—although not going so far as to encourage—at least went some way toward facilitating their participation. The growing tendency to publish in the vernacular was a clear benefit. But most importantly, it was not necessary during this period to possess any particular set of credentials or to belong to a specific profession in order to enter into philosophical debate. There were, as well, a number of acceptable forms in which philosophical discussion was carried out, at least some of which were relatively easy to engage in. Furthermore, the sort of gatekeepers that surround contemporary philosophical publication were unknown. Books were by and large printed and sold by booksellers, who tended to encourage rapid exchange of ideas in the form of pamphlets, controversies, and the like. In addition

much philosophical dialogue took place in letters, which were often circulated or printed, providing a semi-public form of debate. It seems to have been possible, moreover, for a woman such as Mary Astell to introduce herself by letter to a philosopher—in her case, the English Malbranchian, John Norris—and to carry on an extensive correspondence, which was eventually published. The philosophical treatises of the period, which we read today, are only one kind of philosophical discussion and they took place against a background of these various other forms of philosophical activity. Reading the work of these women helps to give a flavor of the variety of ways in which ideas were exchanged.

One factor that may have made it easier for women to express themselves on philosophical issues was the way in which philosophical questions were joined to theological questions in this period. Inasmuch as the care of one's soul was everyone's concern—even a woman's—women may have felt entitled and even obliged to have an opinion on religious matters. It is perhaps no accident that, although they interested themselves in a number of issues under debate, many of these women were particularly interested in drawing the theological consequences of the matters under discussion. It may be that women felt free to participate in philosophical endeavors because such activity held the promise of adding to knowledge that would aid them in their religion. This religious motivation may well have been a liberating force in the intellectual careers of some of these women.

Another factor that may have made it easier for women to see themselves—and to be seen—as capable of doing philosophy was the view of the nature of human reason and the method of doing philosophy that stemmed from Descartes. Descartes encouraged the idea that sound reasoning was in the power of every human soul and that what was required in order to bring it about was not erudition but a method based on introspection, and hence within the means even of women. This account of reason and its implications for women is a theme that Astell and Masham explicitly take up. Astell, for example, in *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies,* Part I, argues in favor of the

value of education for women, pointing out that "All have not leisure to learn languages, and pore on books, nor opportunity to converse with the learned; but all may *think*, may use their own faculties rightly, and consult the master who is within them."[1] Her claim is that education does not require the kind of book learning that men have enjoyed, but rather a proper understanding of the nature of one's rational faculties. In this, she seems to have learned a lesson Descartes was eager to teach.[2]

Whatever the motivations that may have led these women to write philosophy, it is important to emphasize that they were involved in ongoing philosophical debate, and that they did so by accepted means. Moreover, each of them was able to find a place within a recognized philosophical community. They were able to find men who treated their ideas seriously and respectfully. Many of these women were recognized, in their lifetime, for their intellectual accomplishments. If their views have been forgotten, it cannot be attributed directly to any bias against women existing at the time they wrote. More complicated factors have been at work, including the tendency among philosophers to forget all but a very few thinkers.

Although Mary Astell, in particular, and Damaris Masham and Margaret Cavendish as well may be said to have had a special concern for the position of women, they, like the other women writing philosophy, took a lively interest in the debates of the day. All of them framed their issues in the same terms as their male counterparts. Many of the seventeenth-century women interested themselves in the metaphysical issues concerning the status of material substance. We are accustomed to posing these issues in the terms laid down by Descartes, who proposed that it was the nature of body to be extended and that all corporeal states followed from this nature, while it was the nature of mind to think, thus sharply distinguishing the two. Some of the contributors to this work specifically developed their ideas in terms of the way in which Descartes put forward this distinction. Princess Elisabeth is the best example. In her letters to Descartes, she raises the question of how a thinking entity can bring about changes in a body—as it apparently does in cases of voluntary action—if the thinking soul is unextended.

The writings of some of the other women, however, remind us in a salutary manner that debates on these matters were also developed and carried out independently of Descartes. Margaret Cavendish is a good case in point. Although she reflects on Descartes in her *Philosophical Letters,* she does not owe her position to him. The view she puts forward is materialist. That is, she holds that there is a single substance but that it is corporeal in nature. She maintains, however, that this corporeal substance is capable of self-motion. Thus, she is taking a position in an important seventeenth-century debate: if matter is conceived—as Descartes believes—as extended, or even as extended and solid, then it seems to be inert in its nature. It then becomes a serious problem to explain how matter can move. Ann Conway represents a different seventeenth-century position on this issue, one that she shares with, among others, her mentor, Henry More. Because she thinks that the only natural way to explain the existence of motion is in mental or spiritual terms, she holds that there is only one substance, and that it is incorporeal in nature. Lady Masham's letters to Leibniz concern his own claims about the nature of mind and body, that each follows the laws of its own nature, but that a preestablished harmony between the two makes it appear that communication is taking place. Masham is particularly troubled by Leibniz's supposition that there can be substances that are unextended, that have no spatial location. What the ideas of these various seventeenth-century women fill in for us is the richness of the existing debates about the nature of matter, its relation to the soul, and its capacity for motion.

The interests of the remaining women are more disparate, but if there is a continuous thread running through the readings it is epistemological in nature. An important theme in seventeenth-century philosophy is the extent or limits of knowledge. Some argue—like Descartes—that our faculties are such as to give us certain knowledge, while others, like Locke, argue that the nature of our faculties is such that our capacity for knowledge is more limited. In the eighteenth century, there were various attempts to avoid the skeptical consequences of this line of reasoning, either by redefining the nature of knowl-

edge, as Berkeley does, or by shifting the question to the scope of our faculties, as does Hume. Women entered into this debate in a variety of ways. Mary Astell, as mentioned, shares Descartes's interest in laying out rules for right reasoning, but she does not share his confidence in our native abilities. She is concerned to show that, whatever its shortcomings, we can rely on our reason, when properly used, as a guide to action. Catherine Trotter Cockburn is interested in defending a view of moral knowledge, and she carries out her project in a variety of ways. In the selection included, Trotter Cockburn shows that Locke's claim that we are not in a position to know whether or not matter can think, given our idea of matter and our idea of thought, is not a threat to belief in the immortality of the soul. Mary Shepherd, writing considerably later, also focuses on an epistemological issue, but in her case the concern centers on what she sees as the skepticism run rampant in the arguments of Berkeley and Hume. She wants to reinstate a traditional belief in the existence of an external world and in causation, which she sees as undermined by the approaches they take. Again, what we find in the writings of these women are examples of the wide variety of positions found within the epistemological debates of the period.

In making selections for this anthology, I have chosen portions of each woman's work that comment on the writings of the philosophers typically included in history of modern philosophy courses. In so doing, I do not want to imply that the writings of these women are exclusively commentaries on the work of men. This is far from the case. Rather, I have been guided by what I see as a pedagogical need: Making possible the inclusion of the study of these women without unduly disrupting an already crowded course in the history of modern philosophy. It is my hope that these brief selections will whet the appetite for a more inclusive study of these women's work, which would remedy any distorting element that may have been introduced in the editing process. In my introductory remarks to each selection, I have given a short account of each woman's life, explained something of the nature of her philosophical work, and provided some background for each selection.

Notes

1. *A Serious Proposal*, p. 98.

2. Others have seen the influence of Descartes as more pernicious, arguing that he put forward a conception of reason that excluded women. See in particular, Susan Bordo, *The Flight to Objectivity: Essays on Cartesianism and Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987) and Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: "Male" and "Female" in Western Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). I have argued against this conception in "Cartesian Reason and Gendered Reason" in *A Mind of One's Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity*, edited by Louise M. Antony and Charlotte Witt (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993).

Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle

MARGARET CAVENDISH was born, probably in 1623, into a large, landowning family. Her father died when she was two years old, but the family fortunes were held together by the management skills of her mother. Her mother did not, however, find it necessary to provide much of an education for her daughters, and Cavendish complained of having had an inadequate education at the hands of a decayed gentlewoman. She was, however, driven from early childhood by a desire to write, filling a large number of what she later referred to as "baby books." In the quarrel between Charles I and Parliament, Cavendish's family sided with the king, and she became a lady in waiting to Queen Henrietta Maria, eventually following her into exile in France. There she met and married William Cavendish, then marquis of Newcastle, another Royalist in exile and a man considerably her senior. The marquis, like his brother, Sir Charles Cavendish, was a "virtuoso," a dabbler in the New Science. While in exile, he and his wife met and entertained Hobbes, Gassendi, Descartes, and Huygens. Cavendish fell into the habit of writing copiously, and, supported in this by her husband, publishing what she wrote. In all, she published a dozen works in a variety of forms, including poetry, plays, stories, her autobiography and the biography of her husband, and several volumes of natural philosophy. Returning to England after the Restoration, she and her

husband lived mostly in the country, but, during a stay in London, Cavendish made a notorious visit to the Royal Society, the only woman to have done so. She died in 1673, predeceasing her husband, and, although she was his second wife, they lie buried together in Westminster Abbey.

In her earliest writings, Cavendish put forward a kind of atomism, holding that the ultimate constituents of the world were indivisible bits of uniform stuff, but her settled view, described in *Philosophical Letters, Observations upon Experimental Philosophy,* and *Grounds of Natural Philosophy,* was a kind of organic materialism. Nature is eternal, infinite, but above all corporeal. Being corporeal, it can be divided into parts, although these parts are not other than nature. Cavendish speaks sometimes of a hierarchy of matter, distinguishing a sensitive and rational matter, which is purer and finer, from an inanimate matter. But although she thinks it necessary to speak of an inanimate matter, to explain the slowness of some natural events, she is insistent that motion does not exist apart from matter. The belief in immaterial substance, she holds, comes from abstracting motion from matter and making it a separate entity, which entity, if immaterial, would be clearly supernatural. She suggests that the rejection of self-moving matter and the belief in immaterial substance come from human ambition: People are unwilling to see themselves as part of nature but wish to be special and Godlike. Instead, "all and every particular creature, as also all perception and variety in Nature, is made by corporeal self-motion, which I name sensitive and rational matter, which is life and knowledge, sense and reason" (*Philosophical Letters,* preface). This picture of nature as internally self-regulating is occasionally expressed in charmingly feminine language: "Nature, being a wise and provident lady, governs her parts very wisely, methodically, and orderly: Also, she is very industrious and hates to be idle, which makes her employ her time as a good housewife doth" (*Observations,* p. 102).

In the book from which this selection comes, *Philosophical Letters,* Cavendish adopts an epistolary form, which if not widely used in philosophy, was for her extremely successful. She imagines a correspondent, a woman, who is raising questions on

the works of several contemporary authors, Hobbes, Descartes, Henry More, and van Helmont. Cavendish is selective in the portions of the works on which she is willing to comment, avoiding, for example, all of the political aspects of Hobbes's *Leviathan,* on the grounds that she is not qualified to speak on such a topic. She admits she was not able to read Descartes directly because she was unable to read Latin (or French) but instead "had some few places translated to me out of his works" (*Philosophical Letters,* preface). It is not clear what passages she is speaking of, as she discusses issues coming from a range of Descartes's work, including his account of motion, aspects of his theory of the relationship between mind and body, and his view that animals are not rational, a matter on which Descartes had corresponded with her husband.

✧ Selections from *Philosophical Letters*

XXX

Madam,

I am reading now the works of that famous and most renowned author, Descartes, out of which I intend to pick out only those discourses which I like best, and not to examine his opinions, as they go along from the beginning to the end of his books; and in order to this, I have chosen in the first place, his discourse of motion, and do not assent to his opinion, when he defines motion to be only a mode of a thing, and not the thing or body itself; for, in my opinion, there can be no abstraction made of motion from body, neither really, nor in the manner of our

Selections from Margaret Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters* (London, 1664), 97–128.

Anne Viscountess Conway

ANNE VISCOUNTESS CONWAY was born December 14, 1631, and died in 1678 at the age of 47. She was born into a prominent family and although educated at home, she does not seem to have been discouraged from intellectual pursuits, but, among other things, learned Latin and Greek. She was in fact encouraged in this by her brother, John Finch, who introduced her to his tutor at Cambridge, Henry More, the Cambridge Platonist, with whom Conway formed a close friendship. In 1651, she married Edward Conway, Viscount Conway, who had also been a pupil of More's. Throughout her life, Conway suffered from a very debilitating form of headache, probably a version of migraine, and in consequence lived a very quiet life in the country at Ragley Hall, where she was frequently visited by More and others of his circle. It was in the pursuit of a cure for her headaches that Conway met the second important influence in her life, Francis Mercury van Helmont, the son of the "proto-chemist," Jean Baptiste van Helmont, who was persuaded to come to Ragley to try and cure Conway's headaches. Although he was able to work only a slight and temporary alleviation of her pain, he remained at Ragley for nine years, until Conway's death. Initially More and van Helmont shared along with Conway in some intellectual interests, in particular in the Cabalistic writings of Christian Knorr von Rosenroth. In time, however, van Helmont became increasingly interested in Quakerism, and eventually persuaded Conway to formally join the Quakers. Not

long after her conversion, she died after days of terrible pain. Her brother wrote of her: "I must never hope to see again in this world, knowledge enough to have made a man of parts proud, in a more talkative sex to be possessed without noise."

Anne Conway's treatise, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy,* has a rather checkered history. After her death, van Helmont carried away from Ragley a philosophical notebook that Conway had written, but had never revised. It is said to have been prepared for publication and translated into Latin under the joint editorship of van Helmont and More, and was eventually published in 1690 in Holland along with some other material belonging to van Helmont. This Latin treatise was subsequently retranslated into English, and published in England in 1692. Anne Conway's original English version being lost, this retranslation was published by Peter Loptson in 1982, although it is now out of print. Because, upon leaving Anne Conway, van Helmont visited Leibniz to whom he conveyed his good opinion of Conway's thought and to whom he might have shown her work, there has been speculation that Leibniz was influenced by Conway. Leibniz himself contributed to this notion, writing to Thomas Burnett that "My philosophical views approach somewhat closely those of the late Countess of Conway." It is likely, however, that any coincidence in their views stems from ideas "in the air" rather than any transference from Conway to Leibniz, as Leibniz's opinions on the relevant topics had been formed before he could have read Anne Conway's treatise, if indeed, he ever did.

Anne Conway's theory is, as far as nature goes, both monist and vitalist. She distinguishes three distinct kinds of being, God, Christ, and creation, which are differentiable from each other chiefly with respect to changeability—God is utterly unchangeable, Christ is changeable only for the better, and hence forms a necessary mediation between God and creation, and creatures are changeable for better or for worse. With respect to creatures, this feature has the result that any creature could in principle be transformed into any other. Conway emphasizes that what is distinctive about her claim is not that one piece of matter could be transformed into another, as the body of a horse into the body of a person, for this she recognizes as true

on any seventeenth-century account of matter, but what she regards as her interesting claim is that the spirit of a horse could in principle be transformed into the spirit of a person. This is because creation is infinitely perfectible, so that, if a horse could only become as good a horse as possible and never achieve the excellence of a person, this would be a limitation of its ability to change for the better. A horse may not be as good a spiritual being as a person, as intelligent, say, but this is not because it is a different kind of spiritual being with a different kind of intelligence. In fact, Conway wants to go so far as to claim that there is no difference in kind between body and spirit, that even though in each creature there is a passive principle and an active one, the difference is only in degree not in kind. Although Conway gives a number of arguments for this thesis, the most interesting involve her rejection, as unintelligible, of Descartes's claim that there is inert matter subject only to local motion. Conway holds that there are not, as Descartes would have it, two forms of explanation for motion, one for body and one for spirits, but only one. Therefore, for Conway, the only intelligible form of explanation is vitalistic, in terms proper to spirits. Thus she distinguishes her theory from Descartes, in rejecting his dualism, and from Hobbes, in rejecting his materialism.

✧ Selections from *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*

CHAP. VI

That all creatures in their own nature are changeable, the distinction between God and creatures, duly considered, evi-

Selections from Anne Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy,* London, 1692; modern edition, Peter Loptson, ed. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982), 175–185, 188–190, 211–216, 221–231.