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ANATOMY AND DESTINY:
THE ROLE OF BIOLOGY IN PLATO'S VIEWS OF WOMEN

ANNE DICKASON

From the earliest of the Greeks, philosophers have been interested in the problem of change; and one aspect of this problem that has received wide attention is that of the nature of generation, or reproduction. How is a child formed from two adults; what is the role of each parent; how is sex differentiation achieved; why do children resemble relatives; and how does the soul get implanted in the embryo? It was in answer to these types of questions that philosophers first began to consider woman's nature and woman's role; her physical characteristics began to acquire metaphysical importance. From Anaximander to Hippocrates, Presocratic philosophers discussed the problems surrounding generation. Although disagreement was common, most theories believed that both male and female contributed to reproduction. Although many philosophers continued to debate the problems of conception into modern times, scientific evidence about the nature of spermatozoa and the discovery of the mammalian egg eventually began to settle the matter. Later philosophers discussed women primarily in political or psychological contexts, rather than in biological terms.

But the early use of biological arguments is philosophically interesting, and should be examined for several reasons. First, these biological views, especially in Plato and Aristotle, give us the first major investigations of women. Theories of the origin and meaning of sex, as well as empirical observations, are offered as evidence about the nature of women; they present arguments from which other nonbiological conclusions seem to be drawn. Second, these views exemplify many theories about women which are still held today. Examining these early arguments will help us under-

però non si può considerare il mito di Aristofane "dottrina platonica", considerato il livello dell'interlocutore e lo schema narrativo del Simposio dove

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vengono presentati discorsi di livello via via migliore, ma l'unico davvero solido è quello di Socrate-Diotima (quello di Agatone presenta alcuni elementi platonici ma che vanno aggiustati da Socrate-Diotima)

stand why some ideas are maintained, even if the reasons supporting them have changed or disappeared. Third, because these biological arguments are not offered in isolation, but are part of each philosopher's broader theory, they illustrate why views on women are philosophically important.

For example, it is often noted that Plato's political theories about women do not seem consistent, particularly between the more egalitarian *Republic* and the stricter *Laws*. It is my thesis that this difference can be illuminated by examining Plato's thoughts on creation and generation. He gives two accounts of the origin of sex; a poetic speech by Aristophanes in the *Symposium*, and a later, more straightforward version in the *Timaeus*.

As we will see, the *Symposium* discussion presents women in a more favorable light. Since the *Symposium* is generally thought to have been written prior to the *Republic*, and the *Timaeus* written before the *Laws*, I believe that between the *Symposium* and the *Timaeus* Plato's biological views of women change, and that this shift is then reflected in the respective political works. The change in Plato's thinking was neither abrupt nor absolute, and both perspectives can be found in the *Republic* and the *Laws*. But I believe it is more than coincidental that the *Republic's* liberalism closely follows the deeper meaning of Aristophanes' humorous speech, while the *Laws'* conservatism is preceded by the sterner accounts of the *Timaeus*.

circa

più severo

In the *Symposium*, Plato gives this mythic account of the origin of the sexes:

First of all I must explain the real nature of man, and the change which it has undergone—for in the beginning we were nothing like we are now. For one thing, the race was divided into three; that is to say, besides the two sexes, male and female, which we have at present, there was a third which partook of the nature of both, and for which we still have a name, though the creature itself is forgotten. For though 'hermaphrodite' is only used nowadays as a term of contempt, there really was a man-woman in those days, a being which was half male and half female.¹

Each of these three types of beings had four legs and arms, and ran by "whirling round and round like a clown turning cartwheels."²

The three sexes, I may say, arose as follows. The males were descended from the Sun, the females from the Earth, and the hermaphrodites from the Moon, which partakes of either sex, and they were round and they went round, because they took after their parents. And such, gentlemen, were their strength and energy, and such their arrogance, that they actually tried—like Ephialtes and Otus in Homer—to scale the heights of heaven and set upon the gods.³

The gods did not want to destroy them because the gods had come to enjoy all of the offerings the humans made; yet they did want the humans to be less powerful. Zeus decided that if he split each person, they would be half as strong, but there would be twice as many of them—both results pleasing to the gods.

So saying, he cut them all in half just as you or I might chop up sorb apples for pickling, or slice an egg with a hair. And as each half was ready he told Apollo to turn its face, with the half-neck that was left, toward the side that was cut away—thinking that the sight of such a gash might frighten it into keeping quiet—and then to heal the whole thing up.⁴

The skin around the wound was gathered up, and all the puckers smoothed out except a few around the navel, left to remind us of what we suffered long ago. These halves went running about, and “asked for nothing better than to be rolled into one.”⁵ But they began to die because neither would do anything without the other, and since each half was still mating with the earth, the race was not propagated.

So now, as I say, he ^{sposò i loro genitali sul davanti} moved their members round to the front and made them propagate among themselves, the male begetting upon the female—the idea being that if, in all these clippings and claspings, a man should chance upon a woman, conception would take place and the race would be continued, while if man should conjugate with man, he might at least obtain such satisfaction as would allow him to turn his attention and his energies to the everyday affairs of life.⁶ 191c

This explains our innate love for each other, and why some people prefer sexual partners of the same sex (they originally were one woman or man), and why others prefer the opposite sex (they originally were hermaphrodites). Thus, “the happiness of the whole human race, women no less than men, is to be found in the consummation of our love, and in the healing of our dissevered nature by finding each his proper mate.”⁷

Let us now look at the *Timaeus* account. After God made the rest of the universe, he mingled the elements again, though they were not quite as pure as before:  ^{demiurgo plasma le anime con gli stessi elementi dell'anima cosmica, ma meno puri}

And having made it he divided the whole mixture into souls equal in number to the stars and assigned each soul to a star, and having there placed them as in a chariot he showed them the nature of the universe and declared to them the laws of destiny, according to which their first birth would be one and the same for all—no one would suffer a disadvantage at his hands. They were to

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be sown in the instruments of time severally adapted to them, and to come forth the most religious of animals, and as human nature was of two kinds, the superior race was of such and such a character, and would hereafter be called man.⁸ 41d-42a

Since the souls were placed in bodies, it was necessary that they have the same faculty of sensation, and also that they have love, pleasure, pain, fear, anger, and like emotions.

If they conquered these they would live righteously, and if they were conquered by them, unrighteously. He who lived well during his appointed time was to return and dwell in his native star, and there he would have a blessed and congenial existence. But if he failed in attaining this, at the second birth he would pass into a woman, and if, when in that state of being, he did not desist from evil, he would continually be changed into some brute who resembled him in the evil nature he had acquired, and would not cease from his toils and transformations until he helped the revolution of the same and the like within him to draw in its train the turbulent mob of later accretions made up of fire and air and water and earth, and by this victory of reason over the irrational returned to the form of his first and better state.⁹ 42b-c

We will now examine the crucial differences between the *Symposium* and *Timaeus* accounts of the origin of women.

In the *Symposium* version, women are created directly by the gods, the same as men and hermaphrodites; women come from the earth, and men from the sun, but presumably they are made at the same time and have the same ultimate origin in the gods. Further, women are a whole being in themselves, just as men are; they are not inferior or secondary in importance, but equal. When all three sexes are separated, each half is incomplete without the other; men, as well as women, are only half a person without a partner. The gods formulate sexual reproduction among humans so that the species will continue; sexual relations provide a way that the mutual couplings will be productive, and that human minds can be released to attend to other business.

But by the *Timaeus* many changes have occurred. Here, it is only males who are created directly by the gods; they are given souls, and those who live righteously return to their star, while those who fail become women. Being a woman is a punishment, an inferior state. Men here are complete beings in themselves, without need of women if they are righteous, and without a sexual function. This concept of sex differs markedly from the theme of mutual completeness in the *Symposium*. Plato's concept of

questo è vero; anche le donne (eccellenti) possono arrivare a vivere un'esistenza felice e conforme alla loro natura. Come mostra la Resp, se hanno anime di guardiane o addirittura di filosofe in una città come la Mallipolis potranno realizzarsi, ma venendo educate a comportarsi come uomini

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the religious nature of women also changes. While in the *Symposium* both men and women make offerings to the gods and try to overpower them, in the *Timaeus* women exist only because men have failed to be good. Men and women are not religious equals, but rather women, by virtue of their origin, begin life as religious inferiors. By living righteously men can attain "a blessed and congenial existence" with their next birth; the best a woman can hope for is to become a man.

We will now see the ways in which these two concepts of the origin and nature of women result in conflicting views about women's social role. Because of his belief, expressed in the *Symposium*, that women and men have the same essential nature and worth, Plato often indicates that they should receive equal education and treatment before the law. But the ideas of the *Timaeus* lead to the conclusion that men and women have essentially different natures and should be treated separately.

lettura molto semplificatoria

In the *Republic*, Socrates considers this problem:

Similarly, then, said I, if it appears that the male and the female sex have distinct qualifications for any arts or pursuits, we shall affirm that they ought to be assigned respectively to each. But if it appears that they differ only in just this respect that the female bears and the male begets, we shall say that no proof has yet been produced that the woman differs from the man for our purposes, but we shall continue to think that our guardians and their wives ought to follow the same pursuits.¹⁰

Reproductive differences alone here do not justify assigning women different social roles; "Then there is no pursuit of the administrators of a state that belongs to a woman because she is a woman or to a man because he is a man."¹¹ But neither are reproductive functions regarded as secondary distinctions, apparently because sexual differences are a result of different natures, as shown in the *Timaeus*; "But the natural capacities are distributed alike among both creatures, and women naturally share in all pursuits and men in all—yet for all the women is weaker than the man."¹² In these passages Plato reveals that he cannot decide on the importance of sexual differences; this is the same problem he faces between the *Symposium* and the *Timaeus*. In neither the biological nor the political discussions does he question why women are inferior or weaker, or why they are thought to be so. He is involved in a dilemma without being aware of it. On the one hand, men and women were created similarly and have the same essential nature; sexual differences are not important in themselves and do not hold

major social significance. On the other hand, men are more divine by birth; sexual differences are a result of either a superior or an inferior nature, and indicate that separate roles are required.

The first, more liberal strand is seen in Plato's discussion of the guardians. Because some women, like some men, are suited to be guardians, they must receive an education that will prepare them for this: "If, then, we are to use the women for the same things as the men, we must also teach them the same things."¹³ This will include training in gymnastics and music, as well as military training. In the *Laws* the Athenian proscribes that the sexes shall be separated at the age of six and their education should then begin.¹⁴ Girls as well as boys should be allowed to compete with each other;¹⁵ "the girls must be trained exactly like the boys."¹⁶ Following this position, priests may be of either sex,¹⁷ and the laws of assault¹⁸ and adultery¹⁹ apply equally to women and men.

The second, more conservative strand results in a harsher view of women. Having stated that the laws devised for men are admirable, the Athenian says,

... but it is a grave error in your law that the position of women has been left unregulated, and that no vestige of this same institution of the common table is to be seen in their case. No, the very half of the race which is generally predisposed by its weakness to undue secrecy and craft—the female sex—has been left to its disorders by the mistaken concession of the legislator. ... Woman—left without chastening restraint—is not, as you might fancy, merely half the problem; nay, she is a twofold and more than a twofold problem, in proportion as her native disposition is inferior to man's.²⁰

And later,

A legislator should be thorough, not halfhearted; he must not, after making regulations for the male sex, leave the other to the enjoyment of an existence of uncontrolled luxury and expense, and so endow his society with a mere half of a thoroughly felicitous life in place of the whole.²¹

This attitude is reflected in diverse areas of society. In education, women should supervise the games and meals, while men are in charge of instruction.²² And each sex has its own music, indicated by "the actual natural distinction of sex."²³ "Accordingly, we shall pronounce the majestic and whatever tends to valor masculine, while it will be the tradition of our law and our theory alike that what makes rather for order and purity is peculiarly feminine."²⁴ In law, the age of marriage and child-

bearing is much younger for women; women may marry between sixteen and twenty, while men must wait until thirty to thirty-five.²⁵ But the age at which they may accept official appointments is later for a women; he may accept at thirty, though she waits until forty.²⁶ The right of betrothal is held by a woman's father or other male relative.²⁷ And, "good men are the superiors of worse, the aged, speaking generally, of the youthful, and, by consequence, parents of their offspring, husbands, again, of their wives . . ."²⁸ Women are also punished more severely for disrespecting parents.²⁹

ipotesi di Dickason

Because Plato does not directly confront this dilemma, it is difficult for us to find any solid reason for the shift between the earlier and later works. One speculation, at least, does seem possible. Hippocrates of Cos (460-380 B.C.), the prominent Greek physician, was a contemporary of Plato (427-347 B.C.) and offered many theories about generation and the biological nature of women. Plato refers to Hippocrates in the *Phaedrus*, and it seems plausible that Plato was familiar with these theories. Hippocrates believes that though males are hotter and drier than females, both male and female contribute seed to conception; each can give either male or female seed, and the specific combination determines the child's sex and temperament.³⁰ Seed comes from all parts of the body, and this pangenesis explains how each bodily part is created in the embryo and, perhaps, why certain features in the child resemble the parents.³¹ Hippocrates believes also in preformation; the embryo, in the uterus, does not change its form during development, but only its size.³² These theories, in contrast to the later biology of Aristotle, give the female a biological role equal in importance to the male's.

Given Plato's probable acquaintance with Hippocrates, and Hippocrates' theories about women, it is interesting to note Plato's long silence on this problem, especially when we remember the vital interest other philosophers expressed in the area of generation. And it is this clue which may help us understand Plato's difficulties in formulating a thorough, consistent position about women. Plato does not refer to generation in any specific way until the *Timaeus*; even here, his most explicit statement about the physiological role of women in conception occurs in an analogy he uses to explain the nature of the Forms:

For the present we have only to conceive of three natures: first, that which is in process of generation; secondly, that in which the generation takes place; and thirdly, that of which the thing generated is a resemblance naturally pro-

↑
duced. And we may liken the receiving principle to a mother, and the course or spring to a father, and the intermediate nature to a child, and may remark further that if the model is to take every variety of form, then the matter in which the model is fashioned will not be duly prepared unless it is formless and free from the impress of any of those shapes which it is hereafter to receive from without.³³ 50d-e

This view rejects Hippocrates and anticipates Aristotle; woman, like matter, does not contribute any form, or seed, herself but only provides a place for man's seed to grow. Further,

Nel Timeo c'è un altro passo dove si parla del contributo della donna nella procreazione (91a-d), Dickason non lo cita. Plat parla di due "viventti caratterizzati dal desiderio di procreazione", nel maschio e nella femmina

The first principle of all of them was the generation of the marrow. For the bonds of life which unite the soul with the body are made fast there, and they are the root and foundation of the human race.³⁴

The outlet for drink by which liquids pass through the lung under the kidneys and into the bladder, which receives and then by the pressure of the air emits them, was so fashioned by them as to penetrate also into the body of the marrow, which passes from the head along the neck and through the back, and which in the preceding discourse we have named the seed.³⁵

There is no pangensis; seed does not come from all parts of the body, but from the brain and spinal cord. And the embryo is not preformed, changing only in size, but is "without form."³⁶ In each of these cases Plato denies Hippocratean doctrine, and accepts positions Aristotle later argues for; yet unlike Aristotle, Plato offers us no evidence or arguments on why he believes they are true.

I believe there is a reason for this. When Plato was younger, in frequent contact with Hippocrates and his theories, Plato basically accepted these arguments about generation. This acceptance is revealed in the *Symposium's* account of creation, despite its use of myth, and in the *Republic's* theory of law, despite problems of consistency. Because Plato at this time does not offer an explicit discussion of generation, we may assume either that his acceptance of Hippocrates was only tentative or that he was not especially interested in the matter. But as his disenchantment with Hippocrates grew, or as his involvement increased, further consideration of the arguments led to a repudiation of Hippocrates. Whether the older Plato was influenced by an unknown source, or even by a youthful Aristotle, is a matter of speculation. What is important for us is that Plato's biological views of women underwent a change, and that this change was reflected in his social and political theories.

questa è la tesi di Dickason, ma è problematica. In primis xkè *University of Colorado*.

dà al discorso di Aristofane nel Symp lo status di un elemento di dottrina platonica senza contestualizzarlo, poi perchè non considera che nel Timeo si parla di contributo della donna nella generazione e nella Resp anche dato che se così non fosse il progetto eugenetico platonico perderebbe di senso

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