

# Plato and Gender Equality in *The Republic*

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**Abstract**—Plato’s *The Republic* is commonly perceived to be a foe of gender equality, but this perception is ill-founded. Many lines involving, from a modern view, contempt for women’s physical strength, mental capacity and potential for virtue are taken as evidence of Plato’s opposition to the ideal of gender equality. However, those lines are merely indications of Plato’s empirical rather than normative judgment. The is-ought gap warns of the insufficiency of the deduction from those putative pieces of evidence alone that Plato is against the ideal of gender equality.

**Keywords:** *Plato, The Republic, gender equality, is-ought gap*

## I. INTRODUCTION

It would be a surprise to many if Plato was seen as an ally of the ideal of gender equality in *The Republic*. Gender equality, after all, is a modern construct far post-dating Plato’s time. The opposite claim that Plato is a foe of gender equality is much more intuitive at first glance. The portrayal of Plato as a foe of gender equality is said to be backed-up by Socrates’<sup>1</sup> negative, sometimes even offensive, assertions on women’s inferiority in physical strength and mental capacity. However, this perception that Plato is a foe of gender equality drives us away from a more accurate understanding. To keep things manageable, this paper will not dive into the grand conceptual debate on the gender equality, but rather it will adopt a common-sense interpretation of the concept. That is, all women ought to be seen as absolutely independent and not subordinated to men [1]. The core of the ideal of gender equality is that both males and females ought to receive equal treatment, sharing the same political, economic, social and legal rights. Men and women should not be treated differently based solely on their gender [2].

## II. PLATO’S IDEAS ON WOMEN

Prior to Book V of *The Republic*, women are depicted negatively as creatures whose function is to provoke men’s sexual desire with their erotic passion. Plato thinks that women are ‘weepy, weak and worthy of imitation’ (387e, 395e, 420a, 431c).<sup>2</sup> Saxonhouse notes that when Cephalus talks to Socrates about his life experience, women appear ‘as courtesans right in the midst of an enumeration of delights including seasonings, perfumes, incenses and cakes, as needing womanly dress or ornaments, or as wet nurses’ (455d). Even in Book V, where two proposals that benefit women are offered, Socrates still insists that ‘in every way of

life women are weaker than men’ (455e). Socrates also asks whether Glaucon knows any field of occupation in which male practitioners are perceived to be inferior to female practitioners. Glaucon cannot think of any, and concedes that many women are better than many men in many things, but men as a whole work better than their female counterparts (455d). Socrates agrees with this conclusion and continues that even in the fields such as weaving, baking and cooking in which ‘[the] female sex is believed to excel’, men could perform better. Dialogues like these have led to the belief among many modern feminists that the philosophy in *The Republic* is contaminated with an ‘anti-gender equality’ gesture, and Plato himself is charged as an enemy of the ideal of gender equality. As Saxonhouse remarks: ‘prior to book V, Plato tries to make the point that women should not participate in political life, and in Book V Plato discriminates females and his philosophy is absolutely for the sake of males since he lays stress on females’ inferiority all through book V [3].

## III. THE IS-UGHT GAP

However, arguing that *The Republic* stands in opposition to the ideal of gender equality based only on these passages is unconvincing and risks ignoring the so-called is-ought gap.

The is-ought gap, or Hume’s Law, was proposed by David Hume when he noticed that, compared to propositions expressed with ‘is, or is not’, ‘ought, or ought not’ expresses some new relations or affirmations: ‘it is necessary that it should be observed and explained; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it’ [4].

A description, or ‘is claim’, tells about an empirical fact. It concerns ‘what the state of affair is’ and ‘what we do’. By contrast, a prescription, or ‘ought claim’, purports about a normative judgment. It concerns ‘what the state of affairs should be’ and ‘what we should do’ [5]. Since the two families of propositions are so distinct from each other, according to Hume, no ‘ought’ claim can be directly inferred from a set of premises expressed only in terms of ‘is’. The is-ought gap warns us about a possible flawed way of reasoning. A prescription cannot be directly inferred from descriptions without additional reasoning. To establish such an ‘is to ought’ inference, an underlying additional prescription is often needed. For an illustration, suppose:

- A. Peter is tall.
- B. Peter ought to be admitted to the basketball team.

<sup>1</sup> Socrates appeared in this paper refers to the character in *The Republic*.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise specified, references are to *The Republic*.

- C. Those that are tall ought to be admitted to the basketball team.

Statement B cannot be directly derived from statement A. To realise such derivation, an additional prescriptive statement C must be introduced. This additional statement C functions as a bridge over the is-ought gap between statement A and statement B.

There are some metaethical complexities regarding the idea of the is-ought gap<sup>3</sup>. Some efforts are made to dissolve the gap and exemptions from Hume's Law are said to be established. If those exemptions truly exist, then it is not *always* mistaken to directly derive an ought from an is. But, the possibility of exemptions does not hinder the purpose of this section. That it is not *always* mistaken to directly derive an 'ought' from an 'is', is compatible with the modest thesis that to derive an 'ought' from an 'is' *could* often be mistaken. Such a thesis is not controversial and is all that is needed. In this light, we should be alarmed once we notice an ought claim being directly derived from an is claim. In other words, such direct derivation automatically brings about a burden of proof – we have good enough reason to believe such a derivation is mistaken unless we can either show how it constitutes an exemption, or provide some further justifications which function in a way similar to that additional statement C. In short, it is *prima facie* mistaken to directly infer a prescription from a description.

#### IV. THE IS-UGHT GAP AND THE REPUBLIC

Returning to *The Republic*, Plato does think women are weepy and less courageous than men and even holds the general view that women are weaker than men in all respects. From the perspectives of contemporary feminists and of the general public, these statements constitute nothing but an offensive stereotype. Yet these are only his descriptive statements about women's bodies and characters, and provide insufficient evidence for a charge of anti-gender equality against Plato.

It would be useful to compare Plato's opinions with other offensive opinions on women commonly held in Plato's time. For example, Aristotle once indicates that women do possess deliberative faculties, but their deliberative facilities are not granted much authority [6]. He also points out that women are in a melting mood, prefer to complain about trivial matters and are prone to be upset or disappointed. Compared with men, women tell more lies and lack a sense of shame [7]. Aristotle, remarkably, continues to justify male dominance as rational and natural: 'as between the sexes, the male is by nature

<sup>3</sup>a classic challenge of the is-ought gap, see, Prior, A. Norman. "The autonomy of ethics." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 38 no.3 (1960): 199–206. For a recent response that defends the is-ought gap from this challenge, see Brown, Campbell. "Minding the is-ought gap." *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 43, no.1 (2014): 53-69. For another effort to dissolve the is-ought gap, see Searle, R. John. "How to Derive 'Ought' from 'Is'." In Hudson, W. D. ed. *The Is-Ought Question* (London: Macmillan, 1969), 120-134. For a response, see Flew, Antony. "On not Deriving 'Ought' from 'Is'." In Hudson, W. D. ed. *The Is-Ought Question* (London: Macmillan, 1969), 135-143.

superior and the female inferior, the male ruler and the female subject' [8]. By contrast, the objection to women's bodies or psychology does not mean Plato thinks that women *should* be treated differently from men just because of these flaws in their characters. In other words, Aristotle makes both descriptive statements and prescriptive statements. Plato, however, has not gone beyond the boundary of descriptive judgments and has not made any negative prescriptive statement about women.

Since gender equality as a political ideal is essentially about how we should treat people of different genders, it is essentially about a set of prescriptions. People who object to gender equality will, of course, use various arguments to make the appeal that women *should* not share the same rights with men and that they *should* be submissive to men and so on, just as Aristotle argues. Yet, contrary to what Aristotle says, although Plato believes that women are weak and weepy, he does not believe they should be treated differently: 'if it appears that they differ only in just this respect that the female bears and the male begets, we shall say that no proof has yet been produced that the woman differs from the man for our purposes, but we shall continue to think that our guardians and their wives ought to follow the same pursuits' (454c-457d). Thus, Plato has never purposefully weakened women's status. In a sense, Plato's negative descriptive judgments on women are merely outliers. Despite those negative descriptive judgments on women, he makes no effort to integrate such negative descriptive judgments into his prescriptive proposals in *The Republic*. His opinions of or complaints about women, as Grimshaw observes, do not necessarily represent his philosophical construct [9].

#### V. MODERN FEMINIST INTELLECTUAL CONSTRUCTION

If there's a grain of truth above, then the remaining problem is an intuition that has appeal for many of us. Intuitively, the assertion of women's inferior capabilities seems to be enough to alert us. In contemporary politics, an empirical claim of women's inferiority is almost automatically linked to the hostility to the ideal of gender equality. Such a linkage seems to be intuitive and enjoys some degree of plausibility. If there is a significant distance between is and ought, between the description of capabilities women possess and prescription of treatment that women receive, then how can we explain such an intuition?

A possible explanation lies in contemporary feminist intellectual construction. In modern society, social norms and criteria of evaluation are not objective and meritocratic. Rather, they have evolved or have been consciously designed in a way that systematically benefits men and disadvantages women. This awareness of the broad patriarchal picture reveals an ugly truth: what has appeared to be fair and meritocratic competition for positions and opportunities between men and women in job markets and workplaces are in fact an expression of delicately designed social oppression. This intellectual construct has profound influence that goes beyond feminist academic debate and has become a part of our discourse. If it is true, in the contemporary context, to argue for women's inferiority in capability can probably be associated with an intent to systematically disadvantage

women. To merely hold that women are less capable in this context could render an already unfriendly position regarding gender equality. In other words, it is possible that the contemporary feminist intellectual construct may already function in a way similar to an underlying statement C that bridges the descriptive claim that women are less capable and the prescriptive claim that women should be treated differently. However, it is unclear whether a similar construction can be found in *The Republic*. Further research might look at this possibility, but until such an underlying construction is identified, Plato's negative empirical judgment on women alone does not suffice to convict him as a foe of the ideal of gender equality.

## VI. CONCLUSIONS

The common perception that Plato in the Republic stands in line with an anti-gender equality position sits on an insufficient ground. Given the warning of the is-out gap, we cannot directly derive prescriptions from descriptions. Thus, Plato's descriptive judgments of women's inferior body strength, mental capacity, and potential for virtue cannot be taken as sufficient weight of evidence for a position opposed to gender equality. Unless further reasons and justifications are provided to bridge the is-ought gap, those descriptions, however offensive, should be regarded as outliers and Plato

should not be understood as a foe of the ideal of gender equality.

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