Gabrielle Suchon's Theory of Knowledge

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Abstract: The concept of knowledge (*science*) plays a central role in the work of early modern proto-feminist philosopher Gabrielle Suchon. Nevertheless, there has been no comprehensive treatment of her epistemology. This article offers the first extended analysis of Suchon's theory of knowledge and describes the role of that theory in her arguments for the equality of men and women. I argue that Suchon combines an Aristotelian theory of knowledge and its place in the best life of contemplation with an Augustinian narrative of the Fall to conclude that women's happiness is unjustly compromised as a result of their exclusion from the very institutions that would allow them to accomplish an essentially human task: the reparative labor of learning. I argue further that Suchon's theory of knowledge deserves greater attention as a distinctive contribution to early modern epistemology. Suchon's melding of Aristotelian epistemology with an Augustinian narrative of the epistemic consequences of original sin allows her to construe intellectual labor as key to the rectification of the fallen human mind. Through this emphasis on the moral value of intellectual labor, Suchon's epistemology offers distinctive social and political implications, namely the reform of institutions that exclude women from the process of learning.

Keywords: Gabrielle Suchon, Epistemology, Knowledge, Contemplation, Feminism, Theology.

Introduction

This article contributes to the recovery of early modern women philosophers by offering the first analysis of the theory of knowledge of Gabrielle Suchon (1632-1703). The concept of knowledge (*science*) plays a central role in Suchon's thought, occupying an entire third of her wide-ranging *Traité de la morale et de la politique* (1693), which develops a systematic theoretical account of freedom, knowledge, and authority, all of which she takes to be divinely bestowed privileges that are essential to our human nature.[1] In Part II of the *Treatise*, which I will refer to as the '*Treatise on Knowledge*', Suchon argues that men and women possess equal capacities for knowledge and concludes that the customs and institutions restricting women's access to knowledge are an

unjust perversion of natural and divine law (*TMP*.II.XL.264/SW184). Despite the centrality of epistemology to Suchon's philosophical project—and especially to her feminist arguments for equality—the scholarship does not currently offer a sustained account of her theory of knowledge. This article thus offers the first extended treatment of Suchon's theory of knowledge and describes the role of that theory in her feminist arguments for the moral and intellectual equality of men and women.[2] I argue that Suchon combines an Aristotelian theory of scientific knowledge and its role in the best human life of contemplation with an Augustinian narrative of the Fall and redemption through God's grace to conclude that women's happiness is unjustly compromised as a result of their systematic exclusion from the very institutions that would allow them to accomplish an essentially human task: the reparative labor of learning.[3] I make the further claim that Suchon's theory of knowledge deserves greater attention, not only as an important aspect of her own thought but also as a distinctive contribution to early modern epistemology. I argue that Suchon offers a distinctive position in two ways: first, by combining an Aristotelian theory of knowledge and contemplation with an Augustinian narrative of the Fall; and second, by construing intellectual labor as reparation for original sin and as key to the rectification of postlapsarian knowledge.

By attributing an 'Augustinian' narrative of the Fall to Suchon, I mean an account of the Fall that emphasizes the severity of the consequences of original sin and humanity's inability to obtain salvation in the absence of God's grace. As Michael Moriarty notes, this Augustinian account of the Fall 'involved a change in human nature' (Moriarty 2006: 99). Since the Augustinian interpretation of the Fall witnessed increased popularity in seventeenth-century France due to the rise of Jansenism (Doyle 2000; Moriarty 2003; 2006), Suchon is hardly unique in framing her account of knowledge in terms of this narrative. As Moriarty has shown, many early modern French writers considered the implications of the Augustinian account of the Fall in their analyses of human behavior (Moriarty 2006), and many philosophers, such as Descartes, Pascal, and Malebranche, drew on the Augustinian tradition in their development of

epistemologies that offer a 'critical perspective on the spontaneous interpretation of human experience' (Moriarty 2003: 2). As Peter Harrison has shown, the story of the Fall also informed many early modern accounts of the mastery of the passions (Harrison 1998). Additionally, it informed the development of new scientific methods among thinkers ranging from Bacon and Glanvill to Malebranche and Descartes, such that 'competing strategies for the advancement of knowledge in the seventeenth century were closely related to different assessments of the Fall and its impact upon the human mind' (Harrison 2002: 240).

Although Suchon's framing of her epistemology in terms of an Augustinian narrative of original sin was relatively conventional for her time, her insertion of an Aristotelian account of demonstrative science and contemplation within this narrative was much less so. As Harrison argues, most early modern proposals for repairing the intellectual consequences of the Fall also involved an implicit or explicit rejection of Aristotelian epistemology, typically dismissing his approach to knowledge through the senses as uncritical and naive, or as proud and vain (Harrison 2002: 254).[4] Suchon's insertion of Aristotelian epistemology within the Augustinian narrative of the Fall permits her to reframe the rectification of postlapsarian knowledge in slightly different terms than those of her contemporaries. She reframes this problem in an original way through her emphasis on intellectual labor as an epistemic consequence of the Fall: she describes knowledge acquisition as 'reparation' for the past wrong of original sin and construes arduous study as its currency.[5] Rather than framing the problem of postlapsarian knowledge in terms of repairing some lost epistemic access of the mind to the world, she reframes it in terms of providing material access to the time and space required for intellectual labor. Suchon's emphasis on intellectual labor thus renders the rectification of fallen human knowledge a social and political problem rather than primarily an epistemological or methodological one. Its solution requires the reform of institutions rather than simply of methods, and specifically the reform of institutions that unjustly deprive women of the opportunity to engage in the reparative labor of learning.

As of yet, there is little scholarly discussion of Suchon's epistemology. This is not because it has been disregarded, but because the scholarly effort to recover Suchon's thought is still in its early stages. Currently, there is no complete modern or critical edition of Suchon's three-part *Treatise on Ethics and Politics*. Séverine Auffret (1998; 1999) has produced a modern French edition of parts of the *Treatise*, and Domna Stanton and Rebecca Wilkin (2010) have published an English translation of selections from all three parts of the *Treatise,* as well as of selections from *On the Celibate Life Freely Chosen or the Life Without Commitments*. To date, there is no modern edition of the *Treatise on Knowledge,* the text which is the focus of this article.

Although there are many helpful articles dealing with isolated aspects of Suchon's thought, most focus mainly on her feminism (Desnain 2012; Sabourin 2017), her account of freedom (Shapiro 2017; Walsh 2019), her use of religious sources (Hoffman 1978; Desnain 2021), and topics in her moral and political philosophy, such as friendship (Conroy 2021) and natural rights (Wilkin 2019). To the extent that scholars discuss Suchon's epistemology at all, it is typically in relation to other philosophical themes, such as freedom and autonomy (Shapiro 2017; Walsh 2019). To the best of my knowledge, there is only one very short discussion of Suchon's epistemology (Mosconi 2016), although its focus is less on the nature of knowledge as such and more on women's right to its pursuit.[6] My paper thus contributes to the recovery of Suchon's thought by offering an extended analysis of her theory of knowledge, outlining its role in her arguments for equality, and describing its place in early modern epistemology, specifically in relation to proposals for the advancement of human knowledge in light of the Fall.

In Part I of the article, I introduce Suchon's overall project to better situate her epistemology in relation to her broader philosophical concerns with women's moral and spiritual fulfillment. In Part II, I begin an analysis of Suchon's theory of knowledge, starting with her first definition of knowledge or '*science*' offered in Chapter I of the *Treatise on Knowledge*. This definition, which I refer to as the 'philosophical definition,' offers a broadly Aristotelian account according to which knowledge is the clear and evident apprehension of an object through

necessary demonstration (*TMP*.II.I.2/SW138). In Part III, I discuss Suchon's second definition of knowledge offered in Chapter II of the *Treatise*, which I refer to as the 'theological definition'. Here, I show how Suchon combines her Aristotelian theory of scientific knowledge with an Augustinian narrative of the Fall. According to Suchon's account, our original prelapsarian condition consisted in the possession of *science* and our fallenness is characterized by the privation of *science* and the necessity of its pursuit through arduous intellectual labor. The happiness we can enjoy—both in this life through contemplation, and in the next life through the beatific vision—consists in reclaiming the knowledge for which we were created by God.

In Part IV, I describe the role that Suchon's definition of knowledge plays in her arguments for the equality of men and women. Knowledge, or *science*, plays an important role in Suchon's equality arguments because it plays a central role in her account of virtue and human flourishing in general, as well as in her account of freedom, as Julie Walsh has shown (Walsh 2019: 689-91). As Walsh argues, for Suchon, free actions 'are those that are produced by knowledge and informed by "judicious considerations"', and 'freedom can be used in greater or lesser degree insofar as reason determines our actions' (Walsh 2019: 689-90). Since freedom is a crucial component of Suchon's conception of human flourishing (Shapiro 2017; Walsh 2019), and freedom requires knowledge as a necessary condition (Walsh 2019), knowledge is also a crucial component of human flourishing in general.

Broadly speaking, Suchon offers an intellectualist account of virtue or human flourishing according to which virtue stems from knowledge (*TMP*.II.VIII-XII) and vice stems from ignorance (*TMP*.II.XXII-XXXV).[7] For Suchon, knowledge is a necessary condition for natural happiness, and it can cooperate with grace for our salvation and supernatural happiness.[8] For Suchon, the best human life embraces the philosophical activity of contemplation as one of its main activities (*TMP*.II.II.10). She adopts the Aristotelian reasoning that contemplation is the best human life because it is the activity in accordance with the highest part of us, namely our intellect (*TMP*.II.II.10; see also Aristotle *EN*.X.7-8).[9] She combines this with the Thomistic

reasoning that our 'intellectual nature' is that according to which we are made in the image of God (*TMP*.II.XL.264/SW184; see also Aquinas *ST*.I, q. 93, a. 4).[10] Since the activity of contemplation consists in reflexive engagement with and enjoyment of the knowledge we have already attained, the pursuit of knowledge is essential to that best human life;[11] and since Suchon construes knowledge acquisition as reparative of original sin, its value is not merely instrumental: it has additional intrinsic moral value.

Suchon's intellectualist view of the role of knowledge for virtue and human flourishing plays a central role in her arguments for the equality of men and women. It allows her to respond to women's customary exclusion from the philosophical life, as well as to the justifications that are typically offered to defend this exclusion. Specifically, it allows her to combat the objection that if women are barred from the intellectual life, there are still other good lives that are available to them or that are better suited to their allegedly diminished capacities. In opposition to this view, Suchon takes a radically egalitarian stance on the rational capacities of men and women. She argues on both philosophical and theological grounds that it is absurd to deny that men and women possess the same capacities for knowledge, writing that 'one would have to be deprived of reason to deny the existence of reason in persons of the fair sex, since reason defines the perfection of women as well as of men' (*TMP*.II.XL.264/SW184).[12] Suchon's position on the sameness of rational capacities possessed by men and women, alongside her intellectualist view of the role of knowledge in human flourishing, commits her to the following conclusion: the pursuit of knowledge is a crucial component of the best life for women, just as it is for men, provided that one is called to it.

I. Suchon's General Project

Before discussing Suchon's theory of knowledge in greater detail, I will briefly outline the general goals of her *Treatise on Knowledge*. In the context of the *Treatise on Ethics and Politics* as a

whole, Suchon's treatment of knowledge is preceded by her discussion of freedom (Part I) and followed by her discussion of political authority (Part III). The central claim of Part II, the *Treatise on Knowledge*, is that knowledge (*science*) is a divinely bestowed privilege (*privilège*), right (*droit*), or prerogative (*prérogative*) belonging to all human beings on account of their rational nature. As Rebecca Wilkin has argued, Suchon conceives of a 'natural right' as an 'enabling condition of personhood, rather than as the possession of an individual' (Wilkin 2019: 247). What this means is that Suchon construes natural rights as capacities within a metaphysics of final causality where God 'destined the least of His creatures for specific uses and appropriate ends' (*TMP*.II.XX.128/SW157).[13] As Wilkin argues, for Suchon, the actualization of our capacities leads to our flourishing, whereas constraint on this actualization stunts our development and 'entails the violation of natural right' (Wilkin 2019: 240).

Suchon's contention that knowledge is a natural right belonging to all rational creatures permits her to draw the conclusion that the customs and institutions that deprive women of access to knowledge have no basis in natural and divine law. She articulates her conclusion as follows:

> 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. This forces us to conclude that the ignorance of the second sex has no greater source than the imperious domination exacted by the first. (*TMP*.II.XL.264/SW184)[14]

Drawing on Thomistic terminology, Suchon construes women's deprivation of knowledge as a product of human law, but not a human law that is aligned with natural, divine, and ultimately eternal law.[15] According to Aquinas, 'a human law diverging in any way from the natural law will be a perversion of law and no longer a law' (*ST*.I-II, q. 95, a. 2/Aquinas 2000: 47). Suchon adopts this reasoning, arguing that the customs that actively thwart women's access to knowledge are unjust on the grounds that they deviate from natural, divine, and ultimately eternal law. As Walsh argues, '[Suchon] ultimately uses the fact that divine action is end-directed

to ground the point that restricting women's ability to act in a way that is consistent with her rational nature is not only bad or unjust but against God and nature' (Walsh 2019: 687).

Suchon's argument concerning the divinely imprinted ends of natural law allows her to conclude that 'thus the injustice committed against persons of the sex does not represent a stable and permanent right that men can claim against women' (*TMP*.II.XL.265/SW184-85).[16] This claim grounds her concrete and positive proposals for how the customs restricting women's fulfillment of their divinely imprinted ends can and ought to be changed. As Véronique Desnain observes, Chapters V-VI of Part III of Suchon's *Treatise* 'clearly express her belief that laws based on custom can, and should, be challenged and disobeyed when necessary' (Desnain 2021: 86).

The goals of the *Treatise on Knowledge* then, are both critical and positive.[17] On the critical level, Suchon seeks to expose the existing customs and institutions that unjustly deprive women of the means to knowledge and to the fulfillment of their divinely imprinted ends as rational beings. On the positive level, she seeks to establish the conditions for women's participation in intellectual pursuits, at least for those who are vocationally disposed to such a life. Suchon offers numerous practical suggestions for how to bring about women's participation in intellectual pursuits through formal schools for girls (*TMP*.II.XL.266/SW185-86), academies that are open to women (*TMP*.II.XL.266/SW185-86), and informal societies for women to engage in discussion and debate (*TMP*.II.XL.268/SW187).

Perhaps most radically, Suchon's positive proposals also involve an argument for a 'neutralist' vocational path, a life of secular celibacy intended as an alternative to marriage and the convent. Suchon outlines this conception of the best human life more extensively in her later work, *On the Celibate Life Freely Chosen or Life Without Commitments* (1700). As Desnain argues, 'despite her declarations of orthodoxy, what she proposes is essentially a new social and, in the long term, legal status for women' through her defense of 'female celibacy outside the Church' (Desnain 2012: 257). As Walsh argues, Suchon's *On the Celibate Life Freely Chosen* 'ought to be read as a call for a wholesale social, cultural, political, and moral revolution' (Walsh 2019: 686).

Suchon describes the neutralist life as 'a condition without commitments' that 'contains all other states potentially without actually putting them into practice' (*CV*.I.I/SW242).[18] In terms of its content, the neutralist path embraces inquiry, contemplation, prayer, and service as some of its main activities.[19]Although this neutralist state is free from commitments, it is 'nonetheless an act of will, chosen by preference over other conditions' (*CV*.I.I/SW243). As Lisa Shapiro argues, the neutralist's condition consists in 'instituting—or perhaps even legislating—for herself those principles that will guide her actions', where those principles are governed by natural law rather than external institutions (Shapiro 2017: 57). Although Suchon does not exclude men from this neutralist life, women are her primary focus insofar as they are most clearly subjected to conditions that thwart the fulfillment of their divinely imprinted ends and are the most obvious beneficiaries of this third vocational path.

By first establishing her case for equality in the *Treatise*, and then exploring the practical means (and limits) of implementing that theory in *On the Celibate Life Freely Chosen*, Suchon adheres to a model much like that offered by one of her modern sources, François Poulain de la Barre, who first establishes his case for equality in *De l'égalité des deux sexes* (1673) and then develops practical solutions in his *De l'éducation des dames* (1674).[20] Although Suchon's treatment of the practical means of implementing her theory of knowledge is beyond the scope of this article, further research into this area would allow us to better appreciate how her epistemology and feminism are interrelated.

II. The Philosophical Account of Knowledge

I will now turn to Suchon's account of the nature of knowledge or *science*. Suchon begins the *Treatise on Knowledge* with two separate chapters on the definition of knowledge. The first offers what I will call the 'philosophical definition' of knowledge, and the second offers what I will call the 'theological definition'. Chapter I elaborates an account of knowledge as it can be grasped

through natural reason, whereas Chapter II elaborates a distinct but complementary account of knowledge that depends on revelation. I will discuss Suchon's philosophical definition of knowledge below.

Wisdom, intelligence, and knowledge

Suchon begins Chapter I of the *Treatise on Knowledge* by defining knowledge (*science*) in relation to two other categories, namely 'wisdom' (*sagesse*) and 'intelligence' (*intelligence*). Broadly speaking, Suchon uses the term 'knowledge' to describe a deductive inference, or the clear and evident cognition of an object through its causes (*TMP*.II.I.2/SW138). She typically uses the term 'intelligence' to describe the non-inferential grasp of the first principles upon which deductive reasoning depends (*TMP*.II.I.1/SW138). She generally uses the term 'wisdom' to describe the comprehensive grasp of the entire nexus of first principles and what follows deductively from them (*TMP*.II.I.1/SW138).

Suchon begins with an initial definition of wisdom, offering two distinct avenues through which it can be obtained:

> The term 'wisdom' ordinarily means the gift from the Holy Spirit that enlightens men in divine and heavenly knowledge; it is often taken to mean those metaphysical and transcendent perceptions and insights that go beyond the senses and commerce with tangible things. Nevertheless, wisdom is also applicable to knowledge we endeavor to acquire through work and study. (*TMP*.II.I.1/SW137-38, translation modified)[21]

Here, Suchon observes two distinct ways that we commonly speak of 'wisdom.' It can be obtained either through divine assistance or through ordinary human efforts. In the latter sense, wisdom has a natural origin in human reason, whereas in the former sense it has a supernatural origin in the divine.

Suchon distinguishes knowledge and wisdom from 'intelligence,' which she defines as the intuitive grasp of the first principles or premises on which deductive reasoning depends. She

writes: 'intelligence instructs them [human beings] in those first notions that make them understand simple and natural truths without much reasoning' (*TMP*.II.I.2/SW138).[22] Although Suchon does not specify examples of 'first notions', these would presumably include what Aristotle calls non-demonstrable 'principles', such as common notions in geometry and the principle of noncontradiction (Aristotle *Post. An*.I.10).

Suchon introduces knowledge as the stage of reasoning that proceeds from these first notions. She writes: 'through knowledge, they progress further because they penetrate causes, look for effects, and carry the torch of reason into all that is most hidden and secret in the nature and essence of beings' (*TMP*.II.I.2/SW138).[23] Whereas intelligence is intuitive, knowledge is discursive. It proceeds from intelligence, and so it is always related to it, but it is distinct insofar as it always includes a chain of reasoning concerning the relation of causes and effects.

Returning to wisdom, Suchon observes that it is a more comprehensive category than either intelligence or knowledge. She writes: 'and through wisdom, they gain possession of all knowledge—human and divine—that in no way surpasses their ability' (*TMP*.II.I.2/SW138).[24] If knowledge is defined as the clear and evident cognition of an object through its causes, and intelligence is defined as the grasp of the logically prior principles upon which deductive reasoning depends, then wisdom is the possession of knowledge of all causes and the intuitive grasp of the first principles that serve as the foundation for deductive reasoning.

The philosophical definition of knowledge

After defining knowledge in relation to wisdom and intelligence, Suchon immediately remarks that 'this reasoning is too general' (*TMP*.II.I.2/SW138).[25] She then proceeds from a new starting point, offering a definition she associates with the 'logicians', thus drawing attention to her proximity to the Aristotelian and Scholastic tradition (*TMP*.II.I.2/SW138). She proposes that 'knowledge is nothing other than certain and evident understanding of the individual and

particular causes of things' (*TMP*.II.I.2/SW138).[26] This definition of knowledge, which I will refer to as the 'philosophical definition', roughly corresponds to the Aristotelian notion of '*epistêmê*', or '*scientia*' as it is typically rendered in Latin among medieval commentators, such as Aquinas. According to Aristotle, scientific knowledge, or *epistêmê,* consists in certain cognition of an object's essential nature through its causes (Aristotle *Post. An.*I.2, 71b10-15; *Met.*VI.2, 1027a20-35; *EN*.VI.3, 1139b15–35).[27] To possess scientific knowledge of an object is to know the 'why' of it, which consists in comprehending it through necessary demonstration.

For Suchon (as for Aristotle and Aquinas for that matter), this definition of scientific knowledge is not a descriptive account of what human beings typically attain in practice. Instead, it serves as an epistemic ideal, and a largely aspirational one at that. After offering this initial definition of knowledge, Suchon immediately questions its feasibility, noting that it is 'too exacting and difficult' (*TMP*.II.I.2/SW138, translation modified).[28] What she means by this is that it sets too high a standard to be practically applicable in the majority of cases we conventionally describe as 'knowledge'. The reason she states is that 'most things that serve to exercise our minds are known to us by their effects more than by their causes, which are usually so secret and hidden we cannot perceive them, despite our speculations about them' (*TMP*.II.I.2/SW138).[29] Although, in principle, genuine knowledge may indeed be the clear and evident cognition of an object's essential nature through necessary demonstration, in practice, we are not always successful in tracing our demonstrations back to necessary and self-evident principles. Moreover, we cannot always identify all of the proximate causes that follow from these necessary and self-evident principles, which results in incomplete bodies of knowledge.

Describing these non-ideal cases in which we fail to attain demonstrative knowledge, Suchon asserts that 'for most things in the world, especially those that seem wondrous, we can find no other cause than the first and sovereign one that gives them their being. After we relate everything back to this first principle, it is often very difficult to penetrate the secrets of secondary causes' (*TMP*.II.I.2/SW138).[30] In these non-ideal cases, we possess the type of

demonstration that Aquinas would call a demonstration '*quia*', or demonstration *that* a thing is so by reasoning from observed effects to a necessary principle (Aquinas *ST*.I, q. 2, a.2).[31] We do not possess what Aquinas would call a demonstration '*propter quid*' which explains not only *that* a thing is so but also *why* it must be so through its necessary causes (Aquinas *ST*.I, q. 2, a.2; see also Aristotle *Post. An*.I.13). In ordinary cases where we are reasoning only from observed effects, we typically fail to possess knowledge in the strict sense of the term.

Although Suchon concedes that the 'philosophical definition' of knowledge sets too high a standard to be practically attainable in the majority of cases, she does not therefore abandon it. Instead, she goes on to specify the circumstances according to which we could potentially secure demonstrative knowledge. She writes:

> To have certain and assured knowledge, the things known would have to be permanent and immutable; and yet everything under the sun changes continuously. The objects of our understanding are thus uncertain, and we must conclude that our human sciences have more obscurity than certainty; they are more often the daughters of conjecture than of evidence. Consequently, according to this definition, it would be very rare, indeed, to possess certainty in our knowledge. (*TMP*.II.I.2-3/SW138-39)[32]

Suchon's first premise is that in order to have knowledge, where knowledge is defined as certain and evident cognition of an object through its necessary causes, the object of knowledge would need to be stable and unchanging. In other words, immutability and permanence are conditions for knowability. Her second premise is that the objects belonging to the natural world are mutable and impermanent. From here, she draws the conclusion that the objects of our understanding (*connoissances*) are typically uncertain. If immutability and permanence are conditions for knowability, and the natural world is changeable and impermanent, then our understanding of the natural world rarely meets the strictest criteria of scientific knowledge.

According to Suchon's argument, then, knowledge is exceedingly rare, and human attempts at it typically fail to amount to *science* in the technical sense. In Aristotelian terms, we could say that human knowledge is typically 'dialectical' rather than 'demonstrative', at least in practice, although not necessarily in principle (Aristotle *Pr. An*.I.1, 24a22-25; *Post. An*.I.2, 72a9-

10; I.11, 77a26-35). This means that the content of human science is probable and holds true only for the most part, at least so long as we have not yet successfully traced the objects of our inquiry back to self-evident principles.

Although Suchon concedes that her philosophical definition stipulates criteria for knowledge that are rarely met in practice, she does not therefore conclude that knowledge is impossible, nor does she conclude that this definition fails. Instead, she adopts two general strategies to preserve our confidence in the possibility of knowledge and its value in a flourishing human life. One strategy is to defend the possibility of lower forms of knowledge and to affirm their value and utility, while simultaneously conceding that they do not constitute knowledge in the strict sense of the term.[33] The other strategy is to approach the issue from a new perspective, namely the complementary but distinct perspective of faith, and to explain how human beings were created for knowledge such that its pursuit is our characteristic fulfillment.

As a rebuttal to her remarks on the difficulty of obtaining knowledge, Suchon asserts that 'God gave us intelligence to compel us to search for an understanding of things' (*TMP*.II.I.3/SW139).[34] Suchon's assertion that we were created by God to seek understanding does not undermine the 'philosophical' account of knowledge, nor does it suggest that natural reason cannot arrive at demonstrative knowledge in the absence of faith. She remarks, for example, that 'since man is a reasonable being capable of discernment and reflection, it is in his power to grasp all truths that do not go beyond his human nature' (*TMP*.II.I.4/SW140).[35] Although Suchon suggests that natural reason is adequate to grasp all natural truths about the world, nevertheless she contends that these natural truths are not exhaustive of all that can be known. She adds: 'and when the light of faith assists him, his understanding reaches the bosom of God in order to consider His ineffable perfections and the precious works of His grace and love' (*TMP*.II.I.4/SW140).[36] For Suchon, faith complements natural reason by offering access to the ultimate principle and transcendent ground of all natural truths, namely God.

The function of Suchon's second approach to knowledge, which I will describe in the following section, is to respond to the argument that knowledge is exceedingly rare, and to supply confidence in the possibility of knowledge and its value in human life, despite the difficulty of its attainment. If knowledge is rarely attained in practice, as Suchon suggests, then the view that it is the highest aim of a human being may appear relatively weak. Suchon's second account of knowledge emphasizes the value of knowledge for human life by arguing that human beings were created to know and that they have a duty to perfect themselves through knowledge.

III. The Theological Account of Knowledge

If we take Chapter I of the *Treatise on Knowledge* to offer a philosophical account of the nature of knowledge, Chapter II offers a theological one. The first definition offers an account of knowledge from the perspective of natural reason, whereas the second definition offers an account of knowledge from the perspective of faith. Here, Suchon offers an account of knowledge in terms of an Augustinian narrative of the Fall and redemption through grace that complements her Aristotelian account of knowledge offered in the previous chapter. By elaborating on the belief provided by faith that perfect knowledge once existed for human beings, and that it will exist again in its completeness, Suchon challenges potential doubts that her reader might have concerning the possibility of knowledge and its value in human life.

Suchon begins by articulating the rationale for her second definition of knowledge:

> Since among all visible creatures, the human being alone is capable of possessing knowledge, being the proper subject where knowledge can reside and inhabit, it is necessary to give a second definition that expresses the advantages and prerogatives that the human being receives by means of this illustrious quality. (*TMP*.II.II.5)[37]

The rationale for Suchon's definition depends on the Aristotelian notion that the specific difference between human beings and other beings is that human beings possess rationality and the capacity for knowledge. Throughout her account of knowledge, Suchon reconstrues this

differentia in Thomistic terms, namely as that according to which we are made in God's image (*TMP*.II.XX.128-129/SW157; *TMP*.II.XL.264/SW184; see also Aquinas *ST*.I, q. 93, a. 4). Suchon's theological definition of knowledge expresses how this *differentia* distinguishes human beings from other aspects of God's creation. She traces the implications of this specific difference within an Augustinian narrative of the Fall and redemption through grace.

Suchon offers the following four-part definition of knowledge: 'I say then that knowledge is the greatest privilege of the state of innocence, a reparation for our nature that has been wounded by sin, a participation in the intelligence of angels, and the beginning of beatitude' (*TMP*.II.II.5).[38] The first two parts of the definition express the nature of knowledge in relation to the story of the Fall. In the first part, Suchon offers an interpretation of Genesis according to which the first humans possessed perfect knowledge or *science* prior to the Fall, a view that was relatively conventional in her context. As Harrison argues, 'there was an almost universal consensus in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that the progenitor of the human race had enjoyed a greater facility in natural philosophy than any of his descendants' (Harrison 2002: 241).

The second part of Suchon's definition elaborates on the epistemic consequences of the Fall. It offers another view that was relatively common in Suchon's time, namely that the fallen human condition is characterized by the privation of knowledge and the necessity of its pursuit (Harrison 2002). Like many of her seventeenth-century contemporaries, especially Malebranche, Suchon construes the postlapsarian pursuit of knowledge in therapeutic and redemptive terms, where it functions as a means of restoring our original pre-fallen nature. Whereas prelapsarian knowledge was simply a given, postlapsarian knowledge is a moral achievement.

The third part of Suchon's definition situates our humanity on the great chain of being, where we occupy a position beneath the angels but above other creatures within the hierarchy of God's creation. The fourth and final part of the definition expresses the positive role of knowledge, both in our natural flourishing in the life of contemplation and in our ultimate flourishing in the beatific vision. For Suchon, knowledge is constitutive of the happiness we are

able to enjoy in this life, a happiness that prefigures the more complete happiness we can enjoy in the next. I will describe each aspect of the definition in further detail below.

Knowledge as a feature of the state of innocence

The first part of Suchon's definition describes knowledge and contemplation as characteristic of our original human condition. She writes:

> This state of innocence consisted in contemplation, man being endowed with intelligence, knowledge, and wisdom, which put him in possession of all the understanding—both Divine and human—which could contribute to his happiness, without being obliged to acquire it through the work of study. (*TMP*.II.II.6)[39]

Here, Suchon suggests that the first humans possessed comprehensive knowledge and that continuous engagement in contemplation characterized our original human nature prior to the Fall. She adopts the Aristotelian idea that the activity of contemplation is the most complete fulfillment of our human nature but transposes it into a Christian framework where the continuous contemplation of eternal truths was characteristic of our (formerly) complete nature.

For Suchon, the prelapsarian relationship to knowledge differs from the postlapsarian relationship to knowledge insofar as prelapsarian knowledge was systematic and complete, encompassing the categories of intelligence, knowledge, and wisdom discussed above. Whereas for postlapsarian human beings scientific knowledge is not always achieved in practice and serves more as an epistemic ideal, for prelapsarian human beings scientific knowledge was a given that they already possessed.

In her description of prelapsarian knowledge, Suchon places special emphasis on its freedom from the precondition of labor. She writes:

> The difference that can be found between human knowledge in the state of innocence and that which we possess at present consists in that the first demanded no labor, because being natural, man understood all of the things that served the perfection of his mind. But in the state of nature repaired it is not the

> same. Its acquisition is arduous, since it requires long hours, dedication, reflection, and many years to render it complete. (*TMP*.II.II.8)[40]

Whereas prelapsarian knowledge was a given that required no work for its acquisition, postlapsarian knowledge is an onerous achievement that requires painful and meticulous study.

Knowledge as reparation for original sin

The second part of Suchon's theological definition is that knowledge is a 'reparation' (*réparation*) for our wounded nature (*TMP*.II.II.5). Her terms, '*réparation*' and '*réparer*' contain clear moral and juridical meanings, just as the term 'reparations' does today. '*Réparer*' and '*réparation*' refer to the rectification of a past wrong through some form of compensation. For Suchon, the past wrong that requires compensation is original sin. She construes knowledge acquisition as our reparation for that past wrong, and its currency as the arduous labor of learning.[41]

Throughout the *Treatise on Knowledge,* Suchon emphasizes the pain and difficulty of learning, such as in Chapter XXXIX, where she responds to the objection that study is too arduous for women to undertake. She writes, for example, that 'to acquire great knowledge requires great pain, and requires that we increase it every day through the work of the mind, which involves reasoning, study, speculation, reflection, long hours, and other exercises of the soul' (*TMP*.II.XXXIX.257).[42] She frequently connects the pain of learning with our fallenness, writing that 'the conquest of truth in this corruptible and mortal flesh is a very great pain, says the miraculous St. Augustine' (*TMP*.II.XXXIX.255).[43] She associates this painful work with our second fallen nature, citing the Book of Job's claim that 'man [was] born to labor like a bird to fly' (*TMP*.II.XXXIX.257).[44]

By emphasizing pain and toil as characteristic of our fallenness, Suchon is presenting a relatively conventional view. Nevertheless, she offers the following innovation: by emphasizing a specifically *intellectual* type of pain and work, and by suggesting that this intellectual labor is the

toil to which women and men are equally condemned as a result of the Fall, she overshadows the more traditional emphases on the pain of childbirth and submission to male authority to which Genesis condemns women.[45] Instead of emphasizing these gender-specific punishments, Suchon highlights the pain of learning as a universal feature of human fallenness, asserting that 'it is a heritage that is common to all of human nature, both sexes participate equally' (*TMP*.II.XXII.150).[46]

By framing her account of knowledge in terms of the Fall narrative and lending the pursuit of knowledge the moral significance of rectification for original sin, Suchon's approach shares much in common with many other thinkers in her context. As Harrison argues, many seventeenth-century philosophers 'attempt to show how the particular infirmities of the human mind which had resulted from the Fall could be redressed by [their] proposed procedures' (Harrison 2002: 244). As one notable example, Malebranche proposes in *The Search After Truth* (1674-1675) to 'explain how we might conceive the order found in the faculties and passions of our first father in his original state, as well as the changes and disorder that befell him after his sin' (Malebranche 1997: 19).

As Harrison observes, most seventeenth-century proposals for the rectification of fallen knowledge 'were correlated with divergent accounts of exactly what damage was wrought by the Fall' (Harrison 2002: 256). Thinkers such as Malebranche affirm that our faculties were not fundamentally or irreparably damaged by the Fall, writing that 'when we carefully consider man's senses and passions, we find them to be so well suited to the end for which they are given us that we cannot agree with those who say that they are entirely corrupted by Original Sin' (Malebranche 1997: 19; Harrison 2002: 247). Other thinkers, such as Bacon, suggest that our intellectual faculties were more fundamentally corrupted, attributing one source of error to ineradicable idols 'rooted in the very nature of the intellect, which we know to be much more prone to error than the senses' (Bacon 2004: 35; Harrison 2002: 253).

These different assessments of the sources of epistemological error resulted in different proposals for its correction (Harrison 2002: 244). Malebranche, for example, maintained the optimistic goal of reattaining knowledge through the adoption of a Cartesian framework to redirect the mind away from the errors of the senses and toward the order of clear and distinct ideas (Harrison 2002: 247-49). He writes that 'when a man judges all things only according to the mind's pure ideas, when he carefully avoids the noisy confusion of the creatures, and, when entering into himself, he listens to his sovereign Master with his senses and passions silent, it is impossible for him to fall into error' (Malebranche 1997: xxxvii). In contrast to this rationalist approach, experimental philosophers such as Bacon developed methods for slowly and meticulously accumulating instances of natural phenomena in order to correct for the excesses of the vain intellect. Explicitly drawing attention to the Fall narrative in his *Great Instauration* (1620), Bacon expresses hope that his experimental approach will permit knowledge to be 'discharged of the serpent's poison which swells and puffs up the human soul' (Bacon 2004: 23; Harrison 2002: 244, 253).

Suchon's attention to the slow and meticulous labor involved in knowledge acquisition resembles emphases typical of the experimental approach, although her optimism regarding the possibility of perfect science more closely resembles that of the rationalists. Unlike many of her contemporaries, however, Suchon does not ultimately reject the Aristotelian premise that the mind is in harmony with the world or that the senses represent it to us as it really is. Suchon's Aristotelian approach to knowledge, combined with her attention to the epistemic consequences of the Fall, distinguishes her epistemology from that of many other thinkers in her context since, as Harrison observes, 'these therapeutic proposals for the rectification of human knowledge, while they gave rise to somewhat differing prescriptions, contained a common, if at times implicit, repudiation of the methods of Aristotle' (Harrison 2002: 254).

Suchon's Aristotelian approach to knowledge permits her to reframe the rectification of fallen human knowledge in slightly different terms than many of her contemporaries. For

Suchon, the rectification of postlapsarian knowledge is not simply a matter of avoiding the errors of the senses, as it is for Malebranche, or a matter of correcting for the idols of the mind, as it is for Bacon. In other words, the problem does not consist in repairing a damaged (or at the very least altered) relationship between the mind and the world through the imposition of new scientific methods. For Suchon, the problem is instead that knowledge requires an immense amount of labor to acquire, as well as the opportunity to engage in that labor in the first place. Suchon's emphasis on labor thus transforms the rectification of fallen human knowledge into a primarily social and political problem. Its solution requires the reform of existing institutions to provide access to the essentially human labor of learning.

Knowledge as our likeness to angels

Turning to the third part of her theological definition of knowledge, Suchon situates human beings within the hierarchy of God's creation. She adopts a standard account of the great chain of being, according to which God occupies the top of this chain, with angels beneath God, human beings beneath angels, and animals, plants, and minerals beneath human beings. The order of this hierarchy is at once ontological and epistemological. That is, it is organized according to degrees of being and degrees of knowledge. According to this third part of Suchon's theological definition, what it means for us to possess knowledge is to be like angels, who are our immediate ontological and epistemological superiors on this great chain of being.

Suchon describes angels in relation to demons, or fallen angels, writing that 'knowledge is proper to the angelic nature, since the demons still retain knowledge of things, the species of which were imprinted upon them in their creation' (*TMP*.II.II.8).[47] According to Suchon, the pride and will of the demons turned them away from God, while their knowledge remained intact, such that 'they understand perfectly all of the properties of the simple and mixed and they are not ignorant of anything belonging to all of the beings that are in nature' (*TMP*.II.II.8).[48]

Unlike fallen human beings, demons do not experience epistemic consequences as a result of their fall from God. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to address, Suchon's attribution of knowledge to the demons somewhat complicates her association of knowledge and virtue described above.

For Suchon, angels and demons differ only in their 'accidental qualities', while 'in their substantial being, they do not differ at all, which is why they are all learned because they are all spirits' (*TMP*.II.II.9).[49] Insofar as human beings are mixed substances with material bodies and are not 'all spirit', we cannot know everything as easily as angels or demons can. Nevertheless, *when* we know something, we presumably know it in the same way that they do, namely through the clear and evident apprehension of an object through its necessary causes.

This third aspect of Suchon's definition expresses how the possession of knowledge (or the lack thereof) situates us within the hierarchy of God's creation. Moreover, it offers a glimpse of what it might be like to possess knowledge without the precondition of work and to experience a kind of fallenness without epistemic consequences.

Knowledge as the beginning of beatitude

The fourth part of Suchon's theological definition is that knowledge is 'beatitude begun'. Regarding the sense in which the possession of knowledge constitutes the beginning of beatitude, she writes:

> There is no doubt that immortal souls, after having gone forth from their exile in this world, if they reach eternal happiness, will participate in the lights and understanding of the angels. But this does not sufficiently emphasize the great benefits that human beings can derive from knowledge, which in heaven will consist in perfect evidence and consummate beatitude. In this life, it is necessary to anticipate the privileges of these blessed spirits, and to make ourselves in some way resemble them in advance. (*TMP*.II.II.9)[50]

For Suchon, our ultimate happiness consists in the continuous contemplation of the complete knowledge for which we were created by God. We can 'begin' this beatitude here on earth

through the pursuit of knowledge and active engagement with that knowledge in contemplation. By experiencing the happiness belonging to contemplation in this life, we can attain a glimpse of the happiness belonging to the next. We can thus 'anticipate' the ultimate fulfillment of our nature, which consists in immediate knowledge of God in the beatific vision.

To frame her discussion of 'beatitude begun', Suchon mentions a general agreement among philosophers including Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle regarding the superiority and divinity of the contemplative life (*TMP*.II.II.10). She cites Aristotle's two-part definition of happiness, the active and the contemplative life, and Aquinas's view that there is the one happiness begun in this life and another that is 'confirmed in glory' (*TMP*.II.II.10). Considering Aristotle's dual account of the active and contemplative life, Suchon asserts that although both lives are happy in a sense, the happiness belonging to the life of contemplation is the only complete happiness (*TMP*.II.II.10; see also Aristotle *EN*.X.7-8).[51] Although Suchon draws on Aristotle to affirm the contemplative life as the best human life, she departs from his ideas in significant ways, especially in terms of the cosmic significance she lends to the contemplative life. She reconstrues its meaning in terms of an Augustinian narrative of the Fall and salvation through grace.

Suchon uses the term 'beatitude begun' (*beatitude commencée*) to refer to a kind of natural happiness in which we actively anticipate our supernatural happiness. By 'natural beatitude' or happiness, I mean the kind of flourishing we can enjoy in this world whenever we are actively engaged in the philosophical activity of contemplation. When viewed exclusively within a natural register, this natural beatitude conforms roughly to the happiness proper to Aristotelian contemplation. When this natural beatitude is viewed in terms of its additional significance as a prefiguration of our ultimate happiness in the beatific vision, it can be understood as 'beatitude *begun*'.

To describe the philosophical activity that permits us to experience our this-worldly beatitude as the 'beginning' of something more, Suchon introduces a distinction between 'speculation' and 'contemplation'. She writes:

> Speculation makes a philosopher, and contemplation a perfect Christian: by the first, man has a natural beatitude, and by the second, he begins to taste a supernatural beatitude which is the share of the saints and is the reward for their virtue and merit. (*TMP*.II.II.11)[52]

'Speculation' refers to the secular philosophical activity of a mind that understands itself in terms of its naturally given end, whereas 'contemplation proper' refers to the Christian philosophical activity of a mind that understands itself in terms of its supernaturally given end in the beatific vision. In the activity of Christian contemplation, the contemplator understands her happiness on two distinct levels: on one level, she understands it as the completion of her nature in *this world*, and on another level, she understands it as the prefiguration of a more complete happiness belonging to the next.

Suchon describes the relationship between natural and supernatural beatitude in terms of 'participation'. She writes: 'earthly happiness consists principally in the operation of the contemplative sciences, because their exercise is the most noble participation in consummate beatitude' (*TMP*.II.II.10).[53] The sense in which natural beatitude 'participates' in supernatural beatitude is in its prefigurative significance: the happiness belonging to this-worldly contemplation functions as an image of the happiness belonging to the next.

Through the prefigurative significance that Suchon attributes to the contemplative life, we can see an important difference between Suchon and Aristotle's justifications for its superiority. For Aristotle, the contemplative life is the best human life because it is the life in accordance with the highest part of us, namely the intellect (Aristotle *EN*.X.7, 1177a18). The intellect is the highest part of us because it is the part of us that is most authoritative and most divine (Aristotle *EN*.X.7, 1177a15). The best and most complete human life, then, is the life that participates in the divine through the divine-like activity of contemplation. Suchon borrows this

Aristotelian reasoning for the superiority of the contemplative life, but she inserts an additional component insofar as she understands the human being in terms of both natural and supernatural ends. The contemplative life is not simply best because it is the life in accordance with what is highest and most divine in us, but because it prefigures an even better and even more complete happiness to come.

IV. The Feminist Implications of Suchon's Theory of Knowledge

Toward the end of Chapter II on the definition of knowledge, Suchon describes the pertinence of her epistemology to the situation of women. She initially does so through a discussion of the will and the understanding as the 'principal faculties' in a human being (*TMP*.II.II.12). Suchon acknowledges that there has been longstanding debate over whether the activity of the will or the activity of the understanding is most constitutive of human happiness. On account of this disagreement, she remarks that 'the learned are often at pains to decide whether human happiness consists in understanding or in love' (*TMP*.II.II.12).[54] She notes that some privilege the understanding, others privilege the will, and still others take our happiness to consist in some combination of the two (*TMP*.II.II.12).

Suchon concedes that the third possibility is often taken to be the 'most true' because 'the happiness of the saints in heaven will be to know God and to love him' (*TMP*.II.II.12).[55] But even if our happiness is *both* to know God *and* to love him, Suchon still contends that there is a sense in which knowledge takes priority. She thus affirms the first possibility, namely that in favor of the understanding, on the grounds that according to Aquinas, 'what we call beatitude *par excellence*, is the vision of glory and not the life of love' (*TMP*.II.II.12).[56] She associates this 'vision of glory', or the beatific vision, with the faculty of the understanding rather than the will, thus construing the understanding as the faculty most constitutive of our happiness.

Suchon affirms this view in favor of the understanding on additional grounds, namely that 'the eternal truth is the only good that is essential to perfect felicity, which corresponds to the intellectual operation and not to the appetitive action of the will' (*TMP*.II.II.12).[57] If the eternal truth is an essential component of complete happiness—and especially if it is the only true essential, as Suchon suggests that it is—then the activity of the soul that relates us to eternal truth would be that which is most constitutive of our happiness.

Suchon takes this prioritization of the understanding over the will (or knowledge over love) in her conception of human happiness to have important implications for the situation of women. She asserts:

> [It] does much to condemn those who, in order to console persons of the sex for their extreme ignorance, say to them that it suffices to love God, which one can do without having great understanding or particular speculation. (*TMP*.II.II.12)[58]

Suchon's contention is that when women are told by men that devotion rather than knowledge suffices for their flourishing, this deprives women who are disposed to the intellectual life of an important opportunity for spiritual fulfillment, perhaps even the most important one. It is not that Suchon thinks that love is unimportant or mutually exclusive with knowledge (*TMP*.II.XXXVIII), but that women in particular have been systematically denied by men the means to pursue knowledge of God, and that this systematic exclusion unjustly compromises the fulfillment of their divinely imprinted ends.

Suchon goes even further to suggest that men conceal the violence of restricting women's access to knowledge under the pretext that love and devotion are better suited to women's allegedly diminished capacities. If Suchon is correct about the sameness of intellectual capacities shared by men and women (*TMP*.II.XL.264), and the superiority of the contemplative life as the highest exercise of these capacities (*TMP*.II.II.10), then to deprive women of the pursuit of knowledge is to deprive them of their characteristic perfection as human beings. Although Suchon does not think that all women (or all men for that matter) are vocationally disposed to the intellectual life, her contention is that those who are called to it should not be

thwarted in its pursuit. Her argument for women's right to the pursuit of knowledge (and for the violence of its restriction) is grounded on a teleological conception of the human person that is characteristic of Aristotelian and Thomistic thought. By conceptualizing knowledge as a fundamental human need tied to a *telos*, rather than simply, say, as a luxury, Suchon bolsters her case for women's right to its pursuit.

Regarding the roles of knowledge and contemplation in women's spiritual fulfillment, Suchon writes: 'but since the present life must be the beginning of beatitude for predestined souls,' women 'cannot anticipate this happiness except through knowledge which can enable them to know God who is the sovereign object of their felicity' (*TMP*.II.II.12).[59] She concludes: 'it is thus by this luminous quality [knowledge] that they may be made skilled and enlightened, and by this means anticipate the good of the other life' (*TMP*.II.II.12).[60] Suchon's suggestion is that since the happiness of the next life can be best approximated through the activity of contemplation, restricting women's access to knowledge not only compromises their attainment of natural happiness, but also their anticipation of supernatural happiness. To be sure, this does not imply that women who fail to contemplate are barred from salvation, since salvation is ultimately a function of God's grace, and a lack of grace cannot be compensated for simply by study. Nevertheless, restricting women's access to knowledge impedes their efforts to cooperate with grace through reparative learning.

In Suchon's defense of women's pursuit of knowledge and contemplation, it is important to note that she is not simply arguing for women's entitlement to the contemplative monastic life. After all, the monastic life was already an option for women, and the very option from which Suchon fled (Bertolini 2000; Shapiro 2017: 50-1). Instead, Suchon is defending a broader conception of the intellectual life involving the type of knowledge that is acquired through work, specifically the Aristotelian search for causes, and the type of contemplation that engages knowledge acquired through natural means.

Through her emphasis on knowledge acquired through labor, Suchon distinguishes her conception of contemplation from the type of contemplation that requires no work, namely that concerning the 'infused knowledge' (*science infuse*) of mystical revelation. In Chapter III, Suchon defines 'infused knowledge' as a 'gratuitous favor which surpasses the force of our natural powers,' that 'can come only from the liberality of God, to which man can contribute nothing except a simple adherence and voluntary submission' (*TMP*.II.III.14).[61] In Chapter XXXVIII, Suchon describes the infused knowledge of the mystics as God's gift to women who have been denied '*science acquise*', or learning through ordinary means (*TMP*.II.XXXVIII.254-55). She defends women's ability to engage in study, arguing that it is complementary rather than incompatible with this type of devotion (*TMP*.II.XXXVIII.252). Although Suchon commends mystics such as Teresa of Avila and Catherine of Genoa as 'extraordinary' examples of women's capacity for abstract theological knowledge, nevertheless, she does not portray their '*science infuse*' as an alternative to '*science acquise*', or to the type of knowledge that requires work (*TMP*.II.V.34/SW148-49). Regarding ordinary women who have not received God's compensatory gift of infused knowledge, Suchon argues that 'if they do not know the questions treated in the schools, it is simply because they do not have the right to attend them' (*TMP*.II.V.34/SW149).[62]

For Suchon, the labor of knowledge acquisition has intrinsic moral value as reparation for original sin, thus lending importance to the *process* and not simply to the *products* of learning. In Chapter XXII, Suchon emphasizes the violence of preventing women from engaging in the reparative process of study. She writes:

> It is very true that the first man, as the master, having seized all the advantages, found the means to rise up from his degradation, and to heal in some way from this universal wound by means of study, whereas it resides as if incurable in the second sex because all of the paths by which she could deliver herself from it have been taken from her. (*TMP*.II.XXII.150)[63]

Although Suchon contends that the intellectual damage resulting from the Fall is universal, nevertheless, she maintains that women in particular have been systematically disadvantaged in

their ability to recover from this damage due to unjust and (literally) man-made customs and institutions. These include, for example, restricted access to books, colleges, universities, and academies, as well as to other 'palaces of the Muses where minds are enlightened, refined, and attain their highest perfection' (*TMP*.II.XL.265/SW184).[64]

Suchon's emphasis on the intrinsic moral value of the process (and not merely the products) of learning has clear social and political implications involving the reform of existing customs and institutions. In light of her treatment of knowledge, Suchon proposes, for example, that 'women could also have colleges, universities, and academies in which to study languages, rhetoric, philosophy, and other sublime fields of knowledge' (*TMP*.II.XL.266/SW185-86).[65] In addition, she recommends that women engage in 'private study' and 'allot a few hours each day to contemplative thought' (*TMP*.II.XL.267/SW187).[66] She proposes further, that 'persons of the sex who are motivated to study can form societies for themselves to make further progress in the human sciences', adding that 'together, women can reason, develop arguments, debate with one another, and impart what they have learned in private' (*TMP*.II.XL.268/SW187).[67]

In *On the Celibate Life Freely Chosen*, Suchon offers a much more extensive and detailed set of positive proposals for reform. She does so through her defense of a vocational alternative to marriage and the convent, a life of secular celibacy that is free from the dictates of external institutions and in alignment with the demands of our divinely imprinted ends. Through Suchon's concrete proposals to reform existing customs that unjustly relegate women to a subordinate status with respect to men, her epistemology and her feminism are fundamentally intertwined.

V. Conclusion

Throughout this article, I have offered an account of Suchon's definition of knowledge (*science*) and described the role that it plays in her arguments for the equality of men and women.

In her theory of knowledge, Suchon combines an Aristotelian concept of demonstrative science and its role in contemplation with an Augustinian narrative of the Fall and salvation through grace. In doing so, Suchon offers an epistemology that operates on both a philosophical and a theological level. On the philosophical level, knowledge is the clear and distinct apprehension of an object's essential nature through necessary demonstration. In this respect, Suchon's definition of knowledge closely resembles Aristotle's concept of *epistêmê,* or scientific knowledge. Nevertheless, she departs from Aristotle in terms of her conception of the human mind within an Augustinian narrative of original sin. According to Suchon's theological definition of knowledge, *science* was a natural possession of the prelapsarian mind, and the postlapsarian mind is characterized by its privation. The knowledge deficit caused by original sin can be repaired through the arduous process of learning, a process that has the moral connotations of reparation. Once we have acquired knowledge through reparative study, it becomes constitutive of our natural happiness through the reflexive activity of contemplation, a happiness that prefigures the more complete happiness of the beatific vision.

The concept of knowledge plays an important role in Suchon's equality arguments, insofar as the central claim of the *Treatise on Knowledge* is that the capacity for knowledge is a divinely bestowed privilege belonging to all human beings on account of their rational nature, and that the customs restricting women's access to knowledge are a perversion of natural and divine law (*TMP*.II.XL.264). Through an analysis of Suchon's concept of knowledge, we can better grasp the precise content of these claims. That is, we can better understand precisely *what* it is that she thinks women are entitled to when she argues for their right to the pursuit and possession of knowledge.

For Suchon, women's right to the pursuit of knowledge is the right to pursue *science*, or the clear and distinct apprehension of the essential nature of things by means of necessary demonstration. One reason that this type of knowledge is so important, and that its deprivation is so detrimental, has to do with the role of knowledge in contemplation as well as the claim that

contemplative activity constitutes the best human life. Contemplation relates to knowledge insofar as knowledge provides contemplation with its objects. Without knowledge, we cannot contemplate, and without contemplation we cannot enjoy the best, happiest, and most complete human life.

Although Suchon's account of knowledge, contemplation, and the best human life, shares much in common with Aristotle, she departs from him both in terms of her precise account of the contemplative life, and in terms of the consequences she derives from its superiority. For one, Suchon takes the superiority of the contemplative life to extend to all human beings—both men and women. Although this is not a possibility that Aristotle necessarily excludes—at least perhaps not explicitly so—it is not a possibility he thematizes either.

Suchon's originality does not simply consist in extending pre-existing philosophical concepts toward feminist ends, however. Although this is something she certainly does, she also transforms these ideas in original ways. For Suchon, the contemplative life is not simply superior because it is the most authoritative and most divine—most divine, that is, in terms of the activity itself, the part of us that engages in this activity, and the eternal and unchanging objects belonging to that activity. For Suchon, contemplative activity is best for all of these reasons, but additionally because of its prefigurative significance. It is through contemplation that we can best approximate the beatitude belonging to the life to come. Engaging in the activity of contemplation—the activity that is simultaneously the most fully human and the most like the divine—enables us to reinterpret our happiness in this world as a prefiguration of the next. By helping us to conceive of ourselves as beings with supernatural ends beyond our natural ones, and by assisting us in anticipating the fulfillment of those ends, the activity of contemplation transforms our self-understanding. For Suchon, the best and most complete human life is not simply the life that fulfills our rational nature, but the life that assists us in transcending that nature through the attainment of the eternal.

Although contemplation requires knowledge as its precondition, Suchon does not simply construe its value in instrumental terms. Through her emphasis on intellectual labor as a consequence of the Fall, and on arduous study as reparation for original sin, Suchon lends intrinsic moral value to the process of learning. Labor, and specifically *intellectual* labor, becomes our second nature, our first having been fundamentally damaged by the Fall.[68] The labor of learning thus becomes an essentially human task belonging to men and women alike. Through Suchon's emphasis on the intrinsic moral value of intellectual labor, her epistemology offers social and political implications that distinguish her project from other early modern proposals for the rectification and advancement of knowledge. For Suchon, the rectification of fallen human knowledge is less a problem to be solved through the imposition of new methods promising to restore a lost harmony between the mind and the world. Instead, its solution lies in the reform of institutions to permit access to an essentially human task: the reparative labor of learning.

Notes

1. All quotations marked '*TMP*.I/II/III.ch.page' are my own translation from the 1693 edition of the *Treatise on Ethics and Politics*: Gabrielle Suchon [Aristophile]. *Traité de la morale et de la politique divisé en trois parties: sçavoir la liberté, la science, et l'authorité, où l'on voit que les personnes du sexe pour en étre priveés, ne laissant pas d'avoir une capacité naturelle, qui les en peut rendre participantes*. Lyon: Chez B. Vignieu, 1693. All quotations marked 'SWpage' after '*TMP*.I/II/III.ch.page' are from the following English translation: Suchon Gabrielle. 2010. *A Woman Who Defends All the Persons of Her Sex: Selected Philosophical and Moral Writings*. Edited and translated by Domna C. Stanton and Rebecca M. Wilkin. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
2. For a few discussions of Suchon's feminism, see Elsa Dorlin (2001), *L'évidence de l'égalité des sexes: une philosophie oubliée du XVIIe siècle*, Véronique Desnain (2012), "Gabrielle Suchon: Militant Philosophy in Seventeenth-Century France," and Charlotte Sabourin (2017), "Plaider l'égalité pour mieux la dépasser: Gabrielle Suchon et l'élévation des femmes."
3. I thank an anonymous referee for suggesting this reformulation of the central claim.
4. I thank an anonymous referee for drawing my attention to this point.

5. I thank an anonymous referee for drawing my attention to this point regarding the importance of reparation and labor in Suchon's account.
6. Michèle Le Doeuff also discusses Gabrielle Suchon on knowledge in *Le Sexe du Savoir* (1998) and "Women in Dialogue and in Solitude" (2005), although her focus is less on Suchon's epistemology as such, and more on Suchon's attention to the exclusion of women in their capacity as knowers.
7. Suchon's discussion of ignorance as the cause of vice occurs primarily in *TMP*.II.XXII-XXXV. Her discussion of knowledge as a source of virtue occurs primarily in *TMP*.II.VIII-XII where she argues that knowledge assists the understanding, memory, will, and heart.
8. Suchon's treatment of the relationship between knowledge and supernatural happiness occurs throughout the *Treatise on Knowledge* but especially in Chapters II and V.
9. All references to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* are marked '*EN*.book.chapter, Bekker Number.'
10. All references to Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* are marked '*ST*.part, question, article.'
11. For Suchon, just as for Aristotle, knowledge is related to contemplation although it is not precisely the same. For Aristotle, contemplation is not the pursuit of knowledge, but reflexive engagement with the knowledge (*epistêmê*) one already possesses.
12. 'Il faudroit être privé de raison pour la disputer aux Personnes du beau Sexe ; puisque c'est elle qui établit leur perfection, aussi-bien que celle des hommes.'
13. 'les moindres creatures sont destinées à des usages particuliers & à des fins pour lesquelles elles sont propres.'
14. 'Comme j'ay assez prouvé en tout cét Ouvrage que cette privation n'est ni de droit Divin, ni de droit naturel, mais seulement de l'institution & du vouloir des hommes : il reste à conclure, que l'ignorance du second Sexe n'a point de plus grande cause que l'impérieuse domination du premier.'
15. According to Aquinas, an 'eternal law' is God's reason he himself perceives it (*ST*.I-II, q. 91, a. 1). A 'divine law' is a derivation of eternal law through Scripture, revelation, and prophesy (*ST*.I-II, q. 91, a. 4-5). 'Human laws' are laws produced by reason to serve a particular human community (*ST*.I-II, q. 91, a. 3). 'Natural law' is a rational creature's 'participation in the eternal law' through actions in conformity with their divinely imprinted ends (*ST*.I-II, q. 91, a. 2; Aquinas 2000: 9).
16. 'De sorte que l'injustice que l'on fait aux personnes du Sexe n'est pas un droit stable & permanent, dont les hommes se puissent prévaloir contre elles.' Throughout the *Treatise*, Suchon uses the term 'persons of the sex' to refer to women.

17. For a discussion of the positive and militant goals of Suchon's work, see Desnain (2012). For discussions of Suchon's positive proposals for overcoming the detrimental effects that existing customs have on women, see also Sabourin (2017: 226-31), Wilkin (2019: 244-48), and Walsh (2019: 699-705).
18. All references to *On the Celibate Life Freely Chosen or Life Without Commitments* are from the Stanton and Wilkin translation (2010) and are labeled '*CV*.book.chapter' followed by 'SWpage.'
19. For a few helpful discussions of Suchon's conception of the neutralist life, see Shapiro (2017: 54-7); Sabourin (2017: 226-31); Wilkin (2019: 244-48); and Walsh (2019: 699-705).
20. I thank an anonymous referee for drawing my attention to this connection.
21. 'Encore que le terme de sagesse s'entende ordinairement de ce Don du saint Esprit qui rend les hommes éclairez dans la connoissance des chose Divines & Celestes, & qu'il se prenne souvent pour ces veües & penétrations transcendantes & metaphisiques, qui surpassent les sens & le commerce des choses sensibles : il ne laisse pas néanmoins d'être propre à la Science que nous tâchons d'acquerir par le travail & par l'étude.'
22. 'Par l'intelligence ils sont instruits de ces premieres notions, qui sans beaucoup de raisonnement leur font connoître les veritez simples & naturelles.'
23. 'Par la science ils passent plus avant ; car ils penétrent dans les causes, recherchent les effets, & portent le flambeau de la raison dans tout ce qu'il y a de plus caché & de plus secret dans l'essence & dans la nature des êtres.'
24. 'par la sagesse ils sont en possession de toutes les connoissances, tant Divines qu'humaines, qui ne surpassent point leur capacité.'
25. 'Mais comme ce raisonnement est trop universel.'
26. 'la science n'est autre chose q'une connoissance évidente & certaine des choses par leurs causes propres & particulieres.'
27. Aristotle's account of *epistêmê* can be found in *Post. An.*I.2, 71b10-15: 'We think we understand a thing *simpliciter* (and not in the sophistic fashion accidentally) whenever we think we are aware both that the explanation because of which the object is is its explanation, and that it is not possible for this to be otherwise. It is clear, then, that to understand is something of this sort; for both those who do not understand and those who do understand—the former think they are themselves in such a state, and those who do understand actually are. Hence that of which there is understanding *simpliciter* cannot be otherwise.' See also *Meta.*VI.2, 1027a20-35 for the view that science deals with what is 'always' or 'for the most part', but not with what is 'accidental'. For an account of *epistêmê* as an intellectual virtue, see *EN*.VI.3, 1139b15–35: 'Now, what *knowledge* is, if we are to speak exactly and not follow mere similarities, is plain from what follows. We all

suppose that what we know is not capable of being otherwise; of things capable of being otherwise we do not know, when they have passed outside our observation, whether they exist or not. Therefore the object of knowledge is of necessity. Therefore it is eternal; for things that are of necessity in the unqualified sense are all eternal. . . Knowledge, then, is a state of capacity to demonstrate, and has the other limiting characteristics which we specify in the *Analytics*; for it is when a man believes in a certain way and the principles are known to him that he has knowledge, since if they are not better known to him than the conclusion, he will have his knowledge only incidentally.' All quotations from and references to Aristotle are from 1984. *The Complete Works,* 2 Volumes. Edited by Jonathan Barnes. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

28. 'trop exacte & difficile.'

29. 'la plûpart des choses qui servent à exercer nos esprits, nous sont plus connuës par leurs effets que par leurs causes, qui sont d'ordinaire si secrettes & cachées, que toutes nos speculations ne les peuvent appercevoir.'

30. 'parce que dans la plus grande partie des choses qui sont dans le monde, & sur tout de celles qui nous paroissent les plus admirables, nous n'y pouvons trouver d'autre cause que cette premiere & souveraine qui leur donne l'être, & aprés que nous avons tout rapporté à ce premier principe, il est souvent trés-mal-aisé de penétrer les secrets des causes secondes.'

31. For Aquinas, examples of this type of demonstration include demonstrations of God's existence.

32. 'Pour en avoir de certaines & d'assurées, il faudroit que les chose connuës fussent immuables & permanentes; & cependant tout ce qui est sous le Ciel est changeant : de sorte que les objets de nos connoissances étant incertains, nous pouvons conclure que toutes nos sciences ont plus d'obscurité que de certitude, elles sont plus souvent filles de la conjecture que de l'évidence ; & par conséquent selon cette definition il seroit trés rare de pouvoir posséder cette belle qualité de la science.'

33. Suchon does this, for example, in *TMP*.II.XVIII on 'Experimental Knowledge'. To the best of my knowledge, there has been no scholarly treatment of Suchon's concept of experience or experimental knowledge. Since this paper deals only with Suchon's concept of *science*, it is beyond the scope of this paper to treat Suchon's concept of experience (*experience*), since she does not consider experimental knowledge to be a genuine form of *science*. Nevertheless, an inquiry into Suchon's concept of experimental knowledge would be essential to a further reconstruction of Suchon's general epistemology.

34. 'Dieu nous a donné l'intelligence afin de nous obliger à rechercher la connoissance des choses.'
35. 'Car l'homme étant un être raisonnable capable de discernement & de reflexion, il est en son pouvoir de connoître toutes les veritez qui ne sont point supérieures à la nature humaine.'
36. '& quand il est secouru des lumieres de la Foy, il porte sa connoissance jusques dans le sein de Dieu, pour y considérer ses perfections inéfables, & les pretieux ouvrages de sa grace & de son amour.'
37. 'Puis qu'entre toutes les creatures visibles l'homme seul est capable de posseder la science, comme étant le propre sujet où elle peut resider & faire sa demeure: il est necessaire de lui donner encore une seconde definition, qui exprime les advantages & les prérogatives qu'il reçoit par le moyen de cette illustre qualité.'
38. 'Je dis donc que la science est le plus grand privilege de l'état d'innocence, que c'est une reparation de la nature blessée par la peché, une participation de l'intelligence des Anges, & une beatitude commencée.'
39. 'Cét état d'innocence consistoit en la contemplation, l'homme étant doüé d'intelligence, de science, & d'une sagesse qui le mettoit en possession de toutes les connoissances tant divines qu'humaines qui pouvoient contribuer à sa felicité ; sans être obligé de les acquerir par le travail de l'étude.'
40. 'La difference qui se trouve entre la science de l'homme dans l'état d'innocence & celle qu'il possede à present, consiste en ce que la premiere ne lui coutoit aucun travail, parce qu'étant naturelle il connoissoit toutes les choses qui servoient à la perfection de son esprit ; mais dans l'état de la nature reparée cela n'est pas de même, son acquisition étant trés-penible, puisqu'il faut des veilles, des assiduitez, des reflexions continuelles & de longues années pour s'y rendre parfait.'
41. I thank an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this point.
42. 'Pour acquerir une grande science, il se faut donner une grande peine, & l'augmenter tous les jours par le travail de l'esprit, qui n'est autre que le raisonnement, l'étude, la spéculation, les reflexions, les veilles & les autres exercises de l'ame.'
43. 'La conquête de la verité en cette chair corruptible & mortelle est d'une trés-grande peine, dit le miraculeux saint Augustin.'
44. 'l'homme étant né pour travailler comme l'oiseau pour voler.'
45. I thank an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to the point about the pain of childbirth.

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46. 'C'est un heritage qui est commun à toute la nature humaine, les deux Sexes y participent également.'
47. 'la science est propre à la nature Angelique, puisque les Demons retiennent encore la connoissance des choses, dont les especes leur ont éte imprimées en leur creation.'
48. 'C'est ce qui fait qu'ils connoissent partaitement toutes les propriétez des simples & des mixtes, & qu'ils n'ignorent aucune chose de tous les êtres qui sont dans la nature.'
49. 'La difference qui se trouve entre les Anges bien-heureux & les prévaricateurs n'est que pour les qualitez accidentelles . . . mais pour leur être substantiel il ne differe en rien, c'est pourquoy ils sont tous sçavans, parce qu'ils sont tous esprits.'
50. 'Il n'y a point de doute que les ames immortelles aprés être sorties de l'exil de ce monde, si elles parviennent à l'êternelle felicité, seront participantes des lumieres & des connoissances des Anges. Mais ce n'est pas porter assez avant les grands biens que les hommes peuvent tirer de la science, laquelle sera dans le Ciel une évidence parfaite & une beatitude consommée: il faut anticiper dés cette vie les privileges de ces bien-heureux esprits, & se rendre par avance en quelque maniére semblables à eux.'
51. Aristotle's argument for the superiority of the contemplative life occurs primarily in *EN*.X.7-8. He proposes that 'if happiness is activity in accordance with excellence, it is reasonable that it should be in accordance with the highest excellence' (*EN*.X.7, 1177a13). The highest excellence is 'highest' in the sense that it is of the 'best thing in us' (*EN*.X.7, 1177a14). He concludes that 'the life according to intellect is best and pleasantest, since intellect more than anything else *is* man. This life therefore is also the happiest' (*EN*.X.7, 1178b7-8). Aristotle offers a further argument for the superiority of the contemplative life on the grounds that the intellect is our 'natural ruler and guide' and that it is either 'divine or the only the most divine element in us' (*EN*.X.7, 1177a15-6).
52. 'La spéculation fait un Philosophe, & la contemplation un parfait Chrétien, par la premiere l'homme a une beatitude naturelle & par la seconde il commence de goutter une beatitude surnaturelle qui est le partage des Saints & la recompense de leurs vertus & de leur merite.'
53. 'Cette félicité d'ici-bas consiste principalement dans l'operation des sciences contemplatives; parce que leur exercice est la plus noble participation de la beatitude consommée.'
54. 'les sçavans sont souvent en peine pour decider si son bonheur consiste en la connoissance ou en l'amour.'
55. 'l'opinion des derniers doit être estimée la plus veritable ; puisque c'est une chose constante que la felicité des Saints dans le Ciel sera de connoître Dieu & de l'aimer.'
56. 'la beatitude est appellée par excellence la vision de la gloire & non pas la vie amoureuse.'

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57. 'parce que la verité eternelle est le seul bien essentiel de la parfaite felicité, qui correspond à l'operation intellectuelle, & non pas à l'action appétitive de la volonté.'
58. 'Le sentiment de ce rare esprit sert beaucoup à condamner ceux qui pour consoler les personnes du Sexe de leur extrême ignorance leur disent qu'il suffit d'aimer Dieu, ce que l'on peut faire sans avoir de grandes connoissances ni une speculation bien particuliere.'
59. 'Mais puisque la vie presente doit être un commencement de beatitude aux ames predestinées ; elles ne sçauroieut prevenir ce bonheur que par la science qui leur peut faire connoître Dieu qui est le Souverain objet de leur felicité.'
60. 'c'est donc par cette qualité lumineuse qu'elles se peuvent rendre habilles & éclairées ; & par ce moyen anticiper les biens de l'autre vie.'
61. 'il faut observer qu'il y a une science infuse, qui ne peut venir que la libéralité de Dieu, sans que l'homme de sa part y contribuë aucune chose, qu'une simple adherence & soumission volontaire, parce que c'est une faveur gratuite qui surpasse la force de ses puissances naturelles.'
62. 'Que si elles ne sçavent pas les questions qui se traitent dans les Ecoles, c'est qu'on ne leur donne pas le pouvoir de les frequenter.'
63. 'il est bien vray que le premier homme, comme le maître, s'étant emparé de tous les avantages, a trouvé le moyen de se relever de son abaissement, & de guerir en quelque façon cette playe universelle par le moyen de l'étude : pendant qu'elle demeure comme incurable dans le second Sexe, à cause qu'on lui ôte toutes les voyes par lesquelles il s'en pouroit délivrer.'
64. 'Palais des Muses, où les esprits s'éclairent, se rafinent & acquerent leur derniere perfection.'
65. 'elles pourroient bien avoir des Coléges, des Universitez & des Academies pour étudier les Langues, la Rethorique, la Philosophie & les autres Sciences sublimes.'
66. 'De destiner tous les jours quelques heures pour employer à la spéculation.'
67. 'Pour s'avancer davantage dans les sciences, les personnes du Sexe qui sont portées à l'étude, aprés s'être addonnées à celles qui sont solitaires & particuliéres, elles peuvent se former des societez ; afin qu'étant plusieurs ensembles elles raisonnent, argumentent, & disputent les unes avec les autres, & se communiquent ce qu'elles auront appris dans le secret.'
68. I thank an anonymous referee for drawing my attention to this point.

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