

Chapter 10

Sex, Self and Power

Plato's Feminism

Plato was the first feminist. Women were the same as men, only—in general—not so good. But though women were on average less strong and generally less good than men, that was only a generalisation, which did not hold in every case. Some women were just as good, indeed better, than some men (V 455d). Whether a particular woman was suited to a particular task should be decided on the merits of the case, not on any general assumptions about woman-kind as a whole. There was no fundamental differences between the sexes which unfitted women from useful toil. The guardians were to rise above their sexual prejudices. They might feel that the sight of old women exercising in the nude was ridiculous, but that was only a matter of custom, and should be overcome (V 452). It was a waste of woman-power to seclude women in their homes, when they could be performing useful tasks in the factory or the office. Women should be used, just as men were, for the benefit of the community. They should exercise the same as men, be educated the same as men, go to war the same as men, and generally be treated exactly the same, except that not so much should be expected of them (V 457a10). Differentiation in treatment between one guardian and another should be based on difference of talent, not on difference of sex (VII 540c5-9). The only function sex was relevant for was the breeding of children (V 454de). In modern terms Plato holds that while a guardian's chromosomes are highly relevant to his suitability for various social roles, the possession of a Y-chromosome rather than a second X-chromosome is not.

Plato offers no justification, or account of how any justification might be obtained for his factual claim, but none is needed in the context of his argument. It is an indisputable fact that some women are stronger than some men, though women in general are less strong. Once it is allowed that the good of the community overrides all other considerations, it follows that in filling jobs we should seek to have the best person for the job without regard to sex. Whether a particular female candidate is better or worse than a particular male candidate is a question to be decided in each individual case on the basis of the merits they are found, on examination, to have. Sex is irrelevant to everything save sex, and it is only where specifically sexual functions are in issue that any differentiation can be justified.

Sex is relevant to the architect of the ideal society on two counts: it is the means of producing new guardians, and it is emotionally charged and potentially divisive. Motherhood cannot be abolished if there are to be guardians

in time to come, and motherhood is time-consuming. Plato could not want his female guardians to opt out of motherhood altogether, because that would be dysgenic. Once a rigorous selection-procedure is adopted whereby all the best people are identified and promoted to being guardians, they cannot be allowed to opt out of parenthood, or the gene-pool would be rapidly depleted of the best genes. Children will be born to female guardians, and will have to be cared for. But it would be a great waste of valuable administrative and academic talent to have top-class females acting as nursery maids. So there must be *crèches*. Our society has a similar problem, when career women decide to start a family. In time past it was possible for them to hand over nursery functions to nannies, recruited from the lower classes, but in the second half of the twentieth century it has been difficult to accept that some women should look after other women's babies, because it implies, or is thought to imply, lower status. It is often felt that the solution we should adopt is that the father should stay at home and be an *au pair* boy, but Plato could not have countenanced that, because eugenic breeding would require that top-class females should mate with top-class males, who could no more than their spouses be spared for nursery duties. Even so, even if all the chores of looking after children are left to others, women have hitherto been obliged to give up time to gestating and giving birth, and have been correspondingly less available for career jobs. Now, however, modern technology has come to Plato's aid. *In vitro* fertilisation and surrogate motherhood would enable Plato's female guardians to pass on their genes to the next generation without having to waste time away from their high-powered jobs on maternity leave. Lower-class women, who were not capable of anything better could bear children for their upper-class sisters in much the same way as they used to nurse them in the past. The occasional visit to the surgery for egg-extraction would no more interfere with a guardian's usefulness than her male colleague's occasionally having to go to the insemination centre to donate sperm.

Plato is led to the community of children and their communal upbringing in communal *crèches* simply on the economic grounds of getting the greatest possible amount of work out of female workers, in much the same way as the communists did: is a consequence of his principle *τὸ πᾶ ἀὐτοῦ πράττειν*: there must be no *πολυπραγμοσύνη* among the guardians in respect of child-rearing any more than in any other sphere of life. But that is not his only reason. It is not only that motherhood takes time and effort, but that mating is emotionally charged and family affection dangerously disruptive of corporate solidarity. It is a commonplace observation that men are more likely to fall out over the possession of women than for any other cause, and that not even the closest friendship can withstand the rivalry of courtship and the jealousies of love. Once partnerships are countenanced, competition and jealousies will ensue, and the unity of the ruling class will be destroyed by dissension: and once families are legitimised, family pull will be exerted to divert the operation

of meritocratic selection procedures in favour of sons and nephews, and the unity of the ruling class will be riven by dynastic rivalries and feuds.

Emotional Involvement

The community of wives and children solves both problems. Sex is marginalised. In the *Republic* it is only an animal appetite, not a personal affection leading to lifelong exclusive commitment. And family affection is universalised behind a veil of ignorance. Sex is an appetite most men happen to have, and one which we need on occasion to gratify in order to secure the continuance of the species. If men could restrain their appetite, so much the better, but if they cannot, then it should be gratified in a casual, uncommitted way, without forming couples who would distinguish themselves from the rest of the guardians by an exclusive commitment to each other, which could make some other guardian jealous. I need not be jealous of Jill going out with Jack tonight, if I know that it means nothing and my turn will come tomorrow. We can slake our passions as they arise, without our temporary liaisons meaning anything much that anyone else could mind about. Those who have the grace of continence should be continent: those who cannot aspire to so high a standard, should sleep around as need be, being careful to avoid any issue or emotional entanglement. Better sow sterile wild oats than marry.

Homosexuality

Plato's homosexuality has often been cited as the reason for his low esteem of the married state, and at one level this is undoubtedly true. He was attracted to boys and young men, although he became increasingly puritan about the physical manifestations of sex. The saying he reports of Sophocles is illuminating (I 329bc): sexual attraction was a biological fact, to be restrained as much as possible, and otherwise treated as a mere animal necessity, necessary for the generation of guardians, and unavoidable for those who have not the requisite self-control, but not something he could live with emotionally or integrate into his scheme of life. But deeper explanation is called for: it is not simply that he had never experienced the love of a woman, and did not know how much he was asking the guardians to forgo. He knew the power of erotic love, and in the *Symposium*, and later in the *Phaedrus*, likens it to divine ecstasy, reaching out to Beauty itself, an ultimate principle of all things, of which the fundamental explanation is, in Aristotle's phrase, *κινεῖ ὡς ἐρώμενος*, it moves as being the object of love. But he draws back. It is the same as with poetry. The purveyors of divine inspiration in the *Ion* are by Book X of the *Republic* to be banished from the borders of the Ideal Society. The man who was trying to curb his poetic genius and schooling himself to be properly prosaic could well have reckoned that he should also subject the irrational leap of love to the cold calculations of eugenics. And perhaps at

this level his homosexuality should be seen as a symptom rather than a cause. There is, furthermore, especially in the *Republic*, a pervasive sense of turning away from this wicked world, a sense that in the real world real politics is a dirty business, the good man fares ill, and things are inevitably going from bad to worse. The Seventh Letter reveals the biographical background: Plato was emotionally driven out of the Athens that had killed Socrates and the Syracuse that had nurtured Dion; he turned back from the commitment and responsibilities of heterosexual love, to the less deep and more transient fellow-feeling of the adolescent peer-group. His homosexuality represents a certain regression, a turning his back on the world as he found it and seeking solace in the cosiness of a small community in the company of yes-ful youths. He did not just happen to be a homosexual who could therefore forget about the power of love for women, but was one because he could not afford to allow his self to be vulnerable as a lifelong lover and beloved.

The Abolition of the Self

The community of wives and children is part of a more ambitious programme—the abolition of the self. Plato's ideal is that we shall all cease using the pronoun *ἐμόν*, 'mine', in its customary, divisive use, and instead use it only as we now use 'ours' (V 463e5–464d5). Only so, he thinks, can the ruling class be made a complete unity, in which nobody is conscious of himself as a separate entity; and only so shall we each be able to transcend our natural selfishness, and come to lead a moral life. The problem of morality was that we were all rationally inclined to *πλεονεξία*, selfishness, and Plato's solution for selfishness was selflessness.¹ It was only if we could completely escape from the self that we should be able to avoid the ultimate autism of the self-centred life. But marriage is an obstacle to this process: marriage is peculiarly self-enhancing. Each partner is unique in the eyes of the other, and so comes to have a strong sense of intrinsic value and individual identity. It bolsters the awareness of the self, and strengthens its self-image as something existing in its own right and being of inherent value. Marriage separates off the married couple, surrounding them with glass walls, and encouraging them to think of themselves as a unit, as something different from society at large, and espousing values not necessarily the same.

The abolition of the self is a difficult enterprise, and in his concern for the family and the generation of children, he showed himself sensitive to the key factor in the evolution of the self. Organisms have evolved a sense of self because all the genes in the phenotype have a common interest in its survival. The ultimate evolutionary entity, the self-replicating gene, cannot afford to be entirely a selfish gene, because its only chance of replicating itself lies in the

¹ See above, ch.2, pp.23-24, and ch.3, pp.38-39.

survival of the organism to an age when it can reproduce its kind. In sexual reproduction each of my genes has as good a chance as any other of being passed on to my offspring, and there is no way for one to compete with another to obtain a better chance of being passed on. With individual members of a species it is different. Although some co-operation may be beneficial, there is an element of competition in leaving successful progeny behind, and those who lose out in this competition have no posterity to carry on their line. For this reason we have come to care very much about our own children, and to strive to do well by them. If we are guardians, and believe that being a guardian is a great good, we shall want our children to be guardians too. Often, of course they will be, since we shall mate with guardians, and the result of our union will inherit good genes from both parents. Often, but not always. There is in any population, even among children of exceptional parents, a tendency to regress to the norm. Sometimes the children of the guardians will themselves have a less than golden genetic make-up. And then their parents, if they know that they are their parents, will be reluctant to see in their offspring anything less than golden promise. We are partial to our progeny, and will try very hard to secure that they pass their examinations and take their place in the top stream and remain on course for admission into positions of privilege and power. Unless our family pushiness is curbed, the seamless fabric of social unity will be tied into dynastic knots, and evolutionary pressures will continue to operate against true selflessness. Plato needs to place the generation of children behind the veil of ignorance, in order that none shall know who his offspring are, and be thus unable to give them a selectively helping hand.

We may question whether the programme is either feasible or desirable. Surprisingly, it is feasible, being exemplified by a certain species of African mole-rat (*Heterocephalus glaber*), which live in colonies occupying tunnels in the banks of rivers, where it is difficult to re-identify one's previous partner or recognise one's offspring.² There is no occasion for sexual jealousy, no feeling for family, no preference for one's own progeny. The care of the young is a communal responsibility, and each individual identifies with the whole community, not knowing any other entity to identify with. The life-style of the African mole-rat is not pleasing, and Plato's own arrangements are distasteful, not to say disgusting. On a charitable view, we can ascribe them to the technological inadequacies of his time. In the modern world we can, or at least

² Information about this curious beast is most easily obtained from the web. At the time of writing <http://natzoo.si.edu/Animals/nmrats/datasht2.htm> works and is informative, with a webcam offering a glimpse of the beasts themselves. But web sites can be as ephermal as mayflies. A more permanent reference is J.U.M.Jarvis, M.J.O'Riain, N.C.Bennett, P.W.Sherman, *Trends in Ecology and Evolution*, 1994; 9 (2) pp.47-52. We are indebted to Dr Anne Magurran, of the University of St Andrews, and Sir Richard Southwood, FRS, Fellow of Merton for these references.

can envisage our being able to, separate the emotionally charged operation of copulation from the clinical business of conception and gestation. In the first place, contraception enables us to have the former without the latter. A modern-day Plato would have no need to countenance abortion or infanticide: vasectomy and the pill would ensure that there were no unwanted results of the guardians disporting themselves. Artificial insemination would enable the bureau of eugenics to select for desirable qualities of character and intellect without resort to deception. There would however be a danger of their giving preferential treatment to their own sperm. That could be prevented by certain institutional arrangements; or it might be better to eschew selective eugenic breeding among the guardians, mixing the semen from all donors so that there was a random selection of the successful spermatozoon, thus assimilating the reproductive process of the *πόλις*, as a whole to that of the individual organism. And, as we have seen, even gestation may be separated from genetics. Not only would the division of labour be complete, but the veil of ignorance between one generation and the next would occur naturally and without deception or concealment.

Dynasties and Power

Plato's solutions are repugnant, but they are attempts to solve real problems, and we can better appreciate his proposals if we consider how other societies cope with the family and the transmission of power. Some make no attempt, and experience disastrous dissension as dynasties compete for power. With the passage of time the regression to the norm reasserts itself, and the families in power become incompetent, until defeat or revolution supervenes. Other societies, especially those imbued with social ideals, attempt to ensure that family divisiveness does not have it all its own way. The Israeli *kibbutzim* come nearest to Plato's ideal; they countenance marriage, but insist on the communal rearing of children. There has been some evidence that children do not thrive in the absence of traditional family life: they need fathers, and especially mothers, to relate to. It has proved difficult to continue that arrangement into the second generation in the face of that evidence and the natural affections of husbands and wives—who already constitute a fundamental division among *kibbutzniks*. St Augustine relates how, when he was thinking of setting up a select community of like-minded friends, he abandoned the idea on the grounds that their wives would be sure to quarrel, and in due course the monasteries dealt with the problem of sex by banning it altogether. Had Plato known of the monastic movement, and its success in sublimating men's sexual urges, he might well have enjoined celibacy on his guardians too, were it not for the problem of replacing guardians when they die. The monasteries' response is to recruit novices from the outside world and to recognise their own essential incompleteness, as only one facet of the church, whose *raison d'être* lies beyond the monasteries themselves,

and encompasses the non-monastic world. Plato could not envisage his ideal society being similarly dependent on the outside world for its supply of new guardians. Such novices would bring with them many corrupt practices and ideas from the non-ideal world, and would infect the *πόλις*, with dangerous thoughts. If in any existing city all those over ten years of age were to be got rid of in order to ensure that society could start afresh with a clean slate (VII 540e-541a), it clearly would not do to keep on re-infecting the body politic with new arrivals. The mediaeval Western Church had a further problem, that of nepotism. Not all the bishops were chaste as well as celibate (and, even if they were, sometimes had genuine nephews whom they were tempted to promote); hence the prohibition in Canon Law, which survives to this day, on anyone illegitimate becoming a bishop.

The Roman Empire allowed the Emperor to marry, but thanks to the fortunate fact of neither Julius Caesar nor Augustus having a son, developed a policy of adoption, whereby the Emperor chose his successor and made him his nominal son. But family ties proved too much for the otherwise excellent Marcus Aurelius, who allowed his biological son Commodus to succeed him. Neither Rome nor Byzantium ever solved the succession problem for the Emperor himself, and after a few generations of hereditary succession there would be a violent displacement of one dynasty by another. Byzantium, however, went some way to solving the wider problem of power by castrating its civil servants. Eunuchs were excellent. They were disturbed by no sexual jealousies, nor diverted from their work by family commitments. They were often devoted to the public good, and though sometimes given to nepotism in the strict sense, did not push the interests of their relatives with true parental zeal. But they were proverbially power-hungry, and we might well think that children were worth having if only to siphon off successful men's urge to achieve yet further success, and to console the unsuccessful with the prospect of being able to spend more time with their families.

Jowett admired the *Republic*, and sought to make Britain a meritocracy after Plato's heart. He had a fair measure of success. Although there is a dignified part of the constitution in which Parliament plays a key role, and democratic elections take place at intervals, power has been steadily leaking away from Westminster to Whitehall. The Departments of State pay nominal obeisance to their Ministers, and when there is an inter-departmental dispute the Cabinet can exercise real power; but for the most part the Minister has neither the time nor the knowledge to make his Department do what it does not want to do. In that sense the real power in contemporary Britain is substantially exercised by civil servants, themselves selected by examination after a rigorous academic course, often in philosophy. Civil servants, though sometimes said by MPs to be political eunuchs, are not real eunuchs, and have wives and families to prove it. But their wives and families play no part in their public lives and have no political power. Although the wife of

a top civil servant is addressed as 'Lady', she has much less pull than the ladies, or even the mistresses, of previous ages. She is kept in *purdah* in the suburbs, well away from the corridors of power. Nor from the career point of view is it any advantage to be the child of a civil servant. Britain is an enthusiastic meritocracy, and parental pull is rigidly excluded from all selection processes. We deal with the problem of sex by legitimating it but separating it from everything of public importance. A rigid separation between public and private life ensures that amorous ambitions and family loyalties have no influence on the course of events. (It should be noted that the dignified part of the constitution is not totally ineffective. Parliament still has some real power. It should also be noted that the hereditary principle is in practice still strong even in the House of Commons, where many MPs, including many Labour MPs, are descended from the politicians of a previous age.)

The Real Origin of Sin

Plato is dealing with a real problem. We cannot say that we or other societies have dealt with it well, but still we may have qualms about his solution. He himself expresses some doubts: he was more realistic than most in seeing that the problem of succession was one that proves fatal to most regimes, and in the dark passage at the beginning of Book VIII fears that it will be the undoing of even the ideal society. But he fails to identify the source of the difficulty. He lays down that the guardians should have everything in common except their bodies (V 464d9), but this is the wrong exception. Their bodies are not to be peculiarly their own, since they are to be at the disposal of the *πόλις*, for child-bearing and child-begetting: it is their minds that are inherently their own, and it is their minds that need to be excepted from individual determination, if the community is to be completely at unity with itself. And this is difficult. Each of us has a mind of his own, which he can, and sometimes must, make up for himself: that is what it is to be an autonomous agent. The guardians, although acknowledging the supremacy of reason and engaging in free and frank discussion and open-ended argument (VII 534c1-3, 539c5-d1), cannot be guaranteed to reach agreement on all matters, since, as Plato elsewhere notes, there is no decision-procedure for evaluative disputes.³ The guardians will sometimes disagree about what ought to be done, and however much they are anxious to reach agreement and not to quarrel, each will think that it would be better if they agreed with him than if the general consensus went the other way. I necessarily think that what I think is true, and that others ought to agree with me more than that I should agree with them. Although sometimes I shall be convinced by their arguments, and

³ *Phaedrus* 265a

then gladly exchange my own previous false opinions for those I now see to be true, and sometimes they will be convinced by my arguments, and be argued out of their mistaken views, we shall not always reach a common mind on all matters, and then the decision we take, whatever it is and however it is taken, will leave some of us not thoroughly convinced. Someone will be left with a nagging feeling of having been right but not properly attended to; a prophet, temporarily without honour in his own generation, but due to be vindicated in the fulness of time, when others will come to see how right he was, and how much better it would have been if only they had heeded him when he told them so. In that sense there is bound to be a contest for power. I cannot give my mind to the question of what ought to be done—or, often, to the question of what ought to be believed—without wanting my views to carry the day. Although I may change my mind under the influence of argument, discussion, friendly criticism and debate, and the different opinions of different thinkers may converge towards a common mind, we shall not always reach complete agreement, and in so far as we do not, each of us will be ineliminably anxious that his own views should prevail. And this is an inherent source of dissension among the guardians, quite independent of the rivalries of love and quarrels about family possessions. In the decline of the constitution of societies and individuals, Plato sees the competition for *prestige* and the competition for wealth as the first two stages on the downward path, but does not see that the guardians, even though they may have eschewed all pursuit of money or of glory, are still bound, of necessity, to compete for power. Many abbots in the middle ages and many civil servants in our own times have been notably unconcerned with securing wealth for themselves, and have been quite content to stand out of the limelight and let others take the acclaim for what they have done, obtaining their own satisfaction simply from the knowledge of their job well done; but, once their power is threatened, they have fought like tigers to ensure that whatever else happens, it shall be they who have the decisive say about the way things go. The hunger for power is the last infirmity of high-minded men, because it is power that enables them to put their good intentions, based on high aspirations and well-reasoned judgements, into effect. I can keep my bodily appetites under control, and can even curb my family pride for the sake of the community, but to give up power is to give up altogether in the great project itself. To abdicate is to forgo having any say in what shall happen, and to have no share in trying to make the world a better place. It is for this reason that power struggles are more likely to occur among committed intellectuals than sexual jealousies or family feuds, and are more disruptive and deep-seated. Plato thought that having wives and children in common would remove all cause for dispute, and would enable the guardians to dwell together in unity as a band of brothers sharing their joys and sorrows, because they all had the same aim and were of one mind (V 464d), but failed to see

that he had not excluded the chief source of dissension among high-minded men.

Plato's moral and political ideals are at odds with his intellectual methodology. He wants his guardians to have all things in common, but believes that truth comes out of the clash of different opinions. We do not all have the same apprehension of the truth. If we did, there would be no need for *διαλεκτική* (*dialektike*), argument and probing examination of one another's views. IF there were a strict decision-procedure for moral questions, so that initial misapprehensions would be seen to have been wrong even by those who had at first laboured under them, THEN, perhaps, they would not take it too much amiss that they had been shown to be wrong: there are relatively few people who, having once imagined that the square root of two was a rational number, or that π was exactly equal to $3\frac{1}{7}$, cherish a grievance at having been shown to be wrong. But the illumination that comes from *διαλεκτική* comes more sparingly, and may not come at all to some, who may continue in error, sincerely believing that they alone are right, and that everybody else is too pig-headed to recognise the fact. The convergence of opinion on moral matters, which is the most that Plato can reasonably hope for, is neither quick enough nor universal enough to ensure that the guardians are all of one mind about them, and free of all tendencies to *stasis*. But this is only a contingent truth. Although it is a defining mark of our being separate selves that each of us can make up his own mind differently from others, it is not the case that he has to. And hence, though the absence of a decision-procedure for evaluative disputes means that Plato cannot rely on our all becoming like-minded on all questions, there is some tendency for wise men to think alike, and over the ages a consensus has emerged on some moral questions. It could be the case that disagreements, though real, were not so widespread or long-standing as to pose a serious threat to the unity of the state. At least, it did not seem so much a forlorn hope in Plato's time as it does now after two millennia of dissension. Plato's political methodology, although flawed, was not obviously incapable of working. But Plato assumed it was bound to work, because it was based on a programme—the abolition of self—which ruled out the possibility of our making up our minds differently. If I do not even have a mind of my own, I cannot be permanently at odds with my fellow guardians. We may have different perspectives initially, reflecting our different points of view, but we shall soon discount all subjectivity of approach, and see the Forms as they really are, and not as they had at first sight appeared to be. And this programme, we may now conclude, is inherently unattainable; however much we try to put off our selfhood, the old Adam will resurrect himself in new and original ways. But our complaint is not that Plato's programme is incapable of achievement: rather, it is not one we ought to attempt. Granted that *πλεονεξία*, seeking always to get more for oneself, is wrong, it does not follow that the only way of being right is not to consider oneself at all. The opposite

of selfishness is unselfishness, not selflessness. As the lyre-string argument in Book I (349a-350e) shows, a man acts wisely and well in not grabbing too much for himself rather than in insisting on assigning to himself nothing at all.⁴

There is a danger of selflessness masking, and becoming a vehicle for, self-hate, and the moral selfless person often is as hard on others as he is on himself, and unhealthily eager to impose sacrifices on all under the guise of seeking the common good. The Judaeo-Christian commandment that one should love one's neighbour as oneself presupposes that one ought actually to love oneself. Although any concern for others must sometimes require the abridgement of one's own interests, and involve a degree of self-sacrifice, the point of the sacrifice is the good of others, not the abnegation of oneself.

Plato had two problems: the problem of sons and the problem of lovers. They are real problems that any political or social philosopher must address. Those with power want to hang on to it, and to leave it to their family or friends when they die; and the pair-bond, most fully realised in marriage, creates units within the community with values not all identical with those of the community itself. Other societies have adopted different solutions to these problems, but none of them satisfactory. Plato's solution was radical and all-encompassing, but did not get to the root of the problem, which was the self's concern with power rather than sex. Modern technology might make a quasi-Platonic scheme work so far as sex was concerned, but would place the natural affections of most men and women under intolerable pressure, and would not solve the problem of power and political dissension. Our most serious criticism, however, is of his seeking to exalt the community by deflating the self. Although the pair-bond is exclusive, and does indeed create glass walls around married couples, the community can afford to be that amount divided into separate sub-units; and the self is better to that extent when it is fulfilled in loving and being loved than if it is entirely cut down to communal size.

Modern Feminists and Plato⁵

Feminists have ambiguous attitudes to Plato. They approve his giving women equality of opportunity, but do not like his assuming that that will not secure equality of outcome. A few domestic occupations apart, Plato claims that men generally outperform women. But, feminists feel, the factual basis is shaky, and in any case Plato has skewed the playing field by concentrating on 'agonistic' male pursuits like warfare and dialectical philosophy. Women

⁴ See above, ch.1, pp.11-13.

⁵ A helpful and balanced account is given by G.Vlastos, 'Was Plato a Feminist?', *Times Literary Supplement*, no.4, 485, March 17, 1989, pp.288-289, reprinted in R.Kraut, ed., *Plato's Republic*, Lanham, Maryland, USA, 1997, pp.115-128.

are being judged less good than men because they are being judged by men using male criteria of excellence. If instead of setting questions on dialectical philosophy, the Civil Service Commissioners selected on the basis of consensual skills, like securing agreement, our mandarins would be more equitably chosen and more representative of the people they ruled.

There is some force in this criticism. There is an element of *machismo* in Plato's ideal of human excellence, and the militarist tone of the *Republic* grates on our ears. In his defence Plato could argue that the guardians had to guard the freedom of the city. Situated in the Balkans in a violent age, the city was under constant threat of attack, and an ability to defend it by force of arms was a prime requisite. We may concede to Plato that military prowess and bodily strength are a qualification for exercising rule over others; but they are not the only ones: other forms of courage are equally essential—fortitude for instance, and in particular the moral courage needed for taking difficult decisions, and in a less troubled world more weight can be given to less Spartan virtues, such as empathy and sensitivity to the feelings of others. Empathy and sensitivity to the feelings of others are often claimed as peculiarly feminine virtues, and they might in fact be so. But Plato could accept that. Although he has a low view of the general run of women, he is not a principled misogynist—he is equally scathing about the general run of men. Helen was fickle, and there may have been many would-be Helens around him; but Penelope, Alcestis, Antigone and Iphigenia all showed great courage and firmness of purpose, and would have been ranked ahead of most male candidates as outstandingly well-qualified to guard the city.

Plato can be argued with about the virtues needed for being a good guardian. The Civil Service Commissioners do not set examinations only in mathematics and philosophy, but in literature and history too, reckoning that humane letters confer a breadth of comprehension and depth of judgement that are as valuable as precision of thought and penetration of understanding. Plato, if he could have been reconciled to the poets, and not insistent on differentiating his Academy from Isocrates' finishing school, would have acknowledged the value of empathy and intuitive understanding generally. And if female candidates turned out to be better, they would have been chosen. But he would have set his face against regarding specifically female excellences as desirable virtues in guardians simply because they were female. There would have been no paper in Women's Studies. The criteria of selection would have been set solely by the needs of the job, not by the orientation of the candidates. Some modern feminists are outraged.⁶ Plato

⁶ See, e.g., J. Annas, 'Plato's *Republic* and Feminism', *Philosophy*, 51, 1976, pp.307-321. J. Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, Oxford, 1981, pp.181-185. A.W. Saxonhouse, 'The Philosopher and the Female in the Political Thought of Plato', *Political Theory*, 4, 1976, 195-212, and C.D.C. Reeve, 'The Naked Old Women in the Palaestra', both the latter reprinted in R. Kraut, ed., *Plato's Republic*, Lanham, 1997, pp.95-113, and 129-141.

is not showing concern with women's natures as *they* perceive them, but subordinating them to the interests of the community as *he* perceives it. Instead of securing to women the right to abort their foetuses if they so chose, and ensuring that conditions of employment were family-friendly out of regard for women's reproductive role, Plato plays down the fact that women alone can bear children, reckoning that irrelevant to their employment (even among the non-guardians).

Plato would be unworried by these criticisms. Having himself formulated the Law of Non-contradiction, he would see that he could not hope to meet the feminists' demands. We can note his unconcern with women's rights—but note also his equal unconcern with men's rights. Plato's exaltation of the community at the expense of the individual is, indeed, unpleasing. We would like him to combine his moral objectivity and sense of communitarian values with a respect to the individual and kindness to the self. But that would require the *Republic* to be a very different book—indeed, a book that has never yet been written.