The Challenges of Being a Thinking Thing
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Abstract: What is it to be a thinking thing? Is it simply to be conscious, aware of our thoughts? Or is it something more? In this talk I draw upon Descartes and his near contemporaries to explore the question of what it is to think and to become a thinking thing. I argue, first, that Cartesian thinking involves essentially owning one's thoughts, where this ownership is an achievement – the result of an active norm-governed process. However, if thinking is, in this sense, an achievement, it is an ability that we develop. How is it that we develop into thinking things?

In 1686 Françoise d'Aubigné, Madame de Maintenon, opened a school at Saint-Cyr, just outside of Versailles, for impoverished aristocratic girls, (usually daughters of deceased military officers) with 250 students. The school itself is fascinating, offering a developmental curriculum in reading, writing, arithmetic, and religion, and introduced history, Latin and painting for older girls. There were four colour coded classes – reds (ages 7-11), greens (ages 11-14), yellows (ages 14-17), and blues (ages 17-20), and a professional lay teaching corps (the Dames Saint Louis), who were instructed in a pedagogy focused on dialogue or conversation, and who worked with apprentices – drawn from among the older students – who would review material and guide smaller groups in discussion. The school thrived as the leading European school for girls until it closed in 1793 by order of the revolutionary government, and it is historically interesting as a founding institution of lay education of girls and young women. It is also philosophically interesting insofar as the whole enterprise was structured on providing reasons, that is, teaching girls to become thinking things. Considering the structural features of the education at Saint-Cyr invites questions about the core of a Cartesian thinking thing.

Both the form and the content of the curriculum -- the dialogues that the serve as its foundation, as well as the addresses of Madame de Maintenon to the students, and to the faculty – suggests that learning to reason is a matter of practice: providing examples for students, having the students

imitate those examples, and presumably encouraging them to give reasons for themselves. Recognizing that reason-giving involves practice raises a question of how to distinguish autonomous reason-giving, or the ownership of thought, from habituation or automatic trained responses. Equally, this practice in reason-giving at Saint-Cyr was informed by a very clear set of social norms that served a conservative political end. In particular, students were both alerted to the challenges of a woman's place in society, and yet seem to be encouraged not to resist those places but rather to develop the resources to survive the challenges. Maintenon's educational institution thus brings out how reason-giving practices are not independent of social mores, and so raises a question about the degree to which the reasons themselves have validity.