

Plato on women and the family essay sample

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Plato's Republic is, understandably, considered a landmark text in the field of political philosophy. While Plato's main objective in the text was to examine and explain the nature of justice (and the just state), it also invites the reader to consider a number of other philosophical and social concerns, not least that of feminism and the role of women and the family in Plato's ideal state.

Here, we will consider the differing views of Amanda, Brenda and Carol on Plato's ideas about women and the family as seen in the text of Republic.

Amanda: I think the proposals Plato makes for women and the family in Republic Book 5 are among his greatest achievements. He is the first person to recognise that women are capable of doing the same jobs as men and could even be rulers. I reckon the Republic is a major landmark on the long slow road to women's liberation.

Amanda appears to be stating the case for Plato as an early feminist and, indeed, it is difficult not to give Plato credit for his revolutionary ideas of women and equality. Proposing that women could be treated equally with men was, in Plato's time and far beyond, unheard of and so it introduced new and challenging ideas about the positions women could hold within society.

However, before we are to suppose that there is a legitimate basis for considering Plato as the feminist, a clear definition of feminism must first be established. The concept of feminism is generally based on the notion of equality amongst men and women, the idea that women are no less capable of performing tasks than men, on the basis of their sex. So long as one

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believes in this equality, and applies the same standards to both men and women, it is thought that one can be considered a feminist.

In light of this definition, then, can Plato be accepted as an early feminist thinker? By this rationale, Plato emerges as a feminist by insisting on equal education and life styles for men and women guardians, and allowing women to reach the highest strata in Plato's ideal state, as *Philosopher Kings*.

Socrates argues that any physiological difference in men and women is not to prevent them from occupying the same position in the city: "...women... should be selected to live with the male guardians and to join them in guardianship. They are endowed with the natural ability to do so, and they are from the same stock as male guardians" (Rep., 456b).

However, if we consider Plato's writings on women in general, both in *Republic* and elsewhere, Plato seems to hold the misogynistic mindset of his time, frequently making reference to the weaknesses and supposed inadequacies of women, "...women are innately weaker than men" (Rep., 456a), and generally seems to hold that women are, essentially, possessions of men. Notably, there is also little mention of "an expanding role for women in the city's large lower class" (Pappas, P. 106).

There is also a statement in the text which almost makes it seem like Plato himself did not believe his own proposals: "I suppose a lot of our suggestions would seem ludicrous and outlandish if they became practical realities" (Rep., 452a), which leads the reader to wonder to what extent did Plato actually mean such proposals - was it simply the case that he made

such radical suggestions for women because he thought it would never come into practice anyway?

Brenda: I am not so sure about that. Although Plato says that women can do the same jobs as men, he wants them to give up everything that really makes them women - all the distinctively female values and emotions. So really he just wants to turn women into men.

Undoubtedly, Brenda makes a valid point here - rather than Plato being at the forefront of early women's liberation, it could be said that he simply wanted to move women's lack of choice over one lifestyle, to a lack of choice over another kind of lifestyle. He made no proposals to nurture any feminine qualities in men, instead insisting that the women should be taught as men so as to be able to act as men, therefore, there is little equal about Plato's proposals - as Brenda states, he really just wished to turn women into men.

Of course, one could argue that Brenda's objection is, in itself, flawed. She doesn't appear to be taking a feminist stance here either - is it really the case that women are defined as women only by their roles in society, their jobs and generalised qualities ascribed to them? One could argue that this is an all too narrow view of women, one that Plato wished to demolish by proving that men and women were each capable of different roles in spite of, not because of, their sex.

Carol: I don't see how anyone can praise Plato's proposals for women and the family. They would involve subordinating individuals to the state, they

override the most basic human rights and they would deprive the guardians of some of the things that really make life worth living.

It is easy to see why Carol would feel it wrong for Plato to propose a denial of emotional relationships - between women and men, parents and children - and generally denying the whole experience of family life, which is regarded in our own society as so important. One must ask, can such a denial of what are considered basic human rights ever be justified for the greater good of the state?

Firstly, it is important to acknowledge that family life in Plato's time was not as it is now, and it may indeed have been kinder, especially for women, to remove such a burden altogether. "Women...were married off by their early or middle teens to men twice their age; when they did not die in childbirth, they could look forward to a life enclosed in the house...Plato recognises the waste of human resources in this social system" (Pappas, P. 104). Plato recognised the misogyny in his own society, and while what he proposed may not have offered women any more choice, it would at least see them on a more equal footing with their male counterparts and, in theory at least, be more beneficial to the society as a whole.

However, even assuming that such a denial, of what could be termed emotional freedom, is as Carol states, a bad thing, Plato implies that it would only be necessary for the upper class - the elite - in the society. The guardians - governing class - then become a large scale family entity, uniting the entire community under a blanket of common interest. "When all citizens share the same pleasures and pains, the city is unified; when they

have private pleasures and pain, it is divided” (Rep., 462b). The abolition of the small scale family as we know it, for Plato, would have removed the dangers of split loyalties, leaving the citizens only feelings of loyalty and allegiance going to the state, which itself becomes the family.

Having considered the differing positions of Amanda, Brenda and Carol on the matter of Plato, women and the family, it is easy to see where each of them is coming from. However, it is perhaps a mistake to consider Plato a feminist, or Republic as a landmark text in women’s liberation. Such modern terms can cloud our perception when considering the original text in it’s own historical context.

Whilst Plato was certainly the first to even consider women roles beyond those of child rearing and domesticity, it appears after consideration that Plato wasn’t actually advocating the equality of anyone at all. His idea of perfect city state is based on the idea of a mobile system of stratification and communal, rather than family, living, wherein the best were chosen for tasks regardless of their sex or which strata of society they were born into. While parts of this doctrine are identifiable with our own, modern conceptions of feminism, it is unlikely that this was Plato’s intention when writing. Rather, these were by-products as he sought to find the best way of organising and running a perfect state, with little real consideration of fairness or equality for women, or for the individual at all.