Eugesta
ISSN : 2265-8777
Publisher : Université de Lille

15 | 2025
Varia

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https://www.peren-revues.fr/eugesta/1637

DOI : 10.54563/eugesta.1637

Electronic reference
Karel Thein, « Plato on Female “Weakness”: From Biology to Politics », *Eugesta* [Online], 15 | 2025, Online since 25 novembre 2025, connection on 01 juillet 2026. URL : https://www.peren-revues.fr/eugesta/1637

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OUTLINE

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TEXT

1 The lasting interest in the ‘woman question’ in Plato’s *Republic* is certainly due to its broader appeal that transcends the specialized field of Platonic studies[1]. This interest is reinforced by the fact that if the relevant passages offer the arguably first theoretical treatment of sex and gender in a political context, this treatment is deeply ambiguous, suggesting gender equality in some passages but implying the inferiority of women elsewhere.[2] This article does not try to solve the whole complex issue. Instead, it turns to one of the sources of the ambiguities in question, namely a tension between (1) the treatment of gender issues and procreation strictly within the framework common to humans and other herd animals and (2) the defining of individual human natures exclusively through the talents for specific crafts. This tension cannot, of course, explain all conflicting claims about female and male capacities, but it can lead to a more nuanced understanding of one specific motif, the so-called female ἀσθένεια (“weakness”).

2 On the reading that I defend, the ambiguity of this weakness, which has been read as a simply physical female trait or as an allegedly moral inferiority, reflects the broader instability that characterizes, in Plato more than any other ancient author, the polarity of nature and artifice, a polarity that is variously projected in the political sphere. If Plato understands all stable nature (φύσις) as resulting from a human

or divine craft (τέχνη), this perspective has its unavoidable impact on how he sees the matters of procreation and, more broadly, the status of women and men in an ideal city but also in its non-ideal counterparts. In the latter, the originally physical weakness becomes moralized, and if the ideal city gets rid of this moralization, its residuum still affects the very language that describes this admittedly revolutionary project.

3 I will trace this motif in four different sections, whose nexus should add something new to the long-standing debates. The first takes a detailed look at Socrates' avoidance of human exceptionality in the biological realm, from which stems the analogy between women and other female animals. The second section turns to the distinction between the traditionally male and female crafts and asks about the survival of this distinction even in the best city, where craft-like virtue should be, in principle, genderless. Section three connects this survival to those passages that moralize the female weakness, thus taking an important step beyond the simply physical sense of 'having less strength'. Finally, a shorter section four connects the issue of female weakness to a more speculative suggestion that Plato sometimes sees this weakness as a specific reflection of what he describes, more generally, as an ἀσθένεια that characterizes the whole of human nature.

1 Male and Female Animals

4 Behind all the passages where the *Republic* points to some sort of women's inferiority, one and only reason is assumed: women are weaker than men. This is not something that Socrates would persuasively *prove* but, while his focus is on equality, ἀσθένεια returns quite consistently to the foreground, no matter how briefly.[3] Consider Book 5.455e1–2: "Women share by nature in every way of life just as men do, but in all of them women are weaker than men" (ἐπὶ πᾶσι δὲ ἀσθενέστερον γυνὴ ἀνδρός).[4] The emphasis on this statement goes back at least to Sarah Pomeroy's book on women in classical antiquity and was given further relief by, especially, Chelsea Harry and Ron Polansky in their article on Plato and women's natural ability (Pomeroy 1995, 115, Harry and Polansky 2016). Their understanding of ἀσθενέστερον as "weaker" rather than "generally

inferior" met with some criticism from Emily Hulme and Patricia Marechal (Hulme 2022, 503, Marechal 2024, 186, with a subsequent review of different interpretation). As Marechal rightly points out, Socrates discusses a number of tasks that do not depend on physical strength, including the administrative tasks or the activities proper to doctors, cobblers, musicians or, indeed, philosophers. However, it remains true that physical weakness is the only kind of ἀσθένεια made explicit – precisely where the argument extends to humans *and other animals* – and it seems to underlie, no matter how illicitly and wrongly, the more general claim. I will focus on this connection to other animals without neglecting Plato's view of human nature and its relation to craft as its integral part.

5 Before we take a closer look at the quoted lines in their context (see Section 2), it is important to bear in mind that this statement is part of the unfolding analogy between human beings and carefully bred and reared domestic animals. Early in the dialogue, Socrates first introduces the idea of different ἀρετή ("virtue") proper to horses, dogs, and humans, a virtue that needs to be treated justly and not harmed (1.335b–e), and then points out the analogy between the rule over human beings and the craft of horse-breeding (1.342c), both crafts serving the advantage of human beings and horses, respectively. The same is, of course, true of any craft, and Socrates soon adds that the virtue to be cultivated consists in the ἔργον ("function" or "particular work") that no other kind of creature or thing can exercise (1.352d–354a). Without losing sight of the art of ruling, this line of argument will then focus on the soul, but because the qualities of the soul that sit well with the good rule are the same in different animals, Socrates will select the case of the well-bread dogs as a good introduction to the nature that is indispensable to the well-ruled city: the nature of its guardians. Finding this nature would seem to be particularly difficult, since it needs to combine the opposite qualities of gentleness and spiritedness, but perhaps it is enough to look around us to discover natures in which these opposites *are* indeed combined:

> Ἴδοι μὲν ἄν τις καὶ ἐν ἄλλοις ζῴοις, οὐ μεντἂν ἥκιστα ἐν ᾧ ἡμεῖς παρεβάλλομεν τῷ φύλακι. οἶσθα γάρ που τῶν γενναίων κυνῶν, ὅτι τοῦτο φύσει αὐτῶν τὸ ἦθος, πρὸς μὲν τοὺς συνήθεις τε καὶ γνωρίμους ὡς οἷόν τε πρᾳοτάτους εἶναι, πρὸς δὲ τοὺς ἀγνῶτας τοὐναντίον. (2.375d10–e4)

> You can see them in other animals, too, but especially in the one to which we compared the guardian, for you know, of course, that well-bred dogs (τῶν γενναίων κυνῶν) naturally have a character of this sort – they are gentle as can be to those they're used to and know, but the opposite to those they don't know.

6 The equally gentle and spirited guardians are therefore not contrary to nature. As for the "other animals" in question, they include horses, whose possible spiritedness was mentioned only a few lines earlier (375a12). It is precisely from the vocabulary of horse-breeding that Plato may have borrowed the rare adjective for being spirited, θυμοειδής, which Xenophon uses while describing a horse who is naturally eager to participate in a hunt.[5] Be it dogs or horses, the association with the human community and its warlike activities is unmistakable, and although Plato does not limit his animal analogy to domestic animals, the latter are well suited for making several points that are important for establishing the best way of breeding, rearing, and ruling humans.[6]

7 Seen in this light, "well-bred dogs" are more perfected than other animals, but not outside the scope of what good breeding may achieve if extended to other species, including humans, where nature will be completed by extensive nurture. This extension happens precisely at the moment when Socrates mentions, for the first time, the communal ownership of women and children. Assuming that the traits necessary for being a guardian are heritable (but not *necessarily* inherited),[7] Socrates turns to the way of breeding and educating the guardians as a guarantee of civic unity. Summarizing the first condition of this unity, he speaks about "men" (ἄνδρες) and their "possession of wives" (τῶν γυναικῶν κτῆσιν), stressing that marriage and the procreation of children should follow the old proverb "friends possess everything in common." The result would be like this:

> Καὶ μήν, εἶπον, πολιτεία ἐάνπερ ἅπαξ ὁρμήσῃ εὖ, ἔρχεται ὥσπερ κύκλος αὐξανομένη· τροφὴ γὰρ καὶ παίδευσις χρηστὴ σῳζομένη φύσεις ἀγαθὰς ἐμποιεῖ, καὶ αὖ φύσεις χρησταὶ τοιαύτης παιδείας ἀντιλαμβανόμεναι ἔτι βελτίους τῶν προτέρων φύονται, εἴς τε τἆλλα καὶ εἰς τὸ γεννᾶν, ὥσπερ καὶ ἐν τοῖς ἄλλοις ζῴοις. (4.424a4–b1)

> And surely, once our city gets a good start, it will go on growing like in a cycle. Good education and upbringing, when they are preserved, produce good natures, and useful natures, who are in turn well educated, grow up even better than their predecessors, both in their offspring and in other respects, just like other animals.

8 There is no fundamental difference between the breeding of domestic animals and the breeding of humans, and this common ground encompasses infancy and earlier childhood (τροφή and παιδεία). To dissolve the traditional household and possess women and children in common is a step necessary for the unbiased organization of the whole business of begetting and rearing, where parental emotions, once liberated from the bonds of private family, serve to reinforce the civic unity across generations.[8] In his deferred but direct follow-up on the quoted passage (a follow-up introduced, at the beginning of Book 5, by the same proverb, "friends possess everything in common"), Socrates finally develops his idea in detail, with a focus on the meaning of κτῆσις or κοινωνία ("possessing in common").[9]

9 Concerning this most important matter, we have just seen that the first instruction concerning the common possession of women and children ends with the phrase "just like other animals", echoing the earlier parallel between the well-bred dogs and the guardians. From the reaction of Socrates' interlocutors, it is clear that parallels of this sort are for them natural and clear, and Socrates will even appeal to Glaucon's own experience as a breeder. This appeal turns into an explanation that ends on the political level and whose unfolding at 5.459a1–e3 divides into several steps. First, Socrates establishes a further hierarchy among even the noble hunting dogs and fighting birds: some are simply the best and it is from the best in their prime that one tries to breed as many offspring as possible. Second, without a constant and careful breeding, the stock of dogs, horses, birds or "other animals" would not only cease to improve but get worse. Third, the same rule applies to humans except, in their case, the rulers' care for their stock must obey more complex rules that include persuasion or, in other words, "falsehood and deception", especially "where marriages and the producing of children are concerned." The conclusion is therefore clear:

> Δεῖ μέν, εἶπον, ἐκ τῶν ὡμολογημένων τοὺς ἀρίστους ταῖς ἀρίσταις συγγίγνεσθαι ὡς πλειστάκις, τοὺς δὲ φαυλοτάτους ταῖς φαυλοτάταις τοὐναντίον, καὶ τῶν μὲν τὰ ἔκγονα τρέφειν, τῶν δὲ μή, εἰ μέλλει τὸ ποίμνιον ὅτι ἀκρότατον εἶναι, καὶ ταῦτα πάντα γιγνόμενα λανθάνειν πλὴν αὐτοὺς τοὺς ἄρχοντας, εἰ αὖ ἡ ἀγέλη τῶν φυλάκων ὅτι μάλιστα ἀστασίαστος ἔσται. (5.459d7–e3)

> It follows from our previous agreements, first, that the best men must have sex with the best women as frequently as possible, while the opposite is true of the most inferior men and women, and, second, that if our herd is to be of the highest possible quality, the former's offspring must be reared but not the latter's. And this must all be brought about without being noticed by anyone except the rulers, so that our herd of guardians remains as free from dissension as possible.

10 If we leave aside the moral issue of lying in politics, two things stand out in this whole passage including its quoted conclusion. First, except that no lies are needed in the case of other animals, who are ruled by compulsion rather than persuasion, the parallel between care for the animal and for the human stock is strong, and it involves not simply dogs but all the species that humans breed. In fact, the parallel is so tight that it may explain the privileged status of men as, precisely, biologically male. This privilege, whose formulation is narrower here than elsewhere in the *Republic*, would follow from the male capacity to beget simultaneously with different females.

11 This perspective is reiterated some seven pages later, where Socrates, in a further effort "to determine whether it's possible to bring about this association among human beings, as it is among other animals" (466d6–8), first describes the sexual union as a reward for heroic guardians who fall in love with one another, "whether male or female" (ἢ ἄρρενος ἢ θηλείας, 468c3), and then adds, using again the masculine grammatical forms, that since such a warrior is a good person, "more marriages will be available *to him*, and he'll be selected for such things more frequently than the others, so that as many children as possible may be born *from him* (ἵν᾽ ὅτι πλεῖστοι ἐκ τοῦ τοιούτου γίγνωνται)" (468c5–8).

12 One could object that the inference from the grammatical masculine gender to male privilege is erroneous, and Socrates simply sticks to the correct use of the noun "guardian" (φύλαξ). Indeed, both female and male warriors can initiate the intercourse, since they equally deserve it as part of their reward. However, the male perspective and the availability of women capable of bearing children come quickly to the fore. The repeated insistence on "as many as possible" seems to connect to Socrates' claim, made earlier in Book 5, that the female and the male "differ only in this respect, that the females bear children (τίκτειν) while the males beget them (ὀχεύειν)" (454d10–e1). Without much ado, the later passages of Book 5 give this biological difference a political edge. Unencumbered by bearing, male guardians are constantly available for begetting so that, as a result, the rulers could select, via the rigged lottery, a narrower male elite to procreate the best future guardians.

13 This interpretation helps to explain why Socrates, right before saying that "those of the young (τῶν νέων) who are good in war or other things must be given permission to have sex with the women (τῶν γυναικῶν) more often, since this will also be a good pretext for having them father as many of the children as possible" (460b1–5), insists that the goal of this whole scheme of procreation is "to keep the number *of males* (τῶν ἀνδρῶν) as stable as they can" (460a3–4). At the same time, one wonders whether, from a strictly biological perspective, the opposite wouldn't be more logical, since having more excellent breeders than begetters would be advantageous for the city. To this we could add that their pregnancies would keep the female guardians more often away from the battlefield, a fact that Socrates never even mentions, and the demands related to bearing children seem to play no role whatsoever in the alleged female weakness. All this could also reinforce the suspicion that Plato lets his Socrates slip back into the language that automatically equates guardians with males (ἄνδρες).[10]

14 In this situation, it is telling that, again, the alleged weakness of women is treated as one instance of a general female weakness that characterizes a broader spectrum of animal species. This, at least, is what follows from the text, which not only assumes that there is no fundamental gap between humans and some other animal species but also anticipates our discussion of the crafts in the next section:

> [T]ὰς θηλείας τῶν φυλάκων κυνῶν πότερα συμφυλάττειν οἰόμεθα δεῖν ἅπερ ἂν οἱ ἄρρενες φυλάττωσι καὶ συνθηρεύειν καὶ τἆλλα κοινῇ πράττειν, ἢ τὰς μὲν οἰκουρεῖν ἔνδον ὡς ἀδυνάτους διὰ τὸν τῶν σκυλάκων τόκον τε καὶ τροφήν, τοὺς δὲ πονεῖν τε καὶ πᾶσαν ἐπιμέλειαν ἔχειν περὶ τὰ ποίμνια;
> Κοινῇ, ἔφη, πάντα· πλὴν ὡς ἀσθενεστέραις χρώμεθα, τοῖς δὲ ὡς ἰσχυροτέροις.
> Οἷόν τ’ οὖν, ἔφην ἐγώ, ἐπὶ τὰ αὐτὰ χρῆσθαί τινι ζῴῳ, ἂν μὴ τὴν αὐτὴν τροφήν τε καὶ παιδείαν ἀποδιδῷς;
> Οὐχ οἷόν τε.
> Εἰ ἄρα ταῖς γυναιξὶν ἐπὶ ταὐτὰ χρησόμεθα καὶ τοῖς ἀνδράσι, ταὐτὰ καὶ διδακτέον αὐτάς. (5.451d4–e7)

> Do we think that the wives of our guardian watchdogs should guard what the males guard, hunt with them, and do everything else in common with them? Or should we keep the women at home, as incapable of doing this, since they must bear and rear the puppies, while the males work and have the entire care of the flock?
> Everything should be in common, except that the females are weaker and the males stronger.
> And is it possible to use any animal for the same things if you don’t give it the same upbringing and education?
> No, it isn’t.
> Therefore, if we use the women for the same things as the men, they must also be taught the same things.

15 While pleading for the exact same treatment of women and men from their earliest age (τροφή or “nurture”, then παιδεία or “education”), Socrates extrapolates from dogs to humans. The choice of dogs is natural since the discussion concerns male and female guardians, but, even here, Socrates does not omit to mention “any animal”. There is therefore a broader range of species where males and females engage in the same pursuits, and, apparently, the relative weakness of the female is a no less general trait. Again, the perspective is important: the question is not whether animals are like humans. It is exactly the other way round: we observe that, in some species, the males and females exercise the same roles, but can humans be raised and taught to do the same? This is confirmed some fifteen pages later, when, at 466d6–8, Socrates asks: “doesn’t it remain for us to determine whether it’s possible to bring about this association among

human beings, as it is among other animals, and to say just how it might be done?"

16 At the same time, even if women are said to be weaker than men, their capacity for the same occupations or pursuits indicates that the evaluation of individual abilities should prevail over the judgment about gender. I will turn to this much-discussed point in the next section, but first I wish to reinforce the importance of the quasi-zoological background of the claim that males and females of at least certain animal species are equally equipped for the same tasks. Besides the statements to this effect in the *Republic*, Plato puts a more general version in the mouth of Critias, whose phrasing implies no limitation to domestic animals. Explaining why the statue of Athena in Ancient Athens shows the female goddess as armed (ὡπλισμένην), Critias says that this was "an indication that all the female and male animals that live together in a flock can very well pursue in common, as much as is possible, the special talents that belong to each species" (*Critias* 110b5–c2).

17 Here it is not individuals but animal species, taken one by one but always comprising male and female sexes, that possess a special talent for this rather than that activity. In the *Critias*, this shift corresponds to the need to describe human nature, similar to the nature of other herd species, in relation to gods who raise humankind "as their own chattel and livestock, as do shepherds their sheep" (109b6–7). Images of gods shepherding humans are part of Plato's different accounts of humankind's infancy, but the structure of ruling over a herd is the same in a narrower political context, including the *Republic*. On the political level, it is the philosophers who take on the role of herdsmen, with the guardians as their sheep dogs (see 4.440d4–6). In different contexts, Plato thus varies or simplifies the overall scheme that is spelled out in the *Statesman* as a part of yet another account of the period under the direct divine rule: "A god tended them, taking charge of them himself, just as now human beings, themselves living creatures, but different and more divine, pasture other kinds of living creatures more lowly than themselves" (271e5–7).

18 To understand the relevance of this scheme to our main topic, we must bear in mind that, even in Plato, a more detailed comparison to

other species reveals that humankind as a whole is at first quite talentless but then becomes most versatile thanks to the arts and crafts imparted by the gods who wish to remedy this situation (see *Protagoras* 321b6–322d5 on animal capacities versus human crafts). The incorporation of arts and crafts into the structure of the city is clearly at the heart of Socrates' proposals in the *Republic*, which can take advantage of another cultural topos: the variety of human natures allows for the variety of arts whose range exceeds the sum of animal capacities. What, then, does the *Republic* have to say about women and crafts? And how does it relate to the alleged female weakness?

2 Weakness Generalized: From Nature to Craft

19 At first sight, asking about women and crafts may seem like the wrong question. Does Socrates not insist, repeatedly, that there are no specifically female capacities since there is nothing like a general female nature distinct from the male nature, be it in the dogs or the humans? However, it is precisely in relation to crafts that Socrates will claim, in a much discussed passage at 455c–d, that the lack of *naturally* female crafts implies male superiority in *every* craft including those customarily associated with women, such as weaving or baking.

20 To properly address this passage, a few remarks on its broader context are needed, especially because it is here, relatively late in the discussion, that Socrates connects some crafts to the issue of gender for the first time. Until this moment, as we have seen, no craft is described as exclusively male, and, on the female side, Socrates underplays the possible impact of breeding and nursing infants, which are relegated as if to the second plan of the best city: a city that, after all, recovers the original blueprint of the healthy city based on craft and division of labor. At 2.369d–371e, the list of the crafts keeps expanding from "a builder, a weaver, a cobbler, a carer for the health" through "carpenters, metal workers, and many other craftsmen of that sort" to "cowherds, shepherds, and other herdsmen", and finally to trade-related occupations. In his description, Socrates uses grammatically masculine nouns, but the main

point does not concern gender. Describing the first city as the simplest association of specialized artisans, Socrates takes the first step toward the reduction of human nature to different individual natures or talents, regardless of whether these natures belong to women or men. It is this fragmentation of human nature (which is literally "cut up", κατακεκερματίσθαι, into very small pieces at 3.395b) that appears here as uniquely human, and not the sexual difference that characterizes many animal species.

21 This strategy belongs to the repeated, more or less conspicuous avoidance of biology, which cannot be complete but is hard to deny. Especially, it is natural female activities that are minimized, such as the feeding of infants. The guardian mothers will breastfeed, but the wet nurses will also be provided, not only "if mother's milk is insufficient," but also because it is important "that the mothers suckle the children for only a reasonable amount of time" (5.460c–d). In contrast to the wet nurses, who are clearly and traditionally selected from among the lower classes, the female guardians should be *relieved* from nursing as soon as possible, which allows Socrates to avoid any further detail about the female guardians as mothers and keep the silence about the period of their pregnancy. Socrates clearly aims at sidelining everything that could relate to female biology. To this end, he is happy to mention but not really explain the difference between bearing children and begetting them (see again 454d10–e1), which opens the way to measuring all female activities against the male standard. In the end, women are invited to be as manlike as possible, and the argument is less about instituting equality than about effacing the importance of sex.[11]

22 Concerning the crafts, this will lead to a paradoxical, if not outright strange, result: there are no naturally female arts or crafts, and so, once Socrates begins to claim that women are "weaker" than men, he will have to conclude that this is true in all human activities. However, in the passage we will now read, he then concedes to Glaucon that women may be generally weaker, but there are many women who, individually, surpass men in apparently any given art. Importantly, all this follows from the original fragmentation of human nature along individual lines, and hence "the principle that natures that aren't the same must not share in the same pursuits" (454b4–5). This is perfectly illustrated in the example offered by Socrates in the course of his

argumentation: whereas a doctor and a carpenter have souls whose nature is different, this is not the case for the souls of a male and a female doctor whose natures are the same (454d1–6; line 454d2 has often been emended, on which see the detailed discussion in Pomeroy 1978). Of course, Socrates seems to take advantage of the fact that medical expertise was a specialized and socially recognized craft available to women in the Athens of his day (see Connell 2023, 58-59). Yet he is about to imply that a female doctor would be “weaker” than a male one and that, moreover, the same asymmetry applies to all arts, including those that are mostly associated with women. Here we must return to our introductory passage and its general claim about female weakness. Lines 455e1–2, quoted at the beginning of the first section, are actually meant to conclude this exchange:

> Οἶσθά τι οὖν ὑπὸ ἀνθρώπων μελετώμενον, ἐν ᾧ οὐ πάντα ταῦτα τὸ τῶν ἀνδρῶν γένος διαφερόντως ἔχει ἢ τὸ τῶν γυναικῶν; ἢ μακρολογῶμεν τήν τε ὑφαντικὴν λέγοντες καὶ τὴν τῶν ποπάνων τε καὶ ἐψημάτων θεραπείαν, ἐν οἷς δή τι δοκεῖ τὸ γυναικεῖον γένος εἶναι, οὗ καὶ καταγελαστότατόν ἐστι πάντων ἡττώμενον;
> ᾽Αληθῆ, ἔφη, λέγεις, ὅτι πολὺ κρατεῖται ἐν ἅπασιν ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν τὸ γένος τοῦ γένους. γυναῖκες μέντοι πολλαὶ πολλῶν ἀνδρῶν βελτίους εἰς πολλά· τὸ δὲ ὅλον ἔχει ὡς σὺ λέγεις.
> Οὐδὲν ἄρα ἐστίν, ὦ φίλε, ἐπιτήδευμα τῶν πόλιν διοικούντων γυναικὸς διότι γυνή, οὐδ᾽ ἀνδρὸς διότι ἀνήρ, ἀλλ᾽ ὁμοίως διεσπαρμέναι αἱ φύσεις ἐν ἀμφοῖν τοῖν ζῴοιν, καὶ πάντων μὲν μετέχει γυνὴ ἐπιτηδευμάτων κατὰ φύσιν, πάντων δὲ ἀνήρ, ἐπὶ πᾶσι δὲ ἀσθενέστερον γυνὴ ἀνδρός. (5.455c4–e2)

> Do you know of anything practiced by human beings in which the male sex isn’t superior to the female in all these ways? Or must we make a long story of it by mentioning weaving, baking cakes, and cooking vegetables, in which the female sex is expected to excel and in which it is most ridiculous of all for it to be inferior?
> It’s true that one sex is far surpassed by the other in pretty well everything, although many women are better than many men in many things. But on the whole it is as you say.
> Then there is no way of life concerned with the management of the city that belongs to a woman because she’s a woman or to a man because he’s a man, but the various natures are distributed in the

> same way in both creatures. Women share by nature in every way of life just as men do, but in all of them woman is weaker than man.

23 Taken together, all three statements, two by Socrates and one by Glaucon, offer no definitive clarification of what is meant by (generally) "weaker". So, if we want to insist that physical weakness is still at play, we need to take closer look at how this exchange unfolds. At first, Socrates' introductory claim turns our attention precisely to those arts in which strength can hardly play a crucial role (on these arts, see Hulme 2022, 501–502). Simply put, it would seem that if men are after all superior in the "female" arts too, this could be hardly because weaving or baking cakes are physically so demanding. But, importantly, no other reason for female inferiority in this area is given, and it is not plausible that we would deal here with some moral superiority or inferiority. Socrates thus offers a general statement that he deems self-evident: to prove it, we *could* but need not run through the whole gamut of arts. Mentioning the arts "in which the female sex is expected to excel," Socrates appeals to conventional perception of different arts rather than his own earlier arguments, and he confirms this by adding that, in some arts, it would be most ridiculous for women to get surpassed – the use of ἡττώμενον ("being defeated") at the end of the replica may evoke a kind of (almost comical) competition.

24 All this leaves the quoted claim rather vague. This is why Glaucon immediately understands that the result concerns the statistical majority and, precisely for this reason, he feels the need to point out that the pattern in question does not exclude a great many individual exceptions. There are no moral undertones to his remark either. Clearly, it does not hint at matters of education and virtue, which could make certain females better at certain crafts than many men. In the same vein, no such matters are behind the third and summarizing statement, which tacitly acknowledges Glaucon's remark without modifying the general conclusion: the spectrum of individual talents is the same in men and women, but, in every craft, "woman is weaker than man" (ἀσθενέστερον γυνὴ ἀνδρός).

25 This is the moment to acknowledge that the suggested competition between women and men in a broad spectrum of arts is less outlandish than a modern reader might find it. In ancient Athens and

elsewhere, the dividing line between female and male industries was often relatively permeable, and neither weaving nor baking was *exclusively* female. After all, Plato's *Hippias Minor* informs us that Hippias of Elis was weaving his own clothes (368c4), and the "old weaver" in *Phaedo* 87b has always been taken for a man. Also, even some of the mostly female arts were related to male founding figures (Zeus weaving a cosmic πέπλος or "garment" in Pherecydes of Syros, fr. 68 Schibli) or at least excellent and famous male protagonists (see Thearion's "admirable loaves" in Plato's *Gorgias* 518c).[12] There seems therefore to be enough material to construct a kind of "original" male superiority here, although it is unclear whether Socrates hints at such an option that would be difficult to reconcile with his own arguments.

26 Historical material offers therefore no decisive clue about Socrates' woman as "weaker" (ἀσθενέστερον) in all crafts or Glaucon's many women who are "better" (βελτίους) than many men in many things. I believe that none of the suggested interpretations is superior in every aspect, but I will try to argue that the physical sense of weakness has a certain edge here, not in the least because the main subject under discussion is not female nature as such (after all, there isn't any), but the nature of the *guardians* as including women waging war.

27 Those who oppose this reading insist that if ἀσθένεια occasionally refers to physical strength, "it also covers other axes of hierarchy, including intellectual and moral inferiority" (Proios and Kamtekar 2024, 229). Thus understood, ἀσθένεια would be a code name for a fundamental social and political barrier that would limit even those women who are physically strong and excel in the conventionally male professions – these occupations would be closed to them in the first place, and that simply because they are (biologically) women. Where political matters are concerned, this reading may be closer to historical reality (as emphasized in Vlastos 1994, 16–17), but it remains to be seen whether Plato, in his political dialogues, assumes or rather subverts this conventional position.

28 This is why yet another reading was suggested, whose focus is neither on physical weakness nor on the lack of female political authority, but on the weakness of the soul or, in the context of the *Republic*, on the incapacity of the best part of the soul to rule the

inferior parts.[13] I believe that neither of these readings offers decisive arguments against the view that ἀσθένεια stands mostly for the statistically lesser physical strength. As Glaucon's reply to Socrates clearly assumes, such weakness "hardly prevents the very best women provided with appropriate opportunity from being superior to most men, and perhaps in some exceptional cases even surpassing the very best man" (Harry and Polansky 2016, 272). Naturally, this last reading does not contradict the important fact that physical weakness can subtly yet importantly determine social relations and psychological states that relate to them (see the next section).[14] The difference in physical strength is also relatively easy to reconcile with Glaucon's "many women are better than many men in many things," although this is a rather vague claim whose extent is not specified and which cannot resolve the ambiguity discussed by Catherine McKeen: in the best city's distribution of roles, a tension can arise between someone doing a given job better than *they* would do any other job and someone doing that job better than *anyone else* (Mc Keen 2006, 535–537; this relates to the fact that "better than many men" can be very different from "better than a sufficient number of men in order to get the job while being a woman").

29 Regardless of the exact meaning of ἀσθένεια (and of "being better at something"), it is clear that a certain fuzziness of this term must not overshadow the radical streak of Socrates' proposal. Instead of bridging the gap between the female and male versions of human nature, Socrates, as we know, insists that human nature is so thoroughly broken into very small pieces that the only thing that survives from "nature" is the individual talent for a given craft (see the use of εὐφυής at 455b5 and c1). In this fundamental respect, Book 5 fits well together with other ways in which Plato avoids relying on "nature" as a general standard inherent in things.[15] It is no coincidence that, in the *Republic*, everything that pertains to the nature of human beings *as a species* tends to be described as analogous to the nature of other animal species. This tendency culminates in the explanation of the necessary decline of even the best political regime, a decline which will be due to human incapacity to recognize the best moment or season for breeding the best children (8.546a1–547a7). At the same time, this assimilation of humankind to the animal world contains no further biological development and thus no explanation

of female weakness that would parallel, for instance, the Hippocratic treatise *On Generation* 6.1–2, where the sex of the child follows from the relative strength of the mother's and the father's seed, with the assumption that the male creature is stronger than the female and originates from the stronger seed. Plato offers no discussion of these matters, neither in the *Republic* nor in the *Timaeus*, which describes different *anatomies* of male and female sexual organs but also implies a strong *parallelism* of their natures and functions (Timaeus may situate the *female* inferiority on the moral plane, but he identifies as its cause the ethical faults of the previous *male* generation; there is also nothing inherently "worse" in the disorder that Timaeus connects to the female erotic desire since ἔρως affects men in much the same way).

30 In this connection, it is therefore important to stress again that nowhere in the *Republic* do we find any *argument* for the general inferiority of women that would go beyond physical weakness and include the intellectual and moral spheres. This absence is crucial since it points to a real, but not argument-based, gap between biological equality (where ἀσθένεια means just a lesser physical strength) and the male perspective reflected in the language that describes even the female guardians as a prize for the valiant male warriors. This perspectival split does not follow from an extended theorization of weakness but rather from its moralization that reaches beyond what could be logically derived from biology. [16]

31 All this leads to a strange situation. If we take seriously Glaucon's remark that "many women are better than many men in many things," then, on any interpretation of this line, "being a woman" becomes, again, a general condition that cannot explain the individual cases (we would need to construct such explanation – or explanations – ourselves, just as McKeen 2006, 534–537, does). The logical consequence would be to drop, at least when the crafts in the best city are described, the very labels "man" and "woman", which should have lost their explanatory value. On the other hand, if we understand the talk about women being "weaker" in the simple physical sense, then this morally neutral weakness inevitably intervenes in the military craft of the good guardian, which is why the discussion arose in the first place. Socrates touches on this issue in the famous passage about the joint physical training of male and female guard-

ians. Here the meaning of ἀσθένεια is clear and it impacts physical exercises, where the female guardians cannot do exactly like their male counterparts:

> ᾽Αποδυτέον δὴ ταῖς τῶν φυλάκων γυναιξίν, ἐπείπερ ἀρετὴν ἀντὶ ἱματίων ἀμφιέσονται, καὶ κοινωνητέον πολέμου τε καὶ τῆς ἄλλης φυλακῆς τῆς περὶ τὴν πόλιν, καὶ οὐκ ἄλλα πρακτέον· τούτων δ᾽ αὐτῶν τὰ ἐλαφρότερα ταῖς γυναιξὶν ἢ τοῖς ἀνδράσι δοτέον διὰ τὴν τοῦ γένους ἀσθένειαν. (5.457a6–10)

> The guardian women must then strip, since they'll wear virtue instead of their dress. They must share in war and the other guardians' duties in the city and do nothing else. But the lighter parts must be assigned to them because of the weakness of their sex.

32 Here, ἀσθένεια cannot imply inferiority beyond the lesser physical strength, since these same women possess virtue and were previously characterized as philosophical, naturally spirited, and ready for war (456a1–4) (cf. Ironside and Wilburn 2024, 738–744, on Plato's critique of manliness). In fact, these expressions make them similar to Athena, who will be revealed in the *Timaeus* and the *Critias* as the original founder of the best city and described as "a lover of both war and wisdom" (*Timaeus* 24c7–d1) and a lover of craft (*Critias* 109c7–8). The dramatic sequel to the *Republic* thus reveals, perhaps quite symptomatically, that the perfect paradigm of philosophers *and* guardians is a divine master craftswoman who is a virgin with asexual birth.

33 This last point has its importance for the whole story of Socrates' best city, including its mythical past, where the emphasis on the connection between virtue and craft only grows, indeed in parallel with the exclusion of biological matters (see *Critias* 109c4–d2, a telling myth of the origin of the ancient Athenians in Athena's and Hephaestus' workshop). In *Republic* 5, the participation of women in war is described as part of the craft of the guardians, where the relative physical weakness of the female guardians does not affect their virtue, which has been carefully cultivated through the rather brutal training described later. The first test for the children of both sexes comes when, in a war, they should not only observe but, whenever possible, "be brought close and taste blood, like puppies";

then follow several years of physical training; only then, after the successful graduation from this tough regime, which is described as incompatible with intellectual exercise, can the guardians be admitted to the study of dialectics (7.537a4–c3). The mention of puppies reminds the reader of the continuity with the first discussion of military matters at 2.374b6–d6 (with puppies at 375a2–3), where Socrates introduces the art of war as a specialized craft of the utmost importance. The underlying craft model of virtue is clearly at work whenever the guardians are discussed, but it is also clear that this model cannot, in and of itself, establish the superiority of male practitioners in each and every art. And it is this model that leads, or rather *should* lead, to the genderless virtue of the individual.

34 The question therefore remains how to read the residual misogyny that many interpreters of the *Republic* have rightly detected. On a closer look, it seems that Plato is still operating on two levels. On the one hand, once he deals with the weakness in the strictly physical sense and in relation to the hypothetical female guardians, this feature has no impact on the question of virtue. On the other hand, in every other context, perhaps even in the lesser arts, he occasionally mirrors the more or less traditional misogyny. In this second context, one thing is of importance: this misogyny can be understood through the moralization of physical weakness. The latter is not the same thing as general and especially moral inferiority, but, under certain circumstances, it can develop in that direction. On Plato's view, this is what happens in existing cities where women have no direct political authority. This raises the question of whether this moralization reappears in the male perspective that occasionally affects the *Republic*.

3 Weakness Moralized: Cunning as Pseudo-Craft

35 If we have seen how Socrates describes the common "possession" of women and children from the male perspective, including the possible privilege in the choice of sexual partners, elsewhere the *Republic* openly recurs to the stereotypical portrayal of women. To what degree do some of these stereotypes reflect the situation outside the elite group of the guardians? Is it possible that Socrates is

simply not bothered by the gender inequality in the sphere that is not meant to undergo a thorough social reform? After all, it would seem that, in their boorishness, the remarks in question highlight the contrast between the superbly trained female guardians and "other" or stereotypical women. Naturally, I cannot address here the whole issue of women and families outside the circle of the guardians (see Okin 1977, Singpurwalla 2024). However, to better grasp the possible origin of the tension between different statements about women, this section will include not only the examples from the *Republic* but also turn to the *Laws* on female weakness in the "unreformed" cities.

36 Let us begin by an example from the *Republic* itself, an apparently throwaway remark at 5.469d7, where Socrates lambasts the plundering of corpses on the battlefield as a sign of a "womanish and petty mind" (γυναικείας τε καὶ σμικρᾶς διανοίας). Since this is exactly what the guardians, male or female, would never do, we understand that being biologically female and being "womanish" are not the same thing. What makes them coincide are the circumstances that impose on women a position strikingly different from the guardians' public performance. And while there is no discussion of this position in the central books of the dialogue, Socrates' later and colorful account of inferior political regimes offers some material to illustrate the difference in question. Perhaps the most telling illustration comes in 8.549c8–550b7, where Socrates explains the birth of timocracy and draws attention to the role of the future timocrat's mother.

37 Right at the beginning of his explanation, Socrates constructs a tale of female frustration: dissatisfied with her rational husband's indifference to power, the angry mother complains to her son "that her husband isn't one of the rulers and that she's at a disadvantage among the other women as a result" (549c9–d1). Simultaneously aggrieved, envious, and enraged, she's equally unhappy about his lack of interest in money, public honors, and also herself, so that, "vexed by all this, she tells her son that his father is unmanly, too easy-going, and all the other things that women repeat over and over again in such cases" (549d6–e1). Because these insinuations help to reinforce the son's θυμός ("spirit") to the detriment of his reason, Socrates' tale of female θυμός and the unmanly husband demonstrates how, in the non-ideal city, women act in private with serious consequences for the public

sphere (on the context of this passage, see Ironside and Wilburn 2024, 10–11).

38 In *Republic* 8, Socrates does not spell out the connection between this tale and the issue of female weakness, but he implies that the angry mother schemes against her husband so as to compensate for the lack of her own independent authority. Acting behind the scenes is the only way she has to influence what happens publicly and politically. What we do not learn is whether this situation stems from the timocratic constitution or from female nature, whose weakness is not counterbalanced by the now-defunct best political regime. In this respect, Plato is more explicit elsewhere, namely in the *Laws*, where the Athenian Visitor explicitly addresses the issues (and danger) of female weakness in non-ideal cities. In these cities, regardless of the regime of government, the household maintains women in their dependent position, where female physical weakness is not simply stated as a fact but moralized as a cause of "feminine" character traits. To remedy this situation, the Athenian suggests that women should participate in the "splendid and astonishing" communal meals:

> [Τ]ὸ δὲ περὶ τὰς γυναῖκας οὐδαμῶς ὀρθῶς ἀνομοθέτητον μεθεῖται καὶ οὐκ εἰς τὸ φῶς ἦκται τὸ τῆς συσσιτίας αὐτῶν ἐπιτήδευμα, ἀλλ' ὃ καὶ ἄλλως γένος ἡμῶν τῶν ἀνθρώπων λαθραιότερον μᾶλλον καὶ ἐπικλοπώτερον ἔφυ, τὸ θῆλυ, διὰ τὸ ἀσθενές, οὐκ ὀρθῶς τοῦτο εἴξαντος τοῦ νομοθέτου δύστακτον ὂν ἀφείθη. διὰ δὲ τούτου μεθειμένου πολλὰ ὑμῖν παρέρρει, πολὺ ἄμεινον ἂν ἔχοντα, εἰ νόμων ἔτυχεν, ἢ τὰ νῦν· οὐ γὰρ ἥμισυ μόνον ἐστίν, ὡς δόξειεν ἄν, τὸ περὶ τὰς γυναῖκας ἀκοσμήτως περιορώμενον, ὅσῳ δὲ ἡ θήλεια ἡμῖν φύσις ἐστὶ πρὸς ἀρετὴν χείρων τῆς τῶν ἀρρένων, τοσούτῳ διαφέρει πρὸς τὸ πλέον ἢ διπλάσιον εἶναι. τοῦτ' οὖν ἐπαναλαβεῖν καὶ ἐπανορθώσασθαι καὶ πάντα συντάξασθαι κοινῇ γυναιξί τε καὶ ἀνδράσιν ἐπιτηδεύματα βέλτιον πρὸς πόλεως εὐδαιμονίαν· νῦν δὲ οὕτως ἦκται τὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων γένος οὐδαμῶς εἰς τοῦτο εὐτυχῶς, ὥστε οὐδὲ μνησθῆναι περὶ αὐτοῦ ἐν ἄλλοις γ' ἐστὶν τόποις καὶ πόλεσιν νοῦν ἔχοντος, ὅπου μηδὲ συσσίτια ὑπάρχει τὸ παράπαν δεδογμένα κατὰ πόλιν εἶναι. (6.780e2–781c2)

> But it is entirely wrong of you to have omitted from your legal code any provision for your women, so that the practice of communal meals for them has never got under way. On the contrary, part of the human race – the female sex, the part which in any case is inclined

> to be secretive and crafty, because of its weakness – has been left to its own devices because of the misguided indulgence of the legislator. Because you neglected this sex, you gradually lost control of a great many things which would be in a far better state today if they had been regulated by law. You see, leaving women to do what they like is not just to lose half the battle (as it may seem): the female human nature is inferior in matters of virtue to the male one, so there is a proportionately greater danger, perhaps even twice as great. So the happiness of the state will be better served if we reconsider the point and put things right, by providing that all our arrangements apply to men and women alike. But at present, unhappily, the human race has not progressed as far as that, and if you're wise you won't breathe a word about such a practice in other parts of the world where states do not recognize communal meals as a public institution at all.

39 This text is important for at least two reasons. First, the Athenian Visitor establishes a direct *causal* connection between female weakness and a deficiency in virtue. Second, even while speaking about the female part or side of human nature, he relates the alleged female weakness in matters of virtue to the question of political progress.

40 Concerning the description of female weakness, we see a clear shift from what, in an ideal political framework, might be lesser physical strength, to what is morally suspect secrecy and cunning (as noted in Levin 2000, 84). Plato's choice of the adjective ἐπίκλοπος ("tricky", "wily") is significant and refers the readers to its Homeric and especially Hesiodic use. In *Odyssey* 11.364 and 13.291, Alcinous and then Athena uses it to characterize the cunning of the hero who was commonly understood as a prototypical sophist. But it is Hesiod who applies this term to the misogynistic prototype of female evil: Pandora (*Works and Days* 67). Even more than the crafty Odysseus, Pandora is ambiguous as to her "true" nature or the lack thereof, not in the least because she is a divine artefact whose deceitful cunning was put into her by the male god Hermes. But this is why even this ambiguity fits well with Plato's main argument: female weakness transforms into alleged moral inferiority *under certain circumstances*, and these circumstances, those of solely male authority, are historically and politically determined (on *Laws* 6.781–b, cf. Saunders 1995, 592–593, and Kochin 2002, 111).

41 This does not mean that Plato's text would promote the idea of political equality as a way of making women and men morally indistinguishable. It seems that the Athenian Visitor sees female participation in communal meals as a measure that would not eliminate but rather keep under public control the 'danger' of female weakness. This strategy may be behind the Visitor's assessment of how things would unfold if the proposal of communal meals for both sexes were made public. This could only happen in sufficiently advanced cities, but even there, the proposal would meet with resistance – from the *female* side and because of the ingrained habits: women "have got used to a life of obscurity and retirement, and any attempt to force them into the open will provoke tremendous resistance from them and they'll be more than a match for the legislator" (781c4–d1).

42 Again, we are not offered any detail about the women's motivation, and the description is not without internal tension: that the power of female resistance would be too much for the male legislators can hardly be explained by shyness. Rather, this resistance would rely on the whole arsenal of secret weapons that the text imputes to women. The implication is that only a truly new regime, one under discussion in the *Laws*, could overcome such resistance with new rules that would regulate both public and private relations between women and men. In the absence of such rules, let alone those proposed in the *Republic*, women, whose love of victory and honor is not different from that of men, must rely on what the men describe as female craftiness (cf. again *Laws* 6.780e2–781c2). This also means that, if there is no natural difference between the male and female θύμος and related emotions, women must have been pushed into their position by the greater physical strength of men. [17]

43 It is impossible to discuss here the extent to which the *Republic* might suggest that this submission connects to the passage from the "first city", based on crafts and exchange between individuals (with no mention of gender), to the city whose growth implies luxury and war (2.372a5–373e3) (on some related issues, see McKeen 2004, McCoy 2015). But it must be noted that Plato's dialogues are repeatedly relying on the language of strength and power, and that, like in the quoted passage from the *Laws*, they tend to conflate the stronger with the better. On the political terrain of the city, the warning against women can be set alongside the criticism of the sophists, the

large yet barely visible crowd of strange people, who resemble "weak and versatile beasts" (τοῖς ἀσθενέσι καὶ πολυτρόποις θηρίοις) (*Statesman* 291b2). The issue behind the appearance of these magicians, who only pretend to have political expertise, is again one of authority in a well-governed city, an authority that, on Plato's view, must transcend all political scheming. Unlike the sophists, women can therefore be redeemed if the city finds a way to include them in the ruling class, just like the *Republic* strives to do, or at least makes them participate in the important civic rituals, like the *Laws* suggest. Both these dialogues seem to imply that there is no impermeable barrier between women and men or, at least, no barrier as fundamental as those that, for Plato, divide the soul from the body and the gods from humans: in these cases, we deal with true hierarchies where being "better" and being "stronger" unequivocally coincide (see *Phaedo* 80a–b, where Plato brings these two polarities together, turning the divine power into the model for the soul's rule over the body). Once we project this kind of hierarchy into the political field, we obtain polarities such as the one between men and women, polarities made explicit in *Laws* 9.917a4–6: "the better are superior (κρείττους) of the worse, and the older usually of the younger – which means that parents are superior to their offspring, men to women and children (ἄνδρες δὴ γυναικῶν καὶ παίδων), and rulers to their subjects."

44 Importantly for our topic, and differently from the hierarchy of gods and humans, here the word κρείττων retains the ambiguity between "superior" and "stronger" that is similar to that of "weaker" and "stronger" regarding the women in the *Republic*. My intention was to argue that Book 5, where the ideal city admits both male and female guardians, describes women as weaker in the physical sense but not otherwise inferior. Now it needs to be added that this part of the dialogue avoids moralizing the physical weakness, even if Socrates keeps shifting towards the male perspective on "possessing" women. Is it Plato who slips into using this kind of language or is he using it intentionally to draw attention to the difficulty of shaking off the ingrained linguistic habits?[18] It is impossible to know with any certainty, which only confirms the fruitlessness of reducing Plato to either a closet misogynist or a precursor of modern feminism. There is no doubt that, outside of *Republic* 5, the dialogues repeatedly

describe women as morally inferior to men. But the interesting question behind these descriptions is whether, and to what extent, they are meant to mirror the situation in real cities, which do not compensate for the difference in physical strength and, instead, let it develop into a general inequality that further fuels the moralization of weakness.

4 A More Speculative Conclusion: The Female Condition and the Human Condition

45 Recent literature has persuasively argued that the views on women expressed in the dialogues form a mixture that resists easy characterization (see Ironside and Wilburn 2024, 16–17). This article supports this conclusion by arguing that Plato rejects the moralization of weakness while occasionally succumbing to it, paradoxically even where he subverts the typical images of maleness (for instance, when he borrows some "feminine" traits to malign the tyrant in *Republic* 9, 579b–c). In principle, the male perspective (like the language of "possessing" women in common) should become increasingly rare in the best city that would guarantee equality of education and occupation, thus allowing women to express the same psychological drives as men. This new situation should make it unnecessary for women to resort to the alleged cunning and deception that are imposed on them by other political regimes, all of which contain some variation of the household hierarchy. To fully appreciate the conceptual resources of the Platonic alternative, it is important to remember that Plato, unlike Aristotle, never characterizes human beings as political animals and, in the *Republic*, he never describes the internal structure of the city – and of the household – as "natural" or derived from a shared "human nature", which would be more than the sum of the citizens' individual talents (including the intellectual ones).

46 This makes it easier to avoid an openly misogynic stance: no hierarchy between men and women is inscribed "in nature", except for the women's statistically lesser physical strength (this result also agrees with Plato's challenge to gender stereotypes in other texts, including the role of Diotima in the *Symposium* or the image of

Socrates as midwife). At the same time, even the *Republic* apparently assumes that, with the growth of the initially small and arguably egalitarian human cities, the neutral division of labor usually gives way to the sexual division of tasks and the relegation of women to subordinate positions. We have seen how this development implies the moralization of female weakness, which turns women into cunning and scheming creatures. However, and rather ironically, this perspective acquires an interesting meaning once placed into the broader context of other Platonic dialogues and, indeed, the poetic images of human cleverness as a resource that compensates for our relative lack of physical superiority over other animals.

47 From the cunning yet morally suspect Odysseus (whom Socrates defends in the *Hippias Minor*) to the famous ode in Sophocles' *Antigone* 332–375 (where humankind or man, ἄνθρωπος or ἀνήρ, subjugates nature through wit and art), our species distinguishes itself by non-physical skills that take on different form ranging from crafts to speech and hence also lying. Especially the crafts (including the art of politics) can then be described as a god-given remedy for human physical weakness, a remedy necessary for the survival of the 'naked' human species in the face of physically stronger beasts. This is what Plato does in *Protagoras* 321b6–322d5 and *Statesman* 274b2–d2), and what he elsewhere encapsulates in the phrase τῆς ἀνθρωπίνης φύσεως ἀσθένεια ("the weakness of human nature", *Laws* 9.854a1) certainly implies this kind of weakness while already carrying a strong suspicion of inferiority and inclination to vice.

48 The shift from human weakness to female weakness thus seems to belong to this general understanding of humankind and not only to the misogynistic moralizing. One might then wonder if Plato is not suggesting that the badly organized cities push women into a position that reflects the initial position of humankind in the whole animal kingdom. However, this suggestion would be inherently dangerous: moving from 'female' to 'primitive human', it would help create 'woman' as a more stable category than even Plato wants it to be, thus promoting rather than explaining and overcoming gender oppression. This is why it seems possible that Plato, to give him the benefit of the doubt, not only considers female weakness analogous to the general human weakness but also understands the latter in a

way that may illuminate the mishandling of the female condition in existing cities.

49 This would confirm that Plato is neither a woman-hater nor an avant-garde feminist. His main interest in building the new city in words is a traditionally male one: it revolves around the war and, especially, civil war as the greatest political and hence human evil. The divide between men and women is arguably less important to him than the gap between the rich and the poor, which he describes as a potential source of the civil war (*Republic* 4.422e9–423a1). In this context, the status of women receives an original treatment thanks to Plato's turn to individual citizens, whose internal conflicts or internal peace determine the situation in the city (cf. Loraux 2002, 78–83). It is therefore the revision of the soul and human nature that dissolves the "essentialist" opposition between male and female natures. At the same time, regardless this dissolution, the position of women in *existing* cities would still echo the original weakness of humankind. It is contemporary politics that forces women to retain the original human weakness, which is now used to relegate them to the position of the allegedly more animal half of humankind. Rather paradoxically, this happens both despite and because of their specific use of reason. This tension, which would deserve an independent discussion, plays out in the contradictory accusations against women that Plato sometimes reproduces, but not without offering us critical tools for dismantling them.

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NOTES

1 I would like to thank Sophia Connell for helpful comments on the first draft of this paper. I also want to thank Mariska Leunissen for sharing with me the draft of "The Correctness of Laws and (Canine) Natural History in Plato's *Republic*". My further thanks go to the three anonymous readers whose suggestions helped me to substantially rewrite (and hopefully improve) the whole text.

2 Brill 2024, 11, summarizes this tension concisely: "the liberating potential for guardian women of education and political participation does not come with liberation from an essentialist understanding of their 'kind'." For a more general examination that includes the relation to the modern distinction between sex and gender, see, at least, Sandford 2010 and Townsend 2017 (Plato himself does not use any corresponding terminology consistently). Cf. also Han 2023, 23: "If we turn to his descriptions of guardian women and

explore his general attitude toward all women, who constitute a separate race (γένος), Plato's misogyny is undeniable." Han points out a possible defense of Plato's feminism with a view to "the perpetuating divine feminine, defined as vital becoming". However, she admits that such becoming is located on another conceptual level. On a different "divine feminine" as personified by Athena (a warrior presiding over crafts and wisdom) in the *Timaeus* and the *Critias*, see Thein forthcoming.

3 That Socrates does not prove female ἀσθένεια (introduced by Glaucon) is shown in Townsend 2017, 36–38.

4 English translations are from Cooper 1997, with modifications.

5 See Harrison 1953, who lists no less than seven occurrences. The connection to horse breeding seems more plausible than the Hippocratic background suggested in Jaeger 1946.

6 It will be clear that, on my reading, the extent of the animal analogies makes them into something more than a comic device. On this issue, see different views expressed in Saxonhouse 1978, 896 (for the emphasis on comedy) and Townsend 2017, 46 n. 19 (for a criticism of Saxonhouse).

7 Since heredity is not entirely calculable, the guardians will secretly upgrade or downgrade the children who turn out different than predicted (3.415a–c). Socrates clearly acknowledges that accidents of birth are unavoidable and that individual talent is not a sum of the parents' individual natures. This fits well with the account of the best city's downfall in Book 8 but is strikingly different from the concluding myth, where the souls can choose their rebirth and future life, and their choice is determined by previous experience but is otherwise free (10.617e3–5).

8 I wish to thank the anonymous reader who impressed on me the importance of this point, including the survival of parental affection beyond the existence of private family and the persistence of names 'mother', 'father', 'daughter', 'son', 'sister', 'brother' (see 5.463c–d).

9 It is worth noting that if Socrates pretends to apply to humans what is true of the other animals, to recommend the common possession *of children* goes against the rules of dog breeding, at least if we believe Xenophon's *The One Skilled at Hunting with Dogs* 7.3: "When the puppies are born, leave them under the mother and do not put them under another bitch: for they will not grow if they are looked after by others. The milk of the mothers is good, and her breath and embraces are dear [to the puppies]" (quoted from Ehrmantraut and McBrayer 2018).

10 Emphasizing the problematic nature of κοινωνία in question, Gardner 2000, 228, takes this (rightly) for more than a slip of the tongue: "Indeed there is an intimate connection between the appropriation of the reproductive services of women, and the perception of the results of those services as 'products.' Although men too will experience changes with the abolition of the family, it is important to notice that they will not be treated as 'property'; it is significant that when the marriage festivals take place the women are a reward for the men who distinguish themselves in their duties (460b)."

11 Cf. Ruben 2016, 43, on the summary in the *Timaeus*: "Il s'agit là moins d'une volonté d'égalité des sexes que d'effacer la distinction entre les sexes en faisant des femmes des hommes."

12 That men weaved before women is a theme recurrent from Hesiod (*Works and Days* 536–538) to Lucretius (*De rerum natura* 3.1350–1360). For many references concerning weaving, see Thompson 1982, Scheid and Svenbro 1996, 178 n. 45 and 181 n. 75. Cf. also Sparkes 1962 and 1965 with iconographic evidence concerning baking.

13 This kind of ἀσθένεια is discussed in McKeen 2006, 541, who refers to passages from the *Laws* that I will also bring into discussion in the next section. In contrast to McKeen, I will stress that the *Laws* imply rather clearly that the alleged psychological ἀσθένεια of women originates in their lesser physical strength.

14 For a more detailed summary of the three different readings of ἀσθένεια, see Marechal 2024, 186–190, with further references.

15 Plato deploys several strategies of bypassing the opaque "nature": either by making the "natural" properties transparent through the hypothesis of the Forms (the *Phaedo*) or by making nature the product of divine craft (the *Timaeus*, the *Sophist*, but also the *Republic*). In *Republic* 5, determining individual human nature through the craft that it performs the best serves the political purpose of finding each individual's best place in the city.

16 This reading comes close to the concise summary by Hulme 2024, 174: it is possible that "Plato consistently construes women as weaker than men and, in some places, states this in a delicate and qualified way (as in *Republic* 5), and in other places, he states this in a more blatantly misogynist fashion, and without argument." For a long list of other interpreters defending versions of this view, see Blair 2012, 4 n. 18 and 19.

17 On women and θύμος, see again Ironside and Wilburn 2024, whose analysis confirms that, in Plato, θύμος has *always* male and female features, or, more exactly, features traditionally described as such. On a related yet different way of pushing women in their political position in Aristotle, see Connell 2021, 46–48.

18 Kochin 2002, 40–41, suggests a third option: since Socrates rejects the male pretensions before the exclusively male audience, "his occasional use of sexist language is a concession to the limitations of his audience before his speeches have done their work."

ABSTRACT

English

In response to ongoing debates about Plato's view of women, this paper focuses on the source of ambiguities that lead different readers to opposite conclusions. Dealing with the *Republic* and several passages from the *Critias* and the *Laws*, it emphasizes that all the passages that imply some sort of women's inferiority assume one and only reason, namely that women are weaker than men. I argue that, *pace* other interpretations, this claim repeatedly points to physical weakness, although some passages, especially in the *Laws*, moralize this weakness precisely in order to reaffirm male superiority. To disentangle the resulting contradictions in Plato's position, we must consider Plato's use of two interconnected kinds of argumentation: the analogy between human procreation and animal breeding; and the craft model of human virtue. At the same time, if these argumentative tools co-determine Plato's conclusions, a strictly theoretical analysis cannot fully explain those passages that describe the situation of women in both the real and imagined cities from a strikingly male perspective. Besides the narrower interpretation of female "weakness", the paper also offers a more speculative suggestion that Plato sometimes sees this weakness as a specific reflection of what he describes, more generally, as "weakness of human nature".

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Keywords

Plato, Republic, status of women, domestic animals, procreation and politics

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