

Gabrielle Suchon's Vision of the Good Life

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Gabrielle Suchon lived a uniquely solitary life. She joined no salons, although her position as minor nobility would not have barred her; there is no evidence of correspondence with other intellectuals of the time, a practice engaged in as a means of disseminating and developing ideas, and, remaining single, she did not have access to the intellectually stimulating social life a husband might have provided, as did other women of her class in the seventeenth century. Despite this apparent isolation from the cultural community, she had access to libraries and her two 600 page treatises were masterpieces of philosophical erudition, reflecting not only an extensive appreciation of ancient philosophy but also the ability to produce a finely-detailed analysis of the social norms of her time.

That analysis produced several key ideas that form the basis for a comprehensive philosophical view. One is the idea that there is an essential human nature, one not shaped by the institutions that dominated women's lives at that time, namely marriage and the convent. Another is that there are three pillars of human existence necessary for a flourishing life: freedom, knowledge and authority.

Gabrielle Suchon was born in Semur-en-Auxois, in central France, in 1632. Her father was a local judge and her mother came from a land-owning family. The details we have of her life are scant: Suchon was sent to a convent, most probably against her will, when her father died. She spent several years at the convent before being permitted to leave. Once she had left, she returned to her mother's home and supported herself through teaching. She died in 1703 in Dijon. Her first work, *Treatise on Ethics and Politics, Divided into Three Parts* was self-published, while the second, *On The Celibate Life Freely Chosen*, was published professionally.

Both marriage and the convent were, Suchon argued, corrupt institutions, defined by a patriarchal hierarchy that viewed women as naturally subservient to the authority of men. The background to Suchon's understanding of this situation is well documented: there was a long-standing view that women were morally lax and needed guidance to remain virtuous, as well as weak minded and in need of a husband's control. The earliest known argument specifically refuting these views was that of the writer, Christine de Pisan, in her *Book of the City of Ladies*, written in 1405. Pisan's work is considered to be the first challenge to the view that women were inferior to men to gain traction and ushered in a centuries-long *querelle des femmes*, or the "woman

question”, stimulating discussions and arguments throughout the intellectual circles of Europe.

Suchon’s own contribution is in many ways a development of this response to the woman question. However, it also contains a philosophical perspective that goes beyond conceptions of equality, addresses our fundamental nature, and reflects on how human beings can best flourish. These aspects of her work give it its metaphysical and ethical dimensions.

Suchon’s metaphysics reflect a mixture of essentialism and Christianity, while the ethics that emerge from her metaphysics are both idealistic and practical. Suchon develops the concept of “the neutralist” to convey what our nature would be were we able to strip from our character the cultural norms that define us. In the neutralist state of being, humans are naturally lovers of God and naturally virtuous. A life lived in a commune of neutralists involves sharing talents and interests within a community that is never oppressive, as each is there by choice. Neutralists live simply. Intellectual study and passionate social engagement, with friendship playing a central role, create all the pleasures the neutralist needs.

Suchon grounds much of her thinking in an Aristotelian conception of the flourishing life, in which virtue is central and contemplation fulfils us as rational beings. It is clear from her critique of established religion that her Christian faith excludes the conventional ways of expressing one’s love of God, challenging the Scholastic dogma of the time. She describes the convent as a social institution designed to keep women in a subservient position, with virtues such as chastity, modesty and piety encouraged only as a means of social control.

Entry into a convent was often forced upon a woman whose family could not support her or who refused to marry according to her family’s wishes. Once in the convent, any wealth she had went to the Church. Women were taught to read so that they could follow scripture, but the interpretation of scripture was controlled by the priests. It is, nonetheless, possible that Suchon, as did others, used the convent’s libraries as a starting point for her own self-education.

The other institution, marriage, was no better. In marriage, too, a woman’s wealth went to the husband’s family, and she became his chattel, to be treated in any way that he pleased. Suchon’s view on marriage is nuanced: she was concerned with the degree to which marital abuse was common, while also recognising the kindness and compatibility experienced by many married couples. However, as Mary Wollstonecraft pointed out a century later, a benevolent husband does not establish a free condition for his wife: as long as her abilities to express herself are dependent upon his will she does not have the self-determination required to be a free human being. This is a point that underscores Suchon’s arguments: dependency on others and on the institutions of one’s times forces a false definition of our natures upon us and denies us the fulfilment we should, from our God given nature, receive.

The essentialism that forms the basis of Suchon's metaphysics is argued for through a reasoned analysis of our nature, with support from a religious view of what faith tells her is inherently human. Reason, she argues, tells us that a female's nature is not distinct from that of a male. Arguments at the time that reflected the view that men were inherently more virtuous were clearly under attack here: one challenge Suchon raises against this view is that nature is not determined by gender. While it was religious belief that led to the view that women are inherently less virtuous than men, Suchon's view is that God does not claim that women are inferior. All human beings have been made with a good and equal nature by God. Not even the sin in the Garden of Eden can change that.

Suchon develops her account of our nature by referencing nature itself: "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 ... when wind is confined in a subterranean place ... it causes strange disturbances and inflicts severe convulsions on earth." But, she says, "the agitation that constraint produces in the human mind is incomparably more malignant and dangerous than wind Constraint brings changes and troubles to families ... [and] is more frightful than all the reversals of nature and the contrariness of the elements."

Like later female writers concerned with the welfare of women, Suchon also recognises female complicity in their own condition: "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. But far from striving to acquire this sacred freedom, women invent a thousand ways every day that serve to imprison them further."

While Suchon is certainly offering a comprehensive critique of both marriage and religion, she is not arguing that one ought not to marry or enter a convent -- one may do so from one's own free choice. Those who live authentically, as neutralists, live the "celibate" life, or the life without commitments. Celibacy does not have the narrow connotation of virginity, but, rather, refers to a life shaped by the singularity of the individual. Such a life is one committed to living without commitments, but full of potentiality. There are as many ways of being a neutralist as there are ways of being a human being. Each of us is unique and, once we are committed to our own authentic self, those choices we make do not constrain our nature. Some people may live the neutralist life and then choose to marry. Similarly, some neutralists may voluntarily choose to join a convent. If they do, they are doing so with the full awareness of their own freedom to choose.

Suchon takes aim at the tendency within society to marginalise and pressure women who do not marry to conform to social norms. Such women, Suchon argues, if they are neutralists, are expressing their nature and developing the virtuous character that makes them central to the well-being of the larger community. For instance, such

women will choose to work in hospitals, in prisons, or to help care for and educate orphans and the children of relatives. Thus the idea of the unmarried woman as both morally vulnerable and useless, “the spinster”, is shown to be an error: such women should be given great respect and appreciation as highly valuable members of society.

The seeds of an early form of existentialism are clear here: our nature is one of freedom, with constraints upon it coming from the institutions and definitions that encourage us to behave in inauthentic ways. The malign effects of this inauthenticity appear in the ways in which we cling to the chains of constraint and internalise the norms of institutions rather than face the challenges of creating a life for ourselves. This way of life is clearly not an easy option. Suchon warns against viewing the neutralist as a libertine. The libertine does not exhibit the true nature of a human being as understanding the authority of God and the qualities of virtue that make life fulfilling.

Suchon’s treatise on *Ethics and Politics, Divided into Three Parts* analyses the three central conditions for a life among others. In order to live a fulfilling life, we all need freedom, knowledge and authority.

Suchon describes freedom as having three parts, freedom of the mind, freedom of the heart and freedom of conscience. Freedom of the mind is determined by its God-given rational nature, which all humans share; freedom of the heart refers to freedom from love, hatred, or desire, for only the heart that lives for God is free; freedom of conscience is conscience that is enlightened and orderly. Such freedoms are not dependent upon our external conditions: we can be free in this important inner sense regardless of the ways we may need to struggle in our daily lives. Even those who must work in subservient conditions, Suchon says, can develop their inner freedom.

For people to have this freedom, knowledge is necessary. Suchon writes, “Since all the evils committed in the world originate from ignorance, it should not come as a surprise that ignorance engenders dimness, weakness, dissoluteness and corruption of the principal parts of a rational being.” Elsewhere she writes that “knowledge is a habit that forms within the self through the practice of reasoning, It draws its lights from the sight and experience of diverse subjects that the senses communicate to the mind.” Through the mechanisms of comparisons, generalisations and distinctions between items, “knowledge amasses ideas and understandings to produce the certainty that perfects the intellective power.”

Suchon’s addition of the third central feature, authority, adds a pointedly practical element to her tenets for a flourishing life. While it is clear that there is no ultimate authority other than God, authority is worldly too: “Power and authority in the state and in politics are the greatest advantages we could possibly possess. The debasement women suffer in being deprived of these advantages is all the more disturbing since they are thus deprived of honour and power in the world’s eyes.”

Suchon's argument is that women, and indeed all people who are denied authority, are removed from the activity of making the world. Their relationship to others is always one of dependency rather than autonomy, one of subservience to, or constant constraint by, others.

With God as the sole source of freedom, knowledge and authority, and our true natures shaped by God alone, Suchon is able to critique all contingent ways in which women are reshaped by conventional hierarchies of power, removed from access to education and constrained by the institutions that define them. Under such conditions, the development of practical freedom is impossible and inner freedom much more difficult to attain.

Suchon is rare among philosophers in including in her account those who need to labour. She recognises that for many, living freely from all dependencies is not an option. Her call to embrace the neutralist life offers women who depend upon institutions for survival the kind of freedom that cannot be taken from them; if they have developed inner freedom, that inner freedom can lead to informed choices even within the constraints of conditions beyond their control. In this there is anticipation of Simone de Beauvoir's situated ethics: while we do not control the conditions of our lives, we have the capacity to transcend the definitions these conditions place upon us. In doing so, we can develop the freedom we have inherently and perhaps find alternatives to the lives being offered us.

Suchon refers to her own life at times as modelling the neutralist ideal: she lived free from cultural definitions and spent much of her life teaching and studying, while producing what she viewed as a call to arms to address inequality and establish the true basis for human flourishing.