Feminism and Aristotle

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The latest addition to the series Re-Reading the Canon, this book is a collection of twelve essays reflecting on diverse areas of Aristotle's philosophy, following the traditional organization of the Aristotelian corpus. Part One covers theoretical knowledge with essays on logic, physics, epistemology, metaphysics, and the role of gender and essence in his metaphysics and biology. Part Two covers practical and productive knowledge with essays on ethics, politics, poetics, and rhetoric. There is a similar diversity in the authors' estimations of Aristotle's value for feminism, some being very negative, but most finding valuable elements in his philosophy which may be appropriated for feminist purposes. While the exposure of Aristotle's misogyny is a necessary corrective to the traditional presentation of this great philosopher, this book's strength is in the positive contribution it can make to contemporary feminism. It uses Aristotle as ancient philosophers should be used: as a source of inspiration for a perspective different from our own.

In 'Feminist Readings of Aristotelian Logic', Marjorie Hass defends Aristotelian logic against the recent feminist critique of Andrea Nye in Words of Power: A Feminist Reading of the History of Logic (New York: Routledge, 1990). While Nye sees the abstraction inherent in logic as gendered and therefore problematic, Hass believes the association of 'abstraction' with 'maleness' reinforces the stereotype of women being 'intuitive' and 'irrational'. Hass sees abstraction as necessary for feminist

theory. But Hass does endorse the feminist critique of the way in which traditional deductive logic represents relations among statements, especially the relation of negation. Hass argues that Aristotelian logic will at least partly provide the sort of alternative view of negation which feminists are seeking, insofar as his logic allows for four different types of opposition: correlation, contrariety, and privation, in addition to the contradiction allowed in classical logic. While it is in ways dualistic and hierarchical, Aristotelian logic 'can provide resources for feminist reflection on the nature of difference' (37).

Place, Interval: A Reading of Aristotle, Physics IV' is Luce Irigaray's 'meditation inspired by Aristotle' (as CynthiaFreeland puts it in the Introduction, 4) on place. Unfortunately, as an 'inspired meditation', it has very little relevance to Aristotle. Irigaray's poetic style makes it very difficult to comprehend her point. Freeland devotes another essay to trying to explain Irigaray's point and, in so doing, criticizes a contradiction in Irigaray's methodology. These fifty pages are too much on Irigaray, and too little on Aristotle, the putative focus of the volume.

Things improve significantly in the next two chapters, written by excellent Aristotelian scholars. In 'Aristotle's Theory of Knowledge and Feminist Epistemology', Deborah Modrak defends Aristotle's empiricism against three criticisms feminists have made against positivist empiricism. First, Aristotle's epistemology embodies the ideals of objectivity, impartiality and universality, which many feminists reject as gendered. Second, Aristotle's conception of the knower is gendered. And third, Aristotle's essentialism 'erases women' by conceiving of humans as paradigmatically male. But Modrak admits that such a defense can be only partially successful and Aristotle's idealist epistemology does display gender bias.

In 'Form, Normativity, and Gender in Aristotle: A Feminist Perspective', Charlotte Witt defends Aristotle's metaphysics against feminist criticism. Witt's essay is interesting in that she does to feminist theory exactly what feminist theory does to traditional philosophy — she exposes its foundational assumptions. Her target is the assumption that nature itself is devoid of value. Feminists often criticize the traditional view that metaphysics and science are objective, i.e., 'true to reality or nature' (118), because supposedly objective theories are in fact rife with sexist, racist, and classist values. But Witt points out that these feminists assume that the values that appear in metaphysical and scientific theories originate from the subjective side, that is from the theorizer (119). This is because feminist philosophers of science 'work within the problematic of modern science,' which assumes a view of nature which is itself historically and culturally locatable (120). Witt offers an alternative, classical view of nature: Aristotle's view that nature itself is normative and value-laden. She focuses on an interpretation of Aristotle's hylomorphism (his theory of the relationship between form and matter) that emphasizes its inherently normative dimension. Despite the fact that Aristotle 'attaches the gender norms of his culture to hylomorphism' (121), Witt recommends Aristotle's normative metaphysics to feminists for the fuller and more holistic perspective it offers, that of a theorizer and an object of theory which are both value-laden.

In 'Sex and Essence in Aristotle's Metaphysics and Biology', Marguerite Deslauriers examines a conflict in Aristotle's views concerning sex differences. She argues that, on the one hand, Aristotle believes gender, a result of material differences peculiar to a genus, belongs non-accidentally and non-essentially to the genus animal, but belongs accidentally to any particular male or female. Thus, all males and females within a species are essentially the same. Deslauriers reads Aristotle's biological and reproductive theory as stressing the similarities between male and female organs and capacities, rather than the differences. She sees the differences as slight and a matter of degree. For instance, the difference between menstrual fluid and semen is that the latter is slightly more concocted than the former, due to the male's being naturally hotter. But, on the other hand, Aristotle clearly does believe females to be different from and inferior to males. Deslauriers believes that Aristotle merely assumes it is obvious that females are inferior because he gives no philosophical or scientific justification to support this view. She admits that Aristotle may have philosophical reasons for believing that one sex must be biologically deficient relative to the other (140), and his hierarchical view of nature leads him to believe that someone must take the subordinate role and someone the dominant (156), and in reproduction one sex must provide the matter and one the form (157). But what makes Aristotle believe that it is the female that is deficient, subordinate, and the material cause in reproduction? Deslauriers argues that he has no reasons, thus making it an 'unreflective belief' (159). Regarding reproduction, Deslauriers rejects the argument that Aristotle's belief that the female contributes the matter is based on 'innocent empirical observation,' free of male bias (157). She considers and correctly rejects the observational evidence Aristotle may have used to support his belief, evidence such as the material nature of menstrual blood (semen is just as material), the colder temperature of males and their subsequent inability to concoct the male into semen (neither of which is empirically observable). But Deslauriers incorrectly concludes that Aristotle did not
have any empirical reasons for believing that females rather than males provide the matter in reproduction. She neglects to mention the most obvious evidence: females are the ones that get pregnant. The mother’s belly grows, her appetite increases, a fully-formed human is created inside her with no contribution from the father after the initial sex act, and she nourishes the baby from her breasts after birth. What better empirical evidence could there be, if only one sex can contribute the material cause, that it is the female? Therefore, Aristotle does have ‘innocent empirical evidence’ to justify his belief that females contribute the material cause in reproduction; this one belief, at least, is not merely the result of male bias. Furthermore, many of the behavioural gender differences that Aristotle notes may be consequent upon the fact that females bear the children: their nurturing, more emotional, less intellectual ‘nature’ may well be the product of the reproductive role which women have been unable to escape until recently. While Plato may be able to see past the appearances to envision women’s intellectual potential, Aristotle’s method is to start from the appearances. And, arguably, the appearances Aristotle observes are that women get pregnant and devote their lives to nurturing their children.

However, my defense of Aristotle on this point merely staves off the charge of sexism momentarily. Claiming that females provide the matter and males provide the form does not imply female inferiority until one adds the claim that matter is inferior to form. And this hierarchical aspect of Aristotle’s philosophy may be due to male bias.

In the first essay of Part Two, ‘The Virtue of Care: Aristotelian Ethics and Contemporary Ethics of Care’, Ruth Groenhouw advocates a synthesis of Aristotelian virtue ethics with a feminist ethics of care. She argues that Aristotle’s ethical theory is useful to feminists in many ways. For instance, it offers an account of ethical reasoning that incorporates the emotions as essential to adequate rationality and it recognizes the particularity and situatedness of ethical decision-making as well as the inescapably social nature of human beings (172). Groenhouw argues that the popular ethics of care has two weaknesses which Aristotelian ethics can overcome. First, care ethics glorifies care and service to others, the very traits that have been used to justify both women’s relegation to the domestic realm and stereotypes of women as ‘natural’ nurturers. Second, care ethics seems unable to protect the rights of persons outside the ‘circle of care’ (173). While Aristotle’s concern for self-improvement and political participation can strengthen feminist care ethics, an ethics of care can provide balance in an Aristotelian theory which is hierarchical, oppressive, and places too much emphasis on the intellectual life. The result of such a synthesis is a ‘gentler, more caring, Aristotle’ (187).

There are two essays on how Aristotle may be used in feminist political theory. In ‘The Book of “A”’, Linda Redlick Hirshman explores several ways in which Aristotle’s ethical and political theory can be useful to feminist jurisprudence. Most importantly, the Aristotelian vision of an ideal of human well-being and of the good life for citizens can provide feminists with an alternative to liberalism’s political goal of equality, which constantly threatens to disintegrate into what Hirshman calls ‘limoralism’ — the introduction of the male norm in the guise of a universal neural norm (212). She also uses Aristotle’s theories to illuminate two specific issues for feminist jurisprudence: women in the military and surrogate motherhood. Regarding the latter issue, she opposes surrogacy, arguing that as it occurs in the real world today, it instantiates the most oppressive parts of both classical and modern biological theory — the hierarchy of male and female in Aristotle’s view of gender and reproduction and the dualism of the modern view that male and female are ‘opposite sexes’ (221-25).

I shall focus my critical comments on Hirshman’s use of Aristotle’s theories to oppose surrogacy, as her errors are the most egregious occurring in this volume. First, her knowledge of Aristotle’s reproductive theory seems to come not directly from reading Aristotle but from her reading of Thomas Laqueur (Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990) and Lynda Lange (‘Woman is not a Rational Animal: On Aristotle’s Biology of Reproduction,’ in Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka, eds. Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology and Philosophy of Science, Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel, 1983: 1-15). This dependence on secondary sources leads to serious mistakes, such as when Hirshman quotes Lange, saying that Aristotle ‘concludes that it [semen] comes from the male [as opposed to coming from the female, or from both], because, inter alia, “the emission of even a small quantity of semen is exhausting”’ (219). Hirshman’s footnote on the quote cites Lange citing Generation of Animals I 18, 725b6-8. One need not be an ancient scholar or fluent in Greek to find that this statement about Aristotle’s reasoning is absolutely false; one need only read GA I 18. In this chapter, Aristotle is arguing about what semen is, concluding that it is the last stage of residue of useful nutriment (as opposed to being, e.g., a waste product). The exhaustion felt upon the loss of even a small amount of semen is given as evidence for the importance of semen, supporting Aristotle’s view that it is the final stage of development of the
residue of nutriment. Aristotle does not say that men's exhaustion upon orgasm proves that semen comes only from them, nor is there any way to twist the text into meaning this. Aristotle does not even rule out females having semen until the next chapter. Furthermore, adding insult to injury (to Aristotle), Hirshman says in his note citing Lange, 'I kid you not.' This is an especially arrogant comment from a scholar who has not even read the philosopher she misrepresents. An additional, although minor, error occurs when Hirshman cites GA II 3, 737b27–32 when actually the text is 737a, not b.

A further weakness in Hirshman's essay is the way she uses Aristotle to oppose surrogate motherhood. After describing Aristotle's view that the mother contributes only the insignificant matter while the father contributes the soul, she describes surrogacy in terms which make it sound parallel to the Aristotelian, hierarchical view of gender. In surrogacy, she says, the man uses one or two women (depending on whether or not his wife contributes her egg) to 'have' a baby and the woman 'submits herself to the man's reproductive plans' (221). Using the case of Baby M as the paradigm, Hirshman argues that, by taking the baby away from the surrogate mother at birth, the man claims exclusive domain over rearing and educating the child, i.e., over controlling the child's soul. Insofar as the father shares the child with his wife, when she is the egg donor, 'he is claiming at least half of the surrogate's service, which leaves the proportion of women to men in the enterprise at two to one, with one female still functioning entirely as the material cause' (222). Hirshman then claims that the resemblance between surrogacy and Aristotle's picture of the female providing the physical matter for a male to endow with a soul 'is chilling' (ibid.). Her reasoning seems to be that Aristotle's view of reproduction is sexist and so anything that resembles it must be rejected as sexist. But Hirshman greatly exaggerates the resemblance between surrogacy and Aristotle's reproductive theory. Her description of surrogacy as the exploitation of all women involved distorts the reality of the situation. The women who resort to surrogacy because they themselves cannot have children are 'erased' from Hirshman's portrayal of surrogate motherhood, and all men by virtue of their gender are portrayed as dominating exploiters. When one considers what is more plausibly the paradigm case of surrogacy — a man and woman who desperately desire a child who is genetically their own, but who cannot sustain a pregnancy — the resemblance to Aristotle's sexist, hierarchical view is slight indeed and can provide no argument against the practice of surrogate motherhood.

In 'Aristotle, Feminism, and Needs for Functioning', Martha Nussbaum advocates a synthesis of Aristotelianism with modern liberalism. She sees Aristotle's most important contribution to feminism in his view of the material conditions necessary for truly human functioning, and she claims that his theory takes as its starting point the problem of providing basic welfare support, including food, shelter, and medical care (249). This concern for distributing goods so as to satisfy human needs is what liberalism and American feminism both lack — Nussbaum sees them as too concerned with questions of narrow self-interest. What Aristotelianism lacks is an account of the limits of government and legal interference with personal choices, and liberalism can supply this with its view of basic liberties such as is offered in the U.S. Constitution.

In 'Feminism and the Narrative Structure of the Poetics', Angela Curran criticizes Aristotle's aesthetic theory for being socially conservative. For Aristotle, the best tragedies are those in which the tragic hero is a good person who brings about her own misfortune but who acts in ignorance of what she does. Thus, individual error is at the heart of misfortune in the best tragedies, excluding those plays in which external circumstance (such as social role) is the cause of tragic misfortune. But feminists can use Aristotle's aesthetic framework, with its emphasis on the connection between reason and emotion and its vision of artistic representation, as a medium for teaching, supplementing it with different paradigms of good plot and character in order to create art which disrupts social and political norms.

The volume concludes with the most negative essay, Carol Poster's 'Re)Positioning Pedagogy: A Feminist Historiography of Aristotle's Rhetoric'. Poster argues that the importance of Aristotle's Rhetoric has been simultaneously marginalized by philosophers and overestimated by rhetoricians, maintaining that this discrepancy 'exemplifies the way in which prestige hierarchies construct intellectual history' (328). Poster argues that it is only recently that Aristotle's Rhetoric has become a central authoritative text in Composition Studies, and this is because the lower prestige discipline is attempting to use the authority and prestige of Aristotle's name to elevate its own status. She urges that Aristotle's prestige should not be used in this way because 'for feminist rhetoric to reclaim Aristotle as some sort of male mother would be, ipso facto, for rhetoric to accede to the traditional patriarchal judgment of its (feminine) inferiority' (343). Thus, Poster advises feminist rhetoricians to leave Aristotle behind, stand on their own, and be confident in the legitimacy of their own project.
Overall, this volume accomplishes its goal of illuminating both Aristotelian and feminist theory. The essays provide a nice balance of well-deserved criticism of Aristotle's misogyny, defense of Aristotle against undeserved criticism, and suggestions on how feminists can use Aristotle's strengths to their own advantage. But one must read these essays critically and cautiously, and not accept their claims about Aristotle or their arguments as authoritative.

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