

Education, A History of Early Modern Philosophy

Michaela Manson, Research Statement

Philosophies like that of René Descartes have faced criticism for seemingly conceiving of humans as something like the mythical goddess Athena— as if we enter the world with our capacities completely developed, in no need of a protracted period of dependence, growth, and education.¹ Of course, as various critics highlight, our capacities emerge slowly, as a consequence of interdependent, developmental processes by which we learn to think, decide, and act.

Inspired by such criticisms, my work looks at what some early modern philosophers, including Descartes, have said about education and development, especially their intersubjective aspects. The effect is a broadening of the narratives taken to constitute early modern philosophy: casting new light on canonical figures and raising new questions by means of reading them alongside hitherto marginalized voices of philosophy's past. One benefit of this approach is that, rather than anachronistically isolate past interests according to contemporary divisions of philosophical labour, it requires drawing out the systematic unity of a thinker's philosophical commitments across the domains of metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. The result is a historical narrative in the philosophies of mind, education, and feminism that motivates other debates often taken to be central philosophy's history. Let me illustrate.

Cognitive Improvement

With many human activities – playing piano, running a race, speaking a foreign language – we assume that there are practices that enable us to improve at them – rehearsing, training, taking lessons. What about philosophy or other attempts to understand how things really are? In my dissertation, I develop a reading of two early modern European philosophers, René Descartes and Mary Astell, as tackling the question: what makes cognitive improvement possible? (See dissertation abstract). From this project, several papers emerge.

First, while philosophical interest in prejudice can seem like a recent development, both of these early modern philosophers recognize its inhibiting influence for cognitive improvement. In “Habitual Minds: Prejudice and the Cartesian Project of Cognitive Improvement” I argue that Descartes appropriates a scholastic conception of *habitus* in understanding both the inhibiting influence of prejudice as well the goal of cognitive improvement: developing a habit of forming judgements that track the truth.

A second paper, tentatively titled “Squaring up to the Circle: the Rational Self-Confidence of the Cartesian Subject” (in progress, short term aim to complete 2024), seeks to offer a novel solution to the infamous challenge of the Cartesian Circle by introducing the concept I call *rational self-confidence* to explain how the Cartesian meditator can advance in his project despite the First Meditation's doubts about reasoning. The conclusion of this paper admits of two corollaries. First, recognizing the role of rational self-confidence challenges interpretations of Cartesianism as proto-egalitarian. For, if rational self-confidence is instrumental in projects of cognitive improvement and the mechanisms that determine who experiences such confidence unduly advantage some over others, then there will be similar undue disparities in who can fruitfully participate in such projects and securely attain the goods that may be achieved thereby, e.g. knowledge, virtue, happiness. Second, in conjunction with my argument in “Habitual Minds”, the emerging picture of the cartesian

¹ In Hesiod's telling, Athena was born fully formed from her father Zeus's head after he swallowed her pregnant mother, Metis.

subject reveals virtue epistemology's anti-Cartesian origins as misinterpreting the Cartesian project; Cartesianism is a virtue epistemology.

Third, in "The Astellian Circle" (under review) I contend that the early modern English woman Philosophy, Mary Astell (1666-1731) perceives an important challenge for the Cartesian project by recognizing the social dimensions of human cognition. Significantly, left unaddressed, this challenge risks undermining the proto-egalitarian promise of Cartesianism (the first corollary of "Squaring up to the Circle"). From this, I argue that Astell resolves this challenge by attributing a significant role to human relationships, especially friendships, in understanding cognitive improvement. The result highlights how neglected philosophers such as Astell can illuminate the works of canonical figures and also yield new insights.

Beyond this work, my chapter "Early Modern European Women and the Philosophy of Education: Van Schurman, Pascal, Maintenon, and Astell" (published 2023) in *The Routledge Handbook of Women and Early Modern European Philosophy* offers a corrective to popular accounts of the history of philosophy of education which have traditionally excluded women philosophers. By investigating the educational writings of four early modern women, I argue for a set of criteria for identifying texts that belong to the history of philosophy of education: they must address questions about the aims, means, subjects, and circumstances of education.

Early next year, I am writing an invited paper tentatively titled "Astell's Platonism: Beauty and the Dacier Connection" (planned, short term aim to complete 2024) wherein I connect Astell's Platonism to her reading of the French philosopher, Anne Dacier, who both wrote on aesthetics and translated Plato. In particular, I argue that, for Astell, beauty plays a motivating role for cognitive improvement. This work is informed in part by my research of Cambridge University's Pepys Library collection of Astell personal library, which includes volumes containing her marginal notations and references to Dacier.

I also have a draft stemming from earlier research entitled "(De)Regulating the Will: Error in a Malebranchean Mind" (in progress, short term aim to complete 2025) in which I argue that behind Malebranche's theological account of the human liability to error lies a subtle moral psychological analysis about the role of pleasure in directing the mind's attention. I argue that he appeals to this analysis to justify his positive proposal for cognitive improvement.

Friendship

My work on cognitive improvement represents the starting point for my research in the history of philosophy of friendship; for, according to Astell, true friends help reform each other. Significantly, while pursuing archival research in England during my PhD, I discovered a late-17th-century anonymous manuscript, the content of which is a philosophical essay on friendship that, strikingly, conforms largely to the Astellian account, which sees friendship as one of the primary means through which humans improve. At present, I am studying this manuscript with the aim of interpreting its contents relative to Astell's philosophy, the history of philosophy of friendship, as well as contemporary research in this area. As a result of this research, my plan is to publish a book manuscript under the working title *The Practice of Love: Early Modern Women and the Philosophy of Friendship* (in progress, mid term aim to complete 2027).

At present, I conceive of this work as composed of five chapters:

Ch 1 – Friendship Without Women: A Philosophical History

Ch 2 – Equality and Elitism: With whom can I be friends? With whom should I?

Ch 3 – "A Vertue that comprehends all the rest": The Habit(s) of Friendship

Ch 4 – "A wife but not a slave": Engineering the Concept of Marriage

Ch 5 – Friendship and the Form of Philosophy

By fall 2024, I anticipate having 30 000 words written. I envision a total length of 100,000 words for this monograph. I have a draft of chapter two, to be developed by future research, which argues that the philosophy of friendship of Mary Astell, Mary Beale, and the anonymous manuscript answer an objection against the Aristotelian account: its standard for true friendship is elitist. Whereas the Aristotelian ideal conceives of friendship as between two equally virtuous parties (inevitably men), women's writing from this period is sensitive to human shortcomings; friends are conceived as helping each other on the path to *becoming* virtuous, thereby expanding the pool of potential subjects that can achieve the ideal of true friendship.

Concurrently, I plan to edit a volume of early-modern primary sources on friendship that will include hitherto unpublished manuscripts in addition to modern printings of writings from the period that have not been re-published since their day (planned, mid to long term, aim to complete 2027).

At the same time, research on the manuscript is at the heart of two digital humanities projects. The first involves adapting primary sources for use by philosophy teachers in courses on either the philosophy of friendship or history of philosophy (in progress, mid term aim to complete 2026). The second involves collaborating with researchers in stylometrics to assess authorial identity and publish our findings (planned, mid term, aim to complete 2027). This will also result in a database of texts to promote the replicability of these results in response arguments against the value of this research method (planned, mid-long term).

Finally, research in this area invites reflection on several meta-philosophical questions about the history of philosophy: What makes a text a work of philosophy? Why does authorial identity matter? To what degree can we abstract from particularities of identity, e.g. gender, ethnicity, race, nationality, context, when doing historical philosophical research? To what degree should we? What is or ought to be the role of archival research for historians of philosophy? And, what do such potential discoveries (like that of the anonymous manuscript) reveal about the history of philosophy as a subdiscipline of philosophy? I am organising reflections on these questions in a paper about the functions and methods of historical, philosophical inquiry, "Doing (History of) Philosophy" (planned, mid term aim to complete 2026) in which I argue that there is no distinction worth drawing between doing philosophy and doing history of philosophy.