

Plato And Aristotle: A Comparative Study About Their Attitudes Towards Women

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Plato and Aristotle, two of the most influential philosophers in the Ancient World, both had radical views on the nature and capabilities of women. Many of these views were similar, yet somehow Plato became a champion of the female cause, while Aristotle was labelled a male chauvinist. This essay will look to discover whether Plato really was an early feminist, or whether we are looking too far into his ideas.

Plato, in the *Republic*, argues that women should be able to take on the same social roles equally with men in his ideal state. His ideas are based upon the view that women and men have the same nature in respect to acting as guardians of the state, except that the one is weaker while the other is stronger. However, just one generation later Aristotle returns women to their traditional roles in the home, being subservient to men. There is no equality in nature for Aristotle, and in the *Politics* he declares:

..as regards the sexes, the male is by nature superior and the female inferior, the male ruler and the female subject. And the same must necessarily apply to all mankind.

For now, however, our thoughts will concentrate on Plato and what he really thought of women and their capabilities.

Firstly, we should make clear that at no point does Plato deny that there are differences between the two sexes - his ideas on equality lie solely in the nature of humans. He does not pretend that women are as physically capable as men, nor does he deny that women are better at tasks like weaving. He does not say, though, that one could not be better than the other if they had the same training. And this is precisely his main argument in the *Republic* - that given the same training, education and opportunities, suitable women could be equally suited to the position of guardian as their male counterparts.

Plato acknowledges that women are physically weaker than men, but he suggests this should not prevent them from receiving military training. In his *Laws*, he references women from Pontus who are skilled with weapons, indicating that he does not believe women are incapable of learning these skills, even if they might not excel to the same degree as men. He argues that, while women can be trained similarly to men, it is more appropriate for them to handle lighter duties due to their physical limitations:

"...they will receive lighter duties than the men, because of the weakness of their sex."

This observation is not meant to be derogatory; rather, it reflects a recognition of natural differences. Plato understands that, while women can be trained for strength, it is unlikely they will match the physical prowess of men. Nonetheless, having women trained in warfare could provide valuable support for the city in times of crisis. In Plato's ideal state both capable men and women would be allowed to act as guardians of the state. They would be trained in the same skills, for human nature would allow that either sex would be able to do most things if taught, and they would have the same role:

After all, it's the same nature the educational system takes on in both cases.

The women that are good at sports and warfare, and who are philosophically inclined, would make the best guardians. He also agrees, that as in the case of men also, some of the women would not be suitable:

Some women may make good guardians, then, while others won't, since these were the innate qualities we selected as the marks of men who would make good guardians.

Although Plato here appears to be showing belief that women can be men's equal, he denies that they could ever be as able as men:

The one gender is far superior to the other in just about every sphere.

Plato's best women, then, must be those who are only level with the second best of men. They would be better than all those men below second best, yet they could never be as good as the best of men. Perhaps, as Calvert says, Plato means that while men and women have corresponding ranges of talents, men possess these talents to a greater degree. Although this may not necessarily be flattering to women, it was certainly better than what Aristotle believed.

Aristotle thought that this was how life ought to be, with women in subjection, while Plato at least had the idea that it could, or should, change. When saying how men were superior to women, perhaps we should consider that Plato may just be telling us how it was in those days. Middle class women would have been married off in their teens, and if they did not then die during childbirth, they could look forward to a life shut away in the house weaving cloth. Plato must have recognised the waste of human resources in this social system, and thus opposed it. It would have been difficult for him to present his revolutionary ideas, though, without incorporating at least some of the traditional views, for a typical Athenian man would certainly not have been convinced by Plato's appeal to the idea of relative difference. The general view of the day appears to be as follows:

..the virtue of a man consists in managing the city's affairs capably, and so that he will help his friends and injure his foes while taking care to come to no harm himself. Or if you want a woman's virtue, that is easily described. She must be a good housewife, careful with her stores and obedient to her husband.

Yet it is also possible that Plato really did believe that women were inferior. The derogatory comments that he occasionally slips in - where he still sees women as sex objects given to brave warriors - may show he has a misogynistic tendency. However, unlike most men of the period, perhaps Plato was prepared to advocate equality because of the demands of his form of justice. Several of his other works are quite disparaging towards women, though, with only the *Republic* really showing any inclination towards true equality. In the *Apology* Socrates call those who plead in court no better than women? and in the *Phaedo* he talks of the distractions of female lamentations. Perhaps the most damning thought of all occurred in the *Timaeus* (42b-c) where Plato clearly stated that if men lived immorally then they would be reincarnated as women.

If Plato really was a misogynist, then his work would not have aroused such severe criticism from Aristotle, who thought Plato's revolutionary ideas were disgraceful. Perhaps, therefore, we need to look at his change in opinion of women from the *Republic* to the *Laws*.

In *Laws*, Plato shifts back to a traditional view of women, asserting that the differences between the sexes ultimately prevent women from being equal to men. He argues that women possess an inferior virtue and should listen to different types of music. For men, music serves as inspiration, particularly in battle, while women are better suited to more emotional music due to their emotional nature. Plato also recognizes the risks of liberating women from their domestic roles without providing them with alternative functions. He uses the example of the Spartans to caution against allowing women to indulge in luxury and disorder while supervising men.

This shift in Plato's views may stem from the contrast between the idealistic framework of *Republic* and the more practical context of *Laws*, which reflects a recognizable social reality. This perspective aligns with Dickinson's assertion that the notion of male superiority is often a remnant of masculine prejudice.

This prejudice is even more pronounced in Aristotle, Plato's student. Aristotle could not entertain the idea of women being equals to men, viewing males as naturally superior in both physical and moral aspects. He believed that the innate weaknesses of women—both physical and of the soul—defined their nature and capabilities. Like Plato, Aristotle argued that social roles should align with an individual's inherent nature, particularly their psychological traits. Consequently, he sought to determine the appropriate roles for men and women within the polis based on these characteristics of the soul.

For the slave has no deliberative faculty at all; the woman has, but it is without authority, and the child has, but it is immature.

Therefore, a woman's soul lacks the essential qualities to be able to make informed decisions about anything. They lack moral virtue in the same moderation, and have different levels of temperance and courage:

..the courage of a man is shown in commanding, of a woman in obeying.

What we have here with Aristotle is a situation whereby the soul takes on the characteristics of the sex of the body. So, a female soul has the nature ascribed to the female body, and the male soul that nature for the male body. Why this is important is the main difference between Aristotle and Plato, for Plato believed that the soul was essentially sexless, that it was external influences that cultivated and educated the soul, and not the sex of the body that determined roles.

Other than the weaker female soul, Aristotle's main line of argument is concerned with biology and the act of procreation. It appears that Aristotle believes that women are in some way biologically deficient, and that this has some sort of profound effect on their psychological deficiency. In his *Generation of Animals*, he comments that where a lack of heat affects the male semen the result will be female or deficient offspring. This appears to be because in the conception of a female, the form (semen) takes an imperfect hold on the matter (female egg), and therefore the soul is taking an imperfect mastery of the body. He also comments that the generation of the female is no better than that of mutilated male.

The fact that a child is born female does not necessarily make it totally deficient, though, for the female does have some uses for Aristotle. Actually, the woman has one use, for nature only gives things one special function, and that function is the procreative one. The female will carry the foetus, give birth and suckle the young, and this role is reserved by nature for women. As the male role in procreation is short, men are obviously designed by nature to deal with the out-of-house activities, such as politics. To have women doing anything other than homely activities would be to go against nature, and with women being emotionally susceptible they must therefore be ruled by men, who are emotionally steadier. Women were only fit to be subjects of male rule.

Plato, however, does not see the bearing of children as a problem in the education of women, nor is it a hindrance to their role as guardian. He sees it as totally plausible for nurses to take on the role of looking after the child, after an initial period of suckling, in order that the chosen women could continue their duties in the civic arena. Yet not all scholars believe Plato's intentions were true. Moller-Okin believes that he was forced to regard women as equals by his abolition of the private household, which took away their traditional role. Yet this is unfair, for he could just have easily assigned women to male guardians as breeding partners and nurse maids. Another attack on Plato comes from Pomeroy, who insists that Plato did not intend for women to ever be equal in status to men. She notes that female guardians are referred to nine times as communal property, presuming that Plato could not conceive women living without male tutelage; perhaps more interestingly she points out that at no point does Plato bring about the idea of husband-sharing. Excellent male guardians could have many women in order to find the best mother of his children, whereas the same should have applied to female guardians if Plato really wanted to improve the race of guardians genetically.

Plato did not share Aristotle's view that women were meant for the domestic sphere; he saw the suppression of women as a waste of human potential and a loss for society, which should include the best guardians, like philosophers. The idea of women engaging in abstract thought and holding positions of power was radical for his time, making many of his ideas revolutionary. However, his works are marked by contradictions. For instance, in *Timaeus*, he suggested that cowardly and unjust men would be reincarnated as women, reflecting a paradox in his thinking. Wender points out that in *Republic III*, Aristotle claims that future guardians should not imitate "womanish" behavior, implying that the typical traits of women, like those of slaves, are inferior. Plato often described women in negative terms, labeling them as secretive, emotional, and poor educators.

While it's challenging to discern Plato's true feelings about women, we can speculate on the reasons behind his inconsistent views. Greek philosophy valued exploring multiple perspectives, evident in Plato's use of dialogue. This allowed him to argue for women's advancement while also acknowledging the misogynistic norms of his era. His Republic aimed to eliminate nepotism by dismantling family ties and property, suggesting that utilizing women's talents could benefit the state, though this doesn't imply he held entirely positive views about women.

Attributing modern definitions to historical figures from different cultures and times is complex, and much nuance can be lost in translation. There may never be a clear answer as to whether Aristotle was a true misogynist or Plato a true feminist. However, it's clear that Aristotle's overt degradation of women influenced Western thought for centuries, while Plato's ideas subtly laid the groundwork for future women's movements. The power of language and ideas remains profound.

So, we have arrived at a scenario which is familiar when reading into Plato's feminism. There are cases where Plato appears to advocate complete equality between certain men and certain women, to allow them to participate in the same upbringing and education, to give them the same opportunities to achieve success in guardianship; yet there are also cases in later works whereby a typical male misogynistic tendency - of the time - creeps in. We cannot blame these comments on carelessness and inconsistency, for they arise out of a deep-rooted belief that women are inferior to men. By seeing this we are not rejecting Plato's views, rather we are recognising his vulnerability to prejudices of his age. His errors cause him to become somewhat less of a feminist, although his considered proposals remain revolutionary for his time. Plato recognised that women had something to offer the state, and although the scenario in the Republic was predominantly unrealistic, the very fact that he considered a new role for women implied he was prepared for change.

Aristotle, on the other hand, had a typical view of women. They were little other than incubators and were certainly not capable of doing anything other than household chores. They had to be ruled by men to be kept in line, and it was their nature to be subordinate. Their souls were inextricably linked to their sex, and this in turn made them psychologically deficient. Plato's sexless soul in a sexed body allowed him to persuade that essentially the nature of men and women was the same, as their souls did not in essence differ. In nearly every way Plato's view of women was by far the better of the two. Aristotle's woman was an object, Plato's woman was a human being with a capacity to be educated. She was ahead of her time.

When looking at feminist literature on the ancient philosophers there seems to be a recurring question. That question is, "Is Plato a feminist?" What is interesting is that no one ever asks, "Is Aristotle a feminist?" Most feminist literature focuses mainly on how poorly Aristotle represents women. For example, Elizabeth Spelman doesn't even consider the possibility that Aristotle is a feminist. Spelman acknowledges immediately that Aristotle considers women to be both biologically and intellectually inferior to men. These divergent interpretations of Plato's position make it difficult to see what exactly is the difference between the two philosophers and whether or not Plato really is a feminist.

Contemporary writers generally agree that Aristotle seems to have a negative view of women. However, they do not generally agree that Plato is a feminist as Plato has inconsistent interpretations. The truth may be that Plato is not a feminist but instead that he finds certain feminine characteristics appealing. As a result, Plato has a favorable opinion of certain aspects of females. He appropriates these characteristics and metaphorically applies them to male philosophers. While this does not make Plato a feminist it does give him a different approach to women than Aristotle. Appropriation of feminine characteristics is what creates inconsistency in determining whether or not Plato is a feminist.

The first question one must ask is, what is a feminist? Maggie Humm in *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory* defines a feminist as someone who has "both a doctrine of equal rights for women and an ideology of social transformation aiming to create a world for women beyond simple social equality." At the very least a feminist is someone who believes in treating women and men as equals. A feminist believes that women should be allowed to do what men do, such as politics or jobs. Considering the society from which Aristotle and Plato both were writing, even thinking of women as equals to men would have been radical at that time.

One should look very closely at the society that Plato and Aristotle lived in. Women in Plato's and Aristotle's Athens were not treated with very much respect or consideration. For the most part women were isolated and secluded within the household, emerging only to do chores such as washing clothes or to attend religious events. The main purpose of women within Athens was to produce more citizens. Since this was the primary function of a woman, most of the demands and restrictions placed on women were designed to help with this function. For example, women were married very young, usually around age fourteen because at the time young girls were considered lustful and troublesome.

Women were not allowed to be involved in politics and were not allowed any kind of interaction with men in public, including shopping or bartering. In general women were considered unintelligent and untrustworthy. They were married at an early age so that their husbands could control them and they were confined to the household so that they were less likely to be unfaithful. Women were only educated in domestic arts such as cooking and cleaning. Overall, one could assess women's status in ancient Greece as very low.

It is from this environment that Plato and Aristotle both wrote their works. It is interesting is that they both came from the same period. These are not two philosophers from completely different eras. The fact that Aristotle was at one point Plato's pupil also makes it surprising that they would have different view of women in their philosophy. Because women were not held in high regard within the Athenian society, it seems unlikely that either philosopher would break out of this societal mold and give women more credit. However, there are some feminists who argue that Plato did in fact do just that.

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