

The Equality of the Two Sexes

Francois Poullain de la Barre

1673

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1. "After discontinuing his formal studies, Poullain spent about ten years as a tutor in Latin at one of the Parisian colleges. From a literary point of view, this decade was the most productive of his life. In 1672 he wrote his textbook on translation (*Les Rapports de la langue Latine a la Francoise*). In 1672 he published *De l'Egalite des deux Sexes*, and in 1674 a treatise on the education of women (*De l'Education des Dames pour la conduite de l'esprit dans les sceinces et dans les moeurs*). In the latter books Poullain used Cartesian principles to critique common assumptions about sexual stereotypes. Since he advanced unconventional ideas about women and defended their fitness to play the same role in society as men, he expected his books to make a splash. When they did not, he was openly disappointed. In 1675 he tried a different strategy. In *De l'excellence des hommes contres l'egalite des sexes* he took on the duties of devil's advocate, but his discussion of the arguments for male supremacy attracted little attention. Someone, however, was interested in what Poullain had to say, for in 1676 an anonymous translator (identified only as A.L.) brought out an English version of *De l'Egalite* (entitled: *The Woman as Good as the Man, or the Equality of Both Sexes*).

Disappointment at the reception his books received may have contributed to Poullain's belated decision to enter the career for which his early schooling had prepared him. In 1680, at the age of thirty-three, he was ordained to the Catholic priesthood and sent to serve a parish in the archbishopric of Laon. His experience as a priest could not have been pleasant. Having spent his whole life in Paris at the center of things, he was relegated in middle age to an obscure, poverty-stricken rural parish. There, at the time when (as his subsequent decision to flee to Geneva suggests) he must have been entertaining Protestant thoughts, he served an episcopal administration that was extremely hostile to Protestantism. Poullain's disillusionment with scholastic theology and his faith in the Cartesian idea that individuals should be the final arbiters of truth for themselves must have made it difficult for him to endure the authoritarianism of his bishop.

In October of 1685 events conspired to increase pressure on him. Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes and expelled the Huguenots from France. Poullain may have got into some difficulty with his ecclesiastical superiors over his willingness to cooperate with the government's policy. IN 1685 he appears to have been transferred to an even more remote parish than the one to which he had first been posted. Plainly his career in the Church was not flourishing and the points of view that he had advocated in his books were not congruent with those of the men who now had power over him.

At some point in 1688 Poullain made the decision to leave the priesthood and the Catholic Church. He returned to Paris for a brief period of time, but

there was no future for him in the city of his birth. He prepared to leave France, and on 14 December 1689 he registered an application for a residency permit in Geneva. The Protestant city granted Poullain the status of a religious refuge, and Poullain embarked on a new and more promising phase in his career. His education, books, or connections won him admission to the circle of Geneva's prominent families, and early in 1690 he married a magistrate's daughter. Later that year they had a daughter, and Poullain renewed his literary activity. Second editions of *De l'Egalite* and *De l'excellence des hommes* were brought out. Six years later Poullain became the father of his only other child, a son. (Jean Jacques de la Barre grew up to become a Protestant clergyman and, like his father, a publishing scholar.)" p. xv-xvii

2. "As a youth of about twenty, Poullain was drawn into the Cartesian sphere of influence. From the meager biographical information that can be gleaned from his writings it appears that an invitation to a public lecture led him to convert to Cartesianism about 1667. Poullain expressed his new-found enthusiasm for the method of "systematic doubt" by designing a project that would demonstrate its utility. He embarked on an extensive study of human prejudice. the issue of sexual inequality was an ideal vehicle for this purpose. What better way to illustrate how social custom - reinforced by the learned opinions of the ancients -creates a heavy weight of prejudice that men (and women themselves) accept as unquestioned fact? If by rational deduction from "clear and distinct ideas" Poullain could demonstrate that the seemingly self-evident inequality of the sexes is nothing more than an unfounded prejudice, he could graphically illustrate the virtues of the new methodology he championed.

In 1673 Poullain presented his case by publishing *De l'Egalite des deux Sexes*. Poullain's approach in this treatise is an excellent example of the kind of applied Cartesian rationalism that was becoming popular in France in his day. Starting from a position of "systematic doubt," Poullain rejects the traditions and assumptions that customarily promote belief in the inequality of the sexes and accepts only those characterizations of men and women that are "clear and distinct ideas." 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

3. "*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." p. xxvi - xxvii

4. "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 in Descartes by demonstrating the value of the Cartesian method. Poullain wanted to show that a straightforward analysis of facts, which reason and sense make obvious to every intelligent observer, rids people of the errors and prejudices in which tradition mires them." p. xxviii
5. "Much of the literature on the allegedly feminist side of the *querelle* would be offensive to modern feminists. It was flattering, but condescending. Its aim

was to praise women, not to create new opportunities for them in public life. It consoled women for their lack of political power by assuring them that they were too refined for the burdens that coarse males bore in running the world. It taught women that it was their privilege and duty to stand above the fray and witness to the higher values which men often lost sight. Much of this "feminist" writing was a mere amusement for courtiers - an opportunity to demonstrate the wit and gallantry that were the hallmark of the manners cultivated by the upper classes.¹

Poullain designed the *Preface* to *De l'Egalite* to make sure that no one would confuse him with the "courtly feminists." The *Preface* advised the book's readers not to let a mere title prompt them to a hasty conclusion about a volume's content. Poullain knew that he was likely to be misunderstood, for he confessed at the start that nothing required more care than laying out thoughts about women - particularly for male authors taking up the feminist cause. Poullain worried that the man who defends women is always assumed to be acting from self-interest (i.e., pursuing a reputation for gallantry that will win him sexual prizes). Poullain insists that *De l'Egalite* has a much more serious purpose. By dispelling prejudices against women it teaches people how the mind should work. This ought to promote improvements in women's condition, but Poullain is not particularly concerned with the practical implications of his argument for sexual equality. 1 Michael A. Seidel, "Poullain de la Barre's *The Woman as Good as the Man*," *The Journal of the History of Ideas*, XXV (July/Sept 1974), p. 501, offers a brief survey of this literature. " pp. xxix - xxx

6. "Poullain believed that when we break through the prejudicial opinions that society perpetuates about women to the clear and distinct ideas of nature, we discover that the sexes are equal. But to do this, we must confront two different kinds of defenses against truth: the assumptions made by ordinary people and the theories defended by professional scholars. In the first part of his treatise Poullain dealt with the common person, and in the second he took on the arguments of experts. The conclusion he came to in both cases is that a woman's failings are a result of the inadequate education she is given." pp xxx - xxxi
7. "Reflection on the probable course of humanity's social evolution led Poullain to conclude that the dominance of the male was a historical accident - not a conscious plot or a dynamic of nature. Poullain assumed that men have always struggled among themselves for dominance and that this behavior eventually spilled over into family relationships. Poullain was a pioneer in a field that might be dubbed "speculative anthropology." He thought that it was possible, using reason alone, to infer what life was like before civilization and historical records appeared. He assumed that, without institutions to establish pecking orders, men and women had an equal start in the state of nature. Primitive people played at dominating each other, but they shared the work of survival equally and they automatically honored him or her the most who made the largest contribution to the community.

Over the long haul, however, the burden of pregnancy disadvantaged women. Poullain theorized that pregnancy limited a woman's ability to work

and made her dependent on a man for help. As more children were born to her, her need for a mate to help support them increased. The result was the evolution of the family. And as the family increased in size, it forced a more elaborate system of organization on society.

Children naturally honored their fathers, but, when father died, younger brothers would not inevitably accept the yoke of an older brother's authority. Power struggles might emerge within families. These would result in one male establishing dominance over the females and some of the younger males of a kinship group. But a few of the new leader's siblings would choose exile rather than submission. Possessing no patrimony, they would form warrior bands with other outcasts and prey on the property of their neighbors. These associations of brigands laid the foundations for states - the next step in social organization beyond the family. Despising those whom it conquered as weaklings, the new warrior class enslaved its victims and created societies where soldiers were supported by serfs.

Poullain believed that women had no role to play in the rise of the military state, for they were not physically adapted to warfare and were innately "too humane" to enter into the fight to dispossess their neighbors. (Poullain was not immune to infection by the prejudices of "gallantry.") The fact that women did not fight put them at a great disadvantage in competition with men. For when armies became essential to the survival of states, males came to be preferred to females. And militaristic societies, which needed efficient leadership and rigid organization, naturally assumed that authority was a male prerogative. Kings and social classes appeared. Formal religion was established. Men took control of all the institutions that ran communities. Women were confined to the home and so burdened with domestic responsibilities that they had no leisure for anything else." p xxxii - xxxiii

8. "Poullain concluded from his theory of evolution that, although the system of male dominance was universal, it was rooted in history, not nature. He bolstered this point by noting that no one could claim that power had shifted to men simply because males were best adapted to handle it. If that were the case and the world were that rational, then only the men who are best suited to rule would rise to power in each generation. No one who has any knowledge of how things operate could argue seriously that this is the case. Power does not come to those who have the best natural capacity to wield it. It is in the hands of those whom the accidents of history have best situated to seize it. Woman's exclusion from positions of leadership is no argument against woman's ability to handle the responsibility of power. It is a function of a chain of events that would have been different if society had taken another path of evolution." p. xxxiv
9. "Poullain hastened to add that he did not believe that every women [sic] was equipped to handle a position of public responsibility. He only meant to point out that the community of females probably had as many gifted individuals as the community of males. But, in reality, Poullain was willing to venture a little further than this. He suggested that if woman's nature is what it is popularly believed to be, women are more likely than men to possess the traits we want in our leaders. Poullain pointed out that little girls are often

found to be cleverer, quicker to learn, more diligent, and more self-controlled than little boys. Although these are the qualities that supposedly equip young men to become leaders, nothing is done to educate young women who show the same signs of promise. All attention is focused on their brothers, and girls are allowed to languish in ignorance. (Poullain confessed - with more than a little note of sarcasm in his voice - that reflection convinced him that in many cases young women who were deprived of educations were better off than their brothers. The educations boys are given, Poullain said, rarely make them better men. They are still such barbarians when they leave school that, before they can be introduced into society, they must be turned over to women for training in manners and decent conduct.)

Since women are not spoiled by bad educations, women at least have a chance to follow whatever good impulses nature has rooted in their characters. As a result, Poullain believed that women tend to be more morally fastidious, more naturally graceful, and of sounder opinions than men. Poullain objected to the kind of training available in the schools of his day. He felt that it burdened men with a welter of prejudices, muddled their thinking, and confused their speech with meaningless jargon. Women were better off relying on common sense. As proof of this, Poullain claimed to have quizzed women from all walks of life on several of the scientific and theological questions debated in the schools. He reported that he had never found a woman who professed any opinions as outlandish as those defended by experts in scholastic philosophy. Poullain said that women tend to be less disputatious, more open-minded, and quicker to penetrate to the heart of a matter than a man who has been taught the logic chopping and hair-splitting of the university." p. xxxv - xxxvi

10. "At first glance, Poullain observed, historians seem to be more trustworthy than poets, for they seek truth and claim to have no preconceptions about their subject matters. But all that historians usually do is to confirm modern opinions by reporting on ancient prejudices. Poullain was thoroughly modern in his belief that ancient authors were not to be trusted unless there was independent evidence to confirm what they said. He believed that the study of history could be useful to the feminist cause, however, for it turns up many stories of women who did not conform to our expectations about their gender. It shows us that women have led nations, commanded armies, defended fortresses, and mastered sciences. The historical record of their achievements gives the lie to those who claim that women are inferior creatures.

Since lawyers deal in justice - giving each person his or her due - their opinion of women carries great weight. But Poullain warned that we must be wary of what lawyers teach. All laws have been made by males for their own convenience, and it has never been necessary for men to grant women equal rights in order to achieve the primary goal of law (the preservation of order). " p. xxxviii

11. "Having made a case for education as a universal good and an end in itself, Poullain raised the question of why educated women should not be given access to all the jobs that educated men do. Since knowledge equips us to

govern ourselves and to govern others, why should educated women not be promoted to positions of responsibility in our communities?

The most natural use that can be made of an education is to pass it on to others, and women who acquire academic degrees could easily become teachers - posts for which their natural facility with words especially fits them. The skills that make them good teachers also equip them for the ministry. Women could preach and provide spiritual counseling just as well as men. Women could interpret justice, maintain order, and rule nations. A woman's uniquely compassionate nature might even, Poullain suggested, make her a better monarch than a man. Since governmental posts require nothing that is markedly different from the kinds of thinking that women do every day in running their homes and pursuing their entertainments, Poullain saw no reason why women could not lead armies, preside over courts of law, and handle any office in the state." pp. xlii - xliii

12. "If women are sometimes credulous and superstitious, we must recall that their minds have not been trained to think clearly. Their inadequacies of their educations also explain why women are accused of being garrulous." p. xlvi
13. "As a convert to Cartesianism, Poullain was contemptuous of the medieval methods of debate in which he had been trained at the Parisian schools. He believed that common sense sufficed to permit a person to see through the absurdities of scholastic arguments, and he had little reverence for the great philosophers who were worshipped by the scholastics. . . .

Plato's speculation that women were less human than men and deserved to be classed with the animals was silly enough, Poullain said, to deprive Plato of any credibility on the issue of women. Aristotle's claim that women were travesties of men - monsters - is likewise, in Poullain's opinion, a piece of nonsense. Who, he asked, is shocked or surprised at the sight of a woman - as he would be if he encountered a monster? Women have been around as long as men, and it makes as much sense to criticize Aristotle for being different from women as to complain that women are different from Aristotle. Although Poullain had not mentioned Philo earlier in his text, he had already offered his refutation of Philo's theory that women were imperfect men. Since both sexes are equally necessary to the act of reproduction, each one is imperfect when judged according to the functions of the other - but perfect in terms of its own mission. Poullain dismissed Socrates as a man angered by a shrewish wife and made resentful by an ugly face that robbed him of luck with the ladies. Diogenes's malicious epigrams were nothing more than expressions of spleen and attempts to get a rise out of an audience. Democritus was a comedian whose specious arguments can easily be turned against him. And Cato condemned women for failing tests of self-control that men could not pass.

Poullain concluded from his brief survey of the literature that there was nothing in this ancient twaddle of profit to the modern world. The true wonder, he remarked, was that "serious men" could try to make "serious use" of old jokes. Their behavior, Poullain suggested, was but another proof of the blindness that prejudice inflicts on people who ought to know better." pp. xlvi - xlvii

14. "In regard to the sacred authority of the Bible, Poullain was more circumspect. He said that he ignored the Scriptures because he did not think that they had anything to say that was relevant to his topic. His intent was to argue for the equality of the sexes, and he maintained that there is nothing in the Bible about inequality. Further, he explained that the Bible is intended to be read as an ethical guide that leaves each person free to judge "the nature and true state of things." Poullain accused those who use the Bible to denigrate women of doing violence to the Word of God. He said that they develop sophistic arguments to twist the meaning of Scripture. They lift passages out of context and apply to all women injunctions that were meant only for a few in particular situations. Or they assume that nature and divine law are the causes of things that, in reality, spring from custom and education.

A few brief sentences - no matter how advanced they were in anticipating the canons of interpretation used by modern textual critiques - were inadequate to lay the Bible to rest. It was not long, therefore, before Poullain was at work on a second book (*De l'Excellence des hommes*) that dealt extensively with Scriptural material. *De l'Excellence des hommes* and *De l'Egalite des deux Sexes* supplement each other so neatly that in 1690 they were published in one volume." p. 1

15. "*The Equality of the Sexes*

Part One

In which it is demonstrated that ordinary belief is a prejudice and that, when the conduct of men and of women is compared without bias, a complete equality between the two sexes must be recognized." p. 13

16. "The wisest legislators, in founding their republics, have established nothing that helps women with respect to this situation. All laws seem to have been made only to maintain men in the position where they are. Almost all the men who have passed for experts and who have spoken about women have said nothing in their favor. The behavior of men towards them is found to be so uniform through the centuries and across the whole earth that it seems that men have formed a pact - or better, as many have imagined, that men have been led to use women in this way by an unconscious instinct (i.e., by a universal mandate of the Creator.)" p. 21
17. Poullain's theory on the creation of government is found on pages 23-25.
18. "We have little basis for pretending that the most highly capable people of the day are those of their generation who have the great natural aptitude for the things in which they shine - and that among such a great number of people engulfed in ignorance there is none who would excel them if given the same means that others have had." p. 33
19. "However, although the behavior of the two sexes when they are still in their cradles already suffices to convince us that the fairest sex also offers the most attractive potential, we pay no mind. Tutors and instruction are only for men. We take particular care to teach males everything that we believe is most suited to shaping the mind, while we allow females to languish in idleness, softness, and ignorance - or to grovel in the lowest, most base activities.

But, likewise, it only takes eyes to see that the two sexes are in this like two brothers in a family - where the younger often shows (notwithstanding the negligence with which he is raised) that his elder [sibling] is superior to him only in being born first.

What end does the education given men ordinarily serve? It is mostly useless for the purpose for which it is proposed. It does not prevent many of them from falling into dissoluteness and vice and other of them from remaining permanently ignorant (even becoming yet more foolish than they were). If they have some decency, playfulness, and civility, they lose it through education. Everything grates on them, and they grate on everything. One might say they had spent their whole youths travelling [sic] in a country where they had associated solely with savages (so much rudeness and coarseness in manners do they take home with them). What they have learned is like contraband merchandise that they do not dare or do not know how to sell. If they wish to enter the world and cut a good figure there, they are obliged to go to the "school of women" to learn courtesy, kindness and all the visible signs that make up the essence of a gentleman today.

If we consider this closely, instead of despising women because they have no share of learning, we will esteem them fortunate. For it, on the one hand, they have been deprived of the means to cause their talents and unique aptitudes to be respected, on the other hand they have not had the occasion to spoil or lose these talents and aptitudes. And in spite of this deprivation, they grow in virtue, in intellect, and in good grace in proportion to their growth in years. If, without prejudice, we compare young men at the end of their schooling with women of the same age and equivalent intelligence (without knowing how both were raised), we would believe that they had had completely contrary educations." pp 35-37

20. *"The Equality of the Sexes*

Part Two

In which it is demonstrated that the evidence against the equality of the sexes taken from the works of poets, orators, historians, lawyers, and philosophers is completely futile and useless." p. 63

21. "We could entirely do without princes, soldiers, and merchants (as people did at the beginning of the world, and as savages do today). But in our infancies we cannot do without women." p. 69
22. "Nothing but a fantasy has led to women being unappreciated." p. 71
23. "However, the ancients were no less men than ourselves (i.e., no less subject to error), and we need no sooner surrender now to their opinions than we would have in their own day." p. 71
24. "We must take into account that those who have made or compiled the laws, being men, have favored their sex (as women would perhaps have done if they had been in their place). And the laws, having been laid down from the beginning of society as they are now with respect to women, legal scholars,

who also have their prejudices, have attributed to nature a distinction that derives from custom alone." p. 75

25. "It is easy to realize that the difference between the sexes concerns only the body - being, correctly, only [in] this part that serves for the production of men. Since the mind participates [in this activity] only by giving its assent (and giving it in all people in the same manner), we can conclude that it is sexless." p. 85
26. "God joins the mind to the flesh of a woman as to that of a man, and He unites them by the same laws. Feelings, passions, and will make and maintain this union. And the mind, not functioning differently in one sex than in the other, is equally capable of the same things [in both]." p. 85