Assuming Epistemic Authority, or Becoming a Thinking Thing

Abstract: François Poulain de la Barre, Françoise D’Aubigné, Madame de Maintenon, and Gabrielle Suchon deploy the Cartesian idea that human beings are essentially thinking things to offer arguments for women’s education in the latter half of 17th century, confronting the substantive epistemic injustice of the devaluation of women’s rational capacity. In considering how to realize the natural equality of men and women and face and addressing the practical challenge of enabling those who, through prejudice, have been deprived of authority to assume that epistemic authority of their own, they ask: how does one become a thinking thing? Their answers develop the individualist Cartesian conception of thought into one that is essentially dialogic, cultivated through one’s upbringing, and dependent on a political order.

Philosophical arguments for women’s education in the latter half of 17th century aim to confront the substantive epistemic injustice of the devaluation of women’s capacity for reasoning by deploying the Cartesian idea that human beings are essentially thinking things. These arguments take the core of thinking to involve not simply reflexive awareness of one’s own ideas but also being able to give reasons and defend one’s beliefs against objections. That is, they take being a thinking thing to involve holding epistemic authority.¹ In confronting the epistemic injustice facing women, they, unlike Descartes, recognize that being thinking things – holding epistemic authority – is not just up to each of us. Rather it depends upon conditions that all too often go unsatisfied when women (or girls) are not taken to be equal to men (or boys). These arguments for women’s education aim at realizing the natural equality of men and women and face head on the practical challenge of enabling those who, through prejudice, have been deprived of authority to assume that epistemic authority of their own. They ask: how does one become a thinking thing?

My discussion begins with Descartes to show both how it makes sense to take holding epistemic authority to be the core of being a thinking thing and how even Descartes implicitly recognizes that thinking, properly speaking, depends on achieving certain conditions. François Poulain de la Barre, Françoise D’Aubigné, Madame de Maintenon, and Gabrielle Suchon, in addressing the unequal status of women, all accept this Cartesian account of a thinking thing. Yet they also recognize that the social order precludes women and girls meeting the conditions for holding epistemic authority: they lack experience, social freedom, and self-confidence. In addressing these inequities, they develop the individualist Cartesian conception of thought into one that is essentially dialogic, cultivated through one’s upbringing, and dependent on a political order.

I. Descartes. Descartes’s conception of a thinking thing, as it is presented in the Meditations, has three distinct elements – the subjectivity proper to thinking, a representational structure governed by reasons, and third, the connection between the representational structure and subjectivity – which combine to vest a thinker with epistemic authority.

The cogito in the Second Meditation distills the subjectivity proper to thinking most clearly. There, the meditator, in the grip of radical doubt, considers two contrary scenarios. In the first, at least some of his thoughts veridically represent the world. In the second none do. No matter which scenario is the actual one, one thing must still be true:

¹ I frame this historical discussion in terms of ‘epistemic injustice’ and ‘epistemic authority’ to signal that the reception of Descartes’s account of mind can be brought to bear on contemporary discussion, but constraints will not permit me to develop this suggestion in any detail.
‘So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind’ (7:25; 2:17)

For ‘I am, I exist’ to be necessarily true even in the scenario where none of his other thoughts veridically represent the world, what it represents, or perhaps better how it represents, must be importantly different. The subjectivity of the meditator holds promise for addressing this issue, and the clarification by the meditator of just what this ‘I’ begins to make good on this promise. By considering not simply the logic of the situation, but his own thoughts, he concludes that ‘thought; this alone is inseparable from me. I am, I exist -- that is certain. But for how long? For as long as I am thinking. For it could be that were I totally to cease from thinking, I should totally cease to exist. At present I am not admitting anything except what is necessarily true. I am, then, in the strict sense only a thing that thinks; that is, I am a mind, or intelligence, or intellect, or reason – words whose meaning I have been ignorant of until now. But for all that I am a thing which is real and which truly exists. But what kind of thing? As I have just said – a thinking thing.’ (7:27; 2:18)

Rather than defining ‘thinking’, the meditator demonstrates both to himself and to us what thinking consists in: his own, our own, reflexive awareness. In that demonstration, the meditator also asserts his own epistemic authority, citing both his certainty and the basis for that certainty: his access to what is real and true. However, given the background of radical doubt against which these claims are made, his claim to access the real and the true, and so to be warranted in his certainty, seems to come out of nowhere.

Descartes’s account of the representationality of thought begins to address this issue. A consideration of a piece of wax shows that our ideas are of things in virtue of judgement-like constructions. The Third Meditation aligns the representational nature of thought with its being governed by reasons, through the causal argument for God’s existence. Part of properly constructing an idea involves grasping its reasons, and the veracity of our thoughts depends on the quality of the construction -- whether it is clear and distinct or confused and obscure – and so the set of reasons that help structure them. It is, however, not yet clear how this account of representationality applies to ‘I am, I exist’.

Descartes definition of clear and distinct perception in *Principles* I.45 highlights the interconnection between being reasoned governed and the subjectivity proper to thought. There, he defines ‘clear’ as ‘present and accessible to the attentive mind’ (8A:22; 1:207), capturing the subjectivity, or experience, of thinking. ‘I am, I exist’ is an expression of this clarity. His definition of ‘distinct’ as ‘so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear’ (8A:22; 1:208) captures the logical dimension of thought. Again, ‘I am, I exist’ is necessarily true insofar as it articulates the basic presupposition of any act of thinking. In this way, it stands

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2 Descartes is cited as follows (volume of Descartes 1996: page; volume of Descartes 1984-91: page).

3 A full discussion of the distinctiveness of the *cogito* is well beyond the scope of this paper. Two helpful discussions are Wagner 1984 and Boehm 2015.

4 The First Meditation analogy between the content of our dreams and paintings is meant to suggest that are thoughts represent objects to us (whether they do so truthfully or not), and this commitment to the representational structure of thought is reaffirmed in the Second Meditation’s discussion of the piece of wax, which is premised on our thinking of the wax. That discussion concerns, first, what is involved in this representation of wax and, second, how such a representation in thought can be veridical or not. The conclusion of the discussion is that we construct our thought of the wax; our representation is a judgement. The meditator has an idea of God, representing an infinite and perfect being, and to determine the veridicality of that idea he needs to establish its cause: he needs to grasp the reasons for his idea representing what it does.
distinct from our other thoughts representing things. Thinking well about things requires properly distinguishing thoughts (and so things) from and relating them to one another, yet this articulation of the order of reasons requires clarity of thought, that is, subjectivity or reflexive awareness. Thus, what it is to be a thinking thing is to be reflexively aware of things in a way that both recognizes the sources of epistemic authority and itself holds epistemic authority in virtue of that recognition.⁵

Further, the meditative pretense of the work suggests that this awareness and even reason itself comes from within. Thinking is a matter for individuals who then can enter into discussions with other individuals. The self-generation of epistemic authority echoes the Discourse on Method, where in Part Two Descartes presents himself as ‘reform[ing] my own thoughts and construct[ing] upon them a foundation which is all my own’ (6:15; 1:118). However, despite Descartes’s pretensions, the Discourse recognizes that this assumption of authority is not entirely sui generis. While in Part One he presents his formal education as if a waste of time, Descartes acknowledges that it does have value insofar as it expanded his experience, allowing him to engage ‘in conversation with the most distinguished men of past ages,’ rehearsed though that conversation might be (6:5; 1:113), and exposing him to mathematics, theology and philosophy, as do his experiences ‘in the great book of the world’ after his schooling, (6:9; 1:115). Only with these experiences under his belt, does Descartes decide to retreat alone into a stove-heated room ‘where I was completely free to converse with myself about my own thoughts’ (6:11; 1:116), and from which he emerges with the four rules articulating his method of reasoning (in Part Two), a set of maxims for action (in Part Three), and with the realization that Je pense, donc je suis,” [I am thinking, thus I exist (ibid.)] and that he ‘was a substance whose whole essence or nature is simply to think’ (6:32; 1:127) (in Part Four). So, in the Discourse, Descartes recognizes that establishing a method of reasoning requires having had a range of experiences that involve engaging with others, whether through their writings or meetings in the course of life. This makes sense. Engaging with others exposes us to the perspectives of others and informs our judgments by moving us to situate ourselves within that array of diverse perceptions, but it need not threaten the individualism of the Cartesian conception of thought.

The Discourse also implicitly highlights at least two other conditions for assuming epistemic authority. First, Descartes presents himself as having immense social freedom. He can leave school and enter the world, ‘visiting courts and armies’ (6:9; 1:115), moving from region to region, and even country to country.⁶ Secondly, and more implicitly, Descartes exhibits an extraordinary self-confidence, pushing aside what has been taught, setting out on his own, and devising a set of rules to structure his thoughts. This self-confidence is reflected in the moral maxims of Part Three -- to be firm and decisive in action, assured that we have judged the best we can, and to maintain mastery of our own thoughts. This mantle of freedom and confidence allow epistemic authority to appear to come naturally to him.

II. Poulain de la Barre. Poulain de la Barre recognizes that epistemic authority, while essential to human nature as a thinking thing, does not come naturally. In On the Equality of the Two Sexes (1673) he leverages the basic tenets of Cartesian skeptical method to undermine the prejudice that ‘women are inferior to men, both in their capacities and their merit, and they deserve the dependent status

⁵ There is a fourth element to the Cartesian understanding of a thinking thing: it is united with a body. While this element is important and adds another layer to what it is to be a thinking thing, I will leave it aside.

⁶ As I show below, this condition was recognized as effectively precluding women from assuming epistemic authority, but it is worth noting that it effectively precludes those of any social status that constrains movement from being full epistemic agents.

⁷ Schmitter (forthcoming) provides a helpful discussion of Poulain’s notion of prejudice as ‘entrenched … patterns of thought’ and situates it within the reception of Descartes’s epistemology.
they currently occupy’ (Poulain de la Barre 2013, p. 123) by demonstrating that observed differences between men and women might be explained other than by their having different natures. Towards the end of the essay, he suggests that observed differences between men’s and women’s intellectual capacities can be explained by deficiencies in women’s education. Insofar as they deprive women the opportunity to become thinking things, he effectively takes those deficiencies to constitute an epistemic injustice. To address this injustice, and to further undermine the prejudice against women, Poulain advocates for women’s education, providing a model in his On the Education of Ladies (1674).8 The five conversations comprising the work both exemplify and defend his educational program, demonstrating how someone can become a thinking thing.9

In the first conversation, which serves to introduce the four distinct characters, Poulain makes clear that his program aims to satisfy the three conditions for realizing one’s nature as a thinking thing in play in Descartes’s Discourse. First, insofar as the discussants are a mix of men and women, at different stages of their education, and from different backgrounds, in conversing with one another they broaden one another’s experience. Stasimachus, the alter ego of Poulain, is positioned as master, having experienced more of the world and having already harvested the fruits of a proper education; Sophie, a young gentlewoman, has started her education, gone through some initial stages, but is still a novice. Eulalie is of a lower social class and has lived an un-sheltered life, having escaped from a family rife with domestic abuse. With no genuine upbringing, she is barely molded by custom and has had no formal education. Lastly, Timander, a young gentleman, has received some formal education, from which he has received some opinions that he can repeat but not justify, including some regarding the possibility of educating women. Second, through the conversation they demonstrate having met a minimum threshold of freedom in putting forward their own differing points of view and in raising objections to one another’s views. Eulalie, in particular, who was formerly in a coercive environment, is at liberty to assert her point of view and pursue her own interests in the discussion. Third, each character presents a different affective profile, and in particular a different level of self-confidence.10 Again Eulalie is most instructive. Initially, she is too timid to speak, but she quickly develops confidence enough both to be able to share her personal history and to inject herself into the conversation by asking pointed, sharp questions about what has been discussed.11

With the characters introduced, and the conditions sufficiently satisfied, the work of education begins. The first lesson involves some basic ground clearing. First, Poulain signals self-knowledge as the core of education through the set of questions Stasimachus asks Eulalie:12

‘(1) Whether you know what you are, and what is the state of your soul; (2) Whether you know what you are doing when you ask about acquiring knowledge; and (3) Whether you

8 References are to Poulain de la Barre 2002. ‘On the Equality of the Two Sexes’ is also translated in Poulain de la Barre 2002, along with the third work in the trilogy, ‘On the Excellence of Men’. I find Clarke’s translation of ‘On the Equality of the Two Sexes’ to be more attuned to the philosophical issues, and so prefer that translation. The recent French scholarly edition of all three works, Poulain de la Barre 2011, edited by Marie Frédérique Pellegrin, is excellent.

9 Poulain intends his model to apply equally to men and women: ‘This is why they have been given the title On the Education of Ladies, although they are no less useful for men, just as book intended for men are also used by women, there being but one way of teaching both, since they are of the same species.’ (Poulain de Barre 2002, p. 140)

10 Stasimachus, as the tutor, has the self-command of one who has a well-worked out position. Timander presents the dangers of over-confidence, whereas Sophie presents someone who, though she has less knowledge than Stasimachus, is self-assured and confident enough to raise objections to her teacher.

11 Schmitter (forthcoming) discusses the role of the passion of surprise in Poulain’s account of education.

12 There is much to say about the details of Poulain’s account. Here I simply provide a précis, as most readers will not be familiar with Poulain’s work.
think you’re ready for the greatest resolution a person can make.’ (Poulain de la Barre 2002, p. 158)13

Through this self-knowledge, we can achieve the central goal of an education as ‘establish[ing] ... as far as is possible, a sovereign reason, that will enable them to judge all things sensibly and without prejudice [through which they are] slaves to opinion and custom’ (Poulain de la Barre 2002, p. 140). Unsurprisingly, Eulalie does not yet have answers to these questions. Rather than provide answers, Poulain articulates a basic assumption: ‘One is naturally the equal of the other and both are equally prone to error...’ (Poulain de la Barre 2002, p. 165). Assuming this epistemic equality can both loosen the grip of prejudices, allowing for overcoming deference to the opinions of others, and open a space for the self-knowledge that affords assuming epistemic authority. If each person is equally fallible, then each of us has no prior basis for trusting what others have told us over our own judgment. Rather we need to understand the reasons both for our own beliefs and those of others. In fact, we ought to prefer our own reasoning, relying on the testimony of another only because of the ‘truth he has imparted to us not on our belief in his expertise’ (Poulain de la Barre 2002, p. 166), and discounting public opinion if we cannot retrieve the reasons that might have once grounded it. Assuming epistemic equality thus entails a resolution to rely on one’s own judgment and an associated obligation to examine our own beliefs and seek and evaluate the reasons for them.14 That is, it entails we recognize ourselves as holding epistemic authority over our own beliefs. It can seem at this point that Poulain is preserving Cartesian individualism, insofar as he articulates a principle of epistemic equality entailed by that individualism. However, the conversation continues.

Once the ground has been cleared, doubt serves Poulain, as it does Descartes, as a vehicle through which to develop self-knowledge in his interlocutors and so to address the framing questions posed at the outset. First, the act of doubting itself instills a sense of self by highlighting that which escapes doubt.15 Once a student has a sense of self, doubting is the impetus to reason-giving. Raising objections provides the occasion to organize thoughts, to relate them to one another and to the evidence, and to notice consistency and contradiction, as well as other rational relations to one another. As Eulalie notes:

“When I raised objections ... I had given no thought to the pattern and the interplay between the various things we know, nor to the nature or the diversity of our doubts; nor had I thought that that doubt or that impartiality encourages us to find clear reasons for what otherwise we know only confusedly.”

“That is indeed all I claim,” replied Stasimachus.’ (Poulain de la Barre 2002, p. 178)

Once a student is practiced in offering reasons, attention can turn to substantive matters, first evaluating local customs by comparing those practices to those of others and considering which actions best serve our ends. With the guides to practical matters in place, the questions regarding ‘the nature and variety of the principles of which we are constituted’ with which the discussion started can be addressed: ‘what are mind and body, what are their distinguishing and common features, whether they really make a whole or are really distinct, how they are joined together and what are the laws, effects, and results of that union’ (Poulain de la Barre 2002, p. 212). Poulain

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13 With these questions Poulain announces his debt to Descartes, making clear that some kind of self-knowledge is logically prior to any further knowledge of the world, as well as the resolution required to achieve knowledge.

14 See Poulain de la Barre 2002, p. 175 for a synopsis of the account to this point.

15 For Poulain, that sense of self is of an embodied epistemic agent: ‘I concluded just now that I exist, I who think, because I act. There being a thing from which I cannot be separated which brings me pleasure and pain without any contribution on my part, and sometimes even despite myself, then this thing that I call my body must really exist’ (Poulain de la Barre 2002, p. 178). Pellégrin discusses this point in both her critical edition (Poulain de la Barre 2011) and her 2017.
focuses on the nature of the human body, in particular its construction and how the motions of the body affect our thought.16

As I have noted, the character of Eulalie brings out the importance of experience and self-confidence to establishing this ‘sovereign reason’. Her character also highlights that being able to reason does not just so happen. Becoming a thinking thing and assuming epistemic authority is a social undertaking. The work consists of conversations because we are meant to see that it is through discussion itself that the characters, and especially Eulalie, acquire experience and develop confidence. Through conversation the characters learn to reason, and the flow of conversation helps to articulate implications and broaden the range of the connection between thoughts. If doubt is the vehicle through which we recognize our own existence and nature, conversation provides the scaffolding for emerging from that doubt, giving our thoughts structure and direction. In this way, for Poulain, recognizing that one is a thinking thing – having the reflexive awareness proper to thinking, grasping the reasons which set the standards of epistemic authority, and taking oneself as an epistemic authority – is an essentially social process, even while it is up to each of to realize our nature as thinking things.

The style of the work in which he outlines his positive view of education also enacts that view. As we read the work, we witness an education in progress, but as readers we are more than mere witnesses. We can enter into the conversation ourselves, developing interpretations of what Poulain takes to constitute an education and raising objections to his views. Through this enactment of education we also see the shortcomings of Poulain’s view. Though Poulain takes an assumption of epistemic equality to be integral to becoming a thinking thing, in the discussion itself Stasimachus is prima inter pares. He is clearly the master from whom the others are to learn and to pay due deference; he often lectures, asks loaded questions, seeks praise, and guides the discussion along a set course. Though his pretension is to teach his students think for themselves, the fundamental assumptions -- the metaphysics, that self-knowledge is the foundation of all knowledge, the principle of epistemic equality -- are never closely examined.

It may well be that Stasimachus is presented in this way to invite us as readers to apply the principles being articulated to the master himself rather than simply following his authority blindly so that we articulate epistemic standards for ourselves and assert our own epistemic authority.17 Alternatively, it may well be that Poulain self-consciously recognizes that he is writing at the beginning of a transition period, one in which upbringing is at odds with proper educational principles. Until children are brought up cultivating their own capacity as thinkers, a benevolent master is required to effect a proper education and to liberate those enslaved by prejudice. Either of these readings is consistent with the basic lesson: becoming a thinking thing is a social effort premised on the assumption of epistemic equality. However, the character of Stasimachus also raises the question of how egalitarian a proper education can really be if we are to allow for expertise, including expertise in what is required for thinking itself.

III. Madame de Maintenon. Françoise d’Aubigné, Marquise de Maintenon, can be understood as taking up this question. For Poulain, education gets a foothold through the failings of the way in which children are raised, and so can only be undertaken at a certain level of maturity.18 Madame de Maintenon’s central educational project, the Royal Institute of Saint-Louis at Saint-Cyr, aimed to reform the very ways in which children, and in particular girls, were brought up, to ensure they grew into thinking, rational, agents. Founded in 1686 (or 1684 if you include its original home at Noisy),

16 Again, Pellegrin 2017 has a very useful extended discussion of these matters.
17 Schmitter (forthcoming) suggests something similar.
18 Poulain draws this distinction between education and upbringing explicitly. See Poulain de la Barre 2002, p. 141.
Saint-Cyr was an innovative school for girls in a number of ways. First, it aimed to educate girls from impoverished aristocratic families -- for instance, the daughters of military officers -- thus making education accessible to those who could not afford a private tutor. Second, the curriculum at Saint-Cyr not only included arts, such as needlepoint, in which women in the period were typically instructed but also emphasized religion, reading, writing, arithmetic, music, and the storytelling arts of literature and theatre. The curriculum was designed progressively, taking students through different stages of their development from children into adults, and divided into the following elements, each founded in dialogic interactions: Instructions, or talks given directly to the students, in dialogue form; Conversations, dialogues in the form of short plays to be performed by students; and Proverbes, skits acting out a popular saying. In addition, the curriculum intentionally incorporated entertaining activities, for Mme. de Maintenon recognized that time spent learning needed to be offset by lighter activities, as reflected in the dialogue Of Reason, in which a student notes 'but if they're always reasoning, they are not being reasonable. Obviously, we shouldn’t reason all the time.'

Just as much attention was paid to the method of instruction. Teachers were professionalized and given a community-building mission, achieved by living together and by thinking of the students as part of that community. Instruction was always focused on reasoning. Teachers were to explain the reasons for the rules and for the practices and decisions. Moreover, classroom instruction was designed so that students themselves played an active role, with student leaders conducting discussion sessions within their age group, and older students mentoring younger students.

Mme. de Maintenon’s design of her educational community makes clear that she, like Poulain, takes becoming a thinking thing to be an essentially social process. The design also addresses the challenges Poulain’s model faced of enacting the epistemic equality it assumed, for the structure of the program itself recognizes that different activities will be appropriate at different stages of development, while self-consciously inculcating in all participants a motivation to work collectively toward the end they all share – becoming thinking things and assuming epistemic authority. For Maintenon, an assumption of equality is instilled through an upbringing that cultivates habits of mutual respect, rather than recognized theoretically after inequalities have already been instituted through custom. Insofar as the principal mechanisms of instruction were dialogues, the educational model developed the habits of reasoning while teaching students to reason for themselves: In hearing dialogues, students were given examples of how to raise and answer objections – that is, to seek and give reasons; in reading scripted dialogues, students would effectively practice giving reasons; and then ultimately, in performing the dialogues, students would need to have an interpretation worked out, effectively making the reasons their own.

19 It is worth noting that d'Aubigné directed a school for servant girls with a similar basic curriculum at Montmorency (1680) and Rueil (1681) before opening Saint-Cyr. The servant girls were taught religion, reading, writing, arithmetic and home economics.


21Maintenon’s addresses to the teachers, as well as some of the essays and dialogues that were part of the instruction can be found in translation in Maintenon 2004.

22 The school in a number of ways suffered from its initial successes, and Mme. de Maintenon revised the curriculum to focus less on the arts, and more directly on the cultivation of moral virtues, though again time was reserved for lighter activities.

23 Mme. de Maintenon was actively involved in the curriculum design, instruction and professional development of the teachers. Her work in these regards were written down by the Dames de Saint-Louis, the instructors at the school, and included are not only the Instructions, Conversations and Proverbes, but also Entretiens, or talks given to the Dames, composed of questions and answers.
Consider a Conversation aptly titled *On education at Saint-Cyr* and how it works both argumentatively and rhetorically to inculcate epistemic equality, promote virtuous epistemic attitudes and habits, as well as to present reasons and develop the ability to reason. The short dialogue is structured as a discussion amongst six girls about the very dialogues that form the core of their instruction. Two of the girls begin by noting how both entertaining and useful the dialogues are and are immediately met with an objection that nothing that is truly educational could also be pleasant, raised by another girl, Olympiade. This objection raises the general question of what occasions pleasure, and in addressing that question one of the characters admits to rethinking her position on the dialogues. This reconsideration of one’s beliefs in light of listening to another’s point of view effectively demonstrates that which another character remarks shortly after, that through the dialogues ‘our mind is enlightened on certain things that we might never have known. At the very least, it would have required us to have had some lengthy experience’ (Maintenon 2004, p. 73). Another character notes that through the dialogues ‘our heart is formed in all kinds of virtue’ (Maintenon 2004, p. 74). Despite an emerging consensus among her peers, Olympiade persists, insisting that playing children’s games is more fun than learning through dialogues, and in the face of resistance to her point of view, she notes that ‘the education at Saint-Cyr isn’t exempt from criticism’ (Maintenon 2004, p. 74) The dialogue ends with a report of criticisms from outside the school and the ironic retort: ‘the reason they cultivate in us will help us to endure life with those who lack reason’ (Maintenon 2004, p. 75).

The dialogue displays a genuine conversation between friends, that is, individuals with equal epistemic and social status who are concerned for one another’s good. Unlike Poulain’s conversations and other familiar philosophical dialogues, it is difficult to identify a single character with the author and so as the authority. This form of friendship does not require agreement, for the girls maintain their friendship while both criticizing the positions of others and presenting a point of view and defending it against criticism. In presenting their arguments, they find pleasure - through laughter, through sharing in one another’s happiness - and this pleasure promotes the very goals of their education, the pursuit of knowledge and the development of virtue. Some of the pleasures are those of surprise, and surprise focuses attention and prompts explanations, which in turn brings about a greater more durable pleasure, and certainly more so than the pleasures of children’s games with which they could distract themselves. The discussion within the dialogue itself displays what reasoning involves. In asserting their own views and defending them against objection, the girls develop their sense of self and assert their epistemic authority. Through the content of those different and differing perspectives, they learn to draw distinctions - for instance, between different senses of ‘pleasure’ - and the logic relating those different ideas. The continued engagement with others also cultivates virtue by encouraging attitudes of respect for others with whom they might differ. And finally, it is important that within the educational model, there is nothing that is immune from criticism, not even the model itself, thereby showing that the practice of reason-giving is not one of appealing to and affirming external authority, but rather of explaining how one’s practices serve one’s chosen ends and of articulating and justifying those ends themselves.25

Mme. de Maintenon’s program leverages human passions in service to education. Surprise is generated to capture student attention from new perspectives; pleasure is used to sustain that attention; the love proper to friendship is encouraged through dialogue, and that love is developed into respect. Absent from the program are negative passions, whether fear of doing poorly or of punishment, or hatred of others. The explicit aim of the curriculum design is to cultivate in its

24 I am indebted to Haley Brennan for this insight.
25 *On Education at Saint Cyr* was, after all, part of the curriculum, and I would imagine it was designed to occasion a self-reflective discussion amongst students, even if it also aimed to affirm the value of their education.
students those emotions conducive to virtue, but in so doing, the curriculum also builds student confidence, allowing them the freedom to assume epistemic authority by exercising their reason, raising objections, answering them, and entering into reason-giving discussions with those who both agree and disagree with them.

Whereas Poulain sees education as an antidote to upbringing in mature thinkers, Mme. de Maintenon wants to design upbringing to develop children into thinking things. In this way, hers may be a more radical rejection of epistemic individualism than Poulain’s, for Mme. de Maintenon does not simply recognize the social conditions of becoming a thinking thing. Although she ultimately appeals to faith to ground reasoning, Mme. de Maintenon models reasoning as a kind of habit (albeit a very special kind) cultivated through social practices. For this reason, it is not clear that the program of enacting dialogues can achieve its end. Consider two distinct ways in which the dialogues might have been enacted. In the first, the roles are like costumes, with personae put on and taken off just as quickly. There is little guarantee that students learn what the dialogue exemplifies, since the students simply mouth their lines. In the second, after the dialogues have been acted out, teachers and students discuss them fully, articulating the reasons expressed by one’s character and discussing those reasons, raising and addressing additional objections. This second way of deploying the dialogues would stand more of a chance to develop young thinkers. The act of taking up a role and then reflecting upon itself mirrors what it is to be a thinking thing -- from a reflexive awareness, to the articulation of reasons, to the assertion of one’s own reasons -- and so it creates a real opportunity for the young actor to experience the subjectivity proper to thinking and the epistemic authority that follows from it.

However, even this second way faces challenges. First, there remains the trenchant philosophical question of how a process of habituation affords the ownership and authority proper to thinking properly speaking.²⁶ Second, though the arguments in the dialogues could well be disputed in discussion, the school itself is premised on a set of social and political assumptions, and the very operation of the institution requires acceptance of those assumptions. For instance, I have suggested that the dialogues are constructed so as to implicitly affirm the assumption of epistemic equality among the students. It would thus be hard for to challenge that assumption within the lessons themselves without undermining the whole curriculum. Moreover, Mme. de Maintenon was the consort, and then wife, of Louis XIV, and as much as her establishment of Saint Cyr served to open opportunities for young women, it also served political ends.²⁷ The upbringing afforded the students invested them with a sense of belonging to a particular social class and of being part of a new political order, and they were thereby well positioned to contribute to establishing and sustaining this order. Even though their schooling exercised their capacity for reason-giving and developed their sense of epistemic authority, there was nothing in that education that demanded that they turn their reflection on the social structures that supported that training.

IV. Gabrielle Suchon. This point brings me to Gabrielle Suchon.²⁸ In her Treatise on Ethics and Politics, Divided into Three Parts: Freedom, Knowledge, and Authority (1693), Suchon argues forcefully that if women are deprived of freedom, knowledge and authority – that is, constrained, ignorant and subjugated – it is not because they naturally lack these qualities, but rather because of custom. In her

²⁶ I cannot develop this point here.
²⁷ Thanks to Isabelle Moreau for raising this point.
²⁸ Comparatively little is known about Suchon. We do know that after entering a convent, she managed somehow to extricate herself from her vows, and that she made a living by tutoring. From her references, we know she read widely and was familiar with Poulain de la Barre.
subsequent work, *On the Celibate Life, Freely Chosen* (1700), she goes a step further and argues that existing institutional practices interfere with the fundamental human freedom of self-determination.

The title of that second work refers to celibacy, which Suchon defines as ‘a condition without commitments’ (CV 1.1, 242). As she fleshes out this definition, it becomes clear that the commitments she has in mind are features of a profession. While it is hard to know what she intends by ‘profession’, her two central examples are religious vocation and marriage. Given that she defines a commitment as a ‘strict obligation to remain in the same condition, permanently exercising certain duties and ways of living, from which one can never evade’ (CV 1.1, 2-3; 242*), it makes sense to think of a profession as having an institutionalized character, that is, as being constituted by a set of prescriptive policies, codes of conduct, and law-like rules for those who practice that profession to follow, and which do not change. So insofar as one chooses to enter a profession, the prescriptions of the institution entail that there are no further choices to make: one commits to it.

In developing her notion of celibacy, Suchon aims to conceive of a way of life that is resolute but does not have this institutional character. In leading a celibate life, one chooses an end for oneself, and then makes further choices in order to continue to strive to achieve that end. There are no set rules, no prescriptive codes of conduct, simply a resolve to continue to live in the way one judges to be the best.

This distinction between a celibate life and a profession can help to address part of the concern about whether the institution of Saint Cyr, simply in virtue of being an institution, undermined its own efforts to bring up girls become full-fledged thinking things. Institutions like convents and marriage contracts do not simply generate particular sets of obligatory actions, they also fail to contain provisions for reconsidering or revising those obligations. This inbuilt conservatism solidifies them as institutions. Suchon herself seems pessimistic that any social institution could preserve human freedom. However, her critique and her model of the celibate life suggest the possibility of an institution that contains within it provisions for its own revision by ensuring that those who choose to participate in it retain the degree of autonomy required to review and reform the institutional practices themselves, even while those practices instil habits of thoughts within them. In understanding the reasons for those institutional practices, participants would not only ensure practices are attuned to the aims of the institution, but also evaluate and revisit the institutional aims themselves.

While Suchon argues forcefully for women’s education in the *Treatise on Ethics and Politics* she does not herself (to my knowledge) discuss the form that education should take. She does, however, situate learning, and in particular, reading at the centre of the celibate life. For her the joy of

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29 Both texts are translated in part in Suchon 2010. *Du célibat volontaire* is cited in-text as *CV* followed by volume and chapter, page numbers in the original works (see bibliography); page numbers in the translation. An asterisk indicates an emendation of the translation.

30 See my 2017.

31 ‘There are many things to note in the three parts of this definition. The first is the state of indifference in which people who have not committed to a particular profession live. The second is the power they have to embrace the state most appropriate to their way of thinking and their inclination. And the third is the resolution with which they persevere in this state, eschewing every other commitment except for this indifference.’ (CV 1.1; 242)

32 ‘A love of books, together with a mind capable of reasoning and application, ensures our progress in letters and in good morals. Indeed, we can say that these are the two purposes for which books and reading were invented…. Since diligence is necessarily inseparable from attention, we must have leisure time for ourselves that will not be interrupted by the attention we owe to husbands, to the education of children, the care of servants, and by a thousand other things that part and parcel of marriage.…. Diligence requires time and a place of retreat from the outer world, while attention demands a tranquil and intelligent mind without inner turmoil. Free persons possess all these advantages, so long as they
reading consists largely of the peace of having that time to think for oneself, and she takes one-on-one tutoring as the default form of education. This is consistent with her scepticism about institutions more generally. Nonetheless, one might take the form of the school at Saint Cyr, insofar as it actively encouraged the participation of both teachers and students, encouraged the raising of objections, and, as we have seen, a reflection on the aims and methods of the school itself to provide a model of an institutional structure that enables and even encourages the freedom at the core of thinking and epistemic authority, and indeed human nature, on this line of thinking.

V. Conclusion. For Descartes, being a thinking thing involves essentially not only being reflexively aware of one’s own thoughts but also grasping the reasons for them, and in virtue of being able to give and respond to reasons for her thoughts a thinker holds epistemic authority. By Descartes’s lights, epistemic authority comes easily, even if he might acknowledge that it depends on our being able to exercise freedom sufficient to have a range of experiences and the self-confidence to assert one’s own opinions. Poulain de la Barre recognizes that holding epistemic authority also depends on accepting a principle of epistemic equality, a recognition that individuals all have the same capacity for knowledge. Poulain recognizes that all too often, and especially in the case of women, we deny this principle through prejudice, and so do others an injustice. For him, accepting the principle can rectify the injustice by allowing all to become thinking things. In admitting others as epistemic equals, we enable genuine conversations, the interpersonal exchange of reasons that involve querying the claims of others, asserting one’s own views, supporting them with reasons and defending them against objections, and also revising one’s views in light of that exchange. By participating in such genuine conversations, each interlocutor exercises their own epistemic authority. However, even if we do accept others as epistemic equals in principle, having a genuine conversation that recognizes that equality in practice is challenging. After all, some hold more knowledge than others, and it is a challenge to both instruct on the basis of one’s expertise and restrain displays of mastery to allow others to realize their own epistemic potential. Mme. de Maintenon’s educational programme aims to build a genuine community of epistemic equals, in which even the status of an expert is left unclear, and to cultivate a practice of assuming epistemic authority in students from an early age through a curriculum focused on dialogic interactions, but she relies on tools of habituation that seem antithetical to that free exercise of judgement at the core of thinking. Moreover, a school is an institution and as such serves a social end. Gabrielle Suchon argues that institutions, precisely in serving social ends, reify the prejudices that can constrain the exercise of epistemic authority, and her conception of a celibate life can help us to imagine institutions that have built into them both a degree of flexibility and the mechanisms to allow the institution itself to nimbly reflect on and revise its practices. These seventeenth century discussions of education as the vehicle of first recognizing and then achieving the epistemic equality of women highlight the way in which the individualism in Descartes’s account of mind can be leveraged to support claims of epistemic equality, but they also both reveal the limitations of that individualism and begin to develop an account of mind which aims both preserve the autonomy at the core of that epistemic individualism and to recognize that reasoning itself is a social practice situated in a particular political context.33

profit from their state. But in the cloister, the hours are limited and the sheer number of other exercises to be completed do not allow for long hours of diligent reading.’ (CV 2.16; 267)

33 Contemporary discussions of epistemic injustice tend to focus on ways in which individuals and institutions fail to recognize a principle of epistemic equality, similar to that articulated by Poulain, devaluing the testimony, assertions, and reasons put forward by those with less epistemic power, and consider the impact on individuals only as an effect of those injustices. Interestingly, 17th century discussions start from the idea of a thinking thing with its own proper
epistemic authority, and by considering the material conditions required for becoming a thinking thing end up with a critique of social dynamics and institutions.

It is also worth noting that this bit of history of philosophy resonates with contemporary efforts at school curriculum reform centered on critical thinking. In British Columbia, Canada, for instance, the new K-12 curriculum identifies critical thinking as a core competency. Though the expression ‘critical thinking’ is poorly defined, this curriculum reform is meant to prioritize student’s understanding for themselves course content, rather than learning by rote, with the idea that this will enable them to become more engaged citizens. It is a testament to our political institutions that they are developing policy to ensure their citizens have the capacity to reconsider and thereby to revise and adapt the institutions themselves.