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Plato's antifeminism: a new dualistic approach

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Abstract

In this paper I argue for a dualistic approach to Plato's antifeminism. According to this approach, I make a distinction between what I call Plato's "*ordinary- women account*" and his "*exceptional- women account*". This approach is sufficient, I argue, to solve the many problems usually face the coherence of antifeminist accounts of Plato, caused by his feminist tendencies expressed via his references to Diotima in the "*Symposium*", Aspasia in the "*Menexenus*" and to the women-guardians in the "*Republic*".

Keywords: Plato, antifeminism.

Plato doesn't consider any equality between women and men. For him, women always appear to be the less rational, more emotional gender. However, controversially enough, he refers in his dialogue "*The Symposium*" to a mysterious female-Philosopher to whom Socrates didn't hesitate ascribing his knowledge in love; similarly, in the "*Menexenus*" we see Socrates again ascribing his knowledge to a woman, this time to Aspasia. More importantly, in the "*Republic*" Plato seems to be tolerating the women's participation in the state, by acknowledging the possibility of the existence of women-guardians. But these feminist tendencies challenge the coherence of any antifeminist interpretation of Plato's philosophy, and raise many questions regarding what was Plato's real attitude of women. Therefore, in the following, I will clear up the confusion caused by Plato's feminist references in the mentioned dialogues by the appeal to a dualistic approach to his attitude of women.

Roughly speaking, I argue that Plato's antifeminism should be best understood as a dualistic account, in which we should distinguish between two concepts: first, the concept of the ordinary women and second, the concept of the exceptional women. The two concepts, though contradictory, are equally defended in the Platonic dialogues. By the appeal to this dualistic approach, contradictions can be more easily resolvable; because by using this distinction we can understand better how can Plato be -at the same time- a feminist in some texts and an antifeminist in others.

First, I will introduce Plato's main account of women, the ordinary women account. According to this account, I argue, no real sense of equality between men and women can be ascribed to Plato, who was not concerned neither by what we might call today human rights of women nor by the equality between men and women. In fact, Plato would have been centuries ahead of his time if he was really concerned by these issues. In addition, even sympathetic readings can't avoid Plato's repeated insistence on the weakness of women and their inequality to men who can only be punished by being turned into women in their reincarnation circle! In the "*Timaeus*" we read,

(90e) According to the probable account, all those creatures generated as men who proved themselves cowardly and spent their lives in wrong-doing were transformed, (91a) at their second incarnation, into women. And it was for this reason that the gods at that time contrived the love of sexual intercourse by constructing an animate creature of one kind in us men, and of another kind in women; and they made these severally in the following fashion.¹

¹ Plato, "*Timaeus*", Plato in Twelve Volumes, Vol. 9 translated by W.R.M. Lamb. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1925.

Plato's ordinary account of women, the account which discriminates between men and women and consider women the less adequate gender can be observed also in the "Laws", where Plato's distribution of the heritage overlooks the women right to heritage.

(924e) Accordingly, the law that we shall enact, as the best in our power touching such matters, will be this:—If a man dies intestate and leaves daughters, that brother who is born of the same father or of the same mother and who is without a lot shall take the daughter and the lot of the deceased; failing a brother, if there be a brother's son, the procedure shall be the same, provided that the parties be of an age suited the one to the other; failing one of these, the same rule shall hold for a sister's son; then, fourthly, for a father's brother; and, fifthly, for his son; and, sixthly, for the son of a father's sister.²

Plato's ordinary women account takes place almost in all Platonic dialogues, even in book V of "The Republic", where Plato seems to argue for the equality between men and women who can both join the class of guardians and where Plato seems to tolerate the women's' participation in the state. In the "Republic" we read,

(455d) Then there is no pursuit of the administrators of a state that belongs to a woman because she is a woman or to a man because he is a man. But the natural capacities are distributed alike among both creatures, and women naturally share in all pursuits and men in all.³

In the "Republic" Plato defends his seemingly positive attitude of women by arguing that the differences in gender between men and women when it comes to their participation in the state are more like the difference between a bold man and a long-haired man, i.e., a difference with no intrinsic importance. He says,

(454c) Wherefore, by the same token," I said, "we might ask ourselves whether the natures of bald and long-haired men are the same and not, rather, contrary. And, after agreeing that they were opposed, we might, if the bald cobbled, forbid the long-haired to do so, or vice versa." "That would be ridiculous," he said. "Would it be so," said I, "for any other reason than that we did not then posit likeness and difference of nature in any and every sense, but were paying heed solely to the kind of diversity (454d) and homogeneity that was pertinent to the pursuits themselves?" "We meant, for example, that a man and a woman who have a physician's mind have the same nature. Don't you think so?" "I do." "But that a man physician and a man carpenter have different natures?" "Certainly, I suppose." "Similarly, then," said I, "if

² Plato, "The Laws", Book 11, Plato in Twelve Volumes, Vol. 9 translated by W.R.M. Lamb. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1925.

³ Plato, "The Republic", Plato in Twelve Volumes, Vol. 9 translated by W.R.M. Lamb. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1925.

it appears that the male and the female sex have distinct qualifications for any arts or pursuits, we shall affirm that they ought to be assigned respectively to each. But if it appears that they differ only in just this respect that the female bears (454e) and the male begets, we shall say that no proof has yet been produced that the woman differs from the man for our purposes, but we shall continue to think that our guardians and their wives ought to follow the same pursuits.⁴

However, even Plato's argument in the "Republic" for the female participation in the state shouldn't make us believe in a systematic Platonic feminism; because despite the sense of gender equality in which Plato looks as if arguing for; all what Plato suggests is the following: women prepared by their nature to be guardians, carpenters, physicians... etc can become guardians, carpenters and physicians, just like those men prepared by their nature to be guardians, carpenters and physicians. But does this mean that women and men are equal? My answer to this question is: no; because the mere participation in what men can do doesn't guarantee that men and women are considered equally good in what they can both do; this point still needs some more explanation- I think- but before I can be able to do that I must first draw the attention to the existence of two kinds of discrimination between people that simultaneously take place in the "*Republic*"; first, the discrimination between people according to their innate abilities or natural nature, which I will refer to as "the based on nature discrimination", and second the "sexual discrimination".

Now the overlapping between the two levels of classifying people, i.e., according to their gender and according to their innate abilities shouldn't cause us to recognize one level of discrimination on the cost of the other. First, according to Plato there is a difference in nature between people. As he argues in the "*Republic*", book 3; some people can be designed by nature to rule, others to be guardians and the rest to be workers.

(415a) I said; "but all the same hear the rest of the story. While all of you in the city are brothers, we will say in our tale, yet God in fashioning those of you who are fitted to hold rule mingled gold in their generation, for which reason they are the most precious – but in the helpers silver, and iron and brass in the farmers and other craftsmen. And as you are all akin, though for the most part you will breed after your kinds, (415b) it may sometimes happen that a golden father would beget a silver son and that a golden offspring would come from a silver sire and that the rest would in like manner be born of one another. So that the first and chief injunction that the god lays upon the rulers is that of nothing else are they to be such careful guardians and so intently observant as of the intermixture of these metals in the souls

⁴ Plato, "The Republic".

*of their offspring, and if sons are born to them with an infusion of brass or iron (415c) they shall by no means give way to pity in their treatment of them, but shall assign to each the status due to his nature and thrust them out among the artisans or the farmers. And again, if from these there is born a son with unexpected gold or silver in his composition they shall honor such and bid them go up higher, some to the office of guardian, some to the assistanceship, alleging that there is an oracle that the state shall then be overthrown when the man of iron or brass is its guardian. Do you see any way of getting them to believe this tale?*⁵

For Plato this kind of classification is related to the soul more than being related to the body. People vary in their innate abilities; but this kind of difference has nothing to do with their gender, appearance or features. For example, you can't guess simply by looking at a person what he is designed to do or to be. In other words, the physical difference between men and women appears with no much intrinsic value here; both men and women can be equally trained to be guardians, carpenters, physicians or what so ever they are designed to be by nature. As Plato makes clear in the "*Republic*", "*The physician and the carpenter have different natures (454d)*"⁵; but it doesn't follow that this nature can be affected by the gender of this physician or carpenter or affected by any other physical qualities one might have. In the "*Republic*" the difference between men and women when it comes to their natural ability to do things is regarded similar to the difference between a bold man and a hairy man who can equally do the same task; for a simple reason: the difference between both of them is irrelevant to the subject matter; because at the end of the day not all differences matter; only intrinsic differences can affect the individual innate ability. Here, I mean by intrinsic differences, differences due to the nature of the individual, more precisely, to his soul, not to his body, gender, or his physical image.

Consequently, we can have in the state female-guardians, and even philosopher-queens, because nothing in the nature of the female herself can prevent her from being a guardian or a philosopher. But this is not the end of the story, because even if a woman can be a guardian and even if nothing in her nature as a female prevents her from that, she can't be described as fully equal to a male guardian or a male ruler; and here comes the other kind of discrimination in the "*Republic*", namely, the sexual discrimination.

To understand more the difference between "the based on nature discrimination" and the "sexual discrimination" we must distinguish in reading Plato between two questions: the first question is: could a woman be a guardian? (This question can be equally applied to all other jobs); the second question is: could a female-guardian be as good as a male-guardian? Now the answer to these two questions can reveal a lot;

⁵ Ibid.

because while the first question can be positively answered, the answer to the second question is negative. Because with Plato, It is true that the physical nature of women can't prevent them from being participants in the state, but differences in *degree* if not in *nature* between women and men still take place and result in putting women always behind men. Simply stated, if the comparison is to be held between a male-physician and a female-physician, or between a male –carpenter and a female- carpenter..Etc. the comparison will always end in favor of the male over the female. In the “*Republic*” we read,

*“The women and the men, then, have the same nature in respect to the guardianship of the state, save in so far as the one is weaker, the other stronger (456a)”*⁶

In another place we see Plato emphasizing the necessity of assigning light tasks to women because of their; “*weakness as a class (457b)*”⁷

Let me now try to explain the difference between the two levels of discrimination that simultaneously take place in the “*Republic*” by using the following example; a difference between a female- guardian and a male- carpenter can be described as a difference in *nature*; on the other hand, there is still another difference to be distinguished, this time, it is a difference in *degree*, like the difference between a male-guardian and a female-guardian. This difference in degree is what prevents us from ascribing a real feminism to Plato on the level of the ordinary-women account.

*“[456a] The women and the men, then, have the same nature in respect to the guardianship of the state, save in so far as the one is weaker, the other stronger”*⁸

To sum up; the women of the republic can participate in the state, but this participation doesn't guarantee by itself their equality to men. This is true despite the fact that many readings seem to confuse between the women right to participate in the state and to do all what men can do and the acknowledgment of their equality to man. But the fact is that the acknowledgment of the first right is not enough to guarantee the second right. In fact, one major shortcoming that many feminist interpretations to the “*Republic*” suffer from is due to the unjustifiable movement that infers equality between men and women from the mere acknowledgment to the women right to participate in the state. Unfortunately, both concepts are different and not to be confused with each other. Simply stated; for the benefit of the state all are required to do something, i.e. to participate in a way or another; this is what the “*Republic*” assures;

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

but the acknowledgment to the equality to participation doesn't mean that men and women are regarded equally good in what they can do.

Indeed, there is a cleavage between equality and participation; the right to participate doesn't guarantee by itself equality. To explain more what I mean by the cleavage that exists between equality and the mere participation, I will refer to the serious consequences of the confusion between equality and participation, which can threaten any feminist theory that seeks to preserve the rights of the working women. Broadly speaking, to say that women are treated equally to men if and only if they are allowed to work just like men means that we do justice to women by allowing them to work even if we deprived them from their right to equal allowances or equal treatment. Our intuition tells us that there is something wrong with this argument; but Plato's feminism defenders, who argue from the woman's right to participate in the republic, are the same like those who think they can argue for the woman's right to work and against her right to be equally paid and can still be fair in doing that!

Now, although the argument for the right to work without the right to be equally paid might seem absurd to some, a quick look at the records of the woman's actual participation in the job market shows- unfortunately- a systematic historical confusion between the woman's right to work and her right to equal treatment. Shocking numbers of gaps that have existed -and still existing in some countries -between women-wages and men-wages show with no doubt how far did this corrupted concept of equality go. Joyce Burnette in her paper; "Were Women's Wage Customary?" provides us by some striking historical facts;

If we look at the wages paid to men and women at other times and places in history, the wage ratio varies, but is often close to 60 percent. In fourteenth-century Britain, women earned two-thirds as much as men when working as masons' assistants. Women working in agriculture earned 60 percent as much as men in Suffolk; for reaping they earned 64 percent as much as men in Essex and 75 percent as much in Rutland.⁴ By the early nineteenth century, women's relative wages seem to have gone down rather than up, and were usually less than 50 percent of male wages. Parliamentary surveys from 1833 and 1861 suggest that women earned 40 percent as much as men. In the factories of the Industrial Revolution, boys and girls earned approximately the same wages for factory work until age 18, when male wages jumped sharply upwards. Few adult males worked in textile factories, but those that did earned almost three times as much as the adult women.⁹

⁹ Joyce Burnette, "Were Women's Wage Customary?" available on line at ;
["http://www.econ.yale.edu/seminars/echist/eh06/burnett-061011.pdf"](http://www.econ.yale.edu/seminars/echist/eh06/burnett-061011.pdf), p2.

Although one might be tempted to think that the phenomenon of the value gap existing between women-wages and men-wages is only an old dated historical one, more recent numbers show the same tendency continuing to take place

In Japan in 1900, female agricultural laborers earned 53 percent as much as male laborers, and female weaver earned 60 percent as much as male weavers. In 1930 Chinese women working in industry did somewhat better, earning 78 percent as much as men. Even in non-capitalist countries we find similar wage ratios; in 1924 women working in state industry in the Soviet Union earned 62 percent as much as men, and in 1929 they earned 68 percent as much. While the wage differences quoted here do vary substantially, the existence of a large wage gap across so many different times and places is striking.¹⁰

As a result she concludes that the women's lower wages seem to be a universal fact of history. But what really matters for my purpose of discussion is whether anyone can claim that these numbers reveal any sense of equality. Defiantly, it would be an absurd view if one is to claim that these numbers express any kind of equality and still be justified in doing that. But Plato's sense of equality as generated in the republic is not that different from any one who attempt to defend the proceeding value gap between female labor and male labor as being just. On the contrary, Plato's alleged feminism argument in the republic can be the best support for anyone who might be interested in finding a rationale for claiming a moral justification for the mentioned gap; because if what really matters for the female equality is the mere participation in the male work, then the women who did receive less wages than their male colleagues were treated equally and they don't have any claim to be treated equally, because they were treated equally by being allowed to participate in what men do.

In addition, women's participation in the Platonic state has nothing to do with any genuine sense of equality; because what motivates the participation is not the consideration of women rights; rather, it is the mere pragmatic consideration to the benefit of the state, which requires the cooperation of all available abilities, the good ones as in the case of men's abilities as well as the mediocre abilities as in the case of the women abilities. In short, the women of the republic are allowed to participate like men, not because they are as good as men, but because they can be useful.

To sum up, I take Plato's account of women in the "*Republic*" as an example of the ordinary women account, where women are treated less than men and never equal to them. Generally speaking, this account is what reflects best Plato's view of women; because for him, women are not equal to men; this is true despite the fact that some women might be only exceptionally equal.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 3.

Julia Annas correctly argued that it is quite wrong to think of Plato as the first feminist. In her argument against the feminist interpretation to the republic she concludes the following;

*"Plato's argument that women should be guardians thus has three crucial defects; it is not valid against an anti-feminist, it is irrelevant to facts about women's desires, and it is irrelevant to the injustice of sexual inequality"*¹¹

In fact, Plato's views regarding the equality between men and women as revealed in that dialogue were- as many argued- not good enough to make us believe in a systematic platonic feminism. For example, Morag Buchan argues that the female participation in the guardian class doesn't prove by itself a Platonic consideration of abased on gender equality;

*"Women find their way into the Guardian Class, not because Plato considers that they should have equal opportunities as human beings, but because he acknowledges that some have the capacities which would be needed by Gaurdians."*¹²

In addition, she draws our attention to a point that I find extremely helpful for my discussion when she says;

*"It must not be forgotten that the guardian class is one small, elite section of the state."*¹³

The second account is Plato's account of the exceptional women. According to this account, Plato acknowledges that some women who have extra ordinary abilities can be not only equal to men but even better than men themselves, those women are such as Diotima and Aspasia. In the "Menexenus" we see Socrates ascribing his knowledge to a woman: Aspasia when he says; (the dialogue took place between Socrates and Menexenus)

But I was listening only yesterday to Aspasia going through a funeral speech for these very people. For she had heard the report you mention, that the Athenians are going to select the speaker; and thereupon she rehearsed to me the speech in the form it should take, extemporizing in part, while other parts of it she had previously prepared, as I imagine, at the time when she was composing the funeral oration which Pericles delivered; and from this she patched together sundry fragments.

¹¹ Julia Annas, 1996, "Plato's republic and feminism", in "Feminism and ancient philosophy", ed by Julie K.Ward, Routledge, NewYork and London, p. 12.

¹² Bunchan, Morag, 1999, "Women in Plato's political theory", Routledge, New York, p. 138.

¹³ Ibid, p. 137.

Menexenus; Could you repeat from memory that speech of Aspasia?

Socrates; Yes, if I am not mistaken; for I learnt it, to be sure, from her as she went along ((236b)

and I nearly got a flogging whenever I forgot.

Menexenus; why don't you repeat it then?

Socrates; But possibly my teacher will be vexed with me if I publish abroad her speech.

Menexenus; Never fear, Socrates; only tell it and you will gratify me exceedingly, whether it is Aspasia's that you wish to deliver or anyone else's; only say on(236c)¹⁴

However the reference to a woman, more precisely speaking, to a wise woman was not restricted to the "Menexenus". In the "Symposium" we find another reference to another wise women. Diotima, the women-philosopher who taught Socrates the art of love. Socrates introduces Diotima as the following;

And now I shall let you alone, and proceed with the discourse upon Love which I heard one day from a Mantinean woman named Diotima: in this subject she was skilled, and in many others too; for once, by bidding the Athenians offer sacrifices ten years before the plague, she procured them so much delay in the advent of the sickness. Well, I also had my lesson from her in love-matters; so now I will try and follow up the points on which Agathon and I have just agreed by narrating to you all on my own account, as well as I am able, the speech she delivered to me (201d)"¹⁵

But how can one reconcile between the great respect in which Plato speaks about Aspasia and Diotima and his antifeminism? How can the two accounts, namely, the ordinary women account and the exceptional women account exist together in Plato's philosophy without leading to a contradiction? If a female-guardian is always less than a male-guardian as we have found according to Plato's ordinary women account as manifested in the "Republic" , how can Diotima be presented as the teacher of Socrates?! In fact this question can be easily answered by the appeal to the Platonic account of the exceptional women. According to this account and despite the fact that women are generally less than men, Plato does allow the possibility of some

¹⁴ Plato, "Menexenus", Plato in Twelve Volumes, Vol. 9 translated by W.R.M. Lamb. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1925.

¹⁵ Plato, "Symposium", Plato in Twelve Volumes, Vol. 9 translated by W.R.M. Lamb. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1925.

exceptional women: like Diotima or Aspasia; this class of women can be equal to men and even better than them, but those are only exceptional cases, and to believe only in a theory's exceptions is something totally different from believing the theory itself. In other words, even if Plato argued for the equality of exceptional women this doesn't make him a feminist.

James M. Blythe refers to a similar distinction, while reading Plato's "*Republic*" between Plato's reference to ordinary women and exceptional women; he argues that Plato's acknowledgment to the abilities of a few extraordinary women doesn't make him a feminist. He writes;

*Plato was not a feminist, although scholars have sometimes portrayed him as one. Along with the relatively positive (though still deeply sexist) views....He believed that males were naturally superior and he favored subordination of women*¹⁶

In short, I argue that Plato in the account of the ordinary women, as in the "*Republic*" showed no intrinsic feminism, where in his account of exceptional women, which comes as a natural extinction of his first account seems to reveal some feminist tolerance, but as a second thought what kind of feminist is this feminist if it comes only as a result of his deeply rooted anti feminist account? Should we consider it as feminist at all? Defiantly, it is highly controversial for one to make up his mind on what Plato's feminism can be best described by while taking in consideration any fundamental meaning of feminism. But I am not going to push the argument towards denying any Platonic sense of feminism, though one might be easily tempted to do so, because of the need to reconsider his account of the exceptional women which its inadequacy shouldn't lead us to its denial.

However, as a result of my discussion, I believe that Plato's mention to Diotima or Aspasia didn't threaten his deeply rooted antifeminist philosophy. Therefore, Plato didn't feel the need to justify this occasional female appearance nor tried to hide the feminist reality of these characters by any means, it was not even the concern of Plato's contemporaries who seemed to understand him more than the later interpreters who find in Diotima's as well as in Aspasia's appearance a source of unexplainable imbursement. Plato's antifeminist tendencies were taken to be more strong and apparent to be threatened by the rare references to a few exceptional female characters. Or to put it this way, the appearance of Diotima and Aspasia and even the women-guardians didn't constitute a real reason for reinvestigating Plato's antifeminist attitude for those who knew Plato better than we do.

¹⁶ James M. Blyth, "*Women in the military; scholastic argument and medieval images of female warriors*", available on line on; <http://www.imprint.co.uk/hpt/179.pdf> , p. 243. Originally appeared in "*History of political thought*". Vol. XXII. No. 2. 2001.

Conclusion

In this paper I made a distinction between two concepts in Plato's overall view of women, first, the "*ordinary- women account*", which forms Plato's antifeminist approach, and then the "*exceptional- women account*", which explains the reference to Diotima and Aspasia. The second account comes as a result of Plato's belief in the first, which is the more fundamental in terms of expressing Plato's real attitude. Exceptional women who can exceptionally be equal to men can exist, Plato acknowledges; but their extraordinary existence supports and doesn't contradict the main general Platonic convention: namely, women are always less than men and can never be equivalent to them.

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