

FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY IN PLATO'S *LAWS*

The ancient Greeks viewed the relation between male and female as a natural bond. It is impossible for man or woman to be alone and for this reason male and female cohabit. This natural state is accomplished by reason and not only by instinct, as in the other animals. The male - female interaction is manifested in the realm of the gods and goddesses. Also, we find an ideal woman in the model of Penelope of Homer's *Odessey* where her fidelity is glorified. In Sparta the females were the rulers because women were considered to precede in wisdom and ability to lead¹. From childhood, the women in Athens were taught by their mothers to be good housewives, and were admired for their excellence in this role. The main occupation of women was that of rulers of the household.

Plato advocates an equality of women, as will be discussed in the following pages. Aristotle, however, gives woman an inferior status to man both in body and soul. The woman should care about the minor works of the house. The male, he says, is by nature to rule over the female². Further, Aristotle states that, «the male is by nature superior, and the female inferior — the one rules, and the other is ruled; this principle, of necessity, extends to all mankind³».

The Education of Women

Plato advocated the equality of men and women by nature. He dictated a common and equal opportunity for education which must be compulsory for

1. PLUTARCH, *Lycourgos*. Trans. by John DRYDEN and revised by Arthur COUGH, New York, The Modern Library, 1864, (n.d. of reprint), p. 60. A visiting lady observed, «that the women of Lacedaemon were the only women in the world who could rule men»; she was informed by Gogo, the wife of Leonidos, that «with good reason for we are only women who bring forth men».

2. ARISTOTLE, *Politics*, book I chapter 12. He says, «the male is by nature fitter for command than the female». Introduction to Aristotle. Trans. Richard McKEON, New York, Modern Library, 1947, p. 574.

3. ARISTOTLE, *Politics*, book 1, chapter 5, McKEON, *Ibid.*, p. 56.

both sexes, and that both men and women work as equals for the good of the city⁴. Plato gives an etymological analysis of the terms *ἀνὴρ* (male) and *γυνή* and *θῆλυ* (female). He states that:

«The words *ἄρσεν* (male) and *ἀνὴρ* (man) also contain a similar allusion to the same principle of the upward flux (τῇ ἄνω ῥοῇ). *Γυνή* (woman) I suspect to be the same word as *γόνι* (birth): *θῆλυ* (female) appears to be partly derived from *θηλή* (the teat), because the teat is like rain, and makes things flourish⁵».

To the question if the natures of men and women differ, Plato replies, «of course they do⁶». Although Plato argues for the equality of women, he clearly states that women by nature are inferior⁷.

The primary goal and highest duty of the state is to provide food and education to its citizens. Without strong and properly educated citizens, both male and female, there cannot exist an ordered and prosperous state. Plato maintains that the best possible education for all the citizens is necessary to attain the most civilized society. It is the responsibility of the state to provide and supervise the bodily strength and spiritual value of man and woman in order to sustain the nation or state⁸.

According to Plato, the state and education are indissolubly bonded together, because only true education leads to virtue; and the young become perfect citizens through education. An educated person leads them with full understanding of justice and wisdom otherwise, power which lacks reason and justice results in wild disorder and thwarts freedom of the individual. It is by wisdom and virtue that citizens order the state or house; and both wisdom and virtue are attained through true education⁹. Plato carries his argument to the extreme and suggests that the guardians must have houses, property,

4. PLATO, *Laws* VII, 805 a.

5. CRATYLUS, 415 a. Reference to English translations of Plato's works will be to B. JOWETT, *The Dialogues of Plato*, 2 vols. (New York, Random House, 1937), unless otherwise indicated.

6. *Republic* V, 453 a.

7. *Republic* V, 456 a. Xenophone gives us insight into womanhood of the time in his discussion of the form of life in ancient Greece. The woman is the true helper to her husband. «She is the mistress of the household, while her husband directs the laborers in the fields». Werner JAEGER, *Paideia. The Ideals of Greek Culture*. Trans. Gilbert HIGHET, Vol. 3 (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1974), p. 176.

8. *Laws* V. 766 a. Plato says in this passage: «Man (ἄνθρωπος) as we say, is a tame of civilized animal; nevertheless, he requires proper instruction and a fortunate nature, and then of all animals he becomes the most divine and most civilized; but if he be insufficiently or ill educated he is the most savage of earthly creations». JOWETT, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, 527.

9. *Laws* I, 643 e - 644 a. Also *Menon* 91 a.



women and children in common possession within the state¹⁰. The true ideal state would be one in which all people are friends and have all things in common.

Marriage

In view of the fact that Plato claims women and property to be common possessions of the guardians, he abolishes marriage for a certain class. This claim of having all things in common for the guardians is to free the guardians from family cares, thus establishing complete devotion to the state, and to unity for everyone in one common life. He legislates that every man ought to marry between the ages thirty and thirty-five, otherwise he must pay a fine or lose certain privileges. Plato reasons that every man desires immortality and to voluntarily deprive oneself of wife and children is impiety, and therefore must «pay a yearly fine of certain amount» and, «he shall not share in the honours which the young men in the state give to the aged¹¹» Plato believes the human desire for immortality is «attained by generation, because each generation always leaves behind a new existence in the place of the old¹²». He who does not want to marry is dishonored by all.

In the selection of a wife, one must avoid making a mistake. He suggests:

10. *Timaeus*, 18 b - e. Plato states that the guardians are to have «wives and children to be in common, to the intent that one should even know his own child, but they were to imagine that they were all one family». JOWETT, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 4. *Laws V*, 739 d. Again he emphasizes all things are in common for the guardians: «women and children and property, in which the private and individual is altogether banish from life...» JOWETT, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 506. *Republic V*, 462. St. John Chrysostom severely criticizes Plato for his view on having in common the women and children. St. John proclaimed that Plato violated the law of nature that ordered for man to be married to one wife. Chrysostom praised Plato's view of communal living, but attacked the view of the women to be common for the guardians. Homily 4, Acts 4 (PG, 60, c. 48); Homily 2, John 2 (PG 59, c. 31). See Elizabeth A. CLARK, *Jerome, Chrysostom, and Friends*, Essays and Translations (studies in women and Religion, vol. 2). New York, The Edwin Mellen Press, 1979, pp. 12-14. St. John Chrysostom also condemns Plato's supposed support of homosexuality in PG, 50 c, 546; PG 47 c, 360-361. Apparently, St. Chrysostom refers to Plato's works *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*. Plato in *Laws I*, 636 states: «I think that pleasure is to be deemed natural which arises out of intercourse between men and women; but that the intercourse of men with men; or women with women, is contrary to nature, and that the bold attempt with was originally due to unbridled lust».

11. *Laws IV*, 721.

12. *Symposium*, 207 d. JOWETT, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 332. See JAEGER, *op. cit.*, vol. 3, p. 343.

«For people must be acquainted with those into whose families and whom they marry and with those to whom they give in marriage; in such matters, as far as possible, a man should deem it all important to avoid a mistake, and with this serious purpose let games be instituted in which youths and maidens shall dance together, seeing one another and being naked, at a proper age, and on a suitable occasion, not transgressing the rules of modesty¹³».

Plato suggests that opposing qualities be sought in a marriage. For example, the rich should marry the poor, the intelligent should marry the slow. He says, «Every man shall follow, not after the marriage which is most pleasing to himself, but after that which is most beneficial to the state¹⁴». He suggests the blessing of marriage through sacred rites and that the marriage festivals be moderate. He urges great care in the procreation of offspring¹⁵.

The Development and Education of Children

Plato exhorts people to marry in order to create a strong state. He also offers suggestions for the feeding and education of children that they may become good citizens for the benefit of the state. He states, «in infancy more than at any other time the character is engrained by habit¹⁶»; therefore, special care should be given to establish habits which will build strong and moral character. This process which begins in the mother's womb and continues during early childhood—birth to three years old—is crucial to the formation of human character¹⁷.

Plato criticizes those who breed fear into children because this produces cowardice. Rather than providing luxury, which creates discontentment in the young, he suggests making the child happy by the employment of techniques such as proper feeding and development of a cheerful environ-

13. *Laws* VI, 472 a. Women should marry at 20 years of age (*Republic* VI, 460 e), and men should marry between the ages 30 to 35 (*Laws* VI, 785 b). He believed «both in men and women those years are the prime of physical as well as intellectual vigor» (*Republic* V, 461 a).

14. *Laws* VI, 773 a. However, no one should marry for money (*Laws* VI, 774).

15. *Laws* VI, 774 e. He suggests that parents «ought not to be begetting children when their bodies are dissipated by intoxication» (*Laws* 775); and that «a woman during her year of pregnancy should of all women be most carefully tended, and kept from violent or excessive pleasures and pains, and should at that time cultivate gentleness, benevolence and kindness». (*Laws* VII, 792 e).

16. *Laws* VII, 792 e.

17. *Laws* VII, 789 e.

ment. He recommends exercise and nurturing from the earliest years, as well as exposure to melodious music. The early years must be peaceful and silent, both physically and spiritually¹⁸. These means will contribute greatly to the formation of a virtuous person and benefit the soul in his spiritual growth¹⁹.

All must understand that they are duty bound to bring into the world the fairest possible children; they are to nurture them and educate them in the best possible manner in order to present to the state the most perfect specimens of children.

Plato suggests to feed and educate the child at the level appropriate for his age. It is interesting to observe that Plato suggested the creation of kindergartens for children of the ages three to six. He says the childish nature of both boys and girls, three to six years, requires sports and other educational activities. Punishment must not be to disgrace the child but to «get rid of selfwill». The children ought to meet «at the village temples or at homes of families and the nurses to be excellent examples». After the age of six, the boys are to be taught the art to horsemanship, the use of the bow, the javelin and the sling; in addition the girls are to be taught «how to handle heavy arms: when they are ready²⁰».

The Participation of Women in Education and Exercises

Plato presents his educational system for both men and women to be of equal importance. He suggests it is necessary for men and women to exercise the natural physical body to achieve proper function. He says, «Education has two branches, one of gymnastic, which is concerned with the body, and the other of music, which is desired for the improvement of the soul²¹». Also, gymnastics is divided into two branches — dancing and wrestling. Dancing, he says, preserves dignity and freedom, producing «health, agility and beauty»; and in wrestling one learns the «spirit of competition²²». Sacred music and dancing is to be in honour of the gods rather than for self-pleasure. The music for men should be «grand rhythm» to develop courage and for women «moderate rhythm» to create the «womanly quality²³». He explicitly

18. *Laws*, VI, 783.

19. *Laws* VII, 790-792.

20. *Laws*, VI, 793.

21. *Laws* VII, 795. Plato divides man into two natures, body and soul. He suggests: «gymnastic for the body, and music for the soul» (*Republic* II, 376 e).

22. *Laws* VII, 795-796.

23. *Laws* VII, 802.

states, «my law would apply to females as well as males; they shall both go through the same exercise. I assert without the fear of contradiction that gymnastic and horsemanship are suitable to women and to men²⁴».

Plato insists that woman is by nature able to participate in all the acts that man does²⁵. He makes the statement that, «all the pursuits of men are the pursuits of women also, but in all of them a woman is inferior to a man²⁶».

In the thought of this great philosopher, women are able to do everything that man does, but not as well because women are weaker by nature. This does not detract from his position of the equality of the sexes, but rather men and women are by nature given to function differently within the state.

The Status of Women Within the State

Plato explicitly claims the equality of male and female within his legal system. He permits the freedom of women to be a witness, and a woman may offer defense if she is over forty years of age and does not have a husband²⁷. Plato considers women to be able to rule the city or state. In his ideal state, Plato places the female guards (*φυλακίδας*) alongside the male guards (*φύλακας*) to reside together and to guard the city or state together. Both man and woman have a common nature in the guarding of the city or state, as well as common education²⁸. Women may also possess office of authority with the right to punish the offenders regardless of sex²⁹. In the Platonic *Republic* the women rulers, the matronesses, are responsible for the preparation of marriage. Plato speaks of men to hold office after thirty years old and women after forty years old. In reference to participation in war, men should be from ages twenty to sixty. As citizens, women are required not only to give children for the benefit of the state, but to defend the state in combat. However, they cannot participate in war until the age of fifty, when they are no longer bearing children³⁰. He demands women take equal part in

24. *Laws* VII, 804. He says, «there shall be compulsory education» for both males and females.

25. *Republic* V, 451-455; *Laws* VI, 781.

26. *Republic* V, 455.

27. *Laws* XI, 937 a. He says, «A free woman may give her witness and plead, if she is more than forty years of age, and may bring an action if she does not have a husband; but if her husband be alive, she shall only be allowed to bear witness».

28. *Republic* V, 451.

29. *Laws* VII, 794. *Republic* V, 456.

30. *Laws* VI 185. Women are to be trained to participate in war. *Republic* V, 466.

all activities of public and private life of the state. Plato is explicit in his view that men and women are open to any occupation. He says:

«To conclude, then, there is no occupation concerned with the management of social affairs which belongs either to woman or to man, as such. Natural gifts are to be found in both creatures alike; occupation is open to both, as far as their natures are concerned, though woman is for all purposes the weaker³¹».

He emphasizes that men and women must have equal education that prepares them for equal tasks in the state³². The philosopher's proposal to do away with sexual differences in regards to the selection of occupations includes the election of men or women in accordance to their ability to be guardians or rulers in the state. The choice for a position should not be based on the sex³³.

Plato specified that the officers of the temples were to be elected for one year and to be over sixty years old. The priesthood was to be equally available to both men and women³⁴, and they were to be governed by the same laws.

Conclusion

Although Plato regards the female as a weaker nature, he insists on the equality of men and women. He states that, «the neglect of regulations about women may not only be regarded as a neglect of half of the entire matter, but in proportion as women's nature is inferior to that of men in capacity of virtue, in that degree the consequences of such neglect is more than twice as important³⁵». Whereas, Plato philosophizes on the feminist rights and equalities, it may be said that he was the first to champion the women's emancipation, and the greatest feminist. Plato proposed «man and woman have the same nature» and both may have a talent for «medicine», for philosophy, for the art of war, for guardianship, for rulership, and to

31. *Republic V*, 455. *The Republic of Plato*. Trans. by Francis MacDONALD CORNFORD, New York, Oxford Community Press, 1959, p. 153.

32. *Republic V*, 451, *ibid.*, p. 148.

33. *Republic*, chapter XV (IV, 445-V, 457). In this chapter of the *Republic* the equality of women is articulated and argued by the philosopher. It seems the rights of women were very much in the debate during the time of Plato thus, it is not a modern issue alone.

34. *Laws VI*, 759; *VII*, 799-800.

35. *Laws VI* 781.



participate in the education and supervision leadership position of these occupations, as well as to exercise these occupations in the state³⁶. But these proposals, for education and practice of some of these occupations, such as medicine by women, were not allowed until the later nineteenth century. And acceptance in Europe and America did not occur until the twentieth century. Plato revolutionized the position of women in the ancient world. With the advent of time, Christianity completed what Plato began by elevating women to the position of personhood and sainthood.

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ΦΕΜΙΝΙΣΤΙΚΗ ΦΙΛΟΣΟΦΙΑ ΣΤΟΥΣ ΝΟΜΟΥΣ ΤΟΥ ΠΛΑΤΩΝΟΣ

Περίληψη

Παρόλο που ο Πλάτων θεωρεί τη γυναίκα ως ασθενέστερη φύση, επιμένει στην ισότητα ανδρών και γυναικών. Δηλώνει ότι «ή παραμέληση των κανονισμών σχετικά με τις γυναίκες όχι μόνο πρέπει να θεωρείται ως παραμέληση της μισής πολιτείας, αλλά, στο βαθμό που η φύση της γυναίκας είναι κατώτερη από εκείνης του άνδρα ως προς την αρετή, στο βαθμό αυτό οι συνέπειες μιας τέτοιας παραμελήσεως είναι περισσότερο από δύο φορές σημαντικές». Καθώς ο Πλάτων αναρωτιέται στη φιλοσοφία του για τα φεμινιστικά δικαιώματα και την ισότητα, μπορεί κανείς να ισχυρισθεί ότι ήταν ο πρώτος που «άγωνίσθηκε» για τη χειραφέτηση των γυναικών και ο μεγαλύτερος φεμινιστής. Ο Πλάτων ήταν ο πρώτος που υποστήριξε ότι ο «άνδρας και η γυναίκα έχουν την ίδια φύση» και ότι και οι δύο μπορεί να έχουν ταλέντο για την ιατρική, τη φιλοσοφία, την πολεμική τέχνη, τη φύλαξη, την κυβέρνηση, να συμμετέχουν στην εκπαίδευση και την επιτήρηση αυτών των ασχολιών, καθώς επίσης και να ασκούν αυτές τις ασχολίες - επαγγέλματα στην πολιτεία. Αυτές όμως οι προτάσεις για εκπαίδευση και άσκηση αυτών των επαγγελμάτων, όπως η ιατρική, δεν έπετράπησαν μέχρι το δέκατο ένατο αιώνα, ενώ στην Ευρώπη και Αμερική δεν είχαν γίνει δεκτές μέχρι τον είκοστο αιώνα. Ο Πλάτων επαναστατικοποίησε τη θέση της γυναίκας στον αρχαίο κόσμο. Με την πάροδο του χρόνου ο Χριστιανισμός συμπλήρωσε ό,τι άρχισε ο Πλάτων, με το να εξυψώσει τη γυναίκα στη θέση της προσωπικότητας και της αγιότητας.

Μετάφραση: Α. ΑΡΑΒΑΝΤΙΝΟΥ

36. *Republic* V, 455-457; *Laws* VI, 781-785; VII, 805-806.

