On Mexican Philosophy

Lecture 3: If Aristotle Had Cooked

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> "There is not as much to admire in the beauty of a structure built on a solid foundation as there is to admire in one built on a weak foundation, which still has the capacity to dazzle with its brilliance"
> —Sor Juana, Carta Atenagorica, p. 219 (*Selected Writings*)

Introduction

Juana Ramírez de Asbaje (1648-1695), better known as Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, was perhaps the most formidable 17th century intellect in the Americas. Born in 1648 in San Miguel Nepantla, she spent most of her life in a cloister in Mexico City, serving as an administrator and bookkeeper of the wealthiest convent in New Spain (Aspe 2018: 90-1). She was an autodidact—not by choice but by necessity since, because of her sex, she was denied formal education. Even so, she read widely, taking every opportunity to acquire books. During her lifetime she built one of the largest private libraries in the Americas (between 1500-4000 volumes, according to different estimates), although religious authorities ultimately forced her to sell it off.

Sor Juana claims to have learned to read in Spanish at age 3, and to have learned to read Latin with only 20 lessons. In her teenage years, fame about her learning and prodigious abilities gained the attention of the Spanish Viceroy of New Spain. He was reputed to have ordered her to be examined by the leading scholars and intellectuals of her day, and to have astonished them with the depth and breadth of her learning.

Furthermore, she eventually came to be regarded as one of the finest Latin American poets of the Baroque period, composing influential works in Spanish, Latin, and Nahuatl. Within her lifetime, her literary contributions were celebrated on both sides of the Atlantic. Juana's poetic writings ranged over a wide array of subject matters. Many of her most important works of poetry were centrally concerned with philosophical issues. Of particular importance in this way was, "The Dream," or "First Dream." The poem is standardly read as an account of a dreaming and ungendered intellect that aspires to philosophical knowledge (Gaos 1960; Aspe 2018).

Although she was best known for her poetry and plays, Sor Juana was a polymath. What survives of her writing reveals wide-ranging interests in science, philosophy, history, and mythology. In addition to poetry, songs, and plays, she is known to have written devotional guides, a book on music theory, and a considerable number of letters on a wide range of issues.

Today, when she is read outside of the Spanish-speaking world, it is frequently on account of her "Response to Sor Filotea," (1691) a lengthy letter that sets out a rigorous and detailed defense of women's rights—especially to education and scholarship. In this piece, and in a handful of other letters, she explicitly takes up a number of theological and philosophical issues as well.

Despite the manifestly philosophical concerns animating notable portions of her work, there are barriers to the ready reception of her work in the wider philosophical world. For many contemporary philosophers, her intellectual influences—Latin literature, scholastic theology, and the influence of the Counter-Reformation—can make her work appear to be at considerable remove from contemporary interests. Moreover, as Jorge Gracia has noted, “her style, as a humanist, was not what counts as strictly philosophical in the West” (Gracia 2010: 257).

Given her undisputed standing in the pantheon of Spanish literary figures, there is little risk that Sor Juana will go unread any time soon. (I suspect that one can, with reasonable reliability, identify whether a group of people have been educated in Mexico by asking if anyone in the room can finish off the opening sentence of her poem, which begins: “Hombres necios . . . “) There are mountains of scholarship on her and her work, and many of the most distinguished figures in the Spanish-speaking world have grappled with it and its significance.

What there is comparatively less of, though, is serious and systematic engagement with the philosophical elements of her thought. So, my goal here is two-fold: to identify some of the philosophically promising ideas in Sor Juana’s work, and to advance some new readings of familiar themes in it. I’ll start by canvassing some of Sor Juana’s views about gender and social construction. I’ll then take up a number of issues in Sor Juana’s epistemology, including her account of the conditions of effective knowledge production and an interesting and surprising argument for (limited) skepticism about the possibility of theology. I’ll conclude with a discussion of a distinctive proposal she advances in the context of philosophical theology.

Social construction

For present purposes, we can hold that something is socially constructed if its status or nature is defined or produced by social practices, social meanings, or norms and expectations about the thing in question.

Any reader of Sor Juana’s work will soon discover that she is acutely attuned to the social construction of psychological dispositions, and the way social expectations create a double-bind for women. Although these views surface in some of her prose writings, they are most visible in her poetic work. Redondilla 92 is justly-regarded as a highlight on this score. (Her poetry, it is worth noting, is frequently untitled, apart from the form and number it was given in her collected works.) I’ll present chunks of it below, but if you haven’t read the whole thing, do yourself a favor, because excerpts can’t convey its full complexity.

I’ll limit my remarks to three ideas in this poem: (1) the thought that social expectations create real dispositions in people; (2) the idea of a pervasive double-bind in women’s gender roles;

and (3) in the case of gender our norms for how we assign culpability reflect social power, and not the underlying moral faults.

First, she identifies the role that male expectations play in the construction of women's dispositions and behavior [English translation from Grossman; pp. 20-22[1]]

O foolish men who accuse	Hombres necios que acusáis
women with so little cause,	a la mujer sin razón
not seeing you are the reason	sin ver que sois la ocasión
for the very thing you blame:	de lo mismo que culpáis:
for if with unequaled longing	si con ansia sin igual
you solicit their disdain,	solicitáis su desdén
why wish them to behave well	¿por qué queréis que obren bien
when you urge them on to evil?	si las incitáis al mal?
. . .	. . .
The audacity of your mad	Parecer quiere el denuedo
belief resembles that of the	de vuestro parecer loco
child who devises a monster	al niño que pone el coco
and then afterward fears it.	y luego le tiene miedo.
. . . .	. . .
Love them for what you can make them	Queredlas cual las hacéis
or make them what you can love.	O hacedlas cual las buscáis.

We don't know the exact date of the composition of the poem, apart from the fact that it was written in the second half of the 17th century; which is to say, more than a century before Wollstonecraft, Harriet and John Stuart Mill—among other various English-language figures—began to articulate a systematic defense of feminism. The implication of these passages is clear: women's putative nature is the product of male-produced social expectations, in particular, the dual expectations of sexual access and upright morals.

Central to Sor Juana's diagnosis is the idea that women are faced with a double-bind. No matter what they choose—chastity or sexual activity—they will be condemned by their suitors.

> You think highly of no woman,
> no matter how modest: if she
> rejects you she is ungrateful,
> and if she accepts, unchaste.

This fact gives the lie to the way operative social norms assign guilt. Women bear the entirety of moral condemnation for whatever they choose. In contrast, men are largely left untouched by condemnation.

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[1] Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Obras completas* (México, D.F.: Porrúa, 1997), 109.

Who carries the greater guilt in a passion gone astray: the woman, beseeched, who falls, or the man who begged her to yield?	¿Cuál mayor culpa ha tenido en una pasión errada: la que cae de rogada, o el que ruega de caído?
Or which one merits more blame although both deserve our censure: the woman who sins for pay, or the man who pays to sin?	¿O cuál es más de culpar, aunque cualquiera mal haga: la que peca por la paga, o el que paga por pecar?
But why are you so alarmed by the guilt you plainly deserve?	Pues ¿para qué os espantáis de la culpa que tenéis?

This situation is, of course, manifestly unjust. Men have created the double-bind and they enforce it. Although men are the ones paying for prostitution, women are the ones who pay the social costs. Given that men enjoy greater social power, the putatively condemnable choices of women are a lie—although all prostitution is condemnable, the bulk of the guilt should be placed on men who create the demand and social conditions under which prostitution flourishes.

Sor Juana is, of course, focused on the particular case of women in 17th century Mexico. The basic structure of her analysis, however, appears to generalize: we should be alert to social circumstances in which subordinated populations face choices in which all options are stigmatized; and in such cases, we do well to direct our attention to the social expectations and conditions that produce forced choices between stigmatized options.

Sor Juana is not interested in letting women entirely off the hook: she is prepared to find fault in the behavior of women. However, that fault is mitigated in socially subordinated populations when the guilt-producing conditions are knowingly produced by a dominant population, or where the culpable behavior is a product of persistent enticement.

The idea that social practices and social expectations produce self-fulfilling prophecies about people's capacities is an interesting and important one. Sor Juana's focus is on gender, but the idea taps into an old debate about the nature of human beings and how they are made (think: the Las Casas/Sepúlveda debate). Sor Juana doesn't stop with this observation, though. Instead, she notes the possibility that we can do better, that we can improve ourselves by focusing less on the condemnation of individuals and more on the social practices that make people that way: "Love them for what you can make them/or make them what you can love."

There is, of course, more that we could say about these themes in Sor Juana's work, and more places where her poetry has manifestly philosophical content. In particular, "First Dream" offers an especially rich and suggestive account of the intellect, and the knowing power of the human mind. On these issues, one place to start is with Jose Gaos' (1960) discussion of that poem.

I'll touch on some further themes from her poetry in what follows, but I want to turn our attention to Sor Juana's "Reply to Sor Filotea," oftentimes known simply as "La respuesta" or "The Reply." This lengthy letter is one place where Sor Juana's philosophical convictions are extensive and readily extracted, and it deserves a more extended focus.

La respuesta

The full historical context that led up to Sor Juana writing "La respuesta" is a matter dispute among scholars. The disagreement is kept alive by both the limited information we have about the period, and the recent and (one hopes) ongoing discovery of more of Sor Juana's writings (Cf. Paz 1988: 491-5, Soriano Vallès 2014: 49-52; Aspe 2018: xx-xx).

The uncontested facts are these: in 1690 Sor Juana offered some criticisms of an old sermon by a prominent Portuguese Jesuit, Antonio Vieira. Someone asked her to write up her thoughts on the issue, and this document was circulated among the lettered elite of Mexico City. Eventually, and ostensibly without her permission, Sor Juana's friend and the Bishop of Puebla, Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz, published Sor Juana's critique of Vieira as the "Carta Atenagorica." That publication also included a pseudonymous letter by Fernández (under the name "Sor Filotea de Santa Cruz") that praised Sor Juana's work, while also recommending that she spend more time on theological matters and less time on the various worldly writings. A few months later, in 1691, Sor Juana penned "La respuesta" or the "Response to Sor Filotea." The argumentation in that letter overlaps with the arguments she made a decade earlier (1681) to another priest, Antonio Núñez de Miranda, when she dismissed him as her confessor. There, her reply was at least in part to his criticisms of her writing (More 2016: 144).

Sor Juana's reply to Sor Filotea is a masterpiece of argumentation, with her extended defense of women's right to education standing out most starkly for contemporary audiences. Less obvious and less familiar are a variety of epistemic issues that come up along the way (more about which, below). She is also keenly interested in the ways social conditions can mitigate or enhance people's culpability, a theme to which she returns throughout her reply.

Part of what makes "La respuesta" such a fascinating document is that in it Sor Juana is carefully avoids framing any of her claims as revolutionary. Where she is innovative, she intentionally characterizes her innovations as extensions of a tradition—often Catholic, but also frequently pre-Christian and classical. Moreover, she cautiously avoids claiming that she knows anything, insisting, instead, only that she has loved knowledge and letters ("I do not wish to say . . . that I have been persecuted for knowing, only for loving knowledge and letters, because I have achieved neither" (2016: 107).

She opens her reply by explicitly accepting Fernández's admonition that she direct more of her time to studying spiritual matters, but she then proceeds to justify her long history of attention to those secular matters he directed her to avoid. She notes that, first, apart from "First Dream," her writing has always been at the request of others. Second, she insists that her impulse to write and to study is a powerful God-given inclination—an impulse oriented toward some proper end. She claims that she has sought to suppress that inclination, but to no avail.

Her effort to signal that she is obeying Fernández's command, and not at fault for having acted otherwise, is presumably bound up in the significance of her status as a nun. In the New Spain of Sor Juana's day—especially after the Council of Trent—the idealized image of a nun involved her being in "holy" or "blessed" ignorance. This picture of religious life was coupled to a view according to which nuns were to be absolutely faithful to commands by the church hierarchy. Indeed, in a doctrinal guide authored by Sor Juana's sometimes confessor, the Jesuit Antonio Núñez de Miranda, nuns were directed to "renounce [their] own will and freedom" (cited in More 2016: 133 n. 2).

The historical context explains why Sor Juana goes to such lengths to illustrate her efforts to suppress these impulses, and to show that she acted on them in a quasi-pathological way. These are not inclinations that she sought, and on the contrary she had "asked Him [God] to dim the light of [her] understanding, leaving only enough for [her] to obey His Law." And why would she ask for such a thing? Because, "anything else is too much in a woman, according to some; there are even those who say it does harm" (2016: 95). That she succeeded in attaining fame for her writing did not even entail the customary rewards, because her success largely functioned to turn her into a target: "men surpass brutes only in understanding; and since no one wants to be less than another, no man confesses that another understands more" (2016: 105).

A large portion of the reply is autobiographical, with the aim of illustrating the scope and depths of her desire. Because she is at pains to paint it as a divinely inspired drive, it is important to her to illustrate that her intellect is in fact well-suited for these studies. Thus, the barriers she encountered in her studies play a dual role: (1) they show that she is apt for learning, as evidenced by the fact that she has learned so much despite these barriers, and (2) they show that this was not a matter of some one-off poorly considered choice, but instead, some fundamental feature of how she was constituted.

This autobiography, though, also turns into a philosophical Trojan Horse, housing a theory of the social conditions of effective knowledge transmission, with the implied condemnation of the gendered nature of education in her time. It also becomes a vehicle for a subtle and interesting argument against most theological work in her time. Naturally, in making these arguments she asserts that she is doing so out of obedience to turn her attention to matters recommended to her by the bishop (114).

On matters epistemic

One of the remarkable features of Sor Juana's reply to Fernández ("Sor Filotea") is the picture she paints of what kinds of social conditions there are on knowledge transmission and production, and how far the situation in New Spain was from that ideal. She uses her own experience as an illustration of the problems, but much of what she wrote has proved to be prescient.

First, as a woman who was denied access to formal education, she had simply been left with the books themselves. As she put it, “I learned how difficult it is to study those soulless characters without the living voice and explanations of a teacher” (97). The result was, she claimed, decidedly suboptimal. Her method (again, the only one available to her) of unguided reading proved to be a grotesquely inefficient one.

Second, the denial of formal education didn’t just mean that she lacked informed guidance about what to read and about the meaning of texts. It also meant that she lacked peers with whom to confer about the various subject matters she sought to learn and with whom to practice the necessary intellectual skills.

Third, she suggests that learning requires something of a room of one’s own. By her lights, she had little interest in a marriage and the convent seemed to provide a better place to pursue her interests. However, as she was quick to point out, the ordinary demands of convent life were hardly conducive to efficient learning (102).

Fourth, material conditions of effective knowledge transmission require access to the relevant texts. Her own haphazard education reflected the accidents of which books were available, and not her interests or what might have been a more sensibly-organized education (100).

Despite the disadvantages she faced with respect to the social and material conditions conducive to learning and producing knowledge, she did think that she had made an important discovery: in formal and speculative areas (as opposed to the technical arts), spreading out one’s efforts and attentions across subject matters has important advantages, “for one subject illuminates and opens a path in another by means of variations and hidden connections . . . so that it seems they correspond and are joined with admirable unity and harmony” (101). One specific implication seems to be that those whose education is narrow have an impoverished understanding. Her own case, she says, is that knowledge of diverse disciplines has what we would now call a network effect: the more subjects you know things about, the more you can readily learn about new subjects.

The more general implication, though, is that one achieves a better understanding of God’s creation by ranging widely over it. This thought has echoes of Ignatius’ injunction to the Jesuit order to “find God in all things.” Sor Juana, someone well familiar with Jesuit thought in the 17th century, returns to this theme in several places. In perhaps the most paradigmatic passage in this spirit, she notes that even when she was prohibited from book learning for a time, she found that she still could study the world, and that her “book was the entire mechanism of the universe” (108). She goes on to argue that everyday life provided plenty of questions about topics as diverse as the origin of the varieties of intelligence, the variations in tempers, the nature of optical perspective, whether there are patterns in the way tops move, and the recurring presence of geometric shapes in nature (108-9).

All of this is a prelude to one of the most interesting aspects of Sor Juana’s discussion: the effects of an epistemic world structured by gender. As Sor Juana sees it, there are things that men cannot and will not know, because gender roles partition the possibility of certain kinds of knowledge. The way institutions of knowledge production and knowledge dissemination are structured means that we are doing a bad job of learning and teaching all that there is to know, and thus, we do violence to our own understanding of the world (and correspondingly, God's construction of it).

Here's how Sor Juana puts it:

> "And what could I tell you, señora, about the natural secrets I have discovered when cooking? Seeing that an egg set and fries in butter or oil but falls apart in syrup; seeing that for sugar to remain liquid it is enough to add a very small amount of water in which a quince or other bitter fruit has been placed. . . . what can we women know but kitchen philosophies? As Lupercio Leonardo so wisely said, one can philosophize very well and prepare supper. And seeing these minor details, I say that if Aristotle had cooked, he would have written a great deal more" (110).

The force of this point is hard for the modern reader to miss. Beyond simply putting herself in an intellectual tradition with Aristotle, she is making the compelling point that in a gendered world, *knowledge is gendered*. This has far-reaching implications, the most obvious of which is that in a world in which a gender hierarchy structures access to knowledge, we are all likely to be inferior knowers.

Do things have to be that way? No, she thinks. It is possible to conceive of more epistemically egalitarian arrangements, in particular a world that doesn't preclude giving women a more prominent role in a variety of intellect-dependent domains. We would be better off, she thinks, if "older women were as learned as Leta" (115). She recognizes that in her social context, people might have protested that there is scant evidence that, apart from Sor Juana herself, women were readily capable of developing their intellects in this way. So, she offers a veritable catalog of classical and Christian women who achieved success in law and learning.

The ongoing fact of a gendered world is not just damaging to the transmission and achievement of knowledge, it also puts terrible psychological burdens on women subjected to this regime. She notes that the most hurtful effects were not from open enemies, but those who "loving me and desiring my welfare" would tell her that "she will surely be lost, and at such heights her own perspicacity and wit are bound to make her vain" (103). The thought seems to be that it was her friends who sowed the kind of doubt about the value of her studies, and about the virtue-destroying effects of those studies, that was most difficult to bear. It is not quite gaslighting in the contemporary sense of the term—that is, the manipulation of someone by questioning their sanity—but it is not far from it.

An important part of the picture is Sor Juana's commitment to the idea of the rationality of women. In "La respuesta," the case for women's rationality and suitability for education is made largely by appeal to other instances, thereby implying a buried history of women's contributions.

However, Sor Juana's broader picture of the intellect seems to be that minds are not sexed, even if bodies are. This idea appears in several places throughout her work. It is a widely recognized feature of the structure of "First Dream," in which the narrator's intellect is effectively unmarked by Spanish-language gendered pronouns. This changes at the end of the poem, when the narrator is waking up, with the pronoun becoming female as the mind and body re-integrate. It is also made explicit in her earlier letter to Núñez de Miranda:

> "But who has forbidden women from private and individual study? Do they not have rational souls just as men? Why should they not also enjoy the privilege of enlightenment through letters? Is her soul not as capable of divine grace and glory as his? If it is, why is hers not also capable of receiving learning and knowledge, which are lesser gifts? What divine revelation, what Church policy, what reasonable verdict could have made such a sever law only for women?" (2016: 148).

She sounds this note towards the end of her letter to Fernández, arguing that there was no crime in her critique of Vieira's sermon because (a) the Church does not forbid her expressing her opinion, (b) Vieira was in conflict with established Church authorities, and most relevant to our purposes, (c) "Is not my understanding, such as it is, as free as his, for it comes from the same soil?" (119).

Stepping back from the details, we can say with confidence that Sor Juana's anticipation of later feminist thought is expansive. It includes a defense of women's education, the rationality of women, the need for social conditions that enable study, the costs of a gendered world, the idea of something akin to gaslighting, and the thought of a buried history of women's contributions.

But that's not all one finds in her prose work.

Skepticism about theology

Thus far, I have largely focused on immediately recognizable, though no doubt important themes in Sor Juana's work. Here, I take up the first of two topics that seem to me to be underappreciated arguments in Sor Juana's account, namely, a considerable degree of skepticism about then-contemporary theology.

An oft-cited passage in Sor Juana's reply to Sor Filotea turns a traditional argument against women's study (that they are insufficiently learned and virtuous) into an argument that interpretation of Scripture shouldn't be pursued by most men either, for it is typically akin to putting "a sword in the hand of a madman" (113). Her explanation is that most men are as badly suited as most women for undertaking philosophical and theological matters. The fact that they are also educated makes them more confident and prone to error. Better that they remain ignorant, she thinks, because "a fool becomes perfect (if foolishness can reach perfection) by studying his bit of philosophy and theology and having some idea of languages, making him a fool in many sciences and many languages" (113).

This bit of pointed skepticism directed at the male theologians of her day is not an isolated remark. She objects that people don't approach philosophy and theology in a suitably circumspect fashion. Too much work on these topics is propelled by ego and ambition and done without sensitivity to one's epistemic shortcomings. She notes that "if all of us . . would take the measure of our talent before studying and (what is worse) writing . . . how little ambition would we have left and how many errors would we have avoided and how many twisted intelligences would we not have in this world!" (114).

So, it is clear that Sor Juana is committed to approaching theology with great caution. However, carefully woven throughout the text is a suggestion of a much more interesting and subtle critique of theology. To see how that critique goes, we have to return to the beginning of "La respuesta."

Recall that the initial task of "La respuesta" is to offer an explanation of why she hadn't spent more of her time working directly on theological matters. Here's what she says: "I proceeded, always directing the steps of my study to the summit of sacred theology, as I have said; and to reach it, I thought it necessary to ascend by the step of human sciences and arts, because how is one to understand the style of the queen of the sciences without knowing that of the handmaidens?" (98). She goes on to argue that logic, rhetoric, physics, arithmetic, geometry, architecture, history, and law, as well as foreign customs, the early Church fathers, music, astronomy, and the mechanical arts, are all necessary preliminaries to the study of theology.

Here's the upshot, though, of her explanation of her study of so many subject matters that are not theology:

> "[theology] is the book that encompasses all books, and the science that includes all sciences, which are useful for its understanding: even after learning all of them (which clearly is not easy, or even possible), another consideration demands more than all that has been said, and that is constant prayer and purity in one's life, in order to implore God for the purification of the spirit and enlightenment of the mind necessary for comprehending these lofty matters; if this is lacking, the rest is useless" (100).

The parenthetical remark is striking in its context. After arguing that an understanding of theology requires an understanding of its handmaidens, she slips in the observation that understanding all of this is not easy, *or even possible*" [italics added]. The silent conclusion—one that seems to be rarely noted in the secondary literature—is that it may not even be possible for *anyone* to understand theology, and that to the extent to which one has failed to master the subordinate sciences, one is likely to have an impaired understanding of theological matters.

Interestingly, this tacit argument dovetails with aspects of her poem "First Dream," which was written no more than two years before, and was the only work Sor Juana claims to have written purely for herself. "First Dream" recounts a disembodied dreamer's efforts to secure knowledge via intuition and the method of discourse. Neither approach succeeds. When the intellect gazes at the entirety of creation, that creation "appeared clear and possible/to the eye but not the understanding, which/ (stunned by a glut of objects, its power far exceeded by their grandeur)/retroceded, a coward" (55). Later, she maintains that "if before/a single object knowledge flees, and reason,/a coward, turns away; . . . . /it fears it will understand it/ badly, or never, or late,/ how could it reflect on so fearsome and vast/a mechanism, its weight/terrible, unbearable . . . " (62).

Although commentators disagree about how far these skeptical threads are followed out by Sor Juana, the ending of the poem appears intentionally ambiguous. Daybreak illuminates the physical world "with a more certain light" than could be secured by the vaulting ambition of intuition and discourse's efforts at foundational metaphysics and theology (66). Her picture seems to be that foundational knowledge of the sort aspired to by philosophers and theologians encounters a complexity that outstrips any human ability to know.

Skeptical threads aren't limited to her reply to Sor Filotea or "First Dream." Consider Ballad 2:

> "All people have opinions
> and judgements so multitudinous,
> that when one states this is black,
> the other proves it is white.
>
> . . . . A proof is found for everything,
> a reason on which to base it;
> and nothing has a good reason
> since there is reason for so much.
>
> . . . .
> there is no one who can decide
> which argument is true and right.
>
> Since no one can adjudicate,
> why do you think, mistakenly,
> that God entrusted you alone
> with the decision in this case? (Transl. Grossman 2016: 6-7)

Read together, these passages cast a passage early in "La respuesta" in a different light. At the outset of her reply to Fernández, immediately after explaining why she had focused on profane matters (because the stakes were laughter or mockery and not the attentions of the Inquisition), she goes on to note that her critics have maintained that she has "no aptitude for being correct" (94). In the sentence that follows, she suggests that on profane matters there is no possibility of getting things right or wrong, but then she cryptically notes that *no one is obliged to undertake impossible things* (95).

One way of reading that passage is that she is simply saying that it is impossible to be right or wrong about profane matters. That's not obviously true, though, and it isn't clear why it would be impossible to avoid, as she puts it, heresies against art. The passage is ambiguous, though. A different reading supported by the text is that, given her putatively poor abilities, undertaking theological reflections would be impossible. This sort of remark is in keeping with her inclination to turn gendered expectations back on themselves. She can hardly be condemned for not pursuing what is impossible for a woman to do. However, *this* reading, perhaps the most natural reading of the passage, suggests that she may be making a more oblique gesture to an argument that she repeatedly implies but never directly asserts: namely, that she cannot be obligated to do theology *because it is impossible*.

To be sure, we can't be confident that this is what she is intending to imply. The structure of baroque writing, norms of indirectness, her particular social position, and her explicit concerns about the Inquisition all weigh against her making a direct and radical an assertion of this kind. Yet, the components of this deflationary idea, however indirectly expressed, are a recurring theme in her work.

So, is Sor Juana rejecting the possibility of doing any theology? Maybe. But I'm inclined to think the argument is more subtle than that. Her defenses of classical theological views—and especially of early Church fathers—in both the *Carta* and "La respuesta," seem earnest. So, her worries about our ability to be in a position to make contributions to theology seems framed by the thought that *we* (perhaps unlike the early church figures, and a handful of other exceptions) don't have the benefit of proximity to the age of Christ, and perhaps, active revelation.

What we do have are the knowing powers of the human mind and our study of the natural world as a path to being equipped to undertake theology. But the demands of such worldly investigations of the book of nature exceed the abilities of any one person. So, rather than radical skepticism about theology, her position seems to be one of caution: we should be skeptical about efforts to overturn early Church doctrine. We can, of course, build on that tradition, and recover forgotten aspects of it (that seems to be how she couches the role of women). However, such innovations are, in a sense, always within an established tradition, or else products of learning something new about God's designs from studying the structure of the world.

The *Carta Atenagórica*

One reason for thinking that Sor Juana doesn't reject the possibility of all theology is her own handling of it in the work that set in motion Fernandez's admonishment and Sor Juana's reply. For better or for worse, sorting out these issues takes us into the weeds of some issues in philosophical theology. The good news is that Sor Juana's work is original and independently interesting on these issues, independently of whether it supports the reading I've given of her skepticism about contemporary theology that conflicts with especially early church fathers.

In what is known as the *Carta Atenagórica* (orginally published in 1690), Sor Juana takes issues with a sermon given by the then-prominent Jesuit priest António Vieira. In that sermon, Vieira argues that the greatest demonstration of Christ's love [a *fineza*, in the language of the time] was not his death (as St. Augustine held but his physical absence that followed his death. His evidence is that Christ's resurrection happened only once, but his presence in the eucharist (and thus, the ending of his absence) is continuously performed. It almost goes without saying that this was a mostly in-house theological debate.

Sor Juana's *Carta* gets what prominence it has from its role in her life story. It was the letter that, when published by the Bishop of Puebla, Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz, along with a letter encouraging Sor Juana to focus less on worldly things, and more on religious matters, provoked her famous defense of women's education and study of worldly things.

Despite the relatively narrow focus of the issues in the *Carta*, there are a number of things in it that may be of interest to philosophers interested in moral theory and philosophical theology. Not the least is Sor Juana's characteristically acerbic wit. She suggests that God may have been using a woman as an instrument to punish Vieira, someone who thought he do better than Augustine, Aquinas, and Chrysostom on the question of most demonstrated God's love (2005: 244). Textual delights aside, Sor Juana's discussion covers questions of freedom, the significance of divinely-mediated human relations, and an intriguing argument about why God does not grant humans greater benefits of his powers. In what follows, I say a bit about each of these elements.

The proximal issue in the *Carta* concerns competing views about the greatest demonstration of God's love for humans. She begins with a distinction: "the greatness of a demonstration of love is measured from two perspectives. The first (*a quo*) concerns the one who demonstrates love; the second (*ad quem*) the one who receives the demonstration of love. The first measures the greatness of a demonstration of love based on the cost to the lover, the second based on the benefit that accrues to the beloved" (223). On her account, Christ's death is of maximal significance as a demonstration of his love on both fronts: it is the costliest to him and the greatest in its benefits for us.

After arguing that Vieira's wrong about Christ's absence, she goes on to take issue with Vieira's claim that Christ sought to love without a corresponding love from us in return. She thinks it is textually indefensible (233-237), and she insists that although Christ didn't need our love, he did demand it (239). The central issue then becomes the question of why Christ would demand that we reciprocate his love if he doesn't need it.

Sor Juana's position on this point is very interesting, but it has not always been understood by commentators. For example, Octavio Paz suggests that the problem of why Christ wants his love reciprocated is rooted in "an impenetrable mystery," namely, the dual nature of Christ, as both man and God (393). Paz thinks that it is the human part that needs love to be reciprocated (393). He goes on to assert that Sor Juana's reasoning is "more subtle than solid" (393), and he claims that, in the end, "Sor Juana does not answer the terrible question: why does Christ desire to be loved by man?" (394). In his judgment, Sor Juana comes to a contradiction no better than the one she objects to in Vieira (394).

Paz's reading of the *Carta* mischaracterizes a number of interesting ideas in the *Carta*. For example, Sor Juana explicitly rejects Paz's framing of the issue, namely that the difficulty is in reconciling the dual nature of Christ. Instead, she maintains that "Christ's love is very different from ours" (2005: 239), and she regards it as a central task of the *Carta* to explain how. Paz asserts that Sor Juana avoids answering the question of why Christ wanted his love for humans to be reciprocated. However, she's explicit about her answer: "Christ wants both the love he has for us and the benefit of our love for him all for our sakes" (240). It is a selfless love because Christ receives nothing from it. In contrast, humans receive benefits from loving Christ. The ensuing argument is an intriguing bit of philosophical theology.

First, Sor Juana thinks there is an important good for human-to-human relations that flows from loving God. If humans love God, then they will be called to respect his precepts, including the requirement that people love each other *as God loves them*—that is, infinitely (240). So the Christian injunction to love one's neighbor as oneself gets additional motivational force that is parasitic on a prior of love of Christ. At the same time, her picture seems to be that this fact—that this love of a fellow human is a product of an antecedent love of God—helps amplify or reinforce that antecedent love for God. The result is a kind of resounding multi-lateral, mutually reinforcing commitment to others and to God.

Second, and perhaps more centrally, Sor Juana thinks that "loving [God] is our supreme good" (240). This is what makes it possible for God's wanting us to love him be something that is selfless. Although Sor Juana doesn't put it exactly this way, the idea is roughly analogous to a parent wanting her child to love her, not out of the parent wanting to be loved, but out of a concern for how destructive it would be for the child to not be in a healthy, loving relationship with a parent. Her view seems to be that the injunction to love God is like that. Finally, and importantly, the injunction to love God provides a master norm about how orient one's psychology. On her picture, obeying that norm enables achievement of the good, but humans retain the freedom to disobey the norm.

(Here, we might note that a secularized version of this view would be one that holds that the highest human good is found in the moral law, and that our acting out of love for the moral law has benefits for us quite apart from whether the moral law is indifferent about us. Among those benefits, respect for the moral law produces in us a deeper commitment to our fellow human beings, and that morality is thus a unifying and enabling feature for the possibility of moral equality.)

One might protest that if God loves us, but doesn't need us to love him, why bother with the command to love him at all? Why couldn't he just set us up to love him, and to love each other, if that love is so important? Free will makes its inevitable entrance at this point. On this point, Paz read Sor Juana's commitments exactly right: "The love of God does not deny but intensifies human liberty: because of his love of man, God has made man free" (394). As she understands it, free will is "the power with which we can want to do good or evil" (240; using Tolley transl). The only way God can respect the freedom he has given us, she thinks, is to allow us to choose evil. However, it would be cruel to do this without providing us with guidance about what our good is, and that is why he gives us the injunction to love him.

So, contrary to what Paz asserts, Sor Juana's argument doesn't leave us with a "contradiction" (394) or an "impenetrable mystery" (393). Instead, we get a careful story about how an injunction to love God is entirely explicable in terms of human goods and how they are structured given the fact of human freedom.

Before concluding, it may be useful to consider Sor Juana own positive view end of the *Carta*. She argues that the greatest gift or demonstration of God's love for us is what she calls *negative benefits*, or "the benefits that he omits bestowing" (2005: 244). She is careful to frame this not as a competitor to the view of Augustine (or what she regards as the correlative views of Aquinas and Chrysostom). Those are views about God in the person of Jesus, whereas her proposal is about God as God, "continual and everlasting" (244). This distinction between is important for understanding why Sor Juana doesn't think she is in conflict with Augustine, Aquinas, and Chrysostom. (Remember: she roundly condemned Vieira for thinking he could do better than them! They were offering an account of *Christ's* demonstration of love; Sor Juana's account is of *God's* fineza, that is, as a continual and everlasting person.

Sor Juana's view is that when God withholds greater benefits from us, it is because we will use them to our own detriment (245); we would be ungrateful (245); and perhaps more generally, we would have trouble reciprocating (244). As she sees it, "God represses the torrents of his immense generosity, restrains the sea of his infinite love, and holds back the flow of his absolute power. . . . it takes more effort for God not to grant us benefits than to grant us benefits. As a result, it is a greater demonstration of God's love to suspend them than to grant them, since God refrains the generosity of his nature, so that we not be ungrateful" (2005: 245). She goes on to argue that there is textual support for thinking God is concerned to limit our opportunities to commit greater sins, and that it is beneficial to not grant benefits when they will be used badly (247).

This way of reading the *Carta* conflicts with the picture advanced by Virginia Aspe (2018) in her recent book on Sor Juana's account of freedom. According to her reading of Sor Juana, "the greatest [demonstration] of love that God has bestowed on man is freedom (2018: 78; Cf. 106). Aspe is surely right that freedom is plausibly central to a good deal of Sor Juana's thought (in particular, Aspe's discussion of Molinist influences in "The Dream" is very perceptive). However, I read the argument of the *Carta* concerned with God choosing conditions that enable us to use our freedom well (as opposed to poorly—that's the point about negative benefits), and not about his ensuring that we have free will (as opposed to not having free will).

Aspe seems to understand the idea of negative benefits as the idea of freedom-ensuring non-interference (2018: 84, 93-4). For Sor Juana, though, the issue isn't the preservation of our freedom. She takes that as a given, and defines it in a way that makes it hard to see why benefits (of a positive or negative way) would affect that freedom. For Sor Juana, free will is (as she explicitly says) the power to desire good or evil (2005: 240). That power would not go away if God intervened to bestow any number of greater gifts on human beings. So, the gift of negative benefits can't simply be the gift of free will.

What then are the negative goods? They are strategic withholding of benefits, for example, greater good health and the graces God gives others, as in her examples. What makes the negative goods significant is precisely that, *given our freedom*, the greater benefits that we desire would both be ill-used, and would go unappreciated. Both results would make us morally worse off. (And, if Aspe is right about Sor Juana's Molinism, God would know this because he would know all future contingents.) So, Sor Juana's picture is better understood as holding that our disposition to badly use our freedom requires explicit guidance (e.g., in the injunction to love God, as in Christ's demonstration) and it requires some withholding of risky benefits to us (e.g., in not giving us all the benefits we could want).

Sor Juana's account of negative benefits is, so far as I know, an original one within the intellectual tradition in which she worked. It seems to me that there are some tantalizing possibilities for those interested in questions about philosophical theology. They may include the possibility of novel ways to address the problem of evil and novel ways of addressing the problem of divine hiddenness (roughly, the puzzle about why an all-loving and all-powerful God would leave room for human doubt). In either case, one might imagine a defense that leans on the idea that an infinite loving being interested in the welfare of humans might provide negative benefits—benefits of non-intervention—precisely because of concerns about how we use our freedom.

Whatever the right view is of such things, for inspiration on a wide range of topics it is hard to do better than Sor Juana.

Further notes

Although it is now dated in important ways (not the least because of further discoveries of letters by Sor Juana), Nobel-prize winner Octavio Paz's wide-ranging *Sor Juana, Or the Traps of Faith* (1988) remains a common place to start for a detailed account of Sor Juana's life, context, and work. The wider secondary literature on her life is vast. With respect to primary sources, things are happily quite good: although her complete works have yet to be translated into English, a considerable amount of her work and the most important texts are all available in translation, oftentimes in bilingual conditions.

One of several ideas in "La respuesta" that is prefigured in her early letter to the Jesuit Antonio Núñez Miranda is the idea that her impulse to learning was God-given and fundamental to her nature: "God gave me this inclination, it did not seem to be against his holy law or the obligations of my state—I have this mind, even if it may be evil, it made me what I am; I was born with it and with it I must die" (149). *Inclination* is here a technical notion, roughly an "incipient action or movement that will have a certain outcome unless something intervenes"; in Aquinas, it is characterized as involving a love for that thing (Hoffman 2012: 161).

A number of readers have found passages in "The Dream" especially suggestive of Cartesian skepticism, mechanistic philosophy, and aspects of the *Discourse on the Method*. There is reason to think that Sor Juana's friend, Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, had some familiarity with Descartes' works (Cf. Paz 1988: 123). However, Descartes' texts weren't formally permitted in New Spain, and a nun subject to the Inquisition may not have kept such books even if she had access to them. Whether and to what extent Sor Juana was familiar with the work of Descartes is therefore unclear, with commentators sharply diverging on this issue and its influence in her work. Aspe (2018 : 54, 75, 88) and Leonard (182-183) are cautiously optimistic about Descartes influence on "The Dream"; Paz (1988: 375) and Gaos are dismissive (1960: 65).

Sor Juana's picture of free will is very interesting. In the *Carta*, she characterizes it as a power to desire good or evil (2005: 240). In the contemporary philosophical literature on free will, it isn't common to talk about powers to want things (whether good or ill), as desires are (at least in paradigmatic cases) are usually understood to come to us unbidden. It isn't clear what the full story is, whether she is helping herself to a kind of volitionalism about desires (i.e., a view where we can relatively directly will ourselves to desire things) or whether the idea is that acts of the will can come to, over time, shape what desires we have, perhaps by organizing environments, shaping habits, and recruiting effective combinations of desires and beliefs to magnify the desires to seek the good.

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