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PHILOSOPHERS ON GENDER AND SEXUALITY

1. Introduction

First, and most basic philosophical question about sex-difference is, certainly the question whether there is something which may be called women's nature. A very widespread view is that all human beings are essentially the same, with women as having a sub-nature among the human beings. But the view that the distinctive social and historical experiences of women have made them fundamentally different from men is also gaining ground. The supposition that the woman has a distinct nature from that of man has, in fact, turned out to be an instrument of oppression of women. This article is an attempt to give a survey of the views of some of the important philosophers on this subject.

The objection that philosophy's concern is with human nature as such, rather than with such 'special' or 'limited', a 'partial', a 'applied' social questions as gender, which is only an accident to human nature, cannot be given much credit, for the reality of gender difference, which is to be taken note of philosophy, has its own reality. Moreover, the task of giving a philosophical critique of the present social reality of sex-difference is a viable and necessary function of philosophy. To the question whether being a woman is merely social, cultural and historical, those feminists who take the position that women, like men, are persons and that they have all and only those rights which are applicable to men and women equally give an affirmative answer. On this view, women need not be taken as a separate philosophical notion or category. They fear recognition of any sexual polarity beyond the biological differences would lead to continued unequal treatment and to the continued institutionalization of these sex differences. An opposite view holds that there is no common universal human nature, but only male nature and female nature. This extreme polarization of male and female implies that woman is a fundamental philosophical notion and that male and female human beings belong to essentially different categories.

We could also find a third group of thinkers who develop a mid-way position distinct from both of these. In this view the question of women is philosophical, but it does not mean that the differences between men and women are fundamental difference of natures. The source of all significant difference between men and women, according to this position, is historical, social and cultural.¹ In other words, though there are biological differences between men and women, this difference is not, however, fundamentally or significantly biological. This third view seems to have some justification, for, being human is essentially a social, historical and cultural reality and to abstract a human nature disregarding the context in which it is concretely found is to give a distorted picture of existential human beings in the name of universality which is regarded as the mark of science and philosophy.

Philosophers first began to consider woman's nature and woman's role in connection with the question of generation or reproduction. They continued to debate the problems of conception into modern times. The early use of biological arguments, especially in Plato and Aristotle are philosophically interesting because in the over all context of their philosophy, they have arrived at nonbiological conclusions some of which are still maintained even though the reasons supporting them have changed or disappeared. The implicit claim of this article is that the early philosophers on this subject are, to a great extent, responsible for the toleration of gender injustice existing today in our societies.

2. Plato's View of Woman

Plato discussed the question of the quality of human nature in women in his seven important dialogues, namely, the *Symposium*, the *Meno*, the *Apology*, the *Republic*, the *Cratylus* and the *Laws*. A survey of his ideas found in some of these dialogues is attempted here.

The philosophical discussion on the nature of woman began with the question of her role in the generation of a child. How is a child formed from two adults? Why do children resemble their parents; and how does soul get implanted in embryo? The problem of conception is almost settled in the modern times with the discovery of the

1. Cfr. Carol C. Gould & Marx W. Wartofsky (eds.), *Women and Philosophy* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1976), pp. 5-7.

role of spermatogoa and mammalian egg in the generation of a child. Yet the earlier debate of the philosophers on this issue does not seem to have lost its relevance due to its influence still on modern culture and the kind of man-woman relationship we have today in our society. Moreover some of the empirical observations and theories of the ancient authors concerning the origin and meaning of sex and the nonbiological conclusions drawn from them are held to be valid today, even when the reasons supporting them have changed or disappeared. Hence a possible way to liberate oneself from the hold of the traditional views which are prejudicial to women is to critically understand the philosophical sources which were the basis for these views.

Plato's thoughts on the creation and generation of women in the poetic speech of Aristophanes in the *Symposium* is more liberal and it is found reflected in the *Republic*. His conservative views stated in a more straightforward way in the *Timaeus* are found more in the *Laws*. In the *Symposium*, Plato speaks of a man-woman creature:

The race was divided into three; that is to say, besides two sexes, male and female . . . there was a third which partook of the nature of both . . . there really was a man-woman in those days, a being which was half-male and half-female.²

Woman in those days was a being which was half-male and half-female. Each of these three types of beings had four legs and arms. Zeus, the head of the gods decided to split each person into two to make them less powerful than Gods. Thus now "the happiness of the whole human race, woman no less than man, is to be found in the consummation of our love, and in the healing of our dismembered nature by finding each his proper mate."³ In the account of the origin of sexes in the *Timaeus*, it is said that God after creating souls assigned each of them to a star. These souls were placed in bodies so that they may return to the form of their first and better state by the victory of reason over the irrational tendencies.

He who lived well during his appointed time was to return and dwell in his native star, and there he would have a blessed

2. Plato, "Symposium", in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, ed. by Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), (189 d,e), p. 542.

3. Quoted from Carol C. Gould & Max Wartofsky, *Women and Philosophy*, p. 47.

and congenial existence. But if he failed in attaining this, at the second birth, he would pass into a woman.⁴

Thus, being a woman is a punishment for an unrighteous life, and so it is religiously an inferior state.

In the *Symposium* Version, all types of human being, men, women and hermaphrodites were directly created by the gods, and all types were whole beings in themselves with equal importance, before they were split into two halves. But in the *Timaeus* Version, only males were directly created by the gods. Souls are given bodies to live a righteous life to return to their stars. Those who fail in this first birth will become women and other brutes in other births until the soul attains the victory of reason. Men are conceived as complete beings in themselves without the need of women. This concept of women is very much different from the idea of mutual completedness in the *Symposium*. In the former case, the best a woman can hope for is to become a man.

The basic insight of Plato is that both men and women possess the same essential nature and worth. In *Meno*,⁵ Plato argues that since men and women are of the good, they must have the same virtue of temperance and justice. Hence women should receive equal education and treatment before the law. But the influence of the ideas of the *Timaeus* forced Plato to state in the *Republic* that men and women have essentially different natures and should be treated separately.⁶ Plato clearly holds that the women are weaker than man.⁷ Natural gifts are seen in man in a superior degree than in women. Although all pursuits of men are also of women, in all of them women are inferior. Women by nature are prone to secrecy and stealth on account of their weakness. They are accustomed to creep into darkness or hide out and when dragged out into the light, they will exert their utmost power of resistance. They will not endure to have the truth spoken without raising a tremendous outcry.⁸ Yet Plato advocated that all men and women together should take the responsibilities

4. Plato, "Timaeus", (42 b.c.), *op. cit.*, p. 1171.

5. Plato, "Meno", *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. by Harward J., Great Books of the Western World, vol. 7, p. 175.

6. Plato, "Republic", *op. cit.*, p. 357.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 359.

8. Plato, "Laws", *op. cit.*, p. 711.

of building up the community. Women should also be given equal opportunities to toil and safeguard the country. Thus Plato is indecisive on the importance of the sexual difference. Reproductive differences alone do not justify assigning women different social role. The dilemma in which he was involved was that "on the one hand, men and women were created similarly and have the same essential nature; sexual differences are not important in themselves and do not hold major social significance. On the other hand, men are more divine by birth; sexual differences are a result of either a superior or an inferior nature and indicate separate roles are required."⁹

We can notice a liberal as well as a more conservative and harsher view of women side by side in the *Republic*. The reason of this lack of consistency and its source is still to be determined. While it is stated that girls as well as boys should be allowed to compete with each other¹⁰ and the girls must be trained exactly like boys¹¹ and so guardians and priests may be of either sex,¹² yet the women are discriminated in prescribing younger age for marriage and child bearing,¹³ and an older age for accepting official appointments.¹⁴ Women are also to be punished more severely for disrespecting parents.¹⁵ Plato, however, opens all societal activities to women as well as men.

Though the source of assigning different social roles for men and women could not be easily identified from Plato's writings, the view that male and female human beings are two different expressions of a common human nature is somehow implied in his reflections on sex differences. He is, however, very much inconclusive about the equality of woman and man.

3. Aristotle on Man and Woman

Aristotle regarded the sex-difference among human beings as something non-essential. "The difference between male and female, while

9. Carol C. Gould & Max Wartofsky, *Women and Philosophy*, pp. 49-50.

10. Plato, "Laws", in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues* (834 d), p. 1400.

11. *Ibid.*, (804 e), p. 1376.

12. *Ibid.*, (759 b), p. 1338.

13. *Ibid.*, (785 b), p. 1360.

14. *Ibid.*, (785 b), p. 1360.

15. *Ibid.*, (917 a), p. 1488.

they are modifications peculiar to animals, are so not in virtue of its essence but in the matter, that is the body. This is why the same seed becomes male or female by acting in a certain way."¹⁶ Though the theory that there is no difference between male and female from the point of view of essence or human nature is certainly a very laudable and positive one, Aristotle has made more depreciatory remarks concerning women than Plato. Aristotle defined women in terms of both a quantitative and qualitative deficiency. He conceives women as a partial or mutilated male. He provided the first extensive enumeration and explanation of differences between sexes which make women weaker than men. The source of women's inferiority is from the body or matter. "The perfecting of female embryos is inferior to that of male ones since their uterus is inferior in condition. In other animals, however, the perfecting of female embryos is not inferior to that of male ones."¹⁷ Aristotle gave only a low regard for the material factor the woman supplies in human generation. "The female, in fact, is female on account of an inability of a sort, viz., it lacks the power to concoct semen out of the final state of nourishment because of the coldness of their nature."¹⁸

Because of the lack of semen, the mother could not contribute any higher soul (sensitive or rational) to the fetus except the nutritive soul. Women as well as the females of other species, have less intrinsic, vital, or soul heat than man and so females are unable to concoct or cook her menstrual blood to the final stage of refinement, i.e., volume of her menstrual secretions as compared with other animals.¹⁹

Aristotle repeatedly states that human being becomes female due to the lack of certain attributes of the male. He built up a detailed biological theory upon this idea. In this connection he says that "males are having more teeth than females in the case of human beings."²⁰ The female child grows slowly and it gives more pain to its mother while it is conceived and delivered. After birth, the female passes more quickly through youth

16. C. Aristotle, "Metaphysics", *The Works of Aristotle*, trans. J. Harward, *The Books of the Western World*, vol. 8, p. 586.

17. Aristotle, *The Generation of Animals*, trans. by A.L. Peck, Cambridge, Harvard University Press (776 a 10).

18. *Ibid.*, (728 a 18), p. 103.

19. *Ibid.*, 776 a 10.

20. Aristotle, "History of Animals", *op. cit.*, vol. 9, p. 24.

and maturity and old age.²¹ The male is more spirited, less cunning and more simple in character. A woman is more compassionate, easily moved to tears and more jealous and quick-tempered. They are more prone to despondency and less patient to wait hopefully. They are void of shame and self-respect and of false speech. They are deceptive and more capable of retaining memory than man. A woman is more wakeful and more shrinking and more difficult to rouse to action. When the male is in trouble, female runs away.²² This characterization of the woman, whether true or not, has to a great extent determined her sociological status and role in the society. Even in the concept of relationship of friendship between men and women, there is no equality, because for Aristotle, man is the better human being. "The better, that is man, gets more of what is good and each gets what befits him." The better should be more loved and the love should be in proportion to the merits of each one, because justice requires it. Therefore, man should be loved more by woman than he loves woman. The main advantage of this relationship is utility and pleasure for man. From this point of view, woman is not too far from a slave or an instrument.²³

The inequality in the relation between man and woman is permanent. This view is based on Aristotle's theory that the male principle contributes form or movement and the female principle contributes matter in the generation of a child.²⁴ "Now, of course the female, *qua* female, is passive, and the male, *qua* male is active."²⁵ On the metaphysical principle of act and potency or form and matter, the sexual differences are set on a firm ground and thus the inequality between male and female is given a rational foundation. That which is active has to be the ruler. The virtue of the ruler is being rational and of the ruled is that of being irrational. In the *Politics*, Aristotle tells us that it is proper for free adult male to rule over slaves, children and women because in slaves the deliberative faculty is entirely lacking; in free and male children it is immature, and in woman it is defective, that is, without any authority.²⁶

21. Aristotle, "Generation of Animals", Book IV, *op. cit.*, p. 317.

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 64, 69, 72.

23. Aristotle, "Ethics", *op. cit.*, pp. 401, 413.

24. Aristotle, "The Generation of Animals", 716 a 5-8.

25. *Ibid.*, 729 b 14-16.

26. Quoted from Carol C. Gould & Max Wartofsky, *Women and Philosophy*, p. 56.

Aristotle accepted the Sophoclian claim that silence is the glory of women.²⁷ A woman is a half free person in the state. Since man is a finer being than woman, the action of men are nobler than women.²⁸

With the speculations, observations and suggestions of Plato and Aristotle, a firm foundation was already made in the Western Culture to deny the woman, her rightful place in the human race.

4. Thomas Aquinas' Studies on Women

In the hands of St. Thomas Aquinas, the luminary among Christian thinkers, the discriminative philosophy on sex-differences got consolidated rather than rectified. His Christian faith has not helped him to understand the truth of St. Paul's saying that there is difference in dignity between man and woman who believed in Christ. Based on the teaching of Aristotle, St. Thomas also developed a kind of negative philosophy about women. The characteristic features of his thought can be summarily indicated. He believes that women are made as helpers for men. The active power of generation belongs to male and passive power to female. As regards the special nature of women, he holds that a woman is a misbegotten male. He justifies the domination of man over woman on the basis of predominance of reason in man. Since woman is made out of man, he has the right to be the head of the woman. He further says that "in a secondary sense, the image of God is found in man, not in woman, for man is the beginning and end of the woman, just as God is the beginning and end of every creature."²⁹ Interpreting St. Paul, he says, "man is not of woman but woman is of man. She is the principle of man's offspring." He accepts the mythical view of Aristotle that the northern wind favours the generation of the females and southern wind that of the males. The sex of an offspring may also be changed into female due to other unfavourable impressions on the soul or body of the parent. Woman is subjected to man on account of frailty of nature as regards both vigour of soul and strength of body. But after resurrection, the difference in these points will not be on account of the difference of sex but by reason

27. Aristotle, "Politics", *op. cit.*, pp. 445, 448, 453, 454, 459.

28. Aristotle, "Rhetoric", *op. cit.*, pp. 609, 659.

29. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Great Books of the Western World, vol. 19, p. 495.

of the difference of merits.³⁰ Christian faith has helped Thomas Aquinas to wipe out the inequality between men and women due to sex only in the resurrected life!

5. Justice for Woman

It is not easy for a male trained in the Schools of Plato, Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas in the Western tradition to accept the general statement that injustice is being done to a female in various walks of life just because she is "feminine in character." The categorization of feminine and masculine traits and tasks itself is mostly the work of the male members of humanity. Since it has the blessing and sanction of the long standing tradition and culture and the support of the eminent thinkers from the male section of human race, the question of attaining gender justice may remain as an unfulfilled dream of woman for a long time to come!!

30. *Ibid.*, p. 966.