Confrontation in/about/of/for Women in Early Modern Philosophy

Summary: Papers in this double workshop address early modern women in philosophy and confrontation. The concept of confrontation was itself theorized in the period, but the presence of early modern female scholars was (and in part, remains) confrontational to canon traditionalists. Panel participants confront confrontation by pushing on the constraints of oppression, specifically found in the period: in education, in ethics, in philosophy of religion, and in epistemology, through the work of a range of early modern women.

Workshop Session II: Confrontation 1, #10 Topics:

1. Dwight Lewis, ABD, USF (dwightlewis@gmail.com) and Daniel Collette, VAP, St. Norbert College (Daniel.collette@snc.edu), “Jacqueline Pascal: Virtue, Oppression, and Women’s Autonomy”

Dr. Collette and Mr. Lewis collaborate on the work of Jacqueline Pascal. Her philosophy of education is laden with an Aristotelian ethics that motivates a theory of personal autonomy. She advances a concept of virtue that, like Aristotle, requires both theory and praxis: the virtuous person is someone who obtains moral knowledge and then resolutely applies that knowledge. Each person then has moral autonomy regardless of gender, which gives birth to moral fortitude for resisting systemic oppression. We argue that her concept of autonomy, which pushes beyond Aristotle and male counterparts, demands a public rejection of oppression where others can hide their true ideologies behind rhetoric and in private correspondence. In our paper we explicate Pascal’s moral philosophy, which emphasizes applying intellectual virtues, (2) examine events in Pascal’s life that demonstrate moral strength derived from applying her moral theory, and (3) we compare her with two philosophers close to her sphere of influence, Descartes and Arnauld.

2. Sergio Gallegos, Assistant Professor, MSU-Denver (gallegossd@gmail.com), “Artistic Representation and the Cultivation of Moral Virtues in Sor Juana’s Neptuno Alegórico”

Dr. Gallegos focuses on artistic representation and the cultivation of moral virtues in Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz (1651-1695), especially her Neptuno Alegórico. Her scholarship, while attractive across the disciplines, speaks to the struggle and plight of early modern women to contribute to philosophy through the guise of other canons, and to advocate for women’s rights in fields in which women were given some artistic license. Sor Juana is already unique in the period for her ability to produce science in philosophy in New Spain, but her philosophical arguments are also unique, on their own.

Questions for Session 10:

a. What is the relationship been private oppression and moral autonomy? How can the thinkers you discuss confront private oppression—if at all?

b. When virtue is developed as a ways to confront oppression (in various forms), are the oppressed put in a position where they must value their suffering as a way to become virtuous?

c. If the development of virtue requires knowledge, and women (especially) are kept from having access to education in the early modern period, are their only certain virtues that women can develop?

d. The women you write about frequently had to use disguised philosophy and science, through art, literature, correspondence, and political musings (for example). How can these women be physically, morally, and intellectually autonomous given that they were excluded from the disciplines that provide moral and scientific knowledge? How can they authentically have autonomy and virtue if they depend on others for their success?
3. Matthew LaVine, Assistant Professor, SUNY-Postdam (lavinemj@potsdam.edu), "Elisabeth & Wollstonecraft: Inclusive Early Modern Pedagogy"

Dr. LaVine’s contribution to the panel focuses on Princess Elisabeth and Mary Wollstonecraft on Processes of Exclusion in the early modern period. Although the two figures represent both the beginning and the end of the early modern period of philosophy, their work evidences how philosophy systematically encouraged the suppression of women’s thought, and the linguistic and epistemic double-binds we would now say women in the period had to confront.

4. Jill Hernandez, Associate Professor, University of Texas at San Antonio (jill.hernandez@utsa.edu), “Authority & Confrontation: a New Problem of Evil in Early Modern Philosophy?”

Dr. Hernandez’s current project identifies the nature of confrontation in the scholarship of early modern women as it relates, especially, to philosophy of religion. Are there structural evils that function in categorically different ways than abstract evils, and which pose unique threats to theism? During this panel, Dr. Hernandez will look at the extrinsic and intrinsic structural constraints of marriage, as viewed by Mary Astell and Catharine Macaulay. Marriage, so conceived, can serve to oppress (but also to free), and so can serve as a challenge (and a response) to the problem of evil.

5. Joshua Thomas Vonderhaar, Graduate Student, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, "Catharine Trotter Cockburn's Partialist Critique of Consequentialism".

This project locates aspects of Catharine Trotter Cockburn’s ethical philosophy within the tradition of partialism. Cockburn’s partialism is such that, rather than supplementing impartial accounts of ethics or deriving from them, it locates partialist norms prior to impartialist norms. This would mean that, rather than morality beginning with the position that one should not show preference for one person over another, morality would begin with the preferential treatment that one gives to one’s friends and loved ones. This approach, most clearly expressed in her example of the rich miser, is one that suggests Cockburn’s work is consistent with the tradition of feminist ethics.

Questions for Group #30

a. Each of your projects seem to require a contemporary understanding of philosophical problems to correctly read early modern women, whether for exclusionary practices, structural harms, and partialism. Are your projects purely interpretive, and to what extent can we take away that these thinkers would actually agree with what you are attributing to them?

b. In what ways do you see these women confronting systemic, cultural, social, or religious norms? Is the confrontation necessary for their philosophical projects (epistemic, moral, metaphysical) to succeed?

c. Implicit in each of your projects is some conception of ‘freedom’, whether lived or expressed. How do your thinkers conceive of ‘freedom’? Can women be free moral agents if they live within the oppressive structures you suggest?

d. Also implicit in your arguments is a concept of justice, but it is unclear what justice is, how it can be achieved, and how just moral (female) agents can function to forward your scholars’ moral and epistemic goals.
Suggested Readings:

*The Correspondence between Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and Rene Descartes,* edited and translated by Lisa Shapiro. (Univ of Chicago), 2007.

*Letters on Education,* Catharine Macaulay, 1790.


*Neptuno Alegórico,* Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, 1680.


“Remarks upon the Principles and Reasonings of Dr. Rutherforth’s Essay on the Nature and Obligations of Virtue: In Vindication of the contrary principles and reasonings, enforced in the writings of the late Dr. Samuel Clarke,” Catharine Trotter Cockburn


*A Serious Proposal to the Ladies,* and *Some Reflections on Marriage,* Mary Astell, 1694/1703.

*A Vindication of the Rights of Women,* Mary Wollstonecraft (Dover), 1996.