PLATO ON WOMEN

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An examination of Plato's views on women is pertinent from a contemporary as well as from an historical point of view. Plato, in Book V of the *Republic*, treats with some care a number of issues that are live issues in the discussion of the role of women in a just society. These familiar issues include the following:

(1) Many questions about the need to increase opportunities for women are dismissed as jokes before any arguments are heard.

(2) The typical "adversaries position" to women's rights is a stereotypical position and one that was as familiar to the Platonic Socrates as it is to present participants in the discussion. Consequently, Plato's response is a response to a current, and not merely an historical argument, against full membership of women in political and civil communities.

(3) Many well-meaning commentators on women's actual role in society make factual mistakes about women's abilities to function outside traditional roles.

(4) There is a contrast between heroism and courage that points to the humanizing effect of traditionally "womanly" traits.

Accordingly, this paper will be divided into four sections, each an analysis of Plato on one of the issues listed above. The fullest treatment Plato offers on the subject of women is in Book V of the *Republic*.[1]

The question "What is the nature of women?" arises for Plato in this form, "What is the role of women in the ideally just society?" The Platonic Socrates has sought an explanation of justice in the state in order to explain justice in the individual. At the beginning of Book V, Socrates has reached a turning point in his inquiry. He can now state, in the opening lines of Book V, "Such is the good and true city or State, and the good and true man is of the same pattern."[2]

But what of women and children, one might ask. That is precisely the question Glaucon and Thrasymachus ask Socrates.[3] Socrates is eager to answer, but first has some comments about the question.

I

The question, for Socrates, is an important one, for he prefaces his attempt to answer:

> For I do indeed believe that to be an involuntary homicide is a less crime than to be a deceiver about beauty of goodness or justice in the matter of laws.[4]

Therefore, in posing the question of "the birth and education of our women," Socrates is giving it his full and serious attention.

That such attention is not necessarily expected is obvious from Socrates' remarks. He begins with the supposition that the birth and education of women is subject to the same regulations as that of men. This amounts to the supposition that women will be trained for the same duties and positions as men. Part of the training, then, will be gymnastics and the art of war. Immediately, Socrates anticipates riducule of this view.

His tactic in the face of expected gibes is to anticipate what would be uproariously funny to "the many."

> Yes, and the most ridiculous thing of all will be the sight of women naked in the palaestra, exercising with men [here read women in the trenches, on the football field, in locker rooms], especially when they are no longer young.[5]

This response focuses on the lack of reasoning behind his opponents' dismissal of his proposal before he can argue for it. He connects the "jests of the wits which will be directed against this sort of innovation" with "present notions," i.e., unreflective custom and habit. Ironically, Socrates reflects:

> Not long ago . . . the Hellenes were of the opinion, which is still received among the barbarians, that the sight of a naked man was ridiculous and improper. . . .[6]

Thus, unreflective custom is barbarous according to Socrates. He concludes his powerful dismissal of "the wit" with the following, carefully punful reasoning.

> . . . experience showed that to let things be uncovered was far better than to cover them up, and the ludicious effect to the eye vanished before the better principle which reason asserted.[7]

A translation that brings out even more clearly the sting of Socrates' response is Shorey's:

> But when, I take it, experience showed that it is better to strip than to veil all things of this sort, then the laughter of the eyes faded away before that which reason revealed to be best, and this made it plain that he talks idly who deems anything else ridiculous but evil, and who tries to raise a laugh by looking to any other pattern of absurdity than that of folly and wrong or sets up any other standard of the beautiful as a mark for his seriousness than the good.[8]

This is an equally appropriate response to current dismissals of arguments for equal treatment of women as jokes.[9]

Thus fortified, Socrates continues with his attempt to deal seriously with the role of women in the just society, "begging of these gentlemen for once in their lives to be serious."

II

He restates the point of the inquiry which "whether put in jest or earnest" is to come to an understanding about the nature of women. He

asks, "is she capable of sharing either wholly or partically in the actions of men, or not at all?"[10] He sets about answering the question by indirect proof. Having already suggested that "like dogs divided into he's and she's" both men and women must share alike the duties of citizens, he states and defends the adversary's position. This is the familiar outline:

(1) (which has already been granted by Socrates) "Everybody was to do the one work suited to his own nature."

(2) Men and women are different.

(3) This difference is a difference in nature.

(4) (from 2 and 3) Men and women have different natures.

(5) (the conclusion from 1 and 2) Men and women should not be educated since they cannot be expected to perform the same tasks.

In summary, the argument is that since men and women are different, they must have different tasks and duties. Socrates answers that the difference(s) between men and women must be relevant to the tasks and duties in question. Thus, the dispute according to Socrates is really a verbal dispute resting on an equivocation on the meaning of 'nature.' Socrates' point is that his imagined adversary is using the term 'nature' in the following two ways:

(1) Men and women have different *natures* with respect to child-bearing, *viz.*, women bear and men beget.

(2) Because men and women have different *natures*, they must have different social duties.

In (1) 'nature' is specified by reference to child-bearing traits such as having a womb, as opposed to child-begetting traits such as producing sperm. All that follows from the truth of (1) is that one task naturally ruled out for men is the bearing of children; for women, the contributing of sperm is the begetting of children. 'Nature' in (2) is unspecified. Once it *is* specified that there is a difference in nature *with respect* to child-bearing, nothing at all follows from that natural difference about social or civic tasks unrelated to child-bearing. The derivation of (2) from (1) is based on the failure to be faithful to the meaning of 'nature' in (1) where nature refers to basic reproductive funtions. Consequently, the adversary's position rests on "a merely verbal opposition in the spirit of contention and not of fair discussion."[11] To argue (2) that women have different roles in the civil community on the basis of (1) of them having child-bearing traits is analogous to arguing that (i) bald people are different from long-haired people, and therefore (ii) if bald-headed people are cobblers, then long-haired people are not suited to be cobblers.

Like most arguments of the form illustrated in (1) and (2), the adversary's argument needs additional premises. Such premises would have to state that child-bearing capacities entail child-rearing necessities or unique

abilities to nurture, etc. These premises would have to be argued for independently. One of the great dangers in arguments of that sort is circularity. An example of such circularity would be to argue as follows: She must rear because she bears. Why? Because bearing marks her out for—shows she is especially designed to—rear.

Clearly, without additional premises the position opposing that of Socrates on women is unacceptable. Socrates can conclude at this point that sexual differences do not conclusively determine the unfitness of women for tasks traditionally assigned to men, with the notable exception of producing sperm and related reproductive functions.

The next step in Socrates' discussion is to consider the possibility that while sex is not a *conclusive* factor in the assignment of responsibilities in a society, it may be a relevant factor in some cases. The dialogue runs:

> And if, I said, the male and female sex appear to differ in their fitness for any art or pursuit, we should say that such pursuit or art ought to be assigned to one or the other of them; but if the difference consists only in women bearing and men begetting children, this does not amount to a proof that a woman differs from a man in respect of the sort of education that she should receive; and we shall therefore continue to maintain that our guardians and their wives ought to have the same pursuits.[12]

The argument here is slightly tricky. At first Socrates appears to re-emphasize that suitability for various roles is an individual matter. Yet, as the passage quoted above indicates, he has offered a counter-argument to his adversary's proof, not a proof of his own that men and women should share civic responsibilities. In the next passage he seems to yield to his adversary by asking, "Can you mention any pursuit of mankind in which the male sex has not all these gifts and qualities in a higher degree than the female?"[13] What is confusing in Plato's reasoning at this stage can be partially cleared up by noting an important distinction. The structure of his discussion rests on a distinction between attributing a characteristic to an individual member of the class.[14] Socrates admits that, in general, men tend to be stronger and more highly gifted than women. He insists, however, that it does not follow that every man is stronger or more gifted than every woman. Glaucon notes, and Socrates agrees: "Many women are in many things superior to many men, yet on the whole what you say is true."[15]

Another matter that lends confusion to these passages is that there is some question concerning their accurate translation into English. While Jowett, and others, translate 'astheneia' as 'inferior,' 'ischurotera' as 'superior,' Shorey translates the former as 'weaker' and the latter as 'stronger.' There is more support for the second reading, given the sense of physical capacity generally attached to the Greek terms Plato used in these passages.[16] Even on the second reading Plato clearly ascribes greater

strength to men than to women, although he notes that he is speaking of the class. The conclusion at this stage is that while women are on the whole less suited for certain tasks (heavy war duties) than are men, women must be educated in the same way as men. Otherwise, women's individual talents, which may exceed men's even in military skills, would not be allowed to develop. Socrates thus concludes with his original, if to some, laughable, supposition that in a just society men and women would be educated for the same pursuits.

> The law which we then enacted was agreeable to nature, and therefore not an impossibility or mere aspiration; and the contrary practice, which prevails at present, is in reality a violation of nature.[17]

III

We have discovered in Plato's dialogue the claim that as a class men are stronger and more gifted than women. Socrates appears to rest this claim on observation. He asks Glaucon, almost rhetorically, "And can you mention any pursuit in which the male sex has not all the gifts in a higher degree?"[18] Even though Socrates qualifies this admission, a critical reader is still left with the question whether Plato need have yielded that men as a class always surpass women as a class. To put it another way, is the "Plato is only a product of his culture" argument satisfactory here? It can be plausibly maintained that it is not. There were prominent counter-examples to the claim that women seldom or never excelled in battle or in politics, even in Plato's time. To cite a few, consider examples from literature, the visual arts, history and politics.

In Greek literature, one finds a number of female characters who belied the charge of lacking the moral strength or the political finesse of men. Consider Sophocles' *Antigone*. She illustrated the traditional problem of the individual whose informed conscience demands civil disobedience.[19] She is characterized as a rebel, whose sex is irrelevant to the difficulty and integrity of her decision to disobey. Sophocles may not have approved of her disobedience but he portrayed it as the decision of a strong character.[20] The resemblance of Antigone's plight to that of Socrates in the *Apology* and the *Crito* is marked, even given the differences in their status in Greek society. There are other examples of women in Greek tragedy and comedy who showed both insight and adroitness in managing the afairs of state, although frequently not from acknowledged positions of leadership. Among the most notable are Aeschylus' Clytemnestra and Aristophanes' Lysistrata. Furthermore, Greek mythology was full of the successful exploits of women in battle, most notable Athena.

There are illustrations of Athena's physical prowess and leadership not only in the mythological literature of ancient Greece but in the visual arts

as well. Consider the Stymphalides and Atlas metapes from the Temple of Zeus at Olympia. There Athena is shown assisting Hercules in his mighty labors. She is shown, for instance, helping him carry the vault of heaven. The western pediment of the Temple of Zeus which was familiar to everyone in Plato's day depicts another scene in which women were shown actively defending themselves against the centaurs in the battle of the Lapiths and centaurs. Apollo awarded the victory to the Lapiths, both men and women. Similar sculptures represented women competing in the strenuous games, a well-known activity in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.[21]

The most significant historical example of women as leaders in military and political pursuits is, of course, Spartan women. The familiarity of the Spartan woman is evidenced in *Lysistrata.* There Myrrhine satirizes her Spartan sister:

> Ah, dearest Lampito, welcome here from Sparta!
> Oh, what a radiant beauty's yours, sweet friend!
> How fresh your face, how vigorous your body!
> You'd strangle a steer! (77-81)[22]

While these illustrations may not have provided conclusive enough evidence for Plato to assert that women are equal in strength and giftedness to men, they certainly should have counted against conclusive generalities to the contrary. That one sees what one expects to see and draws conclusions accordingly is evident in Plato's case, as it is in the cases of many contemporary writers.[23] Perhaps Plato deserves some critical applause for having refused to make an a priori out of a questionable empirical claim.

If one corrects Plato's argument by showing that there were counter-examples in his own culture to the characterization of women as generally weak and mediocre, one arrives at a position stronger than the one Socrates concludes with above. It turns out that Socrates had a firm empirical basis for arguing against the claim that women can be expected to fall short of men in most pursuits.

There are, however, passages from the *Republic* where Plato may be trapped by the linguistic usage of his time. Here again we can draw contemporary parallels. Earlier, in Book III, Socrates urged censoring any artistic works that encourage the following limitation:

> . . . [of] a woman whether young or old, quarrelling with her husband, or striving and vaunting against the gods in conceit of her happiness, or weeping, and certainly not one who is in sickness, love, or labor.[24]

This and other passages in Book III reflect the view that traits linked with female characteristics are undesirable. The problem comes in ascertaining whether the proscription is directed against certain traits because they are feminine or because they are undesirable. Given the remarks of

Socrates elsewhere in Book III, it seems likely that traits such as quarrelling and weeping are censored in drama because they are undesirable in themselves, not because they are feminine. The Platonic Socrates may be limited by what terms are available to him for criticizing these traits. It can be argued that there is no very clear way in classical Greek to distinguish between (1) an undesirable trait traditionally associated with women and (2) a womanly trait. In contemporary dress, the problem appears in trying to say "women are gentle," or "gentleness is a womanly trait" without thereby making it either unwomanly (rather than just undesirable) to be otherwise, or unmanly (rather than just desirable or atypical) to be gentle. Now as then, our forms of expression may make it hard to appear non-sexist, even when our attitudes are struggling against sexism.[25]

Furthermore, it is likely that Plato could not avoid the connotations of "feminine" and "inferior" that were connected with the term for physically not-strong or weaker, "astheneia." This too is a familiar problem with linguistic usage. "Power" and "leadership" are both terms heavily tied through common usage to physical prowess. It is, therefore, difficult to use "power" or "leadership" to describe the capacities of a small or a slight person or to refer to the capacity to be "powerful" through empathetic understanding or clear-eyed concern.

I have stressed that some anti-female bias may be unavoidable in Plato's written dialogues partly because of passages such as this:

> These [womanly harmonies], then, I said, must be banished; even to women who have a character to maintain they are of no use, and much less to men.[26]

While indicative of the view that in general men are more gifted than women, the Platonic Socrates' remarks also indicate that undesirable traits were equally undesirable for both sexes. The distinction obscured by language, between undesirable traits and womanly traits, is needed to comlete Plato's views on women.

My remarks are not intended as an apology for Plato's blatant rejection of men "playing the parts of women." Rather, reflection on familiar problems in finding non-sexist language in which to express certain claims may shed some light on the unavoidability of an anti-female bias in much of Plato's discussion. Consider, for instance, the difficulty in stating the claim that modern society is traditionally patriarchal without thereby implying that society is naturally patriarchal. What I have tried to show is that even with this perhaps unavoidable bias, the view of Plato on women is strongly opposed to the equation of female with inferior and sharply in favor of education designed to produce autonomous individuals irrespective of gender. His view stands in sharp contrast, for instance, to that of Aristotle. Aristotle maintained that women are to men as the ruled are to the ruler.[27] He insists that it is the nature of women to obey, to serve, and to

be silent. Plato, as we have seen, argues against such a view of woman's nature. Indeed, he argues against ascribing a nature to women as such.

It is fair to conclude that an analysis of both the arguments in Book V and the discussion of censorship in Book III reveals a Plato who eschewed the feminine mystique for both men and women. However in Section IV of the *Republic* Plato qualified his ban on the traditionally feminine by offering a unique definition of 'courage.'

IV

We have discovered a Plato who, through the dramatic character of Socrates, argued that not educating men and women for equal pursuits was "unnatural." To conclude the analysis it is revealing to consider the treatment of 'courage' in the *Republic*. Similar treatment can be found in the *Protagoras*. There Socrates argues that courage is always dependent on wisdom, while confidence out of folly makes only for the kind of heroism that a beast may have.

Courage, argues the Platonic Socrates, is never "uninstructed." To be courageous, one must know "the nature of things to be feared and not to be feared."[28] Mere bravado, while sufficiently "spirited," is insufficiently "instructed" to constitute courage. In Book II of the *Republic* Socrates is careful to distinguish courage and bravery from fearlessness. He asks: "But are not these spiritual natures 'absolutely fearless and indomitable' apt to be savage with one another, and with everybody else?"[29]

What courage requires, argues Socrates, is spirit tempered with gentleness. Courage will then yield fearlessness against enemies and not mere savagery. It is helpful to note that, for Socrates, the greatest possible enemy was oneself. It is better to suffer than to inflict injustice, he constantly urged.[30] Consequently, genuine courage rests on self-knowledge as well as gentleness and spirited fearlessness. Furthermore, that "the many" hesitate to call tempered fearlessness "courage" or that they hurry to call acts of bravado "courage" is no argument against his analysis. Conventional wisdom is often wrong-headed, he notes.[31]

This Platonic definition of courage in the *Republic* lends itself to the view of the nature of women discussed in section II above. If men and women are naturally different with respect to reproductive functions alone, then there are desirable traits that are made up of traits traditionally associated with both excellent men and excellent women. Courage is such a trait. Plato seeks to defeat the stereotypical correlation of courage with brash heroism and untempered bravado.

Though Plato associated courage with the skills of war, he never reduced one to the other. If courage consists of wisdom and gentleness as well as fearlessness, then Homer's Penelope is a paradigm example of the Platonic concept of courage.[32]

NOTES

[1] I will restrict my considerations to the *Republic*, primarility Book V. There is some additional discussion of women in the *Laws*, Books 6, 7, and 8. My quotations are from B. Jowett's translation in *The Republic and Other Works* (Garden City, New York: Dolphin Books, 1960), though I will frequently cite P. Shorey's translation in *The Republic* (New York: G. P. Putnam & Sons, 1930) for contrast and elucidation of the text. All my reference to the *Republic* will include the traditional pagination by line as well as by page in Jowett's translation.

[2] Plato, the *Republic*, in Jowett, p. 138, 449a.

[3] This should provide some discomfort to anyone who wishes to argue that 'man' is meant in the general sense of 'human-kind.'

[4] Plato, p. 140, 451b.

[5] Plato, p. 141, 452b.

[6] Plato, p. 142, 452d.

[7] Plato, p. 142, 452e.

[8] Plato, 452e.

[9] A candidate for political office in Texas recently campaigned against the incumbent, a very competent woman, with the slogan "I am going to beat the pants off her."

[10] Plato, p. 142, 543a.

[11] Plato, p. 144, 454e.

[12] Plato, p. 144, 455c.

[13] Plato, pp. 144-145, 455c, d.

[14] As long as ø is not a defining characteristic of a class L, we may say that most L's are ø's without being committed to the claim that all L's are ø's. For instance, most lions live in Africa but not all do. Or, most lions run faster than most dogs, but some one dog may run faster than any lion.

[15] Plato, p. 145, 455d.

[16] The noun '*astheneia*' (weakness) occurs in the statement on page 147, 457b, best translated by Shorey as "lighter tasks must be assigned to the women than to the men because of their *weakness* as a class." The context here indicates that Plato is using the word 'astheneia' in the purely physical sense of 'non-strength.' 'Astheneia' is the Greek word used throughout Book V, although it is variously translated as 'weaker' and 'inferior.'

[17] Plato, p. 146, 456e.

[18] Plato, p. 145, 455c. Shorey uses "supass" instead of "having gifts in a higher degree."

[19] *Antigone*, line 521.

[20] J.T. Sheppard writes of Sophocles "he saw the problem but could find no sovereign cure." *The Wisdom of Sophocles* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1947), pp. 52-53.

[21] Ludwig Drees, *Olympia: Gods, Artists, and Atheletes* (New York, Washington: Frederick A. Praeger, Publ., 1968), pp. 137-139, Figure 36, illus. 72a, 73, and 74 show the Lapith maidens fighting the centaurs. Illustrations 75-78 depict Athena assisting Hercules in his labors. Pages 28-29 (illustration 7) describe the foot race for girls. Verena Zinserling in *Women in Greece and Rome* (New York: Abner Schram) also includes a number of illustrations of women competing in the games.

[22] Quoted in Verena Zinserling's *Women in Greece and Rome*, p. 32.

[23] Gertrude Ezorsky calls attention to a similar mis-reading of the data regarding non-discrimination and reverse discrimination in the hiring practices of American universities.

[24] Plato, p. 83, 395-e.

[25] Illustrations abound, for instance, in switching from feminine or masculine to clearly neutral forms: from 'chairman' to 'chair' or 'chairperson'; from he to he/she; from mothering to nurturing; from having balls to having nerve.

[26] Plato, p. 87, 398e.

[27] Aristotle, particularly the *Politics*, Book I, Ch. 4 and 14.

[28] Plato, p. 119, 429c.

[29] Plato, p. 60, 375b.

[30] This view is to be found especially in the *Republic* Books I and II, and in the *Apology*.

[31] Plato, p. 115, 426d.

[32] Jack Gilbert makes this same point beautifully in a poem called "The Abnormal is Not Courage," in *Views of Jeopardy* (New York: AMS Press, reprint of 1962).

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