# 3

# CANON, GENDER, AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

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If any period in the history of philosophy has a philosophical canon, it is the period from roughly 1580–1780, or the early modern period. While the situation on the ground is rapidly shifting, it is still the norm within the English-speaking world for both the teaching and continuing scholarship of early modern philosophy to focus on seven key figures: Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, and Kant.[1] These seven figures constitute the early modern philosophical canon. For quite a number of years now, historians of philosophy have recognized that this canon excludes women.[2] The remedy for this exclusion is my particular concern here. More recently, there has been a recognition that this is the *European* early modern philosophical canon. While I will not be able to address the fact that this canon is distinctly European (or even Western European) here,[3] by reflecting upon this canon, I suspect we can learn something not only about the history of European philosophy but also about philosophical canons more generally. What we learn may well help us in moving beyond this canon but also prove instructive about the norms of historiography of philosophy more generally. I begin by setting out tacit assumptions of a philosophical canon and so reasons for calling those assumptions into question. One of those reasons is the way in which women were written out of the history of philosophy in the nineteenth century. In Section 3.2, I turn to consider some remedies for that exclusion, and the prospects for their success. I argue that to successfully redress the injustice of excluding women from European intellectual history, we need to recognize that while some women were interested in the questions that dominate our current history of philosophy, others were interested in different, yet no less central, questions. Moreover, for many women philosophers, no matter what questions moved them philosophically, philosophy was not an idle intellectual exercise but rather addressed questions that were very much alive in the contexts in which they were writing. Recognizing their legitimacy as philosophers aligns with recent critiques of contemporary philosophy. I conclude by suggesting that our histories of philosophy would be more inclusive if we moved from a philosophical canon dominated by a very limited set of figures to one that was framed by a set of questions. We might call these questions timeless questions, as they arise again and again; yet nonetheless, we pose them in a particular place and historical context, and they move us to the reflection that constitutes the practice of philosophy.

## 3.1 The Uses and Disadvantages of the European Philosophical Canon

Often when philosophers talk of our canon, we ignore the origins of the term. Per its primary definition, a canon is a rule or law, decreed by the Church, typically, by a small subset of those

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in authority, (i.e., the pope or a Council charged with developing the law). A canon in this sense is sacred. Also in a religious context, a canon can refer to a set of books identified by the Church as having authenticity as divinely inspired. These works are canonized, and in at least some instances, the authors of those books are sainted; others who are deemed as authentically having divine inspiration are also canonized and placed in the calendar of saints. This ecclesiastical sense of 'canon' is then secularized to mean a law or rule, or a fundamental principle governing a body of knowledge, or more loosely a standard of taste.

Now it might seem easy to take this etymological point cavalierly and claim that in the European philosophical tradition, our canon is secular and not tied to any authentic divine inspiration. However, this dismissal is not as easy as it might appear. The European early modern period in particular is marked by wars of religion, and the effort to set philosophy apart from theology. This might lead us to wonder whether the idea of a canon of early modern European philosophy is in fact designed to be a secular alternative to a philosophical tradition tied to theology.[4] Second, and more importantly for my purposes, the key feature of an ecclesiastical canon is its authentic connection to the divine. Once it is established that an individual is divinely inspired, there can be no questioning of their privileged status, nor of the place of their words and works. Canonical religious figures and their works carry an unchallengeable authority in virtue of their connection to the divine, and in so far as their authority is unchallengeable their views are taken as necessary truths.

Secular philosophical canonical figures have come to carry a similar unchallengeable authority. Our early modern canonical philosophers derive their authority not through a particular connection to the divine but rather from their connection to reason, which is often imagined to be an abstract universal ideal. These figures are deemed to be great minds.[5] It is, however, unclear just what that means. It cannot be because they managed to decisively answer philosophical questions, for the very storyline that ties the canonical figures together depends on their having made errors. It cannot be because they are remarkably effective at conveying their philosophical views; though some are great stylists, others could well have used an editor. Of course, they are taken to be great in part because they made an impact in their own day. Nonetheless, having had an impact at one point in time guarantees neither greatness nor the enduring judgment of their greatness. At the very least, we take these canonical figures to have great minds because the answers they offer to a set of philosophical questions in metaphysics and epistemology inform discussions of the same questions that are still alive today: the ontology of substance and mode, and whether what exists are substances and if so their essence; the nature of causation; the nature of mental representation and of how our ideas can enable us to have knowledge of things. These are good philosophical questions, but we take these questions to be agenda-setting, as necessary to address.[6] I want to suggest that we canonize a philosopher as a secular saint of philosophy insofar as we take them to offer answers that make progress in answering these questions understood as necessary. Further, in being so canonized, even though their answers may be mistaken, their mistakes appear necessary for us to have made further progress and to get closer to definitive answers.

While the early modern European philosophical canon may seem to have an elevated status, the reality is that it is deeply contingent that we ended up with these seven philosophers. For one, which philosophers count as canonical very much depends on the linguistic community in which one finds oneself – there are differences between the American, English, French, and German canonical program. Further, Bruce Kuklick (1984) has shown that in the American context, the canonization of these seven thinkers is in part a function of the late nineteenth-century development of university textbooks, and the related effort to develop a distinctively American philosophical program, with all its associated internal politics. That is, it "depends on disorder, on luck, on cultural transitions that if not random certainly do not reflect overriding purpose, on scholarly power-plays, and on the sheer glacial inertia of the institutions of higher education"

(Kuklick 1984: 137).[7] More recently, the work of Delphine Antoine-Mahut and Sabrina Ebbersmeyer demonstrate in detail that in other locales too, there are complex political considerations involved in establishing a philosophical canon in the first place.

Antoine-Mahut, in her *L'Autorité d'un canon philosophique. Le cas de Descartes*, aims to show that the role in which a canonical figure plays in a history of philosophy is something that shifts with interpretations that are highly sensitive to the contexts in which those interpretations are developed. In a certain respect then the very identity of a given canonical figure is contingent. In an article (Antoine-Mahut 2020) that anticipates the monograph, she provides a snapshot of how this works in Joseph-Marie Degérando's shifting readings of Descartes in the two editions of his *Histoire comparée des systèmes de philosophie* (1804 and posthumously published 1847). Both histories of philosophy have in mind the role of philosophy in French education, and the role that education was to play in the post-revolutionary French republic. That vision of that role shifts from 1804 to 1847, and with it so too does the way in which Descartes's philosophy is characterized. There is, thus, not a fact of the matter about the Descartes ensconced in the philosophical canon. As Antoine-Mahut puts it,

> writing the history of philosophy can, in general, be seen as comparable to a battle … [one which] opens up the possibility of broadening the canon to include more figures but also for broadening the understanding of the canonical figures themselves, or pluralizing the canonical figures.
>
> *(Antoine-Mahut 2020: 548)*[8]

While Antoine-Mahut is concerned to demonstrate how our understanding of particular canonical figures is contingent on social and political aims, and so to "pluralize" them, Ebbersmeyer (2020), in her "From a 'memorable place' to 'drops in the ocean'," looks at the writing of German histories of philosophy in the nineteenth century to show just how, from generation to generation, women became more and more marginalized from the history of philosophy, until there were simply no women in it. What is at one and the same time unsurprising and remarkable are the justifications for the exclusion of women: one's work was derivative; another did not rise to the same level of greatness as the sainted few; of still others, it was denied they were even doing philosophy. Ebbersmeyer highlights that these efforts intensified at just the moment that arguments were being leveled for women's suffrage and entitlement to attend university, and women's exclusion from the history of philosophy came to be naturalized, justified by the supposed "*natural inaptitude* of women for philosophy," conveniently aligning with political efforts to quash women's right to political representation and to higher education (Ebbersmeyer 2020: 460).

## 3.2 The Exclusion of Women and Strategies for Inclusion

It is worth comparing contemporary canon-driven history of philosophy (albeit one that is changing rapidly) with the histories of philosophy presented in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. For there *were* histories of philosophy that included women.

The Renaissance and early modern period saw the reintroduction of Diogenes Laertius' *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, of which printed editions began to circulate in 1472, with a complete text published in 1533. The edition of 1692, edited by Marcus Meibomius, inaugurated the conventions still in use today. That work does not simply allude to the wives, daughters, and even mothers of eminent philosophers, it also recounts their lives as philosophers in their own right, as with Theano (Pythagoras' wife), Themistoclea (with whom Pythagoras studied), Damo (Pythagoras' daughter and student); and it includes other women philosophers such as Hipparchia.[9]

Perhaps following the style of Diogenes Laertius, a number of women (and men) authors engaged in the *querelle des femmes* provided their own catalogs of women philosophers and intellectuals from across history to bolster their arguments that women are indeed fully rational and capable of real intellectual achievement.[10] The lists of names of strong, successful women leaders in Lucretia Marinella's *On the Excellence and Nobility of Women and the Defects and Vices of Men* (1601), in Marie de Gournay's *On the Equality of Men and Women* (1622/1641), and later in Poulain de la Barre's *On the Equality of the Two Sexes* (1673) not only support arguments for women's intellectual abilities, they are also effectively notes for histories of women philosophers. Perhaps for this reason, Thomas Stanley's *History of Philosophy* (1655) included 24 women philosophers and Gilles Ménage compiled 65 women in his *History of Women Philosophers* (*Historia Mulierum Philosopharum*) (1690), an appendix to editions of both Diogenes Laertius and Plutarch. Other seventeenth-century works by Jean de la Forge (1663) and Marguerite Buffet (1668) included both historical and contemporary women thinkers. This practice of including women in the histories of philosophy continued into the eighteenth century, not only through re-editions of Stanley but also in works like Mary Hays' *Female Biography* (1803). It is not until the nineteenth century that women start to be written out of the history of philosophy.

As we work to reintroduce women into the history of philosophy there are a number of strategies to take. One obvious step is to find the names of those who have gone missing from our intellectual history, along with their works. We can go back to those histories of philosophy that do mention women and gather those names once again. Mary Ellen Waithe in the three volumes of her *History of Women Philosophers* brings to the fore 21 women philosophers in Greek and Roman antiquity, another 15 from the medieval and Renaissance periods, and 31 women from 1600 to 1900.[11] The catalog of the *Other Voice in Early Modern Europe* series, which is edited by literary historians, includes a large number of women philosophers from the Renaissance, a period largely ignored by historians of philosophy. Eileen O'Neill, in her agenda-setting piece, "Disappearing Ink" enumerates more than 55 women whose intellectual labor demands our attention, and that is only in one 200-year stretch.[12] Of course, these resources may well also omit many names. This is a bit of an archaeological project.[13]

As O'Neill recognizes, uncovering all these names also leaves us with a real practical problem. In order to truly recover these women thinkers, someone (more than one person!) has to recover, read, and *understand* what is *philosophically interesting* about their works. This is a challenge for a number of reasons. First, there are only so many hours in a day, and there are a lot of works to be read. Moreover, identifying what is philosophically interesting in a work for which there is literally no body of scholarly literature is just difficult.[14] It requires the reader to have an openness to the text that allows them to hear the philosophical issues it engages. We historians of philosophy are simply not accustomed to reading texts that are new to us, and doing so takes time, patience, and, perhaps most importantly, the opportunity to receive feedback (which can be hard when others have not read the works under discussion). There are added hurdles: women philosophers often wrote in genres that have fallen out of fashion,[15] and they were interested in philosophical questions that became gendered, and then downgraded, and in some cases have disappeared from philosophy.[16] There are a number of ways to try to address this practical problem. Being mindful of these challenges, I want to focus on three.

First, we can prioritize attending to women philosophers whose own philosophical work engages with and intersects that of canonical philosophers. This approach can work to some extent. Princess Elisabeth's extant philosophical work consists in her correspondence with Descartes. Damaris Cudworth, Lady Masham corresponded with Leibniz in defense of her close friend Locke's philosophical program. Catherine Trotter Cockburn also wrote in defense of Locke. Nonetheless, this strategy has (at least) two limitations.

The first limitation of this approach is that it inevitably positions women philosophers as subordinate to their canonical counterparts, for the women are read primarily as responding to the work of great thinkers rather than putting forward ideas of their own. This limitation might be overcome by looking to women who *did* develop their own original philosophies as an alternative to those advanced by canonical figures. Margaret Cavendish, for instance, certainly aimed to do this in developing her natural philosophy. Her *Philosophical Letters* consists of an imagined correspondence between herself and Descartes, Thomas Hobbes, Henry More, and Jan Baptist van Helmont, and that work shows just how her own natural philosophy is developing in response to shortcomings of those advanced by others. This philosophy reaches maturity in her *Observations upon the Experimental Philosophy* in which she advances a vitalist metaphysics[17] that affords its own ontology, as well as accounts of causation, perception, and knowledge. Insofar as she is addressing the philosophical questions put on the agenda by the early modern philosophical canon, she can be brought into conversation with our seven canonical figures relatively seamlessly. Similar strategies can be and are being deployed with other women of the period. For instance, Anne Conway's distinctive metaphysics can be put to be into conversation with Spinoza's, which is, of course, in conversation with that of Descartes and Leibniz, and Emilie du Châtelet's natural philosophy and philosophy of science directly engages with that of Newton and Leibniz and can also be set into conversation with Kant's philosophy.

The second limitation of the first strategy to reintroduce women into the history of philosophy is that even while it does allow for restoring some women their places in the history of philosophy, it selects for the philosophical agenda of the existing canon. These women are taken to be worth attending to because they are focused on central questions of metaphysics and epistemology. It is certainly true that these are important, and even core, philosophical questions, but the canonical narrative of early modern history of philosophy presumes that these are the *most* central questions of philosophy, those necessary to address, and pushes us if not to exclude then to ignore other important philosophical questions.

The second strategy for addressing the practical problem effectively asks us to filter through the large number of women philosophers looking for greatness that has been missed, and greatness is understood as making contributions to the canonical philosophical agenda that have not been adequately recognized.

I have concerns about this strategy. Most trenchantly, simply expanding the canon in this way leaves an exclusionary structure very much still in place. The appearance of the necessity of the philosophical agenda is left solidly in place, and while a handful of women may well gain some recognition, there will still be many who will continue to be neglected. It might end up being even worse. For although one might take the canonical philosophers to be great because they made progress on the most central philosophical questions, one might also take it that the philosophical questions become so central – become the philosophical agenda – because those were the questions these canonical figures asked. That is, the canon might be substantively self-reinforcing: once canonical figures get recognized as great – because they manage to make some progress in addressing some questions, perhaps – the importance and centrality of the questions in metaphysics and epistemology are validated by their being the focus of these great minds, and then greatness of their minds is further revealed in their framing and prioritizing these questions in metaphysics and epistemology, and so on. Reactionary forces might push back that while these women might have given particularly astute answers to these questions, they were not themselves agenda-setters.[18] That would inevitably lead to diminishing the contributions of these women, and thus to them once again being moved to the shadows.

However, we need not concede this standard of greatness that seems to drive the early modern European canon. In the introduction to *What Makes a Philosopher Great?,* Stephen Hetherington

suggests that philosophical greatness, rather than a property of an individual thinker, provides a window into what philosophy is like at its best. He suggests that great philosophy, (or a great philosopher, might well be somewhat like a great artwork (or great artist), reorienting us, enabling us to see both the world and ourselves in a new way (Hetherington 2018). This suggestion reminds us that philosophy is a humanistic inquiry, which aims not simply to reveal truths about the world, but also, in doing so, to facilitate our understanding of ourselves in that world. In keeping with these humanistic aims, a great philosopher does the work of jarring us to re-examine what we have been brought up to uncritically assume and demonstrates how doing so makes a difference in the world in which we live.

In that same volume, Karen Detlefsen argues that Du Châtelet's greatness consists not only in her contributions to metaphysics and philosophy of science, which were very significant, but also in the original ways in which Du Châtelet "engages with questions surrounding human minds, ownership of one's mind, and the role that education plays in such ownership,"[19] the precision with which she does so, and the concern that she holds to improve the lives of human beings, and in particular those who are more socially disadvantaged than others. For Detlefsen, Du Châtelet's greatness is certainly tied to the original contributions she makes in philosophy, and the lucidity of her writing, but it is not separable from the social significance of those contributions.

Detlefsen's interpretation of Du Châtelet brings me to the third strategy for approaching the large number of early modern women who have been neglected. While philosophy of mind has long been counted among the canonical topics of early modern philosophy, the focus has largely been on mental representation and related epistemic questions: What is an idea? Does having an idea entail awareness of its content? What is the nature of awareness or consciousness? What is the connection between the content of the idea and its actual object in the world? Detlefsen, however, focuses on Du Châtelet's attention to a different dimension of early modern accounts of mind – the ownership of one's own thoughts. This ownership of thought is related to the canonical question of consciousness, but it adds texture to it. When we *own* our thoughts, we are not merely aware of them, but have appropriated them.[20] While, for Detlefsen, part of Du Châtelet's originality is her shifting of a central question, Detlefsen situates Du Châtelet within a discussion that had been going on long before her, one about equality of women as rational creatures, and so about the importance of educating women. So, Du Châtelet's greatness is not in her special insight or identification of a question. Detlefsen argues that Du Châtelet is a great philosopher in that she rejects appeals to biblical and religious authority to ground rationality, and thereby sets self-ownership of thought on solid secular ground, and in doing so, she opens up the possibility of rejecting the social customs and structures that subjugate women in a new way, one that is not ultimately constrained by religious authority, even if she does not herself fully advocate for those changes. Du Châtelet thus helps to create the intellectual conditions that enable there to be more substantive equality between people and so to more just societies. Essential to Du Châtelet's philosophical greatness is her commitment to principles that make knowledge a good that is accessible to all and her re-conception of education such that through education that good can be equitably distributed.[21]

Part of the reason the contributions of women philosophers have been neglected, or even erased, is because the philosophical questions in which they are most interested were not and have not been on the canonical agenda. Du Châtelet is one in a long line of women thinkers who are particularly concerned with education, and women's education in particular, to argue that women are fit to be educated and so ought to be educated, and to consider the form that education ought to take. And yet, until very recently, these works were not read by historians of philosophy.[22] There are other philosophical questions that historical women thinkers were interested in and yet are not taken seriously within the history of philosophy. Some women were concerned to work out how there could be equality between individual human beings despite their differences – for

instance, the equality of the two sexes. Others were concerned to distinguish true friendship from the superficial relationships that sometimes pass for friends. Others were concerned with religion and distinguishing what was sometimes referred to as true religion from a feigned religious authority. Others considered the challenges the marital contract visited upon women under conditions of real inequality, and so raised questions about the nature of contracts more generally. These considerations of marriage were often also connected with evaluations of familial structures. More standard philosophical questions about the passions, and their regulation, virtue, and autonomy were also of interest to these historical women philosophers.

O'Neill suggests that women whose philosophy is centered on these topics drop out of the history of philosophy because the questions themselves become gendered and diminish in value insofar as they are deemed "feminine." While, as Ebbersmeyer's work shows, this is undoubtedly the case, there is another dimension to the philosophical questions in which women thinkers have been historically interested. For these women, philosophy is a means of both coming to explicate and understand important aspects of the particular situations in which they find themselves and providing direction for how to live in those situations. Two critiques of contemporary moral philosophy can help us to understand how this intertwining of philosophical theorizing with the practical significance of that philosophy has also led to their historical exclusion.

First, G.E.M. Anscombe in "Modern Moral Philosophy" takes aim at the impoverished sense of "moral" in play in contemporary moral philosophy, and in particular the way in which the moral has become divorced from a good that, as Aristotle well-recognized, is inseparable from human flourishing. Many women philosophers of the past developed their own philosophical views with human flourishing very much at the fore. They are less concerned with developing abstract theories that provide mechanisms for drawing distinctions of what is owed or desirable or permissible than with providing arguments for principles that both hold and must be implemented to improve human life. Their work thus does not fit easily into the dominant discussions of contemporary ethics.

Second, contemporary philosopher Charles Mills draws a distinction between two approaches in ethics and political philosophy: ideal theory and nonideal theory. Ideal theory privileges developing idealized descriptions, which are then deployed as models to the exclusion of considering actual cases.[23] These idealized models are meant to help us articulate the norms of decision making to which we ought to be committed. The classic example of a contemporary ideal theory is that articulated at the beginning of John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*, in which we are asked to consider a group of individuals in an original position, behind a veil of ignorance about where they are situated in the world, and determine which principles they would all agree to. But ideal theory certainly predates Rawls. Through its privileging of idealized models in this way, ideal theory not only ends up abstracting away from the messiness of human life, but also from the contexts and situations that move us to ask question about the human good and how it ought to guide decision making and about a just society in the first place.[24] Nonideal theory, however, recognizes human agents in the complex situations they are in, replete with varieties of lived experiences and in messy and inequitable social relations, and aims to articulate general principles and norms to guide human action and interaction that respect these complexities.

Many historical women's approach to philosophy is akin to that of nonideal theory. They are concerned with understanding and addressing the particular challenges they confront as women within a social context that denigrates their intellectual capacities, mocks their social relationships, and gives them very limited options for structuring their own life paths. Their philosophical efforts aim to articulate new conceptions of personhood that affirm their status as persons and of the equality between persons that puts them on level ground; to reflect on the purpose of education and articulate norms to guide educational practices and institutions; to articulate normative standards to shape social interactions, for instance, by distinguishing true friendship from

superficially friendly relationships, or by articulating the norms that ought to guide marriage and similar contractual agreements; to develop accounts of authentic faith and belief in God; as well as to develop accounts of the passions, virtue, and autonomy that both reflect and are responsive to social reality.

Just as philosophy moved toward valorizing ideal theory, so too did the writing of the history of philosophy move toward excluding those who assumed a nonideal theoretic approach. Mogens Laerke argues that for Martial Gueroult, the very influential twentieth-century French historian of philosophy, philosophy ought to be defined as "*any* systematic concern for a-temporal truth" (Laerke 2020: 602). Laerke shows how this conception of philosophy, rooted in a Kantian transcendental project, arises out of a search for a principle through which points of commonality between the work of philosophers of the past and the work of contemporary philosophy can be recognized, even though the work of the two might look quite different. It is through this principle that, according to Gueroult, a history of philosophy can be written. Thus, Gueroult's own interpretive work aims to demonstrate the systematicity of philosophers like Descartes, Malebranche, and Spinoza. That it is hard to imagine how these thinkers might have been read in a way that wasn't as systematizers shows just how deep Gueroult's influence has been, and how it is in the present almost uncritically accepted.

However, as innocuous as Gueroult's definition of philosophy might seem – he countenances *any* systematic effort to arrive at timeless truths – the privileging of systematicity and the pursuit of atemporal truth effectively excludes the intellectual work of women in the history from being philosophical. Truly recovering the work of women philosophers of the past will involve recognizing that there are philosophical questions that are best addressed by attending to the context in which the questions arise and looking for answers that take the form of a nonideal theory that is embedded in those contexts.[25] Insofar as philosophical engagement is sensitive to historical situation, we should also expect that what counts as a philosophical system might well look very different than what we are accustomed to. While we might continue to expect internal consistency and even the articulation of fundamental assumptions or principles,[26] to be philosophical a program need not aim to explain the totality of things. It need only aim to make sense of elements of lived experience that are of particular moment.[27]

### 3.3 Lessons for the Historiography of Philosophy

I have been focused on criticizing the early modern European philosophical canon, and so canons in general, but it should also be noted that there are some advantages to having a canon. The early modern philosophical canon in so far it sets an agenda of philosophical questions provides a background to contemporary philosophical discussions and helps to connect the philosophical present with the philosophical past. This connection helps to justify contemporary philosophical interests.[28] It also has afforded philosophers with different specialized interests to share a background in common, making it easier to have a broader philosophical community. In teaching, a canon helps in structuring curriculum, and so affords a degree of continuity from one institution to another. We aim to disrupt the canon because it is exclusionary. Can we retain these advantages even while we work to make the history of philosophy more inclusive?

Noting these advantages can provide helpful additional guidance as we set about reconceiving both the history of philosophy and how we write this new history. First, while undertaking the doxographic labor of retrieving the work of many women philosophers is essential, we need to be mindful that the doxography not be simply for doxography's sake. That is, the philosopher's project is not identical to a philologist's. In doing this philosophical archaeology, we need to look not only for artifacts, but also for points of potential commonality that can help to lend a degree of cohesion to our discipline.

Second, while we like to think of the early modern canon as providing students, and even more mature philosophers, with a set of common texts that bind us all together, it is less the authors and their works that allow us to enter into conversation with one another but rather the common interest in the philosophical questions that structure the canonical agenda.[29] We are gripped by the questions that are front and center in the early modern canon, and through our interest in getting clear about the nature of things and about how we know things we are primed to engage with one another, in many cases in quite animated ways.

This grip the questions have on us is what some people describe as a philosophical instinct or a motivation to understand ourselves and our place in the world, to reflect on the world around us, and our place in it. While we might well have a shared interest in canonical questions of metaphysics and epistemology, we do so because we have a shared inclination to ask philosophical questions in the first place – to take up a reflective stance. Indeed, philosophy matters precisely because of the reflective stance it cultivates. Philosophy asks us to identify assumptions, evaluate those assumptions, look for consistency, for pressure points. The idea is that doing this actually helps to improve our lives. Notably, that is what these historical women philosophers think.

Women thinkers in the history of philosophy are interested in philosophical questions because they believe that articulating our fundamental assumptions and getting them right can make a real difference in the quality of their lives but also those of women, both their contemporaries and of the future. As we rewrite the history of philosophy, we ought to ensure that this reflective spirit is front and center, for it is through our shared interest in asking questions and interacting with one another to seek answers to them that we can find the commonality the canon provides rather than through a limited set of figures and texts.

We might be tempted to characterize these as timeless questions, for they arise again and again, and insofar as they are philosophical, we engage with them intellectually and abstract from the contexts in which they arise. Nonetheless, while the questions pique our natural human curiosity, interest in them is sustained through a resonance in the context in which they arise. To sustain the presence of women – and indeed other neglected figures – in the history of philosophy, we need to find a way to write histories of nonideal philosophies. Doing so will involve reflecting on and *making explicit* our own interests and aims in undertaking the history of philosophy itself. The failure to do just that is what has left us with a small set of canonized philosophical saints.[30]

## Notes

1 Over the past five years, at least, the *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* has made a concerted effort to build scholarship on a wide range of non-canonical figures, publishing 61 articles (19%) on non-canonical figures across historical periods. Other scholarly journals that publish in English are lagging behind, though 2019–2020 has seen progress in journals such as *Journal for the History of Philosophy* and *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*.

2 This recognition can be dated at least to the dates of publication of Mary Ellen Waithe's three volume series of *A History of Women Philosophers* (1987, 1989, and 1991).

3 We might also note that the "early modern" time period is somewhat arbitrarily defined. Not only is the time period itself marked by events in European history, the disciplines of History and of English actually define "early modern" differently than does Philosophy.

4 The dispute between Descartes and Voetius at Utrecht is one very clear example of a very public struggle between a philosopher currently regarded as canonical and theologians who saw themselves as having the authority to prescribe the discipline of philosophy. See Verbeek (1992).

5 See for instance Kuklick (1984): "If a philosopher in the United States were asked why the seven people in my title comprise Modern Philosophy, the initial response would be: they were the best, and there are historical and philosophical connections among them" (125) and "We do not write the (or 'a') history of philosophy; what we write are histories of philosophers whom we think, or others think, are great" (137).

6 Waithe (2015) following Witt (2006) characterizes these as "burning questions" and rightly recognizes the limitations of understanding the canon in these terms. In Shapiro (2016) I began to highlight central

questions that the current canon omits. In what follows I offer a diagnosis of how some questions come to seem necessary while others disappear from view.

7 Alberto Vanzo (2016) fleshes out details about how the standard narrative of the history of philosophy is a dialectic of competing doctrines of Rationalism and Empiricism and their ultimate synthesis.

8 The expression "pluralizing" an historical philosopher can seem a bit mysterious. As I understand Antoine-Mahut, the way an author is incorporated in the history of philosophy is far from univocal; there is no single Descartes who figures in the history of philosophy. How we position a philosopher's views in intellectual history is highly contingent on the role that history plays in a larger educational program. The case of Descartes is particularly instructive because the same historian of philosophy positions Descartes differently in different editions of his history.

9 Plutarch also names a number of women, apparently a result of great labor. See Bremmer (1981).

10 The discussion of this paragraph draws on O'Neill (1997).

11 See Waithe (1987, 1989, 1991).

12 O'Neill (1997).

13 Karen Green and Jacqueline Broad's *History of Women's Political Thought in Europe 1400–1700* (2009) and Green's *History of Women's Political Thought in Europe 1700–1800* (2014) add more names to the list. See also Karen O'Brien, *Women and Enlightenment in Eighteenth Century Britain* (2009), and Meredith Ray, *Daughters of Alchemy: Women and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (2015); Carla Hesse, *The Other Enlightenment: How French Women Became Modern* (2003); Doris Kadish, *Fathers, Daughters, and Slaves: Women Writers and French Colonial Slavery* (2012) for additional figures. We historians of philosophy need to be vigilant about seeking out the work of historians who are the ones digging through archives and libraries finding long buried intellectual treasure.

As I am finalizing this text, Cambridge University has announced the discovery of Mary Astell's personal library, with important marginalia, among the holdings of Magdalene College.

14 O'Neill (2006) is an illustration of this point. There is a separate challenge of creating a body of secondary literature out of nothing. Publication decisions are made on the advice of expert referees. But what if there are very few such experts in philosophy?

15 See Karen Detlefsen's chapter in this volume. A workshop at McGill University in November 2016 organized by Marguerite Deslauriers focused on issues of genre and methodology in the history of philosophy. Waithe (2015) makes a similar point.

16 O'Neill (1997) argues for this explanation.

17 Here I follow the norm of characterizing Cavendish's metaphysics as vitalist, but it is important to recognize that vitalism refers to a range of views, which are not always compatible with one another. Thanks to Karen Detlefsen for pressing this point.

18 Notably, this response also fails to recognize that because of dominant prejudices and power structures the intellectual contributions of some of these women may have been discounted in their own time, despite what we can now recognize as their originality and potential to be agenda setters. Thanks to Karen Detlefsen for this point.

19 Karen Detlefsen (2018: 130).

20 Detlefsen is building on a theme articulated in Shapiro (2016).

21 Detlefsen notes in conversation that there are strong inegalitarian strands in Émilie du Châtelet, and in her *Discourse on Happiness* in particular. Du Châtelet does not in the end see the implications of her own principles.

22 Amelie Oksenberg Rorty's *Philosophers on Education* (1988) does not allude to any of these writings.

23 Mills introduces language of a contract in a nonideal society in *The Racial Contract* (Mills 1997); he helpfully distills the central principles of nonideal theory in Mills (2005). "But ideal theory either tacitly represents the actual as simple deviation from the ideal, not worth theorizing in its own right, or claims that starting from the ideal is at least the best way of realizing it" (Mills 2005: 168).

24 As Mills notes, within the domain of ideal theory agents have near perfect human capacities, and lack implicit biases; contexts of systematic oppression are ignored; and social institutions function well.

25 In this respect, it is worth noting that contextualist history of philosophy, insofar as it aims to interpret works of philosophy through their significance to active debates in the history of science, already effectively treats metaphysics and epistemology as nonideal theory.

26 We need not always even expect internal consistency. For instance, we recognize that Leibniz has an early, a middle and a late period. And we note too the willingness of contemporary philosophers, i.e., Hilary Putnam, to change their views, without diminishing their stature. Thanks to Karen Detlefsen for this point.

27 On this view, it is somewhat less important that the boundaries between philosophy and other forms of humanistic inquiry be hard and fast. The same figures can be studied by historians of philosophy, literary

historians, and intellectual historians. What distinguishes us are the questions we ask of the texts and the ways in which we relate the past to the present. Indeed, I take it as a benefit of this way of thinking about the history of philosophy that it opens up spaces for these cross-disciplinary conversations. O'Neill (2003) highlights Michèle LeDoeuff's identification in *Hipparchia's Choice* of operative philosophy as an alternative to systematic philosophy.

28 Rorty (1984) makes this point.

29 Shapiro (2016) develops this point more fully.

30 I have benefited from comments by Silver Bronzo, questions from participants in an online workshop on philosophical canons at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, and an email exchange with Daria Drozdova and Daniel Garber arising from that presentation, as well as from discussion with the Philosophy Department at Carleton University.

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