

Extracts from “the equality of the two sexes.”

By Francois Poullain de la Barre

Quote:

." Following the Cartesian method of rational deduction, **he concludes that sexual inequality has no basis in nature**. The female intellect, he maintains, is in no way inferior to the male. The sexes may differ in physical stature (reflecting their different roles in reproduction), but their difference does not constitute an argument for their inequality. **Poullain attributes popular notions of female inferiority to social inertia and historical conditioning**. He dismisses civil law's attempt to legitimize male authoritarianism as an error that has no foundation in natural law. Boldly radical in his support for sexual equality, Poullain argues that women are intellectually and physically capable of serving as heads of state, clergy, military officers, lawyers, and (even) college professors.

Poullain maintains that women were relegated to an inferior role at some very early point in human prehistory, that this accident had its roots in the female's unique reproductive responsibilities, and that familiarity has given an arbitrary distinction between the sexes the feel of a natural gulf. As laws and states evolved, Poullain suggests, bad habits ossified into permanent institutions. Men, as well as women, began to believe that a situation of their own making was a product of natural law and divine will. High priests and intellectuals encouraged this by inventing justification for male supremacy. Their declarations of female inferiority were reinforced by society and transformed into self-fulfilling prophecies.

For Cartesians, history and tradition carry little weight. They know that prejudices of all sorts try to validate themselves by appealing to the past. Clear thinking requires "systematic doubt" - which means that ideas that previously have been accepted can continue to be endorsed only if they withstand the critique to which each rational individual subjects them. Only "clear and distinct ideas," the products of careful, logical arguments, carry the weight of convictions." p. xxiii - xxiv

1. "De l'Egalite des deux Sexes suggested many ideas that were to be explored by later generations of feminists. **It proposed a theory that linked the emergence of misogynistic attitudes in human culture with the process by which the state evolved from the relationships of the primitive family**. It indicted intellectual giants of the past for blatant sexism. It illustrated an effective reform strategy by skillfully using its opponents' arguments to undermine their positions - by employing the Cartesian methods that many male scholars endorsed to weaken the confidence these men had in the superiority of their sex. It anticipated the modern debate about language and its role in subtly perpetuating the myth of male supremacy. And it maintained

that women had little hope of achieving equality of opportunity in society until they had won equal access to education.

Poullain anticipated many of the debates about social issues and reform techniques that still wax hot in our world. He was not a systematic philosopher like Descartes. He did not construct mathematical and mechanical models to explain his positions or advance the techniques of Cartesian argument. But he was a Cartesian in the sense that he grasped the potential of Cartesianism as an instrument for social reform. He did not lay out a detailed program for revolutionary action. *But he sensed how the world of ordinary people might be opened up when the past no longer shackled thinkers and when people imbued with the habit of clear thinking entered on the race's ancient quest for certainty."*

"Poullain was a theorist for feminism, but the raising of consciousness about the wrongs society inflicts on women was only part of what he hoped his book would achieve. *His goal in writing was not just to dispel prejudices about women, but to convert his readers to a method of thinking that he was convinced would free them from all kinds of error.* Poullain was a convert to Cartesianism. He hoped that De l'Egalite would vindicate his faith"

Note: This article was sourced from the Stanford encyclopaedia of philosophy

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/francois-barre/>