

Gabrielle Suchon

A Woman Who Defends All the Persons of Her Sex: Selected Philosophical and Moral Writings.

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The idiosyncratic seventeenth-century philosopher Gabrielle Suchon published a voluminous treatise on ethics and politics (1693) and another one on the voluntary celibate (1700), in which she introduced, and vindicated, the status of *neutraliste*, a name for people (mostly women) who shunned marriage as well as the convent, because both involved a surrender of personal freedom to the authority of others. Today, Suchon is known only to intellectual historians and literary critics interested in the cultural history of seventeenth-century France, and even among them few will have read her books. It is therefore to be welcomed that we now have an excellent translation of large parts of her writings, ably introduced and annotated by Domna Stanton and Rebecca Wilkin. It is published in the University of Chicago Press series, ‘The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe’, which over the past ten years has done a wonderful job to make available translations of early-modern French, Italian, Spanish and German pro-woman writings. To anyone teaching courses in early modern cultural and intellectual history, the series is an invaluable resource.

Central to Suchon’s philosophical position is her approach to freedom. That she valued it highly is apparent from the story of her life. Placed in a nunnery against her will, she waged a hard struggle to obtain permission to renounce her vows. How precisely she managed to escape from the convent the extant sources do not permit us to decide, but escape she did. Thereafter she lived with her mother, and finally alone. Prayer, thinking and writing were Suchon’s chief occupations. Accordingly, she defines freedom ‘as a precious gift that divine generosity bestows on rational and intelligent creatures, a gift by which they become mistresses of all their actions’ (93). ‘Man’s freedom,’ she adds, ‘is the most delicate work that came from God’s hand.’ Finally, God established human freedom so absolutely that He himself cannot destroy it. On the face of it, this sounds more like Descartes than like Calvin, but it leaves open what kind of freedom human beings enjoy.

Suchon calls human freedom ‘a natural right...universal the world over’ (100). We should not, however, equate her idea of freedom with the concept of natural liberty found in seventeenth-century modern natural rights philosophy. The latter concept entails a notion of ‘self-ownership’ that is clearly rejected by Suchon. According to Suchon, the reasonable freedom outlined above is only the first stage of the road to true freedom.

Those who go beyond that can attain a second and higher stage of liberty: this is ‘transcendental liberty’ which can only exist in a ‘free heart’, a heart ‘without love, without hatred and without desire...living solely for God’ (I quote from Suchon, *Traité de la morale et de la politique*, ed. Séverine Auffret, Paris: De Femmes 1988, 35; the chapter from which I quote is not included in the Stanton/Wilkin translation, but reference to this higher freedom appears in the foreword, 88). In the end, freedom means surrendering yourself to God’s love, although this road is open only to persons who have liberated themselves from all earthly tutelage. Some of Suchon’s utterances on the absolute freedom of the human will may sound Cartesian, but in fact she is probably closer to the Augustinian tradition.

Besides these theoretical reflections on the concept of freedom, Suchon’s book offers numerous criticisms of the lack of freedom in the society of her time, and in particular of the severe restrictions on the freedom of women in marriage as well as in the female religious orders. Many of her observations have an autobiographical ring. They also provide a running justification of the choice Suchon herself had made to remain celibate. Beyond that, she consistently defends the equality of the sexes. Women, she argues, are fully as rational as men (and often more reasonable). Sexual difference, she posits, resides only in the body, while the rational soul has no sex. The story of creation likewise teaches that God created both men and women in his own image. To underpin such assertions she refers to the Bible and also frequently to the author of the *Égalité des deux sexes* (apparently she did not know that the Cartesian François Poulain de la Barre was the author). Besides, and in accordance with a long early-modern feminist tradition, she adduces numerous examples of learned women of the past to establish the equality of female and male minds. Coming to political authority, Suchon first states, referring to Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, that the powers that be are instituted by God and therefore command legitimate obedience. But she also maintains that the power men wield over women ‘is usurped more often than it is legitimate, since custom has more force than justice in the way in which we are treated’ (198). The shift from the third to the first person in the last clause clearly shows Suchon’s heartfelt engagement with the critique of male supremacy. Finally, she contends that vices and harmful behavior of women are mostly caused by the ignorance in which they are kept by their male guardians.

Suchon’s *Traité* continues a feminist argument that is found in many seventeenth-century treatises, both in France and in other European countries. It is noteworthy that she does this as a believing Roman Catholic. Her book carries no less than four formal ‘approbations’ by doctors of theology, and it opens with an encomium of ‘the very holy and very adorable Trinity’. The belief, still circulating in the historiography, that early-modern feminism was a protestant genre, is belied by Suchon (and by several other catholic feminist writers, such as Marie de Gournay and Antoinette de Salvan in France, and Lucrezia Marinella and Arcangela Tarabotti in Italy).

Suchon’s treatise on the voluntary celibate bears the imprint of her life. It can be

read as a vindication of the ‘spinster’, the woman who freely chooses to renounce marriage. Single women who were not nuns were much derided, and many of Suchon’s contemporaries considered her way of life an unnatural anomaly. Suchon, on the other hand, not only defended her choice, but coined a neologism for women who decided to shun both matrimony and the convent. According to Suchon, voluntary celibacy was especially needful for the relief of persons (mostly women, going by the examples in her treatise) who are oppressed. Such women she called *neutralistes*. The *neutraliste* spends her life in voluntary celibacy. Her condition, she explains, is ‘without commitments, and it contains all other states without actually putting them into practice’ (242). The *neutraliste* thus embodies the sum total of human potentiality, but remains aloof from all forms of social obligation. This enables her to attain the superior state of transcendental liberty, in which all civil and ecclesiastical commitments are suspended in order to surrender herself to the supreme commitment of contemplating and loving God, as well as practicing charity. Suchon kept a certain distance from the Church. ‘One should not believe’, she declares, ‘that the material temples that stand forth today with so much wealth and splendor are the true Church...the veritable Church...is Jerusalem militant where the just serve God in the spirit and in truth’ (*Du Célibat volontaire ou La vie sans engagement*, ed. Séverine Auffret, Paris 1994, 54-5).

To pin down Suchon’s thought in a neat philosophical pigeonhole seems a hazardous and unfruitful assignment. Several philosophical influences are at work. She frequently cites the Bible and Aristotle, but her preference for a monarchical over a republican regime is clearly indebted to Aquinas’ reading of Aristotle. Her feminist argument draws on Poulain de la Barre and thus indirectly on Descartes, but there are no references to Descartes’ metaphysics. The self-reflexive inward turn that permeates Suchon’s notion of transcendental freedom evinces a Jansenist mentality, even though she does not share the self-abasement and mortification so common among the Jansenists. (Stanton and Wilkin observe that most French nuns got but little intellectual training, but that there were some very learned *religieuses* at Port Royal [22].) With some caution, we might summarize Suchon’s philosophical position as a political philosophy mainly indebted to Thomist Aristotelianism and the Bible, a view of religion with some affinity to Jansenism, a feminist reasoning taken from Poulain de la Barre, and finally a passionate affirmation of the freedom and autonomy of the individual even against overwhelming odds. It is Suchon’s notion of freedom that gives her philosophy coherence and power. She is no follower of Descartes, but her radical concept of freedom has nonetheless a definite Cartesian flavor.

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