Women and Education: Discovering the Philosophical Writings of Rahel Varnhagen

Abstract
This is a paper about someone who isn’t a philosopher, or so they say. Her name is Rahel Varnhagen: a Jewish salonniere living in Romantic era Berlin. Typically considered a writer and studied by literary scholars for her beautiful prose, her significant philosophical contribution is disregarded. I intervene here: arguing that her contributions to the philosophy of education are worthy of consideration as they are highly original, especially in the context of Romantic philosophy. I show that her writings on women and social hierarchy further amend her philosophy of education and are interesting and relevant in their own right. Rahel Varnhagen’s writings challenge common assumptions of what constitutes philosophical writing. A historian of women philosophers interested in her must therefore simultaneously do meta-philosophy.

In January 1819, one woman, Rahel Varnhagen, wrote to another woman, her sister Rose, advising her on how to survive in a world which limits women’s autonomy:

To my sister Rose, January 22, 1819
Go to places where new things, words and human beings touch you, where those renew your blood, life, nerves and thoughts. For us women this is doubly necessary; men’s occupation on the other hand is also business, which they must deem important, in the exercise of which their ambition feels flattered; they see an advance in it, into which they are moved by the movement of humans: while we only always have bits and pieces in front of us that drag us down, small expenses and facilities. It is ignorance of human kind, when people think that our mind were different and constituted for different needs, and we were for example able to entirely live off our husband’s or son’s existence. This claim only develops out of the premise that a woman doesn’t know anything higher in her entire soul than exactly the claims and demands of her husband in the world: or the abilities and wishes of her children (…) but they cannot fulfil, recover, or give us rest for further activity, and conduct; or strengthen and vitalise us for our entire life. This is the reason for the many frivolities, which one can see and believes to see in women: (…) they have no room at all for their own feet, they need to always put them where their husband just stood, and where he wants to stand; and they see with their eyes a very narrow world, like one who is bewitched into a tree with roots in the ground. Every attempt, every wish, to dissolve this unnatural state, is called frivolity, or will be regarded as punishable conduct. This is why you and me need to be refreshed a bit (Varnhagen 1912, 170-1).

In this letter Varnhagen outlines disadvantages for women: unlike men, women don’t usually encounter new input but lead a monotonous and

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1 All translations of Varnhagen’s writings in this paper are my own—to my knowledge no self-standing translations exist (yet).
unfulfilling life at home. To educate themselves, they must therefore specifically seek out new venues and people. This letter chimes with Varnhagen’s major philosophical contributions weaving together two usually unconnected philosophical themes: education and gender hierarchy.

The author of the letter—Rahel Varnhagen—is a well-known public figure in German Romanticism at the turn to the 19th century. Yet, the idea that she could have substantively contributed to any (and indeed two) philosophical debates is novel. She is typically remembered as a public figure (a salonnière), an assimilated Jew (Arendt 1959/1997) and only recently acknowledged as a master of epistolary writing (Becker-Cantarino 1999, 129; Tewarson 1998, 5; Daley 1998). She is never considered to be a philosopher. My aim is to change that: I argue that her contributions to the philosophy of education at her time are original in the context of Romantic philosophy, and highly interesting in their own right; I show how her writings on women and social hierarchy amend her philosophy of education in ways that are still relevant today, especially for intersectional feminists and those interested in how to endure oppression. Varnhagen is certainly a philosopher; this is my central claim. Her writings might even—though that is not my focus here—merit her being a canonical philosopher.

Varnhagen’s writings challenge common assumptions of what philosophical writings must be like. This starts with her genre: Varnhagen writes letters and diary entries which contain philosophical remarks next to comments about the weather, her love life, or the current gossip in Berlin, as we will see. These are neither treatises, the typical philosophical work of her time, nor are they exclusively philosophical. We might therefore worry that her writings cannot be philosophical. Yet, this worry can be quickly rejected: many philosophical, if not canonical, texts by men are neither treatises nor exclusively philosophical (Shapiro 2016, 379). Just think of Plato’s dialogues!

A second worry is more serious: as we will see, Varnhagen’s writings don’t contain her philosophical thoughts collected and coherently presented in one place, terms are not always clearly defined, and the general style is fragmentary (Daley 1998, x-xi; Tewarson 1998, 13-14, 43). Excavation and reconstruction into a coherent body of thought is often left to Varnhagen’s reader. When this work isn’t done, her writings can appear merely as a loose collection of beautiful, sometimes even contradictory, aphorisms or

2 Some early modern women philosophers, writing around a hundred years before Rahel Varnhagen, also embraced these two as their central topics (Shapiro 2005; 2016). Comparing Mary Astell’s rationalistic understanding of women’s education (Detlefsen 2017) and Varnhagen’s Romantic conception would be interesting further research.

3 Varnhagen isn’t the only influential letter writing salonnière of her time, but perhaps the most well-known today: at least Bettina von Arnim and Caroline Schelling-Schlegel must also be mentioned.

4 Daley comes closest, referring to some of Varnhagen’s writings as “a kind of philosophical essay” (1998, 13).
sayings for which the prose matters more than the content. The scholarship on Varnhagen’s work therefore still today praises her *bonmots*, her beautiful words, and in so doing belittles their philosophical content (e.g. Isselstein 2019, 953). Below we will see why her writings lack the desired structure: it has to do with her social position as a Jewish woman. Coherent and systematic presentation of course remain desirable for philosophical writing, but—as Varnhagen’s work demonstrates—it might not be necessary.

Her work gives rise to a third worry about subjectivity: Varnhagen’s writing and philosophical reasoning is at times highly personal when philosophy is usually written in impersonal style to convey a maximum degree of objectivity. I postpone this worry until we know more about her claims and arguments for them. Then I suggest that her subjective style is actually philosophically beneficial.

This essay cannot answer the question what philosophical writing is if it need not be exclusively philosophical, in treatise-form, systematic or objective. Yet, with Varnhagen in mind, we can at least wonder whether the presence of reasons and arguments might not suffice. Thinking about Varnhagen raises difficult meta-philosophical questions. The hope is that it also offers answers to these that are more inclusive than standard conceptions of philosophy still seem to be.

**Rahel Varnhagen on education**

Education, discussed under the German terms *Bildung* (formative education) and *Kultur* (culture), is a central philosophical theme for German Romanticism, contemporary to Varnhagen. In developing her own concept of education Varnhagen adds to this theme.

Her concept centres around the term *Orginalität*, which here means both authenticity and originality. One ought to be authentic: “being oneself”, calling up “one’s deepest essence” (2019, 984), or developing one’s “natural dispositions” (1983, vol. III, 1). Varnhagen strongly objects to adopting others’ beliefs simply because they are their beliefs—one must have one’s own reasons. She refers to the ideal individual who can think for herself as honest: „Honesty is part of thought” (2019, 9). But one also ought to be original: distinct from others (2019, 9). Originality is linked to authenticity: when we develop our natural dispositions authentically, we will become distinct and unique individuals (2019, 9-10).

The ideally original individual is not only honest, but also steadfast: able to make difficult decisions without being tempted to revert them (2019, 13). Varnhagen refers to the steadfast individual as possessing integrity [*Character*] (ibid.). She tests this quality against a specific case: if one can part from a former friend for good (given there are appropriate reasons for this), then one truly has integrity, a quality Varnhagen finds lacking in herself (ibid.).

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3 For an overview of this theme and its historical significance see Gjesdal (2015).
Other virtues are connected to *Orginalität*: the commitment not to lie, a strong will, but also the inclination to listen to one’s feelings. First, Varnhagen admits that lying is one way in which we exercise our freedom: lying is “beautiful if we choose it; and an important part of our freedom” (2019, 19). That lying can be an expression of freedom seems odd. Perhaps this claim makes most sense in circumstances where one has only very minimal freedom of expression anyway. Then even the smallest exercises of freedom become significant. Varnhagen also holds that it is part of *Orginalität* to “be true”: not to lie (ibid., 12). So lying can be desirable in one sense: it is beautiful and an expression of freedom; but undesirable in another: the educated individual doesn’t lie. It is interesting that the most obvious way in which lying is undesirable is missing: that lying is morally wrong.

Varnhagen further suggests that the original person must also be strong-willed to maintain her *Orginalität*:

> We would have made ourselves useful for ourselves if we had an unlimited will over what is raw material within us; and if we turned what is will into an inflexible thing. The human being must be able to make himself into a wall, into something impenetrable entirely due to his will, so that he can battle [external] things and [other] human beings who present themselves as [external] things (2019, 13).

This need for a strong will must not be mistaken with the need for an exclusively *rational* will. In fact, the development of feeling is an important part of Varnhagen’s ideal of *Orginalität*. This is so because “feeling is something more refined than thought” (2019, 38): while feeling cannot understand itself (only thought has that capacity), feeling can form more differentiated judgements (ibid.). Yet, this ability of feeling is frequently overlooked and seldom cherished: “the most intelligent person is often not intelligent enough to listen to (…) feeling” (2019, 23). Following Varnhagen, an ideal education would even out this imbalance in which feeling is disregarded or trumped.

While *Orginalität* is Varnhagen’s own concept, she shares with her Romantic contemporaries the broad idea of *Bildung* towards forming a distinct personality, an important part of which is the development of feeling. Schlegel, in outlining the Romantic programme, states that “the highest good, and [the source of] everything that is useful, is culture [*Bildung*]” (1962, Ideen 36; Beiser 2003, 88). “The most pressing need of the present time is to educate the sensibility”, Schiller adds (2000, letter 8). Varnhagen knows these Romantic works well—Schlegel and Schleiermacher for example attended her salon—and she engages with them in her own work, even if she rarely cites them explicitly; she is especially fond of Fichte’s and Goethe’s ideas. However, there are important differences between her and the Romantics pertaining to how a person should achieve the ideally formed state. I explore these in the next section: Varnhagen links formation to questions about gender and social hierarchies.

**Obtaining Formation**
Orginalität is not naturally given, nor is it something one is usually brought up to have via formal education in school or at home (1983, vol.III, 1). This dislike for formal education is also reflected in prominent Romantic thought. Romanticism instead recommends an education via art or play—an aesthetic education (e.g. Schiller 2000; Beiser 2003, ch. 6). Varnhagen rejects this path: she refers to both formal and aesthetic Bildung as the acquisition of “false wealth” or “bought education” (2019, 72). Both cannot produce strong-willed, original individuals able to face and master the problems of daily life:

If real life actually appears before their eyes, comes to their throat, always anew from soil, and clouds, and from the unique poor flesh, then they [those educated through aesthetic or formal education] (...) do not know how to decide anything, they do not understand how to treat anything, so they do everything wrongly even if only out of mere perplexity (2019, 74).

If Bildung is not attained via aesthetic training, what must one do to achieve it? Varnhagen’s writings are much less clear on that. She writes that being original “takes an entire life full of effort” (2019, 9), suggesting that whatever the correct way to form oneself turns out to be, formation will be difficult and require continuous work. Elsewhere she adds that Bildung depends on “circumstances due to chance” (1983, vol. III, 1). This doesn’t refer to the lucky chance of having been born into privilege and enjoying formal or aesthetic education. Quite the opposite: formation must proceed through ordinary life and the variety of challenges one faces there. As she sees it, if I previously had to make a difficult decision, I will be better equipped to make a second difficult decision now (2019, 74). At this point, formation seems unrelated to privilege: everyone might be lucky enough to face difficult decisions. But there is a relation to gender privilege: Varnhagen suggests to Rose that women should expose themselves to new and unusual experiences to “renew your blood, life, nerves and thoughts” (1912, 170-1). Men usually make such novel experiences through their work and their presence in the public sphere. Women, however, with less access to economic and public sphere, need to specifically seek out such new experiences elsewhere. So men are best positioned to form themselves almost automatically; women are not.

In this way, gender hierarchies come to play a role in Varnhagen’s writings on (the attainment of) formation. This constitutes an entirely novel addition to more well-known Romantic thought on formation. As other Romantic philosophers see it, social hierarchies and injustices have no role to play for Bildung. Varnhagen’s recognition of these social and political dimensions of education is part of a wider interest she has in social hierarchy and specifically the situation of women in society.

Rahel Varnhagen on women
I first trace Varnhagen’s analysis of society to then turn to the remedies she suggests. In the letter to her sister Rose, Varnhagen notes three things about the situation of women: First, their minds are incorrectly deemed “different” or inferior (1912, 170-1; 174). Secondly, this idea of women’s inferior minds serves to justify women’s inferior status when actually, as
Varnhagen points out, this idea only arose from women’s inferior social status in the first place (ibid.). Women have no autonomy from the male members of their family, be it their husbands or sons (ibid.). This also includes mental autonomy: when women have no space to prove their mental abilities, they will be regarded as mentally inferior. Third, any attempt to change this inferior status is socially sanctioned and deemed “frivolous” (ibid.). We can say that in the letter to Rose Varnhagen describes a comprehensive self-justifying, self-reproducing patriarchal system: the claim about natural inferiority justifies women’s social inferiority and lack of autonomy; and the charge of frivolity punishes non-conforming women and thereby functions to keep all (other) women in their place.

To this analysis of a patriarchal system Varnhagen adds an interesting layer of complexity pertaining to the situation of Jewish women:

happily you [as a Jewish woman] would have wanted to be ‘a homely wife, loving and kissing your husband’ as Goethe says in his Distichon; but you couldn’t. And where to put the terrible reserves, the abilities of heart and life! (in Arendt 1959, 231; also 246).

we [Jewish women] are outside of human society! For us there is no space, no office, no vain title (in Arendt 1959, 230).

Varnhagen and her social circle have made the experience that respectable (which at this time means non-Jewish) men don’t marry Jewish women and that therefore even this relatively inferior social status other women can access is barred for Jewish women. In today’s terms, Varnhagen analyses and explains a type of “intersectional” oppression, as coined by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989; 1991): Jews are oppressed and so are women, but Jewish women aren’t even deemed respectable wives. While just being a wife is in itself an inferior social position, from the perspective of Jewish women even that is unattainable.

Varnhagen takes issue with these social hierarchies: “in society there must not be hierarchy” (2019, 15). She takes inspiration for this argument from language: the German term for society, Gesellschaft, derives from Gesellen, German for “companions”. But the idea of companionship is that all companions are equal to one another. Varnhagen then proposes that society should be modelled after this ideal, just as the term “society” is modelled after the term “companion” (2019, 15). So if there cannot be a social hierarchy between companions, there should not be such a hierarchy in society either (ibid.).

Given this analysis and this ideal, what can be done? While Varnhagen doesn’t specify how exactly to bring about this ideal society, she proposes at least three strategies for survival in the present social hierarchy: solidarity, assimilation, and intellectual activity.

**Solidarity**
Women’s solidarity is crucial for emancipation—this remains a contemporary feminist theme. Varnhagen notes the importance of such
solidarity while providing this support to her friend Rebecca Friedländer: “Let this be consolation in this horror, that a creature lives, who knows your existence as a loving witness, and—I dare say—understands it!” (in Arendt 1997, 166). For Varnhagen, having a loving witness will give one strength “you do not yet have [on your own]! That is what is most impossible, and nevertheless possible” (ibid). This is because female solidarity enables one to find pride in one’s social position (2019, 17; in Arendt 1997, 85; 1959, 230). Varnhagen, however, is unclear on whether this pride will then enable emancipation or whether it is an end in itself.

**Assimilation**

Taken together, Varnhagen does not spend much time thinking about solidarity, it seems simple to her. Instead she worries about assimilation: becoming part of high society, even nobility, if possible. Accordingly, Varnhagen writes to her husband August: “as long as one nobleman exists, one must also be ennobled” (in Arendt 1997, 227). This second, assimilationist strategy aims particularly at erasing Jewish or lower-class identity. It is not about women assimilating themselves to men. But Varnhagen ultimately rejects the strategy on two grounds: first, it is partial, second, it is fragile. I focus on fragility.⁶

Varnhagen uses the example of Joséphine Bonaparte: Napoleon Bonaparte crowns Joséphine, previously not a member of the aristocracy, as his queen in 1804 and adopts her children. In 1809, they separate—Joséphine immediately loses all her social privilege. Varnhagen embodies a creator-voice to make her philosophical point about the fragility of assimilation:

‘Look! This is how high I can throw a person like a ball, without her doing; and this deep I can roll her down!’ And her children’s furious happiness, the peak of her pride, her most sensible joy, becomes her most incurable woe, her grimmest suffering (2019, 69).

Having become fully assimilated to aristocratic status—Joséphine is not only like French nobility, she is above them —, her new social position is entirely at Napoleon’s mercy. Divorced, Joséphine is stripped of all her privileges. For Varnhagen this example indicates that assimilation must fail: it can never be stable and secure.

**Formation and Intellectual Activity**

Let’s briefly recap: assimilation is partial and fragile; solidarity helps gain personal pride. A third strategy—formation and intellectual activity—can help women to escape social injustice.

In Varnhagen’s letter to Rose she suggests that Rose “go to places where new things, words and human beings touch you, where those renew your blood, life, nerves and thoughts” (1912, 170-1). The formation Varnhagen recommends to her sister is a specific kind of intellectual activity. This activity provides a refuge from the dull everyday where women must conform to social roles that grant them very little personal autonomy (ibid.).

⁶ For partiality, see e.g. Varnhagen in Arendt (1959, 218) or in Tewarson (1998, 52).
Varnhagen also focuses on a second kind of intellectual activity: writing (1983, vol.III, 10). It can distract from social hierarchy and suffering (ibid.). Such intellectual activities are difficult as Varnhagen notes and knows first-hand, even though this is no reason not to pursue them:

For years [of writing and thinking] one torments oneself to finally bring about a tiny, tiny result. This is the prey! (…) But the trouble is this: the effort, the honest striving, not to rest until we have found the small prey. Our mind is truly weak and lazy (2019, 32).

Yet, Varnhagen is convinced that nevertheless women should write and think. Having traced some of her major philosophical themes, let’s now return to her way of doing philosophy.

Paradigmatic Philosophy
The story philosophy continues to tell of its history is predominantly a male story which can accommodate only “the single and exceptional woman” (Hagengruber 2015, 37). This story is not surprising, given we live in patriarchy. Yet, things get better: recent work by Lisa Shapiro (2019), Julia Borcherding (2019), Karen Detlefsen (2017), John Conley (2002), Margaret Atherton (1993), Rae Langton (1992), and many more has rehabilitated some brilliant, but forgotten women philosophers of the past. In this effort, special prominence has been given to women philosophers of the Early Modern Period. As Waithe explains, these women are not usually considered part of the philosophical canon but they are usually admitted into the philosophical compendium, “the larger set of works or authors from which la crème de la crème has risen” (2015, 22). The compendium includes everything that is (or is immediately recognised as) philosophy; the canon only lists philosophy’s “mountain peaks” (Rorty 1984, 71).

So recent work on alternative philosophical histories has focused on bringing women from margin to centre, on making them part of the canon. No doubt will we immediately recognise the works of Lucrezia Marinella (1601), Mary Astell (1694/1697), Margaret Cavendish (1664), Anne Conway (1692), or Elisabeth of Bohemia (1643-1650) as philosophy once we start to pay attention to these: they are all works of sustained, systematic, and objective argument. Above I suggested that these are three criteria often taken to demarcate paradigmatic philosophy. But when we hold on to this paradigm, Varnhagen remains excluded from philosophy.

John Conley (2002) is one of the few, of those working on canon revision, who makes explicit their reliance on such a paradigm. Conley focuses on five French salonnières about a hundred years before Rahel Varnhagen’s lifetime. As these women inhabit very similar social positions as

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7 For recent edited collections on historical women philosophers, see Waithe (1987–1995); Harris and Hughes (2013), or O’Neill and Lascano (2019).
Varnhagen, Conley’s meta-philosophical convictions are particularly interesting for my project. He writes:

Stylistically, they [French salonnières] all wrote nonfiction works that offered a *sustained argument* about the nature of virtues and related themes in moral philosophy (2002, 2, my italics).

The issue of the proper genre of philosophy presents obvious dangers. Opening (...) philosophy to every work dealing with a philosophical theme simply abolishes the frontier between philosophy and non-philosophy. Novels, plays, sermons, even greeting cards would seem to fit. The works by women included as philosophical in this book qualify on more than thematic grounds. They are *public, systematic works* attempting to treat issues in moral philosophy. Memoirs and novels are excluded. The terms employed and the history of the author reveal an explicit knowledge of philosophical debates. Most importantly, the works develop *an argument on why the positions they defend are in fact true*. Sablé’s argument that friendship can be a site of authentic virtue is more than a *subjective report* on her own happy friendships (2002, 14-15, my italics).

So philosophical works should contain (1) sustained argument (no fiction, no other genres), (2) systematic argument (well-structured), (3) objective argument (no subjective report). Otherwise even greeting cards could be philosophy (Beware!). Content-wise, philosophical writings should demonstrate philosophical knowledge. Content is no problem for Varnhagen, but style is. Her writings don’t have much sustained, systematic, and objective argument. Above, I looked at the first two requirements. Especially the first could be quickly rejected. Let’s here take a closer look at the third, before I return to the second.

Varnhagen’s writings are personal or subjective in at least two senses—and they benefit from this! (a) Varnhagen incorporates her own specific experiences into her philosophical writing. She for example recounts her oppression as a Jewish woman (in Arendt 1959, 203) and outlines the pride she eventually found in her Jewish heritage (in Arendt 1997, 85). Recounting these experiences serves to make plausible her claims about social hierarchy. The very “subjective report” Conley decries is employed masterfully to show “why the positions … defend[ed] are in fact true”. While subjective experience is used to make a claim, the claim itself is not subjective, it is universally true: Jewish women suffer in a particular, intersectional way from social hierarchies and solidarity helps to survive such hierarchy. Further, (b) Varnhagen’s philosophical claims sometimes have a double function—philosophical and personal: her writings (especially those on social hierarchy) seek to provide support and solidarity to the women she addresses. Varnhagen’s writings don’t impress with

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8 Conley’s focus is on Madame de Sablé, Madame Deshoulières, Madame de la Sablière, Mademoiselle de Vallière, and Madame de Maintenon (2002). To my knowledge there is no evidence that Varnhagen read any of their works but we know that she read French salonnières contemporary to those Conley focuses on (Isselstein 2019, 978-9).
impersonal argument—they impress with arguments from personal experience.

Her writings are not only personal, they are also modelled on a conversation. Varnhagen is explicit about that:

My writing should often resemble fresh, aromatic strawberries, on which sand and roots still hang: this you once said; I accept it. (…) Yet, I need to say one thing about my way of writing: (…) I never want to write a speech, but I want to write conversations, as they live in a human being, and as they are only laid out through will and art—if you wish—like a herbarium into an always dead order. (…) If someone’s writing, be it book, memoir, or letter, is only a complete, delivered speech, then for me it always has an aftertaste of dislike (1912, 212-13).

This is opposed to Conley’s understanding of philosophy and to the common picture of philosophy we started with: first, Varnhagen’s writings aren’t sustained argument or feature only philosophical content; secondly they aren’t systematic or well-structured. This is because they are modelled on ordinary oral conversation in which different topics are invoked (from philosophy to the weather) and ideas are erratically presented. In Conley’s view, this basically makes them greeting cards. Yet, Varnhagen clearly has lots to contribute to philosophical debates, as I demonstrated. If this is the case then the paradigm of philosophical writing which Conley invokes explicitly must be too narrow.

But given the existing paradigmatic writing style, why does Varnhagen not make it easier for herself? Why does she write in conversations rather than in systematic, sustained, and objective argument? It is because in the 18th and 19th century she faces a dilemma: either be a woman or a philosopher—but not both.

**Either Woman or Philosopher**

Varnhagen lives in a world of an emerging *Salonkultur* with an established culture of letter and diary writing (Scholz 1999, 73; Tewarson 1998, 45). Women are often the centre of these salons and the letters they write are private correspondence. The emerging norm at the time is that these contain “expressions of female life and experience” (Becker-Cantario 1999, 129), they should be non-political, personal reflections on “family realm” and “women’s circle of life” (ibid., 133). These letters are then informally circulated, sometimes anonymously published during the author’s lifetime, but often only printed posthumously. Inspired by French salons a century earlier and by salons in Jena (Germany), salon and letter culture takes off in late 18th century Berlin with Henriette Herz’s salon (Scholz 1999, 77-8). Previously almost entirely excluded from the public sphere, through correspondence it became possible for women to least penetrate into a literary public (Goodman 2005; Weissberg 1985, 165).

Varnhagen was eager to become a central part of salon culture, especially since—at the end of the 18th century—these circles were starting to be more inclusive, allowing even non-aristocratic, Jewish members. Following
Hannah Arendt’s assessment in her biography of Varnhagen, it was one of Varnhagen’s chief aims to establish herself in a position well within privileged social circles (1997, 237-249). And Varnhagen was successful: her letters become widely read, especially after her husband publicly praises these during Varnhagen’s life and publishes them after her death (Arendt 1997, 198-9; Tewarson 1998, 10).

Adapted to her social conditions, Varnhagen thinks of her own writings as “an original story and poetic” (in Stern 1994, 9); she notes her “love for beautiful language and good expression” (2019, 33) — not for clear philosophical structure. This aesthetic criterion is a requirement of the genre of correspondence. By excelling at one thing (being a woman in the public sphere), Varnhagen must fail at another (writing to fit an established philosophical paradigm). She decides to be a woman, not a philosopher. But she hasn’t fully abandoned the idea that she actually also is a philosopher:

The (...) artist, philosopher or poet is not above me. We are made of the same element. On the same rank and we belong together. And he, who wanted to exclude the other, only excludes himself. But living was assigned to me; and I remained a seed until my century, and am entirely buried from the outside (1983, vol. I, 266).

Varnhagen describes herself as “living” rather than thinking. This refers to her role as a salon host which she understands to be socially determined or “assigned”. Perhaps our time can be her “century” and can see her “seed” sprout: as a philosopher. Judging from her work on education and social hierarchy she deserves it.

Bibliography


For Arendt, Varnhagen is no philosopher. Arendt is interested in her solely as an example of a Jewish life between pariah (a social outsider) and parvenu (one who “must climb by fraud into a society, a rank, a class, not their by birthright” (1997, 237)).


