

**JYX**



**This is a self-archived version of an original article. This version may differ from the original in pagination and typographic details.**

**Author(s):** Reuter, Martina

**Title:** Subjugation, freedom, and recognition in Poulain de la Barre and Simone de Beauvoir

**Year:** 2024

**Version:** Published version

**Copyright:** © 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis

**Rights:** CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

**Rights url:** <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

**Please cite the original version:**

Reuter, M. (2024). Subjugation, freedom, and recognition in Poulain de la Barre and Simone de Beauvoir. *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 32(2), 301-318.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2022.2074364>



## Subjugation, freedom, and recognition in Poulain de la Barre and Simone de Beauvoir

Martina Reuter

To cite this article: Martina Reuter (2022): Subjugation, freedom, and recognition in Poulain de la Barre and Simone de Beauvoir, British Journal for the History of Philosophy, DOI: [10.1080/09608788.2022.2074364](https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2022.2074364)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2022.2074364>



© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 23 May 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# Subjugation, freedom, and recognition in Poulain de la Barre and Simone de Beauvoir

Martina Reuter 

Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland

## ABSTRACT

In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir cited the fairly unknown author Poulain de la Barre in an epigraph for *The Second Sex* (1949). When reading *The Second Sex*, one soon realizes that there are profound similarities between the two authors' discussions of women's situation. Both Poulain and Beauvoir view the subjection of women as a process that includes choice as well as force. Liberation necessarily requires overcoming opinions rooted in custom and prejudice. The article develops a comparison between the arguments of Poulain and Beauvoir in order to illuminate interesting features in the works of both authors. The focus is on similarities as well as differences. The first section examines how prejudice and the practices of men's self-interest have contributed to the reification of women. Section 2 discusses the peculiar nature of prejudices about oneself and section 3 focuses on the metaphysical relation between freedom and materiality. Finally, section 4 examines how mutual recognition becomes possible in the context of freedom, the search for truth, and friendship.

**ARTICLE HISTORY** Received 9 October 2021; Revised 27 January 2022; Accepted 3 May 2022

**KEYWORDS** Poulain de la Barre; Simone de Beauvoir; subjugation; freedom; recognition

In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir chose the little-known author Poulain for an epigraph for *The Second Sex*. She cites his words: "one should be suspicious of everything that men have said about women because they are both judges and litigates" (Poulain, *On Equality*, 151). When continuing to read *The Second Sex*, one finds that Poulain gives Beauvoir much more than a motto.<sup>1</sup> In her discussion of the history of women, she describes Poulain's analysis as follows:

---

**CONTACT** Martina Reuter  [anna.m.reuter@jyu.fi](mailto:anna.m.reuter@jyu.fi)  Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä 40014, Finland

<sup>1</sup>On Beauvoir's reading of Poulain, see also Welch, "Introduction", 32–3, and Schmitter, "Cartesian Prejudice".

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

[Poulain] thinks that since men are stronger, they favor their sex, and women accept this dependence out of custom. They never had their chances: in either freedom or education. Thus they cannot be judged by what they did in the past. Nothing indicates their inferiority to men. Anatomy reveals differences, but none of them constitutes a privilege for the male.

(Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 123–4)

This is a good summary of Poulain's main argument in *On the Equality of the Two Sexes* (1673). It is also an interesting key to Beauvoir's own discussion of how woman became the second sex. Poulain and Beauvoir view the subjection of women as a process that includes choice as well as force. According to both authors, oppressive customs and practices are manifested in opinions, and an important aspect of subjugation consists in our acceptance of living in accordance with these opinions. Liberation is necessarily rooted in a critical self-understanding, through which one may overcome opinions rooted in mere custom and prejudice.

My aim is not to argue that Poulain strongly influenced Beauvoir's thought. I hope to add some reflections to scholarship on Beauvoir's philosophical sources,<sup>2</sup> but my main goal is to compare the arguments of Poulain and Beauvoir, in order to illuminate important features in the works of both authors. In Section 1, I examine how prejudice and practices of men's self-interest have contributed to the reification of women. In Section 2, I discuss the peculiar nature of prejudices about oneself, and in Section 3, the metaphysical relation between freedom and materiality. Finally, in Section 4, I examine how the possibility of mutual recognition appears in the context of the search for truth, freedom, and friendship.

## 1. Prejudice, self-Interest, and reification

Between 1673 and 1675, the young François Poulain de la Barre (1648–1723) published three treatises on the woman question: *On the Equality of the Two Sexes*, *On the Education of Ladies* (1674), and *On the Excellence of Men* (1675). Despite its name, the third treatise continues his defence of women by first positing and then arguing against claims about the excellence of men. Poulain's thought was profoundly influenced by René Descartes' philosophy, particularly by Descartes' method of doubt, which Poulain uses to examine the workings and origins of the prejudiced opinion that women are inferior to men. Upon examination, Poulain finds that beliefs about women are based on mere male self-interest and custom (Poulain, *On Equality*, 123–6). Poulain argues that men's self-interest coincides with their treating women

---

<sup>2</sup>Here we should note earlier work on Beauvoir's relation to Cartesian philosophy, see James, "Complicity and Slavery"; Heinämaa, "The Soul-Body Union and Sexual Difference" and "Ambiguity and Difference"; and La Caze, *Wonder and Generosity*.

as commodities to be used and traded. Still, neither self-interest nor reification (i.e. the treatment of persons as objects) are in themselves natural attitudes belonging to human beings of either sex.<sup>3</sup> The belief that male self-interest is based on a natural instinct, grounded in divine command, is in itself “nothing but a pure prejudice” (Poulain, *On Equality*, 126). The social order, including the oppression of women, is upheld by prejudiced opinions that make people believe that the order is natural. Therefore, all attempts to change the situation must begin by examining and rejecting prejudices.

In order to correct a prejudice, we need “to trace it back to its origin” (Poulain, *On Equality*, 126). Poulain argues that an original state of natural harmony amongst humans was lost when families expand and brothers start quarrelling.<sup>4</sup> The result was a new social order based on conquest and reification. Poulain writes that now “people valued things only insofar as they were thought suitable for whatever objectives they had in mind” (Poulain, *On Equality*, 129). The reification of women was integral to the process and based on an unjustified “law of the strongest” (Poulain, *On Equality*, 126).<sup>5</sup> According to Poulain, women “were forced to accept as husbands unknown strangers who considered them merely as the most beautiful part of their booty” (Poulain, *On Equality*, 128). His phrase is interesting, pointing out the aspects of force and ownership of women, as well as the relation between women’s beauty and value. In addition to women’s beauty, men use them because of their reproductive capacities (Poulain, *On Equality*, 128).

Poulain’s account of the reification of women falls short of a Marxist analysis of commodification in capitalist society, where commodities are defined exclusively by their monetary value. Still, Poulain brings up several features that fit well into Axel Honneth’s recognition-theoretical reformulation of György Lukacs’ Marxist concept of reification. Honneth criticizes the equation of commodity exchange with reification, and emphasizes that the latter “consists in disputing or ‘forgetting’ [an] antecedent recognition” (Honneth, *Reification*, 76).<sup>6</sup> This “retroactive denial of recognition” may appear “for the sake of preserving a prejudice or stereotype” (Honneth, *Reification*, 60). Most importantly, Honneth emphasizes the role of praxis: it is people’s “involvement in particular practices that engenders their reifying behavior”

---

<sup>3</sup>It is likely that Poulain had some familiarity with Thomas Hobbes’ account of human beings in the state of nature (see Poulain, *On Equality*, 164), but he defends a more optimistic position. On Poulain and Hobbes, see Stuurman, *Poulain de la Barre and the Invention of Modern Equality*, 177–9.

<sup>4</sup>There is an evident parallel between the loss of original harmony and the Biblical Fall. For more detail on Poulain’s view, see Reuter, “François Poulain de la Barre”.

<sup>5</sup>When arguing that male rule over women is a form of illegitimate tyranny, Poulain aligns himself with a long Renaissance tradition of defences of women, see Deslauriers, “Patriarchal Power as Unjust”.

<sup>6</sup>Honneth emphasizes that this concept of “recognition” in its most elementary form” as a “primordial form of relating to the world” (Honneth, *Reification*, 37) must not be confused with “that particular form of mutual recognition [...] in which the other person’s specific characteristics are affirmed” (Honneth, *Reification*, 51). Honneth has discussed the latter form in previous works.

(Honneth, *Reification*, 82). Applied to Poulain's analysis, this insight underlines that men are not innately self-interested, but become so, and reify women rather because they act as conquerors.

When comparing Poulain's analysis with Beauvoir's detailed discussions of how women have become the second sex, it is particularly interesting to look at how the two authors discuss the reification of women and its effects on women's freedom. According to Poulain, women are created free, but they are treated in ways that prevents them from living in accordance with their freedom (Poulain, *On Equality*, 152–3, 164). In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir points out that while "being, like all humans, an autonomous freedom [woman] discovers and chooses herself in a world where men force her to assume herself as Other: an attempt is made to freeze her as an object" (Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 17). When discussing Beauvoir's understanding of how women become conceived as objects, Sonia Kruks refers to Honneth's analysis of reification (Kruks, *Politics of Ambiguity*, 62). Kruks wants to emphasize that in Beauvoir's analysis, the process of becoming object is never complete. However successfully reified, woman never completely ceases to be an autonomous freedom. In Kruks' words, woman "does not *literally* become a solidified thing; rather she lives out, in varying intensities, a painful and impossible contradiction" between being freedom and object (Kruks, *Politics of Ambiguity*, 62). The contradiction was already identifiable in Poulain's description of how women, who are created free, become reified, but Beauvoir's analysis spells out the painful ambiguity of the situation in greater conceptual detail.

The most deeply rooted difference between Poulain and Beauvoir is their perspectives on the origin of the subjugation of women. We saw that Poulain tells a story about the historical development of women's reification and related subjugation. Beauvoir recounts similar historical events, but emphasizes that these events do not in themselves explain how woman became the second sex. Related to her critical reading of how Marxist authors explain the oppression of women, she argues that "the triumph of patriarchy was neither an accident nor the result of a violent revolution" (Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 85). She rejects the hypothesis of an original matriarchy, which she characterizes as "Bachofen's lucubrations" (Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 72n1). Woman is an autonomous freedom, but Beauvoir sees no evidence of a historical period when women have been free (Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 71, 80). Her analysis is informed by historical and biological data, and she is keen on getting these facts right, but data receives its meaning only when it is reviewed "in the light of existentialist philosophy" (Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 71).

Beauvoir's claim that the subordination of women cannot be perceived as a historical fact or event is crucial, because it has the consequence that this form of subordination cannot be undone in the same respect as a "situation created over time can come undone at another time" (Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 8). This aspect of Beauvoir's analysis has no counterpart in Poulain's, where

subordination is an accidental historical fact and where change follows quite easily – in theory if not in practice – when prejudices are abandoned. Still, there are many similarities between the two authors' accounts of the inertia of subordination. One of these is their discussions of how women themselves share prejudices about their own nature and abilities.

## 2. Prejudices about oneself

When discussing prejudices about the inferiority of women, Poulain emphasizes that these beliefs, though unjustified, seem

all the more convincing when one considers how women themselves tolerate their condition. They accept it as if it were natural for them, either because they do not think at all about what they are or because, having been born and reared in dependency, they think about it in the same way as men.

(Poulain, *On Equality*, 126)

The process of internalizing prejudices about oneself doubles the burden of oppression, since the victim is not only affected by the attitudes of others but also by her self-understanding.<sup>7</sup> Poulain's analysis is grounded in a broader discussion of how and why prejudices about oneself are particularly difficult to overcome. He develops his view in his second treatise, *On Education*, which has received less scholarly attention than *On Equality*. *On Education* consists of five fictive conversations between four characters: the host Sophia, the tutor Stasimachus (who is in many respects Poulain's alter ego), and two young persons, the curious Eulalia and the occasionally rather prejudiced Timander. The fourth conversation is entirely devoted to the topic of self-knowledge. In it Stasimachus comments on the problematic nature of prejudices about oneself:

We are prejudiced about nearly everything that exists, and most of all about ourselves. We are not only the authors of the prejudice but also its theatre and its victims. As far as the things that touch us most closely are concerned, we immolate ourselves to our ghosts, so to speak. Considering all the weird and grotesque ideas we have about ourselves, we are merely chimeras, phantoms, and ghosts, attributing to ourselves characteristics we do not possess. We cut ourselves off from what is most basic to us and disfigure to such a hideous extent the marvelous creation we are that we become horrible in our own eyes and are afraid to look at ourselves. Although we are made in a certain way, and nature makes us realize that and protests constantly against our own imagination, we still try to be the way people tell us we are. If anyone asks us why we are saying that that's how we are, we simply reply that it's because such and such people have told us so.

(Poulain, *On Education*, 212)

---

<sup>7</sup>For a recent feminist discussion of internalized prejudices, see Saul, "Implicit Bias, Stereotype Threat, and Women in Philosophy".

As we can see, Poulain is remarkably aware of the difficulties in changing our self-conceptions, even in cases when we consciously know ourselves to be the victims of prejudice. Two claims need further scrutiny. Poulain points out that we “are not only the authors of the prejudice but also its theatre and its victims”. Towards the end of the passage cited above, he emphasizes that even when we know that the self-imposed “chimeras, phantoms, and ghosts” we believe in are prejudices, we still “try to be the way people tell us we are”. Poulain indicates that we do not have full control of the authorship of our beliefs about ourselves, in part because we are both subject and object of these beliefs. When seeing ourselves, we are strongly influenced by how other people see us.

Poulain’s interest in the problem of self-knowledge arose in the context of seventeenth-century Neo-Augustinian concerns, articulated by authors such as Pierre Nicole, Blaise Pascal, and François La Rochefoucauld, who see self-deception as integral to human beings in their fallen condition. This is so, because humans are not able to fully grasp the motives that direct their will. The question of self-deception – exemplified by Poulain’s reference to self-imposed chimeras, phantoms, and ghosts – was closely related to the question of self-love.<sup>8</sup> The Neo-Augustinian analysis of how hidden motives distort our self-understanding illuminates Poulain’s analysis of how self-interest affects impartiality. In *On Equality*, he points out that arguments about the inferior nature of women “result from the belief that men are impartial” (Poulain, *On Equality*, 125). This belief in impartiality is in itself a prejudice: men must not be trusted, because they are indeed “both judges and litigates” as Beauvoir cites in her epigraph. Men conflate self-interest with what they believe is impartiality. Here self-interest acts as a motive, of which men themselves are not aware, but which makes them believe that they have a true and impartial understanding of their own superiority over women. In accordance with a Neo-Augustinian approach, Poulain can argue – though he does not develop this argument – that when influenced by self-interest, men do not fully grasp the motives that direct their will. They become unable to distinguish legitimate self-esteem from illegitimate pride.

Interestingly, in *On Education*, which is addressed to women readers (Poulain, *On Education*, 140), Poulain seems to be more interested in distortions that result in too low rather than too high self-esteem. In the passage cited above, motives are related to the fact that, despite knowing better, “we still try to be the way people tell us we are” and this distorts our imaginations (Poulain, *On Education*, 212).<sup>9</sup> At this point, the dialogue partners do not distinguish between the self-understandings of women and men, but

---

<sup>8</sup>On Poulain’s relation to the Neo-Augustinian tradition, see Reuter, “Poulain de la Barre on the Subjugation of Women”.

<sup>9</sup>Though clearly alluding to Neo-Augustinian discussions, Poulain does not relate our wish to live in accordance with others’ opinions to how pride makes us strive for the others’ esteem. For an



Stasimachus is answering a question raised by Eulalia and he seems to describe the process by which many women try to be the way others – men and women – tell them they are. By doing so, women act against what Poulain – and many with him – thinks is women’s true self-interest, but this does not exclude the fact that a distorted form of self-interest may motivate attempts to be as others tell us we are. In *On Equality*, Poulain points out that since women have “been born and reared in dependency” they come to think about their own condition in the same way as men do (Poulain, *On Equality*, 126). As we saw in the previous section, acting as a conqueror constituted male self-interest. Dependency creates its own patterns of self-interest and though Poulain does not discuss the topic in any detail, he is quite aware that women “depend on men for everything” (Poulain, *On Equality*, 125) and that under these circumstances, it is not in women’s immediate self-interest to question men’s expectations about their nature and capacities.

Beauvoir explicates the idea. She develops a rich, material, social, and existential analysis of how women’s self-interest contributes to the inertia of oppression. “Refusing to be the Other, refusing complicity with man”, Beauvoir writes in the introduction to *The Second Sex*, “would mean renouncing all the advantages an alliance with the superior caste confers on them” (Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 10). As opposed to the working class, women do not have shared economic interests. This lack is deeply rooted in the human condition: the “proletariat could plan to massacre the whole ruling class; [...] but a woman could not even dream of exterminating males. The tie that binds her to her oppressors is unlike any other” (Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 8–9). Woman’s situation has a deep effect on her self-understanding and in Beauvoir’s analysis, that situation is intricately intertwined with a general human temptation to flee freedom. When woman aligns herself with her oppressor, she eludes “along with the economic risk” also “the metaphysical risk of a freedom that must invent its goals without help”. As an outcome, woman “often derives satisfaction from her role as *Other*” (Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 10).<sup>10</sup>

### 3. Freedom and materiality

In order to understand how Poulain and Beauvoir see the relations between freedom and constraint, we need to take a closer look at their views on the metaphysics of freedom. In Beauvoir’s early essay *Pyrrhus and Cineas* (1944), she discusses some moral problems that she felt had not been sufficiently addressed in Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* (1943). In order to elaborate on Sartre’s discussion of situated freedom, Beauvoir refers to

---

interesting point of comparison, see Susan James’ parallel reading of Nicholas Malebranche and Beauvoir on how the desire for esteem affects complicity (James, “Complicity and Slavery”).

<sup>10</sup>Beauvoir’s discussion of the temptation to remain dependent is embedded in her and Jean-Paul Sartre’s dialogue about the concept he calls ‘bad faith’, see Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 86–116.

Descartes' case against Stoicism. Her aim is to argue that violence is indeed real, despite the fact that it cannot determine freedom. Beauvoir writes:

Of course, violence exists. A man is freedom and facticity at the same time. He is free, but not with that abstract freedom posited by the Stoics; he is free in situation. We must distinguish here, as Descartes suggests, his freedom from his power. His power is finite, and one can increase it or restrict it from the outside. One can throw a man in prison, get him out, cut off his arm, lend him wings, but his freedom remains infinite in all cases. The automobile and the airplane change nothing about our freedom, and the slave's chains change nothing about it either. [...] Violence can act only upon the facticity of man, upon his exterior.

(Beauvoir, "Pyrrhus and Cineas", 124)

Beauvoir later criticized her early essay for its individualism, subjectivism, and idealism (Beauvoir, *Prime of Life*, 549–50). The self-criticism has led some scholars to assume that her early interest in Descartes was guided by his mind–body dualism (e.g. Bergoffen, "Introduction", 84–5), but a careful reading of the passage shows that this is not the case. What distinguishes Descartes from the Stoics is not his dualism, but his discussion of the mind–body union.

In the "Sixth Meditation", Descartes emphasizes that "my whole self, in so far as I am a combination of body and mind, can be affected by the various beneficial or harmful bodies which surround it" (Descartes, *Meditations*, 56). It is the affectability of the self as mind–body union that interests Beauvoir. According to Descartes, freedom belongs to the will, which cannot in itself be constrained (Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, 343). It "consists simply of one thing which is [...] indivisible" and therefore "its nature rules out the possibility of anything being taken away from it" (Descartes, *Meditations*, 42). Still, humans are freedom intertwined with finite bodies and, when considered as whole selves, humans are indeed affected by harmful material impediments, such as chains and acts of violence. In Descartes, Beauvoir finds support for the idea that human freedom cannot in itself be compromised, but is necessarily intertwined with finite facticity.<sup>11</sup>

We may now return to Poulain's discussion of prejudice in *On Education*, where Stasimachus is again addressing Eulalia. He tells her about the urgency to free oneself from "the tyranny of opinion" and elaborates on a comparison between different forms of slavery suffered under different forms of tyranny. Poulain writes:

A slave in Tunis is a slave in body alone and has only one master he must obey. A man who is a slave to custom is a slave in spirit and has as many masters and tyrants as there are people whose example he tries to follow. The former got his chains by right of conquest and by the law of the strongest. The latter is himself

---

<sup>11</sup>The main difference between Descartes' and Beauvoir's early perspectives on freedom and facticity is that whereas Descartes thinks that God's freedom is pure and infinite, Beauvoir (and Sartre) emphasize that no such abstract freedom exists, i.e. freedom does not exist outside of the finite human situation.

responsible for his chains and submits voluntarily [...]. The former tries to break his bonds and to escape, the second seeks only to bind them tighter, and to remain more firmly attached to them. A slave of Algiers, while overtly doing the bidding of a master, can still keep his internal freedom intact, bemoan his misfortune, accuse his master of cruelty, and think about his escape. But a person who is the slave of opinion is a prisoner inside and outside; he is content in his servitude while suffering its misery;

(Poullain, *On Education*, 182; *De l'éducation*, 208–9)<sup>12</sup>

A parallel reading of the two passages by Beauvoir and Poulain shows an essential agreement: whereas violence and chains affect the outside or materiality of a human being, prejudice and bad faith concern her in her capacity of freedom. Poulain's description of submission to the opinions of others highlights how the slave to custom comes to perceive herself as an object, to the extent that the horizon of freedom disappears and she does not attempt to break her bonds. We can compare this with Beauvoir's discussion in *The Second Sex*, where she points out that women tend to align themselves with their oppressors and achieve "satisfaction from her role as *Other*" (Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 10). This is a process of self-objectification, which includes denying one's existence as autonomous freedom. Whereas a slave in Algiers may "keep his internal freedom intact" (Poulain, *On Education*, 182), slavery to opinion includes giving up internal freedom.

In this passage, Poulain describes the voluntary aspect of submission to custom and prejudice, but as with Beauvoir, we must be cautious not to reduce his argument to its emphasis on freedom. We have seen that Poulain is deeply aware of the difficulties involved in overcoming prejudice, especially prejudice about ourselves. When emphasizing that humans submit voluntarily to custom, he is describing a feature that makes this form of slavery more rather than less difficult to overcome – precisely because it includes an element of voluntary commitment. Poulain writes that "a person who is the slave of opinion is a prisoner inside and outside". Oppression mediated by prejudice is not something that affects only the 'inside', i.e. the mind of the prisoner, but also her 'outside', i.e. her corporeality and facticity. Poulain does not go into more detail here, but when combining this passage with his analysis of the historical constitution of the oppression of women, we may read him as claiming that by being a "prisoner inside and outside", the slave of opinion has received her chains both by "conquest and by the law of the strongest" and by voluntary submission. As we saw in section 1, the tyranny, i.e. the illegitimate rule that men exercise over women, is established by the rule of the strongest and upheld by prejudiced opinions, not least the opinion that the subjection of women is natural. It is

---

<sup>12</sup>Translation altered by the author.

this very double character that makes the oppression of women so difficult to overcome, according to both Poulain and Beauvoir.

Like Beauvoir, Poulain was influenced by Descartes' discussion of the mind–body union. In *On Equality*, he relies on mind–body dualism to argue that when “the mind is considered in itself, it is found to be equal and to have the same nature in all human beings”, but proceeds immediately to a discussion of how the mind is joined to the body (Poulain, *On Equality*, 158–9). Poulain emphasizes the intertwined nature of the mind–body union more than Descartes does (e.g. Poulain, *On Education*, 213, 223). He is not explicitly rejecting Descartes' concept of the free will. In one passage, he refers to Descartes' distinction between bodily passions and our voluntary capacity to assent or dissent (Poulain, *On Equality*, 160), but when he refers to the capacity of assent, he is rarely referring to it as an act of will.<sup>13</sup> Instead, Sophia points out in *On Education* that “since it is not our will (*la volonté*) but our reason (*la raison*) that attaches our mind (*l'esprit*) to a viewpoint, the mind should always be ready to detach itself when reason dictates it” (Poulain, *On Education*, 190; *De l'éducation*, 218).<sup>14</sup> Here reason, not the will, is a cognitive agent. When Poulain refers to the will as a separate capacity, he associates it with whims rather than with reasoned judgements. The will has freedom of arbitrary choice, but Poulain connects true freedom of mind with reason and its fight against prejudice. Asked by Eulalia to define what he means by ‘freedom of spirit’, Stasimachus emphasizes that he does not mean “some blind, rash permissiveness that we associate with libertines [but] rather a judicious, enlightened freedom based on love of truth, not fettered or hampered by cowardice or error or ignorance or scruple” (Poulain, *On Education*, 147).

When Poulain argues that “a slave to custom is a slave in spirit” who “submits voluntarily” (Poulain, *On Education*, 182; *De l'éducation*, 208),<sup>15</sup> he is referring to someone who does not exercise freedom of spirit. Women submit voluntarily when “they do not think at all about what they are” (Poulain, *On Equality*, 126). He clearly thinks that the exercise of freedom requires more than an act of will: it requires the exercise of reason and depends on circumstances, which make this exercise possible. In the next section, I argue that *On Education* is in itself a description of how the

---

<sup>13</sup> I have previously argued that Poulain does not seem to have adopted Descartes' concept of will in any detail (Reuter, “Freedom of the Will as a Basis of Equality”, 79–81). For an alternative interpretation, emphasizing the similarities between Descartes' and Poulain's concepts of will, see Broad “Early Modern Feminism and Cartesian Philosophy”.

<sup>14</sup> Translation altered by the author.

<sup>15</sup> It is important to note that Poulain writes “*se soumet volontairement*” (Poulain, *De l'éducation*, 208), which is best translated as ‘submits voluntarily’. The published English translation has translated the expression as ‘submits of his own free will’ (Poulain, *On Education*, 182) and this translation has led Jacqueline Broad to use the passage as evidence for her claim that Poulain did indeed adopt Descartes' concept of free will (Broad, “Early Modern Feminism and Cartesian Philosophy”, 76).

conversations between the four interlocutors create such circumstances. We may conclude this section by noting that Poulain seems to put less emphasis on the metaphysical independence of the will than does either Descartes or Beauvoir in her early essay *Pyrrhus and Cineas*. When he speaks of voluntary submission, he means submission that is not caused by external force, but his concept of voluntary is not based on the infinite and indivisible nature of the free will, as in Descartes' case, or on the concept of autonomous freedom, as in Beauvoir's early essays on moral philosophy. Poulain draws no clear metaphysical dividing line between human freedom and material conditions. As Beauvoir herself and numerous scholars point out, she also moves in this direction from *The Second Sex* onwards (Beauvoir, *Prime of Life*, 549–50; e.g. Kruks, *Politics of Ambiguity*, 12–4).

#### 4. The search for truth, friendship, and mutual recognition

We have seen that Poulain is utterly aware of the problems involved in combatting prejudices about oneself and in achieving self-knowledge, but he also criticizes overt pessimism concerning its achievability. In this final section, I argue that his optimism concerning self-knowledge is related to his optimism concerning the possibility of mutual esteem. Again, we will find interesting parallels with Beauvoir's thought.

In *On Equality*, Poulain points out that “[s]elf-knowledge is absolutely necessary in order to address [the equality of the sexes] properly” (Poulain, *On Equality*, 155). Women must overcome their prejudiced self-conception in order to liberate themselves. In *On Education*, Poulain is influenced by Neo-Augustinian concerns, but he does also argue against an unmistakably Neo-Augustinian position:

[W]hen we come down to the individual and speak of the necessity of knowing oneself, then we protest that it's like moving mountains and that we will never get to the end of it, that man is hidden from himself, that there are countless hidden recesses of the heart he can never uncover; and by piling up these and countless other figures of speech widespread among the people, we create a monster which frightens us needlessly.

(Poulain, *On Education*, 211)

Having heard this, Eulalia replies: “Isn't there an element of prejudice in that?” and Stasimachus answers “Absolutely” (Poulain, *On Education*, 212). The claim that we cannot know ourselves is thus one more prejudice that we need to discard in order to achieve true self-knowledge. Poulain's Cartesian emphasis on the distorting role of the others' opinions could make him choose solitary meditation in order to overcome prejudice, but this is not what he recommends. Not in words and not in deeds. Poulain's deeds are testified by the structure of *On Education*: the book consists of conversations between

four interlocutors, who meet to search for truth. This is a significantly different setting from Descartes' solitary *Meditations* and *Discourse on the Method*: for Poulain, overcoming prejudice is a joint enterprise. Overcoming prejudice is also put into words. At one point, young Timander declares that if we try to turn our backs on other people's prejudiced opinions

we enter a terrifying solitude; and if we distrust people, we have to make up our minds to walk alone and to seek truth as if we were the only people in the world, with no possibility of ever talking about it to anyone. That must be very difficult, because there is always some reason to doubt one's strength and to fear falling into even greater error if one gives oneself over completely to reason.

(Poulain, *On Education*, 182)

Timander raises a characteristically Neo-Augustinian objection to a Cartesian solution based on solitary meditation. Solitary meditation does not work since we cannot trust either our willpower or our reason. Interestingly, Stasimachus does not respond by defending the power of reason. Instead, he points out that we do not need a multitude in order to confirm true beliefs: it "is sufficient to come across one who is undeceived to realize that there are many others in the same situation" (Poulain, *On Education*, 183).

Stasimachus argues that in order to know that we are not deceived, we need confirmation by another person, who is also engaged in the search for truth. Sophia adds that "it seems to me that we would be less well off to trust [large numbers of people] than to trust one single man who is concentrated and dedicated and who understands what it is to think" (Poulain, *On Education*, 183). Poulain contrasts the opinions of the multitude with the undeceived other, who is necessary in order to show me that I am not myself deceived. *On Education* constitutes the right setting: we find four persons in earnest search for truth under the leadership of a philosopher, Stasimachus, who in Socratic fashion underlines that he does not have any readymade answers. In the very last paragraphs of the book, Poulain describes how Sophia, Stasimachus, Eulalia, and Timander decide to form a little society. He writes:

Thereupon the four of them rose and went outside. After expressing their mutual esteem (*beaucoup d'estime de part et d'autre*), they resolved to form a little society, to meet as often as possible and to follow the guidelines they had established, to celebrate together the freedom of the mind that is one of life's joys and which distinguishes those who value it from the vulgar, self-pre-occupied multitude.

(Poulain, *On Education*, 251; *De l'éducation*, 288)<sup>16</sup>

This little society is founded on mutual esteem and a shared focus on the right use of the freedom of mind. Poulain's small society makes it possible

---

<sup>16</sup>Translation altered by the author.

to cast off the chains of prejudice, which a solitary thinker cannot break. Poulain does not elaborate on the relation between self-knowledge and mutual esteem, but we can assume that the justified esteem expressed in relationships celebrating the joint search for truth may help us combat prejudices about ourselves and confirm a truer self-understanding. The distinction between these truth-oriented relationships and the opinions of the multitude is deeply relevant in the case of self-knowledge. Whereas our self-knowledge is distorted when we “try to be the way people tell us we are” (Poulain, *On Education*, 212), the true self-understanding that we may achieve in conversation with fellow truth-seekers is strengthened by the mutual esteem expressed in these relationships.

Poulain’s little society can also be characterized as a society of friends in the sense that the four members are deeply concerned with each other’s well-being. They do not seek truth only for themselves, but are “kind enough”, as Eulalia puts it, to share their insights (Poulain, *On Education*, 251). It is crucial that the truth-seeking society involve persons of two sexes. Poulain elaborates on the nature of friendship between the sexes when he discusses the true nature of marriage in *On the Excellence of Men*. Here Poulain describes marriage, as it should appear, when it has not degenerated into its present form resting “entirely on the laws made by men for their own specific advantage” (Poullain, *Excellence of Men*, 281). He distinguishes between political society and the society of marriage, which “is not founded on fear, but on love”, and continues:

A man and a woman [...] seek to satisfy, through the possession of their own persons, a desire which banishes all fears, which gives them the mutual consideration of the most perfect friendship [...]. When they agree to live together it is purely voluntary, and at an age when each can have as much reason and experience as the other. Even if woman had less, since the contract they make is free, it does not give men any more power than women wish to yield to them.

(Poullain, *Excellence of Men*, 280)

The distinction between political society and marriage was commonplace in Poulain’s time and taken up by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. His descriptions of marriage emphasizes friendship as well as love, but for him, friendship between spouses must be based on their complementary roles, whereas true friendship between men requires equality.<sup>17</sup> In Poulain’s texts, we find no differentiation between the friendship of spouses and men. On the contrary, by referring to “the mutual consideration of the most perfect friendship”, he seems to perceive spouses as enjoying the perfect form of friendship in general. It is voluntary and equal.

---

<sup>17</sup>On the complementary rather than equal roles of the sexes, see Rousseau, *Emile*, 358, and on friendship e.g. Rousseau, *Emile*, 220, 233–5.

In his description of marriage, Poulain emphasizes that the spouses are in “possession of their own persons”. He is clearly referring to juridical conditions, which should guarantee that marriage is voluntarily entered into, but adds that ideally this voluntary decision is taken “at an age when each can have as much reason and experience as the other”. Poulain’s reference to the cognitive conditions of reason and experience indicates that the possession of one’s person includes elements of understanding, not least self-understanding. Interestingly, Poulain continues by stating that even if a woman has less reason and experience than her future husband, this does not give him power over her, since she enters marriage voluntarily. Here the equal freedom of the spouses seems to be the ultimate condition for marriage as the most perfect friendship. Reason and experience are beneficial, but may develop as part of a marriage as well as precede it. We find a close resemblance between Poulain’s description of marriage and the little society formed by Sophia, Stasimachus, Eulalia and Timander in *On Education*: both are based on the voluntary participation of its members, who are equally free, although initially not equally knowledgeable.<sup>18</sup> The conversations in *On Education* show how such relationships may provide the basis for self-knowledge and mutual esteem. When looking at *On Education* in parallel with Poulain’s discussion of marriage, we find an interesting sketch for – though not a detailed theory of – what we can characterize as the mutual recognition of an equal other, developed in an environment of good will and esteem, not fear.

Turning now to de Beauvoir, we find similar connections between freedom, equality, friendship, and mutual recognition.<sup>19</sup> In *The Second Sex*, she develops an analysis of the profound lack of reciprocity between women and men, which draws on a critical reading of Hegel’s master–slave dialectic (Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 159–60, 266). At one point, she draws a particularly un-Hegelian conclusion. Beauvoir writes:

The conflict can be overcome by the free recognition of each individual in the other, each one positing both itself and the other as object and as subject in a reciprocal movement. But friendship and generosity, which accomplish this recognition of freedoms concretely, are not easy virtues; they are undoubtedly man’s highest accomplishment; this is where he is in his truth: but this truth is a struggle endlessly begun, endlessly abolished; it demands that man surpass himself at each instant.

(Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 159–60)

Whereas the oppression of women consists in a painful contradiction between being freedom and object, reciprocity consists in mutual affirmation of the dual human condition as freedom and corporeal situation. From

---

<sup>18</sup>Neither are they social equals. Poulain makes it clear that Sophia, in whose home the group gathers, has the highest social standing.

<sup>19</sup>On the relation between mutual recognition and friendship in Beauvoir’s writings, see Ward, “Reciprocity and Friendship in Beauvoir’s Thought”.



human freedom it follows that mutual recognition can never be stabilized. Recognition has to be reaffirmed at every instant and is incorporated in the most difficult of virtues – friendship and generosity – which have to be constantly re-achieved.<sup>20</sup> Like Poulain, Beauvoir emphasizes that in the best cases, relations between women and men can be based on freedom, love, and friendship. When discussing marriage in the second part of *The Second Sex*, she emphasizes: the “ideal would be [...] that each human being, perfectly self-sufficient, be attached to another by the free consent of their love alone” (Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 511). We find a striking similarity with Poulain’s account of how men and women in possession of their persons make a voluntary decision to live together, guided by love, not fear. Beauvoir continues:

[W]hat is true of friendships is true of physical love: for friendship to be authentic, it must first be free. Freedom does not mean a whim: a feeling is a commitment that goes beyond the instant; but it is up to the individual alone to compare his general will to his personal behaviour so as either to uphold his decision or, on the contrary, to break it; feeling is free when it does not depend on any outside command, when it is lived in sincerity without fear.

(Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 511)

Here we see what mutual recognition requires when accomplished in the concrete cases of friendship and love. We find a commitment, which goes beyond the instant, but which has to be constantly re-enacted in the instant. This commitment requires freedom for oneself as well as recognition of the freedom of the other. It is possible only when one can live without fear. As we saw in section 1, Beauvoir emphasizes that the subordination of women cannot be theorized as a historical fact or event (Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 8). Therefore, subordination cannot be permanently overcome by historical events, but must be constantly challenged through re-enacting relationships of mutual recognition.

We can now conclude our comparisons between Poulain’s and Beauvoir’s discussions of subjugation, self-knowledge, and mutual recognition. Both authors share an understanding of how profoundly prejudice and custom contribute to the subjugation of women. In some cases, Poulain focuses on problems that Beauvoir analyses in greater conceptual detail, such as the ambiguity confronting women, who are simultaneously autonomous freedom and reified things. We have seen that despite their heightened awareness of the obstacles, Poulain and Beauvoir share an optimistic view of the human ability to achieve self-understanding and relationships

---

<sup>20</sup>I focus only on Beauvoir’s discussion of recognition and friendship, but we may note that she discusses generosity already in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* (Beauvoir, “Pyrrhus and Cineas”, 123–4). On Beauvoir’s Cartesian concept of generosity, see Heinämaa, “Ambiguity and Difference”, and La Caze, *Wonder and Generosity*. On Malebranche’s concept of generosity in relation to Beauvoir’s thought, see James, “Complicity and Slavery”.

characterized by mutual esteem. We saw that when Poulain articulates his optimism, he is criticizing the pessimism of authors such as Pascal and Rochefoucauld. Interestingly, when Beauvoir is defending existentialism against charges of 'miserabilism', she argues that the existentialist concept of human freedom is actually more optimistic than traditional forms of pessimism, which view human beings as trapped by their self-interest. Among the pessimists, she names Pascal and Rochefoucauld (Beauvoir, "Existentialism and Popular Wisdom", 203–5). Even in *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir emphasizes the metaphysical role of freedom more than Poulain. The profound role of human freedom has the consequence that mutual recognition has to be constantly re-enacted. Finally, her emphasis on freedom is related to her claim that the subordination of women cannot be understood as a historical fact or occurrence, a claim which differs from Poulain's discussion of the subjugation of women as a chain of historical events.

## Acknowledgements

I presented a first draft of this article at the conference *Recognition and Respect in Early Modern Philosophy* (University of York, 2019). My most profound gratitude goes to Heikki Haara and Tim Stuart-Buttle, who organized the conference and edited the papers into a special issue of the BJHP, and to my fellow participants for their engaged comments. I presented a later draft at the *Australasian Seminar in Early Modern Philosophy* (University of Queensland, 2019) and thank the organizers and participants of that event. Special thanks for their excellent comments to Marguerite Deslauriers, Marguerite La Caze, Sameema Zahra, Kate Sotejeff-Wilson, and two anonymous referees.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## ORCID

Martina Reuter  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8955-0193>

## Bibliography

- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Prime of Life*. Translated by Peter Green. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. "Pyrrhus and Cineas". Translated by Marybeth Timmermann, notes by Marybeth Timmermann and Stacy Keltner. In *Philosophical Writings*, edited by Margaret A. Simons, with Marybeth Timmermann and Mary Beth Mader, 90–149. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. "Existentialism and Popular Wisdom". Translated by Marybeth Timmermann, notes by Sabine Crespo and Tricia Wall. In *Philosophical Writings*,

- edited by Margaret A. Simons, with Marybeth Timmermann and Mary Beth Mader, 203–20. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. New York: Vintage Books, 2011.
- Bergoffen, Debra. "Introduction." In Simone de Beauvoir, *Philosophical Writings*, edited by Margaret A. Simons, with Marybeth Timmerman and Mary Beth Mader, 79–87. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004.
- Broad, Jacqueline. "Early Modern Feminism and Cartesian Philosophy". In *Routledge Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, edited by Ann Garry, Serene J. Khader, and Alison Stone, 71–81. London: Routledge, 2017.
- Descartes, René. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Translated by John Cottingham. Vol. 2 of *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. Translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- Descartes, René. *The Passions of the Soul*. Translated by Robert Stoothoff. In *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 1, translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, 326–404. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- Deslauriers, Marguerite. "Patriarchal Power as Unjust: Tyranny in Seventeenth-Century Venice". *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 27, no. 4 (2019): 718–737.
- Heinämaa, Sara. "The Soul-Body Union and Sexual Difference from Descartes to Merleau-Ponty and Beauvoir". In *Feminist Reflections on the History of Philosophy*, edited by Lilli Alanen, and Charlotte Witt, 137–151. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2004.
- Heinämaa, Sara. "Ambiguity and Difference: Two Feminist Ethics of the Present". In *Differences: Rereading Beauvoir and Irigaray*, edited by Emily Anne Parker, and Anne van Leeuwen, 137–176. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.
- Honneth, Axel. *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea*, edited by Martin Jay, with comments by Judith Butler, Raymond Geuss, and Jonathan Lear. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- James, Susan. "Complicity and Slavery in *The Second Sex*". In *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, edited by Claudia Card, 149–167. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Kruks, Sonia. *Simone de Beauvoir and the Politics of Ambiguity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- La Caze, Marguerite. *Wonder and Generosity: Their Role in Ethics and Politics*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2013.
- Poullain de la Barre, François. *On the Education of Ladies for Training the Mind in the Sciences and Moral Judgment*. In *Three Cartesian Feminist Treatises*. Translated by Vivien Bosley, 139–251. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.
- Poullain de la Barre, François. *On the Excellence of Men*. In *Three Cartesian Feminist Treatises*. Translated by Vivien Bosley, 265–314. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.
- Poulain de la Barre, François. "De l'éducation des dames pour la conduite de l'esprit dans les sciences et dans les mœurs". In *De l'égalité des deux sexes, De l'éducation des dames, De l'excellence des hommes*, edited by Marie-Frédérique Pellegrin, 151–288. Paris: Vrin, 2011.
- Poullain de la Barre, François. *A Physical and Moral Discourse Concerning the Equality of Both Sexes*. Translated by Desmond M. Clarke. In *The Equality of the Sexes: Three Feminist Texts of the Seventeenth Century*, edited by Desmond M. Clarke, 119–200. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

- Reuter, Martina. "Freedom of the Will as a Basis of Equality: Descartes, Princess Elisabeth and Poullain de la Barre". In *Freedom and the Construction of Europe*, vol. 2, edited by Quentin Skinner, and Martin van Gelderen, 65–83. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- Reuter, Martina. "François Poulain de la Barre on the Subjugation of Women". In *Women and Liberty, 1600–1800: Philosophical Essays*, edited by Jacqueline Broad, and Karen Detlefsen, 33–49. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Reuter, Martina. "François Poulain de la Barre". In *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2019 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/francois-barre/>.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Emile or On Education*. Translated by Allan Bloom. New York: Basic Books, 1979.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. Translated by Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Washington Square Press, 1966.
- Saul, Jennifer. "Implicit Bias, Stereotype Threat, and Women in Philosophy". In *Women in Philosophy: What Needs to Change?*, edited by Katrina Hutchison, and Fiona Jenkins, 39–60. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Schmitter, Amy. "Cartesian Prejudice: Gender, Education and Authority in Poulain de la Barre". *Philosophy Compass* 13, no. 12 (2018). doi:10.1111/phc3.12553.
- Stuurman, Siep. *François Poulain de la Barre and the Invention of Modern Equality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004.
- Ward, Julie K. "Reciprocity and Friendship in Beauvoir's Thought". In *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Critical Essays*, edited by Margaret A. Simons, 146–162. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006.
- Welch, Marcelle Maistre. "Introduction: Poullain de la Barre's Cartesian Feminism". In *Three Cartesian Feminist Treatises*, edited by François Poullain de la Barre, 3–33. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2002.