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SEXLESS MINDS, SEXLESS BODIES: FRANCOIS POUILLAIN DE LA BARRE,  
GABRIELLE SUCHON, AND EARLY MODERN FEMINIST THOUGHT

BY

Dana Aitpenbet

NU Student Number: 201945061

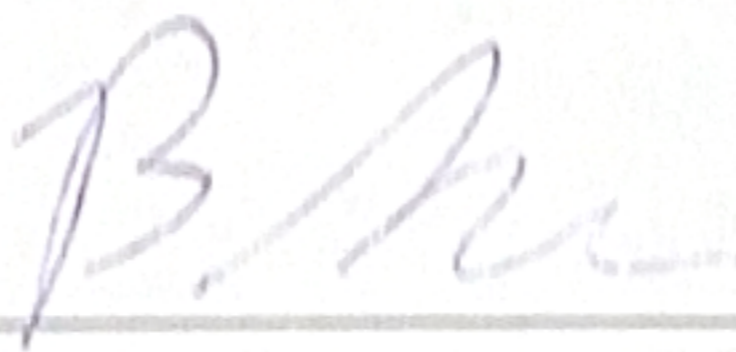
**APPROVED**

BY

BRIAN SMITH, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR

ON

The 06 day of 05, 2026



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Signature of Principal Thesis Adviser

In Agreement with Thesis Advisory Committee

Second Adviser: Dinara Pisareva, Assistant Professor

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*I dedicate this thesis to the thinkers who were ahead of their time.*

## Abstract

The thesis argues that the philosophical tools that early modern feminist thinkers have used to argue in favor of the liberation of women carry with them assumptions that are equally as limiting as the structures that they are trying to dismantle. The thesis shows that the liberatory arguments of the early modern feminists have unintended consequences. Thus, bringing the liberatory power of the arguments together with their unintended consequences, or their cost, reveals a tension within early modern feminism.

The thesis focuses on two feminist thinkers from the seventeenth century France - Francois Poullain de la Barre and Gabrielle Suchon. Both of them have a goal of liberating women, both of them are from more or less the same intellectual milieu, and both of them use newly emerging and sophisticated philosophical tools when making their emancipatory arguments. What is more, both of them produce arguments that require women to give up on some aspects of their womanness.

Drawing on the Cartesian method of radical doubt and mind and body dualism, de la barre makes his famous claim that “the mind has no sex”. By separating the mind from the body, de la Barre grants women rational equality, and uses the method of radical doubt to challenge the prejudices and customs that were used to subordinate women. De la Barre uses the strategy of de-sexing whereby the mind is viewed independently of one’s body. Nevertheless, the unintended consequences of de la Barre’s argument is that by prioritizing the mind, he renders the female bodies as philosophically irrelevant. What is more, de la Barre does not grant true rational equality, but he wants women to conform to a male-coded rationality.

Drawing on the theological ideas, Aristotelianism, and Stoicism, Gabrielle Suchon proposes the creation of a civil institution of celibacy, or a neutral life. Suchon acknowledges that the existing institutions of marriage and convent are deeply unequal and impossible to reform. Therefore, she proposes the institution of celibacy as a third option. By leading a neutral life, women would acquire freedom, knowledge, and authority. The strategy that Suchon uses is de-sexualization, whereby women must refrain from the sexual relations with men in order to acquire social and political equality. The unintended consequence of Suchon’s argument is that freedom and equality are only available for women if they abstain from the heterosexual relations and the embodied experiences.

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## **Introduction**

One of the most ironic aspects of early modern feminist arguments that make them so compelling is that they may have unintended consequences and reproduce equally as limiting assumptions as the structures that they are trying to dismantle. The early modern feminist tradition, especially that towards the end of the seventeenth century, offers a great possibility for examining this dynamic because this period marks the beginning of incorporating philosophical tools to the feminist works. If the feminist tradition before the seventeenth century is the time when thinkers have been relying on the classical texts and the scripture, feminists from the seventeenth century have started to ground their arguments in some broader philosophical discourse and using more sophisticated philosophical tools. Thus, feminist scholars were among the first ones to use the Cartesian method, neo-Platonic humanism, and empiricist epistemology in their works. Nevertheless, these same tools were not entirely unbiased and might have carried ambiguous assumptions. This thesis is about the double-edged quality of the early modern feminist arguments.

This work focuses on two feminist thinkers from the seventeenth century France - Francois Poullain de la Barre and Gabrielle Suchon. The choice of these two thinkers is not accidental since both of them have a goal of liberating women, both of them are from more or less the same intellectual milieu, and both of them use newly emerging and sophisticated philosophical tools when making their emancipatory arguments. However, the most interesting aspect of their arguments is that even though both thinkers have the same goal and write their works while being in a similar context, their arguments are drastically different from each other. Poullain de la Barre relies on the Cartesian dualism when making his famous claim that “the mind has no sex”, thus emphasizing the sameness of reason and its transcendence over the body.

Gabrielle Suchon, on the other hand, argues in favor of creation of the secular institution of celibacy, thus claiming that liberation of women happens when she escapes the constraints of marriage and religion by choosing a particular lifestyle. Therefore, the title of this thesis - Sexless Minds vs. Sexless Bodies - reflects this contrast and captures the arguments of de la Barre and Suchon. Moreover, the title also suggests that both thinkers are engaging in the strategy of de-sexualization. Although not in the same way, the pattern that their arguments follow is similar in some aspects. More precisely, de la Barre employs the strategy of de-sexing, while Suchon has the strategy of de-sexualization in her works. Thus, analyzing the arguments of de la Barre and Suchon at the same time can bring important insights and show the tension within the feminist tradition.

### **The Distinction Between Sex and Sexuality**

At this point, it would be important to clarify the distinction between sex and sexuality. This distinction is necessary because it helps to understand the strategy of de-sexualization that both Poullain and de la Barre use better. Sex, in the context of de la Barre's argument, means the biological distinction between males and females, and all the differences related to the bodies and roles that it implies. Sexuality, on the other hand, refers to the sexual relations and desire. In a general sense, sexuality is associated with something more erotic. Thus, de la Barre's claim that "the mind has no sex" means that it diminishes the salience of gendered difference by finding a common point of reference in the mind, which has the secondary impact of rendering sexuality irrelevant. In contrast, when Suchon argues in favor of the institutions of civil celibacy and leading a neutral lifestyle, she is making a claim on the level of sexuality. What this means is that even though both thinkers employ the strategy of de-sexualization, de la Barre renders the bodily

differences and sexual desire irrelevant to politics, while Suchon de-sexualizes the bodies of women. In effect, she builds political institutions in reference to sexual identity but in a way that eliminates heterosexual relations between men and women. On this view, women acquire political equality by alienating sexual desire and committing to a life of celibacy. Clarifying this distinction is important because it shows how the strategies of de-sexing and de-sexualization can be both liberating and limiting at the same time.

### **Different Kinds of Inequality**

It is also important to clarify the definition of inequality and its different types because there are a lot of dimensions to it. While most of the thinkers within the early modern feminist tradition often use the term inequality in their works without specifying its form, this inequality can be associated with different aspects of women's lives. Intellectual inequality is associated with intellectual "inferiority" of women and the belief that men have a better or more reason than women. It became a basis for the exclusion of women from educational institutions and other forms of inequality. Another form of inequality that is directly related to the former type is institutional inequality whereby women and girls were excluded from schools, universities, governmental offices and all other forms of institutions. Most of the early feminist scholars addressed institutional inequality in their works and tried to find ways to combat it. Another crucial form of inequality is social inequality, and it means that women and girls are assumed to be inferior in their daily lives, families, marriages, on the street, and, basically, everywhere. The most important factor that sustains social inequality is related to the customs, prejudices, and traditions. While early modern feminist thinkers propose arguments to fight against all forms of inequality, it is important to understand that inequality itself can have a lot of different meanings

and dimensions. Some thinkers might argue against one form of inequality, while others target another one. For instance, while Suchon argues for an institution of civil equality between men and women, she never argued that all women should join this institution. If a woman wanted to marry, she could, but she needed to accept the fact that she would be entering into a fundamentally unequal social relationship.

### **The Early Modern Feminist Tradition**

Early modern feminism should not be considered as a tradition with a unified set of arguments and similar approaches. On the contrary, this tradition consists of a vast array of interventions from different perspectives and different backgrounds. The rhetorical strategies and philosophical tools that the thinkers from this period use are very diverse, so are the solutions and arguments that they propose. Lucrezia Marinella, in her *The Nobility and Excellence of Women, and the Defects and Vices of Men*, claims that women, in fact, are superior to men in rationality, intellect, and virtue (Marinella 2007). She uses the Aristotelian notions and terms that were used and interpreted to keep women subordinated, and completely subverts them in order to show that women are far more noble than men are (Marinella 2007). What is more, Marinella claims that women were kept inferior to men and denied the access to education just because of the vices of men and their fear that women would become more powerful than them (Marinella 2007). In *The Equality of Men and Women*, de Gournay relies on the scripture in order to claim that men and women are equal, as she claim that “the virtue of man and of woman are the same thing, since God bestowed on them the same creation and the same honor” (de Gournay 2007, 87). Thus, the proper interpretation of the scripture and theological works also matters when it comes to equality. In her work on *Whether the Study of Letters Is Fitting for a Christian Woman*,

Anna Maria van Schurman proposes fourteen arguments in favor of spiritual and moral development, and claims that “whatever perfects and adorns the human mind is fitting for a Christian woman. But the sciences and arts perfect and adorn the human mind” (van Schurman 1998, 30). Thus, van Schurman claims that intellectual cultivation is both a right and a duty for women. Judith Drake, in her *Essay in Defense of the Female Sex*, presents an argument that rejects the old assumption that women are naturally inferior to men, and rather claims that the denial of education keeps them in subordination (Drake 2017).

Even though all of the aforementioned interventions seem to be so different from one another, they have a shared goal of exposing the mechanisms and ways through which women were made “inferior”. They show that what has been thought of as natural, was in fact historical, and what has been perceived as rational inferiority was prejudice and customs. Likewise, they expose the “divine” as the misinterpretation of the scripture.

### **Historical Context**

François Poullain de la Barre and Gabrielle Suchon are perfect representatives of the early modern feminist tradition because both of them have an aim of liberating women and fighting against the prejudices of their time. More importantly, both of them use newly-emerging and sophisticated philosophical tools that helped them to ground their arguments within a specific philosophical tradition. Thus, if de la Barre grounds his argument in Cartesianism, Suchon uses a combination of neo-Aristotelian, virtue ethics, and even Stoicism when making her claim in favor of the neutral life. Indeed, using the newly emerging philosophical tools marks the new period of feminism. Nevertheless, these philosophical tools might have carried their own assumptions that could distort the meaning of the arguments that they were used to design. This

is the central theme of this thesis. While both de la Barre and Suchon engage in the strategy of de-sexualization and use sophisticated philosophical tools, this strategy may have its own unintended consequences. The strategy of de-sexualization is effective in that it neutralizes or even removes the beliefs that women are inferior and subordinated. In other words, it removes the sexed and sexualized beliefs regarding rationality and reason, social roles, and the like. In the case of de la Barre's work, de-sexualization grants women rational equality and neutralizes or removes the bodily differences because the bodies and minds are viewed as two separate entities. Regarding de-sexualization in Suchon's work, she acknowledges that education and autonomy are denied because women are bound to their husbands or cloisters, and simply gets rid of these bonds through de-sexualization (Suchon 2010).

### **The Structure of the Thesis**

This thesis seeks to reveal tensions within the early modern feminist tradition. The main tension is associated with the fact that these same strategies that are aimed at liberating women come with a cost. In the case of de la Barre's argument, the equality of minds is granted at the expense of rendering the bodies - and experiences associated with them - completely irrelevant. It is also worth mentioning that although de la Barre claims that the minds are equal, women still need to conform to the masculine standard in order to be considered as equal. He implicitly frames his argument in a way that makes the masculine rationality as a norm. In this sense, the equality of reason that he writes about cannot be a true equality.

In the case of Suchon, equality also comes at the cost of women's embodied experiences. She identifies marriage and the convent as two primary institutions that impose constraints upon women, and the institution of civil celibacy that she proposes free women from these constraints.

This proposal is radical and revolutionary for her time, and this is what makes her stand out among many other thinkers. Yet, in order to be equal, women who choose to live a neutral life will have to abstain from sexual relations with men. This implies that the feelings of desire, romantic love, and the experience of motherhood are absent in the lives of women who chose to live a neutral life. Nevertheless, Suchon does not frame these as a loss, but she rather presents them as a condition for a life free of constraints. Therefore, Suchon grants women equality only if they are ready to suppress their desires and emotions. Thus, women are liberated from the constraints of marriage and convent, but they will not be able to experience the full range of their embodied lives.

It is worth explaining the broader context in which de la Barre and Suchon wrote because it might help to understand their arguments better. Both of them were early modern feminist thinkers from France. The seventeenth century, especially the second half, marks the period of a rigorous debate regarding the nature of reason, the roles of the sexes, the power of customs and traditions, and regarding how people should live their lives. The *Querelle des femmes*, or the four-century-long feminist debate that was sparked by Christine de Pisan, was a “vehicle through which most early feminist thinking evolved” (Kelly 1982, 5) became even more sophisticated and thinkers within this debate started to use the newly-emerging philosophical tools. The early modern feminist tradition and *querelle des femmes* was marked by three main ideas - defense of women against misogyny and arguments for education, ideas on gender, challenging the value systems of that time and prejudice (Kelly 1982, 7). Thus, women began to organize the intellectual circles where they used to discuss the themes of the status of women and their liberation. These intellectual communities were almost the only places where the intellectual authority of women was acknowledged and recognized. Thus, understanding why de la Barre

and Suchon produced their arguments in the way they did is easier when the context within which they were writing is explained. The women's question was a subject of the heated debate at that time, and this is probably why the readers can get the sense of urgency from the arguments of de la Barre and Suchon. Nevertheless, despite the uniqueness and radicality of each of the author's arguments, there was no widespread attention paid to them. Scholars who study de la Barre and Suchon suggest that these thinkers did not attract attention in the past because their arguments were simply ahead of their time (La Vopa 2010, 57).

This thesis is structured as follows. The first chapter explores Francois Poullain de la Barre and his argument that the “mind has no sex”. This chapter consists of three sections. The first section is about what Cartesianism offers and why de la Barre used it. In the second section, the theme of how exactly de la Barre used the Cartesian method will be explored. The third section of the first chapter is about the cost of the argument that “the mind has no sex”. The second chapter of this thesis is about Gabrielle Suchon and her argument in favor of neutral life. Likewise, it consists of three sections. The first section is about how Suchon combined Aristotelianism , Christianity, and Stoicism and used it to make her argument. The second section is about the argument in favor of the civil institution of celibacy. The third section of this chapter explores the issue of the unintended consequences that Suchon’s argument may produce. Finally, the third chapter of this thesis is dedicated to conclusion.

## **Chapter 1. François Poullain de la Barre**

François Poullain de la Barre, in his famous work “On the Equality of the Two Sexes”, presents an ambitious and radical argument that “the mind has no sex”, yet it carries with it serious repercussions for feminist thought, both good and bad. Throughout the work, he first

explains why women were deprived of the opportunity to acquire knowledge, then he introduces his main argument, followed by a lengthy justification of why women deserve to hold positions and occupations that were previously unavailable to them. De la Barre's work *On the Equality of the Two Sexes* is truly emancipatory because he was one of the first thinkers to argue that men and women are equal in terms of their rationality. Moreover, he relies on sophisticated philosophical tools and methods in order to make this claim, which also makes his claim unique and strong. Although de la Barre does not specifically mention Descartes anywhere in his work, it can be clearly seen that he stretched the Cartesian method of radical doubt and his dualism so that they would capture the women's question. His logic is simple - he renders the embodied phenomenon of sexual identity and sexuality as irrelevant as he only focuses on the minds and the rational equality between men and women. Following Descartes, de la Barre holds that bodies and minds are two distinct things, and that the minds are the same in both men and women. This line of thought grants women rational equality, indeed, and implies that women and men possess the same rational capabilities. However, in trying to argue in favor of the equality of reason, de la Barre completely neglects the bodily differences and the embodied experiences associated with them. The structure of his argument implies that only the mind is what matters, and the bodies are entirely ignored. On the one hand, his argument is emancipatory because it sees women as cognitively co-equal and thus eligible to gain access to education and certain kinds of intellectual work. In this sense, de-sexualizing the mind is beneficial because it implies that the minds are the same in everyone and that men and women share a fundamental intellectual equality, which was still a radical sentiment in the seventeenth century. On the other hand, this same strategy of de-sexing leads to overlooking the bodies and rendering them as irrelevant to the theme of equality. What is more, this strategy implies that inasmuch as women

are oriented to certain bodily temptations - emotions, passions - they are not operating out of their higher selves.

The unintended consequence of de la Barre's seemingly emancipatory argument is that even if rational equality is possible, women still need to conform to a male-coded rationality and rise up to the level of men, specifically denigrating emotion, passion, and desire. De la Barre's framework implies that in order to be equal, women need to resemble men. It is also worth noting that even though de la Barre argues that the mind has no sex in order to argue that one's mind is not superior to any other person's mind, the structure of his argument implies that de la Barre sees a hierarchy between the mind and the body. Meaning that for him, the mind is superior to the body. Therefore, even the liberatory arguments that are aimed at establishing equality can have serious unintended consequences that are equally limiting as the reasons that they are meant to address.

This chapter is focused on the structure of de la Barre's argument that "the mind has no sex". The significant portion of this chapter will be dedicated to how de la Barre constructs his argument. This chapter consists of three sections - the first one is about how de la Barre leads to the conclusion regarding rational equality, the short second section is about the philosophical tools that he uses and the methods he relies on to make this claim. Finally, the third section is about the cost of his argument and the unintended consequences that it has.

### **1.1. The Structure of de la Barre's Argument**

De la Barre opens his work "On the Equality of the Two Sexes" by claiming that "the best things that could happen to people who are struggling to acquire new knowledge is to question whether the traditional education they have received is valid, and then to try to seek out

the truth for themselves” (de la Barre 2007, 49). This is a hint to the method of Cartesian doubt that de la Barre heavily relies on and that will be discussed in detail in the following paragraphs. He makes a claim regarding the validity of education because he establishes that “we are full of prejudices and that we have to make a real effort to get rid of them before we can hope to come to a clear and distinct understanding” (de la Barre 2007, 49). De la Barre dedicates a significant portion of his work on Equality to prejudices and how they form and sustain a false notion of male superiority. In order to get rid of prejudice and think of the traditions and customs that are deeply woven into the fabric of society, de la Barre proposes something that he calls “the rule of truth” whereby people should “accept nothing as true unless it is supported by clear and distinct ideas” (de la Barre 2007, 50). He makes such a claim because he is well aware of the fact that “if something is well established, then we think it must be right” (de la Barre 2007, 54). What this means is that people do not question the validity and truthfulness of the customs, traditions, and the knowledge that they receive. Regarding the idea of female inferiority and how it originated, de la Barre claims that “both men and women tend to believe that their minds are as different as their bodies and that the distinctions that necessarily exist between them should be extended to all aspects of life” (de la Barre 2007, 55). Thus, for de la Barre, differences in the bodily strength gave rise to the differential treatment in all other aspects. De la Barre sees the bodily differences between the sexes as the basis for the exclusion of women from all kinds of educational institutions and occupations. As de la Barre himself points out, “it is exclusively through their superior physical strength that they have kept for themselves all external advantages, from which women are excluded” (de la Barre 2007, 60). Nevertheless, prejudices give rise to such an exclusion, and they are mainly based on the external capacities and the differences in the strength. For de la Barre, “it is only the use of the mind which should be considered when we

discuss the differences between individuals” (de la Barre 2007, 72). By prioritizing the mind over the bodies, de la Barre grants women rational equality. He renders the bodily differences as irrelevant.

Emphasizing the importance of the mind allows de la Barre to make his main claim regarding the sameness of the minds. According to him, “since the mind merely gives its consent, and does so in exactly the same way in everyone, we can conclude that it has no sex” (de la Barre 2007, 82). What this means is that all of the rational capabilities that women and men possess are the same. Men are not naturally more suited to obtaining knowledge and their minds are not superior. The mind is exactly the same in both men and women. Moreover, de la Barre suggests that “a woman’s mind is joined to her body, like a man’s, by God himself, and according to the same laws” (de la Barre 2007, 82). Thus, this claim contains theological assumptions, but de la Barre mainly appeals to biology. De la Barre goes even further and claims that “a most minute anatomical study reveals no difference here between men and women; a woman’s brain is exactly the same as ours” (de la Barre 2007, 83). However, this quote is quite ambiguous since throughout his work, he argues in favor of separating the mind from the body and only considering the mind; yet at the same time, he emphasizes the sameness of minds through giving an example of the biological sameness. On the one hand, de la Barre argues in favor of the separation of mind and body. On the other hand, he uses an example of the biological sameness of the brain in order to reinforce and support the claim that the minds are the same. This is suggestive of the tension in his own argument because if the second point is taken into account, then it implies that the minds cannot be fully separated from the bodies.

## **1.2. De la Barre’s Use of the Cartesian Method**

Nevertheless, the metaphysical equality and the sameness of the minds that de la Barre proposes are not new ideas. De la Barre heavily relies on the Cartesian method of radical doubt and his famous mind and body dualism when making his argument that “the mind has no sex”. Renee Descartes, in his “*Meditations on First Philosophy*”, begins to explain his method of radical doubt by claiming that “so I shall suppose that some malicious, powerful, cunning demon has done all he can to deceive me – rather than this being done by God, who is supremely good and the source of truth. I shall think that the sky, the air, the earth, colours, shapes, sounds and all external things are merely dreams that the demon has contrived as traps for my judgment” (Descartes [1641] 2004, Meditation 1). What this means is that Descartes wants to emphasize that the senses and the knowledge that is acquired through the senses can be deceptive and misleading most of the time. Thus, the kind of knowledge and information that was acquired in this way is unreliable. This proposition regarding the deceptive nature of the senses leads Descartes to famously declare that “I am, I exist – that is certain. But for how long? For as long as I am thinking. But perhaps no longer than that; for it *might* be that if I stopped thinking I would stop existing” (Descartes [1641] 2004, Meditation 2). Thus, it can be clearly seen that Descartes associates existing and living with thinking. Most importantly, in the same meditation, he makes a connection between thinking and doubting. According to Descartes, “my present policy is to reject everything that isn’t necessarily true. Strictly speaking, then, I am simply a thing that thinks – a mind, or intelligence, or intellect, or reason, these being words whose meaning I have only just come to know” (Descartes [1641] 2004, Meditation 2). Descartes only sees the value of the person in his or her mind, and the main function of the mind is to doubt.

A clear parallel between Descartes and de la Barre can be drawn here since even the phrasing and the structure of de la Barre’s argument and his rule of truth is derived from the

Cartesian method of radical doubt. De la Barre calls his readers to “accept nothing as true unless it is supported by clear and distinct ideas”, and he was directly influenced by the *Meditations* of Descartes. Regarding de la Barre’s use of the Cartesian logic, Reuter claims that “Poullain follows the method of doubt and extends its application from a purely epistemological context to social and cultural prejudices; he uses the notion of clear and distinct ideas to define true knowledge” (Reuter 2013, p.78). Although Descartes never mentioned women or anything that would be related to feminism, his argument and method can be extended to the women’s question, as can be seen from the works of de la Barre. Thus, it can be concluded that de la Barre adopted and adapted Cartesian ideas and extended them to emancipate women.

Regarding the mind and body dualism, in the sixth *Meditation*, Descartes states that “I have a clear and distinct idea of myself as something that thinks and isn’t extended, and one of body as something that is extended and does not think. So it is certain that I am really distinct from my body and can exist without it” (Descartes [1641] 2004, Meditation 6). In this sense, Descartes claims that the mind and the body are two completely distinct and separate things. What is more, the mind can exist without the body, and Descartes clearly prioritizes the mind over the body. Most importantly, the standard by which Descartes characterizes the minds is the ability to think and to have clear and distinct ideas. In this regard, de la Barre seems to have adopted the mind and body dualism with all of its details, and even the phrases like “clear and distinct ideas” appear exactly as in the *Meditations* of Descartes. As Ruth Perry claims, “Poullain de la Barre, a feminist disciple of Descartes, held that since men and women had the same physiological equipment for receiving and registering sensations-the same bundles of nerve fibers - they therefore had the same potential for finding their way to Truth” (Perry 1985). Thus, philosophy and all other sciences became available to women since their minds are equal. Perry

also suggests that the Cartesian method liberated “women intellectually and thus psychically, by making it possible for numbers of them to participate in serious mainstream philosophical discourse” (Perry 1985). By the physical liberation, Perry seems to imply that women were starting to be invited to intellectual environments to discuss important themes and share their thoughts. Most importantly, Perry notices that the Cartesian method does not require any tools or books, “nothing but the quiet necessary for meditation”; thus, it is available for all women no matter where they live (Perry 1985). While it is true that the Cartesian method does not require any drastic institutional changes or reforms, the argument regarding the sameness of minds was quite radical and powerful in the seventeenth century.

Nevertheless, the Cartesian method of radical doubt is not without its criticism. A vast number of feminist scholars, especially in the twentieth century and later, began to criticize Descartes and his disciples for only prioritizing the mind. As Stanley Clarke suggests in her “Descartes’s “Gender””, “dualism of mind and body are said to have confirmed the traditional life of women as unimportant, and Cartesian Rationalism, which requires objectivity defined in a certain way, is claimed to have eliminated the authority of women’s experience” (Clarke, quoted in Bordo 1999, 82). Clarke is well aware of the criticism and connects it to erasure of the embodied experiences of women. However, Clarke argues that the Cartesian view of rationality is more than just compatible with feminism, and that it is much more inclusive than it may seem at the first glance (Clarke quoted in Bordo 1999, 83). She also claims that under the Cartesian framework, everyone has an epistemic authority irrespective of the gender, and that “the fact that we know that we have the ability to discern truth and falsehood before we give this ability any further characterization is the basis for a nongendered justification of equality in Cartesian terms” (Clarke, quoted in Bordo 1999, 89). What this means is that Clark treats the Cartesian

radical doubt as something that is universal to everyone, and that gender does not have an effect on the process of doubting. Regarding the critique of the erasure of the bodies, Clarke argues that “since the body is to be understood only in terms of extension by describing quantifiable characteristics, Descartes is committed to exclude any qualitative attributions to the body that might give some biological functions a greater value than others. Thus, he excludes from his biology any type of language that could privilege the male role” (Clarke, quoted in Bordo 1999, 92). It can be assumed that for Descartes, the sole role of the body is reproduction. What Clarke wants to show is that Descartes and the Cartesian philosophers treat the body as objectively as possible. While it is true that Descartes prioritizes the mind over the body, he views all bodies - both male and female - as secondary characteristics of personhood. As Deborah Heikes points out, “while the diminishing of the body is unquestioningly evident in Descartes’ writings, what is often overlooked is that he never truly doubts that we can have knowledge of the world of appearance (and of bodies), even though empirical knowledge can always be doubted” (Heikes 2010, 39). Thus, Descartes not only diminishes the importance and value of the female bodies, but of the male bodies as well. Nevertheless, although de la Barre adopts some of the Cartesian ideas and extends them so that they will include the social aspects of life, he treats the bodies differently than Descartes. If Descartes erases the bodies universally for all, de la Barre implicitly shows that only the bodies of women are irrelevant to the question of equality.

### **1.3. De la Barre’s Strategy of De-Sexing the Minds**

De la Barre’s strategy of de-sexing the mind can be traced back to Descartes and his method. The argument that “the mind has no sex” is purely Cartesian and is used for the emancipation of women by de la Barre. In this sense, de la Barre extended the Cartesian mind

and body dualism so that it became a tool for women's liberation. As Anthony La Vopa carefully notes, "if Cartesian clarity can prevail on the subject of the equality of the sexes, which is "more prone to prejudice than any other subject," it can prevail against "custom" in any area of social life" (La Vopa 2010, 60). What La Vopa wants to show is that de la Barre noticed an opportunity to make the Cartesian method of radical doubt more inclusive so that it can capture the prejudices related to the subjugation of women, and any kind of prejudice in general. When Martine Reuter analyzes de la Barre's use of Cartesianism, his appropriation of it, to be precise, she claims that "Poullain follows the method of doubt and extends its application from a purely epistemological context to social and cultural prejudices; he uses the notion of clear and distinct ideas to define true knowledge" (Reuter 2013, 78). Thus, the main difference between Descartes and de la Barre is that Descartes uses his method in order to seek truth that is related to the external world, nature, and how knowledge is produced, while de la Barre uses the method of radical doubt in order to challenge the existing social arrangements and institutions. What Reuter wants to show is that de la Barre does not merely extend the Cartesian method, but that he rather uses it in a completely different way. In other words, if Descartes is only concerned with the epistemological aspects, de la Barre is mainly concerned with the social and political aspects of life. However, in this sense, de la Barre did not simply appropriate the Cartesian tools, but extended them so that they can capture social and political aspects of life and discern what is true from what is artificially constructed in order to benefit someone.

The strategy of de-sexing that de la Barre uses throughout his work on *Equality* is chosen with the sole purpose of granting cognitive and rational equality to women. This strategy works in a way that the mind is viewed independently of one's body. As de la Barre himself argues, "considered independently, the mind is found to be equal and of the same nature in all men, and

capable of all kinds of thoughts” (de la Barre 2007, 82). The main function of the mind, according to de la Barre, is contemplation, and since every mind is capable of contemplation, then there is no need to differentiate the minds and ascribe any categories to them. De la Barre also emphasizes sameness of the minds throughout his work, and claims that the existing differences originated because “it is rather the constitution of the body, but particularly education, religious observance, and the effects of our environment which are the natural and perceptible causes of all the many differences between people” (de la Barre 2007, 82). Thus, de la Barre acknowledges that the differences between men and women are associated with their bodies and the social institutions that were arranged in a way that would reinforce the subordination of women because they were created on the basis of the inequality of the bodies. However, the strategy of de-sexing that de la Barre uses works in such a way that eliminates all the factors that would imply differences between the sexes and only focuses on the minds. In the seventeenth century, rationality was associated with judgement and contemplation, and these qualities were divided from the bodies and viewed independently. In order for de-sexing to work, the minds should be distanced from the bodies, and this is precisely what de la Barre does in his work on *Equality*. According to La Vopa, de la Barre argues that the mind has no sex only when the mind is considered independently of the body and that “physical differences between human bodies, including sexual differences, are irrelevant to it” (La Vopa 2010, 68). However, at the same time, La Vopa notices that for de la Barre, the differences between the embodied minds of men and women still exist because of the unequal treatment in terms of education, bodies, and the institutions, but that it “was an eminently Cartesian step. Descartes’s very insistence on the mind/body dualism had made it imperative to explain mind/body interaction” (La Vopa 2010,

68). Nevertheless, de la Barre's de-sexing of the minds allows women to participate in the intellectual discourse and to be the cognitive equals of men.

Scholars who are interested in de la Barre's ideas often criticize him for presenting his main argument that the mind has no sex almost at the end of his work on *Equality*. However, his logic in *Equality* was to first show that women have been deprived from education and the occupations because of the prejudices and customs that were deeply ingrained into society. After establishing that women are not naturally inferior to men, he states that the rational capabilities are the same in both men and women, and that they are as capable of everything as men are. De la Barre then famously declares that "the mind has no sex", and then dedicates the remainder of his work to show that women are fit for all of the occupations and sciences that were previously reserved for men. Nevertheless, the language that he uses throughout the work and the overall tone suggest that the cognitive equality that he grants women comes at a cost. The unintended consequence of this rational equality is that women must conform to a male-coded rationality in order to be considered as their equals.

In the beginning of his work on equality, de la Barre claims that in the first part of the treatise, he intends to show "examples from everyday life to show that women have many advantages that make them the equals of men" (de la Barre 2007, 50). In this sense, he mainly writes about the qualities of women that make them suited for studying and working in the field that were previously reserved for men. Most importantly, de la Barre seems to ascribe certain qualities to women, meaning that there are feminine traits and qualities that are unique to them. What this means is that even if he tries to de-sex the minds, some prejudices are still associated with the bodies. When de la Barre compares boys and girls he claims that girls "work harder and more painstakingly, and they are more obedient, more modest, and better disciplined" (de la

Barre 2007, 61). Indeed, de la Barre's intention is good, and he wants to show that girls possess far more qualities that make them fit for studying than boys do. In general, de la Barre acknowledges that girls and women possess far more virtuous qualities than men and boys do. Nevertheless, the mere fact that de la Barre views some features as feminine and some qualities as masculine is ambivalent, especially if he argues in favor of de-sexing the minds. De la Barre even claims that "a woman's very appearance, her expression, her look, her bearing, her movements have about them something calm, wise, and straightforward that distinguishes her from a man" (de la Barre 2007, 62). Then, it logically follows that if he renders the bodies as irrelevant to the question of equality, then why does he emphasize a woman's look and appearance? The answer is simple, de la Barre himself has some internalized biases about the way how a woman should look and what qualities she should have. Regarding the women's speech and eloquence in the tone, de la Barre states that women "speak easily in a sweet, gentle voice. Their message is accompanied by such beauty and grace that it penetrates our minds and opens our hearts to them" (de la Barre 2007, 66). Still, the main features that de la Barre associates with women are modesty, gentleness, and beauty. As La Vopa suggests, "despite their intellectual equality and, in some respects, superiority, their presentation of self had to remain distinctly feminine" (La Vopa 2010, 68). This, in turn, suggests that there might have been a double standard regarding the rational equality and its application in practice. Moreover, de la Barre not only ascribes "feminine" features to women, but also assumes that women have certain roles. In the passage about marriage, he claims that "girls are capable of running a household at an age when men still need a tutor, and the most frequent remedy for a wayward youth who has gone off the rails is to give him a wife who will calm him down with her example, moderate his excesses, and rescue him from debauchery" (de la Barre 2007, 71). This quote is problematic

because it reflects a tension within de la Barre's framework. By claiming that women are more mature and develop younger than boys, and that they are better at running the household at an early age seems to undermine his own argument regarding the disembodied reason. All of the household chores imply that women's embodied experiences of managing the household and raising the kids, having responsibilities in the private realm also matter. Furthermore, de la Barre seems to accept the gendered division of labor in the household and ascribe certain roles for women. Even though he wanted to use the example of women in the household as evidence that their moral and rational capabilities are developed at an early age, he still uses an example of the subordination of women. This gives an impression that he agrees that women can both develop their virtue and acquire knowledge and be confined to the household and have domestic responsibilities.

#### **1.4. The Unintended Consequences of de la Barre's Argument**

Throughout the treatise, de la Barre writes that "if women studied law they would be at least as successful as men" (de la Barre 2007, 66), "women are as well suited to science as we are" (p.69), "women never cease to be necessary to us" (de la Barre 2007, 76), "the female sex is no less noble than our own" (de la Barre 2007, 77), "the equal distribution of aptitude means that there is nothing wrong with women studying just as we do" (de la Barre 2007, 95), "they have a mind like ours" (de la Barre 2007, 97). All of these phrases suggest that de la Barre constantly compares women to men, in all respects. This comparison creates an impression that de la Barre, in fact, is not arguing for the de-sexing of minds, but that he rather wants the minds of women to conform to a male-coded rationality. As if de la Barre argues that women's minds should like those of men. In general, as Siep Stuurman points out, de la Barre's "main thesis is that all

women have at least the same potential to learn as all men” (Stuurman 1997, 621). Stuurman identifies that de la Barre’s argument is emancipatory, indeed, but that it also has serious limitations and weaknesses. At the very least, she notices that de la Barre does not really want to equate men and women in terms of their rational capabilities, but that he rather wants women to rise up to the level of men. To be just like men. As Stuurman suggests, “Gone are also the Amazon and Scythian queens. This is especially striking in Poulain's discussion of the capacity of women for military command. Instead of the heroic exploits of the Amazons we get the dry observation that women can read maps and understand strategy and tactics, just like men” (Stuurman 1997, 630). Stuurman notices that even though de la Barre wants to make a claim regarding the sameness of reason and of all intellectual capabilities that serve as a basis for the development of skills, he still wants women to resemble men.

Regarding rationality and obtaining knowledge, de la Barre offers an unexpected point that includes both reason and appearance. He argues that “women who seek only to please would find satisfaction in their studies. The radiance of their physical beauty would be enhanced a thousandfold when animated by that of their minds” (de la Barre 2007, 99). First and foremost, de la Barre implies that the education of women is valuable when they become able to please someone by their knowledge. Also, de la Barre creates an impression that women’s beauty is more important and prioritized than her knowledge. What is more, he even goes further and states that “since less attractive women are always greeted with enthusiasm when they are intelligent, the advantages of a well-trained mind would amply make up for a lack of fortune and good looks” (de la Barre 2007, 99). What this means is that less attractive women should overcompensate by becoming more intelligent and knowledgeable. As Michael Seidel points out, women in the seventeenth century France and before, as de la Barre described them, employed

ornaments, silver, gold, and precious stones made them look more charming, amiable, and pleasing, and that these tools “have advanced them to greater Esteem in the eyes of Men” (Seidel 1974, 505). However, what Seidel describes is the old regime and structure of the institutions against which de la Barre was making claims. Generally, Seidel agrees that in the past, women were rather viewed as objects, and that de la Barre dedicates a significant portion of his treatise on Equality to establishing precisely this point (Seidel 1974). Nevertheless, a mere fact that de la Barre suggests less attractive women to at least become more intelligent already suggests that despite arguing for intellectual equality, he still seems to view women as objects in some cases, let alone considering himself with writing about the embodied experiences.

De la Barre is also frequently criticized for his use and interpretation of Descartes and Cartesian tools. As Siep Stuurman suggests, “Poulain nowhere displays much interest in the philosophical and theological hair-splitting about the distinction of body and mind. He accepts Descartes's theory of matter, and he goes along with mainstream Cartesian opinion, emphasizing the intimate union of body and mind and situating the "locus" of their junction in the pineal gland” (Stuurman 1997, 632). What this means is that de la Barre adopts the method, rarely, if ever, gives credit to it and in the work on *Equality*, and does not fully explain his method. De la Barre only takes the Cartesian ideas about the mind, without considering the body. Indeed, the Cartesian method itself treats the body as a secondary substance, and the mind is viewed as the most valuable characteristic of a person. Nevertheless, de la Barre implicitly suggests that the bodies are irrelevant to the question of equality, especially intellectual equality.

Martina Reuter, in her article on gender in Cartesian thought, states that “I now turn back to the topic of gender and want to claim that from Descartes’ point of view, gender, like the imagination and sensory perception, cannot be thought of without reference to a body” (Reuter

2019, 41). In other words, bodily sensations and experiences, and the knowledge that people gain from these sensations participate in the process of formulating thoughts and obtaining knowledge. In this sense, Cartesian thinkers do not neglect the importance of the bodies and treat them as an important source of knowledge, or at least, the tools that help to gain it. Regarding de la Barre and his use of the Cartesian method, Reuter claims that “Descartes did, I claim, successfully provide the tools to show that when the mind is considered on its own it is non-gendered, but this argument is not in itself sufficient to refute the claim that women’s bodily constitution affects their intellectual capacity” (Reuter 2019, 41). What Reuter wants to show is that de la Barre’s argument only works for people who are familiar with the works of Descartes and know about his dualism. De la Barre does not defend his argument that the mind should be viewed independently from the body against possible objections from scholars who emphasize the importance of embodiment. De la Barre does not explain how his argument works, but only rephrases the same Cartesian idea that the minds have no sex, and does not explain why and how exactly this argument works. Likewise, Siep Stuurman identifies this same weakness in de la Barre’s thought, and claims that “he seems not to worry overmuch about the metaphysical foundations of Descartes's thought, innocently rephrasing one of the master's most famous axiom” (Stuurman 1997, 632). Thus, de la Barre uses the Cartesian method without correctly explaining it. What is more, de la Barre seems to assume that his readers are aware of the Cartesian ideas. In addition, de la Barre would not be able to defend his argument against any objections from the thinkers and scholars who value embodied experiences because he simply does not mention anything about the bodies.

Due to the fact that de la Barre uses the Cartesian mind and body dualism and the radical doubt in his work on Equality, this implies that he accepts all of the assumptions and

implications of the Cartesian method and arguments. De la Barre already accepts the premises and assumptions associated with the arguments of Descartes in his meditations and the works where he mentions his famous dualism and the method of radical doubt. Rendering the bodies as philosophically irrelevant must be a part of the Cartesian method. As Susan Bordo points out in her essay on Cartesianism, acquiring pure and unbiased knowledge involves the transcendence of the bodies, “not only of the "prejudices" acquired through the body-rule of infancy but of all the bodily distractions and passions that obscure our thinking” (Bordo 1987, 76). Thus, the idea does not seem to be surprising, especially considering that Descartes differentiates between the minds and the bodies. The ‘transcendence of the body’ aspect of the Cartesian argument can even be viewed as a precondition for achieving intellectual equality. De la Barre also transcends the body and only writes about the value of reason and the mind. Nevertheless, as Bordo suggests, Descartes gives a negative connotation to the body and, overall, describes it as an obstacle or a hindrance (Bordo 1987). Susan Bordo states that “in the history of philosophy, the role of the unclean and the impure has been played, variously, by material reality, practical activity, change, the emotions, "subjectivity," and most often as for Descartes by the *body*” (Bordo 1987, 76). What this means is that there is not only the dualism of mind and body, but also the distinction between pure and impure, valuable and worthless. Not only is the body unclean, but it is also a “prison” which the mind must be liberated from, and, as Bordo claims, Descartes “was offering a program of purification and training for the liberation of *res cogitans* from the confusion and obscurity of its bodily swamp” (Bordo 1987, 92). Even though de la Barre seems to adopt the Cartesian idea of the transcendence of the bodies, he does not claim that they are impure or that they imprison the people. Nevertheless, for the same reason that de la Barre does not mention the

value and importance that he assigns to the bodies, it cannot be determined whether he viewed the bodies negatively or not, like Descartes.

Most importantly, Susan Bordo argues that the Cartesian mind and body dualism treats the minds and the bodies as mutually exclusive (Bordo 1987). As Bordo claims, Descartes perceives the bodies as responsible “for obscurity and confusion in our thinking” (Bordo 1987, 93). This can be regarded as the reason why de la Barre excludes the bodies from the question of intellectual equality. De la Barre seems to adopt the version of dualism that is too restrictive and radical, since Bordo suggests that “while dualism runs deep in our conditions, it is only with Descartes that body and mind are *defined* in terms of mutual exclusivity” (Bordo 1987, 97). It is pretty self-explanatory that de la Barre’s version of dualism is exactly like that of Descartes because the former adopts the entire logic and argumentation of the latter. Cartesian philosophers tend to view things in dualities, and, as Bordo points out, the bodies only have a “mechanical function” (Bordo 1987, 94). Thus, the bodies serve to sustain the life of the mind and its cultivation. De la Barre also presents the minds and the bodies as mutually exclusive. He suggests ignoring the bodies in order for the minds to become equal. Most importantly, de la Barre does not call everyone to treat their bodies as secondary things to the minds, but he only wants women to ignore their bodies and the embodied experiences associated with them.

De la Barre treats the bodies as less important than the minds. By doing so, he neglects the embodied experiences that are associated with the bodies. However, not only de la Barre is blamed for ignoring the bodies. As Elizabeth Grosz suggests, “feminists and philosophers seem to share a common view of the human subject as being made up of two dichotomously opposed characteristics: mind and body, thought and extension, reason and passion, psychology and biology” (Grosz 1994, 3). Grosz claims that this opposition between the minds and the bodies is

extended to the opposition between the male and the female. According to Grosz, “given the coupling of mind with maleness and the body with femaleness and given philosophy's own self-understanding as a conceptual enterprise, it follows that women and femininity are problematized as knowing philosophical subjects and as knowable epistemic objects” (Grosz 1994, 6). Thus, only the female bodies are problematized even by certain feminists like de la Barre. De la Barre also views the minds and the bodies as not compatible at the same time. It creates an assumption that women have to choose either the mind - with all the intellectual equality that is associated with it -, or the body. Grosz also suggests that “Cartesian dualism establishes an unbridgeable gulf between mind and matter, a gulf most easily disavowed, however problematically, by reductionism. To reduce either the mind to the body or the body to the mind is to leave their interaction unexplained, explained away, impossible” (Grosz 1994, 7). This is exactly what de la Barre does - he uses the Cartesian method without properly explaining how it works. In this sense, Grosz's argument is similar to that of Stuurman since both of them claim that de la Barre does not concern himself with explaining the method that he relies on. After writing about Cartesianism and how feminists have used it, Grosz argues that “insofar as feminist theory uncritically takes over these common assumptions, it participates in the social devaluing of the body that goes hand in hand with the oppression of women” (Grosz 1994, 10). What this means is that even when feminists use sophisticated philosophical tools like Cartesianism with the goal of liberating women, their arguments can bear negative connotations and unintended consequences. This is exactly what happened with de la Barre's argument - even though he claims that the “minds have no sex”, he unintentionally de-values the bodies of women and their embodied experiences.

While de la Barre's argument is liberating in that it grants women the intellectual equality, women must conform to the male standard. What this means is that women's minds need to resemble the masculine minds, and women's actions and lives need to be like those of men - not burdened by the household chores and free from the embodied experiences in order for women to be liberated. De la Barre is a Cartesian thinker, and he is often criticized for judging women by the male standard. However, not only de la Barre is guilty of assuming that men are the standard. As Susan Bordo points out, Cartesian objectivism is "facilitated by an aggressive intellectual *flight* from the female cosmos and "feminine" orientation towards the world" (Bordo 1987, 100). Thus, by claiming that the mind has no sex, Cartesian thinkers mean that the minds of women are de-sexed, whereas the minds of men are idealized and viewed as the norm and a benchmark to which women must rise up. Thus, de la Barre is not proposing the neutral view towards the minds since, throughout his work on Equality, he does not write anything about the minds of men, but only writes that the minds of women can become like those of men if women acquire an access to education and occupations that were previously reserved for men. Bordo also claims that Cartesian thinkers "'re-birth" and restructure the world as *masculine*" (Bordo 1987, 100). Thus, while de la Barre wants to present his argument as neutral and equalizing, the strategy that he chose is still full of tensions and contradictions. What this means is that Cartesianism is not neutral, and that it rather presents the world and knowledge through the masculine lens.

Aside from Cartesianism, some scholars claim that de la Barre's positionality does not allow him to produce an unbiased argument. What is more, throughout his work, de la Barre himself makes contradictory points that suggest that he views men as the standard and a norm. As Elizabeth Grosz claims, "it is only men who can afford the belief that their perspective is an

outside, disinterested, or objective position. The enigma that Woman has posed for men is an enigma only because the male subject has construed itself as the subject par excellence” (Grosz 1994, 191). Thus, de la Barre can be blamed for assuming that his position is disinterested and objective, but, in fact, it is not. Throughout the *Equality*, de la Barre constantly compares women and their capabilities to men and those of men. Part of the reason why de la Barre implicitly regards men as the standard is because he acknowledges that historically, men were in an advantageous position. Hence, he might want to make women rise up to this level, which was previously only available to men. Regarding the embodied experiences and their neglect, de la Barre simply may not understand their importance simply because of this same advantageous position of men. Men are not burdened by the reproductive processes, management of the household and raising children in the same way as women are constrained. Thus, this position of men allows de la Barre to treat the embodied experiences of women and their bodies as philosophically irrelevant.

De la Barre does not propose a neutral attitude towards the minds, he judges women and their experiences in accordance to the masculine standard. In this sense, his argument regarding the sameness of the minds cannot be neutral since he implicitly suggests that women can become equals of men if they conform to a masculine standard. As Luce Irigaray argue in her “Speculum of the Other Woman”, “[women] may obey Law itself, the law of the same, which requires that the little girl abandon her relation to the origin and her primal fantasy so that henceforth she can be inscribed into those of men which will become the "origin" of her desire. In other words, woman's only relation to origin is one dictated by man's” (Irigaray 1985, 33). What this means is that “the law of the same” is not neutral. This law is a masculine norm coded as neutral and universal. Irigaray wants to show that women abandon the “relation to their origins” - their

embodied experiences, feminine characteristics and traits - and adopt the “universal” masculine standards in order to be equal. In this sense, de la Barre proposes “the law of the same” by claiming that the minds have no sex and that they are the same. By doing so, he is not arguing that the minds are neutral, but rather that women need to conform to a male-coded rationality and abandon their embodied experiences. Only then can women be “equal” in his framework.

Irigaray also writes about treating masculine rationality and maleness not only as the norm, but as an origin. When she discusses the question of the phallus in her *Speculum*, she claims that “as an appropriation of the relation to origin and of the desire for and as origin. The tropism, as well as the rivalry, is in fact between the man and (his) mother. And woman is well and truly castrated from the viewpoint of this economy” (Irigaray 1985, 33). What this means is that in a system where the man is the standard and masculinity and maleness are the origin, feminine and women - and all of the experiences associated with them - are castrated, treated as a by-product and something alien and deficient. This is what the metaphorical castration means in this sense. Regarding de la Barre and his argument, he does not argue against the idea that masculinity and maleness are the origin and a norm. What he argues instead is that women need to conform to that masculine standard.

## **Chapter 2. Gabrielle Suchon**

Unlike de la Barre who argues for the metaphysical exercise and offers that “the mind has no sex” in order to establish intellectual equality, Gabrielle Suchon suggests a more radical solution in order to liberate women. Suchon’s solution to a problem of subordination of women is more practical and not metaphysical than that of de la Barre. In her work “On the celibate Life Freely Chosen, or Life Without Commitments”, Suchon proposes the creation of a civil

institution of celibacy. Her argument in favor of such an institution is revolutionary even for her time since women in the seventeenth century France, or elsewhere, did not have an opportunity to choose celibacy outside of the convent. Like de la Barre, Suchon also engages in a strategy that is similar to de-sexing, but she rather decides to de-sexualize the bodies of women because she claims that the sexual relations between men and women are inherently unequal and only beneficial for men. In other words, she builds an institution of equality specifically in reference to women's bodies and the vulnerabilities attached to heterosexual sex. According to Suchon, women's sexual relations and reproductive rights are the tools through which women are subjugated, especially within the institution of marriage and how it is organized. What this means is that if women get married, they are necessarily subjecting themselves to a life of political and social inferiority, where they must submit to the will of their husbands. Suchon also suggests that women in convents are under the authority of a religious superior, and that the life in a cloister is full of constraints. As a solution and a way to grant women freedom, Suchon proposes the creation of the institution of civil celibacy. She also calls it a "neutral" life. Thus, women would live a life that is not constrained by the husbands, cloisters, sexual relations, and childbirth. This lifestyle allows women to pursue education and their interests and not be dependent on anyone other than themselves. The main idea that Suchon is trying to convey is that women can only find political equality outside of sexual relations with men.

Suchon's argument is liberating in that she offers an alternative lifestyle. She acknowledges that the institution of marriage and a religious cloister are full of constraints and are extremely limiting. They cannot be reformed. There is something inherently unequal to them, which she does not specify. Thus, Suchon's neutral life should rather be viewed as a third option in addition to the previous two. When making her argument, Suchon relies on Aristotelian ethics

and philosophy, Stoicism, and Christian theology. Hence, the combination of these three sources of inspiration allows her to make an argument that would require the creation of necessary conditions for the pursuit of knowledge and a free life without limitations. It is also worth mentioning that unlike de la Barre, Suchon takes the material aspects and embodied experiences of women into account when proposing her neutral lifestyle. If de la Barre creates a metaphysical claim that the minds have no sex, thus women have the same rational capabilities to pursue knowledge, Suchon claims that women and girls do not pursue knowledge simply because they do not have the right and necessary conditions to do so. According to her, they are not able to obtain knowledge because their autonomy is limited, their time is dedicated to the household chores or religious practices, or their actions are dictated by the fathers, husbands, or religious authorities in a cloister.

Nevertheless, Suchon's argument comes at a cost. Living a neutral life implies the renunciation of sexual relations, religious practices, and the embodied experiences of women associated with reproduction, motherhood, and child-rearing. Social and political equality comes at a high price. However, Suchon frames her argument in a way that presents these factors not as a sacrifice, but rather as a condition for freedom. She engages in the strategy of de-sexualizing the female body, but the cost is suppressing the desires and abstaining from the embodied experiences. Under her framework, women have to give up some aspect of their womanness to acquire political and social equality.

This section is divided into two parts. In the first part, the structure of Suchon's argument and its constituent parts will be analyzed. First and foremost, it would be important to understand how Suchon leads the reader into her main argument and why she claims that the neutral life is the most suitable solution to acquire freedom. In her *Treatise on Ethics and Politics*, Suchon

identifies three components that are necessary for every person, but women were deprived of them - these are freedom, knowledge, and authority (Suchon 2010, 66). Analyzing these components is important since the institution of civil celibacy that Suchon proposes in the later work on the celibate life allows women to regain access to these three. In the final part of the first section of this chapter, it is worth mentioning what led Suchon to produce such an interesting argument in favor of a celibate life. This part will largely be focused on Suchon's inspirations and previous arguments that Suchon might have adopted and developed further.

The second part of this section is dedicated to the cost that this argument comes at and the unintended consequences that it produces. While Suchon creates the space for intellectual freedom and equality, this freedom can only be achieved if the desires are suppressed and sexuality is erased.

## **2.1. Suchon's Sources of Inspiration and Aristotelian Influence on Her Works**

Suchon's argument in favor of the celibate life freely chosen is inspired by Aristotelian philosophy, Stoicism, and Christiana theology. Among the listed sources of inspiration, the Aristotelian influence is the strongest in the works of Suchon. As Julie Walsh suggests, "following the Aristotelian explanation for earthquakes, Suchon suggests that just as wind, unable to find its center of gravity, causes tremors, so too does the constrained mind cause disorder" (Walsh 2019, 693). Nevertheless, Suchon acknowledges that Aristotle's philosophy was not very charitable towards women and that he perceives women as subordinate, yet she still uses some of his ideas about virtue and higher ethical and moral ends. Walsh also claims that Suchon cites *Nicomachean Ethics*, and that her "stated source for the concept of generosity is Aristotle" (Walsh 2019, 695). Likewise, Derval Conroy suggests that the Suchonian notion of

friendship is derived from Aristotelian philosophy (Conroy 2021). Conroy argues that “her treatment of amitié is directly inspired by Aristotle’s political conception of philia, according to which friendship is more important than justice in society”, and that Suchon cites *Nicomachean Ethics* and grounds her argument on that (Conroy 2021, 58). What is more, Conroy states that “drawing on Aristotle’s idea that the human need for mutual assistance obliges them to communicate, and that there is no more just activity than that which contributes to happiness and the preservation of human society”, Suchon claims that the “human interaction is vital for intellectual stimulation as well as material necessity” (Conroy 2021, 58). Throughout her work on the *Celibate Life*, Suchon emphasizes the idea that the neutralists should establish friendships and meaningful connections. Conroy observes that “her arguments draw frequently on the Ancients (Aristotle, Cicero, Seneca) and fathers of the church (Thomas Aquinas, Augustine), yet they are used to provide the foundation for a number of original ideas regarding solitude, freedom and equality” (Conroy 2021, 63). Thus, it can be clearly seen that Suchon may not fully agree with the tradition that she is inspired by, but that she only uses the ideas and arguments and develops them further in her own works. Suchon also signs her works as “Aristophile”, which already suggests that she is largely influenced by Aristotle. As Conroy suggests, “much of the thinking of this ‘Aristophile’, as she signs her first treatise, draws on classical theories on many subjects, adapting and applying them to her own vision of society, despite the fundamental differences between Ancient Greece and early modern France in societal organisation and the understanding of the polity” (Conroy 2021, 56). What this means is that as long as Suchon finds an idea in an entire framework of a philosopher useful, she will use it even if the entire argument is contrary to her own thinking. As Veronique Desnain points out, “Suchon uses a pseudonym (Aristophile) but, while aware that this might give her detractors some ammunition, she makes it

absolutely clear in the Préface Générale that the text was written by a(n unmarried) woman” (Desnain 2021, 74).

Regarding the term “neutralist”, Desnain claims that “the notion, and terminology, of Neutralisme, are not Suchon’s own and can be found in earlier texts, clearly suggesting that such a status, while not widely embraced, or seen as desirable, or even acceptable, by all religious scholars and authorities, was nonetheless accepted as legitimate by some (Desnain 2021, 77). Nevertheless, this notion might not be first used by Suchon, but she ascribes the new meaning and infuses this term with its own liberatory power.

Regarding Suchon’s reliance on religious sources, she uses them selectively and suggests that the scripture or other religious texts can be misread and misinterpreted. According to Desnain, “by using the same sources as had been used to bolster ‘l’iniquité du pouvoir’, she effectively demonstrates the way in which such sources had been used selectively to support and justify male hegemony both within and beyond the church” (Desnain 2021, 84). Thus, Suchon reveals that the same religious sources can be used to liberate women and to show that there is no natural inferiority, but at the same time, these religious sources can be misinterpreted and used to the women’s disadvantage. In an earlier work, Desnain argues that the “close reading suggests that it is, rather, Suchon’s deep-rooted faith that has led her to philosophy and to an open rebellion against what she sees as a perverted use of religion as a means of preserving male hegemony” (Desnain 2013, 259). Thus, Suchon uses the philosophical tools available to her in order to remove the prejudices and biases that originated from the misreading of the religious texts.

Veronique Desnain reveals that Suchon was probably not the first author to write about voluntary celibacy (Desnain 2009). Desnain argues that Suchon might have been deeply

influenced by the works of Nicholas Caussin, and states that she wants “to bring this new evidence to light, in particular regarding her concept of *vie neutre* (secular celibacy) and its relation to Nicolas Caussin’s use of the same term” (Desnain 2009). Desnain notes that Suchon’s argument is very similar to that of Caussin, and that she even mentioned his name in the margins of her *Treatise* (Desnain 2009, 153). What is more, Desnain argues that Caussin’s work entitled “*La Vie de Sainte Isabelle, sœur du Roy Saint Loy et fondatrice du monaste`re royal de Long-champ, qui a donne` un parfait exemple de la vie neutre des personnes non marié`es ny religieuses* (Paris, C. Sonnius). This book may indeed be one of the most important sources of inspiration for Suchon” (Desnain 2009, 152). Thus, Desnain wants to show that Suchon was not the first author to propose the idea of a voluntary celibacy, and that she was largely inspired by Caussin. Nevertheless, Nicholas Caussin is a relatively understudied thinker, and the influence of his work and ideas on Suchon is difficult to analyze. Suchon might have been aware of his arguments and ideas, but she developed them further and introduced her argument in favor of an institution of civil celibacy in two major works. Therefore, Suchon might have been inspired by Caussin, but she introduced this powerful argument and defended it against all possible objections at that time.

## **2.2. The Structure of Suchon’s Argument**

In her *Treatise on Ethics and Politics*, Suchon discusses how the institution of marriage affects women and how it deprives them of freedom, knowledge, and authority. It is important to analyze it before moving to her main argument in favor of a neutral life because in her *Treatise*, she writes about the subordination of women and the deprivation of three main aspects of being a human in great detail. It can be assumed that her *Treatise on Ethics and Politics* is, in some

sense, a groundwork for her work *On the Celibate Life Freely Chose, or Life Without Commitments* and her later argument in favor of a creation of institution of civil celibacy.

Like de la Barre, Suchon acknowledges that customs and prejudices keep women subordinated. In the preface to her *Treatise*, she states that

“persons of the sex are true wonders, because they possess the kind of reason, intelligence, judgment, mind, and will that can learn and know everything. Nonetheless, these sparks, lights, and flames are hidden and buried under the ashes of bad customs and of the conduct of those who cannot bear that women shine, or that they appear as they truly are, and even less as what they could be if they had a different upbringing” (Suchon 2010, 75).

Thus, women are kept in subordination artificially, through the customs and institutions. Nevertheless, unlike de la Barre who claims that women need to rise up to the level of men, and are as capable of studying as men are, Suchon claims that women and men are equal in terms of their rational capabilities and were born with the same abilities. In this sense, the two thinkers both see the problem in the existing institutions and their role in disseminating prejudices and customs that keep women subordinated. However, the main difference is that while de la Barre grounds his argument in the Cartesian idea of the metaphysical sameness of the minds, Suchon relies on Aristotelian philosophy and Christian theology. Another important point of divergence is that if de la Barre proposes a mental exercise that requires viewing women and men as intellectual equals and wants women to acquire access to the existing institutions (mostly educational), Suchon proposes the creation of a new institution. Suchon’s argument is thus suggestive of the fact that she views the existing institutions of marriage and cloister as incompatible with women’s freedom and pursuit of educational endeavors.

In the same preface to the *Treatise*, Suchon defines constraint and dependence, two important terms that the reader usually assumes to be used interchangeably. Nevertheless,

constraint, for Suchon, “must be viewed as a hardship linked to the states and conditions to which persons of the sex commit themselves, be it religion or marriage” (Suchon 2010, 92). By saying “persons of the sex”, Suchon refers to women. Thus, constraints can be understood as the limitations that women experience within the institutions of marriage and a convent.

Dependence, in turn, “means submitting and deferring to the masters and superiors of all these states and professions”, according to Suchon (Suchon 2010, 92). This implies an unequal relationship wherein women are less powerful and are in a state of relying on an authority of others. Suchon also claims that “the laws of constraint are universal and ubiquitous, permanent and unchanging, while the laws of dependence relate to the persons who can order, command, and change one thing today, another tomorrow because they hold power and authority in their hands” (Suchon 2010, 92). What this means is that the effect of constraints within the institutions are more or less stable across these institutions and elsewhere, while dependence is spontaneous and turbulent as it is related to the will of a person of authority that a woman is submitted to.

Regarding the definition of freedom, Suchon states that “I define freedom as a precious gift that divine generosity bestows on rational and intelligent creatures, a gift by which they become mistresses of all of their actions” (Suchon 2010, 93). Later in the chapter on freedom, she claims that “freedom is in man a natural right, which emanates from the power of the Sovereign; God makes man so independent in all things that he can decide which vocation is appropriate and fitting for him to live well” (Suchon 2010, 100). Thus, it can be inferred that freedom is a universal right that everyone has. According to Suchon, whenever this right is violated or the freedom of a person is constrained, “it ceases to be a right and becomes tyranny” (Suchon 2010, 101). Although Suchon does not directly express her critique of traditional heterosexual marriage in the early passages in her treatise, her view on the deprivation of

freedom might serve as a critique of marriage. What this means is that if a woman contracts herself to marriage, she is voluntarily entering a condition of bondage.

Suchon also finds a connection between freedom and desire and claims that “we always possess perfect freedom when we desire nothing” (Suchon 2010, 105). In some sense, Suchon might be hinting at the idea that women in marriage cannot be free because they have desires, or they have to submit to the desires of their husbands, willingly or not. She also acknowledges that “desire is a sign of neediness and poverty. And because the most disadvantageous traits are most eagerly ascribed to women and girls, they are always said to have a multitude of desires” (Suchon 2010, 106). Even though it is not clear what kind of desires Suchon writes about, she is not wrong in arguing that the abundance of desires is assumed to be associated with women. Nevertheless, she suggests that this assumption is wrong and that women possess modesty, virtue, and all the characteristics and traits that are necessary to control their desires.

Considering all of the aforementioned dimensions of freedom, it can be clearly seen that Suchon writes about freedom extensively in order to set up an argument that women are deprived of freedom. She claims that “women and girls are deprived of the treasure of freedom in several ways, because of the misfortune of their condition—they are born into the less-favored sex—and the severity of the laws that always constrain them” (Suchon 2010, 111). What this means is that women can acquire freedom only by giving up their desires. Thus, this deprivation of freedom is completely man-made, and has nothing to do with the natural right that women and girls are born with. Men created customs and laws that make women weaker and keep them dependent on men in all respects - socially, legally, and rationally. Nonetheless, Suchon argues that women themselves can actively participate in the deprivation of their own freedom. As she claims, “it often happens, moreover, that we create a kind of constraint for ourselves through human

considerations or political calculation, such that we both invite and spurn constraint at the same time” (Suchon 2010, 118). It can be assumed that since customs and prejudices are so deeply ingrained into the society, women may not be aware that an alternative way of life exists. Thus, they continue to live as they were taught to do, as they have seen as they were growing up. As Rebecca Wilkin points out, Suchon portrays personhood as the process of becoming, and this, in turn, allows her to “emphasize the continual constraint necessary to deprive women of the freedom inhering in them and the catastrophic damage inflicted on them as a result” (Wilkin 2019). Thus, these constraints do not allow women to develop and live up to their full potential because they are subjected to the authority of their husbands, parents, and religious superiors who decide everything for them. Wilkin also argues that according to Suchon, “the assault on women’s freedom is deliberate, incremental, and systematic” (Wilkin 2019).

Regarding the deprivation of knowledge, Suchon argues that “I do my utmost to persuade the reader that acquiring finer understanding leads invariably to what is good, and that the most enlightened minds are usually the most virtuous” (Suchon 2010, 133). Thus, women cannot reach their full potential simply because they are denied access to knowledge. This denial is a social-institutional problem. The institution of marriage cannot be reformed so one must build a new institution. If women are not fully denied access and still have some opportunities to study, they cannot do so in the same institutions that men and boys can attend. However, Suchon argues that “women must still work to instruct and cultivate their minds, even though they must practice deference and humility to satisfy men. And because no public or mixed schools are provided for them, women can create solitary, private schools and in this way satisfy their teachers and steadily improve themselves” (Suchon 2010, 133). The last sentence from the quote is extremely important since Suchon will argue in favor of a creation of an institution of celibacy that would

enable women to educate themselves and dedicate their time for studying. What is more, Suchon claims that women's lack of studying leads to their "indulgence in gossip, luxury, flirtatiousness, vanity, and greed" (Suchon 2010, 135). Nevertheless, she claims that by studying "they could get rid of these disreputable depravities that are the source of their perdition; but their faint-heartedness is the obstacle that prevents them from applying themselves to great things, unaware as they are of the capacity and competence God has placed within them" (Suchon 2010, 135). Interestingly enough, Suchon does not blame men for the denial of women's access to education, but she also blames women for not wanting to be educated. If she views the institution of marriage as innately unequal, then women could only acquire education with the construction of a new institution of equality. According to Suchon, "I want [women] to know how many great benefits they are losing through their own fault" (Suchon 2010, 136). From this statement, it can be assumed that both men and women are responsible for women's lack of access to education. Namely because women were contracting into marriage. Nevertheless, customs and existing institutions have a larger share in this deprivation. In relation to this, Suchon claims that "as I have often demonstrated throughout this work, women's deprivation of knowledge originates not in divine or natural law but solely in manmade institutions and the will of men" (Suchon 2010, 184). Hence, women and men are born with the same rational capabilities and rights, but women are deprived of those because of the institutions and men's interest in keeping the subordinate.

Regarding the final component of personhood, according to Suchon, and the one that women are deprived of, is authority. Women have authority of their own, but the institutions and customs limit women's exercise of authority and subject them to that of their husbands or someone or something that is superior to them. Suchon acknowledges that women possess

authority, but are deprived of it artificially, and identifies “three main types of dependency: spiritual, political, and private” (Suchon 2010, 191). She specifies each type of dependency and claims that “the first includes instruction, guidance, and confession; the second, the obedience we owe to sovereign powers, their delegates and envoys, as well as to magistrates of the civil administration”, and the third type subjects women to their home and husbands (Suchon 2010, 191). Thus, the existing institutions at that time were structured in a way that women were subjected to the authority of others on different levels. They could not exercise their own authority since they were highly dependent on their husbands and on the multiple layers beyond the private realm. As Suchon states, “I maintain that women do not lack the capacity to share in governing and ruling, that it is in no way because of incompetence that they are deprived of all authority, but only because of laws and customs established to their disadvantage” (Suchon 2010, 206). Thus, women are capable of governing and exercising their authority, but the existing institutions prevent them from doing so. This is part of the reason that Suchon proposes the creation of a separate institution of civil celibacy.

### **2.3. The Institution of Civil Celibacy, or the Neutral Life**

After establishing the groundwork for her main argument and writing about the necessary components of life that women within the religious institutions and marriage are deprived of, Suchon proposes a solution. This solution is not for everyone, but only for women who want to choose it voluntarily. This solution is an institution of civil celibacy, or a neutral life, and she situates it as a third way of living. Leading a celibate lifestyle implies that women can exercise their own authority, freedom, and dedicate their time to gaining knowledge. Regarding the celibate life and how it would be organized in practice, Suchon does not give a clear explanation.

As Julie Walsh suggests, “Suchon notes that there are several categories of neutralist, of which some live together in a community, and others not” (Walsh 2019, 700). Therefore, neutralists can both live in a community and govern themselves, or be solitary women who exercise their own authority and stay committed to their choice of the celibate lifestyle.

Suchon defines celibacy as a “condition without commitments, and it contains all other states potentially without actually putting them into practice” (Suchon 2010, 242). This definition has three dimensions which Suchon identifies as “the state of indifference in which people who have not committed to a particular profession live. The second is the power they have to embrace the state most appropriate to their way of thinking and their inclination. And the third is the resolution with which they persevere in this state, eschewing every other commitment except for this indifference” (Suchon 2010, 242). Thus, this state allows women to live a free life without being burdened by the household chores, child rearing, marriage, and religious vows. Suchon emphasizes the voluntary nature of this state by claiming that “this is a voluntary commitment made by the consent of the will, the promise of words, and the bonds created by actions” (Suchon 2010, 243). What this means is that choosing a celibate life does not require anything but wanting to live a neutral life and committing to it. To enter a convent, for example, women had to pay a certain amount of money, which was commonly called a dowry, in order to enter and cover some of their expenses (Suchon 2010).

As Julie Walsh points out, Suchon sees some women to be better suited to the celibate lifestyle and “God gives some women the inclination to live a life of study. Such women have natural inclinations for books and knowledge in the same way that some women are inclined to be mothers or nuns” (Walsh 2019). However, despite having a natural inclination, women are not the ones who get to decide which vocation they will choose. As Walsh claims, Suchon “notes

that many women find themselves living lives that have been chosen for them, primarily by their parents. Mothers and fathers, she notes, hold ‘absolute power’ over their daughters, which often means that they make important choices of vocation – marriage or the convent – on their behalves” (Walsh 2019). Suchon is against both the institutions of marriage and convent. Walsh states that “Suchon identifies marriage as the worst of the worst”, and that it is motivated by avarice, lust, and desires (Walsh 2019). In a marriage, Walsh suggests that a woman becomes dependent the minute she “has spoken a vow of marriage or a vow of dedication to the veil, her will no longer has the ultimate authority over her actions” (Walsh 2019). Likewise, Walsh interprets how Suchon views life in a convent as the life in a servitude since “being a nun requires following an ordered and solitary life” (Walsh 2019). However, Suchon proposes a third alternative vocation - an institution of civil celibacy - for women that they can choose themselves. What is more, it can even be assumed that women are capable of switching to a celibate life from other vocations.

Suchon also identifies different conditions that lead to voluntary celibacy or that are within this lifestyle. According to her, there are six conditions. Suchon places women who made a deliberate choice to live this life; the second one is comprised of women who lived a majority of their life in Neutrality, but abandoned it in order to devote themselves to religion; the third class includes “those who, as soon as they are free from the bonds of marriage, profit from the opportunity that God gives them and eventually meet death in voluntary celibacy” (Suchon 2010, 249). The fourth category includes women who want to control their lives themselves and be independent; the fifth category is for those who are “still in the power of their fathers and mothers”; and, finally, “there are women who are free but forced to support themselves with

work because of the poverty of their condition” (Suchon 2010, 249). Therefore, there are multiple pathways that women have to enter and abandon a neutral life.

Suchon claims that not only neutralists benefit from choosing a celibate life without commitments, but also the people around them. As she states, “orphans without fathers and mothers find consolation when they have female Neutralist relatives who will take charge of their education”, and she also argues that the neutralists must serve the public good (Suchon 2010, 257). This argument is liberating because women in this state can acquire knowledge themselves and use this knowledge to educate others. Thus, more people, especially girls, can become enlightened. This is an opportunity for young girls who are still under the supervision of their parents to be educated.

Nevertheless, the biggest component of a neutral life is celibacy, meaning that women have to refrain from having sexual relations with men, and having heterosexual relationships in general. Suchon gives a detailed account of how women can transition to celibate life. According to her,

“To preserve continence, we must eliminate all that is inimical to this angelic virtue and put into practice everything that can improve and strengthen it against what we know to be weakest within us. We can achieve these goals first by avoiding whatever is contrary to innocence; next, by exercising the qualities needed to preserve this virtue; and third, by fortifying ourselves so much against the body’s infirmities and the mind’s weaknesses that we become their master” (Suchon 2010, 259).

Here, Suchon explains that leading a celibate life implies that women need to have discipline. She acknowledges that the desires and longing for embodied experiences do not disappear as soon as a woman decides to become a Neutralist. Suchon suggests that leading this celibate lifestyle means a constant battle with the desires, their suppression, and the work of both body and mind. Nevertheless, Suchon sees the body and all of the embodied experiences

associated with it as an obstacle that keeps women subordinated. Another reason for proposing the creation of the institution of civil celibacy is that Suchon sees marriage as inherently unequal and asymmetric. Not only sexual relations and marriage are constraining, but Suchon also identifies other actions that can potentially threaten chastity. She states that “the most dangerous occasions for sullyng the soul’s purity and the body’s integrity are intense, private conversations with persons of the opposite sex; a languid and pleasure-filled life; and excessive freedom of the senses” (Suchon 2010, 260). What this means is that the Neutralists must refrain from any kind of actions that would invoke the feelings of love, desire, or pleasure. These actions are not only morally wrong, according to Suchon, but they also lead to a condition of dependence. In this sense, Suchon understands the weaknesses of the bodies and suggests that the minds should have a strict control over the actions. Neutralists should be highly disciplined and strongly committed to the lifestyle of their choice.

#### **2.4. Suchon’s Strategy of De-Sexualizing the Bodies**

Gabrielle Suchon, in her treatise on celibacy, engages in the strategy of de-sexualizing the bodies of women. If de la Barre de-sexes the minds of women, Suchon particularly focuses on the embodied experiences of women and their daily lives. Her strategy of de-sexualization also touches upon the institutional arrangements and the creation of a new institution of civil celibacy. Suchon implicitly suggests that the bodies of women must be de-sexualized, meaning that in order to acquire social and political equality, women must refrain from the sexual relations with men. As Suchon herself argues, the state of celibacy is a state without commitments. This implies that women who choose this lifestyle must be freed from the sexual relations, motherhood, and any burdens associated with women’s reproductive rights. Suchon’s strategy of

de-sexualization is not only about the absence of the sexual relations, but also about the absence of desires. Like de la barre, she opposes passion, but she also sees this passion as leading to subordination. Women in the state of celibacy must cultivate virtue and preserve purity, innocence, and continence (Suchon 2010, 259). However, for Suchon, the absence of the heterosexual relations with men and all of the embodied experiences associated with them are not losses, but the necessary condition in order to acquire freedom, authority, and knowledge.

Suchon proposes such a strategy of de-sexualization because she does not want women to be part of the institution that uses their sexuality against them. Sexual relations and women's reproductive rights are used as tolls to control women and make them submit to the authority of their husbands. The subordination of women does not only confine them to the domestic sphere, but also makes women legally dependent on their husbands. Thus, sexual relations and the institution of marriage cannot be changed because that would require a major reformation of the society. What Suchon proposes instead is to de-sexualize the bodies of women and to create an institution of civil celibacy so that they can live a neutral life.

Another reason why Suchon uses the strategy of de-sexualization is that she views the bodily desires and everything that is associated with them as a weakness to be overcome. As Suchon claims, "To preserve continence, we must eliminate all that is inimical to this angelic virtue and put into practice everything that can improve and strengthen it against what we know to be weakest within us...by fortifying ourselves so much against the body's infirmities and the mind's weaknesses that we become their master" (Suchon 2010, 259). Thus, freedom can only be granted to those who can control their desires and overcome something that is considered to be the weakness. This particular reason has Stoic and religious origins. Therefore, sexual relations

can even have a connotation of being shameful. This is why Suchon proposes to refrain from sexual relations.

## **2.5. Discipline and Education**

All of the actions that Neutralists are abstaining from and discipline themselves to do are supposed to be done for the good and to lead to virtue. Since women in the state of celibacy are not committed to marriage and a cloister, they have much more free time than those who are living under constraints. Therefore, Neutralists can dedicate their free time for bettering themselves and engaging in obtaining education, according to Suchon. She claims that “in celibacy, women can devote themselves to study more easily than in the cloister or in marriage, because they have more time and better means to make advances in knowledge” (Suchon 2010, 273). Thus, the celibate life is aimed at liberating women and bettering them through knowledge. Suchon lists three reasons why reading and obtaining education is important and one of the main ways towards emancipation, and these reasons are “because it is a way of, first, serving God; second, of constantly improving oneself; and third, of being useful to others” (Suchon 2010, 275). What this means is that celibate life is not merely beneficial for the women who chose it so that they can educate themselves, but it also has communal value and responsibility. Neutralists can have freedom through choosing this life and have much more free time than other women. However, Suchon gives a specific direction to women who acquired this freedom, and the free time should be spent on education. Neutralists should be useful to their communities so that they not only liberate themselves through obtaining knowledge, but also liberate others. There is also a Stoic and Aristotelian element to Suchon’s argument because improving oneself through knowledge is an end in itself. What is more, Suchon is not completely against religion and

theological studies, she only argues that a free life is not possible in a convent because it has a vast number of constraints and women would not be able to have enough free time to pursue their studies. The studies that women in convents are allowed to have bear a religious connotation. Nevertheless, it does not mean that women in a state of celibacy are denied access to religious studies.

Suchon also emphasizes the role of the mind in obtaining education. She claims that “the mind’s work can be double in nature. Through the virtues of internal practices, it can undertake spiritual and contemplative productions that remain within the mind. But it can also make external productions, communicating them through words or committing them in writing to paper” (Suchon 2010, 292). What this means is that Suchon identifies two modes of thinking - contemplative and external. In this sense, it can even be inferred that she has some Cartesian elements of contemplation in her mind. Nevertheless, Suchon was seemingly not aware of the Cartesian arguments and logic. Another assumption from the quote is that the mind can produce something external for others to read and to exchange their ideas and thoughts. Hence, women in a celibate state not only study individually and obtaining education for them is not just a solitary action, but is something that can create an intellectual community. Suchon even identifies the most favorable time to dedicate it to education. According to her, “in the morning, the mind is not yet troubled by fortuitous occurrences or preoccupied by diverse objects and therefore produces reflections with greater freedom than in the evening” (Suchon 2010, 292).

## **2.6. Friendship in Suchon’s Framework**

Finally, one of the most important aspects of a celibate life freely chosen is friendship. Suchon emphasizes the importance of friendship because the women who chose a celibate life

“do not have the protection of a religious community or a husband” (Suchon 2010, 279). She grounds her notion of friendship in the Aristotelian terms, and claims that “those who seek a quantity of friends are friend to no one” (Suchon 2010, 280). Therefore, neutralists should have a solid understanding of someone’s interests and intentions when choosing friends, and that the quality of friendships matters more than the quantity of friends. Suchon identifies three main qualities that a true, genuine friendship should have. These qualities are “sincerity, faithfulness, and steadfastness. Where these three qualities are lacking, neither friends nor friendship exists—only true deceit and true deceivers” (Suchon 2010, 281). Thus, it can be clearly seen that Suchon acknowledges that the neutralists must have some kind of a social network, and that women in celibacy should establish meaningful connections with people. One of the main purposes of friendship is communication according to Suchon, and she defines it as “the highest point where friendship meets freedom” (Suchon 2010, 282). Thus, educated women in celibacy can share their thoughts and ideas in an intellectual network or a community. However, the Suchonian notion of friendship has multiple dimensions. As Derval Conroy points out, “Suchon posits that human interaction is key to economic exchange and material provision but also to producing ‘la conversation & les divertissements de l’esprit’. In sum, human interaction is vital for intellectual stimulation as well as material necessity” (Conroy 2021, 58). What this means is that friendship also has a material component, which implies that friendships are mainly established among the equals. Conroy argues that friendship, in the framework for Suchon, is inextricably linked to equality; according to Conroy, “economic equality is a prerequisite for true friendship... Conversely, equality fosters harmony and friendship... Given the argumentation that precedes this statement, and the importance attached to friendship, the implication is that good society, true society, hinges on equality” (Conroy 2021, 59). In this sense, the liberatory aspect of

the Suchonian notion of friendship is that in the state of celibacy, women become equal in all respects, and that material and economic equality matters when establishing friendship with others. Among a vast number of different relationships, Suchon chooses friendship because it, according to Conroy, “is non-contractual, non-binding, and exceedingly preferable” (Conroy 2021, 63). Thus, it creates a community of equals and does not imply hierarchy or domination.

Suchon also argues that “friendship is, thus, so outstanding that it would be cruel to deny it to persons living in celibacy. On the contrary, because they are deprived of social intercourse and the pleasure of secular unions, they must soften the rigor of a solitary estate by sincere and faithful friendship” (Suchon 2010, 285). This implies that women can create a community of equals and establish friendships with whoever they choose, but they have to choose their friends wisely. Neutralists do not live in solitude, but create meaningful and fulfilling connections without any feelings of desire involved.

## **2.7. The Unintended Consequences of Suchon’s Argument**

The institution of civil celibacy that Suchon proposes is liberating and different from any other argument or a solution that other feminist scholars have offered. While most of the thinkers from the seventeenth century argued for the reformation or changing the existing institutions, Suchon proposed the creation of a separate one, believing that it would be more efficient. Her neutral life is an alternative to the existing institutions of marriage and convents. Suchon challenges the dominant discourse where women could either choose to enter a convent or marriage by offering a completely new option that does not impose constraints on women. At the very least, women are well aware of the constraints of the institution of civil celibacy and have a choice to willingly join this institution. The neutral life grants women freedom that is otherwise

not available for them elsewhere. Nevertheless, the freedom that women acquire in a state of celibacy comes at a cost. Women have to renounce a major aspect of their womanness and refrain from any relations with men that would imply desire, feelings, and emotions. However, Suchon does not view these losses as sacrifices, but rather as a condition for freedom.

Suchon is not wrong when she argues that marriage and cloister are full of constraints. She is also not wrong when she sees a connection between marriage and what it can lead to. All of the burdens of pregnancy, childbirth, child rearing take up a large part of women's time. Thus, they are not able to pursue their studies because they are busy doing household chores. Suchon argues in favor of the institution of civil celibacy and for refraining from sexual relations with men because she understands that the sexual relations are unequal and the marriage ties women to their households and makes them dependent. Rebecca Wilkin interprets the heterosexual relationship between a man and his wife under the Suchonian framework as non-consensual consensuality (Wilkin 2019). Wilkin points out that "Women do violence to their will when they perform the consent that legitimizes men's domination. By sexualizing coerced acts of homage, Suchon gestures toward the psychological consequences of forced (and faked) reverence" (Wilkin 2019). What this means is that for Suchon, women marry because they are often forced to or because it was simply decided for them. And once they enter the marriage, women must consent to whatever their husbands command and submit to the authority of their husbands. Being married implies that a wife has certain duties and responsibilities. Sexualizing coerced acts of homage means that submitting to husband's sexual demands is required in marriage, even if women are against it. These acts of forced submission destruct women psychologically. Hence, Suchon argues in favor of the celibate life because the heterosexual relations to her are inherently unequal. She chooses and actively calls women to refrain from

forming any kind of romantic relationships because this automatically implies that women would become dependent on men and subjected to their authority. Nevertheless, Suchon's argument implies that women who live in the state of marriage cannot become free.

One of the most problematic aspects of Suchon's argument is that she treats sexuality and the embodied experiences as an obstacle that prevents women from acquiring freedom. Thus, it creates an impression that for Suchon, the embodied experiences and freedom are incompatible because in order to become free, women have to give up their sexuality and everything that is related to it altogether. As Elizabeth Grosz points out, "the specificities of the female body, its particular nature and bodily cycles-menstruation, pregnancy, maternity, lactation, etc.-are in one case regarded as a Limitation on women's access to the rights and privileges patriarchal culture accords to men" (Grosz 1994, 15). Thus, Suchon seems to have adopted this logic since she also views the embodied experiences of women, especially the ones that are associated with maternity and childbearing, as a constraint and something that is not compatible with dedicating time to knowledge. The reason might be simple - women in a state of marriage are constrained because they are tied to their families and being responsible for the management of the household is time consuming. Grosz also suggests that for some feminists, "the female body limits women's capacity for equality and transcendence; it is a hindrance to be overcome, an obstacle to be surmounted if equality is to be attained" (Grosz 1994, 15). In the case of Suchon, she also treats women's bodies and their desires and embodied experiences associated with them as a hindrance to obtaining knowledge and being useful to others. Grosz adds that "many feminists within this category see a conflict between the role of mother and that of political or civic being." Insofar as woman adopts the role of mother, her access to the public, social sphere is made difficult if not impossible, and the equalization of the roles of the two sexes becomes nonsensical" (Grosz 1994,

15). Suchon also seems to suggest that the role of the mother or a nun are incompatible with being active in the public sphere. For Suchon, the only state that allows women to be the equals of men is neutralism.

Another compelling aspect of Suchon's argument is that women have to choose either sexuality or equality, and that these two states cannot coexist. What is more, sexuality and equality are mutually exclusive only for women. For Suchon, the state of marriage does not allow women to pursue knowledge. As she herself states, "since women, through the bonds of marriage, are subject to their husbands, attached to their children, and preoccupied by their servants and the pursuit of temporal possessions—prickly thorns indeed that cause inconceivable toil and difficulties" (Suchon 2010, 239). What this means is that within the institution of marriage, women subject themselves to their husbands and their authority. This, in turn, implies that women are not only under the legal authority of their husbands, but also in terms of sexuality. In addition to that, Suchon acknowledges that women cannot fully control their reproduction, and that it also depends on men. Thus, women are attached to children in a sense that they bear these children and raise them. For all these reasons, the only state that allows women to be truly free is celibacy, meaning that women need to choose between their sexuality or equality.

Regarding the incompatibility of sexuality - marriage, more specifically - and equality, Suchon seems to suggest that these two things are only mutually exclusive for women. In the chapter about the aptitude for study, Suchon cites Socrates and claims that "Socrates said that...he had discovered that he was limited by a third from which there was no escape: the commitment he had made in marrying, which obstructed his studies" (Suchon 2010, 279). Nevertheless, Socrates still became a philosopher while being married. Likewise, Suchon also

uses Cicero as an example. She claims that “Cicero said, when he was urged to take a new wife after having repudiated his first: “It was impossible to be married to both a woman and philosophy”” (Suchon 2010, 279). While this quote seems to imply that studies and marriage are also incompatible for men. However, Suchon clearly states that Cicero ended the marriage with his wife in order to pursue philosophy and knowledge. In this sense, men have more freedom in their choice in that they have a right to divorce, while women do not have an opportunity to end marriage under the Suchonian framework. Throughout her work on Equality and elsewhere, Suchon does not mention whether women can have a right to divorce and initiate it.

Another reason for why Suchon treats marriage and equality as incompatible is that she claims that women must have free time (Suchon 2010, 279). Not only do they have to have free time, but they also “must have money for books, even more, for skilled teachers...and those who are their own mistresses and who have at least moderate means—for without resources it is difficult to succeed in any great endeavor” (Suchon 2010, 279). What this means is that no matter how attractive Suchon is trying to present the state of celibacy, it still requires lots of resources. Time is one of the most important resources, but the women who are “their own mistresses” should have enough time to engage in any kind of intellectual activity because they are not burdened by anything. Thus, the unintended consequence of Suchon’s argument is that she treats sexuality (marriage) and equality (freedom) as two mutually exclusive things, and only the state of celibacy allows women to be truly free. While men can pursue both knowledge and be married, women have to make a decision and choose between the two states. This is the tragic nature of the Suchonian equality. She acknowledges that the sexual relations produce a condition of subordination for women. Thus, she writes about the nature of the dilemma that women face - women cannot be both married and equal.

Suchon is against the heterosexual relations with men and sexuality because she understands that those are deeply tied to reproduction and everything that stems from it. Although Suchon does not specifically address motherhood in her works, it can be assumed that it is not compatible with freedom and intellectual life as well. As was mentioned earlier, sexual relations are inherently unequal for Suchon. She claims that “according to Saint Paul, married people do not have power over their own bodies. Although this law upholds the same rights equally for both parties, men always interpret its dispensation more readily in their own favor” (Suchon 2010, 124). Thus, Suchon suggests that even though the power over the bodies should be equal, men abuse this power. Women, in turn, lose the autonomy over their bodies once they enter the state of marriage. This is the reason why married women are always unequal. Most importantly, Suchon ties sexual relations to reproduction and childbearing. According to her, “the sacrament of marriage so that people produce children and raise them in the fear of God, and it renders the spouses inseparable so that they uphold a fidelity beyond suspicion” (Suchon 2010, 121). From this, it follows that if Suchon explicitly states that sexuality and freedom are incompatible, then motherhood is also incompatible with freedom. At least these two states - motherhood and freedom - cannot be compatible at the same time. As Julie Walsh points out, “by Suchon’s own lights, wives, mothers, and nuns are not and cannot be free” (Walsh 2019, 686). In the Suchonian framework, the only way to be or become free is through the institution of civil celibacy.

While Suchon argues that celibate life is liberating and is sufficient enough to grant women freedom that they have been deprived of for centuries, this same celibate life seems to be imposing different kinds of limitations upon women. And these limitations are not only associated with the embodied experiences and their absence, but they also concern other aspects

of the life of a neutralist. As was mentioned earlier, Suchon claims that the neutralists “must eliminate all that is inimical to this angelic virtue” (Suchon 2010, 259). Indeed, this requirement is a condition for freedom. Nevertheless, women who choose the celibate life must be disciplined and aware of their bodily weaknesses, preserving their chastity and purity. Neutralists must also “avoid overly frequent conversations with extreme diligence, treat their bodies with great severity, strive to confine their glances, moderate their volubility, and carry out all actions with a decorous seriousness” (Suchon 2010, 260). Thus, there seems to be an ambiguity in the structure of Suchon’s argument. Even though the celibate life is without any constraints, it is filled with restrictions and limitations. Women who choose this lifestyle are free, but only insofar they comply with the restrictions. Suchon also adds that “free persons must avoid overly frequent conversations with extreme diligence, treat their bodies with great severity, strive to confine their glances, moderate their volubility, and carry out all actions with a decorous seriousness” (Suchon 2010, 260). Nevertheless, Suchon frames all of these rules or recommendations not as restrictions, but as a condition for equality and freedom. These limitations in and of themselves imply that women in a state of celibacy cannot be truly free if they need to commit to the strict lifestyle that is full of limitations. Apart from detaching from their sexuality and embodied experiences, neutralists should also filter their interactions with people. They have to choose their friends very wisely and cautiously. Moreover, free persons must also refrain from having conversations with people that would imply showing some unacceptable emotions and feelings.

### **3. Conclusion**

De la Barre and Suchon offer compelling and radical arguments for their time. Even though the goal of each thinker is to liberate women, throughout this thesis it was shown that

they achieved a liberation of women, but not fully. The sophisticated philosophical tools that they use - Cartesianism or the Stoic and Aristotelian philosophy - carry implicit assumptions that are equally as limiting as the structures that these authors are trying to dismantle. If Cartesian dualism renders the body as irrelevant, the philosophical tools that Gabrielle Suchon relies on treat the embodied experiences of women - motherhood, pregnancy, childbirth, for example - as incompatible with freedom. The strategy of de-sexualization that the two thinkers use - though in different ways - suggests that feminists can both liberate women and impose some new limitations upon women. In the case of de la Barre, his liberatory argument that “the mind has no sex” grants women intellectual equality. However, the cost of this argument is that women will have to conform to a male-coded rationality. The tension within the framework of de la Barre is that men are viewed as the standard, and that the female body is treated as philosophically irrelevant. Likewise, in the emancipatory argument of Suchon where she offers the creation of the institution of civil celibacy as a solution to the subordination of women, the embodied experiences of these women are treated as an “obstacle” to freedom that women need to overcome. In this sense, it can be clearly seen that the liberatory arguments of the early modern feminists reveal the tensions within this tradition. What is more, even the arguments in favor of the emancipation of women come at a cost. In the arguments of both de la Barre and Suchon, women still have to give up on some major aspect of their womanness in order to become equal.

Another similarity between de la Barre and Suchon, other than the strategy of de-sexualization, is how they view the nature of subordination of women. Both of them acknowledge that the prejudices and customs are made and maintained in order to keep women in the inferior position. Both de la Barre and Suchon, implicitly, agree that these same customs and prejudices are made by men and are beneficial for men in the first place. What de la Barre

and Suchon also agree on is that women are not inferior by nature, and that this inferiority is the result of the deprivation of access to knowledge and a limited access to educational institutions. Nevertheless, the ways that they achieve equality and liberation for women differ significantly.

Regarding the points of divergence of de la Barre's and Suchon's arguments, they operate on different levels. While de la Barre offers a metaphysical argument that is more like a thought experiment, Suchon's claim is more practical in that she suggests the creation of a completely new institution that is aimed at removing the constraints. This is part of the reason that the title for this thesis was chosen - de la Barre argues for viewing the minds as "sexless", while Suchon proposes viewing the bodies as "sexless". Another major point of distinction between the thinkers is that de la Barre wants to integrate women into the existing institutions, but that Suchon sees the institutions as inherently unequal and unchangeable. This is why she proposes the creation of an institution of civil celibacy - because it is free from constraints.

The purpose of this thesis is to show that even emancipatory arguments of the feminists of the early modern period can have unintended consequences. Understanding the double-edged quality of such arguments does not diminish or deny their liberatory power. Nevertheless, it reveals the tensions that exist within the tradition of early modern feminism. Looking at the arguments of de la Barre and Suchon through the critical lens allows the readers to see that even when women can gain equality or access to education or other occupations that were previously unavailable to them, these women gain it at a cost. The cost in the case of two thinkers is that women have to give up some aspect of their womanness - their bodies or the embodied experiences that are associated with them.

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