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WOMAN IS NOT A RATIONAL ANIMAL:
ON ARISTOTLE'S BIOLOGY OF REPRODUCTION*

Aristotle . . . pretends that women are but monsters. Who would not believe it, upon the authority of so renowned a personage? To say, it is an impertinence; would be, to choak his supposition too openly.

If a woman, (how learned soever she might be), had wrote as much of men, she would have lost all her credit; and men would have imagined it sufficient, to have refuted such a foppery; by answering, that it must be a woman, or a fool, that had said so.

From *De l'égalité des deux sexes* (Paris, 1673)
François Poulain de la Barre (1647–1723), anonymously translated into English as *The Woman as Good as the Man* (London, 1677).

The conservatism of Aristotle has long been a subject of discussion among philosophers. His belief in the superiority of the male sex, however, while it has not entirely escaped their notice,¹ has not thus far been carefully examined. In a path-breaking article,² Christine Garside-Allen brought to our attention the possibility that the work of Aristotle is in fact the study of the male human, rather than the human species, and pointed to the possibility that this may be true of most influential philosophers. This task of hers was an explicit necessity because in most cases philosophers' ideas about sex difference are not now widely known. In what are known as the "main" theories of various political or moral philosophers, distinctions of sex are not often mentioned, or they are alluded to briefly in a way that makes them appear inessential to the theory. I want to suggest that the reason for this is not that their views of sexual differences are incidental to the theory but that in almost every case they are considered to be a question which is prior to general ethical or political issues. This may be the case regardless of whether or not these views are actually discussed in any detail. For most of these thinkers, however, there will be found a treatise of some sort on the subject. It has been the practice of twentieth-century scholars and educators in the face of the greater equality of women, simply to disregard these works, which they view as minor or peripheral, or perhaps crankish, like Berkeley's

late essays on the value of tar water. Unfortunately, this policy is not soundly based on the actual role of these views in most political and social philosophy. I believe that in the case of Aristotle, these views are more than an "analogy between the biological and ethical relations of man and woman", as Garside-Allen suggested.³ According to her, Aristotle draws this analogy but does not explain *why* a woman is, as he claims, a privation of man.⁴ I want to argue that, however unacceptable his characterization of women may be, within the framework of his own thought he actually does explain it to perfection, in terms of the four types of cause. In fact, judging by the number of references to the question, Aristotle considered the existence and nature of women to be one of the features of life that most compellingly called for an explanation. To Aristotle, it was obvious, as we shall see, that women are inferior, and did not actualize the unique human potential of self-governance by reason. In terms of final causes, there was for him a question as to why they existed at all as separate individuals, rather than there being one type of human capable of reproducing itself in a hermaphroditic fashion.

Aristotle's biological writings as a whole, and not only what he writes about women, have also been treated by many as dispensable for the study of his philosophy, a fact which tends to aid and abet the practice of ignoring his sexism. It has been traditional to approach Aristotle through the logical and metaphysical writings, yet there is evidence that Aristotle himself considered the biological works of great importance. According to J. H. Randall, "his most characteristic distinctions and emphases grow naturally out of the intellectual demands of the subject matter of living processes."⁵ This is a controversial claim, but regardless of whether or not it is true, the fact remains that the important Aristotelian distinctions between "form" and "matter", "mover" and "moved", "actuality" and "potentiality", are all used by Aristotle to distinguish male and female. His theory of sex difference is at the very least interwoven in a consistent manner into the fabric of his philosophy, and it is not at all clear that it can simply be cut away without any reflection on the status of the rest of the philosophy.

In this paper, I shall first present Aristotle's theories of generation and sex distinction, and then proceed to a philosophical examination of their basis and their implications. The outline of the more empiricist skeleton of "the biology" helps to clarify the discussion of the issues, although it must be borne in mind that this is a gross modernization of the concept of biology. The unified Aristotelian view of science, however, ought to emerge in the subsequent section on Aristotle's methods and assumptions.

THE BIOLOGY

Aristotle's initial definition of "male" and "female" in *De Generatione Animalium* is the following: "For by a male animal we mean that which generates in another, and by a female animal that which generates in itself". (716 a 13) To Aristotle this indicates not only a difference of anatomical parts but a difference in their "ability or faculty". (716 a 18) "The distinction of sex", he writes, "is first principle". (716 b 10) As such, it has many other differences consequent upon it.

The Aristotelian theory of generation must have been developed in a milieu of considerable biological speculation, judging by the amount of discussion of rival theories. The question of whether or not both male and female produce semen, where semen is loosely conceived of as "whatever-it-is" that initiates the movement of growth of a new living individual, appears to have been a major controversy. The central question of generation for Aristotle is the explanation of the transfer or creation of soul to give life to the material of flesh and blood, for, as he puts it, a hand is not a hand in a true sense if it has no soul. (726 b 25)

Another question was whether or not "semen" (in the sense in which Aristotle was using the term) comes from the whole of the body of the parent, or only from some part. Aristotle poses both of these questions and states that if "semen" does not come from the whole of the body, then "it is reasonable to suppose that it does not come from both parents either". (721 b 8) It is apparent that this does not follow rigorously, a fact which the translator attempts to explain by saying that Aristotle wishes to reject the Hippocratic view which combined two distinct theories, and appears to assume that oversetting one of them affords a presumption against the other. However, I think this is a somewhat naive underestimate of Aristotle's dialectical discussion, for reasons which will appear below. After numerous arguments against the view that semen comes from the whole body of the parent(s)⁶ Aristotle reiterates, "if it does not come from all the male it is not unreasonable to suppose that it does not come from the female", (724 a 8) to which the translator observes in a note "I do not follow this argument"! Indeed, it seems the reverse position is just as plausible: that if the "semen" *does* come from the whole of the body, it would need to do so from only one parent to create a new individual. Conversely, if it comes from a specialized part, both parents might make a contribution. The latter view would be consistent with modern biology, according to which half the genetic endowment is from the male in the sperm and half from the

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