

Plato's *Republic* and Feminism

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Not many philosophers have dealt seriously with the problems of women's rights and status, and those that have, have unfortunately often been on the wrong side.¹ In fact Plato and Mill are the only great philosophers who can plausibly be called feminists. But there has been surprisingly little serious effort made to analyse their arguments; perhaps because it has seemed like going over ground already won.

This paper is concerned only with Plato. I shall maintain what may surprise some: that it is quite wrong to think of Plato as 'the first feminist'.² His arguments are unacceptable to a feminist, and the proposals made in *Republic V* are irrelevant to the contemporary debate.

The idea that Plato is a forerunner of Women's Liberation has gained support from the fact that in *Republic V* Plato proposes not only that women should share men's tasks but also that the nuclear family should be abolished.³ This idea is put forward by some radical feminists today as an essential part of any programme for the liberation of women. But I shall argue that Plato's grounds for the proposal are so different from the modern ones that he is in no sense a forerunner of them. Furthermore, where they differ, empirical evidence suggests that it is Plato who is wrong.

Plato's proposals about women⁴ come at the beginning of Book V, where Socrates is represented as having to surmount three waves of opposition. The first wave concerns the admission of women as Guardians; the second concerns the communal life of the Guardians; the third concerns the practicability of the ideal state, and this leads into the discussion

¹ Rousseau, *Émile*, ch. 5, and Schopenhauer, 'On Women', in *Parerga and Paralipomena*, are the most striking examples.

² J. R. Lucas, 'Because You Are a Woman', *Philosophy* (1973). The claim that Plato was a feminist is very common in discussions of *Republic V*, and also in recent feminist discussions. Cf. A. Rosenthal, 'Feminism Without Contradictions', *Monist* (1973): 'The feminism of Plato is exemplary and unparalleled in philosophy or political theory'.

³ The term 'nuclear family' may be found dislikable, but it is useful in avoiding the suggestion that Plato wants to abolish the family in favour of impersonal institutions of a 1984 type. He stresses that family affection will remain, though spread over a wider class of people (463d–e).

⁴ And children, though I shall not be considering them in this paper. In modern discussions the question of children's rights is often raised along with that of women's rights, but significantly no one has ever tried to see Plato as a precursor of these ideas.

which occupies the rest of Books V–VII. The figure of separate ‘waves’ is constantly brought before us; for Plato the capacity of women to be Guardians is a separate question from the replacement of nuclear family life.⁵

Plato begins his treatment of the first problem (451) by extending the metaphor he has used already. Female watchdogs do just what the male ones do, except that they are weaker, and their lives are interrupted by giving birth. By analogy, the same is true of women; though they are weaker than men and their lives are interrupted by childbirth, they are otherwise the same, and so should be given the same upbringing and tasks as men, however distasteful the sight of ugly old women exercising in the gymnasium may be.

Now this is only metaphor—and in fact it does not pretend to be serious argument. Plato wants to give us a picture first, perhaps so that we have a vivid idea of what the arguments are about before they are presented, perhaps also so that he can meet and deflect mere ridicule right at the start, before the serious discussion. Still, the initial metaphor is important, for it continues to influence Plato in the actual argument.

Plato now (453b–c) puts forward what he regards as a serious objection to the idea of women being Guardians. The opponent is made to say that it contradicts the principle on which the ideal state is constructed—namely, that each person is to do his own work, according to his nature (453b5). As women differ greatly in nature from men, they should surely have different functions in the city (453b10–11).

Plato dismisses this objection as merely captious. Of course it is true that different natures should do different things, but it does not follow that men and women should do different things unless it can be shown that they have natures that are different in the important respect of affecting their capacity for the same pursuit. Otherwise it would be like letting bald men, but not hairy men, be cobblers. Plato now claims that men and women differ only in their sexual roles: men impregnate, women give birth (454d–e). The objector fails to show that there is any capacity that is peculiar to women, and Plato claims to show that there are no civic pursuits which belong to a woman as such or to a man as such (this is the part of the argument we shall come back to). Since there are no specific male or female competences, men and women should follow the same pursuits, and women who have natures suitable to be Guardians should therefore be appropriately trained.

⁵ Plato justifies the abolition of the nuclear family solely on grounds of eugenics and of the unity of the state (see below), and there seems no reason why these grounds should not hold even if women were not full Guardians and had a subordinate status; Plato’s second proposal is thus in principle independent of his first.

This is how Plato deals with the first 'wave'. There are three important points to be made about his argument.

1. Firstly, there is something very odd about the actual course of the argument from 455a–d. Plato has established the undeniable point that while women are different from men in some ways and similar in others, discussion at that level is sterile; the interesting question is whether the undisputed differences matter when we decide whether women should be able to hold certain jobs. This is the crucial point not only for Plato but for any sensible discussion of the topic. But Plato's argument is seriously incomplete.

At 455a9–b2 he poses the question, 'Are there any occupations which contribute towards the running of the state which only a woman can do?' Very swiftly he claims to show that there are none. Men are better equipped both mentally and physically (455b4–c6). So in every pursuit men can do better than women, though it is not true that all men do better than all women (455d3–5). Women, he says, are ridiculed when men do such traditional feminine tasks as cooking and weaving better than they do; still, it follows from what has been said that if men bothered to turn their attention to these tasks they would do them better. 'The one sex is, so to speak, far and away beaten in every field by the other' (455d2–3).

Now it is hardly a feminist argument to claim that women do not have a special sphere because men can outdo them at absolutely everything. What is more important in the present context, however, is that Plato sums up his argument at 455d6–e1 by saying that there is no civic pursuit which belongs to a woman as such *or to a man as such*. But while he has argued that there are no pursuits appropriate for a woman as such, because men could do them all better, where is the argument that there are no specifically *male* competences? There is not a trace of any such argument in the text, nor of any materials which could be used for one.

This is a serious gap, both because it is the point that the objector, if he were not being shepherded by Socrates (cf. 455a5–b2) would in fact press, and because what Plato says about male and female capacities actually provides material for such an objector.

Anyone acquainted with the modern literature will realize at once that someone objecting to the idea that men and women should share all roles is not very worried about whether there are some jobs that only *women* are suited for. The reason for this is obvious enough: jobs that women usually do are badly paid or unpaid and lack status, and men are generally not interested in doing them. What really interests the objector is the claim that there are some occupations in society which only *men* are suited for: being doctors, lawyers, judges, taking part in politics by voting or holding office, owning and managing property. In the Athens of Plato's day women were not allowed to do any of these things, and the average Athenian would no doubt have simply assumed that they could not do them (as we can see from Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazusae*).

Any feminist must take this objection seriously and meet it, simply because it has been historically the main objection to attempts by women to enter hitherto male professions or obtain hitherto male rights like the vote.⁶ Yet Plato not only does nothing to meet this overwhelmingly obvious objection, he even provides materials for the objector. At 455b4–c6 he distinguishes three ways in which a gifted nature differs from an ungifted one. The gifted learn quickly, the ungifted only with difficulty. The gifted do not have to be taught very long before they can go on to make discoveries of their own; the ungifted need long instruction and are hard put to it to retain what they have learnt. The gifted can put their thoughts into action; the ungifted are clumsy. Plato then asks rhetorically, ‘Do you know of any human pursuit in which men do not greatly excel women in all these qualities?’ Clearly the answer is, ‘No’. But if men always excel women in these very important respects, the objector has all he wants: surely there are some pursuits (e.g. generalship) where these qualities are needed in a high degree and which it is therefore not reasonable to open to women. It is no good saying, as Plato at once does, that, ‘many women are better than many men at many things’ (455d3–4). The objector does not need to claim that all men are always better than all women in a specific respect. If only men excel in a quality, then if efficiency is our aim⁷ surely that makes it reasonable to regard a pursuit that requires a high degree of that quality as suited specially to men. The fact that women will not invariably come bottom is neither here nor there. In Plato’s fiercely specialized state, the aim will be the maximum number of alpha performances.

This is an important argument. Scientific research into sex differences is an area of great controversy precisely because its results do have important social consequences; if men and women did have different types of intelligence, for example, then different types of education would surely be appropriate. But why does Plato not even notice the gap in his argument, or the ammunition he is handing to the opposition? Of course he does not want to make the opponent’s case seem strong. But it is possible that he genuinely does not see the disastrous relevance of his claims about men’s superior intellectual gifts to his point about distinct fields of activity. He may be doing here what Aristotle often criticizes him for—taking metaphor for argument.

⁶ Mill in *The Subjection of Women* deals with this type of argument as an objection to women having political rights. Nowadays the idea that women differ intellectually from men is directed rather against women having serious careers comparable to men’s; cf. C. Hutt, *Males and Females*, ch. 9.

⁷ As it certainly is Plato’s aim. He does not use the patronizing argument that on grounds of ‘respect for persons’ women should have equal pay and status with men even if their contribution is recognized to be inferior.

The metaphor of male and female watchdogs with which the subject was introduced would naturally lead Plato to think predominantly of human tasks which are analogous. And this is what we find. At 455e1, after the argument just discussed, he mentions that women are weaker than men at all pursuits. This suits his use of the analogy with the dogs, for there the difference in strength between male and female was not sufficient reason to give them different tasks. And in the whole discussion that follows he simply shelves the question of intellectual differences between men and women. He never seriously discusses activities where these differences would matter and which are nevertheless to be open to women in the ideal state. There is only one reference to women officials (460b9–10) and even then they have a traditionally 'feminine' role (inspecting newborn children). There is possibly a reference to women doctors at 454d1–3 (but the text is very uncertain), and some women are said to be capable of being doctors at 455e6–7. Against these two (or possibly three) meagre and offhand references to women doing jobs requiring some intellectual capacity, there are at least nine references⁸ to women fighting, serving in the army and doing gymnastics. On this topic Plato's discussion is full and emphatic. He is taking seriously the idea that the life of the human female is like that of any other female animal, with reproduction making only short breaks in physical activity otherwise like the male's. No doubt this is because he is mainly interested in the eugenic possibilities for his 'herd'.⁹ The picture of the female watchdog diverts him from the problems he faces given his beliefs about female intellectual capacities.

So Plato's argument here is not one which a feminist would find useful or even acceptable. In any case, it has a serious gap, and it is not clear that Plato could repair it except by abandoning his beliefs about the intellectual inferiority of women.¹⁰

2. Secondly, the argument is not based on, and makes no reference to, women's desires or needs. Nothing at all is said about whether women's present roles frustrate them or whether they will lead more satisfying lives as Guardians than as house-bound drudges.

This is rather striking, since women in fourth-century Athens led lives that compare rather closely to the lives of women in present-day Saudi

⁸ 452a4–5, a10–b3, b8–c2, 453a3–4, 457a6–9, 458d1–2, 466c6–d1, 467a1–2, 468d7–e1.

⁹ The word is used literally at 459e1, e3, and (possibly) as a metaphor at 451c7–8.

¹⁰ It is, however, true that Plato's argument breaks some ground at least, in making it possible to consider women as individuals and not as a class with fixed capacities; at 455e–456a, after the argument just considered, women are compared with other women in various ways, not with men. Hence Plato has removed objections to considering his proposals at all on the ground that women as a class are incompetent.

Arabia. The place of women in Athenian life is summed up forcibly in the notorious statement, 'We have courtesans for our pleasure, concubines for the requirements of the body, and wives to bear us lawful children and look after the home faithfully'. (Pseudo-Demosthenes, *Against Neaera*, 122). The contrast between this and the life of the Guardians is so striking that one would have thought some comparison inevitable. Yet Plato shows no interest in this side of the picture. Later on in Book V (465b12–c7) he talks about the liberating effect of communal life in freeing people from the struggle to make ends meet and the need to hand one's money over to women and slaves to take care of it. Here the woman's position in the household is presented as something that the *man* is to be liberated from. There is nothing about the effect on *her* of communal living.

Of course Plato is not bound to be interested in the psychology of women, but his complete lack of interest underlines the fact that his argument does not recommend changing the present state of affairs on the ground that women suffer from being denied opportunities that are open to men.

His argument has quite different grounds, in fact. The state benefits from having the best possible citizens, and if half the citizens sit at home doing trivial jobs then usable talent is being wasted. Here Mrs Huby gets the point exactly right: 'There was nothing worth while for a woman to do at home; she should therefore share in man's work outside the home' (*Plato and Modern Morality*, p. 23). Plato's sole ground for his proposals is their usefulness to the state; the point is repeated several times.¹¹

Of course there is nothing non-feminist about this argument.¹² But Plato's argument gains rather different significance from the fact that this is his *only* ground. His argument is authoritarian in spirit rather than liberal; if a woman did not want to be a Guardian, Plato would surely be committed to compelling her to serve the state. Though this question never arises in the *Republic*, at *Laws* 780a–c the Athenian says openly that

¹¹ 456c4–9: the question is, are the proposals best, *beltista* (Jowett translates this and similar phrases by 'most beneficial'). At 457a3–4 the proposals are 'best for the city', *ariston polei*. At 457b1–2 women's nakedness in the gymnasium will be 'for the sake of what is best', *tou beltistou heneka*, and people who find it ludicrous will be foolish, because 'what is useful (*ōphelimon*) is fair and what is harmful (*blaberon*) is ugly', and the proposals are useful as well as possible (c1–2). Cf. 452d3–e2, where the supposed analogy of men exercising naked is justified in terms of benefit.

¹² It is found even in Firestone (*The Dialectic of Sex*, pp. 206–210), though her main argument is not utilitarian. Interestingly, it is not the main argument in the utilitarian Mill, for whom the main objection to sexual inequality is the curtailment of the freedom, and hence the happiness, of women. Mill causes confusion, however, by also including utilitarian arguments.

women are to be compelled to attend the communal meals (all that is left of the communal life of the *Republic*), because most women will be shy and used to seclusion and so will not want to take part. This is rather far from modern liberal arguments that women should have equal opportunities with men because otherwise they lead stunted and unhappy lives and lack the means for self-development.

This point may have been missed because at 456c1–2 Plato says that the present set-up of society is 'contrary to nature' (*para phusin*). We are not, however, entitled to claim that for Plato confinement to the home thwarts the nature of women. What is 'contrary to nature' surely has to be understood as the opposite of what has just been said to be 'according to nature' (*kata phusin*, 456c1), and this is the principle that similar natures should follow similar pursuits. The present set-up is contrary to nature only in the sense that women do not in fact do jobs that they are capable of doing. There is no suggestion in the present passage that by 'contrary to nature' Plato means anything stronger, such as for example that women's present roles are imposed on them in a way which deforms their lives. (This is not a point peculiar to the discussion of women. The arguments in Book II that each person should have one occupation make no appeal to people's happiness or satisfaction in doing only one thing. Cf. 370b–c, 374b–d.)

In the *Laws* also (805a–b) Plato says that it is stupid not to train and bring up boys and girls in the same way to have the same pursuits and purposes, and adds that nearly every state is half a state as things are, whereas it could double its resources (cf. 806c). For Plato the reason why housewifery is not a real occupation is that it makes no irreplaceable contribution to the state, and absorbs time and energy that could be put to publicly beneficial use. He is completely unconcerned with the sort of objection which is nowadays familiar, namely that housewifery is incapable of providing an intelligent woman with a satisfying life, and leads to boredom, neurosis and misery.¹³

3. The third point leads on naturally from the second, since it is also a consequence of the fact that Plato justifies his proposals solely in terms of benefit to the state. The proposals for women are not a matter of their *rights*. There is nothing in *Republic* V that one could apply to the question of women's rights; the matter is simply not raised.

Of course Plato nowhere discusses men's rights either, and notoriously has no word for 'rights', any more than he has for 'duty' or 'obligation'. But the point is not lost if we abandon talk of rights and merely notice instead that Plato nowhere says that his proposals for women are *just*.

¹³ Of course there are other objections to housewifery as an occupation for women, e.g. that it is hard, unpleasant and unpaid, and these may well be more important from the viewpoint of practical reforms, but the charge that it does not satisfy a woman's capacities is the most relevant to discussion of Plato's argument.

It is remarkable in a work which makes proposals about women as radical as the *Republic's*, and which has as much to say about justice as the *Republic* has, that inequality of the sexes is not presented as an injustice, and that the proposals to treat the sexes equally are not presented as measures which will make the state more just than its rivals. Yet the ideal state is just for reasons, explained in Books II–IV, which have nothing to do with the position of women in it. Nothing is said about any connection between the decline to the various forms of unjust state and the position of women in them.¹⁴

In fact it is rather unclear how the proposals of Book V relate to justice at all, whether in the state or in the soul. If women are to be Guardians, they must have just souls. We know from Book IV that the just soul has rightly organized parts—the *logistikón* or rational element, *epithumētikon* or desiring element, and *thumoeides*, the part usually called ‘spirit’ or the like. If the Guardian women are just, presumably they have these parts of soul. But do women’s souls have a thumoeidic part? As it is introduced in Book IV, *thumoeides* appears to be a capacity for aggressive and violent behaviour, visible even in animals, but, one would have thought, notably lacking in fourth-century Athenian women. It is true that *thumoeides* is not limited to unthinking aggression, but even the more developed forms of behaviour that Plato regards as typically thumoeidic display what Gosling¹⁵ calls ‘admiration for manliness’, what we might call *machismo*. Unless the account of the just soul is to be done all over again for women Guardians to take account of female psychology, Plato must assume that women have the same aggressive tendencies as men. And in Book V he does make this assumption, and says that some women at any rate will be of the predominantly thumoeidic type (456a1–5). But this seems to conflict with his statements elsewhere which say or imply that women’s psychology differs from men’s precisely in that they lack the thumoeidic qualities of courage and ‘guts’; by contrast with men they are weak, devious and cowardly.¹⁶

¹⁴ However, the equal and free association of men and women appears as one of the *bad* effects of the completely democratic state (563b7–9). This is discussed below.

¹⁵ Plato, ch. 3, ‘Admiration for Manliness’. As the title suggests, Gosling conducts the discussion wholly in terms of male ideals, and does not remark on any difficulty arising from the fact that half the Guardians will be women.

¹⁶ *Laws* 802e declares that pride and courage are characteristic of men (and should be expressed in their music) whereas what is characteristic of women is restraint and modesty. Plato seems to endorse in the *Meno* the idea that the scope of men’s and women’s virtue is different—that of a man is to manage his own and the city’s affairs capably, that of a woman is to be a good and thrifty housewife and to obey her husband (71e, 73a). This makes it hard to see how women can possess the thumoeidic part of the soul necessary for the complete justice of a Guardian. The *Laws* concludes, consistently, that a woman has less potentiality for virtue than a man (781b2–4): Plato says that it is women’s weakness and timidity that make them sly and devious.

I have argued so far that for Plato his proposals about women are justified entirely by the resulting benefit to the state and not at all by women's needs or rights. It is important that the state in question is the ideal state. As far as I can see, there is nothing in *Republic V* which would commit Plato to the view that it was unjust for fourth-century Athenian women to be treated as they were. The proposals for women arise when the just constitution of the ideal state has been determined. There seems no reason why analogous proposals should be made in an unreformed state. Why should women be able to do men's jobs where this will merely have the result that instead of operating in a private sphere in the home, they will be operating in a private sphere at work? Plato would have no grounds for arguing that it would be best and useful for the state for this to happen.

Is this an ungenerous way to take the spirit of Plato's proposals? We should notice that even in the ideal state Plato limits his proposals for women to the Guardian class. There is nothing to suggest that the worker class do not live like fourth-century Greeks, with the women at home doing the cooking and weaving. This seems to show that whether women should do men's jobs depends, for Plato, on the nature of the jobs. The ideal state might contain many discontented potters' wives wanting to be potters; but presumably the Guardians (male and female) would only tell them to stay at home and learn *sophrosunē* in carrying out their appointed tasks.

If Plato's argument applies only to the performance of tasks which contribute towards the public good in the direct way that the Guardians' tasks do, it is clearly irrelevant to modern arguments for equality of opportunity. No modern feminist would argue that women should be able to do men's jobs when this will result in greater direct benefit to the state, and otherwise stay at home. The moment it could be shown that the state did not need the extra women public servants, there would be no grounds for letting them have the jobs.

It would in fact be surprising if Plato's argument were relevant to women's rights, because it is a purely utilitarian argument. This is, however, precarious ground for a feminist, for once more efficient means to the desired end are found, women can at once be thrust back into the home. Mill begins *The Subjection of Women* with the statement that 'the legal subordination of one sex to the other is wrong in itself'. Plato is not committed to this by the *Republic*, and I see no reason whatsoever to believe that he thought that it was true. He thinks only that the present situation is wasteful and inefficient, and, *under ideal conditions*, should be changed.

This makes it easier to understand what seemed puzzling earlier, namely that Plato should combine a belief that the jobs of (Guardian) men should be open to women with a belief that women are physically and mentally inferior to men. It has always been difficult for those who see Plato as a

feminist to understand why he stresses so much the comparative feebleness of women's contribution, for it is not usual to combine proposals like Plato's with extreme contempt for women. But on a purely utilitarian argument, since women represent a huge pool of untapped resources, it does not matter in the least if their contribution is not as good as that of men; and that is just what Plato seems to think.

Throughout Plato's works there are scattered examples of conventional contempt for women. At *Cratylus* 392b1–d10, for example, we are told that the Trojan men called Hector's son Astyanax and the Trojan women called him Scamandrius, and that this means that the former is the right name, as men are more intelligent than women. Of course nothing can be built on this kind of remark, and it would be unprofitable as well as depressing to comb Plato's works for such passages. Nevertheless they are significant in that taken together they build up a consistent tone which is hard to reconcile with an attitude that could be called feminist. Even in Book V itself Plato remarks that the practice of despoiling the dead shows a 'small and womanish mind' (469d7)—this in a context where half of the army doing the killing and despoiling are women. This might be put down to carelessness were it not for the *Timaeus*, where Plato not only says (42e), 'Human nature being twofold, the better sort was that which should thereafter be called man', but says twice (42b3–c4, 90e6–91a4) that evil and cowardly men are reborn as women, that being the first step downwards to rebirth as animals. There could hardly be a more open declaration that women are inferior to men. If the *Timaeus* was written at roughly the same time as the *Republic*, this embarrasses those who want to see Plato in the *Republic* as a feminist. But if what I have argued is right, then the *Timaeus* is quite compatible with the *Republic*. Even if women are inferior to men, it will still be of advantage to the state to have women do what men do if it is of public benefit. The argument in the *Republic* does not need, or claim, more than this.

There is one striking and revealing passage which shows that even in the *Republic* Plato holds the view of women's inferiority which has its uglier expression in the *Timaeus*. At 563b7–9 equality (*isonomia*) and freedom between men and women turns up as one of the deplorable corruptions of the democratic state. Now what is wrong with the democratic state, in Plato's view, is that unequals are treated equally—young and old, for example, and slave and free. The only possible inference is that Plato himself holds that women are naturally inferior to men,¹⁷ and that any actual state where they are on terms of equality has corrupted the natural hierarchy. It is true that in his hostile portrait of the democratic state Plato carries over some details from contemporary Athens (for example, the fact that slaves cannot be distinguished at sight from free

¹⁷ Cf. *Laws* 917a4–6, where this is clearly brought out.

men by their clothes) and so not all features of his description embody serious theses. But even at his most careless Plato could hardly have thought of fourth-century Athens as an example of a place where men and women were on terms of freedom and equality. The passage must, then, be taken as a deliberate and important statement of what Plato believes, and it shows conclusively that the *Republic* does not differ on this point from the *Timaeus*. Even in the *Republic*, Plato never advocates the view that men and women are equal.

It comes as no surprise, then, that when Plato stops believing that the ideal state can be realized, he also stops thinking that women should do the same jobs as men, even in a greatly improved state. In the *Laws* he has abandoned the idea that men and women might be totally devoted to the state as the Guardians were. And the *Republic's* radical proposals about women lapse. Although women are still educated and forced into public to some extent, this is merely so that they can be controlled, since their potential for virtue is less than men's and they would get up to mischief (780d9–781b6). They are still to learn how to fight, but only so as to defend their homes and children in the last resort (804–806, 813e–814c). The only office they hold seems to be that of organizing a kind of women's moral vigilante group. Otherwise they are left in the position of fourth-century Greek women. They take no part in any political process, they are unable to own or inherit property in their own right, and they are perpetual legal minors always under the authority of male relatives or guardians. Women are married off by their fathers or brothers, and an heiress passes with the property to the nearest male relative,¹⁸ as was the normal Greek practice of the time.¹⁹

Plato's argument that women should be Guardians thus has three crucial defects: it is not valid against an anti-feminist, it is irrelevant to facts about women's desires, and it is irrelevant to the injustice of sexual inequality.

Plato's proposal to abolish nuclear family life has also led to his being associated with radical feminists who claim that women can only be liberated from confining sexual roles by providing an alternative to the nuclear family.²⁰ Here again, however, we should look carefully at what Plato actually says.

¹⁸ A woman can choose her own husband, if she is an heiress, only in the extremely unlikely situation of there being absolutely no suitable male relative available; and even then her choice is to be in consultation with her guardians.

¹⁹ Even so, a limited amount of gymnastic activity and fighting is left open for women in the *Laws*; this shows how little this has to do with real liberation of women from traditional roles, in spite of the fuss made over it in the *Republic*.

²⁰ At this point I distinguish 'radical feminists' from 'feminists', because clearly one can be a feminist without believing that the nuclear family must be abolished.

He attacks the second 'wave' with the proposal (457c10–d1) that 'all the women should be in common'. (It is worth noticing that he describes this always from the male point of view. He talks of the *koinōnia* of women and children, *koinōnia* being a word used in Attic legal documents to mean joint ownership of property, and refers to the 'correct acquisition and use' of women and children.²¹) Socrates says that he had supposed the usefulness of the system to be obvious, so that he would only have to show its possibility, but he is made to describe both. Here again we find that neither justice nor people's actual desires enter in; it is the usefulness to the state alone²² which is in question to justify the measures.

After describing communal life Socrates starts to say why this is the best possible system. He has already pointed out its eugenic advantages. But these are subservient to the main justification, which is given at 462–466. The greatest good for a state is unity; the greatest evil, disunity, which leads to disruption and instability. He undertakes to show that the system of communal living is the best possible one because it produces the highest degree of unity in a state. A Guardian will regard all his contemporaries as brothers and sisters and have filial feelings to all those of an age to be his or her parents. The Guardians will not be tied to houses and families; all their emotional energy will be released for service to the state, and will not be wasted in quarrels over individual concerns. Plato writes at length and eloquently on the superiority of the state which is unitary in this way, so that it can be compared to a body which feels pain as a whole when one part of it is damaged. At the end of the passage he says that in view of all that he has described the life of the Guardians is 'nobler and better' than that of an Olympic victor.

Plato is thus miles away from modern preoccupation with the abolition of the nuclear family as a means to personal liberation and a prerequisite for the achievement of a more satisfying personal life. Plato is uninterested in the question of whether the life of an individual is stunted by the

²¹ I owe the point about *koinonia* to S. Pomeroy, 'Feminism in Book V of Plato's *Republic*', *Apeiron* (1974). Pomeroy holds the implausible view that because Plato uses of the male Guardians' relation to the female Guardians language which can be used of property-owning, it is his considered conclusion that the female Guardians are simply the property of the males.

²² 457d6–9: Socrates thinks it obvious that abolition of the nuclear family is useful (*ōphelimon*) and a very great good (*megiston agathon*). Its justification is characterized as proof that it is not only possible but useful (*ōphelimon*) at d4–5, e3–4. At 458b5–6 it is said that it would be the greatest possible benefit to the city and to the Guardians (*sumphorōtat' an eiē prachthenta tēi te polei kai tois phulaxin*). At 461e7 the *koinōnia* of women and children is said to be best (*beltistē*). At 462a2–7 Socrates says that we must see whether or not it fits the greatest good of a city (i.e. unity); at 464b5–6 it is said to be the cause (*aitia*) of this.

nuclear family. His obsession with unity and stability in a state points in the opposite direction from increasing free self-realization and self-direction on the part of the individual.

It is interesting to compare Plato here with the modern radical feminist Shulamith Firestone in her book *The Dialectic of Sex*. Firestone is just as radical as Plato about abolishing the nuclear family in favour of communal living, and just as visionary about the results. Abolishing the nuclear family, according to her, would 'spread family emotions over the whole society . . . if *no one* had exclusive relationships with children, then . . . the natural interest in children would be diffused over all children rather than narrowly concentrated on one's own' (p. 196 n. 2). But for Firestone this should be done because of the psychological and sexual liberation of people which according to her would result. Until the nuclear family is replaced, she argues, people will be trapped in institutions which are 'psychologically destructive', and their sexuality will be frustrated and unfulfilled.²³ Plato, on the other hand, does not regard the family as psychologically destructive, or rather it does not enter his account of people's psychology at all. As for sexuality, Plato is so far from wanting to liberate it that the communal life of the Guardians is made the basis of a very strict regulation of sex life. No importance at all is given to individuals' choices; eugenic considerations are paramount. The only value Plato can see in sexual desire is the way it can be used to make sexual gratification a kind of bribe for doing well in battle. But even here the advantage is that a brave man will have many children and thus improve the state's stock. No value is attributed to satisfying sexual desire itself (468c5–6; 460b).

Thus for Plato the abolition of the nuclear family is meant to lead, not to greater individual personal and sexual fulfilment, but rather to a deeper sinking of the individual self in the concerns of the city. It is 'privatization' (*idiōsis*) of feelings of pleasure and pain (462b8) that tends to break up a state and should be fought against. What is wrong with the nuclear family is not that it represses the individual but that it does so in the interests of too narrow an ideal, and Plato wants to abolish it in the interests of an authoritarian state. Modern radical feminists want to abolish it in the interests of greater self-realization on the part of individuals.

Interestingly, history seems to indicate that here it is Plato who is wrong. Authoritarian states have not in fact tried to abolish the nuclear family to increase loyalty to the state. If anything it is the other way round; devotion to the state is fostered not by breaking family ties but rather by strengthening them. The growth of Stalinism in Russia was marked by the imposition

²³ *Op. cit.*, pp. 51–54, ch. 3 part 1, 183–186, 187–195, 210–224. This is a common theme in women's liberation literature. Cf. Limpus, 'Liberation of Women, Sexual Politics and the Family' (New England Free Press), Millett, *Sexual Politics*, especially pp. 61–62, 120–127.

of repressive measures designed to strengthen the nuclear family, undoing the measures passed after the Revolution, which were designed to weaken it. The later laws, which made divorce difficult and raised the status and esteem of marriage and child-bearing, were not relaxed until de-Stalinization in the fifties.²⁴ Nazi Germany from the very first linked the cult of the state with emphasis on the traditional family. Goebbels put it very clearly: 'When we eliminate women from public life, it is . . . because we want to give them back their essential honour . . . The outstanding and highest calling of woman is always that of wife and mother . . .' The Nazis passed several laws designed specifically to strengthen the family as an institution.²⁵ That two such different authoritarian states should strengthen the nuclear family in this way can hardly be a coincidence.

Thus not only are Plato's intentions opposite to those of modern radical feminists, but his analysis comes off worse than theirs in the face of empirical findings.

We can now see how wrong is the sort of interpretation of Plato to be found in Crossman's *Plato Today* (which I choose as representative of many interpretations of *Republic V*): 'The abolition of marriage was a tremendous assertion of the rights of woman' (p. 122); 'Plato was a feminist not only in the sense that he wanted to free the best women from the bondage of the family; he also wanted to free them from the ambitions which that bondage imposed on them' (p. 123); 'Plato faces us with the full problem of "feminism"' (p. 125).

Crossman not only accepts the familiar picture but also accepts the usual objection to it, namely that it flies in the face of human nature. Most people, he claims, need lasting sexual unions and family life, and it is no good for a husband and wife to try to live on terms of equality, because the husband's work will inevitably be better than the wife's and all that will result is an unequal rivalry. 'The failure of many modern marriages must be attributed to Platonic ideals' (p. 125).

If what I have argued is right, we shall have to look elsewhere for the cause of the failure of many modern marriages. Plato is not interested in the rights of women, nor in freeing women (or men) from the bonds of the family. What he is passionately interested in is the prospect of a unified and stable state in which some at least of the citizens work solely for the state's good. The proposals about women and the family are means to that

²⁴ Millett, *op. cit.*, pp. 168–176, Firestone, pp. 198–199, Rowbotham, *Women, Resistance and Revolution*, ch. 6, and her introduction to Alexandra Kollontai's pamphlet 'Women Workers Struggle for Their Rights' (Falling Wall Press); W. Reich, *The Sexual Revolution*, part 2.

²⁵ Millett, *op. cit.*, pp. 157–168, where solid facts are cited which refute the silly attempt by A. Stassinopoulos (*The Female Woman*, pp. 76–78) to show that the Nazis were ideologically against the family on the ground that one Nazi sociologist wanted to replace family life with separate male communes.

Plato's *Republic* and Feminism

end, and as the vision of that end fades, so does Plato's interest in those means. Plato the feminist is a myth.

Mill begins *The Subjection of Women* with the statement that the subordination of one sex to the other is wrong in itself. It seems to me that to be a feminist one has to begin from this point. But it is a point that Plato never reaches. And it is not surprising that he never reaches it, for he is not going in that direction at all.²⁶

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²⁶ I am grateful to James Dybikowski for very helpful comments on an earlier draft. He will still think that I am too hard on Plato. I am also grateful to Graeme Segal for improvements in the present version.