



The Roots of Feminist Theory in the Philosophy of Plato

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Abstract

Plato is among the most influential philosophers in the course of history, and the range of his ideas about different issues makes other scholars impressed. Considering his various views on varied subjects, one can argue that many ideas of the thinkers originated from Plato's ideas in the contemporary world. Plato, in different positions, discussed women and their equality with men, especially in Republic Book V. The study of the ideas makes one suppose that the book explores the roots of feminist theory. In Book V, Plato deals with the equality of women and men related to learning different issues and positions. Besides, he has discussed the children-sharing system resulting in the elimination of the private family system. Plato's opinions are highly disputed; on the one hand, his ideas are considered feminist, and on the other hand, however, they are seen with no relation to feminist philosophy. The present paper aims to judge opinions related to women in the Republic Book V.

Keywords: *Feminist Philosophy; Plato; Equality; Women; Republic; Feminism*

Introduction

One can argue that Plato is one of the thinkers who talked about widespread issues that influenced the intellectual system of other thinkers marvelously. Whitehead, therefore, said about Plato's influence on the history of human thought, "The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato" (Whitehead, 1978, P. 39). For example, one can say that Al-Farabi in expressing the theory of Virtuous City had been indebted to Plato (Farabi, 1995). If we decide to generalize this word to all branches of philosophy, then we should say that feminist philosophy is not exempt and has been influenced by Plato's thoughts, and a study of Plato's thoughts proves this. Plato as an expert in the field of epistemology and ontology discussions, and politics and law, has also special opinions about women. But it should be mentioned that these theories were novel at the time and are now considered some parts of noticeable and disputable theories.

Plato, in different positions, has discussed women. But his considerable theories on this issue are expressed in *Republic* Book V. It is a book with different philosophical issues. Ethical, epistemological, ontological, and political issues are addressed in the book. One could say that Plato has presented ethical, epistemological, and ontological systems as an introduction to a government model. Plato's Utopia is the foundation of his political philosophy and is his political model; it is managed by philosopher rulers based on moral virtues, the most important of which is just. The importance of just discussion is such that it can be seen as the main element of Plato's Utopia. And in fact, it should be said that the rulers of the society must have such an attribute. Plato has assigned *Republic* Book I to just discussion and the related issues (*Republic*, 327b- 354c). Moreover, he said elsewhere, "can you mention any greater things than the just, the noble, the good?" (*Alcibiades*, 118a). Further, in the other treatise, he mentioned, "And that this is living well and finely and justly" (*Crito*, 48b). In his view, just is some part of human virtue as an association to join humans in governments. This is the very attribute that makes a good and social human, and one can say that just is the first and most fundamental political theory of Plato (Foster, 1942: 45). Just as a human attribute creates a balance among virtues. Besides, more widely, it turns into a social issue, i.e., with the similitude of society and the human, there is a society consisting of main parts and just creates a balance among them. With this viewpoint to just, one cannot argue that just means equality. But it may be claimed that equality is necessary to create a balance in society, and, in many positions, just is regarded as equality.

In this sense, Plato mentioned the issue of the equality of women and men to plan his ideal society and assigned the *Republic* Book V to the discussion. Two fundamental issues are discussed in the book: First, the discussion of the equality of women and men in instructional, educational, and social affairs, and second, the discussion of shared children and family abolition. The reflection on the two issues makes us find some elements of feminist theory in Plato's opinions. However, Plato's opinions on women are extremely disputable; therefore, it is disputed to regard him as a feminist.

The study of Plato's opinions on the equal rights of women and men in the *Republic* is discussed in the present paper, and finally, the opinions will be judged.

Research Methods

The research method of this paper is based on the library research methods, and also the contents are expressed in an analytical and critical manner.

Research Background

There have been many researches about the issue of women in Plato's philosophy. For example, we can refer to an article by Annas who discussed this issue independently (Annas, 1976), Fatemi Nezhad has also reviewed the rights of women in Plato's philosophy based on Plato's theory of justice (Fatemi Nezhad, 2021). Buchan also examined the issue of women in Plato's political theory in her book (Buchan, 1999). Brown has a paper on ethics and politics in Plato's *Republic* published in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. In a part of this article, he has discussed whether Plato's opinions are feminist or not (Brown, 2017). Brisson has also examined the issue of women in Plato's *Republic* in her paper (Brisson, 2012).

The number of researches on this issue indicates the importance of this topic and it must be said that this matter is still debatable. On the other hand, it should not be expected that the concept of feminism expressed in Plato's opinions is the same concept of feminism in the modern world, Rather, one should look for the roots of feminist theory in Plato's views, and one should not look for whether Plato

himself was a feminist philosopher or not. It should be sought whether Plato's views about women had an impact on the formation of feminist theory?

Concept

Feminism encompasses multiple concepts and cannot be defined by a single meaning. Some view feminism as a social and political movement, while others see it as a legal perspective that fights against injustices toward women. It is important to note that this term entered intellectual literature in the late 19th century (McAfee, 2018).

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, feminism is defined as: “Belief in and advocacy of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes expressed especially through organized activity on behalf of women's rights and interests” (Merriam-Webster dictionary, Feminism). And according to the Cambridge dictionary, feminism is defined as: “the belief that women should be allowed the same rights, power, and opportunities as men and be treated in the same way, or the set of activities intended to achieve this state” (Cambridge Dictionary, Feminism). By examining these two definitions, it can be seen that both refer to two interpretations of feminism.

Moreover, according to the definition of the Cambridge Dictionary, feminist is expressed in this way: “A person who believes in feminism, and tries to achieve change that helps women to get equal opportunities and treatment” (Cambridge Dictionary, Feminist).

On the other hand, McDougall (2012) in her thesis divides feminist definitions into six categories: 1. Working towards justice; 2. Valuing self and other women; 3. Women with diverse perspectives; 4. Relevancy in personal lives; 5. Future orientation; 6. Changing understanding of feminism.

Due to the broadness of feminism, it can also be categorized in other ways, including: 1. Liberal feminism; 2. Marxist feminism; 3. Socialist feminism; 4. Radical feminism; 5. Ecofeminism; 6. Cultural feminism; 7. Black feminism; 8. Postmodern feminism (see Haradhan, 2022: 5- 23).

Above all, if we want to include the category of theories that are close to feminism according to Plato, we must say that Plato's views are more compatible with the second definition.

The Equality of the Rights of Women and Men

Plato points out in the *Laws* that Athenians gathered worthy things in their homes and made women stay at home to protect them. Thus, spinning and weaving were also assigned to women, while the contrary issue is that women can enjoy spiritual education as men shoulder to shoulder (*Laws*, 806a).

Must the girls share in gymnastics and music, and the women abstain from wool-work, but weave themselves instead a life that is not trivial at all nor useless, but arduous, advancing as it were halfway in the path of domestic tendance and management and child-nurture, but taking no share in military service; so that, even if it should chance to be necessary for them to fight in defence of their city and their children, they will be unable to handle with skill either a bow (*Laws*, 806a).

A society that uses only half of its forces cannot have the highest courage. Besides, if half of society stays at home, it will be vulnerable, and such a city cannot defend itself. From Plat's viewpoint, thus, women can participate in the military. Courage is a virtue, and women should not be deprived of it (Fatemi Nezhad, 2021: 204).

Women and men have equal duties, and their education must also be equal. So, women should learn war techniques to be equal to men in every respect. Plato states that some people may disagree with the issue, for example, women in sports instruction must be able to wrestle and be unclothed as men. This is ridiculous for most people, but if we reflect deeply, we find that the feature of wrestling is to be unclothed; if someone decides to wrestle with cloth, he will not succeed. Since women and men are equal in every respect, they can learn such instructions (Republic, 415a-453a).

There is a problem with this opinion: it is clear that women and men are different. Given the natural differences, how would it be possible to face identical duties of women and men and their education? However, Plato has expressed that the nature of individuals is different, therefore, their duties are different, too (453b-453e). It can be affirmed that a problem with Plato's argument on the equality of women and men is his contradiction.

Plato continues to answer these problems in the way that these problems come to our mind when we do not understand the main meaning of the words. In this topic, there are several terms that may mislead us. 1. Equality; 2. Differences natures; 3. Various duties.

Plato does not mean equality and difference in their absolute mean, but he means equality and difference of gifts and natures to do things. A person who is passionate about medicine has a different nature and talent from someone who is passionate about carpentry. In this way, if a man and a woman have a desire to practice medicine, then both of them can practice medicine, and the tasks of both are equal in medicine. Thus, there is no profession that is specific to women or men. Moreover, the fact that women are weaker than men does not mean that they are not qualified to be in that job (454a- 455e).

Some women are eager to enter the military, and others are eager to learn gymnastics, and others are eager to learn philosophy, as it is with men (456a).

It should be noted that Plato considers women to be weaker than men in guarding, but he does not deprive them of their authority. He says that women who are worthy of this task must be chosen to work with men who are chosen in this profession. Therefore, their tasks are equal and if women receive mental and physical training to enter the military, nothing has been done against nature (456b- 457a).

Plato contends that people can be better than each other in any profession. Therefore, a hierarchy is created in every class of society, and the formation of this hierarchy is undeniable. The reason for promoting people is better education. Accordingly, guards who have received good education are better than other people and this matter has nothing to do with men and women. Plato admits that women are generally weaker than men and sometimes states that women can accompany men (457a- 457c).

- Analysis and Criticism

In this topic, Plato argued his view about the equality of women like men to have different positions and receive different educations, but the discussion is whether this equality is accompanied by liberty for women or not? If Plato only meant the defense of women's rights, it seems that he should have mentioned all the natural rights of humankind, which is clear that, along with equality, freedom is also one of the natural rights of human beings.

The next point is that Plato sometimes marginalizes women. Although women have equal rights in holding various tasks and participating in social duties, on what basis are they

sometimes considered weaker than men in Plato's phrases? Plato said that having a better education determines the hierarchy and power of people and there is no limitation in gender. It should be noted that maybe Plato spoke based on conventional understanding in the positions where he considers women weaker.

Children and Women-Sharing System and Elimination of the Private Family System

In the Book V, after discussing the equality of women with men, Plato begins to formulate public laws for women in the guardian class. The law that he states is the participation of women, and in this way, the children born by them will also be shared. It should be noted that this law is related to the guardian class of Plato's utopia, because they have the duty of protecting Plato's utopia. Interestingly, according to this rule, parents and children do not know each other (457d).

The problem with this theory is that it is not applicable and it will not be beneficial for the people of a society. Plato responds to this possible objection by others that the theory has advantages, provided that the plan is implemented. If this plan is implemented, then everyone will realize its merits (457d).

After that, Plato examines the applicability or not of this theory and claims that the guard class does not have personal wealth and lives in common houses and they all live together and are educated. Thus, human nature dictates that they have sex with each other. Of course, it should be stated that Plato believes that the marriage of men and women should not be irregular, and he says that marriage and sacred sex are marriages that are beneficial.

Plato provides an example. He gives the example of animal mating and says that if we own pure animals, we will not allow these animals to mix with non-pure animals; otherwise they will go into decline. This rule is the same for animals and humans (458c- 459a).

The issue that can be understood from Plato's example is that the guardian class must remain a noble class and the rulers are required to provide this happiness for them. This issue is important for Plato, because he believes that rulers can even resort to trickery and lies to ensure prosperity (459b- 459c).

In doing so, the best men should have sex and marriage with the best women, and also, in order to avoid disloyalty among the guards, all these things must be done so secretly that no one but the rulers would be aware of them. Therefore, the number of people's marriages should be in the hands of the rulers.

Plato suggests that the rulers can hold a festival and cheat and choose the pairs of guards, while the guards think this is an accident. Noble children who are born from these sexes, both girls and boys, have positions from the beginning and are equal to each other (459d- 460a).

- Analysis and Criticism

If gifted and elite people have sex with each other and get married, it will have good results and the result will be the birth of noble children, but we have to accept that Plato founded a mechanical and predetermined community with this theory. Further, Plato admits that born children should be brought up by nurses. What is understood from Plato's phrases is that the children born should be brought up according to what is in accordance with the wishes of the philosopher- kings. The education that Plato has in mind makes this society mechanical. In addition, the festival organized by the rulers also mechanizes this society.

On the other hand, the deprivation of people's liberty in this theory is well clear and it is also obvious that freedom is one of the natural rights of humankind. Hence, it can be claimed that depriving women of their freedom, even to achieve their happiness and prosperity of the society, is depriving them of their rights, and this article is in conflict with the first discussion of Book V of the *Republic*.

If we examine this opinion of Plato from the perspective of moral absolutism and consider vices absolutely immoral and impermissible, then we cannot accept Plato's opinion. This is because trickery and lies are inherently immoral and people should not do them.

Denying Family Life

In this theory, Plato rejects family life and does not care about the attachments that may arise between men and women. Also, Plato is aware of the motherly feelings of mothers towards their children, but he says that when mothers go to the orphanage to breastfeed, they should not recognize their child (Fatemi Nezhad, 2021: 208).

The consequence of Plato's theory is that children consider all guardians as their parents, and parents consider all children as their children, and all children will be siblings to each other. This is despite the fact that Plato has denied the intercourse between siblings, but if the lot determines this, it will happen (461c- 461e).

- Analysis and Criticism

It is clear that the feelings of individuals are set aside in Plato's view to create and maintain an ideal society, and it is certain that this is contrary to the natural rights. Additionally, it seems that Plato did not pay attention to the common sense of people in some cases. Common sense argues that human life should be accompanied by diversity and liberty, and it is common sense that has identified natural rights. It is clear that Plato's theory is in conflict with common sense.

Review

Communism, utopianism and feminism can be taken from this theory of Plato. It must be acknowledged that Plato's views cannot be considered completely consistent with communism, and the similarities between these two theories cannot be denied. On the other hand, utopianism is derived from Plato's theory. About feminism, it should be said that Plato's views can be considered a type of feminism. The issue of equality between men and women is the most important common value between the schools of feminism, which is well reflected in Plato's theory.

In some ways, Plato's theory clearly implies a defense of women's rights, because he clearly stated that women should be active in society like men. However, Plato by planning his ideal society rejects women's feelings and this is against women's natural rights (Brown, 2017).

Brown writes in his paper that Plato can generally be called a feminist. The first reason is that Plato admits that people's gender has nothing to do with their presence in society and their jobs.

The second reason is that Plato, by eliminating the private family system and the plan of children-sharing system, actually wanted to dismantle the ownership of the man over the family and women should be the guardians of their children like men (Brown, 2017).

Plato probably expressed the issue of equality between men and women in order to plan an ideal society. Therefore, his concern is not that women should be equal to men and have the same rights because they are women. Thus, it cannot be certain that the discussion of equality between men and women in Plato's theory is only for the defense of women's rights, and it seems that he expressed this discussion in order to establish his utopia.

Another criticism that is raised is that when we want to discuss about the rights of a person or a group, we should consider the welfare of that person or group, not to use them to achieve our aims. Therefore, it can be claimed that Plato has an instrumental view on the issue of equal rights of women and men. Plato's claim also implies the denial of natural rights, because this theory is a form of government interference in the freedom of individuals.

Plato needed this theory to establish his utopia to defend his ideal government model. Directing people in this government model is a type of totalitarianism that is against the natural rights of human. Equality is one of the pillars of natural rights and John Locke also discussed about this issue (Locke, 1823). But in natural rights, equality is only for the human being and is not a means to another goal. It means that women have equal rights with men because they are women and are part of humanity like men. This equality is not intended to achieve a specific aim. As a matter of fact, where there is natural law, people have freedom in addition to equality. Therefore, it can be claimed that equality comes with freedom. However, Plato seems to have taken this liberty from individuals. Although Plato leaves women free to be equal to men in education and to be able to choose jobs that suit their nature, but in many ways, he denied this freedom. When rulers are allowed to trick and lie to determine the pairs of people, can we call this freedom?

On the other hand, men and women are present in society and deserve education. Therefore, they can become philosophers in such a society and take the right to rule based on Plato's aristocracy in utopia (Brisson, 2012). This means that according to Plato, the hardships that people have to endure are necessary to achieve happiness. Since Plato considers happiness to be related to the soul and does not consider the body to be related to human happiness, therefore, in Plato's view, enduring physical hardships is not a deprivation of people's fundamental rights (Crito, 47d; Fatemi Nezhad, 2021: 212).

Khawaja Nasir al-Din al- Tusi also mentioned this and stated that philosophers before Aristotle, such as Pythagoras, Socrates, and Plato, considered happiness and virtue to be related to the human soul, and the human body has nothing to do with happiness and virtue. Therefore, the four virtues of wisdom, courage, moderation, and justice are related to the human soul (Tusi, 1967: 51-52).

It should be noted that by stating this theory, Plato, as stated, has pointed to a kind of totalitarian government and has also planned his desired utopia, and the discussion of the equality of women's rights with men has been placed as a prelude to the creation of the utopia. It can be said that by criticizing the whole utopian and totalitarian system of Plato, his theory about the equality of women with men is also damaged, because basically this discussion is a prelude to reaching Plato's goal, and if his main goal is to create a utopia with the totalitarian government is rejected, this theory of his which is a part of his intellectual system will also be criticized.

Conclusion

Plato has devoted a significant part of Book V of the *Republic* to the discussion of women and at the same time, he has made the issues related to the equality of women and men a prelude to the foundation of his utopia. The issues of women's equality with men, and children and women-sharing system are the two main topics of Book V. In the first topic, Plato clearly admits that women should be educated like men and be able to choose the jobs they like. Plato's focus in this topic is more on the utopia guardian class and he believes that women have the ability to receive spiritual and physical training and can enter the military. In Book V, Plato discusses more about the guardian class. Because the guardian class is an important pillar in Plato's utopia, and because the discussion of women's equality with men is a preliminary discussion for Plato's goal, therefore, his focus in this discussion is the guardian class. His second topic in this book is that rulers should eugenics the guardian class and this is possible through lottery and festival. The best women and the best men should have intercourse with one another, so that noble children are born from them, who are supposed to be part of the guardians of utopia in the future. Parents should not identify their children after their birth, and because of this, offspring are taken to orphanages. In this society, all people are siblings to each other, and parents consider all children as their children, and children also consider elders as their parents. The result of the first topic is the equality of women with men, and the result of the second topic is the right of women to have guardianship over their children. It can be claimed that Plato's opinions are considered a type of feminism and perhaps the roots of feminism can be searched in Plato's views. However, Plato's theory is debatable in many ways, because Plato did not pay attention to women's rights. Actually, the equality of men and women is a model for creating an ideal society. In the second topic, women's emotions are ignored and their freedom is denied in many positions, which is against natural rights. Accordingly, he cannot be considered an advocate of women's rights and his philosophy cannot be considered a feminist philosophy. It should be said that Plato's positions do not agree with feminist theory in many ways, but in other ways they are compatible with this theory. Thus, it may be possible to claim that the roots of feminism can be found in his theories, but it is not possible to definitively consider Plato a feminist philosopher and his philosophy as a feminist philosophy.

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