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Gabrielle Suchon on the Desire for Knowledge, Habit, and Women's Solidarity

In her *Treatise on Ethics and Politics* [*Traité de la morale et de la politique*] Gabrielle Suchon argues that women have been deprived of fully realizing their nature as human beings. Women are constrained and so deprived of their natural freedom; women are kept in ignorance and so deprived of their natural capacity for knowledge; and women are legally dependent on others and so deprived of their natural political authority. This paper focuses on Suchon's account of knowledge and ignorance.

On the face of it, Suchon's account of knowledge seems to downplay to role of emotion in our epistemic pursuits. She begins by defining knowledge "along with the logicians" as "nothing other than certain and evident understanding of the individual and particular causes of things" (TEP 2.1; SW 238). However, she also recognizes that women content not to have knowledge – that is, to remain in a state of ignorance – not only exhibit vices like vanity and greed but also envy through which they "are always ready to cut down those who strive to rise up from grimy ignorance and stupidity" (TEP 2.Forward; SW 135). Why should a lack of understanding of causes of things be correlated with vicious and anti-social behaviour? Why should being content to rest ignorant lead to women undermining one another? Or conversely, why should an effort to understand causes contribute not only to virtue but to social solidarity?

In this paper, I aim to address these questions. I first show that for Suchon, knowledge involves not simply an apprehension of causes, but also a recognition of a causal order that emanates from the divine. The pursuit of knowledge thus brings us closer to God. It also, according to Suchon, "gives us rules for practice" (TEP 2.7; SW 152), facilitating the cultivation of the passions and the habits requisite for virtue. I suggest that Suchon's tripartite distinction of freedom as freedom of the mind, freedom of the heart, and freedom of conscience can help us to understand how the desire for knowledge, and to be closer to the divine, facilitates the regulation of the passions, and the cultivation of virtue, and ultimately solidarity with other women who are aiming to shake off the yoke of ignorance.