

'Naturalness,' Gender Equality and
Women's Education in the Works of
Poulain de la Barre and van Schurman

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Abstract

In this paper, I utilise a feminist perspective to evaluate the arguments for the equality of the sexes put forward by seventeenth-century writers Francois Poulain de la Barre and Anna Maria van Schurman. I argue that Poulain de la Barre's and van Schurman's appeals to women's 'natural' dispositions and behaviours weaken their arguments for the equality of the sexes. I discuss the tension in Poulain's *A Physical and Moral Discourse concerning the Equality of Both Sexes* between notions of naturalness and social construction, and demonstrate how his affirmation of 'natural' distinctions between men and women significantly opposes his alternate method and weakens his conclusion. I then analyse van Schurman's *A Dis-*

sertation on the Natural Capacity of Women for Study and Learning, in which she uses supposed natural dispositions and attributes of women to advance her argument. I conclude that despite their instrumental usefulness in her arguments, van Schurman's usage of damaging and sexist stereotypes of women undermines even her limited conclusion that women should be allowed to study, as well as the greater project of female equality. The intent of this paper is certainly not to discount these authors' important and radical contributions to the furthering of women's interests in the time in which they lived; however, I will conclude that their use of particular naturalness-based evidence and stereotypes means they cannot be considered feminists.

1 Introduction

Seventeenth-century thinkers Francois Poulain de la Barre and Anna Maria van Schurman radically challenged the taken-for-granted societal belief that women were inherently inferior to men, unfit for education and undeserving of political rights. In this paper, how-

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ever, I will criticise their arguments through a modern feminist lens¹; I will argue that Poulain's and van Schurman's appeals to women's 'natural' dispositions and behaviours weaken their arguments for the equality of the sexes. First, I will discuss the tension in Poulain's *A Physical and Moral Discourse concerning the Equality of Both Sexes* between notions of naturalness and social construction, and demonstrate how his affirmation of 'natural' distinctions between men and women significantly opposes his alternate method and weakens his conclusion. I will consider possible explanations that would enable the coexistence of both strategies within his argument, and argue that they do not sufficiently resolve the tension. I will then turn to van Schurman's *A Dissertation on the Natural Capacity of Women for Study and Learning*, analysing her use of supposed natural dispositions and attributes of women to advance her argument. I will argue that they uphold damaging and sexist stereotypes of women and therefore undermine even her limited conclusion that women should be allowed to study, as well as the greater project of female equality. I will consider objections to my interpretation of van Schurman's reasons why her inclusion of evidence based on natural or inherent characteristics might be viewed as particularly effective and necessary and I will argue that these reasons are not strong enough to

¹ I do, however, leave unchallenged their usage of the term 'sex' to signify a dichotomy between women and men. In gender studies, 'sex' usually denotes only the biological differences between male and female anatomy, whereas 'gender' refers to the socially constructed, performed categories of 'woman' and 'man' (and other categories; gender is not a binary distinction). For the purposes of this paper, however, I use the term 'sex' as it was used in seventeenth-century Europe: to differentiate between 'women' and 'men'.

outweigh the negative political and cultural consequences of including such evidence. I will conclude with a discussion of both authors together, analysing their contributions in a political and social context.

The intent of this paper is certainly not to discount these authors' important and radical contributions to the furthering of women's interests in the time in which they lived; however, I will conclude that their use of particular naturalness-based evidence and stereotypes means they cannot be considered feminists. I believe this sort of analysis is important, as the consideration of cultural context should not be co-opted as an 'exemption' from feminist critiques or from philosophical exposition of an argument's inconsistencies. Rather, a nuanced understanding of historical philosophical works necessitates the intersection of history, logic, and modern sociological theory.

2 Poulain de la Barre

A. Tension in Poulain's work

In *A Physical and Moral Discourse concerning the Equality of Both Sexes*, published in 1673, Poulain argues that men and women possess equal intelligence and capabilities, and that the recognition of this equality would justify granting women access to education. He argues that the best way of "rescuing women from the idleness to which they have been reduced" is to "encourage them to study by

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informing them that they are as competent to do so as men" (121). A significant tension pervades Poulain's piece, however, between his recognition of supposed natural distinctions between men and women and his assertions that gender roles (and nearly all supposed differences between male and female minds) are socially constructed, even though both tactics are used to support a favourable view of women and the same conclusion concerning female education.

Poulain, ahead of his time, introduces social constructionist ideas into his theory. He believes that much of what we conceive as 'natural' is actually the result of custom and socialisation. He suggests that even aptitudes for specific fields of study are not 'natural' but rather shaped by necessity or circumstance (161). Likewise, he believes that all human minds have the same capacity for intelligence and knowledgechallenging the modern notion of IQ (158). These are controversial claims that resist the notion of naturalness in its most widely accepted forms. We commonly believe that whatever reflects our current society is natural or inevitable; Poulain argues that this phenomenon can explain many of the misguided attacks on women in his day. He suggests that if women held all positions of authority, everyone would believe men were put on the earth for the benefit of women (the opposite of the existing belief), highlighting the socially constructed nature of beliefs in gender difference (149). Poulain is adamant that the mind does not have a sex (157).

Despite all of this, Poulain includes many mentions of traits and dispositions that are 'natural' to females, seemingly contradicting

the previous assertions. He uses the descriptions of these natural tendencies to demonstrate how women are actually superior to men in many respects. Poulain asserts that women succeed in the art of persuasion “naturally” better than men (163); they have a “more refined temperament” (168); they have a natural intelligence that makes them better learners (175); they have a naturally superior imagination and memory because their brains easily take in impressions from the outside world (179). Although these claims are favourable toward women, they weaken his argument by invalidating his social constructionist claims, which form the strongest basis for his arguments for equality and equal educational opportunity. Poulain cannot validly conclude both that the mind has no sex and that women’s minds fundamentally differ from men’s.

B. Consideration of objections

Attempts can be made to rescue Poulain’s argument from the damaging effects of this contradiction. It could be argued that because Poulain’s use of the word ‘equal’ does not mean ‘the same,’ the contradiction is mitigated. He uses the premise that women have superior imagination and memory due to innate differences in brain activity to prove the conclusion that men and women are equal with respect to the mind (180). Surely, this inconsistency would not have escaped his attention, so it is legitimate to question what he means by ‘equal’ and if there could be implied premises left out of the argument. Perhaps men have other characteristic advantages due to

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their brains, which he assumes his audience to know already. Since it was usually argued that women's minds were naturally inferior, perhaps he felt he only needed to include evidence of female advantages. By 'equal,' then, he could mean that the capacities unique to each sex balance each other out. This suggestion can be refuted, however, with Poulain's claim that the brain anatomy of males and females is identical (158). It certainly does not settle the tension.

Another attempt can be made to salvage Poulain's argument by drawing a distinction between bodily characteristics and characteristics of the intelligent, rational mind. Perhaps men and women differ with respect to one of these two domains, and are identical with respect to the other, and this could explain Poulain's seemingly contradictory statements. Choosing either one, however, leads to a contradiction with another statement of Poulain's. In different parts of his paper, Poulain asserts both that the brains (158) and the minds (180) of males and females are identical. Thus, this line of thought does not satisfactorily resolve the tension, either.

Ultimately, Poulain's use of naturalness-based evidence comes into conflict with his otherwise strong social constructionist argument that "we are full of prejudices," and "it is necessary to get rid of them completely in order to acquire clear and distinct knowledge" (119). By utilising his own experiential, 'natural' evidence, Poulain reveals that he himself has not fully committed to this social constructionist perspective. In addition, his use of adjectives like 'refined' to describe women still perpetuates sexist stereotypes, albeit

with a positive spin. Most importantly, he continues the trend of using evidence based on observed natural dispositions of women that are different from men's—a method used primarily to argue against female equality. In so doing, he pivots the argument toward an ineffective debate pitting one set of experiences against another (for example, the extent of women's intelligence, which Poulain argues is great and his opponents argue is limited). Though this could be a worthwhile strategy for another paper, its presence in Poulain's significantly diminishes the impact of the social constructionist perspective, which urges us to question and discount our experiential prejudices.

3 Van Schurman

A. Van Schurman's antifeminist claims

Anna Maria van Schurman's *A Dissertation on the Natural Capacity of Women for Study and Learning*, published in 1641, attempts to answer affirmatively the "moral question: is the study of letters appropriate for a Christian woman?" (79). Her goal is far narrower than Poulain's; her aim is certainly not to prove that the mind has no sex or even that men's and women's capabilities are the same. Through a series of numbered logical arguments, including counter-arguments to opponents' claims, she merely aims to prove that it is appropriate for Christian women to be educated. Within these

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arguments, van Schurman affirms perceived natural attributes of women, many of which are negative and degrading. Several of these assertions affirm the fragile nature of women; she asserts that “the honour of the female sex is very fragile” (87) and that women, “because of the feebleness or fickleness of their native intelligence or temperament” are “in danger of vanity” (84). She also belittles female intelligence, agreeing with her opponents that “a woman’s natural ability is less able” (91). Additionally, van Schurman lends support to societal definitions of and expectations for women, many of which are justified by supposed natural dispositions. She qualifies her advocacy of female education, granting that she does “not recommend as strongly those studies that pertain to the practice of law, to military affairs, or to the art of public speaking in a temple, court, or academy, because they are less appropriate or necessary” (81). This statement reveals her opinion that women should only fill a certain societal role - “keepers of the home” (85) - and that education must have instrumental value to a student’s practical life to be deemed “appropriate.” Van Schurman also states without criticism that women “are never allowed, I say, to recover our good reputation once it begins to be tarnished by blemishes that cling to us from unwelcome suspicions,” so “it is surely incumbent on girls not only to avoid evils when they encounter them but to anticipate them even before that happens” (*Correspondence* 100-101). Instead of challenging society’s unfair, lasting judgments of women, she places the blame and the responsibility on women themselves to keep up a good reputation, which entails adhering to societally dictated norms and expectations. Her assent to societal sexism in statements such as

these complements her affirmations of natural female dispositions. Like Poulain's, however, some of van Schurman's arguments seem to support the idea that pervasive societal influence or custom impacts common views of women in negative ways, somewhat contradicting her other statements. In one argument, she states that "it is impossible to draw any valid conclusion about our inclination to study without encouraging us to embark on studies by the best means and reasons available" (92), and that those who would argue against women's inclination to study do so "from custom alone, since women very rarely apply their minds to study" (91). This, more than any of her other statements, relies on a social constructionist view: one cannot make judgments about natural inclinations and behaviours of women when women are denied every opportunity to act upon whatever inclinations may be present. In other words, our perceptions of natural behaviour are influenced by societal constraints. This argument criticises the use of natural dispositions as a tool for argumentation, and therefore calls into question many of her previous premises. It is unclear how she can claim women to be 'fragile' and 'fickle' and possessing less 'natural ability' when she also seems to acknowledge that women are regularly denied the opportunity to assert strength or intelligence. Perhaps van Schurman is simply subject to the same prejudices as her opponents, or perhaps there is something purposeful about the inclusion of negative natural female characteristics. The latter suggestion forms the basis for the strongest objection to my interpretation.

B. Consideration of objections

It could be argued that van Schurman's use of the concept of naturalness is actually a purposeful co-optation of the language and beliefs of her opponents to refute the opponents' own arguments, which is arguably the most effective way to challenge them. Van Schurman agrees that "a woman's natural ability is less able" (91), but she uses this statement to cleverly refute a common argument of opponents by using its key premise to achieve the opposite end. The opponent's argument is that "the study of letters is not appropriate for anyone whose natural ability is weaker. But a woman's natural ability is weaker. Therefore, the study of letters is not appropriate for women" (90). Van Schurman does not deny the second premise, but rather challenges the first, asserting that actually, "the study of letters is most appropriate for those whose natural ability is less able," because "the means and supports by which such deficiencies may be corrected are most suitable for those who are provided with fewer natural gifts" (91). This response is arguably much stronger considering the context in which she was writing than if she had argued women to have equal intelligence as men; this response seems more likely to influence an opponent, whereas a critique of the second claim would surely fall on deaf ears. The same argument can be applied to the entirety of van Schurman's paper. Her argument for women's education could be all the more compelling *because* she agrees with her opponents in many respects.

This suggestion is not incorrect, but by perpetuating the most sexist,

pervasive stereotypes of women based on their ‘natural’ behaviours and dispositions, van Schurman significantly limits the impact her work could make. Even within the limited scope of her own paper, her overwhelming inclusion of traditional stereotypes of women weakens her conclusion. Her affirmation that natural female characteristics of fragility and unintelligence exist only reinforces her assent to the societally dictated role for women. Even though she argues that women should be educated, she does not push the point very far, agreeing that some types of education are unnecessary because they are irrelevant to a woman’s life and duties, and that married women should not study (*Correspondence* 95). Her conclusion excludes the majority of women, then, and it certainly does nothing to challenge patriarchal beliefs of female inferiority. The suggestion that she does this purposefully, ‘playing the game’ to maintain high readership and respect, is refuted by van Schurman’s autobiography *Eukleria*, published late in her life. In this text, she essentially withdraws all of her previous work, apologising for the “shameful frailty of [her] mind” and her “worldly or vain mentality” (112).

4 Conclusion: Poulain and van Schurman

Poulain and van Schurman were radical for their time. Simply arguing for women’s access to education, and in Poulain’s case, the complete intellectual and biological equality of men and women, was an utter rejection of the common opinion. Merely by being a well-known female writer, van Schurman broke stereotypes of her sex

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and challenged patriarchal power. When evaluating van Schurman's piece, it is also important to recognise that it would have been far more difficult for a woman to publish a piece as strongly worded and radical as Poulain's. Neither of them, however, is free from sexist assumptions rooted in beliefs about naturalness, and for this reason, neither of them can be called feminist. Both authors' works would have been more compelling and significant to the advancement of gender equality without the inclusion of evidence based on observed 'natural' traits of women.

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