

Plato on Women's Nature: Reflections on the *Laws*

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There remains much controversy over the question of what view of women Plato endorses in the *Laws*, and how that position relates to his stance in the *Republic*. Very often commentators underscore what they take to be strong continuity in Plato's thinking on this topic. Some have been concerned to stress that throughout his career Plato adheres firmly to a belief in women's inherent, or natural, psychic inferiority (see, e.g., Annas 1976 and Rankin 1964). In contrast, Cohen 1987 emphasizes that Plato's view of women's potential in the *Laws* remains strongly positive and that in the later dialogue he advocates full participation for them in the sociopolitical arena.¹ On the interpretation of Okin 1979, Plato's general view of women's capacities in the *Laws* is actually more radical than that presented in the *Republic*.²

As many commentators have observed, Plato offers criticisms of women throughout his career. Failure to distinguish adequately between current and ideal scenarios in assessing remarks about women in dialogues up through the *Republic*, however, can lead to an overemphasis on continuity involving a negative stance between that dialogue and the *Laws*. Alternatively, if one does not compare directly Plato's observations about women's φύσις in the *Republic* and *Laws*, one may be led to see more common ground of a positive variety than the evidence supports. On the interpretation to be defended here, in the *Laws* his view both of human nature generally and of women's nature specifically is decidedly more unfavorable than that presented in the *Republic*. Having argued for this shift in Plato's conception of women's φύσις in the *Laws*, I turn to his treatment of women's sociopolitical role. Here I offer support to the view that, as one would expect given Plato's remarks about women's φύσις, the highest positions in the state will not be open to them. In the article's conclusion, I consider the grounds for the change in Plato's construction of women's nature that is man-

¹ In a recent variation on this view, Saunders 1995, 604 contends that although the *Laws* itself does not clearly endorse this stance, what Plato says there suggests that if women prove themselves at lower tasks, high offices may then be assigned to them. Closely assimilating Plato's views in the *Republic* and *Laws*, Geddes 1975, 37 claims that he 'has a tendency to minimize the difference between male and female. In the *Republic* therefore and in the *Laws* as well, he advocates the education of women for the same tasks as men, and freedom from housework and childcare for what he calls "the guardian class" of women'; although in both places the 'average' man will be superior to the 'average' woman, 'their ἀπερὶ is the same'.

² In her view, there is a discrepancy between the general and specific levels: even though Plato believes more strongly than before in women's natural potential, his reintroduction of the family and private property leads him to put women back in their traditional position (44, 50, 63-64, 69-70).

ifest in the *Laws*.

I. The *Laws* on Human and Female Nature

As is well known, by the end of his life Plato had shifted his focus from the ideal society of the *Republic*, whose existence hinges on the presence and ruling of a few select individuals, to a 'second-best' community founded on law (*Leg.* 739). This change in emphasis stems above all from the fact that Plato's general view of human nature, as evidenced by a range of comments in the *Laws*, is more pessimistic than that evinced in the *Republic*.³ Thus, for example, the Athenian mentions religious activities in which the citizens will engage 'so as to win the gods' good will and live the life that their own nature demands (κατὰ τὸν τρόπον τῆς φύσεως διαβιώσονται), puppets that they are, mostly, and hardly real at all' (804b).⁴ He claims elsewhere that 'human nature...is never able to take full control of all human affairs (ἀνθρωπεία φύσις οὐδεμία ἰκανὴ τὰ ἀνθρώπινα διοικοῦσα αὐτοκράτωρ πάντα) without being filled with arrogance and injustice' (713c). In a crucial passage, Plato states explicitly that his reservations about human nature are directly responsible for his shift to a society founded on law:

It is vital that men should lay down laws for themselves and live in obedience to them; otherwise they will be indistinguishable from wild animals of the utmost savagery. The reason is this: no man has sufficient natural gifts (ἢ...αἰτία τούτων ἦδε, ὅτι φύσις ἀνθρώπων οὐδενὸς ἰκανὴ φύεται) both to discern what benefits men in their social relationships and to be constantly ready and able to put his knowledge to the best practical use. The first difficulty is to realize that the proper object of true political skill is...the common good. ...The second difficulty is that even if a man did get an adequate theoretical grasp of the truth of all this, he might then attain a position of absolute control over a state, with no one to call him to account. In these circumstances...his human nature will always drive him to look to his own advantage and the lining of his own pocket. ...If ever by divine grace some natural genius were born, and had the chance to assume such power, he would have no need of laws to control him. Knowledge is unsurpassed by any law or regulation. ...But, as things stand, such a character is nowhere to be found. ...That is why we need to choose the second alternative (διὸ δὴ τὸ δεύτερον αἰρετέον), law and regulation. (874e-875d).⁵

³ In the view of Klosko 1986, 200, the *Laws* articulates 'a despairing conception of human nature'.

⁴ Translations of the *Laws* are those of Saunders 1970, at times with modifications.

⁵ Regarding Plato's general pessimism about human nature, see also 853e-854a and 870a.

In addition to downgrading his overall assessment of human nature, Plato makes a range of negative comments that target women specifically. In the *Laws*, as in the *Republic* (e.g., 387e-388a and 395d-e), Plato denigrates women without attributing their deficiencies to them 'by nature'. Thus he criticizes men who 'take to damning and cursing each other and to calling one another rude names in the shrill tones of women' (934e6-935a1) and condemns those who give way to 'effeminate wailing' in order to influence the outcome of a trial (949a-b). Plato's negative remarks sometimes encompass women and other groups, as when he chastises those whose behavior in connection with religious sacrifice is nothing short of appalling (909e5-910a1).⁶

As I argued in Levin 1996, 21-22 with 222-223 nn27-35, Greek literature, which provides a central backdrop for Plato's reflections on women's nature, includes both remarks in which women are condemned as a class (e.g., *Soph. Trach.* 1062) and those in which women are judged positively or negatively due to their psychological or behavioral characteristics (e.g., *Eur.* 494N²). At the core of Plato's own account in the period up to and including the *Republic* is a distinction between evaluations that are appropriate under prevailing conditions and those that are fitting if one has ideal circumstances in mind. Although Plato provides negative generalizations about women with existing circumstances in view, when considering ideal conditions he acknowledges fundamental distinctions of type. In addition—and particularly salient with respect to the *Republic*'s ties to the *Laws*—while literary criticisms utilize the term φύσις, Plato's declarations about women's φύσις in dialogues up to and including the *Republic* are positive and pertain to an ideal state of affairs. All but one of these remarks, in fact, occur in book 5, where Plato contends that women have the capacity to become philosopher-rulers (see 453a1-458c8 and 466d3). In the final relevant passage from the *Republic*, Plato ends his discussion of the philosopher-rulers and their education by stressing that his prescriptions apply equally to men and women with the relevant φύσεις (540c).⁷

Thus—and quite importantly—when offering pronouncements about women's nature (φύσις) in dialogues up through the *Republic*, Plato considers only what they might become. Totally unfamiliar from the *Republic* and earlier writings are criticisms of women in which φύσις and φύειν take center stage. Plato's ultimate

⁶ For criticisms involving women that do not speak directly of nature, see also 669c and 836e. At 694e-696a, a 'womanish upbringing' (τροφήν γυναικείαν) is said to produce individuals who are lacking in self-control and virtue generally. For the *Laws*' emphasis on the importance of self-control, see 696b and 839e-840c; on self-control as a rare achievement among human beings, see 918c-d.

⁷ For further discussion of the claims made in this and the following paragraph, see Levin 1996, which includes evidence that Plato's derogatory comments about women in the dialogues investigated there cannot be used to challenge the view that *Republic*'s endorsement of their equality is genuine. My previous arguments and conclusions were based on the cross-referencing of passages featuring φύσις and its cognates, on the one hand, and γυνή, γυναικείος, and θήλυς, on the other. That investigation covered the *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito*, *Ion*, *Hippias Minor*, *Charmides*, *Laches*, *Protagoras*, *Lysis*, *Euthydemus*, *Menexenus*, *Hippias Major*, *Meno*, *Gorgias*, *Phaedo*, *Cratylus*, *Symposium*, and *Republic*.

point of reference in the assessment of all human beings is the capacity to employ one's reason to apprehend Forms (i.e., natures proper). Men and women with this ability have a philosophical φύσις. Negative judgments of the rest are based on the gap between the caliber of their souls and that of the highest type of human being.

With regard to the *Laws*, it is worth observing that a change in Plato's conception of human nature generally and a shift involving women's φύσις specifically are logically independent of one another; that is, he could have downgraded his overall view of human nature without at the same time concluding that the sexes differed by nature (φύσει). Quite significantly, however, Plato in fact does both. According to Okin 1979, 43, 'Plato's arguments and conclusions in the *Laws* about the natural potential of women are far more radical than those put forward in the *Republic*' (cf. 60 and 70). The following remarks will offer support to the view that, *pace* Okin, his position regarding women's nature in the *Laws* is decidedly more negative than that presented in the *Republic*.

In *Laws* vi, the Athenian claims that 'half the human race—the female sex, the half which in any case is naturally inclined to be secretive and crafty, because of its weakness (λαθραιότερον μᾶλλον καὶ ἐπικλοπώτερον ἔφν, τὸ θήλυ, διὰ τὸ ἀσθενές)—has been left to its own devices due to the misguided indulgence of the legislator' (781a). Elaborating on what he has in mind, the Athenian contends that 'a woman's natural potential for virtue is inferior to a man's (ἡ θήλεια ἡμῖν φύσις ἐστὶ πρὸς ἀρετὴν χειρῶν τῆς τῶν ἀρρένων), so she's proportionately a greater danger, perhaps even twice as great' (781b). While at first glance Plato's remarks at 781a-b might seem to hearken back to *Republic* v (451e, 457a), where he says that women are weaker (ἀσθενέστεραι) than men, the crucial difference is that whereas there the inferiority in question involved physical strength, here it is unquestionably mental, or psychic.⁸

In book 12, Plato once again uses the term φύσις to draw a contrast between men and women when the Athenian considers the proper penalty for one who accomplishes his escape from battle by discarding his weapons: 'Unfortunately, it's beyond human power to do the opposite of what people say some god did to

⁸ Plato's focus in the case of the *Republic* is on women's role in activities requiring physical strength, most notably military service. For women's weakness in the *Republic* as physical rather than mental, see also Burns 1984, 137; J. Smith 1983, 602; and Klosko 1986, 145. Saunders 1995, 592 treats the impediment at issue in the *Laws* as physical even though Plato makes clear (781b) that his concern is with the female psyche. In the corpus Plato uses ἀσθένεια and its cognates with reference both to physical and to psychic conditions. With regard to the former, see, for instance, *Phd.* 87d6, *Theaet.* 159b4, 6, *Symp.* 207b3, *Chrm.* 157c8, *Euthyd.* 299b1, and *Tim.* 17a4; for examples of the latter, one may consult *Phd.* 109d8, *Chrm.* 172b7, *Rep.* 411b7, d3, *Tim.* 88a8, 89e7, and *Leg.* 854a1. That Plato would use this terminology in both ways is entirely to be expected given his penchant for speaking of the health, or well-being, of the soul by analogy with that of the body (see, e.g., *Rep.* 444c-445b); whether Plato has the physical or psychic plane in view in a particular case can, of course, only be determined by the context. For ἀσθενής employed in the same breath with reference to both the mental and the physical domains, see *Rep.* 432a3-5 (the terms used here are φρόνησις and ἰσχὺς, respectively).

Caeneus of Thessaly—that is, change him from a woman into a man (ἐκ γυναικὸς μεταβαλόντα εἰς ἀνδρὸς φύσιν). If only we could inflict the reverse transformation, from man to woman (εἰς γυναῖκα ἐξ ἀνδρὸς μεταβαλοῦσα), that would be, in a sense, the most fitting punishment for a man who has thrown away his shield’ (944d-e). The ensuing law makes explicit what was already clear enough, namely, that such a punishment is appropriate because this sort of man is in fact unmanly (i.e., cowardly) ‘by nature’ (κατὰ φύσιν, 945a).⁹ At first blush, this passage might seem to relate closely to *Republic* 620c, where Plato notes that the soul of Epeius entered ‘into the nature of an arts and crafts woman’ (εἰς τεχνικῆς γυναικὸς...φύσιν, Shorey trans.) in its next incarnation, employing the term φύσις in an explicit reference to women. In this passage, however, in contrast to that in the *Laws*, Plato’s concern is not to investigate the nature of women, and he therefore does not use the term to express a judgment about that nature.¹⁰ For present purposes, the most important difference between the two passages is their tone: neutral in the *Republic*, negative in the *Laws*. In the latter context, Plato’s example illustrates his view—nowhere espoused either in the *Republic* or in dialogues prior to it—that women are naturally deficient in courage and virtue more generally.¹¹

Wender 1973, 77 takes as key positive evidence that Plato’s ‘treatment of

⁹ *Leg.* 944-945 meshes closely with *Tim.* 42 and 90e-91d (cf. 76d-e). The fact that this strong tie exists, and that the passages cited from the *Timaeus* diverge sharply from the position taken in the *Republic*, offers support to the position that the *Timaeus* is a late dialogue rather than (as, e.g., Owen 1953 and Allen 1975 maintain) having been composed near the time of the *Republic*. In addition, the existence of such a parallel in the quite different dramatic contexts of the *Timaeus* and *Laws* constitutes evidence against an alternative reading of the latter, mentioned by Ronald Polansky, according to which its divergence from the *Republic* reflects the fact that the dialogue’s elder interlocutors from Sparta and Crete are only willing to accept views of a certain sort. Regarding the corpus more generally, Plato allows the tone of Socrates’ exchanges with others to be affected in limited ways by their identities and characters (as is evident, e.g., from a comparison of the *Euthyphro* and *Laches*) and correlates an emphasis on certain aspects of his view with the commitments of a particular discussion’s participants (as, e.g., in his observations about human flourishing in the *Phaedo* and *Symposium*). What he does not do, however, is allow the very content of the theories he endorses to be shaped in response to the fact that Socrates’ interlocutors in a given instance happen to operate with opinions and biases that Plato does not share.

¹⁰ Concerning *Rep.* 620c, see Levin 1996, 28 and 224-225 n47.

¹¹ Cf. N. Smith 1983, 474n24, who claims in passing that Plato’s account of metempsychosis in the *Laws* represents a ‘downgrading’ of women’s nature vis-à-vis the *Republic*. Plato’s view that male and female human beings differ by nature is also reflected in his insistence that from age six on the sexes be separated for educational purposes (794c); see, in addition, his assertion that boys and girls will have male and female dance instructors, respectively (813b), and his sharp distinction between songs that are appropriate for men and women to sing (802d-e). On the topic of the relation between Plato’s handling of φύσις in the *Republic* and *Laws*, I cannot agree with Annas’ use (1976, 316) of material in the *Laws* (917a) as a basis for suggesting that even in the *Republic* women were viewed as naturally inferior. According to Rankin 1964, 98, ‘[t]hroughout Plato’s writings scattered references can be found which are very uncomplimentary to the natural abilities of women’; he cites *Rep.* 469d and 579b in this regard, despite the fact that in neither case is Plato treating the topic of women’s φύσις.

women [in the *Laws*] remains the most radical part of the proposed constitution' the fact that in book 3 (690a-c) 'what is apparently supposed to be an exhaustive list of the natural dominance relationships'—parent-child, highborn-lowborn, older-younger, master-slave, strong-weak, wise-ignorant, and winner of lot-loser of lot—does not contain the pair man-woman. The foregoing textual evidence (especially 781a-b) should make one hesitate before embracing this interpretation. The terms used at 690b4-5 that are rendered 'strong' and 'weak' are κρείττων and ἥττων, respectively. There is ample suggestion elsewhere in the *Laws* that the pair man-woman is in fact properly encompassed by this distinction. Ἥττων is found in references to psychic impairment (see 633d-e and 634b), while the pair κρείττων-ἥττων is employed in several contrasts involving strength and weakness on the psychic plane (see 626e-627a, 645b, and 863d). Since it is women's relative psychic weakness that Plato targets with his comments about deficient female nature, it is not surprising, but indeed to be expected, that the distinction between male and female would be covered by the opposition between strong and weak. With regard to the contention of Wender, one may, furthermore, cite a key passage in book 11, where Plato maintains that 'the "superiors" of bad men are the good, and of the young their elders (usually)—which means that parents are the superiors of their offspring, men are (of course) the superiors of women and children (ἄνδρες δὴ γυναικῶν καὶ παίδων), and rulers of their subjects' (917a). Notably, the adjective rendered here as 'superior' is κρείττων, which is precisely that employed at 690b4. Thus, at 917a Plato himself states directly what Wender finds to be missing in the earlier passage.

The *Laws*' handling of women in the communal context on which Plato focuses resembles literary treatments more than it does the *Republic* insofar as it embodies both aforementioned strands of literary discourse. The *Laws* shares with the *Republic* and Greek literature the view that women exhibit differences of type, as when nurses, who are themselves women and slaves (*Leg.* 790a), are assigned twelve female supervisors (794a-b); these supervisors, in turn, are elected by the women whose role is to supervise marriage (794b). The *Laws*' depiction of women as naturally inferior with respect to virtue, however, forges precisely that tie with Greek literature which the *Republic* and earlier dialogues studiously avoid. Most importantly, Plato no longer endorses the view, which was a cornerstone of the *Republic*, that there is a single human φύσις—rather than male and female natures—each of whose levels can in principle be manifested in individuals of either sex.

According to Okin 1979, Plato de-emphasizes the importance of φύσις in the *Laws* (52), believing instead that differences in upbringing are responsible for virtually all of the distinctions in men's and women's ensuing capacities and accomplishments (43). In her view, in fact, throughout his career external influences are always more salient for Plato than considerations of nature (54; cf. 55 and 57). I contend, in contrast, that φύσις, already quite important in the *Republic*, becomes still more influential in the final stage of Plato's career. In the middle period, Plato displayed a greater willingness to attribute people's present

shortcomings to disparities and other deficiencies in conventional practice.¹² Now, however, the impediments in question are actually taken to be less matters of convention than they were before. Adopting as a cornerstone of his position the idea that human nature is not as strong as he had previously believed, and that there are significant differences between the sexes in their natural aptitudes—not only physical, but also mental—Plato structures people’s upbringing in accord with this view (notably, dividing the sexes for educational purposes from age six on).¹³ Far from thinking that reforms in institutions could efface, or nearly so, disparities between the sexes in ability and achievement, Plato advocates differences in upbringing due to his belief in natural differences. Having documented Plato’s move, with respect to women’s nature, away from the *Republic* and back toward literary practice, we must consider its implications for the *Laws*’ view of the roles that women are to play in society.

II. The *Laws* on Women’s Sociopolitical Role

On the interpretation of Cohen 1987, 38, the *Laws* endorses ‘full participation in political and civic life for women’.¹⁴ Given the remarks cited above about women’s nature, it is quite unlikely, I believe, that such revisions of existing practice as Plato makes will result in full role-equality. As previously noted, Plato’s less optimistic general view of human nature causes him to advocate a ‘second-best’ society founded on law rather than on the character of extraordinary individuals (874e-875d). In what follows I will suggest that his more pessimistic view of female nature prompts him to allocate to women roles in that society which are in keeping with this diminished status.¹⁵

One’s paramount accomplishment as a human being is to become as good as possible (*Leg.* 707d). In Plato, of course, this never means that everyone has the potential to achieve the same level of excellence: he adheres throughout the dialogues to the view that people differ markedly in their capacity for and degree of virtue. What is incumbent on all members of the community, he insists again in the *Laws* (770c-d), is to attain whatever level of goodness they can. Here, as in the *Republic*, nature, supplemented by upbringing, determines individuals’ level

¹² On this see, e.g., *Phd.* 60a and 81b-c, with Levin 1996, 25. Notably, at *Phd.* 60a4-5 Xanthippe’s conduct—which is described as overly emotional—is attributed, not to nature, but rather to habit.

¹³ The fact that Plato segregates adult men and women in connection with the common meals (780e-781d) also testifies to a belief that the sexes differ by nature and should therefore interact amongst themselves where collaboration is not required.

¹⁴ According to Klosko 1986, 224, the possibility of women’s full participation is left open by the text: ‘all citizens of Magnesia—men and perhaps women also—take part in political affairs and are eligible for all political offices’.

¹⁵ N. Smith 1983, 474n24 mentions, but does not discuss, what he takes to be ‘a considerable backsliding on the issue of sexual egalitarianism in the *Laws*’. For stress on women’s limited sociopolitical role, see Okin 1979, 47-48; she does not, however, tie Plato’s retraction vis-à-vis the *Republic* to a negative change in his conception of women’s nature but instead to his reinstatement of the family and private property (for references see n2 above).

of achievement in this domain (766a). The *Laws* reaffirms Plato's commitment to the view, espoused in the *Republic*, that if too high a position in the community is given to those whose natures are not up to the challenge, the result is invariably disastrous (691c).

In the *Laws*, Plato distinguishes sharply between merit- and lot-based equality in the allocation of offices. He favors use of the former type to the fullest extent possible: 'The general method I mean is to grant much to the great and less to the less great, adjusting what you give to take account of the real nature of each (μέτρια διδοῦσα πρὸς τὴν αὐτῶν φύσιν ἐκατέρῳ)' (757c). The key, Plato says, is to 'confer high recognition on great virtue' and the reverse in the case of those less well endowed (757c). It is to be expected, given this view, that Plato would stress the depth of apprehension and excellence required of officials such as the Examiners (εὐθελνοί) and members of the Nocturnal Council, which, 'duly primed by the course of studies we've described, shall be constituted the legal protector of the safety of the state' (968a6-b1). Thus he tells us that the Examiners' level of virtue must be exemplary (945c-e; cf. 946b7: ἄνδρας τοὺς ἀρίστους τρεῖς) and that all members of the Nocturnal Council must have understanding 'of the common element in all the four virtues—the factor which, though single, is to be found in courage, self-control, justice and wisdom, and thus in our view deserves the general title "virtue." ... If this point eludes us, can we ever expect to attain virtue?' (965c10-e1).¹⁶ A little later he stresses that 'if our guardians [i.e., the members of the Nocturnal Council] are going to be *genuine* guardians of the laws they must have *genuine* knowledge of their real nature (δεῖ τοὺς ὄντως φύλακας ἐσομένους τῶν νόμων ὄντως εἰδέναι τὰ περὶ τὴν ἀλήθειαν αὐτῶν); they must be articulate enough to explain the real difference between good actions and bad, and capable of sticking to the distinction in practice' (966b).¹⁷ Those who lack this insight and high level of virtue will never be good enough to govern a whole state, 'but only to assist government carried on by others' (968a).¹⁸ If people should assume positions that accord with their level of virtue—which, as noted, is determined by nature, suitably cultivated by upbringing—and women's capacity for virtue is naturally deficient (781b), then it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that women will not fill those jobs whose performance necessitates ἀρετή and hence apprehension substantially beyond the norm.

In the *Laws*, Plato does not, like Aristotle, restrict women's function literally to the home. Although Plato does not limit women in this way, the positions

¹⁶ On the depth of insight into the nature of virtue that is required, see more generally 963a-966b.

¹⁷ For additional emphasis on understanding and the correlative ability to give a λόγος, see 964c6-7, d3-5, and 966a5-b8. As Morrow 1993, 503 observes, the Nocturnal Council plays the role of the head in Plato's analogy with the human organism 'in the sense that it is the intelligence which apprehends the reason in the law and the source of this reason in the ordered cosmos'.

¹⁸ According to the vantage point represented by this formulation, of course, the state will end up with a very large number of officials who find themselves in the role of assistants.

assigned explicitly to them emphasize above all the arena of marriage and the family: women function as nurses (789e-790a, 794a), monitor children's play (794a-c, 795d), serve as girls' dance instructors (813b), and have a role in the supervision of marriage and divorce (784a-c, 794b3-4, 929e-930e, 932b4-5).¹⁹ In addition, the main purpose of such military activity as women are permitted to engage in (813e-814c; cf. 785b) is to safeguard the family by not leaving the young and the remainder of the population unprotected if it should be necessary for the army to leave the state for an engagement.²⁰

As the foregoing remarks make clear, official duties are indeed assigned to women. In contrast to *Republic* v, however, where Plato underscores the fact that select women have the nature to be philosopher-rulers, the *Laws* does not comment explicitly on the issue of women's political involvement at the top levels. The fact of silence can of course in principle cut both ways, and I limit myself here to suggesting that there is good reason to think that the highest jobs will not be held by women.²¹

In the *Laws*, raising a family becomes the top female priority. His privileging of this activity leads Plato to curtail the period during which women may assume sociopolitical roles within the community. Women are to marry between the ages of sixteen and twenty, while the period for men is between thirty and thirty-five (785b2-5). Women cannot hold office before age forty (785b5), that is, until they have fulfilled their role of bearing and raising children. Men, in contrast, may assume official positions from age thirty on (785b5-6). In addition, female participants in contests involving armed combat must be under the age of marriage (834a). Furthermore, while men must perform military service from ages twenty to sixty (785b6-7), in the case of women, 'whatever military service it may be thought necessary to impose—which will be limited to the period after they have finished bearing children—should be performed up to the age of fifty' (785b7-9).

From the age of six on, boys and girls are to be taught separately (794c). This policy is not at all surprising given Plato's insistence in the *Laws*, in contrast to the *Republic*, that males and females differ substantially in their natures. With regard to training in skills that have a military application, 'the males should go to teachers of riding, archery, javelin-throwing, and slinging—and the females too, if they are agreeable (ἐὰν δὲ πῆ συγχωρῶσιν), may attend at any rate the

¹⁹ It should be stressed that there is much of importance involving the family that will not fall under their purview but rather under that of the νομοφύλακες. For an enumeration of the guardians' responsibilities in this arena, see Morrow 1993, 202-203.

²⁰ 'It would be a disaster for their society if its women proved to have been so shockingly ill-educated that they couldn't even rival female birds, who are prepared to run every risk and die for their chicks fighting against the most powerful of wild animals' (814a8-b4); cf. Plato's critique of Spartan education (806a-c).

²¹ I am of course not denying that Plato's account in the *Laws* grants women much more sociopolitical responsibility than they had in the Athens of his day. For current purposes my focus is simply on bringing out the constraints that exist in the *Laws*' community by contrast with the πόλις of the *Republic*.

lessons, particularly those in the use of weapons' (794c-d).²² According to Plato, boys and girls have a duty to cultivate the relevant athletic and military skills (804d-805d), and men, women, and children are to participate in monthly military maneuvers (829b). Although women must be capable of defending the state if the army is absent during battle, they are not—as they were in the *Republic* (457a)—part of the army proper: 'Grown women... must play their part in maneuvering, getting into battle formation and taking off and putting on weapons, if only to ensure that if it ever proves necessary for the whole army to leave the state and take the field abroad (εἴ ποτε δεήσειε πανδημεὶ πάσῃ τῇ δυνάμει καταλείποντας τὴν πόλιν ἔξω στρατεύεσθαι), so that the children and the rest of the population are left unprotected, the women will at least be able to defend them' (813e-814a).²³

As we have seen, although female members of the community are involved in military activity, they do not participate in the most central and demanding aspects of it. In addition, while female officials have a hand in important domains, notable among them marital relationships and education, they do not deal with the most intellectually challenging dimensions of those jobs. Women are specifically assigned to the arena of marriage and divorce, but their judgment, when employed in an official capacity, is treated as subordinate to that of male functionaries. If difficulties arise in reaching a divorce agreement, for instance, female officials are not invested with the authority to decide on and impose a solution; instead, the case is referred to the Guardians of the Laws (νομοφύλακες, 784c).²⁴ Moreover, in the arena of education, where men and

²² Saunders 1970, 279 observes that the distinction is between lessons and mock battles.

²³ Based on my interpretation of this passage, I cannot agree with the claim of Stalley 1983, 105 that Plato considers women to be members of the army. Cohen 1987 too contends that women are part of the army and on that basis concludes that they 'were expected, indeed required, to participate in all aspects of political and civic life' (37). I quite agree that military activity is required of women should circumstances call for them to engage in it, but suggest that this limited role is not sufficient, in Plato's view, to make them full-fledged members of the army. In *Republic* v, in contrast, even if women are not performing all the same specific tasks as men on account of what Plato takes to be a certain general difference between them in physical strength, women will participate with men on the battlefield, that is to say, they will be members of the army proper. Plato stresses there the athletic and warlike nature of select women (456a1-2). He indicates later in *Republic* v that the association (κοινωνία, 466c6) of such women with men of like nature in the task of guardianship will include their leaving the city as the occasion arises in order to wage war together against its aggressors (κατὰ τε πόλιν μενούσας εἰς πόλεμόν τε ἰούσας καὶ συμφυλάττειν δεῖν καὶ συνθηρεῦειν, 466c8-d1); see also his insistence on the fact that men and women κοινῇ στρατεύσονται (466e4) and his contention later in the same passage that, in addition to accompanying them in the role of observers, children must διακονεῖν καὶ ὑπηρετεῖν πάντα τὰ περὶ τὸν πόλεμον, καὶ θεραπεύειν πατέρας τε καὶ μητέρας (467a1-2). Noteworthy in the *Republic*, moreover, is Plato's emphasis on the fact that if women are to perform the same duties as men, they must receive the same education (451e6-7). If he did not believe at this juncture that, under optimal conditions, the role of women with a certain type of nature was in all essentials the same as that of men with that φύσις, then it is quite difficult to see why Plato would have placed so much weight on equal education (456c11-d1).

²⁴ See also 794b4-c2, where Plato says that if someone of citizen status contests the punishment allocated by one of the twelve women elected to supervise nurses and their charges, the case must be

women have official responsibilities, the former are assigned the tasks that are deemed both more demanding and more important. Thus Plato tells us that female officials are to monitor children's play, while males will supervise their lessons (795d).

In society more generally, males are given various kinds of priority over females, as when Plato asserts that male relatives of female progeny determine whom the latter will marry: 'The right to make a valid betrothal should rest initially with the bride's father, secondly with her grandfather, thirdly with her brothers by the same father. If none of these is available, the right should belong to the relatives on the mother's side in the same order' (774e). Since inheritance is to transpire exclusively through males, Plato underscores the importance of male children. If a property owner leaves behind no progeny, a male child must be adopted 'on behalf of the deceased's father and forebears, who will receive him as their son' (878a). If he has only female children, his will must single out one of the daughters and 'provide someone to be a husband for her and a son for himself, and record this person as his heir' (923e). Plato offers, in fact, a detailed set of procedures dictating how daughters are to be married off in order to ensure the preservation of estates if men who die intestate have daughters but not sons (924c-925a); decision-making authority is here vested in the deceased's male relatives.²⁵

Underscoring what he takes to be the greater validity and reliability of male discernment, Plato states that while a woman has a living husband, she is allowed to serve as a witness at a trial if she is over forty years of age, but she may not initiate proceedings (937a): as long as she has a male counterpart, his level of judgment is assumed by Plato to be superior. Concerning the disparate treatment of males and females in the legal arena, it is worth noting, moreover, that the latter are punished more harshly than the former for neglecting their parents to the extent that while male offenders receive a beating and imprisonment as long as they are under thirty years of age, this penalty may be inflicted on female offenders until age forty (932b-c). This principle illustrates once again Plato's view that women's central province is the family.

Although Plato does not take an explicit stand on this topic, what he does say supports the claim that the top roles in the *Laws*' society are reserved for males. At 951d-e Plato stipulates that the Nocturnal Council will be composed of priests of high distinction, the ten most senior νομοφύλακες, and the current and previous Directors of Education.²⁶ In addition, each member of the Council is to bring

referred to the City-Wardens. When the City-Wardens are introduced (760b1, 763c4), Plato uses the masculine gender. As others (e.g., Stalley 1983, 105) have observed in connection with the *Laws*, masculine grammatical forms can encompass the female. Nowhere in the *Laws*, however, is the impression that only men will function as City-, County-, and Market-Wardens called into question.

²⁵ After giving a long account of the sequence of relatives through which the locus of authority moves, Plato mentions highly unusual circumstances, involving colonists or non-related citizens, in which the choice of husband lies with the daughter and her guardians (925a-c).

²⁶ The categories of Guardian of the Laws and Director of Education are not, of course, fully distinct insofar as the latter belongs to the class of νομοφύλακες.

along a younger man, selected by him, who is between thirty and forty years of age.²⁷ Plato stresses the importance of φύσις in his account of the selection criteria for these junior members of the Council: they are ‘chosen for their natural gifts and the acuteness of their mental vision’ (ἀπειλεγμένους τοὺς εὐφροεστάτους, ὀξύτητας ἐν πάσῃ τῇ ψυχῇ ἔχοντας, 964e2-4). Since these young men are being groomed for high office (cf. Klosko 1986, 217-218), Plato’s emphasis on φύσις is quite telling and would seem to go against the contention of Okin 1979 that his concern, always more with upbringing than with nature, moves even further in this direction in the *Laws*. Moreover, Plato’s occupation here with φύσις is surely significant in light of his remarks elsewhere in the *Laws* about women’s natural inferiority: if a promising nature is pivotal to one’s approval for a position of this caliber, then it stands to reason that significant natural shortcomings in individuals of either sex would disqualify them for any high official position.²⁸

In book 6, Plato states that the official presiding over education should be the finest all-around citizen (τῶν ἐν τῇ πόλει ὃς ἂν ἄριστος εἰς πάντα ᾗ, 766a7-8). This individual may select people of either sex as assistants in musical and physical education (813c). Though Plato does not say in so many words that the Director must be male, his insistence that the individual in question must be the most virtuous person in the community, combined with his claim that the one in charge ‘must be at least fifty years old, and the father of legitimate children (παίδων δὲ γνησίων πατήρ)’ (765d), points unmistakably in this direction.²⁹ It is noteworthy, in addition, that at 951d Plato singles out priests as members of the Council, not—as when describing religious tasks elsewhere—both priests and priestesses (759a, 800b, 909d, 947d).

²⁷ On the composition of the Council, see also 961a-b. Such differences as there are between Plato’s two descriptions do not bear on the point being made here about the absence of female members.

²⁸ I interpret 805c7-d1 (δεῖ παιδείας τε καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ὅτι μάλιστα κοινωνεῖν τὸ θῆλυ γένος ἡμῖν τῷ τῶν ἀρρένων γένει) to mean that women and men should be on the same footing to the extent that this is possible (the words τῶν ἄλλων are central, and the phrase ὅτι μάλιστα provides a crucial qualification). Saunders’ rendering (‘so far as possible, in education and everything else, the female sex should be on the same footing as the male’) captures the force of ὅτι μάλιστα but over-translates τῶν ἄλλων; Saunders subsequently revises his translation of the latter (1995, 592 with 604n4). Cohen 1987, 35 offers the rendering ‘the completest association’, which is misleading, as Saunders 1995, 604n4 observes, insofar as it downplays the qualification that is represented by ὅτι μάλιστα. Concerning one’s interpretation of this passage, it is also important to keep in mind that Plato is arguing in 805-806 for a specific revision, namely, that of ordinary practice with respect to military activity; in this connection, he criticizes Thrace, Athens, and Sparta, which, notwithstanding other differences in their treatment of women, are united in prohibiting them from all military service. Plato’s concern to include women here comes from a fear about what might happen to the city in emergency situations if women were left to their own devices and untrained.

²⁹ Also suggestive of the fact that males are in charge of education is Plato’s statement that any free man who happens to be passing by (πᾶς ὁ προστυγχάνων τῶν ἐλευθέρων ἀνδρῶν) must punish a boy and his tutor or teacher if he observes misbehavior (808e). At 804d Plato says that children’s attendance at school is mandatory rather than being a matter of their father’s preference, and at 810a he states that fathers are not allowed to shorten established periods of study; interestingly, it only occurs to Plato to make these points with reference to male parents.

The νομοφύλακες play a pivotal role in Plato's community.³⁰ We are given no indication in the *Laws* that women could belong to this group, and powerful signs, via Plato's criticisms of their nature, that they would not measure up on the level of character and cognition. Noteworthy, moreover, is the fact that several of the jobs assigned to the νομοφύλακες are tasks that Plato states elsewhere must be performed by men rather than women. These officials may bring cases to court (910e), yet we know from elsewhere that women, unless divorced or widowed, are barred from doing this.³¹ These officials may also be called upon to appoint guardians for orphans if this is not done in a father's will (924b-c), and they are said to make determinations in the arenas of inheritance and marriage (877d, 926b7-d2). Once again, as we saw, females cannot themselves inherit and run estates, nor do they decide whom they are to wed.³² It would be extraordinarily odd for Plato to invest individuals without this prerogative on their own behalf with the authority for making these decisions on behalf of others.

Although at times *Republic* v formulates its proposals involving ideal circumstances by reference to males, Plato makes clear in book 5, and at the end of book 7, that they apply both to men and to women. In the *Laws*, in contrast, the foregoing passages, in which women are not mentioned as sharing the roles in question with men, are not supplemented by clarifying statements at other junctures. Indeed, it would be quite surprising if such comments were provided given Plato's expressed belief in women's strong natural inferiority with respect to character.

The foregoing interpretation of Plato's treatment of women in the *Laws* offers support to the view that its negative conception of their nature represents a departure from the *Republic* and that the *Laws*' arguments and specific proposals are substantially less radical than the *Republic*'s. Plato's view in both dialogues that individuals should rise as high as their natures permit them might seem tantamount at first glance to an endorsement of equality. However, although women hold office in both societies, the *Laws*' construction of women's φύσις generates the expectation that there—in contrast to the *Republic*—those positions requiring a strong grasp of virtue will be occupied by men. The *Laws*' descriptions of the functions assigned to women, which include stipulations of points at which higher officials must be consulted, call to mind at best the auxiliaries of the *Republic*, whose ὀρθὴ δόξα about courage, cultivated via education, enables them to assist the rulers in a range of fruitful ways. On this interpretation, Plato's divergence from the *Republic*'s account is striking, since there he grants that women and men may occupy all cognitive levels without exception.

³⁰ According to Morrow 1993, 178 the νομοφύλακες are far and away the most important officials in Plato's community. For a different view, one that stresses their subordinate status by comparison with the Examiners, see Kahn 1993, xx. On the role of the νομοφύλακες vis-à-vis that of the Examiners and Nocturnal Council, see Klosko 1986, 215-217 and 235.

³¹ On the Guardians' substantial judicial role, see also 754e, 767e, 948a, and 958c.

³² As previously observed (see n25), even in the rare instance in which they play a role in this decision, females do not make it on their own but rather in conjunction with their guardians.

III. Conclusion

In its view of women, the *Laws* occupies a position somewhere between the *Republic* and Aristotle. Since Plato does not state explicitly why his stance undergoes a substantial change between the *Republic* and *Laws*, there is no way to specify with certainty what accounts for it. Multiple factors are likely to be working in tandem with one another. Dickason 1973-1974 suggests that Plato's biological views undergo a shift: while in the period of the *Republic* he was drawn to the more egalitarian Hippocratic position, subsequently he is exposed to, and endorses, views for which Aristotle argues. N. Smith 1983 claims that the key is not biology but rather Plato's stance on metempsychosis. On Smith's interpretation, while in the middle period Plato views the soul as sexless, by the time of the *Timaeus* and *Laws* he no longer adheres to this position (473).³³ It is reasonable to think that the variables stressed by Dickason and Smith are both pertinent in some way to the *Laws*. In Aristotle, biological and psychological concerns are without a doubt closely interrelated. In *De Anima* (see especially ii 1-4), it is the presence of form, qua soul, to the body that makes an organism belong to a particular class of living thing. As Smith 1983, 477 observes, although Aristotle does not state the connection in so many words, he clearly assumes a link between the fact that form's hold on matter is less complete in females than in males and women's relative natural incapacity with respect to human beings' distinctive faculty, namely, reason.³⁴ Since Plato says much less than Aristotle on the topic of biology, it is less evident how close he intends the relationship to be. What he does say about biology and the soul, however, at least leaves open the possibility that the different aspects of his position were mutually reinforcing.

Quite relevant, in my view, to the change in Plato's stance regarding women is his increased pessimism about human nature. This shift in attitude toward humanity at large leads him to endorse a picture of communal life, and of societal roles, that is distinctly closer to the familiar state of affairs than that delineated in the *Republic*. Plato's enhanced general pessimism about human nature gets extended on a more specific level, and without direct argument, to women. Given the pivotal importance of the concept of φύσις to his reflections on human beings and society, it is not surprising that this twofold demotion of women's nature issues in marked restrictions on their societal role by comparison with that described in the *Republic*. In effect, what one finds in the *Laws* is a fairly broad application of the Principle of Specialization that Plato had introduced in *Republic* ii (370a-c): women's special province is the family, and Plato allows women

³³ On this topic see also Spelman 1988, 31, according to whom Plato, at least in the *Timaeus* and *Laws*, views souls as gendered.

³⁴ On women and rationality, see *Pol.* 1254b2-16, 1259a39-b6, and 1259b28-1260b20. On central aspects of Aristotle's view of women, see also *Gen. An.* i 17-23, ii 1-4, and iv 1-6 (e.g., 735a8-9, 737a25-29, 738b18-27, 767b20-23, and 775a14-16).

to fulfill aspects of that function both within and outside the home.³⁵ Aristotle, by contrast, applies the principle far more narrowly, with the result that women are returned to a strictly domestic role.³⁶

As noted, Plato does not argue directly for the distinct application of his pessimism about human nature to women. Plato may have assumed, wrongly, that what he had said about human nature itself covered the pertinent territory. Alternately, perhaps he believed that the extension followed from his expressed pessimism about the human φύσις generally, once this was combined with one or more additional claims.³⁷ By the time of the *Timaeus* and *Laws*, Plato had come to hold the view that deficiencies in people under present conditions have more to do with nature than he had thought. At this juncture he is therefore far less confident that altering conventional practices with respect to education and upbringing could have a transformative impact comparable to that described in the *Republic*. Plato's examination of his environment led him to certain generalizations about a weakness in human rationality and the relative dominance of one large group in society, namely, women, by emotion and desire. If where people currently are is more a matter of φύσις than he had thought, then such differences as there are between human beings, especially when they seem to manifest themselves consistently in particular groups, would be viewed as more a matter of nature than he had previously contended. In principle Plato could have demoted human nature generally and still have had equal confidence in the possibilities represented by men and women under the best possible conditions. Once, however, his belief in the general weakness of human nature is combined with the view that people's current level of achievement is a more complete reflection of their φύσις than he had previously thought, the way is paved for his conclusion that women are naturally inferior to men. Plato's belief that observable gaps between men and women could typically not be closed was likely generated, at least in part, by the aforementioned developments in his views about metempsychosis and biology.

Ironically, while the *Laws*, in contrast to the *Republic*, speaks at one point of handling the rivalry between philosophy and poetry by having the very text of the *Laws* function as a paradigm for acceptable compositions (817a7-c1)—thus supplanting in a most dramatic way the literary tradition's authority—the *Laws'* stance toward women aligns itself with poetry by incorporating both prominent strands in literary reflections. Although Plato's reflections in the *Laws* still surpass those even of Euripides, arguably the most advanced literary figure on this topic—insofar as Plato invests women with a nexus of roles outside the home—they constitute a crucial stage on the way toward a position, that of Aristotle, which actually lags in crucial respects behind that displayed in Greek poetry.³⁸

³⁵ In using the term 'Principle of Specialization' I follow Annas 1981, 73.

³⁶ For Aristotle's articulation of the principle, see *Pol.* 1252a34-b5.

³⁷ In what follows I articulate a line of reasoning that Plato does not offer explicitly, but which I believe to provide a plausible account of his position on this topic.

³⁸ A defense of this claim about Aristotle would, of course, be a topic for another occasion. With

This state of affairs involving the *Laws* need not, however, diminish the achievement represented by the *Republic*, where for the first time in Western thought a genuine equality of natural potential between the sexes was staunchly and persuasively defended. While one of course wishes that Plato had continued to adhere strongly to the *Republic*'s groundbreaking position, there are doubtless useful lessons to be garnered from further exploration of the manner and basis of the *Laws*' divergence from it.³⁹

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regard to literature, for reasons internal to my earlier project (Levin 1996) that investigation did not include Aristophanes. For a recent contention that *Republic* v is closely connected to *Ecclesiazusae*, see Nightingale 1995, chap. 5. I have suggested elsewhere (see Levin 1997, 195-198) that Aristophanes' role as antecedent of *Republic* v is not as obvious as has been assumed and underscored the importance of recognizing Euripides' contribution.

³⁹ I am grateful to Ronald Polansky for helpful suggestions.

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