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Thinking Sex Politically:  
Rethinking “Sex” in Plato’s *Republic*

**T**his essay is concerned with the category of sex, where *sex* means “sex difference,” as distinct from “sexual difference” (a psychoanalytic category), “gender” (a category describing historical, cultural, and institutional demands or norms), and “sexuality” (which refers to sexual desire and/or its orientation). Its aim is to show that we cannot adequately think about “sex” politically without also thinking about it philosophically. “Thinking philosophically,” in this essay, means thinking through a text from the history of philosophy—Plato’s *Republic*—and critically examining the assumptions of some of the English translations of and commentaries on it, in the light of recent theoretical debates. The aim is to make a general point about the thinking of sex that holds across disciplinary boundaries.<sup>1</sup>

Sex is usually understood to be a natural “given,” and the question of identifying what sex *is* is still usually presumed to be one that can be settled empirically, probably by biologists. However, recent work in both biology and philosophy has shown that “sex” is not merely an empirical issue but, rather, a more complex categorical and therefore philosophical one, though some of the

reasons for thinking this are themselves empirical.<sup>2</sup> Briefly, at the level of anatomy, genital morphology, chromosomal configuration, and hormone distribution, the assumption of a clear binary sex difference is not confirmed.<sup>3</sup> The incidence of human intersexuals suggests that it is the category of binary sex difference itself, not the empirical distribution of its characteristics, that demands investigation. The existence of the intersexed reveals that sex is an epistemological and ontological problem and that the presumption of its justification on the basis of an appeal to allegedly straightforwardly perceptible facts is mistaken.<sup>4</sup> Transsexualism poses further philosophical problems in relation to the concept of sex. The fact that one can *change* sex raises the existential question of what it is to *be* sexed, and not just to be sexed as this or that but to be sexed at all, as well as the ontological question of what sex itself is.

Despite the intelligibility of these questions, however, the presumption of binary sex difference is enduring, and resistance to the philosophical questioning of the category is strong. To understand this we need to investigate how the concept “sex” functions in relation to other concepts. When we are careful to distinguish it from related concepts like “gender,” “sex” is used as an abstract noun of classification referring to “the sum of the characteristics that distinguish organisms on the basis of their reproductive function,” and also to “either of the two categories, male or female, into which organisms are placed on this basis.”<sup>5</sup> As such, the specificity of the concept concerns the status attributed to its two terms, male and female. As a distinct concept, “sex” involves the idea that being-male and being-female are the natural, determining bases for the definition of what it is to be a girl or a boy or a man or a woman. “Sex,” that is, is generally conceived as a concept that signifies something about the immutability and essential nature of its terms, such that they signify as foundational and not themselves susceptible to determination. (“Male” and “female” are treated as natural kinds.) With regard to human existence, the function of the concept of sex has largely been to define being-male and being-female as foundational to, and to a great extent determining of, the social and psychological being of men and women.

To the extent that it thus functions ideologically, as a structuring part in a pattern of beliefs related to the social forms of gendered existence, sex is an eminently political concept. Hoary old presumptions about the universality, neutrality, or purity of the practice of the discipline of philosophy may continue to allow some to believe that it has nothing to do with politics. But even where philosophy has become overtly political by becoming feminist,

thinking politically about sex has rarely involved the critical philosophical analysis of the concept itself. Such an analysis requires an investigation of the function of "sex" in its conceptual constellations in different linguistic and historical contexts and can begin only with specific examples from which we might hope to draw more general conclusions.

This essay focuses on one such example: the function of the concept of sex in the English translations of and commentaries on the arguments for the proposals concerning the role of women in Plato's *Republic*. The main claim in this essay, based on a strict textual analysis, is that there is in fact no concept of "sex," as the general term for the categories of male and female, in the classical Greek text of Plato's *Republic*. On the basis of this claim, a new interpretation of the relevant passages of the *Republic* becomes possible and causes us to call into question the apparent "givenness" of the concept of sex and to appreciate its historical contingency, to see that it is a distinctively "modern" concept.<sup>6</sup> In what follows I shall first examine Plato's main argument for the second and third of three proposals concerning the role of women in the *Republic* from the standpoint of some of the most familiar English translations and feminist responses, where the concept of sex is freely employed. I shall then attempt to justify the claim that there is no concept of sex in the *Republic*, reexamining the argument and some related passages from the *Laws* accordingly. Finally, I shall consider some of the broader philosophical consequences of this claim and its implications for contemporary feminism as an indication of what it might now mean for us to think "sex" politically.

### The Relevance of Sex

In what is conventionally numbered book 5 of Plato's *Republic*, Socrates<sup>7</sup> makes three proposals concerning the ruling "guardian" class of the *Republic*, proposals which seem radical and shocking to his interlocutors: (1) that wives and children should be held in common; (2) that men and women should receive an equal education; and (3) that women should participate in all aspects of governance. Disagreements in the feminist literature have largely centered on the second and third proposals.<sup>8</sup> As the second (a radical transformation of education in its broadest sense of upbringing and acculturation) is the condition of possibility of the third (participation in governance), these two proposals are part of a single program of social and political transformation which, *mutatis mutandis*, is recognizable in

the actual transformations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—regional, national, and continental variations notwithstanding.

Whatever Plato's intentions in its initial presentation, various forms of one crucial aspect of his main argument in favor of these proposals have been central, either implicitly or explicitly, to both liberal and socialist feminism. The argument, insofar as it has interested Plato's feminist readers, may be summarized as follows. According to Socrates in Plato's *Republic*, the difference between the sexes (which is not, in itself, denied) is not such that men or women, *qua* men or *qua* women, are suited to any one kind of work or any distinct social or cultural existence. Rather, the difference between the sexes is reduced to the different roles of men and women in reproduction and is said to be *irrelevant* to their capacities for work. Despite Plato's generalized sexism—his apparent belief that men are superior to women in all things—the argument seems to support the view that it is the different treatment and cultural expectations of boys and girls and men and women that produce many of the differences in capacity and character that people are wont to ascribe, erroneously, to the “natural” differences between the sexes.

Despite profound differences in the various feminist interpretations of Plato's position and its wider implications, there has been a common assumption that the concept of “sex” plays a central role in it. This assumption is, of course, not unmotivated by the terms of the text itself, and in particular by the references throughout to “male” (*arren*) and “female” (*thēlus*). Having earlier compared the military wing of the guardian class to watchdogs, Socrates argues for the equal education of men and women by extending his comparison into an analogy (here Socrates reports his questions and his interlocutor's answers):

“Ought female watchdogs [*tas thēleias tōn phulakōn kunōn*] to perform the same guard-duties as male [*hoi arrenes*], and watch and hunt and so on with them? Or ought they to stay at home on the grounds that the bearing and rearing of their puppies incapacitates them from other duties, so that the whole burden of the care of the flock falls on the males?” “They should share all duties, though we should treat the females as the weaker and the males as the stronger [*hōs asthenesterais chrōmetha, tois de hōs ischuroterois*].” “And can you use any animal for the same purpose as another,” I asked, “unless you bring it up and train it in the same way?” “No.” “So if we are going to use men and women

for the same purposes, we must teach them the same things?” “Yes.” (451d–452a)<sup>9</sup>

For Socrates, this argument establishes that men and women should receive the same education if they are to be used for the same purposes, but it does not establish that they can and should be so used. In the elaboration of his case, the two questions of the possibility and the desirability of Socrates’ proposals are condensed into the question of whether or not they are contrary to nature, as the major objection to them will claim that they are. Because of the limitations of the guard dog analogy, Socrates is aware that most of the work in the argument is still to be done, a point that, at first sight, Aristotle’s surprisingly literal objection (“It is absurd to argue, from the analogy of animals, that men and women should follow the same pursuits, for animals have not to manage a household”)<sup>10</sup> seemingly fails to acknowledge. According to Socrates:

The first thing we have to agree on, then, is whether these proposals are feasible [*dunata*] or not. For, whether it’s asked in joke or in earnest, we must allow people to ask the question, Is the female of the human species naturally capable of taking part in all the occupations of the male [*poteron dunatē phusis hē anthrōpinē hē thēleia tē tou arrenos genous koivōnēsai eis hapanta ta erga*], or in none, or in some only? (452e–453a)

As the question is introduced with the interrogative particle *ara*, a negative answer is expected. The implication, then, is that the capability of the female is “in question,” in the sense of “in doubt.”<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, Socrates formulates a serious objection to his own proposals, on behalf of the doubters, by referring back to the previously agreed-upon principle that “each man was naturally [*kata phusin*] fitted for a particular job of his own” (370b):

“Well,” he [the doubter] will continue, “isn’t there a very great natural difference between men and women [*estin oun hopōs ou pampolu diapherei gunē andros tēn phusin*]?” And when we admit that too, he will ask us whether we ought not to give them different roles to match these natural differences [*oukoun allo kai ergon hekaterō prosēkei prostattein to kata tēn hautou phusin*]. When we say yes, he will ask, “Then aren’t you making a mistake and contradicting yourselves, when you go on to say that men and women should follow the same occupations, in spite of the great natural difference between them [*pleiston kechōrismenēn phusin echontas*]?” (453b–c)

Socrates' answer to this objection, which aims to clear away the appearance of internal inconsistency, constitutes the main argument for both the second and the third proposals. It is the objection, he says, that is faulty, in not being able to distinguish between merely verbal oppositions and more important "distinctions in kind" (*mē dunasthai kat' eidē diairoumenoi*) (454a) and in not considering "what kind [*eidōs*] of sameness or difference of nature we mean, and what our intention was when we laid down the principle that different natures should have different jobs, similar natures similar jobs" (454b). "We never meant," Socrates says,

"that natures are the same or different in an unqualified sense [*ou pantōs tēn autēn kai tēn heteran phusin etithemetha*], but only with reference to the kind of sameness or difference which is relevant to various employments. For instance, we should regard a man and a woman with medical ability as having the same nature [*hoion iatrikon men kai iatrikēn tēn psuchēn ontas tēn autēn phusin echein elegomen*]. Do you agree?" "Yes." "But a doctor and a carpenter [*iatrikon de kai tektonikon*] we should reckon as having different natures."<sup>12</sup> "Yes, entirely." "Then if men or women as a sex [*to tōn andrōn kai to tōn gunaikōn genos*] appear to be qualified for different skills or occupations," I said, "we shall assign these to each accordingly." (454c–e)

Given the previous agreement on the "very great" natural difference between men and women, the situation is now that the interlocutors are agreed both that men and women have different natures (as men and women), and that some men and women have the same nature (as doctors, for example). This is not a contradiction in Socrates' argument, but the exposition of an apparent contradiction in the beliefs of his interlocutors, due to the same mistake that Socrates identified earlier: failure to ask in what the difference between the natures of men and women consists and how that difference is relevant. The next step will be to determine just this:

"Then if men or women as a sex [*to tōn andrōn kai to tōn gunaikōn genos*] appear to be qualified for different skills or occupations," I said, "we shall assign these to each accordingly; but if the only difference apparent between them is that the female bears [*to men thēlu tiktein*] and the male begets [*to de arren ocheuein*] we shall not admit that this is a difference relevant for our purpose, but shall maintain that our male and female Guardians [*tous te phulakas hēmin kai tas gunaikas*] ought to follow the same occupations." (454d–e)

According to Julia Annas, the "crucial point" in Plato's argument is not whether there are differences between men and women—indisputably, there are—but whether these sex differences, which are certainly relevant in procreation, have any bearing on men and women's professional capabilities.<sup>13</sup> For Annas and many other feminist readers, Plato was able to see that these differences are only illegitimately cited as the justification for women's exclusion from participation in education, administration of the state, governance, and so on. For others still, this insight extends to Plato's ability to see that what women currently are and do is not what women *could be* and *could do* under different, more favorable conditions (principally, with more favorable educational opportunities).<sup>14</sup>

Given the conservative or reactionary role that "sex" tends to continue to play in discussions of the capabilities, characteristics, and proper pursuits of men and women, it is not surprising that feminists should emphasize the general irrelevance of the fact (if such it is) of sex difference to professional capability and argue that the fact of sex difference does not translate into necessarily determined intellectual or psychological differences. To the extent that readers have found book 5 of the *Republic* to contain arguments congenial to feminism, it is therefore also not surprising that Plato's position is couched in these terms.<sup>15</sup> According to this interpretation, Socrates' argument is pitted against his interlocutors' assumption that sex difference—the fact that women bear and men beget—is a valid basis for doubting that women are capable of sharing in men's work (most specifically in governance). Despite their varying degrees of sympathy for Plato, most feminist commentators thus agree that the crucial point in his argument is the shift in emphasis away from "sex" as an explanatory category in the social and political existence of women toward "gender," the set of socially determined behaviors and characteristics prescribed for and—to a greater or lesser extent—lived out by women. It is thus generally assumed that the modern category of "sex" is somehow operative in, or can be read back into, the arguments in book 5 of the *Republic*.

### The Relevance of *Genos*

However, from the modern perspective there is a conceptual lacuna in Plato's text which most English translations and interpretations—including the feminist interpretations—do not merely miss but in fact conceal. Moreover, this lacuna occurs in precisely that passage in which, according to Annas and others, the crucial point is made, namely:

“Then if men or women as a sex [*to tōn andrōn kai to tōn gunaikōn genos*] appear to be qualified for different skills or occupations,” [Socrates] said, “we shall assign these to each accordingly; but if the only difference apparent between them is that the female bears [*to men thēlu tiktein*] and the male begets [*to de arren ocheuein*] we shall not admit that this is a difference relevant for our purpose, but shall maintain that our male and female Guardians [*tous te phulakas hēmin kai tas gunaikas*] ought to follow the same occupations.” (454d–e)

What is perhaps most interesting about this—the crux of Socrates’ argument—is obscured, I shall now argue, by the translation of *genos* as “sex,” and by the use of the English terms “male” and “female” in the final line.

In classical Greek there is no distinct word for “sex.” The word *genos*, which is sometimes translated as “sex,” primarily means “race,” “stock,” and “kin,” as well as “offspring,” “tribe,” “generation,” and “kind.” In the passages under consideration, every time Plato’s *genos* is translated into English as “sex,” the more general “race” or (better) “kind” would make equally as much sense. What, then, justifies the translation of *genos* as “sex”?

In modern English, “sex,” as we have said, is an abstract noun of classification referring to “the sum of the characteristics that distinguish organisms on the basis of their reproductive function,” and also to “either of the two categories, male or female, into which organisms are placed on this basis.” “Sex” as a conceptually distinct term is aligned with nature itself, in contrast with the conventional attributes of “gender.” As such, “sex” functions conceptually (and also allegedly empirically) as the basis for, but *is not identical with*, the categories “man” and “woman” (a species-specific version of the adult forms of male and female) and the characteristics of gender. If “sex” is a *general* term referring to the two categories “male” and “female,” the category according to which the “nature” of men and women is ultimately determined, there is no concept of sex in Plato’s *Republic*. For each time *genos* is used in the *Republic* in relation to men or women or male or female, it is attached *to one or the other* in order to specify men or women or male or female as a class in distinction from this or that man or woman or male or female animal. The word is never used (indeed, it *cannot* be used) as a singular term to refer to a distinction in kind covering both men and women or male and female. That is, it is never used as the general term “sex” is used in English.<sup>16</sup> And although the concepts of “male” and “female” seem to be unproblematically recognizable in the Greek *arren* and *thēlus*, the absence of any concept of sex as a general term that designates what kind of cate-



gories "male" and "female" are would suggest that *arren* and *thēlus* are not identical with the English "male" and "female."

The fact that there is no distinct word for "sex" in classical Greek and the—empirically verifiable—fact that the word *genos* is never used in the *Republic* as a singular term to refer to a distinction in kind covering both male and female (because it cannot be used thus) are important for the claim that there is no concept of sex in Plato's *Republic*. However, it does not by itself offer conclusive support for the claim. Rather, the claim is made, very specifically, with reference to the precise context and function of the word *genos* in Plato's dialogue, in comparison with the function of the modern English "sex." Any objection to the claim must therefore be made at the same level. The fact that generations of highly respected classical scholars have routinely employed the category of sex in commentary on and interpretation of Plato's text does not *demonstrate*, but merely *presumes*, that the modern concept is an appropriate translation, and it is precisely this presumption that this essay aims to question. This contemporary context should make it clear, further, that I do not mean to suggest that there is an "objective truth" of "sex" revealed by the modern English word but hidden to Plato. Rather, one of the consequences of the claim that there is no concept of "sex" in Plato's *Republic* is that the contingency of its modern function is revealed. If the claim is taken seriously, it will have implications not only for how we read the *Republic* and other texts of the period, but also for how we understand the status of our *own* concepts of "sex" and "gender." For it would be mere presentist prejudice to imagine that our conceptual divisions must be the right ones and that the absence of any exact parallel with the modern concept of "sex" in classical Greek is a lack.

Reading the *Republic* without the presumption of the modern category of sex entails a shift of interpretive emphasis and warrants the reexamination of several main concepts. In the crucial passage at 454d–e there is a noticeable shift from "man" and "woman" to "male" and "female." In Lee's translation:

"if men or women as a sex [*to tōn andrōn kai to tōn gunaikōn genos*] appear to be qualified for different skills or occupations," [Socrates] said, "we shall assign these to each accordingly; but if the only difference apparent between them is that the female bears [*to men thēlu tiktein*] and the male begets [*to de arren ocheuein*] we shall not admit that this is a difference relevant for our purpose, but shall maintain that our male and

female Guardians [*tous te phulakas hēmin kai tas gunaikas*] ought to follow the same occupations.”

According to the presumption of a determining concept of sex as a baseline supporting and regulating the characteristics of men and women, the move from “man” and “woman” to “male” and “female” is interpreted as a descent to the bottom line, a movement downward on a vertical plane. The destination of this downward movement is already presupposed in the translation of *genos* as “sex” and consolidated in Lee’s translation of *tous te phulakas hēmin kai tas yunaikas*—literally, “our guardians [masculine gender] and the [or ‘their’] women [or ‘wives’]”—as “our male and female Guardians”: that is, according to the categories of sex.

However, without the presumption of the category of sex predetermining the interpretation, the move from “man” and “woman” to “male” and “female” might be seen as a movement, on a horizontal plane, to alternative designations, not foundational descriptions. Without the presumption of the foundational category of sex, “man” and “woman” and “male” and “female” could represent different ways of conceiving the difference between groups or kinds (Plato uses *genos* in relation to the terms of both conceptual pairs) across which the distinction of conditioned/conditioning is not distributed. Indeed, one might even see the primarily adjectival forms of *arren* (male) and *thēlus* (female) as determinations or attributes of *anēr* (man) and *gunē* (woman), a position which, however unorthodox or counter-intuitive, does have the merit of making sense of their almost complete lack of relevance to Plato’s argument in contrast to the role played by descriptions of the possibilities for men and women.

The common assumption that the modern category of sex is central to Socrates’ argument also involves the assumption that it drives the position that Socrates *opposes*. According to this assumption, what is contentious and radical in Socrates’ argument is his claim that the fact that females bear and males beget is irrelevant to employment and governance. But if the presumption of the modern category of sex—which we tend to equate with “the natural”—is removed, then Socrates’ assertion of “a very great natural difference between men and women”—the first real stumbling block to his proposals—need not be read as a reference to the fact that one begets and the other bears. Indeed, Socrates’ argument makes much more sense (and is certainly much more interesting) when it is *not* read in this way. The objection is, rather, a much more far-reaching assertion of a difference between men and women *in every aspect of their existences*, an assertion governed

by the assumption of a set of "natural" characteristics peculiar to women, including (as Socrates emphasizes) a generalized inferiority and weakness.

The question is, what is the presumed basis of this set of characteristics peculiar to women? With the ready availability of the concept of sex, the answer is easy: the basis of the characteristics peculiar to women is their sex, their being-female. But if the availability of the modern concept of sex is not presumed, then what women *are* as a *genos* is constituted by this collection of characteristics, this totality of the set of womanish characteristics themselves, just as much as by their being-female. Without the presumption of the modern concept of sex to carry the explanatory burden, the "nature" of women is not attributable to a singular "essence," in the modern sense, but is composed of a unified multiplicity of behavioral and other characteristics, including their being-female, the totality of which bears the (now historico-)ontological weight. In modern terminology, the greater significance of the set of womanish characteristics and attributes here would amount to the greater significance of "gender" than of "sex"; sex would be just one of these characteristics. This is not just the claim that social and political conditions, rather than differences in capability emanating from the natural fact of sex, determine in any given culture what women can and cannot *do*. It is the claim that the whole of the set of womanish characteristics and attributes, including being-female, constitutes the basis of what a woman *is*. They—and not the modern category of sex—define what it is to *be* a woman in the strong sense.

As has often been pointed out, Plato's dialogues are littered with casual references to women defined according to a set of (wholly negative) characteristics, and they are historically typical in that respect. To the extent that this is also presupposed as the background to the *Republic*, it is what Socrates tries to put into question. What Socrates (unlike modern feminists) must oppose is thus not the presumption of the determining role of sex difference, but the presumption that women as a race (*genos*) are different—indeed opposite—to men in *every respect*, in *every aspect* of their "nature." Accordingly, Socrates' contentious move in the relevant passages in the *Republic* is *not* the claim that the different roles of the male and the female in reproduction are irrelevant to the matter at hand. It is the *reduction* of "the very great natural difference between men and women" to the fact that one begets and the other bears. Philosophically, that is, Socrates' contentious move is the metonymic definition of the nature of men and women in terms of being-female and being-male, the metonymic *substitution* of dif-

ferent roles in reproduction for the “very great natural difference.” To the extent that being-male and being-female do not have the determining function given them by the modern concept of sex, Socrates’ reduction amounts to denying the relevance of “the very great natural difference” as it is usually understood while seeming to acknowledge it. Substituting a part (function in reproduction) for the whole (social and political being), Socrates reduces differences that would be seen as specifically human to a kind of difference that is common to all animals (his use of the verb *ocheuein* for the male role in reproduction emphasizes this, as does the example of the guard dog). According to this interpretation of Socrates’ argument, Aristotle’s objection to it is not so literal after all. That is, Aristotle objects to the reduction of the very great differences between men and women—differences in every aspect of their social and political existences—to the relatively unimportant difference between bearing and begetting as bare animal functions.

As this may be thought to be a contentious interpretation, it is worth reiterating the point to make it clear. The logic of Socrates’ argument, and the logic of Aristotle’s objection to it, suggest that what needs to be opposed is *not* the idea that being-male and being-female (the fact that the one begets and the other bears) determines all aspects of the social, psychological, and political existences of men and women. Aristotle, it seems, objects to the reduction of men and women to their being-male and being-female precisely because these latter *cannot* be seen to determine one aspect of their social existences (broadly speaking, the division of labor) that for him is crucial to the definition of the existences of men and women.

Thus the target and the rhetorical tenor of Socrates’ argument look rather different when it is not presumed, a priori, that the modern concept of sex is operative in the text: when it is not presumed, that is, that what it is to be a man or to be a woman—what constitutes a man as a man and a woman as a woman—is primarily determined by their being-male and being-female. The text suggests, rather, that what constitutes a man as a man and a woman as a woman is equally or even chiefly the sociohistorical norms of what we now call “gender,” where this includes the attributes of masculinity and femininity and the normative social and political roles prescribed for each. This is not to deny, of course, that Socrates and his contemporaries were aware of the anatomical differences between men and women. But it is to suggest that the anatomical differences between men and women were not necessarily understood—as they tend to be today—on the basis of a foundational category of sex.<sup>17</sup>

### Becoming Women, Becoming Men

The idea that—in the absence of a concept of sex—it is the set of womanish characteristics and attributes, quite as much as their being-female, that define what it is to *be* a woman sheds an interesting light on the social prohibition of "womanish" behavior for men in ancient Athens and illuminates the arguments in Plato's *Republic* and *Laws* against certain forms of poetry and against men taking women's parts in dramatic performance. These arguments are, in part, the extension of the familiar social prohibition taken to its limit. "The gravest charge against poetry," in book 10 of the *Republic*, concerns "its terrible power to corrupt even the best characters, with very few exceptions" (605c). Even the best of us, Socrates says, on hearing Homer represent the sufferings of a hero, will be carried away by our feelings and, moreover, praise the poet who can affect the listener most powerfully in this way (605c–d): "Yet in our private griefs we pride ourselves on just the opposite, that is, on our ability to bear them in silence like men [*hōs touto men andros on*], and we regard the behaviour we admired on the stage as womanish [*gunaikos*]" (605d–e). Admiring this behavior, feeling sympathy with this behavior, entails a loosening of the control of the best part of the soul over the lowest and *leads to* this kind of behavior itself (606a–d). It leads to becoming womanish.

This also explains why, in an earlier section of the *Republic* before the introduction of the idea of female rulers, it is said that the guardians, being men (*andras ontas*), will not be allowed to take the parts of or imitate women (395d). For if the set of womanish characteristics, quite as much as being-female, defines what it is to be a woman, a man for whom these characteristics, through repeated imitation, have become natural will, to some degree, *become* a woman. If it is not the case that men and women are defined solely according to their being-male or being-female, the set of behavioral characteristics and attributes that contribute to the definition of what it is to *be* a woman are not mere predicates: they have existential status, a state of affairs that is no doubt encouraged, if not explained, by the lack of linguistic distinction in classical Greek between what we now call the existential and the predicative senses of the verb "to be." These womanly characteristics in a man are not therefore just accidents attached to a determining male substance; they entail an existential transformation.

This existential transformation is possible, moreover, despite the fact that males are always male. As has been pointed out, the modern identification

of sex with what is natural leads us to think of the idea of a “woman’s nature” in terms of the determining role of her being-female. If, however, as Socrates’ argument suggests, a woman’s or a man’s nature is equally determined by the set of behavioral characteristics and attributes that we now call “gender,” we can see how it is possible to conceive of the idea that womanliness and manliness can commute across male and female. At the end of the *Laws*, Plato’s Athenian protagonist imagines the ideal punishment for a man who, in the face of his enemy, deliberately abandons his weapons, “preferring a coward’s life of shame to the glorious and blessed death of a hero.”<sup>18</sup> This is a man who lacks *andreia*, “courage” or “manliness,” the chief virtue of the hoplite. It is not, he says, within mortal power to change such a man into a woman (*eis gunaika ex andros metabalousa*) as a god once changed Kaineus the Thessalian into a man—that is, it is not within mortal power to effect the physical transformation from male to female. But the decreed punishment shall be the next best thing, “the closest possible approximation to such a penalty: we can make him spend the rest of his life in utter safety” (944e), never being appointed to any soldierly position, as he has, because of his own nature, given up on or been debarred from the risks that only men can run (*apheisthai tōn andreion kindunōn kata phusin*) (945a). The man who lacks manliness shall be treated like the woman he really is by nature,<sup>19</sup> a nature that his male anatomy does not override. In this case, indeed, anatomy *contradicts* nature. His being-male cannot ensure that he is a man when his behavior has proved him to be a woman.

### **Para doxan**

The possibility for womanishness, understood in this way, to commute across male and female is recognized in the *Republic* and the *Laws* in the prohibition of behaviors that would encourage it. To some extent, this same commutability of womanishness and manliness is also the ultimate basis for the possibility of Socrates’ proposals concerning women in the *Republic*. For Plato and his contemporaries, the set of characteristics and attributes that contribute to the definition of women as women includes flightiness, untrustworthiness, secretiveness, lack of self-control, and tendency to extremes of emotion (the list could be much longer). As these are the precise opposites of the characteristics of the guardians, and as Socrates argues that some women have the nature befitting a guardian, his argument must imply that some women do not have the characteristics and attributes that con-

tribute to the definition of women as women. All that remains of this set in Socrates' argument—and this is the sole concession to the imaginary opponent's objection—is the idea that women are, in all respects, weaker than men. It is only this remainder that prevents the implication of his argument leading to the *explicit* conclusion that some women (those with the nature of a guardian) are, to all intents and purposes, men.

But this is the implicit conclusion: some women are, or could be, to all intents and purposes, men, although they remain incontrovertibly female. This conclusion seems very odd and contradictory in relation to the function of the modern concept of sex, according to which being female would determine that one was a woman, but not in the context of the equal significance of the set of womanish and manly characteristics and attributes in the definition of what it is to be a woman or a man. To the extent that this conclusion intensifies, rather than contradicts, the assumptions of Socrates' interlocutors, it is "paradoxical" (*para doxan*, as Socrates frequently says): not contrary to logic or possibility, that is, but contrary to *convention* and to what is taken to be desirable. In this context it is always possible that women might become men—a possibility that is both feared and socially prohibited.<sup>20</sup> Socrates' innovation is to endorse and promote this possibility as an alternative to the womanly woman with the set of conventional characteristics and attributes described elsewhere in Plato's dialogues.

The idea that some women might—indeed, ought to—become men has been the target of one form of the feminist critiques of Plato, articulated most vigorously, perhaps, by Arlene W. Saxonhouse, who speaks of the "de-sexed and unnatural females" of Socrates' imagination, repeating the objection of Socrates' imaginary opponent in a modern form:

As Socrates attempts to turn women into men by making them equal participants in the political community, he ignores the peculiar natures of each and thus undermines the perfection of the political society in the *Republic*. . . . If one's *phusis* [nature] is defined by that which one does better than anyone else, then Socrates has disregarded the *phusis* of the female.<sup>21</sup>

Saxonhouse makes this argument in the context of a defense of what she sees as the "natural role" of women, determined by their "peculiar biological qualities."<sup>22</sup> It is based on the unexamined modern concept of "sex" functioning as both the "real property" securing the arguments and the thing secured by them, the thing mortgaged and the loan itself. Although

Saxonhouse is by no means representative of the many feminist readings of book 5 of the *Republic*, this concept of sex is the common assumption that cuts across them all. Without this assumption, I have argued, the context of the discussion of Socrates' proposals is realigned, and the specificity of his argument—its simultaneous immersion in and divergence from the assumptions of his contemporaries—emerges more clearly.

This specific analysis reveals a general point, relevant across the various disciplinary attempts to think sex politically. It reveals the historical specificity of the modern concept of sex, a concept whose general, conservative ideological function, in its association with the idea of a fixed, immutable “nature,” is to mark a universal and unchallengeable difference, located now at the level of the biological, with reverberations throughout the social and political spheres. Thinking sex politically thus means questioning not just assumptions *about* sex, but the assumption of the givenness of the concept of sex itself.

#### Notes

- 1 This essay is a shortened version of the first chapter of my forthcoming *Plato and Sex* (Polity Press, 2006).
- 2 Perhaps the best-known philosophical critique of assumptions concerning the category of sex is Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990). Almost all of the philosophical work in this field, however, is indebted to Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978).
- 3 See, for example, Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).
- 4 See, for example, Suzanne J. Kessler, *Lessons from the Intersexed* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998).
- 5 These are the definitions given in the Collins English Dictionary.
- 6 I use the term “modern” in a broad sense here in distinction from the “ancient.” I leave open the question as to when, exactly, “sex” came to have the meaning that we tend to ascribe to it today. Thomas Laqueur suggests that “sex” began to take on this meaning in the seventeenth century. See Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 8.
- 7 For the purposes of this essay, “Plato” refers to the author of the *Republic* and other dialogues, “Socrates” to a character in these dialogues.
- 8 See, for example, Susan Moller Okin, *Women in Western Political Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).
- 9 Unless otherwise stated, quotations are from Desmond Lee's translation of Plato's *Republic* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1987). References in the text cite the Stephanus numbers of Plato's dialogues.



- 10 Aristotle, *The Politics and The Constitution of Athens*, trans. Jonathan Barnes (revising Benjamin Jowett) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 39 (1264b, 4–7).
- 11 So, Waterfield’s translation (*Republic*, trans. Robin Waterfield [New York: Oxford University Press, 1993]): “Shouldn’t we allow that there is room for doubting . . . whether women do have the natural ability to cooperate with men.”
- 12 The English phrase “a man and a woman with medical ability” translates the two Greek words *iatrikon* and *iatrikēn*, which are masculine and feminine forms, respectively, of the same adjective, here meaning “skilled in the medical art.” The words “doctor” and “carpenter” translate *iatrikon* and *tektionikon*, both masculine forms of different adjectives. Thus the Greek emphasizes, more than the English translation can, the sameness of the man and woman with medical ability and the difference between the man who is a carpenter and the man who is a doctor.
- 13 Julia Annas, “Plato’s *Republic* and Feminism,” in *Feminism and Ancient Philosophy*, ed. Julie K. Ward (New York: Routledge, 1996), 4, 3. See also Janet Farrell Smith, “Plato, Irony, and Equality,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Plato*, ed. Nancy Tuana (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994). Farrell Smith’s argument draws on that of Gregory Vlastos, “Was Plato a Feminist?” also in Tuana, *Feminist Interpretations of Plato*.
- 14 See, for example, Susan B. Levin, “Women’s Nature and Role in the Ideal Polis: *Republic V* Revisited,” in Ward, *Feminism and Ancient Philosophy*.
- 15 See, for example, Elizabeth V. Spelman, “Hairy Cobblers and Philosopher-Queens,” in Tuana, *Feminist Interpretations of Plato*, esp. 89, 94.
- 16 For example, in book 5 of the *Republic*: 453a, *tou arrenos genous*, “of the male race”; 454d, *to tōn andrōn kai to tōn gunaikōn genos*, “the race of men and the race of women”; 455c, *to tōn andrōn genos . . . to tōn gunaikōn*, “the race of men . . . the [race] of women”; 455d, *to gunaikeion genos*, “the race of women,” “the womanish race”; 455d, *to genos tou genous* (genitive of comparison), “the race of [men] [in comparison with] the race [of women]”; 457b *dia tēn tou genous astheneian*, “because of the weakness of the race [of women].”
- 17 In a recent article, Chloë Taylor Merleau has argued something very similar to this in relation to Aristotle. See Chloë Taylor Merleau, “Bodies, Genders and Causation in Aristotle’s Biological and Political Theory,” *Ancient Philosophy* 23.1 (2003): 135–51.
- 18 Plato, *Laws*, trans. Trevor J. Saunders (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1975), 944c. All quotations from the *Laws* use this translation by Saunders.
- 19 The passage reads: “ho de ophlōn tēn dikēn pros tō apeisthai tōn andreion kindunōn kata phusin tēn hautou prosapotisatō misthon . . .” Saunders translates: “and in addition to being thus permitted, like the woman he is by nature, to avoid the risks that only men can run, the guilty man must also pay a sum of money . . .”
- 20 Indeed, despite the function of the modern concept of sex, the contemporary anxiety that females might, to all intents and purposes, become men is regularly revealed in the antifeminist discourses that still warn of the “de-sexing” of modern women and the feminist “perversion” of their natural roles. In a recent (July 2004) statement of doctrine on gender issues, Pope John Paul II’s chief theological spokesperson, cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (now himself Pope Benedict XVI), accused feminists of “blurring the biological difference between man and woman” with dangerous claims about the constructed nature of gender roles—claims that cause women to “neglect their family

duties." See John Hooper and Tania Branigan, "Pope Warns Feminists," *The Guardian*, July 31, 2004, available at [www.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,,1273102,00.html](http://www.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,,1273102,00.html) (accessed March 26, 2004).

- 21 Arlene W. Saxonhouse, "The Philosopher and the Female in the Political Thought of Plato," in Tuana, *Feminist Interpretations of Plato*, 68, 70. See also Saxonhouse, *Fear of Diversity: The Birth of Political Science in Ancient Greek Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), especially 147–57.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 72, 71.