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From Nobility and Excellence to Generosity and Rights:

Sophia's Defenses of Women (1739–40)

Abstract: This paper examines two early modern feminist works, *Woman Not Inferior to Man* (1739) and *Woman's Superior Excellence Over Man* (1740), written by "Sophia, A Person of Quality." Scholars once dismissed these texts as plagiarisms or semi-translations of François Poulain de la Barre's *De l'égalité des deux sexes* (1673). More recently, however, Guyonne Leduc (2010, 2012, 2015) has drawn attention to the original aspects of these treatises by highlighting Sophia's significant variations on Poulain's vocabulary. In this paper, I take Leduc's analysis a step further by demonstrating that Sophia's variations amount to unique and distinctive arguments for the restoration of women's rights, based on both the natural equality and the moral superiority of women compared to men. I argue that Sophia goes beyond Poulain's Cartesian insights to mount a critique of male tyranny characterized as a lack of generosity toward women. My contention is that Sophia's texts represent a culmination in a line of reasoning that extends from the *querelle des femmes* of the Renaissance to Poulain's Cartesian feminism of the seventeenth century, through to arguments for women's rights in the eighteenth century. Her works thus warrant greater recognition as significant turning points in the history of feminist thought.

In 1739, a woman known only as "Sophia, A Person of Quality" published a short treatise titled *Woman Not Inferior to Man*, with the pertinent subtitle "A Short and Modest Vindication of the Natural Right of the Fair-Sex to a Perfect Equality of Power, Dignity, and Esteem, with the Men."¹ This work was once thought to be an English translation of François Poulain de la Barre's *De l'égalité des deux sexes* [*On the Equality of the Two Sexes*] (1673). But scholars now agree that although Sophia may have borrowed from several passages in Poulain's work, her treatise is more of a "free adaptation" of the 1677 English translation of *Égalité*, with a language and tone all of its own (O'Brien 2009, 17). There are, in fact, a number of salient differences between Sophia's text

and its copy source—differences that go beyond the inclusion of eighteenth-century English examples and literary quotations. In her recent analyses, Guyonne Leduc (2010, 2012, 2015) highlights Sophia’s variations on Poulain’s vocabulary, noting in particular Sophia’s use of the terms *generous* (for women) and *ungenerous* (for men), and the political language of *tyranny* and *usurpation*. Leduc suggests that with this “lexical variety,” Sophia takes a more strident feminist stance than Poulain (2015, 21, 30, 32); she differs from Poulain by using forceful and emphatic expressions, and by conveying a highly negative opinion of men in general. Nevertheless, despite these deviations, Leduc maintains that Sophia “does not take up his subversive political idea of natural right, of natural equality” in her text (Leduc 2015, 34; see also 2012, 111–12; 2010, 423). In this paper, I argue that Sophia’s variations on Poulain’s ideas do amount to a further development of his theory of natural equality as well as an appeal to natural rights.² I claim that Sophia goes beyond Poulain’s claim that a woman has the “same Right to Truth” as a man (Poulain 1677, 108), toward a more robust justification for the restoration of women’s right to political participation, founded on the idea that tyranny or arbitrary power is wrong. More than this, I maintain, her arguments rest on her own original insights about women’s moral superiority to men, and not solely on Poulain’s Cartesian claims to equality.

In the first part of this paper, I outline the extent to which Sophia is indebted to Poulain’s ideas, drawing on Leduc’s helpful commentaries on the relevant texts. In part two, I demonstrate how Sophia takes the core moral and metaphysical insights of Poulain’s Cartesian philosophy, to argue in favor of the natural equality of men and women. I then show that the Cartesian concept of generosity (*générosité*) as justified self-esteem plays an important role in Sophia’s arguments for the moral superiority of women compared to men. Here we see Sophia take Poulain’s Cartesian ideas in a new direction. To support my analysis, I draw on textual evidence from both *Woman Not Inferior to Man* and Sophia’s follow-up work, *Woman’s Superior Excellence Over Man* (1740), a

reply to an anonymous critique of Sophia titled *Man Superior to Woman* (1739a).³ In my third and final part, I demonstrate that Sophia's argument for "the rights and liberties of *Women*" appeals to the injustice of a "superiority of power" that has been gained "by fraud and violence" alone (Sophia 1740, 10, 111), and bears a resemblance to common anti-tyranny discourse in the early modern period. Here, once again, Sophia departs from Poulain by highlighting the moral inferiority of men, as demonstrated by their lack of generosity toward women. My conclusion will be that Sophia's texts represent an important culmination of a recurrent line of reasoning that extends from the *querelle des femmes* of the Renaissance to Poulain's Cartesian feminism of the seventeenth century, through to eighteenth-century arguments for women's rights. I will show that Sophia's arguments represent a modern update on the Venetian Lucrezia Marinella's defenses of women, both in terms of her dual claim for women's equality and superiority, and her opposition to male tyranny. Sophia's texts thus warrant recognition as significant turning points—from earlier discussions of women's nobility and excellence to later theorizing about women's rights—in the history of feminist thought.⁴

i. Sophia's Debt to Poulain

Several scholars have dismissed Sophia's *Woman Not Inferior to Man* as a plagiarism or a semi-translation of Poulain's *Égalité* (Moore 1916, 196; Ferguson 1985, 267; Clarke 2013, 216). C.A. Moore describes Sophia as a "rank impostor," someone who "perpetrated one of the cleverest hoaxes of her time" (1916, 196). Moore claims that Sophia "boldly lifted several passages with hardly any alteration" from the 1673 edition of Poulain's text, while her own original contributions consisted merely in the rearrangement of passages and the addition of "satirical touches and a few local illustrations" (195). Among those additions are Sophia's direct responses to a misogynistic piece in *Commonsense: Or, The Englishman's Journal* for September 1, 1739 (issue no. 135), based on the writings of Frenchman Jacques de Turreil.⁵ Sophia uses Poulain's arguments explicitly to

attack this author's assertion that women ought to be kept in a state of subordination to men. More recently, Karen O'Brien has also pointed to Sophia's "embellishments" of Poulain's arguments (O'Brien 2009, 17). O'Brien observes that Sophia intersperses Poulain's ideas with English quotations from Nicholas Rowe, Alexander Pope, and others, as well as references to English exempla, such as Boadicea, Elizabeth I, and Elizabeth Carter. O'Brien observes that Sophia fails to develop Poulain's account of "the social formation of female identity" (18), but she gives Sophia due credit for expanding on Poulain's theory of equality and esteem for women, especially in her second work, *Woman's Superior Excellence*.

Like O'Brien, Leduc also draws attention to the original aspects of Sophia's texts. According to Leduc, in her first work Sophia borrows from 56 paragraphs of the 1677 translation of Poulain's text, *Woman As Good As the Man*; while in the second work, she takes from 54 paragraphs (2012, 100–1; 2015, 16). This amounts to Sophia borrowing from almost all of Poulain's text at some point, without explicit acknowledgement. But Leduc also highlights Sophia's various substitutions and additions compared to Poulain's text. She especially points to salient differences between the affective language of Sophia's texts and that of Poulain's *Woman As Good As the Man*. In Leduc's view, these divergences amount to an evolution in Poulain's ideas and, above all, a difference in force or emphasis: "[Sophia]'s prefeminism proves to be more fully asserted than Poulain's," Leduc says; "she is more audacious than Poulain" (2015, 30, 31).

Leduc draws particular attention to Sophia's use of the terms "generous" and "ungenerous" with respect to men and women—two adjectives that do not appear with any regularity in the 1677 translation of Poulain's text.⁶ In *Woman Not Inferior to Man*, Sophia claims that her argument will succeed "if the *Men* have but generosity enough left to admit this evidence" (1739, 7). She refers to the fact that men make "ungenerous use" of the offices women perform for them (14), and she

describes men as “that jealous, ungenerous sex” (46; see also 10, 14). In *Woman’s Superior Excellence*, Sophia once again describes men as “ungenerous” (Sophia 1740, 3, 12, 13, 29), at one point exclaiming “So ungenerous is that assuming sex!” (11). Sophia’s unknown male adversary, the author of *Man Superior to Woman*, is likewise characterized as “ungenerous” and “void of Generosity” (32, 4). By contrast, women are “generous disinterested” (Sophia 1739, 12); they have “generous souls” and perform “generous offices” for men (14). Women are “such generous creatures,” with a “natural propensity to justice and generosity” (Sophia 1740, 42, 96; see also 1739, 15). The upshot, according to Leduc, is that Sophia’s “prefeminism is more assertive in so far as she refers more to women’s superiority over men than to an equality between the sexes” (Leduc 2015, 32; see also 2010, 392). The additional adjectives—generous and ungenerous—have the effect of highlighting women’s superior moral excellence compared to men, a theme that comes most to the fore in Sophia’s second work.

Similarly, when it comes to the language of tyranny and usurpation, according to Leduc, the vehemence of Sophia’s vocabulary also differs from that of Poulain, who is more moderate in tone (Leduc 2015, 20; 2010, 394). Where Poulain writes that women are “subject,” Sophia says that they are “enslaved” (Leduc 2015, 19). Sophia is also more likely to refer to the “tyranny” of men and she frequently characterizes male power and authority as “unjust” or “lawless usurpation” (Leduc 2015, 25–6).⁷ By contrast, Poulain uses the term “tyranny” only once (1677, 17) and deploys the word “Usurper” only twice, both times in relation to foreign invading forces and not the male sex (12, 16). Again, this reveals that Sophia is more negatively inclined toward men and masculine power than Poulain in his *Égalité*. Her emphasis is not so much on affirming male and female equality, but on showing that men have been unfair or unjust in their treatment of women.

Despite these variations on Poulain's text, Leduc denies that Sophia develops Poulain's ideas concerning natural rights or takes on board Poulain's broader opposition to unreasonable power—that is, not only the power of men over women, but also of men over other men and of absolute monarchs over their subjects (Leduc 2010, 411). Leduc says that

[Sophia]'s verbal audacity against men seems vehement but is a superficial rashness hiding conceptual timidity when compared to Poulain's Cartesian philosophical background and innovations. She does not take up his subversive political idea of natural right, of natural equality, or the relativity of ranks. (Leduc 2015, 34; see also 2012, 111–12; 2010, 423)

Rather, on this view, Sophia's variations appear to be limited to the “violence of her vocabulary” (Leduc 2015, 20), her emphasis on the moral failings of men, and her claims about the moral superiority of women. Unlike Poulain, she exhibits no wider commitment to fighting arbitrary power more generally (on this topic in Poulain, see Stuurman 2004, ch 5).

ii. *Sophia on Generosity, Natural Equality, and the Superiority of Women*

On my own interpretation, Sophia builds on the Cartesian metaphysical and ethical insights in Poulain's text, to develop a robust theory of the natural equality of the sexes and the superiority of women compared to men, as well as a justification for restoring women's rights. In doing so, I argue, she does appeal to a broader political perspective, one that embraces a theory of natural rights and the view that arbitrary power is wrong. To demonstrate this, I begin by outlining those key Cartesian ideas in Sophia's texts, including not only Descartes' ideas concerning the mind and body, but also those concerning the Cartesian virtue of generosity. I then show how these ideas concerning generosity play an important role in Sophia's original arguments for women's moral superiority over men—arguments that go beyond Poulain's treatise.⁸

It is well known that Poulain embraces certain core aspects of Descartes' metaphysics, specifically his view that the mind and body are distinct entities, capable of existing apart from one another (see Reuter 2019, section 2.2; see also Reuter 2013; Schmitter 2018). According to Descartes, while the mind is purely thinking, non-extended substance, the body is extended and non-thinking. Because all human beings are a composite of mind and body, on his viewpoint it follows that there are no essential differences between the sexes: a woman's body (like that of a man) is an essentially material thing, extended in length, breadth, and depth; a woman's mind (like that of a man) is an essentially thinking and immaterial thing (see Reuter 1999). But where Descartes' sexual egalitarianism is only implicit, Poulain makes it explicit: in the soul, Poulain says, "there is no Sex at all" (Poulain 1677, 84). Sophia repeats this sentiment verbatim, also affirming that in the soul "there is *no sex* at all" (Sophia 1739, 23). For both authors, Cartesian dualism grounds their assertion that men and women are of the same nature: the sexes have the same mental capacities and they are subject to the same bodily influences, such as the passions and sensations.⁹ Of course, there are differences with respect to their reproductive organs, but these have no bearing on their ability to acquire truth and knowledge (Poulain 1677, 84; Sophia 1739, 23). If there are any differences between their intellects, they must be attributed to "*education, exercise, and the impressions* of those external objects which surround us in different Circumstances" (Sophia 1739, 23; Poulain 1677, 85); in short, these must be the effects of enculturation, not nature. While women might appear to be more passionate, or less able to control their emotions, this is only an accident of their upbringing. With the right training and meditation, women might develop their own natural logic, and avoid hasty moral judgements, as the wisest of men have done. They might control their "wills and inclinations" (Poulain 1677, 89) and acquire the "skill to regulate" their passions, especially their desires (Sophia 1739, 27). For these reasons, women are "as noble" and "as perfect" as men, they have as much "excellence" and "dignity" (inherent worth), and so they ought to be accorded the same "esteem," "respect," and "dignity" (high rank or status).¹⁰ It follows that they

have a natural “right” to the same advantages as men, to overcome their ignorance, and to attain virtue and knowledge (Poulain 1677, 108; Sophia 1739, 30).

Poulain and Sophia also embrace salient aspects of Descartes’ ethical philosophy. In *Les passions de l’âme* [*The Passions of the Soul*] (1649), Descartes advances a moral theory of the passions in light of the close intermingling of mind and body in the human subject. In this work, he advises that embodied moral agents must learn to cultivate the passion of generosity in order to become virtuous and happy (see Shapiro 1999). For him, generosity does not consist in the mere performance of an action, such as giving liberally to others, but rather in a certain excellence of character, a habitual disposition to feel and act in a particular way. In the Cartesian context, the term generosity means something like “greatness of soul,” a moral ideal related to the ancient virtue of *megalopsychia* (see Brown 2006, 189). Generosity consists in a heightened feeling of self-esteem, a well-founded high opinion of oneself (CSM I, 384; AT XI, 446). This master passion has two components: the first consists in an agent’s recognition that he has the power to control his volitions—that he has a certain freedom of will—and this makes him an appropriate subject of praise or blame for his actions. It is a feeling that what he does or decides is entirely “up to him,” and an awareness that this power (and nothing else) makes him morally accountable. The second component consists in a feeling of “firm and constant resolution” to use his freedom wisely, “that is, never to lack the will to undertake and carry out whatever he judges to be best” (CSM I, 384; AT XI, 446). The agent who cultivates this resolution—always to execute what he judges to be the best course of action—is described as pursuing virtue “in a perfect manner” (CSM I, 384; AT XI, 446). Descartes says that the passion of generosity can be transformed into a virtue, an excellence of character; in fact, it is “the key to all the other virtues and a general remedy for every disorder of the passions” (CSM I, 388; AT XI, 454). Those who have perfected this virtue are less likely to get angry or feel contempt toward others, because they respect other human beings for their equal possession of free will. The

généreux do not esteem themselves more than they esteem others; they recognize the potential for good in everyone—they acknowledge everyone’s innate capacity to act according to their best judgements (CSM I, 384; AT XI, 446–7). This capacity, as John Marshall observes, “establishes a benchmark of equality among all human beings” and serves “as the valuational ground not only for not harming others but for seeking to promote their true good” (Marshall 1998, 152–3). Those who have cultivated the virtue of generosity go beyond their own selfish interests, to do good to others.

Though Poulain does not use the word generosity or *générosité*,¹¹ he echoes Descartes’ remarks about this virtue consisting in a strong feeling of resolution. In *The Woman as Good as the Man*, Poulain says “there is nothing but our Soul capable of Vertue; which consists in a firm and constant Resolution of doing that which we judge, the best; according to the divers Occurrences that we meet with” (Poulain 1677, 155–6). This is a close reiteration of the second part of Descartes’ definition of generosity in article 153 of *The Passions* (CSM I, 384; AT XI, 446). But in keeping with his feminist agenda, Poulain goes further than Descartes to affirm that

the Mind is no less capable in *Women*, than in *Men*, of that firm Resolution, which makes up Vertue, nor of knowing the Ran-counters when it is to be put into Practice. They can Regulate their Passions, as well as we; and are not more enclined to Vice, than to Vertue. We might even make the Balance turn to their Favour on this side; since that the Affection towards Children (without comparison, stronger in *Women*, than in *Men*), is naturally linked to Compassion; which we may call, the Vertue and Bond of Civil Society: It being impossible to conceive, That Society is rationally Established for other end, than to supply the common Wants and Necessities of one another. (Poulain 1677, 155–6)

Here Poulain evokes the idea that generosity involves doing good to others, it is an other-regarding passion, closely associated with affection and compassion for one’s fellow human beings. He suggests that women are more inclined to this virtue than men, as demonstrated by their love and

compassion for children. More than this, this passion-cum-virtue serves as a cohesive for society, helping to bring everyone together for the sake of the common good.

In Sophia's appropriation of the same passage, she says:

there is nothing but the soul capable of virtue, which consists in a firm resolution of doing that, which we judge the best, according to the dictates of *reason* and *religion* compared with the different occurrences we meet with in life. Now the mind is no less capable in *Women* than in *Men* of that firm resolution, which makes up virtue, or of knowing the occasions of putting it in practice.

Weak as the generality reckon us *Women*, we can regulate our passions as well as the *Men*, and are no more inclined to vice than to virtue. We might even make the scale turn in our own favour in this particular, without doing violence to truth or justice. (Sophia 1739, 59)

Here Sophia claims only that women are capable of firm resolution and—if the scales are tipped in their favor—that women are more inclined to virtue than vice. But in other passages, she builds on Poulain's suggestion that women are capable of generosity. Sophia repeatedly affirms that women are capable of strong resolution,¹² and that they may acquire a "greatness of soul."¹³ In one passage, she even suggests that the principal design of her two works is to enable women to develop "just self-esteem," echoing Descartes' notion of justified self-esteem (CSM I, 384; AT XI, 446). At the end of *Woman's Superior Excellence*, she says:

I have indeed in my former treatise, and again in this, endeavoured to spirit my sex to have that just esteem for themselves which is requisite to force the Men to pay them that esteem which is their due. If any blame me for this let them reflect on the advice of *Pythagoras*:
Above all things be sure to have a due respect for yourself. If we think meanly of ourselves;

how can we be surprised if that ungenerous sex should lay hold of it to load us with the contempt we seem conscious of deserving. (Sophia 1740, 86–7)

As we know from Leduc’s analyses, Sophia’s description of men as “ungenerous” is typical of her variations on Poulain’s text. But in the context of her remarks on women’s capacity for a “firm and constant resolution,” for “greatness of soul,” and for a “just self-esteem,” her repeated references to generosity take on a different meaning and resonance. These references are not simply additional adjectives—used to praise women and condemn men—but rather they point to a wider Cartesian metaphysical and ethical framework in operation. Within this framework, all human beings, both male and female, have immaterial minds capable of freely choosing the good (or bad) through an act of will. More than this, on the Cartesian viewpoint, virtue consists in a recognition of this freedom to dispose of our own volitions, and also a strong feeling of resolve to use our will well, to carry out whatever we judge to be best. By transforming this passion into a virtue (an excellence of character or a habitual disposition to be generous), we live up to the dignity of our nature as human beings: we esteem ourselves as we ought, and we esteem others according to their worth too. We do not feel contempt, envy, or anger toward others, because we recognize the moral equality of all human beings (that they have a free will like our own) and, as Descartes says, we “are more inclined to excuse than to blame them and to regard ... wrong-doing as due rather to a lack of knowledge than to a lack of virtuous will” (CSM I, 384; AT XI, 446).

These normative ideas give substance to Sophia’s accusations that men have been “ungenerous in denying us the equality of esteem, which is our due” (Sophia 1739, 10; see also 57). In her opinion, men offer only the “basest contempt of our sex in general” (Sophia 1739, 14; see also 53, 57, 60; 1740, 28, 60, 86–7); they are “jealous” and “envious” (Sophia 1739, 24, 37, 46; 1740, 2, 69), and they miss no opportunity to render women “despicable” (Sophia 1739, 12, 16, 56). This is despite the fact that the men themselves, due to their neglect of women’s education, are responsible for

women's lack of knowledge. While women's defects ought to warrant their compassion, men offer only their contempt (Sophia 1739, 60; see also Poulain 1677, 163, 116). By contrast, despite their oppressive circumstances, women show both generosity and compassion toward the male sex—particularly through their care and attention toward them in infancy. Men regard motherhood and the care of children as lowly and degrading occupations. But in truth, Sophia says (echoing Poulain), the rearing of children should be one of the most esteemed professions in society: “there is no employment in a Commonwealth which deserves more honour, or greater thanks and rewards” (Sophia 1739, 12; see also Poulain 1677, 54, 66–8). Women's “generous disinterested employ of nursing the *Men* in their infancy” actively contributes to the public good (Sophia 1739, 12); for this reason, women are “entitled to the greatest share in public esteem” (Sophia 1739, 13). Despite discouragements, women's “generous souls” continue to do good to the children they breed and nurse: “Such [are] the generous offices we do them: such the ungenerous use they make of them” (Sophia 1739, 14; see also 15).

In *Woman's Superior Excellence*, these observations form the basis of Sophia's arguments for women's moral superiority to men. In this text, Sophia notably departs from Poulain by arguing that women excel men in virtue. In doing so, she responds directly to the English critic of her *Woman Not Inferior to Man*, the anonymous male author of *Man Superior to Woman*. In his critique, this author challenges Sophia's claims to equality by presenting several female character types that supposedly illustrate that women are incapable of virtue and intelligence. At the end of his misogynist litany, the author tells Sophia that she is not entitled to call into question man's natural superiority over women until she can prove that women have a superiority over men (1739a, 73–4). It is unclear why the author makes this claim, but Sophia accepts the challenge anyway. She says that because

the gentleman, my antagonist, is so weak as to dispute our equality with the Men, till we can shew a superiority over them; I think it but justice due to my injured sex to accept of his challenge, and to prove, what is matter of fact, that *Woman-kind* are not only by nature equal, but far superior to the *Men*; which I shall not only make appear from rational theory, but even, to stoop to my adversary's method of arguing, consider in a practical light.

(Sophia 1740, 12)

Crucially, in her work, Sophia avoids making the contradictory assertion that women are both naturally equal and naturally superior to men. Women are not necessarily superior to men, in her view; rather, they are born equal by nature but made superior by custom. Sophia characterizes the superiority of early modern women as the moral superiority of a particular social group situated in a particular historical context. As a “matter of *fact*,” she suggests, women might be regarded as superior to men when considered “in a *practical light*” (1740, 12; my italics). As a result of practical circumstances, women happen to have developed certain excellences of character. Women have been deprived of their right to knowledge, to engage in public employments, and to participate in the political sphere. But in the face of male contempt and lack of esteem, they have learnt compassion, fortitude, and courage (95–6). Above all, they have shown generosity in their roles as the child-bearers and caregivers of men. So, it must be allowed that “The conduct of women ... is generally speaking remarkably virtuous” (95; see also 110). In this way, Sophia gestures toward our modern-day concept of gender as a social construct.¹⁴ Contrary to O’Brien’s view that Sophia has no account of “the social formation of female identity” (O’Brien 2009, 18), Sophia acknowledges that so-called feminine character traits, such as care and compassion, are the product of socio-historical forces. She transforms Poulain’s insights about the enculturated differences between the sexes to make a new point about women’s superior moral excellence.

iii. *Sophia on Tyranny, Usurpation, and Rights*

Sophia's claims about women's socially constructed superiority provide crucial support for her "Demonstration of Woman's Natural Right" (1740). In this final part, it is my contention that Sophia combines her claims about the moral superiority of women—and especially her Cartesian insights concerning generosity—with a Lockean-style argument concerning the injustice of tyranny and usurpation, to call for the restoration of women's rights. Here, once again, Sophia points out that men's treatment of women exhibits a moral failing: a contempt rather than an esteem for the moral equality of human beings. By highlighting this moral deficiency in men, Sophia provides an argument for the recognition of women's rights that both embraces and goes beyond Poulain's insights concerning natural rights, equality, and power. Men's tyrannical domination of women is unjust because unreasonable or arbitrary power is wrong, in Sophia's view. But women's moral superiority also provides a further compelling reason for the reinstatement of their rights—because women *deserve* to have those rights restored.

In Poulain's *Woman as Good as the Man*, the language of women's rights emerges explicitly in only two or three passages. In the first case, Poulain refers in passing to the fact that many women have been heads of state (presumably, as queens or queen regents). But we must not imagine, he says, that their leadership was permitted as a "Restitution of their right" (Poulain 1677, 20). Rather, he suspects, it was because men were simply unable to wrest authority from their hands. Later in the same work, Poulain presents an argument for the view that men and women "have the same Right to Truth" or a natural-born "Title to Knowledges" (Poulain 1677, 108; for analysis, see Wilkin 2019, 231). They have this right, he says, because only the possession of "clear and distinct Knowledges" can lead to true happiness in the hereafter, and all human beings are entitled to this happiness. It is justice to provide the best means to knowledge and to virtue and everlasting felicity (111–12)—that is, "to render to every one that which is their right" (108). He concludes that "Since ... both Sexes are capable of the same Felicity, they have Equall Right to all that which conduceth

to the obtaining thereof” (Poulain 1677, 110). He then expands on this point in a later passage, when he asserts that the goods of the mind can be shared by everyone—like light or air, there is no limit on who might make use of them. If someone has been deprived of these goods, regardless of how long they have been deprived, they will always have a “right of Reversion” or “a right to ... good sense” (120, 119), without injuring anyone else. Following this, however, there are no further explicit references to women’s rights in Poulain’s text.¹⁵

By contrast, the language of women’s rights is prevalent throughout Sophia’s treatises. She refers to “the right of one half the creation,” to women’s “equal right” or “equal claim to power and dignity with the *Men*” (Sophia 1739, 7, 32; see also Sophia 1740, 14, 15), as well as “the rights and liberties of *Women*” (Sophia 1740, 10), and their “equal right to dignity, power and esteem” (Sophia 1740, 12; see also Sophia 1739, 24, 60, 61; 1740, 31, 32). Men should show “some honesty in restoring us to the power, dignity and esteem, we have a natural, equal, nay, superior right to,” she says (Sophia 1740, 40). Adapting Poulain’s words, she claims that women have the same right as men “to all *public employments*; we are endow’d, by nature, with geniuses at least as capable of filling them as theirs can be” (Sophia 1739, 60). She also echoes Poulain’s claims for a woman’s equal “Right to Truth” or her right to the same knowledge as a man (Poulain 1677, 108, 119–20). On the goods of the mind, she says:

Against them there can be no prescription; but however long we have been excluded from them, our right of *Replevin* continues inalienable. Every rational being has a right to good sense, and all that is intelligible. Reason is absolutely unlimited in her jurisdiction over mankind; and we are all born to judge of what concerns and affects us, and if some cannot use the objects of sense with the same facility as others, all have an equal right to them.

Truth and knowledge, like light and air, are not to be diminish’d by communication. (Sophia 1740, 82)

Here Sophia appropriates both the words and the logic of Poulain's text: she insists that women are required to make their own judgements concerning good and bad, and, toward this end, they have a right to truth and knowledge; they have "a natural right" to the "advantages of education" (Sophia 1739, 30).

Unlike Poulain, however, Sophia often presents her arguments for women's rights alongside accusations of "the unjust usurpation and tyranny of the *Men*" (Sophia 1739, 37). We have seen that the language of tyranny and usurpation is one of the key variations between Sophia and Poulain's texts. But while Leduc asserts only that these additional words make Sophia's feminism more strident, I maintain that her claims concerning tyranny and usurpation ground Sophia's argument for the restoration of women's rights. By demonstrating the negative side—that men's rule over women is unjust and illegitimate—Sophia garners support for the positive side—that women ought to have their natural rights reinstated.

Sophia begins with the Cartesian metaphysical insights of Poulain's text, that is, his idea that men and women share an equal ontological and ethical status, and that they have the same innate capacity for knowledge and virtue. Like Poulain, she emphasizes that if there are any moral and intellectual differences between men and women, these are due to custom and not to their natural constitutions. More specifically, she argues that

if, upon mature consideration, it appears that there is no other difference between *Men* and *Us* than what their tyrann[ny] has created, it will then appear how unjust they are in excluding us from that power and dignity we have a right to share with them; how ungenerous in denying us the equality of esteem, which is our due; and how little reason they have to triumph in the base possession of an authority, which unnatural violence, and lawless usurpation, put into their hands. (Sophia 1739, 10)

Sophia uses Poulain's Cartesian insights to assert that there are no natural differences between men and women; rather, the differences must be attributed to the tyranny and usurpation of men; it therefore follows that men have been unjust in denying women their right to an equality of power, dignity, and esteem.

Crucially, Sophia uses the Cartesian notion of generosity to give content to her accusations of male tyranny. Throughout her writings, Sophia complains of the "tyrannic treatment" of her sex (Sophia 1739, 57) and of "*Man's tyranny over Woman*" (Sophia 1740, 8). She accuses men of being "tyrants" who have usurped "an authority over *Women* which they can assign no reason for" (Sophia 1740, 9). With these statements, Sophia demonstrates an awareness of popular anti-tyranny discourse in her time. In early modern England, a tyrant was someone in a position of political power who acted from selfish motives rather than for the sake of the public good (for an overview, see Nyquist 2012). In chapter eighteen of the *Second Treatise* in his *Two Treatises of Government* (1689/1988), John Locke defines tyranny as "*the exercise of Power beyond Right*" and the "making use of the Power any one has in his hands; not for the good of those, who are under it, but for his own private separate Advantage" (Locke 1689/1988, II.199). Locke characterizes the difference between a rightful king and a tyrant as the difference between a ruler who "makes the Laws the Bounds of his Power, and the Good of the Publick, the end of his Government," and a ruler who makes his will and appetite the law by which he governs (II.200). A tyrant controls the lives and liberties of others for his own sake, and not for their benefit; a tyrant fails to respect the equal freedom and rationality of other members of the human race; and a tyrant degrades or injures his subjects by treating them as natural slaves, made for his sake alone. Above all, a tyrant's rule is driven by his own selfish "irregular Passion" and "unreasonable Appetites," not the law of reason (II.199, 200).

In the process of repeatedly highlighting men's lack of generosity, Sophia gives them the stereotypical character of tyrants. In her opinion, men are driven to dominate women by their selfish appetites and passions such as desire, fear, anger, and "a mean dastardly jealousy" (Sophia 1739, 24). In early modern society, women are treated like the "Slaves of Man," as though they were "a seraglio of slaves" (11); men "enslave domineer and play the hectors" over them (Sophia 1740, 13).¹⁶ Within marriage, a husband is like a "tyger" or a dangerous beast (Sophia 1739, 18); in fact, man is often a "*fiercer animal*" than a "tyger," she says (14–15); he frequently treats women with "more fury and cruelty than beasts practice towards one another" (53). By comparison, she suggests, a rightful ruler would demonstrate a generous disposition toward his subjects. According to Descartes, the *généreux* have perfect command over their selfish passions. They do not feel jealousy, for why would they envy what others have, when they know that their happiness is dependent on themselves? They do not get angry or resentful: why would they seek revenge, when they understand that others will be virtuous if only they acquire the right knowledge? The *généreux* "esteem nothing more highly than doing good to others and disregarding their own self interest" (CSM I, 385; AT XI, 448). Sophia repeatedly points out that men have failed to exhibit a generous character in their rule over women, they have failed to nurture and protect their subjects. By implication, their rule is tyrannical—it is unjust and illegitimate:

Were we to see the *Men* every where, and at all times, masters of themselves, and their animal appetites in a perfect subordination to their rational faculties; we should have some colour to think that nature design'd them for masters to us, who cannot perhaps always boast of so complete a command over ourselves. But how is it possible for us to give into such a notion, while we see those very *Men*, whose ambition of ascendancy over us, nothing less than absolute dominion can satiate, court the most abject slavery, by prostituting reason to their groveling passions, suffering sense to be led away captive by prejudice, and sacrificing justice, truth, and honour, to inconsiderate custom?

In short, ungenerous men act like tyrants insofar as they treat their subjects with enmity and contempt, rather than the esteem and respect they deserve; they exhibit only an asocial desire to satisfy their selfish passions, rather than contribute to the good of others; and they treat women as natural slaves, rather than rational beings with a will of their own. Through this tyrannical treatment, women have been recklessly injured: they have been scorned, excluded, degraded, debased, and robbed of all advantages in public life.

On Locke's view, tyranny is wrong because, by contracting into civil society, human beings cannot reasonably be supposed to give themselves up to the absolute arbitrary power of another human being. If human beings did surrender themselves to "the *absolute Arbitrary Power* and will of a Legislator ... to make a prey of them when he pleases," then they would be placing themselves in a worse condition than the state of nature (Locke 1689/1988, II.137). On Locke's account, it is impossible for human beings voluntarily to consent to tyranny; they cannot freely elect to take on such a vulnerable, degraded human status (II.23, II.172). Rather, if they do give themselves up to tyrannical power, they must be either tricked into it by fraud and deception or forced into it by violence and coercion. In the same spirit, Sophia also attributes women's subordination to male dissimulation and brute force, rather than reason and justice. She implies that "*Men* have by fraud and violence gain'd a superiority of power over us" (Sophia 1740,111), and that women "have been subjected to their authority ... by no other law than that of the stronger," and not "for want of natural capacity, or merit, but for want of an equal spirit of violence, shameless injustice, and lawless oppression, with theirs" (Sophia 1739, 36). She says:

Thus far I think it evidently appears, that there is no science, office, or dignity, which women have not an equal right to share in with the men: Since there can be no superiority, but that of brutal strength, shown in the latter, to entitle them to engross all power and prerogative to themselves: nor any incapacity proved in the former, to disqualify them of

their right, but what is owing to the unjust oppression of the men, and might be easily removed. (Sophia 1739, 55)

While men might have a superiority of power over women, they do not have a superiority of virtue—they are not legitimately entitled to keep women in subordination.

Sophia uses these insights not to argue for the right to resist tyranny with force and violence (as Locke does in the *Two Treatises*, II.202), but rather for a “re-establishment” or “*Replevin*” of a woman’s right, “a right to re-entry,” as she puts it (Sophia 1740, 83). She calls for the restoration of women’s right to an equality of power, dignity, and esteem with men. This is only reasonable, she insists, because “it never was heard of that a person, who, by ignorance, neglect, or the surprise of others, has fallen from his just right, may not try all lawful means to recover his property” (Sophia 1740, 82). To the extent that men rule unjustly—that is, have seized their power through force and fraud, and failed to rule for the sake of the public good—she calls not only for women’s equal but also for their superior right to authority; they have a greater claim and entitlement to power, dignity, and esteem than the men. “It cannot be denied,” she says, “that our personal dispositions to what is good and great are much superior to any they make appear and ought to entitle us to a much superior degree of dignity power and esteem than they have any right to” (Sophia 1740, 15; see also 40). In short, through their generosity of character, women have demonstrated that they are better qualified than men to be rightful rulers; they have shown the compassion and other-directed concern that is characteristic of the best political leaders. This is why male tyranny qualifies as a “usurpation,” it is the unjust, unauthorized taking of power and privilege from women, a social group that has a rightful claim to such authority; it is, as Locke would say, “the exercise of Power, which another has a right to” (Locke 1689/1988, II.199).

In these last respects, Sophia's arguments bear a close resemblance to those of Lucrezia Marinella in her *La nobiltà et l'eccellenza delle donne co'diffetti et mancamenti di gli uomini* (1600). It should come as no surprise, then, that Sophia seems familiar with her sixteenth-century predecessor and her arguments on the superiority of women. In response to the author of *Man Superior to Woman*, Sophia says: "Neither can I think he ever heard the least mention of ... Signora Marinella of Italy, who wrote another on the superior nobility of the fair sex" (Sophia 1740, 67). Marguerite Deslauriers has identified two significant argumentative moves in Marinella's contribution to the *querelle des femmes*: first, Marinella's claim that standard male-female relations constitute a form of tyranny or unjust rule; and second, her assertion that women are better qualified than men to govern others (Deslauriers 2019, 724; see also Deslauriers 2018). Sophia makes strikingly similar moves when she goes beyond her copy source, Poulain's *Woman As Good As the Man*, to criticize men for their lack of generosity and their tyrannical treatment of women—and to suggest that women's generosity makes them better qualified than men to rule in the public interest. Like Marinella, Sophia highlights how the tyrant asserts his will over those who are his equals or even his superiors; the moral wrongness of tyranny lies in claiming authority over those who share the same reason and virtue to an equal or greater degree (see Deslauriers 2019, 730, 732). But Sophia also represents a further development from Marinella's insights, toward an explicit theory of women's rights: that is, their right to an equal share of political authority, public offices, and educational advantages. Unlike her predecessor, Sophia does not emphasize that women are naturally superior to men by virtue of their different constitutions. Rather, she draws on Poulain's Cartesian metaphysics to affirm the equality of the sexes, and to assert that women are just as capable of attaining virtue and wisdom as men. Her key point is that, in early modern society, women happen to be morally superior to men by virtue of their evident generosity (and men's lack thereof). Socio-historical forces have led to the generality of women developing a virtuous disposition of character, despite oppressive circumstances. While women are equal to men by

nature, they are superior to men by custom. From this dual grounding of equality and superiority, Sophia argues that the domination of women by men, and society's failure to recognize women's worth and status, constitutes tyranny and usurpation—an injustice. To address this injustice, society must move toward restoring women's right to a perfect equality of power, dignity, and esteem with the men.

In 1916, C. A. Moore concluded that “our first [feminist] militant turns out to be a fraud” (196). Moore claimed that Sophia was a plagiarist and an imposter, someone who merely lifted material from Poulain's *Woman As Good As the Man* as an elaborate hoax. During the intervening century, Sophia failed to receive her due recognition as a pioneer of women's rights. A number of scholars echoed Moore's accusations of plagiarism, without acknowledging Sophia's original developments and departures from Poulain's thoughts. More recently, Leduc has shown that Sophia's variations on Poulain's language amount to more significant differences between the two texts: they show that Sophia could be more strident and audacious in her criticisms of men and in her claims for women's superiority. But Leduc has claimed that, despite this added vehemence, Sophia failed to show a commitment to the broader ethic underlying Poulain's work, his theory of natural rights and natural equality, and his opposition to unreasonable power of any kind. In this paper, I have demonstrated that Sophia develops her own distinctive arguments in ways that crucially differ from those of Poulain. On the one hand, as we have seen, Sophia shares Poulain's view that men and women have an equal ontological and moral status: they have the same mind-body composition, the same innate capacity for knowledge and virtue, and hence the same capacity for generosity. But on the other, Sophia takes these claims further than Poulain. She demonstrates that while women are necessarily equal to men by virtue of their essential natures, they are nonetheless morally superior to them as the result of socio-historical forces; they have cultivated greater generosity than men in early modern society. Sophia also goes further than Poulain by grounding her calls for women's rights on

an underlying demand for an ethical response to tyranny. Although she does not engage in an explicit attack on social hierarchies in early modern society, she affirms that tyrannical power is wrong because it consists in a failure to act in accordance with reason rather than brutish passion and appetite, and gains its authority through force and fraud alone. Through their tyrannical treatment of women, men exhibit a vast moral failing—they fail to exhibit the virtue of generosity. In the Cartesian framework, generosity entails an esteem for every human being’s natural capacity to use their free will (to make the best judgements), as well as an absence of contempt toward their fellow human beings, who are equal to them in the only respect that matters. By highlighting men’s lack of generosity, Sophia introduces a Cartesian twist on the usual *querelle* arguments for women’s equality and superiority, as seen in the arguments of Lucrezia Marinella. To prove that they *are* the moral equals of women, Sophia says, the onus is on men to do the right thing: they must grant women their “equal right to dignity, power and esteem” (Sophia 1740, 12). In this way, Sophia signals an important shift in thinking for her time—a movement away from arguing in terms of women’s equality and superiority alone to arguing in favor of women’s rights—and on these grounds she deserves to be remembered as a pioneer in the history of feminist thought.

Notes

¹ *On Sophia's identity.* Sophia's true identity remains unknown. We know that "Sophia, A Person of Quality" identifies as someone of the female sex: "I happen to be a *Woman*," she says (Sophia 1740, 85). We also know that she was of high social status: "a person of quality" typically denotes a person of noble birth or descent. Some scholars speculate that Sophia may have been Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689–1752), author of the periodical *The Nonsense of Common-Sense* (1737–8), the sixth number of which contains a call for women to rail against those "who, with a Sneer of affected Admiration, would throw you below the Dignity of the human Species" (Montagu 1747: 28). Like Sophia, Montagu also writes in response to an article in the English periodical *Commonsense: Or, The Englishman's Journal*, specifically an essay on opera in the issue of January 14, 1738 (no. 50). But some scholars think that Montagu's authorship of *Woman Not Inferior* is unlikely. In 1740, at the age of 51, Montagu was far from being a "young lady," as Sophia describes herself (1740, 7). And Montagu admired Gilbert Burnet, whereas Sophia agrees with her adversary that he is an "arrant old woman" (see Blain, Clements, Grundy 1990, 1008; Sophia 1740, 62). Others have speculated that Sophia may have been Lady Sophia Fermor (1721–45), the second wife of Lord Carteret and daughter of Henrietta-Louisa, Countess of Pomfret (see Medley 1897, 348; O'Brien 2009, 17–18). But there is no concrete evidence for this attribution either, beyond Sophia's rank and name (Blain, Clements, Grundy 1990, 1008). Otherwise, the only biographical information we have about "Sophia, A Person of Quality" is that she once had a guardian ("Honorio") and a writing master ("Claudio"). In a letter dated December 1, 1739, Elizabeth Carter asks Edward Cave to reveal the identity of Sophia, saying "I beg the favour of you to inquire who is said to be the Author of a pamphlet lately

published, intituled Woman not inferior to man, & to let me know as soon as you conveniently can” (Carter 2005, 79). Carter’s subsequent letter on December 7, 1739 includes the following postscript: “My Letters shall plague you with as much Constancy as a Quotidian Ague till you give me some Information about the Author of the pamphlet I mentioned in my 2 last” (Carter 2005, 81). Unfortunately, no reply from Cave is extant.

² By “natural equality,” I mean an equality based on those inherent qualities and characteristics that human beings share by virtue of their nature; while “natural rights” refer to those claims and privileges that human beings possess independently of civil laws and conventions.

³ All three of these works—Sophia’s two books and her adversary’s critique—were republished in 1751 in a single volume titled *Beauty’s Triumph: Or, The Superiority of the Fair Sex Invincibly Proved*.

⁴ It should also be noted that Sophia’s first text had a discernible influence on the development of later feminism. An 1826 reproduction of the 1750 French translation of Sophia’s *Woman Not Inferior to Man* (falsely attributed to Wollstonecraft) was translated into Portuguese in 1832 by the Brazilian Nisia Floresta; this translation helped to disseminate feminist ideas in nineteenth-century Latin America. For details, see Matthews and Botting 2014.

⁵ Curiously, the anonymous author of this piece argues for the opposite viewpoint in the next issue, dated September 8, 1739. In the conclusion of the second piece, the author says that the equality of men and women might be derived from the notion that “the Soul has no Sex, and that Minds which have the same Make, have the same Kind of Movements; and that the common Principles of Reason and Equity incline those of the same Dispositions, to the same Vertues.” The author also allows that women may “possess a most stedly Firmness of Soul, a

singular Generosity.” See “The Subject of our last continued,” September 8, 1739 (Anonymous 1739b, [1]).

⁶ There is only one explicit reference to women being generous in the 1677 version, when Poulain refers to those chaste women who “with a Generous, and astonishing Gallantry, have endured the most horrible torments, for the cause of Religion!” (71).

⁷ For her repeated references to tyrants and tyranny, see Sophia 1739, 10, 37, 57; 1740, 2, 5, 8, 9, 12, 22. For her references to usurpation, see Sophia 1739, 10, 37; 1740, 5, 9, 10, 11, 12, 108.

⁸ Here it is worth noting that, in light of Sophia’s adaptations of Poulain’s ideas, it is not obvious that the charge of plagiarism would have been levelled against her work in her own day. In the early modern period, there were different conventions of acknowledgement; it was common for scholars to produce translations that were also commentaries and to borrow others’ ideas in the expectation that readers would recognize the source material. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for bringing this point to my attention.

⁹ Consider, for example:

It is God who unites the Soul to the body of a Woman, as to that of a Man, and who joynes them by the same Lawes. The sentiments, the passions, and inclinations, make and entertain that Union; And the Spirit operating after the same manner in the one as well as the other, is there equally capable of the same things. (Poulain 1677, 85)

The same Creator, by the same laws, unites the souls of women and men to their respective bodies. The same sentiments, passions, and propensions, cement that union in both. And the soul operating in the same manner in the one and the other, is capable of the very same functions in both. (Sophia 1739, 23)

¹⁰ Sophia and Poulain both use these highlighted words repeatedly throughout their texts. But it should be noted that Sophia emphasizes dignity in the sense of worth and rank much more than Poulain, who regards dignity only in the sense of an office (see Poulain 1677, 7, 123, 126). On the topic of dignity in Poulain and Sophia, see Broad 2017, 30–1.

¹¹ Poulain refers, rather, to a “generous Resistance, which produceth more Good than Hurt” (Poulain 1677, 156).

¹² Consider the following statements, for example: “it is full as idle to imagin that *Women* are not naturally as capable of *courage* and *resolution* as the *Men*” (Sophia 1739, 52); “[women] have hearts capable of resolution enough to assert that right against such of the opposite sex as want the sense to do them justice” (Sophia 1740, 5); “The heart of Woman is no less capable by nature of that steady resolution which makes up virtuous courage” (91).

¹³ She says: “I only mean to show my sex, that they are not so despicable as the men would have them believe themselves, and that we are capable of as much greatness of soul as the best of that haughty sex” (Sophia 1739, 56). She also observes that many women with an “astonishing greatness of soul” have triumphed over vice (Sophia 1740, 110).

¹⁴ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for bringing this point to my attention.

¹⁵ This is not to say that Poulain does not develop an implicit argument for women’s rights throughout his *Égalité*. On this topic, and Poulain’s arguments concerning women’s rights in later texts, see Wilkin 2019.

¹⁶ The “Slaves of Man” comes from a line in Nicholas Rowe’s “Fair Penitent,” featured on the title page of Sophia’s *Woman Not Inferior to Man*: “How hard is the Condition of our Sex, / Thro’ ev’ry State of Life the Slaves of Man!”

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