

# Everybody's a Little Bit Sexist: A Re-evaluation of Aristotle's and Plato's Philosophies on Women

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It was the Renaissance humanist Francois Rabelais who proclaimed, "Nature abhors a vacuum." In this same way, it is impossible for humans to formulate theories outside of societal influence. The works of Aristotle (384-322 BCE) and Plato (427-347 BCE) were significant in that they either reflected or refuted the perceptions held of women within the Ancient World. Although many critics have deemed one man a misogynist and the other a champion of the feminist cause, a careful inspection of both men's work leads one to conclude that their standpoints were muddled at best. Aristotle, while clearly labeling women as the inferior sex, may have simply been interpreting the scientific observations of his time. In stark contrast, Plato radically promoted equality of opportunity, yet he frequently contradicted himself when making degrading remarks towards women.

Aristotle deviated quite drastically from Plato, his teacher of nearly two decades, when he determined women's role in society based solely upon their flawed anatomy. Drawing upon the work of other Greek writers, Aristotle strongly subscribed to the belief that the universe was composed of opposites. According to Anne Carson, "...in the document cited by Aristotle that goes by the name of The Pythagorean Table of Opposites, we find the attributes curving, dark, secret, ever-moving, not self-contained and lacking its own boundaries aligned with Female and set over against straight, light, honest, good, stable, self-contained and firmly bounded on the Male side" (Carson, 124). Extending this to the biology of the sexes, females were fundamentally colder, wet, and passive, while men were hot, dry, and active.

Aristotle found women to be inferior due to the fact that their bodies were too cold to produce seed (or semen). In his acclaimed work *On the Generation of Animals*, Aristotle states that, "For the first principle of the movement...whereby that which comes into being is male, is better and more divine than the material whereby it is female. The male, however, comes together and mingles with the female for the work of generation" (Aristotle, Book II). Thus, women merely function as a depository for sperm and a nourishing receptacle for a developing fetus. If this was not enough of a compliment, he goes on to make the argument that a woman is a "...deformed male; and the menstrual discharge is semen, though in an impure condition; i.e. it lacks one constituent...the principle of the Soul" (Aristotle, Book III). In addition to possessing soulless semen, women would inevitably reach puberty, maturity, and old age quicker than males due to their imperfection.

Aristotle threw women a bone when he contended that both sexes had a soul that was capable of reason. However, women were doomed to be subservient to men because that they were unable to "...control themselves physically and psychologically through the exercise of reason the way men can" (Whaley, 16). Interestingly, Aristotle used his biology of sex to determine each gender's role in society. He felt that the rational, strong, active, and perfect form of humanity ought to receive an education and hold positions of power. Women, being endowed

with irrationality, weakness, passivity, and imperfection, were not capable of abstract reasoning and were bound to the domestic sphere. Unfortunately, this assessment was the prevailing view until the Middle Ages.

Aristotle's biology has earned him the title of Most Acclaimed Misogynist by a vast majority of scholars. However, some individuals contend that passed judgement too quickly. Johannes Morsink argues that Aristotle did not simply observe the natural world and then formulate a theory; instead, he attempted to reconcile the competing biological theories of his day. Morsink also states that, "Aristotle failed to see that the connection between the 'biological inferiority' of a woman and her alleged social and political inferiority is not at all a straightforward one...His biology was therefore sexist in that it had pernicious consequences which Aristotle failed to challenge" (Morsink, 85). Such a claim makes the philosopher appear to be a passive bystander. In my eyes, Aristotle clearly stepped beyond the bounds of his observations and extrapolated his vague knowledge of human anatomy in order to define an individual's capacity as a human being.

Aristotle failed to challenge the consequences of his theories because he actively promoted ideas that benefited other aristocratic white males such as himself. According to Maryanne Cline Horowitz, "...Aristotle's belief in the mental and biological superiority of free men to both women and natural slaves, which was his ultimate justification for male rule in the household and state, gave sanction to a hierarchy of servitudes, including wifedom and slavery" (Horowitz, 187-188). In this, Aristotle's anatomical descriptions with misogynistic overtones may have been one means of reinforcing typical patriarchal power structures. Who would not promote a system that ensures your own prosperity?

Not only are Plato's views of women highly contested, but the term used to describe him as well. Dorothea Wender, featured in *Women in the Ancient World: The Arethusa Papers*, defines a feminist as "...a man or woman who believes that women should be given a 'better' place in society (legally, politically, professionally, etc.) or one which more closely approximates that held by men of the same class" (Wender, 213). By this definition, Plato was one of the earliest "feminist" writers. The philosopher found the soul to be sexless and he focused little of his efforts on defining the anatomical differences between men and women.

Within the *Republic*, Plato made a bold statement when addressing the superiority of either sex in form or ability: "...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 she should receive; and we shall therefore continue to maintain that our guardians and their wives ought to have the same pursuits" (Plato, Book V). Plato radically promoted the idea that in an ideal society, all worthy individuals would receive training and an education, regardless of sex. While Plato believed women to be physically weaker than men, he establishes in *Laws* that women would inevitably become more equal to men if they received appropriate training.

Plato did not align with Aristotle's philosophy that women were created to serve in the domestic sphere. He viewed the suppression of women as a waste of human resources and denied society access to the best possible guardians (e.g. philosophers). The prospect of women thinking abstractly as well as holding positions of power was nearly unheard of

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during Plato's time, which makes many of his philosophies revolutionary. However, this is not to say his works are not littered with contradictions. In *Timaeus*, Plato quipped that men who were cowardly and unjust in this life would certainly come back as women in the next. Wender is also keen in noting that in *Republic* III, Aristotle "...says that our future guardians should not imitate women acting 'womanish' nor slaves acting 'slavish.' Implication: the typical behavior of women, like that of the other major class of inferiors, is bad. Free-born men do not form a 'class' as slaves and women do; they are mankind; they are the species. Slaves and women are peculiar varieties, deviant from the norm" (Wender, 218). All throughout his works, Plato referred to women as secretive, inferior, irritable, crude, overly emotional, promiscuous, and poor educators.

There is no way to discern Plato's true feelings towards women, but we can postulate the reasoning behind his inconsistent views. Greek philosophy was characterized by the capacity to see both sides of every argument. This is clearly demonstrated with Plato's tendency to write in dialogue form. The philosopher could easily argue for the advancement of women as well as give weight to the misogynistic views of his time. In addition, Plato's *Republic* aimed at ending nepotism through demolishing the family, arbitrarily loyalties, and property. Utilizing the talents of women would help improve the State as a whole, but that does not mean Plato himself harbored purely positive feelings towards the female sex.

It is extremely difficult to ascribe modern terms and definitions to men who lived in entirely different geographical locations, time periods, and social contexts. When reading through their works, much is lost in translation. Perhaps there will never be a definitive answer to the question of whether Aristotle was a true misogynist or Plato was a true feminist. What can be stated with certainty is that Aristotle's blatant degradation of women produced a philosophy that dominated Western civilization for centuries to come, while Plato quietly laid the foundation for women's movements far in the future. It is truly frightening how powerful words can be.

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