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Hist 101

An Essay On Plato's Views of Gender Equality

The social status of women in ancient Greece was a very limited one to say the least. In an era where women were little better than domestic slaves, there were few supporters of any kind of equality for them. One of these rare supporters, surprisingly, was none other than the great philosopher Plato. His great discourse of a perfect government, the Republic, contains arguments for the political equality of women rarely exhibited until modern times.

In the Greek society of Plato's time, women had few, if any, rights. They were expected to be subservient to the will of their husbands and fulfill the role of household manager. A woman in ancient Greece was typically always under the control or protection of a man. In childhood, she was the ward of her father (or whichever of her male relatives headed the household), later she was the servant of her husband. As a widow she would be under the protection of her son. Marriages often involved elaborate dowries and bride gifts, rendering the value of a bride into something measured with cattle, land, or money. In short, a woman's life was dictated to her by a man.

Compare this harsh existence with the ideas put forth by Plato in the Republic. Plato, in typical fashion, builds his argument that women are as capable as men to be rulers in society. He, through Socrates in the dialogue, first compares the apparent weaknesses of women to men and how women (and men) each have individual strengths and talents. Plato uses this obviously leading dialogue to make the point, "Then the

woman has equally with the man the qualities which make a guardian..." (Rogers, 139).

With this statement Plato makes illustrates his view that women can also hold the position of his "Guardian" , a powerful voting citizen of the state.

He then uses the same argument to show that women should hold an equal social role, "... the same education which makes a man a good guardian will make a woman a good guardian..." (Rogers. 140). This differs from opinion of his time which restricted the schooling and education of women.

However, at the end of his dialogue, Plato almost makes a two-thousand year leap into the future and anticipates modern communalism with some rather bizarre ideas about true equality, almost to the exclusion of the individual. In a sense he backtracks on his equality for women stance by proposing that, "...the wives of these guardians are to be common (in the communal sense), and their children also common..." (Rogers 141). Aside from the obvious strangeness of this idea, it seems to cast the role of women back to that of the traditional child-bearing servants.

Plato realizes that carrying equality to this level may be a tough idea to sell. He compares it to a "great wave" and something that will be "very much disputed" (Rogers, 141). He speaks of it as something which, although he believes it to be a good idea, is probably impossible to achieve.

Oddly enough, Plato seems to have been unable to convince even his own students of his views regarding sexual equality. However, his own teacher, Socrates, was a known homosexual so maybe Plato's views can be seen as a surprise as well. Aristotle, Plato's most famous disciple, had exactly the opposite view regarding women. He believed a man to be inherently a better leader than a woman, "... the male is by nature

fitter for command than the female...” (Rogers, 146). Aristotle blatantly says that a woman should be obedient to the will of her husband. He takes a rather harsh view of it even comparing the relationship to that of a master and a slave.

Indeed, ancient Greece was not a particularly favorable place for a woman to live in. The prevailing attitudes of expected subservience and repression were highly ingrained and even championed by some of the great thinkers of the time. Some though like Plato had different views and proposed a more equal status for the other half of their society. While his ideas may not have been perfect or even practical at the time, they were a definite improvement over the prevailing attitudes.