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# MINDS AND BODIES: EARLY MODERN SOCIAL JUSTICE

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## Abstract

In *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* parts I and II, Mary Astell argues that social conditioning impacts women's self-image in such a way as to prevent them from striving for scholarly achievement. Astell's solution is to allow women to withdraw from society into dedicated schools for women and by women, as an alternative to marriage and family life. In this paper, I will explore some of the implications of that argument, how it might be expanded to other marginalized populations, and argue that despite Astell's proposed solution being proven to create at least as many problems as it solves, the groundwork laid in her arguments can form a basis for a functional model of educational justice today. We have learned that "separate, but equal" education is not a solution to the problem of "achievement gaps" between privileged and marginalized populations. If social conditioning impacts educational drive and achievement for women, then it also impacts other oppressed populations. I maintain that subverting this structural oppression is a key to dismantling it and achieving educational justice. The typical foundations for educational justice come from the imperative that education makes better citizens or that education allows further education on a topic. I maintain that if the goal is educational justice, it is necessary to overcome the determinants of social conditioning.

## Minds and Bodies: Early Modern Social Justice

### *Introduction*

René Descartes is frequently cited as the "father of modern philosophy". His impact upon the field is challenging to overstate as there are still philosophers wrestling with the questions he raised some four centuries ago. Much less well known is Mary Astell, said to be the "first English feminist" (Batchelor, 2002). Though she was not progressive by today's standards, being a royalist and both politically and religiously conservative, still she wrote and published in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries on the topic of women's intellectual advancement and equality of reason. While Descartes himself expressed a belief in equality between the sexes, his concept of mind/body dualism has often been cited by scholars as contributory to the systemic, institutional oppression of women, on the basis of their being

deemed less rational, and more closely affiliated with the body and its sensual nature than men. Much scholarship has been done on this topic, and a full exploration of that connection is outside the scope of this paper, but a brief survey will be included for context. The reader is encouraged to examine more closely the works referenced for a detailed treatment of that topic. Astell presented a philosophical account of minds and bodies that differed significantly from that offered by Descartes, holding that humans are a *union* of mind and body, and that one can act upon the other. She posits a metaphysics of differentiated individuals, each with unique abilities, wherein experience directly impacts an individual's ability to reason. It is upon this ground that she builds the argument that women are no less capable of reason than men, but that social conditioning leads them to believe – and thus act as if – they are. In this paper, I will explore Astell's arguments in contrast with those of Descartes to explicate this early modern example of a social justice orientated epistemology and some of its implications, as well as to explore the applicability of her concepts today.

### *Mind Body Dualism*

In his *Discourse on the Method*, René Descartes clearly and definitively established mind/body dualism: “this me — this soul that makes me what I am — is entirely distinct from the body, is easier to know than the body, and would still be just what it is even if the body didn't exist” (Descartes, p. 15). In the culmination of *Meditations on First Philosophy*, he revisited this, writing:

My essence consists entirely in my being a thinking thing. [...] because on the one hand I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, insofar as I am merely a thinking thing and not an extended thing, and because on the other hand I have a distinct idea of a body, insofar as it is merely an extended thing and not a thinking thing, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it. (p. 51)

Though mind/body dualism was hardly a new way of thinking about being, Descartes' formulation of the idea came to be broadly embraced. A positive result of this was the furtherance of medicine. A doctrine of the Catholic Church called “the resurrection of the body” maintains that for a person to go to Heaven at the Resurrection, the body needs to be intact. As a result of this doctrine, many countries prohibited or severely limited the study of anatomy through dissection. Dr. Neeta Mehta, in her article, “Mind-body Dualism: A Critique from a Health Perspective”, writes: “[T]here was a religious prohibition on the study of human anatomy through dissection. Descartes, through mind-body dualism, demythologized body and handed over its study to medicine” (Mehta, 2011). While this is certainly a positive outcome, not every use of Descartes' work was so benign. As Elizabeth V. Spelman writes:

[W]hen one recalls that the Western philosophical tradition has not been noted for its celebration of the body, and that women's nature and women's lives have long been associated with the body and bodily functions, then a question is suggested. What connection might there be between attitudes toward the body and attitudes toward women? (1982, p. 110)

Dr. Sarah E. Johnson has an answer to Spelman's question: "As allegedly more subject to the body than men were, women possessed less reason and lacked control over their passions, determined in large part, of course, by the body's humoural balance" (p. 12). Johnson goes on to explain that "[n]ot only were women more bodily than men, but their bodies were also physiologically inferior [...] matching their easily swayed mental constitutions" (2014, p. 12). Whilst this misogyny did not originate with Descartes, his formulation of mind/body dualism at the very least contributed to the justifications for the attitude toward women, and thus to the oppression engaged in under such justification. Genevieve Lloyd provides a stark example, quoting Hegel:

Women are educated – who knows how? – as it were by breathing in ideas, by living rather than by acquiring knowledge. The status of manhood, on the other hand, is attained only by the stress of thought and much technical exertion. (qtd. in Lloyd, 38)

Lloyd adds, "In western thought, maleness has been seen as itself an achievement, attained by breaking away from the more 'natural' condition of women" (1984, p. 38). This is not to say that these justifications have ever been required in human history to fuel prejudice against any marginalized group – in fact, it is often that these arguments are posed as a means of legitimizing already extant prejudices. Just as with the prejudice against Black people in the writings of the early modern period of philosophy – as explored by many critical race theorists, including Emmanuel Eze, Barbara Hall, and Debra Nails, just to name a few – misogyny has a long history of pseudo-scientific and ostensibly "rational" arguments made by predominantly white men to attach a veneer of reason to a markedly unenlightened emotional reaction to perceived threats to their hegemony. The very concept of "reason" carries a bias toward white, European masculinity.

### *Equality and Gendering of Reason*

We can look back as far as Pythagoras and see "female" equated with "bad", and "male" with "good" in his famous table of opposites. Phyllis Rooney, in "Gendered Reason: Sex Metaphor and Conceptions of Reason," writes that, with the rise of Enlightenment ideals, many of the images of male as dominant, causal, and active and female as incomplete, in subjugation, and passive may appear to be left behind, "but we get what is at best a shift in the articulated, explicit claims about reason and mind" (p. 82). She goes on to note that Descartes "allowed that 'even women' could develop his rational method." In spite of Descartes' generosity toward women, Susan Bordo finds in Descartes a culmination of a "rebirthing of nature (as machine) and knowledge (as objectivity)", resulting in a "supermasculinized model of knowledge in which detachment, clarity, and transcendence of the body are all key requirements" (p. 50). Genevieve Lloyd delves into this concept in her book, *Man of Reason: "Male" and "Female" in Western Philosophy*. She writes, "through [Descartes'] philosophy, Reason took on special associations with the realm of pure thought, which provides the foundations of science, and with the deductive ratiocination which was of the essence of his method" (p. 49). She continues:

We owe to Descartes an influential and pervasive theory of mind, which provides support for a powerful version of the sexual division of mental labour. Women have been assigned responsibility for that realm of the sensuous which the Cartesian Man of Reason must transcend, if he is to have true knowledge of things. (1984, p. 50)

This “Cartesian Man of Reason” is one who has sufficient free time to spend long periods in meditation, who holds fast to reason (the realm of the mind), as opposed to non-reason (the realm of the body), he not only judges, but specifically judges *well*, and, as Descartes enumerates in his *Discourse on Method*, he is capable of “telling the true from the false”; he is able to learn anything just as well as anyone else if they simply take their thoughts along the appropriate path (p. 1). Though Descartes held that “even women” could develop his rational method, common sentiment of the day held that women “are naturally incapable of acting prudently” and “necessarily determined to folly” (Astell, 2014). Here is enshrined the binary between mind and body, and thus, between men and women.

### *Mind/Body Unions*

In contrast to Descartes’ dualism, Mary Astell asserts that people are unions of minds and bodies. In *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, she writes: “We know and feel the Union between our Soul and Body, but who amongst us sees so clearly, as to find out with Certitude and Exactness, the secret ties which unite two such different Substances, or how they are able to act upon each other” (Astell, 1994, 1994, p. 101)?

If all people are unions of both mind and body, then the marginalization of women on the basis of their ‘natural condition’ is revealed as problematic. Rather than being creatures of ‘pure reason’, men are just as ‘bodily’ as women, just as susceptible to passions, tempers, and the other aspects of their physicality as impedances to their reason. It is upon this ground that Astell builds her argument that women are no less capable of reason than men. But if this is so, how do we explain the gross disproportionality of educational achievement between men and women during the early modern period? According to Astell, it is nothing more than the natural result of the oppression resulting from the belief in mind/body dualism, and the nature of women as “more bodily than men.”

### *Social Conditioning and its Effects upon Reason*

Astell argues that social conditioning is the cause of an achievement gap between women and men, educationally. In responding to the accusation that “women are naturally incapable of acting prudently or that they are necessarily determined to folly” she writes:

The incapacity, if there be any, is acquired, not natural . . . The cause therefore of the defects we labor under is, if not wholly, yet at least in the first place, to be ascribed to the mistakes of our education which . . . spreads its ill influence through all our lives. (Astell, 2014, pp. 55-56)

She goes on to more clearly, and rather acerbically, cast the blame at the feet of patriarchal society:

Women are from their very infancy debarred those advantages with the want of which they are afterwards reproached and nursed up in those vices which will hereafter be upbraided to them, so partial are men as to expect brick where they afford no straw and so abundantly civil as to take care we should make good that obliging epithet of *ignorant* which out of an excess of good manners they are pleased to bestow on us! (2014, p. 56)

Her argument is that experiences, particularly experiences of oppression and degradation, train a person to believe that all they are capable of is that to which they are constantly being told they are limited. It is popular, particularly in educational circles, to sum this up as “students rise (or fall) to the level of expectations.” The majority of women in her day were uneducated and did not actively seek out education, not because they were incapable of being educated, but because society had conditioned them to believe that God created them as “lesser” and incapable. In such a circumstance, Astell asserts that women adopt the notion that they are constantly being told, that they are “naturally proud and vain,” and do not strive beyond that. This leads into a feedback loop, wherein women do not strive, thus they do not achieve, confirming the perception that they are incapable of achievement, and therefore, opportunities for self-improvement are “wasted” on them. This scenario can easily be seen in many times and places over human history, continuing to the present day, and women are by no means the only victims of such oppression.

### *Social Justice Implications of the Effects of Social Conditioning*

This feedback loop happens to people occupying many other axes of oppression. We speak today of achievement gaps in inner city schools. We segregate differently abled students into “special education” classes, regardless of the nature or severity of their differentiation of ability. We had a Supreme Court Justice commenting about those who believe that “it does not benefit African-Americans to get them into [elite universities] where they do not do well, as opposed to having them go to a less-advanced school, [...] where they do well” (Fisher v. UT Austin, 2015). Astell’s solution was to establish separate schools for women, but United States history has clearly demonstrated the results of a “separate but equal” educational system. How, then, can this situation – which is obviously still a problem today – be resolved?

### *Socially Conscious Education*

Any attempt to rectify the structural injustice built into educational models needs to address both sides of this issue. José Medina, in his book, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations*, asserts that the experience of being oppressed can, in some ways, present an epistemic advantage, in that oppression provokes the formation of learning processes that the privileged have less opportunity to develop. The oppressed, he writes, “tend to be better listeners, having a *more acute attentiveness to hermeneutical gaps*” (Medina, 2012). Oppressed agents see more of the oppressive structures than privileged agents, as they are the ones who keenly feel the effects of those structures. Privileged agents often struggle to see institutional oppression in the structures of society, much less the ways in which they are participatory. This is why, if we wish to dismantle structural oppression and create a just educational system, education must

actively affirm the lucidity and capabilities of vulnerable agents and work to counter the social conditioning these agents often have to overcome. Further, such a system must also actively engage in educating the ignorance of privileged agents on the topic of systemic oppression. Educational programs must, at all levels, both reflect and teach diversity. The study of cultures and people occupying axes of oppression must cease to be segregated into various tracks of cultural studies, and, instead, be included as part of core curricula at all levels. If we would live up to Descartes' belief in the equality of ability, we must follow in the steps of Mary Astell, and accept that the differences between us are just that: *differences*, not limitations. Different bodies are not *lesser* bodies, and neither are the minds or capacities to achieve associated therewith.

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