# *Introduction: Reworking Early Modern Metaphysics*

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This collection is devoted to exploring the metaphysics of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century women philosophers. These thinkers were deeply involved in the key debates of their period, from the metaphysics of gravity to the nature of eternity, and this volume demonstrates the subtlety and philosophical richness of their work. Ultimately, these chapters show how important it is to recover the neglected views of women philosophers, for this process expands and refines our understanding of metaphysics and its history.

The term 'metaphysics' was originally applied to a collection of books that came to be known as Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, so titled because they came after (*meta*) his books on physics. The topics covered in Aristotelian *Metaphysics* are in some sense the most fundamental, or at the highest level of generality, such as the causes or principles of beings.[1] Characterising metaphysics is difficult but the discipline is roughly concerned with explaining *what* there is and *how* it is. As one scholar puts it, 'Metaphysics is the most general attempt to make sense of things'.[2] For example, metaphysics asks, Do substances exist? If so, what are they like? How are they related to each other? By the early modern period, traditional metaphysical topics included substance, bodies, minds, space, time, identity, and free will. Today, these traditional topics are studied alongside less traditional ones, including the metaphysics of natural laws and gender.

Early modern metaphysics scholarship is thriving but women philosophers rarely appear in the literature.[3] Traditionally, women have been neglected in the history of our discipline, and this is especially true of

[1] See Cohen (2016).
[2] See Moore (2012: 1–7), who draws on various twentieth-century definitions of metaphysics to construct this one.
[3] For example, see Nadler's 2002 edited collection *A Companion to Early Modern Philosophy*, Rutherford's 2006 edited collection *The Cambridge Companion to Early Modern Philosophy*, Robert Pasnau's 2011 *Metaphysical Themes 1274–1671*, and Moore's 2012 *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics*.

early modern philosophy. Just consider its great, all-male canon: Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, and Kant. The reasons underlying the omission of women are many and complex, but misogyny certainly played some role.[4] As feminist historians of philosophy have pointed out, the neglect of women leads to problems. Our histories of philosophy miss the complexity of the periods under consideration, distorting the historical record. And, in missing the ideas of women philosophers – which were just as sharp and original as their male counterparts – we are failing to mine valuable philosophical reserves.[5]

Happily, over the last twenty years, the project to recover the work of historical women philosophers has gained ground. There is now a substantial body of literature on early modern women philosophers.[6] However, very little of this literature concerns their metaphysics, discussions of which are generally limited to individual journal articles or book chapters. This volume addresses that neglect, constituting the first collection devoted exclusively to early modern women's metaphysical views.

The volume explores the metaphysical work of nine women philosophers active in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries: Bathsua Reginald Makin (c.1600–c.1675), Anna Maria van Schurman (1607–1678), Elisabeth of Bohemia (1618–1680), Margaret Cavendish (1623–1673), Anne Conway (1631–1679), Damaris Cudworth Masham (1659–1708), Mary Astell (1666–1731), Catharine Trotter Cockburn (c.1674–1749), and Émilie Du Châtelet (1706–1749). Relatively few early modern women philosophers are known to scholarship, and fewer still wrote on metaphysics, so this selection of figures includes the most prominent early modern women metaphysicians.[7] Some of these women (such as Margaret Cavendish) wrote prodigiously on metaphysics, whilst others (such as Anna Maria van Schurman and Catharine Cockburn) wrote relatively little, and these differences are reflected in the coverage.

This collection aims to consolidate existing work in the field, and open paths for future scholarship. This should help historians paint a more

[4] See O'Neill (1998), Rée (2002), and Witt and Shapiro (2017).
[5] See Duran (2006: 18), Witt and Shapiro (2017), and Mercer (2017).
[6] In the 1990s, Waithe's 1991 *A History of Women Philosophers* broke the ground, providing a collection of survey articles on women. Atherton's 1994 *Women Philosophers of the Early Modern Period* collected and reprinted some of their texts. More recent work on women includes Broad's 2002 *Women Philosophers of the Seventeenth Century*, Duran's 2006 *Eight Women Philosophers*, and Broad and Green's 2014 *A History of Women's Political Thought in Europe, 1400–1700*.
[7] Although there may be more out there. For information on additional early modern women philosophers (not all of whom wrote on metaphysics), see Waithe (1991).

accurate picture of the period, and uncover fresh metaphysical ideas. To show how, let's give an example. Here is a time-worn metaphysical question: What am I? Famously, Descartes answered, 'I' am a thinking, immaterial substance, joined to a material one. As this volume shows, early modern women provided a range of alternative answers to this question. For example, Damaris Masham believes 'I' am a non-solid yet extended substance. Anne Conway holds 'I' am a collection of substances, all fundamentally of the same kind. Mary Astell argues 'I' am a non-gendered mind, of which we cannot know the essence. Each of these answers are unique, and shrewd. They are historically important because understanding them improves our history of metaphysics. If we wish to write a truly universal history of philosophy's general attempt to make sense of things, we must go beyond the male perspective. Further, these answers are philosophically important. As we will see, these metaphysical theories avoid problems facing other theories, such as Descartes' interaction problem, and the problem of how we can represent our own minds to ourselves. The metaphysical theories of these women are not just different to those of their male counterparts, they may be better.

The chapters of this volume are grouped into five themes. The first is meta-metaphysics. Marcy Lascano's chapter, '"Heads Cast in Metaphysical Moulds": Damaris Masham on the Method and Nature of Metaphysics', neatly brings out early modern debates over the subject matter of metaphysics. Lascano shows that, contrary to how it might seem, Masham does advance views that we would consider metaphysical. However, Masham only advances metaphysical views that can be defended using *a posteriori* knowledge, for example concerning the nature of substances and freewill.

The second theme is the metaphysics of science. Susan James' chapter, '"Hermaphroditical Mixtures": Margaret Cavendish on Nature and Art', explores Cavendish's views on things created by the practitioners of scientific arts, such as chemical mixtures and microscopes. For Cavendish, the products of such arts are 'hermaphroditical', in the sense they are partly artificial, and partly natural; as such, they cannot rival things found in nature. James details Cavendish's rare and thoughtful critique of experimentalism, a critique alert to its gendered character.

Andrew Janiak's chapter, 'Émilie Du Châtelet: Physics, Metaphysics and the Case of Gravity', considers Du Châtelet's role in the history of science and metaphysics. Against scholars who hold that Du Châtelet was merely aiming to provide a metaphysical foundation for Newton's physics,

Janiak takes her work on gravity as a case study to argue that Du Châtelet used metaphysical ideas to build a more systematic physics than Newton.

Karen Detlefsen's chapter, 'Margaret Cavendish on Laws and Order', explores Cavendish's role in the evolving history of thinking about laws of nature, and the order of the natural world. Detlefsen argues that Cavendish occupies an unusual, middle position in the transition from pre-modern to modern ways of thinking about this topic. Further, this position anticipates a twenty-first century account of laws and order offered by the feminist philosopher of science Evelyn Fox Keller.

The third theme is ontology. Sara L. Uckelman's chapter, 'Bathsua Makin and Anna Maria van Schurman: Education and the Metaphysics of Being a Woman', studies the metaphysics underlying seventeenth-century views on the education of women. Uckelman considers two of the earliest treatises arguing for the education of women, by women and in English. She argues that their attitudes towards education *also* reveal the essence of that which is to be educated. This, in turn, provides insight into how Makin and van Schurman understood the nature of women.

Deborah Boyle's chapter, 'Margaret Cavendish on the Eternity of Created Matter', argues that Cavendish held two seemingly contradictory theses: the universe is eternal, and it was created *ex nihilo*. Against existing scholarship, Boyle argues it is consistent for Cavendish to hold both theses, in light of the knowledge Cavendish believes we can have of God.

My chapter, 'Anne Conway on the Identity of Creatures over Time', investigates Conway's views on identity. This is a critical question for Conway because she believes that creatures are continually changing. Against existing scholarship, I argue that Conway does not ground creaturely identity on haecceities, but on sameness of soul substance. Elements of this view are in accord with the later work of Henry More, drawing Conway closer with Cambridge Platonism.

Katherine Brading's chapter, 'Émilie Du Châtelet and the Problem of Bodies', explains that early modern natural philosophers took laws to apply to bodies. This raises what Brading calls the 'problem of bodies': What exactly *are* bodies? Brading argues that Du Châtelet advances a novel solution, one that fares better than rival solutions of the period.

The fourth theme is the metaphysics of minds and selves. Frederique Janssen-Lauret's chapter, 'Elisabeth of Bohemia as a Naturalistic Dualist', discusses Elisabeth's account of the mind-body relation. Elisabeth's comments are scattered throughout her correspondence with Descartes, and commentators are divided on how to interpret them. Janssen-Lauret presents a new reading of Elisabeth as having a distinctive but dualist position,

deriving from an effort to improve upon Descartes' metaphysics. It is informed by anti-Scholasticism and a kind of proto-naturalism, which prefigures views held by some philosophers of science and psychology today.

David Cunning's chapter, 'Margaret Cavendish on the Metaphysics of Imagination and the Dramatic Force of the Imaginary World', explores Cavendish's views on the imagination. Cavendish presents a detailed metaphysic of the imagination, an account of what the imagination *is*. Cunning explains that, for Cavendish, imaginings consist of active bodies that move inside our heads, and imaginary worlds provide benefits that can easily go unnoticed. They are often more pleasant to inhabit than the actual world, and in addition they inform us about the social, political, and material structure of that world by contrasting it with representations of how it might be different. They also provide us with a map of how a different world might gradually come about.

Jacqueline Broad's chapter, 'Mary Astell's Malebranchean Concept of the Self', investigates Astell's understanding of the self. Other scholars have read Astell as holding a Cartesian view of the self, as an immaterial thinking thing. However, Broad argues that Astell departs from Cartesian orthodoxy, and holds a view of the self closer to that of the French philosopher Nicolas Malebranche and his English follower John Norris. Broad argues that although Astell's resulting conception of the self is not robust enough to ground claims about the immortality of the soul, it is adequate for Astell's moral and practical purposes.

The final theme is the metaphysics of women and morality. Sarah Hutton's chapter, 'Goodness in Anne Conway's Metaphysics', explores a key concept in Conway's system: goodness. Hutton argues that Conway's conception of goodness is decidedly metaphysical, as it is grounded on divine goodness, and created beings achieve goodness only through participation with the goodness of God.

Patricia Sheridan's chapter, 'Catharine Trotter Cockburn's Metaphysics of Morality', details Cockburn's metaphysics by way of showing what is so original about her moral naturalism. Sheridan shows that Cockburn held the view that 'virtue consists in following nature', and that a distinctive feature of her view is the way morality is grounded in a comprehensive system of nature.