

Women on Liberty 1600-1800

*An invited symposium at the Monash Prato Centre, Italy
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Abstracts

1. *Liberty and Feminism in Early Modern Women's Writing* **Karen Detlefsen** (Penn, US)

Nietzsche writes in *The Genealogy of Morals* that a concept with a history cannot have a definition, for the fact that it has a history lends it many, and sometimes conflicting, definitions. Such is the case with both liberty and feminism. In this paper, I will look at three distinct conceptions of liberty found in the philosophical, political and literary writings of a number of early modern women. These conceptions may not be named explicitly, but they are surely to be found in the writing of women working in the 16th through 18th centuries, even if they are found in pre-theoretical form. Moreover, in discussing these three forms of liberty, I note that we see three distinct forms of feminism – or perhaps proto-feminism – emerge in the works of early modern women.

The first form of liberty I examine is first theoretically identified by J.S. Mill, but it is found implicitly in the work of women writing at least a century before. This is the liberty that follows when we retain our own nature, and when we do not “make second nature into first nature”. This form of liberty means that we do not choose what is customary over what is authentic to us, and that we do not internalize social expectations, making them our own. This can be considered a form of negative liberty, that is, liberty from interference with our authentic selves. But precisely because it speaks to freedom to retain a true consciousness (and to avoid developing a false consciousness), it is an especially crucial form of negative liberty for women and their individual happiness. This form of liberty is associated with a feminism grounded in female authenticity and self-possession.

Still, there are potential difficulties with this first form of liberty, for it presupposes that individuals have *essences* or *true natures* preceding their lives and choices, and such essentialism has often been used to define women as essentially different from men. So I then consider a second form of liberty found in early modern women's work, grounded in a Cartesian-inspired belief in the essential sameness of all humans, a sameness grounded in their unsexed, rational souls. This form of liberty requires that individuals be permitted and enabled to fully develop their rational capacities as the source of our freest actions, and in the case of women, this requires significant improvement in their educational opportunities. As such, this is a form of positive liberty – the liberty to develop one's rational powers. This form of liberty is most clearly associated with an early form of liberal feminism.

Yet again, there are potential difficulties with this second form of liberty, for it emphasizes the human's individual rational capacities, potentially at the expense of her communal relations and her emotional nature. So I then consider a third form of liberty found in nascent form in some 16th through 18th century women – a proto-expression of what is now theorized as relational autonomy. This form of liberty pays heed to the relations we bear to our fellows, and it depends upon the cultivation of care for our fellows (near and far, known and stranger alike) so that we realize our own freedom only insofar as we recognize others' similar right to freedom. This form of freedom has recently been advocated by feminists, and has been posed as a distinctively feminist form of freedom.

My goal in this paper is not to settle on *specific and preferred forms of liberty and (proto) feminism*, but rather, my goal is to note the sophistication found in early modern women's writings on the complex idea

of liberty, and how their grappling with this idea shows that they offer a variety of ways for women to envision better, more equitable lives for themselves.

2. *Freedom and Necessity in the Works of Margaret Cavendish*

Deborah Boyle (College of Charleston, US)

In Margaret Cavendish's vitalist materialism, Nature is composed of three intermixed types, or "degrees" of matter, two of which are intrinsically self-moving, knowing, and perceptive. Moreover, Cavendish often characterizes the two types of self-moving matter as "free." Although Cavendish claims that she is not much interested in questions surrounding free will and necessity, saying that she leaves such questions to "Moral Philosophers and Divines" (*Philosophical Letters*, p. 96), she frequently mentions freedom. Many Cavendish scholars have noted such passages, and have taken Cavendish as an indeterminist, holding that matter is free in the sense of having a power of self-determination. I think this is right. However, I think the argument for ascribing this view to Cavendish needs to be made more carefully. Cavendish's texts regarding freedom and determinism are more complicated than I think the secondary literature has recognized.

First, the word "free" is ambiguous. When Cavendish describes some entity as free, is she appealing to an indeterminist conception of freedom as a power of spontaneously initiating an action, a metaphysical freedom of the will? Or is she appealing to a Hobbesian notion of liberty as being unimpeded in one's actions? To be free in the latter sense would be to possess freedom of action, but would not entail metaphysical freedom. Thus, one task is to look closely at Cavendish's texts to see if there are passages that unambiguously express an indeterminist conception of freedom. This is my aim in Section 2, where I argue that there are several such passages.

A second factor that complicates Cavendish's account of freedom is that her texts contain some passages which appear explicitly to endorse determinism. I turn to these puzzling passages in Section 3. So far, they have not been discussed in the secondary literature, but they need to be explained. There are four possibilities: Perhaps Cavendish was simply inconsistent. Or perhaps her views were consistent at any given time, but those views evolved over time, so that the determinist texts and the indeterminist texts come from different periods in her thinking. I provide brief arguments against these solutions. A third possibility is that the puzzling passages are evidence that Cavendish was actually a compatibilist about freedom and determinism (in which case it is the indeterminist passages which are puzzling). Finally, maybe the apparently determinist passages can be read in a way that makes them consistent with an indeterminist account of freedom.

There is in fact some reason to think that the third approach is the best. This is because, in addition to the passages where Cavendish uses "free" in an indeterminist sense, there are many passages where Cavendish uses "free" to mean, as Hobbes did, that the free entity is unconstrained. I discuss these passages in Section 4. However, as I argue in Section 5, even though this meaning of "free" is compatible with determinism, a compatibilist reading is not the best interpretation of Cavendish's views. I argue that the apparently determinist passages can be read in a way that preserves the interpretation of Cavendish as an indeterminist.

3. *Anne Conway on Liberty: Indifference of Will, Vital Motion, Transmutation and Perfection*

Marcy P. Lascano (California State University Long Beach, US)

Anne Conway claims that if we consider God’s wisdom and goodness, we can “refute and eliminate that indifference of will which the Scholastics and those falsely called Philosophers believe to be in God and which they incorrectly call free will” (P III.1, 15). According to Conway God is “both a most free agent and a most necessary one” (P III.2, 16). She claims that a perfectly good and wise agent cannot will anything less than the best, and thus God always does as much as he can for his creatures. God is necessitated by his goodness and wisdom to act in accordance with moral duty and justice. However, he is also most free in that his actions are done without external force or compulsion and are spontaneous. Conway equates God’s actions being completely determined by wisdom and goodness with true justice. Given this account of God’s freedom (that he is determined to do the best for his creatures), we might expect that her account of human or creaturely freedom would be that our wills are also determined by the good (or apparent good). This is not the case. Conway holds that created beings, such as human beings, have indifference of will – the ability to act or not act. Her account of creaturely indifference of will raises a number of important questions for her philosophical system.

In this paper, I explain Conway’s account of God’s freedom and the indifference of will in created beings. I then discuss Conway’s account of the reasons for creaturely indifference of the will. In doing so, I address two related concerns. First, why does God create beings with indifference of will, which Conway calls an “imperfection”? Second, what are the metaphysical and moral purposes that such indifference serves? These concerns will take us into Conway’s theodicean project, allowing us to explore Conway’s views concerning God’s justice and creaturely redemption. I will argue that Conway’s view of creaturely freedom is the lynchpin that binds together her metaphysical and moral views concerning creaturely transmutation and perfection.

4. *François Poullain de la Barre on the Freedom of Women*

Martina Reuter (University of Jyväskylä, Finland)

I have recently argued that despite being profoundly influenced by Cartesian philosophy, Poullain de la Barre did not adopt Descartes’s voluntarist understanding of the freedom of the will. Inner freedom, according to Poullain, was achieved by reason rather than the will.

In this paper I will take a closer look at Poullain’s two major feminist works, *On the Equality of the Two Sexes* and *On the Education of Ladies*, and examine the concepts of freedom spelled out in these treatises. Whereas *Equality of the Two Sexes* is concerned with social and to some extent political issues, and posits the question of Women’s freedom in relation to these issues, *Education of Ladies* is almost entirely concerned with inner individual freedom. I will look at the differences and tensions between these two framings of the question of freedom.

I will argue that though the understanding of social (if not yet political) liberty spelled out in *Equality of the Two Sexes* was significant in its own time, it is from our perspective less philosophically interesting than the understanding of inner freedom elaborated in *Education of Ladies*. Like Descartes, Poullain focused on self-knowledge as a prerequisite for moral freedom and responsibility. There are many similarities between their descriptions of self-knowledge, at the same as the foundations of self-knowledge is profoundly different, relying ultimately on the will in the case of Descartes and on reason in the case of Poullain.

Poullain took Descartes's notion of the mind-body union very seriously and his notion of self-knowledge is explicitly concerned also with knowledge of our bodies. This focus opens up possibilities to discuss gendered aspects of self-knowledge and freedom grounded in self-knowledge, which, even though Poullain do not elaborate on them in any detail, remain philosophically significant today.

5. *Lady Masham, Liberty, Reason and the Love of God*

Luisa Simonutti (ISPF-CNR Milano, Italy)

Damaris Cudworth Masham was the inspiring muse of the intellectual life at the manor at Oates. Her philosophical reflection was unequivocally characterized by the conviction that: "The Love of my Friends Therefore and the Best Kinds of Useful Knowledge so far as I am Capable of it, will still Possess my Heart as much as ever They did." The authoress assumed that the 'useful knowledge' has a theoretical, practical and pedagogic content that bring an intellectual and spiritual agreement necessary for the training of each person. According to Damaris Masham, God created man as a rational creature, and we ought to live according to the laws of reason, that we cannot violate without disrupting the order that he created and without offending the Creator God. Man has a social destiny and we cannot offend the divine wisdom assuming that religion precludes this approach and expects the breakdown of society. The reason therefore has a prominent character on the will, is the requirement for virtuous behavior. Free will, freedom to act are the pillars of moral practice and this has as its goal the happiness of human beings. Education contributes to the proper use of reason, and then to follow the principles of morality in all stages of life.

The solidity of her cultural training, the depth of her poetic and philosophical interests, the role played by her intellectual relationship with the great philosopher were the base for Lady Masham's growth from the condition of 'absolute ignorance' and cultural isolation where she was locked originally by her marriage and the family commitments. She absorbed the neo platonist and Smith works, she approached maturity with the epistolary correspondence with Locke and then this very pedagogic and philosophical concept became, for the gentlewoman, the theoretical foundation for her 'philosophical salon' at Oates. Lady Masham turned the mansion at Oates into the meeting point, the location designed for the 'Rational Conversation' available for a number of overseas scholars and the English friends.

6. *Mary Astell: Liberty, Knowledge, Passion, and Virtue*

Alice Sowaal (San Francisco State University, US)

Which intellectual abilities and passions are involved in an individual's moral cultivation? I evaluate the degree to which Astell holds the following view, according to which knowledge (versus belief) and joy and generosity (versus hope and fear) are required for the transition from vice to virtue.

All individuals are born with a striving for perfection. This striving can develop into virtue or vice, depending on whether one has knowledge or confusion of one's perfections. Once vice develops, metaphysical meditation can be used to cultivate virtue.

Meditation works because knowledge (in the form of a clear and distinct perception [CDP]) has a number of linked effects. A CDP of a simple truth occasions both participation in God and an affirmation of the will, each of which have additional effects. Participation in God perfects the mind as it occasions the passion of joy (an intellectual passion). The passion of joy in turn occasions the meditator to use her will to direct her understanding to more truths, which restarts the cycle. The individual now enjoys a new relationship with God.

In order to enjoy a new relationship with other humans, she must come to know the following truths about her will. (1) All thinking things are, strictly speaking, merely their (God-dependent) wills. (2)

The will works perfectly (freely) when it affirms truths upon the occasion of CDPs of those truths. (3) In addition to occasioning the will's affirmation of truths, CDPs also occasion both the soul's participation in God and intellectual passions. (4) The strength of intellectual passions counteract competing desires due to unruly bodily passions (e.g., anger), transforming a (phenomenally) divided mind into a (phenomenally) unified one. (5) Thinking things can control only their wills. (6) Praise and blame are properly based on the use of the will; the most important instances of these are God's salvation and damnation.

This collection of knowledge occasions at least two additional intellectual passions. One is a resolution: in anticipation of experiencing future conflicting desires, the individual resolves to use her will at such times to occasion an intellectual passion, which will in turn occasion a unity of the mind. Thus, she resolves to change internals rather than externals.

With this resolution arrives the passion of generosity: the individual withdraws all self-esteem from externals, placing it entirely on her free will. As a result, for example, upon her neighbor's misbehavior, she exercises generous neglect rather than vengeance; she attends to her neighbor's state of vice, seeking to cultivate her neighbor's perfection through an education in metaphysical meditation such that they together can become perfected members of a perfected whole.

Through the process of metaphysical meditation, the one vice-ridden individual undergoes a moral conversion. Her passion of generosity marks this transition, as her inborn striving for perfection has developed into virtue. Far from collapsing into solipsism, her moral lens becomes panoramic in scope, and she fulfills the vocation of her soul—to be in unity with the truth and in service to others.

7. *Marriage, Slavery, and the Merger of Wills: Responses to Sprint, 1700-01*

Jacqueline Broad (Monash, Australia)

In his short pamphlet, *The Bride-Woman's Counsellor* (1699), John Sprint argues that married women have a duty to please their husbands in everything. To perform this duty, he advises that a wife must be pliant and yielding to her husband's every will and desire. Though she might think that her thoughts are free, he says, she should remember that God sees everything: he will disapprove of any thoughts that are 'beneath the Dignity and Excellence of the Husband' (12). A wife is thus duty-bound to follow her husband's will as the sole directory of her thoughts and actions. The very desires of her heart, Sprint says, should 'be regulated by him so far, that it should not be lawful for her to will or desire what she herself liked, but only what her Husband should approve and allow' (6).

From 1700 to 1701, there were three heated feminist responses to Sprint's sermon: Eugenia's *Female Advocate* (1700), Mary Astell's *Some Reflections upon Marriage* (1700), and Mary Chudleigh's *Ladies Defence* (1701). In this paper, I demonstrate how these responses highlight the moral dangers of the marital relationship, and especially the threat that such relationships pose to a woman's moral freedom. Recent feminists such as Sandra Lee Bartky and Marilyn Friedman have observed that the modern heterosexual love relationship can be disempowering for women. They note that a woman's disempowerment arises from the fact that, as a result of certain customary roles and expectations, a woman typically gives greater emotional nurturance to her man than she receives in return. In their view, this asymmetry can result in an internalised affirmation of the male's importance, and an assimilation of his values and commitments, to the detriment of her own. As a result of the marital 'merger of selves', Bartky warns, a woman can start to lose sight of 'the world according to *her*': she takes on her man's perspective, and she evaluates the world on *his* terms, according to *his* moral standpoint. Needless to say, such relations can prevent a woman from living her life in accordance with her own deeply held values and commitments—they can lead to the loss or diminishment of her *autonomy*.

The early modern feminists criticise Sprint's marriage sermon along strikingly similar lines. In this paper, I highlight the fact that Astell, Eugenia, and Chudleigh criticise Sprint not only because he suggests

that husband and wife merge their accidental properties (such as their wealth and possessions and bodies), but because his proposed ‘merger of wills’ would endanger a married woman’s sense of her true self and thus prevent her from attaining proper self-determination in her moral choices and actions. This is why they accuse Sprint of turning marriage into the worst kind of slavery imaginable.

8. *Creation, Divine Freedom, and Catharine Cockburn: Possible Worlds and Natural Laws*

Emily Thomas (Groningen, The Netherlands)

The early modern Catharine Cockburn discusses several aspects of divine freedom with regard to creation, including God’s freedom over which possible world to create, and over which moral system to create. Edmund Law - one of Cockburn’s peers - argues that there is no best possible world, and this entails voluntarism. ‘Voluntarism’ holds that God wills what is morally right, such that what God does is good; it is contrasted with ‘intellectualism’, which holds that God knows what is morally right, such that God does what is good. This paper situates Cockburn’s views on divine freedom in their intellectual context and, through a thorough exploration of these views, confirms her intellectual independence. We will see that, whilst Cockburn agrees with Law that there is no best possible world, she also accepts intellectualism, advancing a ‘moral fitness theory’ akin to that of Samuel Clarke. In the course of rejecting Law’s argument for voluntarism, Cockburn argues that moral laws are contingent, allowing God an extra measure of freedom with regard to creation; I argue that this reveals a significant divergence in her metaphysics from Clarke. Along the way, I ask why Cockburn rejects a best possible world - an aspect of her work on which there is no existing literature - and connect this rejection to her views on space and Platonism.

9. *«si nous n’avons pas le pouvoir de commencer le mouvement nous ne sommes point libres»
Laws of Nature and the Problem of Free Will in the Philosophy of Emilie du Châtelet*

Ruth Hagenruber (Paderborn, Germany)

Emilie du Châtelet’s moral ideas aren’t yet and haven’t been up to now of wider interest for the scholars of the history of enlightenment. The *Discours sur le bonheur*, yet formed nearly incessantly a part of the scholarly debate on morals, but it did not lead to an approval of Du Châtelet’s moral competence. Du Châtelet’s moral philosophy is – if it is discussed at all – still controversial today and did not yet gain the attention it deserves. A main reason for this is due to the fact that Du Châtelet articulated core arguments of moral philosophy in strong interrelation to problems in physics.

In earlier writings (HAGENGRUBER 1999, 2011) I have argued that there is a strong connection between Du Châtelet’s moral philosophy and the development of her investigations into physics in her *Institutions physiques*. In my talk I try to make this connection more obvious, introducing Du Châtelet’s concept of force and her research for the definition of conservation of force. Furthermore, I will try to develop how the question of free will played an eminent role in her investigations to deliver a valid definition of movement and how these reflections led to her concept on substance, matter and ‘energy’. In Du Chatelet’s philosophy the methodic questions on the validity of science, the metaphysical principles that secure the validity of scientific laws and the fact of constructability of scientific laws are irresolvable connected to the question of free will. Physics not only have to be compatible with the presupposition of the idea of free will, much more, it is her endeavour to form holistic explanations of physical and social concepts, or at least to presuppose an analogy between these investigations into our experienced world.

10. *Locke, Enlightenment, and Liberty in the Works of Catharine Macaulay and her Contemporaries*

Karen Green (Melbourne, Australia)

In this paper I explore the connection between Catharine Macaulay's views on freedom of the will and her promotion of the cause of political liberty, and show that the position she develops has its origins in Locke's philosophy. I argue for the existence of a distinctive 'Lockean' conception of political liberty, which is grounded in an account of moral agency, and which does not fit very well into contemporary characterisations of negative, republican, or positive liberty. I claim that this concept of political liberty was widely disseminated during the eighteenth century, and can be found in the writing of many of Macaulay's female contemporaries, both in Great Britain and on the Continent. Recognising this 'Lockean' conception of political liberty is important for understanding the connection between idea of enlightenment and radical movements promoting political reform. Furthermore, acknowledging its widespread influence undermines Jonathan Israel's recent attempt to overthrow standard histories, according to which Locke's rational religion is foundational for radical politics during the period, and his attempt to replace the standard view with an account that locates the impetus for political reform in metaphysical monism and religious scepticism.

11. *Mary Wollstonecraft and Feminist Republican Freedom*

Lena Halldenius (Lund University, Sweden)

In this paper I argue for a reading Mary Wollstonecraft as a feminist republican and draw out the implications of that interpretation. Regarding her as *republican* is to emphasize that freedom for her is conceptualized in terms of independence. There are importantly two components to freedom conceived as independence for Wollstonecraft; these are analytically distinct yet heavily dependent on each other. Liberty is independence in relation to others, but also a kind of inner intellectual independence, a state in which a person relies on her own judgement and value no other authority than her own reason. The relation between these two is complex, yet crucial for understanding Wollstonecraft's view of society and morality. There is a long philosophical tradition of treating moral freedom as an internal phenomenon, as an aspect of freedom of the will. Wollstonecraft makes this inner freedom politically conditioned. By referring to her as a *feminist* republican I aim here to draw attention not only to her subject matter of sex inequality but to an aspect of her philosophical method, which is to reason through lived experience. What liberty is and requires can only be articulated by "poor men, or philosophers", as she puts it in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, 1790. The "poor man" here represents the philosophical vantage point; the disinterested, impartial view is the view of those with no wealth or titles to lose. The job of the philosopher is, therefore, to reason from the perspective of, or to represent in thought, the unprivileged. The emphasis on the lived experience of unfreedom and subordination as a valid source of knowledge implies that a crucial question regarding freedom and unfreedom is not only what freedom is, but what it is *like*. In this paper I analyse the radical implications of theorising about freedom in this way.

12. *Some Reflections on Women, Freedom and History of Philosophy*

Sarah Hutton (Aberystwyth, Wales)

Most of the work done on early women philosophers since Eileen O'Neill's seminal article, 'Disappearing Ink' (1998) has been concerned with retrieval of the forgotten female voices. Most of this work has

focused on individuals. This symposium is no exception. But one thing that is different, and that is that we are also focusing on a particular theme—liberty.

The fact of being able to focus on a single theme, is surely an indicator of the success of the programme of recovering women philosophers. Ten years ago, I doubt whether such a symposium of female philosophical voices would have been possible. So this seems an opportune moment to reflect on the past, present and future of women philosophers' 'fate in history' (to adapt Eileen's phrase) and to think about where they sit in relation to the history of philosophy in general.

Liberty is a theme which connects, directly, or indirectly present interests with past philosophy. In particular, it is a concern of feminists today. Taking as my starting point Bernard Williams's distinction between 'history of ideas' (which highlights the remoteness of past philosophy from the present) and 'history of philosophy' (which reinterprets past philosophy from the standpoint of the present), I shall consider discussions of liberty and freedom by women philosophers of the past in order to reflect on where are we now in the history and where we go from here.

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