

PLATO ON FEMALE EMANCIPATION AND THE TRADITIONAL FAMILY

With the growth of the modern women's movement, it is only natural for contemporary philosophers to inquire as to what light the work of our predecessors can shed upon current feminist issues. Unfortunately, as Julis Annas has noted,¹ few previous philosophers have discussed the status and condition of women seriously and, by current social standards, most of what has been written is quite unacceptable. One of the few notable exceptions in this rather depressing situation might be Plato in the *Republic*. In *Republic V* Socrates offers three successive waves of paradox, the first being that amongst the rulers

(I) Men and women will be assigned to fulfil the same social functions and the second being that amongst the rulers

(II) The traditional private family will be abolished.

Given the present efforts of women to achieve economic and social equality and the alleged impact of this struggle upon the nuclear family, the importance of understanding Plato's views on the relation of (I) and (II) is obvious.

In her recent article "Philosopher Queens and Private Wives: Plato on Women and the Family"² Susan Moller Okin has discussed this question. Disputing what she takes to be the views of previous writers concerning *Republic V*, Okin states that

Some have stressed the independence of the two proposals, some have maintained that there is probably a causal link between them but have not committed themselves on its direction, and at least one has asserted, without giving any reasons, that it is the emancipation of women [i.e. (I)] which renders necessary the abolition of the family [i.e. (II)]. For a number of reasons, however, it seems that the causal connection that exists between the two paradoxes goes the other way. . . (p.356)

Thus Okin wishes to maintain that in *Republic V* Plato accepts

(A) If (II), then (I).

In this note I will show that the argument which she offers in support of (A) fails and, in part based upon evidence which Okin herself adduces elsewhere in her paper, that Plato's understanding of the relationship is revealed to be

(B) If (I), then (II).

Okin's main reason for accepting (A) consists of her reading of *Republic V*. According to Okin, Plato introduced women into full membership in the guardian class as a consequence of his having abolished traditional private marriages amongst the guardians. Since

... the female guardians were no longer to be defined in relation to particular men, children, and households [i.e. (II)], it seems that Plato had no alternative but to consider them persons in their own right. If they were to take their place as members of the guardian class, each must share in the functions of that class [i.e. (I)].³ (p. 356-357)

However this argument fails for two reasons. First, as Gregory Vlastos has noted,⁴ that Plato abolished private families amongst the guardians does not imply that the male guardians' female consorts be granted equal status as fellow guardians. Even if we allow

Okin that the abolition of private possessions amongst the guardians would remove the basis of the traditional Greek marriage, Plato still could have consigned the male guardians' female mates to a collective concubinage. In fact, given the attitudes of his contemporaries, unless Plato began with his radical belief that both men and women should be assigned to perform the task of ruling, i.e. (I), and deduced from this the abolition of traditional private marriages amongst the rulers, i.e. (II), then it seems far more likely that Plato would have reduced these women to the status of collective breeding mates, nurses, etc., rather than have raised them to the status of guardians, coequal in all possible respects to their male colleagues.

Second, and more importantly, the actual argument of *Republic V* does not proceed from (II) to (I) but rather from (I) to (II). In contrast to Okin's reading, in *Republic V* Plato argues that (II) is a necessary condition for the male and the female guardians successfully practicing their social functions. Since both the male and the female guardians, as part of their task, are trained to subordinate all of their special private interests in favor of the best interest of the whole *polis*, if it is in the best interest of the *polis* that they forgo private marriages and live communally and if such living arrangements are possible, then the guardians will adopt this way of life. This, of course, is exactly what Plato, at the outset of the second wave, sets out to do: Socrates declares that he will show that for the guardians such communal living both is desirable and is possible.⁵ In short, rather than supporting Okin's interpretation, the actual argument of *Republic V* shows that Plato's position is (B).

Perhaps Okin was misled into adopting her analysis by a consideration which she later mentions, namely that in *Republic V* Plato only introduces (I) after already having asserted (II) (p.359). Though Okin believes that this indicates that Plato's adoption of (II) caused him to accept (I), no such inference as to Plato's motivation is justified and, if it proves anything, the fact that when he is challenged to defend (II) Plato does so by introducing (I) confirms my view that in *Republic V* Plato's belief in (II) rests on his belief in (I), i.e. (B).

Furthermore Okin's citation of a brief passage from the *Laws*,⁶ which allegedly "... shows how aware Plato was of the danger of freeing women from their confined, domestic role without giving them an alternative function" (p.359), simply fails to corroborate her view that Plato's acceptance of (II) caused him to adopt (I). At best all that this passage shows is that Plato's "... dismantling of the family... [forced him] to *rethink* the question of women and their potential abilities" (p.359; my own emphasis), *not* that in rethinking the issue Plato accepts any particular answer to this question, much less one so seemingly radical as (I).

Surprisingly, in two final arguments concerning Plato's views on the effect of retaining the traditional private family, Okin herself presents a major reason why we should understand Plato's position in *Republic V* to be (B) rather than (A). One argument notes that when, amongst the craftsmen of the *Republic*, the traditional private "... family is retained, women continue to be private wives and functional mothers" (p. 360); the other argument is that "... in the *Laws*... Plato's reintroduction of the family has the direct effect of putting [women] back into their traditional place" (p.368). Though the former must be rather weak since, as Okin herself notes, in the *Republic* Plato makes "... no mention... of the women of the inferior classes" (p. 359), in the latter she does successfully marshal considerable evidence for the conclusion which both arguments aim at showing, namely that Plato accepts

(C) If not (II), then not (I).
However, via contraposition, (C) is logically equivalent to (B). Thus, rather than establishing that Plato accepts (A), her own arguments really suggest the exact opposite position, namely that in *Republic V* Plato understands the relation of (I) and (II) to be (B).⁷

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Notes

1. "Plato's *Republic* and Feminism," *Philosophy* Vol. 51 (1976) p. 307.
2. *Philosophy and Public Affairs* Vol. 6 (1977) p. 345 – 369. All parenthesized numbers refer to the pages of this article.
3. Note that in the above quotation Okin unnecessarily confuses the issue by initially labelling the male guardian's female consorts "guardians". Since these women will be members of the guardian class if and only if they fulfill the function of guardians, if, at the outset, we already presume these women to be guardians, then it is pointless to ask what further conditions must be fulfilled in order for these women to become guardians.
4. In "The Status of Persons in Platonic Justice: Women", the second of his three 1976 Carus lectures (unpublished).
5. *Republic* 457 C–D.
6. *Laws* 806 A–C.
7. I would like to thank Professor Gregory Vlastos for his comments on an earlier version of this note and for his kindly making available to me the unpublished material cited in note 4.