Contested Identities
Challenging Discourses on Female Intellectuality

PhD Dissertation
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Submitted on October 9, 2023
Word count (excl. bibliographies): 55,366
**Funding:** The Independent Research Fund Denmark (DFF) is gratefully acknowledged for funding this doctoral thesis within the project ‘Archeology of the Female Intellectual Identity (Denmark and Germany, 1650-1800)’, project number 9037-00161B, under the Faculty of Humanities, University of Copenhagen (Principal Investigator Sabrina Ebbersmeyer).

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Abstract

This thesis studies the figure of the female intellectual and its conceptualizations in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Germany and the Dutch Republic. The thesis focuses on two women intellectuals, namely the Dutch polymath turned radical pietist, Anna Maria van Schurman (1607-1678) and Germany’s first female Doctor of Medicine and a fierce advocate for women’s education, Dorothea Christiane Erxleben (1715-1762).

The main part of the thesis consists of four research articles that, in different ways, address the question of the formation of a female intellectual identity during the early modern period. Article I challenges the common misconception that gender roles progress throughout history towards an ideal of freedom and equality. Instead, I argue that a regression took place in the course of the eighteenth century where specifically the ideal of female intellectuality changes dramatically from focusing on gender-neutral traits such as learnedness and academic skill to emphasizing traditionally feminine virtues such as modesty, piety, and domesticity. This argument is based on an analysis of entries on Anna Maria van Schurman in the German catalogues of learned women.

Van Schurman is also the focal point of Article II, which questions the ‘standard narrative’ of her present-day reception. The article argues that there is a considerable discrepancy between the way van Schurman researchers present her life and van Schurman’s own account from her autobiography Eukleria or Choosing the Better Part (1673); while scholars emphasize her continual commitment to her intellectual studies, van Schurman stresses the radicalism of her transformation, her devotion to the Labadist cause, and her disdain for her past life as a public intellectual. The article criticizes this widespread tendency to distort her own narrative and argues that the anti-intellectual elements in her thinking should have a more prominent role in her reception.

Article III goes on to critically assess the way, in which the historiographical term ‘Radical Enlightenment’ results in the exclusion of female thinkers, using Dorothea Erxleben as a case study. The article develops a new methodology that makes it possible to identify radical elements in Erxleben’s philosophical and early feminist dissertation Rigorous Investigation (1742). Finally, it argues that, using this framework, Erxleben can be considered a radical thinker. With Article IV, the thesis returns to Anna Maria van Schurman, engaging with her unforgiving criticism of metaphysics. The article argues that there are remarkable similarities to be found between her arguments and current deflationist critiques of mainstream analytic metaphysics. After a systematic comparative analysis, the article closes with a discussion of possible ways to encapsulate van Schurman’s critique in contemporary terms.

The four articles are preceded by an introductory chapter, which presents the common narrative of the thesis, connecting the articles through a shared objective and guiding research questions. The introduction also contains a comprehensive review of relevant literature, situating the thesis within the broader field of feminist history of philosophy. A section on methodology explains and justifies the research methods applied in the thesis, which include critical discourse analysis, archeological and genealogical analysis, and rational reconstruction. Finally, the dissertation closes with some concluding remarks, summing up the overall results of the thesis, as well as making suggestions for future research.
Resumé

Denne afhandling undersøger, hvordan den kvindelige intellektuelle identitet blev dannet og forstået i Tyskland og De Forenede Nederlande i det syttende og attende århundrede. Afhandlingen fokuserer på to kvindelige intellektuelle, nemlig den nederlandske polyhistor og senere radikale pietist, Anna Maria van Schurman (1607-1678) og Tysklands første kvindelige læge og kvinderetighedsforkæmper, Dorothea Christiane Erxleben (1715-1762).

Afhandlingens hoveddel består af fire forskningsartikler, som på forskellig vis behandler spørgsmålet om den kvindelige intellektuelle identitets tilblivelse i den tidlige moderne periode. Artikel I anfætter den udbredte misforståelse, at vores kønsroller historiske udvikling har gennemgået en lineær progression henimod et ideal om frihed og lighed. I stedet argumenteres der for, at der forekommer en tilbagegang i løbet af det attende århundrede, hvor specifikt idealerne for kvindelig intellektualitet undergår en gennemgribende forandring fra at bygge på kønsneutrale egenskaber som lærdhed og akademiske evner til at fremhæve traditionelle feminine dyder såsom beskedenhed, huslighed og fromhed. Dette argument er baseret på en udførlig analyse af portrætteringer af Anna Maria van Schurman i de tyske fruentimmerkataloger.

Van Schurman er også omdrejningspunktet for Artikel II, som sætter spørgsmålstegn ved den 'standardfortælling’, der hersker i moderne forskningslitteratur om hende. Artiklen påviser, at der er en betydelig diskrepans mellem den måde, hvorpå nutidige van Schurman-forskere skildrer hendes liv og van Schurmans egne beretninger fra selvbiografien Eucleria seu Melioris Partis Electio (1673); mens forskerne fremhæver hendes vedvarende interesse for akademiske studier, så understreger van Schurman selv, hvor dybt hun forargede sit tidligere liv som offentligt intellektuel, og hvor dedikeret hun er til Labadisternes sag. I artiklen kritiseres denne udbredte tendens til at fordreje hendes eget narrativ og der argumenteres for, at de anti-intellektuelle elementer i hendes tænkning bør have en mere prominent rolle i vores forståelse af hende.


Før de fire artikler er der en indledning, som præsenterer afhandlingens samlede fortælling og forbinder artiklerne igennem et fælles formål, samt specifikke forskningsspørgsmål. Indledningen indeholder også en omfattende gennemgang af den mest relevante forskningslitteratur med henblik på at placere afhandlingen i en bredere feministisk filosofihistorisk kontekst. Et efterfølgende afsnit om metode redegør for valget af de forskningstilgange, som er anvendt i afhandlingen, nemlig kritisk diskursanalyse, arkaologisk og genealogisk analyse, og rationel rekonstruktion. Afhandlingen afsluttes med en række konkluderende bemærkninger, der opsummerer undersøgelsens samlede resultater og kommer med forslag til fremtidig forskning.
Acknowledgements

One of the most important things I’ve learned these past four years is to know when to ask for help, to be vulnerable enough to share my work with people before it’s finished, and to really listen to their feedback. Although this space does not permit an exhaustive list, I want to say thank you to everyone, who’ve helped me along the way.

First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Sabrina Ebbersmeyer. Thank you for being so generous with your time, for your invaluable feedback, and continual support. Thank you for going along with my “bold” ideas and for reminding me to relax and go home early once in a while – I’ve really needed that. You have been an incredible inspiration and a role model for me throughout this project.

Next, I would like to thank Prof. Nils Holtung, Prof. Lisa Shapiro, and Prof. Andrew Janiak for agreeing to be members of the assessment committee. I also gratefully acknowledge the financial support from the Independent Research Fund Denmark.

I also want to extent my sincere thanks to all the talented people, I’ve had the pleasure of working with on various projects during the past four years: Rosa Skytt Burr, Matilda Amundsen Bergström, Maria Nørby Pedersen, Bodil Hvass Kjems, Anna Cornelia Plough, and Martin Arndal. Thank you for the many thought-provoking discussions and for always being there to remind me why we do this research.

A special thanks to Anders Sørup Nielsen for applying your expertise to the layout – you’ve done a bang-up job! And thanks to Frederik Tollerup Junker for being my second set of eyes on the last article.

A heartfelt thanks to my colleagues at the department: Thank you, Andrea, for being my trusted confidant and delightfully goofy sidekick. You’ve made these last few months fun and exciting rather than excruciatingly stressful and angsty. To Filippos and Katla, for welcoming me with open arms to the philosophy corridor. Thank you for making me feel like it was okay to say weird things at work and, of course, for insisting on Friday afternoon beers in the sun/endless Danish winter. Thanks to Laura and Gaia for the sister solidarity. I’ve enjoyed our many openhearted and candid conversations. And to Anders, Valentyna, and Frederik, for our invaluable ‘wine and whine’ sessions during lockdown – may we never meet on Zoom again! And, finally, thanks to all the colleagues, who have come and gone, and who’ve enriched my existence as a PhD-student: Anders, Ody, Juan, Nana, Victor, Julia, Linas, Gregor, Nicola, Patricia, Helene, Jelle, Line, and Turiò.
It is hard to believe that I have studied philosophy for more than ten years now. That’s a lot of books about death and existential despair! But I have stuck with it, firstly, because I really do love philosophy, but also because of all the incredible people, who have shared this passion with me, inspired me, challenged me, and, above all, laughed with me. Thank you, Lasse, Peter, Jeppe, Linda, Isamu, Frederik-Emil, and “Robin”. Thanks to my old study group, Sofie, Frederik, and Stefan, and thanks, of course, to the infamous Smørrum crew, Jens, Jes, and Ugilt. You have been my BA-family.

I’d also like to thank my Freiburger Kommilitonen: Leo, Alex, Julian, Yannick, Michael, “Leo”, Niklas, Johannes, and Pascal. I miss our late nights at Schlappen, our hikes in Schwartzwald, and the endless discussions about Hegel (other philosophers too, but mainly Hegel). You made Freiburg feel like a home – only with better weather and mountains. And to the Notis: Pablo, Philipp, Sebas, Melanie, Sebster, Saniea, and, of course, Seb. We have been through hell, but I’m grateful we went through it together.

Most of all, I am thankful for my incredible family. My mom, Lisbeth, for bringing me up to be a feminist and for always encouraging me to go my own ways. My dad, Mogens, for having a dark and wicked sense of humor that prepared me for studying philosophy. Thank you both for always taking my questions seriously, even when they were undeniably silly. To my amazing big brother, Anders. You have always believed in me, and I will always believe in you. To Annie, for your support and your bright spirits. To Steen, for extending my horizon. And to my almost-sister, Cecilie, for being there no matter what, which is really the only thing one can ever hope for in a best friend.

And finally, a great big, sentimental thanks goes out to my two favorite guys: Andreas and Hjalte. Darling Hjalte: You have made it so incredibly easy to leave the office, just forget about the project, and enjoy the truly important things (like reading the same children’s book twelve times over or devouring a bowl of strawberries in under 30 seconds). I love you always. And Andreas: Thank you for your curiosity, your appetite for life, your brilliant mind, and your warm and compassionate nature. You’re a wonderful husband and an even greater dad. I could not have done this without you.

Anne-Sophie Sørup Wandall
Copenhagen, September 26, 2023
Part I

Preface
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Preface

Most of this thesis takes place in the past, but the issues that have prompted this research are very much a part of our current reality. Recent empirical studies confirm that, despite years of progress, women are still severely underrepresented in academic philosophy, and the gender gap only increases when moving up the institutional ladder (Beebee and Saul 2021).\(^1\) It is embarrassingly visible on the syllabi, in our history books, and in the philosophical canon. Studies even show a significant gender gap when it comes to submission and acceptance rates in philosophical journals, as well as on patterns of citation (Healy 2015; Schwitzgebel 2015). Apart from having a well-known issue with women, the proportion of non-white philosophers is also exceptionally low (APA Membership Demographics 2018-2020 n.d.). As a matter of fact, philosophy is the least diverse field within the humanities when it comes to the demographics of its professional practitioners, even surpassing some traditionally male-dominated STEM-fields (Healy 2011; Park 2014). And as if that wasn’t enough, when we look at the testimonies from the women who have nonetheless decided to pursue a carrier in philosophy, many report experiences of discrimination, sexism, microaggressions, and gaslighting as a part of their everyday work-environment (Alcoff 2003; Haslanger 2008; Saul, n.d.). This is the political backdrop to the present thesis; a political reality that should anger and disappoint anyone who cares about equality and philosophy.

In the last decade, feminist researchers have enhanced their efforts to figure out why so many women turn their backs on philosophy, despite women making up nearly half of students enrolled in introductory philosophy classes (Paxton, Figdor, and Tiberius 2012).\(^2\) The fact that women sign up for philosophy courses but then drop out at a later stage in the program shows that there is a discrepancy between their expectations of the discipline and the actual culture of teaching and learning philosophy at the university. Leaving aside the many cases of sexual harassment that occur in academia, the scope of which the MeToo movement has helped to uncover, there appears to be some features specific to philosophy that actively opposes women’s full admission to and inclusion in the field.

Feminist philosophers have attempted to explain these mechanisms of exclusion in several different ways. Implicit biases and stereotype threat have often been seen as an

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\(^1\) The following empirical studies focus on the US and the UK, as this is where the most comprehensive data collections have been carried out. Naturally, this raises some issues about the generalizability of these findings. More research is necessary to conclude exactly how pervasive these issues are in other countries. It should also be noted that all these studies work from a binary notion of gender, meaning that, to my knowledge, we have no data on gender queer or transpeople in philosophy.

\(^2\) For an empirical survey of possible explanations for the gender gap in philosophy, see Thompson 2017.
explanation for the low percentage of women in academic philosophy (Leuschner 2019). Studies on implicit bias show that both men and women are biased against women, and that these biases also exist in academics with explicit egalitarian beliefs. In philosophy, this can mean that having a woman’s name on your CV might make it more difficult to get a faculty position, as highly valued traits like originality, excellence, leadership, and intellectual ability are more readily associated with men than women (Saul 2013). The term ‘stereotype threat’ refers to the phenomenon that, under pressure or when confronted with certain stereotypes, members of stigmatized groups underperform on tasks that prejudices expect them to be bad at, ironically, due to a fear of confirming to the stereotype (Saul 2013; see also Steele 2010). Assuming that there is a stereotype of women not being good at philosophy, or not being particularly smart, this unconscious mechanism may even cause women to underperform in this field when faced with the expectation that they will fail.

Taking another approach, Eyja Brynjarsdóttir has addressed the widespread and problematic view that to achieve success in philosophy requires a kind of innate talent or genius (Brynjarsdóttir 2018). This “tendency to treat learned skills as innate talents” was also identified by Behrensen and Kaliarnta as one out of four key factors that lead to the above-normal frequency of depression among academic philosophers (Behrensen and Kaliarnta 2017). These studies suggest that the belief that to succeed you need to be naturally gifted rather than just hardworking is more prevalent in philosophy than any other academic discipline (Leslie et al. 2015). Together with the fact that women tend to underestimate, and men overestimate their own intelligence (Rammstedt and Rammsayer 2000), it is only fair to assume that this would lead to women disassociating themselves from the identity of ‘the philosopher’, which may cause them to eventually abandon the discipline completely.

Researchers have also pointed out how philosophy’s distinctive culture of debate may create an environment that is less attractive to female students and other ‘diverse practitioners’ of philosophy (Dotson 2012). Janice Moulton has suggested that norms of masculine aggression have created an antagonistic reasoning method that has become prevalent in philosophy (Moulton 1989). She calls this the ‘adversary paradigm’ and under this paradigm, philosophical reasoning is seen primarily as a highly competitive mode of critique, operating in terms of attack and defense. While Moulton does assign this form of reasoning a place in philosophy, she argues that the fact that it dominates the methodology and evaluation of philosophy has a restricting effect on the discipline. Other aspects of philosophical discourse, such as the war and battle metaphors that underlie and structure the way we think about argumentation (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), have also been criticized by feminist philosophers as a source of alienation and exclusion (Rooney 2010; Hundleby 2013).
Other scholars have explained women’s underrepresentation in philosophy by referring to the lack of diversity in the reading methods and approaches to philosophical questions applied in academic philosophy (Dotson 2012). Developing on this critique, Erika Ruonakoski argues that women’s alienation from the discipline could be counteracted by engaging with new questions and genres, as well as applying new pedagogical tools, such as problem-based learning, active listening, self-reflection, and a heightened focus on embodiment (Ruonakoski 2023, 65–66).

Adding to the already mentioned lack of representation in contemporary philosophy and among the faculty members is, of course, the lack of representation in our history books. This issue has gained attention since the late 70’s with a surge of research devoted to women’s contribution to the history of philosophy in the 90’s and early 2000’s (O’Neill 1997; Shapiro 2004; Alanen and Witt 2005). I will come back to this research field in the ‘State of the Art’ section as this is the field of study to which my thesis mainly contributes. For now, it will suffice to say that being confronted with a canon in which no one shares what is arguably one’s most identifying feature, namely gender, will lead many to doubt their own position within this academic field.

Most likely, the answer to the question of why women are abandoning philosophy, is a variation of a ‘perfect storm’ model, as proposed by Louise Antony, in which all of these factors (unconscious bias, the myth of innate talent, lack of representation, etc.) are brought together to create a very unwelcoming work environment for women in philosophy (Antony 2012). Not one issue can sufficiently explain the lack of women in the field; we need to consider how different mechanisms of exclusion interact. What is clear, however, is that something needs to change. By not encouraging a diversity of voices, philosophy fails to live up to its potential, that is, to be a place where we explore profound and difficult questions from the complete range of human experience. But how do we change the current state of the discipline to make it more inclusive and attractive to a wide variety of different people? Well, one thing we can do is start by revising the story of philosophy’s past.

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3 Antony likens this model to Kimberlé Crenshaw’s notion of intersectionality, where several logics of discrimination intersect in one subject, amplifying the individual discriminatory experiences (Crenshaw 1991).
Introduction

This thesis consists of three parts: An introductory part, which presents the common narrative of the thesis, connecting the articles through a shared objective and guiding research questions. This part also contains a comprehensive review of relevant literature, i.e., the State of the Art, which situates the thesis within the broader field of feminist history of philosophy and makes clear the thesis’ original contribution to this research. This is followed by a section on methodology, which explains and justifies the research methods applied in the thesis; these include critical discourse analysis, archeological and genealogical analysis, and rational reconstruction. The first part closes with a detailed preview of the four articles, highlighting how each article contributes to answering the central research questions. The second and main part of the thesis comprises the four research articles that, each in their own way, address the question of the formation of a female intellectual identity during the early modern period. And, finally, the third part offers some concluding remarks on the thesis as a whole, recollecting the most important points and providing some suggestions for further research.

Like any decent story, this dissertation also has a time and a place. The time is the early modern period (1600-1800), and the place is Europe, more specifically Germany and the Dutch Republic. This time was not only extremely important to the history of philosophy (as it was the time of Descartes, Spinoza, Locke, and Kant), it was also a time in which women’s role in society was being fiercely debated and renegotiated; where women enjoyed a brief moment of being invited into the philosophical community and where women took up their pen to defend their sex and fight for universal education. However, these women do not enjoy a place in today’s pantheon of philosophers, and their contributions to the philosophical endeavor have been all but erased from our histories (O’Neill 1997; Ebbersmeyer 2019). This is indeed the case for the two main characters of the thesis: the once famous Dutch scholar turned pietist, Anna Maria van Schurman (1607-1678) and Germany’s first female Doctor of Medicine, Dorothea Christiane Erxleben (née Leporin, 1715-1762). Regardless of their many differences, these women were both respected intellectuals in their own time but are now largely forgotten. Yet, their relationships with the learned world were not straightforward; by unraveling the intricacies of those relationships and the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that exist within them, we can learn a lot about the formation of a female intellectual identity in the early modern period. Having thus ‘set the stage’ for the following, I will now present the concrete objectives and questions that have motivated and guided my investigation.
Main objective

This thesis contributes to the effort of rewriting the history of philosophy from a feminist perspective by investigating the complex figure of the female intellectual and its conceptualizations in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Germany and the Dutch Republic.

Research questions

To limit the scope of the investigation, I concentrate on the following questions:

1. How were women intellectuals perceived in the early modern period?
2. How did they see themselves?
3. How do we perceive them today?

These three main questions address separate fields of interests all pertaining to the representation of early modern female intellectuals. These fields, then, invite further and more specific sub-questions:

(1) Historical representation

- How are early modern female intellectuals represented in literature in- and outside of philosophy?
- How has this depiction developed over time?

(2) Self-representation

- What topics were female intellectuals interested in?
- How did they respond to the exclusion of women from academic studies?

(3) Contemporary representation

- How do we best include female thinkers in the philosophical canon?
- To what extent does this inclusion change the discipline of philosophy?

Together, these are the questions that guide the four articles that make up the thesis. The questions address matters of representation and self-representation, agency, the confines of historiographical categories, and our visions for the future of philosophy. I will refer to these questions again in the Article Previews, demonstrating how each article addresses one or more of these issues.
State of the Art

In this section, I situate the thesis’ contribution within the broader research context of feminist history of philosophy. The purpose is to provide an overview of the current debates that the thesis intersects with and to make explicit how the work adds to this existing research.

I will start by introducing the field of feminist history of philosophy in broad strokes. Then, I will show how this thesis as a whole adds to this field of research. This is followed by two sections on specific research activities within the field, to which the thesis provides new insights, namely the pursuit to retrieve the ideas of women philosophers and to reassess the methodology of history of philosophy.

Feminist history of philosophy

The field of feminist history of philosophy is engaged with the “re-reading and re-forming [of] the philosophical canon” (Witt and Shapiro 2021). This mission is prompted by the continuous exclusion of women thinkers from the history books (O’Neill 1997; Waithe 2015), the problematic and misogynist depictions of women and femininity by canonical philosophers (Deslauriers 2009), and the gendering of central philosophical concepts such as reason and objectivity (Schott 1988; Lloyd 1995). Since the 90’s, we have seen an increase in scholarship pertaining to this field, especially concerning the retrieval of women from the early modern period (e.g., Atherton 1994; Shapiro 2004; O’Neill 2005; Hagengruber 2015; Broad 2019; Detlefsen 2019; Mercer 2019; Ebbersmeyer and Hutton 2021). These immensely important research contributions have helped to recover the works and ideas of now well-known figures such as Elisabeth of Bohemia (1618–1680), Anne Conway (1631-1679), Émilie du Châtelet (1706-1749), and many more (Hutton 2004; Hagengruber 2012; Ebbersmeyer 2020). They have engaged with these women’s writings, positioned them in relation to their contemporary male and female philosophical colleagues, and developed strategies to include them in the canon of philosophy (Pal 2012; Tyson 2018).

A helpful way to gain an overview of the field, is to classify research outputs according to their approach to the problem of women’s exclusion from the Western philosophical canon as well as the devaluation of women and femininity in this tradition. Charlotte Witt offers a helpful framework for this in the anthology Feminist Reflections of the History of Philosophy (2004). She divides the field in three approaches: (1) feminist criticisms of the canon as misogynist, (2) feminist revisions of the history of philosophy through the retrieval of women philosophers, and (3) appropriation of canonical
philosophers for contemporary feminist philosophy. These approaches are recounted in the Stanford Encyclopedia article on feminist history of philosophy, but here a fourth and important category of research is added, namely that of (4) ‘feminist methodological reflections on the history of philosophy’ (Witt and Shapiro 2021). I will introduce these four approaches and the debates that exist around them before positioning my work within the overall field.

(1) Most students of philosophy will probably have experienced reading a classical text and then encountering some unexpected sexist or racist comment tugged in between lofty observations on metaphysical or ethical questions. Identifying these derogatory statements about women and femininity, as well as criticizing the oppression of women that these descriptions reinforce has been a continual task of feminist philosophers (Lange 1983; Pateman 1988; Le Dœuff 2013). Based on these observations, some scholars have gone on to argue that the Western philosophical tradition as such is gendered, and that fundamental concepts such as reason and objectivity are inextricably tied to notions of masculinity (Lloyd 1995; Deutscher 1997; see also Bordo 1987). These scholars analyze imagery and metaphors in classical texts to show how pervasive the logic and language of misogyny is within philosophy.

Calling out sexist remarks in philosophical texts is important work, as it helps us to critically reassess philosophers who have achieved the questionable status of infallible idols. Extending this analysis to the entire philosophical tradition, however, has its disadvantages, specifically concerning the issue of how to solve the problem. If reason itself is male, are feminist philosophers forced to abandon philosophy altogether? Some feminist writers such as Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and Julia Kristeva have attempted to create a replacement to philosophy called écriture féminine, which aims to be free of phallocentric and oppressive language (Cixous 1976; Kristeva 1985; Irigaray 2002). And this may well be necessary if we are to be truly free of the ‘masculinism’ of philosophy, assuming that the problem is as pervasive as some feminist claim and given that it is even possible to break free of a logic that is cemented in our language and thinking. Still, it does not actually change the philosophical canon – it opposes it, and it supplements it. Ultimately, it risks sidelining itself from the discipline, making it easier to ignore their critique.

(2) The second and perhaps most prolific strategy of combatting the exclusion of women from the histories of philosophy is the ‘revisionary’ approach. It is this research

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4 This three-part categorization of the ‘genres’ of feminist history of philosophy is also used by Eileen O’Neill in Feminist History of Philosophy: The Recovery and Evaluation of Women’s Philosophical Thought (O’Neill and Lascano 2019).

5 Le Dœuff raises a similar critique (Le Dœuff 1989; 2013).
that seeks to disprove the common assumption that there simply weren’t any female philosophers in history. To contradict this notion requires undertaking the colossal task of tracking down women intellectuals who wrote on philosophy, recovering their writings, reading them (which is not always easy as the text material is often in poor condition, handwritten, using unfamiliar terms, and perhaps disguised as poems or letters) and then, integrating them into a context which is designed to keep them out. We see the results of this work in seminal texts such as Mary Ellen Waithe’s *A History of Women Philosophers* in four volumes (1987-1995), Margaret Atherton’s *Women Philosophers of the Early Modern Period* (1994), and *A History of Women’s Political Thought in Europe, 1400-1700* (2009) by Jacqueline Broad and Karen Green, as well as the pivotal article *Disappearing Ink* (1997) by Eileen O’Neill. These scholars have uncovered countless names of intellectual women and presented their ideas to the academic public. This work continues today, and I will come back to how the present thesis adds to this endeavor later in the section.

By just presenting women’s intellectual writings and arguments, we challenge the myth that only men have the capacity to be philosophers, but it is also the task of feminist historians of philosophy to argue that these women offered original philosophical contributions (O’Neill 1997). Today, the charge against female thinkers is not so much that they could not possibly have been philosophers but rather that their philosophy was derivative or just plain bad (Connell and Janssen-Lauret 2023). This, of course, poses the question of what good philosophy is, what we want from philosophy, and how these women contribute to philosophy – either as it is now or as it should be.

(3) Next is the ‘appropriation’ tactic, where classical texts are seen as useful resources for feminist thinking. Instead of thinking of the history of philosophy as permeated by patriarchal structures, this approach considers sexism to be external to philosophical theories; and, as such, we should not ‘throw the baby out with the bathwater’. Instead, we should weed out sexist comments and reinterpret these canonical texts for our own purposes. Iris Marion Young describes her own appropriation of the term ‘seriality’ from Sartre in a similar way. She calls the feminist philosopher a *bandita* (borrowing the term from Linda Singer), referring to “an intellectual outlaw who raids the texts of male philosophers and steals from them what she finds pretty or useful, leaving the rest behind” (Singer 1993; Young 1994, 723). Other examples of this approach can be found in the series *Re-Reading the Canon*, edited by Nancy Tuana, in which many volumes have as their explicit aim to scavenge the works of canonical authors for ideas that may be reapplied or transformed by feminist philosophers (see e.g., Lange 2002; Gatens 2009; Wright 2012). This is not to say that these feminist authors are not critical of sexist statements in classical texts. But rather than discard these texts as misogynist, this strategy salvages useful concepts and builds from them.
Witt remarks that this approach raises a serious challenge to modern feminist theory, as it appears paradoxical that the same authors are both criticized as sexist and then used for feminist purposes by other scholars (Witt 2004, 11). How can Spinoza be both perpetuating a dualist devaluation of the body in favor of the mind to the detriment of women (Irigaray 2004) and a forefather of a feminist theory of embodiment (Gatens 1996; cf. Donovan 2009)? Surely, feminist philosophy is incoherent in claiming both? Witt responds to this criticism by underlining the fact that feminists, like women, are not a monolith. There are serious divisions within feminist philosophy and scholars disagree on central issues; even over the identity and self-image of feminism, which is mirrored in the diversity of approaches to the history of philosophy. However, following Penelope Deutscher, I would go a step further and argue that this incoherence is, in fact, unavoidable if we wish to think critically about a concept as unstable as ‘gender’ (Deutscher 1997). A plurality of responses is needed to counter the ever shifting and internally conflicting attacks launched against women. In that sense, it is not so much feminism that is causing these inconsistencies but rather the incoherent views held by canonical philosophers.

(4) Finally, we arrive at the methodological branch of the field of feminist history of philosophy. Works belonging to this sub-genre can be separated into two categories: one occupied with analyzing and criticizing the historiographical methods that facilitate and police the exclusion of women from philosophy (Ebbersmeyer 2019; Waithe 2020), and one, which searches for new methods that make it possible for women to become part of the history of philosophy (Berges 2015; Tyson 2018; Hutton 2020). As mentioned above, this is also one of the main areas to which this thesis contributes, which I will elaborate on later in the section. In short, this is the part of feminist history of philosophy that explicitly deals with the how of it all: how do we incorporate women philosophers into the canon? How should we read their texts? How do we change the ideal of the philosopher? How do we expand the notion of what counts as philosophy? So, needless to say, this sub-genre covers a vast range of different research activities, such as developing new reading strategies (Deutscher 1997; Le Dœuff 2013), reassessing historiographical categories (Braude 2004; Jennings 2007), and expanding the notion of philosophy to include new traditions, themes, and genres (Le Dœuff 1989; Gardner 2000; Hutton 2015a).

The assumption that underlies this approach is that traditional methods of historical research are in risk of reproducing and tacitly supporting oppressive ideas because they are too reverential of past philosophers and fail to ‘call them out’ on their problematic views (Witt and Shapiro 2021). Changing this, however, means deviating radically from the epistemic norms of the field of history, introducing new, feminist values into a discipline, which strives to be value-free. Traditional historians of philosophy
may accuse the feminist historian of *politicizing* history, of being anachronistic, or twisting the words of canonical philosophers to fit with feminist views, thereby misrepresenting their philosophies (Connell 2016, 37).

There are several ways to respond to these accusations, I will briefly mention three. 1) One might argue that no interpretation of a historical text is neutral; that is, there is not *one* objective reading of Machiavelli, Hobbes, or Astell (Fox-Keller 1985; Harding 1986; 2004). Following this view, to claim that one’s reading is neutral or apolitical would only demonstrate a lack of reflection towards one’s own epistemic biases. 2) Another response is to argue that modernization *should* be an essential part of historical research. We should read Plato and St. Augustine, not to understand them, but to better understand ourselves. According to Bernard Williams, this is what differentiates the history of philosophy from the history of ideas (Williams 2009, 257). In this case, feminist readings are not more anachronistic than any other reading. Finally, 3) one can argue, as Sophia Connell does, that attempting to explain away sexism in classical texts can be *more* distorting than just taking it at face value (Connell 2016, 40). She explains that, in the case of Aristotle, it is actually the classical scholars and not the feminists that have trouble explaining his views on women, as they, in their eagerness to exonerate him from accusations of sexism, construct intricate theories that venture far beyond what can be inferred from the texts. Unfortunately, there is no obvious answer to these challenges. But the first step to dealing with this issue is to be explicit about one’s methodological approach, providing arguments for why it is meaningful to read a text from a feminist perspective and what might be gained from such a reading (see section on methodology).

Even though Witt’s overview is from 2004, the framework still works today. While a new generation of feminist historians of philosophy have entered the field, this has not caused a significant break with these initial approaches to the practice of canon-critique. However, some activities have received less attention in recent years, such as criticizing reason as such for being gendered or trying to recover a particularly ‘feminine’ tradition in philosophy based on an essentialist notion of womanhood. Instead, the tendency has been to simply expand the effort to diversify the canon: Researchers are starting to think about inclusion of female philosophers in intersectional terms, bringing attention to women who have suffered multiple forms of discrimination and marginalization on account of e.g., race or sexuality (Buxton and Whiting 2020; Waters and Conaway 2022). And following a well-founded criticism of eurocentrism in the discipline of history of philosophy (Park 2014; Cantor and Miller 2023), scholars have begun to investigate the contribution of women to philosophical traditions beyond the Northern hemisphere, (Hind 2010; Chimakonam and du Toit 2018; Adamson 2022), with a surge of interesting work especially in the Asian context (Rošker 2020; Wang 2020; Ivanhoe and Wang 2023).
There has also been an expansion in terms of time periods. In the 1990’s, early modern women’s writings were among the first to be rediscovered in the endeavor to recover women’s intellectual thought. This is now being evened out as new volumes are coming out on women in ancient philosophy (Pellò 2022), in the so-called long nineteenth century (Salenius and Laschinger 2019; Nassar and Gjesdal 2021), and in the early analytic tradition (LaVine 2020; Connell and Janssen-Lauret 2022). What this shows, sadly, is that the exclusion of women from our collective histories is a timeless phenomenon.

On a positive note, we are also starting to see more diversity among the scholars of the field. From the outset, feminist history of philosophy has been almost exclusively dominated by female scholars. But interestingly this has also started to change in recent years as we see an increase in research by male scholars who specialize in this field. This testifies to the fact that working on women’s intellectual thought is becoming more mainstream, and that some women philosophers such as Margaret Cavendish, Mary Wollstonecraft, and G. E. M. Anscombe have finally been accepted as essential members of the canon.

This completes the brief introduction to the field of feminist history of philosophy and the central debates that have dominated and shaped it in recent years. I will now proceed to carve out my place in the field and explain how this thesis as a whole contributes to this research.

Overall contribution

Despite this growing body of literature, current debates lack a critical discussion of the formation of the female intellectual identity. Emerging in the early modern period, when women started to participate in public intellectual debates in larger numbers, this new female identity prompted reactions from both supporters and skeptics (Kelly 1984; Petschauer 1986). Women writers began to advocate for the moral and societal benefits of universal education, and, as a part of this, argue that women possessed the necessary intellectual capacities for scholarly work (van Schurman 1641; Makin 1673; Masham 1705; Erxleben 1742). In 1636, Anna Maria van Schurman became the first woman in northern Europe to study at a university, which she did at the newly established University of Utrecht (Beek 2010), and although she did not obtain a degree, her reputation for exceptional erudition was widespread. In Germany, literary women like Christiana Mariana von Ziegler (1695-1760), Johanna Charlotte Unzer (1724-1782), and Elise Reimarus (1735-1805) wrote on matters of literature, philosophy, and politics, and

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6 This work is also being pursued by the research network Women in Ancient Philosophy, which was established in 2014 at the Humboldt University of Berlin.
hosted learned salons in Leipzig and Hamburg (Goodman 1999; Curtis-Wendlandt 2016; Buchenau 2021). These women represented a whole new female identity, namely that of the public scholar and intellectual. But who was she, the female intellectual? Which characteristics were associated with this character, and which were dissociated from her? Which opportunities did she have, and which doors were closed to her? And how did the discourse on female intellectuality develop throughout this period? These and similar questions still stand unanswered in the current research literature.

Nonetheless, some investigations have already been undertaken to reach a fuller understanding of the persona or archetype of the philosopher in a historical perspective (Condren, Gaukroger, and Hunter 2006; Smith 2017), and some of these have included considerations on women’s claim to this title (see also Hutton 2008; Ebbersmeyer 2023). Karen Green and Jacqueline Broad have analyzed how the philosophical persona changed from the Renaissance to the early modern period, suggesting that this change helps to explain the remarkable difference in reception between Christine de Pizan and Margaret Cavendish (Green and Broad 2006). By describing the shift in philosophical personae from the ‘courtly philosopher-poet’ of the Renaissance to the ‘academically trained philosopher-scientist’ of the seventeenth century, Green and Broad show how some depictions of the ideal philosopher offer more opportunities from women than others.

In Silvia Bovenschen’s influential book Die Imaginierte Weiblichkeit, a chapter is devoted to a discussion of the ‘learned woman’, using Anna Maria van Schurman as an exemplar of this Kulturtypus (Bovenschen 2016, 80–150). Her analysis shows that women’s intellectual work was seen as a significant threat to the patriarchal societal order in the seventeenth century, challenging commonly accepted ideas about ‘abstract’ concepts such as femininity and reason, but also material structures including the division of labor and the economic value of women’s work. Christine Battersby explores the unfortunate uncoupling of the notions of woman and genius in the world of aesthetics in the book Gender and Genius (1989). Here, she uncovers the complex history behind the masculine gendering of today’s notion of genius, tracing it back to eighteenth-century Romanticism and its reevaluation of traditional feminine traits such as passion and imagination in the new, explicitly male figure of the artistic virtuoso. The present thesis builds on these seminal works that, despite not using the term, center around the construction of a female intellectual identity.

Similar to Green and Broad, I analyze the shift that takes place in the discourse on the figure of the female philosopher. However, this thesis is focused on changes that occur during the seventeenth and eighteenth century, whereas the focus of Green and Broad is earlier. I have also chosen to broaden my investigation, looking at ‘intellectuals’ rather than ‘philosophers’, as I also want this thesis to help expand the notion of what is
considered philosophy and avoid the limiting effects of having to conform to narrow ideas about philosophy’s style and content. Like Bovenschen, I also focus much of my attention on van Schurman and her identity as an archetypical learned woman. But like many others, Bovenschen models her depiction solely on van Schurman’s early texts, seemingly unaware of Eukleria and other later publications. Including these later works, especially the Eukleria, into the analysis radically changes the way we understand van Schurman’s life story, not least with respect to her commitment to learning and, consequently, her identity as an intellectual. Finally, Battersby’s findings on the concept of genius have informed my analysis of the changing narratives on womanhood and learning in the transition from the Enlightenment to the Romantic era. However, Battersby’s work focuses on artists rather than intellectuals, leaving still a vacuum concerning the role of genius in philosophy.

There has, of course, also been feminist scholarship on the concept of identity over the past twenty years. These have sought to understand identity as subversive performativity (Butler 2006), ontological lack and otherness (Irigaray 1985), as group membership (Crenshaw 1991), or as a composition of subject positions (Mouffe 1995). They have questioned the essentialist notion of a specifically female identity and worked to rethink identity in post-modern terms (Nicholson and Seidman 1995; Young 2002). This thesis draws on especially the non-essentialist notion of female identity, as the terms ‘women’ and ‘femininity’ are approached from the perspective of discourse analysis, interpreting common uses of the words rather than deducing and imposing specific understandings from a preconceived notion of womanhood (more on this in the section on methodology). Nevertheless, this feminist research has been less interested in the historical roots of female and feminist identities, specifically the lack of an explicit philosophical identity to rival the dominant masculine identity molded in the image of philosophers like Aristotle, Descartes, and Kant. Such a historically founded, yet forward-looking, examination of the figure of the female intellectual is the overall contribution of the present work. I now move on to addressing the specific ways in which this thesis supports activities within the field of feminist history of philosophy.

Contributions to specific fields of research

Having shown how the thesis as a whole fills a gap in current research literature by centering on the underexplored figure of the female intellectual, I will now go on to position the individual articles within their specific fields. Here, I return to the aforementioned approaches that comprise the field, as all four articles can be considered

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7 Bovenschen writes that there are no surviving testimonies from the pietist phase in van Schurman’s life, suggesting that she was not familiar with Eukleria nor the even later devotional work Mysterium Magnum, Oder: Grosses Geheims, which is also credited to van Schurman (Bovenschen 2016, 91).
as contributing to either the revision of the history of philosophy (2) or the methodological reflections on the history of philosophy (4).

The revisionary approach: retrieving the writings of women intellectuals

As already mentioned, a substantial part of the work of feminist historians of philosophy concerns the recovery of women’s text with the purpose of reshaping the philosophical canon. I add to this endeavor by examining the writings and ideas of two early modern women intellectuals, namely Anna Maria van Schurman (1) and Dorothea Christiane Erxleben (2).

(1) Anna Maria van Schurman is the focal point of Article I, II, and IV. While Article I mainly focuses on her early reception and how she has been used to represent archetypical female learning, Articles II and IV engage more directly with her own philosophical and religious thought. These articles draw on knowledge that has been accumulated over the past three decades, during the time when research on van Schurman has been most prolific. She was rediscovered by historian, Joyce Irwin, in the late 70’s (Irwin 1977) and since then research has mainly centered on her early writings, particularly the Dissertatio (1641), in which she argues for the appropriateness of literary studies for Christian women (van Eck 1996; Sneller 1996; Larsen 2008; Beek 2010; Bulckaert 2010; Clarke 2013; Larsen 2016; van Elk 2017; Uckelman 2018). Less attention has been paid to her later autobiographical work Eukleria (1673), where she presents a radically different view on education and, in fact, denounces all of her earlier intellectual works (Baar 1996; Becker-Cantarino 1996; Lee 2014). This may very well have to do with the fact that only the first two chapters of Eukleria have so far been translated from the original Latin into English, which was skillfully done by Joyce Irwin (van Schurman 1998). The only existing translations of the remaining seven chapters are a Dutch translation (Eucleria of Uitkiezing van het Bested Deel) from 1684 and a much later, and fairly opinionated, German edition (Eukleria oder Erwählung des Besten Theils) from 1783.

Moreover, previous work on Eukleria approach the book primarily from the perspective of history and gender studies, focusing on van Schurman’s depiction of her life and the conditions for women’s learning in the seventeenth century (Baar and Rang 1996; Beek 2010), or from theology, where researchers mainly focus on her role in the Labadist movement (Saxby 1987; Peacock 2014), as well as her ideas about piety, self-denial, and spirituality (Irwin 1991; Lee 2014; Gosker 2020). So far, only Angela Roothaan has engaged with the philosophical content of the book, specifically the

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8 Although Article I also contributes to the project of retrieval, the main focus is on methodological questions concerning genre, which is why this article is dealt with in more detail in the following section.
arguments developed in the third chapter (Roothaan 1996). Roothaan’s very brief text on the subject also attempts to understand her philosophical position, however, it stays within a seventeenth century context, likening van Schurman to Spinoza, Descartes, and Voetius. Roothaan’s text does not reconstruct van Schurman’s arguments, neither does it discuss her anti-metaphysical views in any systematic way. In fact, she makes a point of stating that van Schurman’s arguments should not be understood as a kind of pietist anti-intellectualism (Roothaan 1996, 116). This is in stark contrast to the reading I develop in Article II. Here, I argue that if we take van Schurman at her word, what she is suggesting is actually a radical break with a scientific approach to knowledge.

In this article, I argue against what I call the ‘standard narrative’ of van Schurman’s life (exemplified by Baar 1996; Rang 1996; Larsen 2016) which emphasizes her continual dedication to learning and downplays her radical break with the scholarly world and her fierce pietist beliefs. By committing to a close and literal reading of Eukleria, the article calls for a re-writing of the story of van Schurman and a new engagement with her intellectual legacy.

The final article on Anna Maria van Schurman (Article IV) continues the work to recover her philosophical contribution by performing a detailed analysis of chapter three of Eukleria and the uncompromising critique of the discipline of metaphysics expressed in these pages. As mentioned, these arguments have not been systematically reconstructed and evaluated. Article IV offers such a reconstruction, while also building a bridge to contemporary debates on the epistemic value of metaphysics. As far as I know, this kind of comparative analysis has not yet been attempted in the research literature on van Schurman. In the article I argue that there are considerable similarities between current criticisms of mainstream analytical metaphysics (e.g., McGinn 1993; van Fraassen 2002; Hirsch 2005; Thomasson 2014) and van Schurman’s seventeenth-century critique of scholastic metaphysics. By tracing these debates back to van Schurman, her understudied work gains a new relevance and nuance is added to our understanding of her intellectual identity.

(2) Article III introduces and discusses the political and early feminist arguments of Dorothea Erxleben. The existing research on Erxleben is very sparse and mostly concerned with her biography and her place in the history of extraordinary German women for her achievements in medicine (Knabe 1952; Böhm 1985; Markau 2006; Kraetke-Rumpf 2019). Her political and philosophical arguments have received little attention from historians of philosophy, with few exceptions (Petschauer 1986; Poeter 2008; Dyck 2021). As for these articles, Petschauer’s text focuses on situating Erxleben’s Rigorous Investigation (1742) as a forerunner of modern feminist thought, while still questioning just how feminist her dissertation really was. Poeter seeks to make clear the
originality of Erxleben’s dissertation, showing how her early feminist contribution was informed by both her knowledge of the medical science and her relation to the Halle pietists. Also emphasizing her relation to the intellectual milieu in Halle, Dyck aims to demonstrate the connection between Erxleben’s arguments and those of other German enlightenment figures such as Christian Thomasius (1675–1728) and Christian Wolff (1679–1754), focusing on their shared criticism of ‘prejudice’. Considering this likeness, Dyck argues that Erxleben’s defense of women’s education deserves a more prominent place in our history of the Enlightenment.

**Article III** builds on this literature, as it likewise argues that Erxleben’s text is an important and original philosophical work which should be taken seriously as a contribution to enlightenment debates. However, it goes one step further than e.g., Dyck by arguing that she should not only be considered an enlightenment thinker but rather a radical thinker in the tradition of the so-called ‘Radical Enlightenment’ (Jacob 1981; Israel 2001). Reading Erxleben’s dissertation through this lens changes the way we think about her and her work today, while also placing her in conversation with a different group of early modern intellectuals; a group which includes such figures as Baron d’Holbach (1723-1789) and Nicholas de Condorcet (1743-1794).

**The methodological approach: historiography, narratives, and genre**

In addition to retrieving Erxleben’s political philosophy, **Article III** also contributes to debates on the methodology of feminist history of philosophy by questioning conventional storylines in philosophy that allow for the exclusion of female philosophers. The article offers a critical assessment of the historiographical category of the ‘Radical Enlightenment’ (and its German counterpart ‘die Radikalaufklärung’) in order to find out why so few women are characterized as radicals and researched in relation to this widespread European movement. As the article already contains an introduction to the relevant research literature in the field, I will keep this overview brief and focus on clarifying how the article contributes to the research on the Radical Enlightenment.

Since 2001, when Jonathan Israel revitalized the term that was first coined by Margaret C. Jacob, there has been an abundance of research on the Radical Enlightenment (Jacob 1981; Israel 2001; see e.g., Ali 2013; Wolfe 2016; Ducheyne 2017). And even though many works tend to focus on Spinoza, this research has led to the discovery of countless underappreciated writers who defended the progressive ideas that paved the way of today’s Western democracies.⁹ In the German context, which is the focus of **Article III**, Martin Mulsow’s work presents the most significant contribution to

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⁹ It should be noted that the term ‘Radical Enlightenment’ has become somewhat controversial in recent years, for a systematic analysis of the critiques launched against Jonathan Israel, see Eigenauer 2019.
the field (Mulsow 2002; 2007; 2012; 2018; see also Oergel 2012; Niekerk 2018). Through intensive research, Mulsow has successfully debunked the common assumption that the German Enlightenment was a moderate and cautious movement rather than a radical advance towards social reform. However, most research on the Radical Enlightenment has largely ignored women’s contribution to the movement; something that has not gone unnoticed by feminist scholars (Davis 2017; Ebbersmeyer and Paganini 2021).

As a part of the effort to correct this oversight, feminist scholarship has worked to uncover radical ideas in the writings of early modern female authors from all over Europe (Ellenzweig 2003; Mannucci 2013; Ebbersmeyer 2021; Pajmans et al. 2021). But, despite these new and important research outputs, very little work has been done on the German context; a gap that Article III aims to fill by reading Erxleben’s Rigorous Investigation as a radical early feminist tract. In addition, the article also discusses the criteria used to define what is ‘radical’ as opposed to ‘moderate’, arguing that the current methods of classification are incoherent and unaccommodating of women’s radical thought (drawing on insights from Lord 2017).

Another methodological strategy for expanding the field of philosophy is to explore new and unstudied genres. Article I contributes to this endeavor with a systematic analysis of over thirty works, belonging to the rich textual genre of Catalogues and Lexica of Learned Women (Frauenzimmerkataloge). These books provide concrete testimonies about the perceptions and ideals of female intellectuality during the seventeenth and eighteenth century. This is a genre that has only received very limited scholarly attention: First by prominent feminist theologian, Elisabeth Gössmann, who worked to make excerpts of these works available to the academic public (1984a; 1984b; 1994), then, in a very thorough article by Brita Rang (1992), and later, in an extensive and well-researched dissertation by cultural historian, Karin Schmidt-Kohberg (2014), not to mention recent work by Sabrina Ebbersmeyer (2019).10 These works provide valuable information on the historical contexts and biographies of the many cataloguists, as well as quantitative analyses, pertaining, for instance, to the distribution of Protestant and Catholic authors, the reception and printing history of the catalogues, and the most frequently mentioned learned women. This previous research, however, does not approach the catalogues from the perspective of the field of history of philosophy (with the exception of Ebbersmeyer 2019), nor does it offer a critical analysis of the considerable changes that the persona of the learned woman undergoes during the early modern period, when the catalogues were popular. These are the uncharted territories that the present work intends to explore.

10 One or two catalogues of learned women are also mentioned in Becker-Cantarino 1987 and Bovenschen 2016, but with no analysis.
Methodology

This section outlines the most important methods applied in the thesis, namely critical discourse analysis, archeology and genealogy, and rational reconstruction. Addressing them one by one, I will first explain what each individual method entails, then, how I have applied the method in the articles, and why the specific method is particularly suitable for answering the research questions above.

Critical discourse analysis

Since the 80’s, the field of discourse analysis has grown at a rapid pace, giving rise to countless sub-fields such as conversation analysis, corpus-based discourse analysis, multimodal discourse analysis, etc. (Flowerdew and Richardson 2018; Gee and Handford 2023).11 In the political vanguard of discourse analysis we find critical discourse analysis (CDA), which focusses on the relationship between discourse and power, tracing and dissecting the ways in which domination and hegemony are reproduced through text and talk (van Dijk 2001, 363).12 Practicing CDA has both a normative and an explanatory element: It is normative critique because it not only describes existing discourses but also evaluates these based on stated values and ideals of social justice (Fairclough 2023, 11). And it is explanatory as, in addition to describing and assessing discourses, it seeks to explain them by examining and theorizing about the material and ideological mechanisms that have produced specific discourses.13

While CDA has, unsurprisingly, been attacked for its normative approach to the scientific praxis of language analysis (Hammersley 1997), it has also been criticized for having become too respectable and for lacking the subversive edge (Toolan 1997; Billig 2000).14 These – mostly internal – critiques have led to divisions within the field which has created sub-genres of CDA. One of these is feminist critical discourse analysis, which “aims to advance a rich and nuanced understanding of the complex workings of power and ideology in discourse in sustaining (hierarchically) gendered social arrangements” (Lazar 2007a, 141). Although traditional CDA is already explicitly political in its approach, feminist scholars wanted to bring the concept of gender to the forefront of the analysis, highlighting that “even though power may be ‘everywhere’ (...) gendered subjects are affected by it in a different way” (148). By using the ‘feminist’ label, researchers sought to emphasize that not all CDA is feminist; that is, they are not all motivated by the need

11 The term ‘discourse’ carries different meanings, depending on the discipline, in which the method is applied. The Handbook of Discourse Analysis distinguishes between three categories of definitions, in which ‘discourse’ is understood as either (1) anything beyond the sentence, (2) language use, or (3) a broader range of social practice that includes non-linguistic and non-specific instances of language (Schiffrin et al. 2001, 1).
12 For more on the theoretical underpinnings of CDA, see van Dijk 1993.
13 On how to apply the method of CDA in research, see Locke 2004.
14 For a systematic overview of the critiques raised against the CDA, see Breeze 2022.
to challenge oppressive gender structures (Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1995). Also, this label makes it easier to bring researchers with similar objectives together, increasing group visibility and improving the collective work outcome.

Michelle Lazar describes the praxis of feminist CDA as a form of ‘analytical activism’, which is preoccupied with “critiquing discourses which sustain a patriarchal social order – relations of power that systematically privilege men as a social group, and disadvantage, exclude, and disempower women as a social group” (Lazar 2007a, 145). The tasks involve examining how power and dominance is discursively produced and reproduced, as well as analyzing how access to certain forms of discourse such as communicative events and culturally valued genres is unequally distributed between the sexes (van Dijk 1996; Lazar 2007a). Like traditional CDA, feminist CDA is also devoted to developing strategies for resisting the social injustices that are uncovered through these critical analyses and to create societal change.15

Feminist CDA works with a wide variety of data, from instances of spoken and written language to visual images, layout, gestures, and various speech acts. Some scholars base their work on interviews and observational studies, while others perform close readings of texts, explicating and dissecting instances of gendered language and textual violence. Their analyses engage with both openly expressed meanings in communication and “less obvious, nuanced, implicit meanings to get at the subtle and complex renderings of ideological assumptions and power relations” (Lazar 2007a, 151). More specifically, feminist CDA pays attention to choices of lexis, turns of phrase, idioms, metaphors, genres, argumentative strategies, and even the interaction between different discourses; also known as “interdiscursive analysis” (Fairclough 1992).

However, CDA focuses almost exclusively on contemporary discourses in texts, speech, and media, seemingly disinterested in historical texts. This may very well be a consequence of a misconstrued and naïve understanding of historical power relations, which has its roots in postmodern theory. Scholars of CDA tend to differentiate between an ‘old-fashioned’ premodern power structure, which is considered to be straightforward in its uses and abuses of power and a modern power (or hegemony), which operates at a much subtler and almost invisible level, through the internalization of norms and the hidden layers of meaning in language (Lazar 2007a, 148; Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999; Reed 2020). According to this framework, discourse analysis is particularly apt for uncovering the refined mechanisms of oppression in the modern world, whereas it would be unnecessary to apply this method on historical texts, whose sexism is so blatant and obvious.

15 For an example of the versatility of feminist DCA, see Baxter 2003; Lazar 2007b.
I think this tacit understanding is flawed, and although it may be true that our modern world with its excess of information and means of expression is indeed overwhelmingly complex, we should not underestimate the subtleness and intricacies that exist in historical sources. Power has always been multilayered and opaque, even in feudal societies, and for that reason, I would argue that CDA is just as useful to detect gendered language in early modern texts as it is for exposing sexist undertones in a recent issue of ELLE Magazine.

I will now give some examples to show how the method of feminist critical discourse analysis has been applied in this thesis. This method is most clearly expressed in Articles I and II, which in separate ways identify and describe discourses that have shaped our perception of female intellectuality since the seventeenth century. Article I examines the shifting discourses on femininity and learnedness in the catalogues of learned women during the eighteenth century. I analyze the authors' choice of words when describing the learned women, tracking the falling popularity of words such as ingenium and Philosophin (female philosopher), and their replacement by words relating to traditionally feminine traits such as modesty, innocence, and beauty. Through this analysis, the article helps to uncover the origin of sexist stereotypes that disenfranchise women and diminish their intellectual accomplishments. Article II uses feminist CDA to analyze the prevalent discourse on Anna Maria van Schurman today. Through a survey of over 30 texts, the article uncovers a tendency within van Schurman research to downplay her conflict with the learned world to preserve her image as the female scholar of the seventeenth century. Arguing for a respectful commitment to women’s self-representations, the article critically explores how well-meaning discourses can obscure and distort our understanding of the past.

Although Article III is in itself a methodological investigation of the historiographical category of ‘Radical Enlightenment’, and therefore includes its own reflections on methodology, this article also draws on insights from feminist CDA. By analyzing how the standard criteria for classifying an author or a text as ‘radical’ have led to the exclusion of female writers, I engage with the question of access to a specific discourse, namely the academically revered genre of radical enlightenment literature. In the article, I show how molding the genre after famous male philosophers such as Spinoza has embedded the field with a gender bias, which makes it difficult to identify and appreciate the radicalism of women’s thought. Analyzed as an academic discourse, scholarship on the Radical Enlightenment can thus be seen as perpetuating the all-male canon and reproducing hierarchical gender structures in the history of philosophy.

Critical discourse analysis and specifically feminist CDA is a fitting choice of method to approach the research questions that form the basis of this thesis. As all three main questions (How were women intellectuals perceived in the early modern period? How did they see
themselves? How do we perceive them today?) have to do with modes of representation, discourse analysis is a suitable tool for identifying, tracing, and comparing depictions of early modern female intellectuals. Since the stated intent of the thesis is to uncover mechanisms of exclusion and critique their discriminatory effects, with the purpose of transforming our historical narratives, it is only appropriate that the analysis is critical in its approach. And as the work is specifically targeting the illegitimate exclusion of women from the history of philosophy, it is likewise fitting that the method used is feminist in nature.

Archeology and genealogy

As an extension of discourse analysis, the practices of archeology and genealogy provide a framework for engaging specifically with historical material. Both approaches were developed by Michel Foucault and applied throughout his authorship (see e.g., Foucault 1995; 2002; 2018). Underlying both historiographical methods is the aim to avoid a subject-oriented understanding of historical events as well as the notion of a progressive history, which characterized the psychoanalytic, structuralist, and Marxist theories of history of the 1960’s.

The archeological approach seeks to identify the episteme of a time; that is, the way people thought about a certain thing at a specific time and the conditions under which what was accepted as knowledge was possible (Foucault 2018, xxiv). This episteme or discursive formation is not governed by any one individual or a group of individuals. Its power is spread throughout networks as an undercurrent of language itself, making certain propositions possible while others are unthinkable. For the purpose of archeological analysis, documents are seen as monuments of a time and a way of reasoning rather than a testament to the thoughts and inner life of a certain writer (Foucault 2002, 8). Furthermore, the archeological approach is especially interested in the history of voices that have been silenced or marginalized in traditional accounts (Venable 2021, 10).

In the history of philosophy, the practice of archeological analysis has led to an emphasis on discursive “discontinuities, on radical breaks and dislocations” (Gutting 1989, 229). This is because, in traditional history of ideas, the subject has been considered an agent of continuity, “transmitting (...) ideas from one mind to another” (229). So, in order to detect knowledge production outside of the subject, archeological analysis searches for discontinuities and contradictions that cannot be traced back to individual subjects.

In The Archaeology of Knowledge (1969), Foucault sets up four principles characterizing the method of archeology: 1) Archeological analysis strives to study discourses as they appear; it does not search for a hidden truth behind discourse (Foucault
2002, 155–56; cf. Webb 2012). 2) It considers discourses to be irreducible to one another, rather than moving continuously from one discourse to the next. 3) It analyzes the conditions that make a particular creative thought possible at a certain time, instead of regarding creativity as the consequence of spontaneous ideas invented by free subjects. And 4) it acknowledges that the method is itself interfering with the original discourse by analyzing it and ordering it as a discourse, thus abandoning the aim of recovering the original and untouched version of a given idea. Together these principles should steer the study of the history of ideas away from a focus on intensions, authors and *ouvrages* and towards a history free of “the sovereignty of the subject” (Foucault 2002, 14).

However, as Foucault realized, the method has its limitations. It only allows us to describe fragments of temporally disconnected discourses and compare them. This shows the contingency of discourses, but it does not tell us anything about how our current state has developed and how change is produced (Gutting and Oksala 2022). To make up for these short-comings, Foucault developed the method of genealogy, inspired by Nietzsche’s *The Genealogy of Morals* (1887). The genealogical method, which was first put to use in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), has a new purpose, namely, to show how our present understanding of a phenomenon is the result of contingent historical events, or, in Foucault’s own words, to provide a “history of the present” (Foucault 1995, 35). The focus of the analysis becomes political, as Foucault attempts to use history to intervene into the present by tracing the conditions that allowed for present power relations to emerge in the way that they have (Koopman 2013, 25). Instead of seeing the objects of analysis (such as prisons, schools, psychiatric wards, etc.) as ‘natural’ or ontologically stable, he wants us to think of these as historically situated, produced, and therefore “open to transformation, revision, abandonment and challenge” (Taylor 2014, 113). The genealogical approach thus gives structure and purpose to the archeological excavation of seemingly random discourses.

So, in short, the archeological method analyzes systems of knowledge (*epistemes*) about certain phenomena at a given time in history and differences between these systems, whereas genealogy takes the present day as its point of departure and investigates how current perceptions, structures, and concepts came into being, emphasizing continuities rather than discontinuities. But what is, then, the relationship between the two methods? In research on Foucault, the transition from the method of archeology to genealogy is typically described as a radical shift in methodology (Paras 2006; White 2009). However, some scholars have argued that the change was, in fact, not all that abrupt, as Foucault’s earlier works were also motivated by the desire to bring about political change as well as uncover the historical roots of thinking and behavior which is still with us today (Koopman 2008; Garland 2014). I agree with Koopman, when he suggests that the methodological shift, in which Foucault is said to abandon archeology for genealogy, is
actually better conceived as a historiographical expansion from ‘pure’ archeology to genealogy plus archeology (Koopman 2008). If we take this to be the case, then there is no reason why the two methods should not be used together – supporting and complimenting one another.

That is essentially the way the methods have been used in this thesis. As a whole, the thesis constitutes a genealogical project, as it aims to uncover the background for the present exclusion of women from academic philosophy through an analysis of the formation (or birth) of the female intellectual in the early modern period. To do this, it employs archeological analyses, which are meant to excavate different historical discourses on female intellectuality. Article I is perhaps the best example of this. This article deals with the different epistemess of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, performing a diachronic analysis of the dramatic change in the discourse on female intellectuality during this period. Following the archeological methodology, the analysis is disinterested with the personal thoughts and opinions of the authors of the catalogues. Instead, it focuses on the implicit expectations and ideals of what it meant to be a female intellectual at the turn of the nineteenth century, which are perhaps unwillingly expressed in the texts. Neither is it the purpose of the article to discover the ‘truth’ about what it really means to be a learned woman. The object of analysis is the way in which female intellectuals were portrayed, i.e., the discourses that made it possible for the cataloguists to think of some women as intellectuals (even philosophers), while overlooking others. When it comes to the change in the depiction of learned women, this discontinuity is not considered a spontaneous invention by any one of the cataloguists, but as an expression of a societal norm that ‘speaks through them’. These historiographical choices are all in line with the principles of archeological analysis outlined above.

Foucault’s methods are useful tools for answering the research questions of this thesis – especially the ones concerning the historical representation of female intellectuals (i.e., How were women intellectuals perceived in the early modern period? How are they represented in literature in- and outside of philosophy? And how has this depiction developed over time?). The archeological method provides guidelines for analyzing historical literature from a non-subjective point of view, determining specific trends and their historical embeddedness. Building on this, the method of genealogy helps to develop a coherent narrative of the discursive changes that occurred during the early modern period, while adding a critical and contemporary perspective to the inquiry.

Rational reconstruction

In a seminal article on the historiography of philosophy, Richard Rorty describes the method of rational reconstruction as the practice of “treating [great dead] philosophers as contemporaries” (Rorty 1984, 49). This method entails applying modern day
terminology to the arguments of historical figures and evaluating them under today’s philosophical standards. In other words, philosophical theories are severed from their original context and translated into modern-day language. Rorty, however, raises some concerns about this historiographical method, regarding its ability to accurately represent the arguments of historical figures. Contrasting this method with its counterpart, namely historical reconstruction, which aims to describe past philosophers ‘in their own terms’, he points out how rational reconstructions have “led to charges of anachronism” (49). This methodological approach is accused of misleadingly “beating texts into the shape of propositions currently being debated in the philosophical journals” (49). The defenders of historical reconstruction argue that, if we translate historical ideas into contemporary terminology this might lead to serious misunderstandings of their original meaning. On the other hand, the champions of rational reconstruction point out that if we refuse to engage actively with past philosophers for fear of distorting their views, we run the risk of making the history of philosophy irrelevant to present-day philosophers. This is the dilemma involved in choosing between these methodologies.

Eventually, Rorty concludes that, since none of these approaches are flawless, it is necessary to do both. Because despite the risk of misinterpretation, there is something to gain by ‘reviving’ the dead. Translating the philosophical ideas of the past into contemporary terms makes it easier for us to relate to the issues that a given writer is concerned with, which, in turn, demonstrates why it is meaningful to research these texts. In this way, historical ideas obtain a new life and can be used to inspire and push forward the thinking of present-day philosophers. The intention, of course, is not to actively misrepresent or ignore historical circumstances that may affect our understanding of the original arguments – the context should still be respected. The aim is, instead, to shift the focus away from the historical contextualization and engage solely with the content.

This method is primarily used in Article IV, which is dedicated to exploring Anna Maria van Schurman’s virtually unstudied views on metaphysics. The analysis takes the form of a rational reconstruction, as it offers a detailed and systematic reconstruction of van Schurman’s original arguments and introduces these into current debates on the epistemic value of metaphysics. This comparison with contemporary anti-metaphysical theories helps to translate van Schurman’s seventeenth-century religious vocabulary into modern-day philosophical terminology. The article also discusses which philosophical position within contemporary metametaphysics best encapsulates her views.

The method of rational reconstruction is particularly helpful in approaching the research question of how we perceive early modern women intellectuals today. As mentioned, this method is devoted to viewing the history of philosophy from the perspective of the present, evaluating arguments and assigning hypothetical positions to philosophers of the
past. By reconstructing van Schurman’s thought and communicating it in modern terms, it becomes possible to enter into a discussion of how her work should be viewed today and how we can include her, not only in the canon, but also in contemporary philosophical debates. Rational reconstruction further allows us to learn about what topics female intellectuals were interested in. Instead of focusing on her reception or the way she has been conceptualized by historians and cataloguists over the past centuries, Article IV deals exclusively with the content of her work, the arguments she puts forth, and lessons we may learn from her today.
Article Previews

The thesis consists of four independent but closely related articles, all of which are single authored. The articles are ordered by how they respond to the research questions above: Article I examines the shifting ways in which women intellectuals were depicted throughout the early modern period, taking Anna Maria van Schurman as a case study. Article II continues to focus on van Schurman but moves on to her modern-day reception, questioning the current narrative of her intellectual identity. The thesis takes a turn with Article III, which moves from investigating changes in the representations of women intellectuals to a critical analysis of historiographical classifications, specifically the category of ‘Radical Enlightenment’ and its exclusionary consequences for women enlightenment thinkers, centering on Dorothea Erxleben. The final article, Article IV, engages systematically with van Schurman’s own philosophical views on metaphysics. The purpose of this article, in relation to the overall thesis, is to reconstruct the original ideas of this neglected female intellectual and to demonstrate their relevance to contemporary philosophical debates, specifically current debates in the field of metametaphysics.

In what follows, I will give an outline of each article and explain how they contribute to the overall aim of the thesis, specified in the research questions above.

Article I: How female intellectuals stopped being philosophers


Article I examines the figure of the female intellectual as it takes shape in the German catalogues of learned women published between 1633-1812. The article is based on a survey of more than twenty catalogues and lexica from the period with the purpose of tracing discursive changes in the conceptualization of female intellectuality.

The article challenges the widespread misconception that cultural norms, such as gender roles, become more liberal over time; that the history of women is a progressive story, in which women gain freedoms and independence and slowly remove themselves from the confines of sexist stereotypes. Through an in-depth analysis of the entries on van Schurman in the catalogues of learned women, I demonstrate that, in fact, the discourse on female intellectuals suffers a backlash around the turn of the nineteenth century. Whereas women intellectuals were praised for gender-neutral traits such as learnedness, academic skill, and innate talent in the seventeenth century, the eighteenth-century cataloguists begin to focus instead on classical feminine virtues such as modesty, piety, and domesticity. What is more, van Schurman is stripped of her title as ‘philosopher’ by the end of the century, now being characterized rather as a ‘lovable maiden’ and a ‘learned beauty’.
The article begins with an introduction to the genre of *Catalogues and Lexica of Learned Women*, staying within the German context. I then proceed to an analysis of the entries on Anna Maria van Schurman, starting with the early seventeenth-century catalogues followed by entries from the eighteenth century. I begin by identifying the descriptive features that are repeatedly emphasized in these catalogues, after which I highlight which traits are conspicuously missing from these descriptions. The analysis reveals a disappointing pattern: while early cataloguists aimed to present women as (at least in theory) equal to men in intellectual capacity, later cataloguists pushed a different agenda, arguing instead that women and men were fundamentally different. In the last part of the article, I take a step back to explore how this dramatic shift in the catalogues corresponds to a more substantial transformation in gender narratives during the early modern period from an enlightenment emphasis on equality to a romantic notion of gender complementarity.

**Article I** engages with the question of how women intellectuals were perceived and conceptualized in the early modern era. The article provides a detailed analysis of a substantial text corpus, the primary function of which is to set up criteria, defining what counts as ‘learnedness’ in women and offer examples of learned women. These books were widely read, many of them re-printed in several editions (Schmidt-Kohberg 2014), making them excellent source materials for investigating the progression of ideals about female intellectuality. In the article, I show how the persona of the learned woman became femininized in this period; a shift that correlated with a general change in views on gender roles.

Publication status: **Article I** has been accepted for publication by *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*.

**Article II: Identity crisis**


Developing on the findings from **Article I**, this article is likewise focused on early modern representations of the figure of the female intellectual, exemplified in van Schurman. However, this time I focus on her modern-day reception. The article is based on a survey of 32 books and articles written from 1977-2022, through which researchers have developed what I have termed a ‘standard narrative’ of van Schurman’s life and, of specific interest to the thesis, her relation to the learned world. This narrative is characterized by the idea that van Schurman’s commitment to learning was continuous throughout her life. As a response to this, I argue that this narrative does not correspond to the later van Schurman’s own story as it is presented in her autobiography *Eukleria,* or
Choosing the Better Part (1673), in which she accentuates her religious conviction and her condemnation of scholarly studies.

**Article II** takes on several of the abovementioned research questions: In comparing the narrative of contemporary research literature to van Schurman’s own words, I address the question of *how women intellectuals saw themselves*, as well as *how they are perceived today*. I show how these two portrayals do not always harmonize, and I argue that it is vital that we respect learned women’s own self-representations and stay true to the diversity of their ideas. By glossing over ambiguities and uncomfortable truths in the texts, we miss out on relevant information. Investigating her story, as she tells it, allows us to ask *why* she chose to abandon her studies, offering new insights into women’s struggles to find a place in the learned world, and about which communities actually supported women’s independence.

In addition, **Article II** also offers insights that relate to the question of *how women intellectuals responded to the exclusion of women from academic studies* by examining the widespread tendency in the early modern period for older women to abandon their previous intellectual studies in favor of a religious life. I argue that van Schurman’s religious conversion (which mirrors that of Elisabeth of Bohemia and Marie de Moulin) should also be understood as a response to the unfavorable conditions for intellectual women, as well as proof of the possibilities and recognition that religion provided for women in this period.

Publication status: **Article II** will be published as a part of the peer reviewed conference anthology *Archaeology of the Female Intellectual Identity: Women, Philosophy and Academia in Early Modern Europe*, forthcoming.

**Article III: Were there any radical women in the German Enlightenment?**


The point of departure for **Article III** is a sense of suspicion towards the blatant underrepresentation of female writers in current scholarship on what, following Margaret Jacob and Jonathan Israel, has come to be known as the Radical Enlightenment (Jacob 1981; Israel 2001), as well as its German counterpart the RadikalAufklärung (Mulsow 2002; 2007). Since the early 2000’s there has been a surge in research in this field, and while it has helped to further our knowledge of some previously undervalued historical figures such as Theodor Ludwig Lau (1670-1740), Julien Offray de La Mettrie (1709-1751), and Baron d’Holbach (1723–1789), female authors are still noticeably missing from these towering works of research.
In this article, I argue that the German Doctor of Medicine and writer on women’s rights, Dorothea Erxleben, deserves a place among these radical enlightenment thinkers, due to her subversive ideas on women’s education and their access to public professions. The article opens with a targeted introduction to the term ‘Radical Enlightenment’, particularly its place in German intellectual history. This is followed by the conceptual heart of the article, which consists in the identification and development of two methodological problems that, I argue, inhibit the use of the term ‘radical’ in relation to early feminist writings of the period. I refer to these problems as the ‘package logic problem’ and the ‘hierarchy problem’. These problems call for a new approach to enlightenment texts; an approach that avoids ‘package deals’ and dissolves hierarchies between different subversive positions (ranking materialism and criticism of religion above calls for social justice and social reform). In the remainder of the article, I apply this methodological framework to Erxleben’s main work Rigorous Investigation (1742). The purpose of this analysis is to show how radical features of Erxleben’s are allowed to shine through if they are not confined by the established and somewhat limited notion of radicalism that exists in the current research literature.

Like the previous article, Article III is also primarily concerned with the question of how early modern women intellectuals are perceived today, that is, how we interpret and categorize their philosophical contribution: Is Erxleben considered “simply” an early educational reformist? Or is she read in relation to the influential movement of the Radical Enlightenment, herself a radical in her fight for women’s rights? This makes a world of difference, when we consider which contemporary philosophers, we compare her to, and which ideas and arguments should be emphasized in our analyses. As I have also shown, navigating how she should be perceived today also means rethinking the categories and boxes, in accordance with which we customarily organize history.

The article also helps to answer the sub-question of how women intellectuals responded to their exclusion from academia. However, in contrast to van Schurman’s complete refutation of intellectual studies, I here engage with an author who fiercely defended women’s right to study, who argued for their admission into higher education, and who never gave up her work as a professional physician, despite vicious slander being circulated against her (Dyck 2021, 61). By presenting two such different answers to the exclusion of women from academia, I aim to show, firstly, that there is not one specific way that women have reacted in the face of adversity, and, secondly, that it need not be a feminist defeat to leave the learned word. Van Schurman wrote her most original and critical work after having left her former intellectual circles. These two women, a century apart, offer insights into formal and discursive changes in the academic milieu, differences between academic disciplines, and the significance of individual characters and their personal decisions on the course of history.

Moreover, Article III also tackles the complicated issue of whether the inclusion of women into the philosophical canon requires a change within the discipline of philosophy. In this
article, I argue that such an inclusion does indeed require a reevaluation of our historiographical categories with special attention to potential sexist or gender biased historical and conceptual frameworks. I argue that the common definition of the term ‘Radical Enlightenment’ favors independent, academically trained, while systematically omitting female writers, who focus on political issues such as women’s rights, equality, and universal education.

Publication status: Article III was published in Intellectual History Review in 2021 as a part of a special issue on women and radical thought in the early modern period.

Article IV: Against scholasticism

Wandall, Anne-Sophie Sørup. “Against Scholasticism: Contemporary Perspectives on Anna Maria van Schurman’s Criticism of Metaphysics.” Manuscript.

The fourth and final article of the thesis is radically different from the previous three in both subject and style. The textual focus is again on van Schurman, specifically the third chapter of her autobiography, Eukleria, in which she discusses the epistemic and moral value of ‘the humans sciences’. However, this time I carry out a ‘rational reconstruction’ (see section on methodology) of her arguments against the academic discipline of metaphysics, engaging with her own philosophical position. Leaving historical considerations aside, this article is dedicated to exploring her original ideas, which have received little to no scholarly attention (a notable exception being Roothaan 1996). This reconstruction is then ‘put to work’ in a comparative analysis, connecting van Schurman’s anti-metaphysical arguments to current critics of mainstream metaphysics such as Eli Hirsch, Amie Thomasson, and Bas van Fraassen.

Article IV starts from a premise that is gaining traction in metametaphysical scholarship today, namely that ‘mainstream metaphysics’ (referring roughly to neo-Quinean metaphysics) shares important characteristics with seventeenth-century scholastic metaphysics (van Fraassen 2002; Ladyman and Ross 2007). Expanding on this notion, I argue that in an analogous way, contemporary objections to mainstream metaphysics resemble early modern critiques of scholasticism. To further this argument, I first reconstruct van Schurman’s critique of scholastic reasoning, disentangling her concise and theoretically dense argument and separating it into five independent points of critique. These critical points are then likened to issues raised by modern-day philosophers in the field of metametaphysics. This comparison helps to demonstrate the persistent relevance of van Schurman’s arguments, the historical depth of current debates, and the unexpected affinities that can be discerned between authors from profoundly different intellectual backgrounds. In the final section of Article IV, I seek to position van Schurman’s anti-metaphysical views in a contemporary metametaphysical setting, using a conceptual framework developed by Karen Bennett (2009).
By introducing the original ideas and critical arguments of this once famous learned woman, I work towards answering to the all-important question of what early modern female intellectuals wrote about. It is, of course, crucial that we not only deal with how women were portrayed and evaluated by male (and occasionally female) authors such as the cataloguists. To be able to properly integrate them in the philosophical discussion and show why this is worthwhile, we need to engage actively with their own writings. The article also deals explicitly with the question of how early modern women intellectuals are perceived today, as it discusses how the emergence of analytical metametaphysics offers a new role for van Schurman’s anti-metaphysical arguments in our modern-day context. This new application of her original ideas adds yet another layer to her intellectual legacy.

In light of this, I would argue that Article IV also presents an example of how to include female thinkers – not in the canon – but in the philosophical discussions of today. One way to do this is through the method of comparative analysis, which makes clear that early modern authors were concerned with issues similar to modern-day scholars, thus making it easier to incorporate their thoughts and ideas into current research and to introduce their texts into the course syllabi.

Publication status: This article is intended for publication in the British Journal for the History of Philosophy. Envisioned submission date: November 1, 2023.

Although the four articles are different in focus, they all contribute to forming a picture of the identity and role of women intellectuals in the early modern period. Some elements of this research support already existing scholarship, providing further textual evidence that helps to buttress and add nuance to historical theories (Article I), while other parts challenge already established narratives (Article II and III). Finally, some elements point forward, exploring new paths for research on early modern women (Article IV).

With these previews, Part I comes to an end. Part II comprises the four full-length research articles. To improve readability and create coherence, all the articles, including those that have been published or accepted for publication, have been reformatted so the layout and citation style is the same in every article. Finally, Part III completes the thesis with some concluding remarks and ideas for future research.
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Part II

1. How female intellectuals stopped being philosophers

2. Identity crisis

3. Were there any radical women in the German Enlightenment?

4. Against scholasticism
Article I
How Female Intellectuals Stopped Being Philosophers: On Anna Maria van Schurman in the Catalogues of Learned Women

Abstract

This article examines the figure of the female intellectual exemplified in Anna Maria van Schurman, as she is portrayed in the catalogues of learned women. The aim is to demonstrate the dramatic and unexpected changes that this persona undergoes during the eighteenth century. The article challenges the common misconception that gender roles progress throughout history towards an ideal of freedom and equality. Instead, I argue that we see a regression in the eighteenth century where the ideal of female intellectuality transforms from focusing on gender-neutral virtues such as academic skill and learnedness to emphasizing traditionally feminine traits like modesty, piety, and domesticity.

The first part of the article introduces the genre of catalogues of learned women, focusing on the German context. The main part presents an in-depth analysis of the biographical entries on van Schurman, juxtaposing the early eighteenth-century portrayals with entries from the turn of the nineteenth century. The purpose of this analysis is to illustrate the radical discursive changes concerning women intellectuals by using van Schurman as case study. Finally, the last part of the article will be dedicated to a discussion of historical conceptualizations of womanhood, exploring why the gender narrative changed in the early modern period.

Keywords: Female intellectual identity; Anna Maria van Schurman; catalogues of learned women; enlightenment; romanticism; equality; complementarity.

1. Introduction

Is it possible that early eighteenth-century women enjoyed greater freedoms and more equality than their great-granddaughters? If we consider the history of gender, and specifically the figure of the female intellectual in early modern Germany, we will find evidence to support such an idea. During the eighteenth century, a dramatic and unexpected regression took place in the narrative and ideal of female intellectuality. This transformation can be detected in literature and art, as well as scientific and political discourse (Hausen 1976; LeGates 1976; Bloch 1978; Schiebinger 1989, 214–45). In this article, I trace this development in the previously under-researched text corpus, belonging to the genre of catalogues of learned women (gelehrte Frauenzimmerkataloge); a genre that was thriving in early modern Europe. These catalogues comprise entries about thousands of women who were active in scholarly fields such as theology, law, art, medicine, and philosophy, and they contain revealing information about the historical development of

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16 I will come back to these theories of transformation in section 5.
the ideal of the female intellectual. Nonetheless, very little research has been done on Germany’s extensive contribution to this tradition, which counts more than twenty catalogues and lexica.\textsuperscript{17} Due to the sheer size of this text corpus, my investigation will center on a systematic examination of entries portraying the famous Dutch polymath Anna Maria van Schurman (1607-1678).\textsuperscript{18} I will be using van Schurman as a case study, through which I will make visible the changing views on women’s intellectual abilities as they evolve throughout the eighteenth century.

There are many reasons for choosing to focus this investigation specifically on van Schurman: Firstly, she is mentioned in sixteen out of twenty-two catalogues written within and after her lifetime, which, to my knowledge, makes her the most frequently mentioned woman in the German catalogues.\textsuperscript{19} She is also one of the few women who actually appears in both the early and the later catalogues. The selection of women changes during the eighteenth century from a keen interest in ancient women (as well as mythical ones) to a preference for contemporary noble women and monarchs at the turn of the century. Secondly, there is no other woman who receives the same consistent and abundant praise as van Schurman, who is almost always provided with grandiose epithets such as a “female prodigy,” “German Minerva” and “the alpha of maidens.” (Pasch 1701, 55; Hueber 1717, 94; Vulpius 1812, 91). Using her as an example of how female intellectuality was conceptualized therefore seems quite fitting, as she is so often pointed out as the exemplar of female learning (Eberti 1706, 320; Hueber 1717, 94). But most interesting, perhaps, is the fact that Anne Maria van Schurman can be said to have lived two lives; one as a respected and admired young scholar and one as a controversial religious outcast.\textsuperscript{20} This is especially interesting to the present inquiry, as it presents the

\textsuperscript{17} Some noticeable exceptions include the pioneering work by Elisabeth Gössmann, an excellent dissertation by Karin Schmidt-Kohberg and a very thorough article by Brita Rang (Gössmann 1984a; 1984b; Rang 1992; Schmidt-Kohberg 2014).

\textsuperscript{18} When I use the term ‘catalogues’ in the following, I refer only to the German catalogues, which are the focus of this investigation. To my knowledge, the genre was most prolific in Germany but there are also examples of catalogues of learned women published in other European countries such as France, the Netherlands, Spain, England, Denmark, and Sweden. Some of these catalogues are analyzed in the article by Brita Rang. Further research is needed to determine whether the narrative change that I have uncovered in the German catalogues is part of a bigger trans-European trend, although such a hypothesis is supported by the findings, I present in section 5.

\textsuperscript{19} Van Schurman has her own entry in eleven catalogues (Omeis and Händel 1688, 20; Pasch 1701, 54–55; Paullini 1705, 124–30; Eberti 1706, 317–24; Corvinus 1715, 1783–86; Lehms 1715, 111; Hueber 1717, 94–96; Heumann 1721, 849–51; Finauer 1761, 190–94; Heinzmann 1790, 56–60; Vulpius 1812, 3:91–106), and is referred to by name in at least five others. Schmidt-Kohberg gives a systematic account of the most frequently mentioned women (Schmidt-Kohberg 2014, 199–212).

\textsuperscript{20} There is much debate in the research literature of whether van Schurman’s later years in the Labadist community, described in her autobiography Eukleria (1673), represents a radical shift in her ideas and values (Lee 2007, 191; Clarke 2013, 351; Bovenschen 2016, 86), or if they are, in fact, coherent with
catalogue authors with a choice: which van Schurman do they want to emphasize? And what parts of her life should be left out or downplayed? The fact that van Schurman lived such a rich and diverse life that can be framed in various ways allows us to see more clearly the priorities and values of her biographers. Hence, this article can be seen as a contribution to three separate fields of research: The research on Anna Maria van Schurman, to which it provides new insights based on overlooked historical source material, shedding light on her early reception. At the same time, it contributes to the highly under-developed research field pertaining to the German catalogues of learned women. And, finally, it adds to and supports already existing research about gender narratives and the history of womanhood.

In the following, I will start with a brief history of the text genre of catalogues of learned women, focusing on its role in the debate concerning women’s intellectual abilities, which began in the Renaissance but gained popularity in the early modern period. The main part of the article will consist of a thorough analysis of a selection of entries written on van Schurman, examining first the early catalogues from the first half of the eighteenth century, followed by entries published in the late eighteenth and start of the nineteenth century. The purpose of this analysis is to make clear the noticeable discursive changes that take place in the course of the eighteenth century, in which the ideal of female intellectuality transforms from focusing on gender-neutral virtues such as academic skill and learnedness to emphasizing traditionally feminine traits such as modesty, piety, and domesticity. Finally, the last part of the article will be dedicated to a wider discussion about the historical conceptualizations of ideal, female intellectuality and why this ideal changed in the early modern period.

2. The peculiar text genre of catalogues of learned women

In the early modern period, a vibrant discussion was taking place, concerning the nature of women, their intellectual abilities, and their role in society. This discussion is often referred to as the querelle des femmes and it can be traced back to the Renaissance. Some of the most important defenses of women in the querelle des femmes were written by forward-thinking renaissance women such as Christine de Pizan (1364-1430), Moderata Fonte (1555-1592) and Lucrezia Marinella (1571-1653) (Fonte 1997; De Pizan 1999; Marinella 2007). Joan Kelly reconstructs this feminist tradition in her essay "Early Feminist Theory and the Querelle des Femmes, 1400-1789".

thoughts, she has expressed in earlier writings (Baar 1996, 96, 101; Rang 1996, 38–39; Beek 2010, 235, 239; Pal 2012, 208; Larsen 2018, 305).

21 These findings are of particular interest to contemporary feminist research on gender stereotypes and misogyny (e.g., Saul 2014; Manne 2017), as it shows how many ‘traditional feminine traits’ or gender stereotypes were constructed and promoted in a specific historical period, namely the eighteenth century, offering a historical anchor to analyses of everyday sexism.

22 Some of the most important defenses of women in the querelle des femmes were written by forward-thinking renaissance women such as Christine de Pizan (1364-1430), Moderata Fonte (1555-1592) and Lucrezia Marinella (1571-1653) (Fonte 1997; De Pizan 1999; Marinella 2007). Joan Kelly reconstructs this feminist tradition in her essay “Early Feminist Theory and the Querelle des Femmes, 1400-1789”.

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by providing extensive lists of learned women along with brief biographies of their lives and works (Ebbersmeyer 2019, 4). This genre can be traced back as far as antiquity where we find Plutarch’s book De Mulierum Virtutibus (On the Bravery of Women), depicting the lives and heroic deeds of ancient women. Another well-known example of the genre is Giovanni Boccaccio’s De Mulieribus Claris (Concerning Famous Women), which was written around 1361-62. Both works are written in praise of exceptional women of the past and from mythology but neither focus specifically on learned women. This focus did not become popular until the seventeenth century.

One of the earliest examples of a catalogue exclusively dedicated to learned women is the Catalogus Doctarum Virginum et Foeminarum (Catalogue of Learned Maids and Women, 1606) by Georg Martini von Baldhoven (1578-1615), which includes the names of around 70 women (Baldhoven 1606; See also Rang 1992, 526). The book started a trend, and the genre spread rapidly across Europe, becoming especially popular in Germany where more than twenty catalogues were published between 1633 and 1812. The first of these was Die Lobwürdige Gesellschaft der Gelehrten Weiber (The Praiseworthy Society of Learned Women, 1633) authored by Johann Frawenlob (likely a pseudonym, as the surname literally means ‘Women’s Praise’), which consists of 212 entries on women from antiquity up to his own time. Many other catalogues followed until the genre eventually disappeared in the nineteenth century (Rang 1992, 514; Ebbersmeyer 2019, 12).

The main aim of the cataloguists was to provide exemplars of female intellectuals in order to support the claim that women were rational creatures, and to motivate contemporary women to imitate these exemplary women (Frawenlob 1633, 38; Paullini 1705, 10; Eberti 1706, “An den Wohl-gesinten Leser!”; Finauer 1761, “Vorbericht”). As Anne R. Larsen notes, this idea of the exemplar is “linked to the concepts of imitation and mimesis which are central in Renaissance exemplarity, whether male or female” (Larsen 2008, 106). She elaborates on this notion, explaining how “[e]xemplarity assumed two slightly differing forms [in the catalogues of intellectual women], one based on the lives of illustrious figures taken from the Christian past and Roman moral philosophers, and the other on conduct books containing examples to follow or avoid in the conduct of daily life” (106). In the first form, of which Boccaccio’s De Mulieribus Claris is emblematic, the exemplar is rather progressive, facilitating “revisionist arguments on the nature of women,” whereas the second form offers conservative models of ‘the good woman’ to be used as guidance in everyday life (106). These two forms of exemplarity are both present in the German catalogues.

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23 For more on the aims and motivations of the catalogues, see Rang 1992, 514.
Because the catalogue authors wanted to inspire women to take up studies themselves, many of the catalogues were written with women as their target audience.\textsuperscript{24} Christoph August Heumann (1681-1764), who wrote the first German history of women philosophers in 1721, presents his catalogue with the hope that “our German women will let themselves be inspired to study philosophy, when we present the most distinguished examples of women who are well experienced in philosophy before their eyes” (Heumann 1721, 832).\textsuperscript{25} In his view, examples were more effective in inspiring and motivating women than arguments. What was needed was for learning to become fashionable, so that “our women may laudably follow the example of French women in studying and reading philosophical books, just as they zealously imitate the clothing styles of French women” (832). Behind this veil of gender stereotypes, Heumann articulates a wish for his female readers to feel inspired by the accomplishments of other learned women and to emulate them.\textsuperscript{26} The wish to reach female readers also explains the widespread use of the vernacular, as most German women at the time did not read Latin.

Still, there are examples of some Latin catalogues as well. They appear to have been produced as academic dissertations, arguing for women’s intellectual abilities within the university walls.\textsuperscript{27} However, the interest in learned women faded by the end of the eighteenth century and by the turn of the nineteenth century the genre “fell into oblivion and is now barely known and not easily traceable” (Rang 1992, 514). But before the genre died out, a discursive change took place within it, which involved a fundamental re-conceptualization of its very object, namely the learned woman. In order to make this change visible, I will center my analysis on one particular woman, who embodies the notion of the \textit{femme savante}, namely Anna Maria van Schurman. In the next section, I will provide some basic biographical information about van Schurman, so as to allow the reader to better appreciate the differences in how she is portrayed in the catalogues.

\textsuperscript{24} The cataloguist Corvinus directly addresses his audience as “Mes Dames & Demoiselles” (Corvinus 1715, 2), just as Eberti addresses his as “Hoch= und Wohl=gebohrne Frauen” (Eberti 1706, a1). Frawenlob declares in his introduction that he “gifts the entire praiseworthy female sex with this little book”, thereby stating that he also regards women readers as his recipients (Frawenlob 1633, “An den Leser”). Moreover, several of the catalogues were also dedicated to noble women, whom the authors wished to impress and win as patrons (Baldhoven 1606; Sauerbrei et al. 1671; Meuschen 1706; Hueber 1717; Heinzmann 1790).

\textsuperscript{25} Cataloguist Peter Paul Finauer similarly wanted his book “to inspire the young woman (...) and to lead her on the path of honor on which so many of her sex have already wandered with immortal merit” (Finauer 1761, b2v).

\textsuperscript{26} As Brita Rang states in her analysis of the genre; “‘Imitatio’ was the keyword” (Rang 1992, 515).

\textsuperscript{27} Examples of this are: Omeis and Händel 1688; Juncker 1692; Pasch 1701. For more on the academic dissertations, see Ebbersmeyer 2019, 5–6.
3. The case of Anna Maria van Schurman: “Artist, Scholar, Saint”

Van Schurman was born in Cologne in 1607 to Frederick van Schurman and Eva von Harff, who also had three sons. The family had settled in Germany after fleeing their hometown of Antwerp due to religious tensions between Catholics and Calvinists, the van Schurman family belonging to the latter group. Already at an early age, Anna Maria van Schurman showed an aptitude for a variety of crafts such as paper cutting and engraving, as well as a talent for languages, for which she is perhaps best known. By the 1640s, she was fluent in fourteen languages, which apart from the classical languages of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew also included Arabic, Syriac, Chaldean, and Ethiopic. Van Schurman lived most of her life in Utrecht, where she found a mentor in the French theologian André Rivet (1572-1651), with whom she discussed the issue of women’s education in a letter correspondence (Van Schurman 1998, 39–57). These letters developed into her first published work Dissertatio de Ingenii Muliebris ad Doctrinam, & Meliores Litteras Aptitudine (A Treatise Regarding the Fitness of the Female Mind for the Study of the Arts and Sciences, 1638). Written as a scholastic disputation, van Schurman presents fourteen theses, arguing that studying is fitting for a Christian woman and rebutting possible counterarguments. The Dissertatio found immense popularity and inspired several other similar writings across Europe. During this time, the young van Schurman was even invited to attend lectures at the University of Utrecht by the professor of theology, Gisbertus Voetius (1589-1676), which she accepted, earning her the title of ‘the first female university student’ in the Netherlands (Beek 2010).

For decades, Anna Maria van Schurman enjoyed her reputation as a renowned scholar and devoted all her time to her studies. But something changed in the 1660’s. Van Schurman’s growing discontent with the Dutch Reformed Church eventually led to her break with the institution in 1669, after which she joined the circle of the defrocked French priest Jean de Labadie (1610-1674). In collaboration, they established a sectarian religious community in Herford under the protection of Elisabeth of Bohemia (1618-1680). In 1672, the group was driven from Herford to Altona where de Labadie died two years later, after which they moved to Wieuwerd in Friesland where van Schurman lived the remainder of her years. Before de Labadie’s death, she published a combined

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28 This quote is borrowed from the title of Una Birch’s biography of Anna Maria van Schurman from 1909.
29 The Dissertatio, among others, inspired Bathsua Makin’s An Essay to Revive the Ancient Education of Gentlewomen (1673) and Dorothea Erxleben’s Gründliche Untersuchung der Ursachen, die das Weibliche Geschlecht von Studieren abhalten (1742).
30 For a full history of the Labadist community, see Saxby 1987.
autobiography and *apologia* for the Labadist belief with the title *Eukleria seu Meliores Partis Electio* (*Eukleria, or Choosing the Better Part*, 1673).

4. In praise of female learnedness

I will now start the examination of the early entries on van Schurman, focusing on the catalogues of Johann Caspar Eberti (1677–1760), Ivo Hueber, and Christoph August Heumann. I have chosen these authors because they give the most extensive and substantial accounts among the early catalogues, as well as present a wide variety of themes, which help to add nuance and complexity to the analysis. When analyzing the early catalogue entries, a pattern emerges, in which certain concepts, virtues, and ideals are emphasized while others are downplayed or left out entirely. My analysis will follow the structure of first presenting the themes that are emphasized by Eberti, Hueber, and Heumann, namely learnedness, academic skills, *ingenium*, philosophical acumen, literary productivity, and professional acclaim within the learned world. Then, in the subsequent section, I will present some aspects that are noticeably missing from the early catalogues, to give a clear impression of the authors’ priorities.

In the book *Eröffnetes Cabinet deß Gelehrten Frauen-Zimmers* (*Opened Cabinet of Learned Women*, 1706), Eberti starts off his entry on van Schurman with lavish words of praise. He declares that she is “decorated with so much learnedness, lofty sciences, and arts that one may either never in the history of the world, or maybe only every thousand years, come across such an excellent exemplar within the female sex” (Eberti 1706, 318). As is clear from this quotation, Eberti’s entry centers on the ability that one would expect to be the focus of a catalogue of learned women, namely learnedness (*Gelehrsamkeit*). With epithets such as “patroness of the learned” and “learned muse,” this undefined quality becomes the vital criterion for considering van Schurman as a scholar in her own right (Eberti 1706, 318; Hueber 1717, 94).

To support the notion that she was indeed the “quintessence of all learned maidens,” the early cataloguists list her academic accomplishments, starting with her impressive knowledge of ancient and modern languages (Eberti 1706, 320). Van Schurman’s language proficiency is mentioned in almost all of the catalogues, and,

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31 For more on Anna Maria van Schurman’s biography, see Birch 1909; Irwin 1998; Beek 2010.
32 I have not been able to find any living dates for Ivo Hueber. Karin Schmidt-Kohberg tells us that he was a Franciscan Catholic in the Provinciae Astriae Lectorem et Praedicatore but she gives no further biographical information (Schmidt-Kohberg 2014, 40).
33 Eberti’s entry covers eight pages (including notes) compared to Lehm’s, which is a mere six lines long, and Omeis’, which takes up only one page. I have also chosen not to focus on the catalogues of Pasch (1686) and Paullini (1705) in this analysis, as they do not provide any additional information.
34 All the translations from the original German are my own, as there are no official translations of any of the catalogues.
unsurprisingly, it is often seen as her crowning achievement. Eberti also mentions her exceptional admission to the University of Utrecht, where she was granted an “honorable and private place in the auditorium” (Hueber 1717, 317), referring to the fact that she would “attend lectures in a special loge that concealed her from the male students” (Irwin 1998, 5). But her admission to the university is, indeed, one of the things that place her on a somewhat equal footing with the learned men of her time. Hueber also informs us of the specific kinds of studies that van Schurman was particularly interested in, namely the academic disciplines of philosophy and theology. This adds to the picture of her as a serious scholar, who is not only a keen student of languages but also someone who is sufficiently learned in “all arts and sciences that she may be a part of disputes with the most learned of men” (Hueber 1717, 95). Her ability to match and even challenge her male contemporaries on intellectual matters is also something that is often mentioned in the early catalogues (Paullini 1705, 126; Hueber 1717, 95; Heumann 1721, 850).

Similarly, Heumann states (via a quote by Ottavio Ferrari) that she was endowed with “[a] capable ingenium up to the competition with the best men” (Heumann 1721, 850). So, not only does she possess abilities that can rival those of male scholars, she is also endowed with a so-called ingenium. Historically, the term ingenium has referred to a wide variety of phenomena, from simply meaning the ability to reason, associated with “wit, intelligence, cleverness, spirit, mentality, temper, and character” to implying an exceptional mind with connotations of “inventiveness, resourcefulness, and even genius” (Steinberg 2020, 159). But no matter which meaning one focuses on, ingenium is consistently associated with mental acuity and intellect. Both Hueber and Heumann consider the possession of an ingenium or genius a central criterion for the women in their catalogues. Hueber directly ascribes van Schurman’s fame and reputation as “a miracle and a wonder of the female sex” to her “remarkable ingenium” (Hueber 1717, 94–95). And for Heumann, the fact that van Schurman is characterized as possessing this ability is in large part what qualifies her for his catalogue of women philosophers, as he considers a powerful ingenium to be the most important characteristic of a true philosopher (Heumann 1721, 93–103, 576–670, 817–58).

Ingenium is a multi-layered term with a rich conceptual history, which is too complex to do justice in the scope of this article. For more on the concept of ingenium, see Hellerstedt 2019; Garrod and Marr 2020; Morton 2023. Concerning the gender dimensions, see Battersby 1994, chap. 8.

Other catalogues that apply the term ingenium to women include: Frawenlob 1633, 38; Omeis and Händel 1688, 20; Pasch 1701, 54; Paullini 1705, 129; Meuschen 1706, 4, 41; Lehms 1715, “Vorrede: § 31”.

In the introduction to his catalogue, Heumann discusses the strength and capacity of women’s ingenium, concluding that women’s genius must “give preference to men”, while still maintaining that women do possess a sufficiently developed ingenium to become scholars in their own right (Heumann 1721, 829–33).
Being the first German history of women philosophers, Heumann’s catalogue only mentions women who he considered to be philosophers due either to their education, form of life, or scholarly contributions within the field of philosophy. The fact that Heumann includes van Schurman in this catalogue, and even goes so far as to suggest that she is more learned than Mademoiselle de Scudéry, whom he calls “the queen of female philosophers”, shows just how capable a philosopher he believed her to be (851). As the title of philosopher was strongly associated with maleness, the fact that van Schurman was considered a philosopher (by Heumann) and described as “applying herself to philosophy” (by Hueber) is certainly noteworthy (Hueber 1717, 94).

Another emphasis that we find in the early catalogues is on van Schurman’s writings. Both Heumann and Eberti refer to her collected works (Opuscula), and Eberti even gives a comprehensive list of all her books from the Dissertatio (1638) to Eukleria (1673). This tells us that publications were seen as an important proof of scholarly learning, and that van Schurman was seen as a productive intellectual rather than just a student.

The final proof of her extraordinary learnedness is given in the form of extravagant Latin eulogies from famous contemporary intellectuals such as her former mentor Gisbertus Voetius, Claude Saumaise (1588-1653), Pierre Gassendi (1592-1655), and several others. It is stressed by almost all of the early catalogue authors that she was highly respected in learned circles and that she corresponded and disputed with famous learned men of her time. Lastly, some paragraphs are spent on praising her artistic skills as a multilingual poet and a naturalistic painter but compared to the prominence this is given in the later catalogues, the early cataloguists only seem to mention her art in passing, and only as a ‘bonus’ rather than a dominant feature.

Oversights and understatements

Thorough as they may be, the early eighteenth-century catalogues do choose to downplay and ignore certain aspects of Anna Maria van Schurman’s life such as her radical break with the learned world in the latter half of her life and her devotion to the Labadist cause. I will deal with these two omissions in this section.

In Eukleria, van Schurman retracts all of her earlier intellectual writings, stating that they exude “a vain and worldly spirit” (Van Schurman 1673, 11). She, then, proceeds to criticize the moral and spiritual deficiencies of theologians, philosophers, and other learned men, whom she refers to as “profane, greedy, proud, [and] scornful”, while distancing herself from the studies that once made up her entire world and her public identity (94). Her main concern is the corrupting dangers of scholarly studies, which, in her mature view, only distract from a direct and unmediated comprehension of God. Her hostility towards the learned world is not mentioned in any of the early catalogues.
Instead, van Schurman is portrayed as the learned woman *par excellence*. One reason could be that they were simply unaware of this radical change in sentiment. The *Eukleria* was not translated into German until 1783. Before then, it was only available in Latin and Dutch (translated in 1684). But this explanation is not convincing, as Eberti explicitly mentions the work in his entry, in which he also refers to and quotes many other Latin works, indicating that he was proficient in Latin. For this reason, it seems more likely that Eberti wanted to preserve her reputation for learning and chose to omit any anti-intellectual statements to achieve a more coherent depiction.

The second aspect of van Schurman’s biography to be omitted or downplayed is her role in the Labadist community. Hueber does not mention her affiliation with the Labadists or her commitment to piety at all, and this is also the case for other early cataloguists such as Pasch, Omeis, Paullini, and Lehms. Heumann gives a hint to her religious conversion, as he refers the reader to a quote from the Lutheran pastor Johann Balthasar Schupp (1610-1661), in which he compliments van Schurman, saying that she “is missing almost no perfection except the true and sincere (Lutheran) religion” (Heumann 1721, 850). The fact that Heumann mentions this only in passing and in the form of a quotation tells us that he did not consider van Schurman’s religious beliefs to be particularly important when it came to assessing her intellectual abilities. Rang similarly notices that “knowledge and virtue’ are not necessarily thought in relation to Christian virtues by these 17th century humanists”, which supports the notion that, to the early cataloguists, it was possible to appreciate the learnedness of a woman independent of her religious confession (Rang 1992, 529). Eberti is the author who spends the most time discussing her relation to Jean de Labadie but, still, he does not seem to think that her religious transgressions diminish her scholarly accomplishments. He writes that “this crown jewel of the female sex would have shone ceaselessly in posterity as the paragon of all learned women, had she not somewhat darkened her shine and reputation by her objectionable doctrines” (Eberti 1706, 319–20).

By joining the Labadists, she *somewhat* tarnished her reputation, but Eberti seems to excuse this deviation by saying that she was led astray by her “genuine eagerness [to] improve her piety” (320). Common to all the early catalogues is the view that van Schurman’s religious and spiritual life was not particularly relevant to her status as an extraordinarily learned woman, and that the most important part of her life was her younger years, before she became disenchanted with academic studies and the institution of the church.

While not the only omissions in the early catalogues, these two appear particularly striking to anyone familiar with van Schurman’s biography. The following section, in which I analyze the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century entries, will reveal several new themes that are also left out of the earlier descriptions. These themes may,
however, be surprising to a modern reader as they represent a quite radical shift in the notion of what it meant to be a woman intellectual.

5. The glorification of feminine virtue

In this section, I analyze the depiction of Anna Maria van Schurman in the late eighteenth-century catalogues of Johann Georg Heinzmann (1757-1802) and Christian August Vulpius (1762-1827). I follow the same structure as earlier and present first the themes, values, and virtues emphasized by these two authors, namely her personality, artistic abilities, feminine virtues, and religious zeal, after which I will dedicate a short section to elements that are noticeably missing from these catalogues such as learning, academic achievements, and philosophical *ingenium*. My analysis is focused on Heinzmann and Vulpius for practical reasons. The number of catalogues plummets at the end of the century, after which the genre dies out entirely, which means that there are only three catalogues mentioning van Schurman. The third is written by Paulin Erdt (1737-1800) in 1783, and although he does mention van Schurman’s name, she does not have a separate entry (Erdt 1783, xxiii).

From the very first sentences, it becomes clear that the style of the catalogues has changed by the end of the century. Instead of presenting short, concise, and rather ‘dry’ lexical descriptions of each learned woman, the entries become detailed biographies, poetically describing the life and character of the woman, heavily embellished with personal anecdotes. The romantic *zeitgeist* of the late eighteenth century clearly shapes not only the language but also the content selected by the authors. Starting with Heinzmann’s catalogue from 1790, we find his priorities expressed already in the opening lines where he describes van Schurman as “[a] learned woman but, more importantly, a noble, pure, and authentic soul, who throughout her entire inner life was one of the most virtuous, complete, and extraordinary persons that her sex has ever produced” (Heinzmann 1790, 56). To Heinzmann, van Schurman’s learnedness comes second to her purity of heart; what matters to him is her personality, her inner life. He continues to stress her moral character as a kind of ‘antidote’ to her intellect, stating that although she “knew all of the learned and ancient languages” her exceptional modesty meant that she “did not recognize all her merits” (56). It seems that Heinzmann is defending van Schurman from an anticipated criticism, in which intellectual skill is inextricably tied to arrogance and pride or other traits that would be considered ‘unbecoming’ of a woman. This theme is continuous throughout the entry, where van Schurman’s relationship with learning is described in strangely ambivalent terms: She is, at the same time, applauded for her intellectual accomplishments (such as her knowledge of languages), all the while

38 The catalogues that do not mention Anna Maria van Schurman are Wichmann 1772 and Hanker 1783.
being praised for distancing herself from the learned community. Heinzmann makes sure to emphasize that her recognition by the learned world was not something she actively pursued. Rather her early fame happened “without any effort on her part,” and later in life, she even fought to dissociate herself from this “learnedness trend,” which she found to be vain and futile (57). Hence, instead of admiring her scholarly talents, Heinzmann focuses on other talents that better fit the profile of a pious and modest woman, namely her skills in arts and crafts.

The fact that Anna Maria van Schurman was an artist is mentioned in most of the catalogues. In the early catalogues, this is mentioned as a side note to show just how versatile her abilities were, whereas, in the later catalogues, her talents for painting, drawing, wax figures, and paper cutting take center stage along with her religious views. It is mentioned that “as a girl of barely six years of age she knew, without any lessons or examples, how to neatly cut any figure out of the paper that fell into her hands” (Heinzmann 1790, 59). But this interest was also abandoned for religious reasons later in van Schurman’s life, as she came to feel “disgust and contempt” for all imitations of God’s creation (59). Again, Heinzmann praises her for being able to do something but resisting the urge to do it for the good of her moral character.

Heinzmann’s narrative relies heavily on van Schurman’s autobiographical work *Eukleria*, which he cites at length. This is also the book in which she officially renounces her intellectual works and argues for a life dedicated solely to the contemplation of God (Van Schurman 1998, 78). In fact, he does not reference or quote any of her earlier works such as, for instance, the *Dissertatio*, in which she argues for the appropriateness of studies for Christian women. The van Schurman of the late eighteenth-century catalogues is primarily the ‘mature van Schurman.’ This stands in stark contrast to the woman we met in the earlier catalogues, who is built historically on a young van Schurman, in her years as a linguistic prodigy and champion of women’s education.

This image only gets clearer as we turn to C.A. Vulpius’ catalogue from 1812. Vulpius similarly describes van Schurman primarily as an artist of many talents, of which he mentions papercutting, drawing, embroidery, singing, instrumental music, painting, and copper engraving (Vulpius 1812, 91–92). He also bases his entry solely on her autobiography, and only the first couple of chapters, in which she describes her childhood and her aptitude for painting and sculpting. The third and fourth chapter that contain the theoretical core of the book where she discusses the disciplines of metaphysics, physics, moral philosophy, and theology, are not mentioned at all. The bulk of Vulpius’ entry is spent eulogizing van Schurman’s character for possessing “true English purity,

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39 This includes both the early catalogues (Eberti 1706, 319; Hueber 1717, 95) and the later ones (Heinzmann 1790, 59–60; Vulpius 1812, 3:91–93).
innocence, truth, simplicity, love, and humility” (97). In true romantic fashion, she is depicted as a deeply sensitive person, who follows her passions and insists on being “true to her feelings” throughout her life, no matter the cost (96). Although she is often referred to as a ‘learned maiden,’ her scholarly achievements are quickly summed up in just a few sentences, complementing her “splendid mind,” her knowledge of fourteen languages and her schooling in geography, astronomy, and philosophy (92). The rest is dedicated to depicting van Schurman’s “admirable heart” (103).

It is also in Vulpius’ entry that we find a particular emphasis on stereotypical female features that would most likely not have been mentioned in an entry about a male scholar. Firstly, on the topic of love, he mentions how she refused a marriage proposal from the Dutch poet Jacob Cats (1577-1660). But, as he writes “the poet’s heart remained hers (...) and, as his esteemed muse, she inspired him to write many beautiful poems” (93). Why Vulpius chooses to include this information, which was not mentioned in the earlier catalogues, is not explained. But one might venture the guess that he wants to prove to the reader that van Schurman was, indeed, an attractive and desired woman who could have married, had she wanted to. Later, when Vulpius returns to this subject, he laments the lack of romantic love in her life, saying that “regardless how much she knew, she never understood the language and beating of a love-struck heart” (94). Secondly, we find a change in the formal address used in the early catalogues where van Schurman is exclusively referred to as die Schurmannin or by her full name. This is changed to the rather personal use of her first name Maria. The practice of calling women by their first names has been commented on by Martha Helfer, who rightly describes it as “an unreflected rhetorical gesture that implicitly suggests these women are not to be taken as seriously as their surnamed male counterparts” (Helfer 2003, 229). The use of van Schurman’s first name infantilizes her, and this is not helped by the frequent use of other belittling forms of address such as calling her a “lovable maiden” (Heinzmann 1790, 58), and a “learned beauty” (Vulpius 1812, 94). Finally, Vulpius calls attention to van Schurman’s femininity by complimenting her for her talents for housekeeping. In telling her life story, he arrives at the death of van Schurman’s mother, after which she took over the care of two elderly aunts and the management of the household. According to Vulpius, she performed this task “with such skill, as had she always done it,” which, he exclaims, should be “a hint to her learned sisters, especially in our time!” (95–96). It is clear that the praise of van Schurman’s exceptional intellectual abilities is given on the condition that she still lives up to traditional domestic expectations for women, including being eligible for marriage (although not necessarily married) and a capable housekeeper.

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40 It was a widespread practice at that time to add the feminine ‘in’-ending to last names. It simply meant that the person mentioned was a woman and was seen as a completely respectful form of address.
Finally, her religious conviction receives a lot of attention in the later catalogues. Heinzmann and Vulpius applaud van Schurman’s courage in her decision to leave the Dutch Reformed Church, while not necessarily supporting or condoning her theological views. Her unpopular commitment to the Labadist community was seen as proof of her passionate spirit and her commitment to following her heart. Vulpius calls her critics “prosaically rude” in their attacks on her newfound system of belief; van Schurman, on the other hand, “always remained balanced, quiet, [and] calm” (Vulpius 1812, 96). They do not see her as a fallen woman, nor as someone who deviated from ‘the one true path.’ On the contrary, Heinzmann states that “until her death she made it her chief concern to be a Christian; and indeed, in the sense of the true, active follower of the first church” (Heinzmann 1790, 57). This is also the understanding of Labadism present in Vulpius’ entry, where he defines a Labadist as “a person, who had joined a small congregation, and who imagines Christianity and true Christians as they were in the time of John and Peter” (Vulpius 1812, 98). Both strive to present the Labadists in sympathetic terms and not in contrast to a ‘right’ kind of Christianity.

Notable omissions

In the case of the late catalogues, it is particularly telling which elements of van Schurman’s life are not mentioned. For the most part, her knowledge of philosophy and theology and other typically ‘male’ scholarly fields is left out or only mentioned in passing instead of being emphasized as an important part of her studies. Van Schurman is never described as a philosopher, although her knowledge of philosophy is praised in both Hueber and Heumann’s catalogue. Heinzmann does not mention philosophy at all, and Vulpius only briefly remarks that “[s]he was well-educated in philosophy, geography, and astronomy but, in spite of that, she was uncommonly modest and humble” (Vulpius 1812, 92). Vulpius seems to suggest that her schooling in philosophy was in danger of compromising her modesty and was therefore something to tolerate rather than celebrate. Likewise, the term ingenium is completely absent. This might just be a linguistic trend but analyzed together with the general shift in the narrative around female intellectuals, it might also be a symptom of something bigger. It may indicate a shift from applauding

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41 The fact that the late catalogues look so kindly on van Schurman’s religious conversion may be attributed to the historical and religious context. When Eberti, Hueber and Heumann wrote their catalogues, the Labadist community was still alive and active, though they were struggling due to the loss of their charismatic leaders Jean de Labadie, Pierre Yvon (1646-1707) and Anna Maria van Schurman. But by the 1730’s the congregation had completely dissolved. So, when Vulpius and Heinzmann published their works, the followers of Labadism were all gone, which meant that the community no longer posed a threat to the established church, and for this reason, it might have seemed less important to condemn them in the catalogues (cf. Saxby 1987, 327–30).

42 Christine Battersby shows how the term ‘ingenium’ was partially replaced by or conflated with ‘genius’ in the late eighteenth century, but this does not help van Schurman’s case, as she is also not described as a genius (Battersby 1994, 103–16).
learned women for their ability to reason to casting them as disciples of learned men, what Sarah Hutton calls the “coat-tail-syndrome” (Hutton 2019, 687), and focusing instead on their ‘womanly’ traits such as emotion and artistic skills over their scholarship.

Secondly, there is no reference to her time at the University of Utrecht, despite the fact that she was their first female student, making her admission a historical event. Although her studies at the university were unconventional compared to the education received by her fellow male students, she did receive some formal education, when she attended lectures there from 1636 onwards (Larsen 2016, 75–76). This leads us to the third omission from the late eighteenth-century catalogues, namely van Schurman’s appeals for women’s education. This early feminist idea is one of the primary reasons why scholars are interested in her life and work today. But also in her own time, people and especially women found the notion enticing, and she became famous as a champion of female learning. Her argument for women’s education is most thoroughly presented in the Dissertatio, which is mentioned by neither Heinzmann nor Vulpius. In fact, this is the case for all her writings (including letters and poems) except for Eukleria, in which she has completely abandoned the fight for women’s access to knowledge.

The last notable omission from the later catalogues is her many correspondences with learned men and women from all over Europe. Anne Maria van Schurman was an integrated part of what has become known as the republic of letters, as well as what Carol Pal calls “the Republic of Women” (Pal 2012). The term Republic of Women, inspired by Laura Cereta’s description of learned women as muliebris respublica, denotes “an intellectual commonwealth whose citizens were all female scholars” (Cereta 1997, 80; Pal 2012, 1). According to Pal, this network existed from 1630-1680 and included numerous famous writers and philosophers across Europe such as Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, Marie de Gournay (1565-1645), Bathsua Makin (1600-1675), and Marie du Moulin (1622-199). As a part of the much larger commonwealth now called the republic of letters, this network of women was very influential in shaping early modern intellectual culture through their exchanges and collective forming of ideas, and Anna Maria van Schurman was a respected and important part of it (Pal 2012, 52–78).

Some early catalogues mention van Schurman’s correspondences with other learned women, such as her letter exchange in Hebrew with Marie du Moulin (e.g., Heumann 1721, 847). But even those who do not make references to her female ‘colleagues’ instead remark on her intellectual interactions with learned men, as mentioned above. Heinzmann and Vulpius do neither. Their portrayals do not position her as a part of an intellectual network. If anything, they place her in opposition to the learned world. In Vulpius’ rendition, van Schurman is

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43 For more on van Schurman’s correspondence with Marie de Gournay, see Larsen 2008; On her influence on Bathsua Makin’s essay about women’s education, see Uckelman 2018; On her correspondence with the Danish philosopher Birgitte Thott, see Beek 2010, 190–92.
forced into scholarly life “entirely against her will” by her intellectual contemporaries Voetius, Saumaise, Rivet, Friedrich Spanheim (1600-1649), and Daniël Heinsius (1580-1655) (Vulpius 1812, 93). This is described as causing her great distress due to her modest and virtuous nature, leading eventually to her condemnation of the “learned republic,” which she finds “adorned with the vanity of learning” (99). It is true that she expresses these opinions in her autobiography. It is, however, only one side of her life story, given that she defended the pursuit of knowledge in her youth.

In conclusion, the major changes in the narrative of the learned woman that can be determined based on the lexical entries on Anna Maria van Schurman from the early to the late eighteenth century are the following: firstly, the focus on academic skill and exceptional learnedness is replaced by an emphasis on personal character and traditional feminine virtues such as purity, innocence, modesty, and piety. Secondly, the image of van Schurman as an internationally recognized scholar of many academic disciplines (languages, theology, philosophy, geography, and arts) is limited to centering on her skills in the arts. Thirdly, we see a shift in the description of her relationship with the learned world. In the early catalogues, van Schurman is seen as the crown jewel of learned society in the Netherlands – maybe even in Europe. They do not mention her renunciation of her academic works and her criticism of the sciences, which can be found in Eukleria. In the later catalogues, on the other hand, van Schurman is described as being in conflict with the learned world throughout her life; a tension that is only released when she decides to abandon this life in favor of a deeper religious commitment. Fourthly, she is stripped of her title as ‘philosopher’ and genius (or at least as someone possessing philosophical ingenium) by the end of the century. From the point of view of feminist history of philosophy, it is interesting to note that, based on this particular text genre, early eighteenth-century writers were far more inclined to ascribe the role of philosopher to a woman than their successors were. In addition, we see a shift in focus from the public to the private sphere. In the catalogues of Eberti, Hueber, and Heumann, van Schurman is painted as a public figure, who is sought out by the most learned men of Europe. This stands opposed to the later catalogues where the authors stress how she never wanted to be famous and how she fought to lead a quiet life. 44 Finally, a striking change can be detected in the portrayal of the Labadists, shifting from little or no mentioning of the religious community to an extensive and mostly positive representation, emphasizing van Schurman’s deep-felt emotional connection to the community and her authenticity in choosing a path in life that was unpopular but right for her.

44 In Vulpius’ own words: “Her merits and insights would have stayed hidden (...) had it been up to her to display them” (Vulpius 1812, 3:93).
6. Equality and complementarity: shifting ideals of female virtue

So far, I have shown how the portrayals of Anna Maria van Schurman in the catalogues of learned women dramatically changed up through the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. For this last part, I want to ‘zoom out’ and address how this change corresponds to a larger transformation of gender narratives that took place in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth century. This transformation has been conceptualized in several ways: as the ‘polarization of gender characteristics’, as the rise of a ‘cult of womanhood’, a shift from ‘similarity’ to ‘distinctiveness’, or the ‘triumph of complementarity’ (Hausen 1976; LeGates 1976; Bloch 1978; Schiebinger 1989). All of these theories highlight similar elements in their analyses such as women’s exclusion from the public sphere, the accentuation of sexual difference over equality, and a romantic view on femininity.

Marlene LeGates describes how “a dramatic change in the image of woman” occurred in the literature of the eighteenth century, leading to the idealization of character traits such as sensibility, innocence, virtue, obedience, religious piety, modesty, and amiability in women (LeGates 1976, 21, 28–29, 34–35, 37.). According to LeGates, earlier literature mostly satirized domestic life, paying more attention to “unruly” women than the “virtuous and obedient” ones (LeGates 1976, 23). But that changed by the eighteenth century when “the image of the disorderly woman [was] replaced by the image of the chaste maiden and obedient wife” (LeGates 1976, 23); an image later popularized in the figure of ‘the Angel in the House’.45 This account matches the analysis of Karin Hausen, who traced a polarization or typification of gender characteristics during the same period. She also found that certain traits were being attributed to the “nature or essence of man and woman”, separating them into two distinct groups with contrasting qualities (Hausen 1976, 363). Men came to be seen as active, strong, independent, rational, and contemplative, whereas women were perceived as passive, weak, dependent, emotional, and amenable.

In The Mind Has No Sex? by Londa Schiebinger, this polarization of characteristics is also described but framed, instead, as the rise of the theory of complementarity.46 According to Schiebinger, the most important discursive shift is that from a sixteenth and seventeenth-century focus on sexual equality, in which the bodies of men and women

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45 The term ‘Angel in the House’ originates from a narrative poem by Coventry Patmore, first published in 1854.
46 Schiebinger 1989, chap. 8. Although it rose in popularity in the late eighteenth century, the notion of complementarity can be traced back to biblical times and references to the Bible are often used in support of this position. Complementarianism as a theological view in Christianity, Judaism and Islam still exists today in some religious communities, and there have even been academic publications arguing its relevance in modern day society (e.g., Piper and Grudem 1991, 31–60).
are considered almost identical except for their reproductive organs, to an emphasis on physiological difference, which is then translated into social difference. She defines the late eighteenth-century idea of complementarity as “a theory which taught that man and woman are not physical and moral equals but complementary opposites”, and states that, based on this theory, “women were not to be viewed [as] merely inferior to men but as fundamentally different from, and thus incomparable to, men” (Schiebinger 1989, 217). Schiebinger, who is a historian of science, explains what this new narrative meant for female scientists and scholars. As women were seen as belonging in the domestic sphere, their learning should be aimed at developing specifically feminine talents and improving “a woman’s abilities in the home” (226). This meant that some fields of study were viewed as off limits, fearing that “equal education would masculinize women” (230). Some scientific fields such as the study of “history, the gospels, and the Old Testament,” were seen as appropriate for women, whereas “Latin, metaphysics, geometry, [and astronomy]” were not (239). An artistic education in “painting, music, and poetry” was also considered “particularly suitable for women” (241). However, regardless which scientific discipline female scholars practiced, it was the common notion that “their ambitions (...) should not transcend those of the amateur” (242). In other words, women should not be professional scholars but private dilettantes. This point also relates to the question of intellectual ability. Owing partly to the philosophy of Rousseau, who very much embodies the complementarian view, Schiebinger states that women were thought to “lack the genius to engage in the search for abstract and speculative truths” (236). Women could be erudite, skilled, and well-read but not geniuses. Learning was seen as a fundamentally different practice for women than for men – different in content, purpose, and intensity.

The difference in kind rather than degree has also been noted by Ruth Bloch, who identifies this feature as one of the main changes in the gender narrative from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century. According to her, the sixteenth and seventeenth century was characterized by “a vertical, hierarchical definition [of sexual difference] that stressed qualitative similarities [over] traditional horizontal and qualitative sex distinctions, attributing to each sex a separate sphere of activity” (Bloch 1978, 238). Essentially, men and women were seen as capable of doing the same things, but women were generally seen as capable to a lesser degree than men were, though not excluded by definition. Bloch identifies, in this period, a “tendency to blur many distinctions between the sexes,” arguing that “women lost some distinctiveness (...) but gained greater access to traditionally masculine sources of respect” (238). She also specifically mentions that

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47 This is most clearly expressed in Book V of *Emile*, in which he writes about “Sophie, or the woman” (Rousseau 1979, 358 ff.). See also: Lloyd 1995, 75; Lange 2002, 4–8. Lloyd performs a critical analysis of Rousseau's concept of complementarity in the article “Rousseau on reason, nature and women” from 1983 (316-324).
literature, defending women in the debate over female nature (such as the early catalogues), “tended to emphasize the same qualities in women that were most admired in men” (245). This also changed in the eighteenth and nineteenth century; by this time, “[m]ale and female imagery and activities became more distinct and increasingly associated with contrasting ‘rational’ and ‘affective’ styles” (245). This description fits very well together with Schiebinger’s account of the rise of complementarity. Both stress how seventeenth-century gender ideals were centered on similarities or equality, making it theoretically possible for women to compete with men, although social hierarchies still made this difficult in practice. Both scholars also agree that by the end of the eighteenth century, the idea of womanhood had changed, and women were seen instead as complementing men by contributing with specifically female qualities and virtues.

While the theories paint a quite coherent picture of the changes that took place during this period, the explanations they offer as to why this change occurred vary, depending on the methodological framework used by the scholars as well as their disciplinary backgrounds. Bloch attributes the change in gender roles to economic and cultural factors such as the emergence of romantic, evangelical Protestantism and industrialism (Bloch 1978, 246). With production being commercialized and concentrated in factories and workshops, “domestic work [was transformed] into an activity with no commercial value”, which, according to Bloch, led to the devaluation of the ‘woman’s sphere’ (246). Men became the “active breadwinners” of the family, and women’s role was altered into that of the “passive nurturer” (247). On the other hand, women gained influence in “the sacred, moral, and emotional spheres of life” (246).

Schiebinger offers another explanation, which focuses on the aftermath of the Enlightenment. She argues that liberal, egalitarian enlightenment philosophy created a problem concerning women’s place in society, namely the issue of “how the continued subordination of women [was] to be reconciled with the axiom that all men are by nature equal” (Schiebinger 1989, 214–15). Or in Mary Astell’s famous words: “If all men are born Free, how is it that all Women are born Slaves?” (Astell 1996, 18). Enlightenment thinkers had advanced the notion of universal equality seemingly without realizing the dramatic effects such an idea would have on the social structure of society. When women’s rights advocates, then, used the same idea of equality to argue for women’s involvement in public affairs, the notion of complementarity emerged as a response, and the argument was formed that women were by nature inferior to men due to their weaker physical constitution and the burden of motherhood.

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48 For more on the separation of production and reproductive work and its influence on gender roles, see Gray 2000.
Schiebinger is not the only one to see this change as the backlash of enlightenment thought; LeGates also perceives the “new ideology of the nuclear family” and its emphasis on feminine virtues as a response to a fear of women’s uncontrolled sexuality, supposedly an effect of the “new morality” of the Enlightenment (LeGates 1976, 35–36). Several other scholars have argued that the unrest preceding and following the French Revolution and the political instability, which took hold of Europe during the revolutionary years, likewise contributed to the suppression of women’s rights (Schiebinger 1989, 225; Fraisse 1994, 1–26; O’Neill 1997, 37).

Although the explanatory models vary, they do not contradict one another, and together they help to tell a nuanced story of the shift in gender narratives at this point in history. This story, I have found, is strongly supported by the catalogue entries on Anna Maria van Schurman, which provide concrete historical evidence of the discursive change. This can be seen in the way the early catalogues present van Schurman as being in conversation with contemporary learned men, even competing with them, indicating that she is seen, at least to some extent, to be their equal. She is also praised for her erudition in fields that would later be considered masculine, as well as being portrayed as an active scholar with several publications, rather than simply a passive recipient of knowledge. Lastly, she is credited with possessing an *ingenium* or genius; a term that is completely absent from the later catalogues. In contrast, these late eighteenth-century catalogues emphasize so-called ‘feminine virtues.’ They focus on her domestic life, casting her as an attentive housekeeper and potential wife. She is primarily praised for her talents in what came to be seen as ‘feminine fields’ such as the study of Scripture, arts, and poetry. And, finally, the story of how she was forced into academia against her will and only reluctantly participated in learned debates supports the complementarian view on women as belonging to the private sphere, fit to be intellectual amateurs rather than professional scholars. It is striking to see just how accurately this societal and cultural change, which has been identified and analyzed by numerous scholars, can be traced in the narratives built around the once legendary figure of Anna Maria van Schurman.

7. Lasting effects of the romantic gender narrative

In this text, I have carried out a close examination of the entries on Anna Maria van Schurman in the *catalogues of learned women* and traced the redefinition of the female intellectual from the beginning to the end of the eighteenth century. I have identified distinct differences in the expectations and values related to female intellectuality, which support the notion that the overarching discourse on womanhood underwent a significant and radical transformation during this period. This change, which has been conceptualized in many ways, consists in a shift in focus from an enlightenment notion
of gender equality to a romantic idea of sexual difference, stressing specific masculine and feminine traits as well as their complementarity.

This romantic notion of womanhood provides the basis of many sexist ideas that are still dominant today, and this backlash has had serious long-term consequences for women’s access to academia and to philosophy in specific (Riley et al. 2006; Baron, Dougherty, and Miller 2015; Biggs, Hawley, and Biernat 2017). It was during this period that learned women stopped being considered geniuses and philosophers, paving the way for the male-dominated canon of philosophers we have today. The very role models or ‘exemplars,’ which the early cataloguists found so important for motivating young women to become scholars, changed character and became ‘feminized’ versions of themselves. The catalogues offer an important insight into this gradual devaluation of women’s learning. In these works, van Schurman, once known as the most learned woman in Europe, was reshaped into a sensitive artist and modest pietist, while her philosophical engagement slipped out of sight. Most likely, this reconceptualization of the female intellectual has played a vital role in the historical development that has resulted in the current underrepresentation of women in many academic fields.

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Article II
Identity Crisis: Challenging the standard narrative of Anna Maria van Schurman’s Intellectual Legacy

Abstract

In her autobiography, *Eukleria, or Choosing the Better Part* (1673), the celebrated Dutch polymath Anna Maria van Schurman (1607-1678) denounced all her earlier intellectual writings, stating that they exuded “a vain and worldly spirit” (Van Schurman 1998, 78). This retraction marked her official departure from her learned circles in Utrecht and demonstrated her commitment to the Labadist community. In contemporary research, however, it has been suggested that this break “should not be taken at face value” (Larsen 2016, 6), and, in fact, she never wanted to give up her intellectual studies.

In this article, I want to question the prevalent narrative about the later van Schurman’s relation to learning. My aim is to show the discrepancy between the ‘standard narrative’ and her own account of her life, in which she accentuates the radicalism of her transformation, her devotion to the Labadist cause, and her disdain for her past life as a famous intellectual. I will proceed in three steps: First, I will present van Schurman’s own narrative, staying as close to the original text as possible. Then, I oppose this to the ‘standard narrative’ in the research literature, centering on anti-intellectual elements in her thinking and their misrepresentation in the literature. I argue that, if we respect her narrative, the later van Schurman should rather be characterized as an anti-intellectual than an advocate of learning. Finally, I will add some feminist reflections on why van Schurman may have wished to leave the learned world when she did.

Keywords: Anna Maria van Schurman, *Eukleria*, anti-intellectualism, Jean de Labadie, reception, narratives.

1. Introduction

Narratives matter. The way we tell the stories of early modern women impact not only their legacies but also the collective history of women today. It is important that historians of philosophy display the richness of this history – even when this means losing an intellectual heroine. In the research literature on Anne Maria van Schurman (1607-1678), the prevailing view is that she remained a patron of learning all her life and that “there were not two Anna Marias – one young lover of scholarship and one pious old woman. Scholarship and faith were not opposites in her view” (Scheenstra 1996, 119). Despite her stated retraction of all her intellectual works, which can be found in the opening chapter of van Schurman’s autobiography *Eukleria* (1673), most researchers choose to highlight the continuity of her thinking and downplay the radical break that this retraction appears to represent, as well as the anti-intellectualist ideas present in the
book. Such a reading helps to preserve the image of Anna Maria van Schurman not only as a learned woman, who could herself serve as an example for other studious, young women all over Europe, but as a persistent advocate of women’s studies and education in general.

In this article, I want to question this established narrative, which has dominated the research on van Schurman since the late 70s, when she was ‘rediscovered’ by feminist intellectual historians. My aim is to show the discrepancy between the ‘standard narrative’ and van Schurman’s own account of her life, in which she accentuates the radicalism of her transformation, her spiritual devotion to God and the Labadist cause, as well as her disdain for her past life as a famous intellectual. In doing so, I hope to make clear van Schurman’s alignment with a long tradition of anti-intellectualism in Europe, which includes the works of prominent thinkers such as Nicholaus Cusanus (1401–1464) and Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa (1486-1535); an alignment that has so far been obscured by the current narrative, which emphasizes her erudition rather than her pietism. Highlighting the anti-intellectual and even mystic elements of van Schurman’s later thinking will also allow me to articulate some underlying issues concerning women’s relationship with learning and the intellectual world in the seventeenth century. Particularly, the issue of the many female scholars, who, like her, chose to abandon their intellectual careers in their old age. Van Schurman’s Eukleria provides a rare glimpse into the mindset of one of these women, offering not only personal reflections but also philosophical arguments for her decision to reject worldly knowledge and analytical reasoning in favor of unmediated devotion.

My argument will proceed in the following way: First, I will present some quotes from van Schurman’s text, in which she presents her own story of her conversion. Then, I will give some examples of the ‘standard narrative’ of van Schurman’s authorship and her relation to the learned world, specifically the ways in which her retraction of her scholarly writings and condemnation of her previous status as a famed learned woman has been interpreted by contemporary scholars. After this, I will go on to examine the reasons for questioning this narrative, based on the testimony she gives in Eukleria, focusing specifically on the largely unstudied third chapter “On the human sciences: and on the sincere judgement which I nowadays have and hold of the same.” In this analysis,

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49 Larsen 2018, 305; Baar 1996, 96, 101; Pal 2012, 208; Rang 1996b, 38–39; Duran 2014, 8; Becker-Cantarino 1987b, 571; Beek 2010, 235, 239. There are a few exceptions to this trend such as Lee 2007, 191; and Irwin 1977, 58, both of whom accentuate the radicalism of her break with the learned world.

50 For more on the role of exemplars or ‘role models’ in the literary genre catalogues of learned women, see Rang 1992, 515; Larsen 2008, 106.

51 At the time of writing, only the first two chapters of Eukleria have been translated into English, which was skillfully done by Joyce Irwin in the book Whether a Christian Woman Should be Educated (1998). All
I will draw out the strong anti-intellectual sentiments present in the chapter and discuss the reasons that scholars have given for disregarding these ideas. I will argue that we have an obligation to respect van Schurman’s own narrative, which is openly critical of the notion of attaining knowledge by means of human reason, instead of reading between the lines and questioning the sincerity of her argument based on matters of style. Finally, I will employ a feminist perspective and explore some of the reasons why van Schurman might have chosen to leave the learned world, taking her position as a mature, unmarried woman into account.

2. In her own words: the story of van Schurman’s conversion

In 1669, after years of dissatisfaction with the Dutch Reformed Church, Anna Maria van Schurman decides to take a new direction in life, break away from the church, and join the religious following of the defrocked priest Jean de Labadie (1610-1674). This decision came as a great disappointment to her previous intellectual circle, especially her former mentor, Gisbertus Voetius (1589-1676), and her close friend Constantijn Huygens (1596-1687) (Saxby 1987, 177). After years of public slander and persecution, in which she and the Labadist community relocated first to Herford, then Altona, and then finally Wieuwerd in Friesland, van Schurman wrote and published her autobiography Eukleria. With this book, she hoped to “once and for all (...) explain briefly and candidly to all who love truth and justice the reasons for the remarkable change of my station in life” (Van Schurman 1998, 73). She, then, proceeds to emphasize how dramatic and profound this “remarkable change” had been, describing both the vanity of her former life and the bliss she had found with the Labadist community. The radicalism of her conversion is underlined when she describes how she renounced her fame, gave away or sold most of her belongings, and uprooted her entire life to “follow in the footsteps of Christ” (Van Schurman 1998, 76–77). This all leads up to the narrative ‘point of no return’ where she announces her irrevocable departure from the learned world with the following declaration:

    In the full light of day, therefore, I retract (after the example of Augustine, the most candid of the church fathers) all those writings of mine which exude such a shameful slackness in my soul, or, if you will, a vain and worldly spirit. I no longer recognize them as mine. Also, I hereby reject and remove far from myself as alien to my condition and profession all the writings of others, especially the panegyric poems, which are marked with that sign of vainglory and godlessness (Van Schurman 1998, 78)

This marks the end of her scholarly carrier and completes her journey to find a home amongst like-minded, spiritual people. She goes on to urge others to follow her
example and abandon the pursuit of worldly knowledge. Along with defending the religious beliefs of the Labadists, she states it as an explicit aim of her book to point out “what necessarily happens to all others who are seized with a desire for learning because of the general darkness of the human mind and deviation from the true and good” (Van Schurman 1998, 79). I will come back to this and other anti-intellectual statements later in the article, but for now, this will suffice to demonstrate, firstly, how the later van Schurman frames her own story, and, secondly, how clearly and confidently she presents this framework.

This was also the narrative that Joyce Irwin took up in 1977, when she reintroduced the then “virtually unknown” van Schurman to an English-speaking academic audience with the article “Anna Maria Van Schurman: From Feminism to Pietism.” In Irwin’s portrayal, van Schurman’s “renunciation of intellectual pursuits” is seen as an “overwhelming discontinuity” which clearly “distinguishes the later from the earlier period.” Respecting van Schurman’s own narrative, Irwin describes how “she felt she had misspent her energies on studies which were of little benefit to a spiritual life” (Irwin 1977, 58–59). Irwin concludes, based on van Schurman’s stated renunciation and the reasons and explanations that follow, that the transformation from feminism to pietism is complete (‘feminism’ here referring to van Schurman’s text Dissertatio [1641], in which she defends women’s right to study). Nevertheless, in the years following Irwin’s rediscovery, the story about van Schurman began to change, and this reading, straightforward as it may seem, lost support in the research literature.

3. The ‘standard narrative’

In this section, I will analyze what, according to my investigation, has become the dominant narrative about the last decade of van Schurman’s life. The picture that I will present is based on a survey of the existing research literature on Anna Maria van Schurman. The survey is centered on the following questions: How have researchers

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52 Irwin 1977, 48. I have not been able to find any earlier articles or books in English on Anna Maria van Schurman, except for a 1909 biography written by Una Birch titled Anna Maria van Schurman: Artist, Scholar, Saint, which I have chosen to leave out, as I am focusing here on contemporary research literature. Other examples of earlier works in Dutch and French include: Douma 1924; Voisine 1972.
interpreted van Schurman’s retraction of her intellectual works? Is her oeuvre presented as a coherent body of work, or is *Eukleria* seen as representing a decisive shift? And how do her modern day readers address anti-intellectual elements (such as the hostility towards intellectuals, academic learning, and intellectualism) in her mature work? In the following, I will present my findings. I will focus on the writings of the three prominent van Schurman scholars, Anne R. Larsen, Mirjam de Baar, and Brita Rang, as I have found that they exemplify quite well the prevalent attitude toward these questions.

In 2016, Anne Larsen wrote that “[s]cholars today agree that Van Schurman’s stated rejection of her learning in her autobiographical work *Eukleria* (1673) should not be taken at face value.”55 She argues that because van Schurman acted as “the theologian and intellectual guide of the Labadist community” and continued to write in Latin, she never really gave up on learning, implying that her retraction was purely a rhetorical device (Larsen 2016, 6). Another influential van Schurman scholar, Mirjam de Baar reaches the same conclusion, writing that “Van Schurman presented herself in the *Eukleria* as a very learned woman, indeed as a theologian” (Baar 1996, 100). According to de Baar, van Schurman demonstrated with her work “that she had not altogether given up her practice of scholarship – perhaps, indeed, that she had not given it up at all.”56 Again, van Schurman’s theological arguments and learned style are seen as reasons to circumvent van Schurman’s own wish to abandon the learned world. The same is true of Brita Rang, who makes the following argument for dismissing the renunciation: “The later Labadist Van Schurman still made use of her scholarly knowledge. Latin remained the language in which she could best express her religious and pietist feelings, and conduct the written defense of Labadist ideas” (Rang 1996a, 40). In conclusion, “visitors to the Labadist community (...) were still able to meet the scholar she essentially still was.”57

These are three examples of scholars who contend that van Schurman’s decision to retract her learned works was not to be taken all to seriously, an attitude that is echoed in many other articles (See also Roothaan 1996, 116; Beek 2010, 235). Explaining away her ‘right choice’, most researchers insist on casting van Schurman as a perpetual scholar, either by ignoring the last 18 years of her life and focusing on the *Dissertatio* (Van Eck

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55 Larsen 2016, 6. Most of Larsen’s writings on Anna Maria van Schurman focus on her early arguments for women’s education (Larsen 2005; 2008; 2022). She did however write one article on van Schurman’s relationship with Jean de Labadie, where she argues that her decision to join de Labadie was “consistent with her earlier choices” (Larsen 2018, 305).

56 Baar 1996, 100. De Baar’s work as editor of *Choosing the Better Part* (1996), the only anthology devoted primarily to van Schurman’s later work, is of great scholarly value, and her portrayal of van Schurman is nuanced and well-researched. Nevertheless, de Baar also follows the trend of questioning the sincerity of van Schurman’s own narrative (89, 99-101).

57 Rang 1996a, 40. Rang expresses the same doubt about the authenticity of van Schurman’s renunciation in another article from the same year (Rang 1996b, 24, 38-41).
1996; Bulckaert 2010; Uckelman 2018), or by framing her religious conversion in academic terms that emphasize the philosophical and theological content of her Labadist faith (Larsen 2016; Roothaan 1996). I believe that this ‘academia-washing’ is well-intended and stems from a wish to hold on to an intellectual heroine, who may work as historical proof of women’s commitment to learning. However, I do not think that this interpretation is supported by van Schurman’s own writings, and I would argue that pushing this framework continues an unfortunate tradition of disregarding and disrespecting women’s own narratives. To support this claim, I will now investigate the anti-intellectual sentiments that dominate van Schurman’s text, as well as respond to arguments, maintaining that van Schurman’s position “cannot be seen as a pious anti-intellectualism” (Roothaan 1996, 116).

4. Anti-intellectualism in *Eukleria*

Before she retracts her learned writings, van Schurman writes that she would like to give her “reasons, along with supporting arguments” for leaving her former learned circles. Although she appears to be initiating a list of reasons, she only ever gives one before she is lost in digression, and that is religion, which she believes cannot be understood with human reason. She writes: “Indeed, reason and human, that is to say, carnal, wisdom neither savors of the things of the kingdom of God nor understands them. (…). Rather we must listen only to the voice of God and Christ.”

*Eukleria* is chock-full of statements like this, rejecting worldly knowledge and philosophical concepts for the sake of the divine. If these statements are read by the letter, the impression that one is left with of her attitude towards learning and the learned is one characterized by hostility and suspicion. These are essential traits of anti-intellectualism, which is commonly defined as a mistrust of the intellect, intellectuals, and intellectualism (intellectualism referring broadly to the belief that reason and conceptualization has primacy over will, emotion or other means of understanding and perception). In this section, I will show that van Schurman expresses mistrust on all three levels, starting with the level of reason.

Van Schurman believes that intellect or reason (*ratio*) cannot lead us to truth about God or help us to understand the true wonder of his creation; in fact, it is more likely to be a hindrance. In her critical discussion of the science of metaphysics, she writes that oftentimes the metaphysicians’ “ideas of universal concepts” actively “block the path to godly truth” and that, ultimately, it would be “better for one, if he had remained a blank

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58 Van Schurman 1998, 77. Another clear example of her disapproval of learning can be found in a paragraph devoted to the study of languages: “I am indeed now of the persuasion that the slightest experience of the love of God gives us a truer and deeper understanding of the sacred page than does the most complete knowledge of the sacred language itself. And I believe that the same judgment should be made concerning all sciences” (92).

slate (*rasa tabula*)” (Van Schurman 1673, 38). In her view, it seems that human reason clouds the otherwise bright light that shines directly from God’s grace. In addition, the fundamental nature of God is one that defies reason, as it is riddled with contradiction and paradox. This is perhaps most clearly exemplified in the figure of Christ, who is both God and human – two categories that are usually thought of as mutually exclusive. Van Schurman points out that “this unity (between God and humanity, which is the highest aim of Christianity) originally happened in an *ineffable* way” (Van Schurman 1673, 49, my emphasis). The unity of man and God in the birth of Christ made him at the same time creator and creation. This paradox is incomprehensible to humans and any attempt to describe God’s excellence will be in vain. She writes: “If I wanted to venture to depict all of these things (...), then I would thereby show that I have no concept of their inconceivable sublimeness” (Van Schurman 1673, 50). This is the mistake that philosophers and theologians make when they attempt to debate metaphysical and moral questions by means of philosophical reasoning. As an example, she condemns those who practice so-called ‘didactic-elenctic theology’ (a highly systematic form of scholastic theological reasoning), whom, she believes, “wound themselves and others while mixing their own *corrupt* reason with divine matters and raise it up as administrant, interpreter, and judge of Holy Scripture” (Van Schurman 1998, 93, my emphasis). This is an indirect attack on her former mentor Voetius and his followers, who were concerned with the practice of composing philosophical arguments in defense of the Reformed churches with the purpose of persuading readers of other faiths.60 Van Schurman does not believe in this theoretical approach. In her view, scholars of didactic theology “turn the weapons of erudition against the simplicity of faith” (Van Schurman 1998, 94). She, on the other hand, believes that reason and human knowledge is limited, flawed and, ultimately, a source of corruption. By putting their trust in reason, these scholastics...

...erect a theater pleasing to the devil, since he not seldom presides at their disputations and forges or supplies arms or arguments for his champions of errors to fight truth; he provides them material to nourish ambition, envy, anger, and other such monsters of the human heart or else to establish the reign of and love for reason and human argumentation (Van Schurman 1998, 94).

In this quote, van Schurman subverts the connection between reason and truth, suggesting that human argumentation is a tool of the devil. Instead of being a pathway to truth, reasoning becomes a clever method to mask errors, distracting people from a more fundamental (spiritual) truth that comes “from actual experience” (Van Schurman 1998, 77).

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60 On Voetius and didactic-elenctic theology, see Beach 2020; and Beck 2021.
This leads me to the second level of mistrust, namely the mistrust of intellectuals. In the previous quotation, they are described as perverted people, driven by the lowest of human emotions, namely ambition, envy, and anger. Their “love for reason” is a kind of idolatry urged on by the devil himself. All these vices, however, come down to one, namely pride or vanity. The vanity of learned men is a reoccurring theme in Eukleria (Van Schurman 1998, 77-79, 83, 85-87; 1673, 38, 41, 46). In heated passage, she refers to her previous scholarly associates as “lying eulogist (...), as they sing each other’s praises, transform themselves into mere animals, living for glory” (Van Schurman 1998, 78). In other words, she was convinced that the learned men of her intellectual circle were not only incapable of answering life’s fundamental questions, in fact, their true motivation was rather to gain status and fame.

In addition to her general criticism of intellectuals, van Schurman also reflects on her own experience as an internationally renowned scholar. She describes how she, throughout her life, struggled with her reputation as a public intellectual and the fame that came with it, before finally deciding to escape this role and “renounce[e] this beautiful ampule of fame” (77). She describes how she was brought onto the international scene by the famous theologian, and her mentor, André Rivet, who went against her “innate modesty and a sincere desire to keep out of the public eye”, lamenting that she realized all too late “how much this [fame] ran counter to Christian humility and renunciation of all created things” (88). Based on this experience, she had come to believe that fame would inevitably lead to pride and arrogance, making any participation in the academic public debate morally damaging and the men of letters inherently untrustworthy.61

The third level of mistrust concerns intellectualism as a philosophical idea. This term has at least two meanings: 62 (1) In an epistemological context, intellectualism is seen as synonymous with rationalism, that is, the idea that reason is the source of knowledge about the world (as opposed to empiricism). (2) In a theological context, intellectualism refers to the belief that reason, rather than faith or will, is the proper basis for knowledge of God (opposing intellectualism to e.g., fideism or voluntarism). I would argue that van Schurman is skeptical of an intellectualist approach to knowledge in both contexts. I have already mentioned her critical views on reason, and how she doubted the possibility that one could reach any fundamental truths by way of this faculty. To her, “only those possess true knowledge of humankind, who have examined and discovered his cause; and who

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61 For more on the role of the public and private in the Republic of Letters, and women’s access to early modern intellectual debates in the public sphere, see Goodman 1996; Dalton 2003.
62 Many philosophical dictionaries do not have an independent entry on ‘intellectualism’, but from the ones that do, it becomes clear that there is not a complete agreement about its definition. I have chosen to highlight the two uses that were most widespread (Mittelstrass 1984, 2:255; Ritter et al. 1976, 4:441; “Intellectualism | Encyclopedia.com” n.d.).
clearly understand his material, namely the body and his form, namely the soul and the
spirit, (...) and finally the true purpose, for which he is made by his creator” (Van
Schurman 1673, 43). This kind of knowledge is only accessible to true Christians, who,
“always and in all things, see and feel the presence of God” (Van Schurman 1673, 43). It
is through this experience of God’s presence that one arrives at knowledge of “the essence
of natural creatures” (43). Not reason but experience, and specifically “experience of the
love of God” is, to van Schurman, the source of any knowledge worth its name (Van
Schurman 1998, 92).

Van Schurman expresses her views concerning the second (theological) meaning of
intellectualism quite clearly. As many other pietists, she believed that faith and lived
experience had preference over reason when it came to understanding God. She writes:

For it is not a divine faith that depends on human reason (...). Whatever the so-called angelic
doctor may assert concerning the defense of religion by reason unless it is established by the
grace of God, I know for certain the one argument that is most effective against the errors of
atheists or contentious men is a blameless life striking by the brightness of Christian virtues
(Van Schurman 1998, 94).

Referring to Thomas Aquinas as “the so-called angelic doctor”, van Schurman rejects the
idea that faith should rely on reason as well as the notion that reason should be more
useful in persuading non-believers than the act of living a virtuous Christian life. In her
view, deeds, experiences, and emotions are more convincing than theoretical arguments
and scholastic disputations.

Based on this textual evidence, I would argue that her declared views put her in
opposition to any school of thought that could be characterized as intellectualist. In other
words, if one accepts the aforementioned definition of anti-intellectualism, it seems that
van Schurman fits neatly into this category.

5. Challenging the arguments for the standard narrative

So, what are the reasons that scholars have offered for not reading her as such? I have
already mentioned a few: (1) She is considered to be the ‘house theologian’ (and by
extension, ‘house scholar’) of the Labadist community. (2) The literary style of Eukleria is
described as being very learned, as it is characterized by “scholastic disputation techniques
and hundreds of authoritative citations” (Baar 1996, 99). 63 (3) Some scholars also point
to van Schurman’s use of reasoning rather than divine revelation to legitimize her
position. And lastly, (4) her choice of writing in Latin is seen as proof that she had not
abandoned her role as a scholar. In the following, I will present and refute these four

63 Carol Pal presents a similar argument (Pal 2012, 245).
arguments, which can be found in texts by Larsen (1), de Baar (2-3), and Rang (4), respectively.

But before examining these reasons, it is important to make a distinction between, on the one hand, being an intellectual, meaning to have the knowledge and skills of someone who has studied the arts and sciences, and, on the other hand, subscribing to an intellectualist viewpoint. The following argument does not aim to question whether van Schurman did, in fact, possess the capabilities and frame of reference of an intellectual. Such an argument would, indeed, be very short-lived considering her personal history (one does not forget a lifetime of studying simply because one abandons the search for knowledge). What I do mean to question is whether the later van Schurman still endorsed learning and the intellectual community. I find that these two points have often been conflated, and that her outstanding erudition has been taken as proof of her enduring support of learning. This tendency will become apparent in the following discussion.

Starting with Larsen’s argument that van Schurman acted as the theologian and theoretical anchor of the Labadist community (1). There is no doubt that her role in the sectarian movement was crucial, and that her personal beliefs helped to shape the theological foundation of the community. In that sense, one may justifiably call her ‘the theologian of Labadism’. But this should not be understood as an endorsement of the academic discipline of theology. In the fourth chapter of *Eukleria*, which is devoted to Christian theology, she explicitly separates her approach to religion from the method of academic, scholastic theology. While complaining that people are not more emotionally moved by Scripture, she makes the following comparison: “I am reminded of the academic exercise (which I must warn against as a striking example of how far some have distanced themselves from the great Teacher), in which they, by means of logical and rhetorical aids, represent the art of prayer in tables (†abula)” (Van Schurman 1673, 55). Instead of this systematic approach, van Schurman emphasizes the simplicity of faith, the redundancy of theory and the primacy of the humble, unschooled experience (Van Schurman 1673, 54). In other words, it is true that van Schurman discusses theological questions, but she is opposed to the intellectualization of these questions and the practice of theology as an academic discipline.

Moving on to de Baar’s stylistic argument (2), this point is only partly right. It is true that she draws heavily on her classical education in quotes and references. Most of the citations, however, are Biblical or from Christian authorities (such as Tertullian and Saint Paul), and when referring to philosophical texts, she does so with a certain distance. For instance, she writes that “the paradoxes of Seneca used to please me”, or “at the time I believed that I must learn everything (...) ‘in order to flee ignorance,’ in accordance with
the words (...) from the Philosopher”, referring to her past fascination with Aristotle (Van Schurman 1998, 85, 90, my emphases). At other times, she openly criticizes the philosophers she quotes, as in the case of Thomas Aquinas, the Peripatetics, the Stoics, and the Platonists. And so, I would argue that her use of “authoritative citations” does not undermine but rather support an anti-intellectualist reading, as she mentions them in order to criticize or dissociate herself from such writings.

The issue becomes more complex, however, when turning to de Baar’s second argument, concerning van Schurman’s preference of reasoning over revelation (3). Again, de Baar takes the style of the argument as her starting point, drawing attention to the “matter-of-course way in which Van Schurman set out her theological insights and ideas” (Baar 1996, 100). Contrary to other devotional writings by female authors in the seventeenth century, there is “no invocation of divine revelations to lend legitimacy to what is said” (Baar 1996, 100). De Baar takes the fact that van Schurman decided not to rely on revelation and instead argues her position using logic and reasoning, as evidence that she still believed in the power of reason. And it is true that that many other anti-intellectual writers, including medieval mystics and radical pietists from the early modern period, who defended ideas similar to van Schurman’s, relied on revelation to give legitimacy to their views (Engelhardt 2021, 76). What I do want to stress, however, is that not everyone did so. In fact, some of the most influential anti-intellectual writers chose the same approach as van Schurman. Take, for instance, Nicolaus Cusanus and Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa. They are two of the most prominent advocates of anti-intellectual views in the 15th century and both authors used traditional philosophical concepts and reasoning to express these views.

Starting with Nicholaus Cusanus, who is best perhaps known for his book On Learned Ignorance (1440) in which he explores the limitations and imperfections of human knowledge. This book is highly philosophical in nature. Nonetheless, the point of learned ignorance is to accept the fact that God is unknowable due to the paradoxes of his existence. In Jasper Hopkins’ words: “[T]he program of learned ignorance attempts to show the limitations of human knowledge by exhibiting the cognitive limits for various domains” (Hopkins 1986, 43). Like van Schurman, Cusanus’ anti-intellectualism came from a dissatisfaction with scholastic theology, which he considered to be akin to a heretical sect (Le Goff 1993, 135). He believed that the method of learned ignorance would “triumph over all the philosopher’s means of rationalizing” (cited and translated

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64 Van Schurman criticizes Thomas Aquinas for using reason and philosophical arguments to defend Christianity, instead of relying on lived examples of Christian virtue. The Peripatetics, the Stoics, and the Platonists are all criticized for their moral philosophies, which, in her view, are respectively based on self-love rather than selflessness, too concerned with avoiding suffering and pain, and too preoccupied with the attaining worldly virtues and goods (Van Schurman 1998, 94; 1673, 45).
in Le Goff 1993, 136). Still, he made use of dialectical reasoning and scholastic language in his writings, despite the anti-intellectual implications of his ideas.\textsuperscript{65}

The same is true of Agrippa von Nettesheim, the author of \textit{Declamation Attacking the Uncertainty and Vanity of the Sciences and the Arts} (1526); a book, in which he declares his categorical condemnation of the arts and sciences with the following words: “I, persuaded by reason of another nature, do verily believe, that there is nothing more pernicious, nothing more destructive to the well-being of Men, or to the Salvation of our Soul, than the Arts and Sciences themselves” (Agrippa 1694, 2). The book consists of a systematic review of every conceivable discipline related to the arts and sciences, including metaphysics, natural and moral philosophy, and scholastic theology, thereby covering all the disciplines van Schurman criticizes in the third and fourth chapter of \textit{Eukleria}. What is more, Agrippa also reaches many of the same conclusions as van Schurman: He argues that metaphysics overcomplicates that which faith conveys with ease, and that moral philosophy leads to a form of moral relativism, in which the definition of virtue and vice is subject to the whims of the philosophers (Agrippa 1694, 145–46). Taking a strong anti-intellectualist stance on ethics, he even goes so far as to argue that people would be happier if they “should not only not commit sin, but also not know it” (Agrippa 1694, 148–49). Throughout the book, Agrippa uses logical, argumentative language, giving numerous reasons for condemning the arts and sciences. This, however, has not stopped researchers from calling him anti-intellectualist.\textsuperscript{66} That being the case, I think it is tenable to argue that van Schurman’s choice of presenting her ideas by way of reasoning rather than revelation does not necessarily make the content of her argument any less anti-intellectualist, given that this strategy of arguing rationally against the use of reason, paradoxical as it is, was not uncommon among anti-intellectualists.

This leads me to the last and most common reason for still considering van Schurman a scholar despite her anti-intellectual ideas, namely her choice of writing in Latin (4). So, why did she write in Latin? Why did she not write in French like her fellow sectarians, Jean the Labadie, Pierre Dulignon (†1679) and Pierre Yvon (1646-1707)?\textsuperscript{67}

\textsuperscript{65} Cusanus continued working on the notion of ‘docta ignorantia’ until his death in 1464. In 1450, he wrote a series of dialogues between philosophers or orators and the character of the \textit{idiota}/layman (\textit{Idiota de sapientia}, \textit{Idiota de mente}, \textit{Idiota de staticis experimentis}), in which he “exalts the wisdom of the layman” (Hopkins 1986, 3).

\textsuperscript{66} Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2022. Marc van der Poel moderates Agrippa’s polemical ideas, saying that he actually only believed the sciences to be ‘relatively useless’, compared to faith, and not absolutely useless (Van der Poel 1997, 112). One cannot deny, however, that the quoted statements read as a very strong attack on the arts and sciences.

\textsuperscript{67} De Labadie wrote almost exclusively in French (only three out of his 100 texts and pamphlets have Latin titles), Dulignon only wrote four works, one in Dutch and three in French, and Yvon shifted between French, Dutch and German with two out of his 32 texts having Latin titles. I follow the list of works provided by Saxby 1987, 441–53.
Writing her *apologia* in Latin is certainly a curious choice for an anti-intellectualist, who wishes to depart from the learned world. Especially considering that the mystic and radically pietist writers, who defended similar ideas, had been composing their works in the vernacular since the thirteenth and fourteenth century (Newman 2012, 231). Firstly, I think it is worth noting that this was the only text she published in Latin after her conversion.68 However, it was not her only defense of the Labadists’ beliefs; she also wrote two French (1669) and two Dutch pamphlets (unknown date), as well as a German tract, which bears the title *Mysterium Magnum*, alluding to Jacob Böhme’s book by the same name.69 In this sense, she did, in part, follow the mystic tradition of writing in the vernacular, and, being fluent in several languages, she used these skills to communicate to a variety of people. But this still does not explain why she decided to write *this* book in Latin, especially considering that it was an autobiography, solidifying her religious choice to leave the learned world.

I suggest that we can better understand this choice if we consider her target audience, which was first and foremost the learned world – specifically her former associates Voetius and Huygens. She wanted to take the opportunity to defend herself against their public slander. In the opening lines of *Eukleria*, she explains her situation like this: “Everyone is aware from their publications that some renowned men who in the recent past were quite favorably disposed to me now find my new manner of living very displeasing” (Van Schurman 1998, 73). It is her clear intention to address these allegations head on, and even try, to some extent, to persuade her learned readers that she made the right choice, although she does not seem too confident about this aim. She writes that “[t]hrough this work, even if I should not change the opinions of these great men, I may at least fortify the hearts of the little children in Christ against all future prejudice” (Van Schurman 1998, 73). Mirjam de Baar likewise identifies “the great scholarly men” as the target audience, due to the “language, style and the form in which the *Eukleria* was written”, as well as the many “quotations from classical and Biblical texts” (Baar 1996, 92–93). In de Baar’s analysis, however, this chosen audience only confirms her suspicion that van Schurman merely “postulates a break” with the learned world (Baar 1996, 101, my emphasis). I, on the other hand, see her wish to defend herself and confront these learned men as a very legitimate reason to write the book in Latin; one

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68 Several researchers have put together comprehensive lists of her works, which all support this claim. See Saxby 1987, 449–50; Stighelen 1987, 299; Beek 2010, 263–64. For the sake of this discussion, the first and the second part of the *Eukleria* (which was published posthumously in Amsterdam in 1685) are counted as one book, as it would make little sense to produce the second part in a different language from the first (Van Schurman 1685).

69 There is some controversy concerning this short pamphlet: It is unknown when Anna Maria van Schurman wrote it, in which language it was originally written, and whether she was the sole author. For more on this, see Gosker 2020.
that is still compatible with her wish to separate herself from her former intellectual circles. If we accept her own narrative, she explains that she is writing the book to urge these learned men, who, in her youth, composed panegyric poems in her honor, to “condemn them with me or even retract or correct them”, because she now considers them to be “not only pointless, but in some instances also perverse and harmful by their example” (Van Schurman 1998, 78).

Apart from addressing the renowned members of her former intellectual circle, van Schurman might also have wanted to make the content of her autobiography available to other readers in Germany, France, and England, who might have been more sympathetic to her cause, and who would have felt inspired by reading her story. From her letters, we know that she was in contact with German pietists such as Johann Jakob Schütz (1640-1690) and Johanna Eleonora Petersen (née Merlau, 1644-1724). She was also acquainted with the French mystic, Antoinette Bourignon (1616-1680), although they did not see eye to eye on many religious issues (Irwin 1991; Saxby 1987, 224). These and other potential readers would have made it inexpedient for her to write the book in Dutch, which would be the appropriate vernacular language to address Voetius and Huygens. So, considering her expertise in Latin and its position as the lingua franca of Europe, it seems only reasonable that she would write the book in Latin to reach the widest possible audience. In conclusion, her wish to defend herself against her accusers as well as to broaden the knowledge of her newfound bliss are two compelling reasons that explain why she chose to write in Latin, although this was not the practice of many other anti-intellectual, pietist authors. As a side note, it should be mentioned that this strategy worked, as her book was widely read and mostly positively received, especially in the pietist circles in Frankfurt and Halle (Saxby 1987, 225).

Nevertheless, I do not mean to claim that there are no ambivalences in the text. It is possible to pick out quotes in which van Schurman appears to condone some level of study, as long as it is motivated by faith. For instance, she writes: “This is not to say, however, that we should utterly reject all true sciences and useful or necessary arts indiscriminately. Nor should we deny that the pure can make use of some of them in a pure and useful manner” (Van Schurman 1998, 93). However, the paragraph does not end there. She goes on to qualify her statement, saying: “But it is to say that most of them are vain and superfluous, fully occupying people's foolish minds and hindering them from aspiring to more enduring things, and that even good things are not good for everyone” (Van Schurman 1998, 93, my emphases). So, although she admits that studies can be useful if conducted by the right people (i.e., a select group of born-again Christians), her view is still that for most people they stand in the way of living a truly religious life. This suspicion comes from her belief that studies actively corrupt the student, meaning that even if one did possess admirable intentions from the start, the allure of science would
lead one astray. She appears to think of this as a basic psychological inclination that stems from human weakness; she states that “there is scarcely anyone who, when eager to please himself and others (...), will use something correctly or in moderation, and the rarer and nobler the gift is, the more easily and harmfully it is abused” (Van Schurman 1998, 82). In the end, she simply does not have faith in learned men’s ability to study “in moderation.” From her own experience, she knows that engaging with intellectual work can ignite a spark and a thirst for knowledge that has the power to lure one away from the right path.

Owing to ambivalences and inconsistencies like these, Euklería does remain a somewhat paradoxical piece of writing. It is clearly a learned book, written in Latin, and with references to Aristotle, Plato, Seneca, Cicero, and Saint Augustine as well as unnamed contemporary philosophers. Yet, it is highly critical of the arts and sciences to the point where it argues for the complete abandonment of learning. This tension is in part what makes it a fascinating book to work with. But when it comes to the issue of how one should interpret van Schurman’s retraction of her learned works and the anti-intellectual statements in the book, it ultimately comes down to one question: Should we ignore van Schurman’s own narrative because it may not be supported by her choice of literary style and language? Or should we take her statements at face value, and assume that she was the best judge of her own intentions?

6. Homeless in academia: reconciling religion, learning, and humility

So far, I have discussed how to interpret Anna Maria van Schurman’s retraction of her intellectual works in Euklería, arguing that we should accept her own narrative despite occasional inconsistencies between form and content. If we do this, her story can be seen as presenting a rare insight into the challenges that women intellectuals were facing in the early modern period. In this final section, I want to adopt a feminist perspective and explore some additional reasons that may help to explain why van Schurman, and other female intellectuals, decided to break away from the learned world. She herself argues that it was a disenchantment with academia and a spiritual awakening that drove her to dedicate her life to the Labadist cause. But might there be other contributing factors? In other words, could there be a gendered aspect to her denunciation of learning?

First of all, it was very nearly impossible for her to secure a permanent place in the learned world. As women were not officially allowed to attend the university, van Schurman’s admission was very clearly an exception (the next woman to be admitted to a Dutch university was Aletta Jacobs in 1871). There were no positions on the faculty for women, she could not obtain an official degree, and she could not teach. In short, there was no future for her at the university. Nor would she be able to attain a court position, as a tutor or a librarian (like Leibniz at the Hanoverian court). Such professional
positions, which were places of prolific academic activity, were equally unavailable to women.

But, of course, this was not the only way to be an intellectual in the seventeenth century; many learned debates were being conducted by people with no official academic positions. The so-called ‘republic of letters’ stretched across countries and included some of the most prominent thinkers of the time – both male and female.\textsuperscript{70} But for van Schurman to take part in this learned network, she would need to remain a public figure, something she struggled to reconcile with her Christian ideal of modesty. On several occasions in \textit{Euklería}, she condemns her fame and the people responsible for making her famous. It seems her moral and religious devotion made it impossible for her to continue playing the role as public intellectual. On a larger scale, Carol Pal describes how the republic of letters changed by the end of the seventeenth century with serious consequences particularly for the learned women. She explains that the “mid-seventeenth-century republic of letters had been an enterprise embracing everything from alchemy to agriculture, an open conversation wherein discussions could range in one breath from metaphysics to mining to millenarian theology” (Pal 2012, 207). By the end of the century “that scholarly whirlwind had begun to calm down and was organizing itself along disciplinary lines” (Pal 2012, 207). Many female scholars who, being intellectual autodidacts, thrived in a diverse and inclusive milieu now “found themselves without an intellectual home” (Pal 2012, 207). Without the opportunity of seeking “institutional rescue”, learned women responded by either standing their ground (and consequently struggling to make ends meet), or retreating into religious communities. Pal considers van Schurman’s choice of the latter a result of both internal and external factors, as “her spiritual journey interacted with the loss of the larger supportive structure that had been the mid-century republic of letters” (Pal 2012, 238).

As it turns out, Anna Maria van Schurman was not the only woman to abandon serious intellectual study in favor of religious devotion. Her long-time friend and supporter, Elisabeth of Bohemia (1618-1680), who had spent her youth contemplating the relation between the soul and the body, retired from her studies at age 49 to live out her life as abbess of the Lutheran convent in Herford.\textsuperscript{71} Elisabeth also expressed regret regarding her previous learning which she now considered “dirt in comparison to the true knowledge of Christ” (From a letter to Barclay 21/31 July 1676. Ebbersmeyer 2020, 9).\textsuperscript{72} The English philosopher Anne Conway (1631-1679) also authored original texts on

\textsuperscript{70} For an in-depth analysis of the international network of women intellectuals, see Pal 2012.
\textsuperscript{71} For more on Anna Maria van Schurman’s friendship with the philosopher Elisabeth of Bohemia, see Baar 2021.
\textsuperscript{72} Quoting the last words of her mentor André Rivet, van Schurman writes in similar phrases: “when at the end of his life he felt in his soul the light and power of divinely imprinted experimental knowledge.
metaphysical issues but converted to Quakerism shortly before her untimely death at age 47. Her conversion, like van Schurman’s, greatly influenced her legacy and her early reception, as the Quakers were considered a controversial religious group. Another female writer and scholar, Marie du Moulin (1622-1699), who was a trusted friend and mentee of van Schurman, also ended up seeking “refuge in a cloister-like environment” (Pal 2012, 237). She had fled to the Netherlands after facing imprisonment for being a Huguenot upon her return to France in 1686. Like van Schurman, Marie du Moulin’s religious convictions had a significant impact on the last decade of her life.

These examples add to a picture of an academic public that was disinterested in independent, mature women but perfectly willing to entertain and praise young female prodigies (Jardine 1983; King 1988; Pal 2012, 206–65). Margaret King refers to this as a “pattern of failure” and believes it to be caused partly by the inaccessibility of professional positions and partly by the social constraints put on women (King 1988, 437). Following social customs, women were expected to marry, which would generally put a stop to their studies. Some women decided, then, not to marry and were ostracized from society as a result, living out their lives in “self-constructed prisons, lined with books” (King 1988, 440). Focusing on Italian renaissance women, King describes a complicated relationship between women and learning in which women’s gender identity, their chastity and their social status was endangered by their intellectual work. They were either accused of being unchaste or they were famously virginal (as was the case for van Schurman, until she moved in with de Labadie and his associates in Amsterdam [Beek 2010, 221–24]). Some were desexualized, as they failed to live up to their reproductive duties; and, as a group, they were dissociated from society, living as nuns, hermits, or lone spinsters.

In other words, life as a learned woman came at a great cost. So really, we should not be surprised if van Schurman did not feel welcome in the academic environment and decided to go somewhere else, where she was able to express herself more freely. In fact, instead of viewing this break with the learned world as a failure for women intellectuals, I think we should appreciate the subversiveness of her decision. Van Schurman was disavowed by her former friends and mentors, depicted as a madwoman, and persecuted for her religious beliefs (van Elk 2017, 179–80). Her choice was controversial and unpopular. But she did what she felt was right, and many scholars comment on the strength and confidence she exudes in her later work. Larsen writes that: “Paradoxically,

He considered knowledge drawn from book like dung or filth, and he broke out in these savory words greatly worthy of all our attention: ‘You are the teacher of spirits. I have learned more theology in these ten days in which you have visited me than in the space of fifty years ...’” (Van Schurman 1998, 93).

73 After her death, it was rumored that she ‘ate spiders’, meaning that she had gone mad. This was repeated in several catalogues of learned women (Finauer 1761, 194; Vulpius 1812, 3:106; Sauerbrei 1671, para. 48; see also Baar and Rang 1996, 7).
as she left behind that ‘illustrious fame’ and moved into the Labadist network, she gained a new public voice, shed all the humility tropes endemic to her earlier writings, and achieved equality of respect within the community’s leadership” (Larsen 2018, 310). Bo Karen Lee, one of the scholars to focus primarily on the mature van Schurman, accentuates how “she emerged as poised and confident; her emphasis on self-denial served not to weaken, but to liberate and strengthen her” (Lee 2007, 190). And, once again paying attention to the literary style of van Schurman’s autobiography, de Baar observes that “[i]n the Eukleria there is no preface by an authoritative male figure – as there was for example to introduce her Dissertatio (1641) and her Opuscula (1648)” (Baar 1996, 100). This time, she “published her work under her own name and her own authority” (Baar 1996, 100). So, if one considers women’s independence, self-confidence, and personal freedom feminist values then van Schurman’s “right choice” may also have been a feminist choice.

7. Respecting women’s (inconvenient) narratives

In this article, I have systematically discussed reasons for and against characterizing Anna Maria van Schurman as an anti-intellectual with the purpose of challenging the ‘standard narrative’, dominating the reception of her mature work Eukleria. I have argued that van Schurman’s stated retraction of her learned works should, indeed, be taken at face value, as such a reading is supported both by her own account and by the philosophical (or rather anti-philosophical) views she defends in the book. Finally, I have argued that her break with the learned world may be better understood by applying a feminist analysis to her situation as an elderly, unmarried woman, linking her fate to the fates of many other disillusioned women intellectuals.

This article set out to demonstrate the importance of narratives. And in the case of early modern women writers, it is critical that we respect their own self-representations and stay true to the diversity of their ideas. By paying close attention to van Schurman’s own narrative, we learn a lot about the history of women and their adversities. Her departure from and unforgiving criticism of the scholarly world shows us just how difficult it was to be a woman intellectual in this period. Just as her passionate defense of her Labadist beliefs shows us how the religious sphere offered an opening for women’s ability to express their independent views. As historians of philosophy, we should insist on the nuances within an author’s body of works and allow for different phases in the writings of women philosophers – just as we do in the case of canonical male figures. After years of being a part of the learned elite, van Schurman changed her mind. She chose to retract her intellectual works and devote herself completely to her religious cause. And she had good reasons for doing so. It is important that this conscious choice becomes an essential part of her story.
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Article III
Were there any radical women in the German Enlightenment?
On feminist history of philosophy and Dorothea Erxleben’s
*Rigorous Investigation* (1742)

Abstract
This article examines the term ‘Radical Enlightenment’ as a historiographical category through the lens of the philosophical work of Dorothea Christiane Erxleben (1715-1762); a keen advocate for women’s education and the first female medical doctor in Germany. The aim of the article is to develop a methodological framework that makes it possible to critically assess the radicalism of Erxleben’s philosophical position as it is presented in her highly systematic work *Rigorous Investigation* from 1742.

In the first part of the article, the term ‘Radical Enlightenment’ is briefly discussed, centering on the German context (2). The second part is dedicated to articulating two methodological problems, concerning the use of the term ‘radical’ with regards to early feminist writings of the 17th and 18th century. The aim of this section is to develop a new approach to the classification of radical thinkers of this period (3). In the third part, this methodological approach is applied in the analysis of Erxleben’s views on equality and education, focusing on her call for women’s active participation in society (4). Finally, it is concluded that there is sufficient evidence to categorize vital parts of Erxleben’s philosophy as radical (5).

**Keywords:** Dorothea Christiane Erxleben; equality; women’s education; history of philosophy; feminism; Radical Enlightenment.

1. Introduction
The question of education took center stage in many philosophical debates in Europe throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Some of the most canonical and beloved figures of the Enlightenment even wrote entire books on the subject of education, including John Locke’s *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693) and Rousseau’s *Émile, ou de l’éducation* (Émile, or, On Education, 1762).74 But education was also a controversial subject and a battle ground on which radical enlightenment thinkers such as Denis Diderot (1713-1784), Baron d’Holbach (1723-1789), and Nicolas de Condorcet (1743-1794) fought for substantial reforms for the sake of the intellectual improvement of the people.75 As a general rule, women were omitted from this political

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74 Other works by enlightenment authors that also deal with the question of education include Montesquieu 1777, 37-51; Smith 1981, 758-88; Humboldt 2017, 5-25; and Kant’s lectures on education, which were converted into the book *Über Pädagogik* (1803) and published by F. T. Rink.
75 See Diderot 1875-77, 429-52; Condorcet 1989; and d’Holbach 2001, 88, 109, 145-156.

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and philosophical debate, although this did not prevent them from writing dissertations and treatises arguing for women’s right to education. During the Enlightenment, most of the prominent European countries such as England, France, Italy, Spain, and the Dutch Republic were home to significant dissertations on this issue, written and published by women. Looking at the research literature, German women, however, seem to have been almost entirely absent from these early feminist debates. Still, one figure does stand out in this regard and that is Dorothea Christiane Erxleben, née Leporin (1715-1762). Her dissertation titled Gründliche Untersuchung der Ursachen, die das Weibliche Geschlecht vom Studien abhalten (Rigorous Investigation of the Causes that Obstruct the Female Sex from Study) appears to be the sole known exemplar of a “systematic rebuttal of misogynist conceptions about women’s intellectual abilities in eighteenth-century Germany” (Poeter 2008, 101). Strangely, this detailed philosophical publication has received little recognition in comparison with the treatises of other European women, many of which have gone down in history as pinnacles of proto-feminist literature. Nevertheless, it is in Dorothea Erxleben that we find Germany’s counterpart to influential figures like Marie le Jars de Gournay (1565-1645), Anna Maria van Schurman (1607-1678), and Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797). The question is then, why has Erxleben’s contribution to this debate gone virtually unnoticed? And how radical were the thoughts that she presented in this little-known text?

In this article, I will investigate the historiographical category of ‘Radical Enlightenment’ from a feminist perspective. To do this, I will start out with a brief presentation of the term ‘Radical Enlightenment’, centering on the German context. Then, I will delve into a methodological discussion, presenting two problems that may help to explain the noticeable lack of women in the research on the Radical Enlightenment, while asking whether or not this now controversial notion is useful when examining the work of radical feminist writers from the seventeenth and eighteenth century. These methodological considerations will allow me to develop a new approach to the assessment of radical thinkers, which I will demonstrate through an analysis of Dorothea Erxleben’s highly systematic work Rigorous Investigation from 1742. The purpose of my analysis is to emphasize radical and even potentially revolutionary aspects of her

76 The most famous of these dissertations was perhaps the Dissertatio de Ingenii Muliebris ad Doctrinam, & meliores Litteras Aptitudine (Whether the Study of Letters is Fitting for a Christian Woman, Paris 1638, and Leiden 1641) by the highly celebrated Dutch scholar Anna Maria van Schurman (1607-1678), whose work and personal example inspired learned women all over Europe. Other similarly influential works, dealing with the subject of women’s education, include Makin 1673; Masham 1705; Wollstonecraft 1992; Gournay 1993; Amar y Borbón 1994; Astell 1994.

77 Only very little research has been done on Dorothea Christiane Erxleben and her philosophical and political influence. Notable exceptions are Petschauer 1986; Markau 2006; Poeter 2008; Kraetke-Rumpf, 2019; Dyck 2021.
thinking, which have been mostly overlooked or underestimated in the research on Erxleben. Finally, I will conclude that, using this approach, there is sufficient evidence to categorize vital parts of Erxleben’s philosophy as radical.

2. Radical Enlightenment in the German context

An extensive amount of research has been done on the notion of ‘Radical Enlightenment’ during the past forty years. As a consequence, it is no easy task to position a specific thinker such as Dorothea Erxleben within this complex historiography of philosophical, political, and theological theory. Nevertheless, it is necessary to settle on some general definition of the term Radical Enlightenment in order to evaluate to what extend Erxleben can be thought of as a radical enlightenment thinker. If we look to the most influential figures in the history of the term, namely Margaret C. Jacob and Jonathan I. Israel, for a clarification of what it means to be radical in the Age of Reason the most predominant features in the philosophical realm are atheism or pantheism, metaphysical materialism, and Spinozism (Jacob 1981; 2014; Israel 2001; Israel and Mulso 2014). In the world of political thought, such values as equality, freedom, democracy, or republicanism are the guiding principles uniting this otherwise scattered group of freemasons, free-thinkers, and intellectuals who have come to make out the movement of Radical Enlightenment.

Concerning the German context, which is of course the setting in which Dorothea Erxleben must be situated, Martin Mulsow’s book Enlightenment Underground: Radical Germany, 1680-1720 presents the most significant contribution to the field of research. Mulsow confronts the widespread assumption that the Enlightenment in Germany was merely a “cautious movement for reform,” partially due to the German aversion to “anti-Christian or extreme positions” (Mulsow 2015, 1). This assumption has led many scholars to focus on other countries with far more visible radical communities such as the Netherlands, England, and France. But Mulsow uncovers a secret network of German radicals who produced and distributed their manuscripts underground. Again, the main

78 For a comprehensive general view of the history of the term Radical Enlightenment and the research pertaining to it, see Stjernfelt 2017.
79 Many other values or significant issues have been identified as pertaining to the radical sphere in Frederik Stjernfelt’s “Radical Enlightenment: Aspects of the History of a Term”, 80–103. Among them are: science, reason, education, liberalism, anti-dualism, revolution, autonomy, skepticism, tolerance as well as strong criticisms of the monarchy, the academies, epistemic and political prejudice and organized religion.
80 In 2018, the book was republished in a new edition under the title Radikale Frühauflärung in Deutschland 1680-1720. Mulsow has written a number of other influential texts on different aspects of the German Radical Enlightenment and early modern period in Germany. See also Mulsow 2007; 2012; 2014, and 2019.
81 For more on the role of underground networks and clandestine writers in early modern Europe, see Paganini et al. 2020.
characteristic of these radicals is their criticism of religion. *Religionskritik* for the most part overshadows other forms of criticism such as political critiques, which Mulsow states “were less common because these radicals were often allied with absolute rulers and court jurists against what they saw as the pedantry of the universities and the clerical deceit of the churches” (Mulsow 2015, 5). Mulsow does, however, acknowledge that religious radicals, or rather “fanatics,” have played some role as a part of a German radical movement and should not be “systematically excluded” (5). He specifically mentions the Pietist movement, which was widespread in Germany and influenced both moderate and radical thinkers of the period. Still, his focus is mainly on atheist or anticlerical radicals instead of the many philosophers and intellectuals who called for drastic political change but were supportive of the Christian faith. This, along with other prioritizations, has resulted in the exclusion of many thinkers who can easily be said to have been radical in some aspects of their thinking but who have been dismissed primarily on account of their religious beliefs.  

3. Feminist methodological considerations

One writer, who does not appear in Mulsow’s detailed investigation of Germany’s clandestine radical movements, is Dorothea Erxleben. In fact, women are rarely present at all in the research literature pertaining to the Radical Enlightenment. But why is that? Were there just no radical women in this period? Or were they radical in some fundamentally different way? I believe the problem to be, to some extent, methodological, which is why it is crucial to think carefully about which criteria one uses to classify a writer as radical and how one expects the writer to live up to these criteria. In this section, I will mention two methodological issues that I believe can help to explain the absence of women from research literature on Radical Enlightenment; issues which have also shaped my approach to the assessment of Erxleben’s *Rigorous Investigation*. Both issues pertain to how we identify the defining features of Radical Enlightenment. For the sake of clarity, I have termed the first issue the ‘package logic problem’ and the second the ‘hierarchy problem.’

The problem of applying a ‘package logic’ to enlightenment thinkers was first identified by Jennifer J. Davis. She stressed the need to “identify ‘radical’ principles and

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82 A notable exception is Katherine Goodman’s paper “Luise Gottsched, Freethinker,” which argues for a radical reading of parts of Gottsched’s authorship. Although, Goodman’s project is similar to that of the present article, her approach is somewhat different, as she does not critically interrogate the historiographical category of ‘Radical Enlightenment’ but rather accepts the understanding of radicalism found in e.g., Israel and Mulsow’s writings. My aim, on the other hand, is to reassess the classification of radical thinkers, which will then allow me to articulate the radicalism in Erxleben’s thought.
avoid categorizing individuals as ‘radicals’ or ‘moderates’” (Davis 2017, 293–94). As already mentioned, numerous principles and philosophical ideas are related to the notion of Radical Enlightenment; from materialism and pantheism to political values such as democracy, equality, and tolerance. Expecting radicals to ‘tick all the boxes’ is simply not realistic. In fact, it was very common that a writer’s “radicalism in one area (...) went hand-in-hand with moderation in another” (Mulsow 2014, 81–82). This is especially true for radical women, as the ‘boxes’ are sculpted on male radicals such as Spinoza (1632–1677), Diderot, and Baron d’Holbach with very different interests from female radicals who are primarily motivated by political issues such as gender equality and not necessarily as concerned with abstract metaphysical debates. Davis accentuates the consequences this approach has for the perception of the women’s movement in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, stating that if the Radical Enlightenment is seen as a “checklist of beliefs,” this would cause us to “lose sight of some of the most important and influential advocates for women’s equality during this period” (Davis 2017, 293). If, instead, we focus on recognizing specific radical traits in the writings of these women, their radicalism gets the chance to shine through without being canceled out by views that are now considered as conservative or reactionary. The women’s movement has grown out of diverse milieus with different systems of beliefs, but this does not reduce the radicalism of their feminist works. In order to make room for women’s voices from this era, we must find some way to accept the sometimes strange ways, in which radical criticism of women’s inferior position in society is intertwined with conservative Christian worldviews or keen defenses of absolute monarchy.

Expecting radical writers to come as a specific sort of ‘package deal’ is not the only methodological problem that stands in the way of including women in the narrative of the Radical Enlightenment. When we look at the figures who are perceived as radical, it becomes clear that some radical traits count for more than others. This is what I call the ‘hierarchy problem’. Although many feminist values such as equality, emancipation, autonomy, and universal education are considered radical, these are often overshadowed in the research by a focus on atheism, materialism, and criticism of organized religion. So, even if one does not consider Radical Enlightenment to designate a closed set of ideas that must all be present (and, in practice, mostly scholars do not, since many thinkers, who are perceived as radical were, in fact, anti-democrats or theists in some form), some beliefs are still seen as indispensable. The result is that “according to the terms adopted by scholars of the Radical Enlightenment, most eighteenth-century feminists were not

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83 For a discussion of the usefulness of distinguishing between moderate and radical Enlightenment, see Chisick 2017.
84 For an example of a Christian feminist position, see e.g., Masham 1705, and for a feminist critique of republicanism and defense of monarchy, see Astell 1996, 168-69.
radicals” because their struggle for equality did not involve a belief in “pantheism, republicanism, or libertinism” (Davis 2017, 293). But they were built on radical ideas of the intellectual and moral equality between men and women; ideas whose full realization “would require the fundamental reorganization of society and State” (294).

In short, when assessing the radicalism of female writers of this period, it is often helpful to look at their views independently, estimating the radicalism of each trait instead of evaluating their entire philosophical profile. It might also be important to gain an understanding of how their moderate positions might be mobilized in their argumentation – does it maybe help her cause to use Christian dogma? Might an enlightened monarch provide a better chance of securing women’s right to education than a democracy, in which only men have the right to vote, and women are considered as property? Also, it is useful to break with the hierarchy that puts anti-religious views at the forefront of the debate, so that we might do justice to more freethinking, enlightened women.

Now, one might feel compelled to ask why it is so important that these women are characterized specifically as radical thinkers. Is it not enough simply to call them proto-feminists or political commentators? I believe that there are at least three reasons why this classification is worth fighting for. First of all, it should be noted that the title of ‘radical philosopher’ has become somewhat of an honorary title in the field of history of philosophy. This is most likely due to the role that has been ascribed to these thinkers as pioneers and front-runners of Western society, laying the foundation for a modern conception of secularization, science, and democracy. It is important to acknowledge that women have also contributed to this development and that they deserve to be recognized for their efforts, even if they did not support all elements of the movement. Secondly, including proto-feminist authors in the canon of radical thinkers sends a strong message about the central position that equality, and especially gender equality, occupied in the enlightenment project; a position that was severely shaken with a backlash that followed the French Revolution (Hunt 1992, 1–17; Scott 1993, 201; Mousset 2007, 99–103). During the nineteenth century, the question of women’s rights faded into the background but in the early modern period, the debate about women’s rights and their position in society was both active and quite progressive. By pointing out that the fight for gender equality was an essential part of what it meant to be radical in the Age of Reason, we will do justice to the long history of the women’s rights movement. Finally, bringing attention to the role of gender politics in the radical enlightenment debate also allows us to point out the fact that many celebrated radicals of the period were not supporters of women’s emancipation, and that some actively argued against women’s
rights as citizens, as was the case for the archetypical radical thinker, Spinoza. If gender equality is recognized as a radical enlightenment value then misogyny and gender discrimination will begin to appear as notable shortcomings in otherwise radical texts and not just as accidental oversights. In *The Archeology of Knowledge*, Michel Foucault urges us to “question those ready-made syntheses, those groupings that we normally accept before any examination, those links whose validity is recognized from the outset” (Foucault 2002, 24). This also concerns groupings such as the category of radical enlightenment thinkers. Such historiographical divisions “are facts of discourse that deserve to be analyzed beside others. (...) [T]hey are not intrinsic, autochthonous, and universally recognizable characteristics” (25). We must ask ourselves if it might not be time to reevaluate the notion of radicalism in order to include marginalized voices into this field of research. And to acknowledge that any struggle for gender equality, including those fought by religious women, presents a radical criticism of the order of society. With these methodological considerations in mind, it is now time to show how such a principle-based and non-hierarchical approach will allow us to call attention to the radicalism that is present in the work of Dorothea Erxleben.

4. Assessing the radicalism of *Rigorous Investigation*

Dorothea Erxleben wrote *Rigorous Investigation* in 1742 while working as a physician in Quedlinburg in Saxony-Anhalt, Germany. As a matter of fact, Erxleben was the first woman in Germany to obtain the degree of Doctor of Medicine (Klemme and Kuehn 2016, 190). From an early age, she was encouraged to study by her father, and in 1740, she applied for a special dispensation from the newly appointed King of Prussia, Frederick II (1712-1786), to study medicine at the University of Halle. The dispensation was granted to her in 1741 “with the argument that the presence of a female student at a German university would help to enhance the image of Germany as an enlightened nation” (Poeter 2008, 106–7). Unfortunately, Erxleben’s medical education was cut short due to tumultuous circumstances within her immediate family, and it was not until 1754, when she submitted her dissertation, that she finally obtained her degree and officially became the first female doctor in Germany.

In *Rigorous Investigation*, Erxleben deals with a comprehensive list of obstacles that may stand in the way of women receiving an education. Most of these pertain to prejudices held by both men and women, concerning women’s intellectual abilities, the nature of learning, and the possible ethical and societal consequences of letting women

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86 Poeter refers to Haase 1993, 65.
87 For more on Erxleben’s life and, specifically, on her Latin dissertation, see Markau 2006.
In the remainder if this paper, I will analyze Erxleben’s *Rigorous Investigation*, focusing on her thoughts on equality and education with the intention of emphasizing their radicalism. Taking the abovementioned problems of classification into account, I will look for radical principles in Erxleben’s work, instead of expecting her to be radical in all aspects of her work. I will also refrain from letting her moderate religious beliefs interfere with or overshadow her other, more forward-thinking ideas. The section on female education will make out the bulk of the analysis, as this is the main concern of Erxleben’s dissertation but, first, I will deal with the notion, upon which her entire argument is based, namely the equality of the sexes.

**Metaphysical and political equality**

Egalitarian views have continuously been associated with the notion of Radical Enlightenment. But it is far from all radical thinkers who have gone so far as to extend the notion of equality to women. Still, Erxleben is not alone in arguing for equality among the sexes; there are other European radical thinkers who also considered women’s rights to be a key issue, one of whom is “the last of the great *philosophes*,” Nicolas de Condorcet (Ansart 2009, 347). In the following, I will be comparing Erxleben’s views on equality to the views expressed by this widely acknowledged French radical in his controversial text *De l’admission des femmes au droit de cité* (On the Admission of Women to the Rights of Citizenship, 1790). My aim is to identify likenesses in their political views that might at first be overlooked due to a dissimilarity in their metaphysical starting points. This will support a radical reading of Erxleben’s work, as Condorcet is often considered one of the most radical thinkers of equality due to his advocacy for women’s suffrage and his demand for the abolishment of slavery (Condorcet 2012b; 2012a).

First, it is important to understand that the role equality plays in Erxleben’s reasoning is twofold; it is both the premise and the aim of her argument. This might seem counter-intuitive at first. How can she, on the one hand, assume that men and women are equal and then, on the other hand, argue that education is needed for men and women to become equal? To explain this, one might say that Erxleben asserts a *metaphysical* equality and uses it to argue for a *political* equality (Erxleben 2019, 45). In other words, the equality that she takes as her starting point is an abstract and theoretical equality but by educating women in the same way as the men, she argues, this equality will be fully realized. This distinction will help us to compare Erxleben’s argument to that of Condorcet's.

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88 In the following analysis, I will make use of two editions of Erxleben’s text, namely the original German dissertation from 1742 and a recent English translation from 2019 by Corey W. Dyck, which unfortunately only covers the paragraphs §18-51 and §91-110. The translation is published as a part of the anthology *Early Modern German Philosophy (1690-1750)*, 41-57.

89 On the question of equality in the Radical Enlightenment, see e.g., Israel 2001, 175-184; Chisick 2017, 66-67; Lord 2017, 127-142.
of Condorcet because, even though they start from different metaphysical premises, their views are aligned when it comes to arguing for political equality.

Like many other eighteenth-century feminists, Dorothea Erxleben finds the premise of her argumentation in Christian dogma, which she develops using secular philosophical reasoning. From creation, men and women are endowed with the same potential for knowledge: “The powers of the human soul are a part of the image of God after which the human being is formed. The female sex is created in accordance with this image as well as the male” (Erxleben 2019, 45). From this, at the time, uncontroversial assumption, she infers that “whoever would deny the powers of the soul of the female sex would also have to hold that this sex is not made according to the likeness of God” (45). This essentially means that anyone who undermines or dismisses women’s abilities simultaneously offends God. Understanding is one of the abilities “that both genders are endowed with in the same measure” by virtue of being human (46). For “understanding and speech are the human properties that separate us from irrational animals” (Erxleben 1742, 106). Condorcet, on the other hand, builds his argument for gender equality on a different foundation. Instead of referring to Scripture, he asserts a natural equality independent of religious doctrine. To him “[t]he rights of men stem exclusively from the fact that they are sentient beings, capable of acquiring moral ideas and of reasoning upon them” (Condorcet 2012b, 156). This right naturally extends to female citizens: “Since women have the same qualities, they necessarily also have the same rights. Either no member of the human race has any true rights, or else they all have the same ones.” (156-57). Condorcet refers to a set of “natural rights predating the pact of association and the civil order,” which is based on human nature, endowing both men and women with the ability to reason and act morally (Williams 2004, 161). Although Condorcet’s fundamental premise is secular, it plays much the same role as Erxleben’s biblical foundation, as it affirms the existence of a metaphysical equality, which is not necessarily manifest in the world right now, but which nonetheless works as a point of reference for building a just society in accordance with those same metaphysical facts. Because, as it is the case for Condorcet, Erxleben’s idea of a God-given equality is also only an equality of ‘raw material’. She does not go so far as to claim that people were actually economically, physically, or even morally equal. Instead, people are equal in terms of their ability to reason, that is, in terms of their potential. But when it comes to women this potential is not allowed to flourish.

Having established a biblical equality between the sexes, Erxleben seeks to explain why men and women do not appear to be intellectually equal and this is where her argument aligns with Condorcet’s. She makes a very important distinction, stating that it is “one thing to have received an understanding, and another to have learned to apply the understanding one has received. It does not follow from the fact that one does not
actually apply something, or does not know how to apply it, that one does not have or possess that thing” (Erxleben 2019, 46). So, even though eighteenth-century women might have appeared to possess a weaker faculty of reason, this is only because they have not learned how to properly apply their potential for reasoning. This is where metaphysical equality is politicized; because, as she argues, it is a “great injustice,” how this artificial inequality is created and upheld by favoring boys for education and condemning girls to a life of household chores. In Erxleben’s own words: “Why must we waste away in forced ignorance and tolerate being called simple when we are without fault? Are we not human beings like the men? (...) Why should we not be allowed to exercise our understanding?” (Erxleben 1742, 106–7). Erxleben values learning for its own sake above all else, but she also stresses how receiving an education gives one a considerable advantage in life. Using classical enlightenment imagery, she compares the difference between being learned and having no education to the difference between light and darkness. Just as light is superior to darkness, so does “the privilege that is granted to those who have improved their understanding through learning” elevate the learned above “those who are still fumbling around in the dark” (3). Being learned provides one with certain privileges – status, skills, proficiencies – that make it easier for people to make something of themselves. To not teach girls and women is to rob them of such privileges and opportunities.

Learning has made men and women unequal because it has been distributed unequally amongst them. But education is also the only means to right this wrong. Until girls are taught the same as boys, Erxleben sees herself forced to “admit that the female sex must fall short of the male sex in understanding” but only because “the understanding of the former is not, like that of the latter, used, exercised, and applied” (Erxleben 2019, 47). To Erxleben, all human beings are equal in terms of reason and worth, but equality is also something to aim for by giving men and women the same opportunities in life. She laments the fact that it is accepted that “every one of the female sex is predetermined for household work,” while it is generally unacceptable for parents to choose a specific life for their sons before they are even born without regard for their individual abilities (Erxleben 1742, 95).

Condorcet also argues that the “apparent intellectual advantage” which men might have appeared to enjoy “was not a consequence of nature and the forces of physiological determinism, but of unequal educational opportunities” (Williams 2004, 165). In his own words:

It has been said that, despite being better than men, gentler, more sensitive and less subject to the vices of egoism and hard-heartedness, women have no real idea of justice and follow their feelings rather than their conscience. There is more truth in this observation, but it still proves nothing since this difference is caused, not by nature, but by education and society
which accustom women, not to the idea of justice, but to that of decency (Condorcet 2012b, 159).

The gender inequality that we find in society is, according to Condorcet, due to an unequal access to education and not due to a difference in nature or worth. That is why he, in addition to arguing for women’s suffrage and civil rights, also argued for universal education, stating that “[p]ublic education, to deserve its name, must be extended to every citizen (...) it cannot be established for men only without introducing blatant inequality” (Williams 2004, 167). Like Erxleben, Condorcet believes education to be both the root of the problem of inequality, as its unequal distribution artificially introduces differences between men and women that do not exist naturally, and the solution to the problem by making education available to all citizens.

In summation, although Erxleben bases her argument on Scripture, which supports a moderate interpretation of her views, her argument for political equality bears a strong resemblance to the thoughts expressed by one of the most radical thinkers of the late Enlightenment when it comes to the question of equality, namely Nicolas de Condorcet. With the previously developed methodological considerations in mind, it is possible to accentuate this similarity and Erxleben’s radicalism without neither ignoring her Christian roots nor allowing for them to cancel out other less moderate elements of her argumentation.

**Education: a question of intellectual and financial independence**

As already mentioned, the main goal of *Rigorous Investigation* was to refute all arguments that stood in the way of women’s education. This was an aim that Erxleben shared with many female writers before her and, in that sense, her treatise is nothing new (see e.g., van Schurman 1641; Makin 1673). This is what a conservative reading of her work would accentuate. But although she was not the first to present the argument that education should be open to women, this does not necessarily mean that the argument had lost its radical edge in 1742. In this section, I will give four reasons supporting a radical reading of her arguments on education. The first pertains to the poor state of women’s literacy and the general opposition to women’s higher education in Germany at the time when she was writing her dissertation. The second is related to Erxleben’s positive and modern view on co-education, which breaks with the age-old connection made between educated women and unchastity. Thirdly, I will point to Erxleben’s understanding of education as a means to drastically change a person’s character. And finally, the fourth and perhaps most radical element has to do with Erxleben’s view on the purpose for which young girls

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90 Quoted from the English translation by Williams 2004. The original French quote can be found in Condorcet 1989, 46-47.

91 For a conservative reading of Erxleben’s dissertation, see Poeter 2008.
and women should be educated, namely, so that they may become active members of society.

In the introduction, Dorothea Erxleben states that she simply wants “to investigate the triviality (Unerheblichkeit) of the causes that obstruct the female sex from studying, and to show that it is possible, necessary, and useful for this sex to also endeavor to become learned” (Erxleben 1742, 5). At first, this might seem a fairly modest claim. It comes down to the basic assertion that women are capable of learning and that this capability must be cultivated through education. It is necessary to look at the specific historical context in which Erxleben makes this statement to realize its radical nature. *Rigorous Investigation* was published at a time when many German women were still mostly illiterate or very poorly educated. Education was a very unequally distributed good and although the access to education overall increased in the eighteenth century “determinants such as region, urbanization, sex, and wealth shaped its distribution” (Melton 2001, 85). Erxleben herself received special admittance to the University of Halle but it would take more than 100 years before German women were officially allowed to study medicine, and it was not until 1906 that women were openly accepted to the universities in Saxony, Erxleben’s home state (Mazón 2003, 10). So, the call for basic as well as higher education for women was still a somewhat controversial issue at the time when Erxleben was writing. In fact, German public opinion about women’s education was suffering in the second half of the eighteenth century due to, among other factors, the emerging romanticization of the traditional ‘Hausfrau’ (housewife) (Petschauer 1986, 289).

The views that dominated the public debate on women’s education were far more conservative than Erxleben’s egalitarian position. Women were still seen as “predestined helpers of their husbands” instead of independent subjects whose intellectual faculties should have a chance to reach their full potential (Petschauer 1986, 264). Even those who argued that women should be educated stressed that they should be taught differently than men, focusing mainly on religious and moral teachings together with practical skills that would prepare them for their lives as wives and mothers. Conservative educational reformers inspired by works such as Fenelon’s *Traité de l’éducation des filles* (*Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, which was translated into German in 1698) wanted to introduce female education in Germany in a way that did not do “terrible things (...) to women’s femininity,” focusing instead on Christian principles and traditional family order (Petschauer 1986, 289). Compared to the general opinion of the German public at her time, Erxleben was a truly modern and enlightened thinker. Like a true radical, she

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92 The percentage of people who could sign their own name varied highly across the country, with some regions such as East Prussia ranking as low as 10 percent for adult men in 1750 and even lower for women (82). For more on women’s access to education in early modern Europe, see Houston 1983; Wiesner 2019.
“presented a more progressive point of view which represented the opinions neither of most women who left a written record, nor of most men who dealt with female education” (291). She did not see any reason to keep women out of the universities, nor limit them to any specific fields of study. Because she believed that one should be judged purely on one’s abilities, and that men and women possess reason in equal measure, she saw no reason why women could not be physicians: “for why would one hesitate to entrust a woman with one’s health when she can sufficiently demonstrate that she has thorough knowledge of the science” (Erxleben 1742, 140). This was quite uncommon. The demarcation between feminine and masculine arts and sciences was very explicit in eighteenth century Germany. Poetry, music, and the study of classical texts and languages were perceived as more appropriate for women than, for instance, law, medicine, philosophy, and theology. But Erxleben chose to devote her life to the study of medicine instead of contributing to society “from the culturally more acceptable role of the intellectual woman as poet” (Poeter 2008, 100). The fact that Erxleben chose this traditionally male field and urged other women to join her speaks to her independence of mind. This is supported by her unconventional life as a medical practitioner. By examining the historical and biographical context of her work, it becomes clear that Erxleben did not represent the general opinion of the public or of the conservative academic or clerical elite and, in that sense, her thinking must be viewed as radical.

Now for the second reason for considering Erxleben’s views on education as radical, namely her support of mixed-sex education. For even among those who did believe that girls and women should be allowed to receive a formal education, there were some controversies about how this education should take place. Should girls and boys be allowed to study together, or would it be better to postpone the education of women, until separate schools for girls had been established? On this issue, Erxleben, once again, takes a forward-thinking and modern stance. Although she does not consider co-education in itself to be an ideal, Erxleben states very firmly that the absence of “maiden-academies” is no reason to deny women the right to an education (Erxleben 1742, 79). As long as no other alternative is available for women, they should be allowed to attend schools and universities together with their fellow male students. But why was co-

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93 This divide between feminine and masculine sciences is also present in Catalogues and Lexica of Learned Women (Frauenzimmerlexica); a genre that was immensely popular in the 17th and first half of the 18th century. Cf. Frawenlob 1633; Pasch, 1686; Omeis, 1688; Paullini, 1705; Eberti, 1706; Eberti, 1727. In an impressive study, Karen Schmidt-Kohberg shows that far fewer learned women were applauded for contributing to the sciences/natural philosophy and medicine than to the humanities, arts, and theology. Philosophy is regarded as both male and female depending on which branch of philosophy one looks at; ethics and philosophy of religion was normally seen as compatible with femininity, whereas metaphysics, logic and natural philosophy were highly masculine fields (Schmidt-Kohberg 2014, 224).

94 Once again Erxleben’s views coincide with those of another radical thinker, namely Nicolas de Condorcet, who also argues for mixed-sex education in his Écrits sur l’Instruction Publique, 48.
education so controversial? And what were the concerns that conservative voices raised on this issue? The main concern, which Erxleben addresses in her argument, is that mixed-sex studies would lead to a moral corruption of the youth, causing unchristian and inappropriate relations between men and women. Erxleben defends her stance by rejecting this concern in two different ways: First, she challenges the notion that universities should be especially dangerous places for young people to interact, emphasizing that “the immoral consequences that people fear would result from teaching men and women simultaneously, are in no way to be found in the matter itself but rather in the foul disposition of their characters” (80). It is, as she writes, “not the place, but rather the evil in their hearts, which is the reason for their wrongdoing” (81). In fact, Erxleben believed that education could significantly improve one’s moral disposition, making universities and other learning facilities places of virtue instead of vice. This is something I will come back to in the following section. She, then, goes on to argue that if the issue is simply that men and women are physically present in the same place at the same time, then this is not something unique to educational institutions. If being in the same room as anyone of the opposite sex would necessarily lead to inappropriate behavior, then any public place which is frequented by both sexes would potentially be a breeding ground for sin – including the church; a place, which, as she points out, is not generally expected to incite immoral conduct. It is only “because one is not used seeing this happen” that people believe it to be immoral (81). If, however, this prejudice was interrogated further, one would discover that it has no rational foundation. Erxleben points this out by tracing the logical consequences of arguing that women’s presence in an auditorium is morally dangerous:

Should such an acquaintance as this between men and women, (...) inevitably carry immoral consequences with it, then one would either have to prevent that persons, who are not of the same sex, ever see or speak to each other, or, as this is not possible to avoid, not a moment would go by which cannot be expected to bring about unhappy consequences (82).

Erxleben’s main point is, then, that if we allow for men and women to be in the same space at all, then the university is far from the most corrupting place for them to interact, for, as she asks rhetorically, is it “more likely for bad things to occur in the Athenaeum or at a wedding?” (82). By supporting co-education, Erxleben positions herself in an age-old debate about the dangers of women’s education; a debate in which misogynist authors have long coupled female erudition with loose morals and sexual promiscuity (Ebbersmeyer 2018, 149-50). As we have seen, Erxleben strongly disagrees with this

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95 Ebbersmeyer mentions Christine de Pizan (1364- c. 1430), Moderata Fonte (1555-1592), and Arcangela Tarabotti (1604-1652) as women, who have all dealt with this argument in their texts. Their rebuttals all follow a similar line of argument to the one presented by Erxleben (De Pizan 1999, 139-40; Fonte 1997, 236; Tarabotti 2004, 109).
critique, arguing instead that education is a way to improve one’s moral faculty as well as one’s ability to reason.

This leads me to the third radical element of Erxleben’s philosophy of education, which concerns the transformational power of learning. Like many other enlightenment educational reformists before her, Dorothea Erxleben cherished the ability to learn as humankind’s greatest treasure. A very big part of this fascination with education was due to a belief that learning was a way to break free of the position that you had been given in life, becoming something new and better through hard work and dedication. Erxleben defines learnedness (Gelehrsamkeit) as “a rigorous cognition of such necessary and useful truths whereby the understanding and the will are improved and, consequently, the true happiness of the human being is promoted” (Erxleben 2019, 44, my emphasis).96 Education does not simply mean to acquire a new skill or a specific piece of information about the world. Education is a transformation of the “understanding and the will” of an individual.97 This means that both the rational and the moral faculty can be improved by way of education. But that is not all. Even something as fundamental and ‘inborn’ as our emotions or temperament can be “moderated, altered, and improved” through intellectual studies (Erxleben 1742, 41). This is a very important part of her reasoning and part of what makes her philosophy feminist because it questions the notion of an unchangeable female essence. She writes on education and the ‘nature’ of women:

Who denies that only few women improve their understanding through studies? Who denies that far fewer of the female sex than of the male are fit for the task of governing, as so few of them are brought up to do it? Who denies that women are more dissolute (lasterhaft) than men? That they are more inclined to vice than men from nature; that is what I call into question (47-48).

Often misogynist arguments are based on the assumption that women possess a specific female nature or essence, which makes them inferior to men and unfit to study or work. But Erxleben rejects this notion, arguing that women are not naturally inferior to men but have been made so “because no one has thought to care sufficiently for their improvement” (68). So, just because women do not appear to be well educated, stately, and even ethical at the moment, this does not mean that they do not possess the potential to become academics, leaders, and virtuous citizens. Women are no more destined to become housewives than men are to become lawyers (95-96). Education thus becomes the means by which women can take charge of their own lives. Erxleben’s view on education presents a challenge to traditional gender roles because all the female essential qualities

96 As the translator, Corey Dyck, points out, this definition is inspired by Christian Thomasius’ notion of learning from Einleitung zu der Vernunft-Lehre (1691).
97 By ‘will’ (Wille), Erxleben refers to the moral faculty, which can be guided either by a good will, inclined to make virtuous decisions, or a bad or weak will, which is motivated by selfish desires.
that are used to justify the oppression of women are made contingent.\textsuperscript{98} Even traditionally despised feminine traits such as the characteristic of being a ‘blabbermouth’ or prone to gossip is due to a lack of education. She writes: “How are they supposed to become prudent, and thereby avoid chitchat, when their understanding and will is not improved? \textit{Studia} make people wise, and this wisdom brings them to know when it is time to remain silent and when it is time to speak” (Erxleben 1742, 149). Given the right education, women have the abilities to radically transform their characters and become, what they in some sense already were, namely men’s equals. This is a view that calls for massive changes in the order of society and established gender norms, as it becomes impossible to excuse social inequality by referring to the natural inferiority of women if this inferiority only exists due to a lack of education and could be overcome through political reform.

The belief in the transformational power of education is also something that Erxleben shared with other radical thinkers. Take, for instance, the famous atheist Baron d’Holbach. In his work \textit{Le Système de la Nature} (The System of Nature), published in 1770 under the pseudonym Jean-Baptiste de Mirabaud, d’Holbach presents, in continuation of his materialist and atheist teachings, some views on education as “the proper method of cultivating advantageous passions in the heart of man” (Holbach 2001, 1:178). According to d’Holbach, everything from a person’s temperament and virtue to their political opinions are “the effect of education” (88). His materialist philosophy leads him to reject the notion of innate ideas and, instead, insist that every trait, thought, and movement of the soul can be traced back to sensory experience – to matter interacting with matter. Like Erxleben, d’Holbach argues that, although man initially derives his temperament from nature, “the education he receives, the ideas that are presented to him, the opinions he imbibes, modify this temperament” (Holbach 2001, 1:65). This means that education (or the lack thereof) becomes a vital element in explaining the differences among people; differences that allow for social hierarchies to be installed and inequalities to be justified.

Lastly, the fourth and most progressive aspect of Erxleben’s philosophy of education relates to the \textit{purpose} of women’s education. Unlike many of her early feminist predecessors, Erxleben believed that some women should make use of their academic training by pursuing professional positions outside of the home (Erxleben 1742, 130–60).\textsuperscript{99} This was not generally a popular idea in eighteenth-century Germany where women

\textsuperscript{98} Fifty years later, Mary Wollstonecraft uses a similar approach in \textit{A Vindication of the Rights of Woman} (1792), arguing that education is the key to achieving equality between the sexes.

\textsuperscript{99} Neither Anne María van Schurman, Marie de Gournay, Bathsua Makin, nor Josefa Amar y Borbón argued that employment should be the aim of women’s education. However, Erxleben was not entirely
were supposed to “be professionals in the house, not outside of it” (Petschauer 1986, 272). But according to Erxleben, there is no logical reason why women should not be allowed to work. The argument that women can and, to some extent, should enter the workforce, is developed as a response to a common objection against women’s education, namely that “[l]earnedness is not fitting for the female sex because women cannot expect to gain any usefulness from it” (Erxleben 1742, 113). The idea is that not much knowledge is needed to perform the duties that are expected of women and therefore it is a waste of time, money, and energy to educate them beyond the practical training pertaining to housekeeping and motherhood. From this objection, other arguments are derived such as: “Women are not entrusted to hold neither clerical nor worldly offices. It follows from this (...) that the education of the female sex (...) would result in futile knowledge, which serves no one” (130). Erxleben responds to this claim on two levels. Firstly, she states that employment is not the only use for education and that the highest purposes of studying are to serve God, to serve one’s fellow human beings, and to strive for one’s own completeness (126). This means that even if women do not hold any public offices, their education is still useful and serves an important purpose. This is a very common response to this argument but not the most interesting for the present inquiry. Her second defense, on the other hand, is much more unconventional. Here, Erxleben presents the bold claim that “the female sex is not at all entirely excluded from the already mentioned offices of the learned” (132). This is, of course, not exactly true. Women were legally excluded from universities and the same applied to public offices. But Erxleben thinks about this in a radically different and very enlightened way. She approaches the matter by way of reason and logic instead of merely looking at the current state of affairs. So, to her, there is no rational reason for keeping women away from these offices. In other words, it is not unthinkable that women might fulfill such positions. All the given reasons are based on prejudices about women’s capabilities and not rational explanations. In addition, there are several cases of women who did, in fact, teach, preach, or govern. Erxleben takes these exemplars as logical counterexamples disproving the claim that women are categorically excluded from these posts. Her conclusion is, then, that women are not necessarily excluded from such offices because 1) they possess or are able to attain the necessary qualifications and 2) other women have already held both clerical and worldly offices, proving that this is, indeed, possible. To support her claim, she mentions several examples of women who taught philosophy, rhetoric, and language such as Cassandra Fedele (1465-1558), Helena Cornaro (1646-1684), and her contemporary Laura Maria Bassi (1711-1778). But what is then prohibiting women from getting an alone in taking this stance. The Italian feminist Arcangela Tarabotti expressed similar ideas in her main work Paternal Tyranny (1654) and so did Gabrielle Suchon, a radical French advocate for women’s rights. This is the position championed by Schurman, Whether a Christian Woman, 36–37.
education and pursuing a carrier? Erxleben mentions several hindrances both external (pertaining to laws and the restrictions of marriage and motherhood) and internal (the women’s own prejudices). While acknowledging that the cards are stacked against women, she nonetheless rejects that external factors are enough to keep women from becoming learned if they really want to. The real challenge is the internal obstacles, meaning the irrational assumptions that both men and women hold about learning and the female sex. Once again, education is the only way forward. Because one of the things that education brings with it is an increased knowledge of oneself. Among other things, this knowledge shows us if there is something that we “abstain from doing out of humility although we have the abilities to do it” (Erxleben 1742, 118). So, if women began to study, they would soon gain the confidence to pursue the profession of their choice and release themselves from the prejudices that were holding them back.

By taking on this issue, Erxleben embarks on the next big feminist and civil rights issue after education, namely women’s right to work and, thereby, break out of “the poverty resulting from extreme restrictions placed on women’s labour” (Davis 2017, 292). And even though she does not argue that all women should work or that any laws prohibiting women’s employment should be changed, she does try to make a change in the public opinion by eliminating any irrational prejudices that might prevent change.

On a final note, it is worth briefly commenting on the role of religion in Erxleben’s argumentation. Like many other proto-feminist writers, Dorothea Erxleben made use of the Bible to advance her cause (cf., Gournay 1993; Astell 1994; van Schurman 1998; De Pizan 1999; Nogarola 2004). The strategy of basing an argument on Scripture was a typical way to lend credibility and authority to one’s claims and, hopefully, make the reader more perceptible to the more progressive elements of the argumentation. Because early feminist writers like Erxleben did not set out to be radical or revolutionary. Her approach is more pragmatic than idealistic, and giving the reader the impression that she might be a revolutionary would not help her in persuading the conservative elite to accept advances in women’s rights and would therefore be counterproductive. Instead, Erxleben strived to make her appeal for women’s education sound as moderate and widely accepted as possible, as this strategy was much more likely to bring about real change.

That being said, there is no reason to doubt that Erxleben was herself a devout and faithful Christian. She does not significantly question the authority of the Bible, she believes in the existence of an immortal soul, and the burden of original sin. This fidelity to Christian doctrine supports a more moderate or even conservative reading of

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101 For more on Christian arguments for equality, see Gössmann 1984; 1994.
102 Dorothea Christiane Erxleben was married to Johann Christian Erxleben, who was a deacon, which means that she had close personal ties to the church. For more on the role of religion in her argument for women’s education, see Dyck 2021; Poeter 2008, 107, 113.
her philosophy, rather than a radical. But, as previously mentioned, I believe that it is a shame to dismiss the radicalism of her claims relating to equality, education, and women’s active participation in society just because she did not criticize the Church. These two positions do not necessarily cancel each other out. She can be a radical proto-feminist and a Christian at the same time, without her position being contradictory or weakened by it. Similarly, it is possible to simply accept Erxleben’s religious belief as an aspect of her thought that was not radical, but which, nonetheless, does not take away from the fact that other parts of her philosophy were.

5. Conclusion

In this article, I set out to show how a change in our methodology can allow us to discover radical philosophical notions in writers who would typically be classified as moderate due to some religious elements in their authorship. I have attempted to show this through an analysis of Dorothea Erxleben’s political and philosophical work *Rigorous Investigation*. By focusing on individual aspects of her dissertation instead of treating her work and life as a ’package deal’, I have been able to highlight some philosophical ideas concerning gender equality and the nature of education, which deserve the term radical. Other elements of her authorship such as her religious views would typically support a conservative or moderate reading of her work. Still, this should not undermine the radicalism of her political criticism, which is the main objective of the work. The fight for equality and women’s access to knowledge are just as much radical enlightenment issues as religious criticism. In falling victim to the ‘hierarchy problem’ and placing religious criticism above political criticism, we make ourselves blind to women’s participation in the Radical Enlightenment. If the tables were turned and the issue of gender equality gained primacy over religious critique, Spinoza would no longer be called a radical, as he believed that “women do not, by nature, have a right equal to men’s, but that they necessarily submit to men” (Spinoza 2016, 603). Neither would d’Holbach, who Martin Mulsow calls the “critical highpoint” of philosophical radicalism (Mulsow 2015, 2). D’Holbach did not believe in neither natural equality of abilities nor cultural equality of opportunity among human beings, let alone between genders (Chisick 2017, 66–67). So, why is it that we disregard the sexism of Spinoza and d’Holbach when the principle of equality is perceived as a similarly intricate part of radical enlightenment ideals? Why is religious criticism treated as more important than other radical issues such as equality, democracy, tolerance, and education, when these issues, like religion, go to the ‘root’ of society? If Spinoza and d’Holbach, and the many other philosophers who did not believe that men and women should be equal, are to receive the honorary title of ‘radical authors’ in spite of their inegalitarian views, then Dorothea Erxleben’s radicalism should be equally acknowledged in spite or her lack of religious critique.
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Article IV
Against Scholasticism: Contemporary Perspectives on Anna Maria van Schurman’s Criticism of Metaphysics

Abstract
In this article, I will argue that there are remarkable similarities to be found between current deflationist critiques of mainstream analytic metaphysics and the arguments presented by early modern pietist thinker, Anna Maria van Schurman (1607-1678). In recent years, critics of contemporary metaphysics have pointed out certain parallels between the dominating neo-Quinean approach to metaphysics and traditional scholastic metaphysics (van Fraassen 2002; Ladyman and Ross 2007). However, no one has yet compared the objections raised against these two schools of metaphysics. That is the purpose of this article, which contributes, firstly, to research on van Schurman by introducing theoretically profound points from a virtually unstudied chapter of her autobiography, Eukleria (1673). And, secondly, to ongoing debates in metametaphysics by providing a survey of existing arguments against metaphysics, as well as a historical perspective on current debates.

Structurally, I open with a systematic reconstruction of van Schurman’s arguments against metaphysics (1). This is followed by a contextualization of her position within its original seventeenth-century setting (2). Next, I introduce her arguments into a contemporary metametaphysical context, comparing individual points to modern-day criticisms of metaphysics (3). And, finally, I discuss which contemporary notion of antimetaphysics best encapsulates van Schurman’s original critique (4).

Keywords: Anna Maria van Schurman; metaphysics; contemporary analytic philosophy; metametaphysics; deflationism.

1. Introduction
Metaphysics is a notoriously controversial field within the philosophical enterprise. By some it is considered the ‘crown jewel’ of philosophy, while others believe it to be sheer nonsense. In recent years, critics of mainstream metaphysics have called attention to what they consider to be a “reversion to a seventeenth-century style of metaphysics” (van Fraassen 2002, xviii). Some go so far as to refer to standard analytic metaphysics as ‘neo-scholastic’ metaphysics (Ladyman and Ross 2007, vii), or, with a polemical turn of phrase, “neoQuinean scholastic mumbo-jumbo” (Sider 2009). These attacks are coming primarily from naturalist and empiricist philosophers, as well as ordinary language theorists. What these critics might not have considered is that, in a similar way, their critiques resemble concerns raised by early modern opponents of scholasticism; criticisms voiced by people,
whom modern thinkers like Bas van Fraassen and James Ladyman might not have expected to agree with, much less seen as philosophical allies.

In this article, I will reconstruct and discuss the arguments of one such early modern critic of metaphysics, namely Anna Maria van Schurman (1607-1678). My aim is twofold: First, to make clear the continual relevance of van Schurman’s original arguments by comparing them to points from current debates on the role and value of metaphysics. Such a comparison, spanning almost four hundred years, will reveal the overlooked and surprising similarities between current critics of analytic metaphysics and early modern critics of scholasticism, making unlikely ‘comrades in arms’ of science-loving naturalists and anti-intellectual pietists. My second aim is to show how van Schurman’s religiously founded criticism (which would earn her the title of anti-metaphysician in her original seventeenth-century context) would, in a contemporary context, place her among the metametaphysicians – albeit in the skeptical end of the spectrum. Rather than signifying the departure from a philosophical approach to knowledge, these criticisms are today considered important contributions to philosophy, developing and improving our methods of thinking about the world. The fact that these criticisms have since been incorporated into philosophy also adds another layer to the story of van Schurman’s intellectual identity, and the quest to unravel her complicated relationship with philosophy, knowledge, and faith.

The structure of the article will be as follows: first, I will begin with a systematic and detailed reconstruction of van Schurman’s arguments (1). Then, I will briefly contextualize her criticism in its original seventeenth-century setting. As I will show, she positions herself in opposition to the dominant school of philosophy at the time, namely scholasticism (2). Next, I will introduce van Schurman into a contemporary metametaphysical context, comparing her individual points to arguments made by modern-day critics of metaphysics such as Amie Thomasson, Eli Hirsch, and Bas van Fraassen. Based on the parallels between these arguments, I will argue that van Schurman’s views should be seen as contributing to the field of metametaphysics (3). And, finally, I will discuss which contemporary notion of anti-metaphysics best encapsulates van Schurman’s original critique, applying a conceptual framework developed by Karen Bennett (2009) (4).

2. Reconstructing van Schurman’s criticism of metaphysics

Van Schurman’s unforgiving criticism of metaphysics is presented in the third chapter of her autobiography Eukleria, or Choosing the Better Part (1673); a chapter dedicated to questioning the epistemic and moral value of metaphysics, physics, and moral philosophy.
under the common name ‘the human sciences’ (*scientia humana*).\(^{103}\) The following analysis is exploratory, as it deals with text materials that have not yet been translated into English, and which have received virtually no scholarly attention.\(^{104}\) This is puzzling as the third chapter deals explicitly with questions about knowledge and truth, which are without doubt of interest to historians of philosophy. One explanation might be that the book is presented as primarily an autobiography, as well as a defense of her unpopular choice to join a small religious community under the leadership of the defrocked French priest, Jean de Labadie (1610-1674). But apart from the detailed descriptions of her life and central beliefs, the work offers profound reflections on the philosophical studies that made van Schurman famous throughout Europe.\(^{105}\)

Although the chapters in *Eukleria* do follow a chronological and thematic structure, the arguments presented (especially in the third chapter, which deals with metaphysics) are multifarious and not easily disentangled from one another. Therefore, what I will be attempting in this section is a systematic reconstruction of what I consider to be the main points of criticism raised against the practice and practitioners of metaphysics. I will stay as close to her own formulations as the process of translation allows and refrain from applying modern terminology at this point. For the sake of clarity, I have chosen to name the individual arguments. These labels do not figure in the original text but will make the subsequent comparison with modern metaphysical debates easier to follow. I will begin with the most fundamental issue, namely the question of whether the field of metaphysics has produced any substantial knowledge whatsoever.

**Metaphysics as empty abstraction (a)**

Van Schurman’s main criticism (and the one with the most fatal consequences for philosophy) is that metaphysics is completely void of knowledge. Rather than providing answers to fundamental metaphysical questions such as ‘what is the true nature of reality?’ ‘What is the essence of things in themselves?’ and, most importantly, ‘what is the nature of God?’ this science only offers “shadow images” of things and empty “human vessels” (van Schurman 1673, 37). Van Schurman is here referring to the theoretical concepts that constitute the fabric of metaphysical thinking. She finds these “logical and metaphysical terms” to be lacking any real substance, calling them “artificial capsules of

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\(^{103}\) At the time of writing, only the first two chapters of *Eukleria* have been translated into English, which was skillfully done by Joyce Irwin in the book *Whether a Christian Woman Should be Educated* (1998). All quotes from the rest of the book are from the original Latin publication from 1673. The translations are my own.

\(^{104}\) The only other text to deal explicitly with the third chapter of *Eukleria* is Angela Roothaan’s contribution to the 1996 publication *Choosing the Better Part* (eds. Baar, Löwensteyn, Monteiro, and Sneller). However, this text does not offer a reconstruction of van Schurman’s arguments, nor does it focus specifically on metaphysics (Roothaan 1996).

\(^{105}\) For more on van Schurman’s biography, see Beek 2010; Larsen 2016.
things” (artificiosae capsulae rerum) or “human concepts” (conceptus humani) meant only to express the thoughts of scholars in a briefer and more convenient way (van Schurman 1673, 38). ‘Human’ is here meant in opposition to ‘divine’ and carries with it the negative connotations of fallibility, imperfection, and corruption. So, when van Schurman accuses metaphysics of relying on mere ‘human concepts’ this implies that these concepts are insufficient and futile in comparison with things that originate in God (such as nature or revelation).

This rich and impressive terminology which makes use of words like essence, substance, and infinity, might tempt one to think that metaphysics can help us to understand God, but in reality, van Schurman argues, these words only scratch the surface. This is because they are pure fabrications conjured from the overactive imaginations of philosophers. They are only good for explaining what is in the minds of metaphysicians, as that is where they came from (van Schurman 1673, 39). If we really want to understand God, we must first “correct or annihilate” these philosophical ways of thinking about God, in which his “attributes are derived from his essence or his Godliness, [and] his omnipresence from his infinity” (van Schurman 1673, 39). This “dry and superficial” (arida ac superficialis) science of metaphysics cannot fathom the real supremacy of God.

Neither do metaphysical concepts such as “the concept of the thing itself” (entis ipsius conceptus) provide any clear or profound understanding of reality. Despite the fact that ontology is a central domain of metaphysics, van Schurman finds nothing in this science that could “tempt our souls into an intimate contemplation and cognition of these (the things)” (van Schurman 1673, 39). In her experience “things and concepts are often very different from each other”, as concepts are necessarily abstract and detached from lived experience (van Schurman 1673, 53). In short, this criticism concerns the epistemic value of metaphysics, which van Schurman believes to be non-existent. In her view, metaphysicians promise certainty and truth but do not deliver. Instead, they offer abstract concepts with no root in reality.

Metaphysics as obscuring divine truth (b)

Having determined that metaphysics does not reveal any profound truths about the world, van Schurman takes her criticism one step further, arguing that metaphysical thinking actually “blocks the path to divine truth” (van Schurman 1673, 38). According to her, if we adopt this philosophical mindset, “our reason, in a way, becomes everything (…), leaving no room for true supernatural wisdom” (van Schurman 1673, 38). In other words, if we use philosophical terminology to examine the world around us, we will fail to see all those things that do not fit into any metaphysical or logical system. Supernatural phenomena would then either be overlooked or they would be misinterpreted to
correspond to our preconceived metaphysical notions. For this reason, van Schurman argues that it would be “better for one, if he had remained a blank slate” (van Schurman 1673, 38).

In line with pietist principles, van Schurman emphasizes the “simplicity of faith” over the obscurity of the sciences (van Schurman 1998, 94). She believes that the sciences, including metaphysics, overcomplicate things that are, in fact, trivial and simple. Divine truth, which is communicated in Scripture and through revelation, need not be complex. It is only when scholars begin to debate truth that all these complications arise. In writing about why she chose to join the Labadist community, she mentions that it was exactly this simplicity that drew her to the teachings of Jean de Labadie in the first place. Unlike the theoretical and speculative studies that had previously captured her imagination, de Labadie’s sermons offered a “simple explanation” that spoke to the “inmost feelings of [her] heart” (74). After leaving her academic life behind, she started to believe that in everything we do, we should let “simplicity (...) be the rule” (van Schurman 1998, 79). By keeping it simple, we avoid spending too much time on insignificant and unnecessary matters, which is the focus of her next argument.

Metaphysics as a waste of time (c)

It becomes clear that, if metaphysics has no epistemic value, and might even undermine other types of understanding, any time spent studying such a subject would be an utter waste of time. And, unsurprisingly, this idea does appear several times in the text (van Schurman 1998, 84, 89–91). However, van Schurman believes this to be true of all sciences, including metaphysics, as she came to regard scientific study as unnecessary for attaining the ultimate goal, namely salvation. She repeatedly laments her “lack of moderation in studies”, regretting that she “did not always give first place to the things that could glorify God” (van Schurman 1998, 90). Because, in her view, even if studying is not in itself harmful, it is nonetheless unnecessary, making it a waste of time; time that could otherwise have been spent living an exemplary Christian life. Besides, as van Schurman points out, the sciences are indeed very likely to monopolize all our time, given that the pursuit of knowledge is never-ending. She describes how, in her youth, she “considered so many and such different aids necessary for understanding Scripture that this study would easily exceed the bounds of the very brief life of mortal human beings” (van Schurman 1998, 90–91). Going on to say that if “the grace of God [had not] ordained otherwise, death would have overtaken me while still in these preparations” (91).

106 On the role of ‘simplicity’ in Pietism, see Yoder 2020, 4; Breul and Hahn-Bruckart 2021, 351.
After having spent the better part of a lifetime learning ancient languages and reading classical texts, van Schurman concluded that none of this is really necessary for those who are chosen by God: For them “three books are more than sufficient (...), namely the book of Scripture, the book of Nature, and the book of inward grace, in order to know God and themselves (...), in this knowledge all true wisdom is located” (van Schurman 1998, 92). To the born-again Christian, books on metaphysics, or any science for that matter, are worthless compared to “the slightest experience of the love of God” (92).

The incomprehensible nature of metaphysical truths (d)

So far, the main takeaway has been that the study of metaphysical questions is useless and futile. But is this because there are no metaphysical truths? No, van Schurman does, indeed, believe in metaphysical truths (like the existence of God). The discipline is futile because metaphysical questions cannot be answered by using human reason. We simply cannot grasp the true nature of reality or of things in themselves without the help of divine inspiration. Throughout the text, van Schurman expresses suspicion and hostility towards the faculty of reason and the philosophers’ persistent belief in this human capacity (van Schurman 1673, 37, 46; 1998, 93–94). She believes that truth originates in God, and any truth, we as human beings have access to, is only obtainable by the mercy of God. In her words: “Where is the truth of all perfection, which metaphysicians assign to things, except in God?” (van Schurman 1673, 41).

As expected, it is particularly with respect to questions concerning the nature and essence of God that van Schurman finds metaphysics to be overly confident, refusing to recognize the boundaries of reason. Philosophers want God to comply with the laws of logic, producing rational proofs of his existence, instead of accepting the inherent paradoxes that God presents us with. This is best illustrated in the enigmatic figure of Christ, about whom van Schurman writes that God chose “an admirable and incomprehensible medium for his union with man” (van Schurman 1673, 49, my emphasis). Through this medium he joined “the Highest Good with the lowest, the uncreated with creation, perfection with imperfection” (49). These paradoxes “reveal that his union with man originally came to pass in an ineffable way”, as Christ was both “God and man, creator and creation, son of God and of man” (49). Because she considers God to be the source of all truth, the fact that his being is inexplicable undermines the validity of all other metaphysical truths.

The moral hazards of studying metaphysics (e)

Finally, I arrive at the moral concerns that van Schurman raises against the discipline of metaphysics. Among her worries are the vices of deception, arrogance, vanity, blasphemy, and atheism. Most pronounced is the accusation that metaphysicians (and the learned in
general) are vain and proud people, who believe themselves to be better than the uneducated mob. Here, she blames the use of esoteric philosophical terminology, which, she believes, philosophers actively use to fool laypeople into thinking that they are smarter than they are. She compares these learned men to merchants, who “make use of peculiar signs and characters on their merchandise to prevent other people from knowing its true price” (van Schurman 1673, 38). What is more, they keep up this charade in the public literary sphere by flattering and complementing each other for their intellectual achievements. Van Schurman finds this practice completely unacceptable, calling them “lying eulogists” who “as they sing each other’s praises, transform themselves into mere animals, living for glory” (van Schurman 1998, 78).

Most serious, however, is the claim that the ‘human sciences’ could turn scholars into atheists. This, she argues, happens because metaphysicians (and, to an even larger extent, natural philosophers) become so fascinated with the study of nature and things in themselves “that they often become atheists, and are content with creation alone” (van Schurman 1673, 42). Here, she may very well be referring to the materialist or mechanist movement within philosophy, the advocates of which were frequently accused of atheism because they appeared to defend a worldview in which God was superfluous. Another aspect of philosophical and metaphysical studies that, she argues, might lead to atheism is the persistent skepticism, which may cause philosophers to lose their faith. She explains how “the learned and the philosophers, who investigate the most hidden secrets of nature, so often become caught in a net of doubts and questions that is it right to say that they transform everything into thorns and snares” (van Schurman 1673, 42). Again, this may lead to atheism, as they come to doubt everything, including God’s existence.

This completes the reconstruction of van Schurman’s arguments against the field of metaphysics. In the following, I will discuss her anti-metaphysical views in their original seventeenth-century context in order to show who her opponents were and what notion of metaphysics she was rejecting. Then, I will travel four hundred years up to the present day and discuss how her arguments fare in a contemporary philosophical context.

3. Metaphysics in seventeenth-century Utrecht: Van Schurman’s original opponents

The intellectual environment in Utrecht, where van Schurman spent most of her adult life, was dominated by two fractions: the well-established scholastic philosophers, spearheaded by professor of theology and later rector at the University of Utrecht, Gisbertus Voetius (1589-1676), and the new growing movement of Cartesians,

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107 It is not clear from the text, whom exactly she is referring to, as someone who has become atheist due to their studies of nature. But she may be referring to some of the contemporary materialist philosophers who were publicly accused of atheism, such as e.g., Thomas Hobbes and Baruch de Spinoza (Tuck 1992; Nadler 2011, chap. 7).
championed most noticeably by Henricus Regius (1598-1679), professor of theoretical medicine. Both taught at the newly founded University of Utrecht, at which Anna Maria van Schurman became the first female student. Between 1636 and 1650, the university became a central battleground for philosophical and theological debates with great impact on the public intellectual sphere in the Netherlands (van Rinsum and Koops 2016).

So, when van Schurman rages against the ‘metaphysicians’ and philosophers more generally, the targets of her critique should be found among these people and schools of thought. Like in many other European countries, Cartesianism was gaining footing in the Dutch Republic and, during the seventeenth century, Cartesian philosophy started to appear on the curricula, challenging the monopoly of Aristotelian metaphysics (Hutton 2015b, 15, 42; Clemenson 2017). Van Schurman, like many of her European contemporaries, was not convinced by this ‘new philosophy’. However, in Eukleria, Descartes is primarily cast as the (implicit) antagonist of the section dedicated to contemporary physics due to his mechanistic views on nature and not in the paragraphs on metaphysics. In these paragraphs, it is the scholasticism of Voetius and his followers that figures as the main opponent. This is not too surprising, however, considering that this was the kind of metaphysical teaching she herself would have been subjected to during her time at the university and as Voetius’ protégé. We see the influence of Voetius’ reformed scholasticism on van Schurman’s early writings such as the Dissertatio, which is filled with references to Aristotle and written in a traditional syllogistic style. Voetius’ own works are similarly written using the scholastic method, working through theological and philosophical issues with the help of quaestiones, responsiones, objectiones, exceptiones, problemata, and conclusiones (Broeyer 2010, 128).

Voetius’ views on metaphysics can be characterized as a kind of orthodox Protestant Aristotelianism, strongly inspired by the Spanish Jesuit philosopher of the Second

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108 For a detailed analysis of the emergence of Cartesianism in the Netherlands and the querelle d’Utrecht, see Verbeek 1992.
109 It should be noted that van Schurman did not ‘break the glass ceiling’ for women at the university, as it would take more than two centuries before another woman was admitted to a Dutch university (Aletta Jacobs in 1871).
110 For more on the early critics of Descartes, see Verbeek 1992; Antoine-Mahut and Roux 2018; Schmaltz, Antoine-Mahut, and Nadler 2019, pt. 3.
111 On Voetius’ scholastic approach to philosophy and theology, see Asselt and Dekker 1995.
112 For more on the argumentative style and content of the Dissertatio, see van Eck 1996; on the scholastic method of reasoning, and the role of scholasticism after the Reformation, see Asselt 2011; McGraw 2019.
Scholasticism, Francisco Suárez (1548-1617). This is seen most clearly in his disputation on substantial forms, in which he argues that if one does not commit to the Aristotelian notion of forms, one will not be able to account for the substantial character of individual beings (Verbeek 1992, 18). The disputation as a whole was intended to refute the Cartesian separation of the soul and the body, which is why Voetius spends the second half of the text defending the notion of a substantial union of the two. This disputation is but one contribution to the infamous *querelle d’Utrecht*, which led to the official condemnation of Descartes’ philosophy and a prohibition against its teaching (Verbeek 1992, 19). The reason given for this was, among others, that Cartesian metaphysics diverted from ‘ancient philosophy’, i.e., the teachings of Aristotle. Voetius wanted to protect these established metaphysical principles, which had been reinterpreted by scholastic philosophers to coincide with Christian teachings, from what he identified as a new and dangerous atheist philosophy (Verbeek 1991).

It is this systematic form of scholastic metaphysics exercised in public disputations that van Schurman later accuses of being dry, superficial, and futile; it is their concepts she finds to lack a concrete connection to the real world as well as the divine inspiration and emotional reverence of religious experience. When she states that metaphysicians are vain and arrogant, her finger is pointed at Voetius and his colleagues, and their (in her view) presumptuous attempts at settling religious and metaphysical questions by way of systematic, theoretical disputations (van Schurman 1998, 94). Despite internal differences within scholastic metaphysics (exemplified in its separation into Thomist, Scotist, and Jesuit schools), the tradition still maintained its dominance on university curricula and in intellectual debates in the first half of the seventeenth century. The fact that van Schurman was in opposition to this prevalent notion of metaphysics positioned her outside of established academic philosophy. But her relation to philosophy changes character when we consider her arguments in the context of current debates on the value of metaphysics, and that is what I will proceed to do in the following.

4. Critics of contemporary metaphysics

Today, the metaphysical landscape has expanded far beyond the seventeenth-century notion of metaphysics. One reason for this is that “a philosopher who denied the existence of those things that had once been seen as constituting the subject-matter of metaphysics (...) would now be considered to be making thereby a metaphysical assertion”

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113 Suárez’ metaphysical theories, presented in his *Disputationes Metaphysicae* (1597), were widely read throughout Europe in the seventeenth century and quoted in metaphysical textbooks by Timpler, Combach, Scheibler, and others (Garber, Ayers, and Thiel 2000, 216).

114 It should be noted, however, that Voetius’ relation to philosophy was complex, and, like van Schurman, he strived to put faith first in his dealings with theological and metaphysical questions, emphasizing asceticism, piety, and close readings of Scripture (Schuurman 2010; Baines 2022).
(van Inwagen, Sullivan, and Bernstein 2023). This means that metaphysics has begun to absorb its critics with the reasoning that any stance on metaphysical questions (whether affirmative or dismissive) does, in fact, have a place within the philosophical field. So, today metaphysics is a much more complex and pluralistic discipline than it was in the early modern period.

One clear illustration of this expanded view of metaphysics is the emergence of metametaphysics, a field devoted to the study of “methodological issues that arise within metaphysics” (Miller and Bliss 2020, 1). Philosophers in this discipline go so far as to question, not only what should be the method and theoretical criteria of a sound metaphysical thesis, but also whether metaphysics is even possible or meaningful as an epistemic project. As a matter of fact, there has been a growing interest in recent years in questions concerning the “legitimacy of ontological debates” – ontology, now considered the most important metaphysical field (Thomasson 2014, 18). And, surprisingly, many of the skeptical arguments raised by metaphysical anti-realists, deflationists, semanticists, and the “neo-Carnapian naysayers” echo the points made by van Schurman hundreds of years earlier (Bennett 2009, 38). Only now, they are considered part of philosophy, and as having significant theoretical implications within the realm of metaphysics.

In this section, I will identify traces of van Schurman’s anti-metaphysical thinking in current metametaphysical debates, referring to the following modern-day skeptics of mainstream metaphysics: Amie Thomasson, Jonathan Schaffer, Colin McGinn, David Chalmers, Eli Hirsch, and Bas van Fraassen. I will show how certain arguments have been repeated almost word for word, whereas others have taken on a new form, more relevant to modern philosophers, while still maintaining the basic ideas. But first, some preliminary remarks on the scope and focus of this examination.

Mapping out the current field of metaphysics is an impossible task, so I will not claim to provide a complete overview of contemporary criticisms. Instead, I will focus solely on the ones that mirror van Schurman’s original arguments. It should also be mentioned that all the critics I cover in this article belong exclusively to the field of Anglo-American analytic philosophy, even though there is a rich tradition of criticism of metaphysics in other schools of thought such as deconstructivism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and feminist and queer theory. This is because, for some reason, the

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115 It should be noted that few of these philosophers are completely dismissive of metaphysical thinking but instead skeptical of a specific approach to metaphysics (i.e., the neo-Quinean approach), and therefore many of their arguments are rather revisionist than skeptical. I will come back to these nuances in the comparisons below.

116 Jacques Derrida famously criticized the ‘metaphysics of presence’ (1972). The relationship between modern phenomenology and metaphysics is ambiguous (Zahavi 2003), but there are strands of phenomenology that expand on the later Heidegger’s criticism of metaphysics (1978). Gianni Vattimo, the most influential proponent of postmodern hermeneutics, also engaged critically with the Western tradition of metaphysics and its interpretations of being (1994). And finally, feminist philosophy offers
The likenesses to van Schurman’s views are simply greater within this branch of philosophy. This might have something to do with the rise of neo-Quinean realism, which has introduced a new and more ‘constructive’ way of thinking about metaphysical questions. This neo-Quinean approach, which has become so popular that David Manley refers to it simply as “mainstream metaphysics”, has inspired “a whole industry within philosophy that had no equal before: the industry of ‘formulating an ontology’” (Manley 2009, 4; Thomasson 2014, 3). This has brought on a wave of critics, who question the legitimacy of this newfound confidence displayed by neo-Quinean philosophers, and with it, the legitimacy of their metaphysical theories (Thomasson 2014, 3). With a bold and, admittedly, anachronistic simplification, some critics have argued that these neo-Quinean philosophers have become the scholastics of our day. However, the purpose of this investigation is not to explain why contemporary metaphysical debates in analytic philosophy resemble seventeenth-century debates. This task has already been undertaken by other scholars (see Ladyman and Ross 2007; Novák et al. 2012). The aim here is to show how critics of this neo-Quinean approach to metaphysics resemble early modern critics of scholasticism. So, in the following paragraphs, I will present four points of comparison between van Schurman’s views and modern-day arguments, continuously pointing out the similarities as well as the inevitable differences that emerge over the course of 350 years.

Obscurity

One of the most common and frequent objections to metaphysics is that it is obscure and speculative nonsense. It has been the calling card of any self-respecting anti-metaphysician, since Carnap’s famous attack on Heidegger’s grammatically dubious sentence “Das Nichts selbst nichtet” (Carnap 1931, 229). And, today, it is present in the neo-Carnapian criticisms of Quine’s ontological project (Yablo 1998; Thomasson 2014), in the neo-pragmatist attempt to resolve metaphysical confusions (Macarthur 2008; Rorty 1991), the resurgence of ordinary language philosophy (Hirsch 2002; Laugier 2013; Crary and de Lara 2018), and in empiricist and naturalist critiques of a priori intuitions (van Fraassen 2002; Ladyman and Ross 2007). The common denominator of most of these


117 For a recent defense of the neo-Quinean approach to existence questions, see van Inwagen 2009; Sider 2011.

118 This depiction of Quine as a traditional (even scholastic) metaphysician has been disputed by, among others, Schaffer, who argues that Quine and Carnap were not so different, referring to both of them as “anti-metaphysical pragmatists” (Schaffer 2009, 349). Schaffer is nonetheless critical of Quine’s rethinking of metaphysics, which reduces metaphysics to ontology (see discussion below).
approaches is the idea that metaphysical propositions are either meaningless (and should therefore be dismissed) or they are trivial.

In his famous article “On What There Is”, Quine is quick to admit that one could give a straightforward and, in that sense, trivial answer to his titular question; and the answer would be ‘everything’ (Quine 1948, 21). But he goes on to say, “there can be disagreement over cases” (21). These disagreements have now shaped the field of contemporary metaphysics for more than fifty years, but some philosophers think that Quine should have settled for ‘everything’. Jonathan Schaffer, for instance, argues that, despite disagreements, “contemporary existence debates are trivial, in that the entities in question obviously exist” (Schaffer 2009, 357). Schaffer proceeds to demonstrate that existence questions are trivial by solving four of them in five pages, and then concluding that “contemporary metaphysics, insofar as it has been inspired by the Quinean task, has confused itself with trivialities” (361). To give an example, Schaffer answers the ontological question ‘are there properties?’ by referring to our everyday intuition that the sentence ‘there are properties that you and I share’ (such as having eyes) is true. That is, he settles ontological disputes by way of everyday truisms. This is a part of his permissivist view of existence, which asserts that all meanings of the word ‘exist’ are acceptable, as long as they are not internally incoherent. Consequently, God, the Devil, and Santa Claus all exist (either as real or fictional characters).

Schaffer’s critique resembles that of Amie Thomasson, who argues that current metaphysics has become too suspicious of ‘easy’ answers. After accusing neo-Quinean philosophers of making “the epistemology of metaphysics obscure”, Thomasson argues for her own deflationary approach to metaphysics, which, according to her, “enables existence questions to be easily – often trivially and always straightforwardly – answerable” (Thomasson 2014, 16, 23). So, like Schaffer, Thomasson thinks that existence questions are, in fact, trivial, but she does not consider this to be the problem. What is problematic is when we debate them as though they are complex and profound, and that is what she accuses neo-Quinean metaphysics of doing.

While Schaffer and Thomasson still assign some role to metaphysics (albeit a transformed metaphysics), Bas van Fraassen takes a more radical stance against the metaphysical enterprise as such, arguing that it “subverts our understanding both of our own humanity and of the divine – be it real or unreal – by its development of a detailed, intricate understanding of simulacra under the same names” (van Fraassen 2002, 4). In other words, metaphysicians take words and phenomena that we talk about and understand within our everyday language (such as ‘tables’ or, more generally, ‘things’) and they imbue them with so much specialized meaning that they become alien to us. Van Fraassen thinks of metaphysics as a creative yet unnecessary fabrication of terms and
categories, which are projected onto the world, thereby causing more chaos than clarification. Joining “the empiricists’ revolt against metaphysics”, van Fraassen casts doubt on the self-image of metaphysics as the foundation of philosophical thought, without which philosophers and scientists would be unable to claim to possess knowledge of any kind (xiii). Instead, he turns this image on its head, seeing “metaphysical concoctions not as underpinnings but as the canopies of baroque four-poster beds” (van Fraassen 2002, 3). With this, he implies that the field only provides unnecessary embellishments rather than fundamental knowledge. So, instead of providing new insights and clearing up mysteries, van Fraassen finds that metaphysics is concerned with trying to explain things that most people feel like they already know (such as ‘does the world exist?’). “Paradoxically,” he writes, “metaphysicians interpret what we initially understand into something hardly anyone understands, and then insist that we cannot do without that” (3).

Van Fraassen’s critique mirrors both van Schurman’s charge that metaphysics complicate matters that are actually simple, and the moral criticism of metaphysicians’ excessive sense of self-importance. Furthermore, he also appears to agree with van Schurman that metaphysics is not only impotent but also harmful and undermining of other approaches to knowledge (5). To van Schurman, the issue of intricate scholastic metaphysics is that it clouds our perception of divine truth, which is characterized by being simple and self-evident. Leaving these religious themes behind, modern critics argue in a similar way that the obscurity of metaphysics impedes our understanding of the world, as it transforms trivial existence questions into complicated speculative problems.

There are, however, considerable differences to address between modern-day philosophers’ critiques of obscure metaphysical language and van Schurman’s. Most importantly, contemporary philosophers tend to believe that this issue can be solved either by setting up new and more commonsensical criteria for metaphysical debates (Schaffer 2009; Thomasson 2014) or by changing our expectations for knowledge, so that we may accept ‘empirical accuracy’ rather than ‘absolute truth’, and thereby avoid “inflationary metaphysics” (van Fraassen 1980). Van Schurman, on the other hand, does not give up on absolute truth but believe to have found it elsewhere, namely in religious experience and divinely inspired readings of Scripture.

**Verbal disputes: a matter of terminology**

Metaphysical debates are easily recognized due in part to their highly specialized and esoteric language. Here, philosophers engage in discussions about the existence of things like qualia, monads, universals, abstract objects, and the color ‘grue’. Not to mention the many ‘isms’ one needs to be familiar with to navigate these discussions (realism,
physicalism, epiphenomenalism, verificationism, perdurantism, etc.). What is more, these concepts and categories are subject to never-ending debates, constantly being renegotiated and redefined. In recent years, some scholars have asked whether these disputes may have lost touch with the subject matter they are supposedly discussing, getting distracted by petty quarrels about semantics.

Philosophers such as Eli Hirsch, Alan Sidelle, and David Chalmers have argued that many of the central disagreements in metaphysics are simply verbal, meaning that participants do not genuinely disagree on the matter at hand, but are merely talking past each other (Hirsch 2005; 2009; Sidelle 2007; Chalmers 2011). Although the words they use are the same, the meanings they attach to these words are dissimilar, leading to the propositions having different truth-values within each participant’s own linguistic framework. In such cases, Hirsch argues, “nothing is substantively at stake (...) beyond the correct use of language” (Hirsch 2005, 67). This includes such debates as that on the existence of physical objects, the dispute between perdurantism and endurantism, and the seemingly trivial question of whether a glass is a kind of cup (Hirsch 2005; 2009). As these disagreements are neither factual nor substantive in Hirsch’s opinion, he concludes that the only way to resolve such disputes is “by appealing to common sense or ordinary language” (Hirsch 2005, 70).

But how serious is this problem for the study of metaphysics? According to Chalmers, “almost every philosophical dispute has been diagnosed as verbal at some point” (Chalmers 2011, 517). This, however, does not eliminate the possibility that some of these disputes could be framed in a way that allows for proper deliberation of the substantive claims involved. But it does tell us that language plays an important role in perpetuating certain debates that might not be substantive (‘substantive’ meaning any dispute that is not purely verbal, i.e., that cannot be resolved by clearing up misunderstandings about the terms involved or referring to ordinary language). Hirsch is very careful to say that he only believes certain disputes to be verbal and that many metaphysical discussions are still meaningful and necessary. Chalmers, on the other hand, is less cautious in assessing the scale of the problem, stating that “this phenomenon is familiar and ubiquitous in science, in philosophy, and in everyday life” (Chalmers 2011, 517).

As mentioned above, van Schurman finds the highbrow academic terminology of metaphysics both exclusionary and futile. She considers these abstract concepts to be pure

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119 Since Hirsch first put forward the notion of ‘verbal disputes’ the term has been the subject of considerable debate, some arguing that the specific disputes, which Hirsch and Chalmers identify as merely verbal, are in fact substantive (Bennett 2009; Jenkins 2014; Belleri 2018), and others arguing that the distinction between verbal and factual disputes should be rejected (Graham 2014; Koslicki and Massin 2023).
fabrciations and criticizes the academic community for contributing to the creation of new concepts and theoretical languages that drive us further away from the ‘original language’, which, according to the Bible, existed before the blasphemous construction of the tower of Babel. She writes: “As were there not enough languages in the world due to the pride and curse of Babel”, philosophers have decided to think up “new expressions, formulas and barbaric phrases, which would, without a doubt, be left behind in Babel, if Christ ruled over all” (van Schurman 1673, 38).

This view, that metaphysical terminology leads to alienation and conflict rather than improving our knowledge of the world, resembles current critiques of verbalness in philosophical disputes. Common to both criticisms is the pronounced suspicion that philosophers tend to get lost in terminology and, eager to debate, fail to see the common ground between them. They fail to acknowledge that these metaphysical questions only cause trouble because of the way we talk about them. And that, at the end of the day, we do not actually disagree on what a table is, or whether the world exists.

The main difference, however, between the defenders of this semantic approach and van Schurman’s attack on metaphysical language is how they suggest that we should react to this problem. In Hirsch’s case, the answer is to engage in the project of weeding out verbal disputes by referring to ordinary language, and then continue discussing questions that pose substantive philosophical challenges. Chalmers similarly believes the concept of ‘verbal dispute’ to be an effective methodological tool for dismissing unnecessary disagreements in philosophy and identifying actual (substantive) disagreements that should be dealt with by philosophers. Van Schurman, on the other hand, finds the problem of philosophical terminology insurmountable, and calls for the complete abandonment of metaphysical study in favor of a religious approach to these questions. Neither Hirsch nor Chalmers go as far as van Schurman in claiming that it is the philosophical language itself that is at fault. Even if the critique of verbal disputes bring attention to confusions and ambiguities in philosophical terminology, these critics do not call for the abandonment of concepts per se, only that these concepts be reevaluated to coincide with ordinary English uses. It should be noted, however, that van Schurman clearly finds questions about the existence of God (and similar metaphysical propositions) to be substantive. Nevertheless, she does not consider intellectual quarrels about abstract concepts to be the way to reach an understanding of these.

Unanswerable questions

Kant famously argued that there are limits to human understanding, and that these limits are reached when it comes to metaphysical questions such as ‘is the world infinite or does it have a beginning in time?’ and ‘is reality made up of simple parts or do simple parts not exist?’ When we try to answer such questions, we run into contradictions as either
side of the dichotomy is equally reasonable. This idea is essentially based on an understanding of the human mind – or reason – as unfit for finding answers to metaphysical speculation. This skeptical argument dates back much further than Kant and can also be found outside of the Western tradition of thought. And, still, the argument persists today, although in new and updated versions.

Colin McGinn, a leading proponent of the philosophical position ‘new mysterianism’, argues that human beings have not developed the necessary cognitive abilities to solve the ‘hard’ problems of philosophy. These problems (e.g., the problem of consciousness, which McGinn deals with at length) are mysteries to us; they are unknowable due to the “contingent cognitive capacities” that we possess as human beings (McGinn 1993, 3). This does not mean that the specific problem or the phenomenon that one is trying to understand is inherently mysterious (McGinn is a committed physicalist), but rather that evolution has not granted us the ability to understand such things. He writes: “[P]hilosophical perplexities arise in us because of definite inherent limitations on our epistemic faculties, not because philosophical questions concern entities or facts that are intrinsically problematic or peculiar or dubious” (McGinn 1993, 2).

McGinn’s argument is rooted in biology, and the assumption that it “is a general property of evolved organisms, such as ourselves, to exhibit areas of cognitive weakness or incapacity, resulting from our biological constitutions” (McGinn 1993, 5). Weaknesses are easily detected in our physical design but obscured when it comes to the functionality of our minds. But, as McGinn argues, “it is entirely reasonable to expect naturally based limits to human understanding” due to the composition of the brain, or, simply put, “[w]e are not gods, cognitively speaking” (McGinn 1993, 5). From his point of view, this is “the true epistemological predicament we are in: namely, that we can formulate questions about the world that we lack the faculties to answer” (11). Our language and our reasoning have the ability to venture beyond their own limits, but these attempts are doomed to fail.

The immediate similarity between this and van Schurman’s argument is apparent: both assert that human beings are not cut out for answering metaphysical questions. However, their arguments proceed in very different ways, as McGinn believes the problem to be only on the side of human understanding; that is, the world as such is not inherently irrational or mysterious – some facts are just beyond our cognitive capacities (3). And,

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120 Earlier versions of this idea exist in most philosophical traditions: For more on similarities and differences in skeptical views on reason in the East and the West, see Pathak 2021. For the Western tradition, see Popkin 1979; 2003.

121 Other notable defenders of ‘new mysterianism’ include Thomas Nagel, Noam Chomsky, and Steven Pinker.
while van Schurman agrees that human reason is limited, she appears to argue that some phenomena are, in fact, innately mysterious and paradoxical. In other words, even if our understanding were perfect these things would always be incomprehensible (e.g., the union between God and Christ).

Modesty

I now arrive at the fourth and, for the purpose of this article, final ‘echo’ of van Schurman’s critique. In general, modern-day philosophers do not seem to worry about potential moral dangers of metaphysical thinking. However, I have noticed one morally charged concern, lurking between the lines of especially the neo-Carnapian critics: the worry that metaphysics has become too audacious. In the introduction to her main work *Ontology Made Easy*, Amie Thomasson declares it her mission “to unearth the roots of a more modest, easy approach to existence questions” (Thomasson 2014, 4). The ‘immodest’ attitude, to which she refers, is to be detected in the already mentioned neo-Quinean approach to ontology, which she believes to be alluring exactly because it allows “philosophers to return to their grander ambitions of discovering fundamental features of reality – and distinguish what does and does not really exist” (13). After having spent decades confined to the conceptual analysis of ordinary language philosophy, Thomasson speculates, it must have been a very welcomed idea that philosophy might again gain access to profound truths via the quasi-scientific method that Quine introduced.122 Thomasson, on the other hand, wants to go back to thinking of the philosopher’s contribution as something that lies primarily on the conceptual side – “in analyzing the concepts in ways that can make explicit the conceptual truths that license the inferences, in addressing objections that would treat the concept as confused, in suggesting conceptual revisions, or removing doubts that rely on conceptual confusions” (21). Whether van Schurman would consider this a modest approach to philosophical question is open to interpretation. The main point here is that current philosophers also worry about metaphysics becoming overconfident or too ambitious.

Another expression of this worry is formulated by Thomas Hofweber, who is concerned with the relationship between philosophy and science. He criticizes the immodest self-importance of some philosophers, who appear to believe that scientists depend on and adjust according to the ‘results’ of metaphysical theories. Hofweber remarks that such a stance “is immodest, on the side of metaphysics, since it takes metaphysics to be of grander importance than it is” (Hofweber 2009, 263). To avoid this, philosophy should change its self-image to one that aligns better with being the handmaiden of science, rather than its master. To Hofweber, such a “modest attitude” would involve accepting “that the sciences don’t need philosophy for their final

122 Thomasson adopts this narrative from Sider 2001.
vindication, nor does philosophy have the authority to overrule the results of the sciences” (263).

As shown in the previous, van Schurman was likewise appalled by the hubris of her contemporary intellectual colleagues, who believed that, using the right scholastic methods of reasoning, they would be able to answer profound philosophical questions. But, to van Schurman, the relationship that needs careful attention is not that of science and philosophy (this divide was still being negotiated at the time), but instead that of the ‘human sciences’ (i.e., philosophy) and faith. In her opinion, philosophers should not believe that they have a unique access to truth or that they can monopolize truth. In fact, their truth is at best a supplement to religious truth and at worst an obstacle to be eliminated.

In short, Hofweber criticizes philosophers who think they know better than scientists. Thomasson criticizes those who think they know more than anyone could possibly know. And van Schurman criticizes those who think they know more than god-fearing Christians, who rely on Scripture for their understanding of the world. All three caution against the notion that metaphysics should have some special status when it comes to knowledge (Thomasson 2014, 16, 20; Hofweber 2020), but they disagree on what knowledge is and how we ought to search for it.

5. Van Schurman’s position in the current metametaphysical landscape

So far, I have compared van Schurman’s anti-metaphysical views to views championed by contemporary philosophers, thereby demonstrating, firstly, that van Schurman’s critiques are still relevant today, and, secondly, that views that in a seventeenth century context would have been deemed in opposition to metaphysics and philosophy more broadly, have today been retrieved by philosophers under the label ‘metametaphysics’. Now, I want to develop this comparison further by discussing what place van Schurman’s anti-metaphysical views would occupy in the field of metametaphysics today. Compared to modern-day thinkers, how radical was her dismissal of metaphysical thinking? In this section, I will be arguing that van Schurman’s critical position on metaphysics can be categorized as, what Karen Bennett calls, epistemicist dismissivism (Bennett 2009).

Three kinds of metaphysical dismissivism

Just as there are numerous philosophical positions within the field of metaphysics, skeptics of metaphysics also come in many different flavors. We have various types of deflationists, anti-realists, new mysterians, ordinary language philosophers, and the neo-Carnapians, to name a few. It would be unwise to go through each of these skeptical positions, as this would be a colossal task and would most likely confuse more than it would clarify. Instead, I have chosen to apply a framework presented by Karen Bennett,
who differentiates between three types on ‘dismissivism’, which she terms anti-realism, semanticism, and epistemicism (Bennett 2009). This framework will work as a point of departure for the discussion of van Schurman’s metametaphysical position. Within this framework, van Schurman’s position is most aligned with the epistemicist view, which is in some ways the least skeptical of the three. I will give a short description of this position along with my arguments for assigning van Schurman’s anti-metaphysics to this group by recalling her five allegations against seventeenth-century metaphysics.

Bennett defines epistemicist dismissivism as the view that any metaphysical proposition “is either true or false, and disputes about its truth-value are not verbal disputes. But there is little justification for believing either that it is true or that it is false” (Bennett 2009, 42). It is clear from this quotation that this view is defined in opposition to other positions; I will come back to these, and how they differ, in a moment. But, in its essence, the epistemicist view is that, in many cases, there are no grounds for choosing between different metaphysical theories, and, therefore, the given disputes should be abandoned. We simply do not have either the knowledge, the capabilities, or the methods to solve these disputes, and some of them might even be either meaningless or inconsequential.

Looking back at van Schurman’s critiques of metaphysics, we see the strongest support for assigning her this position in her argument that metaphysical truths are incomprehensible to human reason and should therefore be settled by reference to religious beliefs instead of through learned disputes (d). Van Schurman’s position shares with epistemicism the notion that we as human beings cannot settle metaphysical questions within the realm of academic discourse, and therefore any answers to these questions must be found elsewhere, or we must accept that such answers are out of our reach. If this entire domain lies outside of human capability, then there is surely no way to justify subscribing to one metaphysical theory rather than another.

If we return to the first argument in the preceding reconstruction, regarding the emptiness of metaphysical concepts (a), we likewise find support for this reading as this argument also concerns the epistemic value of metaphysical inquiry. Van Schurman considers philosophical concepts to be hollow abstractions, out of touch with lived experience and therefore unable to inform us about the world they seek to describe.

Bennett is not the only writer on metametaphysics to undertake the task of separating and ordering different deflationist and anti-metaphysical views (see also Manley 2009, 4; Sider 2009, 386–87; van Inwagen, Sullivan, and Bernstein 2023). Similar analyses could be made using these alternative means of classification. However, I would argue that her framework represents the most sophisticated tool available at the moment.

This conception of epistemicism is largely compatible with the mysterian rejection of metaphysics (McGinn 1993).
Following this logic, what sense would it then make to discuss which of these “shadow images” is to be preferred? How can we even talk of justification and truth-values if the given concepts are pure fiction? If you accept that abstract concepts are missing a link to reality, then the only sane thing would be to abandon the discussion altogether. To an atheist, discussing how many angles might fit on a pinhead would seem to be a pointless activity, as taking such a discussion seriously would necessitate believing in the existence of angles.

Following up on her second accusation, namely that metaphysical theories block our access to divine truth (b), this is also consistent with the epistemicist position. This blockage happens exactly because these debates are unsolvable. Since we have no way of justifying our alignment with either side of these metaphysical debates (Bennett offers the debates on composition or colocation as examples), it is possible to continue to develop new arguments and counterarguments in perpetuity. This endless rumination is one of the reasons van Schuman gives as to why metaphysical study can hinder our access to other forms of knowledge. In her view, scholars devote their entire lives to answering questions that will never be resolved, all the while religion provides simple and dogmatic answers to many of these problems.

Needless to say, continuing these debates when there is no end in sight could be seen as a serious waste of time (c). And even though the ‘waste of time’-argument does not unequivocally support the classification of van Schuman as specifically an epistemicist dismissivist, seen as several other deflationist positions consider some metaphysical scholarship pointless (Ladyman and Ross 2007, 29–30; Chalmers 2011, 520), it also does not contradict such a reading. From a time-optimizing perspective, it would, indeed, be better to work in a field with more readily achievable results.

Arriving at the final accusation, concerning the morally corrupting effects of metaphysical studies (e), I find that this argument also fits well with the epistemicist position. Focusing on the charge of vanity, it would certainly be very arrogant to feel justified in championing either side of a metaphysical debate on an issue that is ultimately beyond our comprehension. It takes a certain amount of confidence to call yourself a ‘universalist’ or a ‘substance dualist’. The modest approach to such disputes would be to admit that we simply do not know (whether universals exist or not, or whether mind and body are separate substances, etc.). With only the very short definition of epistemic dismissivism, we can already see how this position appears to align well with the arguments presented above.

To strengthen this case, we ought to consider whether van Schuman’s position better aligns with epistemic dismissivism than other dismissivist positions. Bennett first mentions anti-realism, which is characterized by the belief that metaphysical statements
are neither true nor false; or, in other words, they have no truth-value (Bennett 2009, 39). So, when a theist states that ‘God exists’ and the atheist offers the counterclaim that ‘God does not exist’, then the anti-realist would declare that none of the two positions can be said to be true, as we have no way of definitively confirming or denying either belief. I think there is no doubt that van Schurman is not an anti-realist, as she defends a long list of beliefs (most of them religious), which depend on metaphysical assumptions about existence, essence, reality, etc. (van Schurman 1673, 39–40, 43–44). And the fact that she does not deny metaphysical truths as such, tells us that she is not as radical in her criticism as some contemporary anti-realist philosophers.\(^{125}\)

Epistemicist dismissivism is also contrasted with semanticism, which is defended by such scholars as Hirsch and Thomasson, whom we have encountered above. Semanticists reject metaphysical debates on the grounds that they are “merely verbal”, that disputants “assign different meanings” to the terms involved, and that they are “consequently just talking past each other” (Bennett 2009, 40). As demonstrated in the section on verbal disputes, van Schurman’s arguments share some common characteristics with this approach to metaphysics, such as the suspicion that metaphysical debates are empty bickering about the meaning of words that ultimately have no impact on real life. However, as I have shown, there are also profound differences to be found between these approaches. Van Schurman considers lofty academic debates about metaphysical questions to be futile and purely verbal, as they deal with figments of the imagination rather than real experiences; that is, she is skeptical of this scholastic form of reasoning. However, she does believe that the content of some of these debates is incredibly important (i.e., substantive). To her, discovering the truth and living in accordance with the truth is a matter of salvation or eternal damnation, making petty bickering about insignificant theoretical distinctions all the more infuriating.

In this section, I have made use of Bennett’s conceptual framework to flesh out van Schurman’s metametaphysical position and negotiate how her position compares to those of contemporary scholars. I have established that her position is realist, concerning the notion of metaphysical truths, that it is not entirely consistent with semanticism, while still sharing some common traits, and that, within Bennett’s taxonomy, it is best characterized as epistemicist, as van Schurman denies that humans have the necessary epistemic capacities to answer metaphysical questions.

6. Conclusion

\(^{125}\) For a thorough introduction to the many nuances of the realist-antirealist debate in both metaethics and metaphysics, see Kyriacou n.d.
In this article, I have reconstructed Anna Maria van Schurman’s critical arguments against metaphysics (1). I have shown how these views situated her in opposition to the established schools of metaphysics, namely scholastic metaphysics, making her an anti-metaphysician in her early modern historical context (2). However, as I have then proceeded to demonstrate, van Schurman’s skeptical arguments strike another note in a twenty-first century setting. Through a comparison with contemporary critics of mainstream metaphysics such as Eli Hirsch, Amie Thomasson, and Bas van Fraassen, I have shown how central aspects of her critique are still in use today (3). Finally, I have discussed van Schurman’s hypothetical position among other deflationist philosophers in contemporary metametaphysics, arguing that her views are best categorized as a version of epistemicist dismissivism (4).

To scholars interested in van Schurman and early modern philosophy, this article offers a systematic reconstruction of her views on metaphysics, which have, until now, received little to no scholarly attention. In addition, it shows that her skeptical ideas are still alive and kicking today, and what is more, these ideas have since become part of philosophy. Together, these insights add a new dimension to van Schurman’s intellectual legacy. To contemporary analytic philosophers, this article reviews anti-metaphysical arguments in today’s metametaphysical debates through a historical lens. It also shows that allies can be found in unexpected places. Although none of the critics of metaphysics, whom I mention in this article, share van Schurman’s religious views, their mutual skepticism of certain approaches to metaphysics do share some common features. This testifies to the deep historical heritage and the continual relevance of these complex philosophical questions.

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Part III

Concluding remarks
Future research
Concluding remarks

This dissertation set out to achieve a better understanding of the figure of the female intellectual in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Germany and the Dutch Republic. I have studied the works and receptions of two very different women, namely Anna Maria van Schurman and Dorothea Christiane Erxleben, who both in their own way embody this intellectual persona. As I have already demonstrated how the individual articles respond to the research questions in the Article Preview, this final section will be dedicated to presenting the general results of the thesis, as well as offering some reflections and ideas for further research.

Although the articles make individual points, some general conclusions can be drawn from the thesis in its entirety. Firstly, the access to education and the importance and usefulness thereof has been a central issue for women intellectuals throughout the period. However, women writers did not always agree and their views on education vary. Some are highly radical in their demands, arguing for co-education and access to professional positions (e.g., Erxleben), while others are radical in their rejection of learning and the academic worldview (e.g., van Schurman).

Secondly, it appears that the seventeenth and eighteenth century offered an opening for female intellectuals which was later sealed off during the eighteenth century with the onset of German Romanticism. During this period, the title of ‘philosopher’ was more generously applied, and the discipline thrived outside the university walls; both circumstances that furthered women’s active participation in intellectual debates. Furthermore, women and men were to a certain extent judged under the same criteria as an effect of the enlightenment emphasis on universality. Late eighteenth-century philosophers and historians of philosophy later constructed an idea of philosophy (and of women), which still has a strong impact, and which excludes certain people, topics, and schools of thought from the canon. To understand what it really meant to be a woman intellectual in the early modern period, we need to engage with their own works and take their arguments seriously; even when they challenge our established narratives. Through close-readings and analysis, these original ideas can obtain a new life in current debates and a new place in history.

Finally, it has become clear that a multifaceted approach is needed to transform the philosophical canon to include more early modern women philosophers. A variety of strategies must be employed, such as (but not limited to): (1) the reconstruction of

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126 This is not to say that there were less women contributing to philosophy in the nineteenth century (if anything there were probably more, see Nassar and Gjesdal 2021), only that political opinion and external circumstances had been turned against them, making it harder for them to gain the title of philosopher (see e.g., Fraisse 1994).
philosophical arguments, (2) a critical evaluation of historiographical categories, (3) historical contextualization, (4) the expansion of the notion of philosophy, and (5) an openness to alternative literary genres (letters, pamphlets, poetry, etc.).

Future research

I hope this thesis inspires future research. There is still much work to be done on the figure of the female intellectual, and we need to include more historical women in this investigation. During my research, several pertinent topics and questions have turned up along the way which I have not had the chance to develop further within the scope of this thesis. I will give a brief introduction to some of the ideas that I think would be worthwhile investigating further.

First, there are some unresolved issues concerning the notion of ‘exceptionality’. Learned women were seen as ‘rare birds’ by many the cataloguists and the fact that they were few and often portrayed as exceptions, excelling ‘beyond their sex’, raises some questions about the ideal of female learning. Is it for everyone? And how much can we actually learn about the identity of scholarly women from studying an abnormality like van Schurman? Is it the exception that proves the rule? And what is the relationship between the logic of exception and the logic of imitation? These are questions that remain unanswered.

The virtue of modesty or humility as a specifically gendered virtue is also something that lures beneath the surface in both Erxleben’s and van Schurman’s texts. It was a common notion that studying would make women arrogant, and this argument was used to exclude women from higher education. This is something that I touch upon in Article IV when van Schurman takes over the claim herself, but the full scope of this idea and its impact on women’s relationship to the learned world needs to be researched in more detail. Where does this notion come from? And how have women intellectuals responded to this accusation? Is it feminist to defend learning, arguing that this practice does not make one arrogant? Or should one rather challenge the notion that women are expected to be modest in the first place? These are complicated questions that require more research.

Another issue that deserves further attention is the notion of originality. When we describe these women philosophers and argue for their place in the canon, we stress their original contributions, their original ideas. But why is originality so important for philosophers? Might this implicit and widely accepted criterion have become a mechanism of exclusion? Some of our greatest male philosophers ‘borrowed’ ideas from

127 Some work has already been done on this issue, see the forthcoming dissertation on the concept of ‘supra sexum’ and the Danish noblewoman Birgitte Thott by Rosa Skytt Burr.
their predecessors and presented them as their own by adding their own variations. This is considered inspiration. However, it is often the case that women’s use of collegial input is seen as an excuse to discard their ideas, calling them ‘derivative’ and unoriginal; seemingly believing that the philosophical canon is a continual line of unique and spontaneous ideas. But is there really such a thing as a spontaneous idea? Is it fair to use this notion as a criterion for what is considered relevant philosophy? And in which historical context did originality become one of the main characteristics of the philosopher?

These and numerous other questions still need answers. Luckily, there are already many fascinating research activities that, like the Archeology of the Female Intellectual Identity project, endeavor to retrieve the works of women and other marginalized groups and dive into these important issues, regarding women, philosophy, identity, and our collective history. Initiatives such as Extending New Narratives project, the Center for History of Women Philosophers and Scientists, the Center for New Narratives in Philosophy at Columbia University, Project Vox, the project Women’s Invisible Ink (WINK) and, on the analytical tradition, the In Parenthesis project are attracting talented scholars and producing valuable knowledge. These initiatives have helped to bring attention to the lack of women in our histories of philosophy, as well as offered concrete strategies for amending this issue.

It will take time and effort to re-write our histories of philosophy. It will require more research to uncover forgotten figures and reconstruct their ideas, as well as critically investigate the mechanisms of exclusion that exist in our historiographical methods. And, of course, all this research needs to be incorporated into our course syllabi and our teaching plans. On top of that, the conditions for women and minority scholars must be improved to transform the face of the faculty and make the working environment more inclusive. Because it is not only early modern women who faced adversity when trying to find their place in the learned world, as the statistics show, these structures of exclusion still exist today.

References