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I

SABINA LOVIBOND

Feminism in ancient philosophy The feminist stake in Greek rationalism

Introduction

Despite the internal diversity of extant ‘ancient philosophy’, it has generally been agreed that the main intellectual legacy of classical Greece and Rome to the modern world is the idea of the value of truth and the capacity of human reason to discover it. This idea, powerfully expressed in the dialogues of Plato and in the more systematic teaching of Aristotle, has provided an implicit point of reference – usually, though not invariably, positive – for all subsequent ‘philosophy’ in the western world, and feminist thought has been no exception to the rule. What remains unresolved, however, is the proper ratio of positive to negative in the attitude of feminism to ‘reason’. Since the eighteenth century at least, there has been an effort to rethink the rationalist ethical and political tradition for the benefit of women, and to detach its characteristic themes (legitimate social order; mutual recognition among citizens; co-operative pursuit of a common good) from the ideology of male supremacy. But the sexual egalitarianism which we inherit from the age of Enlightenment is complicated, today, by a rival impulse of *solidarity* with what the rationalist tradition symbolically excludes – that is, with reason’s supposedly feminine ‘other’ or complement. It is this tension that sets the scene for our discussion.

Probably the burden of argument can be said to rest at present on those who still wish to speak of continuity, rather than of discontinuity or rupture, between feminism and its philosophical past. There is at any rate no doubt that the overall effect of feminist scholarship since the 1970s has been to jolt the traditionally educated classical student into a less respectful attitude. Although it has been cheering to learn of a number of individual women who practised philosophy in the Greek world (even if their access to this activity may have been principally through their male kin or sexual protectors),¹ the most influential theme during this period has been that of

the masculinism of ancient thought – its assumption, explicit or otherwise, of the centrality and superiority of the male point of view. Of course it is no secret that Greece and Rome were patriarchal societies,² and one can hardly expect their theoretical products to be unmarked by this fact. Rather, what has produced a *frisson* has been the cumulative revelation of something intellectually embarrassing or scandalous in our classical heritage. In particular, where liberal modernity has prided itself on a supposedly universal respect for ‘rational nature’, feminist criticism has enabled us to see in the dominant philosophical culture the enduring effects of a different and more sinister tradition – one that teaches the individual thinking subject to understand himself as essentially *not* a bearer of the attributes associated with his sexual, social or ethnic inferiors. Such criticism suggests that the other side of the rationalist coin may be a defensive, or ‘paranoid’, attitude to these putative boundaries.³

In the face of growing resistance to any idea of a ‘canon’ of western literature, it would be pointless to deny that there is a kind of conservatism involved in choosing to study certain ultra-canonical texts which stand at the origin of ‘our’ tradition. If nothing else, the choice implies a willingness to believe that these texts possess the interest and importance claimed for them. Yet to contribute to the work of handing on a tradition does not imply an attitude of simple deference towards it: here as elsewhere, historical insight is at least as valuable to emancipatory causes as it is to the forces opposing them. Nor can we tell, except by experiment, what materials from the corpus of European philosophy may be of continuing use – in Europe or anywhere else in the world – to people with the ambition to think politically. This chapter aims to describe, and to participate in, one phase of the experiment.

An account of the feminist reception of ancient philosophy should perhaps begin by looking at the way in which the concept of reason took shape. When ancient Greek culture is described as having a ‘rationalist’ bent, some or all of the following points are likely to be intended:

(i) By the fifth century BC a high value had come to be placed on the fact of culture itself – on social stability, the rule of law, speech, intelligence. This is a recurrent theme, in particular, in the literature of classical Athens, where it is memorably set forth by writers as diverse as Sophocles, Thucydides and Plato.⁴ ‘Reason’ is opposed, in the first instance, to instinct and brute strength; extant Greek literature shows a vivid consciousness of how far humanity had advanced in this respect, and of pride in the achievement, however incomplete.

(ii) By extension from this, value is attached to speech in its more

particular capacity of representing or expressing ‘what is’, i.e. reality. This is arguably still an aspect of the ethical value of culture, since (truthful) communication is a co-operative act – the information communicated is a potentially useful gift to the recipient; hence the power of human intelligence to make contact, through language, with realities elsewhere in space or time is a resource naturally suited to the furtherance of common aims (though not, of course, guaranteed to be so used by any particular person). In any event, speech (*logos*) and thought (‘the mind’s dialogue with itself’, Plato, *Theaetetus* 189e–190a; *Sophist* 263e) are seen as outstandingly precious human attributes.

(iii) Next, the value attached to the capacity for representation in general suggests the idea of the value of *theory*: the ability to represent features of reality which are apt to be hidden from view, and perhaps even to grasp the underlying constitution of reality as a whole. This leads to the elaboration, on one hand, of materialist theories of nature (the Ionian tradition, which asks what the world is *made of*), and on the other hand, of formalist theories (the Eleatic tradition, which sees mathematical structure as the ultimate reality, taking precedence over the matter organized by it). The latter, formalist, approach (inaugurated by Pythagoras and exemplified above all by Plato) gives rise to what will subsequently be known as ‘rationalism’ in a more technical sense – the kind of philosophy based on mathematical or other *a priori* methods of enquiry, and contrasted with ‘empiricism’. The former achieves its most lasting influence through its contribution to a system – that of Aristotle – which has many points of continuity with Platonism, but which develops that philosophy along a path determined not so much by mathematics as by Aristotle’s extensive researches in biology.

The Aristotelian approach to sexual matters offers a relatively obvious target to feminist criticism. Aristotle (384–322 BC) holds that the essence of a thing is to be identified with its *function*, or with what it is ‘for’ from the point of view of some organic whole to which it belongs (*Politics* 1253a20–25; cf. *de Anima* 412b18–20). This identification rests on the assumption that ‘Nature does nothing in vain’ (*Pol.* 1256b21), and hence that in order to understand a thing we must first come to see the point or purpose of it. Moreover, ‘nature’ for Aristotle is hierarchical: here, as in the realm of human goal-directed activity, ‘the lower always exists for the sake of the higher’,⁵ and indeed every kind of natural thing contributes in its own way to a single ultimate good (e.g. by being available for human beings to eat: *Pol.* 1256b15–20). The natural world is like a household in which some have greater responsibilities than others, and consequently greater authority;⁶ relations of ‘ruling-and-being-ruled’ occur sponta-

neously and ubiquitously within it.⁷ This doctrine is applied most notoriously to the moral justification of slavery (some men ‘differ from others as much as the body from the soul or as an animal from a man’, *Pol.* 1254b16–17), but another clear instance of natural dominance and subordination, in Aristotle’s view, is the relation of men to women – ‘a union of the naturally ruling element with the naturally ruled, for the preservation of both’.⁸

Aristotle can appeal to his postulate of a purposive nature to explain why there are two sexes in the first place. In his work *On the Generation of Animals*, which maintains that in sexual reproduction ‘body’ comes from the female and ‘soul’ from the male,⁹ he says that ‘As the proximate motive cause, to which belong the *logos* and the form, is better and more divine in its nature than the matter, it is better also that the superior one should be separate from the inferior one. That is why wherever possible and so far as possible the male is separate from the female . . . The male, however, comes together with the female and mingles with it for the business of generation, because this is something that concerns both of them’ (732a3 ff.). In this way Aristotle equips himself at a stroke not just with a ‘scientific’ explanation (in terms of final causality) of the existence of two differently sexed kinds of animal body, but also with a rationale for the accepted way of organizing social space (as for example in the Greek household, where women typically had their own separate quarters).

Probably the most important result of the study of Aristotle by feminists has been the transformation into objects of historical – and hence critical – study of some of the central themes of male supremacism. We have just encountered one of these in the shape of the idea that women as such have a natural ‘place’ which is fixed by their role in reproduction. Another has been the idea of femaleness *per se* as a disability. When Aristotle opines that ‘we should look upon the female state as being as it were a deformity, though one which occurs in the ordinary course of nature’,¹⁰ he lends his authority to what has proved a remarkably durable conception of the female animal, *qua* female, as defective. And this supposed defectiveness is as much psychological as physical, for we read in *Politics* I (1260a10 ff.) that ‘All these persons [freeman and slave, male and female, adult and child] possess in common the different parts of the soul [namely, the rational/ruling and the irrational/ruled elements]; but they possess them in different ways. The slave is entirely without the faculty of deliberation; the female indeed possesses it, but in a form which remains inconclusive [*akuron*, lacking in authority]; and if children also possess it, it is only in an immature form.’

The idea that human rational capacities are realized to an unequal degree

in different classes of person leads Aristotle to reject the view advanced by Socrates in Plato's *Meno* (73ac) that virtue must have a common structure wherever it is found, and to assign to men and women respectively distinct grades of virtue corresponding to their distinct social functions. 'The ruler', he argues, 'must possess moral goodness in its full and perfect form [i.e. the form based on rational deliberation] . . . but all other persons need only possess [it] to the extent required of them [by their particular position] . . . [So] temperance – and similarly fortitude and justice – are not, as Socrates held, the same in a woman as they are in a man. Fortitude in the one, for example, is shown in connection with ruling; in the other, it is shown in connection with serving; and similarly with the rest of the virtues' (*Pol.* 1260a17–24).

Aristotle is on the lookout for the 'full and perfect form' of moral goodness because he holds that the function (and hence the nature) of any given type of thing is to be discovered by looking at an example that represents the norm for that type: 'We must fix our attention, in order to discover what nature intends, not on those which are in a corrupt, but on those which are in a natural condition.'¹¹ This principle, when conjoined with the assumption of superior perfection in the male (not just biologically, which would follow from the considerations about sexual difference noted earlier, but in respect of the functions of thought and deliberation that define our humanity),¹² is of interest to modern feminism because it underwrites the tradition whereby 'man' denotes – by a non-accidental semantic slippage – both humanity in general *and* the male sex as its 'natural' representative. It is only since the nineteenth century that there has been an effective challenge to the brute social facts rationalized by this tradition, namely the denial of full legal and political personality to women; and much more recently that attention has come to be paid to related symbolic phenomena such as the 'inclusive' use of the masculine pronoun.

The evidence introduced so far has had a purely negative significance for our topic.¹³ Turning now to the somewhat different tradition represented by Socrates (c. 470–399 BC) and Plato (c. 429–347 BC), we will find that the picture becomes more complex. On one hand, it is not surprising that the extreme intellectualism of these philosophers should have been seen as hospitable to the idea of sexual equality, especially since one of the most influential Platonic texts contains a ground-breaking argument – however limited and flawed in detail – for that very idea. This is the famous passage (*Republic* v, 455de and context) where Socrates is made to point out that in a rational political order (sexual) anatomy – at least for some women – would not be destiny, since it is irrelevant to the ability to perform social

functions other than that of producing children. Despite the solemn concession that on average men as a sex are better at everything than women as a sex, this passage leaves us with the all-important insight (454de) that while biological sexual difference assigns different ‘natural roles’ to women and men *within* the sphere of sexual reproduction, it does not determine a ‘natural’ way for each of the sexes to contribute to the wider social order, so that there is no reason why women (for example) should not take part in the traditionally masculine activities of law-enforcement and defence. In a comment celebrated for its amusement value,¹⁴ Aristotle complains that Plato’s vision is flawed by his failure to notice that human beings, unlike other animals, live in households and consequently have sexually differentiated functions. This criticism, of course, misses the point that there is nothing in their reproductive biology to prevent human beings from replacing the traditional household with some alternative system of meeting their day-to-day material needs; but it is no more questionable on that score than the present-day habit of worrying about the welfare of children whose *mothers* (as opposed to ‘parents’) go out to work, and even in the twentieth century there have been those for whom Plato’s disregard for orthodox sexual psychology has retained a certain power to disturb.¹⁵

Against this passage, however, must be weighed the evidence amassed by recent scholarship that Plato’s ‘feminism’ is no more than superficial. This evidence ranges from the frequent occurrence in his writings of commonplace psychological sexism,¹⁶ through the unselfconscious application of conventional notions of gender to more speculative metaphysical or cosmological questions (as at *Timaeus* 50c7 ff.), to the kind of motif which – most disturbingly for those who would like to see Plato as rising above the biologism of Aristotle – convicts his thought of a refusal, at the ‘imaginary’¹⁷ level, of the fact of sexual difference. Under the last heading fall those elements which can be read as symptoms of an *unconscious* impulse to equate femininity with the darkness of unenlightened nature (the womb-like Cave of *Republic* VII),¹⁸ to diminish women’s powers of physical reproduction by treating them as a mere symbol of the genuine (spiritual) reproduction accomplished by men through the power of *logos*,¹⁹ and in general to suppress the emotionally unacceptable theme of natural transience or ‘becoming’ through a variant of the philosophy of ‘being’ derived from the Presocratic philosopher Parmenides.²⁰

This negative evidence looks more powerful than any grounds for optimism provided by the fleeting appearance in a Platonic dialogue of the idea that ‘nature’s’ intentions for women may not be exhausted by family life. It also possesses the kind of prestige accruing to a ‘suspicious’ reading

– one that claims the authority to go beyond a mere reconstruction of what the text was *meant* to convey. I think that in the case now before us this authority is incontrovertible and that whatever else we may find in Plato's writings, we can hardly recover our innocence with regard to the fantasy enacted there of a woman-free regime of procreation and eternal life. The disclosure of this barely suppressed gender theme at the origin of western philosophy has produced a kind of epistemological break in feminist theory, and has largely overturned the older view that the Socratic school – by virtue of its insistence on the *psyche* ('soul' or 'mind') rather than the embodied creature as the real person – could be credited with a 'well-reasoned and deliberate attempt . . . to improve the position of women in Greece'.²¹

However, rather than dwell on the unconscious provocation offered by Platonism to the (woman-identified) woman reader, I would like to turn the tables and discuss an unacknowledged *debt* which that reader may owe to the philosophy responsible for her symbolic annihilation. The debt I have in mind relates to the concept of *form* or *limit*, and to the organizing role of this concept in Pythagorean–Platonic philosophy. Limit (*peras*) is contrasted with the *apeiron* (the indeterminate or formless – a character attributed, in this way of thinking, to matter), and together the two make up one of ten pairs of opposed terms which Aristotle (*Metaphysics* 986a22 ff.) says were recognized by the Pythagoreans as ontological or cosmological 'first principles'.²² The pairs (which in fact include 'good' and 'bad') each comprise a 'good' and a 'bad' term, though in some cases the values attaching to them are derived from a highly specific philosophy of mathematics; 'limit' falls on the 'good' side of the table, prefiguring the role of 'forms' or universals as ideal paradigms in middle-period Platonism. For us, though, the important point is the appearance of 'male' and 'female' in the list. What this has suggested to feminist readers, especially to those influenced by 'deconstructionist' modes of reading, is that Platonism – and by extension all 'rationalist' philosophy, in the technical sense introduced earlier – possesses a *gendered* conceptual structure. For example, in addition to portraying form or determinacy *per se* as good and indeterminacy as bad, there seems to be a fair amount of textual evidence that Plato pictures their distinctive goodness or badness in a way that is shaped by images of sexual difference.²³

Now to note the existence of such a structure is not yet to work out how we can best negotiate the hazard it may present to our thinking; and on this question I have nothing of a general methodological nature to offer. Instead, what I want to pursue in the rest of this chapter is the more concrete suggestion that however integral the hierarchically ordered 'male–

female' pair may be to Greek rationalism, feminist students of the tradition have at least one powerful incentive not to treat that fact as decisive for their own 'theoretical practice'. There is, of course, something uncomfortable in the prospect of continuing to acquiesce in a cognitive order within which the attribute of femaleness has, historically, borne a negative value.²⁴ Yet it would be hard to deny that the consciousness of this metaphysical misogyny – a consciousness which the 'feminism of difference'²⁵ has done so much to enforce – has to co-exist in our minds with much else that we have learned about what is to count as *enquiry* or as (ordered, purposive) *thought*. In particular – and as if we still heard an echo of the Platonic proposition that 'the source of all fine things is found in a mixture of the unlimited with that which has limit' (*Philebus* 26b) – the quest for a satisfying accommodation between 'form' and 'matter' continues to preoccupy us. This holds good both in the theoretical sphere (we see it as a merit in a theory that it should organize its subject-matter into a unified whole, but without doing too much violence to observational or intuitive data), and also in the practical (we aspire to a political order that would extend legal rights and duties to all citizens, but without denying their individuality). We may not know exactly what would constitute the concrete fulfilment of either of these ideals, but this does not prevent us from using them for purposes of orientation. All attempts to pass beyond a purely abstract or 'minimalist' account of truth (or beyond a dogmatic 'intuitionism' about questions of value), and to specify under what conditions we feel we are making theoretical or practical progress, seem to owe something to the Platonic schema.

Feminists who acknowledge the persistent (if not unquestioningly accepted) presence of rationalist values in their own thinking have found it natural to explain this phenomenon in a spirit of 'critical realism'. That is, they point out that if there is to be any possibility of the kind of active response to female subordination that consists in *understanding* it, there must first be the possibility of *understanding* anything at all, i.e. of successfully bringing thought to bear on it. Our criteria of success here, if they are to command the kind of recognition that will mediate agreement, cannot be conjured out of thin air by each individual thinker for her own use but must owe something to a common background of intellectual experience – even if, as is inevitable, this background incorporates the common *social* experience of subordination on which feminism tries to reflect. So despite the strictures of those theorists who see any project of truth-orientated enquiry as structurally incapable of accommodating the fact of sexual difference, it is plausible to represent the relation of feminist thought to its discursive environment in terms of 'Neurath's boat', which

cannot find a haven safe from error but has to be repaired while out at sea.²⁶ This is in effect the position of all those who look with scepticism on the idea of a *radical*, or absolute, break with existing habits of thought.²⁷

The reasoning just sketched takes the form of a ‘dialectical’ argument, where our partners in dialogue would be the proponents of an absolute break with epistemic tradition. It assumes that feminists, as such, will think of themselves as a body of people characterized not just by certain behavioural *symptoms*, but by a project of collective *action*, i.e. of behaviour which is purposive (and hence – so far as any human behaviour merits this description – intentionally controlled). And it is ready to build on this assumption by arguing that if we think of the feminist project as defined by certain controlling purposes or values, these must be capable of being discursively recommended to people not already persuaded of their practical claim upon us; otherwise they would not be *values* but merely arbitrary objects of pursuit.

This first dialectical argument appeals to what we might expect feminists to acknowledge as the logical consequences of adherence to anything recognizable as a politics. However, it may be possible to construct a further, less familiar dialectical argument to the same conclusion – namely, the impossibility of a complete severance of feminism from its rationalist antecedents – on the basis of the substantive political views we can expect feminists to hold. These views have to do with the defence of women’s generic interests, in so far as these can be identified in a given context, against any unjust precedence enjoyed by the generic interests of men.²⁸ So our second dialectical argument will be addressed to feminists, no longer simply as ‘political’ beings in the abstract, but now as adherents to a *specific* politics.

It will start from the suggestion that we can discern within modern normative thinking two main themes, each with its distinct ‘genealogy’. This suggestion has no claim to originality, but derives from the nineteenth-century paradigm of modern culture as a zone of contention between the rival forces of ‘Hebraism’ and ‘Hellenism’. Our terminology here, which gained currency in English from Matthew Arnold’s essay *Culture and Anarchy* (1869),²⁹ obviously belongs to the synthetic or imaginative genre of historical thought rather than to exact philology. Still, it may be that this contrast between the Judaeo-Christian and the classical elements in western culture can be of service in rendering the perception of our Greek inheritance more determinate, and so in clarifying the sense in which feminist thinking may need to reconcile itself to the presence of ‘Hellenic’ elements within it.

In *Culture and Anarchy* Arnold explains ‘Hebraism’ and ‘Hellenism’ as

two distinct spiritual disciplines with a common goal – ‘man’s perfection or salvation’ (p. 121). Both are ‘profound and admirable manifestations of man’s life, tendencies and powers’ (p. 125), but they diverge dramatically in content. For Hellenism the key to salvation is to think truly or ‘see things as they really are’, whereas for Hebraism it is ‘conduct and obedience’ (p. 123). Again, while the leading idea of Hebraism is that of *strictness of conscience*, that of Hellenism is *spontaneity of consciousness*: ‘to follow, with flexible activity, the whole play of the universal order, to be apprehensive of missing any part of it, of sacrificing one part to another, to slip away from resting in this or that intimation of it, however capital’ (p. 124). The materials already assembled in this discussion suggest another way of putting Arnold’s point: what he understands as the ‘Hellenic’ ideal consists in the capture of all the content, or matter, of reality within our thinking, which must therefore be organized in such a way as to accommodate it, assigning every element to a place from which it will not be dislodged. So it consists in giving thought a form that will do justice to the seemingly anarchic plurality of what there is for us to think. And this looks like a natural point of application for the duality of ‘limit’ and ‘unlimited’ which we have seen to be central to the Pythagorean–Platonic tradition.

We know that within that tradition the principle of ‘limit’, for example, is *dominant* with respect to that of the ‘unlimited’. But by now, with the feminist critique of ‘reason’ before us, we may be disposed to look around for alternatives to this way of thinking. And, in fact, a number of resources for questioning it can be discovered *within* Greek culture. Hegel and Nietzsche have drawn attention to some of them: the contrast between ‘written’ and ‘unwritten’ law explored in Sophocles’ *Antigone* calls into question the Platonic value-hierarchy (while preserving its gendered character);³⁰ the contrast between the ‘Apollonian’ and ‘Dionysian’ principles sees in the artistic achievement of Greek tragedy a distinctively aesthetic solution to the problem of existence – a device which works by affirming, and converting into a ground of triumph over personal suffering, the merely superficial character of separate individual existence.³¹ And it is worth recalling that even for Plato the principles of form and formlessness do not stand in a relation of unmitigated opposition, but need to be correctly combined with one another in order to produce objects of value within the domain of experience – just as the principle of ‘difference’, along with that of ‘sameness’, eventually has to be understood as part of the structure of ‘what is’.³²

However, what may be of more significance for our second dialectical argument is a mode of thought in which positive value is associated with the limitless *as such*. It is at this point that we encounter the ‘Hebraic’

element in our moral tradition – that concerned with *obedience*.³³ Nietzsche writes in *Beyond Good and Evil*:

What Europe owes to the Jews? – Many things, good and bad, and above all one thing that is at once of the best and the worst: the grand style in morality, the dreadfulness and majesty of infinite demands.³⁴

Infinite demands – as exemplified by the Old Testament story of God’s incomprehensible order to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, the story which prompts Kierkegaard’s famous reflections on the inadequacy of an ethics grounded in social or ‘universal’ rationality.³⁵ Greek rationalism offers us the ideal of a moral order characterized by perfect integration or *harmony* – the condition in which every element in a complex whole has been stabilized, setting the whole at peace with itself (Plato, *Rep.* 443c9–444a2); or where the actions that give expression to an individual personality are as perfectly judged as a work of art in which one ‘wouldn’t change a thing’ (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1106b8–16).³⁶ ‘Limit’ is of the essence here because if we think of a moral entity – be it a social unit comprising a number of persons, or a human life comprising a variety of particular actions – as a complex object capable of displaying a greater or lesser degree of formal perfection, then clearly that perfection will be compromised by the exaggerated development of any one component part or tendency, or by any local feature that detracts from the overall ‘balance’ of the object. This moral ideal is shaped by a sensibility that is apt to condemn any such feature as absurd, barbarous, ‘offensive to reason’. By contrast, a morality centred upon the value of *obedience to God’s will* (whatever blend of the literal and the metaphorical we may bring to our understanding of this phrase) will never see an object of moral appraisal as disfigured, but on the contrary as fulfilled or perfected, by the ever more extreme realization of this disposition; its demands will thus take on the ‘sublime’ aspect associated with immeasurable depth or height.

What is the bearing of each of these traditions on modern moral or political thought? Suppose we ‘begin with what is known *to us*’, as Aristotle says, and consider a contrast that has become very familiar to feminist students of philosophy since the 1980s: that between the ‘ethics of justice’ and the ‘ethics of care’.³⁷

At first glance there is no apparent connection between this contrast and that of ‘Hellenism versus Hebraism’ which we have just been considering. Yet it seems to me that on closer inspection an interesting congruence emerges between the nineteenth-century schema and the contemporary one, and that this finding can be used to shed light on the significance of each for feminism. Of course such a procedure makes sense only in so far as

we credit feminism with some determinate belief-content by virtue of which feminists have reason to react in a particular way to this or that phenomenon: this was why I noted that the argument now under construction, like our earlier ‘Neurath’s boat’ considerations, could be regarded as dialectical in form.

The standard way of introducing the contrast between an ‘ethics of justice’ and an ‘ethics of care’ is by reference to the different degrees of authority they give to abstract principle relative to the claims arising out of concrete involvement with others. An ethics of justice represents the thinking of a morally competent person as centred on the search for universal rules; though prompted by the moral difficulties of daily life, it passes beyond them in so far as it works towards a stable view of what should happen in *any* situation ‘relevantly similar to this one’. An ethics of care on the other hand sees moral intelligence as consisting primarily, if not exclusively, in (suitably informed) sensitivity to the needs of others – ‘sensitivity’ here retaining its connotation of emotional responsiveness, capacity for vicarious distress, etc., as opposed to the theoretical awareness of life’s evils which exists more or less inertly in most of us. We might say that for the former approach the characteristically ethical question is: ‘Has everyone got what is due to them in this situation?’,³⁸ while for the latter it is: ‘Has everyone got what they need here?’ (Or, more ambitiously: ‘Is everyone *happy*?’) These questions, or perhaps the ‘carer’s question’ in particular, encapsulate states of mind whose gendered nature should be obvious; their importance for feminism stems from the conviction that the care-centred component of moral rationality has been systematically (though not of course inexplicably) underemphasized at the level of theory.

I think it is plausible to represent the contrast between these two approaches – or if they are seen as jointly realized to some extent in the moral consciousness of every individual, between these two components of morality – in terms of the Platonic principles of ‘limit’ and the absence of limit. And if this is accepted, then we can see the opposition of ‘justice’ and ‘care’ – understood as they have been within recent feminist writing – as a reworking of that between ‘Hellenism’ (with its ideal of order and balance) and ‘Hebraism’ (with its ideal of submission).³⁹

Nietzsche’s vision of the ‘dreadfulness and majesty of infinite demands’ may seem far removed from the range of activities celebrated by feminist exponents of the ethics of care, much of which is accounted for by the daily round of women’s physical service to others, especially to young children. But the theme of limitlessness within the ethics of care emerges once we attend, precisely, to the cyclical and interminable nature of such service: ‘a woman’s work is never done’, or as Simone de Beauvoir observes, it is such

as to condemn the worker to ‘immanence’⁴⁰ because of the continual need to repeat actions such as feeding and cleaning. The demands acknowledged by someone adhering to an ethics of care can be described as infinite, to begin with, in this mundane sense. But there is another, less literal sense in which they can be so described: because the adherent of such an ethics accepts, even if only by default, the role of *one whom others count on* to meet their needs, she cannot think of her obligations as ending anywhere short of the point where those needs have been (‘well enough’,⁴¹ if not perfectly) met – and the location of that point depends on contingencies not fully predictable or controllable by her. We may recall here Emmanuel Levinas’s reflections on the ‘*empirical* event of obligation to another’, a responsibility to which he says it is ‘impossible to fix limits’, so that ‘to be one’s brother’s keeper is to be his hostage’.⁴²

The aptness of picturing the traditionally feminine side of ethics as ‘unlimited’ in character is reinforced by Kant’s contrast between ‘narrow’ and ‘wide’ obligation.⁴³ A narrow obligation is such that failure to comply with it is automatically culpable, as when we encroach on another person’s rights; whereas failure to comply on any given occasion with a ‘wide’ obligation (like that of helping others or cultivating one’s own talents), provided it does not express any vicious principle, is merely a ‘deficiency in moral worth’.⁴⁴ Now this implies that in the case of wide obligations, just as there is no definite point of transition from permissible to transgressive behaviour, so there is also no definite point at which one can say one has done *enough*. ‘No rational principle prescribes specifically how far one should go’⁴⁵ in such an effort, yet the effort itself is mandatory: without it, one does not qualify as a conscientious person. In this way we arrive at a classification of duties which seems to align itself with the structures we have just been exploring: narrow obligations are those associated with the realm of law, or at any rate of some authority which can determine what is due to or from any given person; wide obligations belong, rather, to the realm of upbringing, i.e. to the scene of a continuing effort – not however mediated in any direct way by the exercise of formal authority – to establish certain dispositions of character. Again, a gendered contrast: women can recognize themselves as the *de facto* custodians of the domestic or ‘indefinite’ part of ethics, men as the custodians of the juridical or ‘definite’ part.

The tendency of our second dialectical argument will therefore be to suggest that even in the face of all the disrespect, whether literal or symbolic, offered to women by the Greek rationalist tradition, feminism cannot afford to regard the condition of indebtedness to that tradition as an intolerable contamination. For it is within this part of our inherited

corpus of ‘morality’ that we have the best prospects of finding a counterweight to the Judaeo-Christian theme of *unconditional obedience*, which, for all its grandeur, is (in ‘worldly’ terms) full of danger for women. No doubt the ‘justice versus care’ theme in recent feminist theory represents a legitimate protest against the excessive prominence of the ‘Hellenic’, or form-related, contribution to ethics. But the fact remains that ‘care’ is, or must at some point be expressed in, *work* (the *practical* love of one’s neighbour, as Kant would put it), and if we fail to question the social distribution of the burdens and benefits of such work, we effectively acquiesce in the systematic injustice towards women that exists in this domain.⁴⁶ Worse, if we seek to reclaim as a source of female pride the particular form of moral consciousness that makes one ‘hostage’ to the needs (or demands) of others, we are liable to provide further proof of the principle that any attempt to promote feminism by affirming the ‘feminine’ leaves one ‘wallowing in the mire of ideology’.⁴⁷ So our present line of thought can be summed up by saying that feminism needs to grasp historically, and to resist politically, the imaginary link between femininity and the indeterminate or infinite;⁴⁸ not to accept this particular cultural product as a source of insight into ‘moral reality’, but on the contrary to *bring* ‘limit’ into female ethical experience where it is currently lacking – especially where that experience reflects the power historically enjoyed by men to limit their own exposure to ethical claims, and to transfer any unwanted surplus to women.

To concede that we can learn this much from Greek philosophy is not to argue that ‘caring’ values should be assigned a subordinate place within ethics, still less that they should be banished from it. Rather, it is to suggest that there is a sense in which feminists can endorse the search for a ‘correct mixture’ of the relevant principles of limit and non-limit. Justice, understood as the manifestation of a will to impose limit (or form) on human relations, would be superfluous if it were not for the *vulnerability* of human beings – their susceptibility, not just in infancy but potentially at any moment in life, to conditions which prevent them from asserting themselves successfully and which make them dependent on the readiness of others to fill the gap by appeal to a common understanding of rights and duties. It arises, however flickeringly and erratically, from an awareness of this shared vulnerability, which is in effect a continuing shared dependence on the power of ‘care’ to motivate others to help us. However, because of the practical demands imposed by the caring attitude, the systematically skewed *de facto* distribution of these demands between women and men is itself a moral problem which calls for redress. For us, if not for the ancient world, it constitutes a situation of precisely the kind to which the concept

of justice applies: one in which a vulnerable group (here, women as family members, exposed to exploitation by the stubborn survival of the idea that the business of ‘care’ falls particularly to them) must look for protection to a certain moral (or political) consensus. I think it is fair to say that that consensus does not yet exist, but is something that feminism aspires to create, at least in so far as it declines to be drawn into a romantic celebration of the state of exposure to ‘infinite demands’. And in attempting, more soberly, to spell out what *is* demanded of each of us in the name of social and generational solidarity, perhaps we can after all think of ourselves as engaged in something akin to the classical endeavour to apply reason to human life. For however different the prospective solution, the problem – as ever – is that of how best to organize our collective existence, given the kind of natural species that we are.⁴⁹

NOTES

- 1 See M. E. Waithé, ed., *A History of Women Philosophers*, vol. 1 *Ancient Women Philosophers 600 BC–500 AD* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1987); R. Hawley, ‘The Problem of Women Philosophers in Ancient Greece’, in L. Archer, S. Fischler and M. Wyke, eds., *Women in Ancient Societies: An Illusion of the Night* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1994); S. Hornblower and A. Spawforth, eds., *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) under ‘Women in Philosophy’.
- 2 For a wide-ranging collection of literary and epigraphical evidence, see M. Lefkowitz and M. Fant, *Women’s Life in Greece and Rome* (London: Duckworth, 1982).
- 3 On the ‘logic of paranoia’, see N. Scheman, *Engenderings: Constructions of Knowledge, Authority and Privilege* (London: Routledge, 1993), esp. p. 77; on ethnicity and the Athenian civic ideal, see E. Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition through Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).
- 4 Sophocles, *Antigone*, lines 332 ff. (‘Many things are wonderful and none more wonderful than man’); Thucydides II, 35–46 (the funeral oration of Pericles); Plato, *Protagoras* 320c–328d (Protagoras’ account of the historical development of justice).
- 5 *Politics* 1333a20–21. (Translations from the *Politics* are based on E. Barker, *The Politics of Aristotle* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946).) For the meaning of ‘lower’ and ‘higher’ compare *de Anima* 414a29–b19: plants have the nutritive faculty only, animals also have sense-perception and locomotion, while ‘human beings and anything else that is similar or superior to them’ add the faculties of thought and intellect.
- 6 *Metaphysics* 1075a16–25.
- 7 *Pol.* 1254a24–33.
- 8 *Pol.* 1252a30–31.
- 9 *De Generatione Animalium* 738b26 ff.; cf. 716a20ff. (the male is that which has the power to generate in another, the female is that out of which the generated offspring comes into being); 734b35 (the generating parent is *actually*

- what the material from which the offspring is formed is *potentially*); 729b12 ff. (the offspring comes from its male and female parents respectively in the sense in which a bedstead comes from the carpenter and the wood). (Translations from this text are based on that of A. L. Peck in the Loeb Classical Library edition (1942).)
- 10 *De Gen. An.* 775a15. See also 728a17 ff. ('A woman is as it were an infertile male'); 766a31 (maleness as a capacity, femaleness as an incapacity); and for further references and discussion, S. M. Okin, *Women in Western Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), ch. 4.
- 11 *Pol.* 1254a36–7 (a biological application of the more abstract thought in Plato, *Republic* 504c2–3, 'Nothing imperfect is the measure of anything').
- 12 See *Nicomachean Ethics* 1166a16–17; 1168b31–69a3; 1177b31–78a3.
- 13 I do not wish to suggest that this represents the last word on 'Aristotle and feminism', however. For more optimistic approaches see M. C. Nussbaum, 'Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach', in M.C. Nussbaum and A. Sen, eds., *The Quality of Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) and 'Human Capabilities, Female Human Beings', in M. C. Nussbaum and J. Glover, eds., *Women, Culture and Development* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); also C. A. Freeland, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Aristotle* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998).
- 14 *Pol.* 1264b4–6: 'It is odd to base on an analogy with animals, who have no domestic duties, the claim that women ought to engage in the same occupations as men.'
- 15 Thus E. Barker, *Greek Political Theory*, 5th edition (London: Methuen, 1960), p. 261 objects to the egalitarianism of *Rep.* v that 'the fact of her sex is not one isolated thing in a woman's nature, in which, and in which alone, she differs from man: it colours her whole being . . . She has by nature a specific function of her own, which she will always refuse to delegate to a crèche; and the long period of growth and the need of nurture of her children . . . will always make the discharge of this function the work of a lifetime.'
- 16 See L. Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. G. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 152–60; J. Annas, 'Plato's *Republic* and Feminism', in J. K. Ward, ed., *Feminism and Ancient Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1996).
- 17 'Imaginary' is used here in a sense deriving from the psychoanalytic writings of Jacques Lacan. 'The Imaginary order . . . is the domain of transference relations' – that is, of behaviour manifesting 'affective conflicts which remain unresolved from childhood' – and is 'governed by jealousy, competition and aggressivity, mediated through idealization, love and the rationalizations which Lacan calls misrecognition' (E. Ragland-Sullivan, 'The Imaginary', in E. Wright, ed., *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: A Critical Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 174).
- 18 See Irigaray, *Speculum*, pp. 243 ff.
- 19 *Theaetetus* 149b–151d, Socrates as a midwife of the intellect; *Symposium* 206b–212c, the object of love is 'procreation in the beautiful': for some men this process involves physical intercourse (with women), for some intellectual intercourse (with other men). See also P. duBois, *Sowing the Body: Psychoanalysis and Ancient Representations of Women* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), ch. 8.

- 20 See A. Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato: A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy*, trans. S. Anderlini-D'Onofrio and Á. O'Healy (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), ch. 2.
- 21 J. Adam, *The Republic of Plato*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1905), p. 280 (on *Republic* 451c ff.). (But it may be that the pendulum has begun to swing the other way on this point: see S. Levin, 'Women's Nature and Role in the Ideal Polis: *Republic* v Revisited', in Ward, ed., *Feminism in Ancient Philosophy*, esp. at pp. 26–7.)
- 22 Pythagoreanism had its first flowering at Croton, a Greek community in southern Italy, around 500 BC. Aristotle (*Metaphysics* 987a30) describes Plato as 'in most respects a follower' of this school; hence the term 'Pythagorean-Platonic' in the text above.
- 23 I discuss some of this evidence in 'An Ancient Theory of Gender: Plato and the Pythagorean Table', in Archer, Fischler and Wyke, eds., *Women in Ancient Societies*. Of related interest are the essays by Judith Genova and Cynthia Hampton in B. Bar On, ed., *Engendering Origins: Critical Feminist Readings in Plato and Aristotle* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994).
- 24 'Uncomfortable' fails to do justice to the gravity of the situation, some feminists would argue. I explore this position in 'Feminism and the 'Crisis of Rationality'', *New Left Review* 207 (Sept./Oct. 1994), 72–86.
- 25 Works representing, or inspired by, what I would call the feminism of difference include those of Irigaray, duBois and Cavarero cited in notes 18–20 above. For explicit advocacy of what the author describes as a 'radical feminism of sexual difference', see R. Braidotti, *Patterns of Dissonance* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991). A valuable account of this style of feminist theory is to be found in M. Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* (London: Routledge, 1991).
- 26 The image is named after its originator, the 'Vienna Circle' anti-foundationalist philosopher Otto Neurath.
- 27 A classic statement of this position can be found in G. Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: 'Male' and 'Female' in Western Philosophy* (London: Methuen, 1984) (see esp. 'Concluding Remarks').
- 28 Some feminist writers, such as Judith Butler, would now condemn the uncritical acceptance of the dualistic categories 'woman' and 'man' as a residue of conventional (and oppressive) modes of construction of gendered identity. However, since it is admitted that this view does not debar us from 'speaking as and for women' for strategic (political) purposes (see Butler in S. Benhabib et al., *Feminist Contentions* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 49), I will not pursue it here.
- 29 See M. Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (London: Macmillan, 1938), ch. 4; and compare F. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. C. Diethe, ed. K. Ansell-Pearson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), esp. Essay 1. The same theme figures in Wittgenstein, who is reported as saying – for related reasons – that his own thoughts are 'one hundred per cent Hebraic' (R. Rhees, ed., *Recollections of Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 161; and cf. L. Wittgenstein et al., 'Wittgenstein's Lecture on Ethics', *Philosophical Review* (1965), 13, 15).
- 30 See G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), §§446–76.

- 31 See F. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967). Nietzsche argues here that Apollo, the sun-god, is associated with clarity of outline and hence with determinate form; Dionysus, the wine-god, with an ecstatic loss of identity.
- 32 Plato, *Sophist*, esp. at 258ab and context.
- 33 It may be worth stressing once again that for present purposes, ‘Hebraic’ means Judaeo-Christian in contrast to Graeco-Roman.
- 34 F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), §250. Arnold likewise describes Christianity as a matter of ‘boundless devotion to that inspiring and affecting pattern of self-conquest offered by Jesus Christ’ (*Culture and Anarchy*, pp. 124–5, emph. added).
- 35 S. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. A. Hannay (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985).
- 36 More precisely, the reference is to works which do not admit of anything being added or subtracted, ‘since excess and defect are destructive of goodness’.
- 37 This contrast owes most of its importance in recent ethical theory to the impact of Carol Gilligan, *In A Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).
- 38 This terminology raises the question of how to give substance to the idea of what is ‘due’ to people – a question beyond the scope of this discussion, though the choice of a form of words vague enough to embrace both retributive and distributive justice is deliberate.
- 39 To imply that the Old Testament is unconcerned with justice would, however, be a misrepresentation. See B. M. Metzger and M. D. Coogan, eds., *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) under ‘Righteousness’.
- 40 S. de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. Parshley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), pp. 94–5. ‘Immanence’ as opposed to ‘transcendence’: the implicit picture of masculine work, however stylized, conforms to the familiar Aristotelian example of a ‘process’ (see e.g. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1174a19–27) – the building of a temple which, on completion of the process of making it, continues to exist as a monument to the maker’s work. This achievement figuratively lifts the maker above the flux of events, whereas a ‘product’ that promptly deteriorates or disappears drags its maker down with it.
- 41 Compare S. Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking* (London: The Women’s Press, 1990), p. 161.
- 42 E. Levinas, ‘God and Philosophy’, in S. Hand, ed., *The Levinas Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), pp. 180, 181 (emphasis added). (But for evidence that Levinas too wishes to see cross-fertilization between ‘Athens’ and ‘Jerusalem’, see S. Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), esp. p. 239.)
- 43 See I. Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. and ed. M. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 153–7.
- 44 *Ibid.*, p. 153.
- 45 *Ibid.*, pp. 154–5.
- 46 See D. Bubeck, *Care, Gender and Justice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), Parts II–III.
- 47 Compare M. Le Dœuff, *Hipparchia’s Choice*, trans. Trista Selous (Oxford:

- Blackwell, 1991), p. 103. My own reservations about the ‘feel-good’ genre of feminist writing on motherhood (and ‘caring’ relationships generally) are stated in ‘Maternalist Ethics: A Feminist Assessment’, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 93:4 (Fall 1994; Toril Moi and Janice Radway, eds.: special issue on materialist feminism), 779–802.
- 48 Space is lacking here to pursue the distinction between the Presocratic ‘unlimited’ or ‘indefinite’ and the more precise notion of the infinite which evolved from it in later Greek (and subsequent) philosophy. For more on this see M. Inwood, *A Hegel Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) under ‘Infinity’; or at greater length, A. W. Moore, *The Infinite* (London: Routledge, 1990).
- 49 I am grateful for comments on earlier drafts of this chapter to seminar audiences at the Universities of Oxford and Edinburgh, and (especially) to the editors of this book.