

# Poulain de la Barre's socializing of the cartesian mind

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**Resumo:** Poulain de la Barre tanto se apropria da concepção de mente de Descartes quanto a desenvolve através da socialização da mente cartesiana. Entendo a concepção de mente de Descartes como envolvendo consciência, representação e etiologia causal, e essas características conjuntamente entrelaçadas permitem uma posse do pensamento. Mostrarei primeiramente que Poulain aplica a metafísica cartesiana aos tipos sociais de homens e mulheres para efetivamente desnaturalizar essas categorias sociais e afirmar que homens e mulheres são metafisicamente iguais. A socialização da concepção de mente de Descartes feita por Poulain emerge através de sua abordagem de como chegamos a representar e, portanto, a ter falsas crenças sobre tipos sociais. Nessa abordagem, Poulain introduz causas sociais de nossas ideias e, desse modo, começa a reconhecer dimensões sociais do conteúdo representacional das ideias. Apesar disso, Poulain almeja manter a concepção cartesiana da posse do pensamento, ainda que reconheça que coisas pensantes são essencialmente seres sociais.

**Palavras-chave:** Poulain de la Barre, Descartes, filosofia da mente, metafísica social, epistemologia social.

**Abstract:** Poulain de la Barre both appropriates Descartes's conception of mind and develops it by socializing the Cartesian mind. I understand Descartes' conception of mind to involve awareness, representation, and causal aetiology, and these features interwoven together allow for an ownership of thought. I show first that Poulain applies Cartesian metaphysics to the social kinds of men and women, to effectively de-naturalize these social categories and maintain that men and women are metaphysical equal. Poulain's socializing of Descartes's conception of mind emerges through his account both of how we come to represent, as so to have the false beliefs about, social kinds. In this account, Poulain introduces social causes of our ideas, and thereby begins to recognize social dimensions of the representational content of ideas. Nonetheless, Poulain aims to maintain the Cartesian conception of ownership of thought, even while he recognizes that thinking things are essentially social beings.

**Keywords:** Poulain de la Barre, Descartes, philosophy of mind, social metaphysics, social epistemology.

## Introduction

That François Poulain de la Barre (1647-1723) was a Cartesian philosopher is hard to deny and is widely recognized. His *De l'égalité des deux sexes* (1673) invokes the skeptical moment that

opens Descartes's *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting Reason* and *Meditations on First Philosophy*. And in his *De l'éducation des dames* (1674), in the Fifth Conversation, through the character of Stasimachus, he sets a reading list that includes all of Descartes's works, as well as the Port Royal *Logique*, and works by the Cartesian philosophers Géraud de Cordemoy, Jacques Rohault, and Louis de la Forge; he then proceeds to offer the characters in that work, and so the work's readers, a condensed course in Cartesian natural philosophy. It is, however, less clear just how we ought to understand Poulain's Cartesianism. Poulain certainly appropriates different elements of Cartesian philosophy in his effort to argue for and promote the equality of the sexes. Siep Stuurman (STUURMAN, 1997, 2004) focuses on Poulain's application of Cartesianism to the social domain; Amy Schmitter (SCHMITTER, 2018) focuses on the epistemology of prejudice and the appropriation of Cartesian epistemology more generally to the assumption of that the sexes are unequal; Martina Reuter (REUTER, 2013) has focused on Poulain's Cartesian account of judgment; and Marie-Frédérique Pellegrin (PELLEGRIN, 2020) has read Poulain as applying Cartesian physics to explain sexual difference without appeal to forms. In this paper, my focus is on how his views relate to the Cartesian account of mind. I will argue that Poulain both appropriates Descartes's conception of mind and develops it by socializing the Cartesian mind. To argue for this reading, I set out in Section 1 just what I will take to be the basic framework of Descartes' conception of mind, highlighting three features -- awareness, representation, and causal aetiology -- and maintaining that these features interwoven together allow for an ownership of thought. In section 2, I turn to Poulain, and I motivate his socializing of the Cartesian mind by showing how he applies Cartesian metaphysics to the social kinds of men and women, to effectively de-naturalize these social categories and maintain that men and women are metaphysical equal: they are both simply bodies, differing only in their reproductive organs. In Section 3, I turn to Poulain's socializing of Descartes's conception of mind, and I argue it emerges through his account both of how we come to represent, as so to have the false beliefs about, social kinds and in his method for arriving at true beliefs about social kinds. In this account, Poulain introduces social causes of our ideas, and thereby begins to recognize social dimensions of the representational content of ideas. In section 4, I show how Poulain aims to maintain the Cartesian conception of ownership of thought, even while he recognizes that thinking things are essentially social beings.

## 1. The Cartesian Mind

There are three basic elements of the Cartesian conception of mind.<sup>1</sup> First, for Descartes, thinking things are essentially *aware* or *conscious* things, with thoughts present to them.<sup>2</sup> Second, thoughts are representational, and thus, we ought to be able to judge whether they represent the world veridically or not. Third, whether our thoughts are veridical representations or not is a matter of how our mind is connected causally with the world. Equally, our capacity to judge whether representations are true or false at all derives from our capacity to offer reasons for our beliefs, and this capacity to reason is a matter of the mind's being caused by God. These three elements of thought are interwoven together to provide an account wherein thinking involves more than simply having ideas but rather *owning* them or holding them with epistemic authority. So, while the veridicality of any particular thought is a matter of its being caused in an appropriate way, it is also true or false in virtue of our own grasp of the reasons we think what we do. In grasping the causes of our thoughts and the reasons we take them to be true, we effectively know our own mind – we are reflexively aware of not only the content of what we are thinking but also of the norms through which we epistemically evaluate that content.

Descartes's own interests are squarely on the development of scientific knowledge, and his metaphysics of mind emerges from a recognition that the foundations of scientific knowledge need to be rethought, if not completely revamped. The *Meditations* begins with a skepticism about “the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood” (7:17; 2:12).<sup>3</sup> It is widely recognized that those falsehoods were laid bare by the advances in the sciences of which figures such as Galileo were the most visible. The skeptical arguments of the First Meditation highlight that without a proper metaphysical foundation, not only “physics, astronomy, medicine, and all the other disciplines which depend on the study of composite things, are doubtful” but so are even “arithmetic and geometry ... which deal only with the simplest and most general things” (7:20; 2:14). The *Meditations* is squarely focused on getting mathematics and geometry, and medicine, physics, and astronomy back. Reclaiming the truth of mathematics and

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<sup>1</sup> I cannot defend this interpretation of Descartes here, and while I recognize that the details are important, I do hope that the broad outline sketched in this section is not overly controversial. I find my interpretation broadly aligned with that in (ALANEN, 2003) and (CARRIERO, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> With this formulation, I am resisting the metaphor of a theatre of the mind, whereby mental activity consists of perceiving ideas contained in the mind. I do not take either Descartes or Poulain to have this view.

<sup>3</sup> Citations of Descartes's works will follow the following format: (CARRIERO, 2009) volume: page; (DESCARTES, 1984-1991) volume: page).

geometry is the achievement of the Fifth Meditation, and the task of the Sixth Meditation is to restore the validity of medical knowledge and the perceptual knowledge that serves as the basis of physics and astronomy. This mirrors the aims of Parts 5 and 6 of the *Discourse on Method for Rightly Conducting Reason*, as well as the essays that accompany the work, which showcase not simply what is to be gained from the right metaphysics but also what Descartes took to be the power of his account of mind for making progress in the sciences.<sup>4</sup>

While Descartes consistently maintains that scientific progress is for the sake of improving the conduct of human life,<sup>5</sup> notably, in the *Discourse* Descartes expressly limits his remarks on social matters. In Part 3 of the *Discourse* he sets as the first maxim of his provisional moral code

to obey the laws and customs of my country, holding constantly to the religion in which by God's grace I had been instructed from my childhood, and governing myself in all other matters according to the most moderate and least extreme opinions – the opinions commonly accepted in practice by the most sensible of those with whom I should have to live. (6:23; 1:122.)

Descartes is not interested in (at least directly) addressing the falsehoods that may serve to structure social life, nor is he interested in demonstrating (again, at least directly) how the metaphysics of body and mind he advances and on which he wants to ground scientific knowledge can also impact the beliefs that structure social life. Instead, he lays out a set of maxims to guide personal conduct and judgement, and leaves it at that. In his correspondence with Princess Elisabeth, Descartes does expand his thoughts about virtue or, as Elisabeth puts it, “the principal maxims concerning private life” (4:406), though he there remains reticent about matters that directly engage with social norms of civil life.<sup>6</sup>

Whether Descartes prefers to remain silent on social matters for strategic reasons or because he is simply uninterested, for him, our beliefs about the social world remain effectively protected from skepticism and so from revision. François Poulain de la Barre is interested in just what Descartes leaves aside.

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<sup>4</sup> The strength of Cartesian method, and so of the account of mind from which that method is derived, is also reflected in the *Principles of Philosophy*, which is squarely focused on natural philosophy, as well as *Traité de l'homme*, focused on human physiology and so medicine.

<sup>5</sup> See for instance (9B:2; 1:179); (10:361; 1:10); (6:10; 1:115); (6:81; 1:152); and (8B:26; 3:220-21)

<sup>6</sup> In response to Elisabeth's direct request to present corresponding maxims of civil life, Descartes demurs (4:412). See Elisabeth's letter of 25 April 1646, and Descartes's reply of May 1646.

## 2. Poulain's insight: Cartesian metaphysics and social kinds

As Siep Stuurman notes, “Poulain’s egalitarian philosophy was actually the first sustained attempt to apply Cartesian reasoning to the analysis of society, authority, and power” ((Stuurman, 1997), 618). That Poulain does this is clear. Poulain opens the first of his essays, “On the Equality of the Two Sexes,” with a claim that should recall both the First Meditation and Part One of the *Discourse*:

The best idea that could occur to those who are working to acquire stable knowledge, if they have been taught in accordance with common methods, is to doubt if they were taught well, and to want to discover the truth themselves. Over the course of their search for truth, it will necessarily occur to them to note that we are full of prejudices [*préjugés*], and that it is necessary to renounce them completely in order to have clear and distinct knowledge.<sup>7</sup> (POULAIN, 2011, p. 53)

In this section, I focus on *De l'égalité des deux sexes* (“The Equality of the Two Sexes”) and argue that Poulain applies Cartesian metaphysics to the social domain, and in particular to the categories of men and women, demonstrating that these categories are not natural kinds but rather social kinds.

Whereas Descartes’s project starts from the falsity of our habitual beliefs about scientific matters, for Poulain, the paradigm prejudice is that of the inequality of the sexes: “Of all the prejudices, there is none more appropriate to demonstrating my thesis than that which is commonly held regarding the inequality of both sexes”<sup>8</sup> (POULAIN, 2011, p. 54). Poulain’s project starts by highlighting a false belief that undergirds social life. Descartes aims to correct our false beliefs about the natural world by setting us up with the proper metaphysics: once we properly understand the nature of body and understand the nature of mind, and so how to reason well, we will end up if not with only true beliefs at least with the ability to recognize and correct our errors. Knowledge of the natural world can move forward. In his focus on a belief

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<sup>7</sup> La plus heureuse pensée qui puisse venir à ceux qui travaillent à acquérir une science solide, après avoir été instruits selon la Méthode vulgaire, c’est de douter si on les a bien enseignés, et de vouloir découvrir la vérité par eux-mêmes.

Dans le progrès de leur recherche, il leur arrive nécessairement de remarquer que nous sommes remplis de préjugés, et qu’il faut y renoncer absolument pour avoir des connaissances claires et distinctes. Compare (7 : 17-18; 2 :12) and (6 :4-11; 1 : 113-16)

<sup>8</sup> De tous les Préjugés, on n’en a point remarqué de plus propre à ce dessein que celui qu’on a communément sur l’Inégalité des deux Sexes.

about the social world – about the inequality or equality of men and women – Poulain aims to extend Descartes metaphysics and epistemology.

There are three aspects of Poulain's project: (a) the social world is understood as part of the natural world; (b) our beliefs about the social world should be held to the same epistemic standards as other beliefs about the natural world; (c) just as our beliefs about physics, astronomy, and the like, need to be grounded in the proper metaphysics, so too do we need to ensure that our beliefs about the social world are undergirded by a proper metaphysics. The social world, however, is neither simply in the domain of body, nor simply in the domain of mind: it is the domain of human beings, unions of two really distinct substances. Poulain himself does not seem to take human beings to be a third substance, and it is perhaps this metaphysics which opens a space for social kinds.

In focusing on the common false belief women are inferior to men, Poulain is homing in on a belief that both impacts and is determined by the social structures of everyday life. It is important that this initial characterization of the differences between men and women is framed entirely in terms of social roles and social institutions: the kinds of education men and women receive, the kinds of work they do, the kinds of relationships they stand in to other individuals. As he notes, this false assumption underpins differences in their civil roles ((POULAIN, 2011), 54), “how women have been subjugated and excluded from the sciences and public positions” ((POULAIN, 2011), 54-55), and the view that “they [women] *must* be in the dependent position in which we see them” ((POULAIN, 2011), 60, emphasis added). That is, Poulain remarks that in drawing an inference from the differences in social roles men and women hold to the conclusion that these differences must exist, people have effectively *naturalized* the distinctions between men and women: What are social facts are claimed to be facts about nature. His aim is to undermine the false belief by applying the Cartesian criteria of clarity and evidence, and thereby allow his readers to see that women and men are equal.

Poulain proposes to analyze the categories of men and women using the framework of Descartes's natural philosophy. Descartes's rejection of Aristotelian hylomorphism entails that differences in human bodies are to be explained entirely by physics. A living body is distinguished from a dead body not by the presence or absence of a soul animating that body but rather by the motion integral to our complex bodies.<sup>9</sup> Human bodies are distinguished from other bodies

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<sup>9</sup> See *Traité de l'homme* and *Passions of the Soul* in (DESCARTES, 1997).

not by the presence of a human soul, but rather by the particularities of the organization of parts that form that human body.<sup>10</sup> As Poulain explicitly recognizes, though there may be differences between particular human bodies, we share the same sensory organs and so the same capacities for sensory experiences, and so the same capacity for scientific knowledge.

Since all human beings are made similarly, they have the same sensations and the same ideas of natural objects; for example, of light, of heat, of hardness. And all the scientific knowledge that one tries to have reduces to knowing truly particular disposition, both interior and exterior, of each object to produce in us the thoughts and sensations that we have of it.<sup>11</sup> (POULAIN, 2011, p. 97)

From this point, Poulain draws out the further implication that

... sexual difference concerns only the body, as this part of the body only properly serves human reproduction. And as the mind does nothing but provide its consent, and it does so in the same way in everyone that this, one can conclude that the mind has no sex. If the mind is considered in itself, it is found that it is equal and of the same nature in all human beings, and is capable of all kinds of thoughts: the smallest occupy it just as much as great ones, and just as much of the mind is needed to know a mite as an elephant.<sup>12</sup> (POULAIN, 2011, p.99-100)

Poulain expects his readers to assume that women are in their social roles by their very nature as women. Yet, he argues, if we properly understand the nature of body, the sex organs through which men and women are differentiated have no particular significance outside of the role they play in reproduction. The real distinction of mind and body ensures mind does not inform the body and give its shape. Thus, we cannot infer anything about the mind from features of the

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<sup>10</sup> See *Traité de l'homme* in (DESCARTES, 1997).

<sup>11</sup> Tous les hommes étant faits les uns comme les autres, ont les mêmes sentiments, et les mêmes idées des choses naturelles ; par exemple, de la lumière, de la chaleur, et de la dureté ; et toute la science que l'on tâche d'en avoir, se réduit à connaître au vrai quelle est la disposition particulière, intérieure et extérieure de chaque objet, pour produire en nous les pensées et les sentiments que nous en avons.

<sup>12</sup> Il est aisé de remarquer, que la différence des sexes ne regarde que le Corps : n'y ayant proprement que cette partie qui serve à la production des hommes ; et l'Esprit ne faisant qu'y prêter son consentement, et le faisant en tous de la même manière, on peut conclure qu'il n'a point de sexe.

Si on le considère en lui-même, l'on trouve qu'il est égal et de même nature en tous les hommes, et capable de toutes sortes de pensées : les plus petites l'occupent comme les grandes ; il n'en faut pas moins pour bien connaître un Ciron, qu'un Éléphant...

body. Different sex organs thus signal nothing about different cognitive capacities of men and women and nothing about any different capacity to hold a public office.<sup>13</sup>

In applying Cartesian metaphysical principles to the social categories of men and women, Poulain effectively deflates the differences between those categories: men and women are equal insofar as they are both human beings, and human beings are essentially thinking things that find themselves embodied. Without any basis for differentiating the nature of one human mind from another, there is no metaphysical foundation for the social differences between men and women. Men and women are thus not to be understood as natural kinds, but rather as socially differentiated. And insofar as the differences between them have only a social basis, they are contingent and not necessary. If men and women are to be thought of as kinds at all, they ought to be considered social kinds.

### **3. Socializing the Mind: Social causes and the problem of representing social kinds**

If there is no natural or essential difference between human minds, for Poulain, it may seem surprising that I want to argue that Poulain socializes the Cartesian mind. Socializing of the mind for him comes with both his explanation of how we come to form the false beliefs about social kinds we have and his method for arriving at true beliefs. In this section I continue to draw on *De l'égalité des deux sexes* to show that the socializing of the mind is not a matter of the metaphysics of mind but rather of the role of mind in epistemology.

Poulain is well aware that false beliefs about the inferiority of women are entrenched by custom:

If we press people a little, we will find that their strongest reasons are reduced to saying that things have always been the way that they are regarding women, and this is a sign that they must be as they are, and if women had been capable of scientific knowledge and of public office, men would have admitted them along with others.... It is enough to find a custom established to believe that it is well-founded.<sup>14</sup>  
(POULAIN, 2011, p. 62)

Again, like Descartes, Poulain recognizes that habitual beliefs get their own grip and are hard to dislodge. Descartes, insofar as he is focused on scientific knowledge, seems to think that once

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<sup>13</sup> See (PELLEGRIN, 2020) for an extended discussion of this argument, as well as for a situation of Poulain within the context of 17<sup>th</sup> century theorizing around sexual difference.

<sup>14</sup> Si on pousse un peu les gens, on trouvera que leurs plus fortes raisons se réduisent à dire que les choses ont toujours été comme elles sont, à l'égard des femmes: ce qui est une marque qu'elles doivent être de la sorte: et que elles avaient été capables des sciences et des emplois, les hommes auraient admises avec eux.

we do manage to get to the right metaphysics, our beliefs will follow suit. Perhaps Descartes's optimism with respect to our scientific knowledge is well-founded, but it is worth noting that even metaphysical beliefs are habitual. In order to disabuse ourselves of a faulty metaphysics to arrive at the proper (Cartesian) metaphysics, a lot of work needs to be done.

For Descartes, that work involves tracing the cause of our ideas, and indeed of the mind itself. While the *cogito* establishes the subjectivity proper to thinking,<sup>15</sup> the *cogito* alone does not afford a way of distinguishing true from false thoughts: it does not connect the thoughts a mind thinks to the world. To establish a criterion of truth and falsity, Descartes adopts a strategy of assessing whether the representational content of an idea, and indeed of the mind itself, could be caused by that object – the thing in the world -- they represent. This causal strategy enables the meditator first to establish that at least one idea represents an entity existing outside of the mind, (the idea of an infinite being (God) represents God). And second, to establish that he himself, a thinking thing with an idea of God, must be caused by God. This point in turn entails his own rationality: his capacity for thinking entails that he *can* distinguish between true and false representations, and that he can track the truth. A similar causal strategy is adopted in the Sixth Meditation to establish that the material world exists independently of the human mind, with properties that correspond to those we perceive clearly and distinctly. For Descartes, once we properly understand our capacity for thought and the causes of the mind, we are on track to arrive at a proper metaphysics which can then underpin the revision of our other beliefs.<sup>16</sup>

It is not clear that this strategy will work for Poulain. In the social domain there is hardly always a rational relation between metaphysical commitments and our other beliefs. While Poulain might allow that scholars will be able to follow where reasons take them ((POULAIN, 2011), 54), he does not expect that this will be true for most. So, simply understanding that men and women are the same natural kind will not entail revisions to beliefs about men and women aligned with their social differences. Nonetheless, Poulain, like Descartes, adopts a causal strategy.

To combat a prejudice, such as that women are inferior, Poulain proposes to go back to its cause:

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<sup>15</sup> By 'cogito' I refer to the extended argument of the Second Meditation in which the meditator first recognizes that "the proposition *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind," (7:25; 2:17) and then goes on to flesh out that this 'I' is "in the strict sense only a thing that thinks" (7:27; 2:18).

<sup>16</sup> Again, I cannot here offer an argument for this reading of Descartes. I do not think it is controversial, but the details do matter.

However, this conviction, as most of those which we have on customs and practices, is nothing but a pure prejudice, which we form on the appearance of things without examining them more closely, and about which we would correct our errors if we could take the trouble to trace it back to its origins.<sup>17</sup> (POULAIN, 2011, p. 63)

To this end, Poulain offers an 'historical conjecture' as to how men made themselves masters. What is notable about this history is that Poulain does not ascribe men's current positions as masters as the result of an intentional and rational effort:

In fact, when one considers honestly human affairs of the past and in the present, one finds that they all resemble one another in one respect: that reason has always been the weakest factor, and that it seems that all history has happened only to show what each sees in his own time, since there have been human beings, that force has always prevailed.<sup>18</sup> (POULAIN, 2011, p. 64)

Poulain goes on to outline how the growth of families brought about a division of labor between men and women, whereby women became dependent on men, how larger families brought about internecine battles, as well as battles between clans, and these battles subjugated women in new ways. Women were further excluded from holding power as part of efforts by rulers to expand empires and consolidate their power. As society stabilized, the institutions that developed reified these power structures; religious and educational institutions excluded women; and eventually certain domains – beauty and fashion, for instance – became the purview of women. My concern here is not with the details of this history, though like Rousseau's strikingly similar conjectural history ninety years later in the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, it is a starkly contemporary analysis of power relations. Rather, what is significant is Poulain's insight that in nature there are socially causes.

I want to highlight two implications of Poulain's conjectural history. First, though Poulain recognizing that social kinds are in fact part of the natural world, and denies of the metaphysical necessity of social kinds, he still recognizes that social kinds do exist, even if they are contingent, and he seeks an explanation for them as social kinds. The historical conjecture

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<sup>17</sup> Cependant cette persuasion comme la plupart de celles que nous avons sur les coutumes et sur les usages n'est qu'un pur préjugé, que nous formons sur l'apparence des choses, faute de les examiner de près, et dont nous nous détromperions, si nous pouvions nous donner la peine de remonter jusqu'à la source...

<sup>18</sup> En effet quand on considère sincèrement les choses humaines dans le passé et dans le présent, on trouve qu'elles sont toutes semblable en un point, qui est que la raison a toujours été la plus faible: et il semble que toutes les histoires n'aient été faites, que pour montrer ce que chacun voit de son temps, que depuis qu'il y a des hommes, la force a toujours prévalu.

through which we are to understand the origin of the social kinds of men and women demonstrates that social entities have *social* causes. Insofar as social causes do not have the necessity of natural causes, the illusion of the metaphysical necessity of social kinds is revealed: the cause of social kinds is itself contingent, and so the social kinds themselves are contingent.

Second, Poulain not only recognizes that social *kinds* are socially caused, he also recognizes that social mechanisms often cause *beliefs*, especially beliefs about social kinds. Social structures, through the institution of custom, effect stable relationships and hierarchies of social power. At the same time, and in virtue of the stability afforded by customs, these social structures serve as social forces, analogous to physical forces. The social world as it stands causes us to form beliefs about the social world. Insofar as our social structures are stable, they appear to have the necessity of the physical world, and so our beliefs about the social world appear to be as true as those caused by the physical world. However, social structures are not necessary, unlike the laws that govern the physical world: the conjectural history demonstrates that. And so social forces are not reliable sources of belief. For Poulain, we need to use reason to assess the degree to which social relationships are necessary or contingent, and to base our conclusions not on false assumptions and prejudice but instead on clarity and evidence. Cartesian principles are deployed again; this time they are used to assess our beliefs about social kinds.

For Poulain, once we understand the social causes of the observed inequality of the sexes, we will see that our prejudices – the false assumptions -- we have taken to be necessary truths are in fact contingent, and we will be in a position to accept the truth that men and women are equal:

On what grounds then can we be sure that women are less capable than ourselves [for public office], since it is not chance but an insurmountable impediment that makes it impossible for them to take up these roles?... My only point is to insist that insofar as we consider both sexes in general, we find as much aptitude in one as in the other.<sup>19</sup>  
(POULAIN, 2011, p. 71)

So, there is both a parallel and an anti-parallel between the role of an infinite being in Descartes's *Meditations* and the role of social structures in Poulain's account. In the *Meditations*, the infinite being constitutes the order of nature, and the Third Meditation aims to guarantee that we can acquire knowledge of the world if we properly understand the causes of our ideas,

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<sup>19</sup> Sur quoi donc peut-on assurer que les femmes y soient moins propres que nous, puisque ce n'est pas le hasard, mais une nécessité insurmontable, qui les empêche d'y avoir part ? ... mais je demande seulement qu'à prendre les deux Sexes en général, on reconnoisse dans l'un autant de disposition que dans l'autre.

and of ourselves as minds with the ideas we have. With this understanding, we can distinguish true from false ideas. The social world also has an order, and it extends indefinitely back in time and across places, as our histories, whether conjectural or rooted in evidence, demonstrate. Poulain thinks that in order to assess the truth or falsity of our beliefs about social kinds we need to understand the causes of those beliefs. The causes we need to understand, however, are not physical or natural causes but rather social causes. And unlike the order of nature, this social order is not intrinsically beyond our full comprehension. While human beings are both part of the natural world and the social order, the social order is instituted and maintained by human beings. Insofar as we are agents, we can change the course of history. The structure of the social world might create social kinds, which insofar as they are kinds have stability. But stability and necessity ought not to be mistaken for one another. The social order, despite its stability, is still contingent. And our beliefs about social kinds will only be warranted if they reflect that contingency.

#### 4. Socializing the Mind: Owning One's Thoughts

It might be tempting to conclude that Poulain is simply identifying a class of beliefs – those that are socially caused and about social kinds -- that are reliably false, and so to be avoided. He may well think that we should reserve judgement about social kinds, or at least always be prepared to revise our beliefs. However, in *De l'éducation des dames*, or “On The Education of Ladies,” published a year after “On the Equality of the Two Sexes,” Poulain moves beyond thinking about the social causes of our ideas to recognize that thinking things are integrated parts of the social world in which those causes operate. And so, as thinking things, they form ideas through their interactions with other thinking things. That is, thinking things are essentially social beings. This recognition that thinking things are social things has two implications for him. First, while each individual human being is a thinking thing, thinking is not an activity of an isolated individual sequestered from social interaction. Second, because thinking things are social things, in order for our beliefs to well-founded, the social causes of our thoughts need to be well-structured. For Poulain, we can achieve the ownership of thought that is the crux of the Cartesian account of mind not by thinking on our own, but rather when our thinking happens in a social context that enables us to fully realize our rational capacities.

Let me begin with the first point. “The Education of Ladies” is structured as a series of five *conversations*, in which Poulain's alter-ego Stasimachus leads two young women, Sophie and

Eulalie, and one young man, Timander, through a primer on Cartesian philosophy. Sophie is already well on her way in following Stasimachus's program, while Eulalie has barely received any education at all. Timander has received an education of a sort, but holds many prejudices, or false beliefs. They all converse with one another. While Stasimachus clearly assumes the role of master, he strives to avoid being didactic. Rather his manner of instruction invites questions, allows for disagreement, and supports all the participants in the discussion to work their way through the ideas he is discussing at their own pace. So, even though each of the discussants arrive at their conclusions *for themselves*, they do *not* arrive at those conclusions *on their own*. Indeed, it seems important that each has their own social situation, and so their own point of view, for these differences contribute to the very process of reasoning – putting forward a claim, considering its evidence, grasping how it relates to other claims. It is thus both striking and significant that the mode of instruction is that of conversation. I will return to this point below.

At the beginning of the Third Conversation, Poulain recasts Descartes' *cogito* in a way that reflects the social position of thinkers. After introducing the need to doubt our custom-based beliefs, and our ability to doubt even our own existence and God, Stasimachus says:

I admit to you that if we ought to be assured of anything, it is of our own existence. And any doubt that we can have of it brings with its own clarification, because being a true action that cannot belong to nothing, it seems that an attentive mind cannot seriously doubt if it exists. Nonetheless, if someone asks us to justify our own existence, to be other than someone who does not know [*un ignorant*], it is necessary for us to make the same demands of ourselves that others can and conclude that we exist because one who doubts acts, and whatever acts exists.

...

I concluded just now that I exist, I who think, because I act: there being a thing from which I cannot be separated, which gives me pleasure and pain, without any contribution from me and even very often despite myself, it is truly necessary [*il faut de nécessité*] that this thing which I call my body really exist.<sup>20</sup> (POULAIN, 2011, p. 204)

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<sup>20</sup> Cela suppose, je vous avoue que si nous devons être assurés de quelque chose, c'est de l'existence de nous-mêmes. Et le doute que nous en pourrions avoir, important avec soi son éclaircissement, parce qu'étant une action véritable qui ne peut appartenir au néant, il semble qu'un esprit attentive ne puisse sérieusement douter s'il existe: néanmoins pour être en état de rendre raison de notre propre existence, autrement que ne ferait un ignorant, si quelqu'un nous la demandait, il faut nous faire à nous-mêmes les mêmes demandes que d'autres nous pourraient faire, et conclure que nous existons, parce que ce qui doute agit, et que ce qui agit existe.

...

Je conclusais tout à l'heure, que j'existe, moi qui pense, parce que j'agis : y ayant une chose dont je ne me puis séparer, qui me donne du Plaisir et la douleur, sans que j'y contribue, et même très souvent malgré moi, il faut de nécessité que cette chose que j'appelle mon corps existe réellement.

This passage highlights, first, that Poulain's version of the *cogito* is embodied. The 'I' whose existence cannot be doubted cannot be separated from feelings of pleasure and pain that are not in his control, and this 'I' acts in the world. An agent, for Poulain, is not simply a will, capable of affirming or denying or withholding judgement; an agent moves about, interacting with other things, and importantly, other people. Second, though our ability to doubt our own existence that Poulain imagines might echo the meditator's claim at the end of the First and the beginning of the Second Meditation,<sup>21</sup> for Poulain, the occasion for such doubt is not self-generated, borne of a feigned malicious demon, but rather emerges from other people, who ask us to justify our own existence. We recognize that we must exist insofar as we act because other people demand of us to assert ourselves. Moreover, Poulain implies, the answer that ultimately satisfies us will also satisfy those others making the demand. The *cogito* for him is thus essentially an act of an embodied social entity.

Eulalie's response emphasizes this point and move beyond it in demonstrating that it is through the conversation that she has come to think for herself – to own her thoughts:

When I raised objections to your view, said Eulalie, I had not taken note to the order and connection which must be between our pieces of knowledge, nor of the nature or the diversity of our doubts. And I had not reflected that this doubt or that indifference only leads us to find clear and distinct reasons for that which otherwise we know only confusedly.<sup>22</sup> (POULAIN, 2011, p. 204)

Eulalie had started the conversation by raising objections haphazardly, but through Stasimachus's responses, she comes to recognize the connections that constitute reasons, as well as the criteria that distinguish good from bad reasons. What is more, through the interaction she is able to reflect on and articulate just what she has been doing in the conversation itself. This reflection on the practice of reasoning in which she has been engaged allows her to be able to distinguish better from worse thoughts, and so ensures that her beliefs are held intentionally rather than through custom, or simply by repeating the views of others in the conversation. Through interacting with others Eulalie learns to reason and to think clearly and to become a

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<sup>21</sup> See (7:22-25; 2:15-16), especially "But I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, *no minds*, no bodies" (7:25; 2:16, emphasis added).

<sup>22</sup> Quand je vous ai fait la difficulté, reprit Eulalie, je ne prenais pas garde à l'ordre et à la liaison qui doit être entre nos connaissances, ni à la nature et à la différence de nos doutes : et je ne faisais pas réflexion que ce doute ou cette indifférence ne tend qu'à nous faire trouver des raisons claires de ce qu'autrement l'on ne connaît qu'avec confusion.

self-aware thinking thing. Her capacity for thinking develops *through* social interaction, and yet her thoughts and her judgements are her own.

This brings me to the second point. If thinking things are essentially social beings, we cannot simply avoid the social causes that foment prejudices. Rather, we must ensure first that the social world we move about in affords the conditions for well-formed beliefs. While each thinker must take responsibility to not give in to the ‘tyranny of opinion’ ((POULAIN, 2011), 208) and to hold a proper attitude towards the opinions of others, in order to do this each must take care to seek out social situations which are aligned with search for truth.<sup>23</sup> Through this discussion he makes explicit that the form of “The Education of Ladies” is indeed significant: the conversations constituting the work are meant to model a social world in which it is possible to have if not true, then at least unprejudiced, beliefs. Eulalie remarks

Whatever you may think ... I think that it is better to examine things together rather than by ourselves. Conversation opens the mind: one person sees things from one angle, another sees them from another, and from each putting forward what he knows, as you just did, we each benefit from one another’s reflections. And we each reciprocally given occasion to note important truths that we would have let pass without reflection in our own study.<sup>24</sup> (POULAIN, 2011, p. 212-13)

Stasimachus immediately reaffirms her point:

When I claim that one must walk alone on the path to truth, which is as narrow as that to virtue, I claim only that one must see oneself as alone, whether one is in fact alone or among company. And when I speak of company, I understand a large group, where the passions always play a role. For I do not forbid at all conversations among several people or disputations, but they must be between three or four people who love the bare truth, and search for it sincerely and scrupulously, and who apply their minds, and are comfortable receiving the views of one another without exception.<sup>25</sup> (POULAIN, 2011, p. 213)

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<sup>23</sup> Poulain understands truth as the correspondence between ideas and their objects (POULAIN, 2011, p. 216-217).

<sup>24</sup> Quoique vous en pensiez ... je crois qu’il est meilleur d’examiner les choses plusieurs ensemble, que d’être seul : la conversation ouvre l’esprit : l’un regard les sujets d’un côté, l’autre les considère de l’autre, et chacun proposant ainsi ce qu’il sait, comme vous venez de faire, on profite des réflexions les uns des autres : et l’on se donne occasion réciproquement de remarquer des vérités importantes qu’on laisserait passer sans réflexion dans son cabinet.

<sup>25</sup> ... quand je prétends qu’il faut marcher seul dans le chemin de la vérité qui est aussi étroit que celui de vertu, je prétends seulement qu’il la faut regarder comme seul, soit que l’on soit seul en effet à la considérer, ou que l’on soit en compagnie. Et lorsque je parle des compagnies j’entends celles qui sont nombreuses, où la passion fait toujours son jeu. Car je ne bannis point les conférences, ni les disputes; mais il faut que ce soit entre trois ou quatre personnes, qui aiment la vérité toute nue, qui la recherchent avec sincérité, et sans scrupule, qui y appliquent leur esprit, et soient bien aises de la recevoir les uns des autres, sans aucune acceptation.

The ideal form of intellectual activity is not a theatre in which theses are put forward and disputed in front of an audience, where the force of rhetoric can gain sway, but rather a more intimate conversation, in which the participants' questions, and even objections, will be asked sincerely in the service of a collaborative effort to get to the truth and not simply to get a rise.

There are two ways in which these intimate collaborative efforts of conversation work. First, discussants working together with the shared aim of searching for truth is conducive if not necessary to discovering truths and acquiring knowledge. One cannot run a laboratory on one's own: running experiments that explore the natural world, including the human body, takes a large number of people, dividing both the labor of the experiment and the epistemic labor of collecting and collating data amongst them.<sup>26</sup> Important to this activity is that there is room for disagreement. Timander certainly disagrees with the group, and Eulalie often asks pointed questions. What matters is that they share a common goal: they want to understand.

However, the model social world of "The Education of Ladies" highlights another way in which the mind is social. For each of us to be able to be able to understand for ourselves and to evaluate the opinions of others, we must have confidence in our own capacity for making judgements. When we find ourselves disagreeing with others, we need to be able to put forward what we think, and not simply demur to louder voices. This sense of our own epistemic authority – our ability to own our own thoughts -- does not just so happen. It emerges through our social interactions. In some rare cases, one's family may cultivate an ability to think for oneself, but more often families demand a conformity to social expectations. Our sense of our own worth as epistemic agents comes through the recognition and respect of peers with whom we engage in conversation. This epistemic self-confidence is what enables their shared pursuit of knowledge to move forward. Once the four discussants, through their conversation with one another, possess that sense of themselves as knowers, capable of judging for themselves, once they have demonstrated that they are each committed to pursuing the truth, albeit each in their own way, they are then in a position to know themselves as the part of nature they are: that is, they are prepared to learn the science of man as set out by Descartes.

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<sup>26</sup> Francis Bacon's unfinished *New Atlantis* (BACON, 1627) makes this point, imagining a utopian society with a lively division of epistemic labor. Margaret Cavendish's *The Description of a New World called the Blazing World* (Cavendish, 1666) owes a debt to Bacon, and expands on this vision.

## 5. Conclusion

François Poulain de la Barre's Cartesianism is well-acknowledged. Cartesian natural philosophy and Cartesian method serve as the foundation for his advocacy for the equality of men and women both metaphysically and politically. However, at the same time as he endorses the Cartesian conception of mind, he also implicitly criticizes Descartes' conception of thinking as an essentially individual activity. For Poulain, human beings are essentially social beings, and as such situated in a social world structured by social causes. Social causes leave us with prejudices, or false beliefs, about the social world, but we cannot simply absent ourselves from society. We need to understand these social causes of belief to correct our prejudices. Social interactions, however, also enable us to realize our natures as thinking things in the first place. We learn to reason through conversing with others, we learn to distinguish good and bad reasons through those conversations, and we develop our confidence in ourselves as thinkers through these exchanges. For the shared search for truth to be successful, it is imperative that our social relationships are structured well. Conversations among friends provide the model of social structures that are well-suited to the pursuit of truth. Friends respect differences of opinion, even as they try to persuade one another; they listen to one another; they ask questions; they respect one other in a way that enables each of them to have confidence in their own thinking; they each bring different experiences to the conversation, and thereby expand each individual's capacity for reasoning. Perhaps most importantly, they share a common goal: the search for truth.

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