

Part I

Ethical and Political Liberty

Liberty and Feminism in Early Modern Women's Writing

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Nietzsche famously (and parenthetically!) writes in *The Genealogy of Morals* that '[o]nly something which has no history is capable of being defined'.¹ While much ink has been spilt over this evocative thought, one way of thinking about this is to note that a concept with a history will mean very different things throughout the lifetime of that concept. Different historical contexts produce different meanings for a thing. This can be said of the idea of *feminism*, and it can be said of the idea of *liberty*—a concept with an even longer history than that of feminism. Recognizing this—that feminism, as a concept with a history, evades definition—is helpful in thinking about the early modern period and the women and men who wrote favourably about women in these centuries. For one regularly comes across early modern thinkers whose ideas about women, their minds, their liberties, their very selves, strike the modern mind as distinctively feminist, and yet who also embrace ideas that we find troublesome, precisely on feminist grounds. But drawing upon Nietzsche's idea expressed

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, translated by Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), Essay 2, Section 13.

above, we might say that ‘feminism’ cannot be defined precisely because it is embedded in different historical contexts, and that we can recognize ideas from the past as being feminist ideas *for that time period*, or feminist ideas given *what they subsequently made possible* in the evolution of feminism. But further, I think we can also find in past writers ideas that strike us as remarkably modern. We often find that thinkers from the past were clearly alert to some issues addressed theoretically by later feminists, even if our early modern forebears dealt with these issues pre-theoretically and in nascent form. It behoves us to recover these prescient proto-feminisms that have been ignored for too long.

This chapter aims to show the various ways in which we might think of Mary Astell and Margaret Cavendish as feminists in this historically-situated way of thinking about feminism, as well as women who presaged with acute insight, many ideas we are only now theorizing in the history of feminism and philosophy.² I aim to do so by discussing their identification of three forms of liberty (both freedom, and its close cousin, autonomy), which seventeenth-century women standardly lacked. In Cavendish’s and Astell’s recommendations of how women might push for greater liberty of these three forms, we find some radical suggestions for women’s progress. For they agitate for greater equality of educational opportunity, for social conditions which enable women to develop more authentic, autonomous selves, and

² For other essays on Cavendish and Astell in this volume, see Deborah Boyle’s ‘Freedom and Necessity in the Work of Margaret Cavendish’, Alice Sowaal’s ‘Mary Astell on Liberty’, and Jacqueline Broad’s ‘Marriage, Slavery, and the Merger of Wills: Responses to Sprint, 1700–01’.

for the inculcation of women-only communities in which women can uniquely thrive as individuals. They thus present a number of feminist ideas, whatever other less-woman-friendly ideas we may find in their writing.³ As a secondary aim, this paper urges us to think in an expansive way about what counts as a philosophical text, for many important philosophical insights from our past are found in genres and expressed by methods not typically recognized as philosophy in the dominant anglo-analytic tradition. Too much understanding of our philosophical past is lost due to this narrow view of our discipline.⁴

1.1 Rationality and Freedom: Feminism as Equality of Educational Opportunity

However later thinkers might have viewed the role of Descartes and Cartesianism in the history of feminism, many in the seventeenth century took Descartes' idea of an unsexed, rational soul, and the fact that all humans are essentially alike in our possession of such a soul as our essential nature, as holding enormous promise for women. If women, no less than men, are defined essentially by their ability to think rationally, then women and men are essentially equal in nature. Moreover, differential treatment of men and women, due to the contingencies

³ Astell is especially interesting on this front, given her views of women's subordination to men within marriage. On this strange mix of the feminist and anti-feminist in her work, see Karen Detlefsen, 'Custom, Freedom and Equality: Mary Astell on Marriage and Women's Education', in *Feminist Interpretations of Mary Astell*, edited by Alice Sowaal and Penny A. Weiss (State College, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016), pp. 74-92.

⁴ It is important to note that the continental tradition in philosophy is much more open to some of the forms of philosophical writing that women of the early modern period utilized to great effect, and so a corollary to my call for anglo-analytic openness is a call for the bringing together of strength from both the analytic and continental traditions. On this as one strategy for enriching our histories of philosophy, see Calvin Normore, 'What is to be done in the history of philosophy', in *Topoi* 25 (2006): 75-82.

of their sexed bodies, which do not define their essence, could be seen as an unjust violation of their proper, rational nature. This is precisely how Astell interpreted the power of Cartesianism. In her first letter to Norris, she writes:

Sir,

Though some morose Gentlemen wou'd perhaps remit me to the Distaff or the Kitchin, or at least to the Glass and the Needle, the proper Employments as they fancy of a Womans Life; yet expecting better things from the more Equitable and Ingenuous Mr. Norris, who is not so narrow-Soul'd as to confine Learning to his own Sex, or to envy it in ours, I presume to beg his Attention a little to the Impertinencies of a Womans Pen. ... For though I can't pretend to a Multitude of Books, Variety of Languages, the Advantages of Academical Education, or any Helps but what my own Curiosity affords; yet *Thinking* is a Stock that no Rational Creature can want.⁵

The connection between the human's power of rational thought, as the defining feature of her human essence, and freedom is complex and interesting in Descartes. Here, I treat one aspect of that connection to set the stage for a consideration of the first distinctively feminist idea to be found in Astell.

⁵ Mary Astell and John Norris, *Letters Concerning the Love of God*, edited by E. Derek Taylor and Melvyn New (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005), p. 69.

Famously, in the Fourth Meditation, Descartes associates the human's empowerment through the possession of reason with a certain variety of freedom. To recall the context of that Meditation, Descartes is trying to explain the brute fact of human error given that the human has been created by a benevolent and non-deceiving God. He must locate the source of human error squarely within the human herself, for otherwise, blame may devolve onto God himself as our maker, thus implicating this (supposedly benevolent) being in human wrong thinking and wrong action.⁶ The problem is especially acute given the device of the deceptive God presented in the First Meditation, for in that Meditation, Descartes calls upon the brute fact that humans err, even in mathematics, while believing themselves to be in the right. To explain human certainty even in the face of error, Descartes posits the idea of a deceptive God who either made us the sorts of faulty beings who regularly go wrong even while we are certain we are right, or is actively tricking us into believing a falsehood (AT VII, 21). This brute fact of human error remains in the Fourth Meditation, and so Descartes must explain how we go wrong so as to not undermine the existence of a benevolent, non-deceiving God just proven in the Third Meditation. He does so by attributing human error to a misuse of the free will, specifically, the will's assenting to or denying a claim about which it does not have a clear and distinct idea (AT VII, 56ff). This *freedom of indifference* is our lowest form of

⁶ René Descartes, *Meditation on First Philosophy*, in *Oeuvres de Descartes*, 11 vols., edited by C. Adam and P. Tannery. Paris: J. Vrin, 1964-76, volume VII, pp 53ff. Hereafter, Descartes' texts are cited by AT volume and page number.

freedom, and it is the source, found within the human herself, of human error.⁷ But we also have another, higher, form of freedom—the *freedom of spontaneity*—which is the self-compulsion to assent to any idea that we see clearly and distinctly to be correct (and to deny any idea that we see clearly and distinctly to be incorrect). While we cannot do anything but assent to the clearly and distinctly true ideas—that is, we have no choice among alternatives—we are nonetheless free, for the constraint that pushes us inevitably toward assent is a self-constraint, and not an external constraint. We are *self-determined* in this case, and we are thus free. The general thrust of the Cartesian project is to perfect human reason as fully as possible so as to set firm metaphysical foundations for the whole of philosophy, which finds its fullest realization in the special sciences, including morality.⁸ Education, taken to be thinking properly for oneself in order to discover all of our clear and distinct ideas as the sure foundation upon which to build our edifice of knowledge, is crucial to our full realization of reason, and thus to our full realization of our highest form of freedom.⁹

⁷ While I focus on the feminist implication of the freedom of spontaneity, to be examined shortly, indifference is also instructive for feminist considerations as Lisa Shapiro shows in her paper on Suchon in this volume, ‘Gabrielle Suchon’s “Neutralist”: The Status of Women and the Invention of Autonomy’.

⁸ For more on human freedom, and as a few mere examples in a vast literature, see Gary Hatfield, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Descartes and the Meditations* (New York: Routledge, 2003), chapter 6; Lilli Alanen, ‘The role of will in Descartes’ account of judgment’, in *Descartes’ Meditations: A Critical Guide*, edited by Karen Detlefsen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 176-99; and C. P. Ragland, *The Will to Reason: Theodicy and Freedom in Descartes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁹ On the importance of education in seventeenth century philosophy, see, for example, Lisa Shapiro, ‘What is a philosophical canon’ (ms).

Astell is clear on the importance of the ontology of the human mind as the source of men and women's natural equality,¹⁰ and she is clear on the importance of education for the development of the human soul as the essence of the human *being*. Her *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* is precisely meant to encourage women to join together in a religious, educational community in order to perfect their rational minds for freedom's sake, a perfection that is difficult to achieve in the wider world of men. Three crucial steps in Astell's reasoning must be underscored. First, she emphasizes that true freedom is not the freedom to do anything we want (a Cartesian freedom of indifference); rather, true freedom is to guide the will in accordance with the dictates of reason such that freedom *requires* reason: liberty 'consists not in a power to do what we will, but in making a right use of our reason.... He and only he is a freeman who acts according to right reason'.¹¹ Second, women's reason cannot be properly developed in a world where customs and the pressures exerted by men pervert women's rational development by, for example, encouraging women to focus on their bodies and beauty (contingent, inessential features of themselves) over their minds (their very essence). She encourages women to 'regain your Freedom' by getting out from the 'Tyranny in Ignorance and Folly' imposed by men.¹² She supposes women are 'fill'd with a laudable Ambition to brighten and enlarge your Souls, that the Beauty of your Bodies is but a

¹⁰ For complications surrounding Astell's reliance on a human *soul* to ground her beliefs in women's and men's equality, see Jacqueline Broad, 'Mary Astell's Malebranchian Concept of the Self' (ms).

¹¹ Mary Astell, *The Christian Religion, as Professed by a Daughter of the Church of England*, edited by Jacqueline Broad (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies and Iter Publishing, 2013), §249.

¹² Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Parts I and II*, edited by Patricia Springborg (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2002), p. 121. Hereafter, references to this edition will be cited in-text with *SP I* or *SP II* and page number.

secondary care' (*SP II* 122; see *SP I* 54). And the best way to gain this freedom to enlarge their souls is to sequester themselves in a women-only religious retreat, free from customs and prejudice largely imposed by men. Finally, because women no less than men are identified by their rational souls, they ought to have equal opportunity to educational resources in order to develop their rational minds, in order to be truly free.

This first conception of liberty underscores the idea that freedom is reliant upon reason, such that the less well-developed one's rational capacities are, the less free one is. And from this conception of freedom emerges the feminist ideal of equality of educational opportunity. That Astell suggests women's reason is best cultivated in a community of like-minded women, makes her thoughts on this score radically feminist for the seventeenth century. It is important to note that Astell does not call for equal *rights* to education, an idea more readily associated with liberal feminism. For no human, for Astell, has *rights*. Rather, we have duties to God—duties to cultivate the nature that he gave us in order to live in accordance with his plan for us, both on earth and in the afterlife. But lacking rights does not detract from the feminist emphasis on equality that we find in Astell on the point of educational opportunity. And indeed, Astell has an especially potent arrow in her quiver on this front, for our duty to educate ourselves, thus expanding our power of reason, and thus realizing our freedom is something we owe God; it is something God wishes of us, men and women alike. There can be no greater sanction for the theist than this. Astell's feminism on this score is grounded in

God and our duty to him, a grounding that ought to convince all thinking, theologically-oriented humans.¹³

1.2 Authenticity and Autonomy: Feminism as Retaining (or Regaining) One's True Nature

While Astell believes that we are essentially defined by our rational souls, it is also true that during our life on earth, we are embodied creatures. Cavendish, unlike Astell (and Descartes) is a materialist, and so for her, our embodiment is even more prevalent for we are essentially defined by our material nature.¹⁴ Our embodiment is crucial to Descartes, too, despite some twentieth-century feminists who emphasized what they take to be Descartes' hyper-rationality and neglect of the body, and related, neglect of the sensations and passions.¹⁵ For Descartes, for example, our moral lives depend upon how we react to pain, just as they depend upon how we channel and exploit the passions in service of virtue.

¹³ I think an argument for a similar conception of freedom, together with the feminist idea of equality of educational opportunity, can be found in Cavendish. For the argument in favour of increased freedom coming from increased reason, see Karen Detlefsen, 'Reason and Freedom: Margaret Cavendish on the Order and Disorder of Nature', in *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 89, no. 2 (2007): 157-91. For the argument in favour of equality of educational opportunity, see Karen Detlefsen, 'Margaret Cavendish and Thomas Hobbes on Freedom, Education, and Women', in *Feminist Interpretations of Hobbes*, edited by Nancy J. Hirschmann and Joanne H. Wright (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2012), pp. 149-68.

¹⁴ For the purposes of the present discussion, I bracket Cavendish's discussion of the divine soul within the human, which may well complicate the claim I have just made. However, even if Cavendish believes that humans alone have a soul, it would still be embodied in our life on earth, and so the arguments made throughout this section apply to her no less than to Cavendish. On Cavendish and the divine soul, see Margaret Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters: Or, Modest Reflections Upon some Opinions in Natural Philosophy, Maintained by several Famous and Learned Authors of this Age, Expressed by way of Letters* (London: 1664), pp. 210-11.

¹⁵ For example, see the writings of Karl Stern, Susan Bordo, and Genevieve Lloyd.

Our sexed embodiment in this world complicates the preceding picture of reason, freedom, and feminism for both Astell and Cavendish. For one, Astell's claim that *naturally equal* women are nonetheless subordinate to men in marriage¹⁶ can make sense *only if* our embodiment in sexed bodies is taken into account. For as souls, there are no sexes or genders. To be a woman (subordinate to man), is exactly to be embodied. Moreover, to be embodied means that we have passions, including what we would now call the emotions. The passions contribute to how we interact with other humans, including how women *qua women* and men *qua men* interact with each other. Turning briefly to another early modern philosopher with generous views about women, François Poullain de la Barre suggests that it is the passion of self-interest within men that leads them to believe that women's actual inferiority is the cause of their current oppressed state, rather than that state being the result of the unjust treatment of women.¹⁷ The passions, which are a feature of our embodiment, are not to be neglected when considering gender relations in seventeenth-century thought. But beyond the passions, we just are experienced by others as sexed (because embodied) creatures; we are not immediately received as unsexed souls. And when seen as sexed creatures, gender norms routinely constrain human lives.

¹⁶ See, for example, Mary Astell, *Reflections Upon Marriage*, in *Astell: Political Writings*, edited by Patricia Springborg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1700] 1996), pp. 48ff.

¹⁷ François Poullain de la Barre, *A Physical and Moral Discourse Concerning the Equality of Both Sexes*, in Desmond M. Clarke, ed. and trans., *The Equality of the Sexes: Three Feminist Texts of the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 123-4.

Here, a powerful insight from J. S. Mill more than a century later is helpful. In the opening pages of *On Liberty*, Mill discusses the rules of conduct necessary for joint human life, noting that if one lives by these rules for so long *by custom*, then one may mistake these merely customary rules as being centrally definitive of who one is as a person. What is originally obedience to an authority—often against our ‘first natures’—becomes what Mill calls one’s ‘second nature’.¹⁸ Expanding upon Mill’s idea, one might acknowledge that custom can be so influential, that a person can mistake this second nature for her first nature. She might thus mistakenly believe that what she *essentially* is is what she merely *contingently* has become due to the influence of custom. So, for example, if a person’s first, true nature is to be a rational, unsexed soul (perhaps with individual variation as Astell, for example, allows¹⁹), her second nature might be her nature as a socialized being, adjusting to the dictates of custom. In the seventeenth century, with women and men’s customary roles so strictly defined, one’s second nature almost certainly will be conditioned by what customs expect of us due to our sex. And so, a seventeenth-century woman’s second nature is almost certainly a gendered nature. Were the woman to take this second nature to be her first, true nature, she might well have a wholly misplaced conception of her true nature.

¹⁸ J. S. Mill, *On Liberty and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), chapter 1, paragraph 6.

¹⁹ See Astell’s *Proposal* (SP II 153 and 186).

Discussing this important idea in Mill, which contributes to our thinking about the history of conceptions of liberty, Quentin Skinner notes the following.²⁰ A simple, original, liberal account of individual freedom suggests that a free individual is one who has the *power* ‘to act in pursuit of a given option’, while at the same time encountering *no interference*, with that interference coming from external forces either physically acting on the body to prevent the desired action (as on Hobbes’ account) or coercively acting on the will through threats to prevent the desired action. Mill’s advancement expands the source of interference to include, in addition to external agencies, internal impediments. That is, *the self* can prevent or compel ‘action due to operation of (a) passion, (b) inauthenticity, (c) false consciousness, [or] (d) the unconscious’. Many of these forms of self-interference gain full expression in later thinkers, but I suggest the recognition of the phenomenon of self-interference is to be found at least as early as the seventeenth century, for example, in the writings of Astell and Cavendish. That is, unfreedom through inauthentic self-constraint, or through self-constraint based on a sort of false-consciousness is strongly suggested by our two philosophers. One might include another form of interference by the self, a form closely related to false consciousness. This is what some theorists called ‘deformed desires’, or (as I shall call it) misguided desires that are a result of ‘adaptive preference formation’. According to this theory, ‘the oppressed come to desire that which is oppressive to them ... [and] one’s desires turn away from goods and even

²⁰ Quentin Skinner, ‘How Should We Think about Freedom?’, public lecture at The University of Pennsylvania, 2 April 2014.

needs that, absent those conditions [of oppression], they would want'.²¹ Such preferences are often the result of the oppressed internalizing ideas about themselves, which do not accord with their own, original ideas.

Before turning to Astell and Cavendish to substantiate this suggestion, I shall first fill out some details on the connections between authenticity and true consciousness on the one hand, and autonomy (as a form of liberty) on the other hand. We can think of autonomy as capturing at least three distinct ideas: personal autonomy, moral autonomy, and political autonomy. Moral autonomy, paradigmatically captured by Kant's moral theory, entails having the capacity to conceive of and set moral rules for oneself. Political autonomy typically entails that an individual's interests are reflected in the political institutions under which she lives, or that she has some role in the realization of those institutions. My interest is with personal autonomy, one conception of which portrays it as 'the capacity to be *one's own* person, to live *one's own* life according to reasons and motives that are taken as *one's own* and not the product of manipulative or distorting external forces'.²² There are at least two crucial elements to this conception of personal autonomy: self-ownership or self-possession, including over one's mind and motives; and being an informed, active agent who has had a significant hand in her self-making, and not merely a manipulated, passive product

²¹ Ann Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 181.

²² John Christman, 'Autonomy in Moral and Political Philosophy', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [online encyclopedia], edited by Edward N. Zalta (Spring 2015), <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2015/entries/autonomy-moral/>>; emphasis added.

of another's making. On this conception, personal autonomy is marked in part by authenticity of the self without false consciousness or without preferences *malformed* to adjust to gendered social demands. But how can one decide whether one has such self-possession, and is made primarily by oneself? Isn't it possible for a *truly* non-autonomous, inauthentic sufferer from false-consciousness still to believe herself to be *exactly* what she wishes to be? This has led some theorists who think about personal autonomy, and the closely related idea of the authentic self without false consciousness, to distinguish between a synchronic conception of autonomy and a diachronic conception of autonomy.²³ In any given moment (synchronically) one can claim self-ownership of one's self; one can say she has made herself and her life to be exactly what she wishes these to be. But since such claims may be the result of adaptive preference formation, turning to a diachronic conception of autonomy can give us a fuller account of personal autonomy. According to such an account, one can be said to be truly autonomous, with an authentic self, if one has come to have one's preferences and to be the person one is in particular ways (but not in other ways).

Returning to Mill's account of first and second natures, when a customary, often gendered, second nature is internalized by the individual who lives by the customs imposed upon her such that this second nature is mistaken by the person as her first, *true* nature, she is, in an

²³ For example, see Alfred R. Mele, *Autonomous Agents: From Self-Control to Autonomy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); and John Christman, *The Politics of Persons. Individual Autonomy and Socio-historical Selves*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

important way, not *herself*. She has not necessarily made herself into the person she would wish to be were her preferences not manipulated by customary expectations. She is not necessarily living her life according to her own reasons and motives. It is certainly possible, of course, that one's external environment encourages the construction of a self and of a life that is basically in line with one's own first nature and preferred life, but this will not always necessarily be the case.

We find a variety of this lack of personal autonomy, and the inauthenticity and adaptive preference formation that attend it, in both Astell and Cavendish. Crucially, for Astell, personal autonomy is of a different nature than how I have been discussing it. As presented above, such autonomy relies upon self-definition, of one's very being and of one's life. But for Astell, of course, one does not rightly make herself or her life (and its purpose). One's first, true nature, to borrow Mill's term, is made by God, and one's life should be oriented toward her one true purpose, defined not by herself but by her maker. And the purpose of all human lives is to know and to serve God in preparation of the soul for the afterlife (e.g. SP II, 187-9; 200). Still, any second (for example, customary and gendered) nature that identifies a different life purpose from the service of God, and which suggests that one conceives of one's self as other than God made that self, is a case of taking second nature as one's true nature. It is a case of inauthenticity. If one internalizes the idea that one's second nature is one's true, first nature, then one has a false idea of who one truly is; one has what would later

come to be called false consciousness. Adapting Christman's conception of personal autonomy offered above to the case of Astell, one may conceive of an autonomous state to be one in which the subject has 'the capacity to be one's *true* person, to live one's *true* life according to reasons and motives that reflect one's *true* purpose, and are not the product of manipulative or distorting external forces'.

In her recent book on Astell, Jacqueline Broad presents Astell's philosophy as providing a moral theory for women in order to guide women to the virtuous life. Broad presents us with two 'different character types' found in Astell, one virtuous, the other not. My interest is in the characteristic of the non-virtuous woman, for such a woman is often as she is because she lacks authenticity and suffers from false consciousness; she lacks the autonomy to be the self that God has made and to live the life that God has prescribed for her. She lives in accordance with custom and she has adopted the second, false nature prescribed by custom as her first, true nature. As Broad underscores, the non-virtuous woman according to Astell, is overly concerned with other people's (especially men's) opinions of her, she is overly focused on her youth and beauty (including anxiety when she loses these), she has no clear goal in life, her mind is underdeveloped, she relies excessively on other people's opinions of her, and she pursues unworthy activities to fill her days.²⁴ Perhaps most poignant in Astell's characterization of such a woman is her claim that she is 'perpetually uneasy' for her sense of

²⁴ Jacqueline Broad, *The Philosophy of Mary Astell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 1-2.

self worth is so tightly wound up with that which is beyond her control—beauty, others' opinions, material goods, and so forth (*SP I 92*).²⁵ The non-virtuous woman has become like this because she has succumbed to the pressures of customs that are not in accordance with God's plan for humans, and so she has cultivated features of herself that are not in accord with her true nature and purpose. She has elevated second nature—customary nature—over her true nature. Such a woman may even have internalized this customary, second nature such that she believes it captures her true worth.

This process is enabled and encouraged by our embodiment, a feature of us that can easily obscure—to ourselves and to others—our true natures as rational, God-inclined souls.

Women's bodily beauty is easier to see than the beauty of their souls, and their sexuality and how it can manipulate men who otherwise occupy a more powerful social position is easier to experience than their rationality.

Cavendish deals with this second form of freedom less powerfully than Astell, but various aspects of it nonetheless enter into her plays. While the *internalization* of a second nature is less obvious in Cavendish's works, what is obvious in her writing is the fact that customary expectations (or second natures) exert pressures on women to live in various ways that conflict with their preferences for themselves and their lives. Two examples will suffice to

²⁵ See also Broad, *Philosophy of Mary Astell*, pp. 1-2.

drive this point home, and I draw these examples from two of her plays, *Youth's Glory*, and *Deaths Banquet* (hereafter *Youth's Glory*) and *Convent of Pleasure*. There are two, loosely related, plot lines in *Youth's Glory*. The one relevant for my concerns runs roughly as follows. Lady Sanspareille, daughter to Mother and Father Love, wants to pursue a life of education and oration and believes that she must forego marriage and having children in order to satisfy her life goals. Her mother prefers she pursue a more traditional female education, marry, and have children. Father Love encourages his daughter's choices and aids her in realizing her ambitions. Lady Sanspareille gains a superior education, becomes a well-regarded orator—the only female among many wise men—but tragically dies young after contracting a terrible disease. In *The Convent of Pleasure*, Lady Happy is the mentor of a group of women enclosed in a women's-only educational institution, with no way of the women on the inside interacting with men on the outside. The men outside contemplate removing bricks to be able to see what goes on within, and they are agitated by the seclusion and inaccessibility of the women. Part way through the play, a princess arrives in the convent, and she and Lady Happy fall in love. Lady Happy openly contemplates pursuing what feels fully right and good to her—a lesbian relationship. In the end, the princess's identity is exposed; 'she' is a prince, the two enter into a heterosexual marriage, and the convent disbands.

In *Youth's Glory*, Lady Sanspareille is very clear that customary expectations of her as a woman would interfere greatly with her desires for how she wants her own life to unfold; self-ownership of her life requires that she eschew the second nature that custom offers her. The most obvious example is in her rejection of marriage:

[I]f I marry, although I should have time for my thoughts and contemplations, yet perchance my Husband will not approve of my works... I am of the opinion, that some men are so inconsiderately wise, gravely foolish and lowly base, as they had rather be thought Cuckolds, then their wives be thought wits, for fear the world should think their wives the wiser of the two...²⁶

In *The Convent of Pleasure*, the women also have a clear understanding that custom—and marriage is again singled out—lades women especially with personal burdens that detract them from lives they would want for themselves. For example, in that play, the women of the convent perform masques in which there are fully ten scenes depicting women suffering in various ways in the marital bond. It is no wonder that Lady Happy believes that the ‘best of Men, if any best there be ... [brings] more crosses and sorrows than pleasure, freedom, or happiness. ... [Men] make the Female sex their slaves’.²⁷ An obvious solution to this problem is for women to provide themselves with the sorts of communities that provide

²⁶ Margaret Cavendish, *Playes Written by the Thrice Noble, Illustrious and Excellent Princess, The Lady Marchioness of Newcastle* (London: A. Warren for John Martyn, James Allestry, and Thomas Dicas, 1662), p. 131.

²⁷ Margaret Cavendish, *Plays, Never before Printed. Written By the Thrice Noble, Illustrious, and Excellent Princesse The Duchess of Newcastle* (London: A Maxwell, 1668), pp. 3, 7.

healthy relations which enable women, develop their intellects, and thus make them free. Not only will women in such circumstances find themselves with a greater measure of agency, but they will also find themselves to take on a range of occupations not available to them in communities where men monopolize certain professions. In the convent, for example, there will be ‘Women-Physicians, Surgeons and Apothecaries’.²⁸ Women can pursue life options more in line with their preferences given their evaluations of their true natures, not perverted by custom.

This second form of liberty connects with the first considered above. Recall there, I note that Astell (and a similar case can be made for Cavendish) identifies the freedom to develop one’s rational capacities to their fullest—the freedom to empower one’s mind as fully as possible—as a crucial freedom that women often lack. Suggesting a single-sex educational institution where women can retreat from the world of men and distracting requirements loaded on the women, provides a solution to the lack of freedom women experience in their lives. If rationality is a crucial, if not the crucial, feature of women’s first natures, this form of liberty I am currently considering—that which permits the development of personal autonomy such that one’s first nature is not replaced by a second, customary nature—merges with the first form of liberty above. For development of rationality in (often self-segregated) educational institutions at one and the same time empowers women by helping them develop their

²⁸ Cavendish, *Plays*, p. 11.

rationality and ensures their true natures are cultivated rather than pushed aside in favour of second natures prescribed by customs in the wider world.

But separating out this second form of liberty from the first, and noting the role of living an inauthentic life and developing what will later be called false consciousness, is crucial for underscoring a specific aspect of Astell's, and perhaps Cavendish's, work. Astell spends the first part of *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* diagnosing the ills that women face by living in the world of customs and men who enforce those customs, and as suggested in this section, she does so extremely effectively, with a clear understanding of the psychological burdens women face by internalizing these customary, second natures. The second part of *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* sets out the solution, namely, the religious retreat where they will gain superior education focused on fulfilling their duties to God so as to strengthen their first natures. But the problem with false consciousness, or preferences formed under non-ideal conditions, as modern feminists theorize, is precisely the difficulty involved in identifying a true nature once it is suppressed and even replaced with a false nature. There is something seemingly patronizing in one woman telling another that she needs to join a women's only retreat to regain what she has lost, especially when the latter woman may not see the need of this *for herself*, precisely because of her having internalized a second nature. Here the distinction between synchronic accounts of personal autonomy and diachronic accounts of such autonomy is helpful in understanding the depth of this problem. For Astell is writing to

women, many of whom might have been raised to cultivate selves and to desire certain things for their lives that run counter to the selves and lives God prescribes for them. A synchronic account of personal autonomy might tell us that such women have personal autonomy so long as their wishes for their own lives, which may be to pursue bodily beauty, sexual manipulation of men and so forth, can be satisfied. But a diachronic account of personal autonomy would most likely suggest that such women do not have personal autonomy if having been raised in the way that they have been raised suggests that they are unable to develop the selves and lives they would have *preferred* to develop, and that they are unable to critically evaluate who they are and how they live to see if their lives are as they and God wish them to be. The depth of the problem facing women and their autonomy is especially highlighted by this second account of liberty in a way that the first account cannot make as clear.

So this second form of liberty—personal autonomy, which carries with it an account of authenticity and true consciousness (or holding true preferences)—highlights a second way of thinking of Astell and Cavendish as feminist. For they wish to construct social settings for women where their true natures can be cultivated or, perhaps, recovered and then cultivated. They wish to help women avoid the lack of personal autonomy associated with inauthentic, falsely developed selves. They are feminists who want for women environments where they

can avoid the psychological oppression of internalized second, and perverted, selves to allow their first, true natures to flourish.

1.3 Relational Autonomy: Feminism as the Cultivation of Female-friendly Communities

While it is true that many early seventeenth-century feminists find Cartesianism a promising starting point for women and their increased freedom, later feminists take issue with some aspects of Descartes' thought. Two issues identified are the following. First, some twentieth-century feminists worry about the excessive emphasis placed upon rationality at the expense of our embodiment and the passionate natures that attend that embodiment (though see above for my belief that Descartes himself is well aware of the role the body plays in human life). Humans are not just reasoning machines; we are caring and loving, too.²⁹ Second, there is a worry, first and powerfully highlighted by Princess Elisabeth (AT III, 684), that Descartes emphasizes too heavily the solitary life. At too many junctures, success in the Cartesian project of uncovering true metaphysical foundations for understanding physics and ultimately for understanding what it means to live a virtuous life requires the sort of isolated, contemplative existence which Descartes himself enjoyed, but which few people can similarly enjoy (should they even want to). Elisabeth's own concerns are not voiced in gendered terms, but it is a very small step from the acknowledgment that some people are required to live with *and for the benefit of* other people (much more so than, for example,

²⁹ For a classic account of this view of the moral person, see Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

Descartes himself) to the acknowledgment that women have been traditionally much more burdened than have men by living for the benefit of others.³⁰

Both these concerns are addressed in the third form of liberty I identify as undergirding feminist thought in Astell and Cavendish.³¹ This is what has been recently dubbed ‘relational autonomy’, and it has been seen as especially friendly to feminist ends. Here is a brief primer on central aspects of this form of liberty. In somewhat recent feminist theory, there has been a great deal of opposition expressed toward the ideal of the free or autonomous agent.³² The ideal of autonomy with which these feminists take issue assumes a self-sufficient, independent and ‘atomistic’ agent, and is thus seen as exalting hyper-individualism. Because this ideal of autonomy distances itself from emotional commitments such as care, it is also seen as hyper-rationalistic. This conception of autonomy is further seen to be masculinist because historically the traits of self-sufficiency, independence, non-connectedness, and rationality have been associated with men, while interdependence, reliance on social communities, trust and care, and thus emotions and passions, have been associated with women. So, according to this feminist line of thought, any theory of freedom which lauds the

³⁰ For development of these ideas, see Shapiro’s account of Suchon in this volume, ‘Gabrielle Suchon’s “Neutralist”: The Status of Women and the Invention of Autonomy’.

³¹ Material in this and the following paragraph reiterates points that I have made in Detlefsen, ‘Margaret Cavendish and Thomas Hobbes’, p. 162, and Detlefsen, ‘Custom, Freedom and Equality’, pp. 86-7.

³² Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar, ‘Introduction: Autonomy Refigured’, in *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*, edited by Mackenzie and Stoljar (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 3.

former list of traits and portrays them as central to a fully and freely-lived human life, and which disparages the latter list of traits, is a masculinist theory.

Lately, a number of feminist theorist, including Marilyn Friedman, Nancy Hirschmann, Diana Tietjens Meyers, and Natalie Stoljar to name a few, have argued forcefully that we should recognize the critical importance of freedom for feminist ends.³³ Without women and men being free or autonomous agents, it is unclear how we can engage in the project of pushing against and overcoming the oppression of women. Here, the notion of autonomy at work more closely aligns with a sort of ethical and political autonomy (rather than personal autonomy), where women and men have an active role in shaping their public lives and the institutions that govern those lives. Yet these theorists are still mindful of the important feminist criticisms levied against the ideal of autonomy sketched above. And so, recent theorists suggest we ‘refigure’ rather than reject the concept of the autonomous or free individual. Central to one such refiguring is the acknowledgment that we just do find ourselves in social relations, and that these relations are crucial to how we understand our freedom because of the range of human actions that our relations can permit or disallow. The kind and quality of our relations are important in understanding freedom or autonomy, according to these thinkers, insofar as agents just are ‘intrinsically relational because their identities or self-conceptions are constituted by elements of the social context in which they

³³ For example, see papers collected in Mackenzie and Stoljar, eds., *Relational Autonomy*.

are embedded', and insofar as social relations shape the range of options open to people.³⁴ This is 'relational autonomy'. According to this theory, we can give a feminist account of freedom if we expect that women and men alike acknowledge the subjectivity and projects that others wish to pursue, and that women and men alike modulate their behaviour in their relationships so as to allow others the freedom to pursue their projects, even if this requires the individual to curb one's own freely-pursued projects.

I have argued elsewhere that both Cavendish³⁵ and Astell³⁶ develop early, pre-theoretical forms of relational autonomy in their philosophies. Both acknowledge the benefit of women sequestering themselves away from men so as to cultivate productive relations among like-minded individuals. Astell explicitly discusses the importance of a specific form of female friendship as especially helpful in these relations. One central aspect of these friendships is the care and concern each person shows others, with a special emphasis placed on acknowledging the subjectivity of others and their consequent desire to cultivate a specific (first, true) nature in order to live lives they deem appropriately God-directed. Cavendish is quite clear on the case that runs counter to relational autonomy, namely the case where men intrude into women-only communities with the aim, or at least the consequence, of disrupting the productive relations and the women's learning that goes on within those communities.

³⁴ Mackenzie and Stoljar, 'Introduction', in *Relational Autonomy*, p. 22.

³⁵ Detlefsen, 'Margaret Cavendish and Thomas Hobbes', pp. 149-68.

³⁶ Detlefsen, 'Custom, Freedom and Equality', pp. 74-92.

This is clear from the plotline of *The Convent of Pleasure* detailed above. But it is also clear from the plotline of another of her plays, *The Female Academy*. In this play, a number of women have retreated to a woman-only educational institution under the tutelage of an older matron. There, they converse among themselves ‘wittily and rationally’,³⁷ with men outside the walls furious at their unwillingness to make themselves available for marriage and procreation. The women’s seclusion is not complete, however, for there is a large open grate where the women and men are able to converse. Eventually, the men contact the matron, help to convert her from leader of women into marriage broker, and the women inside the gates are married off to the men after the matron rewrites the Academy’s purpose to one in which women are taught to be better wives.³⁸

As contemporary accounts make clear, feminists today believe that relational autonomy is a sort of *feminist* account of freedom, and to the degree that Astell and Cavendish both presage this ideal of autonomy, they are offering a feminist account of liberty. Once again, this ideal dovetails nicely with the previous forms of liberty, for the women-friendly communities that exhibit relational autonomy are especially good at allowing women to cultivate their first, true natures by cultivating their rational capacities. But these communities that enable

³⁷ Cavendish, *Playes*, p. 653.

³⁸ One important caveat to the picture I have painted here and elsewhere (see footnote 28) of Cavendish’s theory of relational autonomy is her depiction of women striving for fame, which may well conflict with the self-modulation associated with relational autonomy. This is an important point and needs to be considered in a fuller treatment of Cavendish’s complex theory of metaphysical, ethical, and political freedom. I am grateful to Deborah Boyle for drawing this point to my attention.

relational autonomy to thrive are not just communities of hyper-rational beings. They are communities that acknowledge our embodied, and thus passionate, natures; they are communities of loving female friendship and they are convents of pleasure. The proto-relational autonomy to be found in Cavendish and Astell addresses both feminist concerns with Cartesianism noted above, for both our thinkers emphasize productive human emotions realized in productive communities as enabling to women and their freedom.

1.4 The Role of Fiction in Philosophy: Cavendish as Case Study

I conclude my thoughts on freedom and feminism with some historiographical reflections, which naturally present themselves when considering Cavendish's *oeuvres*. For whatever account of women, freedom, and feminism that we find in Cavendish is not to be located in her more traditional 'philosophical' works, such as philosophical treatises. Rather, we find these themes most fully developed in her literatures, such as the plays I have addressed here. This suggests that when we wish to understand the fullness of philosophical issues dealt with by historical figures, we ought not to confine ourselves to texts that contemporary anglo-analytic philosophy considers as a philosophical text.

But there is an important lesson about philosophical *method* in addition to this first lesson about *genre*. One lesson about method is best expressed through an example in Cavendish. This is the example of the struggle in *Youth's Glory* between Lady Sanspareille and her

mother, Mother Love—a very aptly chosen name, for her mother does love her. Mother Love is painfully concerned with the possible censure and difficulties her daughter might meet if Lady Sanspareille follows through with her chosen way of life; indeed, she is concerned that in her search for freedom, she will in fact find herself more constrained than she would be if she pursued a more traditional, female seventeenth-century life. And she's got a point. Given the background conditions facing a woman in this period, a freedom-depriving backlash from the broader society is entirely realistic. The *theory* of increased freedom suggested by Lady Sanspareille may gain no traction in *practice*. By employing conflicting voices and points of view in a play where there really is no settled and satisfactory conclusion about women and their freedom, Cavendish is able to efficiently and powerfully address women and their freedom in highly non-ideal conditions, a topic that I suspect she realized had no easy conclusion.

A second lesson is embodied in the fact that Cavendish is employing *fiction* in order to present cases of women realizing greater freedom through greater development of their minds, resistance of social settings that pervert their preferences for themselves and their lives, and banding together with like-minded women in autonomy-affirming communities. Again, a lesson from another woman-friendly seventeenth-centuryist is helpful here. In order to explain why women are routinely underrepresented in intellectual and other pursuits, in his *A Physical and Moral Discourse Concerning the Equality of Both Sexes*, Poullain tells a just-

so genealogical story of how the state of women might have come to be. In this hypothetical account, as Desmond Clarke notes,

At the beginning of history, men were superior to women in physical strength; ... societies were formed; ... they went to war and relied on the strength of male warriors; ... the role of women was limited to child-rearing and ... over the centuries, the prejudice about women's inequality corresponded to what people actually observed in almost every society.³⁹

But appearances need not be an adequate reflection of reality, and to better know the contours of what women and men really are or might be, we need to run the social experiment of allowing women to prove their equality with men.⁴⁰ Facing a dearth of readily-available factual accounts of women proving their equality, including their equal claim to freedom, Cavendish provides fictional accounts showing how women might fare under more women-friendly conditions, and the supposed outcome (until men intrude in their communities) is promising indeed for women. Employing the fictional form, especially the semi-comedic play, allows Cavendish to present a potentially seditious hypothesis in a playful manner, perhaps with the intent of making people think anew about whether facts as we know them are a true reflection of the only lives we might reasonably hope to lead.

³⁹ Clarke, 'Introduction', in *Equality of the Sexes*, p. 40.

⁴⁰ Clarke, 'Introduction', in *Equality of the Sexes*, p. 40.