Reason and Experience In Women's responses to Descartes and Locke

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1 Synonyms (if possible)

Thought, rationality, sensation, mind, sensibility

2 Related Topics

Mind and body; rationalism; empiricism; dualism; monism; feminist epistemology.

3 Definition/Introduction

From the nineteenth to the twentieth century, commentators characteristically divided the epistemological trends of the seventeenth century into two streams, the rationalists and empiricists. Cartesian rationalism, in particular, was associated with a distinctive form of metaphysical dualism and a sharp mind/body divide. Reason was not only claimed to be a more reliable source of knowledge than sensory experience, it provided access to an immaterial realm of immutable truths. Having been educated in this tradition, a significant group of late twentieth century feminist interpreters of early modern epistemology and metaphysics argued, from a number of perspectives, that Cartesian dualism, with its associated high evaluation of pure reason, was entangled with metaphorical and psychological tendencies that debased the bodily, sensual, emotional, and natural features of existence. The latter were marked feminine, while reason and the mind were elevated and conceptualized as masculine. These feminists argued that, at least metaphorically, rationalism excluded women. In response to such claims, other scholars pointed out that Cartesian rationalism had been attractive to many early modern women interested in philosophy, and that the idea of an immaterial mind or soul, which has no sex, fostered claims for the intellectual equality of the sexes. More recent detailed scholarship into the philosophical writings of early modern women reveals that many were, in fact, suspicious of philosophies that imposed a sharp opposition between reason and experience, or mind and body. Reading the works of these women demonstrates that even when influenced by Descartes, women philosophers questioned Cartesian forms of dualism, developing their own theories of the relationship between reason, sense perception, and knowledge. The complexity

and variety of the positions they developed highlights the crudity of the historiographic tendencies to read historical texts through simple dichotomies such as rationalism and empiricism.

4 Main Text

1. Reason and Experience in Feminist Historians of the Early Modern period

Feminist theory within the Western academy, during the late twentieth century, drew heavily on contemporary Marxist, psychoanalytic, and post-structuralist tendencies within left-wing philosophy in order to develop feminist standpoint theory and a feminist critique of male-authored philosophy as patriarchal ideology. Characteristic essays in Harding and Hintikka's seminal collection, *Discovering Reality* claimed that there are different masculine and feminine ways of knowing and built on psychoanalytic object relations theory to develop accounts of gender difference that identified masculine and feminine epistemological standpoints, proposing a relational feminine experience opposed to the abstract rationality of masculine science (Harding and Hintikka 1983). Earlier, in France, during the 1970s, Luce Irigaray had adapted Lacanian psychoanalytic themes to feminist purposes, in order to postulate a repressed feminine unconscious incapable of expressing itself in rational symbolic language (Irigaray 1985). Building on philosophy's own self-characterization, as a rational discourse grounded in abstract argument, feminist critics of the history of philosophy began to represent it as built on an ideal of reason that was fundamentally masculine and inimical to the easy inclusion of women (Lloyd 1984; Bordo 1987).

These overarching claims were soon challenged by other feminist scholars, who argued that reason, as conceptualized by historical women philosophers, did not have the features it was claimed to exemplify in these accounts. Some argued that, in fact, Cartesian method had helped foster the intellectual liberation of women by emphasizing that Latin learning was not necessary for the acquisition of knowledge and that the mind has no sex (Smith 1982; Perry 1985; Atherton 1993). They pointed out that the early modern period witnessed a flourishing of philosophical engagement by women, as exemplified in Descartes's correspondence with Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia, and his fateful engagement to discuss philosophy with Queen Christina of Sweden. Leibniz owed his employment to the Electress Sophie of Hanover, and corresponded on philosophical issues with her and her daughter, Sophie Charlotte, who became Queen of Prussia (Strickland 2011). During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in France, Italy, Great Britain, and the many principalities and municipalities of Germany and the Netherlands, elite and middle-class women discussed philosophy and the new sciences, participating in the translation, publication, and dissemination of scientific and philosophical works. Recently, a growing movement has developed that aims to retrieve the philosophical contributions of such women, and subsequent scholarship reveals that they subscribed to a rich variety of metaphysical and epistemological positions that belie the simplistic dualisms that had structured standard histories of philosophy.

2. Reason and Experience in women philosophers of the early-modern period

Cartesian method has been identified as intellectually liberating for women, and in 1673 it inspired at least one man to critique of the prejudices that prevented women from pursuing all the intellectual and professional avenues open to men (Poullain de la Barre 2015). However, Descartes's influence on the development of feminist ideas can be over stated. Already at the beginning of the fifteenth century, Christine de Pizan had questioned the authority of the ancients, appealing to reason and experience in

order to refute the Aristotelian representation of women as men's intellectual and moral inferiors. Augustinian doctrine represented the soul as an immaterial element, implanted in the body by God, and this orthodoxy allowed her to emphasize that the soul is immaterial, so it has no sex, and that it is through the possession of a soul that women and men are made in the image of God (Pizan 1999). By the time Descartes published the *Discourse on Method* (1637) a rich tradition of female authored defenses of women's intellectual and moral equality with men already existed, including Marie de Gournay's *Equality of Men and Women* (1622), and he recognized women's capacity to engage with his philosophy, cultivating their interest by publishing in French as well as in Latin (Gournay 2002). Women in previous centuries had developed a number of religious and philosophical positions, usually accepting both reason and experience as sources of knowledge, but often emphasizing the limits of human knowledge and turning towards Socratic ignorance, religious illumination, or faith in God (Navarre 1989). For many women the most important epistemological tension was not that between the relative authority of reason and experience, but that between beliefs grounded in frail human faculties and those based on faith and revelation. Similar impulses can be detected among later women, who engaged with Descartes's theories.

2.1 Reason and Experience in Elizabeth of Bohemia

Applying his method of doubt, Descartes had convinced himself that he was a thinking thing, and then argued further that, as a thinking thing, he was something distinct from his body. As thinking, he was capable of considering ideas, and on the basis of his clear and distinct ideas, of gaining knowledge. But this duality of thinking substance and bodily being raised as many epistemological and metaphysical problems as it solved. For most of the ideas that we acquire, we acquire through the senses, that is through the body. And the outcome of our thinking manifests itself in decision and action. Our self understanding as moral agents involves representing ourselves as responsible for the actions that we choose to undertake on the basis of reasoning, yet Descartes's dualism threatens to undermine the connection between thought and action. In her correspondence with Descartes, Elizabeth raises this problem asking both, how an immaterial, non-extended, thinking substance 'can determine the bodily spirits in order to bring about voluntary actions' and how it can 'be moved by' material substance (Shapiro 2007, 61, 68). She observes that, if matter provides the soul with information, then it must be intelligent, which Descartes cannot allow. Moreover, he himself admits that bodily disturbances can distort our reasoning, but it is incomprehensible how this occurs, on the hypothesis of strict dualism.

In a following letter Descartes admits that we know of the interaction of thought and action through the senses, but fails to explain how this commonsense knowledge is compatible with his metaphysical conclusions. In effect, he admits that his ideas are contradictory, and encourages Elizabeth not to think too hard about the contradiction, but having been convinced by the reasoning that results in his conclusion that mind and body are distinct, to remember this result, despite its conflict with common sense (Shapiro 2007, 69-71). Elizabeth then chides him, pointing out that were he pursuing his own method of clear and distinct ideas, the fact that his reasoning results in such a confused idea of the soul, as both immaterial and interacting with matter, ought to make him doubt the conclusion that the soul is completely immaterial. She addresses him as 'you who alone who have kept me from being a skeptic' challenging him to show how the conflict between reason and experience can be resolved, in order to continue to preserve her from skepticism (Shapiro 2007, 72). In later letters, in which they discuss Seneca's ideas concerning virtue and the good life, the common sense interaction between the body and soul is assumed, and Descartes attempts to convince Elizabeth that it is sufficient for virtue that one should do what one believes to be the best, having reasoned about the matter to the best of one's abilities. She continues to voice some skepticism, noting that 'to err is as natural to man as to be sick' so happiness is not something that is within the will's control (Shapiro 2007, 100). By the end of the correspondence, although she

flatters Descartes with compliments, she still doubts whether an ordinary human whose faculties are finite can avoid mistakes and regrets, and she falls back on knowledge of the existence of God and faith in his being the ultimate cause of human action as the only consolation for the mishaps caused by humanity (Shapiro 2007, 114). In judging that it is 'very impertinent for finite persons to judge the final cause of the actions of an infinite being' and in despairing of the contradiction posed by the belief in God's omnipotence and our experience of the freedom of the will, she implicitly reverts to the kind of skepticism with regard to the powers of human intellectual faculties, both reason and experience, that had been expressed by her distant ancestress, Marguerite of Navarre, and this is consistent with her later retreat as abbess of a Protestant convent (Shapiro 2007, 124, 127). In a later letter from that convent to the Quaker, Robert Barclay, she deems herself very spiritually poor and naked, saying that all her happiness is in knowing that she is so, and that whatever she has studied is but dirt in comparison to the knowledge of Christ (Shapiro 2007, 188).

2.2 Reason and Experience in Margaret Cavendish

Whereas Elizabeth posed pertinent problems for Cartesian dualism, which Descartes could not solve, Margaret Cavendish was impertinent enough to develop her own philosophical system, rejecting both the mechanical, atomist materialism found in Hobbes, and the metaphysical dualism of Descartes, in favor of a vitalist mind/body monism that allowed for different kinds of matter, rational, sensitive, and inanimate (Cavendish 2001; Broad 2002, 44). For her, nature, which she deems feminine, is self-moving and animate, and she anticipates some of the elements of late twentieth century feminist critiques of male authored philosophy, suggesting, that 'man has a great spleen against self-moving corporeal nature, although himself is part of her, and the reason is his ambition; for he would fain be supreme, and above all other creatures, as more towards a divine nature: he would be a God, if arguments could make him such' (Cavendish 2001, 209). The idea of reason, which transcends nature, she might have said, is an expression of a masculine need to separate from the mother. Equally, when she does away with the problem of immaterial souls she adopts gendered language, pointing out that it is just as probable that God gave nature a self-moving power, as that he created 'a Spiritual Nurse, to teach matter to go or move' (Cavendish 1664, 195; Broad 2002, 58).

Perception, or sense experience, is of material things, 'no part of nature (her parts being corporeal) can perceive an immaterial; because it is impossible to have a perception of that which is not perceptible, as not being an object fit or proper for corporeal perception'(Cavendish 2001, 89). Corporeal perception, she suggests, occurs through what she calls 'patterning' which involves the perceiving agent receiving an impression or copy of the thing patterned (Cavendish 2001, 186-7). But this does not result in Cavendish accepting sensation as a necessarily reliable source of knowledge. She claims that rational knowledge is more noble than sensitive knowledge, so reason has to direct how the senses work (Cavendish 2001, 196). However, she leaves us in the dark as to how rational knowledge differs from that provided by sensation, and since she is not a complete monist of the Spinozistic kind, and accepts that God is outside nature and immaterial, there is a large gap in her system with regard to an explanation of our acquisition of the idea of God (Cunning 2017).

Cavendish accepts the evidence of common sense, and in a move that is quite uncharacteristic for her time, adopts the conclusion of the modus tolens argument that Elizabeth had suggested to Descartes. If minds were completely separate from bodies, then it would be mysterious how they could determine bodily actions though reasoning, or how they could be influenced by corporeal sensation. Since it is clear that minds do cause action and are influenced by sensation, they must be corporeal and not completely separate from bodies. Despite the lacunae in her system, her vitalist mind/body monism has much to recommend it from the point of view of modern science.

2.3 Reason and Experience in Anne Conway and Mary Astell

Both Anne Conway and Mary Astell were influenced by Cambridge Platonists, the first being the pupil of Henry More, who developed a highly Platonic version of rational theology, the second also being influenced by More. More's commitment to mind/body dualism preceded his engagement with Descartes, deriving directly from Neo-Platonism, but his female student studied with him after he had discovered Descartes and was deeply influenced by Descartes's method, relying heavily on *a priori* reasoning as a source of knowledge. Conway, ultimately moved away from both Descartes' and More's metaphysics, and solved the problem of mind/body interaction by denying that there is such a thing as inert matter, thus developing a kind of spiritual mind/body monism (Conway 1996).

Although mind/body monism was a fairly rare metaphysical position during the seventeenth century, it is striking that a version of it was expounded by two of the equally rare early modern female philosophers. Both Conway and Cavendish take minds and bodies to be modifications of a single substance. Unlike Cavendish, who assumes that our bodies are material, and concludes that therefore perception and thinking must also be so, Conway begins from the attributes of an infinite, active, and perfectly good God and agues that it would not be consistent with His nature to have produced dead, inert, finite matter. 'Since every creature shares certain attributes with God, I ask what attribute produces dead matter or body, which is incapable of life and sense for eternity' (Conway 1996, 7.2). Here she is reacting to Henry More's dualism. He makes matter completely dead and inert, but in doing so, he deprives it of any clear purpose. He then introduces an active Spirit of Nature which moves the dead matter. Conway, in effect, recognizes that retaining Descartes's inert, dead matter is then pointless. God's creations act on us, cause ideas, sensations, and passions, so cannot be completely inert.

Like Cavendish, Conway avoids complete monism, arguing that there are three substances, an infinite, eternal, and immutable Creator, God, who is the source of the infinite and mutable created substance, which encompasses both minds and bodies, and also a mediating substance, that she calls Christ, which is mutable but can only change towards perfection (Hutton 2004; Broad 2002, 65-89; Grey 2017). Unlike Cavendish, Conway does not show a great deal of interest in the mechanism of sense perception, or the relationship between ideas apparently derived from the senses, and our capacity to reason, which remain under theorized.

The primary source of Mary Astell's engagement with Cambridge Platonism was John Norris, who, like Henry More, accepted that matter is completely dead and inert. This did not lead him to postulate a Spirit of Nature, as More had done, or to reject mind/body dualism like Conway, instead he followed Malebranche and denied that the mind and body interact. But, as Conway had already seen, if matter plays no active role in the universe, why would God have created it? This question is particularly pertinent for a writer like Astell, whose focus is on practical philosophy, and who aspired to offer women advice on improving themselves as moral creatures and achieving happiness. Some sensations are pleasurable, others painful, we are beset with desires for approval, friendship etc. If the sensations and passions which move us are immaterial entities, only occasioned by the presence of certain arrangements of matter, why would God, who does nothing in vain, have created matter at all? In one letter Astell uses this argument to criticize Norris's occasionalism, and appears to favor More's introduction of a mediating Spirit of Nature (Astell and Norris 1695, 278-82) (Broad 2002, 104-5). Scholars continue to debate whether she ultimately adopts a mind/body dualism that is closer to Descartes' position (Broad 2015, 63-83). What is clear is that she nevertheless follows Norris in accepting a doctrine that he derives from his occasionalism, which is that God alone should be the object of our love. In order to make this surprising conclusion more appealing, they distinguished between a love of desire and a love of benevolence, and

allow that we may take the second attitude to things of this world. However, the direction of our will should be determined by God, as the one infinitely good, source of all being.

2.4 Reason and Experience in Damaris Masham and Catharine Trotter Cockburn

Following Locke, Damaris Masham and Catharine Cockburn accept that we derive a great deal of knowledge of the world through sensation, and that God would not have made things of this world objects of pleasure and desire had he not intended us to love or desire them. Developing an argument that is reminiscent of Astell's own criticism of Norris's occasionalism, Masham objects to the claim that we should love God alone, since it makes the strong inclinations that we have to love God's creatures otiose. Indeed, Scripture requires us to love our neighbor as we love ourselves, which conflicts with the idea that we should love God alone (Masham 1696; Frankel 1989). By rehabilitating ordinary experience, Lockeans provided matter with a purpose.

Nevertheless, although Locke rejected the Platonist or Cartesian view that we have innate ideas or innate knowledge of principles, the defense of his ideas by Catharine Cockburn reveals that there were aspects of his thought that implicitly relied on assumptions that were not tenable from the point of view of a pure empiricism. The Cambridge Platonists were intellectualist theists, who argued for the existence of immutable moral truths, that can be known by reason. Locke's own mature position in relation to the debate over voluntarism and intellectualism continues to be debated. But there is no doubt that Cockburn, whose defense of him in 1702 he endorsed, assumed that he believed that there is a law of nature, knowable by reason, and by reflection on the ideas we gain from sensation and reflection (Cockburn 1702). This is in line with Locke's claim in the *Essay* that the principles of morality could, if care was taken, be shown to be as incontestable as those of mathematics. Cockburn set out to defend the compatibility of objective morality with Locke's account of the origin of our ideas in sensation and reflection, against a critic who complained that without the postulate of innate knowledge, we could have no assurance of the immateriality of the soul, the goodness of God, or the objectivity of moral truth. Ultimately, she decided that, in order to retain a belief in the existence of immutable moral truth, it was necessary to accept, with Samuel Clarke, that ideas of the natures of things, which ground morality, exist eternally in the mind of God (Cockburn 1751, 1:56, note f). This retreat towards a highly Platonist metaphysics of morals caused an early critic to dismiss her as highly confused (Stephen 1959-1960). We should, however, recognize that Cockburn's pertinent reasoning, like Elizabeth's questioning, reveals the tensions and confusions within the philosophies to which they had been introduced. The simple characterization of Descartes as a rationalist overlooks how, in the light of Elizabeth's questioning, he took seriously the problems to be faced in explaining how the sensations and passions move us. The simple characterization of Locke as an empiricist is undermined when reading Cockburn's attempt to defend his belief in objective morality.

5 Cross-References

Dualism; Mind-Body Interaction; Perception; Reason; Occasionalism; Emotions, Passions, and Affections; Bohemia, Elizabeth of; Cavendish; Conway, Empiricism; Mind and Body, Women on.

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