



FEMINISM AND ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY

EDITED
BY
JULIE K.
WARD

FEMINISM
AND
ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY



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*To the memory of my friend and brother,
Christopher Grove Ward.*



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ABBREVIATIONS

Plato

<i>Ap.</i>	<i>Apology</i>
<i>Chrm.</i>	<i>Charmides</i>
<i>Crat.</i>	<i>Cratylus</i>
<i>Cri.</i>	<i>Crito</i>
<i>Epist.</i>	<i>Epistles</i>
<i>Euthyd.</i>	<i>Euthydemus</i>
<i>Euphr.</i>	<i>Euthyphro</i>
<i>Gorg.</i>	<i>Gorgias</i>
<i>Menex.</i>	<i>Menexenus</i>
<i>Phaed.</i>	<i>Phaedo</i>
<i>Phdr.</i>	<i>Phaedrus</i>
<i>Phil.</i>	<i>Philebus</i>
<i>Pol.</i>	<i>Politicus</i>
<i>Parm.</i>	<i>Parmenides</i>
<i>Prot.</i>	<i>Protagoras</i>
<i>Rep.</i>	<i>Republic</i>
<i>Symp.</i>	<i>Symposium</i>
<i>Thaet.</i>	<i>Theaetetus</i>
<i>Tim.</i>	<i>Timaeus</i>

Aristotle

Abbreviation	Latin Title	English Title
<i>Cat.</i>	<i>Categoriae</i>	<i>Categories</i>
<i>De Int.</i>	<i>De Interpretatione</i>	<i>On Interpretation</i>
<i>An. Pr.</i>	<i>Analytica Priora</i>	<i>Prior Analytics</i>
<i>An. Post.</i>	<i>Analytica Posteriora</i>	<i>Posterior Analytics</i>
<i>Top.</i>	<i>Topica</i>	<i>Topics</i>
<i>Soph. El.</i>	<i>Sophistici Elenchi</i>	<i>Sophistical Refutations</i>
<i>Phys.</i>	<i>Physica</i>	<i>Physics</i>
<i>GC</i>	<i>De Generatione et Corruptione</i>	<i>On Generation and Corruption</i>
<i>DA</i>	<i>De Anima</i>	<i>On the Soul</i>
<i>PA</i>	<i>De Partibus Animalium</i>	<i>Parts of Animals</i>
<i>MA</i>	<i>De Motu Animalium</i>	<i>Movement of Animals</i>
<i>GA</i>	<i>De Generatione Animalium</i>	<i>Generation of Animals</i>
<i>Meta.</i>	<i>Metaphysica</i>	<i>Metaphysics</i>
<i>EN</i>	<i>Ethica Nicomachea</i>	<i>Nicomachean Ethics</i>
<i>EE</i>	<i>Ethica Eudemia</i>	<i>Eudemian Ethics</i>
<i>Pol.</i>	<i>Politica</i>	<i>Politics</i>
<i>Rhet.</i>	<i>Rhetorica</i>	<i>Rhetoric</i>
<i>Poet.</i>	<i>Poetica</i>	<i>Poetics</i>

Hellenistic Texts

<i>DL</i>	Diogenes Laertius, <i>Lives of the Philosophers</i>
<i>SVF</i>	<i>Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta</i>

Transliterations of the Greek letter *upsilon* in this volume use either the English letter “u” or “y,” according to the choice of the author. Both are standard usages.

INTRODUCTION

Julie K. Ward

I. FEMINIST INTEREST IN ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY

Scholarly interest in the confluence of the fields of ancient Greek thought and feminism has been on the rise since the 1970s in Anglo-American academies. Yet many of the previous publications arising from this attention have been marked by two features. First, the works have tended to focus more on the literature of ancient Greece and Rome than on its philosophy,¹ and second, they have largely been written in the wake of what might be termed a “second wave” in feminist thinking, one that may be characterized by a kind of gynocentric theorizing. This followed an earlier period typified by a “humanistic” feminism in which the interpretation of past views about women were made in light of Enlightenment ideals of individual liberty and freedom.² While these projects have provided needed perspectives on ancient Greek thought, they have not always done so accurately with respect to the actual historical texts, nor have they revealed the complexities of the ancient theories themselves. To mention one often-repeated example, one finds Aristotelian reproductive biology described as proposing what has been called the “flower pot” theory of reproduction, in which the male provides the seed, and the female, the matter, so that the female’s role is simply to provide the medium for the developing seed.³ However, such a “model” of reproduction would, in fact, be more closely parallel to the theory of preformationism current in Aristotle’s day—a theory which Aristotle explicitly rejects. So it is inaccurate to equate this model with Aristotle’s theory of generation, whatever else one may say about the role of the female in supplying the material cause in reproduction as against the role of the male in supplying the formal cause.

In light of the limitations of some previous feminist interpretations of ancient philosophy, a new school of interpreters has emerged that includes

women trained in ancient philosophy who are also feminists.⁴ As historians of philosophy, we are interested in trying to explain, frequently to non-historians, what the full texts reveal to us about issues relating to women and gender to which previous feminist thinkers have alerted us. As feminists, we find it valuable to take up the discussion where it has left off so as to further and enrich it. Although I doubt that all the contributors here conceive of feminism in exactly the same terms, making it pointless to try to define our feminism in some univocal sense,⁵ one may distinguish two approaches taken in these papers by virtue of which the volume can be considered feminist.

The first approach assumes that a valuable goal in studying the history of philosophy consists in a careful analysis of the primary texts in their own context so that the arguments or passages concerning women or gender are explained in relation to the rest of a work belonging to a thinker or to a philosophical school. Here the goal in the analysis is not primarily to evaluate past theories or schools in light of present standards of equality or to attempt to discern sexism of influence, as Kathleen Cook (this volume, 66) describes it. For although the historical influence of a thinker or a theory may have contributed to the continuation of sexism, this is a separate issue from the question of whether (and to what extent) the original theory is sexist—the point being that it is unwarranted to hold a thinker responsible for the historical consequences of a theory or argument.⁶ Frequently, the current literature confuses the two questions, arguing that since Western intellectual history (which supports sexism) has been deeply influenced by Plato and Aristotle, their theories themselves are intellectually suspect.⁷ The second point is best determined by a careful historical analysis of the texts, a task for which historians of philosophy are well qualified. Thus, one of the aims of the present volume is to elucidate more carefully the precise outlines of the theories which deal with women's nature and capacities.

A second approach characteristic of certain papers in the volume is not only descriptive but evaluative. These papers try to indicate ways in which some aspects of the ancient view may be of interest to contemporary feminists. While they begin with a historical analysis of the texts belonging to a specific thinker or school, they also suggest ways in which the views presented are fruitful as resources for feminist theorizing. This second approach is especially evident in the essays that are concerned with issues that have emerged from work in Anglo-American feminist ethics and moral psychology, such as the relation of reason to the emotions, the acquisition and nature of moral thinking, and the construction of desire.

The present volume offers papers ranging from classical Greek philosophy through the Hellenistic periods. While it does not pretend to be com-

plete in scope, as various schools in these periods are not considered (including the Sophists, Cyrenaics, Cynics, and Skeptics), it offers a representative selection of work on or relating to the major thinkers or schools of ancient philosophy: Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Stoics, and Epicureans. Spanning such a long period of ancient philosophy, the papers reflect a variety of subjects from the Stoic conception of women's nature to Aristotle's theory of reproduction to an analysis of Plato's use of narrative. While the collection is not marked by a single issue or approach, certain themes surface repeatedly among these papers such as the nature and capacities of women, the shape of moral thinking, and the role of the emotions, to name a few. Consequently, I have chosen to group the essays together on the basis of certain focal topics, rather than to separate them by school or by chronological period. The topics of the various subject areas are: women's nature and capabilities; the relation between reason and emotion in the good human life; special applications of Aristotle's moral theory; and the affiliation between *logos*, or philosophical language, and desire.

II. DESCRIPTION OF THE PAPERS

The collection opens with a group of essays on women's nature: do (free) women have the same nature as (free) men, and if they do, how can this be reconciled with their conventionally subordinate position? On this topic, we find Julia Annas and Susan Levin writing to rather different conclusions in their papers considering Plato's views of women's nature. Julia Annas, in an early essay on the topic, argues that the limited scope of Plato's proposal in *Republic* V that women, suitably educated, should rule the city along with men demonstrates that he should not be considered an early feminist. For Annas, contemporary feminism (in part, anyway) is concerned with producing equality of opportunity, suffrage, and the emancipation of women from the restrictions of domestic labor. Yet she finds that Plato's proposal ignores all of these goals: it is confined to a select fraction of women, and it does not attempt to provide goods or equality for women as such. Although Plato does not hold that women as women are naturally inferior in capacities to men and in this respect appears to agree with the view of contemporary feminism, in fact, Annas thinks the similarity is rather deceptive. For Plato's underlying interest in proposing that (some) women should rule is purely Utilitarian: women should be trained and be able to rule the city so as to free up an intellectual resource heretofore unavailable.⁸ Furthermore, the actual argument in *Republic* V showing that women are by nature capable of performing any task which men perform

related to ruling the city is marred by a final caveat that men will execute these tasks better than women. Since the proposals for women's ruling are contingent upon producing the greatest concord within the state and not upon a concern for women's status as such, Annas concludes that the argument of the *Republic* cannot be considered a precursor of contemporary arguments for women's emancipation, nor Plato a proto-feminist.

Susan Levin's paper comes to a rather different conclusion. By focusing on the distinction between the terms for "women" and "feminine" as opposed to "nature" and "being by nature," she argues that Plato differentiates between women's conventional and ideal capabilities. This fact explains what has troubled many interpreters of Plato, namely, that while he proposes women as philosopher-rulers in *Republic* V, elsewhere—*Republic* VIII and IX, for example—he makes various derogatory remarks about women and feminine behavior. Levin argues that if we are to understand Plato correctly in *Republic* V, we must read him as arguing about women's nature within the conditions given by the education and socialization of the ideal city, not outside of it. Thus, the negative comments about women in *Republic* VIII and IX do not contradict his proposals in V since they concern women living under non-ideal conditions. In consideration of Plato's other critical remarks about women, Levin canvasses texts outside the *Republic*, as well, and finds no contravening passage concerning the inferiority of women's nature as such, only references to what women are "accustomed" to say or to do given conventional training. Platonic dualism plays a pivotal, though implicit, role in the proposal for women rulers in *Republic* V. For since the soul and its capacities are not physically determined, the sex of the body is not determinative of the embodied soul's powers. Thus, possessing a certain set of physical or physiological properties implies nothing about the set of psychological or mental properties one possesses. This shows that dualism itself, even substantial, cannot be counted as theoretically opposed to feminism, as some critics have maintained.⁹

Plato's proposal concerning "having women in common" from *Republic* V¹⁰ appears to be echoed in Stoic recommendations by Zeno, the founder of Stoicism (334–262 B.C.E.), and Chrysippus (c. 280–c. 206 B.C.E.), one of its foremost thinkers. Yet whether or not this implied that the Stoics held that (free) women were equal to (free) men in moral and intellectual status remains difficult to ascertain given other evidence concerning the Stoic view regarding what is permissible, as Elizabeth Asmis points out in her paper. For both Zeno and Chrysippus maintained that nothing prohibits acts that are conventionally forbidden such as incest, pederasty, and cannibalism. In this light, the Stoic recommendation for having women in common might

appear to be nothing more than a claim about their interchangeability as sexual partners. Yet Asmis argues that in fact the Stoic proposals do amount to more than mere ridicule of sexual conventions, as was characteristic of the Cynics. Including in her discussion a series of overlooked texts by Antipater, Musonius, and Hierocles, as well as the more familiar ones by Chrysippus and Cicero, Asmis explains that the proposal about women must be seen in its connection with the Stoic account of the genesis of the larger human society. According to various Stoics, human society begins with the couple, followed by the family, and then the household, which is described as the “seed” of the state. The state is, in turn, superseded by the association of all humanity: this is the universal city termed *cosmopolis* in some sources. Located at the periphery of the widest circle of association, the universal city, one source, Cicero, places a select community of good men (*boni viri*) who are alike in being morally excellent. While the explicit reference to “men” in Cicero’s account makes it clear that women are excluded from this final association of the wise, Hierocles, Musonius, and Antipater find it otherwise. Musonius argues that women possess the same virtue as men, while Antipater and Hierocles appear to hold that women are equal partners to men in the household and that one aim of marriage is a harmony of minds. Yet the inclusion of women in the final association of the wise at first appears problematical since the Stoics appear to agree that free women, although part of the city, are not citizens; thus, their role in the *cosmopolis* appears nonexistent, or at best, incidental. But Asmis argues that since the early Greek Stoics define the true city, that of the wise, as consisting of “human beings” (*anthropos*, plural), they do not restrict it to men and so do not deny that women can be as virtuous as men. Finally, Zeno’s claim initially cited concerning men “having women in common” is not to be interpreted as demeaning women. While sexual permissiveness is compatible with wisdom, the community of the wise includes women as partners in actual virtue (Asmis, 89). Consequently, we are to see that the place of women in the community of the wise is chiefly ethical, not sexual.

In contrast to the Platonic and Stoic proposals concerning the possibility for some women to attain the same degree of virtue and wisdom as that of men, Aristotle is distinguished by his claims in the *Politics* that (free) women and men do not share the same kind of virtue or excellence (1260a2–24), that the male is more of a leader than the female (1259b1–2), and that the deliberative faculty in (free) women is present but “without authority” (*akylon*, 1260a12–13). However, whether these claims about women’s inferior moral and intellectual capacities can be traced to a foundation in his biological theories remains controversial. While various feminists

have argued that Aristotle's biological and social views about women constitute a single piece of cloth, the two scholars included here disagree but come to rather different conclusions about the significance of Aristotle's theory of reproduction in *Generation of Animals*. Daryl Tress argues that feminist critics of Aristotle's theory of reproduction have erred in their estimation of the theory on two counts. First, most contemporary critics of his theory begin with materialist assumptions, having no use for the teleological kinds of explanation that Aristotle employs in his theory of generation. Thus, the modern scientific account of reproduction ignores much of the metaphysical side of the account that Aristotle provides and in so doing, distorts his theory. Second, she maintains that an examination of the actual theory of generation in *GA* Bks. I–II indicates that the female plays a crucial role in the generation of offspring. For the female contributes something analogous to the male's semen in generation, namely, menstrual blood. While it must be admitted that the contributions are not equal in kind since menstrual blood contributes only the material cause in contrast to semen which provides formal, moving, and final causes in generation, Tress emphasizes that the activity of generation is the actualization of two potentialities (Tress, 46). Furthermore, by comparing Aristotle's theory to that of "preformism" current in his time, Tress notes that his account actually elevates the role of the female in the process of reproduction.

In contrast, Kathleen Cook argues that the role of the female in supplying the material cause in reproduction cannot save it from being unequal to the role of the male in supplying the three other causes (the moving, formal, and final causes). One problem, as she sees it, concerns the alleged inconsistency between the account of reproduction in *GA* Bks. I–II and that of inheritance in Bk. IV. The inconsistency arises from those who hold to an "essentialist" notion of Aristotelian form, according to which the form captures all and only the essential features of the human, is common to all members of the same species, and is supplied by the male parent. Other scholars have argued for a distinct view of form so as to preserve the consistency between the two accounts in *GA*. According to this second view, form includes characteristics below the species level and so covers attributes belonging to the individual features as well as those belonging to the species. Professor Cook, however, argues that the charge of inconsistency is misplaced: the account of inheritance in *GA* IV. 3 does not warrant the conclusion that the female contributes form to the child simply because the child exhibits characteristics of the mother. Rather, Cook holds, if certain maternal characteristics manifest themselves in the offspring, it is because they are present in the *kuema* (the embryonic union of *katamenia* and

semen) by virtue of what is, essentially, a deficiency or lack in the female material contribution. So, while there is no inconsistency in Cook's view between the accounts of reproduction and inheritance, it follows that the female contribution in generation cannot be equal to that of the male, a conclusion driven at least partly by sexist assumptions. However, Cook rejects the idea that such assumptions overdetermine Aristotle's theory, and in this sense, it remains intact.

In the second group of papers, the authors are generally concerned with explaining the relation of reason to the emotions as it relates to Aristotle's notion of the flourishing human life. In "Feminism and Aristotle's Rational Ideal," Marcia Homiak examines the ideal for living that Aristotle proposes in his ethics: the best human life is one consisting of rational activity. Professor Homiak argues that, instead of being oppressive, the Aristotelian ideal holds emancipatory potential for women. Part of her argument here depends upon the potential dangers that ideals of altruism and compassion, such as are mentioned in the work of Gilligan, Noddings, Ruddick, and others, can pose to women in their socially and economically subordinated positions. In contrast to norms for women that focus on their emotionality, sympathy, and altruism, Homiak suggests that women need to consider a moral ideal that attempts to balance the emotions with reason. For without a component of rational deliberation about the good, lives conducted according to altruistic standards can become destructive and unhealthy given women's general secondary status in relation to men.

That Aristotle's ideal should be applicable to women is surprising given that his city, or *polis*, depends upon a hierarchical organization of human beings according to what Homiak calls "psychological freedom." This kind of freedom consists in the degree to which people can make reasoned choices about their lives. A common classical Athenian opinion, and one that Aristotle shares, is that non-citizens, like slaves, manual laborers, and free women, do not possess an ability to deliberate well about the good.¹¹ Consequently, these groups, according to Aristotle, require that another group with full deliberative capacity have authority over them. Now, since this description of the social and political structure is undemocratic, we need to ask in what respect an ideal emerging from this perspective can hold promise for women.

Homiak answers that although Aristotle's notion of the good society places free citizen men at its top and identifies the best human life as following activities associated with men, it is, nevertheless, not "masculinist" in the sense in which feminists such as Lloyd (1984) have defined the term. For Aristotle's ideal of the good life does not ignore the role of the emotions

in a well-lived life, nor does it lack a conception of the place of personal relationships in the moral sphere. On the contrary, his rational ideal preserves a close relationship between reason and the emotions such that the virtues of character depend equally upon feelings as upon calculation. Since an analysis of Aristotle's rational ideal shows reason to be both guided and limited by emotion and feelings, it cannot be reduced to some form of impartialism. Furthermore, since it is bound up with character states such as justice, courage, and friendship that require a social community for their exercise, this ideal supports personal relationships and concern for others.¹² Thus, Aristotle's ideal of the human good supports a notion of intellectual and emotional competence and independence that Homiak thinks necessary for women in a contemporary society in which they live and work in economic and emotional subordination to men.

Deborah Achtenberg's paper, "Aristotelian Resources for Feminist Thinking," takes up the theme developed by Homiak concerning the relation of reason and the emotions in the well-lived life and extends it in various directions. Achtenberg situates her analysis by reference to several contemporary thinkers on psychology and moral development, including Kohlberg and Gilligan, Noddings, Silverstein, and Chodorow. The separation between an ethics of principle and of care that has emerged in recent moral and psychological discussions, however, preserves a distinction between reason and emotion that she finds inadequate to the demands of psychology and the moral life. Achtenberg argues that rather than following either the ethics of care or principle, feminists should consider a neo-Aristotelian conception of ethics in which emotions function along with reason in the activity of human virtues. Furthermore, she argues that since for Aristotle the emotions themselves are forms of perception, they, too, require cognition—the cognition of value—which is presented to us through particulars.

To explain the way in which Aristotle's position concerns itself with the emotions as well as with the weight of moral particulars, Achtenberg discusses the role of perception of value as it relates to Aristotle's theory of the moral virtues, or excellences. For Aristotle, moral virtues consist in part upon emotions—which depend upon feelings of pleasure or pain—and in part upon reason, but require being in a state of activity for their fulfillment. And that which makes possible their fulfillment, in part, is a moral situation and more importantly, a perception of what is good, or morally required, at that very time by the moral subject. Since "good" for Aristotle is an analogical equivocal,¹³ it is not something that can be specified fully in abstraction from a moral context, but only grasped in the context itself by a type of

perception, according to Achtenberg. A full understanding of Aristotle's moral theory, one taking account of the various elements mentioned, finds that it accomplishes two goals central to feminist theorizing: first, a unified conception of moral intelligence that ignores neither the emotions nor moral particulars, and second, a view of human beings whose individual nature is such as to flourish only in the society of flourishing others. According to Achtenberg, part of our adequacy as moral persons depends upon the capacity to recognize the good, that is, to provide what is needed for myself and others to grow.

The third section presents two papers dealing with special cases of Aristotle's moral theory: his account of moral character, and that of *philia*, or friendship. In the first paper, Patricia Curd begins with Virginia Woolf's claim that fiction is about character, and by connecting this concern with Aristotle's analysis of character in the *Ethics*, shows that an Aristotelian framework of moral character illuminates the reading of Woolf's novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*. Virginia Woolf's connection to Aristotle is not superficial, as Woolf herself studied and greatly admired Aristotle's *Poetics* and most probably was familiar with his ethical views as well. What we find in the characters of Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* is a constant concern with the importance of moral discernment, the place of emotion in the moral life, and a proper estimation of ends in life. Professor Curd argues that the picture that Woolf's fiction provides concerning moral virtue and character, although not presented systematically, can be compared to the theoretical discussion Aristotle furnishes us in *Nicomachean Ethics*. There Aristotle focuses on the roles that practical reason, moral intuition, and the emotions play in his notion of the morally excellent life. As Curd points out, these components must be properly combined so as to produce the person of moral character, the one who is best able to judge character in others. Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway is herself such a person, according to Curd, or is, at least, in the process of becoming one. For Mrs. Dalloway has achieved a balance between her reason and her passions and made actions and emotions "a true part of herself" (Curd, 151). Furthermore, it is through Mrs. Dalloway's eyes that we as readers perceive and understand the others around her; in this respect, also, we find Mrs. Dalloway to be Aristotle's person of excellent moral character.

In the second paper in this section, I consider whether and to what extent a feminist theory of friendship, that is, a friendship between women whose aim is the good of women, can profit from a reevaluation of Aristotle's theory of *philia*. In spite of the fact that elsewhere Aristotle holds women to have differing moral virtues from men and to be less able to deliberate than men, in his *Ethics* he claims that women are able to have friendships of

character, or “virtue friendships,” as they are usually termed. Thus, although his focus centers on friendships between men, I argue that the theory allows that women are capable of mutual ties of affection that aim at promoting morally excellent lives. This conclusion is reached by considering various components of his theory of friendship in *Nicomachean* and *Eudemian Ethics*, including *eunoia*, or mutual well-wishing, *philêsis*, loving affection, and *prohairesis*, or choice. Further, Aristotle’s general notion of friendship as a *hexis*, a state of character that implies a balance between practical reason and emotion and aims at good activity, should be reconsidered for application to a feminist ideal of friendship.

In the final section of the collection, two papers consider the relation between language and desire from different perspectives. In the first, Anne-Marie Bowery focuses her exposition on Diotima’s narrative speech in Plato’s *Symposium*, arguing that an analysis of the narrative structure of the speech reveals several characteristics of Diotima’s way of philosophizing that distinguishes it from Socrates’ own. The essay centers on three related issues arising from the narrative analysis. First, Diotima’s narrative style is more aptly suited to foster the philosophical education of her audience (namely, Socrates) than is Socrates’ own narrative style. Second, the feature of self-inclusion in Socrates’ narrative style distinguishes it from that of Diotima: in referring to himself in his narratives, Socrates demonstrates that his philosophy aims at self-knowledge. Finally, Plato employs narrative differently than does Socrates, in that Plato does not tell narratives about himself but remains the absent narrator of the dialogues. After consideration of these points, Bowery comes to the surprising conclusion that Plato’s use of narrative closely mirrors that of Diotima, rather than that of Socrates. The implications of Diotima’s mode of narrative for contemporary feminism, particularly French feminism, are twofold. First, it serves to combat the criticisms voiced by some feminists that Continental philosophy, even French feminism, while promising to break with the “patriarchal hegemony” of traditional Western philosophy (Bowery, 175), actually continues it. For Bowery argues that in the *Symposium* Plato gives us an account of truth “tethered to the female” (Bowery, 182–3), in the sense that Diotima’s narrative style is shown to be more adequate than Socrates.’ Second, the participatory aspect of Diotima’s narrative, distinct from Socrates’ narratives, allows her to foster philosophical exchange through interaction with her audience, an achievement that recalls the contemporary feminist conception of truth as created through mutual agreement and interaction.¹⁴

In the final paper, Martha Nussbaum opens with a passage from Epicurus in which “women” and “boys” are listed in parallel fashion with “drinking

bouts,” “fish,” and other “luxuries” of the table as things that do not conduce to the truly pleasant life. Standard translations of this passage, she notes, do not preserve the actual things named but substitute the words “sexual love” for the terms mentioned, “women” and “boys.” The implications of this substitution are deeply suggestive showing that our conceptions of desire are not ahistorical and descriptive, but normative and historically determined. Whereas heterosexuality clothes the contemporary notion of what desire is and what its objects are, it obviously did not determine the ancient conception. Furthermore, as the passage makes clear, the problem of sexual desire is subsumed under that of self-control, which Professor Nussbaum finds generally characteristic of the language of desire in the ancient world. But Nussbaum’s larger thesis is that much of the ancient philosophical discussion about desire presupposes that emotion and desire are largely formed by socially instilled beliefs which themselves can be changed. Consequently, the purpose of much of the ancient discourse, especially in the Hellenistic period, was to persuade the reader or listener of wrongfulness of beliefs supporting certain desires. The process by which these fundamental beliefs come to be changed—through philosophical analysis and argumentation—is regarded by Hellenistic schools, like the Epicureans, as a kind of “therapy” considered to constitute an entire mode of living. Nor is this discussion of purely historical interest, for first, Nussbaum proposes the ancient notion of therapy as a model for change for the individual in contemporary society, arguing that the ancient debate about emotion and desire strikes a balance between the contributions of personal history and social learning. Second, she suggests that the ancient debate illuminates the extent to which desire and emotion, although socially constructed and culturally bound, are to a great extent culturally and historically overlapping experiences.

The present collection does not and—given its limits of space—could not furnish a comprehensive account of the nexus of ancient philosophy and feminist theory. Its more modest aim is to provide the reader with an illustrative survey of some of the recent work in these areas.



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PART I

WOMEN'S NATURE AND CAPABILITIES



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PLATO'S *REPUBLIC* AND FEMINISM

Julia Annas

Not many philosophers have dealt seriously with the problems of women's rights and status, and those that have, have unfortunately often been on the wrong side.¹ In fact Plato and Mill are the only great philosophers who can plausibly be called feminists. But there has been surprisingly little serious effort made to analyze their arguments, perhaps because it has seemed like going over ground already won.

This paper is concerned only with Plato. I shall maintain what may surprise some: It is quite wrong to think of Plato as "the first feminist."² His arguments are unacceptable to a feminist, and the proposals made in *Republic V* are irrelevant to the contemporary debate.

The idea that Plato is a forerunner of Women's Liberation has gained support from the fact that in *Republic V* Plato proposes not only that women should share men's tasks but also that the nuclear family should be abolished.³ This idea is put forward by some radical feminists today as an essential part of any program for the liberation of women. But I shall argue that Plato's grounds for the proposal are so different from the modern ones that he is in no sense a forerunner of them. Furthermore, where they differ, empirical evidence suggests that it is Plato who is wrong.

Plato's proposals about women⁴ come at the beginning of Book V, where Socrates is represented as having to surmount three waves of opposition. The first wave concerns the admission of women as Guardians; the second concerns the communal life of the Guardians; the third concerns the practicability of the ideal state, and this leads into the discussion which occupies the rest of Books V–VII. The figure of separate "waves" is constantly brought before us; for Plato the capacity of women to be Guardians is a separate question from the replacement of nuclear family life.⁵

Plato begins his treatment of the first problem (*Rep.* 451) by extending the metaphor he has used already. Female watchdogs do just what the male ones do, except that they are weaker, and their lives are interrupted by giving birth. By analogy, the same is true of women; though they are weaker

than men and their lives are interrupted by childbirth, they are otherwise the same, and so should be given the same upbringing and tasks as men, however distasteful the sight of ugly old women exercising in the gymnasium may be.

Now this is only metaphor—and in fact it does not pretend to be serious argument. Plato wants to give us a picture first, perhaps so that we have a vivid idea of what the arguments are about before they are presented, perhaps also so that he can meet and deflect mere ridicule right at the start, before the serious discussion. Still, the initial metaphor is important, for it continues to influence Plato in the actual argument.

Plato now (*Rep.* 453b–c) puts forward what he regards as a serious objection to the idea of women being Guardians. The opponent is made to say that it contradicts the principle on which the ideal state is constructed—namely, that each person is to do his own work, according to his nature (*Rep.* 453b5). As women differ greatly in nature from men, they should surely have different functions in the city (*Rep.* 453b10–11).

Plato dismisses this objection as merely captious. Of course it is true that different natures should do different things, but it does not follow that men and women should do different things unless it can be shown that they have natures that are different in the important respect of affecting their capacity for the same pursuit. Otherwise it would be like letting bald men, but not hairy men, be cobblers. Plato now claims that men and women differ only in their sexual roles: men impregnate, women give birth (*Rep.* 454d–e). The objector fails to show that there is any capacity that is peculiar to women, and Plato claims to show that there are no civic pursuits which belong to a woman as such or to a man as such (this is the part of the argument we shall come back to). Since there are no specific male or female competencies, men and women should follow the same pursuits, and women who have natures suitable to be Guardians should therefore be appropriately trained.

This is how Plato deals with the first “wave.” There are three important points to be made about his argument.

1. Firstly, there is something very odd about the actual course of the argument from 455a–d. Plato has established the undeniable point that while women are different from men in some ways and similar in others, discussion at that level is sterile; the interesting question is whether the undisputed differences matter when we decide whether women should be able to hold certain jobs. This is the crucial point not only for Plato but for any sensible discussion of the topic. But Plato’s argument is seriously incomplete.

At 455a9–b2 he poses the question, “Are there any occupations which contribute towards the running of the state which only a woman can do?”

Very swiftly he claims to show that there are none. Men are better equipped both mentally and physically (455b4–c6). So in every pursuit men can do better than women, though it is not true that all men do better than all women (455d3–5). Women, he says, are ridiculed when men do such traditional feminine tasks as cooking and weaving better than they do; still, it follows from what has been said that if men bothered to turn their attention to these tasks they would do them better. “The one sex is, so to speak, far and away beaten in every field by the other” (455d2–3).

Now it is hardly a feminist argument to claim that women do not have a special sphere because men can outdo them at absolutely everything. What is more important in the present context, however, is that Plato sums up his argument at 455d6–e1 by saying that there is no civic pursuit which belongs to a woman as such or to a man as such. But while he has argued that there are no pursuits appropriate for a woman as such, because men could do them all better, where is the argument that there are no specifically male competencies? There is not a trace of any such argument in the text, nor of any materials which could be used for one.

This is a serious gap, both because it is the point that the objector, if he were not being shepherded by Socrates (cf. 455a5–b2), would in fact press and because what Plato says about male and female capacities actually provides material for such an objector.

Anyone acquainted with the modern literature will realize at once that someone objecting to the idea that men and women should share all roles is not very worried about whether there are some jobs that only women are suited for. The reason for this is obvious enough: jobs that women usually do are badly paid or unpaid and lack status, and men are generally not interested in doing them. What really interests the objector is the claim that there are some occupations in society which only men are suited for: being doctors, lawyers, judges, taking part in politics by voting or holding office, owning and managing property. In the Athens of Plato's day women were not allowed to do any of these things, and the average Athenian would no doubt have simply assumed that they could not do them (as we can see from Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazusae*). Any feminist must take this objection seriously and meet it, simply because it has been historically the main objection to attempts by women to enter hitherto male professions or obtain hitherto male rights like the vote.⁶ Yet Plato not only does nothing to meet this overwhelmingly obvious objection, he even provides materials for the objector. At 455b4–c6 he distinguishes three ways in which a gifted nature differs from an ungifted one. The gifted learn quickly, the ungifted only with difficulty. The gifted do not have to be taught very long before they can go on to

make discoveries of their own; the ungifted need long instruction and are hard put to it to retain what they have learn. The gifted can put their thoughts into action; the ungifted are clumsy. Plato then asks rhetorically, “Do you know of any human pursuit in which men do not greatly excel women in all these qualities?” Clearly the answer is “No.” But if men always excel women in these very important respects, the objector has all he wants: surely there are some pursuits (e.g., generalship) where these qualities are needed in a high degree and which it is therefore not reasonable to open to women. It is no good saying, as Plato at once does, that, “many women are better than many men at many things” (455d3–4). The objector does not need to claim that all men are always better than all women in a specific respect. If only men excel in a quality, then if efficiency is our aim⁷ surely that makes it reasonable to regard a pursuit that requires a high degree of that quality as suited specially to men. The fact that women will not invariably come out on bottom is neither here nor there. In Plato’s fiercely specialized state, the aim will be the maximum number of alpha performances.

This is an important argument. Scientific research into sex differences is an area of great controversy precisely because its results do have important social consequences; if men and women did have different types of intelligence, for example, then different types of education would surely be appropriate. But why does Plato not even notice the gap in his argument or the ammunition he is handing to the opposition? Of course he does not want to make the opponent’s case seem strong. But it is possible that he genuinely does not see the disastrous relevance of his claims about men’s superior intellectual gifts to his point about distinct fields of activity. He may be doing here what Aristotle often criticizes him for—taking metaphor for argument.

The metaphor of male and female watchdogs with which the subject was introduced would naturally lead Plato to think predominantly of human tasks which are analogous. And this is what we find. At 455e1, after the argument just discussed, he mentions that women are weaker than men at all pursuits. This suits his use of the analogy with the dogs, for there the difference in strength between male and female was not succinct reason to give them different tasks. And in the whole discussion that follows he simply shelves the question of intellectual differences between men and women. He never seriously discusses activities where these differences would matter and which are nevertheless to be open to women in the ideal state. There is only one reference to women officials (460b9–10) and even then they have a traditionally “feminine” role (inspecting newborn children). There is possibly a reference to women doctors at 454d1–3 (but the

text is very uncertain), and some women are said to be capable of being doctors at 455e6–7. Against these two (or possibly three) meager and off-hand references to women doing jobs requiring some intellectual capacity, there are at least nine references⁸ to women fighting, serving in the army, and doing gymnastics. On this topic Plato's discussion is full and emphatic. He is taking seriously the idea that the life of the human female is like that of any other female animal, with reproduction making only short breaks in physical activity otherwise like the male's. No doubt this is because he is mainly interested in the eugenic possibilities for his "herd."⁹ The picture of the female watchdog diverts him from the problems he faces given his beliefs about female intellectual capacities.

So Plato's argument here is not one which a feminist would find useful or even acceptable. In any case, it has a serious gap, and it is not clear that Plato could repair it except by abandoning his beliefs about the intellectual inferiority of women.¹⁰

2. Secondly, the argument is not based on, and makes no reference to, women's desires or needs. Nothing at all is said about whether women's present roles frustrate them or whether they will lead more satisfying lives as Guardians than as house-bound drudges.

This is rather striking, since women in fourth-century Athens led lives that compare rather closely to the lives of women in present-day Saudi Arabia. The place of women in Athenian life is summed up forcibly in the notorious statement, "We have courtesans for our pleasure, concubines for the requirements of the body, and wives to bear us lawful children and look after the home faithfully" (Pseudo-Demosthenes, *Against Neaera*, 122). The contrast between this and the life of the Guardians is so striking that one would have thought some comparison inevitable. Yet Plato shows no interest in this side of the picture. Later on in Book V (465b12–c7) he talks about the liberating effect of communal life in freeing people from the struggle to make ends meet and the need to hand one's money over to women and slaves to take care of it. Here the woman's position in the household is presented as something that the *man* is to be liberated from. There is nothing about the effect on *her* of communal living.

Of course Plato is not bound to be interested in the psychology of women, but his complete lack of interest underlines the fact that his argument does not recommend changing the present state of affairs on the ground that women suffer from being denied opportunities that are open to men.

His argument has quite different grounds, in fact. The state benefits from having the best possible citizens, and if half the citizens sit at home doing