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PLATO ON WOMEN AND THE PRIVATE FAMILY

Rachel Singpurwalla

1 Introduction

Plato's attitude toward women in his major political works, the *Republic* and *Laws*, is complex. In the *Republic*, Socrates argues that in his ideal city, Kallipolis, women will be rulers (451c–457c); since rulers must be virtuous, Socrates must think that women can be virtuous. At the same time, Socrates makes numerous disparaging comments about women throughout the text, many of which imply that women as a kind lack virtue in so far as they fail to manage the non-rational parts of their soul (e.g., 431b–c, 605c–d). This pattern continues in the *Laws*, where the Athenian argues that in the city he is constructing, Magnesia, women will be eligible to hold public offices (e.g.,785a–b); again, since a requirement for holding public office is virtue, he must think women can be virtuous. But the Athenian also claims that women are inferior to men with respect to virtue (780e–781b).

In an attempt to reconcile these conflicting attitudes, some scholars, focusing on the tension within the *Republic*, propose that when Plato is discussing the possibility of women holding positions of rule, he is thinking of exceptional women as they could be given the right education and environment, while his sexist comments are directed to women as they are.[1] This proposal often goes hand in hand with the claim that Plato thinks that women and men have the same nature with respect to virtue, and so women's inferiority is wholly the result of nurture.[2] However, the issue of whether men and women have the same nature is vexed, for some passages imply that women are by nature inferior to men with respect to virtue, and, more specifically, have difficulty managing the non-rational parts of the soul. Perhaps the clearest example is in the *Timaeus*, where Socrates claims that if a man masters his passions, he is just, but if he is mastered by them, he is unjust and will be reincarnated as a woman (42a–c, 90e–91a).[3]

It is worth noting, however, that even if Plato thinks that women have some natural impediment to virtue, he must not think it is great, since he thinks it can be largely overcome by nurture. In the *Laws*, for example, the Athenian claims that if the legislator fails to create the same regulations for women as he does for men then the city will only be about half as happy as it could be (806c). Since virtue is required for happiness, this suggests that if attention is given to women's lives and environment, then they can be (almost) as virtuous as men.[4] The fact that Plato thinks that women can be almost as virtuous as men given the right environment points to culture as the primary culprit for women's inferiority with respect to virtue.

DOI: 10.4324/9781003047858-16

In this chapter, then, I do not take a stand on whether Plato thinks that women have some natural impediment to virtue, and I focus instead on the cultural contributions to women's problems with respect to virtue. Surprisingly, commentators who argue that women's position in society is the source of Plato's critical comments have failed to identify which aspect or aspects of women's social position is the issue. Commentators often point to the fact that women did not receive the ideal education that Plato outlines in the *Republic*. But men did not receive that education either, and Plato does not subject men as a kind to the same kind of criticism. I argue that a central problem is women's role in the institution of the private family and household. More specifically, I argue that Plato thinks the institution of the private family and household is an impediment to the development of virtue. Since the private family and household is the traditional domain of women, they will be particularly susceptible to its ill effects. In short, individuals' characters are shaped by the institutions they inhabit; the private family and household is a character-shaping institution that is the primary domain for women, and as a result their characters will be shaped for the worse.

In Section 2, I discuss Plato's criticism of the institution of the private family and household and I identify four features of the institution that make it an impediment to the attainment of virtue. In Section 3, I argue that Plato criticizes women for having exactly the problems that the institution of the private family and household tends to generate; and I argue that Plato is aware that women's position in the household is a significant source of their failure to develop virtue. In the conclusion, I argue that focusing on Plato's attitude toward the private family raises a new puzzle about Plato's attitudes toward women and suggest a possible line of response.

2 What's Wrong with the Private Family?

Plato is hostile to the private family. In the *Republic*, Socrates argues that in Kallipolis, the rulers and auxiliaries will not have private families and households but will instead live as a communal family (457c–466d). In the *Laws*, the Athenian allows the citizens of Magnesia to have private families and households, but he explicitly claims that this is a second-best arrangement (739a–740a), and, as we shall see, he takes several measures to weaken the institution. But what, exactly, is the problem with the private family? I argue that the institution of the private family is an impediment to the development of virtue. In both the *Republic* and the *Laws*, Plato defines virtue as the state where reason rules over the non-rational parts of the soul (*Rep*. 441d–442b; *Laws* 653a–c, 863e–864a). In both texts, being ruled by reason involves a commitment to the common good.[5] Thus, the virtuous individual values the common good over the satisfaction of their more selfish, often materialistic, non-rational desires. The institution of the private family is associated with four features that make it an impediment to developing virtue so understood.

2.1 The Private Family and Selfishness

The first feature of the institution of private family that makes it an impediment to virtue is that it divides citizens into family members and non-family members and claims that individuals should have a special concern for family members; this leads the citizens to narrow their circle of concern and potentially favor the interests of their family members over the common good.

This is stated most clearly in *Republic* V, where Socrates argues that the private family threatens the unity of the city (462a–b). Socrates argues that a city is unified when the citizens

share pleasures and pains or rejoice at one another's successes and grieve at their failures; in other words, the city is unified when the citizens care about the welfare of their fellow citizens (462b). He claims that this is achieved, at least in part, when the citizens see their fellow citizens as "mine" or as belonging to them in some sense (462c). The private family threatens civic unity since it encourages the citizens to see some of their fellow citizens (their family members) as belonging to them, and others as not belonging to them, and this in turn leads to private and potentially conflicting pleasures and pains among the citizens, which ultimately dissolve the city. Socrates is particularly concerned with the guardians and so emphasizes that they should not have private families.

He summarizes as follows:

> So, as I say, doesn't what was said earlier, as well as what is being said now [abolishing private property and private families for the guardians], make them into even better guardians and prevent them from tearing the city apart by applying the term "mine" not to the same thing, but to different ones – with one person dragging into his own house whatever he, apart from the others, can get his hands on, and another into a different house to a different wife and children, who create private pleasures and pains at things that are private? Instead of that, don't our guardians share a single conviction about what is their own, aim at the same goal, and, as far as possible, feel pleasure and pain in unison?
> *(Rep. 464c4–d6)*[6]

This passage makes clear that good guardians believe that all the citizens are their own and thereby aim at the same goal, namely, the common good and stresses that the institution of the private family threatens this commitment.

In sum, the institution of the private family is associated with norms that license the thought that family members are related to you in a special way and that this warrants giving them special consideration. Thus, the institution of the private family compromises the guardians' virtue in so far as it is likely to cause the guardians to lose their commitment to the common good and favor the interests of their family.

2.2 The Private Family, Private Property, Materialism, and Intemperance

The second feature of the institution of the private family that makes it an impediment to virtue is that it is linked to the institution of private property, and private property is an obstacle to the development and maintenance of temperance, or reason's rule over the appetites.

For Plato, the private family and private property go hand in hand. In *Republic* V, when Socrates describes why the private family is problematic, he highlights the link between the private family and private property. In the passage quoted above Socrates says that abolishing the private family for the guardians will prevent them from tearing the city apart "…with one person dragging into his own house whatever he, apart from the others, can get his hands on, and another into a different house to a different wife and children…" (464c8–d2). In *Republic* VIII, Socrates says that the downfall of the ideal city occurs when rulers distribute the land and houses among themselves as private property (547b–c). As Susan Moller Okin notes, Socrates simultaneously reintroduces the private family without noting this as an additional change in the constitution.[7]

Why does Plato link the private family with private property? Okin argues that Plato links the two because he sees women as property, so it is a natural step from owning private

property to having a wife and a private family.[8] But there are other possible explanations. Perhaps owning private property creates the desire for an heir – someone related to you to pass your property on to (so that you can, in a sense, hold onto it forever) – and having an heir requires a private family and in turn a household so that men can seclude their wives and thereby guarantee paternity. Alternatively, perhaps the desire for a private family comes first and this requires a private household. Specifically, perhaps all people desire to reproduce themselves and this in turn creates the desire to educate and influence one's child in one's own values and way of life, and this requires a private household, a physical space to delimit the boundaries between the public and the private, where parents have more influence over their children.[9]

Whatever the reason for the connection between the private family and private property, the link between the two is a problem, for Plato thinks the institution of private property breeds materialism and acquisitiveness and ultimately intemperance. We see this clearly in *Republic* III, where Socrates discusses the living quarters of the guardians. Socrates claims that it is vitally important to ensure that the guardians are not led by intemperance, hunger, or some other bad condition to do evil to their fellow citizens (415e–416a). Importantly, Socrates claims that while education is a safeguard against this, it is not enough (416a–d). In addition, the guardians must have living quarters that will ensure that they care for their fellow citizens: specifically, they should not have private property that is beyond what is necessary or living quarters or storerooms that are not open to all; instead, they should have the minimal provisions that are required of "temperate and courageous men" (416d7–8). Socrates concludes that "if they acquire private land, houses, and money themselves, they will be household managers and farmers instead of guardians – hostile masters of the other citizens, instead of their allies" (417a7–b2). Thus, Socrates thinks that private property is a threat to the guardians' temperance and thus to their ability to value the welfare of their fellow citizens over their own materialistic desires.

And indeed, in *Republic* VIII, Socrates describes how the acquisition of private households and property leads the honor-loving timocratic constitution to turn into a money-loving and oligarchic one. Socrates claims that although the timocratic rulers value honor, they will have an appetite for money, owning storehouses where they deposit their gold and silver and private homes where they can spend their money however they wish (548a–b). Ultimately a timocracy transforms to an oligarchy because of:

> …The storehouse filled with gold we mentioned, which each possess…First, you see, the timocrats find ways of spending their money; then they alter the laws to allow them to do so, and then they and their women disobey the laws altogether…So, in the end, victory-loving and honor-loving men become lovers of making money and money-lovers, and they praise and admire the wealthy man and appoint him as ruler, and dishonor the poor one.
>
> *(550d5–551a8)*

So Plato thinks there is a clear step from owning private property to developing a strong desire for money, gold, and silver, which threatens one's ability to rule over these desires, or to value other things more highly than money.

The culprit here is the appetitive part of the soul, which Socrates describes as the strongest source of motivation in the soul and most insatiable for money (442a; 580e–581a). Plato seems to think that our materialistic desires are so powerful that the only strategy for managing them

is to refrain from indulging in certain desires in the first place. Thus, he argues that reason and spirit should watch over the appetitive part so that:

> ...It does not get so filled with the so-called pleasures of the body that it becomes big and strong, and no longer does its own job but attempts to enslave and rule over the classes it is not fitted to rule, thereby overturning the whole life of anyone in whom it occurs.
>
> *(442a7–b3)*

2.3 The Private Family, Privacy, and Indulging in Non-Rational Desires

A third feature of the institution of the private family and household that makes it an impediment to the development of civic virtue is that it provides privacy, which affords the opportunity to act on desires and emotions that one would be ashamed to act on in public; by acting on these desires, one strengthens them and this can lead to an inability to manage them in general, and thus to a degeneration of character.

We have already seen that Socrates criticizes timocracy because it allows for private households and property and this ownership strengthens our materialistic desires. But the private household is not only problematic because owning private property itself breeds acquisitiveness and materialism. Socrates also describes as problematic the very privacy of the private household, which allows people to act in ways they would not act in public. The timocrat, for example, lives in a city that does not value money; but the privacy afforded by the private household allows him to indulge in his acquisitive desires:

> Such men will have an appetite for money just like those in oligarchies, passionately adoring gold and silver in secret, owning storehouses and private treasuries where they can deposit them and keep them hidden; and they will have walls around their houses, real private nests, where they can spend lavishly on their women or on anyone else they please…They will enjoy their pleasures in secret, running away from the law like boys from their father, since they have not been educated by persuasion but by force.
>
> *(548a5–b7)*

As we have seen, Socrates claims that repeatedly acting on these appetitive desires causes the rulers to value money, thus moving their characters further from virtue or reason's rule over the appetites.

Socrates thinks that privacy allows for the satisfaction of all kinds of non-rational desires which conflict with reason, not just those associated with money. In *Republic* X, he claims that privacy provides a space for people to indulge in desires that they would not indulge in public, such as excessive grief. During his critique of tragic poetry, Socrates describes how the good person responds to the loss of a child. The good man grieves but is measured in the face of pain. He says:

> Do you think he will be more likely to fight and resist pain when he is seen by his equals, or when he is just by himself in a solitary place…But when he is alone, I imagine, he will venture to say many things he would be ashamed if someone else heard, and to do many things he would not want anyone else to see him doing.
>
> *(604a2–604a8)*

Socrates repeats the same idea in the case of humor. He says:

> You see, if there are jokes you would be ashamed to tell yourself, but that you very much enjoy when you hear them imitated in comedy or even in private, and that you don't hate as something bad, aren't you doing the same as with the things you pity? For the element in you that wanted to tell the jokes, but which you held back by means of reason because you were afraid of being reputed a buffoon, you now release; and having made it strong in that way you have been led unawares into becoming a comedian in your own life.
>
> *(606c1–d1)*

In sum, Socrates thinks that privacy affords one the opportunity to act on desires and emotions that one would be ashamed to act on in public; by acting on these desires, you strengthen them, and this can lead to an inability to manage these desires in general.

What is important to note here is that Plato sees the sense of shame, or the fear of being seen failing to act in a way that one considers decent and honorable, as an important source of moral motivation. But shame is less operative in the privacy of the household where one is freed from the gaze of others. We can put this in terms of the tri-partite psychology of the *Republic*: Socrates claims that spirit is the source of the love of honor and the fear of shame (581a–b); as such, it pushes the person act in ways one considers decent and honorable. But this motivation might be less active in the privacy of the home, thus providing a space for people to indulge in irrational desires and thereby strengthen those desires.

2.4 The Private Family, Lawlessness, and Variable Pleasures and Pains

The fourth feature of the private family that makes it an impediment to the development of virtue is that some actions typically taken within the private household are beyond the bounds of legislation; as a result, people are not guided by reason and law in these domains, but instead by their idiosyncratic pleasures and pains, thus leading to variety and inconsistency in the character of the citizens and away from virtue.

In *Laws* VII, the Athenian discusses the very early upbringing of children and he is against creating legislation in this area, even though he thinks early upbringing is of crucial importance for the development of virtue. He says:

> In people's private and domestic lives a great many things are done – trivial things, hidden from public view – which are prompted by the pains and pleasures and desires of particular individuals, and which can easily run counter to the intentions of the lawgiver, resulting in all kinds of variety and inconsistency in the character of the citizens. This, for cities, is a bad thing. The triviality and frequency of this behavior makes it inappropriate and unbecoming for the person making laws to make them punishable offences, and in any case it undermines the written laws if people get into the habit of breaking the law through repeated petty infringements. So it is a pretty hopeless task to make laws in this area…
>
> *(788a6–c2)*[10]

Shortly thereafter, the Athenian repeats the idea that we should not create legislation with penalties regarding how pregnant women should behave or how nurses should carry children, even though these are important for the development of character. He says, "We would be a

laughing-stock – not to mention the nurses refusing to obey; in terms of character, they are women and slaves, after all" (790a6–8).

Why is Plato against creating legislation regarding some aspects of early upbringing? First, he thinks it is unfitting to create laws with penalties prohibiting actions that people take frequently and that do not cause obvious harm to others. Second, he thinks even if someone were to create laws in this area, people would ignore them and this would undermine the force of the law. It is not clear why Plato thinks people would ignore these laws, especially women and slaves. Perhaps he thinks that since these actions often take place in the privacy of the home people will ignore any laws they do not see as important since they are free from public scrutiny. Or perhaps he thinks people are accustomed to being free from law with respect to many actions that take place in the home, and so are not in the habit of being lawful in this domain, and as a result will be less likely to take laws governing this domain as authoritative. This tendency to ignore the law might be particularly true of women and slaves, whose lives more often primarily take place in the private household.

Since certain actions in the domain of the private family and household are beyond the bounds of legislation, citizens are likely to either do as they please or be guided by household customs which are patterns of action that have been established within the home, often by previous generations. But even this could be a problem, for if the household customs are out of sync with the written laws, then citizens will eventually reject those laws. The Athenian says of household customs:

> If they are the right customs in the first place, and have become second nature, then they envelope, and completely protect whatever written laws exist at that point; if they are out of key, and get out of true, then they are like the timber supports which carpenters put in; if those suddenly give way, in the middle of the building, they bring the whole thing down with them, one part on top of another, the supports themselves together with the fine structure that came after, once those original components have collapsed.
>
> *(793b7–c7)*

In short, then, certain choices and actions within the private household are beyond the bounds of legislation and thus people may not be guided by right reason and law in choosing their actions. This leads to the growth of variable pleasures and pains, which in turn affects the character of the citizens, and ultimately, the stability of the law-code.

So the institution of the private family has several features that are problematic for the development of virtue: it gives citizens a special relationship and thus special concern to only a few members of the community; it is associated with private property which leads to materialism and intemperance; it comes with a private space which leads people to indulge desires they would not indulge in public and which in turn strengthens those desires; and it is beyond the bounds of legislation, which allows people to act in accordance with their idiosyncratic pleasures and pains, which, again, leads to a strengthening of the appetites and a variable character.

Socrates explores two solutions to the problem of the private family and household in his major political works. In the *Republic*, he abolishes the private family and household altogether, at least for the guardians (457c–466d). In the *Laws*, he thinks that abolishing the private family and household is beyond the capabilities of humans (739a–740a), but he takes numerous measures to weaken the institution of the private family and household and thereby lessen its deleterious effects. These include taking the education of children out of private hands and instead having a mandatory public education which stresses the common good on the grounds that children "belong to the city more than they belong to their parents" (804d);

putting limits on the acquisition of private households and property (737b–747e); instituting public common meals so as to lessen the time spent in the privacy of the household (780a–781d); and including in the law-code, which all citizens must read, "advice" about the correct house-hold customs (788a–793d). All of these are designed to mitigate the specific problems with the private family and household summarized above.

3 Women and the Private Family

Thus far I have argued that Plato identifies several features of the institution of the private family and property that are an impediment to the development of virtue, or reason's rule over the non-rational appetites and emotions. My claim is that, given women's traditional role in the private home, they will be at a particular disadvantage when it comes to developing virtue.

How did Plato and his Athenian contemporaries conceive of women's role in the institution of the private family? In the *Meno*, Meno expresses a standard view. He says:

> …A man's virtue consists of being able to manage public affairs and in so doing to benefit his friends and harm his enemies and to be careful that no harm comes to himself; if you want the virtue of a woman, it is not difficult to describe: she must manage the home well, preserve its possessions, and be submissive to her husband.
>
> *(Meno 71e1–6)*[11]

In this passage, we see a clear contrast between men's role in the public, and women's role as caretakers of the private realm.[12]

This idea is echoed in various passages in the *Republic* and *Laws*, where Plato emphasizes women's role in educating children and taking care of the families' possessions. In the *Republic*, when he discusses how children are currently educated, he stresses that it is mothers and nurses who tell the stories to children (377b–c). Also in the *Republic*, he stresses that women are in charge of the family's possessions; he says that abolishing the private family would be a good thing, as it would free men of "…the need to make money necessary to feed the household – the borrowings, the defaults, and all the things people have to do to provide an income to hand over to their wives and slaves to spend on housekeeping" (465c4–8). And in the *Laws*, he says "…we huddle all of our goods together, as the saying goes, within four walls, and then hand over the dispensing of them to women …" (805e5–8).

Given women's role as caretakers of the family and its possessions, it is unsurprising to see Plato regularly depicting women as a kind failing to develop virtue. First, women's role as caretakers of the home will promote a strong interest in the welfare of the family, and their isolation from the public realm will make it difficult to cultivate a concern for the common good. Thus, in *Republic* VIII, Socrates describes the timocrat's mother as encouraging her husband to compete with other men in the public realm to bring goods into the household so that she is not at a disadvantage among the other women (549c–d). Second, women's role as caretakers of the family's possessions will promote a strong interest in money and material goods and thus a strengthening of the appetites. Thus, Socrates again criticizes the timocrat's mother for being oriented toward money and thereby strengthening her son's appetites (549c–550a). Third, women's role as caretakers of the private realm with its associated seclusion from the public means that women have every opportunity to indulge their appetites and emotions without fear of shame, thus strengthening those appetites and emotions. And so, Plato often associates women with being unable to manage their emotions; in *Republic* X, for example, he claims that quietly enduring a personal loss is what a man does, while indulging in grief is

what a woman does (605c–e). And finally, the fact that some trivial actions that typically take place within the private home are beyond the bounds of legislation allow women the freedom to act as they please and this leads to lawlessness and variable pleasures and pains. Thus, in *Republic* IV, Socrates claims "…pleasures, pains, and appetites that are numerous and multifarious are things one would especially find in children, women, household slaves, and in the so-called free members of the masses – that is, the inferior people" (431b9–c4).

It is worth noting that women are doubly disadvantaged with respect to developing virtue. For not only does their role in the institution of the private family directly encourage the growth of the appetites, but also it prevents them from participating in institutions which strengthen the spirited part of the soul, which has a special role to play in making the person virtuous by enabling the individual to resist appetitive pleasures and pains. In the *Republic*, Socrates tells the story of Leontius, whose spirit is angry with his shameful appetitive desire to look at corpses and pushes him to resist (439e–440e). And he later characterizes the relationship between reason and spirit as follows:

> And wouldn't these two elements [reason and spirit] also do the finest job of guarding the whole soul and body against external enemies – the one by deliberating, the other by fighting, following the ruler, and using its courage to carry out the things on which the former had decided? I imagine, then, that we call each individual courageous because of the latter part – that is, when the element of his that is spirited in kind preserves through pains and pleasures the pronouncements of reason about what should inspire terror and what should not.
>
> *(442b4–c2)*

Thus, the spirited part of the soul, in its pursuit of acting courageously and honorably in general, pushes the person to act in accordance with reason, despite appetitive temptations to the contrary.[13]

But in the *Republic*, Socrates is clear that the spirited part of the soul is nurtured through physical and military training (411e–412a). And in the *Laws*, Socrates contrasts the education received in the home with an education that strengthens one's ability to endure pleasures and pains. In *Laws* III, while discussing how correct constitutions are a blend of monarchy and democracy, the Athenian discusses the virtues of the Persian king, Cyrus, and the vices of his sons. While Cyrus spent his life from his earliest youth facing the dangers of war, the women brought up his children in the royal household, where they were indulged and prevented from enduring any hardships. The Athenian refers to this as a "woman's education" and contrasts it with the traditional Persian education, which includes physical hardships and gives children a preparation for war because of the ability to endure physical pains (694d–695b).

Since Plato contrasts life in the household with physical hardship and thinks the latter leads to softness while the former leads to courage and the ability to withstand pleasures and pains, and since women, whose role is to be caretakers of the home, have little opportunity to strengthen and nurture the spirited part, it is, again, unsurprising to see Plato claiming that women fail to manage their appetites. And in particular, it is unsurprising to see him regularly associating women with cowardice (e.g. *Republic* 388a, *Timaeus* 90e, *Laws* 994e–d).[14]

It is clear, then, that Plato's critique of the household has the resources to explain, at least in large part, women's deficiencies with respect to virtue. But does Plato see it this way? Does he realize, that is, that women's position in the household is at the least a significant source of their problems with respect to virtue? I think he does. One piece of evidence is that one of Socrates' most damning depictions of women in the *Republic*, the timocrat's mother, occurs

immediately after the reintroduction of the private family, suggesting a link between the negative characteristics of women and their role in the private home (549c–550b).[15]

A second, stronger piece of evidence is that in the *Laws*, the Athenian advocates a public life for women on the grounds that a private life – a life in the household – breeds vice. The clearest instance of this is in the Athenian's discussion of communal meals. The Athenian advocates communal meals, even after marriage, for both men and women. He says:

> Anyone who thinks he can promulgate laws in cities dealing with the public and communal life of the citizens in the belief that there is no need for laws governing their private lives…and that you can leave their private lives outside the scope of the law they will be willing to lead their communal public lives in accordance with the laws – he's not thinking straight.
>
> *(789e10–780a7)*

While he praises Sparta and Crete for advocating communal meals for men, he criticizes them for not applying the same idea to women. He says,

> So the sex which is in any case, in us humans, by its very nature more secretive and devious because of its weakness (*dia to asthenes*), has, through some misplaced indulgence on the part of the lawgiver, been left completely unregulated. The consequence of this omission was that you lost sight of a number of things which, had they been governed by law, would be in a far better state than they are today. After all, it's not just half the battle lost, as you might think, if we sit back and allow women's lives to go unregulated: to whatever extent the female sex has a natural (*physis*) inferiority to the male when it comes to human goodness, to that extent the danger is more than double. Better for the city's well-being, to remedy this, put it straight, and make joint regulations for all activities, for men and women alike.
>
> *(781a2–b3)*

Thus women, like men, should participate in the public life of the city and in particular the practice of communal meals, since the private realm is unregulated and so promotes vice.

Now thus far I have been arguing that Plato sees culture as the primary culprit when it comes to women's inferiority with respect to virtue. But the passage just quoted might appear to suggest that women's nature is the bigger problem, since it claims that women are by nature secretive and devious and inferior to men with respect to virtue. However, this passage is deeply ambiguous.[16] While the Athenian does say that women are secretive and devious due to their weakness (*asthenês*), it is difficult to determine from the context what sense of "weakness" he has in mind. He *might* think that women have some kind of psychological or moral weakness that inclines them to being secretive and devious.[17] But he might also think that women are physically weaker than men, and thus must use devious means to exercise their agency.[18] Or he might think that women are politically weaker than men, and something about this subordinate political position leads to secretiveness and deviousness.[19] I think there is reason to favor this latter reading, for women's subordinate political position is associated with being secluded in the home, and we have seen that Plato thinks that the privacy of the home leads to secretiveness and deviousness; recall, for example, his description of the timocrat in the *Republic*, whose private household allows him to indulge his desire for money in secret, "running away from the law like a boy from his father." Moreover, the Athenian goes on to claim that women are accustomed to a life of seclusion and obscurity and may have to

be forced into the public realm, which further emphasizes that women's secluded lives are the problem (781c). And finally, a passage to which we now turn further confirms that it is the private household, and not women's nature, that is the primary problem.

In *Laws* VII, the Athenian returns to the argument that men and women should share in everything. He says, "We shall still assert that, both in education and in other things, the female sex in our city must as far as possible be no less involved than the male sex" (805c8–d1). The Athenians claims that if they did not assert this, they would have to come up with a different set of rules for women. But what rules? The Athenian canvasses the alternatives on offer and rejects them. The Thracians have the women work on the land, herd farm animals, and generally work as servants; but then they might as well be slaves (805d–c). The Athenians bring all their possessions under one roof and the women act as stewards and engage in domestic labor such as weaving (805e). The Spartans have a compromise: they give women an equal physical and musical education, but then the women, while freed from domestic labor, are stewards of the home. But the Athenian argues that because the women are relegated to the home and freed from military service, they, unlike the Amazons and Sarmatians, fail to develop courage (806a–b). He continues:

> [The lawgiver] must not concern himself only with the male sex, and allow the female sex to enjoy an unregulated life of luxury and expense. That really would leave the city with just about half of what it needs for a happy life, when it could have twice that amount.
>
> *(806c1–6)*

This passage as a whole associates the private household with cowardice, luxury and expense, and claims that allowing women to spend their time in the household leaves the city with half of the happiness it could have, strongly suggesting that women's position in the household is the primary source of any problems with respect to virtue.

What is also interesting to note here is that Plato does not think education is enough of a safeguard against vice, for the Spartan women receive a (decent) education, but it is not enough to sustain their virtue once they live their lives in the private household. Here, Plato is echoing the claim made in *Republic* III that education is not enough of a safeguard against intemperance; instead, a public, communal lifestyle is required (415e–417b). Again, the thought is that allowing women to live a life centered on the home leads to vice and the solution is to have men and women share in the same public and communal way of life as much as possible. He laments, however, and says:

> Now, if we were looking for things to be exactly so, in the minutest detail, then it probably wouldn't ever happen – certainly not while women and children and houses are in private hands, and all arrangements of that kind, in our respective cities, are made on a private basis.
>
> *(807b3–7)*

These observations shed new light on the issue of the relationship between Plato's proposals regarding abolishing the family and his progressive proposals regarding women's role in society. Susan Moller Okin argues that there is a connection between Plato's views on the family and his ideas about women holding position of rule.[20] She claims that Plato is first and foremost critical of the family and wants to dismantle it. This leads him to think about what new role women should play in the city; he assesses women's capabilities and comes to a relatively

positive assessment. So, in the *Republic*, when he abolishes the private family, he argues that women can be guardians. In the *Laws*, however, Plato re-establishes the private family, and as a result, according to Okin, women's role in society is greatly diminished, even though Plato's estimation of women's capabilities remains high. This is because the reintroduction of the private family puts women back into their role as caretakers of the household, leaving less freedom and time for public pursuits. Thus, on Okin's view, Plato's views on whether women can have a significant role in public life in his ideal society rises and falls with the existence of the private family.[21]

The passages we have been examining suggest, however, then the relationship between Plato's views on the family and his ideas about women's public role in society is more complex. While the extent to which women hold positions of rule in the Magnesia is controversial, Okin is surely right that the re-introduction of the private family puts some limitations on women, and in particular on what offices they can hold during their child-bearing years.[22] At the same time, the passages we have been examining suggest that the reintroduction of the private family in the *Laws* gives Plato even more reason to give women an education and a public role in society. That is, the fact that the society is built around the private family and household, that women are influential within families (particularly when it comes to child-rearing), and that there are certain vices associated with the private family and household, pushes Plato to think even harder about how to prevent his citizens from being susceptible to those vices, and this includes arguing for women's education, participation in the military, communal meals, and public roles and offices.

4 Conclusion

I began this chapter by noting that Plato has conflicting attitudes toward women: on the one hand, he thinks they should hold positions of rule, but, on the other hand, he regularly criticizes women as a kind for failing to develop virtue. I noted that some commentators resolve this tension by claiming that Plato's more progressive attitudes are about women as they could be, while his more derogatory comments are about women as they are. The argument of my chapter has gone some way toward vindicating this approach by identifying the problematic aspects of women's position in society and linking it to the vices he associates with them.

At the same time, focusing on Plato's attitudes toward the household might reveal a new problem in Plato's attitudes toward women. I have focused on Plato's critical attitudes toward the private family. But Plato is not wholly critical of the institution of the family; there are some aspects of the institution that he values. Specifically, he values the attitudes of care and concern that people have toward their family members; he simply wishes those attitudes would extend more widely. Thus, in *Republic* III, he claims that the citizens will be told a "noble lie" which encourages them to think of one another as siblings and he hopes this will motivate them to care more for the city (414c–415d). And in *Republic* V, while he abolishes the private family (at least for the guardians), he does not get rid of the notion of family altogether. Instead, he encourages the guardians to think of one another as family and he thinks this will motivate them to care for one another (463b–465b).

But if the institution of the private family cultivates these valuable attitudes of care and concern, and if the primary domain of women is the private family, then it seems that women in particular would exemplify these attitudes of care and concern. This gives rise to a question: if Plato criticizes women as a kind for having the sorts of negative traits that are cultivated in the family, why do we not see him praising women as a kind for having the praiseworthy attitudes that are cultivated in the family?[23] Here is a charitable answer: if Plato's aim is to

encourage men to develop traits like gentleness and care for others, he might think that praising women for having these traits, and thereby labeling them as "womanly," is an ineffective strategy for encouraging men to value and aspire to them, given the sexism of the time.[24]

Notes

1 This is defended by Smith 1983; Vlastos 1995; Levin 1996; Harry and Polansky 2016. There are other ways of reconciling Plato's conflicting attitudes. Some argue that Plato's proposal that women should rule is not meant to be taken seriously (Strauss 1964; Bloom 1968; Saxonhouse 1976; Spelman 1994). Others argue that Plato's proposal that women should rule is meant to be taken seriously, but that it is compatible with his disparaging remarks about women, since he thinks women should rule for the sake of efficiency (Annas 1976) or civic unity (McKeen 2006) or eugenics (Gardner 2000) or to professionalize childrearing (Fletcher 2021), and not because he thinks women are equal to men with respect to virtue.

2 Smith 1983; Vlastos 1995; Levin 1996; Levin 2000; Harry and Polansky 2016 argue that Plato thinks women and men have the same nature with respect to virtue in the *Republic*, but not the *Laws*.

3 Harry and Polansky 2016 argue for a way of interpreting these passages that does not imply that women are by nature inferior to men.

4 There are other passages in the *Laws* that support the idea that with the proper training, women can be (almost) as virtuous as men. For example, the Athenian claims that any city that leaves women uneducated in horseback riding and gymnastics is only half of what it could be (804d–e), suggesting that women are as capable as men with respect to strength and virtue. See also 794d–795b.

5 In *Republic* IV, Socrates says that musical and physical training result in the rule of reason over the non-rational parts of the soul (441e–442b); in book III, Socrates claims the best preservers of their musical and physical education are those that hold onto their belief that they should always do what is best for the city (413e–414a). In the *Laws*, the Athenian claims that the name "law" is given to reasoning that has become the common opinion of the city (645a), that laws aim at the common good (715b), and that the good and virtuous person both knows and is a servant to the law (822e).

6 All translations of the *Republic* from Reeve 2004.

7 Okin 1977, 350.

8 Okin 1977, 349–350.

9 See also Kochin 2002, 103–104, who argues that all people desire to reproduce themselves, and this gives rise to the desire for a private wife and a private household in which to seclude the wife in order to guarantee that the child is one's own.

10 All translation of the *Laws* from Griffith 2016 with some modifications.

11 Translation G.M.A. Grube.

12 Hulme 2022 argues that scholars have often over-stated the extent to which women's lives were restricted to the private realm and draws attention to evidence that women practiced a wide range of trades. She notes, however, that less women than men practiced a trade and that women always had to balance this with their role as caretakers of the private household. Thus, women spent more time both in and concerned with the household than men. See also her contribution to this volume (Chapter 12).

13 See Singpurwalla 2013; Wilburn 2015, 2021, 177–182; Kamtekar 2017 165–185 for fuller and differing accounts of how and why spirit is the ally of reason.

14 See Marechal's paper in this volume for an argument that Plato thinks that women are by nature weaker than men in so far as they have a psychological propensity to get easily dispirited (Chapter 13). While the argument of my paper is not incompatible with her claim (since I do not deny that Plato might think women have a natural impediment to virtue), I think culture plays a larger role in determining the extent to which women are able to develop virtue. More specifically, I think women's role in the private household negatively affects all aspects of women's psychology: it prevents their reason from developing a concern for the common good, strengthens their appetites, and weakens their spirit.

15 See Brill 2015 for an insightful discussion of the role of the private family in Socrates' description of civic and psychic degeneration in *Republic* VIII and IX.

16 See Bobonich 2002, 385–389; Samaras 2010, 188–191 for a detailed discussion of this passage.

17 Levin 2000, 84; McKeen 2006, 541–542 argue that this passage claims that women have a moral weakness.

18 Samaras 2010, 189 claims that Plato has physical weakness in mind.

19 Kochin 2002, 110–111 argues that Plato is referring to political weakness in this passage.
20 Okin 1977.
21 See Jacobs 1978 and Bluestone 1987, 102-108 for objections to Okin's claim that in the *Republic,* Plato is first and foremost interested in abolishing the family and his argument that women should rule is dependent on this.
22 The Athenian is clear, for example, that women will only participate in the military after the age of childbearing and that they are not eligible for public office until the age of 40 (785b). See Saunders 1995 for a detailed discussion of Plato's thoughts on the extent of women's public roles in the *Laws*.
23 See Kochin 2002 and Ironside and Wilburn (forthcoming) for arguments that Plato does want his male citizens to cultivate virtues and traits typically associated with women. But neither argue that Plato explicitly praises women for having these traits.
24 I am grateful to Sara Brill and Catherine McKeen for inviting me to contribute to this volume and for their helpful comments on earlier drafts. I would also like to thank Emily Hulme, Rachana Kamtekar, Patricia Marechal, John Proios, Clerk Shaw, and Josh Wilburn for their valuable comments, as well as audience members at the Workshop on Women and Ancient Greek Philosophy 2021, and the Plato's *Republic* conference at the University of Barcelona 2023.

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Further Reading

For a sharp and influential argument regarding the relationship between Plato's attitudes toward women and the family in the *Republic* and *Laws*, see Susan Moller Okin, "Philosopher Queens and Private Wives: Plato on Women and the Family."
For a balanced discussion of Plato's attitude toward the family in the *Laws*, and Plato's attitude toward women in both the *Republic* and the *Laws*, see Thanassis Samaras, "Family and the Question of Women in the *Laws*."
For a wide-ranging analysis of Plato's attitude toward women and the family in the *Republic* and *Laws* which highlights the rhetorical constraints given by Plato's interlocutors, see Michael Kochin, *Gender and Rhetoric in Plato's Political Thought*.