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Gabrielle Suchon's 'Neutralist':

The Status of Women and the Invention of Autonomy

Lisa Shapiro

8.1 Some Preliminaries: Biographical Notes and a Point about Historiography

Since currently Gabrielle Suchon, the focus of this chapter, is not widely known among philosophers, I begin with some biographical detail. Gabrielle Suchon was born 1632 in Semur (in Burgundy, not far from Dijon), her parents were of minor gentry, and there were numerous jurists in the family. Her father died when she was thirteen. At a certain point, she entered a convent, and at some other point she left it. Upon leaving the convent, she supported herself as a teacher while living with her mother, and led what has been described as a studious life. She died in 1703 at 72. That is almost all that is known with certainty about her life. It has proven a challenge to fill in the details.[1] The framework for her biography comes from a short entry in the *Bibliothèque des auteurs de Bourgogne* by Abbé Philibert Papillon published in 1745. Some of the details there are incorrect (it lists her as born in 1631). The reasons she entered the Dominican convent in Semur are unknown. Given the apparent affluence of her family, it is unlikely that she was sent there for lack of a dowry. In each of her major works, she inveighs against the institution of marriage and the harm

[1] See Sonia Bertolini, 'Gabrielle Suchon: une vie sans engagement?', *Australian Journal of French Studies* 37, no. 3 (2000): 291-309.

marriage brings to women, so it might well be that she refused to marry. But she also attacks the oppressive conditions of convents, especially for those without vocation. In October 1666 she was to be transferred to the Jacobin monastery at Langres, but it is unclear both why she was transferred and whether she ever arrived. She is not listed in the 1673 register of residents. Papillon reports that she travelled to Rome to obtain a papal rescript against her vows, but the Vatican claims there are no extant records of such a rescript. There is a record, dated 1672, of a petition to the pope for restoration to lay status. She would have been in the convent for twenty-five years. However, there is some reason to think that Suchon petitioned to the diocese for release from her vows within five years of her entrance into the convent, as Papillon also mentions a court ruling in Dijon mandating her return to the convent. There is no reason to doubt Papillon's claim that Suchon taught and lived with her mother after having finally left the convent, though questions remain about how that was effected, whom she taught, and equally, how she gained access to the many works she cites in published writings.

Suchon authored two major works: (1) *Treatise on Ethics and Politics Divided into Three Parts: Freedom, Knowledge and Authority, where it is shown that persons of the [female] sex have a natural capacity that enables them to exercise these three prerogatives now denied them*.[2] It was originally published in 1693 under the pseudonym 'GS Aristophile', and then reprinted in 1694, with a slightly modified title. And (2) *On the Celibate Life Freely*

[2] Gabrielle Suchon [G. S. Aristophile], *Traité de la Morale et de la Politique, divisée en trois parties, sçavoir la liberté, la science, et l'autorité où l'on voit que les personnes du sexe pour en être privées, ne laissent pas d'avoir une capacité naturelle, qui les en peut rendre participantes* (Lyon: B Vignieu, 1693). Hereafter, references to this edition will be cited in-text as *TMP* followed by chapter and page numbers. Emended translations will be followed by an asterisk (*).

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Chosen, or Life without Commitments[3] was published in 1700 under her own name. The latter work was reviewed in print, and so, we can assume, read by others, if not widely read. Both works are striking in demonstrating a pointed concern with the situation, and status, of women, even while they aim to develop an ethical and political theory. That is, Suchon's theoretical aspirations are intimately tied to her concern for liberating—that is, ensuring genuine freedom for—women.

Just as there are open questions about her life, there are unanswered questions about Suchon's influence on those who followed her. In her *The Sex of Knowing*, Michèle Le Doeuff suggested that perhaps Rousseau plagiarized Suchon.[4] There are passages that support this suggestion. In the *Treatise on Ethics and Politics*, Suchon talks of women as essentially free, but constrained by chains which they have helped to forge by unthinkingly accepting the institutions and conventions which prescribe their conduct (*TMP* 1.23).[5] Rousseau's oft-quoted opening to *The Social Contract* that 'man was born free, and he is everywhere in chains' echoes Suchon's language, and the view articulated there and in the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* also resonate with Suchon, who published her work a good sixty years

[3] Gabrielle Suchon, *Du célibat volontaire, ou la vie sans engagement,* 2 vols (Paris: Jean et Michel Guignard, 1700). Hereafter, references to this edition will be cited in-text as *CV* followed by volume, chapter, and page numbers.
[4] Michèle Le Doeuff, *The Sex of Knowing*, edited and translated by Kathryn Hamer and Lorraine Code (New York and London: Routledge, 2003).
[5] 'Women would surmount some aspects of their constraint if they knew how to resist and how not to be so pliable and blind in helping to forge their own chains.' See Gabrielle Suchon, *A Woman who Defends All the Persons of her Sex,* edited and translated by Domna Stanton and Rebecca Wilkin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 119. Hereafter, references to this edition will be cited in-text as *SW* followed by volume, chapter, and page numbers.

earlier. However, Rebecca Wilkin and Sonja Ruud have found no evidence that either Rousseau or Madame Dupin, a woman for whom Rousseau served as secretary while she was writing her *Ouvrage sur les femmes*, concerning equality of the sexes, read Suchon.[6] Even if there isn't evidence for a direct causal relation between Suchon and those who come after, one might still think there is a story to be told about Suchon's significance within the history of philosophy. That is, it might be possible for a thinker to have *import* without there being a well-established direct causal *impact*. The discussion that follows is meant to support this claim, though it does not fully constitute an argument for it.

In this chapter I argue for two claims: (1) that Suchon's efforts to articulate a theory of freedom fit nicely into the narrative of the invention of autonomy told by Jerome Schneewind; and (2) that these efforts cannot be separated from her concern with the status of women. This second point adds an interesting twist to Schneewind's story: it demonstrates how political concerns can impact a metaphysical position that grounds an account of morality. I begin by sketching out the narrative of early modern moral philosophy told by Schneewind in his sweeping and masterful *The Invention of Autonomy*.[7] I then turn to Suchon, explicating her position in *Du célibat volontaire* and the term 'Neutraliste' that she coins in that work. With her view laid out, I also situate her on the path to Kantian autonomy traced out by Schneewind as well as within the discussion of free will preceding her, and in

[6] See Rebecca Wilkin and Sonja Ruud, 'Reappearing Ink: From Equality of the Sexes to Equality among Men', unpublished manuscript.
[7] J. B. Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

particular, that of Descartes. With this architecture in place, I then turn to consider the role her critique of the social and political status of women plays in her account. I conclude by considering what attention to this role can tell us about the invention of autonomy.

8.2 The Invention of Autonomy

Schneewind in *The Invention of Autonomy* argues, as the title suggests, that the Kantian concept of autonomy, and its particular way of grounding morality in self-governance, was not given in experience, as Kant suggests it is,[8] but rather was invented. Though necessity may be the mother of invention, technological inventions are not born without the happy convergence of accident and painstaking labour of research and development. Similarly, the Kantian notion of autonomy emerges from working out a critique of accounts of morality as obedience to divine law (and those who have special access to that law) as well as earlier accounts of morality as grounded in self-governance.

It may be helpful at this point to say a bit about the difference between self-governance (or self-mastery) and autonomy. Autonomy is perhaps best understood as a species of self-governance. Self-governance, the general category, is the ability to regulate oneself in accord with a conception of the good. But there are many ways in which one might master oneself—for instance, by cultivating proper emotional responses, and so habits of response, or by

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[8] Some scholars disagree with Schneewind that Kant takes autonomy to be given in experience. This disagreement is not central to my discussion of Suchon, and indeed, if Kant himself does not take autonomy as given in experience, that only adds more texture to the fabric of the history of philosophy into which I am arguing Suchon can be woven.

steadfastly obeying the laws of the land, or by adhering strictly to commands handed down by an external authority. Autonomy is a specific form of self-mastery that, at minimum, involves setting *for oneself* a set of rules by which one is determined to act. Accounts of autonomy can be further specified by the ways in which those rules are understood to be in accord with the good.

As Schneewind's story unfolds, thinking of morality as a matter of self-governance also emerges in an accidental social-historical context shaped by wars of religion. These wars both, in their religious dimension, undermined ecclesiastical moral authority, and, through their political impact, opened up the possibility of participating in public affairs to ever more people. Appeals to self-governance addressed emerging questions about wherein moral and political authority was to be found. Initial appeals to self-governance preserved God as a source of moral authority, whether through voluntarist accounts, which maintained that God ordained the moral order, or through intellectualist accounts, which maintained that God simply grasped the moral order and legislated the rules to be followed so as to abide by it. These initial self-governance accounts also made an important assumption about human psychology—that 'normal adults are able to be aware of or to know, with no external help, what morality directs or approves, and to bring themselves to live accordingly regardless of threats and rewards'.[9] Normal adults are effectively held responsible for their own moral worth for this reason, and as a result they engage in a process of self-perfection. There is an

[9] Schneewind, *Invention of Autonomy*, p. 9.

unavoidable tension in this position: God grounds morality, but human nature grounds moral evaluation. This tension can be alleviated (without becoming reactionary) by taking morality itself to be grounded in human nature and the human ability to self-govern by legislation. Kant's concept of autonomy answers the challenge of articulating this position.

Schneewind not only articulates this overarching narrative but also works through the details of these moves in the dialectic. My aim here is not to take issue with either the narrative arc or the details he presents, though it is worth noting that nary a female thinker appears in his story of the invention of autonomy. I want to situate Suchon within the story he tells in part to fill this lacuna, but that is not my central aim. Rather, I want to pursue a suggestion that Schneewind makes in the last more historiographical chapter, that the aims of moral philosophy are contingent on the historical context in which moral philosophers are developing the accounts they put forward.[10] Schneewind himself doesn't develop this suggestion, and, as at least one reviewer pointed out, it is not clear that he himself follows it in the work.[11] Reading Suchon illustrates well how to realize this suggestion, for an understanding of Suchon's philosophical position is deeply enriched (if not shifted) by attending to the very specific context in which she writes: the problem of the status of

[10] Schneewind offers this suggestion as a counter to the view that moral philosophy has a single aim—whether it be to answer the question of how one should live or to adduce some as yet unrevealed (scientific) moral knowledge.

[11] Ian Hunter suggests that Schneewind himself in constructing the narrative he does assumes that moral philosophy does have a single aim, rather than a historically contingent one. See Ian Hunter, 'Review of *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy* by J. B. Schneewind', *The Philosophical Review* 109, no. 3 (2000): 444-7.

women.[12]

8.3 Suchon's '*Neutraliste*'

In her *Du Célibat Voluntaire* Suchon introduces a term *Neutraliste* to characterize those who lead what she calls a neutral life, or a life without commitments (*vie sans engagement*). This neutral life constitutes the voluntary celibacy of the work's title. While *Neutraliste* is a neologism, '*célibat*' is not, though its seventeenth-century sense is importantly different from the contemporary one: the 1694 *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Français* defines *'le célibat'* as the state of someone who has never been married. I begin by unpacking Suchon's definition of this neutral life. With the view in place, I will then turn to consider the how this account is situated within early modern discussions of will, self-mastery, and autonomy.

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Suchon writes:

> I could not define celibacy any better than to say: it is a condition without commitments that contains all other states potentially without yet putting them into practice. (*CV* I.1, 2; *SW* 242*)

She identifies three parts of the definition and in so doing clarifies the term: (a) being

[12] In conversation, Owen Ware has helpfully distinguished two ways of considering the relevance of historical context to a philosophical position. On a strong view, we might think that historical context produces the philosophical claims put forward in a given period, and so the claims are inextricably tied to the historical context in which they are put forward—there is a real way in which the context constitutes (in part) the philosophical claims. A weaker view maintains that the historical context renders certain philosophical topics salient, and so is important for properly understanding philosophical claims, though those claims are articulable without reference to the historical context. I do not think that my discussion hinges on adopting one or the other of these perspectives, though I am presupposing at the very least the weaker view.

'without commitments' is just the absence of a commitment to a *profession*, and, equally, a state of *indifference*; (b) the potentiality of the state of celibacy involves a 'power to embrace' the state most appropriate to one's 'way of thinking and ... inclination' (*CV* I.1, 2; *SW* 242); and (c) this celibacy is a condition, or a way of living, entailing a strength (*fermeté*) to persevere constantly in this state of indifference over anything else.

Let me begin by considering what she intends by describing the celibate life as a state of indifference. Ruling out one option is straightforward. It is clear that by 'indifference' she does not mean a state free of preferences regarding what to do. This is clear from the second part of the definition, where she assumes that those leading a celibate life have their own proper inclinations. It is also clear from a further clarification of the third part of the definition: 'Although I have defined celibacy as a state without commitments, it is nonetheless an act of will, chosen by preference over other conditions' (*CV* 1.1, 4; *SW* 243). Insofar as celibacy (a state of indifference) is an 'act of will, chosen by preference', it cannot be understood as a lack of preference. Rather it is an active decision to be without commitments. To understand what Suchon means by indifference, we must understand what she means both by a commitment and to be without commitments.

As Suchon defines it, a commitment is a 'strict obligation to remain in the same condition, permanently exercising certain duties and ways of living, from which one can never evade' (*CV* 1.1, 2-3; *SW* 242*). This definition makes clear that for Suchon one commits to a *profession*. Professions, for her, have what I will call an institutional character.

They are constituted by a set of policies, codes of conduct, and law-like rules for those who practice that profession to follow. So, one enters voluntarily into a certain profession, but once one has made that initial choice, there are no further choices to make: one must, in virtue of one's entering the profession, follow its rules. This is indeed a commitment. For Suchon, religious vocation and marriage are paradigm professions, but one need only look to more contemporary professions to see that (at least some of) her usage is still with us. Lawyers and physicians must adhere to strict codes of conduct in their respective practices of law and medicine. Alternatively, when one commits to a PhD programme in philosophy, say, one binds oneself to a set of requirements for completion of the degree, to adhering to a set of standards, to being evaluated by one's professors as to whether one met those standards, following the policies of the university in which one is enrolled (as well as following implicit codes of conduct towards one's peers), and so on.

Before returning to the concept of indifference, it is worth noting that the commitments Suchon considers here are what she terms voluntary (*libre*) commitments, 'made by the consent of the will, the promise of words and the bonds created by actions' (*CV* 1.1, 4; *SW* 243). She distinguishes them from natural commitments, intrinsic to human beings as rational creatures, which include accepting and loving God, and following divine law.

If voluntary commitment entails obligating oneself to fulfil the 'duties and way of life' proper to a profession, then the state of indifference constituting celibacy is a refusal to enter into any such obligations, and so into any profession. This understanding of the state of

indifference proper to celibacy affords insight into other aspects of the account. Refusing to enter a profession leaves open a full range of options for actions going forward. One might think that is a sufficient explication of how celibacy 'contains all states potentially', but it also does not seem to do justice to how Suchon uses the term 'state' (*état*). A state for her is something akin to a form of life: a profession is a 'state', as is the celibate life. Insofar as professions have an institutional character, are structured by sets of rules of conduct, in refusing to enter a profession one is not bound by any of those rules, and so one has a power to do anything, so one can 'choose to embrace the state' that best suits one. But wilfully refusing to enter into any obligations is itself an obligation of a sort: celibacy is a state, a way of life, that entails a commitment to persist in a state of celibacy.

Suchon further contrasts the commitment to the celibate life with that to another (any other) kind of profession.

> To live in a state of celibacy, it is not necessary to make a solemn declaration orally or in writing, or enter a community, reside in it, and commit one's possessions to it, even less to take vows before the Church. It is enough to want it, to be compelled by inclination, and to have no affection in one's heart other than to have none. It is also not necessary to have the consent of a second or third party, for each person is capable of shaping this way of life, without recourse to an external power. (*CV* 1.1, 5-6; *SW* 244)

Committing to a 'certain profession' involves a set of public practices that cement that

commitment. One signs a contract or articulates a vow. Such a declaration is witnessed by others, and so is a matter of public record. Additionally, one demonstrates one's commitment to this chosen way of life by giving over whatever belongs to one, one's possessions. On Suchon's account, there are both *public* and *material* constraints imposed through commitment to professions, and the implication seems clearly to be that it is as much through these constraints as through one's willing obligation to adhere to the rules of the profession that one closes off possibilities for future choices. By contrast, committing to the celibate life involves only one's own will; it need not involve any 'second or third party', nor any set of rules that effectively determine the course of the life that one has chosen; it does not involve transferring possessions to the professions to which one has also given over decision making. The celibate life 'contains all other states potentially' because in choosing to practice that way of life one is not constrained either by a public act or a material sacrifice.

We are now in a position to better understand Suchon's neologism *Neutraliste* or Neutralist. Those who commit to the celibate life are neutral with respect to the demands set up by social, religious and political institutions:[13]

> Neutral life is not accompanied, or better, informed by the formal ceremonies and the strict obligations that constitute other vocations; like so many mixed bodies it

[13] Suchon claims that Neutrality best serves the interests of a republic—a political entity. Though it would seem that for it to do so, that political entity would need to have a structure and laws which constrain how politicians act, I take her point to be that an optimal political arrangement allows for the decision makers and citizens alike to remain free to make the appropriate choices for themselves and for the community going forward, and so materially unconstrained by entrenched customs. This is another of Suchon's points that has clear resonance in Rousseau's political thought.

> nonetheless has a form that defines the perfection of its being, which is nothing other than true disengagement, which retains the power of commitment without ever reducing it in practice. That is why I say that the Neutral life receives its form from reason's orders and its matter from an emancipation from formalities and exterior ceremonies that serve to bind the other conditions. (*CV* 1.1, 11-12; *SW* 247*)

This passage brings out two other features of Suchon's account. First, refusing to enter any profession is no easy task. For this refusal involves both absenting oneself from societal expectations that one enter into one profession or another and being without the institutional structures and codes of conduct that can guide one's actions. To set oneself apart in this way—to remain neutral in the face of forces pulling one into a profession—requires real resolve. The celibate life, rather than not involving any choice at all, is 'a state marked by choice and deliberation' (*CV* 1.1, 8; *SW* 245), for the person who chooses a life without commitments must choose the path on her own at every step along the way. It is in this way that it involves 'a resolution to persevere constantly in this state of indifference'.

This leads to the second point. That Neutralists are unconstrained by institutional demands does not mean they are wholly unrestricted. The commitment a Neutralist makes to the celibate way of life entails not that she follow however she is inclined from moment to moment. The Neutralist does not follow the prescriptions of professional institutions for her conduct, but that does not entail that she rejects aspects of that framework for thinking about how to act. Suchon accepts that our actions should be governed by codes of conduct that we

are obliged to follow. Rather she rejects that the terms of that obligation and the code itself be *externally* determined. The Neutralist, thus, institutes her own code of conduct, one that will govern her actions going forward. That is what it means for the Neutralist to choose *a way of life*: to determine for herself principles to govern her actions within that way of life. Indeed, Suchon makes a point of contrasting the Neutralist with a libertine:

> it should be said that if someone were to seek out this uncommitted life to have greater freedom and enjoy leisure and diversion, he would be seeking not continence but rather libertinism. We would be wrong to glorify this way of life as celibacy, a state that has no other goal but virtue. (*CV* 1.2 18; *SW* 250)

The Neutralist, rather, in committing to being without commitments, recognizes that she must enact a code of conduct to replace those rules. However, Neutralism does not specify any one particular code of conduct to enact. There are many different ways in which one can be a Neutralist. One is to set for oneself the way of life to which one is best suited. Nonetheless, all these different ways of life share one aspect: they are self-set.

We can now begin to see how Suchon figures in the invention of autonomy. The Neutralist, a moral ideal, is characterized by her instituting—or perhaps even legislating—for herself, those principles that will guide her actions. We are not, however, to autonomy yet. For Suchon, it is not this legislation for oneself that grounds morality. Rather, the principles that Neutralists institute are governed by what drew them to celibacy in the first place: the same 'inner, rational, and natural law, that leads them to realize that they are unsuited' for the

other professions, and that is given to them by God (*CV* 1.1, 9-10; *SW* 246). That is, the voluntary commitments the Neutralist undertakes, whatever they might be, are guided by the natural commitments all human beings share, and through which we can understand divine law.

8.4 Descartes on Indifference

In order to better understand how Suchon's concern with the status of women informs her account of the Neutralist and what insight her account affords into the development of the concept of autonomy, I want to consider Suchon's relationship to an earlier discussion of indifference: that of Descartes.[14] I do want to qualify this discussion with a caveat: there is no evidence that Suchon read Descartes.[15]

In the Fourth Meditation Descartes defines the will in the context of his discussion of judgement as

[14] Pierre Charron (1541-1603), a contemporary of Michel de Montaigne, is another possible point of contact. His *De la Sagesse* develops a kind of neo-Stoic moral philosophy, but what he writes about indifference there (in Part 2, Chapter 2) is of particular interest with respect to Suchon. There, Charron maintains that a sceptical attitude is critical to maintaining the openness required for grasping the truth. And to maintain this openness, one must remain free from obligations. For Charron, this freedom has a distinctly political aspect, for it seems that following the laws and rules that others set for one is sufficiently constraining so as to stand in the way of wisdom. Rather, the wise person is one who exhibits self-restraint, and that self-restraint enables them to remain free. See Pierre Charron, *De la Sagesse*, excerpted in *Descartes'* Meditations*: Background Source Materials*, edited by Roger Ariew, John Cottingham, and Tom Sorrell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), especially pp. 60-1. Another possible source is Nicolas Caussin. See Véronique Desnain, 'The Origins of *La vie neutre*: Nicolas Caussin's influence on the writing of Gabrielle Suchon', *French Studies* 63, no. 2 (2009): 148-60.

[15] Very little is known about what Suchon read. While she did read and endorsed the theory of equality defended by the Cartesian François Poullain de la Barre, it is unlikely she would have learned about Descartes only through Poullain, who simplifies Descartes' thought.

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> simply … our ability to do or not do something (that is, to affirm or deny, to pursue or avoid); or rather, it consists simply in the fact that when the intellect puts something forward for affirmation or denial or for pursuit or avoidance, our inclinations are such that we do not feel we are determined by any external force.[16]

He then goes on to distinguish two aspects of this freedom: what is often called a freedom of spontaneity, wherein the will, either by divine grace or by reason, cannot but spontaneously affirm that which it clearly understands as true or good; and a freedom of indifference, wherein 'when there is no reason pushing me in one direction rather than another' (AT 7:58; CSM 2:40), the will is pulled and pushed in opposing directions. For Descartes, this indifference is a lesser grade of freedom, reflecting a 'defect in knowledge' (AT 7:58; CSM 2:40) that requires deliberation about what ought to be believed or done. By contrast, the freedom of spontaneity, a great inclination of the will impelling it to affirm one's understanding, reflects the clarity and distinctness of intellectual perception. Insofar as Suchon is arguing for the value of the state of indifference it can be tempting to read her as inverting (at least part of) Descartes' picture of the will, but this is to get both Descartes and Suchon wrong. Let me begin with Descartes. I will argue that Suchon can be read as criticizing a Cartesian conception of the will, but her criticism aims to preserve some central

[16] René Descartes, *Oeuvres,* edited by Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, 11 vols (Paris: Vrin, 1996), Vol.7, p. 57; René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes,* edited and translated by John Cottingham, Roger Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and (for vol. iii) Anthony Kenny, 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984-91), Vol 2, p. 40. Hereafter, I use a standard format to refer to these editions respectively. I refer to AT followed by volume and page numbers; then, after a semi-colon, I refer to CSM followed by volume and page numbers.

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elements of its freedom of indifference, even while she rethinks the role of social institutions in his account of human freedom.

First, in the *Meditations*, Descartes' concern is with first philosophy—the basic metaphysical principles that frame all our beliefs. The epistemic standard for settling on these principles is extraordinary: they must be immune to even the most metaphysical doubt. For Descartes, this entails they be clearly and distinctly perceived, for in that case the will by its nature is impelled to affirm spontaneously. These clearly and distinctly perceived ideas are few: the existence of God, or an infinite, perfect being, the nature of thought, and the nature of body. The vast majority of our ideas are confused and obscure, and with regards to them the will is not impelled either to affirm or to deny, to pursue or to avoid: we are indifferent. If we are engaged in the project of first philosophy, the proper way to handle this indifference is to withhold judgement. However, in the ordinary course of life, we cannot afford the luxury of standing idle; we must make decisions, of what to believe and what to do.[17]

This indifference is not the central concern of the *Meditations*, and it is only at the end of the Sixth Meditation that Descartes begins to consider the matter. In other works, the earlier *Discourse on Method* and the later correspondence with Elisabeth and the *Passions of the Soul*, Descartes does say a bit more, but it is still not much. For Descartes, in practical contexts, in which our knowledge is invariably imperfect, our indifference affords us time to deliberate before choosing what to do, but it can also lead us to fall prey to an irresolution

[17] It is no doubt no accident that the context in which the meditator arrives at metaphysical truths is one that is expressly removed from practical considerations: that is part of the point of engaging in meditations.

that leaves us in a state of suspended judgement and hinders us from acting (AT 11:459; CSM 1:390-1). In the *Discourse* he offers a set of maxims meant to guide action in conditions of imperfect knowledge: to follow local laws and customs and, in general, opinions of sensible men, to be 'firm and decisive' in acting, to work to master oneself, and change one's desires, rather than to change the order of the world, and then finally, to choose philosophy as an occupation. He repeats the first three of the maxims in correspondence with Elisabeth, and they are intimately connected to his account of virtue.

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Self-mastery sits at the core of these maxims, and especially the second and third maxims. The resolution to follow our best judgement involves a concerted effort both to set a plan and to keep to it. And setting a plan requires that we distinguish what is in our power from what is not, and constrain ourselves to act regarding what we can control. Insofar as these maxims are meant to guide our actions under conditions of imperfect knowledge—contexts in which we are indifferent, for Descartes—the liberty of indifference demands self-mastery.

However, this self-mastery is manifest differently in different contexts. In the metaphysical context, self-mastery consists in self-restraint, withholding judgment when perception is not clear and distinct. In ordinary life, regarding both epistemic and practical matters, self-mastery involves more: Descartes needs to explain how distinguishing what is within one's power from what is not leads to a plan to which we will adhere. For him, as we are properly understood as thinking things, 'nothing lies entirely within our power except our thoughts' (AT 6:25; CSM 1:123). It is not clear how this self-understanding as individuals

can help us in forming plans in contexts of imperfect knowledge. In correspondence with Princess Elisabeth, she presses him on a similar point. While Descartes' response fails to satisfy her,[18] he does suggest that in determining what to do in the course of life we have to attend to a larger context, understood in terms of both the vastness of the natural world and the many-layered social relations we stand in, from our immediate family to the civil society of which we are a part. This suggestion is already in the *morale* of the *Discourse.* Descartes there, in the first maxim 'to obey the laws and customs of my country' (AT 6:23; CSM 1:122), implicitly acknowledges that in deciding how one should act, one observes what others do and to follow along, at least with those more moderate and commonsensical opinions. That is, one has to recognize the social relations one stands in to formulate a course of action. Interestingly, however, Descartes stops short and counts 'as excessive all promises by which we give up some of our freedom' and so eschews 'vows or contracts that oblige perseverance' (AT 6:24; CSM 1:123). It is only by refusing to enter into these obligations that he can ensure that he remains master of his own thoughts. His fourth maxim, the choice of occupation to 'devote my whole life to cultivating my reason and advancing as far as I could in the knowledge of the truth, following the method I had prescribed for myself' (AT 6:27; CSM 1:124), seems to be a consequence of this position.

I have dwelt on Descartes' moral philosophy for two reasons: first, it is clear in the moral

[18] For a more substantive discussion of this exchange, see Lisa Shapiro, 'Descartes, Elisabeth and la psychologie morale du regret', in *Elisabeth de Bohème face à Descartes: Deux Philosophes,* edited by Delphine Kolesnik and Marie-Frédérique Pellegrin (Paris: Vrin, 2014), pp. 155-70.

philosophy that, for him, indifference, at least in the course of ordinary life, demands a set of maxims guiding action. Further, Descartes' *morale par provision* is focused on individuals, their recognition that we have power over our thoughts, so an ability to constrain ourselves in accordance with our nature as thinking things. Descartes' maxims hinge on our mastery of ourselves, but they do not rise to the level of autonomy; the maxims seem to be less rules than an effort to instil habits to guide decision making. Second, while it might be that nothing is within our power but our thoughts, Descartes seems to appeal to social-situated norms of appropriate behaviour—in the country in which one lives, in the occupation in which one is engaged—to resolve questions of how one should act in particular cases. Descartes simply assumes that appeals to these social norms will not be in tension with the individual freedom at the heart of self-mastery.

8.5 Suchon on the Status of Women

We can now see more fully how Suchon's discussion of the status of women situates her within the story of the invention of autonomy. For it is through this aspect of her work that she both appropriates and critiques a Cartesian notion of indifference. Suchon's earlier *Treatise on Ethics and Politics* is squarely aimed at examining and addressing 'the hardships and humiliations that the persons of the sex endure.' Her own rationale for that work is worth quoting at length:

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> The constraint, ignorance, and dependence in which persons of the sex spend their

> lives encompass all the hardships that make them inferior to men; for being denied freedom, knowledge, and authority, they do not partake of the greatest advantages we can gain from politics and ethics.
>
> A treatise on these three subjects is as necessary and useful as it is arduous and delicate, because the majority of women imagine that constraint, ignorance, and subjugation are so natural to their sex that their suffering can never be remedied … . To uncover the source, origin, and causes of ignorance, constraint, and dependence in which the persons of the sex spend their lives, I prove through pertinent and forceful arguments that the conduct imposed upon them is based on custom rather than on a natural ability to study, govern or act freely; and thus that their capacity to accomplish great and beautiful deeds cannot be contested. (*TMP*, Preface; *SW* 73-4)

Suchon's argument that freedom, knowledge, and authority are natural human capacities is motivated by a recognition that women are systematically deprived of the opportunity to exercise and develop each capacity. She first argues from particular cases that women do have each of these three basic human capacities and then aims to explain why it is that more women do not exercise them. Here she argues that the professions—in particular, marriage and religious vocation—through which women's lives are structured are constituted by sets of rules which constrain women from choosing their own course of action, ensure that women remain ignorant, and leave women dependent on others. This explanation, however, leaves a pressing question: if women are deprived of the exercise of their basic capacities by

the institutions that structure their lives, what is there to be done to ensure that they can exercise these capacities?[19]

In *A Celibate Life,* Suchon is best read as addressing just this question. She does not argue for the elimination of the professions of marriage and religious vocation she takes to be so debilitating of women. Nor does she argue for reform of the institutional character of these professions. She grants that marriage and religious vocation might well be suitable courses of the life for some women, and she grants that within those institutions the rules and laws governing individuals are appropriate. Instead, she proposes to open up an alternative to entering one or another profession. That is, she suggests that women have failed to realize their own basic human capacities because they have been directed to enter into one or another profession, each of which is designed to limit the exercise of those capacities. What women require in order to realize their nature as full human beings, free, capable of knowledge and independence, is a third option for organizing their lives: the Neutral or celibate life.

To illustrate her point she goes on to discuss an array of Neutral lives, all of women. There are those 'who spend their lives without commitments with resolute purpose and firm will', those who live without commitment until the end of their lives where they either enter society or a convent; those who live without commitment only after the end of a marriage; and then there are those who are 'wholly their own masters and rule over their possessions

[19] One might hold women themselves entirely responsible for failing to recognize their own abilities or at least to exercise them, and indeed, in the passage above Suchon does seem to do that. To do so, however, fails to acknowledge the role that institutions play in the understanding individuals have of their own abilities, and while Suchon does recognize this fact in the *Treatise on Ethics and Politics,* her later work serves to highlight the way institutions interfere with self-understanding.

and their conduct'; those who live under the power of their parents; and those who support themselves through work to stay out of poverty (*CV* 1.2, 14-15 ; *SW* 249). These Neutralists are of different ages, of different degrees of wealth, have different material resources, and might either live in communities or live on their own. What they share is an unwillingness to take on the trappings of the professions and social institutions that prescribe for them sets of rules. Their indifference leaves them unconstrained in their actions, but, as we have seen, this lack of constraint leads them to set their own code of conduct, in keeping with their natural commitment to obey divine law. For Suchon, determining for themselves how they will act in accord with their human nature enables them to better serve the public good (*CV* 1.7, 46-52; *SW* 255-8).[20]

That Suchon has to make the case that it is possible for a woman to thrive and to serve the public good in a life that remains indifferent to one profession or another is somewhat astonishing, but it serves to highlight a central point of difference between Suchon and Descartes. Descartes' moral maxims presuppose that each human being—and it is worth recalling that the *Discourse* (in which those moral maxims appear) was written in French in part to appeal to women readers—has power over his or her thoughts, and this power is what defines us as the individuals we are, capable of making judgements, aiming to make the best judgements we can, and resolving to adhere to them. As I noted earlier, Descartes maintains

[20] While she does not offer an argument for this last point, the idea might be that all professions aim to serve the public good in some way. They, however, fail insofar as they demand their practitioners follow a set of prescribed rules that may well not be aligned with their natural inclinations. Neutralists share the aim of serving the public good, and they can do so more efficiently insofar as they determine for themselves the code of conduct that will guide the way in which they realize this aim.

that the social context in which an individual exercises this power must be respected, but he simply assumes that context is just one element that figures in our decisions. Moreover, Descartes' fourth maxim, concerning his choice of occupation, assumes that each individual is as free as Descartes himself was in choosing a profession to pursue.

Suchon's focus on the status of women brings out just how contentious each of these assumptions are. Women rarely find themselves in a situation where their thoughts are assumed to be in their power, and that power is cultivated.[21] Instead, they are directed from an early age into professions. While they might appear to have a choice of which profession to enter, their options are limited—typically to the convent or marriage. Then, once they do opt for one or the other profession, their further actions are determined by the rules that govern those institutions, rules that they are obligated to follow. Suchon's concern with the status of women reveals that individuals, that is, individual thinkers, are intimately tied to their social situation. Social context is not simply a factor to be respected in decision making but rather influences and informs the decision-making process itself, for the social situation one finds oneself in makes available the set of options one can entertain in considering what to do. Suchon's argument for the viability of a celibate life effectively is an argument to create for women, and indeed for anyone who is similarly constrained, a position that Descartes simply assumes—a position in which a person has power over her thoughts, and can choose that occupation that suits her best.

[21] Descartes' method for rightly conducting reason aims to cultivate the power of thought he takes each of us to possess.

Suchon's position is a subtle one. For at the same time that she aims to highlight the way women's very capacity to choose has been affected by the social context in which they find themselves, she also wants to insist that a genuine freedom of choice is intrinsic to human nature. These two claims can appear to be in tension: on the one hand our freedom is a metaphysical necessity; on the other hand, our freedom is socially constituted, and so contingent. The subtlety of Suchon's position consists in recognizing that the freedom that is intrinsic to humankind requires proper conditions to be fully expressed. Someone like Descartes is thus correct in insisting that human beings are fully free and capable of self-mastery, but at the same time he is mistaken in suggesting that realizing one's own freedom involves simply a recognition on the part of each individual that she is free. Suchon holds that each individual does need to recognize her own essential freedom, but also holds that social institutions not only can constrain that freedom, by externally determining what one can and cannot do, but in doing so can also obscure from view the very fact of our freedom.

8.6 Suchon in Relation to Descartes and the Beginnings of Autonomy

If Suchon aims to criticize Descartes in this way, why does she characterize the celibate life, a life without commitments, as a state of indifference, a term that must resonate with Descartes' account of the will for her?

Recall that for Descartes, the highest degree of freedom is the freedom of spontaneity. In choosing spontaneously, the will realizes its nature as inclined to the true and the good. It

seems, at least in the moment, that we cannot do otherwise.[22] What Suchon terms a 'natural commitment' seems directly analogous to the freedom of spontaneity. For her, natural commitments are 'necessarily attached to the general condition of mankind' and we are 'obligated by the law of our natural condition, as creatures endowed with reason and intelligence' to adhere to them (*CV* 1.1, 3-4; *SW* 242-3). While Suchon shares with Descartes a view about the metaphysics of human freedom—a view that human beings are intrinsically free and that the freedom contains within it a normative standard—unlike Descartes, she is not at all interested in explicating these natural commitments and how they derive from our nature.[23]

Suchon focuses instead on the voluntary commitments 'made by the consent of the will, the promise of words, and the bonds created by actions' (*CV* 1.1, 4; *SW* 243). Certainly, she wants us to recognize that religious vocation and marriage are *voluntary* commitments; women, as they are directed to one or the other way or life, are often painted as *naturally* determined to either enter the convent or to be married.[24] She also wants us to recognize that once they have entered into the commitments entailed by one or another institution, their actions are determined by the rules of that institution. In these two ways, for women, what is

[22] There is some controversy on how to read Descartes on this matter, as he wants to claim both that a free will is a two-way power, a power to do otherwise, and that the will is determined by reasons of truth and goodness. I do not want to delve into this interpretive question here.
[23] She gestures at a requirement to love God and obey divine laws, a natural right guiding our actions, and a natural duty to adhere to a law of nations and local custom, but that list is literally all she has to say on the matter.
[24] Suchon does allow that some women might well have a natural religious vocation or be called to marriage, but she also suggests that these women are but a small portion of those who are actually directed to enter the convent or marry.

in fact a voluntary commitment is presented as if it were a matter of a natural determination of the will. In framing her discussion in terms of indifference, Suchon effectively draws attention to this confusion.

She is, however, also up to something more. I want to suggest that she aims to revise Descartes' account of the liberty of indifference in light of her critique of Descartes. On Descartes' account indifference consists of the will's being pushed and pulled in competing directions by opposing reasons. It seems that we find ourselves in this situation simply because we have imperfect knowledge: if we knew more we would be directed towards the right course of action. Our lack of access to a full set of reasons is simply a function of the human condition as finite beings. As Descartes notes in the Fourth Meditation, we have no cause for complaint that we do not understand more than we do. Suchon in her critique effectively maintains that despite our nature as free, in a sense very much akin to Descartes', (as well as capable of arriving at knowledge and of holding authority) the reasons that pull and push us are often biased in virtue of existing social mores and institutions. And about these we can, and for Suchon, women do, have cause for complaint. In order to be properly indifferent, in the sense of indifference that Descartes envisions, we need to be able to be influenced by reasons independently of social institutional influence. We see this point about indifference reflected in her account of the Neutralist, for it is central to her account that the Neutralist not enter into any *institutional* commitments. I have focused on how this liberation from the constraints of professional obligations leaves the Neutralist free to choose her own

course of action, but it is worth noting that part of that freedom involves being able to think for oneself without being beholden to the reasons offered by the institutions which determine one's actions. In this way, Suchon appropriates the concept of indifference, or rather the liberty of indifference, in a way that both preserves Descartes' account even while it also imports a critique.

This appropriation is then used to leverage a reshaping of the account such that Suchon begins down the road towards autonomy. For she also follows Descartes in recognizing that a state of indifference does not entail being guided by one's inclinations of the moment of decision. A Neutralist does not entail being a libertine. And just as Descartes takes our indifference in conditions of imperfect knowledge to demand that we settle on maxims to guide our actions, so too does Suchon maintain that a Neutralist institute for herself a code that will structure her way of life.

I have suggested that this institution of a code of conduct is something more specific than the self-mastery at the core of Descartes' maxims. That Suchon's Neutralist determines her own way of life, within the constraints of a conception of the good fixed by divine law, situates her as somewhere in the middle of Schneewind's narrative arc of the invention of autonomy.

Her place in that narrative is not, however, simply a matter of working through the dialectic of the nature of the will and what grounds our normative judgements regarding acts of will. Her move away from self-mastery and towards autonomy is informed by a profound

critique of the status of women within her society, of the ways in which their lives—their profession and the actions they take within that profession—are determined by others. Her advocacy of the celibate life, one without commitments, is modelled as a state of indifference to emphasize not only that we as human beings are not naturally determined how to lead our lives and so must decide for ourselves how to live, but also that a life without commitments demands that the celibate prescribe for herself the rules or laws governing her actions, on analogy with the work that professions in their institutional character effect. Without an established profession to prescribe those rules of a way of life to her, the celibate must take on the work of providing that institutional character for herself. In this way we might think that Suchon's Neutralism not only takes an important step from self-mastery to autonomy, it might even offer us a prototype of that invention of Kant.