

Book Reviews

Jacqueline Broad. *Women Philosophers of the Seventeenth Century*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2002. 191pp. ISBN 0-521-81295-X. Hardback \$55.00.

Jacqueline Broad's important study of seventeenth-century women philosophers significantly revises current perceptions. Her central argument is that although women philosophers of the seventeenth century were strongly influenced by the Cartesian valorization of reason, they all observed and questioned the antifeminist undercurrents in Cartesian absolute duality. Despite sometimes opposing philosophical leanings, all of the women in Broad's study, often independently of each other, are shown finding ways to resist the Cartesian absolutist denigration of matter that separated matter and spirit, associated matter with woman and spirit with man, and then disparaged the feminine.

This text revises both the historical understanding of the early modern women philosophers and the perception of their relevance to current feminist criticism. While Broad refers to public works usually explored by feminist scholars, her emphasis is on private correspondence. Letters, she observes, can uncover a writer's most passionately held beliefs, and in the correspondence of her diverse group of seventeenth-century subjects, she finds evidence of commonality. She uses these affinities to connect the views of early moderns such as Margaret Atherton and Genevieve Lloyd to the contemporary feminist critique of Cartesianism.

For instance, although Broad reaffirms other analyses that label Elizabeth of Bohemia as a Cartesian and a dualist, Elizabeth's correspondence with Descartes shows her departing from an overall acceptance of Cartesianism to challenge Descartes' absolute dualism between body and soul. Elizabeth offers an alternative view to Descartes: that both the soul and the body are intimately united with each other and remain associated until death. As with other writers whom Broad discusses, she strategically connects Elizabeth's relational view of body and soul to contemporary feminism. In the instance of Elizabeth, she points out Carol Gilligan

and other current thinkers emphasize the usefulness of a specifically female moral outlook and defend the traditional woman's view that life is based on relationships, not on a detached, impartial mind. Broad also generalizes from the correspondence and texts of the other philosophers in the book to build a case that in certain ways women's moral reasoning is consistently different from men's, even in the case of women who were isolated thinkers not influenced by female peers. This was the situation for the very first moderns, Elizabeth of Bohemia and Margaret Cavendish, First Duchess of Newcastle: Cavendish's unique materialistic reclamation of monism addresses the same concerns that Elizabeth raised against Cartesian dualism. Anne Conway also created a monistic universe, but it posited a single spiritual nature for all creation, opposite to Cavendish's belief that the mind is a subtle material and that the body has spiritual properties (66, 51).

Within such convergences and divergences, Broad finds recurring connections, and as her chronological presentation progresses through the seventeenth century, evidence becomes easier to find that female predecessors are influencing later women thinkers. At first, some of the interactions that she detects are adversarial, and the women (Mary Astell and Damaris Cudworth Masham in particular) justly appear to other critics only as "seconds" in duels between their male mentors (140). But Broad shows that even Astell and Masham influence each other in their challenge of Astell mentor John Norris' "occasionalism." Norris' "occasionalism" posits a micromanaging god while condemning matter and it uses a simile of courtly love (implicating Woman) to denounce matter as a "cheat" (101). Broad cites support on the part of these mutual adversaries for the idea of a beneficent creator who would not have endowed women with a rational nature without intending women to exercise it for their betterment. And significantly, both favor systematic education of women.

The book concludes with a discussion of eighteenth-century woman philosopher Catherine Trotter Cockburn. Aware of her seventeenth-century female predecessors, she attempts full inclusion of their various perspectives, thereby blurring the divide between matter and spirit. Cockburn also supports Locke's notion of thinking matter, ending the influence of Cartesian dualism in women's thought.

In summary, Broad counters a bias that she perceives in current studies of these seventeenth-century women philosophers which would constrict them within a male-dominated philosophical system. In contrast, she insists on the label “feminist” for these philosophers and she repeatedly connects her subjects’ issues with contemporary feminist challenges to dualist discourses. This book is essential reading for the feminist scholars and critics of the early modern period to the present. It is also of great importance for students, historians and moral theorists of early modern philosophy, since this exploration shows that early woman philosophers created a surprisingly independent core of thought that stands on its own, opposing dualism while embracing reason. These seventeenth-century feminists critique male mentors, sometimes exacting concessions from even the greatest of them, and they develop original views of matter and of life that significantly influenced the direction of philosophy.

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