

FREEDOM, SOCIETY, AND THE INDIVIDUAL IN EARLY MODERN WOMEN'S THOUGHT

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# **ABSTRACT**

## **FREEDOM, SOCIETY, AND THE INDIVIDUAL IN EARLY MODERN WOMEN'S THOUGHT**

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This dissertation describes and analyses several different approaches to the relation between individuals and wider social groupings in the work of Margaret Cavendish, Sophie de Grouchy, Gabrielle Suchon, Mary Wollstonecraft, and other women of the early modern period in Europe. From these disparate sources—Cavendish's vitalist metaphysics, Suchon's practical ethics, Wollstonecraft's polemical aesthetics—a unifying political concern can be drawn: one of how individuals relate to their societies, and how this relation can be distorted or outright controlled by existing power relations.

Each chapter approaches this subject from a different side: the tension of individual freedom and universal order in Cavendish's metaphysics; the problem of autonomy for socially-constituted subjects in Suchon's ethics and, by contrast, in the ethics of contemporary relational autonomy theory; the revolutionary solutions to the gendered traps of aesthetic ideology presented by Mary Wollstonecraft; and the practical, activist route to the achievement of freedom in the actions of the radical republican women of the French Revolution.

In analysing the political bases of these questions I aim to provide new interpretations of these works of the early modern era, many of which have been unjustly neglected until very recently. But I also motivate changes in the methodology of early modern philosophy that are ongoing and that, I hope, can be pushed yet further. By focusing on the political in early modern women philosopher's work, and by reading that work politically, I argue, we can effect a wider break with older methodologies and open up many new avenues of inquiry.

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## **i. Introduction**

### **i.1 Early Modern Narratives**

The four chapters of this dissertation are all concerned with examining how individuals interact with larger social groupings of which they are a part—societies, governments, even the universe itself—through the lens of the social and political thought of women in England and France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Each chapter explores this relation from a different direction and in a different context: through metaphysics, ethics, revolutionary politics, and aesthetics. And though each chapter contains its own strong central thesis, I do not aim to forge from them a single grand claim about how individuals and societies relate, or how they ought to relate, or how we ought to read the early modern women philosophers in the light of this question. Such a claim would, I think, obviate the advantage to be had in using multiple perspectives in the first place: their differences are as important as their similarities. Rather, through the chapters I seek to illuminate again pathways through this subject-society relation that were visible at the time of Margaret Cavendish and Gabrielle Suchon, Mary Wollstonecraft and Sophie de Grouchy, and to think along them again with a view to, perhaps, looking newly at contemporary conditions. This search is informed by, and in turn has informed, a number of methodological and philosophical preoccupations that are present throughout the dissertation.

These preoccupations follow, and aim to expand upon, an unfolding change that has been occurring in the study of the history of philosophy for the last few decades. During this period historians of philosophy have sought to alter, challenge, or undo the famous “standard narrative” of early modern philosophy: that narrative that sees the era beginning with the spontaneous generation of René Descartes; constructs Spinoza and

Leibniz as his “rationalist” epigones; traverses the Channel to the “empiricist” Locke, Berkeley, and Hume; then returns to the continent to crown Kant as the era’s synthesis and apogee.

Like many historical stories, the standard narrative probably does not date from the period it purports to describe, but achieved its form later. Knud Haakonssen locates the beginning of the “epistemological paradigm” of the history of philosophy in the work of, separately, Thomas Reid and Kant at the very end of the eighteenth century; this paradigm was then standardised in textbooks, at differing rates in different locales, over the course of the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Don Garrett claims that it was British Idealist followers of Hegel that first developed the standard narrative “toward the end of the nineteenth century.”<sup>2</sup> Alberto Vanzo, against both Haakonssen and Garrett, argues that the narrative was developed by Kantian historians in the first half of the nineteenth century but only became “standard” later, noting key differences between “our” standard narrative and the Hegelian ones that remained popular competitors into the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup>

Whatever its provenance, the standard narrative does provide a useful structure that makes one kind of sense of the emergence of Kant’s critical philosophy as the bringing-together of rationalist and empiricist doctrines rather neatly at the tail end of the eighteenth century. But when this becomes the only lens through which the thought of the early modern period is understood it also becomes a severe limit on the potential of contemporary thought and of contemporary historians. Certainly the early modern period has more to offer us now than just this tale of the emergence of transcendental idealism from the battle between “continental rationalists” and “British empiricists.”

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<sup>1</sup> Haakonssen 103

<sup>2</sup> Garrett 49

<sup>3</sup> Vanzo 259, 267, 274



Clearly, one of the primary problems with the standard narrative is the poverty of its representation of early modern thought. It presents us with seven European men as the minds and faces of all the philosophy of a period of globalisation and revolution. By now, much work has already been done on redressing this imbalance by focusing on the work of the many women philosophers of the time: as I will discuss in more detail shortly, this dissertation is one contribution to that process. Progress in contemporary history of philosophy is also being made in considering the period from outside of the small cluster of western European countries in which the seven legendary sages lived, and in considering the ways that thought in Europe was influenced by growing connections with the wider world—and vice versa.<sup>4</sup>

But the narrative is limited even beyond making seven men stand for all the thought of the period. In its extreme form, it focuses exclusively on epistemology and metaphysics: those questions relating to what is in the world and how we can come to know anything of it. The narrative thereby even overlooks large portions of the work of those figures it does consecrate, or shapes their ideas to fit itself. A dedicated vivisector like Descartes is made to appear opposed to empiricism, and Berkeley is lined up alongside Locke against a fellow idealist like Leibniz.<sup>5</sup> Questions of politics, ethics, beauty, education, sociality, and natural science are marginalised alongside the people that sought to answer them.

Further, the particular focuses and preoccupations of the standard narrative can also lead to methodological distortions in its consideration of texts. For example, Jorge Secada has noted that even for Descartes' *Meditations*, surely the ur-text of the entire

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<sup>4</sup> Shapero 366

<sup>5</sup> Vanzo 273. The alternative schema that sees Leibniz and Berkeley as “idealists” and Hume and Locke as “realists” is what Vanzo calls the “Hegelian narrative,” and with this he differentiates that narrative from the standard one. Of course it is just as much a constructed narrative, and no more representative of the full gamut of the period. Hegel's own comparison of Berkeley and Leibniz can be found in *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, volume 3, 366-7.

narrative as it is now presented to us, philosophers' "focus on argument and doctrine" has caused them to overlook much that is of philosophical importance.<sup>6</sup> Rather than treating them as a philosophical treatise or set of essays, or—what may amount to the same—mining them for rational arguments to reconstruct, Secada argues for a close attention to the *Meditations* as meditations, as texts operating in a very particular chosen genre and thereby with certain goals that treatises mightn't share. Work such as this moves us away from the strict paradigms of the standard narrative just as considering little-known figures or texts does.

This move away from the standard narrative is now very much in progress, and making strides. Lisa Shapiro places the beginnings of a serious challenge to the narrative in the work of historians that sought to contextualise its metaphysical concerns within the history of science more generally. This contextualism, Shapiro argues, began then to shift the narrative's rigid shape. Considerations of how bodies work and interact are moved into view alongside the old question of what they are. This means that Descartes' vivisections were no longer in vain and, more importantly, brings some new figures onto the field of the early modern canon: Bacon, Boyle, Hooke, Hobbes, Newton, Cavendish, and du Châtelet.<sup>7</sup>

As we look deeper into multiple historical contexts and try to undo the homogenisation of the canon a great number of alternative narratives become possible—just as they were possible before the standardisation of the rationalism-empiricism-Kant narrative. Here, my focus on the relation between individuals and larger groups traverses metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics, but in all cases it leads me back to politics, another area that was neglected in the history of early modern philosophy until fairly recently. For the most part I do not focus on the crafting of theories or descriptions of

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<sup>6</sup> Secada 201

<sup>7</sup> Shapiro 371

new societies of the kind put forward by Hobbes, Locke, or Rousseau during the period. Rather, the views on the freedom of individuals within groups that I find here are rooted more strongly in their immediate contexts: they seek to criticise existing structures and systems, analyse those systems' bases and causes, and consider possible routes out of the present. Practical political work such as this is common in the writing of women philosophers of the period, who in many cases were better placed than men to understand the restrictions and incoherences of existing (and persisting) conditions.

This focus on politics, and especially a politics that pays attention to the present, opens up fruitful ground for a philosophy of the early modern period that exceeds and moves away from the standard narrative. There is a vast amount that could be done here. Even if we limit ourselves to considering only Europe and the places it subjugated, the early modern period was one of extraordinary political change and turmoil. It saw the deaths of kings; wars of religion; revolutions; the expansion of slaveholding across the Atlantic and its forcible destruction by the enslaved in Haiti; the zenith then decline of the Dutch global empire and the earliest rise of the British. Its thought included millenarians and religious dissidents and levellers, and—allowing ourselves anachronism for a moment—feminists, anarchists, communists, anti-imperialists, and punks.<sup>8</sup> Doing justice to the narratives that could be drawn out of these ideas and the people that made them will, and has, taken many lifetimes.

At the broadest scope, then, this dissertation is one of many attempts of recent years to look at the early modern period of European philosophy afresh. This entails looking for new questions and new figures—in my case especially I look toward women political philosophers and the questions and concerns that, I believe, interested them. But to look anew like this, especially in the face of an institutionalisation that has

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<sup>8</sup> For the classic statement on just the radical thought of the English Revolution, see Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*.

proceeded along pernicious, oppressive lines—that has excluded people on the basis of their being women, rather than for any other reason—also requires that we turn to new genres of philosophy and develop new methods for dealing with them. As Shapiro notes,<sup>9</sup> and as we saw in the work of Secada on the *Meditations*, not all philosophers wrote treatises; as I shall come to argue in the course of this dissertation, not all philosophers wrote at all. This is less controversial than it seems: think of Socrates. But it does require different methods from those traditionally used by historians of philosophy.

Even reading texts contextually and with an eye to political content requires some difference in methods. I have worked with particular political preoccupations in mind, and have sought to place the work of the figures I read or consider within that wider context. I do not think I have thereby done significant interpretative violence. But we are each our own particularities, and one important commitment, I believe, in a contextual study of the history of philosophy that admits of many narratives is forthrightness about those lenses we look through.

So here I have tried to read figures that have not frequently been read, for the political content that interests both me and them, using methods that have not frequently been used. I aim to be one in a number of recent salvos that thereby seek to destabilise and decentre the standard narrative. I will turn next to the specific ways I have set about this task.

## **i.2 Freedom and Society**

As I stated at the outset, I work to achieve this goal of bringing new figures, new genres, and new content into the history of early modern philosophy through investigating the general theme of individuals and their societies in the work of Margaret

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<sup>9</sup> Shapiro 379

Cavendish, Gabrielle Suchon, Mary Wollstonecraft, Sophie de Grouchy, and other women of the early modern period. This very broad theme has many facets, and in the four chapters of the dissertation I work to illuminate the relations of individuals and societies through several of these facets. Nevertheless, there are a number of common theoretical positions that are articulated and defended throughout: a dynamic and constructive approach to the understanding of individual freedom; a similarly dynamic approach to charting the complexities of the ontological nature of individuals; and a commitment to the primacy of politics in allowing us to understand both these issues and the thought of the period more generally, as can be observed in the political readings I give of the metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics of the philosophers on whom I focus.

In this section of the introduction, then, I will add meat to this skeleton, illustrating the substance of the above positions through a summary of their treatment in each of the dissertation's chapters. This will serve to introduce the core arguments specific to each chapter alongside their contribution to the project's overall theme. In this way, and through the project as a whole, I hope to build up a particular way of thinking through the relation of individual to society as the problem is dealt with in various forms—metaphysical, ethical, aesthetic, straightforwardly political—by some of the women philosophers of the early modern period. I propose, that is, a separate, newer narrative: one that looks to how societies treat their people, and vice versa, from the perspectives of some of those that were mistreated.

### **i.2.1 Chapter One: Margaret Cavendish's Sympathetic Metaphysics**

Chapter One makes two arguments regarding the role of sympathy in Margaret Cavendish's metaphysics. The first is a historical argument about the place that Cavendish occupies in the history of the development of sympathy as a concept, from an

animating vital force that permeates the universe to an individual affect experienced only by humans. The second argument is that this unusual understanding of sympathy allows Cavendish to explain how Nature appears mostly (but not entirely) ordered and harmonious without having to contradict her other metaphysical commitment to the freedom of all creatures.

For Cavendish, the capacity of all things to freely move themselves is a central tenet of metaphysics. When a billiard ball strikes another, nothing is transferred, nor does the first ball somehow force the other to move. Rather, Cavendish argues, the motion of the second ball comes from within itself: the second ball, being composed of the same rational and sensitive matter as everything else, senses the motion of the first and then chooses to respond in kind by moving itself. All motion in the universe, then, is free for Cavendish in the sense that the thing moving is always the principal cause of its own motion—nothing is ever made or ‘forced’ to move by anything else.

A problem arises in this picture once we come to consider that the universe appears, to us, to be largely orderly and harmonious. Certainly, things hold together fairly well and move with some regularity: the infinite plenum in which Cavendish believes is not just a chaotic primordial soup, as we might expect when we first hear that all matter in the universe, down to its tiniest motes, is able freely to move itself as it chooses. Contemporary scholarship is divided on how Cavendish can account for this orderliness while not constructing a deified Nature that is able to overrule the free choices of all the things that are her parts.

I argue that this can best be achieved by paying close attention to Cavendish’s historically unique account of sympathy. For Cavendish, sympathy is distributed universally within Nature, and she uses it to explain otherwise mysterious phenomena in much the same way that it was used by earlier philosophers and chymists. However, because for Cavendish everything is rational and everything is sensitive, sympathy is not

a mysterious force generated by God or a quasi-mystical kind: it is, as we might expect as contemporary readers, an emotion felt by individuals for one another. The upshot of this is that Cavendish can use the affective and affectionate bonds that hold between the separate and free creatures of the universe to explain how orderliness prevails without outside interference.

For Cavendish, then, freedom is a natural fact, an intrinsic quality of matter that cannot be overridden, and that needn't be overridden to explain how order can prevail. We can move further than this, however. Chapter One also considers the work of Sophie de Grouchy, who more than a century after Cavendish argued that sympathy could be used to explain the positive foundations of civil society—justice and rights. De Grouchy claimed that these values are the result of the development of a sympathy for others that we acquire in early childhood. We arrive at the concepts of justice and right by combining our inclination to care for the well-being of others with our ability to think rationally. For de Grouchy, ordered societies are like the universe is for Cavendish: they have sympathy at their very roots.

The well-ordered de Grouchean society, then, is one whose institutions of law and order can be recognised as directly resulting from the sympathetic bonds its people have for one another. (De Grouchy, having lived through the French Revolution, was clear that existing societies were not well-ordered, and had institutions that suppressed rather than encouraged sympathy). People then are ruled by themselves: the laws do not constrain them, but are created by, and help to codify, their emotional and rational needs.

Returning to Cavendish, we can see a more substantial account of freedom developing—one that, in keeping with the positions of this dissertation, traverses the line between the metaphysical and political. Nature herself, being made of matter, is a thinking and feeling creature for Cavendish—an infinite one—and, like all her smaller

parts, she is made up of matter that itself thinks and feels. If, as Karen Detlefsen argues, her “laws” are for ethical regularities—akin to human laws<sup>10</sup>—then, if my arguments are correct, the laws of Nature are themselves the outgrowth of the sympathetic bonds of her parts. Everything is material for Cavendish, including thoughts and communication: Nature cannot generate ethical prescriptions from nothing any more than I can generate new thoughts without the matter that makes my mind moving in particular ways. Nature as a whole, then, could be just like the de Grouchean well-ordered society: an order that arises from the sympathetic feelings of individuals for one another, and that thereby generates its own ethical prescriptions. For Cavendish, we are not subject to the law of Nature: we are participants in it.

This gives us a more radical and, I think, concrete image of freedom than the one of simple lack of determination with which we started. All the creatures of Nature are not just free because they may do whatever they want, but because they have the capacity to participate in the functioning of the order in which they exist—because the laws above them are nothing but their own collective activity. As we shall see, this participatory vision of freedom is one that flows through all the chapters of this dissertation.

Finally, however, we should note that what constitutes an individual—which we might, in other circumstances, wish to hold forth as the obvious subject of freedom—is a profoundly slippery notion for Cavendish. She believes in an infinitely divisible plenum, and in matter that is rational and sensitive down to the infinitesimal scale: it is thereby very difficult to say where, for Cavendish, one individual stops and the next begins. At times, for instance, it seems not just that all the matter of my body is co-operating to a particular end, but also the matter of things around me, like a beer can and a chair. At others, not even all the matter of my body works together, as when I am mentally or physically ill. How then can I claim to be a separate and distinct individual?

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<sup>10</sup> Detlefsen 80-1



I'm not sure that, in the Cavendishian framework, I can. But this needn't be a limitation—indeed, I believe it is a virtue. For Cavendish, individuals are complicated things: forever shrinking, growing, turning to inner turmoil or finding bonds far beyond their skins. Sometimes individuals resemble societies and sometimes societies resemble individuals. If freedom is to be understood in this collective, participatory way then we must look past notions that attempt to limit it to the capacities of the individual mind or body. It will be helpful to have this thought in mind as we turn to the next chapter.

Chapter One, then, introduces and illustrates the interactions of the three primary themes of the dissertation. Beginning with a view of freedom as the simple unconstrained action of individuals, and noting the problem that this seems to raise for Cavendish—that such freedom, if it really existed, would result in permanent chaos—it offers a solution based on the expressly political thought of Sophie de Grouchy. In this solution, not only freedom, but individuals themselves, are seen to depend on sympathetic co-operation. In my view, the parts of Cavendish's Nature are free not just because their activity is unconstrained, but because in their unconstrained activity, guided by their sympathetic affections, they create the orderly structures in and through which they persist.

### **i.2.2 Chapter Two: The Limitations of Autonomy in Gabrielle Suchon and Contemporary Philosophy**

Chapter Two, then, looks closely at the relation between freedom and the individual. It compares the analyses of contemporary theorists of relational autonomy with that of the seventeenth-century nun Gabrielle Suchon. Both the contemporary theorists and Suchon point to the limitations of conceptions of autonomy that constitute, or posit, a socially-atomised individual as autonomy's proper subject. Such conceptions improperly ignore the effects, both negative and positive, that social circumstances have

upon the capacity of individuals to govern themselves: they falsely and immorally assume that individuals can and should act in ways that proceed directly from some asocial core of themselves.

For Suchon, that this is impossible is a fact, resulting from our fallen natures, against which we—and especially women, who suffer the greatest of the deprecations of heteronomy-generating ideologies—can struggle more or less successfully. For the contemporary theorists, the impetus is to create a new conception of autonomy, for two reasons. First, the possibility of political progress toward a better society—one not so detrimental to the autonomy of its members—requires, it is asserted, that it is possible for people to act in some way contrary to their social programming. If people are wholly heteronomous, then the prospect of change, especially the destruction of patriarchy, looks dim. Second, a conception of autonomy is necessary to make normative assessment of individuals—judgements of their morality—possible, or at least possible without being outright tyrannical.

Before I turn to my own intervention in this discussion, a brief but necessary note on terminology. So far I have largely used the term “freedom” to denote my subject; in Chapter Two, and my summary of it here, I use “autonomy.” This is largely because I follow the lead of the relational autonomy theorists that use the term, rather than for any more substantive reason. Nevertheless the two terms have different connotations. In my usage, “autonomy,” following its etymological origins denoting self-government for polities, largely emphasises the internal, psychological condition necessary for an individual to shape their life and/or endorse their choices as speaking, in some way, of who they are. It is hence less concerned with the external, concrete limitations or aids that are also encompassed by the broader “freedom.” As we shall see, I think this entire schema is severely limited. But it is helpful for the internal logic of the chapter to speak of “autonomy,” and this is what I mean by it.

Chapter Two, then, contrasts Suchon with later theorists in feminist philosophy, such as Catriona Mackenzie, Diana Tietjens Meyers, Paul Benson, and Natalie Stoljar, who argue in various ways for the thesis of “relational autonomy.” These theses all attempt to find a space for autonomy within the social, thereby opposing the overly-atomised patriarchal image of autonomy and taking into account the operations of ideology and social pressure on individual psyches.

I argue that all these attempts fail to sufficiently account for the conceptual incompatibility between autonomy and sociality. Following Mackenzie’s split of the conceptual terrain, I consider first Meyers’ authenticity and competence-based account that sees choices as proceeding from an authentic, true self when they are made using a particular set of critical skills; Stoljar’s substantive, norm-based account that understands autonomy as arising only when one acts according to norms that are not false; and Benson’s account of autonomy as “normative competence,” the ability of individuals to understand and endorse the norms by which they are judged in their communities.

All these theories, I argue, describe qualities or experiences that are important to have, and that far too few do have. But they also all seek to carve out a space for autonomy within prevailing social conditions that are understood to be bad and harmful; and to this extent, I show, they fail. If we understand ourselves as thoroughly and perniciously structured by these conditions, then we cannot take for granted that our self-authorisation and self-governance strategies even lead us in the direction of autonomy: they could just as well lead us away, or in circles. Ultimately this is because even the relational autonomy theories cleave too closely to the individual as the proper subject of freedom: to be free, on these grounds, is to be an individual possessed of some collection of qualities, strategies, and/or beliefs—and lacking external and internal impediments—with which one can hack one’s way into autonomy. These qualities might

be impossible to attain as a totally atomised being, on the theories' readings, and instead be the result of social structures. To be autonomous might yet involve having relationships with other beings. But autonomy remains an individualised property.

In Suchon's account, social mores and ideologies are also understood to be harmful to autonomy—what Suchon calls freedom—and to that of women in particular. For Suchon this is because bad customs and attitudes structure our desires and influence our emotions such that our God-given reason, by which we ought rightly be guided, is clouded or suppressed. Suchon talks in some detail about how ideology operates in this way: by forcing women into vocations to which they are unsuited (Suchon herself only escaped the convent after many years), social structures not only directly impinge upon their autonomy, but also constrain their reason and inflame their emotions such that new autonomy-damaging mental states are generated. Material and psychic oppression are hence utterly intertwined for Suchon, and once in this state she does not see any conceptual or mental strategy by which women could escape. Rather, she advocates education as the best route to improvement in the position of women in general, and argues that society ought institute and allow a “celibate” or “neutral” life for women, beyond marriage or the convent.

She thus advocates a more directly practical response to the contradiction than do the relational autonomy theorists. At the same time, however, Suchon's acknowledgement of the contradiction is less fatal to her overall ethical project than for the later theorists. This is the final move of the chapter: ultimately, Suchon can allow that we are flawed creatures buffeted by the winds of society because her ethical system does not require that our actions speak directly of our truest selves for the purposes of moral judgement. God is the ultimate judge of goodness and badness; it would be surprising and impious if we could easily make such judgements. Later ethical systems, by contrast, require that a person's actions reveal important truths about them, such that

it might be proper to make judgements about that person as a result. This is the stated goal of at least some of the relational autonomy theorists: to take into account that society structures our choices in various ways while still preserving the idea that individuals can and should be subject to normative assessment.

Chapter Two is therefore an argument against the idea of the autonomous individual that is to be understood as both irreducibly structured by the social and the proper object of ethical judgement. This is so even in the context of the theories of relational autonomy that are far superior to the older theories that they set out to replace. The chapter makes this argument by questioning those theories that attempt to preserve the individual as an autonomous subject while widening their engagement with the social. It aims to describe an incoherence, and does not present a positive framework for understanding freedom. But in the context of the wider dissertation I think it can more clearly be seen that freedom is better understood as a collective, participatory, and political project.

A comparison with Chapter One will be instructive in showing how Chapter Two contributes to the themes of the dissertation as a whole. In Cavendish's *Nature*, I argue, individual parts are free not just because they are individually unconstrained but because they are participants in the communal project of the ordered universe. A similar view of freedom in human affairs can, I think, lead us away from the incoherences of the relational autonomy theories. As the relational autonomy theories note, to have one's choices structured by bad social forces is to be unfree. The solution, however, is not to try to carve a space within the self that is isolated from those forces. It is to make those forces themselves the product of one's own activity as a participant in society, just as the regularity of *Nature* is the product of all creatures' sympathy in my reading of Cavendish. Our societies now are unfree because almost everyone is locked out from such participation in the direction of the forces that shape their lives. To change this will

require the political emancipation of collectives, not the conceptual emancipation of individuals.

### **i.2.3 Chapter Three: Patriarchy, Beauty, and Revolution in the Work of Mary Wollstonecraft**

Chapter Three similarly looks to chart the effects of social ideologies and their impacts on the lives of women, but it does so through telling a historical story about the development of the relation between women and beauty in eighteenth century Britain. It argues that the work of Mary Wollstonecraft, right at the end of the eighteenth century, can be read as rejecting the feminised view of beauty that had by then developed: not, I argue, because of any misogyny on Wollstonecraft's part, but because she sees this ideology as an outgrowth of bad social trends that must be overturned at their bases. For her, aesthetic ideologies and practices—self-adornment, charm, artistic appreciation, et cetera—have radically deleterious effects on those that allow them to take precedence over their “natural” rational capacities. Like Suchon more than a century earlier, Wollstonecraft believes the position of women forces them to contort themselves into the shapes demanded by aesthetic ideology; and like Suchon, she understands how thoroughly this undermines the capacity of women to pursue independent, meaningful lives.

With this understanding of Wollstonecraft in hand, earlier aesthetic theories can be seen as part of this story of the association of beauty and femininity against which Wollstonecraft argues. The second section of the chapter, then, concerns Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third Earl of Shaftesbury, and the artist Frances Reynolds, both of whose aesthetics made use of gender to structure their accounts.

Shaftesbury closely links aesthetic taste with virtue, claiming that true virtue is a love and appreciation of order, harmony, and proportion; especially as these are

expressed in a well-functioning society. Shaftesbury's aesthetics is centred on the importance of taste in ensuring that people act selflessly and for the public good; greed and private self-interest are to him unpardonable deviations, and it is with these tendencies that he associates women. On the one hand, for Shaftesbury, an overly private, overly sensuous appreciation—one that looks past harmony and proportion to baser sentiments—is itself an “effeminate” form of taste. On the other, women themselves might, with their enervating and distracting beauty, drive men to just such an improper appreciation. To have taste is to be virtuous for Shaftesbury; and the right kind of taste is one that is explicitly constructed in contrast to a kind that is associated with women.

Reynolds also closely associates women with private, sensuous beauty, but she changes its moral valence: it is no longer a threat to a more austere, manly virtue but the highest expression of a different kind of virtue. She argues that the apprehension of beauty is the apprehension of an inner virtue, and as, she says, women are the “sweetest, most interesting image of beauty,” it is clear that women are the objects par excellence of that inner virtue. Indeed, she argues that all our aesthetic sentiments derive from our understanding of the essential virtues proper to each gender: when we judge non-human objects to be beautiful, for Reynolds, we are anthropomorphising. The virtue of women, grasped via their beauty, is hence the axis around which her entire aesthetic system revolves. Reynolds also reserves an important role for women in the construction of taste, since, as the proper arbiters of the domestic realm, it is they who must cultivate good taste in the following generations.

It is in this milieu that we can situate Wollstonecraft's two *Vindications*. Of course, Reynolds' positive association of women with beauty is better than Shaftesbury's negative one. But Wollstonecraft argues that these associations, far from being essential aspects of nature, are themselves the products of society: in this case, the products of a

society gripped by an oppressive malaise that praises weakness, indolence, extravagance, and stupidity as beauty and taste. She sees these tendencies operating, in very different ways, on both the aristocracy and the middle class women of her time. The aristocracy, she argues, use what is charming and easily pleasurable to the eyes of their subjects as a cover for their illegitimate and ill-gotten power: with opulence and luxury they add lustre to their rule. At the same time, that very power, and the ease of acquiring pleasure that comes with it, cramps their minds and virtues such that soon the aristocracy are no longer capable of doing anything but appealing to the baser sentiments of the masses. And hence a cycle turns that sees an increasing focus on beauty and taste to the detriment, Wollstonecraft claims, of reason and virtue.

A similar cycle afflicts women, according to Wollstonecraft: not as a result of power, as it is for the aristocracy, but of a lack of it. Without access to other avenues to assert themselves and live their life-plans, women increasingly rely on becoming beautiful objects and witty subjects of taste for the small amount of power this grants them—over men, Wollstonecraft says, but also over other women. As with the aristocracy these methods lead to an increasing focus on appearances and taste and a neglect of reason and virtue; and as with the aristocracy this neglect forecloses any possible avenues toward power other than beauty and taste. Beauty, then, for Wollstonecraft, is one ideological method by which patriarchy perpetuates itself; and it is even able to accomodate moves like that of Reynolds, which aim to change the moral connotation of the link between women and beauty while keeping it alive. While this association remains, Wollstonecraft argues, women will be harmed by it.

We can see here another facet of a collective account of freedom. Wollstonecraft acknowledges that for certain women, for a short time, adherence to the oppressive structures of aesthetic ideology might indeed grant them power, and with it a kind of freedom: those women that have the resources and skills to play the game of manners



and beauty well will be able to achieve much of what they set out to do. But for Wollstonecraft this cannot ever be a path toward liberation. To begin with, this method of pursuing one's life-plans can only ever work temporarily, as aesthetic ideologies (then as now) skewed radically toward appreciation of youth and denigration of age. But more importantly, the kind of life-plan that one is capable of realising in this way is one that leads away from freedom, not towards it. Playing the game well requires a single-minded attention on oneself only insofar as one is a beautiful object and a witty subject, and this narrowness of focus leads to a narrowness of the horizons of the player's potential. Beauty and sentiment become ends for themselves in the minds of the players, and this causes their rational capacities to fester through disuse. For Wollstonecraft, these unreasoned creatures remain inevitably unfree. And of course, in playing the game well, they are contributing to its persistence, and hence to the unfreedom of all around them: other women, who are not as skilled as they, will suffer in their failure to compare; and even men, whose overly sentimental desires are the clear cause of the situation, find those desires encouraged and inflamed rather than questioned.

We do not need to agree with Wollstonecraft's commitment to Enlightenment rationality to learn important political lessons here. Freedom cannot be a matter of individual advancement through otherwise oppressive structures. To make oneself more free in such situations is both illusory and harmful: it requires the contortion of oneself into a shape favoured by those structures. Nor, as we learn from the comparison with Reynolds, can freedom be a matter of ideological finesse. Shifting the connotations of oppressive structures might feel better, and this is valuable. Reynolds is surely better than Shaftesbury, just as the relational autonomy theories are better than the patriarchal ones they replace. But true liberation for Wollstonecraft lies in the practical expression of political power: her famous "revolution in female manners." Changing bad ideologies like beauty, the chapter argues, following Wollstonecraft, requires changing the power

structures on which those ideologies grow. In the final chapter, I turn to look directly at a case study of practical action, its relation with freedom for the oppressed, and the political and methodological lessons that we can learn from it.

#### **i.2.4 Chapter Four: Women's Militancy and Women's Republicanism During the French Revolution**

In Chapter Four, freedom appears most explicitly as an object and goal of collective action. The chapter aims to show how the philosophical ideas of liberty and right have been shaped by political practice; and, in particular, by the direct political action of the masses in the form of riots, insurrections, and rebellions. It also takes suspicion of the ontology of the individual as a jumping off point for methodological considerations regarding the relations between collectives and ideas, and begins to sketch a framework for doing philosophy around or within mass movements.

The chapter is hence divided broadly between methodological and political concerns, but both these sides take the actions of the militant women of Paris during the French Revolution as model and inspiration. The goal of the first, methodological, section is to begin to open up movements and beliefs that may have been under-studied in philosophy because of their lack of central texts or other verbal expressions. The militant Parisian women are a good example of this. Though they did write and make speeches, their political efficacy and their later philosophical and historical impact was dependent on their ability and willingness to assert themselves through collective physical confrontation and insurrection. The chapter hence seeks to understand both how political action and texts can interact in the development of political or philosophical ideas and, perhaps more controversially, how even actions that take place entirely without texts can be fruitfully investigated in philosophy. With this latter goal in

mind, I consider the women's march on Versailles of October 1789 in the light of the work on the "moral economy" of crowds done by E.P. Thompson. If, as Thompson argues, food riots can and often did result from a set of beliefs held by the working-class regarding the duties of the state toward them, insurrections such as the march on Versailles, I argue, can usefully be understood as important philosophical events. They have antecedents, causes, and consequences in the world of abstract ideas as well as in the political one.

In this sense, though they used force as the primary means to achieve their goals, insurrections such as the march on Versailles cannot be dismissed as entirely arational or outside the realm of ideas. During such events freedom is immediately visible as inhering in the people as a mass, regardless of the pretensions of rulers that might codify it—to this extent, that the event takes place beyond text is a large part of its point. It serves to show that physical confrontation is a last resort of people for whom institutional channels have been closed, while at the same time demonstrating that any attempt to limit political expression to those institutional channels is provisional on the sufferance of the people. If the insurrections were legal, then, they would not be the same. On the other hand, however, the presence and success of the insurrection is itself evidence for its legitimacy and for the truth of its central claim: that the poor women of Paris are one of the groups that has the right to use force when they feel that their needs are unmet and the responsibilities of their nominal rulers have been shirked. The first section of the chapter, then, works with these considerations, and with potential problems, to begin to produce a methodology that can adequately capture the philosophy of insurrection.

With these methodological considerations in hand, I then try to construct a comparison of the militant republicanism of the women of the Revolution with contemporary forms of neo-republicanism, along the three contemporary axes of

freedom as non-domination, participatory politics, and civic virtue. I argue that in their actions the militant women express and contest their own versions of all these features of republicanism. They demanded that they be free in the undominated sense not only when they rioted against dominative governments, even driving them to write a constitution (that of 1793) that explicitly acknowledged their right to insurrection, but also when they demanded that the national government institute and rigorously enforce the Terror against the speculators and aristocrats that they saw as their enemies. They demanded their right to participate in politics again through their insurrections, through their petitions, through their direct participation in local assemblies, and through their demand that they be allowed to bear arms, form militias, and defend the new republic. In all these things they articulated their civic virtue; they also engaged directly in the policing of civic virtue, prowling through marketplaces on the lookout for those less patriotic or republican than themselves.

Not all these things are very nice, of course, but, as I argue in the chapter, they represent a republicanism that was worked out by the practical and political action of working-class women in the midst of a period of extraordinary political foment. It also shows freedom in the light that I wish to consider it—the view of freedom that has been an undercurrent of all the previous chapters and that I have brought forward here. As in the sympathetic universe of Cavendish, freedom in the milieu of the Revolution’s radicals was both the aim and basis of collective action. Freedom for them was the capacity to engage directly in the shaping of the society that would itself shape them, and it could not result from having the right laws or ideologies or even psychologies in place. For my purposes, then, the radical women of the Revolution are a useful model for the image of freedom toward which I have been working in the previous chapters.

Indeed, critics of the radicals—the chapter quotes Mary Wollstonecraft, who, though she supported the Revolution, was sharply critical of the turn that popular justice

took—were often quick to claim that the insurrectionary masses were frenzied or manipulated: in the terms of contemporary autonomy theory, the claim was frequently made that their desires and choices were inauthentic and thereby unfree. Chapter Four provides some reasons for doubting that this is true. But on a wider scale, I argue, whether it's true is beside the point. As I have tried to show throughout the dissertation, freedom does not proceed organically from an individual in possession of the right style or shape of soul, the right suite of capacities, or the correctly equanimous mind. Rather, freedom is a matter of the relation of individuals to the structures that shape them, and this relation can be the object of political activity. During the French Revolution, if only briefly, the working-class women of Paris saw that those structures could be moulded—indeed, were moulded—by their action, not as individuals but as collectives with shared interests. And it was by this method that they sought to make themselves free.

### **i.3 Some Assumptions**

Though it shadows much of the preceding discussion, I have not yet much engaged with the third of the major themes of the dissertation that I identified at the outset: the primacy of the political in allowing us to understand new, non-standard narratives—or even ideas beyond narrative—of the early modern period. Nevertheless it is a concern that I have brought with me to all of my discussions, and it is visible in the progression of each chapter's individual narrative: metaphysical questions are brought into the realm of the political in Chapter One; an ethical question in Chapter Two; the entire practice and ideology of aesthetics in Chapter Three; and in Chapter Four, textual political philosophy is juxtaposed with direct political action. In all these cases I understand “the realm of the political” to mean that realm that is preoccupied primarily with understanding or influencing the organisation of the social life of individuals and

larger groups and with the distribution of power across those individuals and groups. In Chapter One, then, the metaphysical question of universal order is understood in the political terms of social order; in Chapter Two, responses to the ethical problem of autonomy are critiqued on the grounds that they fail adequately to account for how social organisation affects individual psyches; in Chapter Three, practices and beliefs regarding beauty are discussed in the light of their function in the distribution of power; and in Chapter Four a link between philosophy and violent attempts to shift that distribution is explored. In each case, this movement toward the political is motivated by the concerns of the chapter and of the figures whose thoughts, beliefs, and actions I discuss: this concern to prioritise understanding philosophical issues politically is, I think, present in different ways in the work of all of the figures of the dissertation, and so it is not merely a methodological quirk on my part.

Nevertheless, looking through a political lens is also a significant concern of my own, and so here I wish briefly to flag and justify this assumption and other corollary assumptions that have informed my discussions. Reading politically means situating texts both in their historical contexts and in the contexts, sometimes wildly different, in which they have come to be understood since; searching for the effects of texts beyond their intent, and the effect of political events on texts; excavating the power structures that texts assume and attack, again beyond the singular intentions of the author; and, not least, testing out how the text structures narratives, of its period and otherwise, and how it can be used to form new ones. I have tried to use all of these methods in writing the chapters of this dissertation. Doubtless there are many more approaches too that would fall within the remit of a politicised methodology.

In some cases these approaches and techniques lie outside of traditional or established methods in the history of philosophy. Historians of philosophy, for example, are often concerned with finding out what a particular figure actually meant when they

wrote a particular text, and will look to letters, drafts, and notes to achieve this greater intimacy with an author's mind. This can often lead to quite different interpretations than if we try to find out what a text meant in the world beyond the author, or what it means now, or what it has come to mean in the context of a particular historical narrative. All of these approaches are valuable and all have produced and will produce important scholarship.

I believe that what I have called a politicised methodology can be robustly defended in philosophical terms as a way of getting the history of philosophy "right." Doing so, however, would probably take an entire dissertation. Here, then, I just wish to present a couple of reasons for granting these assumptions for the time being.

Of primary importance to me is that the contemporary attempt to destabilise the standard narrative is a political project, and hence certain political viewpoints will naturally inflect the work that is done for this project. The standard narrative is limited in many ways, but one of the main reasons that challenges to it have proliferated recently is that it ignores and marginalises the contributions to philosophy of anyone that is not a white European man. Bringing in more viewpoints from women, people of colour, and people beyond Europe exposes us to new ideas and allows us to more accurately construct an image of the thought of the time, but the project is also important—and accuracy and novelty are important—because of the impact that such work can have on the contemporary world or on contemporary philosophy. By changing how we look to our field's past, we hope to make the field's future more just and equal in both the people and ideas that it includes.

This is, then, an avowedly political project, and as such it is open to the charge that political motivations are incompatible with the search for uncorrupted truth. There are many reasons to doubt such an opposition, but at the very least provisionally it helps us if we acknowledge that we have these motivations in the background of our work. One

reason for granting a politicised methodology, then, is itself political: reading for the political symptoms of the contemporary world and their etiologies in our views of the past helps orient us toward, hopefully, a better world.

The second reason to provisionally grant these methods is that I believe that their worth is best demonstrated in practice; what's more, the methodology I use has only been developed in practice, in a conjunction between the political necessities above and the interpretive restrictions brought by the texts (or riots, or insurrections) themselves. Figuring out how to read politically is therefore not a matter of constructing a framework that can thereafter be imposed, and presenting such a strict framework now would be counterproductive. In this I follow methodologically one of the main philosophical themes of the dissertation: that conceptual or philosophical questions can best be thought through and addressed through practical work. Finding a new methodology, then, is a matter of responding pragmatically to existing conditions while retaining previous political commitments. In this, it mirrors in miniature the approaches of the philosophers of the forthcoming chapters in their work on, and towards, freedom.

#### **i.4 Concluding Remarks**

With all preliminary pieces now on the table, I am able to finish by restating the dissertation's themes, and in particular its understanding of freedom, more concretely. In this I am helped by the revolutionary republican women of the final chapter, whose militant attempt to forge a freedom that worked for them has informed the considerations of all the previous chapters: we can follow the logic of their insurrections by beginning quite simply with freedom taken as non-domination and moving pragmatically from there to a more positive conception. As the Parisian women saw, to be undominated means more than having a written promise from authorities—in the



form of a constitution or set of laws—that they will exercise their power wisely or gently. It means ultimately that no such authorities exist, or at the very least that they are understood by all to exist only as long as the people as a collective allows them to.

In this sense, real freedom resides in the capacity of individuals to form together as a community and to exercise this sovereign power as they see fit—to shape the social forces that, in unfree situations such as our own, might dominate them. It is important then that we understand these communities not merely as made up of individuals but also as shaping them to be the kind of individuals they are. It is inevitable that we are made from the social structures and ideologies in which we live and grow: we cannot strategise or critically reason our way out of this. Rather, we must be empowered to shape ourselves by being full and equal participants in those social structures.

The women philosophers that I discuss in this dissertation are better placed to understand this than many male philosophers of the time were. As repressed individuals locked out of power, the social forces that beset them—that, according to Wollstonecraft and Suchon, coerce their psyches into harmful shapes—are more alien to women than they might be to men. And they understood, like the radical women of the French Revolution, that to forge a collective freedom it would not do merely to replace kings with parliaments or promulgate bills of rights. Those ideologies, practices, and material structures that locked out particular people—women, people of colour, poor people, the enslaved—from full participatory freedom had too to be destroyed. As the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women noted, once kings were disposed of, speculators and merchants sought to dominate them. Undoing all such domination was the basis of collective political action. Or, as Wollstonecraft said, what was needed was a revolution in manners—not just in governmental structures.

Opposed to this encompassing and pragmatic view of freedom are views that focus on the internal qualities or possessions of the individual. As I noted in my

discussion of Chapter Three above, it is doubtless possible for individuals to gain much for themselves by personal advancement through the restrictive ideologies or structures of an unfree society: Wollstonecraft noted that some women could gain an illicit form of power by playing well the game of prettiness and wit that she saw enmeshing all women as a class. Such power would make the successful player more free in a limited sense: she would have more opportunity to fulfil her life-plans, she would be able to gain more of her desires. But as Wollstonecraft shows us, such “freedom” is illusory and harmful. It is contingent upon the vicissitudes of current aesthetic trends, and thus can never be said to be freedom from domination, nor the capacity to shape oneself through society. Worse, in playing the game well, the player reinforces those dominative ideologies all the more, by giving them the sheen of validity or the players the illusion of autonomy: in this she makes herself less free, as she retrenches those forces on whose largesse her supposed freedom depends.

The same can be said of the procedural accounts of autonomy that I discuss in Chapter Two, which seek to locate autonomy in the ability of individuals to organise their thoughts in a particular way. Such strategies might provide solace or guide individuals to make helpful choices, and these are not valueless. But they do not provide a route toward freedom, as they leave those ideologies that dominate people in place. Destroying those ideologies is not merely a species of negative freedom—a “freedom from” domination or bad ideology. It entails people exercising collectively their “freedom to” shape themselves via the world and the society around them.

With all these themes in mind, the more abstract and metaphysical Chapter One might appear a puzzling inclusion. But the particular reading I give of Cavendish’s sympathetic metaphysics is guided by these political considerations, as can be seen explicitly in the engagement with Sophie de Grouchy. De Grouchy’s account of sympathy allows her to develop a kind of image of collective freedom: for her, the laws and

practices of a just society are ones that arise naturally and rationally from out of the affections of its citizens for one another, and so in a truly just society everyone is ruled not by alien forces but by the feelings that inhere in their own hearts—exactly the kind of collective freedom I spend the next three chapters working out. From this I can develop a reading of Cavendish, whose metaphysics is irreducibly sociopolitical, that understands the entire universe as a similarly just society of individuals ruled only by themselves as a collective. By beginning with this image of freedom in its most abstract, metaphysical, and—perhaps—utopian sense I hope to provide a fruitful grounding for the considerations of the human realm that follow. So it is to Cavendish that I will turn first.

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# **1. Margaret Cavendish's Sympathetic Metaphysics**

## **1.1 Introduction**

For Margaret Cavendish, Nature is a living thing, and all her parts are living things too: down to the smallest possible levels of description, sensitivity, animation, and rationality will be found. This multiplicity of life and movement and consciousness could have chaotic results, and indeed Cavendish devotes a lot of space in her philosophical writings to consideration of what seem like disorders within Nature, such as disease, madness, and the breakdown of the state. These appear like moments in which the living parts of nature work against each other and move in contrary ways that produce irregularity. For Cavendish, however, it is clear that this irregularity is deviation from a more-or-less regular order; though Nature contains disease and war, it more often holds together remarkably well. In this chapter, I argue that of particular significance in explaining this holding-together is Cavendish's account of sympathy: a unity, love, or fellow-feeling amongst Nature's creatures that can be found down into its microscopic depths.

Cavendishian sympathy hence plays a historically unusual dual role in both its character and function. It figures in her philosophy both as a causal explanation for physical phenomena—in a way that is reminiscent of the sympathetic cures of Jan Baptist Van Helmont and Sir Kenelm Digby—and, as already mentioned, a moral or emotional accord between sensitive and rational beings.

Cavendish thus stands at an ill-explored, but significant, crossroads in the history of the concept of “sympathy.” This is not an unusual position for Cavendish. Karen Detlefsen convincingly identifies another historical crossroads at which Cavendish faces in both directions: the slow change in the philosophy of science from “law” referring

merely to human political constructs to the propagation of “natural laws,” out in the regular inhuman universe.<sup>1</sup> That sympathy is able to fill this dual role marks another way in which Cavendish’s philosophy stands apart from the channels that history has taken.

In the second part of this chapter, then, I will provide the historical context for Cavendish’s view of sympathy: the two roads at whose intersection I take her account to be standing. The first of these is that of sympathy as a causal-explanatory phenomenon: a force, divine or otherwise, perhaps permeating the entire universe, and holding between similar beings, by which otherwise mysterious actions-at-a-distance such as magnetism or the famous “sympathetic cure” can be explained. In her own account of sympathy, Cavendish makes use of it to explain similar—and in places, the exact same—phenomena.

The second relevant historical account of sympathy comes later, in the eighteenth century. In the work of Sophie de Grouchy and Adam Smith, as well as other moralists of the time, sympathy is no longer a spiritual or quasi-spiritual ordering force, but an emotion held by human individuals for one another. I will look in particular at the work of De Grouchy, who argues that though it is a personal emotion, not a spiritual emanation, sympathy underlies much of the structure of the Enlightenment polity, including—importantly—its orderliness. Cavendish’s account, I argue, has much to do with this view, too; for though she sees sympathy as able to explain the actions of non-human beings, she still grounds it in individual emotion.

From there, Cavendish’s own view of sympathy can be elucidated in more detail. And with this view in hand, a new account of the order of Cavendish’s Nature, over which there is much debate in contemporary scholarship, can be given. This new account takes the order of Nature to be the result of the affective responses—the sympathetic motivations—of her autonomous individual parts.

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<sup>1</sup> Detlefsen “Laws and Order” 80-1

The debate regarding the order of Nature for Cavendish has two strands. First, there is the question of whether the irregularities that we observe in Nature are ‘real’ disorders, or illusory artefacts of our own limited understanding. David Cunning and Lisa Walters argue that any observation of disorder that we make is a result of our ignorance as mere parts of Nature, necessarily incomplete, and if we were to describe Nature from her own point of view then we would see that she is, in fact, perfectly ordered. On this view, the lower-level disorders of Nature’s parts—disease, war, et cetera—contribute to a perfectly-ordered whole.

Karen Detlefsen argues that disease, war, and other forms of breakdown or corruption are real disorders for Cavendish, and that they therefore detract from the orderliness of Nature as a whole. The infinite parts that make up Nature all have their own consciousnesses and their own motions and their own epistemic limitations; in these circumstances it is inevitable that without some external guiding hand the parts will act at cross-purposes with each other and do things that result in real disorder.

This difference continues into the second strand of the debate, which regards the *method* by which Nature is ordered—whether this resolves itself into a perfect order or one with possible deviations. Walters, here, suggests that Nature acts to balance the actions—orderly and disorderly, antipathetic and sympathetic—of her parts such that everything works out perfectly ordered at the highest scale. Detlefsen has convincingly argued that the suggestion that Nature guides all her parts to produce order is in conflict with Cavendish’s basic metaphysical tenet that everything is the principal cause of its own motion - that is, that everything is self-moving.<sup>2</sup> If Nature guides all motion so as to produce order then Cavendish’s commitment to this principle of occasional causation is undermined. Instead of this direct intervention, then, Detlefsen argues that Nature’s law of order manifests itself to her parts as a rational suggestion or prescription: an

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<sup>2</sup> Detlefsen, “Reason and Freedom” 170

instruction to act in an orderly fashion, that can be more-or-less successfully followed according to the stupidity, sympathy, or antipathy of individual creatures.

There is an ambiguity here of which we ought be aware. When we say that “Nature acts,” what is the character of the agency that we are ascribing to her? Does she intend to produce order, or is this a mere effect of her action? There is a risk here of incorrectly anthropomorphising or deifying a being that—for Cavendish—was patently, and importantly, neither human nor divine. I believe that a description of Nature that understands her agency and wisdom as arising from the ordered, sympathetic action of her constituent parts avoids either of these risky paths. It allows us to explain the order of Nature without making her a divine tinkerer or an abstracted, law-giving empress. Order, I shall argue, necessitates neither a law imposed from above nor the quasi-spiritual guidance of every moment of motion. In fact, Nature’s being and her wisdom depend, it seems to me, on an already-existing order among her parts.

In this chapter I will argue that even while holding fast to this principle, Cavendish’s sociopolitical view of the universe gives her the resources to explain why Nature is ordered, though not *necessarily* so: why, that is, the guiding hand of Nature is an invisible one. In particular, I argue that Cavendish’s unique usage of sympathy as both a moral-political and causal power allows her to explain how an infinite community of willful and ignorant parts can come together to form an ordered (but not perfectly ordered) whole. In this sense Cavendish presages Smith and De Grouchy in explaining higher-level social phenomena by the bubbling-up of individual actions and attitudes within a community; though that, for Cavendish, the relevant community is not the Enlightenment polity but the infinite universe separates her significantly from these thinkers too. This allows us to explain the order of Cavendish’s universe using neither of the positions found in the second strand of the debate: neither direct intervention nor rational suggestion. Rather, like the political communities of De Grouchy, the



community of Nature is *self*-ordering. From each creature's freedom to move itself, which has sympathy amongst its effects, an entire universal community is made, regulated not from above but by the creatures themselves.

## **1.2 Sympathy in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries**

### **1.2.1 Sympathy as a Causal Explanation**

I begin, then, with an excursus on the two historical tendencies that can be found within the concept 'sympathy.' The first of these accounts is the older, and in a sense more alien, idea of sympathy as being—or resulting from—a metaphysical force or spirit that, in one way or another, permeates all reality and contributes to the ordering, harmony, or mutual functioning of its creatures. In her account of this “universal sympathy” of the seventeenth century, Christia Mercer describes the development of sympathy from an “‘occult power’ treated mostly by thinkers on the periphery of philosophy” to a “central component of mainstream philosophical systems” such as those of Conway and Leibniz.<sup>3</sup> Alongside this development, and intimately related with it, was an effort made by philosophers such as Kenelm Digby and Jan Baptist Van Helmont to describe the effects of sympathy as though it were an observable and explainable part of nature, rather than a hidden, occult power essentially closed to investigation.<sup>4</sup> This occult power, however, played a major role in causal explanations of apparently mysterious phenomena for many centuries: Pliny the Elder makes quite frequent use of antipathy and sympathy— “the hatreds and friendships of things deaf and dumb, and

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<sup>3</sup> Mercer 107

<sup>4</sup> Mercer 111

even without feeling”—in the explanations and observations of his *Natural History*, where he attributes this affective ordering of nature to “the Greeks.”<sup>5</sup>

Of particular interest to physicians and natural philosophers at the beginning of the seventeenth century was the “weapon-salve,” which could, it was said, be applied to a bloody weapon or bandage to cure a wound, though the weapon or bandage was at a distance from the wound itself. This cure was the cause of significant controversy in both England and continental Europe in the first half of the seventeenth century.<sup>6</sup> In a 1637 translation, into English, of Daniel Sennert’s attack on the salve, we read that “most men attribute [...] to Paracelsus” an “Unguent” of skull moss, mummy (i.e., preserved human flesh), man’s fat, man’s blood, linseed oil, rose oil, and bole Armoniack (Armenian bole, a kind of iron-heavy clay). This ointment, applied to a stick dipped into blood from a wound, would cure the wound.<sup>7</sup>

“Moreover,” writes Sennert,

The Patrons of this Oyntment doubt not, but naturall causes may be given of this action; and *Crollius* [Oswald Croll, another partisan of the salve], calls them ignorant fooles that doubt of its efficacie, or referre the cure to Sorcery. And to make it appeare that the cure may be done by a naturall way, they prove at large, that first there are actions which no corporall touch interceding, are done by an hidden Sympathy or Magnetisme as they call it. And so the Loadstone draweth Iron, although it touch it not with its body, and maketh it move toward the Pole; the Starres also worke upon inferiour things, which they touch not bodily [ ...] There be some that cannot endure to be where a *Cat* is, though she bee lock’d up in a Chest that they see her not; and unlesse the Cat be removed, or they goe out of the place they fall into a swoone. Dogs *know* the foot-steps of their Masters, and of wilde Beasts too, and follow them by their track. The shade of the Ewe-tree is hurtfull to many ...<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Pliny the Elder 3

<sup>6</sup> Debus 392-3; see also Waddell.

<sup>7</sup> Sennert 2

<sup>8</sup> Ibid 10-11

Examples of this kind—from, it seems, astrology to cat allergies—were, in Sennert’s words, “heape[d] up” by the patrons of the salve as examples of “hidden actions” taking place at a distance. If cats could make people uncomfortable from within a box, or the shade of a yew cause an ache, there was no in-principle reason why an ointment applied to a bloodied stick could not cure the wound whence the blood came. Such things were attributable to the essential unity and interconnectedness of the universe—a sympathetic relation that exists between all things. As Sennert puts it:

Another thing they presuppose is, that there is a spirit of the world, diffused over the whole Universe, which is the conveyor or conveyance of all occult vertues and actions; and conjoyneth all the parts of the World, and effecteth a wonderfull harmonie between them. <sup>9</sup>

This “spirit of the world, diffused over the whole Universe” was indeed taken by believers to account for sympathetic or “magnetic” relations between distant objects such as the cure of the salve. One such patron of the weapon-salve was the English Paracelsian physician and astrologer Robert Fludd, who in his 1638 *Mosaicall Philosophy* defines sympathy to be a “consent, union, or concord, between two spirits, shining forth, or having their radical emanation from the selfsame or the like divine property.”<sup>10</sup> Fludd explains the functioning of the weapon-salve by means of these emanations, or “beamy spirits,” and a complex web of immaterial and “magneticall” interactions between the ointment, the blood on the weapon, and the wound.<sup>11</sup> As Allen Debus writes in his 1964 paper on Fludd and the weapon-salve controversy, for Fludd “the world is pictured as a unified living whole and the magnetic cure of wounds becomes only a special instance

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Fludd 170. For a detailed account of Fludd’s arcane views on the weapon-salve, and on the controversy in England, see Debus.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid 262

and consequence of this vitalist universe where all things have correspondences based on sympathetic or antipathetic action.”<sup>12</sup>

On this picture, sympathy is a hidden, occult, and immaterial connection, or tendency toward union, between created beings: “that concording and vivifying love, which ariseth from the benigne emanation of the Creator, which desireth to be joined with his like, and seeketh to preserve his like by union,” as Fludd puts it, taking a Neoplatonist tack against the prevailing Aristotelian opinion that forbade action-at-distance. This sympathy is opposed by antipathy, “that discording, privative, and hatefull affection” which springs, also in created beings, from “darknesse and deformity.”<sup>13</sup> Effects like that of the weapon-salve or the lodestone were explicable as arising from these spiritual forces.

A large part of the controversy surrounding the weapon-salve was about the nature of these forces. Action-at-a-distance of the kind apparently seen in the weapon-salve was more easily seen as magic, or the work of the devil, than as something natural and benign. Fludd’s earlier writings on the weapon-salve were vociferously attacked on these grounds by one Parson William Foster in 1631, in the splendidly titled treatise *Hoplocrisma-Spongus: or, a Sponge to wipe away the Weapon-Salve*, which bore the only slightly less splendid subtitle “A Treatise, wherein is proved, that the Cure late taken up amongst us, by applying the Salve to the Weapon, is Magicall and unlawfull.”<sup>14</sup>

Some time earlier, on the continent, Van Helmont had sought to explain “that the Magnetick Cure of wounds, is the single, and ordinary effect of Nature.”<sup>15</sup> He attempted to clarify the position of Rodolphus Goclenius the Younger, seemingly the progenitor of the new controversy surrounding the salve, who had explained the action-at-a-distance

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<sup>12</sup> Debus 416

<sup>13</sup> Fludd 143

<sup>14</sup> Foster, title page. See also Debus 396-7 and Waddell 185.

<sup>15</sup> Van Helmont 5. I work from Walter Charleton’s 1650 translation of *De magnetica vulnerum curatione*.

at work in the cure by way of universal sympathetic and antipathetic forces that were supernatural and “magical.” Goclenius became embroiled in a long debate with the Jesuit Johannes Roberti for his troubles.<sup>16</sup> In fact Van Helmont, too, ended up in trouble with the Jesuits; he was investigated by the Spanish Inquisition and imprisoned under house arrest, most likely for suggesting that the magnetic cure was analogous to the curative effects of saints’ relics.<sup>17</sup>

Van Helmont sought to defend the weapon-salve from Goclenius’s own inopportune, and plausibly heretical, defence. In so doing he invoked his own understanding of sympathetic action: it was caused by “the *universal spirit*, the *Common Mercury*, inhabiting the middle of the universe, [...] the faithful *executor* and *adjutor* of all natural actions.”<sup>18</sup> There was, hence, no reason to “tremble [...] at the name of *Magick*”; the same magic that explained the weapon-salve explained all natural activity. Sympathy was spiritual, but that did not make it unnatural or diabolical. Elsewhere, Van Helmont describes the universal spirit (“the grand and sole causant of all *sympathy*”) thus:

... in real verity, it is a more and vital breath of Heaven, a Spirit which comprehends and cherishes within it self the Sun, and all the herd of lesser Stars, a minde or intelligence which diffused through all the limbs or parts of this great *Animal*, the *World*, doth inform and regulate the whole; and so by a certain commerce, communion, and conspiracy of otherwise-discordant parts, and an harmonious marriage of the distinct virtues of single essences, doth order and govern the vast engine of the Universe, according to the unanimous consent of all, who have read and commented on the true *History of Nature*. To example, the *Solissequous flowers* sensibly observe the travel of the Sun: and the Sea conforms to either *Lunestice*, and swells her obsequious tides high in the full, but shrinks them low again in the Wane of the Moon. In sum; all Creatures by their life, (let us, the master-piece, and abridgment of all, do homage to

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<sup>16</sup> Camenietzki 7-8; Mercer 111.

<sup>17</sup> Waddell 187

<sup>18</sup> Van Helmont 80

the Majesty of that *King*, to whom all things live) essence, existence and sensation visibly attest the *majesty*, *liberality*, and *presence* of the great *Creator*.<sup>19</sup>

Sympathetic action, then, the visible concord of the activity of creatures even over a distance, is explicable because all creatures are participants in, and infused by, the universal spirit of God. As Mercer notes, this explanation of sympathy as arising from the vital activity of God in every creature resembles the Stoic notion of *pneuma*. It also entails that for Van Helmont, all creatures “stand in sympathetic attraction and concord with everything else and so [are] active.”<sup>20</sup> The harmoniousness of the universe is therefore explicable by this universal perception, activity, and sympathy. This sympathy, as Mercer notes, varies depending on the similitude of creatures with one another; but it holds to some degree universally, as all creatures recognise their similarity as beings imbued with the divine spirit.<sup>21</sup>

Cavendish, as I have already mentioned and as I will expand upon in far greater detail later, expounds a view that is in many ways similar. But in her doggedly materialist hands the position of universal (or near-universal) harmony amongst sensitive creatures takes on a very different complexion.

To cap off the strange story of the weapon-salve, while it still runs along the same tracks as the story of sympathy, we return briefly across the Channel to the English natural philosopher (and sometime privateer) Sir Kenelm Digby. In his *Late discourse* of 1658, Digby describes his own success at curing the wound of one James Howell. He did this, he claims, by bathing a bloodied garter that Howell had used to bind his wound in a basin of water, in which he had dissolved his “powder of sympathy”—a powder of a single

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid 44. All emphases original.

<sup>20</sup> Mercer 117

<sup>21</sup> Ibid 121

ingredient (green vitriol, or anhydrous iron (II) sulphate<sup>22</sup>), rather than the gruesome bits-and-pieces of human corpses called for by the previous Paracelsian recipes. Digby describes what happened once the garter touched his solution:

... [Howell] started suddenly, as if he had found some strange alteration in himself; I asked him what he ailed? I know not what ailes me, but I find that I feel no more pain, me thinks that a pleasing kind of freshnesse, as it were a wet cold napkin did spread over my hand, which hath taken away the inflammation that tormented me before; I replied since then that you feel already so good an effect of my medicament, I advise you to cast away all your playsters, onely keep the wound clean, and in a moderate temper, twixt heat and cold.<sup>23</sup>

Digby distinguishes himself from the other true believers of the weapon-salve because he attempts to give a mechanistic and atomist account of the functioning of his powder: “there is no need,” he says, “to admit of an action distant from the Patient.” Rather, there is a “real Communication twixt the one and the other [i.e., the patient and the bloody garter], viz. of a Balsamical substance [the powder], which corporally minglenth with the wound.”<sup>24</sup> Digby describes how atoms (or “spirits”) of the blood on the garter, now with the much lighter atoms of the powder adhering to them, are thrown into the air by heat; at the same time, the wound itself (being inflamed) constantly emanates spirits which agitate the air around it, causing a constant circulation of new air across itself. By these mechanisms the vitriol-enhanced blood atoms in the air eventually find

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<sup>22</sup> Dobbs 8

<sup>23</sup> Digby, *Late discourse* 9-10. We can speculate that this final piece of advice—to keep the wound clean, and not contaminate it with plasters—was likely the true cause of the powder’s curative effects. This is similarly true for the other weapon-salves; Paracelsus’ original recipe, if Sennert is to be believed, called for the wounded limb to be bound in a bandage soaked in the patient’s hot urine. Even this would constitute relatively little troubling interference with the healing process, by the standards of the time.

<sup>24</sup> Digby 151

themselves back at the wound, where they settle back into “their naturall beds, and primitive receptacles,” healing it.<sup>25</sup>

There is a kind of sympathy at work here: these atoms, for Digby, are attracted to others that they resemble—“if it happens that within the air there be found some dispersed atoms of the same nature, with the body which draws them, the attraction of such atoms is made more powerfully, then if they were bodies of a different nature.” But again there is nothing spiritual about this operation. Rather, Digby explains that this “same nature” consists of physical properties; in the *Late discourse* he explains that bodies of the same weight, the same rarity or density, and the same figure or shape are drawn together and stay together, giving mechanical explanations for how this occurs.<sup>26</sup> “It is a poor kind of pusillanimity,” he concludes, “and faintnesse of heart, or rather a grosse ignorance of the Understanding, to pretend any effects of charm or magick herein”; “we need not have a recourse to a Demon or Angel” here.<sup>27</sup>

So in Digby’s hands sympathy and antipathy cease to be real explanatory causes. In his earlier text *Of bodies and of man’s soul* he says that “with the bare sounds of which words most men pay themselves, without examining what they mean”—these terms cannot provide explanations, but are themselves in need of explaining by “downright material qualities.”<sup>28</sup> And so when, with all the flourish of an inveterate self-promoter,<sup>29</sup> he speaks of the powder of sympathy or the sympathetic cure, he is speaking of a kind or character of mechanical action—one in which like unifies with like, by means of their physical similarities—not a mysterious, universal affinity that can only be explained in spiritual or immaterial terms.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid 132-5

<sup>26</sup> Ibid 68-73

<sup>27</sup> Ibid 151-2

<sup>28</sup> Digby *Of bodies* 421

<sup>29</sup> See Petersson 265-274 for an appropriately swashbuckling account of Digby’s presentation of the cure in Montpellier, from which the text of his *Late discourse* is derived. See also Hedrick for a dismantling of Digby’s claim to have introduced the weapon cure to Europe after being shown it by a Carmelite monk in Italy.



We have dwelt in some detail on the story of the weapon-salve because, for Cavendish too, sympathy plays an important role in physics, biology, and medicine—in fact, in everything. At times, with their emphases on universal feeling, Cavendish’s explanations resemble the Stoic-influenced vitalism of Van Helmont; at others, with their zealous and pedantic materialism, they resemble the kind of explanation given by Digby. But for Cavendish sympathy is not the product of an immaterial force, an emanation from the Creator; nor is it just a way of characterising the apparently-affinitive movements of unliving atoms. Instead, on my reading, it is a feeling of living matter, born out of itself.

### **1.2.2 Sympathy as Individual Affection**

Before we can turn more fully to Cavendish, however, there is another side to sympathy that bears investigation: its ethical side. Of course for the likes of Van Helmont and Fludd a divine emanation from God above could not help but be, all things considered, a good thing. But for other philosophers sympathy played an important role in *producing* ethical goodness. In the seventeenth century, for Gottfried Leibniz and Anne Conway, sympathy contributed to the ethical ordering of the entire universe—its presence and action made the universe better than it would otherwise be.<sup>30</sup> For our purposes, however, the more significant development in the concept of sympathy into an ethical principle was in the eighteenth century. Then, political thinkers tore sympathy from the heavens and installed it in the human heart, whence it was used as an explanation for the ethical ordering of human polities. It is to these thinkers, and particularly Adam Smith and Sophie de Grouchy, that I will now turn.

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<sup>30</sup> See, for instance, Mercer 126

In the eighteenth century, as Ryan Patrick Hanley argues, the shift in the context of sympathy from the physical to the ethical realm that we noted above is “cemented.” Sympathy transitioned, Hanley says, from being “a principle primarily dedicated to explaining connections between substances to a principle dedicated to explaining connections between human individuals.”<sup>31</sup> These connections are perhaps more familiar to us now under the much-later term *empathy*: the feelings we associate with imagining ourselves in another’s place, feeling their pains and joys as our own.

Hanley argues that this change in the usage of sympathy occurred due to the creation in industrialised nations—the sorts of nations that were producing the sorts of philosophers we read in those same sorts of nations now—of new social forms that required in turn new ways for fellow-feeling to exist between people who were part of larger, and hence less intimate, social units than had previously existed. Sympathy on Hanley’s thesis is a new force in maintaining the social order, able to replace Christian love, which—Hanley says—had become less viable following “the secularizing and skeptical tendencies” of the eighteenth century.<sup>32</sup> Sympathy is also, in many cases, less of a strident ethical requirement than full-fledged love, and thus more suited to the urbanising and estranging societies of the Enlightenment.

Indeed, sympathy, already a phenomenon with ethical import and power for Conway and Leibniz, is a preoccupation for many of the big names of eighteenth century moral theory: Francis Hutcheson, in his *Short Introduction to Moral Philosophy* of 1742, harkens to sympathy’s roots in medicine by likening it to a “contagion or infection” by which our pleasures and joys demand to be shared<sup>33</sup>; in the *Treatise* Hume puts sympathy at the base of our moral sentiments, analogising the similarity of human minds to “strings all equally wound up,” by which motion—or emotion—can be

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<sup>31</sup> Hanley 174

<sup>32</sup> Ibid 176

<sup>33</sup> Hutcheson 12 / I.I.IX. I work from the 1787 translation into English.

communicated from one to all others.<sup>34</sup> Sympathy, it seems, is now to be understood as the propagation of feeling from one human being to another, and it can be leveraged to explain our moral sentiments and to provide force to political calls for more open, co-operative societies.

In this section, I will look in some depth at two more of the eighteenth century theorists of sympathy: Adam Smith and Sophie de Grouchy. De Grouchy's *Letters on Sympathy*, published in 1798 as a commentary to her French translation of Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, constitute a century-capping defence of the ethical primacy and political importance of sympathy, both in explaining our current societies and in helping determine our thought about better ones. At times this can seem to resolve itself into a starry-eyed, though heartening, faith in the moral virtue inherent within humanity:

What do we not owe to sympathy, even in its faintest glimmerings, since from that moment sympathy is the first cause of the feeling of humanity, the effects of which are so precious. It compensates for a portion of the evils issuing from personal interests in large societies, and it struggles against the coercive force that we encounter everywhere we go and that centuries of Enlightenment alone can destroy by attacking the vices that produced it! Amid the shock of so many passions that oppress the weak or marginalize the unfortunate, from the bottom of its heart humanity secretly pleads the cause of sympathy and avenges it from the injustice of fate by arousing the sentiment of natural equality.<sup>35</sup>

To see how she reaches these conclusions, and to fully excavate the bases and workings of sympathy in de Grouchy's political thought, a comparison with her interlocutor will be instructive.

Smith describes how sympathy operates at the very beginning of his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. For him, it would seem, in contrast to Hutcheson and Hume—and, as

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<sup>34</sup> Hume III.III.I

<sup>35</sup> De Grouchy 113. I work from James E McClellan III's 2008 translation of the *Lettres sur la sympathie*.

we shall see shortly, in partial contrast with de Grouchy—sympathy is an operation of our imaginations. While Hutcheson and Hume see sympathy as a kind of contagion or harmony, more-or-less naturally propagating between receptive human hearts, for Smith the mechanism of sympathy is more intellectual.<sup>36</sup> “Though our brother is upon the rack,” he writes, “as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers.” They are a separate person from us; for Smith their pain does not, without mediation, leap from them to ourselves. Nevertheless, “that we often derive sorrow from the sorrow of others, is a matter of fact too obvious to require any instances to prove it.”<sup>37</sup>

Instead of the immediate propagation of feeling, which might hew closer to its spiritual, quasi-Stoic forebears, then,

it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations. Neither can that faculty help us to this any other way, than by representing to what would be our own, if we were in his case. It is the impressions of our own senses only, not those of his, which our imaginations copy. By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them. His agonies, when they are thus brought home to ourselves, when have thus adopted and made them our own, begin at last to affect us, and we then tremble and shudder at the thought of what he feels. For as to be in pain or distress of any kind excites the most excessive sorrow, so to conceive or to imagine that we are in it, excites some degree of the same emotion, in proportion to the vivacity or dullness of the conception. <sup>38</sup>

We are here a long way from sympathy understood as a kind of pre-existing affinity or connection between similar creatures. Presumably, of course, a condition of

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<sup>36</sup> See, especially, Brown 12 (in De Grouchy, *Letters on Sympathy*) for a discussion of the differences between De Grouchy and Smith, by which I am guided in the forthcoming.

<sup>37</sup> Smith 13

<sup>38</sup> Ibid 13-14

this imaginative exercise—and perhaps of its degree of vivacity—is still our perception of our similarity with the person in whose situation we place ourselves. We do not usually imagine ourselves in the place of a kicked stone or swatted fly, though of course we may; and that it is a less frequent and surely much weaker feeling than sympathy for the pains of other humans can be explained by the relatively greater distances in kind that our imaginations have to cover to do so.

In fact, though, our imagination never covers any distance: sympathy, for Smith, has no ‘spatial’ character. It is not spread out between feeling individuals; it is not a relation. As Karin Brown notes, Smith’s concept of sympathy is “individualistic.”<sup>39</sup> It is a feeling for others, but it is generated entirely within ourselves, by ourselves; not given to us by others or by a relation in which we are both participants.

“Sympathy, therefore,” Smith writes, “does not arise from the view of the passion, as from that of the situation which excites it.”<sup>40</sup> We can sympathise with people on the basis of their situation, even if the emotion we thereby feel diverges from the real emotions of the object of our sympathy:

We sometimes feel for another, a passion of which he himself seems to be altogether incapable; because, when we put ourselves in his case, that passion arises in our breast from the imagination, though it does not in his from the reality. We blush for the impudence and rudeness of another, though he himself appears to have no sense of the impropriety of his own behaviour; because we cannot help feeling with what confusion we ourselves should be covered, had we behaved in so absurd a manner.<sup>41</sup>

Smith goes so far as to say that we can even feel sympathy for the dead in this manner (“it is miserable, we think, to be deprived of the light of the sun”).<sup>42</sup> Though he

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<sup>39</sup> Brown 36

<sup>40</sup> Smith 16

<sup>41</sup> Ibid

<sup>42</sup> Ibid 17

doesn't say it, this view of sympathy also entails that there is no in-principle reason we cannot feel sympathy for rocks or flies, if we're imaginative enough. I think these effects of Smith's view grant it a certain intuitive plausibility: it seems we can feel sympathy (or empathy, we might say now) for people more on the basis of how they might feel than how they do—and such a tendency does not always have positive effects. But Smith is able to explain these effects because his view of sympathy as an imaginative exercise taking place within the individual is one that—as Brown evocatively puts it—“assumes we are alone first.”<sup>43</sup>

De Grouchy, instead, starts from the view that “before everything we are similar and connected.”<sup>44</sup> Her resulting conception of sympathy is one that, like those of Hutcheson and Hume, stays closer to its occult ancestors, rooted as it is in mutually-recognised similarity.

Unlike Smith, who—as de Grouchy herself notes—observes the obviousness of the existence of our feeling of sympathy against having to explain its origin, and is content just to explain the mechanism by which sympathetic feelings are generated by the imagination, de Grouchy is concerned to explain whence the tendency to have such feelings comes. “I regretted,” she writes, “that he did not dare to go further, to penetrate its first cause, and ultimately to show how sympathy must belong to every sensible being capable of reflection.”<sup>45</sup>

Even here, at the beginning of the first of her *Letters*, de Grouchy carefully yokes together intellect and affect in her account of sympathy: “every *sensible* being capable of *reflection*.” She explains the necessity of sympathy to all such creatures with reference, first, to an investigation of the workings of pain. She notes that the immediate moment of pain contains two separable sensations: a “local” pain, in whatever part of our body is

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<sup>43</sup> Brown 16

<sup>44</sup> Ibid 16

<sup>45</sup> De Grouchy 108

currently afflicted; and “a painful general impression in all our organs, an impression very distinct from the local pain and that always accompanies the latter, but that can continue to exist without it.”<sup>46</sup>

This general impression appears to be the emotional aversion or unpleasantness that we feel alongside specific, localised pains—hence its ability to persist beyond the existence of those pains. De Grouchy describes a “general feeling of malaise” that can often last for a long time after the cessation of particularised pains, “because the organs that are the principal seat of that general impression are the most essential for vital functions as well as for the faculties that make us sensitive and intelligent”—again suggesting that this general impression of pain is an emotional response.

This general impression returns to us whenever we remember our particular injuries and pains. And, as soon as we have become sufficiently acquainted with this feeling and its causes, we can come to feel it even apart from our own pains:

In the same way as the memory of an injury we have felt reproduces the painful impression that affected all our organs that formed part of the local pain this injury caused us, so, too, we feel this painful impression again when, being in a position to note the signs of pain, we see an impressionable being suffer or whom we know suffers.

In effect, as soon as the development of our faculties and the repeated experience of pain permit us to have an abstract idea of it, that alone renews in us the general impression made by pain on all our organs.

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Here, there, lies the root of sympathy, at least insofar as it pertains to the physical pains of others: one part of our own sensation of pain—our general impression of it—is reproduced when we encounter its mere idea. This idea, as long as our sensibility is sufficiently acute and our intelligence attuned to the outward signs of pain, can be

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid 108. Emphasis original.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid 109

generated easily enough at the mere sight of pain in others. An analogous, though weaker, process explains our ability to sympathetically feel the pleasures of others too.<sup>48</sup>

The distinction between Smith and de Grouchy here is subtle but significant. For Smith, we feel the pains of others indirectly—by imagining ourselves in their place. From this it follows that we can feel even pains that are not felt by others, if we imagine that we would if we were in their place. For de Grouchy, by contrast, we feel the pains of others directly, albeit lacking the localised pain of their particular affliction. As for Smith, our capacity to feel sympathy is dependent upon, and responsive to, our reflective faculties: physicians and surgeons, de Grouchy says, are able to block the sympathetic propagation to themselves of the pains of their patients by their knowledge that such pain is all to the good.<sup>49</sup> In this we are no more strings wound to the same note, moved by the same vibrations, for de Grouchy than we are for Smith. But the “general impression of pain” that we feel when observing the pains of others is precisely the same general impression that we have of our own. Though there is no mystical force at work here, we are hence much more intimately connected with one another on de Grouchy’s picture than we are on Smith’s—sympathy spreads among us along the channels of our affective and intellectual machinery, which are of the same kind, if not of the same degree of sensitivity or control, in every person.

De Grouchy explains that our capacity to sympathise with others begins “in the crib,” at our first realisation of the dependency of our happiness and well-being on the care, and therefore happiness and well-being, of others.<sup>50</sup> As Brown notes, in this respect de Grouchy’s ethics resembles a feminist ethics of care *avant la lettre*.<sup>51</sup> And this sympathy, induced by the care of others for us, causes us—as we become more sensitive

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid 112-3

<sup>49</sup> Ibid 111

<sup>50</sup> Ibid 118

<sup>51</sup> Brown 68



and reflective as we age, if properly nurtured—to extend our sympathetic feelings yet further. In large societies, we rapidly come to understand our similarity to, and dependence on, a great many other people, and our sympathy follows behind this realisation.<sup>52</sup>

From this basis, much follows. For our purposes, most important is the role that sympathy plays in the creation and maintenance of ethical and political order. Our principles of moral goodness and badness are derived from sympathy: our ability to feel the pains of others is compounded and intensified by our own pains when we grasp that we are the cause of those others' misfortunes; likewise our capacity to feel pleasure in the happiness of others can be joined by a pleasure in having been the cause of that happiness.<sup>53</sup> These second-order pleasures and pains can also persist beyond the immediate moment of their cause and can be reignited by memory; and, like sympathy itself, with adequate intellectual reflection and generalisation we can derive from these sentiments our moral principles:

This more lasting feeling of satisfaction or pain connected to the recollection of the good or harm we have done to others is necessarily modified by reflection. And the modification which reflections entails lead us to the idea of moral good or evil and to the first and eternal rule that judges men before the laws, a rule that so few laws have consecrated or developed, that so many others have violated, and that prejudices have so often and absurdly stifled!<sup>54</sup>

We are hence, thanks to our sympathy, naturally good creatures, at least in potentia, and it is only where social institutions have stifled our sensitivity and perverted our reason that we become cruel and selfish. Further abstraction through reason leads us to rights, as “preference[s] commanded by reason itself in favor of a particular

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<sup>52</sup> De Grouchy 118

<sup>53</sup> Ibid 148-9

<sup>54</sup> Ibid 151

individual,”<sup>55</sup> and thence to justice, which is merely the character of actions in conformity with right.<sup>56</sup> The moral correctness of all this abstraction is confirmed to us in our sentiments, which are more greatly pained by an injustice than by “a simple wrong.”<sup>57</sup> Sympathy, then, beginning just as the pain we feel on observing the pain of those that nurture us, underpins—through a rigorous rational progression—morality, human rights, and justice. And yet despite this progression, confirmed as much by our sentiments as it is by reason, it is easy enough for us to be led away from all these things in irrationally organised societies.

As we saw in the quotation that opened this section, de Grouchy sees sympathy as an important—*the* important—counter to “the evils issuing from personal interests in large societies.” It is notable that she specifies that it is in large societies that these personal interests arise. Selfishness is not a natural human disposition, against which sympathy must function as a salutary check to an increasing degree as societies grow larger and more urban and egoistic beings increasingly rub up against one another. Rather, selfishness is a socially constructed phenomenon, and we, in our modern urban polities, would be in an even worse position than we are were not our natural sympathy—arising, originally, from the apprehension by our affective-cognitive faculties of our dependence on others—struggling gamely against this younger threat.

“In society,” she writes in the fourth letter,

A vicious system of legislation, instead of uniting the interests of individuals, has set them at odds. Human greed has led men to the point where they all cannot satisfy these social fantasies at the same time, social fantasies that, turned into habits, have usurped the name of *needs*. From childhood these men tacitly acquire the habit of perceiving misfortunes and the goods of others as a given which fortune has bestowed on them for their own enjoyment. Civilized man, if he is governed by prejudices

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid 157

<sup>56</sup> Ibid 160

<sup>57</sup> Ibid 158

and bad laws, is thus naturally envious and jealous—and increasingly so, as vices of social institutions separate him further from nature, corrupt his reason, and make his happiness depend on the satisfaction of a greater number of needs.<sup>58</sup>

Bad institutions hence create incentives for us to be selfish, possessive and envious, suppressing our natural tendency to sympathy. De Grouchy is a strong advocate of an education that would nurture the affective sensitivity and abstract thought necessary to work from our own sympathetic feelings to the principles of justice and right as she does in the letters:

What an immense labor remains for education, not to develop or direct nature, but only to preserve nature's beneficent inclinations, to prevent them from being stifled by prejudices that are so well accepted and common and that totally corrupt any sense of humanity and equality. These sentiments are as necessary for the the moral happiness of each individual as they are for maintaining fairness and security in all relations in the social order!<sup>59</sup>

In addition to education, however, undoing human beings' socially-implanted selfishness requires extensive political reform for de Grouchy. She claims that the four artificial needs that have been implanted into us by society, and that are the cause of all unjust action, are jealous or possessive love, desire for money, ambition, and vanity.<sup>60</sup> All these things are encouraged and sparked by existing social structures, and would dissipate in a society with rational institutions— impoverishment, for instance, caused by laws that at present “favour the inequality of fortunes,” silences or overrides the natural

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid 137

<sup>59</sup> Ibid 137. In addition, see Forget 329-331 for a useful and much more expansive account of education in de Grouchy.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid 167

sympathy of the poor and makes them more likely to act unjustly from sheer need:

“conscience,” she writes evocatively, “soon fades when entangled by chains.”<sup>61</sup>

Law and other social institutions, therefore, must be rationally constructed such that they encourage, rather than suppress, our natural sympathies and desire to do good. Punishments under law must not be so nasty or disproportionate that we are blocked by our sympathy from administering them or from turning wrongdoers into the authorities; nor must they be applied unequally due to social privileges, wealth, or status. Under the current conditions of brutality and inequality, people distrust and dislike the law, which causes crime to propagate, rights to be threatened, and suspicion, fear, and envy to overrun sympathy. If the law is consistently applied and punishments are made reasonable, then people’s increased security will reverse the degradation of their sympathies:

The social order, in preserving man his natural rights, would put men in the optimal position to lead them to mutually respect these rights, and then these rights would be guaranteed by the interest in each individual’s happiness and tranquility even more than by the laws.<sup>62</sup>

Here we can see the finer mechanics of de Grouchy’s firm belief in the connection between sympathy and order. To the extent that contemporary societies are ordered at all—and for de Grouchy, writing only a few years after her husband died in a prison of the Terror, this is a questionable proposition—it is in spite of existing laws and institutions. But she is no anarchist. Rather, she believes that in an ideal and reasonable polity laws are a catalyst rather than a cause of order. Order arises from our perception of the rights of others, and our natural, strongly-felt disinclination to override those rights, both of which arise in turn from our sympathy: order arises, that is, from our

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid 169

<sup>62</sup> Ibid 177. Forget translates “plus encore que par les lois” as “rather than the laws,” stating the case even more strongly. See Forget 333; de Grouchy, in the original French, 494.

capacity to feel the emotions and even sensations of others as our own, through our recognition of our essential similitude, interconnectedness, and mutual dependence.

Though she is a political thinker, writing only of the affective connections between humans and their consequences, there is much in de Grouchy that echoes the distant earlier voices of sympathy. Sympathy is an affinity, an emotionally-felt connectedness and similarity, and it grounds the capacity of otherwise wayward beings to work together and produce a harmonious social order, even without the direct intervention of gods, spirits, or lawgivers. For Van Helmont sympathy explains how a salve can work to cure a distant wound; for de Grouchy it explains how I can desire to aid those that I've never seen in distant places.

In the eighteenth century, thus, sympathy is internalised by humanity, taken out of nature at large and confined within the individual psyche. It becomes a check upon our own most selfish desires, making possible (if Hanley is right) the kinds of states and societies that were developing at the same historical moment. The cost, of course, is that sympathy ceases to be the kind of relation that can hold between the non-human elements of nature; while human actions can be explained by these fine (and less fine) moral sentiments, the actions of the brute matter of the universe must be explained in mechanistic, lifeless terms.

But for Cavendish no such cost is incurred. It is with all these parallel threads in mind that we can finally turn to her, and to the question of just how and to what extent order is manifested in her image of Nature—an image that is, as much as that of the polity is for de Grouchy or Smith, irreducibly a social one.

### **1.3 Cavendish's Sympathetic Universe**

### 1.3.1 Cavendishian Nature

De Grouchy, then, in fine republican tradition, is able to show that social order needn't necessitate top-down legislation or control. Rather, it can bubble up from the mass of the polity itself, thanks to a natural emotional and reflective endowment held by each individual within that polity. In the forthcoming I will argue that this model is the best way for us to think through the orderliness of Nature in Margaret Cavendish's metaphysics; and in so doing I hope also to show how her conception of sympathy can be read as standing at a unique, and complex, historical intersection. To get there, I will first sketch the building blocks of Cavendish's metaphysical system, and then turn to the contemporary debate regarding how this system is to be ordered.

Cavendish is a thoroughgoing materialist. In the early *Poems, and Fancies* (1653), she appears to be an atomist, as described in many of her poems:

Small *Atomes* of themselves a *World* may make,  
As being subtle, and of every shape:  
And as they dance about, fit places finde,  
Such *Formes* as best agree, make every kinde.<sup>63</sup>

I say “appears” because there is much controversy regarding how seriously to take any of Cavendish's metaphysical claims, particularly in this avowedly fanciful early work, in which, as Jay Stevenson notes, much of the text is presented by Cavendish as being digression, distraction, idle imagining, or the therapeutic discharge of unruly thoughts.<sup>64</sup> Stevenson argues that all this is to Cavendish's favour in her presentation of a true vitalist atomism, in which even thoughts may be made from the contrary moments of independent atoms. He gives a Straussian reading that suggests that her later

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<sup>63</sup> Cavendish *PF* 5

<sup>64</sup> Stevenson 535

disavowal of atomism (beginning, it seems, in her *Philosophical and physical opinions* of 1655) is not as strong as it appears, and more strategic than substantive.<sup>65</sup>

For my part, I am persuaded by Detlefsen's argument against this reading of Cavendish,<sup>66</sup> and will proceed taking her later rejection of atomism, and endorsement of plenism, at face value—as expressed, with more or less consistency, in the *Philosophical and physical opinions*, the *Philosophical letters* (1664), the *Observations upon experimental philosophy* (1666), and the *Grounds of natural philosophy* (1668). Significant, however, for my purposes is Stevenson's emphasis on Cavendish's belief that, however matter is organised or divided, it always carries the potential for dissolution, disorder, and conflict: "order," he writes, "for Cavendish is not absolute, or even rational in a Hobbesian sense, but contingent on the interplay of autonomous, independent forces."<sup>67</sup> This is true whether Cavendish endorses atomism or plenism; and I think that my forthcoming sympathetic explanation for the inherence of (some) orderliness in Nature can equally apply to either reading.

Nevertheless, let us understand Cavendish as endorsing the view that all of Nature is comprised of an infinite, and infinitely divisible, material plenum, without interruption or vacuum. Everything, hence, is material: there may be spirits and there is certainly a God, but—as material beings with material brains within which are material thoughts—we cannot even think of such things. Everything that we experience, and indeed everything that happens, must be explicable in terms of matter and its motion—and indeed, perhaps, matter and motion are ultimately the same thing.<sup>68</sup> All matter contains, or has, three aspects or "degrees"—inanimate, sensitive, and rational—that are

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<sup>65</sup> Stevenson 536, and *passim*.

<sup>66</sup> Detlefsen "Atomism"

<sup>67</sup> Stevenson 532

<sup>68</sup> Cavendish *GNP* 1-2. Cavendish acknowledges that "Matter might be without motion," but then later in the same sentence says "Matter, Figure, Place, and Motion, is but one thing, viz. a corporeal figurative Motion."

infinitely commingled; that is, mixed such that no part of matter, however divided, is small enough that it does not contain all three.<sup>69</sup>

Inanimate matter is brute matter, dumb and (of course) immobile; sensitive matter is animate, able to perceive other parts of nature around it, and able too to move inanimate matter when it moves; and rational matter is rarefied, agile, and able to move the most freely; so rare and agile, in fact, that it cannot move inanimate matter with it. All motion in Nature is hence explained by the free self-generated motion of matter itself; because everything is animate, there is never any transfer of motion between different bodies. This is most strikingly illustrated in the *Philosophical letters*, where Cavendish explains that a body falling into snow does not, itself, move the snow to create its own imprint. Rather, the rational and sensitive matter which constitute the snow perceive the falling body and pattern out themselves—the sensitive matter hauling inanimate matter with it—into the body’s shape.<sup>70</sup> All changes and processes in Nature, from learning to medicine, can be explained thus.

As both the sensitive and rational forms of matter have life and knowledge, all of Nature has life and knowledge.<sup>71</sup> The creatures of Nature are, of course, formed by the free self-motion of their constituent parts:

All *Creatures* are Composed-Figures, by the consent of Associating Parts, they joyn into such, or such a figured Creature: And though every Corporeal Motion, or Self-moving Part, hath its own motion; yet, by their Association, they all agree in proper actions, as actions proper to their Compositions: and, if every particular Part, hath not a perception of all the parts of their Association; yet, every Part knows its own Work.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid 3-5

<sup>70</sup> Cavendish *PL* 104

<sup>71</sup> Cavendish *GNP* 6-7

<sup>72</sup> Ibid 17



At this early juncture in the *Grounds*, then, Cavendish seeks to explain the persistence and consistency through time of the bodies of natural creatures with reference to the rational agreement and “consent” of their constituent parts. A “Composed-Figure”—such as you or I, a partridge or a hawk, a chair or a desk, a rock or a tree—here resembles nothing so much as a social organisation, an organic collective or commune of self-moving, freely associating parts. Indeed it is striking that Cavendish explains here how a rock or partridge or I can exist and hold together (albeit imperfectly, as shown by disease and death and the like) without recourse to any kind of top-down authority. But as the controversy among contemporary Cavendish scholars regarding orderliness demonstrates, she does seem to resort to such an authority at times—understanding Nature, it seems, either as an imperial lawgiver, giving commands from on high that have more or less efficacy, or as a kind of tinkerer that reaches directly into the motions of all her parts to guide them.

The character, extent, and—importantly—provenance of this ordering authority is the central concern of this section of the chapter, a concern with which a deeper contextual understanding of Cavendishian sympathy can help us. Once we have an image of how sympathy functions for Cavendish, one that can be illuminated by the historical context of the preceding sections, it will be possible, I think, to show that neither of the conceptions of the authority of Nature given above are necessary to explain her orderliness. It is, hence, to how Cavendish presents sympathy that I turn next.

### **1.3.2 Cavendishian Sympathy**

Fixing precisely what the terms *sympathy* and *antipathy* mean for Cavendish is a complicated endeavour. One of the central theses of this chapter is that Cavendish, by virtue of the unique affective-vitalist character of her metaphysics, exhibits both the early

causal-explanatory and the later ethical-ordering tendencies of sympathy in her own usage of the term. Naturally, given her own position in the history of the term, she never states this explicitly. Coming to this conclusion is therefore a matter of reconstruction from the available textual evidence.

The most overt statement about sympathy in Cavendish is in the fifteenth of the third section of her *Philosophical letters*.<sup>73</sup> The letter is striking for numerous reasons. Like the other letters in the third section, it is addressed to a hypothetical female interlocutor (“MADAM”), but it concerns the work of Van Helmont, referred to by Cavendish as “your Author”<sup>74</sup>:

MADAM, [...] Concerning Sympathy and Antipathy, and attractive or magnetick Inclinations, which some do ascribe to the influence of the Stars, others to an unknown Spirit as the Mover, others to the Instinct of Nature, hidden Proprieties, and certain formal Vertues; but your *Author* doth attribute to *directing Ideas, begotten by their Mother Charity, or a desire of Good Will*, and calls it a *Gift naturally inherent in the Archeusses of either part*: If you please to have my opinion thereof, I think they are nothing else but plain ordinary Passions and Appetites.<sup>75</sup>

There is an undeniable, and doubtless self-conscious, bathos in the precipitous fall from the divine Archeus of Van Helmont—that spirit that comes from God and grounds the sympathetic connection of all creatures—to the “plain ordinary Passions and Appetites” of Cavendish. Wacky as her metaphysics may appear to contemporary readers, with its sentient snow and the like, Cavendish is a hard-nosed realist in her own idiosyncratic way. She will have nothing to do with the spirits of Van Helmont. After all,

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<sup>73</sup> Cavendish PL 289-97

<sup>74</sup> Cavendish introduces the third section thus: “I have discharged my duty thus far, that in obedience to your commands, I have given you my answers to the opinions of three of those famous and learned *Authors* you sent me, viz. *Hobbes, Des Cartes, and More*, and explained my own opinions by examining theirs; My onely task now shall be to proceed in the same manner with that famous Philosopher and Chymist, *Van Helmont*.” PL 234; see also Clucas for a detailed account of the encounter in the *Letters* between Van Helmont and Cavendish.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid 289

who is able to conceive all those *Chymaeras* and Fancies of the *Archeus*, *Ferment*, various *Ideas*, *Blas*, *Gas*, and many more, which are neither something nor no-thing in Nature, but betwixt both, except a man have the same Fancies, Visions and Dreams, your *Author* had?<sup>76</sup>

Such things are hallucinatory nonsense for Cavendish. “Nature is easie to be understood,” she writes, “and without any difficulty, so we stand in no need to frame so many strange names, able to fright any body.”<sup>77</sup> Understanding sympathy, then, like understanding anything else, oughtn’t be a complex matter, and we certainly can’t help ourselves to spiritual emanations or hidden properties where our understandings falter. Hence we should emphasise the plainness and ordinariness of the passions and appetites that, for Cavendish, comprise sympathy.

The bathetic juxtaposition of the seemingly magical, the scientific, and the plainly human is a frequent literary technique of Cavendish’s, and she deploys it with notable effect in the letter on sympathy. In comparing the “many sorts of Sympathyes and Antipathyes, or Attractions and Aversions,” she brings in the famous weapon-salve, in comparison to magnets and compasses:

In some subjects, Sympathy requires a certain distance; as for example in Iron and Loadstone; for if the Iron be too far off, the Loadstone cannot exercise its power, when as in other subjects, there is no need of any such distance, as betwixt the Needle and the North-pole, as also the Weapon-salve; for the Needle will turn it self towards the North, whether it be near or far off from the North-pole; and so, be the Weapon which inflicted the wound, never so far from the wounded Person, as they say, yet it will nevertheless do its effect.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid 238

<sup>77</sup> Ibid

<sup>78</sup> Ibid 290

The diversity of examples of sympathetic action arrayed by Cavendish is reminiscent of that of Sennert, above, dismissively noting that the believers of the weapon-salve seek to explain everything from cat allergies to the effectiveness of astrology with reference to a “hidden Sympathy or Magnetisme as they call it.” As well as magnets, compasses, and the weapon-salve, Cavendish explains sympathy with reference to infectious diseases, the feelings of men for one another, “good Cheer draw[ing] abundance of People,” the attraction of predators to prey, humans and animals’ food preferences, flowers turning toward the sun, “faithful Servants watch[ing] and wait[ing] for their Master,” “hungry Beggars at a rich man’s door,” the migration of birds, the feelings of herself (Cavendish) for her hypothetical interlocutor, and, surely to be saved for last:

I have seen an Ape, drest like a Cavelier, and riding on Horse-back with his sword by his side, draw a far greater multitude of People after him, then a Loadstone of the same bigness of the Ape would have drawn Iron; and as the Ape turn’d, so did the People, just like as the Needle turns to the North; and this is but one object in one kind of attraction, *viz.* Novelty: but there be Millions of objects besides.<sup>79</sup>

While Sennert gathers his menagerie with the aim of showing the presumption of those, like Van Helmont, that would seek to ground the effectiveness of the salve in a force that pervades all Nature, Cavendish—apparently herself a believer in the salve—gathers hers to show the wide variety of effects that are explicable by her own, non-mystical, conception of sympathy. As well as emphasising the mundanity of sympathy by showing that, even in the cases of the weapon-salve or the movement of flowers, it is just the same feeling that humans—including Cavendish herself—sometimes have for one

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid 289-97

another, she also explicitly reiterates its “ordinariness” and “plainness” twice more in the letter:

As I said in the beginning, Sympathy is nothing else but natural Passions and Appetites, as Love, Desire, Fancy, Hunger, Thirst, &c. and its effects are Concord, Unity, Nourishment, and the like: But Antipathy is Dislike, Hate, Fear, Anger, Revenge, Aversion, Jealousie, &c. and its effects are Discord, Division, and the like.<sup>80</sup>

The regularities—with the inclusion of the weapon-salve, the precise same regularities—that for Van Helmont and Fludd are explained by a quasi-spiritual force permeating the firmament are hence explained by Cavendish as arising from commonplace emotions. Indeed, in the above quotation we see that for Cavendish sympathy is not a single thing at all, but a name for a set of emotions that have concord and unity as an effect—with antipathy being the converse. It is notably strange, however, that she includes hunger and thirst—not obviously positive feelings—amongst the passions of sympathy. What they have in common, of course, with love, desire, and fancy, is that they too draw creatures toward other creatures: “the Wolf’s stomach,” she writes, “hath a sympathy to food, which causes him to draw neer, or run after those Creatures he has a mind to feed on.”<sup>81</sup>

Perhaps this shows that sympathy is still a confused notion for Cavendish: the mixture between physical explanation and individual feeling that is evident throughout her account of sympathy, as well as in her metaphysics more widely understood, includes little quirks like this one that elides love and hunger. But, though we might think of hunger as being a generalised feeling that does not always have a particular object, for Cavendish to hunger is clearly transitive. She writes that sympathy needn’t be a reciprocated feeling:

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid 293

<sup>81</sup> Ibid 292

Neither is it required, that all Sympathy and Antipathy must be mutual, or equally in both Parties, so that that part or party, which has a Sympathetical affection or inclination to the other, must needs receive the like sympathetical affection from that part again; for one man may have a sympathetical attraction to another man, when as this man hath an antipathetical aversion to him; and the same may be, for ought we know, betwixt Iron and the Loadstone, as also betwixt the Needle and the North; for the Needle may have a sympathy towards the North, but not again the North towards the Needle; and so may the Iron have towards the Loadstone, but not again the Loadstone towards the Iron.<sup>82</sup>

With an understanding of this unreciprocated sympathy in hand, Cavendish's inclusion of hunger and thirst alongside love makes more sense: to hunger for something is surely to have a motivation to positive action in its direction, even if—as in the case of the wolf's stomach—it's a stretch to imagine that the object of that attention feels the same way.

The above-quoted passage, however, is remarkable for other reasons. It shows the distance of Cavendish's departure from Van Helmont and his ilk in her understanding of sympathy. Like the later eighteenth century writers, she has decisively torn it from the heavens, broken it up, and propagated it out into the mass of individual creatures, with all of the contradiction and disagreement that such an action entails. No longer a peaceful unifying force suffusing all things, sympathy becomes the individual possession of individuals; causing them, to be sure, often to act in one another's interests, to imitate one another, to draw close to one another—"proceeding," as Cavendish puts it, "from an internal sympathetical love and desire to please"<sup>83</sup>—but with no hard-and-fast rules and certainly no requirement of balance or equality. As passions and appetites, sympathy and antipathy can have chaotic, unpredictable, unbalanced effects.

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid 291

<sup>83</sup> Ibid 292

Unlike the eighteenth century theorists, however, who also see sympathy as an individual feeling, Cavendish does not confine sympathy to the human or even to the animal world. She helps herself to sympathy as a causal explanation for a great many of the phenomena of the natural world, from magnets to flowers to magical cures. Indeed, as I shall argue shortly, I don't believe that the (imperfect) order of Cavendish's material universe is explicable without reference to the individual sympathetic passions of its creatures. So once again Cavendishian sympathy is brought closer to that of de Grouchy: for both women, a feeling within separate individuals is the cause of self-ordering and self-organisation.

Before moving to order as such, however, it will be helpful to consider briefly what the claim that sympathy is a passion or appetite entails for Cavendish. A clue is visible at the end of the letter on sympathy, where she restates its ordinariness:

And thus, to shut up my discourse, I repeat again, that sympathy and antipathy are nothing else but ordinary Passions and Appetites amongst several Creatures, which Passions are made by the rational animate Matter, and the Appetites by the sensitive, both giving such or such motions, to such or such Creatures; for cross motions in Appetites and Passions make Antipathy, and agreeable motions in Appetites and Passions make Sympathy, although the Creatures be different, wherein these motions, Passions and Appetites are made; and as without an object a Pattern cannot be, so without inherent or natural Passions and Appetites there can be no Sympathy or Antipathy.<sup>84</sup>

Her remark about "inherent or natural Passions and Appetites" suggests that they are essential qualities of, respectively, rational and sensitive matter. This would mean that all matter in the universe, containing as it does both rational and sensitive aspects, has the capacity for passions and appetites and hence, also, the capacity for sympathy. I think this is the correct understanding of Cavendish's metaphysics. If so, then her tight

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid 297

integration of passion and appetite with rationality and sensitivity is another wrinkle in Cavendish's thought that sets her apart from a dominant intellectual tradition that sets rationality as separate from, and often superior to, emotion.

To confirm this reading, however, we should turn to precisely what Cavendish says about the passions elsewhere in her work. The fifth and sixth parts of the *Grounds*, about human beings, contain a remarkable materialist account of the passions in which Cavendish associates different emotions with different kinds of motion amongst the rational parts of the human creature, or of motion of the rational parts with respect to the sensitive parts:

When some of the Rational Parts move sympathetically, to some of the Sensitive Perceptions; and those Sensitive Parts sympathize to the Object, it is *Love*. If they move antipathetically to the Object, it is *Hate*. When those Rational and Sensitive Motions, make many and quick repetitions of those sympathetical actions, it is *Desire* and *Appetite*. When those Parts move variously, (as concerning the Object) but yet sympathetically (concerning their own Parts) it is *Inconstancy*. When those Motions move cross towards the Object, and are perturbed, it is *Anger*. But when those perturbed Motions are in confusion it is *Fear*.<sup>85</sup>

And so on and so forth, down to the passions associated with dilation (joy), contraction (grief), contraction plus attraction (covetousness), dilation plus sympathy (generosity), et cetera. It will be noted, first, that this is another wonderful example of Cavendish's commonsensical approach to materialism; but it will be noted, also, that in all this great list sympathy appears not as its own particular passion—as do pride, pity, horror, good-nature, et al—but rather alongside contraction, dilation, and attraction as a kind or character of motion from which the 'higher-level' passions can arise. This is reminiscent of Digby's account of sympathy, in which it is again just a way of characterising a kind of harmonious motion that has a mechanical-atomist explanation.

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<sup>85</sup> Cavendish *GNP* 72



Sympathetic motion, as we have seen multiple times, is for Cavendish *agreeable* motion: it is the kind of concord of motion that occurs when separate parts decide to move with one another, in unity or harmony. And if this unity or harmony of motion occurs between the rational and the sensitive parts, and between the sensitive parts and an external object, we call it love.

Does this mean that Cavendish is just confused or incoherent when she describes sympathy as resulting from love in the *Letters* while describing love as resulting from sympathy in the *Grounds*? I don't think so; I think there is a deeper explanation that has the virtue of being properly Cavendishian.

First, we must ask what causes parts to move together in sympathetic ways—what motivates them to do so. In the letter, Cavendish—in speaking of reciprocal sympathy in particular—says that agreeable sympathy, “a conforming of the actions of one party, to the actions of the other,” proceeds from “an internal sympathetical love and desire to please.”<sup>86</sup> If Cavendish were an atomist, the parallelism of this explanation would be pernicious circularity: at some point, she'd have to decide whether sympathy causes love or love causes sympathy. In the *Poems, and Fancies*, indeed, when she is an atomist, she does suggest that atoms just have sympathy innately: “By *Sympathy*, *Atomes* are fixed so, / As past some *Principles* they do not go.”<sup>87</sup>

But circularity of this kind is not a problem for Cavendish the theorist of the infinitely divisible plenum. Recall that for her as far as one divides matter one will find rational, sensitive, and inanimate aspects; and as far as one divides matter one will find corporeal motion. This means that the very idea of differing levels of description does not apply in Cavendish's universe; any bit of matter, no matter how small, can be understood simultaneously at all levels of description; it is always a moving part and always made up

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<sup>86</sup> Cavendish *PL* 292

<sup>87</sup> Cavendish *PF* 12

of moving parts. Indeed everything in Nature is both citizen of a society and a society itself. One can explain sympathetic motions by love, and love by sympathetic motions, because one can always penetrate deeper into matter and always find both. If I wish to explain the love that I feel, I can point to the sympathetic motions of my rational parts; if I then wish to explain that sympathetic motion, I can point to the love those parts have for one another; if I wish to explain that love, I can point to the sympathetic motion of their own parts; and so on into the infinite guts of the universe. There is no level of complexity necessary for passions that we cannot find in the thinnest imaginable slices of being and beyond.

This also explains another seeming contradiction. Digby argued that sympathy was just a name for a particular kind of motion that was explicable in physical-atomist terms. Cavendish frequently suggests both that sympathy is innate to matter and that it is a kind of motion between separate parts. Again, for an atomist this is a contradiction. But for a plenist it is no problem at all. Sympathy can be both innate to matter and a characteristic of the motor interaction of separate parts of matter because to be made of the motion of separate parts is, itself, innate to matter. It's motion, interaction, and therefore agreement (and disagreement) all the way down. If this is incoherent, the problem lies in the idea of infinite divisibility itself.

Sympathy, then, along with the other passions, must be innate to matter as a consequence of the innateness of rationality, sensitivity, and motion. As far as we penetrate into the plenum we will find agreement, love, and sympathy—alongside their negative converses. As I stated at the outset, for Cavendish sympathy is both a particularised feeling of love or connection that individuals have for one another and a phenomenon suffused into every corner of the universe, there to explain all kinds of physical processes. It is not put there by God or by any of his vicegerents—it is already there in matter. And, I argue in the forthcoming, it can explain how that universe can

appear so ordered without necessitating any such top-down rule; including from Nature herself.

#### 1.4 The Order of Cavendishian Nature

I contend, therefore, that for Cavendish Nature is societies all the way down, and all the way up. Explaining how Nature appears ordered is then as much a political question as a metaphysical one—it is as much a question for political theorists like de Grouchy as it is for physicists like Van Helmont. And as we have seen, at the beginning of the *Grounds* Cavendish does explain how “figures”—that is, individual creatures like hawks and partridges, rocks and trees, you and me—come to be “composed” by the “consent of Associating parts” and their “agree[ment] in proper actions.”<sup>88</sup> This consent and agreement is explained by Cavendish, particularly in the *Letters*, as arising from the sympathy that individual parts have for one another. It is clear, then, that for Cavendish sympathy plays an important role in explaining how Nature can appear organised, coherent, and orderly.

In fact, I argue, sympathy—and its corollary positive emotions, such as agreeableness and love, with which Cavendish sometimes takes sympathy to be synonymous—can be used to explain much, or all, of the order that we observe around us in Nature. The parts of Nature have their own individual sympathetic motivation to act in orderly fashion, one that is generated from their own parts and not imposed from above or without. This allows us to assess and intervene in the contemporary debate regarding the order of Nature in Cavendish from a new direction.

As I noted in my introduction, this disagreement in the contemporary literature on Cavendish regards the extent to and the method by which Nature is ordered.

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<sup>88</sup> Cavendish *GNP* 17

Doubtless this debate in part arises from what appear to be inconsistencies of Cavendish's own. She suggests both that real disorder is possible in Nature—we have already seen that her discussions of sympathy and love are very frequently accompanied by discussions of antipathy and hate—and, at other times, that Nature is perfectly regular. On the latter point, David Cunning points to this passage in the *Letters*:

And as for Irregularities, properly there is none in Nature, for Nature is Regular; but that, which Man (who is but a small part of Nature, and therefore but partly knowing) names Irregularities, or Imperfections, is only a change and alteration of motions; for a part can know the variety of motions in Nature no more, then Finite can know Infinite ...<sup>89</sup>

Our judgements of the disorder or irregularity associated with war, disease, death, et cetera are hence, for Cunning, to be understood as arising from our own ignorance as limited parts of Nature; looking, perhaps, from her own point of view, we would see that these changes or alterations in motion were no more disorderly than any other—as Cunning puts it, “there is no such thing as disorder; instead there are events that run counter to our parochial expectations and concerns.”<sup>90</sup>

Of course, this does not entail that there is no conflict or disagreement in Nature; we have already seen that for Cavendish antipathy and hate are almost as important explanatory feelings as sympathy and love, that Nature contains cross motions as well as agreeable ones, discord as well as concord. It just means that those motions that result from hatred and antipathy, and that run across one another rather than move together, are—strictly speaking, at the universal level—no more disorderly than those motions that are agreeable, loving, or sympathetic.

This view is also given by Lisa Walters, who points out that “oppositions which occur in Nature are necessary for the creation of a variety of figures” and that irregular

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<sup>89</sup> Cavendish *Letters* 439

<sup>90</sup> Cunning 155

motions are not true disorders but are “*necessary* aspects of how matter is balanced into a peaceful order.” “While Nature herself cannot make mistakes as she is a whole, infinite body,” Walters writes, “the individual parts within her make local errors of perception because they lack the capacity to comprehend Nature in its entirety.”<sup>91</sup>

There are, I think, a number of problems with this view, and in particular with the notion that disorders are balanced out in creating a perfectly regular universe. The first problem is that Cavendish at times suggests that the perfect regularity of Nature is just the result of her being a single, infinite individual. Walters, for instance, cites a passage in the *Observations upon experimental philosophy* in which Cavendish says, explicitly, that all Nature’s actions “are ballanced by their opposites; as for example, there is no dilation but hath opposite to it contraction; no condensation but has its opposite, *viz.* rarefaction,” et cetera, “All which produces a peaceable, orderly, and wise Government in Natures Kingdom.”<sup>92</sup> She then goes on to say that

although the actions of Nature are opposite, yet Nature, in her own substance is at peace, because she is one and the same; that is, one material body, and has nothing without her self to oppose and cross her; neither is she subject to a general change, so as to alter her own substance from being Matter, for she is Infinite; but because she is selfmoving, and full of variety of figures, this variety cannot be produced without variety of actions, no not without opposition; which opposition is the cause, that there can be no extreams in particulars; for it ballances each action, so that it cannot run into infinite, which otherwise would breed a horrid confusion in Nature.<sup>93</sup>

The first half of this long sentence implies that the orderliness of Nature is a trivial point in that it results just from her being a single individual, with “nothing without her self to oppose and cross her”; that is, nothing with respect to which she can

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<sup>91</sup> Walters 85-6

<sup>92</sup> We should note that here it is suggested that it is not Nature that is producing this orderly government, but that it is produced by the balance of her actions.

<sup>93</sup> Cavendish *OEP* 65-6

be disordered. If this is right, Nature can no more be disordered than can a helium atom in an infinite vacuum; disorder requires interaction, and Nature, from her own infinite viewpoint, interacts with nothing. This would also explain why Cavendish qualifies the passage about the regularity of Nature in the *Letters* with “properly”: it is a technical point, trivially true but substantively false.

This is a minor point, and not one that I believe can take much interpretive weight, especially as later in the same sentence Cavendish says that things balance out within Nature’s body in some way too. The deeper and more troubling problem for this view is the question of how this balancing occurs. Nature, we know, is infinitely wise by virtue of her being an infinite plenum of rational and perceptive matter. But the centrepiece of all Cavendish’s metaphysics is that that matter is able to move itself, which means that—individual parts *not* being infinitely wise, but limited and made stupid by their finitude—it should be possible for them to move in ways that contradict this fine balance.

What’s more, if Nature herself somehow acts to keep this balance, we must limit ourselves to explaining that action strictly in terms of matter and its motion, which for Cavendish constitutes the full extent of the contents of the universe. If Nature reaches into her own innards to ensure that a big outbreak of discord here is balanced out by a concordant pressure there, we cannot turn for aid to a tinkering God or to the spiritual, sympathetic emanations of Fludd or Van Helmont to explain how she does this. My concern is that Nature’s balancing act cannot be explained without improperly deifying or spiritualising her, attributing to her a power that extends beyond the limits of Cavendish’s physics.

The most substantive problem here was identified by Karen Detlefsen, who argues that this image of Nature as perfectly and wholly self-organising at the universal level contradicts Cavendish’s commitment to occasional causation—that is, the thesis

that all parts of Nature are the principal causes of their own motion, with other creatures acting only as occasions for that motion.<sup>94</sup> Allowing that Nature's parts are their own causes allows that they can act freely<sup>95</sup>; and allowing that they can act freely allows that they can make moral and epistemological mistakes based on their limited knowledge.<sup>96</sup> Such mistakes inevitably manifest themselves as disorders within Nature. This explains Cavendish's apparently strong commitment to the real evil and disorder of civil wars and disease.<sup>97</sup> In her explanation in the *Grounds* of how "cordials" function to rid the body of disease, she combines these two preoccupations:

... in Disputes between Two different Parties, a Third may come into the assistance of one Side, more out of hate to the Opposite, than love to the Assisted. The same may Cordials, or such like Applications, do, when the Corporeal Motions of Human Life are in disorder, and at variance: for, oftentimes, there is as great a Mutiny and Disorder amongst the Corporeal Motions, both in the Mind and Body of a Man, as in a Publick State in time of Rebellion: but, all Assistant Cordials, endeavour to assist the Regular Parts of the Body, and to perswade the Irregular Parts. As for Poysons, they are like Forrein War, that endeavours to destroy a Peaceable Government. <sup>98</sup>

This is a particularly useful example of Cavendish's frequent combination of the natural or physical and the political or social. And though the passage does not prove that the balancing-act view of Nature's order is false—the disorder of disease is rebalanced by the use of cordials—it does suggest that she thinks such disorders are of real ethical import. Indeed, Cavendish expends an inordinate amount of energy in

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<sup>94</sup> Detlefsen "Reason and Freedom" 170

<sup>95</sup> As Deborah Boyle has significantly pointed out, being able to act freely does not entail being wholly undetermined; further argumentation is needed to show that Cavendish is a libertarian about the freedom of Nature's parts. Boyle notes, however, that Detlefsen's argument that Nature's parts are the principal causes of their own motion supports a libertarian reading of Cavendish's metaphysics. She also provides further evidence for the reading that Cavendish is a libertarian regarding all Nature's parts; see Boyle 142, 146, 157, and *passim*.

<sup>96</sup> Detlefsen "Reason and Freedom" 177

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid* 174

<sup>98</sup> Cavendish *PL* 157-8

explaining how diseases, madness, and other bodily disorders occur, which would be odd for someone who considers such things to be parochial perceptual mistakes. This, also, suggests that if there is a perspective from which Nature is perfectly orderly, it is not ultimately an important one.

Nevertheless, the most significant counter to the balancing-act view is Detlefsen's: it is difficult to see how Nature could physically intervene in the actions of her parts to ensure that order is produced without compromising the freedom of those parts. This is complicated yet further when we consider that Nature is made up of those parts, and has no being separate from them. If an act proceeding from Nature's wisdom is to be propagated through her infinite body, it must be through the consent and through the sympathetic motion of the parts that constitute that body, and not through a unilateral force that cannot exist in Cavendish's universe. But this would mean not that Nature acts to balance out order and disorder within her body, but that she *suggests* or *asks* of her parts that *they* act to balance it out; much as when I raise my arm, a chain of suggestions, reciprocations, agreements, and sympathies proceeds from the rational-material spark of my brain through all the moving matter of my nerves and muscles to cause my arm to move in a particular way. It is the principal cause of its motion; my desire that it move is merely the occasion for it to move itself. (Presumably, when my arm loses feeling after having been slept upon, and my desire is unable to occasion my arm to move, it is because somewhere this chain of sympathies is broken—some part of me is distracted or stropic.)

This is precisely the view of Nature's orderliness that Detlefsen proposes.<sup>99</sup> She argues that Nature prescribes regularity within her parts, and that this comes about not because Nature herself acts as the principal cause of orderly movement—that would contradict Cavendish's foundational metaphysical views—but because, being rational

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<sup>99</sup> A substantively similar account of Nature's order is also supported by Boyle; see Boyle 156.



and perceptive, the parts understand this prescription and act in accordance with it. As Detlefsen notes, the law of Nature is hence closer to the laws of human societies than it is to the tight mathematical regularity that the term was coming to mean at the time.<sup>100</sup> Disorder is real, then, and can be explained as the result of limited and ignorant creatures misinterpreting or ignoring Nature's rational prescription toward regularity:

So infinite Nature, as infinitely wise, *knows* what all the parts of finite nature ought to do in order to follow the one peaceful law, but finite parts, which are the source of both the occasional cause and principal cause in any given interaction between two finite parts, *will* and *act* upon their volitions to either follow or to dissent from the overall, peaceful law, and what law prescribes in individual causal interactions.<sup>101</sup>

I think Detlefsen's critique is correct and her reconstruction of order as resulting from affective and rational interaction between perceptive parts, rather than as a top-down imposition, is much closer to both the spirit and letter of Cavendish's metaphysics. Detlefsen also notes, importantly, that a key plank of Cavendish's methodology is to use social interactions between humans—of which we have direct knowledge—to explain how things work in Nature.<sup>102</sup> Or, as Boyle puts it—though perhaps in the opposite direction—for Cavendish “the mode of organization and values appropriate for human societies can be found in the natural order itself.”<sup>103</sup> This is borne out by passages like those regarding sympathy in the *Letters*, where Cavendish moves smoothly from magnets and compasses to her own feelings for her recipient; further, this is a core insight on which a central thesis of this chapter—that sympathy for Cavendish is both a personal feeling and an explanatory power—rests.

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<sup>100</sup> Detlefsen “Laws and Order” 78-80

<sup>101</sup> Ibid 78

<sup>102</sup> Detlefsen “Atomism” 220-1

<sup>103</sup> Boyle 158

Detlefsen's position is also given support by other passages, such as this one in the *Letters*, which emphasises that individual parts of creatures are free to do as they please:

... it is impossible, that one single part should be King of the whole Creature, since Rational and Sensitive Matter is divided into so many parts, which have equal power and force of action in their turns and severall employments; for though Nature is a Monarchess over all her Creatures, yet in every particular Creature is a Republick, and not a Monarchy; for no part of any Creature has a sole supreme Power over the rest.<sup>104</sup>

Nature then stands in relation to her parts as a queen to her subjects, able to hand down pronouncements that have power, and have effects, but are not completely binding or causally determined. Let us reflect on this image for a moment. An important difference between a monarch and Nature is that a monarch is a separate person from all her subjects, an individual in some way invested with power, while Nature, it seems, is entirely and only the sum of her parts. In this sense she resembles more the artificial person of Hobbes' commonwealth than an ordinary individual. When Nature prescribes, of me, that I act regularly or in an orderly fashion, I receive a prescription from an entity of which I am a constituent part. If there is a law of Nature, I am a participant in its creation and propagation, and not merely subject to it—though Cavendish mightn't accept it, an extreme consequence of this view would be that Nature and her laws are just the general will of the infinitely divisible (and divided) universal community.

We needn't run to this extreme, however, to reflect further on this line of thought about the composition of Nature. If, as Detlefsen persuasively argues, the law of Nature is a rational suggestion or command, we should ask ourselves how this command is communicated and, indeed, what it's like to receive it. Though Cavendish emphasises the

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<sup>104</sup> Cavendish *PL* 337

explanatory power of ordinary human experience, we oughtn't trust our own perceptions too closely for this reflection; humans, after all, seem to act in much more chaotic and unpredictable ways than other creatures, like rocks or planets. Perhaps those creatures have a more direct or clear experience of Nature's law towards order than we do—Boyle notes that, for Cavendish, humans differ from other creatures in that we suffer from ambition and pride, which may well cloud our perception of the law.<sup>105</sup>

We should, however, work with what we have: and from our perspective, I think, any motivation toward regularity we have seems to come more from within than without. We do not feel an external pressure from an infinitely wise being to act in a harmonious and orderly fashion; rather, much in the vein of Hume or Smith or, especially, de Grouchy, our motivations to create order and ameliorate disorder seem to arise from our own feelings. If we were to attempt to describe our moral phenomenology in eighteenth-century terms, we might indeed say that it is because of our sympathy for the individual creatures immediately around us that we act in roughly orderly ways, and not because of an ethical commitment that we have to orderliness writ large across the universe. As Cavendish emphasises in her letter, sympathy is the individual possession of individual creatures, and it seems to be that possession that motivates them to act in orderly ways, not any kind of external commandment.

From this observation there are three paths that can be taken. We might say that the sympathetic desire to act in orderly ways in one's immediate surroundings is, precisely, the universal law of Nature that Detlefsen identifies. Nature the monarchess, then, propagates her law not through external commands but through the emotional and rational motivations of her creatures. In de Grouchean fashion, we might even note that when we fail to act harmoniously it is still because of an ignorance that causes our natural rational and emotional tendency in that direction to be obscured or co-opted;

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<sup>105</sup> Boyle 160

perhaps we might even construct, in Cavendishian terms, social critiques that can explain such ignorance, in the way de Grouchy critiques the sympathy-cancelling effects of her own society.

The second path turns out to be closely related, for if the motivation to act in orderly ways comes from within we can return to the balancing-act, interventionist view of Natural order while dispensing with the troubling incompatibility with the freedom of creatures. If Nature acts directly on the motivations of her parts, then she can balance herself into an orderly whole while still allowing those parts to be the principal causes of their own motion—she doesn't force them to move in particular ways, but tunes their feelings so that they choose to act in those ways. This is, admittedly, an attenuated view of freedom, and—as I have argued elsewhere—one that, politically, we ought reject in the sphere of human relations. But it is not implausible to say that I am the principal cause of my action even when my motivation to act comes from elsewhere.

Bringing the phenomenological experience of sympathy into the picture, then, can bring these two explanations of Natural order a little closer together. There is, however, still a problem with both. We still need a physical, thoroughly materialist explanation as to how sympathy and its corollary order-creating feelings (including, at times, negative ones) come to be inscribed into the hearts of creatures by the infinite intelligence of Nature of which they are, themselves, constituents. This is not a persnickety or arcane technicality, either. Recall that sympathy itself is a kind of motion for Cavendish. If, as Cavendish consistently maintains, all parts are the principal causes of their own motion, then sympathy *cannot* be implanted into creatures by Nature, because this would entail that Nature orchestrates or forces certain motions to ensure that sympathy arises. This is another consequence of Cavendish's belief in an infinitely divisible, self-moving plenum: there is no way for Nature to act on her parts that does not contradict something's self-motion. If I act from my sympathy, it is true that I am

still the principal cause of my motion even when my sympathy is implanted; but for my sympathy to be implanted at all, something at a lower level has to be moved rather than self-moving.

We might, then, reject this phenomenological picture of Nature's law that sees it expressed by our own sympathetic feelings. Perhaps Nature has some other way to propagate her laws, a chain of communications and consents and sympathies that involves no over-running of individual creatures' freedom. This is a complicated proposition, given that Nature is not an individual part but, it appears, and unlike everything else, only a community of parts; we would have to identify a space in which she can act without tyrannising, and the location or articulation of that space is not obvious to me. This would also ignore what seems to be phenomenologically true for us, and textually supported in Cavendish: that our own felt sympathy does cause us to act in roughly orderly ways.

To be sure, ignorance remains possible, and at times sympathetic action might have disorderly effects; in the *Grounds*, for instance, she describes how the sympathy of sensitive matter for rational matter in the minds of mad people causes their disorderly thoughts to find outward expression, causing more disorder than if their madness was confined to only their rational parts.<sup>106</sup> In general, however, sympathy creates order, and Cavendish frequently avails herself of this fellow-feeling to explain what would otherwise be mysteriously harmonious behaviour—most obviously in the letter that I discussed in detail. We ought not throw out this effect of sympathy too hastily.

A third path here becomes visible. This path puts sympathy at the centre of an account of the orderliness of Nature. It also emphasises what we might call the communitarian image of Nature, the view that holds that it is central to our understanding of her that she is a society of rational and emotional individuals. We can

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<sup>106</sup> Cavendish *GNP* 127

say, then, that Nature is not orderly because of any top-down ethical imposition, but—following de Grouchy—because of the intrinsic sympathetic motivations of her creatures and their positive, loving feelings towards one another. As such feelings are imperfect, and as their converses are also possible, disorder is a real and constant presence. But in general, and most visibly in their capacity to persist through time—some, like stars, for much longer than others, like butterflies—creatures freely create their own order.

Taken as a whole or as an individual, Nature might indeed have, or manifest, or even prescribe a general ethical commitment to order. She might yet be, as Cavendish describes her, a monarchess. But in such things, I think, she must be posterior to the sympathetic order of her parts. Following de Grouchy, who explains how conceptions of right and justice follow rationally from sympathy, we might say that the universal ethical prescription towards order is a *result* of the sympathy that creatures innately feel for one another, rather than vice versa, or rather than a view that relegates sympathy to a handmaiden or helper for a law that Nature generates herself. If I do feel an external Natural pressure to act in an orderly way, that pressure is in part the result of my own motion, a growth from my own sympathetic motivations, alongside those of every other thing in the universe; it is the self-generated law of a community of which I am, inescapably but freely, a part. Again following de Grouchy, while it cannot be its cause, perhaps that law is a catalyst of orderly behaviour. And if I choose to act according to that law, it is because I already have, as an essential function of my being a society of living matter, an affective motivation to create order—with more or less success. Sympathy, or agreeable motion, or love, as Cavendish will sometimes call it, is thus the individual possession of individual creatures while remaining, still, the power that orders the universe.

## 1.5 Conclusion

Sympathy, therefore, allows Cavendish to explain why Nature can appear so orderly without compelling us to see Nature herself as the sole creator of her own ordering and, thereby, contradicting Cavendish's commitment to occasional causation. For Cavendish the creatures of the universe, just like the citizens of the Enlightenment polity, are free and self-moving. But, just as de Grouchy hopes for citizens of the polity, the creatures of Cavendishian Nature are imbued with a sympathetic fellow-feeling that constrains their baser motivations and causes them to work together to further one another's interests. The quantitative aggregate of these sympathetic relations causes the qualitative order that we see when taking a higher-level perspective on Nature. Order is not, therefore, generated by Nature ruling as absolute monarch over her constituent parts and running roughshod over their own self-motion; rather, Nature is herself a sovereign generated by the free association of her parts. Her orderliness is an emergent, bottom-up property of the sympathy that her parts feel for each other.

In many ways, therefore, the picture we get of sympathy in Cavendish is one that has more in common with the eighteenth century sociopolitical views than the seventeenth century metaphysical or occult ones. Sympathy is an individual feeling of individual parts; they may all come together in a single whole from Nature's perspective, but sympathy is not itself a feeling acquired through the intervention of an external being, as it is for the likes of Van Helmont and Fludd.

On the other hand, of course, Cavendish differs greatly from the eighteenth century theorists in that, for her, sympathy is not merely something that obtains between human beings. It really does permeate all of Nature, in the same way that the seventeenth century philosophers thought. It has an important explanatory role to play in everything from the existence of animals to the operation of diseases to the

functioning of magnets to, of course, the attraction of large crowds to the sight of an ape on horseback. Sympathy, for Cavendish, is significantly *both* sociopolitical and natural, because in her philosophy everything is always both. Nature acts like our political institutions, made up of feeling, rational parts, with their own agendas, running up against each other, and occasionally or often finding ways to work together.

She thus resolves a tension between individual and universal in the Natural sphere in much the same way that later political theorists would in the smaller social sphere. Sympathy is a universal or near-universal ordering force because it is an individualised feeling spread universally throughout a collectivity. As Lisa Sarasohn puts it, for Cavendish “harmony should be the state of natural and manmade entities, and it cannot be imposed from above but must be the product of the constitutive parts of the whole.”<sup>107</sup> That she was able to reach this sociopolitical view of metaphysics before most theorists had even managed to reach this view of politics is remarkable, and worthy of further study; but for Cavendish, sympathy has an important role to play in explaining physical interactions in nature *because* it has an important role to play in explaining social interactions in human life. In this sense, she represents a reversal of the trend taken by history itself, where what began as a supernatural force was dragged from the heavens and placed into the mind. Cavendish instead studied her own mind and propagated the results out into Nature herself, filling her entirely with all the emotional and political life that we usually reserve for ourselves. Again, Cavendish’s philosophy leaves her standing outside the processes and paths that led us to the moment we now occupy.

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<sup>107</sup> Sarasohn 118



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## **2. The Limitations of Autonomy in Gabrielle Suchon and Contemporary Philosophy**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The problem of autonomy for feminism is usually construed as one of how autonomy is conceptualised. In its traditional philosophical and political images, the ideal autonomous agent is sketched as one whose actions are not influenced by circumstances or conditions external to themselves, but only by reason—which is, of course, something wholly belonging to, and internal to, the agent. These images are of an individualistic, atomised, self-interested, rational choice-maker, and these characteristics—feminist critics contend—are all ones that are coded as masculine in Western patriarchal societies. In the reciprocally reproductive mental and material realms of these societies women have, by contrast, been constructed as more relational, dependent, altruistic, and emotional; which is to say that, under patriarchy, women are both thought to be more essentially and naturally relational than men and are forced into roles that make them more so, not least by the thought itself.<sup>1</sup>

Under the traditional conception of autonomy, one is heteronomous to the extent that one is moved to act by factors external to reason—including one's own emotions, desires, and relations to others. While autonomy retains this atomistic connotation, then, and women retain their relational one, their exclusion from the category of autonomous agents is conceptual as well as historical.

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<sup>1</sup> This account of 'patriarchal' autonomy is perhaps somewhat caricatured, and not necessarily reflective of any particular philosopher's considered views. Nevertheless it captures the view that, as an adversary, animates much feminist thought on freedom. A useful summary of feminist critiques of autonomy, as well as responses that seek to rehabilitate it, can be found in Mackenzie and Stoljar 5-12.

In this chapter I will consider some attempts by contemporary feminist philosophers to take into account these critiques while preserving a conception of individual autonomy. Preserving this conception is seen as important for at least two reasons: first, having some idea of autonomy allows for the articulation of critiques of gender oppression that might otherwise be submerged, and any emancipatory politics seems to require a belief in the capacity of people to act autonomously beyond the norms and algorithms that have been coded into them by oppressive social contexts.<sup>2</sup> Second, it is necessary to hold on to the idea that people's actions in some way bespeak who they are so that we can make normative assessments on the basis of those actions. If we abandon autonomy it is difficult to see how this ordinary ethical practice is possible without being tyrannical.<sup>3</sup>

Attempts to rehabilitate individual autonomy, therefore, contend that “autonomy” needn't connote a coded-masculine, perniciously atomised agent. These arguments claim that a more accurate and more morally fruitful image of autonomy would make clear its essentially relational and social nature, and take into account subjects' status as socially situated—perhaps even socially constituted—beings. They seek to build a conception of autonomy that is intrinsically relational.

In the forthcoming chapter I compare these relational theses of autonomy to the work of the early feminist nun Gabrielle Suchon, who also recognised that the social reality of women's lives undermined both their well-being and their ability to act autonomously. This wasn't just a matter of the circumstances and ideologies that kept women fettered in roles that severely limited their ability to do as they pleased. For Suchon, these social circumstances affected the way women thought, believed, and desired; they produced structures of thought that caused women to constrain

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<sup>2</sup> Mackenzie 7

<sup>3</sup> Benson 55. Benson uses the term “free agency” rather than autonomy, but his normative competence view is taken (e.g. by Mackenzie 5) to be a part of the relational autonomy literature.

themselves, and made impossible the rational use of the freely-willing soul that is God's universal gift. In these senses she is a clear forerunner of the feminist critiques of autonomy; she shows that people are not self-regulating and self-transparent atoms.

But if we follow the consequences of Suchon's arguments a little further a significant problem arises. Once one allows the social to glom onto a person's identity—to come between them and their vision onto the world and into themselves—one introduces opacity into the self and into any possible faculty of self-scrutiny. And if we take the totalising effects of sociality seriously then we acknowledge that one cannot tell, easily, which parts of oneself derive from oneself and which come from outside—from one's oppressive social milieu. There is thus an epistemological-phenomenological problem looming for any theory that introduces sociality into the soul while still hoping to preserve a space for autonomy.

I aim to show that this problem is insoluble both for the seventeenth century theorists of women's freedom and for the contemporary theorists of relational autonomy. Any foundation for autonomy that is erected within a socially-constituted self will collapse—either into heteronomy or into the old rationalist image of an autonomy immune to the social. And the idea that there was ever an autonomy immune to the social was, always, a socialised heteronomy by a different, ideologically constructed name.

Though the problem stands for both Suchon and the contemporary theorists, it is fatal only for the later thinkers. Suchon has religious beliefs that allow her to skirt the problem of self-knowledge for social beings. Both of the contemporary reasons for holding onto autonomy—its apparent centrality to emancipatory politics and to normative assessment—require a kind of self-knowledge or self-transparency that cannot be generated from relational conceptions of autonomy. I do not believe this necessarily leaves us in a dim spot with regards to liberation. And if an ethics grounded in the

normative assessment of individuals by their actions is rendered impossible without autonomy, I contend, then we have a good reason to reject that individualistic ethics. In this, as shall be seen, I follow Theodor Adorno in his critique of Kant, the almost-sole object of his lectures on the *Problems of Moral Philosophy*. As will perhaps also become obvious, I am moved—and somewhat guided by—Adorno’s frequent assertion that “in the bad life a good life is not possible.”<sup>4</sup>

So it is in the effects of the apparent unknowability of the autonomous self that I think an encounter between Suchon and the contemporary theorists is instructive. Ultimately, the solution to the problem of the contradiction between autonomy and society is not to be solved by any kind of conceptual reworking of autonomy. It is to be solved by the revolutionary reworking of society—that is, by politics.

## **2.2 Three Axes of Relational Autonomy**

Before I go on, a quick note about liberation. Resistance to the oppressive structures of patriarchy is, of course, the primary animus of feminism. I have already given away that this chapter ends with the repudiation of the ability of the agent to ever know that she is acting autonomously under current conditions, but I do not mean by this to repudiate the possibility of resistance to oppression. I do not endorse hopelessness. At the same time, however, I do endorse a grim realism about the extent and nature of the task that confronts us. Patriarchal structures have been influencing the mental and material conditions of society for thousands of years. They have conditioned and determined the ways that all of us think about ourselves and each other, and they

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<sup>4</sup> Adorno 167. I don’t provide any argument for the persuasiveness of this formulation. But I take it that, even if we do not share Adorno’s world-beating pessimism, the readers of this chapter will agree that the world and society are currently beset by a great number of harmful structures and conditions. This seems to me to be a prerequisite for feminist philosophy and political philosophy in general. I believe my arguments are persuasive using this as a starting point.



have structured thought and language to such an extent that, in many places and for many centuries, the catastrophe of its own existence was almost impossible to express despite its horrendous consequences.<sup>5</sup> Our present position is one of several centuries of hard-fought struggle, but we are still very much within patriarchy, as we are within white supremacy and imperialist capitalism and other structures yet unnamed. The reciprocal mental and material effects of these structures are totalising or very close to totalising; we shouldn't imagine that there are easy ways out, and should be suspicious of any that present themselves. Resistance to patriarchy is a vital political duty, but it is also one that is extremely difficult—not just to achieve but to articulate. In our theorising we should face up to this difficulty.

Nevertheless I believe that there are ways to express the goals and impetus of emancipatory politics without recourse to the language of autonomy. In many cases, the forthcoming qualities that are taken to be important to autonomy, and that are systematically denied to marginalised populations, can be understood without the implantation of the concept of autonomy; the harm of their denial can be understood as harms that are not necessarily grounded in the restriction or limitation of an autonomous soul. Charting the hopes of emancipation beyond the limitations of patriarchal language and concepts is a big project, for another day. I hope here merely to militate against despair.

With all this in mind, I turn first to the contemporary theories of relational autonomy. In doing so I follow the taxonomy of theories used by Catriona Mackenzie in her excellent multidimensional analysis of relational conceptions of autonomy. Mackenzie argues that the usage of the concept of autonomy shifts according to “different social and normative contexts,” and that any unitary notion of self-governance fails to capture everything that we want autonomy to be. She therefore identifies three

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<sup>5</sup> For a moving discussion of this, see Rowbotham 29.

“distinct but causally interdependent” axes of autonomy: self-determination, self-governance, and self-authorisation.<sup>6</sup> Many of the preceding decades’ theories of relational autonomy can be grouped along these axes.

I will deal only briefly with one of these axes. For Mackenzie, self-determination is defined as “having the freedom and opportunity to make and enact choices of practical import to one’s life.”<sup>7</sup> It identifies “external, structural (social and political) conditions for individual autonomy.”<sup>8</sup> These include basic political and personal liberties and access to an adequate array of opportunities to instantiate one’s life-plans. Mackenzie references the capabilities theories of Martha Nussbaum, Elizabeth Anderson, and Ingrid Robeyns as providing relational autonomy theorists with a “useful vocabulary for articulating the opportunity conditions for self-determination,” including importantly relational ones.<sup>9</sup>

I agree with Mackenzie about the importance of amenable external structural conditions necessary for people to live lives that they can endorse as meaningful to themselves, and find little to criticise in the substance of her depiction of the self-determination axis. Paying close attention to the extent to which these structures limit self-determination, and how these limits fall unevenly across different social groups, is a significant part of any political liberation movement. The self-determination axis of autonomy hence gives us a useful tool in analysing—and hoping to overcome—oppression. It’s worth noting, of course, that under present conditions the great majority of people on earth are some distance—some a much greater distance than others—from being able to autonomously self-determine in this way. Insofar as autonomy is taken to be self-determination it is therefore mostly impossible at present—and this is a fact that

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<sup>6</sup> Mackenzie 17

<sup>7</sup> Ibid 17

<sup>8</sup> Ibid 25

<sup>9</sup> Ibid 28

we should loudly and repeatedly express, not one that we should submerge within other, more internal accounts of autonomy. The solution to this global lack of self-determining individuals is political change, and such change has most frequently been fought for by the very people who face external impediments to their flourishing. That autonomy, understood as self-determination, is impossible for many people, does not render political emancipation impossible. Indeed, it makes it morally, if not historically, necessary.

As it is, autonomy is not just taken to be the absence of external structures hostile to one's life-plans, or the presence of ones that move in sympathy to them. It is also taken to be a freedom from, or within, those structures' influence upon the self. It is the construction of an autonomous self from the pieces of the socialised self that I take to be the substantive aim of the relational autonomist project—without it, our world that is radically hostile to self-determination would render individualistic ethics impossible. This substantive aim is instantiated by the self-governance and self-authorisation axes. It is to these that I turn next.

### **2.2.1 Self-Governance**

Mackenzie says that the self-governance dimension of autonomy “involves having the skills and capacities necessary to make choices that express, or cohere with, one's reflectively constituted diachronic practical identity,”<sup>10</sup> referring to the Korsgaardian notion of one's identity as a “description under which you value yourself ... under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking.”<sup>11</sup> According to Mackenzie, the self-governance axis identifies conditions of *competence*

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<sup>10</sup> Mackenzie 17

<sup>11</sup> Korsgaard 101

and *authenticity* for autonomy.<sup>12</sup> Many of the other conceptions of relational autonomy, including those of Meyers, Stoljar, Barclay, and—in some lights—Benson, can best be described as falling under the self-governance axis and as articulating conditions for authenticity and/or autonomy competences.

Autonomy competences are sets of skills that “a person must possess, to a certain degree at least, to be self-governing.”<sup>13</sup> On relational accounts these competences are ones that agents develop or acquire (or not), partly or wholly, through their social situation. Autonomy competences can be content-free critical or self-reflective skills or they can be substantive normative competences requiring that an agent understand particular norms in particular contexts.

Authenticity conditions are those that, in Mackenzie’s terms, specify “what it means for a choice, value, commitment, or reason to be one’s own.”<sup>14</sup> An action that in some way proceeds from one’s true or authentic self—with which one’s true self identifies—is an autonomous one, and agents who have the capacity to programmatically perform such actions are autonomous agents. Perhaps the best-known example of an authenticity condition for autonomous action is Harry Frankfurt’s account of the endorsement, by a second-order volition, of a first order desire.<sup>15</sup> A person is thus autonomous if, in their action, there is some agreement between their self-reflective life-plans or self-images—their authentic self—and their desires or reasons. For Frankfurt, this is a matter of the higher-order volitions ruling hierarchically over one’s otherwise-wayward lower-order desires. Marilyn Friedman proposes an *integration* model wherein one’s lower- and higher-order motivations reciprocally inform one another.<sup>16</sup> Under a

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<sup>12</sup> Mackenzie 31-2

<sup>13</sup> Ibid 32

<sup>14</sup> Ibid 31

<sup>15</sup> “It is in securing the conformity of his will to his second-order volitions [...] that a person exercises freedom of his will.” Frankfurt 15

<sup>16</sup> Friedman 32

relational conception it is understood that this authentic self, choosing whether or not to endorse its desires and actions, is itself constituted or strongly influenced by social forces.

These two ways that one can self-govern are not unrelated—on Diana Tietjens Meyers’ account, for instance, the authentic self is one that is formed by the effective exercise of one’s autonomy competences. To possess an authentic self, for Meyers, is to be within a dynamic process of self-definition guided by one’s autonomy competences. The authentic self is not in a fixed state; it is defined by an ongoing activity of constant, reflective, autonomous re-constitution. In Meyers’ own terms, the authentic self is “nothing but the evolving collocation of attributes - analogous to a musical ensemble’s sound - that issues from the ongoing exercise of this repertory of skills.”<sup>17</sup> She identifies seven—though there may be more—areas of competence that are “needed” for self-definition: introspective skills, imaginative skills, memory skills, communication skills, analytical and reasoning skills, and interpersonal skills.<sup>18</sup>

Meyers is guided by intersectionality theory. A large part of the self-knowledge required to define one’s authentic self, she argues, is of the subject’s situation within intersecting planes of oppression and privilege, as defined by that subject’s social milieu. When one accepts one’s intersectional identity as a “feature of one’s authentic self,” according to Meyers, one acknowledges one’s placement at particular intersections, and understands and analyses how this placement has influenced one: one “disclos[es] to oneself the ways in which associated norms have become embedded in one’s own cognitive and motivational structure, appreciat[es] how entrenched they are, and assum[es] responsibility for the ways in which one may enact them.”<sup>19</sup> When one’s

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<sup>17</sup> Meyers 173

<sup>18</sup> Ibid 166

<sup>19</sup> Ibid 159

process of self-definition is guided by this knowledge of one's intersectional identity, one is able to define an authentic self.

Meyers gives the example of a “young, white, middle-class, heterosexual (let us suppose, recently married), Italian-American woman” who is trying to decide whether or not to become a mother. Through her knowledge of her social placement, and her knowledge of the history of maternal norms within her identity-groups, she is able to bring resources to bear on her decision to which she would not otherwise have access. She might, for instance, observe that there is a long history in the United States of encouraging white women to procreate ‘for the good of the race’; this knowledge might cause her to pause while considering if she is motivated by such racist norms. Attending to one's group identities in this way, and their histories and interactions and tensions, “authorizes *individualized* reflections and choice.” “In the end,” Meyers writes,

a woman might refuse on principle (antiracist or ecological) to reenact the maternal norm, but alternatively she might conclude that the satisfactions of motherhood would probably outweigh the negatives and decide to have children.<sup>20</sup>

Her knowledge of herself, her constitution by intersectional identity, and the history of her own social situation, combined with the seven (or more) critical competences that Meyers identifies, allows the woman to autonomously define how she relates to the motherhood norm: to what extent it is constituted within her historically, what it means historically, to what extent this meaning contradicts or accords with her values and desires. And an authentic self is one that is self-defined, in the light of its social situation, by this sort of dynamic, never-ending process.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid 164

<sup>21</sup> Ibid 166

Meyers' conception has a strong intuitive pull. We are tempted, I think, to believe that a woman who decides to become a mother without any knowledge of the ways that femininity is intertwined with motherhood within patriarchal culture does so less autonomously than a woman who thinks hard upon the norms surrounding motherhood; we might also then conclude that a white woman who also reflects upon the ways in which white motherhood is inflected by white supremacy acts more autonomously than a white woman who does not. Alongside feminist standpoint theory, Meyers also argues that an authentic self and autonomous agency "may be more accessible" to more oppressed individuals: for those on the dominating or privileged sides of these axes, acknowledging one's social situation entails acknowledging that much of the good in one's life does not proceed from within the self, which may be more threatening to one's self-image than the knowledge that much of the bad in one's life comes from an external oppressive structure.<sup>22</sup>

We are then left with the satisfying conclusion that the better one understands one's oppressive milieu, and the better one applies this knowledge self-reflexively and critically, the more autonomous and authentic one is able to become. As we shall soon see with Suchon, for Meyers knowledge begets freedom, even within systems of suffocating oppression. And it is an important insight that autonomy—or freedom—is birthed from a struggle in which we are all intertwined through our different subject positions. But I am doubtful that it is the kind of struggle that people can undertake within themselves, even when those selves are understood to have help from outside in the form of education—the learning of competences—and emotional support.

For Suchon the epistemological problem for autonomy posed by society is that of differentiating the autonomous parts of the self—which she knows exist—from those constituted heteronomously. When taking an outside view upon the self, these two

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid 162

separate realms are not easily differentiated. Meyers and most of the other contemporary theorists avoid this problem by denying that there is some unsocialised part of the self to be distinguished—“autonomy unfolds in situ,” as Meyers puts it, “and autonomous individuals must work with whatever material is at hand.”<sup>23</sup> This material is one’s oppressive milieu and the self that it constitutes.

Nevertheless, Meyers’ view of autonomy and others that rely upon the autonomous action or creation of an authentic self do not successfully circumvent the opacity of the social self. When one engages in the reflexive activity of self-definition that Meyers describes, one takes oneself as an object of knowledge—with all the situatedness and vulnerability to external forces that that implies—but one also sets oneself up as an opposed *subject* of knowledge, reflecting on that object. Acknowledging the extent to which we are constituted by the social requires acknowledging the extent to which we are constituted as perceiving subjects, and not just as objects. But it is difficult to see how one could have the kind of objective knowledge required of one’s own subjectivity; one cannot make judgements about one’s subjectivity without immediately constituting it as an object, and generating a new, still abstracted subject.

This matters for autonomy because if—as both I and the relational autonomists think we should—we accept and allow that we are creatures shaped in heteronomous ways by oppressive social forces, then we must also accept and allow that our judgements about our own and others’ autonomy could be so shaped. When we look upon ourselves we do not know the whole etiology of the thing observed but we know even less the etiology of the thing observing, except to know that both have origins in a catastrophic and oppressive society. We do not know, to borrow an evocative turn of phrase from Donna Haraway, with whose blood our eyes were crafted.<sup>24</sup> So when I engage in the

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid 159

<sup>24</sup> Haraway 585



activity of self-definition described by Meyers I could just as easily be using a heteronomous subjectivity to denounce “authentic” parts of myself, and to lionise heteronomous parts, as vice versa; more likely I am heteronomously denouncing other heteronomous parts, and nothing resembling authenticity enters into the picture. Saying that these authentic parts of the self are themselves the products of social forces does nothing to solve the problem of telling them apart from inauthentic parts when using an opaque subjectivity. Though Meyers and others assert that authenticity and autonomy are matters of degree, not absolutes, and that we are thus never wholly free from the social, our constitution by the social prevents us from ever even apprehending the scale. Even allowing the possibility that we sometimes look along heteronomous lines rules out the possibility that we could ever know the extent of our autonomy.

For her part, Meyers is careful to problematise the visual metaphor of which I have been making such use above. “People cannot be expected to cast their gaze inward,” she writes, “behold their intersectional identity, and intuit its import, for culturally transmitted cognitive schemas and emotional scripts organize introspection, and those frameworks are not hospitable to intersectional self-definition.”<sup>25</sup> She thus readily accepts that there is some nugget of heteronomy within our powers of self-scrutiny. Instead of armchair introspection she describes a spate of heterogeneous critical, intellectual, emotional, and social strategies of which subjects can make use in their self-definition. She advocates curiosity about other people and cultures and attentiveness to one’s emotions in different situations as well as “critical thinking skills” as important directions toward self-definition. But all these activities presuppose an autonomous subjectivity that is able to make free decisions about the information it gets from itself, from its emotions and its cultures—decisions about how to sort this information, how to weigh it, what to keep and what to reject. This autonomous subjectivity looks a lot like

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid 167

the old masculinist one of the abstracted and rational observer. It resembles the soul-part of the self immune to the social in which Suchon believed. And if this asocial homunculus is removed from the picture, we are left with a self buffeted by information from all sources, making choices in the dark. This self is not free.

Take Meyers' example, above, of the white woman who decides that, in spite of her close knowledge of how white supremacy and patriarchy structure her decisions, "the satisfactions of motherhood would probably outweigh the negatives" and she should therefore have a child. The "negatives" of patriarchal and racist norms are not weightless, of course; they are assigned a weight in decision making. They are not only assigned that weight by the woman in question, but by the social force of the norms themselves, or by other norms generated in the woman's milieu. Even when she does seem to assign a weight herself she is affected from the outside. So generated, too, is the relative weight she gives to the satisfactions of motherhood, which are themselves handed to her by social forces that are far from innocent. Given all this, there is, I think, no reason for us to think that a decision that takes all these things into account is more autonomous than one that does not, though doubtless it is still better in other ways. To do so we must either suppose that the standpoint from which that accounting is made is already more autonomous—which begs the question—or suppose that accounting as such somehow generates autonomy, even when it is done from a heteronomous standpoint. But even in this second case we need an autonomous observer who can judge that autonomy, rather than disguised heteronomy, has indeed been generated— again begging the question.

As much is true, I think, of any conception of autonomy in which an authentic self organises the heteronomies in its experience—be it Frankfurt's hierarchy of desires or Friedman's reflective equilibrium of desires and life-plans. Any procedural conception of autonomy is vulnerable to the critique that there is no way, in a world of socially-

constituted subjects, to apply a procedure that generates autonomy without first presupposing autonomy—or at least, no way to apply the procedure and then make an autonomous judgement about its results.

More substantive competence conceptions of autonomy, like Natalie Stoljar's, perhaps provide a way out of this. For Stoljar, being autonomous is not merely a matter of reflectively endorsing one's actions as having emerged from an authentic self, or as resulting from a sound procedure: "even women socialized through stereotypical feminine socialization will often have developed good capacities of critical reflection and hence [according to procedural views] autonomy."<sup>26</sup> But, Stoljar argues, there is a "*feminist intuition*" that "preferences influenced by oppressive norms of femininity cannot be autonomous."<sup>27</sup> She therefore proposes a content-thick account of autonomy—what she calls a "strong substantive theory of autonomy"—which holds that a subject cannot be autonomous if she has internalised, and acts upon, a norm that is "*false*." "And because of the internalisation of the norm," she writes, "they do not have the capacity to perceive it as false."<sup>28</sup>

Stoljar uses the example of women surveyed by Kristin Luker in a California abortion clinic in the 1970s.<sup>29</sup> In many instances, these women had decided not to use contraception, and this decision was reflectively endorsed in ways similar to the endorsement provided by the authentic self of procedural theories like Meyers'. But, Stoljar argues, feminists have the intuition that their decision was not an autonomous one, as the women's reasons for endorsing their action to forgo contraception were predicated on false (and patriarchal) norms, such as that women shouldn't initiate or

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<sup>26</sup> Stoljar 107

<sup>27</sup> Ibid 95. Emphasis original.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid 109. Emphasis original.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid 96

plan for sex or that bearing a child increases a woman's worth or femininity.<sup>30</sup> Hence autonomy requires a strong and substantive idea of normative competence—that is, autonomy requires, at the very least, that one not be motivated by false norms.

Stoljar's account might be termed 'externalist' in that it is used to make judgements about when other people act heteronomously, unbeknownst to themselves. They presumably perceive that they act according to a true norm or just according to some kind of natural order of things. The account can thus skirt the phenomenological problem by making autonomy or heteronomy objective features of people's actions rather than ones constituted in their subjective perceptions of endorsement or non-endorsement. There is just a fact of the matter about whether someone acts heteronomously or not, and how they or anyone else feels about it doesn't matter. (Stoljar says that not acting according to false norms is a necessary, but not necessarily sufficient, condition for acting autonomously.<sup>31</sup> It is thus less clear if on her account there is also just a fact of the matter about whether someone acts autonomously or not.)

The problem arises, of course, in how we are to make use of this account. All structures of domination and oppression operate by the propagation of false<sup>32</sup> and harmful social norms which appear as socially useful, necessary, or just true. Given how totalising the structures that beset us are, we can assume that we have all internalised many more of these norms than we know—and, as Stoljar points out, internalisation disables our ability to perceive these norms' falsehood and harm. So there is a fact of the matter about our heteronomy too, and it's one that's inaccessible to us; but we can safely assume that a great many of the norms that underpin our actions are false. There is an arrogance in presuming to impugn the actions of others as structured by false norms

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid 99

<sup>31</sup> Ibid 95

<sup>32</sup> For the purposes of this chapter I assume that there is such a thing as a "false" social norm, and concentrate only on the knowability of a norm's truth.

from a position itself structured by false norms. Even our action of judging another to have acted heteronomously may be motivated by our internalisation of a false norm—and again, there is no way to know one way or another. So even a substantive, objective account of heteronomy faces this same knowability problem.

But, it could be argued, there do seem to be some false norms that we know about and that do properly seem to disable autonomy. The “feminist intuition” is well-named. There are even more uncontroversial-seeming examples than Stoljar’s of the women who forgo contraception: a sexual assault survivor, for example, who structures her choices according to a belief that she is responsible for her assault, has surely internalised a harmful, morally reprehensible, false norm. Surely, too, we can rightly say that choices that proceed from this norm are heteronomous, even if there are many cases where we cannot.

Perhaps we can say these choices are heteronomous. It could even be a central feminist strategy to point out the harm of such choices—a case where we do not allow a sceptical worry to impede political action. As subjects constituted by harmful structures we cannot know much about what a freer world would look like, but we can at least demand that it not include such terrible social phenomena as victim-blaming and internalised victim-blaming. It is a harrowing and obvious manifestation of a heteronomy that pervades many more of our actions than we realise. But it should be noted that in labelling her actions heteronomous we do not thereby gain a coherent or usable account of autonomy appearing in opposition. It may well be that in our current condition heteronomy is sometimes easy to identify and autonomy always impossible. We don’t recognise it by denouncing the autonomy of others. (This suggestion—that we can constitute autonomy from the recognition of heteronomy in others—is not one made by Stoljar. To this extent we are in accord.)

This should give us reason to militate our paternalism, or the impulse toward purity or righteousness that underpins it, in instances where—perhaps due to sheer rage—we insist that no free person could ever act in such ways or believe such things. Such an insistence is proper and right, but it should be accompanied by an insistence on a humility motivated by our recognition that we, too, are not free from socialisation by harmful structures. I think mutual recognition of this kind should push our responses in such clear-cut cases of socially-constructed horror closer toward solidarity, or shared suffering, than the paternalist intervention implied by the abstracted impugning of another's autonomy. The horror of anyone coming to believe that she is responsible for being sexually assaulted is a severe indictment of the society that would cause that belief; that it might cause her to act in ways that will further harm her is a more severe indictment still; it is this fact upon which we should reflect and act, not the authenticity or autonomy of her choices. We can express the badness of this state of things without recourse to the language of heteronomy.

The self-governance theories of relational autonomy, therefore, must either resign themselves to the result that the governor is as unfree as the governed, and is hence no source of autonomy at all, or arbitrarily declare some part of the self to be the source of autonomy despite its potential infection by the heteronomies of a bad society. But the arbitrary exaltation of a socialised part of the self as the seat of autonomy was just what the old patriarchs of autonomy did with reason, for which they were rightly criticised. Just acknowledging that that part of the self is socialised is more honest, but is not enough to reconcile the contradiction between autonomy and society if we still have to make normative assessments predicated upon the autonomy of ourselves or others. A normative assessment—a moral judgement—requires both an object and a subject; but if, as the relational autonomists presuppose, both are constituted by social forces whose own normative character is at best suspect then any assessment made by the subject is,

itself, open to insoluble charges of hypocrisy or tyranny. The judging subject collapses to become as much an object as the judged. There can be no free moral judgements on this account.

### **2.2.2 Self-Authorisation**

For Mackenzie, the self-authorisation axis of autonomy “involves regarding oneself as having the *normative authority* to be self-determining and self-governing.”<sup>33</sup> It is thus a self-reflexive attitude in which one regards oneself as a competent moral agent in a community of other moral agents: as someone who can account for, explain, and take responsibility for her actions, and who is “authorized” to expect the same from others. Hence, being self-authorising requires that an agent think of herself as capable of explaining her actions to others in ways that are at least in principle acceptable to those others. Self-authorisation is thus relational in two senses: because it involves an agent’s perception of herself in the light of others, and because it involves reasons, commitments, and values that are themselves socially constituted within the agent.<sup>34</sup>

Mackenzie writes that “regarding oneself as accountable involves having a sense of one’s epistemic and normative authority with regard to one’s life and one’s practical commitments.”<sup>35</sup> The points I have raised above regarding the opacity of the self and the ubiquitous badness of the social that constitutes it serve to undermine the sense any of us could have of ourselves as normatively or epistemically competent in an authority-conferring way with respect to our own actions. Mackenzie herself observes the apparent demandingness of self-authorisation, saying that these self-evaluative attitudes “may seem to assume an unrealistically high level of confidence in oneself.” She emphasises in

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<sup>33</sup> Mackenzie 35. Emphasis original.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid 36

<sup>35</sup> Ibid 36

response that it only requires “appropriate” self-evaluative attitudes, and that—like the other relational theorists—she takes autonomy to be a matter of degree.<sup>36</sup>

But there are other interesting questions raised by Mackenzie’s characterisation of self-authorisation as involving a sense of one’s normative competence. There is a question, for instance, about whether successfully navigating social norms—and taking oneself to be capable of doing so—really confers or constitutes any form of autonomy in situations such as ours in which a large part of the norms are hostile to one’s well-being or self-image. For people in oppressed groups, confidence in expressing one’s reasons and one’s ability to account for oneself involves confidence in speaking the language of the oppressor. Certainly someone who feels a sense of dislocation, alienation, or incompetence within their social milieu—who finds themselves unable to find the words to account for themselves in an oppressive tongue, and who is conscious of that—is robbed of a kind of well-being and respect. They will find the world to be a hostile place largely arranged against them. But they are right about this, and from their position of dislocation they have the potential to articulate some opposition to that world that someone who navigates it with confidence is likely to miss.

Mackenzie might simply respond that all this is true, but that someone who misses this self-confidence is nevertheless in some sense less autonomous than someone who has it. But this implies that someone who internalises bad norms, and thinks of themselves through these norms, is more autonomous than someone who cannot. This flatly contradicts Stoljar’s “feminist intuition” that internalising false norms harms one’s capacity to act autonomously. It also strikes me as a bad conception from which to attempt to construct a resistance to oppressive structures.

In his relational theory of autonomy as normative competence, Paul Benson raises a similar question regarding the norms with respect to which an agent’s autonomy

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid 38



is to be judged. Under Benson's account, the "norms which, in fact, we must be capable of recognizing and appreciating in order to act freely are those that actually play a part in the particular personal and social relationships in which we are involved."<sup>37</sup> A person's freedom is thus always judged according to the particular normative domain—made up of the people around them—in which they act, and they are free to the extent that they, themselves, appreciate and recognise those norms. "Apart from specific norms," Benson writes, "freedom is vacuous, since those norms set the terms in which free actions may reveal pertinent features of agents."<sup>38</sup> And as Benson himself points out, this gives the account a supple approach to oppressive normative contexts:

If one's freedom seems irremediably splintered because the norms that one is expected to comprehend in order to be minimally respected as a free and accountable agent are themselves contradictory or incoherent, then one is not at fault for feeling alienated from one's agency. The cause of one's feeling need not be some gender-specific defect in one's inner volitional machinery. Rather, it can be attributed to the alienating, gender-bound expectations of oppressive social institutions and practices.<sup>39</sup>

Benson's normative competence account hence allows the expression of an important feature of oppressive social structures: that they can not only frustrate one's autonomy but can also, paradoxically, invoke one's autonomy as a weapon to be used against one. The common norm of victim-blaming, in which a sexual assault survivor's autonomy is invoked just so that she can be subjected to blame for her assault, is a good example of the paradoxical nature that autonomy can take on under patriarchy. The survivor is subjected to blame because she used her autonomy to flout oppressive social norms regarding modesty in women—survivors are told, sometimes by a person invested

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<sup>37</sup> Benson 56

<sup>38</sup> Ibid

<sup>39</sup> Ibid 59

with significant institutional authority, that the way they were dressed, or that they were drunk, or that they invited someone in for coffee, makes them at least partly culpable for the subsequent attack. In all these ways she failed to act as someone who is fundamentally a passive object of outside forces; she is expected always to be thinking of herself as something potentially acted upon, rather than as an agent with her own ends to pursue. She is thus blamed for failing to use her autonomy in essentially autonomy-nullifying ways.

I take contradictions like this to be a good reason to be suspicious of the utility of the concept of autonomy within current social conditions. It can easily be pressed into the service of those conditions, and turned against their most vulnerable victims. Benson, too, thinks that prevailing social norms confront women and other oppressed people with contradictory and alienating judgements regarding their freedom. He is, however, more optimistic about the possibility of moving into other normative realms in which one can be judged in less hostile and alienating ways: “many persons’ relationships,” he writes, “give rise to ways of understanding the meaning and value of human activity which diverge sharply from values predominating in the society at large.”<sup>40</sup>

I’m not sure that these alternative ways of understanding can give rise to a workable conception of autonomy as normative competence. It is certainly true that there are interpersonal relationships that appear to diverge from a large part of the oppressive social norms that structure society at large. But these alternative normative domains are subject to the same knowability question as the norms with which one identifies or one’s application of an authenticity procedure: the most insidious ways in which they are structured by the oppressive milieu in which—despite everything—they are situated are likely to be the ones that are most difficult to identify and express. For

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid 59

Benson, so long as we feel competent—are confident in our competence—within a normative domain, and our agency does not appear “irremediably splintered” within it, then our actions can rightly be taken to “reveal who we are,” and we are free.<sup>41</sup> As I’ve said, I don’t think that confidence in navigating an oppressive normative context can be taken to track one’s freedom or autonomy, and nor do I think that one’s feeling of confidence within a particular normative context is necessarily a sign that it is not oppressive. Nevertheless, Benson’s account does give us a useful way to express an important operation of oppression, and a standpoint from which to internally critique societies that take themselves to promote autonomy while constituting it in hostile and contradictory forms.

With all this in mind, however, self-authorisation is cut adrift. Under current conditions one’s confidence in one’s ability to account for oneself to others does not lead to anything resembling autonomy. Confidence in one’s own normative competence is an important part of well-being, and we should fiercely criticise all the structures that rob people of it, but this doesn’t entail arguing that people within those structures ought to feel confident in this way. It entails that those structures ought to be destroyed. Confidence can be misplaced; one can be wrong about one’s competence—one’s ability to self-govern or self-scrutinise—or one can be confident in the usage of the wrong norms. Self-confidence alone cannot confer or constitute autonomy. Like Stoljar, I believe that the content of the norms with which one explains oneself is important. But I am doubtful about our ability to access or know when we are using good norms within a society so thoroughly constituted by bad ones. To see how the contradiction between society and autonomy could—potentially—be reconciled, we turn next to a far older account of freedom, based upon a different conception of ethics entirely.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid 55

## 2.3 Society and Freedom in the Philosophy of Gabrielle Suchon

To a certain extent, of course, it is anachronistic to include a discussion of a seventeenth-century nun in a chapter about autonomy, a term which extended only to polities until a hundred years after Suchon wrote. But as Lisa Shapiro has pointed out, there is a remarkable consonance between Suchon's theorising about freedom and later depictions of autonomy: in particular, Shapiro says, Suchon's views on freedom could be cast as a "prototype" of the Kantian view of autonomy as self-governance.<sup>42</sup> What's more, Suchon recognised the threat that an oppressive society poses to the achievement of self-governance, as it conditions lives without real choices and conditions minds unable to imagine other choices. On the other hand, she articulated a rationalist theory of autonomy similar to the one that was later repudiated as antifeminist.<sup>43</sup> She thus stands in a hazy position with respect to the history of autonomy that she presaged, answering some of its problems and instantiating others. Ultimately, I think, the ethics of obedience to and identification with God that Suchon espouses tempers some of the force of the contradiction between society and autonomy that becomes so fraught for later theorists.

Suchon begins her 1693 *Treatise on Ethics and Politics* with a long discussion of the nature of freedom, which she places deep within the essence and nature of the rational soul. She defines it as "a precious gift that divine generosity bestows on rational and intelligent creatures [...] by which they become mistresses of all their actions,"<sup>44</sup> pre-echoing later theorists that would locate autonomy in self-mastery and self-accountability. She also identifies free action with action guided by or "conduct[ed]" by reason, and says that freedom is the differentiating principle of an "intellectual

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<sup>42</sup> Shapiro 65

<sup>43</sup> Broad and Green, in their history of European women's political thought, call Suchon's theory of freedom one of "rational autonomy." Broad and Green 257

<sup>44</sup> Suchon 93

substance” like the human or angelic soul. We are ourselves, then, only to the extent that we act freely—and to act freely is to act according to reason (“animals”, she says, “have no freedom because they can neither speak nor reason”<sup>45</sup>). In contrasting “the reason of man” to “the intelligence of angels,” however, she already acknowledges a potential threat to this rational autonomy:

[Angels] are endowed with contemplative reason; in other words, they comprehend without language only through their vision and understanding of the ultimate good. But man’s reason is discursive and consists exclusively in reasoning. He achieves an understanding of all he wants to know through specific acts and operations that depend on external and internal senses.<sup>46</sup>

The “bod[ies] full of corruption and misery” with which we are saddled muddy the waters for reason and tempt the will toward acting upon base inclinations that pull us further from our essential freedom. But it is especially noteworthy here that Suchon writes of reason’s dependence on “internal senses” to gain understanding, as it suggests that reason must work with what it is given in directing action; and what it is given is a psyche partly conditioned by the limitations of the body with which it is unified and—as we shall see later—by the society in which it is formed. This raises a question about just how trustworthy we ought to consider the actions that appear to us to be dictated by reason; couldn’t they, just as easily, be the deceptive rationalisations of a disordered and desirous body?

Compounding this so-far inchoate problem is Suchon’s strong endorsement of a Hellenistic conception of freedom that sees it residing only in a soul that is untroubled by intemperate emotion and the vicissitudes of desire. “We will never be free if we have desires in abundance,” she writes, “because they completely undermine the freedom of

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid 95

<sup>46</sup> Ibid 96

our hearts and tear them apart unceasingly.”<sup>47</sup> Desires produce strong emotions that can pull our motivations away from those mandated by reason and make us less free.

Suchon differs from other philosophers interested in the untroubled soul in her insistence upon the ways that troublesome desires and emotions are propagated and maintained by bad social circumstances and norms. Unfreedom in society can instigate unfreedom in the psyche for Suchon as much as for the later feminist theorists of autonomy. Women’s subjected social position, Suchon writes, closes off opportunities for them to rid themselves of troublesome emotion and move toward freedom:

Desire is a sign of neediness and poverty. And because the most disadvantageous traits are most eagerly ascribed to women and girls, they are always said to have a multitude of desires [...]. To this we can respond that it is extremely unfair to attribute such faults to women, while at the same time to deprive them of the means to get rid of them. Achievement and possession are tried and true means of stifling and extinguishing all desires that are both rational and proper. Why are women not allowed to satisfy their desires and achieve their goals, when these goals are just and gratifying?<sup>48</sup>

That Suchon suggests one method of dealing with desires is just to satisfy them marks her as a more socially-minded thinker than other philosophers that advocate desire’s subjugation to the clinical operation of reason. But it is not just by closing off this opportunity to satisfy one’s “just and gratifying” goals that society propagates unfreedom within the minds of women. By forcing women into vocations to which they are unsuited, and making them dependent upon the whims of others, society generates new and yet more troublesome emotions that can only serve to constrain them further. As creatures essentially characterised by freedom, anything that constrains us and denies our ability to act according to this nature “gives birth to tempests and to the most

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid 105

<sup>48</sup> Ibid 106

pernicious storms of passion”<sup>49</sup>; these storms will, themselves, serve to cloud the judgements of reason and estrange us still further from our essence as free and rational beings. And, of course, it is “persons of the fair sex [...] who suffer the deprivation of the greatest advantages of moral and political freedom” and who are thus most likely to be subject to these freedom-denying emotions. Society perpetuates the unfreedom of women by externally constraining them in ways that generate the internal constraints of passionate emotion and unquenchable desire. She thus has an image of the reciprocity of the social and the mental in the construction of heteronomy, but—unlike the relational autonomists—she does not imagine that there is any space within this cycle to build a foundation for autonomy. To the extent that society acts to constrain you, for Suchon, you are just not free—you are estranged from your essence.

This might make surprising the harshness with which Suchon condemns the behaviour of other women. But there are moments in the *Treatise on Ethics and Politics* where she is strikingly critical of (what appears to be) women’s own complicity in their unfreedom. She writes, for instance, that

The vanity of women’s dress, the flirtatiousness of their gestures, the affectation of their compliments, and the fakery that infects their kindnesses, along with several other behaviours, can rightly be called puerile and artificial constraints. They provide evidence that women are their own enemies, opponents of their own freedom, which they unfortunately manacle by themselves. To be sure, those little amusements I mentioned above appeal only to society people, for wise and judicious women do not display these base behaviours, which are the daughters of constraint and the enemies of true freedom.<sup>50</sup>

Acknowledging as Suchon does that these behaviours are the “daughters of constraint” ought, one would expect, temper any harsh criticism of those that fall into

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid 119

<sup>50</sup> Ibid 120

them; they are, after all, not the result of free action. But Suchon sees these counterproductive behaviours as arising out of an ignorance that at least some women are capable of overcoming even in their subjected state, and she later confines her harsh judgement to only those women who “have the means to escape ignorance, but who are occupied with weak-minded vanities and pernicious friendships.”<sup>51</sup>

Suchon thus advocates education as a method to break the cycle of unfreedom in which the subjected women of her time found themselves. And she also advocates widespread social reform to enable women to receive education: in the *Treatise on Ethics and Politics* she advocates the creation of “colleges, universities, and academies” in which women could study the human sciences and from which men would be barred.<sup>52</sup> Her later *On the Celibate Life Freely Chosen* is devoted entirely to arguing that women should be permitted, in law and custom, to live “Neutral” lives outside of the convent or marriage in which they could dedicate themselves to study.

Until these institutions are in place, Suchon writes, women

are obliged to wage war against their passions without knowing where they are seated or being able to differentiate passions that reside in the lustful appetite from those that dominate the irascible. And women enact habits without knowing if they are inborn or acquired, and practice virtue without knowing whether a virtue is moral in general or Christian in particular.<sup>53</sup>

Suchon therefore anticipates the potential objection that I articulated earlier—that of not knowing which of our motives inhere in bad desires and which in our true freedom, the operation of reason—and prescribes education, via social reform, as a solution. We might ask whether, from within this position of ignorance, one is capable of fooling oneself into believing one is really free; and if so, whether any amount of

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid 136

<sup>52</sup> Ibid 185-6

<sup>53</sup> Ibid 155



education is enough for us to really know that our actions are free. If, as she seems to allow here, it is sometimes impossible to differentiate inborn and acquired habits, it could be the case that it's possible to confuse the actions of reason with actions motivated by the pernicious effects of the social. Certainly Suchon does not want to undersell the power of the negative forces that beset us, saying at one point—though with reference to original sin—that “corruption inheres in us and we carry it everywhere.”<sup>54</sup> By arguing that some women remain in their position of ignorance despite having the opportunity to leave Suchon also closes off the possibility that the emotional turmoil of unfreedom is, itself, a sufficient cue that we are ignorant and dependent and should work to self-improve. If we agree with Suchon, we agree that we are in essence free and that we have this capacity as a gift from God; but we also agree that a great many of our actions are born of unfreedom. How do we tell them apart from the ones that proceed from our nature?

Suchon would probably just respond that there is no mistaking the contentment that results from the agreement of one's essence with God's purpose. We might find this an unsatisfying response. But it is here that the temporal gulf between us and Suchon makes itself known. She may be surprisingly modern in her treatment of freedom and society, but ultimately her ethics is grounded in obedience to God and fulfilment of our natural commitments to him.<sup>55</sup> We are free when we fulfil our true nature by exercising our reason and obeying God. This is also when we are good. As a result the problem of the opacity of the socialised self is somewhat tempered, though not outright cancelled: for Suchon's purposes it doesn't hugely matter if we cannot know precisely how free we are, as God knows the extent to which we fulfil his purpose for us. Her ethics does not set out to give us a standard by which we judge ourselves or others according to the

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid 128

<sup>55</sup> Ibid 242

character of our, or their, actions; it tells us how to live in a way favourable to God. It is thus not fatal to her project if her account of freedom and its social opponents makes it difficult or impossible for us to make such judgements. As we saw, however, if we estrange ethics from God, and instead locate it in the interpersonal actions of individuals, matters change considerably.

## 2.4 Conclusion

In the lectures on the *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, Adorno criticises Kant for (as he saw it) failing to adequately reconcile necessity and spontaneity—from which freedom could be derived—in the third antinomy of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant fails, Adorno says, because in our current society—and he takes Kant to be the exemplary thinker of that society—moral philosophy is “necessarily a theory of private ethics,” an ethics centred around the interpersonal actions of individuals in an individualistic society. Adorno claims that the “highest point” of such an ethics is the “antinomy of causality and freedom which figures in Kant’s philosophy in an unresolved and for that reason exemplary fashion.” And, importantly, Adorno notes that “what appears in Kant as the intertwining of man and nature is also the intertwining of man and society.”<sup>56</sup> An individualistic ethics, for Adorno, cannot reconcile freedom and society any more than it can reconcile freedom and causality.

I believe that this problem is visible in the difficulties into which the contemporary accounts of relational autonomy run in their attempts to hold onto both the socially-constituted self and an idea of autonomy. As I noted at the outset, in his own account of autonomy as normative competence Paul Benson takes the significance of free agency or autonomy to be “the power of our actions to reveal who we are, both to

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<sup>56</sup> Adorno 176

ourselves and to others, in the context of potential normative assessments of what we do.”<sup>57</sup> Alongside the necessity of autonomy to political emancipation, this need for normative assessment is the motivation for preserving a concept of autonomy against the social. Allowing that we are thoroughly socialised would seem to render confused the ideas that what we do reveals who we are in some stable or uncomplicated way, and that who we are is the kind of thing that is properly subject to normative assessment. Procedural conceptions of relational autonomy attempt to resolve this confusion by installing within the self a place from which a critical perspective can be taken upon the ways in which that self is socially constituted; with this critical perspective in hand, one is properly the subject and object of normative assessments. But as we have seen, this location within the self must either be a homunculus implausibly immune to the social, and subject to all the same critiques that feminists levelled against the old masculinist conception of autonomy; or we must nihilistically accept that it is just whichever one of our numerous heteronomous parts is currently most powerful in our subjectivity. Substantive conceptions allow that we are unfree when motivated by bad norms, even ones that are reflectively endorsed by the critical procedures of authentic selves. But without some account of how to identify these bad norms, given that they press themselves upon us as insistently as good ones, we are not left with anything from which autonomy could be constructed.

As we also saw, Suchon’s admittance of the social into the self—if not the soul—was not as problematic for her ethical project. She does not need to ground a standpoint from which normative judgements of ourselves or others are possible and that is not itself vulnerable to charges of hypocrisy or inhumanity. A perfect standpoint for normative judgement exists in God; to expect that we too could have such a standpoint is not just overly optimistic, given our vulnerability to society, but impious. For Suchon,

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<sup>57</sup> Benson 55

ethics is not a matter of our accountability to others but our accountability and closeness to God. The social exists within her philosophy as a threat to women's freedom that is to be overcome through institutional and social reform, but it does not have to be *conceptually* overcome, as the unknowability of the social self does not render ethics itself impossible for Suchon.

The problem for the relational autonomists, then, is that their critique of the masculinist atomised conception of autonomy does not go far enough. They recognise, correctly, that the old view of autonomy is based on this atomised, individualistic image of competing individuals constituting a fragmented society; but they fail to recognise that so too is ethics itself. A view of ethics grounded in the interpersonal actions of individuals, and of the individualised assessment of those individuals and actions, requires a self that is autonomous and knowably so. Without it all normative assessment is open to charges of hypocrisy or nihilism, the denigration of one socially-constituted subject by another according to norms or self-beliefs which have no graspable independent standing. But, as I hope I have shown, or given some reason to believe, society muddles the knowability of this autonomous self, and hence muddles autonomy itself as a ground for normative judgement. This is especially true in a society as oppressive and, we think, distorted as ours.

As Adorno argued, the contradiction between society and autonomy is an artefact of this individualised view of ethics. While we retain this view, we are committed to attempting to reconcile autonomy and society conceptually—and, given how bad society is, this reconciliation strikes me as politically suspect. We ought, I think, properly recognise that society as it currently stands makes its own ideological conception of autonomy impossible, and use this as one critique to motivate the revolutionary reworking of society into one that does not contradict freedom. The views currently articulated in defence of autonomy could be very useful in this task, as they identify in

the negative many of the ways in which society assaults the psyches of its most vulnerable denizens: they are unable to determine the content of their own life-plans, they make decisions that harm themselves, they feel morally and socially incompetent or isolated, they are seen by others or by society at large as being so. They are, in short, unable to self-determine, self-authorise, and self-govern: they are alienated and unfree. I don't think that any of the attempts to derive a theory of a currently-possible autonomy from these harms succeeds. Worse than being conceptually fraught, such attempts to find pockets of autonomy within an unfree society end up making that society seem more free than it is, and they make the obvious need for radical change seem less pressing. But the relational autonomists do give us a new and better image of heteronomy than the old patriarchs, from which an internal critique of this society can be formulated, and progress toward reshaping it can be made.

For Suchon, reshaping society involved turning it into one in which women were not estranged from their essence and were hence able to realise it in their relation to God. Obviously I do not share the same religious or metaphysical beliefs as Suchon, but her case is instructive. If society renders freedom incoherent, it is not because we need to rethink freedom but because we need to change society.

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### 3. Patriarchy, Beauty, and Revolution in the Work of Mary Wollstonecraft

#### 3.1 Introduction

In 1600, Lucrezia Marinella wrote in her polemical *The Nobility and Excellence of Women and the Defects and Vices of Men* that “man needs to love beautiful things, and what more beautiful thing adorns the world than woman?”<sup>1</sup> Beauty, both that of performance and adornment, the natural and affected, is contested ground for Marinella as it had been for many other writers, misogynist and counter-misogynist: aesthetics as a discursive realm has long structured and been structured by gender ideology, with the common association of women with beauty serving to inform notions of the place, function, and nature of beauty as well as those of women. Marinella, concerned to counter Giuseppe Passi’s misogynist tract *Dei donneschi difetti*, released the previous year, makes extensive use of beauty as both a social and natural phenomenon in her defence—and exaltation—of women. In the process she produces a particular, heavily theological aesthetics that defends a place for beauty and for women, configured as beauty’s exemplary objects, within the social and divine order. In this way, Marinella’s work at the very opening of the 17th century exemplifies the three-sided conflict that I will discuss in this chapter: a network of complex interactions between beauty, gender, and social and political power.

These three things, and their influences upon one another, are present in the backgrounds of many of the writers—pro- and anti-woman—of the early modern period. Writers may lean on particular ideas of women’s place or character—those ideas

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<sup>1</sup> Marinella 63



themselves influenced by women's social position—to justify or explain aesthetic theories. They might use those aesthetic theories in the service of existing power or in the service of revolution. Or they might seek to change the position of women through a cunning use of existing ideas on beauty.

This chapter is situated within the eighteenth century British context, and it presents a reading of the work of Mary Wollstonecraft as seeing many of the contours of this three-sided conflict and coming down decisively on its “power” side; that is, Wollstonecraft argues that gender and aesthetic ideologies are both the products of existing oppressive social orders, and that hence only major ‘on the ground’ political change can go about shifting them in favour of women. In this way Wollstonecraft can be presented as a torch-bearer within a materialist revolutionary tradition—albeit one whose sympathies and faith lie firmly with the bourgeoisie of eighteenth century Britain.

To get to this point we will first have to see how Wollstonecraft sees beauty, gender, and power interacting in her two *Vindications* of 1790 and 1792. We will also have cause to examine the other intellectual currents of the time—here represented by the third Earl of Shaftesbury, Edmund Burke, and Frances Reynolds. Before all that, however, and by way of continuing this introduction, I will briefly sketch out how I see the work of Marinella falling within the triangular contest that I have described.

Beauty does have a certain kind of power for Marinella, predicated on what seems to be a fact about its nature—“man *needs* to love beautiful things.” This power is explained earlier in the text with reference to the perceived power of women as objects over presumed heterosexual male subjects: “men are obliged and forced to love women,” she writes, and “women are not obliged to love them back, except merely from courtesy.”<sup>2</sup> Again, then, beauty and gender are intertwined, with the pleasure and appeal of beauty referred back to the pleasure and appeal of women understood merely as

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid 62

objects. (“Everyone will be convinced of these matters one day,” she adds, “and the obstinate oppressors of women who trample on their dignity with greater insolence each day will be overcome.”)

Beauty has another power too, one that is—for Marinella—far more important than any kind of appetitive inducement. Beauty leads to knowledge of God; and, again, it is the beauty of women in particular that is of most significance here: “women’s beauty leads to the knowledge of God the supernal intelligence, and shows the way to heaven.”<sup>3</sup> She describes beauty as a “golden chain” upon whose links the soul progresses to heaven, beginning with “corporeal beauty” but then quickly ascending to the second link that “gazes with the internal eye at the soul that, adorned with celestial excellence, gives form to the beautiful body.” From there - the beauty of the soul that shines through the body - the soul then progresses further, to contemplate “the angelic spirits” and God himself.<sup>4</sup> Reflecting on the beauty of women, then—again from the perspective of a presumed heterosexual male subject—leads an adequately contemplative mind directly to knowledge of God.

This theological picture has many consequences. Situating women within a divine system is, of course, itself a strong defence of their significance and virtue; so, too, is Marinella’s insistence that a more beautiful body is an indicator and consequence of a more beautiful soul, which she lays out explicitly earlier:

Now, if we wished to apply the common reasoning, we would say that women’s souls are equal to men’s. But the complete falseness of this opinion will become apparent to everyone whose mind is not totally committed to the opposite point of view if we consider the body, because the nobility of the soul can be judged from the excellence of the body—which is ornamented with the same character and beauty as the soul, “which such a body manifests in itself.” The greater nobility and

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid 63

<sup>4</sup> Ibid 66

worthiness of a woman's body is shown by its delicacy, its complexion, and its temperate nature, as well as by its beauty, which is a grace of splendor proceeding from the soul as well as from the body. Beauty is without a doubt a ray of light from the soul that pervades the body in which it finds itself, as the wise Plotinus writes ...<sup>5</sup>

Through aesthetics and its attendant associations, then, Marinella claims for women a superior personal virtue to that of men, as well as greater favour from God and a divinely-ordained social, epistemological, and theological role within the natural order of things.<sup>6</sup> In a heavily religious society, this role—if taken seriously by men—would translate to significant social and political power, with women, merely by virtue of their beauty, acting as guarantors of the moral fabric of society itself (we will see a strange mirror of this in the work of Frances Reynolds more than a century later). In Marinella's work, then, aesthetics lies in the heart of a complex of moral and political questions—ones that surround not just the position and experience of women (seemingly inert objects in all this, even on the counter-misogynist side), but the shape of the society in which those women live.

Ideology surrounding women and beauty, itself a complex and interpenetrative knot, has frequently served as a locus of sprawling political contexts. Marinella, writing at the very beginning of the seventeenth century, mediates her arguments about the political and moral value of women through an aesthetic and theological lens. Several decades later, François Poulain de la Barre argued that women's adherence to and apparent obsession with the rituals of performative beauty was a result of their oppression—it was a sort of palliative, and an illicit avenue toward an informal power

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid 57

<sup>6</sup> Contemporary feminists will, of course, disagree with many of her positions, not least her seeming dismissal of women's agency throughout all this. We mustn't forget *Nobility and Excellence's* provenance as a specific response to Passi, and at any rate I've here focused exclusively on her chapter regarding beauty.

that was the only form not denied to them.<sup>7</sup> This shifts the ideology of beauty to a different ground: the beauty of women and their participation in its practice is no longer a natural given from which arguments of the kind Marinella made can proceed, but a social fact in need of explanation. This in turn can lead to a reorientation of the political aspect of beauty: rather than arguing alongside a known, established order—for improvements within that order—beauty, its effects and fellow-travellers, can be made to argue against that order. Hence the relationship between beauty and power - at least in theory - needn't always be unidirectional.

In this chapter, as I have said, I will focus on another knot of ideology surrounding beauty, gender, and political power—this time in eighteenth century Britain. I argue that the work of Mary Wollstonecraft, right at the end of that century, is able to penetrate much of this fog, arguing as she does for a revolutionary reworking of society that would change the bases of beauty and of the subject- and objecthood of women. This argument is itself refracted through various lenses, not least that of the growing economic and cultural power of the bourgeoisie as a class; these lenses, too, will need to be scrutinised. But I begin by turning to how Wollstonecraft understood the interplay of beauty and power to function within her society at large, and with regard to the contested position of women in particular.

### **3. 2 Beauty and Social Power in the Thought of Mary Wollstonecraft**

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<sup>7</sup> Poulain is strikingly explicit on this point: Once [women] noticed that external adornments made men treat them more gently and that their own condition thereby became more tolerable, they exploited everything that they believed would make them more amiable. For that purpose they used gold, silver, and precious stones as soon as they were in vogue. Since men had prevented them from displaying their intellectual gifts, they applied their energies exclusively to whatever could make them look more attractive. They succeeded admirably, and their clothes and beauty won them more esteem than all the books and knowledge in the world. This tradition became too well established to allow any possible change subsequently; the same practice has been passed on to us, and it now seems to be a tradition that is too old to criticize. Poulain 131.

Wollstonecraft sees the relation between beauty and power in much more complex and dynamic terms than Marinella or Poulain. Like Poulain, she understands that the dominance of performative beauty over the lives of women is a result of their exclusion from the realms of institutional power: they are “confined ... in cages like the feathered race” with “nothing to do but to plume themselves and stalk with mock majesty from perch to perch.”<sup>8</sup> But unlike the relatively straightforward therapeutic role that performative beauty plays in Poulain’s analysis, in Wollstonecraft’s works—in the *Vindications of the Rights of Men and Woman* and in the *Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution*—beauty is situated in a dialectic with power; a dialectic subjugatory of women which beauty actively advances. From this, Wollstonecraft is able to combine the view of Poulain—that an emphasis on beauty is a direct result of a lack of power—with a sort of corollary or consequence of that of Marinella—that beauty grants its wielder a kind of social power—and show that both conditions conspire to keep women in a state of spiritual, mental, moral, and physical enervation. Only some kind of liberatory political effort can break this exhausting cycle.

This critique is formed alongside, within, and around Wollstonecraft’s critique of the aristocracy. The attack on aristocracy takes centre stage in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, an early rebuke to Edmund Burke’s counterrevolutionary *Reflections on the Revolution in France* that participates in the discourse on gender, beauty, and power of which Burke’s much earlier *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* is the paradigmatic text of eighteenth century Britain.<sup>9</sup> Though with some significant differences—foremost among them being that aristocrats have real power—Wollstonecraft sees the same process that degrades and enervates women at work in the indolence and moral decay of the aristocracy, and uses this

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<sup>8</sup> Wollstonecraft *Rights of Woman* 125

<sup>9</sup> See Todd xiii

process' corruption, not just of the aristocracy or of women but of society as a whole, to justify French Revolution in 1789. The harm of this process to society in its entirety will also justify the famous "revolution in female manners" for which Wollstonecraft calls in the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.<sup>10</sup>

I will begin with the aristocracy, whose slovenly otium and the vanity that is its effect Wollstonecraft decries throughout her work. As Claudia Johnson notes in *Equivocal Beings*, Wollstonecraft's first *Vindication*—the *Rights of Men*—"refutes the Burkean axiom" that "to make us love our country, our country ought to be lovely."<sup>11,12</sup> Indeed, in his *Reflections*—whence the axiom comes—Burke mourns the loss of the "mixed system of opinion and sentiment" of the European ancien régime, of which by Burke's lights the French Revolution is just the beginning of the end; a regime that depended for its power not just on the bare light of reason, but on the "superadded ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination, which the heart owns and the understanding ratifies." The power of the old aristocratic regimes, Burke argues, comes from such "pleasing illusions," and from the incorporation into politics of "the sentiments that beautify and soften private society"; the new revolution proposes to burn all these traditional affects away, leaving us with our "naked shivering nature."<sup>13</sup>

In sum, for Burke in the *Reflections*, aristocracy as a system of government is justified by its beauty: that is, by its appeal, both sensuous and imaginative, to the sentiments.<sup>14</sup> As he wrote in the *Enquiry*, beauty for Burke is a "social quality," because the "sentiments of tenderness and affections towards [the] persons" of others that it inspires causes us to enter "willingly" into relations with them.<sup>15</sup> Hence the axiom that

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<sup>10</sup> Wollstonecraft *Rights of Woman* 113

<sup>11</sup> Johnson 27

<sup>12</sup> Burke *Reflections* 78

<sup>13</sup> Ibid 76-7

<sup>14</sup> Beauty "is a name I shall apply to all such qualities in things as induce in us a sense of affection and tenderness, or some other passion the most nearly resembling these." Burke *Enquiry* 44

<sup>15</sup> Ibid 37

the institutions of power ought to inspire love rather than appeal merely to the calculating strictures of reason so fêted by the archetypal French revolutionaries. In the *Rights of Man*, published mere weeks after the *Reflections* in 1790, Wollstonecraft treats this notion with unvarnished contempt:

If there is any thing like argument, or first principles, in your wild declamation [i.e., the *Reflections*], behold the result:—that we are to reverence the rust of antiquity, and term the unnatural customs, which ignorance and mistaken self-interest have consolidated, the sage fruit of experience: nay, that if we do discover some errors, our *feelings* should lead us to excuse, with blind love, or unprincipled filial affection, the venerable vestiges of ancient days. These are gothic notions of beauty—the ivy is beautiful, but, when it insidiously destroys the trunk from which it receives support, who would not grub it up?<sup>16</sup>

Throughout her work Wollstonecraft never tires of cataloguing the abject, rotten condition of the ruling class, and she locates this condition precisely in the tendency of the ruling class to derive its continued power from appeals to the sentiments—what she so acidly calls “*feelings*” above—rather than to reason. Burke, in defending them, has made himself an “adorer of the golden image which power has set up,”<sup>17</sup> and this adoration is poisonous both to society as a whole and to the characters of those idle aristocrats. “Luxury and effeminacy” have introduced “much idiotism into the noble families which form one of the pillars of our state”; “restless idleness, and its concomitant, vice” have spread as a “contagion” through society.<sup>18</sup>

The spread of this contagion proceeds by, first, rendering the rich themselves indolent, stupid, and shallow: placed in a “torrid zone, with the meridian sun of pleasure darting directly upon them” they experience none of the wants and needs that

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<sup>16</sup> Wollstonecraft *Rights of Men* 8. Emphasis original.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid 11

<sup>18</sup> Ibid 23

Wollstonecraft sees as necessary for the development of solid virtues.<sup>19</sup> With an education that focuses on refinement and manners rather than the “practice of those duties which dignify the human character,” the rich soon soon become conditioned as “vain and helpless.” For Wollstonecraft, this social conditioning operates “by the same law which in nature invariably produces certain effects”<sup>20</sup>: the characters and virtues of the rich—like those of anyone else—are inevitably formed by the social structures in which the rich are situated and the material conditions on which those social structures supervene.

The arbitrary system of property and position that Burke considers so lovely thus has a debilitating effect on the minds of the people it exalts:

The mewling babe in swaddling-clothes, who is treated like a superior being, may perchance become a gentleman; but nature must have given him uncommon faculties if, when pleasure hangs on every bough, he has sufficient fortitude either to exercise his mind or body in order to acquire personal merit. <sup>21</sup>

Wollstonecraft consistently aestheticises this state as gaudy, deformed to the point of putrescence and—in a sign of her participation in and (arguably) subversion of the discourse of gender and beauty given zenithal expression in Burke’s *Inquiry*<sup>22</sup>—effeminate. We will have cause to return to this aesthetic characterisation of the melting, relaxing effects of power shortly.

Worse than the deformed state of the ruling class alone, however, is the effect that this deformation has on wider society. Wollstonecraft (correctly) notes that the great men of the nobility all achieved their status by some inaugural injustice or deceit— chiefs “touching the most powerful springs of savage conduct, hope and fear”—rather than

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<sup>19</sup> Wollstonecraft *Rights of Woman* 124

<sup>20</sup> Ibid 73

<sup>21</sup> Wollstonecraft *Rights of Men* 15

<sup>22</sup> See Johnson 27



through any kind of natural right. Nevertheless these despots must make a “shew of right,” and they must make ever greater shows of right as the progress of civilisation expands the intellectual opportunities and capacities of their subjects. They are “compelled to make covert corruption hold fast the power which was formerly snatched by open force.”<sup>23</sup> The power of the aristocracy cannot be grounded in reason or the intellect. It is itself irrational and unjust: hereditary power “clash[es] with the mental superiority that naturally raises a man above his fellows.”<sup>24</sup> The best way, then, to grant a legitimate sheen to the power of the aristocracy is to, as she puts it, make a great show of pomp and circumstance, luxury, extravagance, superstition, and “the pestiferous purple”<sup>25</sup>: that is, to generate the “pleasing illusions” masking despotism that Burke explicitly celebrates. By gilding their power they make it temporarily tolerable, but they make themselves stupid.

Worse yet, this power structure makes the contagion more virulent by creating perverse incentives for those lower down the hierarchy. The pathetic creatures of the ruling class warp the fabric of society around them such that the acquisition of true merit pales as a method for social advancement compared to appealing to their own cramped and shallow sentiments. Virtue, talent, and industry are neglected as the game of wealth and rank is played with pride, flattery, and adornment—an immoderate obsession with appealing to the sensuous:

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<sup>23</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman* 82-3

<sup>24</sup> Ibid 80

<sup>25</sup> Ibid 83. This tendency of the good effects of civilisation—expanded intellectual ability among them—to generate through the operation of repressive power the bad effects of indolence, flattery, and amour propre forms the backbone of one of Wollstonecraft’s substantive critiques of Rousseau: she accuses him, perhaps unfairly, of seeing the bad effects as effects of civilisation as such, rather than part of a dialectic of civilisation grounded in the irrationality of despotic power: “Disgusted with artificial manners and virtues, the citizen of Geneva, instead of properly sifting the subject, threw away the wheat with the chaff, without waiting to inquire whether the evils which his ardent soul turned from indignantly, were the consequence of civilization or the vestiges of barbarism. He saw vice trampling on virtue, and the semblance of goodness taking place of the reality; he saw talents bent by power to sinister purposes, and never thought of tracing the gigantic mischief up to arbitrary power.” Ibid 79-80

Have ye not heard that we cannot serve two masters? an immoderate desire to please contracts the faculties, and immerges, to borrow the idea of a great philosopher, the soul in matter, till it becomes unable to mount on the wing of contemplation.<sup>26</sup>

For Wollstonecraft, this is a necessary consequence of the coincidence of that which is appealing to the senses—beauty—with power: in this case, the very real power of property and rank. A harmful cycle is therefore formed in which beauty and power each feed off and structure the other: power grants access to the objects of beauty without any need to first acquire virtue or talent, thus cramping the mind; these beauty-cramped minds, easily appeased by frippery and flattery, then control access to power and reputation, encouraging further vitiation of both themselves and others. This whole process is based not on any principles but on sentiment and—as Todd puts it—“mystification,” demanding “emotional acceptance” of the ruling class’ power “without cause.”<sup>27</sup> And in her *Historical and Moral View* of the French Revolution Wollstonecraft makes clear that it is this dynamic of decay and degeneracy that leads to—and justifies—the revolutionary break in which the industrious, soberly virtuous bourgeoisie seize power from the luxuriant aristocracy in the name of reason and liberty:

The idle caprices of an effeminate court had long given the tone to the awe-struck populace, who, stupidly admiring what they did not understand, lived on a *vive le roi*, whilst his blood-sucking minions drained every vein, that should have warmed their honest hearts.

But the irresistible energy of the moral and political sentiments of half a century, at last kindled into a blaze the illuminating rays of truth, which, throwing new light on the mental powers of man, and giving fresh spring to his reasoning faculties, completely undermined the strong holds of priestcraft and hypocrisy.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Wollstonecraft *Rights of Men* 22

<sup>27</sup> Todd xiii

<sup>28</sup> Wollstonecraft *Historical and Moral View* 292

With a rational social hierarchy in place—one structured by the “natural” distinction of mental prowess rather than by arbitrary divisions of power—there is no longer any reason for those in power or those seeking to gain it to indulge in their own sentiments or others’.<sup>29</sup> The self-evident justice of the system means it needn’t hide its power behind awesome rituals of wealth or extravagance, and the holds of superstition and sentiment over society are broken.<sup>30</sup> Individuals rise on the true merits of their virtues and capacities which, exercised now by necessity, are cultivated and expanded.<sup>31</sup> This necessity of exercising ability and virtue is one that Wollstonecraft sees as already holding over “the middle rank of life”—the men of that middle rank, that is—with the consequence that “the middle rank contains most virtue and abilities.”<sup>32</sup> With the aristocracy deposed, the structures of beauty and sentiment that hold back others from exercising their abilities are deposed too: the middle classes, then, are for Wollstonecraft the subjects of revolution not just because their circumstances permit them to undertake it but because the revolution forms a societal structure aligned with the values, as she sees them, of the (current) middle class.<sup>33</sup>

Changing the deep structure of power, therefore, changes too the influence that beauty holds over society. Wollstonecraft, however, would not allow for the exclusion from this formula of the circumstances of women, whose oppression and enervation

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<sup>29</sup> As Alan Coffee puts it, “a republican society cannot permit or tolerate any form of arbitrary power within its midst because the dependence that this creates has the potential to undermine everyone’s freedom.” Coffee 195

<sup>30</sup> Wollstonecraft’s desire to see reason elevated above superstition and sentiment does not, however, necessarily translate to a whole-hearted denigration of feeling or the passions; see Reuter 50-66 for a useful discussion of the relationship between the passions and reason in the *Vindications*’ account of virtue.

<sup>31</sup> For a much more detailed account of the nature of virtue in a “Wollstonecraftian” virtuous republic, see Coffee 187-92.

<sup>32</sup> Wollstonecraft *Rights of Woman* 127

<sup>33</sup> Wollstonecraft is sympathetic and sensitive to the plight of the poor, and is harshly critical of the hierarchy that oppresses them. She does not consider, however, that hope for reform or revolution can spring from the peasantry or proletariat, believing that their horrendous circumstances prevent them from gaining the abilities necessary to penetrate the smoke-and-mirrors of the wealthy; see for example *Rights of Men* 59-60

renders the hope of reform or revolution remote for everyone. And we can now turn more specifically to the way that Wollstonecraft sees this dialectic of beauty and power operating on the social position of women—a critique that Wollstonecraft makes alongside that she makes of the aristocracy, rather than artificially separating them as I have here—and the way that she responds to the gendered account of beauty given by Burke. This will hopefully also temper, though probably not eradicate, any lingering concern that Wollstonecraft’s contemptuous characterisation of the “effeminate” is itself misogynist or antifeminist.

The vast majority of women, of course, did not enjoy the real power of wealth and rank of the aristocracy. But Wollstonecraft does believe that, through beauty, women—at least, women of the middle and upper classes—do become trapped in a similar cycle to that of the aristocracy. In the case of women, however, it is not generated by plenitude but by a lack of rational and virtuous paths to power and self-efficacy. The rich have no incentive to expand their minds or virtues because they want for nothing and are surrounded by idle pleasures; women have no opportunity to do so because they are systematically denied any such opportunities by patriarchal institutions and traditions.<sup>34</sup> The industry and necessity for and by which middle class men are cultivated is closed away from almost all of their women counterparts (Wollstonecraft herself seeming to be a rule-proving exception). Middle and upper class women receive only “a disorderly kind of education”<sup>35</sup> from which emerge “uncultivated understandings [that] make them entirely dependent on their senses for employment and amusement.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Though I focus exclusively on her analysis of the depredations to which women are subjected through beauty, Wollstonecraft herself is highly sensitive to many other forms of subjection; see, for example, the discussion of her novel *Maria, or the Wrongs of Women* in Bergès 90.

<sup>35</sup> Wollstonecraft *Rights of Woman* 88

<sup>36</sup> Ibid 94. In fact middle class women are in this respect worse off than both upper and working class women, according to Wollstonecraft: upper class women receive a helpful “smattering of literature” in their leisure and working class women are able to cultivate a rough-and-ready form of virtue - “to use the word in a comprehensive sense”—through their labour, especially child-rearing; see ibid 148. As we’ve

This forced dependence on the senses narrows the horizons of women's activity, and—because “the employment of the thoughts shapes the character both generally and individually”—the effect is that women are constructed as objects and subjects of taste and little else.<sup>37</sup> That is, women are constructed both as beautiful bodies to be admired and adorned and as beings in thrall to their own senses and sentiments, who can participate in refined, pretty conversation on matters of taste. This significantly demonstrates a slippage between the division of subject and object wherein being a subject is itself objectified by the demand that opinions be appealing. Both sides are thereby weaponised against women's characters. As Wollstonecraft observes, the two also participate in their own self-reinforcing cycle: being a beautiful object requires the cultivation of the senses and faculties of sensuous taste; this devotion to the senses, rather than to reason or truth, reduces one's self-efficacy and makes the appeal to the senses of others yet more necessary.

Wollstonecraft's acerbic—and at times mournful—depiction of this condition takes up much of the prose of her *Vindications* and even of the *Historical and Moral View*, all of which are outstanding polemics. A couple of examples will suffice, though there are many from which to choose:

Women are every where in this deplorable state; for, in order to preserve their innocence, as ignorance is courteously termed, truth is hidden from them, and they are made to assume an artificial character before their faculties have acquired any strength. Taught from their infancy that beauty is woman's sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body, and, roaming around its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison.<sup>38</sup>

Where is the dignity, the infallibility of sensibility, in the fair ladies, whom, if the voice of rumour is to be credited, the captive negroes curse in

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already seen, she believes that this working class virtue is insufficient to effect radical change, preferring, it seems, the more abstract intellectual virtues of the bourgeoisie.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid 148

<sup>38</sup> Ibid 112

all the agony of bodily pain, for the unheard of tortures they invent? It is probable that some of them, after the sight of a flagellation, compose their ruffled spirits and exercise their tender feelings by the perusal of the last imported novel.—How true those tears are to nature, I leave you to determine.<sup>39</sup>

As with the wealthy, this impoverishment of women's intellectual and moral faculties is both symptom and cause of their single-minded focus on the performances of beauty and taste. For, again like the wealthy, the enervated state of refinement that is cultivated in women really does work to grant women access to a form of power that otherwise would—like all others—be closed off from them: “if women,” Wollstonecraft writes, “are not permitted to enjoy legitimate rights, they will render both men and themselves vicious, to obtain illicit privileges.”<sup>40</sup> Women, shut out from political or institutional power,<sup>41</sup> adorn their bodies and refine their opinions to appeal to the base sensualism of men, who—themselves vitiated by the moral malaise generated by the pestiferous purples of aristocracy and patriarchy—find themselves taken in and setting up women as despots. As Johnson puts it, for Wollstonecraft, “women's weaknesses render them imperious rather than docile ... Men ought to resent in women the same power they resent in kings”<sup>42</sup>: that is, an irrational and arbitrary power based on the senses rather than reason.

So the “passions of men have thus placed women on thrones,” and while this continues to be the only possible avenue for women's access to power and self-efficacy it will continue to be one frequently walked, and women will continue to cramp their

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<sup>39</sup> Wollstonecraft *Rights of Man* 45

<sup>40</sup> Wollstonecraft *Rights of Woman* 68

<sup>41</sup> See Halldenus 166-182 for a discussion of nature and possibility of republican representation in Wollstonecraft, and the ways by which women might come to political and institutional power. In particular, Halldenus notes that for Wollstonecraft women must participate directly in their own government; this is the only way that their interests might be represented.

<sup>42</sup> Johnson 33

intellects and spirits in the pursuit of these “illicit privileges.”<sup>43</sup> The two conditions—enervating beauty and illicit, sensual power—reinforce one another for women as they do, in a different way, for the aristocracy. And of course, as well as being undesirable from the point of view of its vicious effects on the mind, soul, and body, the arbitrary power women gain through beauty is also exclusionary of the great many women who are unable for whatever reason to meet the arbitrary demands of men’s desires. To be a beautiful object or a refined subject is expensive and difficult; it excludes the poor, the old, those whose appearance deviates from a societal norm. As the dialectic turns between beauty and social power it leaves more and more women behind—the vast majority of them, in fact. Even those women who can meet the demands of male lust are excluded for most of their lives: “the usefulness of age, and the rational hopes of futurity, are all to be sacrificed to render women an object of desire for a *short* time.”<sup>44</sup>

This dialectic is therefore in a dynamic of “patriarchal equilibrium,” as described by the historian Judith Bennett: a historical dynamic distinguished by the plasticity of patriarchal institutions, that is, their ability to persevere through time while accommodating and adapting to apparent or superficial changes in the status and condition of women.<sup>45</sup> So despite—in fact because of—the despotic power of the imperious beauty, women as a category remain subjugated. As Naomi Garner notes, “the illusion of power through beauty that entices and entraps women is a manageable power that does not threaten male superiority.”<sup>46</sup> We will have cause to return to the phenomenon of patriarchal equilibrium shortly.

As Johnson demonstrates, Wollstonecraft therefore constructs a sweeping critique of a weak, ignorant, sensualist societal tendency: one that keeps the aristocracy

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<sup>43</sup> Wollstonecraft *Rights of Woman* 68

<sup>44</sup> Ibid 164. Emphasis original.

<sup>45</sup> Bennett 54-81

<sup>46</sup> Garner 90

in power, keeps women subjected, and “degrad[es]” men, whose own vicious sensualism is also enflamed by a society structured according to their desires.<sup>47</sup> It is this same sentimental aesthetic tendency that Burke celebrates (and whose passing he pre-emptively mourns) in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, using his idea of beauty from the *Enquiry*: that quality which, “in bodies, [causes] love, or some passion similar to it.”<sup>48</sup> In the *Enquiry* Burke also explicitly links this notion of beauty with women and with weakness:

[Beauty], where it is highest, in the female sex, almost always carries with it an idea of weakness and imperfection. Women are very sensible of this; for which reason they learn to lisp, to totter in their walk, to counterfeit weakness, and even sickness. In all this they are guided by nature.<sup>49</sup>

Wollstonecraft references this passage in the *Rights of Man*, addressing Burke directly:

Thus confining truth, fortitude, and humanity, within the rigid pale of *manly* morals, they might justly argue, that to be loved, women’s high end and great distinction! they should ‘learn to lisp, to totter in their walk, and nick-name God’s creatures.’ Never, they might repeat after you, was any man, much less a woman, rendered amiable by the force of those exalted qualities, fortitude, justice, wisdom, and truth; and thus forewarned of the sacrifice they must make to those austere, unnatural virtues, they would be authorized to turn all their intentions to their persons, systematically neglecting morals to secure beauty.<sup>50</sup>

Wollstonecraft’s contempt for effeminacy or femininity, then, is predicated on the Burkean ideology that yokes together femininity, beauty, weakness, and love, and on the

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<sup>47</sup> Johnson 39. See also Coffee on the negative relation between dependence (of which the dependence caused by beauty is a particular kind) and virtue: “the corrupting effect of dependence affects parties on both sides of the relationship, dominator and dominated alike. Wollstonecraft stresses that the virtue of dominating men, no less than dependent women, has been compromised.” Coffee 192

<sup>48</sup> Burke *Enquiry* 73

<sup>49</sup> Ibid 88

<sup>50</sup> Wollstonecraft *Rights of Men* 45-6



dire social order that that ideology justifies and from which it emerged. As both Garner and Johnson observe, in different ways, Wollstonecraft's attack is against a femininity understood (or "prescribed," to use Garner's more enlightening term) in the eighteenth century as one that uses weakness and smallness to enflame the sentiments.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, her repeated invocation of the effeminacy of men—both in the otiose aristocracy and in the middle class men that chase women's beauty—stands as a rebuke to Burke and, what's more, to the notion that these aestheticised gender divisions really are "guided by nature."<sup>52</sup> She attacks femininity throughout society and across genders, and in so doing decouples "femininity" as an ideological construct born of the corruption of its times from women as real beings. As she says in one of her most revolutionary passages, her aim is nothing less than to "see the distinction of sex confounded in society."<sup>53</sup> And, as both Garner and Johnson note, this distinction, and the effeminate society around it, was created by men<sup>54</sup>; it was the intemperate libidinal social order created by effeminate men that placed women upon enervating thrones.<sup>55</sup>

### 3. 3 Taste, Femininity, and Power in the Eighteenth Century

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<sup>51</sup> Johnson 35; Garner 92

<sup>52</sup> See Garner 91

<sup>53</sup> Wollstonecraft *Rights of Woman* 126

<sup>54</sup> Johnson 31; Garner 91-2

<sup>55</sup> Interpretations of this moment can differ, of course. Johnson (I think correctly) sees Wollstonecraft as a prototypical liberal feminist who valorises masculine virtues and argues that women can and should have equal access to them (Johnson 29). Presumably this would have the long-term effect of the terms "masculine" and "feminine" ceasing to make sense when applied to virtue. Whether Wollstonecraft's position is convincing depends upon one's own feminism. Some will argue that there is real sexual difference and that the feminine qualities ought to be celebrated and "owned"; others that this entire system of oppositions, as well as the notion of opposition itself, is linked with patriarchy and should in some way be rejected. For all Wollstonecraft's radicalism she does not reject the masculine/feminine opposition as such (she does not, for instance, demonstrate ways that the two ideas might interpenetrate and structure one another); she only rejects its clean application to real men and women. If we were in the business of taxonomising the women of the past then she'd therefore fall into the "liberal" rather than "poststructuralist" basket.

Wollstonecraft's anti-effeminate feminism and her republicanism are hence intertwined: both aristocracy and patriarchy depend for their operation on a particular gendered aesthetics that both hides and justifies the irrational power at their cores, and to do away with the despotic aristocracy one must also do away with the despotic patriarchy that shares its structural logic. We can thus begin to see the general shape of Wollstonecraft's intervention in the three-sided contest between beauty, gender, and power that I identified in the introduction: the power of the aristocracy and of the patriarchy operates through, and helps create, a particular aesthetic order that makes use of ideological assumptions about gender that are themselves generated by existing power relations. Attempts to decouple the bad parts of these assumptions from the good or to rework the connection between beauty and women in a way that could be more positive or pro-woman are fruitless while material social relations—the domination of women by men, and of the lower classes by the aristocracy—are pushing back in the opposite direction. The only solution is to reject such ideologies entirely and to work to overthrow their bases within those material social relations.

This in itself is evidence of Wollstonecraft's radicalism. But in this section I will attempt to grant some particularity to the shape that Wollstonecraft's radicalism can take when read in the context of a wider discourse that took place in the eighteenth century at the intersections of class, gender, and beauty. This discourse, according to Robert W. Jones in *Gender and the Formation of Taste in Eighteenth Century Britain*, sought to make the social function and meaning of taste accessible to the rising bourgeoisie and amenable to their class interests, rather than just to the interests of the aristocracy. Within this debate the role of women as arbiters of a private, domestic realm and as subjects and objects of beauty was contested.<sup>56</sup> Situated in this light, Wollstonecraft's introduction of the analysis of patriarchy into the debate can be read as

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<sup>56</sup> Jones 114 and 95

a dialectical manoeuvre that both refutes the middle classes' attempts to turn taste to their own ends and uplifts or confirms their rejection of the aristocracy's own claims for it. To see how, we'll examine the contours of this discourse by turning to two of the eighteenth century writers analysed by Jones: Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third Earl of Shaftesbury, and the artist Frances Reynolds. Both have work that encompasses and interacts with, in various ways, all three sides of our triangular conflict between beauty, power, and gender—and both bring particular, distorting class interests to bear upon it.

Shaftesbury, of course, is an aristocrat, and his *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* of 1711 gives a depiction of the relation between aesthetics and virtue that places virtue—and its attendant prestige and social power—firmly in the hands of the aristocracy. An appreciation and understanding of beauty—a refined taste—is vital for Shaftesbury as a motivator toward virtuous action; an understanding of virtue in principle is hopelessly outmatched when it runs counter to the appetites and sentiments:

Thus we see, after all, that 'tis not merely what we call *Principle*, but a TASTE, which governs Men. They may think for certain “This is *right*, or that *wrong*”: They may believe “This a *Crime*, or that a *Sin*; This punishable by *Man*, or that by *God*!” Yet if the *Savor* of things lies cross to HONESTY; if the *Fancy* be florid, and the *Appetite* high towards the subaltern Beautys and lower Order of worldly Symmetrys and Proportions; the Conduct will infallibly turn this latter way.<sup>57</sup>

This—that the mind will not turn to the good while it has idle fancies or “subaltern Beautys” to keep it occupied—could have been written by Wollstonecraft. But for Shaftesbury the cultivation of taste means much more than learning to resist the temptations of those things which are charming but vicious. It means, too, an appreciation and love of “Order, Harmony and Proportion,” which is not just “highly

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<sup>57</sup> Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks* vol 3 177. All emphases original.

assistant to Virtue” but is constitutive of it: virtue “is itself no other than the Love of Order and Beauty in Society.”<sup>58</sup>

For Shaftesbury, this social aspect of virtue and taste is extremely important: he writes that “in this Case *alone* it is we call any Creature *worthy* or *virtuous*, when it can have the Notion of a publick Interest, and can attain the Speculation or Science of what is morally good or ill, admirable or blameable, right or wrong.”<sup>59</sup> Virtue is expressed by the extent to which one works for the public good; the public good is that which lends order, harmony, and hence beauty to society. Indeed Shaftesbury argues later in *Characteristics* that “a Creature” cannot “be good or useful to himself” apart from “as he continues good to Society, and to that Whole of which he is himself a Part.”<sup>60</sup> And it is taste, an appreciation for the beauty of the just society, that moves the creature to act for the good of that society and hence virtuously. Virtue, as Jones puts it, is defined for Shaftesbury as “the ability to rise above particular concerns or personal interests,”<sup>61</sup> and the ideal life is that of an ideal citizen, one who—like the citizens of the old Greek and Roman republics—is guided by taste and beauty in the fulfilment of his civic duty.<sup>62</sup>

And, as with the Greek and Roman republics, the characterisation of virtue as tastefully and disinterestedly transcending the particular is both gendered and classed, with the effect that truly virtuous citizens can only be drawn from the ranks of the male landed gentry or aristocracy. The new middle classes, who owe their position to their engagement in private commerce and industry (rather than land or heredity), are too tied to their own self-interest and to the particularised realm of the commodity to be truly virtuous: “aristocratic landowners,” writes Jones, “were thought to be above the particular and divisive economic interests which debarred the East India merchant from

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<sup>58</sup> Shaftesbury, *Characteristics* vol 2 75

<sup>59</sup> Ibid 31. Emphasis original.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid 175

<sup>61</sup> Jones 17

<sup>62</sup> Ibid 16

the exercise of citizenship fully as much as the cobbler and the tallow-chandler.”<sup>63</sup>

Referencing JGA Pocock, Jones argues that the “ability to be a citizen was thought to rely on the practices and principles of patrician landownership.”<sup>64</sup> We can see this in Shaftesbury’s frequent excoriation of idle luxury, which—unlike the similar tone in Wollstonecraft—serves the interests of the old aristocracy, who needn’t purchase fame or their entrance to the public: “*Equipages, Titles, Precedencys, Staffs, Ribbons*, and other such glittering *Ware*, are taken in exchange for *inward* MERIT, HONOUR, and a CHARACTER.”<sup>65</sup>

Like the Greeks and Romans of his model, Shaftesbury expects that the highest quality characters of a society will “fight against Luxury and Corruption in times of Prosperity and Peace,”<sup>66</sup> imagining as Wollstonecraft does a link between access to beautiful objects and corruption. While Wollstonecraft thinks that having to work for such access is improving—and hence that the middle classes are in a better moral position than the aristocracy—Shaftesbury thinks that such work is indicative of a narrow, privatised self-interest alien to (or, at best, irrelevant to) a proper public virtue. The “public” is thus for Shaftesbury very narrow, consisting only of the landed aristocracy: those that, within the structures of the early eighteenth century, still hold onto institutional and political power.

Shaftesbury thus takes a stand for a traditional civic virtue that finds beauty in the order and harmony of a well-functioning society and rejects the love of luxuries and pleasurable objects as a vicious, self-interested lack of taste. Hence it is important for

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid 18-9.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid 18

<sup>65</sup> Shaftesbury vol 3 169. Emphasis original. Contrasting somewhat with Jones, Terry Eagleton in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* positions Shaftesbury “cusped conveniently between traditionalism and progress,” reconciling his “traditional aristocratic resources” with the bourgeois ethics of affect. On this reading Shaftesbury does not stand so firmly on the side of the aristocratic old guard, but himself represents a movement in the general privatisation of virtue via taste. Nevertheless Shaftesbury’s relentless focus on the public good over all else sets him apart from Reynolds, who, as we shall see, argues explicitly for the movement of virtue and taste to the private sphere. Eagleton 34-6.

<sup>66</sup> Shaftesbury vol 1 122.

Shaftesbury to delineate an understanding or image of the proper objects and subjects of taste; and it is here that we can see the work that gender does in structuring his account. Women appear throughout *Characteristicks* as both symbols of improper aesthetic appreciation - an over-sensual, “effeminate” taste - and as concrete objects of that improper appreciation that can drive otherwise virtuous men to distraction, indolence, and irrationality. In a parable he writes approvingly of a prince who resists the urge to gaze upon a beautiful woman (unknown to him, his own wife), believing that it will cause him to abandon his duties<sup>67</sup>; later he argues that women are “the chief subject” of many “civil turmoils” between “fine gentlemen.”<sup>68</sup> The appreciation of women’s beauty hence appears alongside the appreciation of the beauty of equipage, staffs, and ribbons: as enervating indulgence in idle pleasures. And, traversing the subject-object distinction, this bad aesthetic sense is itself frequently derided as “effeminate” or otherwise associated with women.<sup>69</sup> The acquisitiveness and commerce of the bourgeoisie is hence excluded from the realm of virtuous taste by its association with a ‘womanly’ aesthetic sense that is understood as too sensuous and too sensual.

Shaftesbury therefore links taste intimately to virtue, and then uses misogynist associations to limit that taste to a particular kind: austere, aristocratic, and masculine. The ‘correct’ kind of beauty is understood to inhere in the abstract qualities of harmony, proportion, and order, and though for Shaftesbury a taste for such things is an “appetite” it is still opposed to the “effeminate, indolent, and amorous Passions” that characterise pleasure.<sup>70</sup> Once again the three sides of our conflict—beauty, power, and gender—come clearly into view, with a gendered aesthetics that grows from existing power relations being leveraged to lend the lustre of virtue to those relations.

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<sup>67</sup> Shaftesbury vol 1 176-80

<sup>68</sup> Ibid vol 1 273

<sup>69</sup> For example, ibid vol 1 340; vol 3 386.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid 386

Burke, as we have seen and by strong contrast, holds women up as the absolute exemplars or ur-objects of beauty. Indeed he rejects the idea that proportion has anything to do with beauty—as it does for Shaftesbury—using, as an example, the beauty of a woman to a presumed heterosexual male reader:

If you assign any determinate proportions to the limbs of a man, and if you limit human beauty to these proportions, when you find a woman who differs in the make and measures of almost every part, you must conclude her not to be beautiful, in spite of the suggestions of your imagination; or, in obedience to your imagination, you must renounce your rules; you must lay by the scale and compass, and look out for some other cause of beauty.<sup>71</sup>

As for Shaftesbury, the appreciation of beauty is appetitive for Burke (“the suggestions of your imagination”) but in decoupling it from the ideas of proportion or order he decouples it also from general principles that could be communicated and shared between separate individuals within a public, and which might inspire those individuals to virtuous social action. For Burke, the appreciation of beauty rests much more upon that which privately gratifies the sentiments and inspires individualised love—what Jones calls “an aesthetic of heterosexual excitement.”<sup>72</sup> Nowhere is this aesthetic more obvious than in Burke’s description of the beauty of “gradual variation,” in which he expounds breathlessly upon the appeal of a woman’s décolletage:

Observe that part of a beautiful woman where she is perhaps the most beautiful, about the neck and breasts; the smoothness, the softness, the easy and insensible swell; the variety of the surface, which is never for the smallest space the same; the deceitful maze through which the unsteady eye slides giddily, without knowing where to fix, or whither it is carried. Is not this a demonstration of that change of surface, continual, and yet

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<sup>71</sup> Burke *Enquiry* 79

<sup>72</sup> Jones 56-7

hardly perceptible at any point, which forms one of the great constituents of beauty?<sup>73</sup>

Jones' discussion of Burke's *Enquiry* dissects the ambivalence of his aesthetics and its political corollaries; certainly, Burke was no libertine, and he cannot without considerable violence be made to stand for a singular ethics of bourgeois acquisitiveness.<sup>74</sup> As we've already seen, the private, sensuous aesthetics that we're here contrasting with Shaftesbury's aristocratic posture was nevertheless pressed into the service of counterrevolution a few decades later. Nevertheless, for our purposes, it's enough to note the way gender ideology structures the aesthetic theory Burke outlines in the *Enquiry*. As taste retreats from the public realm, the perspective of the heterosexual male aesthetic subject on women as objects changes: from the dissolute and wanton desire injurious to virtue warned against by Shaftesbury to a private appreciation that acts as an exemplar or prototype through which the faculty of taste itself can be understood. To put it another way, and as Jones demonstrates, as taste becomes more private and more sensuous it becomes more closely associated with women—though the perceived moral threat of the lascivious and libertine woman never entirely dissipates.<sup>75</sup>

This association between women and taste is demonstrated and positively articulated by the artist Frances Reynolds in her short *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Taste, and of the Origin of Our Ideas of Beauty, &c.*, of 1785. Even more so—and more explicitly—than Burke or Shaftesbury, Reynolds makes the gender division the axle and origin of her entire aesthetic system:

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<sup>73</sup> Burke *Enquiry* 93

<sup>74</sup> Jones 58-9

<sup>75</sup> Jones 123-4



It is I imagine to the principles of the masculine and the feminine character, that we owe the perception of beauty or taste, in any object whatever, throughout all nature, and all art that imitates nature ...<sup>76</sup>

For Reynolds, therefore, all our judgements regarding the beautiful and sublime refer back, either directly or “symbolically,” to the aesthetic judgement of human beings as objects, with the “feminine character” as the “sweetest, most interesting image of beauty,” and the masculine “partak[ing]” of the sublime. “Thus it will be found,” she writes, “that, in every object that is universally pleasing, there exist principles that are analogous to those that constitute beauty in the human species.”<sup>77</sup> And the “governing principle” of beauty in humans—and hence, by analogy, in everything—is “the moral sense.”<sup>78</sup> That is, for Reynolds, that our apprehension of beauty in humans is an apprehension of the “moral virtue” of the object: “*the body charms*,” she writes, “*because the soul is seen*.” This ability to perceive virtue is a matter of cultivation: “the rustic” is charmed by the physical, but “to a man of taste the physical pleases only through the medium of the moral.”<sup>79</sup> And in this schema it is only the “man” of taste that perceives “the real charms of beauty,” which is hence always an appreciation of inner virtue—or, in the case of non-human objects, a kind of anthropomorphism in which they are symbolically imbued with human-like mental qualities:

Witness the charm of the infant innocence, of the snow-drop, of the soft elegance of the hyacinth, &c. and on the contrary, our disrelish of the gaudy tulip, the robust, unmeaning, masculine piony, hollyhock, &c. &c.<sup>80</sup>

This mediation of the moral by the physical in aesthetic judgement is again explained by—and helps further justify—the gender binary; Reynolds yokes together the

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<sup>76</sup> Reynolds 28

<sup>77</sup> Ibid

<sup>78</sup> Ibid 22

<sup>79</sup> Ibid 20. Emphases original

<sup>80</sup> Ibid 30-1

physical charms of the sexes with essentialised moral and mental qualities in considering their forms of beauty, which exist distinctly from each other. “The beauty of each sex,” she writes, “is seen only through the medium of the virtues belonging to each,” just as the beauty of particular stages of human life (infancy, youth, “manhood,” etc) are seen only through the virtues particular to that stage (innocence, compassion, fortitude, etc).<sup>81</sup> Where there is an incongruity between physical appearance—no matter how formally charming that appearance might be—and the correct or expected virtues of a particular sex or age, Reynolds claims, we are disgusted: “without congruity, there could be no virtue; without virtue, no beauty, no sentiment of taste.”

The softness and mildness of the feminine expression would be displeasing in a man. The robust and determined expression of the rigid virtues, justice, fortitude, &c. would be displeasing in a woman. However perfect the form, if an incongruity that touches the well-being of humanity mingles with the idea, the form will not afford the pleasing perception of beauty, though the eye may be capable of feeling its regularity, &c. So far is it from pleasing, that it is the more disgusting from its semblance to virtue, because that that semblance is a contradiction to her laws.<sup>82</sup>

As we’ve already seen, Reynolds also says that the feminine is the “sweetest, most interesting image of beauty”; with some more of her aesthetics in place we can now see that this constitutes a moral claim about women that opens a significant gulf between her and Shaftesbury (but, interestingly, brings her into a strange kind of alignment with Marinella). Far from seeing the beauty of women as “subaltern” and as a threat to an active masculine virtue, Reynolds forthrightly claims that the beauty of women is an expression of important inner virtues that are at least on a par with the masculine virtues. Indeed, later in the text she describes “woman” as “the most perfect existing object of taste in the creation,” taking the idea of feminine beauty as the prototype of all

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid 21-2

<sup>82</sup> Ibid 22-3

beauty familiar from Burke and linking it with an explicit claim about the concomitant moral excellence of women.<sup>83</sup>

This moral excellence is argued for even more strongly in Reynolds' account of taste; that is, in her account of the subjects, rather than objects, of beauty. Here too Reynolds opposes the misogyny of Shaftesbury and stakes a claim for the significance and centrality of women to the aesthetic realm. As we've already seen, for Reynolds taste must be cultivated, and the true appreciation of beauty requires an appreciation of the moral virtues of which beauty is an expression:

Taste is intellectual pleasure, an approving sense of truth, of good, and beauty. The latter seems the visible or ostensible principle of the two former: and is that, in which the universal idea of taste is comprised. All are pleased with the sight of beauty; but all are by no means sensible, that the principles that make it pleasing, that constitute a form beautiful, are those, or to be more intelligible, relate to those, that constitute man's highest excellence, his first interest, his chief good!<sup>84</sup>

Somewhat vaguely, Reynolds identifies the "three co-existing principles of taste" which "run through all its perceptions" as virtue, honour, and ornament. Honour and ornament form the "public character" of taste, and virtue the "private and domestic." Of these three, private virtue is exalted as the most important: indeed, Reynolds writes (again confusingly) that it is in virtue that, "though unperceived by the vulgar, *to the eye of taste* she [taste] appears in her highest ornament, highest honour."<sup>85</sup>

As they are the "public characters" of taste, honour and ornament are prone to corruption by the social: by the enervating influences of wealth, or by the "false honour" afforded to prevailing modes and fashions. Like Wollstonecraft, then (and like

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid 43

<sup>84</sup> Ibid 35

<sup>85</sup> Ibid 39

Shaftesbury, though for very different reasons), Reynolds is conscious of the risk posed to true taste and virtue by extreme wealth:

In the progress of civilization, the polishing principle, which I call taste, is chiefly found in the highest sphere of life, highest for both internal and external advantages: wealth accelerates the last degree of cultivation, by giving efficacy to the principles of true honour; but it also accelerates its corruption, by giving efficacy to the principles of false honour, by which the true loses its distinction, becomes less and less apparent, nay by degrees less and less existent. Wealth becoming the object of honour, every principle of taste must be reversed. Hence avarice, and profusion, dissipation, luxurious banqueting, &c. supersede the love economy and domestic comfort, the sweet reciprocation of the natural affections, &c. hence the greatest evils of society, the sorrows of the virtuous poor, *the spurns that patient merit of the unworthy takes*; in a word, the general corruption of morals, and of course of true taste.<sup>86</sup>

In such circumstances, true people of taste are disgusted by the ornament and honour incongruously afforded to unvirtuous things.<sup>87</sup> Cultivating true taste therefore requires cultivating an understanding and appreciation of virtue, and this can only be achieved in the private and domestic sphere, where taste is insulated from the pernicious social effects that might unworthily co-opt it. And this private, domestic sphere—as it was for Shaftesbury, and more generally throughout the eighteenth century and beyond—is associated by Reynolds with the feminine. Women hence appear for Reynolds not as threats to taste and virtue but as their arbiters and cultivators—as they did, through the theological lens, for Marinella.

The cultivation of the social moral affections is the cultivation of taste, and the domestic sphere is the true and almost only one in which it can appear in its highest dignity. It is peculiarly appropriated to feminine taste; and I may say, it is *absolutely* the only one in which it can appear in its true lustre. True taste, particularly the feminine, is retired, calm,

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid 37-8. Emphasis original.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid 42

modest; it is the private honour of the heart, and is, I imagine, incompatible with the love of fame.<sup>88</sup>

Reynolds, then, can stand at the apex of the movement that Jones describes taking place throughout the eighteenth century: one in which taste, and by association with it virtue, is shifted from the public sphere to the private, with “private” here referring both to the domestic realm—the interior of the home—and to the emotional realm on the interior of a person. By both connotations taste and virtue also come to be more closely associated with women, confined as they were to the domestic realm and thought of as more sentimental and more sensuous.

Jones sees this change in the terms of the aesthetic debate in the eighteenth century as a consequence of the growing economic power of the bourgeoisie: the shift from the public, politicised and general taste represented by Shaftesbury to one more closely associated with the private and the domestic is favourable to the rising middle classes, who had plenty of money but did not yet have much access to formal political power.<sup>89</sup> With taste, as we have seen, comes virtue; and with it comes too a kind of social and cultural power.<sup>90</sup>

Jones’ account is much subtler than the schematic provided here, and well argued and evidenced. But the schematic will suffice for our purposes, which are to shed light on a particular reading of Wollstonecraft that can be situated within this contested aesthetic-political discourse. We have already seen foreshadows of her positions in the *Vindications* in the work of Reynolds and—even—Shaftesbury, but I believe that Wollstonecraft can be read as engaging with this discourse in a wholly different, revolutionary way.

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid 43-4. Emphasis original.

<sup>89</sup> Jones 39

<sup>90</sup> Jones 10

### 3.4 Conclusion: Wollstonecraft's Intervention

The work of Reynolds in 1785 might seem to herald a significant improvement in the position of women when compared to that of Shaftesbury in 1711. After all, Reynolds argues forcefully for the pre-eminence of women as both subjects and objects of taste, and reiterates the significance and intimacy of the link between taste and virtue. Undoubtedly, then, and expectedly, Reynolds' *Enquiry* is more pro-woman than either Burke's one or the work of Shaftesbury. She puts an unquestionably positive spin on the linkage between women and beauty expounded by Burke. She carves out a role for women as important moral actors, participating in a long tradition of counter-misogynistic cultural arguments that seek to exonerate or promote women's virtue, and she does it—if Jones' history is right—within the newly-produced private space of bourgeois virtue. Certainly, symbolically at least, there is a wide gulf between Reynolds' opinion of women as aesthetic and moral subjects and Shaftesbury's.

And perhaps, indeed, a longer timeline could be drawn that would situate Reynolds' moral-aesthetic arguments within a centuries-old discursive contest that leads to the present day and that does seem to coincide with some improvements in some aspects of some women's lives. But cultural histories that locate the impetus for major material change in fairly isolated intellectual arguments are tenuous at best. Wollstonecraft, writing only a few years after Reynolds, already sees that the change in women's position that Reynolds articulates and defends is not going to undo—and in fact participates in—women's oppression.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> I do not here impute to Reynolds some kind of naïve idealist strategy vis-à-vis women's liberation, nor even any particular political programme whatsoever. She is concerned entirely with her aesthetic project. Nevertheless, as Jones shows well, that aesthetic project has political antecedents and consequences; in the forthcoming I argue that Wollstonecraft sees that Reynolds' centring of women as aesthetic or moral subjects is insufficient for liberation.

Here we can again make use of Judith Bennett's description of patriarchal equilibrium. The cultural shift that occurs in the symbolic relation of women to taste and virtue through the eighteenth century, metonymised in the shift from Shaftesbury to Reynolds, leads to a change in the tenor or tone of women's subjugation but not, for Wollstonecraft, to any kind of weakening of that subjugation. Patriarchy adapts: the centring of women as aesthetic subjects and objects—as people not just capable of but important for understanding beauty—becomes another part of its mechanism. As we saw in detail in the first section, the construction of women as exclusively or almost-exclusively aesthetic subjects and objects—as people judged only by their beauty and their aesthetic sense—creates conditions pernicious to the moral, spiritual, and intellectual virtue, and thereby the freedom, of even those women able to meet the exacting and arbitrary standards against which they are held.<sup>92</sup>

Further, Wollstonecraft explains the construction of women as primarily aesthetic subjects—even ones that can in some circumstances be quite influential—as a consequence of their lack of other forms of power. In this light Reynolds' claim in favour of women's virtue, depending on under-explained and essentialised gender traits, can be recast as a post-hoc rationalisation of already-existing oppressive relations 'on the ground,' as described by Wollstonecraft. The structure that limits women to being merely judged by their beauty and their aesthetic opinions is thereby justified, in a tendency we can see in Burke as well as Reynolds, by an appeal to women's innate and exceptional suitability to that limited role. Even a justificatory account that exalts women on these grounds is then reconfigured by patriarchy towards its own perpetuation. It attempts to

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<sup>92</sup> Now, I think, we should be suspicious of—and in fact hostile to—the kinds of virtues that Wollstonecraft champions and that she sees threatened by oppressive beauty. History has shown that such virtues are not liberatory and that they are, perhaps, an ideological cover for oppressive social tendencies that tend to reverse their outward appearance. But I also think we needn't accept the specific virtues of Wollstonecraft to see the value in her critique of the effects of oppressive beauty.

spin and alter perceptions of beauty and of women while failing to take notice of the final, and for Wollstonecraft most basic, side of the conflict: power itself.

What, then, of Wollstonecraft's own proposed route out from the cycle? We might expect that her "revolution in female manners" is as bound to the private realm and to the symbolic and cultural position of women as Reynolds' own lionisation of domesticity. After all, both Reynolds and Wollstonecraft are suspicious of the effects that wealth and a dissolute social life can have upon the attainment of virtue, and much of Wollstonecraft's polemic can be read as a pretty direct manifestation of the disgust that Reynolds declares accompanies our apprehension of the incongruity between outer beauty and inner vice. Reynolds argues that cultivation of the "social moral affections," accomplished in private and primarily by women—who are naturally more suited to such cultivation—is a necessary defence against the moral dangers of unsuitable ornament and honour; Wollstonecraft, similarly, stresses the significance of education in overcoming the deceitful values of society at large,<sup>93</sup> and often speaks glowingly of the virtues of domestic women.<sup>94</sup> Is the distinction between the two really as great as I have suggested here?

I think there is a significant political difference, one that places Wollstonecraft within a particular revolutionary tradition, and I think that much of the ground for understanding this difference has already been laid out. As we know, Reynolds believes that women have a natural role to fulfil as educators because they are exemplar subjects and objects of beauty, by virtue of their particular and essential characteristics as women. Wollstonecraft, by contrast, is clear that no such essentially and peculiarly aesthetic character exists in women; it is all the product of their construction by the contingencies of a patriarchal and aristocratic society—that is, a society characterised by the arbitrary and irrational exercise of power. Indeed, she goes so far as to say in the

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<sup>93</sup> Wollstonecraft *Rights of Woman* 193

<sup>94</sup> E.g., *ibid* 223



*Rights of Woman* that she “firmly wish[es] to see the distinction of sex confounded in society,”<sup>95</sup> and that

I here throw down my gauntlet, and deny the existence of sexual virtues, not excepting modesty. For man and woman, truth, if I understand the meaning of the word, must be the same; yet the fanciful character, so prettily drawn by poets and novelists, demanding the sacrifice of truth and sincerity, virtue becomes a relative idea, having no other foundation than utility, and of that utility men pretend arbitrarily to judge, shaping it to their own convenience.<sup>96</sup>

Hence for Wollstonecraft liberating women requires shifting the conditions in which they are constructed: lionisation of their virtues will always be insufficient while those virtues—if virtues they really are—are understood and formed within currently-existing oppressive structures. This determination to shift the conditions that create attitudes is one of the basic principles of revolutionary politics.<sup>97</sup>

Wollstonecraft emphasises the importance of education in effecting this change; in particular overcoming the “enervating style” of education to which women are subjected that gives a “sexual character to the mind.”<sup>98</sup> This acquired sexual character is responsible for the lasciviousness, wantonness, or irrationality of which women are frequently accused. With a manifestly Enlightenment tone, she invokes Reason—capitalised—as that which will serve to liberate women from this false sexual character that so many take to be inborn:

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid 126

<sup>96</sup> Ibid 119

<sup>97</sup> Coffee reads the “revolution in female manners” as the creation of a society in which “women’s perspectives have helped shape the public culture so that the kind of pernicious ideas (such as that women are made rather to feel than reason) that impede their freedom cannot gain a foothold.” Coffee 198. Attacking such pernicious ideas, I argue, requires the removal of those arbitrary powers that generate them.

<sup>98</sup> Wollstonecraft *Rights of Woman* 191-2

... how carefully ought we to guard the mind from storing up vicious associations; and equally careful should we be to cultivate the understanding, to save the poor wight from the weak dependent state of even harmless ignorance. For it is the right use of reason alone which makes us independent of every thing—excepting unclouded Reason—‘Whose service is perfect freedom.’<sup>99</sup>

As we’ve now seen multiple times, excessive concentration on oneself as an aesthetic object or subject is a consequence—and cause—of a mind “not sufficiently opened to take pleasure in reflection,” and hence an education that turns the mind toward reflection is essential if women are ever to be free. Significantly, Wollstonecraft presents this progress away from excessive ornamentation of the body and toward abstract thought as a process of becoming ‘civilised’: she compares the position of European women with that of men “in barbarous states” for whom the “savage desire of admiration” is a “first inclination.” And further:

An immoderate fondness for dress, for pleasure, and for sway, are the passions of savages; the passions that occupy those uncivilized beings who have not yet extended the dominion of the mind, or even learned to think with the energy necessary to concatenate the abstract train of thought which produces principles.<sup>100</sup>

In arguing for the liberation of European women, then, and for their inclusion in the community of the free and reflective, Wollstonecraft invokes—and helps construct—the narrative that associates European civilisation with abstract thought and rational progress; a narrative which the ascendant bourgeoisie used, and in the nineteenth century will use yet further, to justify the brutality and rapine which they exported across the globe.

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid 197

<sup>100</sup> Ibid 275-6

As I noted earlier, alongside this apparent belief in the bourgeois division of the world into civilisation and barbarism, Wollstonecraft also has great faith in the importance of mental and physical exertion—work—in constructing virtuous, useful beings: she contrasts it with the pernicious effects that indolence has on the wealthy, trapped forever in the torrid light of the meridian sun, never incentivised toward self-improvement. These beliefs in a disconnected abstract Reason and in the work ethic might seem reactionary in contemporary times—they are—but read in the context of Wollstonecraft’s intertwined critiques of aristocracy and patriarchy they become more explicitly revolutionary. This reading can be expounded in two ways.

First, for Wollstonecraft, liberating women requires making accessible to them the values that were, at that time, only accessible to middle class men: the values of the bourgeois merchant who rises or falls solely by virtue of his conscientiousness, grit, and mental acuity. Abstractly declaring that such values should be made available to all is not enough: in aristocracy and patriarchy Wollstonecraft recognises the twin snakes constricting society, rewarding the uncivilised passions and undermining the possibility of meritocracy. Hence the necessity of a bourgeois revolution that sweeps away those old structures and replaces them with structures mirroring middle class values. Wollstonecraft, perhaps uniquely, recognises that to truly fulfil its promise such a revolution must overcome patriarchy as much as aristocracy.<sup>101</sup> A revolution that failed to liberate women, she saw, would also fail to liberate men: both would find themselves still ensnared by an order that undeservingly rewards the sensuous pleasures and fails to reward true virtue.

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<sup>101</sup> Sandrine Bergès argues that Wollstonecraft believes “inequality should be combated gradually, not through a revolution, but by the individuals such as herself who see the need for it, through rational persuasion of both oppressed and oppressor”; Bergès 94. Wollstonecraft certainly does place great faith in the capacity of rational argument to effect change but, as Coffee notes, arbitrary power stands in the way of the creation of a public realm in which reasoned discussion, especially reasoned discussion that includes women, can be had; Coffee 198, *passim*. The removal of these powers must be a revolutionary change—it entails restructuring all the power dynamics and attitudes of society in a new image—though perhaps it needn’t be violent and sudden.

Second, Wollstonecraft motivates the overthrow of the aristocracy by associating an overly-feminine and indolent taste with them, rather than with the bourgeoisie as Shaftesbury does. At the same time she refuses to allow the cultural manoeuvre exemplified by Reynolds—the movement of the social sources of virtue from a realm dominated by the aristocracy to one more open to the middle classes—to stand as the middle classes’ only gambit in their war against entrenched power, recognising as she does that this manoeuvre is only made possible by the essentialised “sexual characters” for which Reynolds argued so firmly and which, in their current form, only help justify patriarchal and aristocratic power. She advocates a revolution in values that would render such manoeuvres unnecessary; and indeed, she motivates this revolution by, in a neat dialectical reversal, claiming for the middle classes the austere, manly, and public virtues whose inherence in the aristocracy was lionised by Shaftesbury. She thus, mediated by her critique of patriarchy, completes a turn that took the whole eighteenth century: at its beginning, public virtue was claimed for the aristocracy; later, in their growing economic power, and making use of a patriarchal discourse on taste, the bourgeoisie sought to move virtue into a private sphere more accessible to themselves; and, finally, Wollstonecraft advocates the revolutionary expansion of that bourgeois sphere to cover the whole of society, ‘re-publicising’ virtue and confounding the gender division in the process.

The contrast with Shaftesbury and Reynolds helps us to see in starker relief the revolutionary character of Wollstonecraft’s intervention in the contest between beauty, gender, and power. Shaftesbury uses a misogynist aesthetics to justify existing power; Reynolds presents a pro-woman aesthetics that serves the interests of the rising powers of the bourgeoisie, but that fails to address the underlying patriarchal power structures on which that aesthetics is based—in particular, the patriarchal ideology that sees women as essentially, naturally beautiful and domestic. Wollstonecraft is able to

excavate through these layers, in all their complexity and seeming-contradiction, and find the subjugation at their bases. She recognises that the way we think about beauty, the way we think about women, and how those two are intertwined, is always dependent on power relations. Without altering those relations beauty can never be liberatory: shifting attitudes toward beauty and gender, and thereby creating people free from the dependence they generate, necessitates shifting—or destroying—the power structures on which, like ivy, they grow.

Unfortunately, as we now know, and despite the significant involvement of many women, the bourgeois revolutions that did occur failed to deliver on the promise that Wollstonecraft saw for them. Kings were indeed swept away, and power placed in the hands of a slightly-expanded community of free men; but those same bourgeois values in which Wollstonecraft placed so much faith found, too, that—with the exception of working class women, whose newfound freedom to work in factories was hardly liberatory—maintaining the patriarchal order would also maintain the state of affairs in which women were domesticated and their productive and reproductive labour provided at no outside cost. Instead of an end to subjugation, new subjugations were formed, with different characters and ideologies.<sup>102</sup> Patriarchy reasserted its equilibrium. But while it—and the other oppressive structures that it permeates and by which it is permeated—continues to exist, Wollstonecraft's more basic message keeps its hard core of revolution: the world makes us badly, and so we must remake it.

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<sup>102</sup> Arguably, indeed, the privatised virtue visible in the work of Reynolds—without its pro-woman aspect—remains the primary ideological face of virtue to this day, with it still mostly adhering to the individual choices of individual subjects. This lends some credence to Jones' contention that it is an ideology strongly amenable to the interests of the bourgeoisie, who seized power in Wollstonecraft's time and have held on since.

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## 4. Women's Militancy and Women's Republicanism During the French Revolution

### 4.1 Introduction

“It is these counter-revolutionary sluts,” declaimed François Chabot, at a session of the Jacobin Club, by then the dominant republican debating society in Paris, on the sixteenth of September 1793, “who cause all the riotous outbreaks, above all over bread. They made a revolution over coffee and sugar, and they will make others if we don’t watch out.”<sup>1</sup> The women that Chabot insulted were those of the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women (*Société des républicaines révolutionnaires*), a militantly radical all-women political society, officially founded on May 10th of the same year and led by Claire Lacombe, an actress from the southwest of France, and Pauline Léon, a Parisian chocolatier.<sup>2</sup> In the few months of their activity Lacombe, Léon, and the Society as a whole had already made their names several times over; including, indeed, in riotous outbreaks over bread (they were a ‘nucleus of potential mob-leaders, always ready and eager to transmute economic grievances into political rebellion’, as R.B. Rose describes them<sup>3</sup>). But the target of Chabot’s remark was not just the immediate one of the Revolutionary Republican Women: in his contemptuous invocation of revolutions over “coffee and sugar,” Chabot conjured the more diffuse, but no less concerning, spectre of militant women in general—those working-class women of Paris that had, to be sure, dragged the King out of Versailles in October 1789, but that had also rioted over sugar in

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<sup>1</sup> *Journal historique et politique*, no. 69, 18 September 1793. Cited in Rose 60 note 28

<sup>2</sup> George 410-437; Rose 56-72; “The Society of Revolutionary Republican Women Registers with Authorities at the Commune” in Levy et al 149

<sup>3</sup> Rose 60



early 1792.<sup>4</sup> And these women, suddenly unbound by the rapid expansion of the horizon of political possibility, were—as the appearance of the Revolutionary Republican Women demonstrated—becoming a problem, even in nominally radical republican circles.

As Sandrine Bergès discusses in her paper “Women Political Philosophers of the Eighteenth Century and Why They Matter,” this sudden boundlessness of political potential lays fertile ground for philosophical investigation: during times, of which the French Revolution is surely the paradigmatic example, when the assumptions underpinning society are being questioned, the technocratic debates of ordinary politics are supplemented or replaced by the contestation of bare and basic principles. Philosophy, as it were, comes to permeate thoroughly the social and political life of the people: during the Revolution, ‘any political writer was also a philosopher’ as Bergès succinctly puts it.<sup>5</sup> Without old prejudices or heuristics to fall back upon, the political work of persuasion and power has to be tightly unified with the elucidation and defense of foundational values. Hence, Bergès argues, the journalistic polemics of women like Olympe de Gouges are properly read as philosophical texts, as they are participants in this dynamic philosophical contest.

Bergès’s insight is significant and, I think, clearly correct both methodologically and philosophically. In this chapter I will expand out from here to consider the political-philosophical values expressed in the demands and actions of other militant women of the Revolution. In so doing, I hope to show how the women of Paris tried to carve out an alternate vision of republicanism that was inclusive of them, their rights and their concrete needs, and that rejected the austere masculinity with which republicanism is sometimes associated now and that the men of that time were then in the process of constructing.

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<sup>4</sup> “Parisian Women Protest via Taxation Populaire in February, 1792” in Levy et al 115-8

<sup>5</sup> Bergès 7

In her paper, Bergès uses this first argument about what can constitute philosophy in revolutionary times to give us an account of republicanism that is more amenable to women and feminism through women's own philosophical, political, and journalistic writings. In particular, she discusses the relationship that these women saw between republicanism and the private or domestic realm that was then—and is now—most closely associated with women. In public, however, an alternate current played out. This current was no less republican and no less one instantiated and worked-out by women, but it had radically different goals and methods to those of the journalists. Nevertheless, these two sides of women's republicanism could often be complementary, just as the texts of the Revolution often interacted dynamically with the on-the-ground interventions of its political actors. By their very nature, these actions show the militant, public side of women's revolutionary republicanism. They also show us a possible way toward new methodologies and metaphilosophical principles in the history of philosophy.

This chapter is hence put together from two separate, but intertwining, strands. The first of these strands follows the logic of Bergès's argument for the inclusion in philosophical study, alongside "traditional" genres like treatises and essays, of pamphlets, speeches, and journalistic writings. By walking this path, I argue, we can open up the philosophy—the dispute over basic principles—latent in the times themselves, demonstrated not just in texts but in action: that is, in the deeds of those people in Paris, especially women, who challenged the assumptions of social life right in the process of living it. The Revolutionary Republican Women have texts: the club had written rules, and there are accounts of their meetings and their petitions before the National Convention—the first republican government of France—and the local Paris

Commune.<sup>6</sup> Such texts are, of course, important philosophical documents for the reasons given by Bergès, in spite—or because—of the extra excavation that is necessary to find the philosophical underpinnings of the practical and political concerns expressed therein. But more important, I argue, are the actions of the Revolutionary Republican Women and their sisters in the struggle behind and beyond these texts. It is by their actions that they asserted their rights, argued their humanity, and attempted to delineate a working-class republicanism with an equal or liberated place for women. I hence propose searching for the philosophical expression to be found in these social movements and incidents.

The second strand, then, attempts to sketch the philosophical contours of this women-led republicanism of the street: the principles of the sugar rioters and the so-called furies of the guillotine. Work has already been done to elucidate the attitudes of these women and the political meaning of those attitudes: here, then, I will focus on the philosophical comparison of this militant women's republicanism to more contemporary forms. Of particular significance here is the role played by subsistence and broadly economic concerns in the politics of the Parisian women; those concerns that are invoked in Chabot's venomous dismissal of the Revolutionary Republican Women. And indeed there is a risk even today of dismissing an insurrection that is over bread as unprincipled because of that very fact: of labelling the agitation of Paris's women regarding what, in the following century, would become the "social question" as unserious or unphilosophical when compared to the reasoned debates on abstract principles that—we imagine—occurred in the National Convention and the political clubs. But in their actions the women of Paris challenged this strict division of economic

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, "The Regulations of the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women," "Accounts of a Session of the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women," and "Petition from the Revolutionary Republican Women to the National Convention on the Leadership of the Armies and the Law of Suspects," amongst others in Levy et al 161-175

and political or concrete and abstract. So I hope that the second strand can also, in some sense, constitute a defence of making a revolution over coffee and sugar.

## **4.2 The Philosophy in Activism**

I begin, then, with the methodological question, in whose exploration we will have cause to reflect on much of the militancy of the Revolution's republican women. Let us return first to Bergès's discussion of the philosophical value of journalistic writings and speeches. She notes first that her subjects—Marie-Jeanne Philipon Roland, Olympe de Gouges, and Sophie de Grouchy—contrary to some assumptions that they were too concerned with activism, did produce a large corpus of philosophical texts, and that they are not any the less philosophical for their participation in contemporary debates: they constitute “applied philosophical reflection,” as Bergès puts it, referencing Quentin Skinner.<sup>7</sup> They are indeed interested in providing individual and particular answers to the individual and particular questions then facing them, in much the way that Skinner advocates we read the history of ideas in general.<sup>8</sup> It can only be some noxious mixture of parochialism, ahistoricism, and misogyny that would deny that this fact makes these women's writings unphilosophical. Quite the opposite: it is this groundedness in the challenges and debates of the times that makes them philosophical.

Bergès's second point on this matter is that the particular time that supplied their questions—one of considerable social and political flux—led those questions, and their answers, to be especially philosophically interesting and significant. This is in part because in periods of revolution much of the structure of society is up for grabs, as it were, and ideological assumptions that might seem fairly fixed at other times are open to

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<sup>7</sup> Bergès 5

<sup>8</sup> Skinner 50

challenge at their bases. “Applied philosophical reflection,” then, by virtue of the times to which it is applied, allowed for considerable exploration and contestation of axiomatic first principles: without, that is, a ready-made (to use Bergès’s term) supply of ideologies and axioms on which to hang one’s actions and prejudices, just living one’s life—never mind actually labouring to create a new republic—required philosophical work.<sup>9</sup>

During times of relative political stability, to illustrate, there might be political debate on the correct proportional allocation of government resources to, say, education as against arms, or police as against healthcare. The contours of the debate will be shaped by considerations of efficiency and feasibility, loyalty and enmity, prejudice, fear, party politics and electoral strategy, and more. First principles will be invoked, but those voices that demand that those principles be shifted—for instance, by demanding that governments ought as a matter of moral urgency provide healthcare for all their citizens and not get involved in foreign wars—are by that very fact revolutionary voices, forever trying to push debate toward axiomatic values. Those elements that reject the debate on the grounds that, say, governments should not have the right to use force to collect tax or that representative democracy is by its nature illegitimate will remain at best fringe elements; fringe enough that it is questionable whether they are engaged in applied philosophical reflection at all.

During times of revolution, however, and surely during some revolutions more than others, these more basic questions surge forward into public view and public scrutiny. The demand that particular governments legitimate their very existence becomes less abstract, since it is entirely possible that those governments could be dismantled; the question of the basis of the relationship between citizen and state becomes live as the citizens assert a right to reshape the state as they see fit. There will still be debates over allocations of resources—people cannot eat principled reflection—

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<sup>9</sup> Bergès 7

but those debates will be more malleable, more open to radical change: whether to fund education or arms might rest on one group convincing another about what education is for, or about what governments should do, or even about what governments are, rather than on what represents a better return on investment. The underlying logic of the particular order is laid bare and becomes an object of practical action. If philosophy is, on some level, the excavation, clarification, expression, and contestation of principles, and if practical action is at least partly guided by principles, then to do politics in such times is, to paraphrase Bergès, to do philosophy.

Bergès is right, then, to say that the textual interventions of Olympe de Gouges and Madame Roland are philosophical. They are so because they are engaged in activism, because they aim to produce particular changes in their own times, and because they are polemical. If one takes the (perhaps vulgar) materialist view that principles follow practical reality, then, indeed, activism—practical action—is the only way to do philosophy; if one thinks that sometimes principles come first, then, at the very least, activism is one major constituent of philosophical work, and in times of revolutionary change to do philosophical work is to engage in activism.

It is clear, I think, that these reflections need not only apply to textual interventions; nor is all of the political and philosophical import of a textual intervention to be found in the words themselves. A useful example is supplied to us by Olympe de Gouges. In *Only Paradoxes to Offer*, Joan Wallach Scott describes how, for de Gouges, publishing her texts—indeed, literally pasting them on the walls of Paris—was more than making available a vehicle for her reflections:

For de Gouges, writing, signing, and publishing demonstrated, for her contemporaries and posterity, what the law erased: the fact that women could be, already were, authors. Under revolutionary legislation women did not have the rights of authors, of individuals who possessed their intellectual property,

because they did not have the rights of active citizens. To be recognized as an author, then, meant for de Gouges recognition as an individual and a citizen.<sup>10</sup>

So not just the texts that she wrote—most prominently, of course, the “Declaration of the Rights of Woman and Female Citizen”—but the act of writing, signing, and publishing them expressed political, and hence philosophical, content. The production and dissemination of the text was itself an assertion of rights and active citizenship, and that the division of gender was no grounds for division between citizens. That she had asserted this claim in her actions—though, not of course, its truth—was even acknowledged in a contemptuous report of her death under the guillotine:

Olympe de Gouges, born with an exalted imagination, mistook her delirium for an inspiration of nature. She wanted to be a man of state. She took up the projects of the perfidious people who want to divide France. It seems the law has punished this conspirator for having forgotten the virtues that belong to her sex.<sup>11</sup>

Pierre Gaspard Chaumette, the president of the Paris Commune, also invoked the spectre of this woman that had forgotten her place during his speech banning women’s deputations from appearing before the local government’s sessions, hectoring women citizens to

remember the impudent Olympe de Gouges, who was the first to set up women’s societies, who abandoned the cares of her household to get mixed up in the republic, and whose head fell beneath the avenging knife of the laws. Is it the place of women to propose motions? Is it the place of women place themselves at the head of our armies?<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Scott 37

<sup>11</sup> In *La feuille du salut public*, cited in Scott 52 from Laitullier 140

<sup>12</sup> “Women’s Deputations Barred from Sessions of the Paris Commune,” in Levy et al 220

De Gouges asserted that it was the place of women to propose motions and become mixed up in the republic by doing those very things; she philosophised in deed as well as word, as even her opponents saw, and paid a heavy price for it.

There is not, then, anything particularly mysterious about the idea that one can do philosophy by acting beyond text or even speech. But de Gouges was an individual, and a writer, and even in her non-textual actions her intention is quite easy to interpret. I wish to assert what is perhaps a step further: that even mass popular actions such as the women's march on Versailles in October 1789 or the insurrectional *journées* between Germinal and Prairial Year III (early April to late May 1795) can be interpreted in this way. Such actions have clear purposes and goals, and though—with a handful of exceptions from police reports and the like—we cannot necessarily ascribe an explicit goal to any one participating individual, we can nevertheless read the actions themselves as expressions or manifestations of popular values; and if we do so, we gain access to the principles and beliefs of those without institutional access to writing and publishing. We miss the radicalism inherent in direct action if we limit ourselves to studying only those values that are expressed in text or speech.

Mary Wollstonecraft, perhaps—and understandably, given the havoc it wrought on her Parisian social circle—having soured on popular revolutionary justice by the time of its writing, is contemptuously dismissive of the women's march on Versailles in her *Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution*. In it she sees little in the way of values or principles in the action:

The concourse, at first, consisted mostly of market women, and the lowest refuse of the streets, women who had thrown off the virtues of one sex without having power to assume more than the vices of the other. A number of men also followed them, armed with pikes, bludgeons, and hatches; but they were strictly speaking a mob, affixing all the odium to the appellation it can possibly import; and not to be confounded with the honest multitude, who took the Bastille.—In fact, such a



rabble has seldom been gathered together; and they quickly showed, that their movement was not the effect of public spirit.<sup>13</sup>

It was “designing men,” writes Wollstonecraft, “lurk[ing] behind them as a kind of safeguard, working them up to some desperate act” that were the cause of the insurrection of October 1789, and not any kind of reasons based on the beliefs of the women themselves regarding their relationship to the King and to the newly-formed National Constituent Assembly, or those institutions’ duties toward them. “A scarcity of bread,” she says, “the common grievance of the revolution, aggravated the vague fears of the parisians [sic], and made the people so desperate, that it was not difficult to persuade them to undertake any enterprize”<sup>14</sup>; and so are many of the women-led insurrections of the Revolution characterised: as the random, thoughtless reflex of a hungry multitude, reacting to any stimulus like a tapped knee. E.P. Thompson calls this the “spasmodic view of popular history,” and, against it, he asks the important question: “being hungry [...], what do people do? How is their behaviour modified by custom, culture, and reason?”<sup>15</sup>

That is to say, to assert that a riot occurred due to a lack of bread might be true, but it fails to explain the particular shape of a bread riot: its goals, its targets, its effects. How a riot plays out will speak to the implicit assumptions and beliefs of those that take part. A crowd is not a knee, and a six-hour march from Paris to Versailles is not an involuntary kick. Being hungry, the women of Paris attacked the hôtel de ville, demanding bread and arms, then—also offended by rumours that the King had disrespected the new order through its symbol, the tricolour cockade<sup>16</sup>—walked to

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<sup>13</sup> Wollstonecraft 344

<sup>14</sup> Ibid 342

<sup>15</sup> Thompson 77-8

<sup>16</sup> The truth or falsity of these rumours does not, I think, affect the beliefs that are manifested in the actions that are based on them. If someone tells me that there is milk in the fridge, my walking to and opening the fridge manifests my belief that there is milk in the fridge regardless of the truth or falsity of

Versailles and demanded the same of the King and the Assembly<sup>17</sup>; these are not random targets. Rather, these targets express a set of political claims: that the King and the new governmental institutions have responsibilities and duties toward the people, including the provision of subsistence; that the symbols of the new order were important and to be respected; and, most significantly, that the people have the right to insurrection when these responsibilities are abrogated. In his study on the English crowd in the eighteenth century, Thompson speaks of a “consistent traditional view” held by the poor of England “of social norms and obligations, [and] of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community, which, taken together, can be said to constitute the moral economy of the poor”; in their insurrections, the women of Paris defended and demanded this moral economy from both old institutions of power and new.<sup>18</sup>

Their movement, then, was one of “public spirit,” if not the specific kind of public spirit that Wollstonecraft presumably would have liked to see. “In deeds,” as Darline Gay Levy and Harriet B Applewhite put it, “they shattered the traditional authority and sovereignty of absolute kingship. They demonstrated how the people itself functioned as sovereign legislator.”<sup>19</sup> Their insurrection might have had economic bases, but it expressed explicit political views about how different sections of society ought relate to one another, and the rights and responsibilities of each; and at any rate, there cannot be a more basic political question than that of who gets to eat. And if, despite that philosophy is impossible without it, “I must have food” is not obviously a philosophical principle, during a time of great flux those notions that underlie it—about the commonweal, the duties of governmental institutions thereof, the right of insurrection—

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the assertion. This is also why merely saying that the women were provoked by male agents provocateur is insufficient to demonstrate that the insurrection was unprincipled; the women acted on their political views, and even if lurking males provoked that action, they did not implant those views.

<sup>17</sup> Stanislas Maillard Describes the Women’s March to Versailles, October 5 1789” in Levy et al 36-42

<sup>18</sup> Thompson 79. For an illuminating application of Thompson’s framework to the French case, though less focused on the Revolution than I am, see Tilly 23-57.

<sup>19</sup> Levy and Applewhite 85

surely are. Indeed, as we shall see in the following section, these notions could be based on other, perhaps deeper views about the natural rights of all human beings; those views too are expressed in insurrection.

To participate in these direct actions—and there were many led by women during the revolution—is to lay a stake in philosophical ground. It is not just to attempt to gain through force what one considers one is due; it is also to assert one's belief that one *is* due those things, and that the kind of person one is is due those things, just as de Gouges asserted through publishing that she was due active citizenship as much as any man.

To limit ourselves to hearing only those voices that expressed themselves through reasoned debate, that followed the subtlest rhetorical canons, is not just to miss out on much that was being said: it is to miss out on a very particular section of what was said, a section that was determined not by reason or philosophy but by an uneven and oppressive distribution of power that persisted from then till now. The Revolution emboldened many of the people—women—on the wrong end of that distribution to declaim their own views and to hence assert their right to be heard. It also emboldened many women to act, and hence assert their right to participate in the shaping of their lives by state power. If, like the women that Wollstonecraft called the 'lowest refuse of the streets', one cannot be heard through text or speech, direct action may be the only way to have one's own principles become those of society itself. We ought hear those principles; but trying to hear them in the context of contemporary philosophy, or history of philosophy, raises an interesting tangle of issues. It is to the metaphilosophical outlines of the assertions of the women in Paris that I will turn next.

### **4.3 Rationality, Action, and the Use of Force**

There are therefore, I think, good reasons—methodological and political—to pay attention to the viewpoints that underlay the insurrections and riots of the Revolution and those that underlie activism and street action more generally. It not only broadens the scope of analysis, but it broadens it in the particular direction of undervalued and underheard voices that are, due to that very fact, more likely to be revolutionary ones. Nevertheless, we might ask whether this method really does, or really ought, take these insurrections to be philosophy. Might it not be the work of interpretation that constitutes philosophy, rather than the events themselves? After all, not everything in the world is philosophy, and nor should it be; does naming an insurrection as philosophy diminish the specific character of philosophy or—arguably worse—improperly circumscribe the nature of the event? In seeking to find what makes a riot philosophical, we oughtn't lose track of what makes it riotous.<sup>20</sup>

There are numerous tacks that might be taken in navigating these charges. In the previous section, I followed Bergès in arguing that the events I labelled as philosophy, or as philosophical, were so because they were concerned with providing answers to or expressing opinions on a particular set of basic or fundamental questions that are generally taken—though we might properly ask by whom—to be philosophical: questions about what kinds of things governments are, how they should relate to their citizens or subjects, whence their power comes, and what they should do. Even historical-contextual readings that, after Skinner, situate these questions in the live debates of their times nevertheless take them to be more basic, fundamental, or principled than, for instance, questions on the allocation of budgets. It is partly for this reason that such questions are taken to be philosophical; but more important, I think, is their simple resemblance to questions that are already established within the dominant institutions and canons of

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<sup>20</sup> I am thankful and indebted to Lisa Miracchi, Shereen Chang, Paul Musso, and Ben Baker for their insights and questions on another version of this chapter, which helped form the forthcoming section.

political philosophy. In the previous section, I implicitly argued that the women of the march on Versailles were doing philosophy because they were answering the kinds of questions that Rawls and Locke answer.

This rhetorical strategy—the subject-matter approach—surely suffices in many cases. Making philosophy more inclusive and open surely includes making more available responses to its traditional questions that come from quarters that are underrepresented due to systemic oppressions, and that might include responses that are delivered through unusual media like insurrections. Nevertheless, on a broader scope this strategy is methodologically unsatisfying: it defers the big question by pointing to established traditions that mightn't, themselves, have truly convincing bases. Perhaps worse, this approach might improperly shift the site of philosophising from the event itself to the later interpreter: if doing philosophy is merely a matter of providing responses to established questions then we are left open to the charge that it is us, contemporary historians of philosophy, that are really constructing these responses, and that the lives of the women of the past are just so much raw material in that process. For writings, even 'non-philosophical' ones, the risk here is lower; but for events, whose explicit values are by and large not verbalised or written, it is great.

An alternative that skirts both of these issues is to argue that to do philosophy is not to respond to particular questions, or particular kinds of questions, but to make use of a particular method. This latter claim can arguably be drawn back to Plato, in whose *Gorgias* Socrates differentiates himself from the eponymous sophist by pointing to the difference in how the two convince their interlocutors or audiences: emotional persuasion for Gorgias, true reason for Socrates.<sup>21</sup> With this in mind we might therefore say that to do philosophy is to aim to convince others about something by appeal to

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<sup>21</sup> Plato 464b-465e

reason: it is a *rational* method. It can hence be differentiated from *arational* methods that aim to convince by, for instance, emotion or force.

This approach does not rest philosophy on resemblance to established works, as does the subject-matter approach. Nor does it confine philosophy, in non-verbal cases, to those doing the interpretation rather than those doing the initial activist work. But in avoiding these issues we may still have excluded the insurrections with which I am concerned from being philosophy. On this new schema, it would appear, insurrections and riots cannot be philosophy because they use force, which is arational, to achieve their aims. Indeed, perhaps even journalistic writings or polemics which appeal to emotion could be excluded from the realm of philosophy on these grounds. So in skirting the problems of the subject-matter approach we have, from the point of view of this chapter's thesis, found ourselves in worse straits than we were before.

As I have said, I think we have good political and methodological reasons to understand the street actions of the women of Paris as philosophy. We should therefore not accept too readily the apparent restrictions of the rational-method approach. And, happily, it does not stand up to much scrutiny.

First, against Plato, it is not clear that the rational-method approach really does describe philosophy, even when philosophy is understood in narrow or traditional terms. This is a large claim, much larger than can be dealt with adequately here; but it is, I think, at least plausible that many arguments in canonical philosophy—especially in ethics and politics—rely more on emotional persuasion than they care to admit. Many intuition pumps, for instance, might use reason to convince us of the consequences of our responses to particular situations, but those responses themselves needn't be arrived at by rational argument. This muddying of the rational waters mightn't be a bad thing; and to the extent that, from the rational-method approach's own perspective, it is a bad thing, we might ask whether it ought to be. One response we could give, then, is that if

the rational-method approach excludes polemics or excludes insurrection, then so much the worse for the approach.

Second, and I think of more concrete use to us here, we might argue that the use of force is not as arational as it might seem. The intuition that the use of force is arational might derive from the intuition that, for instance, if I am held at gunpoint and made to concede that the Catholic God exists, I am not thereby rationally convinced that the Catholic God exists. But the problem with this illustration, as the old Spanish inquisitors themselves realised, is that it is not clear that I am convinced at all. I am just—perfectly rationally, unless I believe in a paradise for martyrs—saying that the Catholic God exists to avoid being shot; what I believe is a different matter. So this intuition pump doesn't quite work: the problem isn't that I'm convinced arationally, but that I'm not convinced.

When we move to the political arena of groups and governments and power the problem becomes murkier still. The separation between force and reason becomes less clear. During the women's march on Versailles, Marie-Rose Barré, a twenty-year-old Parisian lace-worker, was one of four women taken to meet the king to ask him for bread:

His Majesty answered them that he was suffering at least as much as they were, to see them lacking it, and that so far as he was able he had taken care to prevent them from experiencing a dearth. Upon the king's response they begged him to be so good as to arrange escorts for the flour transports intended for the provisioning of Paris, because according to what they had been told at the bridge in Sevres by the two young men of whom they spoke earlier, only two wagons out of seventy intended for Paris actually arrived there. The king promised them to have the flour escorted and said that if depended on him, they would have bread then and there.<sup>22</sup>

With the previous example in mind, we might argue that, despite the apparent cordiality of this interaction, the presence of a thousands-strong crowd of armed women

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<sup>22</sup> "Women Testify Concerning Their Participation in the October Days" in Levy et al 50

immediately outside means that the king was not really convinced of the people's need for bread—or, more strongly, of their moral claim to it. At the very least, we might say, he wasn't rationally convinced of anything. He was just saying what needed to be said to avoid violence.

Perhaps this interpretation would be true if what the king was forced to concede was a bare factual claim such as “the Catholic God exists” or “two plus two equals five.” But the demand of the women of Paris was a political one. And for such claims the bringing to bear of force to convince does not automatically make that convincing arational. This is because political claims are about power, and hence are partly about the use of force: about who gets access to it, who gets to use it, when, and to what end. By appearing in force, the women of Paris concretely illustrated the truth of their claims: not, it must be conceded, necessarily the truth that they needed bread, but the truths that they had power and that they had the right to use it when they saw fit regardless of the wishes of the nominal authorities. The insurrection hence expressed truths beyond its immediate goal, and, observing the insurrection, it would be rational to be convinced of those truths. And if one were to accept those truths, it would be rational to accept the truth of the insurrection's goal after all: the people must have bread.

Indeed, in settling questions of who gets to use force and when, one can think of fewer more convincing arguments for the oppressed classes of society than using force when they see fit. In general the rulers of a society reserve for themselves the right to use force to settle political contests and disputes.<sup>23</sup> One can argue verbally against them that they are not the true arbiters of the proper application of force; or one can assert the falsity of their claim by using force oneself, by asserting one's own right to bring force to bear on issues where that right is denied by one's rulers. As we shall see in the following

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<sup>23</sup> The claim that “a state is a human community that (successfully) claims the *monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force* within a given territory” is Max Weber's: Weber 4, emphasis original.



section, the articulation of this natural right of insurrection beyond the bounds of existing powers, is, I think, an important part of the latent philosophy of the street actions of the Revolution. And this articulation is rationally convincing *because* it is made through force; much more so than if—as I do so here—it is merely expressed through words. In this case, it is the force of the insurrection, not the work of later interpreters like myself, that does the convincing. As Marx wrote, “the weapon of criticism cannot, of course, replace criticism of the weapon, material force must be overthrown by material force”<sup>24</sup>; to convince those more powerful takes power.

I do not hereby claim to have settled the big question of what, in the end, philosophy is. And, as I said at the outset, I think the subject-matter approach works well enough for my purposes here: the women of Paris were, I think, in their insurrections engaged in the same kind of project as people that almost everyone would agree were doing philosophy. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise the approach’s limitations, and especially important when in so doing we’re thereby able to see another sense in which the women’s street actions really can be understood to be philosophy: they aimed, rationally, to convince of the true existence of a natural right. It is to the excavation of this right that I turn next. In the process of that excavation, we can also see a dynamic interaction of philosophical texts and political action.

#### **4.4 Militant Women’s Republicanism**

Much changed between October 1789 and Germinal-Prairial Year III, not least the calendar itself, but when women then rioted against the most recent iteration of the First Republic—the more conservative National Directory—it was once again over bread, as had been the earlier riots of 1789 and 1792; and, like those earlier riots, it was not *only*

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<sup>24</sup> Marx 7

over bread. The insurrection of 1 Prairial (20 May 1795), again led by women, took as its slogan “Bread and the Constitution of 1793,” succinctly combining economic and political concerns into a single expression of the people’s demand for their rights.<sup>25</sup> It is from this slogan that I will begin to work out the outlines of the militant republicanism of the women of the riots, using the tripartite characterisation of neo-republicanism given by Bergès as a source of inspiration and comparison—with particular emphasis, in this section, on the republican tenet of freedom as non-domination.<sup>26</sup> In this way we can see, alongside Bergès’s explication of the women-centred republicanism of de Gouges, de Grouchy, and Roland, another attempt to work out a republicanism that worked for women and that was made and expressed by women. In this case, that republicanism focused on the rights of women to live free of domination by state institutions, and—importantly—to participate in the creation of that non-dominative order.

The values expressed in the slogans of the insurrection, as well as in the insurrection itself, can help us to understand this other republicanism that was formed and reformed by the working-class and militant women of Paris throughout the period of the Revolution, but it arguably reached its clearest manifestation in Prairial. At the same time, the insurrection can help us to see how political practice and philosophical writing interacted at a moment of particular foment: how texts and activism entered into a reciprocal relationship of mutual reinforcement. Philosophy, then, both drove and was driven by the direct actions of the street. With a little unpacking, “bread and the Constitution of 1793” can show us this vividly as well as showing us, or at least guiding us towards, the concrete values of the women that used it.

The Constitution of 1793 is the Montagnard Constitution, the first republican constitution of France, written by the radical republican faction of the National

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<sup>25</sup> Godineau 334-9; Levy et al 272

<sup>26</sup> Bergès 8

Convention and containing a spate of democratic reforms, including universal manhood suffrage and the abolition of slavery; it was never implemented.<sup>27</sup> Its text was preceded by a Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, similar to the more famous such Declaration written by Lafayette, Jefferson, and Mirabeau at the very beginning of the Revolution in 1789. But while the 1789 Declaration aimed to limit the absolute power of the King and to do away with feudal privileges, the Declaration 1793 is more stridently republican and egalitarian.<sup>28</sup>

Massimiliano Tomba argues that the 1793 Declaration signals a reconfiguration of the relationship between the individual bearer of rights and the state: a shift from what he calls the “juridical universalism” of 1789 to the “insurgent universality” of 1793. “The tradition of the first declaration,” writes Tomba, “shows how individuals strip themselves of their social characteristics in order to become ‘simple individuals’ and therefore citizens of the state”: this is the tradition of the “abstract bearer of rights,” to quote Tomba again, that has been one of the troubling legacies of liberalism and republicanism for feminists and those in other radical liberatory movements, who have frequently seen this abstract bearer of rights as implicitly white, propertied, and male.<sup>29</sup> What’s more, the rights of the man and citizen of 1789 were seen as handed down benevolently by governmental institutions, and in the same breath as their declamation they were limited by strictures that the rights not be abused and not disturb public order.<sup>30</sup>

Such a conception of rights, then, is doubly dominative, and thus doubly unfree: on the one hand, it constitutes a bearer of rights that is individualised and abstracted only insofar as they are not a woman, not a person of colour, not enslaved, and not poor;

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<sup>27</sup> Levy at al 146

<sup>28</sup> Tomba 114

<sup>29</sup> Ibid 110; see also Scott 5-7

<sup>30</sup> Tomba 110-2

on the other, even the rights of that heavily circumscribed group are dependent on the largesse of a government that can, at any point, invoke the expediency of public order to circumscribe the rights themselves. In the republican tradition non-domination entails not just non-interference but the absence of the possibility of arbitrary interference: not just the presence of a kind-hearted or lackadaisical master, but no master at all.<sup>31</sup> The handful of abstract right-bearers of the 1789 Declaration, then, were not free in the republican sense (nor, indeed, were they yet living in a republic).

The 1793 Declaration was written after three years of popular protest and insurrection of women, the poor, and the enslaved people of the colonies. It, by contrast to the more liberal 1789 Declaration, “announces” what Tomba calls “insurgent natural rights” that ‘express the political agency of human beings beyond the state.’ That is to say that, rather than emptying out individuals of their concrete features, making those whose social position makes this operation possible “abstract,” and then bestowing them with rights that are carefully limited by the state, the 1793 declaration—on Tomba’s reading, at least—acknowledges that individuals have rights by virtue of their concrete features and admits no possibility of their being limited by the state; rather, the state and governmental institutions exist at the sufferance of a people who have a permanent right to insurrection.<sup>32</sup>

Tomba sees the provenance and expression of this understanding of insurgent natural rights in the insurrections, during the Revolution, of those people whose “non-abstract” features had disqualified them from rights under the older declaration: the poor, the rebels of Saint-Domingue, and—of course—women<sup>33</sup>. By acting as citizens despite their exclusion, and expressing their rights despite their disqualification, these groups, Tomba argues, articulated the gap between the concrete human being and the

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<sup>31</sup> Bergès 8-9; Pettit 63-4

<sup>32</sup> Tomba 112

<sup>33</sup> Ibid 114

abstract citizen rights-bearer of the 1789 Declaration, putting a whole dominative political and social order into question; not with the end of admittance into that order but with the far greater one of expressing and demanding one's human agency in the face of any order.<sup>34</sup> In this, again, the insurrections of women, the poor, and the enslaved people of the colonies can be seen as making demands outside of, but here also alongside, philosophical texts.

One such text, as Tomba notes, is de Gouges's Declaration of the Rights of Woman and Female Citizen, written two years before the 1793 Declaration. It expresses its own understanding of insurgent universality, rewriting Article 6 of the 1789 Declaration—"The law is the expression of the general will"—to "the law *should be* the expression of the general will," hence making the law "subject[.] to the judgment of the people."<sup>35</sup>

Here, then, is a thoroughgoing demand for freedom as non-domination; for freedom as the non-possibility that one's rights will be infringed, enshrined in a right of insurrection that can be acknowledged, but never granted or circumscribed, by the state. It is a demand made overwhelmingly by the participants in the popular politics of the Revolution, the riots and actions of the street carried out by all those that saw the gap being forged between human being and citizen: that is, by those human beings whose citizenship was denied. Where bread, or indeed coffee or sugar, was a part of their motivation, the demand is expressed only the more clearly, showing that gap in yet starker terms: those of a state that would grant rights to abstract subjects while ignoring the concrete needs of real human beings.

In taking the Constitution of 1793 as their slogan and model, the women of the Prairial insurrection express their refusal of domination clearly. The insurrection is both

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid 128-9

<sup>35</sup> Ibid 118; de Gouges 90

sanctioned and granted political meaning through the invocation of the Constitution; at the same time, the insurrection itself constitutes evidence for the truth of the claims in the Declaration that the rights of expression and assembly “cannot be forbidden” and that “insurrection is for the people and for each of portion of the people the most sacred of rights and the most indispensable of duties.”<sup>36</sup> In a sense, then, by allowing for the fulfillment of the people’s right to non-domination and by enshrining their right to resistance, the Declaration—even though it was never put into law—generated its own evidence. It philosophically justified political actions that themselves justified its principles. The content of the insurrectionary claim—the demand not to be dominated—is expressed in text, in action, and in the interaction of the two.

There is a further interesting wrinkle to this interplay, however. As noted, Tomba argues that the 1793 Constitution was itself written in response to earlier insurrections of the poor, of women, and of the enslaved (including the by then quasi-legendary march on Versailles that we discussed in the previous section). Here the direction of influence is reversed: rather than political action being justified by an earlier text, the pre-1793 insurrections are retroactively justified by a text that is written partly in their light. In other words, political practice here generates its own philosophical justifications: “applied philosophical reflection” taken to the extreme. The Declaration of 1793 here acknowledges pre-existing facts on the ground: the women (and enslaved people, and poor) of the Revolution have rights, including the right to insurrection, and they will not be dominated. And in making that acknowledgement it creates the conditions for new political actions and new on-the-ground insurrections—ones that make it into their slogan.

All of this helps us to grasp the expression of freedom as non-domination—republican freedom—in the insurrections and riots of the revolutionary period. The

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<sup>36</sup> Tomba 111-2

storming of the Bastille, the march on Versailles, the last gasps of the Germinal and Prairial Days: all these can be said to express, instantiate, and demand a particular variant of militant or insurgent republicanism. The women of Prairial Year III that cried “bread and the Constitution of 1793” asserted their right not to be dominated, by hunger or by unscrupulous flour merchants or by the state itself, and they asserted it by refusing to be dominated and by taking their rights into their own hands. Their rights overspilled the bounds set them by the state, and they demanded the ratification of the Constitution that acknowledged this.

#### **4.5 Public Participation and Public Virtue**

Republicanism, however, is not just an understanding of freedom as non-domination. Its other two features, as identified by Bergès in her discussion of the republican women writers, are its emphases on virtue-led politics and political participation.<sup>37</sup> As we have already seen several times, a part of the underlying logic of the women-led insurrections and riots of the revolutionary era was the demand, and indeed understanding, on the part of the women that they should participate in the political process even as they were excluded from most governmental institutions. To be sure, rioting over bread is not the form of participation that most of the great republican men of the time are likely to have had in mind, but with no other options available insurrection becomes a tool of both participation and non-domination.

There are, however, other ways that the militant republicanism of the women of Paris was expressed, and it is to these that I wish to turn in this final section—to the ways that the republican women of Paris emphasised their desire to participate and their instantiation of civic virtue. It is here, then, that we can finally return to the Society of

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<sup>37</sup> Bergès 8

Revolutionary Republican Women, and, I think, to a vision of radical republicanism that is more explicitly focused on the rights of women. This vision was also, significantly, one that was expressed in public and made a demand for women's inclusion in the public sphere: the species of participation and civic virtue desired by the militant women of Paris were ones that led beyond the domestic and private realm. Where they used texts, the context of their dissemination helped support the texts' content, and the content helped support political action.

Pauline Léon was already making herself known in March of 1791, two years before the official registration of the Society at the Commune, when she and three hundred other women petitioned the National Assembly for the right of women to bear arms:

We wish only to defend ourselves the same as you; you cannot refuse us, and society cannot deny the right nature gives us, unless you pretend the Declaration of Rights does not apply to women, and that they should let their throats be cut like lambs, without the right to defend themselves. Can you believe the tyrants would spare us? No, no—they remember October 5 and 6, 1789 [that is, the march on Versailles] ... But, you say, men are armed for your defense. Of course, but we reply, why deprive us of the right to join that defense, and of the pleasure of saving their days by using ours? [...] Why then not terrorize aristocracy and tyranny with all the resources of civic effort and the purest zeal, zeal which cold men can well call fanaticism and exaggeration, but which is only the natural result of a heart burning with love for the public weal?<sup>38</sup>

In 1791, of course, France was still a monarchy of sorts. Nevertheless, Léon makes no mention of the King and frequent references to civic virtue and citizenship. Here then, in inchoate form, is the beginning of a specifically women's form of resistance to domination, what would in time become essential to republicanism; in this case to domination by the enemies of the nation both interior and exterior. But Léon's petition

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<sup>38</sup> "Petition to the National Assembly on Women's Rights to Bear Arms," in Levy et al 73



also lies direct claim to the ability of women to participate in the defence of the polity and of the availability to them of the civic virtues of patriotism and sacrifice. Despite their limited citizenship and limited rights, Léon and the other women expected not just that they be granted their constitutional rights but that they could, and should, participate in their creation and safeguarding as equal members of both polity and ongoing project. “We are *citoyennes*,” Léon announced, “and we cannot be indifferent to the fate of the fatherland.”<sup>39</sup> The very fact of their petitioning, of course, just like in the case of de Gouges, formed a part of their assertion of their right to participate. Their 300-strong presence provided force to their argument. As ever, they demonstrated their willingness and desire to become citizens and to participate both in word and deed.

Nevertheless, the women desired more than just the right to appear and to petition. In this it seems that their words, supported as they were by their presence and their activism, would be insufficient: the petitioners demanded the right to participate specifically in the armed defence of the new nation. The petition, by itself, is an act of participation and a demonstration of civic virtue. But the ability to petition—which was itself to be taken away from women in 1793—was not enough. Léon and her fellow petitioners saw the right to bear arms as the route along which they could access all the rights and responsibilities of republican citizenship: to be independent, women had to participate in the armed defence and creation of the nation; to participate, they needed the independent right to bear arms, still given only to active citizens; to access and express their (soon to be) republican virtue they also needed the freedom to participate. And so they were compelled—again by civic virtue—to participate directly in the creation of a non-dominative state and to defend it from domination from abroad.

Again, these considerations were not made in abstraction but in the immediate context of work then needing to be done. Léon here is beginning to form a republicanism

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid 72. See also Levy and Applewhite 88

that responds immediately to its circumstances and whose principles are created in the process of political work.

The right of women to bear arms and form militias was a central preoccupation of the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women, of which Léon was a central member and occasional president, during the short span between its official formation in May 1793 and its proscription along with all other women's clubs by the Jacobins at the end of October. The first article of the Society's rules stated that "The Society's purpose is to be armed to rush to the defense of the fatherland; *citoyennes* are nonetheless free to arm themselves or not."<sup>40</sup> They hence argued for their inclusion in public citizenship not primarily through the vote, or through political representation, but through the right to aid in the defence of the nation—to be a part of a civically virtuous, publicly visible corps of patriots.

There were other means, however, by which the Society articulated—and worked to produce—its vision of a militant female republicanism. They expressed strong support for the implementation, and then vigorous enforcement of, the Terror and the repressive Law of Suspects against aristocrats, speculators, and hoarders of grain, in another petition made alongside the radical Cordeliers Club just after the Society's formation in May 1793:

Legislators, strike out at the speculators, the hoarders, and the egotistical merchants. A horrible plot exists to cause the people to die of hunger by setting an enormous price on goods. At the head of this plot is the mercantile aristocracy of an insolent caste, which wants to assimilate itself to royalty and to hoard all riches by forcing up the price of goods of prime necessity in order to satisfy its cupidity. Exterminate all these scoundrels; the Fatherland will be rich enough if it is left with the *sans-culottes* [that is, the urban poor] and their virtues.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> "The Regulations of the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women," in Levy et al 161

<sup>41</sup> "The Society of Revolutionary Republican Women Joins the Cordeliers to Denounce Traitors," in *ibid* 151

And then again in another petition to the National Convention in August:

No, it will not be said that the people, reduced to despair, were obliged to do justice themselves; you are going to give it to them by ruining all guilty administrators and by creating extraordinary tribunals in sufficient numbers so that patriots will say, as they leave for the front: “We are calm about the fates of our wives and children; we have seen all internal conspirators perish under the sword of the law.”<sup>42</sup>

In these cases the women of the Society participated in the creation and dissemination of radical, polemical text and speech that aimed both to show that they could so participate and to steer the conditions of the Revolution in the direction they desired. Their bloodthirsty rhetoric found expression in action and their actions supported the seriousness of their rhetoric.

Extraordinary tribunals and swords of the law, of course could—and did—severely impact the non-dominative freedom of those unfortunates who found themselves on the wrong side of them. And the image of civic virtue here is a blood-drenched one. Yet for all that this is still a species of republicanism: in this case, non-domination, virtue, and participation are all brought together in the demand for extraordinary violence, in both senses of the term “extraordinary.”

The Revolutionary Republican Women saw the formation of a republican ethic and a republican society as an ongoing project, and not one that could only be theorised about: to be undominated required a robust and terrifying participation in politics, a bellicose expression of their virtuous commitment to the ideals of the republic. Joan Landes describes how they “took to policing markets to root out hoarders’ and ‘engaged actively in surveillance’<sup>43</sup>—another expression of their desire to participate in the public sphere and shape what that sphere was like. These activities can be read philosophically

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<sup>42</sup> “Petition from the Revolutionary Republican Women to the National Convention of the Leadership of the Armies and the Law of Suspects,” in *ibid* 173-174

<sup>43</sup> Landes 141

too: to be undominated, the women asserted in their petitions and through their actions, meant the forcible destruction of those that tried to dominate them. If we see a deplorable contradiction here, they surely saw a hard-nosed practical response to concrete circumstances.

Landes describes how the women of the Society also worked to express a particular visible and public role for women, specifically, in the new republic. In September they successfully petitioned the Convention to pass a law requiring women to wear the republican tricolour cockade while in public.<sup>44</sup> Here lies another tangle: the quasi-feminist demand that women be able to participate in the public life of the republic—that their citizenship and belonging be visibly represented—and that they be able to demonstrate their civic virtue and commitment runs roughshod over the demand for non-domination. Other women, especially market women at Les Halles, did not appreciate this domination, and fought back—literally—against the women of the Society that tried to enforce it.<sup>45</sup> And so the expression of a women’s republicanism continues to turn, contested at every moment through text, through speech, through force and insurrection.

## **4.6 Conclusion**

These alternate models of republicanism, then, are not universally positive or admirable. They can be dark and violent. But still they represent how women of the Revolution who could not frequently be heard by traditional or decorous means still, in the public realm and with the tools they had, worked to produce a republicanism for themselves, and in this I think there is much that can be learned.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid 142

<sup>45</sup> Police Reports on Marketplace Disturbances Over the Cockade,” in Levy et al 199-201

Philosophically and politically, the understanding of freedom as non-domination that I have excavated here is one that takes freedom to be not a particular state of being, and certainly not one whose boundaries are codified in law, but an ongoing, collective project in which people must participate as full-fledged citizens. To be undominated on the terms of the Revolutionary Republican Women requires vigilance, practical action, and the means to defend oneself against threats: all these things can only be realised in the coming-together of people as collectives or communities where they can protect one another. The polity itself does not make people free: rather, the people's capacity to shape the polity, to be actively involved in the progress and direction of the society in which they are part, is what grounds their freedom.

As I noted in my discussion of Tomba and the Constitution of 1793, this capacity of the mass of the people to shape the state as they see fit is always there, latently, within them. To this extent freedom would appear to be a metaphysical fact: that the Declaration of 1789 pedantically circumscribed the cases in which political protest and assembly were permissible had no bearing on what actually happened, because the law had no relation to this capacity. A capacity, however, translates to nothing without political work, and it is in this insistence that political work must be done to secure the freedom of the people that the militant women of Paris are, I think, most instructive. Certainly, securing the writing of a Constitution that made itself subservient to the insurrectionary rights of the people was a victory—even if it was immediately suspended in a state of emergency—but one of the primary ways that it *was* a victory was that it could subsequently act as a locus and model for further political action. It was the action itself that, however briefly, seemed to be pushing things in the direction of liberation. Freedom, then, understood as the impossibility of one's domination by another, is something that people make for themselves.

These political considerations can also inform the methodological turns that I have made here. Of course, the insistence on the importance of political action can lead us directly to the attempt to bring that action into the realm of philosophy—not to denature action but, hopefully, to radicalise philosophy. The importance of collectives in ensuring political change, I think, gives us a good reason to seek ways to understand how intellectual currents can be expressed in the forms of social movements that exist beyond texts, and especially beyond texts written by individuals. Understanding political thought requires understanding all the things that drove it, and in many instances it was driven by the forceful action of groups of ordinary people, who used texts as justifications and models, retroactively and proactively. In finding a methodology that can adapt to this, I have only started to chart new paths forward. As always, there is more work to be done.

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## 5. Conclusion

In my introduction, I said that one of my aims in this dissertation was to contribute to an ongoing attempt at destabilising the so-called “standard narrative” of early modern philosophy: that narrative, familiar to every philosophy undergraduate, of the development from rationalism, through empiricism, to Kantianism. To do this means not just that we ought search for the overlooked philosophers of the past—though this is a valuable aspect of the trend, and especially when those new figures frustrate previous assumptions about who can be philosophers. It also means that we critically interrogate the questions and methods that have contributed to the narrative’s longevity and—until recently—seeming unassailability, not with the goal of declaring those questions and methods illegitimate but, more modestly, with the goal of finding alternate routes that were previously hidden. To understand the methodological and political architecture of the standard narrative is to understand what could now be otherwise.

In the preceding chapters I have presented several ways of engaging with the philosophy of the early modern period outside of this Kantian narrative. In my introduction I noted that I would do this in part by constructing a “separate, newer narrative” about the relations between people and societies from the perspective of those that were marginalised. Here at the end, we can see that narrative with more clarity.

By focusing on women, and in particular on their responses to their subjugation throughout the period, I have crafted a narrative that shows the relation of individuals to wider groups, as it is considered philosophically, becoming increasingly a political question: that is to say, the philosophers on which I have focused increasingly turned to the matters of social organisation and the distribution of power to find solutions to the ethical, aesthetic, and more broadly philosophical problems that they faced. Each

chapter gives a political response to its individual concerns, but over the arc of all of them politics as a practice grows to swallow metaphysics, ethics, aesthetics, and then philosophy itself. This, I hope, gives us a new way to think through early modern philosophy outside of the standard story—and as such thinking is itself a political project, the work of the philosophers I discuss can also provide a model for us in bringing political commitments into the history of philosophy.

This new narrative of the growth of the political has been a convenient way for the structure of the dissertation to mirror its methodological and philosophical preoccupations regarding the primacy of the political in reconstructing past thought in forms that are helpful to contemporary concerns. And this growing primacy of the political might even be persuasive as one way that the period can be read: a period that began with witch-trials and weapon-salves and that ended in secular revolution, with the materialism of Marx and *realpolitik* on the horizon. But I have not presented this narrative with the aim of encapsulating, representing, or even describing the contours of the political thought of the women of early modern Europe. I do not think, ultimately, that destabilising the standard narrative means setting up something new to take its place—though perhaps if we were to say many things should take its place we would be on firmer ground.

Rather, I have presented four chapters that each seek to understand the philosophy of the early modern period beyond the standard narrative—that is, that take steps on a number of routes forward. Here at the close I will draw out those routes more explicitly and then suggest further research to be undertaken in the same vein in future.

## **5.1 New Routes**

Firstly, then, and most obviously, by focusing on the work of women philosophers, writers, and activists of the early modern period we can immediately effect a radical break from the exclusively male canon handed to us by tradition. New faces with new perspectives can be added to the canon even without significantly altering the canon's biases in terms of content and genre. Cavendish, as we saw, was as concerned to describe the deep structure of the universe—what is in it and how it works—as any male metaphysician, and in her *Philosophical letters* she sets herself up as responding directly on such matters to Hobbes, Descartes, More, and Van Helmont.<sup>1</sup> We might also include Anne Conway, whose *Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* developed a monist metaphysics against Descartes that seems to have strongly influenced Leibniz.<sup>2</sup> And though the standard narrative has traditionally overlooked ethics, aesthetics, and politics in its reconstruction of the early modern period, this dissertation has presented women working on those issues too, which are after all now very much in the mainstream of philosophy: Suchon on freedom, de Grouchy on moral sentiments and political rights, Reynolds on aesthetics, Wollstonecraft on aesthetics and republicanism, de Gouges and the Revolutionary Republican Women on republicanism, political rights, and economic rights.

Though matters have been changing in recent decades, these writers and activists were for a long time stranded on the outside of the institutionalised history of philosophy. Even if we hold fairly conservative views of what constitutes or ought to constitute philosophy, these women—and many more—can help us to construct a narrative or picture of early modern philosophy that is far closer to the true intellectual complexion of the era than that of seven men stretched over two hundred years. Uncovering and engaging with the work of early modern women is hence one way of

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<sup>1</sup> Cavendish *PL* 234

<sup>2</sup> Coudert and Corse xxx

progressing beyond the standard narrative.<sup>3</sup> That project is very much ongoing, and I hope this dissertation can serve as one small part of it.

There are other ways that I have sought to progress beyond the traditional Kantian narrative, however. As I previously noted, throughout the dissertation I have tried to show how close political concerns are to each philosopher's treatment of their particular issues. The way that politics emerges as a primary concern differs in each chapter: for Cavendish the primacy of politics is an artefact of her belief that all things are living individuals who must therefore be socially organised in some way, while for the republican women of Chapter Four politics is front and centre as the method by which they will take control of their lives. In all cases, however, politics is inextricable from each woman's writing. In the process of thinking through the answers to questions in metaphysics, aesthetics, or ethics, we find ourselves thinking along the lines of social organisation: how societies can be organised; how different forms of organisation affect the individuals within them; how power can be distributed across them; how individuals can relate to that power; and, importantly, how the contestation of that power can generate new ways of thinking and relating.

Such thinking is alien to the early modern period of the standard narrative, which has tended to view its canonical figures as grappling alone with stable and permanent universal questions—what kinds of things exist? how do we know?—that are not sensitive to social circumstances. This might be a consequence of the homogeneity of the narrative's canon: as men, mostly of independent means, the seven great sages are less likely to have been subject to, or cognisant of, the psychic turbulences or material restrictions of patriarchal social structures than the likes of Suchon or Wollstonecraft, both of whom demonstrate a clear sensitivity to how thought can be bound up by

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<sup>3</sup> For a useful discussion of strategies for bringing women philosophers into the canons of early modern philosophy, and of the extent to which women were part of the intellectual networks of the time, see Bergès 381-97.

politics. And so another way that I have sought to move beyond the canonical narrative is by bringing such concerns, and the people that wrote about them, to the forefront of my engagement with early modern philosophy.

Finally, I have also tried to give political readings of the texts that I discuss throughout the dissertation. “Reading politically” can mean many things, and I briefly covered what I meant by it in the introduction: situating texts in the power structures they assume, and excavating those that they attack; understanding both the narratives that they place themselves in and those narratives in which they have come, subsequently, to be placed; testing out how texts might be placed in newer narratives, including contemporary ones for our own use. It is clear, I think, how such methodology seeks to move beyond the standard narrative—for one thing, it assumes that there are other narratives to be had, and actively searches for them. It also seeks to keep ideas closely in their immediate contexts, and in the contexts that they have accrued over the years, rather than treating them as abstract or timeless. It tries to understand how the answers to philosophical questions—and the questions themselves—are formed not just in the minds of individuals, or even of individuals in dialogue with one another, but in the structural conditions in which those individuals involuntarily find themselves. In this again I have tried to work in opposition to the image of the hermetic and heroic “great man” philosopher of the standard narrative.

## **5.2 Future Routes**

To bring the dissertation to an end, then, I will here briefly identify a few avenues for research to be undertaken in future, following some of the routes I have mentioned above or forging new ones. I will begin with content questions that have emerged during

the process of writing the dissertation, and then turn to new possibilities in methodology.

First, an underlying concern of many of the writers and activists of the dissertation that could fruitfully be the object of further study is that of the distinction between the masculinised public realm of political reason, abstract right, and civil participation, and the feminised private realm of domestic duty, personal ethics, and maternal care. The relation of these two realms to one another, and the relation of women to them, was complicated throughout the early modern period. Some of this complexity can be seen in Chapter Three, where I noted a distinction between two understandings of good aesthetic taste in the work of the Earl of Shaftesbury and Frances Reynolds: Shaftesbury argued for a masculinised, aristocratic taste that translated to virtue in the public realm, while Reynolds described taste as a matter of private feelings incubated by women in the private realm. Between and beyond these two opposed views was that of Wollstonecraft herself, who in rejecting the association—positive or negative—between women and taste also sought to move beyond that association that kept women tied to domestic life. To complicate matters further, Wollstonecraft associated the aristocracy—the constituents of “the public” for Shaftesbury, and the bearers of public virtue—with the same indolent and feminised aesthetic forms that Shaftesbury decried. For Wollstonecraft, perhaps, the public and private realms are best muddled together, their distinctions abandoned, with both men and women able to participate in public and to have rational domestic lives.

In Chapter Four the gendered contestation of the public realm is seen more explicitly. The women’s requests to form armed militias, de Gouges’ demand for political rights, and the direct actions of insurrection or revolt themselves were all attempts to seize control of the public and to make a presence there known. The men of the Parisian and French legislatures responded aggressively to ban women from public political

participation—from petitioning the assemblies and from forming their own political clubs.<sup>4</sup> In this case, then, the public realm is something that has to be created and defended, its boundaries policed. For women to act in public was to overrun these boundaries, to declare their full citizenship, and to reject the gender binaries that were just then being coded into the new republic.

In the seventeenth century the distinction is more inchoate. But there are promising avenues in the work of—for instance—the Venetian nun Arcangela Tarabotti, who wrote fervently against the practice of imprisoning unwanted daughters in convents but whose solution to the practice, rather than a more thoroughgoing liberation of women, was to allow daughters to “enjoy a true Christian education at home accompanied by modest retirement from the world.”<sup>5</sup> The idea that women should or could be *of* the world seems remote. More complicated still are Suchon’s arguments for the “Neutralist” life in *The Celibate Life Freely Chosen*, which arguably blend together elements of public and private life.<sup>6</sup> Drawing together these disparate threads from the seventeenth century, and following them to the great contests over the public realm at the end of the eighteenth, requires a great deal more study.

A related avenue for further research concerns the role that social class plays in the work of the women writers of the early modern period. As we already saw, Shaftesbury linked the public realm directly to the aristocracy; Wollstonecraft, by contrast, attacked the aristocracy and instead defended a robust, austere rationalism that

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<sup>4</sup> “Does the honesty of woman allow her to display herself in public and to struggle against men? to argue in full view of a public about questions on which the salvation of the republic depends? In general, women are ill suited for elevated thoughts and serious meditations...” “The National Convention Outlaws Clubs and Popular Societies of Women” in Levy et al 216

<sup>5</sup> Tarabotti 42

<sup>6</sup> For Suchon, the celibate life is one that is neither a married nor religious life, but one “without commitments.” There is however a great deal of variance in how much those living the celibate life might involve themselves in the outside world. See, for instance, “On Different Kinds of Lives without Commitments,” Suchon 248-55. She also argues that institutionalising the celibate life is good for society in general: “We must serve the public good, and no one can do that with greater ease than those without commitments,” Suchon 256.

she associated with the middle classes. Her innovation in both her anti-aristocracy and anti-patriarchal polemics was to break apart the naturalised association of women and the middle class, defended with different moral valences by both Shaftesbury and Reynolds: this allowed her to claim that the middle classes were the true bearers of “masculine” Enlightenment values and that such values were in principle open to women as well. As I noted in Chapter Three, the revolutionary change she foresaw for society was one in which the rational virtue of middle class men was open to everyone, and the irrational sentiment of the aristocracy—which had the effect, Wollstonecraft thought, of bewitching the working class, making them impotent to affect change<sup>7</sup>—was done away with.

Middle class virtue was hence the route to women’s liberation for Wollstonecraft. For the working class Revolutionary Republican Women, however, this proved insufficient. As we saw in Chapter Four, their coupling together of economic and political concerns—in the bread riots, for instance, but also in their demand that the Terror be enforced against “speculators, hoarders, and [...] egotistical merchants”<sup>8</sup>—was decried as counter-revolutionary in the Jacobin Club.<sup>9</sup> But for the radical women of the Revolution the institution of a liberal capitalist democracy did not go far enough: they saw, from the position of people that had to work for the food of themselves and their families, that to really ensure their new rights meant a reorganisation of the class structure of society as much as of the government. And this classed element of their resistance was part of their downfall.

These are just the beginnings of an attempt to tease out the intricacies of the relation between class politics and pro-women politics in the early modern period. Such

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Wollstonecraft 59-60

<sup>8</sup> “The Society of Revolutionary Republican Women Joins the Cordeliers to Denounce Traitors,” in Levy et al 151

<sup>9</sup> *Journal historique et politique*, no. 69, 18 September 1793. Cited in Rose 60 note 28



a project would also have to look back to the seventeenth century, to see how class conflict and women's liberation interacted in thought then too. Much work could yet be done.

Finally, a quick look toward future methodologies. In Chapter Four, I argued for a methodology in the history of philosophy away from the "great man" view of the standard narrative. There are, I think, good political and moral reasons for abandoning, or at least looking beyond, this way of structuring our history: as I said in Chapter Two, the construction of the individual as an asocial singularity is often criticised as implicitly masculine, and even if this image is a little caricatured we might do well to use such critiques as a route toward thinking differently. This desire to move beyond the "great man" helped motivate the move toward a philosophy of crowds and revolt in Chapter Four, but it also affords us new opportunities in how we engage with the named philosophers of the past.

Rather than treat such philosophers as hermetic, *sui generis* figures, whose thought was shaped only by their engagement with the deep structures of the universe, the view—expressed throughout the dissertation—that individuals and their work are complicated assemblages, sensitive to social and political circumstance, could lead us in new directions. We might, where possible, want to move yet deeper into the archives to find the ways that the seemingly abstracted thoughts in philosophical texts might have been influenced by more practical day-to-day concerns and relationships. There are multiple good examples of such work in recent scholarship on Emilie du Châtelet, among others.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For contextual studies of du Châtelet see, for example, Nagel 97-112, Hutton 515-31, and Winter 173-206, especially 186-90; Larsen 105-26 for an analysis of the epistolary relationship between Marie de Gournay and Anna Maria van Schurman; and Bergès 386-9 on the exigencies of women's publication and intellectual activity in the early modern period.

Alongside this opportunity, however, we are afforded another chance for pluralism. Abandoning the hermetic “great man” philosopher also allows us to be less beholden to authorial intention in our interpretations of the works of the past. In Chapter Three, for instance, I sought not to give a fulsome account of Wollstonecraft’s views on aesthetics but to situate the views I found in the *Vindications* in their intellectual and political contexts. Though Wollstonecraft surely would deserve a place in a true monumentalist survey of the intellectual history of the period, my intention in the chapter was not to treat her as an honorary female “great man” but as a political actor and a producer of political texts: texts that can even, perhaps, have meanings in their contexts or ours that are beyond their authorship. Remaining open to this possibility might radically change how we read the texts of the past. The interpretations I presented throughout this dissertation only tentatively begin down this path.

Of course, as I already noted, the move away from “great man” history of philosophy is most radically made in Chapter Four, which not only does away with the “man” side of the formula but also searches for philosophical ideas beyond individualised greatness. In part this is because of necessity: one cannot easily get a fix on the intentions or beliefs of the great majority of the radical women of the French Revolution. But it is also reflective of an attempt on my part to do philosophy, or the history of philosophy, at a remove from not just the content of the standard narrative—its preoccupation with particular figures and particular questions—but also its form. Due to the work of recent decades to move away from the standard narrative, we need no longer feel bound to interpret only individuals, or only scholars in particular lines of lineage, or only texts.

This has the advantage of not just replacing the standard narrative with another that changes its faces but keeps its methods and commitments. But though I think such a radical break is necessary I do not think it needs to be destructive. We have all learned

and will continue to learn much from the standard narrative; and though I have been guided by a new methodology I think that my interpretations are plausible enough on their own or by conventional lights. Moving forward, however, we are afforded an opportunity to approach the history of the early modern period with more pluralism, more collectivity, and more politics. I think this will help us to produce more interesting and even more accurate narratives of the history of thought. And it shows us that like the societies and governments I have discussed, the history of our discipline is the product of collective, politically-engaged, and practical action. Shifting the standard narrative means in part allowing that we are free to do so.

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