

***Plato's "Feminism":
Reassigning the Female as Male***

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In Book V of the *Republic*, Plato asserts that women are eligible for admission into the Guardian class, the elite of society.^{1,2} Contrary to the misogynistic attitudes of his contemporaries, this idea is often cited as evidence for his feminism by many feminist philosophers. That he prescribes equality in opportunity is generally accepted; whether those arguments constitute feminism, however, has elicited more controversy.

Here, I challenge the consensus: I argue that Plato's methodology resists the very idea of gender equality. I contend that readings of a gender-equality-advocating Plato rest on a fallacious synthesis of two distinct approaches, one particularistic and one universal. His proposal affords equal opportunities to individuals of identical natures irrespective of gender, not to the collective category of gender. Drawing from Iris M. Young's politics of difference, this argument exhibits an abstraction of the man: By projecting male qualities onto the Guardian position, the male perspective is upheld as the normal and the universal. Allowance of a woman into the Guardian class is then determined on the basis of conformity

to this norm. Because of this, the qualities characterizing the class of women are only glossed over. In its failure to affirm and respect the differences between the social groups of gender, Plato's proposition is decidedly not a form of feminism.

§I begins with Plato's prescriptions for Guardian women, mired as it is with contradictions between his chauvinistic and "feminist" views. §II offers a brief interjection with an exposition of Young's argument on the politics of difference. This will be used in §III to formulate the central thesis that Plato's conflation of individual and social equality means that we cannot interpret him as a feminist, and that doing so in fact perpetuates the social evil of gender inequality. Finally, §IV offers responses to questions on the authenticity of my argument—of whether my claim is even directed at all to a Platonic conception of gender equality.

§I Plato on Women

The didactic aim of *The Republic* is predicated on a search for an answer to the question first posed in Book I: what is justice? Maintaining that the makeup of the state is analogous to the composition of the soul, Plato attempts to illustrate justice by presenting its manifestation in the city. To that end, Plato's discussion of women is set against the backdrop of his broader aim to sketch out the contours of an ideal state.

Central to this utopia is the principle of specialization,

wherein each person pursues that which suits his or her nature. Accordingly, this would allow for the preservation of the state's unity (423d5), as the specified roles would give way to efficiency and harmony. It is then—in reference to the city's oneness—that Plato first makes mention of women: like everything else, they are to be shared in common among the specialized Guardians. (423e6)

Initially only touching on the matter, he is pressed to add flesh to the bones of his views. Women, according to him, differ from men only in their reproductive capacities, and all other differences are as irrelevant as baldness and long-hairedness. (454bd) The only distinction between men and women lies in their respective roles in procreation, which is extraneous to pursuing their respective pursuits. This applies to Guardianship. Therefore, so long as women are of the Guardian nature, they may pursue Guardianship. Because of this, he argues, Guardian women should receive the same musical, physical, and military education as men. (451de) Plato anticipates the objection that this sharing in education would result in the absurd idea of women exercising naked alongside men. To this, he counters by saying that, just as the idea of stripping for men was initially perceived as ridiculous and then as reasonable, the same would hold true for his proposal. (452a8-b2, 452c4-e1)

From there, Plato proceeds to his next “wave” of laws on women: the abolition of the nuclear family. Following his

earlier proposal to dissolve private property, as owning private property would incite hostility and bring about the destruction of the city (417a5-b5), the nuclear family is to be treated similarly. Women and children are to be shared, a man and a woman are not to live together, and no parent is to know who their offspring are and vice versa. (457e10-d2, 460b-461e) To regulate the erotic desire for sex, marriages should occur during festivals with pairings decided by the rulers. (459d-460a) Ultimately, this is to make the Guardians impartial to any form of the private, reinforcing Plato's vision of the state's unity.

Still, it would be remiss to condone the numerous remarks Socrates makes that qualify, if not explicitly contradict, his view of women as being on equal ground with men. He maintains that "one sex shows greater mastery than the other in pretty much every arena" and "for the purposes of all of them [the arenas] women are weaker than men." (455d10-e1) In the context of reproduction, men who excel in war or other pursuits should have more opportunity to have sex with women in order to father more children, degrading women to merely material prizes and rewards. (460b1-5) Further, Guardians, who should only imitate those exhibiting virtue, but not a woman, implying that the virtuous and women are mutually exclusive classes of people. (395cd) The text is replete with many other sexist comments, but I mention only these few.³

§II The Politics of Difference

Here, I will turn to Young's politics of difference. Stripped to its bones, her theory extends conceptions of justice and injustice beyond the individual to social groups. This is made on the basis of the exclusion of peoples from participation, as affected by structural causes. She presents what she calls the five faces of oppression, each of which is a distinct form irreducible to more basic criteria. In this paper, I focus specifically on cultural imperialism, the "universalization of a dominant group's experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm." By instantiations of cultural imperialism, deviant positions are rendered inferior and branded as the Other.

Driving cultural imperialism are the ideal of impartiality and a logic of identity. Impartiality, often hailed as a pillar of reason, assumes the existence of an objective point of view. Abstracting from particularized perspectives, it constructs one point of view to be taken as objective and true. This, as Young believes, is impossible, because perspective cannot be decoupled from context or commitment. In much the same way as impartiality presupposes the possibility of one true perspective, a logic of identity attempts to construct identities as homogenous unities, paring down a multiplicity of perspectives to one that serves as a static benchmark against which all others are measured. In doing so, all other viewpoints are expelled.

To this problem of cultural imperialism, Young endorses a politics of difference, by which social differences are valued. They are ideals of liberation: by imbuing diversity with positive connotations, differences relativize the dominant culture, puncturing its universalistic claim. Her solution is one opposite assimilation, which demands conformity to an arbitrary view. The call to homogenize forces excluded groups to shed their perspectives and truths for those of the dominant groups. To be accepted, *they* must change to become like *us*.

Returning to the core of Young's argument, pivotal to cultural imperialism and a politics of difference are social groups. Cultural imperialism is based on a social view of the world, where the perspective of an entire class of people is universalized. Not to be interpreted as mutually exclusive with individual oppression, social oppression (including cultural imperialism) locates inequality and injustice in broader structural biases. This is what I argue in the next section: Plato's treatment of women is a form of cultural imperialism, and feminist interpretations of him are misguided by the erroneous synthesis of individual and social inequality.

§IV Plato's Cultural Imperialism

Before I continue, one distinction must be made clear. Here, I take the term gender inequality to refer to a *social* inequality. It is inequality not between a man and a woman, but men and women. While it may manifest itself on an individual level, gender inequality is grounded in more structural in-

equities rooted in the being of a woman, the being of which references the collective experience of women.

Given this, I argue that feminist interpretations of Plato's proposal have disregarded this distinction between individual and social inequality through their conflation of woman and women. Specifically, I am responding to one strand of the argument held by Saxenhouse and Spelman. They argued that gender equality is present in the *Republic*, but emerges from his desexualization of women. Saxenhouse (1976), while admitting that women play a different role in reproduction, believes that their biological differences nonetheless do not affect their unique contribution to the governance of a city. As she argues, the woman's part in the creation of the next generation is uncredited, removing her bodily nature. *She* is removed. Similarly, Spelman (1994) maintains that Plato's gender equality comes about through a perversion of the gendered self through his dualistic attitude towards the soul and body. As the only vehicle for knowledge of the Forms, the soul may inhabit a male and female's body in the same way. Hence, gender equality follows from the fact that the nature and soul of a Guardian is independent from its bodily being in a man or woman.⁴

I begin with Saxenhouse's and Spelman's premise: Plato de-sexes women. Ignorance of gender, however, does not entail equality. Instead, the overlooking of gender exhibits the problems of the ideal of impartiality and a logic of iden-

tity. It commits a form of cultural imperialism that universalizes the male experience and otherizes the female one. In particular, this takes place through the arbitrary assimilation of the female to the male in two contexts: the biological and the social.

The Biological Case

In suggesting that women's dissimilarities to men are as irrelevant as baldness insofar as the pursuit of Guardianship is concerned, Plato overlooks the sexual qualities of women. Their bodies are apparently of no consequence, as demonstrated by his proposal to have them strip down alongside men in the palestra for physical training. Further, although he recognizes the difference of reproductive capacities, he nonetheless chooses to overlook its significance. . The communitarian proposal, by which children are handed over to officials, downplays, if not fully erases, the woman's physical role in the development of the next generation.

Plato's dualistic conception of the body and soul continues with this purging of the soul from the body. Following Spelman's claim, the soul exists independently of the body. Thus, gender, which is implied to be located in the body, has no place in the soul. The soul may inhabit either a man or a woman's body. It is in this way that a woman and a man may possess the same natures and hence, pursue Guardianship.

For both Saxenhouse and Spelman, it is Plato's dismissal

of the woman's body that brings forth his feminism. It is, according to Saxenhouse, the de-sexing of the female, who is "destroyed as woman in order to participate,"⁵ that "introduces [her] as the equal of the male."⁶ Spelman similarly contends that the disregard of the female body paves the way for philosopher-queens, the highest positions of society. Through the ignorance of the woman's body, there exists an equality of opportunity between men and women.

Such contentions of a feminist approach emerging from the desexualization of women, however, demonstrate how the fictional nature of impartiality is presented as instead factual. The expulsion of the soul from the female body denies recognition of a particularly female biological sensitivity. The proposal for women to exercise alongside men in the gymnasium, for example, accords no role to the breast or menstrual activities. The minimization of their role in procreation too blatantly ignores the subtleties of the female body. Apart from the occasional breastfeeding, her bodily differences are disregarded in her undertaking of the tasks of Guardianship.

Still, it must be said that Plato is not merely unaware of these differences. Prior to Book V, women are described in terms of exciting and erotic objects. They appear as prostitutes--luxuries of his city (373a3), and his objection to Corinthian girlfriends, implied to be prostitutes given their international reputation in the day, is founded on an assumption that

they would be distractions to the instillation of virtue in the Guardians (404d5). In this sense, his adoption of the male body as the universalized norm without heed to the biological needs of women cannot be attributed to merely a blindness to difference. Instead, the assimilation of the woman to the man is due to an intentional ignorance of these differences that instantiate cultural imperialism.⁷ The female body, so as to qualify for the tasks of Guardianship, must conform to the male body.

The Social Case

In addition to the biological case, Plato further expels the female from her social position. To be specific, when the *Republic* was written, her social position was domestic: women were primarily found in the household, shielded and excluded from public life.⁸ That she is forced out from this position is often understood as a feminist proposal, as it frees women from their confinement to the domestic sphere. Plato's displacement of the woman from this position, however, is a far cry from what may be considered feminist. Instead, his characterization of Guardianship as a gendered pursuit forces Guardian women out from the sphere they were typically found in. By displacing them to the realm of men, he idealizes the male experience as representative of the pursuit of Guardianship while simultaneously degrading what was traditionally regarded as the female experience.

As the original aim of the *Republic* is to construct an ideal

city founded on the thesis that unity is the greatest good, I begin this section with his discussion of the abolition of the nuclear family. This elimination destroys not only the biological qualities of the female in procreation as mentioned earlier, but also the social positioning of women as mothers. Guardian women are accordingly no longer assigned to the positions of nursing and childrearing. Joining the men in guarding the city, they are to share, in addition to the activities of Guardian training and education, all lodgings and meals with the Guardian men (458c8-d1).

This expulsion of women from their sphere of the private and domestic has been the subject of many feminist interpretations. Some feminists today may argue that the very abolition of the nuclear family dismantles gender norms in the division of labor and propels women from their typically entrapped position from the private, domestic life to the publicly shared one.⁹ The decoupling of the women from the domestic, according to Saxenhouse and Spelman, is grounds enough for the argument in favor of Plato's feminism.

Plato's proposal, however, is predicated on the pursuit of Guardianship being characteristically male. As such, a woman's entrance into the class of Guardians necessitates her assimilation into the male sphere. On a literary level, this is made evident by certain rhetorical strategies Plato employs. By his account, a Guardian woman should be assigned the same tasks as a Guardian man: the females are to "join in"

the pursuit of the males (451d5). However, this rhetoric echoes an assimilation of the female to the male. That the woman is *joining* implies that her entrance is an addition, her presence not a core factor. It is thus arguably understood that she exists initially as outside the pursuit, as an excluded Other only later absorbed into the Guardian class.

The irrelevance of a particularly female social position to the pursuit of Guardianship is also implied elsewhere in the text. That there is nothing unique to women relevant to Guardianship underlines this point: a woman has nothing in her *being a woman* to contribute to the pursuit (455b1). Further, the reference to weaving and cooking as separate pursuits implies that these tasks are to be taken up by those with the relevant natures (455d6-7). This, taken hand in hand with the operating principle of specialization, means that the pursuits of weaving and cooking are understood to be excluded from the pursuit of Guardianship. Not only are they incompatible, but as Guardians are society's elite, the exclusion of domestic tasks makes it such that the pursuit of the domestic is inherently inferior to the practice of Guardianship. The eradication of the traditionally domestic sphere in Plato's utopia thus underscores the low value ascribed to the position women were most commonly found in.¹⁰ As such, the Guardian woman must shed the role she occupies in her purportedly second-rate domestic space.

Still, it may be argued that Guardianship is gender-neutral.

Indeed, a man is also said to have nothing in his *being a man* to contribute to Guardianship (455d8). The soul being genderless, its tendency towards a specific pursuit could also be said to be genderless. As Plato presumes that men and women can share in each pursuit (455d6-7), the framing of the pursuit as accessible to both genders hints at an impartiality between them. But this is not the case. Women are stripped of their private space, which is replaced by a necessarily public, shared one. That the position of Guardians is public points to a projection of the male's public existence in society onto Guardianship. While publicity does not imply that this quality of Guardianship is necessarily male, the norm at the time of Plato's writing was that the public was a sphere that men — and only men — occupied. Publicity is not intrinsically male, but by empirical evidence and the social norms of the time, publicity was characteristically male. In this sense, the public character of Guardianship can indeed be said to be fundamentally male.. The assertion that man has nothing in his being a man to contribute to Guardianship is only a testament to how Guardianship has already been standardized to the male. The Guardian woman must don his existence: only through her assimilation to the category of man can she partake in the pursuit.

Through this method of argumentation, Plato is guilty of engaging in cultural imperialism. He has adopted the male experience as that of the Guardian pursuit, such that Guardian women are to conform to the same experience. The male's

perspective is arbitrarily entered as the stable category that defines the pursuit of Guardianship. It is used as a metric to measure the value of other tasks, such as those devalued ones relating to domesticity. The plurality of perspective and experience offered by the woman's viewpoint is effectively expelled.

Returning to the original question of whether Plato can be considered a feminist, the implications of his cultural imperialism point to the negative. Intimations of gender equality are found in his proposal for an individualization of opportunity, such that a pursuit is undertaken so long as one possesses the nature inclined to that pursuit. This has led feminist interpretations, among them Saxenhouse's and Spelman's, to see Plato's society as a post-gender society, and therefore as one exhibiting gender equality.

Such attitudes, however, are misguided because they conflate individual equality with the extension of equality on the social level. Indeed, Plato makes the explicit distinction between the individual and the universal class of women in the following quote:

"It is true that one sex shows greater mastery than the other in pretty much every area. Yet there are many women who are better than many men at many things..." (455d)

In saying that *many* women may be better than many men,

the woman is picked out as an individual to be granted equality. On the social level, though, men are apparently superior to the collective class of women.

The conflation of individual and social equality is then vulnerable to the blind spots of structural inequities. Equality between man and woman does not directly translate to equality between men and women. In fact, equality between man and woman holds *because* the woman has been negated in her woman-ness. Gender *inequality*, as in the assimilation of women to men, is instrumental to the individual equality which Plato posits between man and woman. As such, individual equality between a woman and man comes at the cost of perpetuation of inequality between women and men. From this, it can hardly be said that gender equality has been established.

To truly call Plato a proponent of gender equality, his proposals must meet the standard given by Young's politics of difference in order to reckon with the structural problems of social inequality. Gender should not be obscured as a social category, but its differences should be recognized, affirmed, and respected. It is clear, however, that Plato neither strives for nor achieves a full recognition of difference. The distinction between man and woman is *incomparable* to that between the bald and the long-haired because Plato's trivialization of the differences assimilates the female to the male. Attainment of gender equality necessitates the recognition

of these differences.

§IV On Definitions and Idealizations of Gender Equality

So far, I have argued that Plato's treatment of women does not exhibit gender equality because it glosses over the very idea of gender. The attribution of male qualities to the Guardian class is a form of cultural imperialism that projects the male perspective as the universal.

Regarding the question of whether my argument holds weight, though, there is a prior matter to address. Dealing with the issue of gender equality first requires a definition of the term. My claim is grounded in a specific conception of gender equality. Here, I mean to say that gender refers to the social category of gender as opposed to the individual category. Equality is not merely a formal conception, but an approximation of gender justice, by which equality goes beyond access to opportunities, but extends to equal value being accorded to both men and women. It is apparent that Spelman and Saxenhouse's argument does not conceive of gender equality in the same way: formal equality is seemingly sufficient. In this way, there is arguably no basis for comparison between their views and mine, as we target entirely different concepts masked under the same linguistic term.

To this point of definitions, gender equality cannot be equated with formal equality. Such a definition lowers the stan-

dard for what it means to attain equality. While this formal aspect is necessary, it is *not* sufficient, as it fails to overcome deeply-rooted structural and cultural barriers. Thus, although Spelman and Saxenhouse may be reading gender equality differently, their readings do not properly satisfy the conditions necessary to justify the use of the term ‘gender equality.’

Further, the reader of Plato must heed the original aim of the *Republic*: to outline the mechanisms of an ideal city. The key term here is ‘ideal.’ Plato’s feminism may be said to hold only under conditions of his ideal city. Thus, to my argument, the assumption of the existence of a woman’s perspective breaks away from his hypothetical project. In other words, the *Republic* hinges on a male perspective masked under an absence of a gendered one. The ideal city is able to exist ahistorically, without attention to a woman’s traditional place in society. The destruction of gender is part of the ideal, and it is the vision and optimism of a genderless society that makes Plato a feminist.

This, I believe, is a product of Plato’s own privilege as a man in his time. As Young suggested, an entirely impartial perspective is neither possible nor desirable. Gender identity cannot be decoupled from the context of any proposition locating gender. This fiction of objectivity is better understood as symptomatic of the cultural imperialism pervading ancient Athens. While Plato may write *The Republic* for dialectical

and pedagogical purposes, the act of positing his philosophy as the correct one is a privilege afforded to the male. He is able to ignore his own group specificity and formulate his argument with the assumption that his perspective represents an objective point of view. In this way, the contention that Plato is a feminist even in his ideal city is merely an expression of an ingrained form of cultural imperialism and cannot be said to be a sufficient justification for his “feminism.”

Because of Plato’s methodology of abstracting a woman into a man in describing the ideal society, he does not deserve the title of feminist. Thus, his apparent feminism is just that: apparent.

Notes

1. All references to the Republic draw from the Reeves translation.
2. Throughout this paper, I use the term “female” and “woman” interchangeably. Though there is a marked difference between the two in today’s terms, in that “female” refers to the sex of any species responsible for offspring and “woman” to any human being that identifies as such, because Plato equates the terms, I adopt the same terminology.
3. It is important to recognize that many of his sexist attitudes are continued and echoed in his other works. In the Laws, for example, he claims that the “female sex has a natural inferiority to the male when it comes to human goodness.” (781b).
4. What is interesting is how the gender is necessarily tied to, if not identified, with the body. This, however, runs into the counterargument of the

view of gender as a social construct. Many will argue that gender is how one identifies irreducible to biological attributes. Another claim can be made here that this in itself is also a non-feminist argument, as it ignores the experiences of the trans and non-binary community, a direct charge against intersectionality. Still, in keeping with the scope of this paper, I do not address this as an argument against Plato's feminism.

5. Saxenhouse, 202.

6. *Ibid.*, 198.

7. This is another area of debate. On one hand, there is the argument that women should be treated differently because of their bodily distinctions. For example, they should not be made to wear the same swim attire, and tampons should be distributed freely. On the other hand, there is the counter that these distinctions should be transcended, as differential treatment and attitudes have been imposed by a patriarchal history.

8. See: "Law, Custom, and Myth: Aspects of the Social Position of Women of Classical Athens," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 100 (1980): 38-59. Hints of this can be spotted throughout the text as well, where women are assumed to be the superior sex in weaving and cooking (455c6-7) and initially taken to be indoors, looking after the house (451d7).

9. See: Firestone, S. *The Dialectic of Sex*.

10. The argument is similar to what persists even today with the lack of value placed on a woman's work: there is little recognition for the second shift, and women are often the ones charged with unpaid, invisible work. The absence of remuneration then feeds into the biased perception of the woman's work as valueless and insignificant. For more, see: Hochschild, A. (2012) *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home* and "Time spent in paid and unpaid work, by sex," OECD, retrieved from <https://stats.oecd.org/index.aspx?queryid=54757>

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