

Does Plato's Argument for the Equality of the Genders in the Guardian Class Liberate Women?

Shayma Bashawieh

In one of his renowned pieces of writing, the Republic, Plato sets out to construct the ideal city, during this process Plato finds himself faced with the obstacle of what role to assign the females and children of the guardian class. As a consequence of Plato's proposed solution for this class various debates over the possibility of Plato being one of the first feminist has resulted with arguments available to support both ends of the spectrum. Though it was generally agreed at first that Plato is indeed a feminist, close speculation of his works and further critical analysis by female theorists have made possible different interpretations of his decision. While it should be acknowledged that both interesting and viable points have been raised by the different perspectives regarding this topic, this paper will sympathize more with the views of liberal feminists. Prominent liberal feminists such as Susan M. Okin argue- rather convincingly- that Plato, though somewhat a feminist is rather an insufficient one who made the decisions regarding female guardians not for the emancipation of women but instead to make the city of words both possible to construct and durable (Okin, 1977, pp.356-357).

Those familiar with the Republic will certainly agree that the guardians are regarded by Plato as an important class in the city of words, as some of its members are to be future philosopher kings. Hence, the degree of success in establishing a stable guardian class is one of the key factors which make the city a possibility as opposed to meagre wishful thinking. That being said, any decision made by Plato regarding the guardian class, be it the question of the role of women or the nature of the soul required by an individuals in order to qualify as a member is no simple decision.

The topic of guardian women and children is discussed in book 5 of the Republic after Plato is challenged by Adeimantus and the remaining audience to explain what the specific roles of the females and children of the guardian class is to be (449c7-450a). Plato, though realising his explanation will be controversial as it defies convention is hesitant to share his views but nonetheless continues to do so as he realises he has no alternative. In response to this question Plato asks:

Do we think that the females of our guard-dogs should join in guarding precisely what the male guard, hunt with them, and share everything with them? Or do we think that they should stay indoors and look after the house, on the grounds that they are incapable of doing this because they must bear and rear the puppies, while the males should work and have the entire care of the flock? (451d4-4519).

In response his audience decides that female guardians should share in the duty of guarding the city with the male guardians. From this moment on it could be argued that Plato has already won the argument of what should be the main function of the female guardians, as, by deciding that female guardians should guard with the males his audience automatically- without realising- have rendered the natural differences between the sexes- especially differences pertaining to procreation-irrelevant, in respect to the function an individual is best suited at naturally performing. Furthermore, Plato has repeatedly emphasized that a city can only remain just if its citizens perform their naturally assigned function and do not meddle with other individuals functions (423d-423d6). Thus, it logically follows that the just thing to do is make the females with natural guardian abilities perform their functions as guardians since not permitting this will in fact be unjust. Plato argues that there are many differences between individuals of the same and different genders, therefore only those differences relevant to their main function should be considered, thereby justifying his claim that reproductive differences between the genders are irrelevant in respect to their purpose or main function (Okin, 1977, p.357). This argument raises the concept of meritocracy in its most undeveloped form. This is for the reason that- Plato believes- though women are generally “weaker than men” (455e), some females are better suited by nature to become guardians while some males are not, therefore justice would dictate that those naturally suited to be guardians be awarded that status and hence enjoy equality of the sexes by means of merit (454d7-454e2). Plato argues it does not make sense to ignore ones natural ability or main function for the sole purpose of them belonging to a certain gender.

When Plato’s reasoning is viewed in light of female traditional roles during classical Greece, the reforms seem radical. This is especially evident when one puts into consideration that Athenian women were amongst other things not regarded as full citizens, not allowed to participate in the affairs of the polis (something regarded of paramount importance in Greek democracy), and were viewed as properties either owned by their fathers or husbands (Noble et. Al., 2011, pp70-71). Therefore, at first sight it is understandable that Plato’s decision to grant

equality to the female guardians seem radical when it means- contrary to convention- that women can now dine with the opposite sex, receive education (both physical and musical), bear arms and fight in the battle field alongside their male counterparts as equals.

On the other hand, when Plato's decision is viewed from a contemporary liberal feminist standpoint there are numerous shortcomings in his decision to liberate the guardian class, rendering him an inadequate feminist, if indeed a feminist at all. The first, and most logical argument that comes to mind is, if Plato was really concerned with freeing women from the constraints of traditional roles why then was this emancipation not extended to apply to all the females in the city of words as opposed to only the guardian class. Okin's gives various explanations for Plato's decision to take this approach in her essay 'Philosophers queens and private wives: Plato on women and the family'.

Firstly Okin argues that the reason for the emancipation of guardian women is not to award female's equality of opportunity as understood presently (1977, p.346), but instead to make the city of words possible to construct. Plato stresses that in order for the city to survive it should function as one whole and avoid factions at all costs, when he says, "Now do we know of any greater evil for a city than what tears it apart and makes it many instead of one? Or any greater good than what binds it together and makes it one?" (462a9-462b1). Consequently, in order to avoid the development of factions in the city Plato decides the abolition of the traditional nuclear family is necessary. This is because the family is viewed by Plato as an institution that divided the unity of the guardian class, as each guardian will have a priority held more dearly to him than the protection of the city, making the guardian first and foremost a husband and/or a father rather than a protector of the city, thereby creating conflict of interest between the class, which would eventually lead to its deterioration.

Additionally the abolition of the family is important because there was "various areas of life where it had not yet become clear whether family or civic obligations should prevail" (Okin, 1977, p.352). To illustrate this point Plato gives the example of the timocratic youth being transferred into an oligarch as a result of the dangers posed by conflicts of interest arising from strong familial bonds and sense of obligation:

It first happens when he listens to his mother complaining that her man is not one of the rulers and that she is at a disadvantage among the other women as a result. Next, she sees that he is not very serious about money, either; does not fight or exchange insults in private lawsuits or in the public assembly, but takes easily everything of that sort: has a mind always absorbed in its own thoughts; and does not overvalue her or undervalue her either. As a result of all those things, she complains and tells her son that his father is unmanly and too easygoing, and makes a litany of the other sorts of things women love to recite on such occasion. (549c7-549d7)

Here the reader is presented with a scenario of a young man being corrupted by his mother as she is dissatisfied with the life choices her husband makes, therefore convincing her son to choose a different course of action, one that will benefit her private family's interest at the cost of harming the city. When looked at from this perspective, it could be argued quite rightly so that women were viewed as a threat in Plato's city of words. Their power was exercised through the family which had to be abolished if the unity of the guardian class is to be attained. This leads to the problem of what to do with the guardian women if the traditional family is abolished, as the only social role women occupy has been eliminated automatically depriving these women of a purpose or function in their society. At this point Plato, more so out of necessity rather than any other reason decides to grant equality to the female guardians as he cannot fit them into any other role (Okin, 1977, pp. 356-357), otherwise he would have emancipated the entire female population and not just the guardians. The reason to emancipate the guardian females can be looked at as a means to an end, a necessary solution adopted to realise the city of words.

The emancipation of female guardians and the abolition of the traditional family also serve a secondary and equally important purpose. In consequence of these decisions the guardian class will be consolidated further, as their bond will grow since the whole class functions as a single family, strengthening the loyalty and bond one guardian feels towards the next (Okin, 1977, 355). This automatically eliminates the threat of conflict of interest and the development of different factions threatening the survival of the guardian class. Moreover, it will make the guardians more likely to succeed on the battlefield as it is highly unlikely an individual will abandon his wounded kin in the battle field (471c8-471d).

Another argument presented by the liberal feminist school of thought is Plato's eugenics project. Plato talks about the mating process that involves rigged lotteries in order to arrange for the best male guardians to mate with the best female guardians, while at the same time allowing the guardian class to believe these incidences occur as a result of chance rather than careful planning. The rigged lottery coupled with the reward of the 'best' guardian having the option to mate with the best female guardian (460a12-b5) suggests that the females of the guardian class are regarded no less of a property than the producing class females. These women, similar to their counterparts in the producing class are not allowed to choose their sexual partners and are handed over as some sort of trophy, or property to be owned at ones discretion (Okin, 1977, p.354). When looked at from this perspective it could even be argued that the female guardians were not given equality at all but rather the illusion of one to attain the unity of the guardians desperately needed in the city of words.

In conclusion it should be stressed that whatever the real motive for the emancipation of the female guardians one could, or rather, should not overlook Plato's decision to grant women equality-though restricted to the guardian class- as unimportant, as this very decision is what initiated the concept of natural differences between the genders not necessarily dictating an individual's ability to perform a certain task to light. Plato, through his liberation of the guardian women forced- whether willingly or as a necessary by-product of his decision- different schools of thought and prominent scholars to reassess the societal roles females should occupy as the idea of nature not dictating an individual's opportunity or destiny was born. Moreover, the shortcomings evident in Plato's emancipation of women, such as not extending equality to incorporate all the women in the city is an issue faced presently. This is to say that there is still uneven levels of equality females enjoy in present day society when one looks at the rights and privileges women of different socio-economic classes exercise. However while there is an upside to the liberation of guardian women, the limitations or shortcomings of Plato in this topic should also be put into consideration when assessing whether Plato is a feminist or not. These shortcomings might not seem significant in light of the conventional norms during classical Greece, however, close speculations of the limitations such as Plato's inability to develop the concept of the emancipation of women can lead to two conclusions. Firstly, females were not liberated in actuality but rather only shifted from one form of property i.e. property of a specific

individual (husband or father) to the property of the guardian class as a whole, or only given the illusion of emancipation in order to contain the threat posed by them. This is since the real limitations faced by females such as being viewed as properties to be owned, or prizes to be awarded, or their inability to control their destiny in terms of sexual partners were not eliminated but only regulated by law and also extended to include the male gender as well in attempts to ensure the stability and durability of both the guardian class and the city of words.

References

Noble, Strauss, Osheim, Neuschel, Accampo, Roberts, et al. (2011). *Western Civilization: Beyond Boundaries*. Boston: Cengage Learning.

Reeve, C.D.C. (2004). *Plato's Republic*. Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett publishing company, inc.

Okin, S.M. (1977). Philosopher Queens and Private Wives: Plato on Women and the Family. *Philosophy & Public affairs*, 6, (4), 345-369.

Second Year Essay
Citation style: APA