

Plato on gender: an analysis



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Plato on Gender

Platonic advocacy of female public engagement as articulated in *Republic V* challenges an organizational ethos by which the activities, movement, and behavior of women were severely restricted. Indeed the role of women in Plato's political philosophy is arguably at odds, not only with the negative and oppressive depiction of women in Athenian philosophical thought at large, but also with the broader Platonic corpus which seems to speak to the natural inferiority of females. Plato advances the radical argument that insofar as the body and soul are distinct, women and men may serve coequally in the guardianship of the state. That is, assuming that the nature of a person is independent of his/her body, and to such an extent as each individual should be assigned work suited to his nature, both sexes will be capable of performing all the functions needed by the city, including philosophy, despite the innate and inevitable inferiority of women (Okin, 1979). Yet however progressive his embrace of women in terms of their capacity to assume political, ethical, and intellectual responsibilities alongside men; the evidence suggests that Plato did not stand for a liberationist philosophy that elevates women to the moral status of men. Only by examining the proposals of *Republic V* with an eye toward the overriding aims and structure of the ideal society do Plato's apparent contradictions in his views toward women become apparent.

While his views on women were no doubt revolutionary for the day, the degree to which Plato was motivated by an egalitarian ethic remains an open question. We must remember that Plato was a product of a society locked into a rigid patrimonial order in which the confinement of respectable women

was *de rigeur* and where upper class women were valued primarily as instruments of reproduction and legitimacy (Pomeroy, 1975). The Athenian woman of citizen class was secluded within the parental home until she became a ward of the matrimonial household, where she was expected to exercise her maternal responsibilities, especially the breeding of sons. She was likewise controlled and deprived with respect to her sexuality, without the compensation of any participation in life outside the domestic sphere (Okin, 1979). Socialization with men at any level, even within the confines of the home, was not consistent with her service to the household and commitment to chastity, frugality, and silence (Pomeroy, 1975).

In conceptual terms, meanwhile, emotionalism and lack of self-control were seen as products of female nature; reserving bravery, norms of reason, and objectivity for men within the intellectual and institutional structure (Just, 1989). Thus to the extent that women were devoid of moral agency and self-possession, they were subject to the authority and guardianship of men, effectively disqualifying them from the ruling class as a condition of “natural” dependency. The recurrent theme in the literature is of female subordination and loss of autonomy as a result of excessive physical indulgence: “women are in bondage to their physical appetites as much as those who are legally bound” (Just, 1989, p. 186). A woman, as such, is unable to subordinate her appetites, desires, and emotions to reason (i. e. higher-order valuations) in pursuit of virtue. A man however, presuming the opportune socio-economic conditions, is free, and hence is arguably considerably less, if at all, inclined to fall victim to akratic action. By this reasoning, men maintain the ability to act in accordance with their decisive

better judgments, while women are seen in connection to and dependent upon their appetitive urges (*Politics* , 1260a2-12). Hesiod's *Theogony*, for example, likens the woman to a gluttonous and sexually licentious “stomach” inflicted on the man to consume the fruits of his labor and weaken his resolve to self-govern, which, as a free man, he is presumed capable of (Just, 1989, p. 164). Aristotle confirms; noting in the *Politics* that, “the woman has [a deliberative faculty], but [that] it is without authority” (*Politics* , 1260a12-14). Correspondingly, he submits that “to a woman, silence brings refinement – whereas this does not apply to a man” (*Politics* , 1260a30-31). Hence, as Just comments, “the opposition between those innately possessed of self-control, and those who lack it . . . ideologically renders women's subordinated place within the social structure of the *polis* a ‘natural’ one” (Just, 1989, p. 166).

Against this backdrop, it seems unrealistic to believe that Plato was immune to the influences of the historical and cultural standards that underscore his dialogues. In fact, in the *Timaeus* , Plato himself explains the inferiority of women in terms of devolution from an original creation consisting of men. Those able to master their passions and live virtuously on Earth are granted passage back to the stars from which they came; cowardly and unrighteous men are reborn as women to account for their failures. “All male-born humans who lived lives of cowardice or injustice were reborn in the second generation as women” (*Timaeus* , 90e7-8). Indeed victory of the rational over the irrational was the means by which a debased soul may return to “his original condition of excellence,” and avoid further degeneration into an animal form appropriate to the evil nature which he had acquired (*Timaeus*,

42b1-d2). Plato continues to explain that, ultimately, procreation results from the union of the “ woman’s desire and the man’s love;” an explanation that speaks to appetitive/reason distinction discussed above (*Timaeus* , 91d1).

Thus Plato builds a hierarchy of goodness and rationality in which woman is positioned midway between man and beast, a sentiment echoed in the *Laws* (Okin 1979).

The dialogue of *Republic V*, however, suggests that while human beings can differ in many ways, certain attributes have no bearing on the assignment of different functions to different persons in accordance with their natures. For example, whereas a man with a full head of hair is known to be a good cobbler, the bald man is not necessarily incapable of practicing the same profession (*Republic V* , 454c1-6). There seems, therefore, to be no reason to consider the difference between the sexes in terms of procreative function relevant to whether they should play equal roles in the guardianship of the state (Okin, 1979). Plato thereby manages to reconcile the dialectical opposition between the belief that different natures ought to accord with different pursuits, and the suggestion that the same pursuits be open to both sexes in spite of female inferiority. Thus although he asserts that women are generally less capable than men, especially in physical strength, he maintains that individual members of both sexes are capable of concurrently performing all the city’s functions, including rule and defense (Okin, 1979).

The collective good therefore seems to demand that individual pursuits and education be in keeping with the merits of each, irrespective of sex. That “ women bear . . . and men beget,” Plato reasons, is not tantamount to proof

that women ought to be denied the ‘ guardian-rearing’ education provided to their male peers (*Republic V* , 454d5-12). Accordingly, Plato maintains that the guardians of his state, along with their (collective) wives, ought to enjoy the same pursuits. Just as a “ male and female doctor have souls of the same nature,” so to would Plato’s purported male and female guardians (*Republic V* , 454c10-d1). Plato does, however, prescribe a lighter share of defensive duties to women, in keeping with their relative physical weakness and consistent with their assumed level of strength (*Republic V* , 455d7-e2).

Thus although Plato expands the range of activities open to women, the notion (articulated in the *Timaeus*) that the female form embodies a wicked soul certainly calls into question Plato’s embrace of the egalitarian ideal as such. To be sure, Plato grounds his emancipation of women in the metaphysical assertion that the body and soul are distinct, such that the body becomes an obstacle to the ambitions and potential of the soul. If a male soul can reside in a female body and vice versa, it follows that a female with a philosophical nature may aspire to re-enter life as a man to the extent that she severs her attachment and dependence on the body in favor of philosophy (Bar On, 1994). In effect, since the desired quality of one’s soul may be incongruous with one’s sexual identity, Plato implies that manliness is not necessarily a function of the body. If “ female” refers to someone connected to the world on a bodily level, and “ male,” to a person elevated to a philosophical plane (Bar On, 1994), then anyone of a suitable nature can be considered male as a matter of statecraft.

In this vein, Okin argues that Plato shared his fellow Athenians’ contempt for women, suggesting the emancipation of female guardians was a necessary

byproduct of the dismantling of the family: “ The most important consequence of Plato’s transformation of the guardian class into a single family is the radical implication it has for the role of women” (Okin, 1979, p. 37). Sensing the antagonism between the state and the family, Plato seeks to disengage the guardians from all connections and motive which may undermine their dedication to the state, thereby extending the primary ties of kinship throughout the ruling class (Okin, 1979, p. 37). Thus Rousseau points to a causal link between the abolition of the family and the granting of equal opportunities to women, such that “ having dispensed with the individual family in his system of government, and not knowing any longer what to do with women, [Plato] finds himself forced to turn them into men” (Okin, 1979, pp. 37-8). Indeed the need for unity within the ruling class – which eliminated private property and the wifhood, and minimized the role of maternity – is critical to the involvement of women in the administration of the city. “ If for the female guardians the relationship to particular men, children and households has ceased to be crucial, there seems to be no alternative for Plato but to consider women as persons in their own right” (Okin, 1979, p. 38).

Thus the utilitarian ethic by which Plato’s seeks communal “ happiness” (eudaimonia) is not built on modern notions of liberty, justice, or equality of the sexes. Plato appeals to the efficiency, harmony, and moral goodness on which his politics rest – the oppression of women notwithstanding. “ Excellence, not liberty, is his goal, and he rejects liberty as the enemy of excellence” (Vlastos, 1994, p. 22). The discharge of women from the confines of their traditional domestic role – absent a suitable outlet for the

excesses of female nature – would constitute a threat to civil accord, leaving Plato no choice but to rethink the matter of woman’s role and her potential abilities (Okin, 1979). Allen, who explains Plato’s acceptance of women in the context of a political agenda that does not tolerate any manner of civil discord, and which thereby aims to eliminate potential sources of disorder in the city, also shares this interpretation (Okin, 1979). Arguably then, Plato intends to foster harmony and unity of purpose by resolving the problem of selfishness and contentious interests through the elimination of private property. Thus where property, inheritance, and marriage are reintroduced – as prescribed in the *Laws* of Plato’s second best city – the proprietary status of women renders immaterial Plato’s frustration with the “irrational” maintenance of rigid sex roles (Okin, 1979). “Given these basic features of the social structure of the city, it is not surprising that Plato, in spite of general pronouncements to the contrary, is not able to treat or use women as the equals of his male citizens” (Okin, 1979, p. 46). Further, and of importance if one is to fairly evaluate Plato’s concern for *all* women, though *Republic V* validates the notion that female talents may extend to other crafts under the rubric of maximum efficiency, it proffers nothing toward applying this notion to any but those fortunate enough to be of aristocratic decent. Hence, even if we were to absolve Plato of his (perhaps more subtly) biased inferences observed in conjunction with his emancipation of the female-elite, a comprehensive feminist portrayal of the great philosopher demands that one reconcile his violently opposed views on feminine potential as a function of class.

What emerges is a Platonic distinction between similarities in the potential *range* of men's and women's talents and similarities in ability, with the related distinction between equality of opportunity and equality of outcome. Whereas "women share by nature in every way of life just as men do," there exists no pursuit of mankind in which the male sex maintains not the gifts and qualities to a higher degree than the female, save for absurd examples of household production (*Republic V*, 455c4-d7). This distinction helps to explain why Plato defines male guardians as the "best of the *citizens*" and the female guardians as less-than, i. e. the "best of the *women*" only (*Republic V*, 456e1-5). By extension, Plato asserts that the female-guardians – despite their having been educated in tandem with the males – will serve as assistants (i. e. 'secondary companions' of sorts) to their male compatriots (*Republic V*, 471c2-d4). His description of the optimal brigade arrangement, whereby the guardians would be "less likely to desert each other...if *their* woman joined their campaigns.... positioned in the *rear* to frighten the enemy, and in case their help should ever be needed" indubitably indicates this much, while further implying that men harbor greater capability and potential in warfare than do women (*Republic V*, 471d1-4). Therefore, in constant reference to the "wives" of the guardians, and by defining female guardianship in terms of its value to men, Plato betrays the cultural predispositions embedded in language throughout his work. Unsurprisingly, the notion that 'a woman can do what her fellow man does, but is nonetheless incapable of doing it as well,' lies at the heart of feminist objections to Platonic thought.

Some suggest that Plato's apparent hostility toward women can be explained by appeal to an elitist contempt for a corrupt and inefficient social order under which women fail to meet their potential. Vlastos, for example, adopts a minimalist and conservative conception of personal rights that intends to reconcile the equality Plato provides for women with the philosopher's negative portrayal of women elsewhere (Vlastos, 1994). On Vlastos' account, if Plato's policies reflect a belief that "equality in the rights of persons shall not be denied or abridged on account of sex" – a claim that bears contrary to the norms governing the status of Athenian women at the time – then Plato is aptly characterized as a feminist (Vlastos, 1994, p. 12).

On attempting to reconcile the emancipation of the female-elite in *Republic* V with the reproachful remarks targeted at women – as evidenced throughout the broader Platonic corpus – Vlastos suggests that the "'womanish' traits [Plato] denigrates are those of the great mass of women, not of those brilliant exceptions from whom the guardians would be recruited; and, moreover, they are the traits common to women *now* [i. e. Plato's time], under conditions [then] prevailing which [did not] foster the development of energetic minds and resolute characters" (Vlastos, 1994, p. 18). Arguably, Vlastos' explanation does not merely 'explain away' Plato's irreverent tone toward women; a tone persistent throughout his works and, notably, targeted at the *general* female body. Ultimately, Vlastos' approach fails to satisfy those who subscribe to a liberationist ethic that values women's preferences and needs for their own sake (Annas, 1976). On this account, Pomeroy calls attention to contempt for women throughout the Platonic texts, either expressed directly, or implied through images and

metaphors; and points to a proprietary canon that positioned women as property, prizes, and slaves under the custodial care of men (Pomeroy, 1975). Moreover, noting that Plato's liberation of women resides within a metaphysical framework in which a woman's opportunity to pursue "knowledge of the good" depends on the intrinsic value of the soul, Annas poses a consistent hostility toward women throughout Plato's dialogues. Accordingly, she argues against the feminist thesis; namely pointing to the facts that Plato does not reject inequality between the genders as such, nor does he suggest, in any way, that he genuinely cares for the desires of women, as women (Annas, 1976).

Clearly, the broader Platonic corpus fails to transcend the gender stereotypes and sexist notions that circumscribe its time. However, in so much as Plato gives voice to a class of citizens that remained mute for ages – barred by the values of a rigid societal construct – some may deem Plato a revolutionary proponent of female-actualization. While his overall presentation may offend modern feminist sensibilities, Plato's policies are attuned to the potential of females in the face of a disparaging cultural opposition. And, although the evidence suggests that Plato does not consider women as the *moral* equals of men – by any measure – he nonetheless deserves credit for being among the first to promote the equality of women in meaningful aspects of social status and function.

References

- Annas, Julia. (1976). Plato's " Republic" and Feminism. *Philosophy* , 51, 307-321.

- Aristotle. (1995). *Aristotle Politics: Books I And II*. (Trevor Saunders, Trans.). New York: Oxford University Press. (Original work written 350 B. C. E.).
- Bar On, B. (1994). *Engendering Origins: Critical Feminist Readings in Plato and Aristotle*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Just, R. (1989). *Women in Athenian Law and Life*. New York: Routledge Press.
- Okin, S. (1979). *Women in Western Political Thought*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Press

- Plato. (1997). *Complete Works: The Republic*. (J. M. Cooper & D. L. Hutchinson, Eds.). Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.
- Plato. (1997). *Complete Works: Timaeus*. (J. M. Cooper & D. L. Hutchinson, Eds.). Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.
- Pomeroy, S. (1975). *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*. New York: Random House, Inc.
- Vlastos, Gregory. (1994). Was Plato a Feminist? In Nancy Tuana (Ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of Plato* (pp. 11-23). University Park, PA: Penn State Press.