

Week 4: Gabrielle Suchon (1632 - 1703)

The "Neutralist"

"Neutralism" is Gabrielle Suchon's neologism designed to create a new concept from a combination of ideas about natural law, the role of God and the nature of virtue along with a critique of ways in which women are denied their right to freedom, knowledge, and authority. It is a huge undertaking, and I can only present a few aspects of this project. The concept itself is unique, but not only that, the aim to create something new, a new way of understanding a way of life is itself radical. The concept is, to this day, still struggling to find its place within social norms¹. To see this, we only need to recognise that women are generally still expected to become wives and/or mothers as if this is an essential part of being female, rather than a choice that women have.

The notion of "celibacy" is different from our English understanding.

"The celibate life" does not refer to a life without sexuality, it refers to a life lived as a single person who chooses "neutralism". In contemporary French "célibataire" means "single". A nun is meant to be virgin, but she is not on Suchon's definition "a neutralist".² She contrasts the neutralist with the libertine, who is not a chaste figure, but is a célibataire, or single person.

"The celibate life can be considered in so many ways that it is difficult to find a definition that accounts for its particularities." Suchon writes in her treatise *On The Celibate Life Freely Chosen*. The idea of particularity is central to Suchon's thinking: each situation, person, moment in their lives, is particular, no person's aims, no situations, no responses to situations can be generalised. This may be the first account of this kind: although she draws extensively on Aristotle's account of virtue as involving a particular sensitivity or

¹ Where matriarchies flourish motherhood is still central to the female's power. Perhaps not always?

² the life of the neutralist may coincide with a life without sexuality, but our understanding of what chastity, as a virtue, meant at that time is still being explored. There are interesting explorations of sexuality in different communities, for instance, that suggest a contemporary dichotomy between leading a sexual life and a life as a virgin may not be applicable.

attunement to the situation, Suchon adapts Aristotle to fit her own account of the neutralist. Conditions that must be met to be a neutralist are:

1. A person must have knowledge of the nature of their choice (it cannot be made by guesswork)
2. A person must act intentionally (not by chance, or by a lucky consequence of some other act)
3. A person must have a sufficiently steady disposition formed by self-knowledge (so the choice is one that they identify with).

To choose the life of the neutralist one must choose it voluntarily, be able to articulate it and to follow through on it with action. These require knowledge, or even wisdom. Suchon says that without wisdom there is no freedom. This brings out the difference between a freedom that leads to flourishing and one that leads to randomness and instability.

“Although I have defined celibacy as a state without commitments, it is nonetheless an act of will, chosen by preference over other conditions.” This emphasises the requirement of knowledge that sets this choice up as a fully willed one. No other desires will compete with the wish for this kind of life.

In the institutions of her time, both the convent and marriage required those who enter these to be obedient to the laws and norms governing being a wife of a man or a wife of god, both submissive to the dominance either of the husband or of the priest who interprets holy text. The radical departure from this approach to a life made by understanding that these institutions create identities for us, might be one of the earliest accounts of individual ‘authenticity’, as it relates to human flourishing that we have. She departs from Aristotle here in that virtue for Aristotle involves social training to become part of the social institutions and norms, rather than learning to listen to one’s own voice and developing an identity based on understanding.

Suchon does not consider this an easy option. Nor is there any way to ‘fake it’; if one uses the idea without knowledge of its meaning, then one is a ‘libertine’, which would have

meant to her what it means to us: someone who exploits their freedom to act as they please to produce a life that harms themselves and others.

What the neutralist does, instead, by refusing all definitions imposed through social norms, is to discover the deeply social nature that is fundamentally ours.

Neutralism is highly individual in the kind of life one leads. Neutralism gives rise to a deep interest and compassion for others in one's community, so the life of a neutralist connects one to the community in ways established institutions, despite appearing to be socialising institutions, do not. Both the convent and marriage tend to isolate women from the world, and make them dependent upon the guidance of the husband / priest.

Rejecting both, the neutralist is a central part of her community, contributing through work and interest in the well-being of everyone, while choosing for herself the life she feels most fulfilled by.

Additional features of the life lived by a woman self-determining her identity:

Women need to be educated and to be able to use their freedom to think, developing their 'inner freedom'. Freedom and knowledge need each other. "Only those who are wise can truly be free" (p92).

"Man's freedom to choose his estate and vocation is as natural to him as it is for fire to burn, water to refresh, air to moisten, and soil to produce plants." (p101)

"Since we are all born for freedom, death is preferable to constraint, because we no longer belong to ourselves if we lack the power to dispose of our own belongings and actions or if, in all things, our actions depend on the movement of others." (p 117)

"All things in nature know no more deadly effects than when they are constrained, which is to say, when they are removed from their centre of gravity. Where do the thunder and lightning that clatter over our heads come from if not from the exhalations and vapours that rise from their natural ordinary abode in the ground and in water? Battered and beaten by hot and cold clouds, they cause all those disturbances that strike fear into

humans. And what of earthquakes, which cause so much fright and such great damage? They are nothing but winds trapped in caverns and subterranean places that have no exit, thus causing the earth horrible movements and jolts. Saint Thomas says that wind, which appears to be nothing but a feeble vapour, produces tumultuous commotions and frightful storms to rid itself of the tyrants that restrain it. When wind is confined in a subterranean place that prevents it from rushing into the air, its natural resting point, it causes strange disturbances and inflicts severe convulsions on earth.

“The agitation that constraint produces in the human mind is incomparably more malignant and dangerous than wind, because this imperious ruler [constraint] gives birth to tempests and to the most pernicious storms of passion

“Persons of the fair sex, who suffer the deprivation of the greatest advantages of moral and political freedom, are often overwhelmed by the intolerable weight of constraint. Constraint controls their youth, rules their condition, and accompanies them throughout their life. Most of the time women are moved about, rather than moving, and take on as many forms and countenances as others give them. They should recall the words of Saint Jerome, who reasons that since we are formed in the image and likeness of God, it is an extreme baseness and infirmity to accept any other form. Women would surmount some aspects of their constraint if they knew how to resist and how not to be so pliable and blind in helping to forge their own chains.” (p119)

All material quoted comes from:

Suchon, Gabrielle, (2010), *A Woman Who Defends All The Persons of Her Sex, selected philosophical and moral writings*, ed. and trans. By Donna C. Stanton and Rebecca M. Wilkin, University of Chicago Press.

WEEK 5 MATERIALS

In Resources: Read the biographical entry on *Émilie Du Châtelet* (Project Vox)

And Du Châtelet’s Discourse “On Happiness”