

Women and the High Priests of Reason

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Introduction

Women are not supposed to be truly rational. The conviction that women can at best worship in the outer precincts of the temple of reason has a long tradition. It has survived philosophical and social revolutions. The idea is not that women are incapable of any kind of activity requiring reason. Those who sometimes like to think that we are by nature intuitive, impractical and illogical at the same time castigate us for being calculating, manipulative and ruthlessly efficient at achieving our ends. Women have a certain low cunning; or, seen more positively, a sound common sense understanding of the part of the world that comes within their grasp. It is the grander shores, the more sacred groves of rationality which women are supposed to be unfit to aspire to. A few women may now be philosophers, mathematicians or practitioners of a 'hard' science, but these disciplines - which have been traditionally regarded as the supreme achievements of the human intellect - are masculine domains. Women exist in them only in some discomfort.

Why is it that reason as it is employed in these areas is regarded as peculiarly masculine? Do theories about rationality propounded by philosophers legitimate and perpetuate this situation? To subject the whole of Western philosophy to a critical examination would be an immense undertaking. This paper will concentrate on looking at a theory which has had - and still has - an enormous impact on the way we think about rationality.

I The Man of Reason and the Man of Science

For as to reason, or sense, inasmuch as it is that alone which renders us men and distinguishes us from the brutes, I am disposed to believe that it is complete in each one of us.

(Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, Part I)

Descartes contends that the ability to discover what is true or false is not confined to 'the company of learned men' or to those who are trained in academies. Indeed, those who are too respectful of academic dogmas are hindered rather than helped in their attempts to gain knowledge. Almost anyone, Descartes says, can train themselves to make proper use of their rational powers. Thus a person who wants to make discoveries is advised not to depend on books or teachers, but to find out for himself, using his own mind, what is true and what is false. What Descartes seems to be offering is a liberation from the stuffy, elitist halls of academia and a road to truth which

can be taken by people who might never have been found in these halls in the first place.

When Descartes directed his fellow men to make proper use of their natural light of reason, he may have had in mind only the 'men' referred to by the narrow sense of the term. But nothing he says about reason suggests that the power is confined to one sex. Indeed, we might suppose that Descartes' view of rationality would have positive implications as far as women are concerned. For the Cartesian view, unlike the then prevalent Aristotelian view, did not allow that particular kinds of persons - women, for example - could be naturally deficient in their powers of reason. And further, the Cartesian view emphasises that these rational powers can be exercised properly and to good effect by people who are not - as women were not - part of an academic establishment.

There have been feminists who have tried to make use of these implications of Descartes' theory of rationality. A 17th-century disciple of Descartes, Marie de Gournay, in *L'Egalité des Hommes et des Femmes*, argued that only the lack of proper training in the use of their minds kept women from being able to understand the true nature of the universe. Therefore it may seem strange that some people, from a feminist point of view, have contended that the Cartesian theory of rationality has had a pernicious effect on the way women in our society are treated and perceived.

Genevieve Lloyd in *The Man of Reason* argues that the ideal of rationality associated with Descartes and other Rationalist philosophers of the 17th century, rather than challenging views about the natural differences between women and men, had the effect of sharpening the mental division of labour between the sexes. The ideal of the Man of Reason was, in fact, an ideal for males and not females; to women were assigned characteristics which the Man of Reason was supposed to suppress or overcome: sensuousness, emotions - in short, the non-rational.

Lloyd thinks that the Cartesian rational ideal had this effect because it required a more drastic separation than ever before between the intellect and the emotions:

The search for the clear and distinct, the separation out of the emotional, the sensuous, the imaginative, now makes possible polarization of previously existing contrasts - intellectual versus the emotions; reason versus imagination; mind versus matter.

[1]

Thus when the Cartesian view of rationality was applied to the already existing notion that women are

more emotional, sensuous and less rational than men, women's supposed mental characteristics were even further downgraded. For now these characteristics were no longer part of the rational. Further, those who embark on the austere path which Descartes recommends to the Man of Reason, need comfort, relief and solace. And who better to provide this service than those traditional nurturers - women? The Man of Reason must have his Ladies Auxiliary.

Nevertheless, the link between the Cartesian view of rationality and the degradation of women remains puzzling. For if it is granted that women are human, that we have minds as well as bodies, then it is difficult to deny that we too have reason 'complete in each of us'. From a rational point of view the marriage of Cartesianism with the Aristotelian belief in the mental deficiencies of women doesn't make much sense.

Though it is true that a contradiction can become common currency if it suits popular prejudices, we may still wonder why Cartesianism didn't more successfully challenge traditional views about women. Is this failure connected, as Lloyd believes, to the deficiencies which undoubtedly exist in Descartes' view of rationality? To investigate this further we have to look more closely at the purposes Cartesian theory was meant to serve and the way it entered the social world.

The promise Descartes holds out in *Rules for the Direction of the Mental Powers* and also in his more mature works is that by exercising our mental faculties properly, we will be able to have incontrovertible knowledge of the nature of the universe. But from our vantage point we can see that Descartes was not so much liberating our rational powers from bookish irrelevancies as binding them to a new view of the world - to the natural philosophy of Galileo, Copernicus and other 'mechanists'. His view of rationality and the new natural philosophy were made for each other.

The secret of correct method, as Descartes explains it in the *Rules*, is to obtain clear and distinct ideas as the result of an analytical process - i.e. by breaking down data until we reach the 'simple natures'. Then by relating these epistemological atoms in ways that are also clear and distinct (and by making methodical 'enumerations') we can pass 'sound and true judgments on all that presents itself to us' (Rule 1).

But only to someone who has already accepted the new natural philosophy would it seem obvious that the simple natures must be of 'likeness', 'equality', 'extension', 'shape', 'motion', 'existence', 'unity', 'duration', and not say, 'colour', 'texture', 'sound', etc. Only to those who accept mechanistic views about causality would explanations in terms of pushes and pulls seem clear and distinct, and explanations in terms of potentialities obscure and 'occult'.

Even the reductionism inherent in Descartes' method is only self-evident within a certain framework of explanation. Why should we believe that we properly understand the nature of a piece of wax (to use the example in the *Meditations*) when we reduce it to its epistemological atoms and not when we comprehend it in relation to bees and beehives? Descartes' commitments required him to render the piece of wax into a fit object of contemplation for the kind of scientific understanding he was inclined to accept. The Man of Reason is the man who was on the winning side in the scientific revolution of the 17th century. And Descartes was only one of the first to identify rationality with the explanatory principles of this science.

However, to see the Cartesian view of rationality as merely underwriting theories which have to a large

extent been superseded is to ignore the main source of its power and continuing attractiveness. Some ideals which Descartes embodied in his description of the Man of Reason, particularly those Lloyd is most concerned to expose, transcend his time and place. Descartes' theory of rationality is meant to demonstrate that when the mind concerns itself with its proper objects - and these turn out to be what can be known in mathematics, science and philosophy - then it is capable of true objectivity, true rationality, of real knowledge. Whereas what cannot be clearly and distinctly understood - and this turns out to be most of what we are concerned with in our daily existence - is not true knowledge.

Descartes' rules for the direction of our mental powers are like instructions for the efficient employment of a machine where it can be assumed that the mechanism will operate properly providing it is used in the way it was designed to be used. The main instruction is that we should not allow its operations to be clogged by impurities. The imagination, the senses, contribute raw materials to this machinery, but must by no means be allowed to interfere with the workings of the mechanism. This is how error and disagreement creep in.

The reason why these other mental faculties introduce error is because they are subjective. Individuals differ in imaginative powers, in their memories, their emotional life, and to some degree in their sense experiences. Only the intellect can provide an objective view of the world - a view that isn't affected by an individual's personality, special abilities or point of view. What sense experience does contribute - the possibility of knowing the simple natures - is kept from being a threat to this objectivity by ensuring that these natures can be described in impersonal - i.e. mathematical - terms. When Descartes insists that our rational powers are complete in each of us, what he is really concerned to establish is that objectivity is possible. Each of us has an intellect which can operate, if we let it, undisturbed by individual differences or by our being the kinds of people we are.

The setting for the operation of reason which Descartes constructs is not only designed to prevent the idiosyncracies of individuals from interfering with the intellect, but to overcome the limitations which all humans share as bodily creatures. In ordinary life we are caught up in our daily concerns, forced to decide and act on the basis of opinion. We are beset by bodily needs, desires and passions. Our thoughts revolve around our relations to each other; our view of the world is coloured by our values and attitudes. The arrangements which Descartes describes at the beginning of the *Discourse on Method* for achieving peace, objectivity and tranquillity are meant to ensure that such human passions, bodily needs and cares do not interfere with the workings of the intellect. Being rational requires that we cut ourselves off from ordinary existence temporarily. If we can do so, then we should be able to come to a view which is not affected by the human standpoint. We can, for instance, learn to comprehend the piece of wax as an extended thing - rather than as an object with a use, as something that has a certain significance to us and a connection with our lives.

What Descartes is striving for is an epistemological ideal which is still influential and is above all embodied in some views about philosophy, science and mathematics. For it is commonly believed that true knowledge must be objective - not only as far as individuals are concerned, but in so far as the human species is concerned. Real knowledge cannot be merely human knowledge. And thus when Descartes

suggests that the natural light of reason is a divine light he should be taken seriously. We become god-like to the extent that we can be rational. And this means for Descartes as it did for Plato, being able to contemplate with the intellect the objects that are appropriate to it.

How can we be sure that our knowledge when it is obtained according to Descartes' rules is not merely human after all? How can we be sure that what appears to us individually and collectively as clear and distinct is really the case? Only a metaphysical guarantee can possibly assure us of this. And therefore Descartes in the *Meditations* deals with this problem by attempting to prove the existence of God as a non-deceiver. Descartes' theory of rationality, in the end, is founded on a theological premise.

Descartes' advocacy of the new science and his metaphysical theory of rationality reinforced each other. The new science encouraged a distinction between the common sense world of appearances and a reality describable in mathematical terms - a distinction embodied in Galileo and Descartes' advocacy of the primary/secondary quality doctrine. Moreover the very possibility of science, mathematics and philosophy, as they have been traditionally conceived, seems to depend on the ability of the practitioners to detach themselves from the concerns of daily life, to obtain results which can be accepted by anyone, no matter what their personality or background, to develop universal knowledge rather than knowledge of the particular and local. So it's not difficult to understand how a belief in the possibility of such knowledge, along with the success of the new science, could encourage the idea that reasoning in science, mathematics and philosophy can achieve an objectivity which is more than human. At the same time Descartes' theological grounding of this rationality sanctified these disciplines, encouraged a belief that only scientists, mathematicians and philosophers can be truly objective and truly rational.

Both the special relation of Descartes' account of rationality to these disciplines and its theological foundation must be appreciated in order to understand why Cartesianism does not, as far as women are concerned, have much of a potential to liberate.

II Women in the Heavenly Kingdoms

Ability and inclination alone have never determined who can join the ranks of the scientists, mathematicians and philosophers. The new scientists of the 17th century were not on the whole craftworkers - those people who actually had a practical knowledge of the materials which scientists theorised about. The natural philosophers were people of independent means with the education, leisure and contacts necessary to carry on their correspondences, their experiments, their theorising. Thus the new rationality was associated with a division of labour according to class, and Descartes' challenge to the intellectual establishment was on behalf of this new intellectual elite.

The intellectual elite was also almost exclusively masculine. Only women of the aristocracy occasionally had a chance to pursue philosophical or scientific studies, and even for them the practical difficulties of fulfilling their social roles and having a life of the mind were often insuperable. Princess Elisabeth, who corresponded with Descartes, complains continually that her social duties and household cares made philosophical reflection virtually impossible [2]. Nor would the proprieties permit her to visit and converse with learned men. The independent life and the dedication of a savant were just not possible for women.

Though it is now possible for us to enter those disciplines which our society has always regarded so highly, impediments still exist. A woman with a room of her own and some time in the evening might be able to write a novel. But becoming a scientist, or even a mathematician or a philosopher, not only requires an advanced education - something that is beyond the means of more women than men - but also a kind of dedication which many women and men believe to be incompatible with a woman's other responsibilities.

Moreover from the 17th century up through modern times, these disciplines have always been most closely associated with activities traditionally carried on by men. The new science had its earliest applications in astronomy, navigation, ballistics, mining and other engineering activities. On the other hand, those associated with nurturing, domestic organisation and personal relationships seem far away from the heart of knowledge, according to Cartesian standards. The skills and ways of understanding that belong to women seem hopelessly bound to the world of appearance, to the confusions and turmoil of everyday life, to the passions and to the imagination.

One of the effects of the Cartesian account of rationality is to glorify the knowledge and skills involved in the 'grand' disciplines and the activities associated with them, and to downgrade the more mundane skills and knowledge which people - women and men - employ in everyday life. It did this much more decisively than did the Aristotelian account of rationality - for the Aristotelians did not attempt to make such a sharp distinction between common sense knowledge and the knowledge possible in science and philosophy. It is not so much the Cartesian distinction between the intellect and the passions which led to a devaluation of women and their traditional activities, but rather the distinction between *real* knowledge belonging to the 'grand' disciplines, and the knowledge required for everyday life. Our problem as women is not simply that we are emotional, but that activities appropriate to us keep our minds focused on the merely mundane.

However, the association of the higher reaches of rationality with masculinity cannot be entirely the result of the impediments which now and in the past have kept women out of the 'higher' disciplines. The very idea that women too might devote themselves to making discoveries in the realm of pure intellect seems to many people to be absurd, incongruous, unnatural, unseemly, a subject for a joke or a sermon. Descartes' own account of what this devotion entails indicates why it is so widely believed that women shouldn't aspire to intellectual priesthood.

The Man of Reason is supposed to rise above bodily influences, put behind him the seductions of the body, detach himself from everyday involvements, use bodily organs as instruments under the control of his intellect. Being rational is to be objective, to concern oneself with universals rather than with matters particular and local. Being rational is a matter of mind over matter, will over emotions. And this is precisely what we as women are not supposed to be able to achieve.

Our female bodies are irrepressible. They clog up our mental machinery. We are the subjects of our wombs, the slaves of our sexuality, or as more recent writers have it, our minds are drugged by our raging hormones, we are pushed off the straight and narrow path of reason by the menstrual cycle, by menopause, by pregnancy. Women may have the same mental capacities as men, but this doesn't count for much if we are constitutionally unable to use them properly.

Any woman who looks into the literature past and present on the supposed mental disabilities of women will have cause to wonder whether men are capable of

being rational about this subject. The vehemence with which generations of scholars have tried to establish the inferiority of women suggests that more is at stake than is usually acknowledged. Those who point out the unfitness of women are not so much interested in saving us from tasks too difficult for our constitutions, but in keeping the more sacred regions of intellectual activity free from female pollution. Intercourse with the divine has always in our society been a masculine prerogative. Women have souls but cannot be priests; women have minds but should not be the high priests of rationality.

I have suggested that the separation between matters pertaining to the intellect and matters pertaining to the body and the passions goes along with a distinction between the sacred and the profane. Descartes' view of rationality rests on the belief that we can have knowledge that is not limited by our bodily existence. By drawing a sharper distinction than his predecessors between knowledge obtained by the intellect and beliefs we get from our senses, he also sharpens the distinction between what is spiritual, objective, untainted, masculine and the earthy, impure, pragmatic realm which women are supposed to be bound to. The Cartesian theory of rationality, by sanctifying science, philosophy and mathematics, removed them further from the reach of women. And even after all these centuries, the odour of sanctity still clings.



III High and Low Rationality

To present the Cartesian knower as a detached intellect and Cartesian rationality as limited to the operation of an understanding concerned with mathematical objects and a mathematised reality is to give an incomplete picture of Descartes' own view of reason. For Descartes himself was aware of some of the limitations of the Man of Reason conceived as an intellect. In Meditation VI he admits that just as the natural light of reason can compel our assent, so

too, at times, does nature - and rightly so. '... Those things given by God to me as being composed of mind and body' teach me things that I can scarcely deny, for example, that I have need for food and drink, that injury causes me pain, and so forth.

Later he advises Princess Elisabeth:

It is by availing oneself only of life and ordinary conversations, and by abstaining from meditating, and studying things that exercise the imagination, that one learns to conceive the union of the soul and the body.

[3]

For practical purposes it's best to have the concept of ourselves which everyone has when not philosophising, as 'one person alone who, at the same time, has a body and thought' [4]. The questions about the good and virtuous life which Elisabeth especially wants answered seem to require this ordinary and more integrated way of conceiving the self. Though Descartes doesn't explicitly say so, they also require a different conception of rationality.

According to the moral philosophy and psychology which Descartes develops in the course of his correspondence, our human natures teach us about more than our bodily needs. Our natures if we read them rightly can also tell us what is ultimately valuable to us [5].

What brings us true contentment, what the ground of virtue is, can only be discovered by reflection on our nature and needs as embodied beings who hate and love, sympathise and suffer. In undertaking this task reason must, as in its scientific applications, distinguish reality from appearance. But this means separating what is really good for me from what the passions of the moment urge me to do. Descartes provides some practical suggestions about how through reflection, through psychological knowledge about where our passions come from, we can put our inclinations and feelings in perspective. But there is no question of obtaining any clear and distinct ideas. Reason is operating not only in different territory and with different aims, but also according to different standards of objectivity.

There is also no question of separating the operation of the intellect from the influence and activities of the body. Being rational involves reflecting on needs, inclinations and attachments, and evaluating these in the light of experiences, self knowledge and imaginatively constructed possibilities. It is having a human nature which enables us to answer the questions which Elisabeth asks. But also it seems inevitable that the answers each of us gives will be affected by what kind of persons we are. Descartes recommends that we should value most the kind of contentment which fortune cannot take away from us. But not everyone, even after reflection, would agree with his rather stoical views about value. We know, in fact, that different people with different inclinations and experiences can make different considered judgements on the matter of what should be most important in their lives. In any case, life-long reflection on the experiences we have had, on our own natures, on the successes and failures of others, on the constructions of our imaginations, gets us as close as we can ever get to objectivity.

Descartes is right to suggest that as far as practical life is concerned we have little choice but to regard mind and body, reason and action as belonging to a person conceived as an integrated unit. Not only is the standpoint appropriate to the questions of morality which he discussed with Elisabeth but also to other matters which require the combined effort of mind and body, the entire skill of a person. For practical knowledge, whether of matters pertaining to one's own inner well-being or the kind of

understanding we need to deal with our social and physical environment, is the knowledge of a person and not an intellect. When we are called upon to deal with the people and objects in our social and natural environment, we bring to bear mental and physical skills which we have acquired in our life time; we depend on our ability to act, to think, to imagine, to feel, to sympathise. Though scientific knowledge may sometimes be useful, as Descartes himself suggests in his discussions of the passions, skill and experience is also needed to understand its relevance and how it can be applied.

Being rational, as it is ordinarily understood, is being able to choose and pursue ends, to carry out means, which are desirable and effective. Being rational is thus a human ability which requires us to reflect on and use our imaginations, bodily skills experiences, attachments. And further, it is inseparably connected to an individual's way of seeing and doing things. People may share some standards and methods and goals, but what counts as a desirable end or an effective means cannot be entirely divorced from personal assessments and personal style.

Descartes rightly thinks that the use of reflection and skill in ordinary life counts as rational. On the other hand, he never brings out how far his account of earthly rationality - 'low' rationality - has departed from his theory of canonical rationality - the 'high' rationality of the *Rules*, the *Discourse* and the *Meditations*. Low rationality does not separate mind from body, the intellect from the imagination or passions, but on the other hand it has no divine light, promises no super-human objectivity, and permits nothing to be sacred.

Descartes' canonical theory of rationality is supposed to show how science, mathematics and philosophy rise above the plain of ordinary human activities. In many respects, these forms of knowledge may differ in organisation, scope, aims and reliability from the knowledge of everyday life. What is doubtful is whether there is such a thing as canonical rationality.

Conclusion

The very possibility of canonical rationality rests on a theological guarantee. In a sense Paul Feyerabend is right - if God is dead, 'anything goes'. Or rather, what is rational to believe depends on nothing more than what we human beings with our experiences, capabilities, sense organs, predilections, bodily needs, find rational to believe. And once knowledge is seen to be human knowledge, the possibility arises that even in its grandest forms, it cannot free itself entirely from the personal viewpoints of those who develop it. People at different times, in different situations and societies may not have the same experience, predilections, or use their sense organs in the same way.

The implications of this are still being worked out for science, mathematics and philosophy. In these disciplines it may be possible to achieve an impersonality, a universality and detachment which the knowledge we use in everyday life does not generally have. On the other hand, this impersonality and detachment is not enough to free such knowledge from the bonds of the human point of view. Nor is it guaranteed to keep it beyond the reach of the influence of personal perspectives.

Once we realise that these 'grand' disciplines are the result of human practices, then questions about their content and development cannot always be settled by referring to rules, a technique, or what is clear and distinct. Has the monopoly over the 'high' disciplines, held for so long by an elite group of men, affected their direction or content? What distortions, oversights, omissions have resulted from the limitation on points of view? It is difficult to answer these questions, but impossible to push them aside. After all, if knowledge is going to be merely human knowledge, then why should we settle for less?

Footnotes

- 1 Genevieve Lloyd, 'The Man of Reason', *Metaphilosophy*, Vol.10, No.1, January 1979
- 2 Elisabeth to Descartes, 10/20 June 1643: '... the life I am constrained to lead does not allow me enough free time to acquire a habit of meditation in accordance with your rules. Sometimes the interests of my household, which I must not neglect, sometimes conversations and civilities I cannot eschew, so thoroughly deject this weak mind with annoyances or boredom that it remains for a long time afterward, useless for anything else...', p.111 in John Blom (ed.), *Descartes: His Moral Philosophy and Psychology*, New York University Press, New York, 1972.
- 3 Descartes to Elisabeth, 28 June 1643.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 Human relationships are among the things which nature teaches us are valuable. 'After one has thus recognised the goodness of God, the immortality of our souls and the greatness of the universe, there still remains a truth the knowledge of which seems to me very useful, and it is this, that while each of us is a person separate from others, whose interests consequently are in some way distinct from the interests of others, nevertheless one should consider that one could not subsist alone and is, in effect, one of the parts of the earth, and more particularly, of this state, of this society, of this family to which one is joined.' (Descartes to Elisabeth, 15 September 1645).

