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Review of *Women and Liberty, 1600-1800: Philosophical Essays* by Jacqueline Broad and Karen Detlefsen (eds.)

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Abstract:

A review of Jacqueline Broad and Karen Detlefsen's (eds.) recent book *Women and Liberty, 1600-1800: Philosophical Essays* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017).

Keywords: early modern philosophy, early modern feminism, early modern political theory, early modern theories of oppression, liberty, human freedom, relational autonomy, women's education, women and reason.

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Broad, Jacqueline and Karen Detlefsen, eds. *Women and Liberty, 1600-1800: Philosophical Essays*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017. 272 pp. \$65 (hbk). ISBN 9780198810261.

Reviewed by PATRICIA SHERIDAN

The early modern period underwent a conceptual shift in thinking about morality: more than mere obedience to divine law, morality was increasingly understood as a matter of rational self-governance. In tandem with this shift grew a conception of individual freedom as more than absence of constraint, but rather as acting in accordance with the dictates of one's own reason. While this particular turn in the early modern *Zeitgeist* has already received significant attention in philosophical scholarship, what is less widely understood is the way in which the twin ideals of self-governance and freedom were interpreted and mobilized as a tool for women's emancipation.

This collection sheds light on a number of thinkers, both women and men, who considered freedom and self-governance through the specific perspective and conditions of women. Rational self-governance is a laudable ideal, and for all of the thinkers discussed in this volume, it forms an important first step in legitimizing women's equal claim to moral agency and freedom of thought. However, a notable theme that runs through the readings in this volume is an identification, albeit in a nascent and pre-theoretical form, of the internalizing effects of oppressive forces directed at women in the form of prejudicial assumptions and stereotypes about women's nature or their moral potential. The theme, again and again, is one of inner freedom and acting in accordance with the dictates of one's own reason as a means of countering the stultifying effects of gendered bias—the ideal we thus find here is that of women achieving an authentic inner voice to guide their choices.

The introductory essay, by editors Jacqueline Broad and Karen Detlefsen, offers a thorough discussion of the unique philosophical contributions of early modern women and men who theorized about women's freedom. Philosophical discussions of liberty have, the editors explain, generally ignored the claims of women as subjects of liberty in their own right. Even today, they claim, the subject of female freedom rarely gets the critical attention it deserves. The aim of this volume is broadly three-fold. First, to disclose a more inclusive history that expands the voices and perspectives represented in the philosophical history of the early modern period. Second, to expand the notion of philosophy itself—that is, what counts as philosophy and why. There is a great deal of philosophy to be found in plays, poems, letters, and fiction, and these atypical genres, which were employed often by women thinkers, served as an underappreciated vehicle for presenting challenging and deep insights. Finally, these essays open up a new way of thinking about feminism and shine light on the nascent feminist ideas that were emerging in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The first paper in this collection, Karen Detlefsen's "Liberty and Feminism in Early Modern Women's Writing," explores some of the arguably feminist themes found in the works of Mary Astell and Margaret Cavendish. Detlefsen picks out three feminist forms of liberty, and the necessary conditions for their achievement, as identified by both Astell and Cavendish: the equality of educational opportunities and the benefits of intellectual development that follow from education, social conditions that allow for women's authentic self-expression, and the encouragement of women's communal bonds as a

means to achieving true autonomy. This final point, Detlefsen argues, has resonance with modern feminist theorizing around the notion of relational autonomy. Recent feminist thinkers have sought to rethink the traditional ideal of autonomy and its emphasis on the individual as a self-sufficient, dispassionate, and independent agent. Detlefsen appeals to recent feminist work that considers agency with reference to the embodied and passionate aspects of human nature, the individual's relations with others, and the social context in which she is embedded. An agent's passions and relations texture the ways in which she can or will act, which suggests that traditional conceptions of free agency do not adequately capture what it means to be human. For Cavendish and Astell, Detlefsen shows, women gain a greater and truer sense of themselves as embodied, passionate, and rational beings from friendship and community with other women.

Martina Reuter's "Francois Poulain de la Barre on the Subjugation of Women" looks at the work of Poulain de la Barre and his defence of women's liberty. Reuter offers a fascinating discussion of Poulain's historical analysis of the subjugation of women and the effects of internalized oppression. As Reuter shows, Poulain proposed introspective self-knowledge as the key for women's freedom from socially-constructed prejudices and preconceptions about their natures and capacities. This process of self-examination unfetters the mind and develops intellectual freedom—a freedom which is, for Poulain, fundamental to any other social, economic, or political liberty. Through rational introspection, the individual achieves an understanding of her authentic self and a basis from which to challenge external subjugating forces. Reuter shows that Poulain's insights on internalized prejudice marks an important contribution to the history of feminist thought.

Lisa Shapiro's "Gabrielle Suchon's 'Neutralist': The Status of Women and the Invention of Autonomy" explores Suchon's concept of the neutral life and the significance of its liberating message for women. Suchon's neologism *neutraliste* defines a person who is unconstrained in her choices by the external rules and conventions imposed on her by social, religious, or political systems. She commits herself to celibacy, avoiding the institutional commitments of marriage and the convent. Suchon's view is informed by her perception of the deeply inhibiting effects of such systems and the power they have to determine individual values and choices. The *neutraliste* aims at autonomy, determining for herself how to lead her own life and prescribing for herself the rules that will govern her actions. Shapiro argues that Suchon represents an important step from the ideal of self-mastery to that of autonomy, offering what Shapiro suggests is a prototype of Kantian autonomy.

Jacqueline Broad's "Marriage, Slavery, and the Merger of Wills: Responses to Sprint, 1700-01" examines the responses of three women (Eugenia, Mary Astell, and Mary Chudleigh) to a particularly misogynistic 1699 sermon by John Sprint. Sprint held that a successful marriage depends on the complete submission of a wife's will to that of her husband's. Broad shows that Eugenia, Astell, and Chudleigh share the view that moral virtue centrally involves self-governance. The ideal of freedom we find in all three thinkers involves an internal state of mind—the free agent is one whose will is guided in accordance with reason to the end of moral self-perfection. All three thinkers consider a common threat to a woman's inner freedom, marital conventions that demand a self-effacing commitment on the part of wives towards husbands. Until marriage ceases to be this radically submissive relationship for women, these thinkers argue, the inner freedom of rational self-governance will be severely limited. As Broad argues, Eugenia, Cavendish,

and Astell all recognize the role of external social conditions in either facilitating or inhibiting the freedom of individuals. For all three, Broad shows, certain social changes are necessary as preconditions for women's rational self-governance.

Karen Green's "Locke, Enlightenment, and Liberty in the Works of Catharine Macaulay and her Contemporaries" looks at the distinction Locke draws between liberty and licence and the women whose views on liberty made use of Locke's distinction. Green looks at the themes of moral self-governance and self-realization as they ground political theory in the works, primarily, of Catharine Macaulay, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Louise Keralio-Robert (though Green's discussion touches on a number of other thinkers as well, including Catherine II of Russia, Octavie Belot, and Elise Reimarus). Green is especially interested in a common thread that runs through these thinkers' ideas, which is the difference between liberty as unfettered licence and liberty as self-governance in accordance with laws of reason. Since they all believe that liberty truly consists in the latter, human moral progress, both individual and social, depends on education and the advancement of reason. For all of these women, Green shows, freedom involves enlightened moral self-realization.

Lena Halldenius's "Mary Wollstonecraft and Freedom as Independence" examines Wollstonecraft's arguments for women's rights in the context of her egalitarian view that a person has rights on the same ground that they have duties, i.e. on grounds of their capacity to reason. For Wollstonecraft, the notion of freedom plays a key role here—a person is free, and thereby an equal rights-bearer, when she acts on motives that are properly her own and in accordance with what her reason dictates. This level of freedom is difficult to achieve, however, if the society is an unequal one based on economic and gendered hierarchies. Rights are, in such a society, accorded unequally based on wealth or gender rather than inherent and equal rationality. Women would thus live under a system of oppression that imposes irrelevant, gendered, limits on their freedom to self-govern, for Wollstonecraft, which affects not only their material circumstances but their capacity to reach their full potential as rational agents with all the rights and duties that attach to that status.

Eric Schliesser's "Sophie de Grouchy, the Tradition(s) of Two Liberties and the Missing Mother(s) of Liberalism" looks at Grouchy's distinction between positive and negative freedom as a precursor to the distinction between positive and negative liberty made famous by Isaiah Berlin and Benjamin Constant. In so doing, Schliesser aims to show that Grouchy has been unfairly left out of the history of liberal thought. Schliesser examines Grouchy in the context of more well-known accounts found in Smith and Rousseau, showing how Grouchy forms an important part of the liberal tradition. Of special interest to Schliesser is Grouchy's intertwining of the political issues of rights and justice with the aim of advancing human moral virtue. Grouchy seeks, Schliesser shows, to encourage a social and political system that fosters individual virtue.

Sarah Hutton's "Liberty of Mind: Women Philosophers and the Freedom to Philosophize" looks at an idea of liberty specific to early modern thinkers, namely that of liberty as a moral, social, and religious idea rather than a political one. In this period, Hutton shows, freedom involves the freedom to philosophize, which was a distinctly pluralistic and anti-dogmatic concept. For women however, the freedom to philosophize represented something much more fundamental, that is, the freedom to think and philosophize *at all*. With little access to formal education and traditional spheres of intellectual discourse, women, Hutton explains, forged their own conditions for

philosophical engagement—salons and correspondences were typical routes for intellectual women to take—and argued for women’s education, for women-only communities of learning, and above for women’s equal capacity to reason. Hutton concludes that the freedom to philosophize was, for these women, foundational to overcoming stultifying social prejudices about their rational capacities and social roles.

Deborah Boyle’s “Freedom and Necessity in the Work of Margaret Cavendish” offers a libertarian reading of Cavendish, but argues that Cavendish’s libertarianism is not as straightforward as some commentators have suggested. Cavendish, Boyle shows, is working with two notions of freedom. On the one hand, parts of matter, including humans, are free in the sense of initiating action in accordance with the norms of order and regularity of nature. All parts of matter are free to accept or reject these norms and are therefore not determined by them. However, Cavendish does not recommend this kind of freedom as the basis for a political state and it is a mistake, Boyle argues, to see her natural theory as a normative guide to human action. Cavendish defends the sovereign’s right to curtail freedom, understood here as freedom from constraint, in the interests of the peace and security of the state. Even though humans share with other parts of matter a libertarian power of self-determination, this does not, Boyle argues, mean that Cavendish thinks they should be self-governing in the political realm.

Marcy P. Lascano’s “Anne Conway on Liberty” explores Conway’s account of the freedom of human beings and other creatures and the metaphysical and moral system within which this freedom must be understood. For Conway, all created beings are endowed by God with a tendency towards the good, and this constitutes their proper end. But created beings are distinguished by an indifference of will, due to their inherent imperfection, that constitutes a specific form of freedom distinct from that of God. Creatures, though guided by a striving for the good, are free to choose whether or not to act in accordance with what is best. In this way, created beings are responsible for their choices even though they are not free in stipulating their ends. Lascano discusses how this view aligns with Conway’s broader metaphysics. All creatures, striving to move towards the greater goodness, seek to achieve the most perfect expression of their specific natures. Their proper moral choices effect metaphysical changes towards greater wisdom and deliberative resolve. In this way, Lascano shows, Conway’s metaphysical system is a moral one wherein all creatures are ultimately rewarded for their actions.

Alice Sowaal’s “Mary Astell on Liberty” discusses Astell’s view of freedom and its religious dimensions. For Astell, an individual is truly liberated when her passions are governed by reason, and therefore the foundational project to all forms of emancipation is the attainment of internal liberty. This involves a process of meditation that strengthens one’s capacity to self-determine in accordance with reason. Rational discovery of truth brings us closer to God; we are freed from bodily passions and feel only an inward sensation of joy in God’s goodness. A person who attains this state will always act in accordance with what is good. For Astell, therefore, it is necessary that women achieve a capacity for rational self-regulation. Though Astell’s is not a call for political action aimed at state and social structures of oppression, Sowaal argues that what Astell offers is a route for women to begin their emancipatory practice without men and through the development of their own strength of will.

Ruth Hagengruber’s “If I were King! Morals and Physics in Emilie du Châtelet’s *Subtle Thoughts on Liberty*” examines the link between Châtelet’s idea of freedom in science and morality. Free will, for Châtelet, is akin to dynamic power. Since, for Châtelet, there needs

to be an equilibrium of forces, the inequality of men and women suggests a state of disequilibrium and social misery. As Hagengruber shows, Châtelet does not appeal to transcendent powers or to moral institutions, but to the same principle that grounds her scientific method, the search for truth and the exclusion of contradictions. Scientific and moral rules are both, for her, subject to the same standard of contradiction-free reasoning. In this regard, Hagengruber suggests, Châtelet anticipates Kant.

The final paper, Emily Thomas's "Creation, Divine Freedom, and Catharine Cockburn: An Intellectualist on Possible Worlds and Contingent Laws," looks at Cockburn's intellectualist metaphysics and the freedom it affords to God's creative acts. Intellectualism tends to be characterized by a view of God as necessitated to create the best and most perfect of all possible worlds. Cockburn, however, holds that God is free to choose what worlds to create, even if that involves numerous good worlds. While God is free in this creative act, however, the moral system of fitness relations holds necessarily within a world once it is created. Cockburn, as Thomas shows, ends up with an intellectualist account that affords God a greater degree of creative freedom than most intellectualist accounts do, while stipulating, however, that God cannot determine the moral fitness relations that will govern any world that God chooses to create.

What emerges from this collection of papers is a sense of the unique contributions of lesser-known figures in this period to the development of modern notions of freedom and autonomy. But more than this, I would suggest what also emerges is the appreciation a reader gains for the developing feminist consciousness in this period and the importance of this emerging framework for thinking about morality and freedom in the context of women's oppression and liberation. This is an excellent collection and highly recommended for early modern and feminist scholars alike.

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