

Is Aristotle a Misogynist?

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There is much scholarly debate regarding Aristotle's view on women. One finds that writers on this topic attempt to answer this question by referring to his comments on women found within the entire scope of his philosophical inquiry. The works most frequently sourced from include, but are not limited to: *Politics*, *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Generation of Animals*, *Rhetoric*, and *Poetics*. Drawing their own interpretations on these ancient texts, scholars raise, and attempt to explain, various questions regarding Aristotle's opinions on women. More specifically, these questions include women's role within marriage and the household (the *oikos*), a woman's position as an active member of the city (or *polis*), and women's status as biologically equal or inferior, as a sex, to males. As my writings will show, the opinions of Aristotle that modern scholars hold oftentimes vary greatly and beg the question: how are modern readers of Aristotle supposed to interpret his teachings with so many conflicting views? What does this say about Aristotle's place in philosophical history? In this paper I will answer these questions by presenting what the experts claim to be the major sources of Aristotle's opinion of women, and describing these drastically different interpretations of his writings. It will be argued that our modern speculation of Aristotle ought to consult his texts that are relevant to contemporary life. Readers must take into account the socio-political state of Athens of his time and the context in which his quotes are taken. This contextual look at his views is an essential part of understanding this great philosopher's knowledge, and gives us a better insight into some of his positions that do not necessarily agree with modern ethics.

As Richard Mulgan points out, there are roughly three major camps on the issue of Aristotle's sexist views. The first consists of the commentators writing before 1970 such as E. Barker, W.L. Newman, and W.D. Ross.¹ They did indeed question Aristotle's ethics regarding slavery, but when it came to women they tended to see Aristotle as a humane family man and thus were silent on criticism. The second camp is composed of scholars such as S.M. Okin and J.B. Elshtain.² Noticing the patriarchal implications of Aristotle's texts, they denounce Aristotle as a sexist and blame him for his compliance and even advocacy of the lower status of women. Both of these groups share the same view of Aristotle's bias towards women; only later writers were more offended due to the development of the feminist movement.

H. L. Levy, from the third group of writers, believes Aristotle has quite the opposite intention and attempts to affirm Aristotle's status as a female sympathizer. Part of Levy's investigation cites text from Aristotle's *History of Animals*, which is ironic because this text is perhaps the most popular source of hypothetical evidence branding Aristotle a sexist. Levy's interpretation includes statements such as, "In *History of Animals*, Aristotle finds women to be superior in every intellectual characteristic worth noting. Women are *mathetikoteron*, more apt at rational learning, *phrontistikotera*, more considerate about the rearing of the young, and *mnemonikoteron*, more retentive in memory."³ This quote summarizes Levy's claim that Aristotle was actually a champion for women's rights and a feminist. He also points to passages in *Nicomachean Ethics* concerning *phronesis*, or prudence, and deduces that, in his listing of women's chief virtues, Aristotle was hinting that women had a greater tendency for prudence than men. Bradshaw shares this view on the importance of prudence in political leadership, and points to passages in *Politics* where she writes "Importantly, while Aristotle emphasizes prudence's application to practical, variable human activity, and sees its value as lying particularly in the running of political and household affairs, he nevertheless categorizes prudence as an intellectual virtue, indeed as one of the two highest intellectual virtues."⁴ The virtue prudence is critical for a good ruler, and based on this assumption one might conclude that Aristotle used his rhetorical skill to blanket his true intentions, which were to covertly suggest that women should be recognized citizens and make political decisions, and even hold political power. This could not be openly stated as such because Athenian male citizens were naturally accustomed to their lofty positions as rulers and feared any change in social order, especially if their political influence was threatened.

Compared to most scholars, Levy's take on Aristotle casts his view on women in a very favorable light. Femenias reads Aristotle quite differently as is evident in her text. She observes, "Aristotle minutely describes the virtues that are feminine by nature: incapacity for command, hence submission and passivity, bodily weakness, *arete* fitting homemaking tasks, subordinate courage, moderation, and modesty."⁵ Further in her text, she concludes that the status of ancient Greek women was essentially equivalent to slavery.

As Guariglia acknowledges concerning the institution of slavery, "the condition of honest living is the existence of a type of men, the slaves, subjected to the heavy burden of the instruments necessary for the life of others, which turns them themselves into instruments, means, animated property" If we compare these words with the situation of women according to the model of the *Politics* and the established social order, it turns out that the existence of fifty percent of the species is legally and economically

subordinated to the benefit of the remaining fifty percent. The social system depends on women to give up their public rights and autonomy to the benefit of the private security granted by the status of minority they must have for life.⁶

Observing that Aristotle would sometimes counter himself, scholars such as Dobbs and Levy acknowledge this paradox by examining Aristotle in a different light. Mulgan explains this as he states, "Apparent inconsistencies and contradictions in the surface meaning are taken as hints of another deeper meaning. Thus Aristotle's theory of natural slavery, which is notoriously inconsistent, is interpreted as being deliberately weak and a covert attack on the institution of slavery as practiced by the Greeks. This in turn lends support to the view that Aristotle is also criticizing his contemporaries' treatment of women."⁷ The problem with this ambiguous interpretation is that it takes Aristotle's explicit statements on one subject and constructs implicit hidden meanings upon a different subject. By employing this tactic, one can draw nearly infinite conclusions from ancient texts. Socrates was well aware of this danger as he discusses, in *Phaedrus*, the difficulties in deciphering the written word.

Scholars debate Aristotle's view of the hierarchy within the *oikos* or household. Some say that Aristotle describes the state of marriage as more political than despotic. Saxonhouse, who sees Aristotle as an advocate for women, points to Book I of *Politics* in which Aristotle describes his set of three relationships for a man in household management: *despotike* is between master and slave, *patrike* the art of being a father, and *gamike* the art of marriage. She makes the distinction between *patrike* and *gamike*, claiming that rule over women is *politikos* and that of offspring is *basilikos*, or kingly.⁸ Based on this, Saxonhouse portrays the relationship between man and wife as political, and therefore, equal. She notes that, according to Aristotle, women have a deliberative part of the soul (*bouleutikon*) but it has no authority (*akuron*)⁹ (Saxonhouse 208). However, women's status is elevated above children and slaves because women possess the same capacity for virtue that men do, therefore their lack of authority is only circumstantial to their natural dispositions.

According to Dobbs, Aristotle sees women as suited to ruling the *oikos* because, like Levy, he interprets Aristotle as holding high regard for women in this position. While it may seem sexist by modern standards, Dobbs describes women's positions in the *oikos* and their exclusion from civic affairs as necessary to the time "...because this practice conforms to the natural complementarity of the sexes and because it fortifies the naturally pluralistic structure of society. By securing these underpinnings, Aristotle frames a constitution that best supports women and men in their pursuit of human excellence."¹⁰ This need for harmony in the household is what Dobbs believes to be the reasoning for Aristotle's assertion of its importance by outlining the guidelines for proper behavior for both men and women. He proclaims that women have a natural potential disposition to rule as he states, "The office of *oikonomikos* is not awarded to the husband because he is better than his wife-for she is substantially equal to him and is in many particular cases his moral and intellectual superior."¹¹

It is important to consider that women's subservient role is taken by the Athenians to be natural. The obvious differences in physique and anatomy are likely the best cause of this assumption. Are these differences alone enough to condemn all women to the fate of being men's servant? Nicholas Smith has an interesting position on this point. He sees the major distinction between male and female as stemming from Aristotle's theory of the soul. In his paper, he compares Plato and Aristotle's opinions on the soul. Plato believed in a sort of reincarnation that he is said to have acquired from the Pythagoreans. Since this soul can transcend through various lifetimes, it is possible for it to embody both male and female forms. Qualities of the soul, therefore, are not bound to it, but are products of how one lives one's life.

Unlike Plato, who thought that human souls were eternal and sexless, Aristotle imagined Male and female souls as the form of the body. The female body, Smith writes, is "incomplete" compared to a male body. Women's deliberative powers are *akuron*, or lacking in authority. "Aristotle makes the soul the form of the body, and offers a biological account of human reproduction that renders female psychology naturally and importantly different from that of males. These differences, I claim, provide the naturalistic warrants for Plato's celebrated "feminism" and Aristotle's notorious "male chauvinism."¹²

Another argument that supports the claim of Aristotle's hidden respect can be found in his account of Amasis and his footpan. Aristotle spoke of the importance for the ruler to be marked distinctly from his subjects and used the story of Amasis to illustrate his point. Amasis was king of Egypt who had a footpan made of gold that he had reshaped into the statue of a god. As his subjects worshipped the statue, Amasis remarked on the irony of his subjects worshiping what used to be a common household item. He observed that if this is possible, how could subjects deter a false king? This story helps to symbolize why Aristotle believed rulers needed distinctions between them and their subjects. Saxonhouse concluded that this anecdote may be a sign of Aristotle's sympathy towards women as she notes that "The male, always being in the position of rule, receives the external honors and accoutrements of a ruler (though in fact he may be no more worthy of reverence than Amasis' footpan). He is marked off from his wife less by a difference in nature than 'by a difference in appearance (skemasi) and speech and honors (timais)."¹³

There are some scholars who occupy the middle ground between Mulgan's two opposing interpretations. Salkever is perhaps the best example. Salkever's work describes two critical roles the *oikos* serves in ancient Greek culture. One is to balance the citizen's commitment to the *polis*; Aristotle feared that too much dedication to it would lead to an irrational populous bent on victory and honor that ignores the more important virtues of moderation and justice. Another function of the *oikos* is to develop the character of its occupants. On this Salkever writes:

I would suggest, in fact, that the function of the family is not procreation (nor security) but the development of this indispensable sense, without which decent political life as such is impossible. Familial life, then, has crucial political importance in two ways: it prepares us for political life, and at the same time it provides a separate focus of attention and care that can check political excess which threatens to turn the most tightly knit cities into armed camps.¹⁴

This insight helps to illuminate the function of the *oikos* within the city; it serves as a balance of power and to properly prepare its members for life outside the household.

With the vast amount of scholarly dispute over Aristotle's apparently sexist statements throughout his work, if one takes him literally it is easy to conclude that he was, without a doubt, a chauvinist. However, it is important to note that much of Aristotle's work is incomplete. Historians have consolidated his work but most of his pieces, including the *Nicomachean Ethics*, were not entirely complete. Any direct investigation he may have done on the equality of men and women has been lost to the ages. Thus we are left with bits and pieces of text on the issue and it should come as no surprise that the issue is highly disputed. Levy examines this problem as he states:

Aristotle never directly investigates whether women should be excluded from politics that, of course, poses a basic problem for anyone who seeks to interpret him on this question. Far from pursuing his prescribed method for direct investigation, he reports Socrates' opinion that women should be included in politics but does not report the contrary opinion, much less the fact that the contrary opinion heavily prevails. That he does state his own opinion on related but different questions, such as whether women are inferior, should be further warning that he does not state his own opinion, even in passing, on our question.¹⁵

Levy raises an excellent point: how can we presume to interpret an ancient philosopher's opinion on a subject he never directly approached? Attempts to do this, as we have seen, lead to drastically different versions of his teachings.

The question of Aristotle's opinion on women remains woefully unclear. If one adopts the stance of Femenias and Mulgan and read Aristotle by focusing on the plain meaning of the words, it is not surprising that they would draw negative conclusions on the issue. However, if the reader expounds on the general ideas of goodness and justice that Aristotle describes, the position of Levy, Saxonhouse, and Salkever becomes attractive. Scholars of the Bible and even the Constitution have similar issues when it comes to precise interpretation, especially regarding issues that were never directly covered within the text.

Those who read Aristotle today, and are aware of his controversial views on women, might wonder what to make of his teachings. Supposing Femenias and Mulgan are correct in their depiction of Aristotle - are we to discard all that Aristotle has taught us? It would be a grave error to do so; Aristotle may have been misguided in his classification of women as such, because he was also mistaken about many things. No doubt Aristotle was quite brilliant. He contributed to the disciplines of mathematics, chemistry, and biology during his lifetime; however it is also true that he was wrong about much of his work in these fields. Fire and earth are not elements, deductive logic is dated and by no means absolute, and his biological assertions of reproduction fail in the light of modern science.

This analysis of Aristotle's views on women, and how those views have been debated by scholars, leads one to wonder how he developed his ethical beliefs, and how today's ethicists, working in a far more complex society, relate to his teachings. When it comes to ethics, we cannot so easily say that Aristotle was wrong. The importance of his teachings on this subject cannot be disputed because the ethical quandaries he presents within the texts are still relevant to our modern day. Science and technology have answered much more than Aristotle ever touched on in his endeavors, but technology cannot tell one how to live with virtue and lead a good life with others. Aristotle's ethical philosophy is certainly his strongest field of study and is most relevant to a modern audience because his works on this subject, most scholars agree, accents the goodness of wisdom and rational living. If one ponders his work in the light of universal equity, that is more prevalent today compared to the times of ancient Greece, then one can find substantial value illuminated in Aristotle's philosophy.

Notes

¹ Richard Mulgan, "Aristotle and the Political Role of Women", 180.

² Ibid.

³ Harold Levy, "Does Aristotle Exclude Women from Politics?", 399.

⁴ Leah Bradshaw, "Political Rule, Prudence and the 'Woman Question' in Aristotle", 560.

⁵ Maria Femenias, "Women and natural hierarchy in Aristotle", 168.

⁶ Ibid, 169

⁷ Mulgan, 182.

⁸ Arlene Saxonhouse, "Family, Polity, & Unity: Aristotle on Socrates' Community of Wives", 205-206.

⁹ Ibid, 208

¹⁰ Darrell Dobbs, "Family Matters: Aristotle's Appreciation of Women and the Plural Structure of Society", 74

¹¹ Ibid, 78

¹² Nicholas Smith, "Plato and Aristotle on the Nature of Women", 477-478

¹³ Saxonhouse, 206.

¹⁴ Stephan Salkever, "Women, Soldiers, Citizens: Plato & Aristotle on the Politics of Virility", 247.

¹⁵ Levy, 397.

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