

Michael S. Kochin:

Gender and Rhetoric in Plato's Political Thought

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This exciting book places the reform of gender relations at the heart of Plato's political philosophy. In Michael S. Kochin's view, the qualified gender equality of the *Republic* and the limited but still radical reforms of the *Laws* are not oddities or side issues, but serious (if impractical) proposals that conventional gender roles must be abandoned if individuals or communities are to achieve the good life. While justifiably cautious of the dangers of anachronism that go with describing Plato as a feminist (p. 37, n. 1), Kochin presents the philosopher as a radical and profound critic of patriarchy and its consequences.

Kochin starts from a Straussian reading¹ of Plato's account of gender relations as a critique of conventional Greek ideals of masculinity, but transforms it by placing it within a serious, not an ironic, interpretation of the political idealism of the dialogues. By having Socrates declare that women possess, to an extent, the same natural abilities as men, Plato takes 'manliness' from its pedestal as the paradigm of human excellence. For Kochin, though, he does so not as a prelude to the inevitable decline of political idealism into tyranny, nor as a foil to the superior contemplative life of the philosopher, but because he sees manliness as a psychic disorder, a deviation from an ideal of unified human excellence. The book offers dense and stimulating readings of Plato's two attempts to wrestle with the "disease of masculinity": *Republic*, where the disease is cured at the expense of an inconceivable start from *tabula rasa*; and *Laws*, where the start from more-or-less realistic premises results in at best a palliative approach to the disorder. From the limitations of each dialogue emerge insights into the relationship between philosophy, politics, and rhetoric.

Chapter 1, "Gender and the Virtues in the Rhetorical Situation", makes the case for revisiting Plato's arguments on the subject of gender by underlining the contemporary need for "a rhetorical art that is suited for the new public in which men and women for the first time have the full right [...] to speak and to listen" (p. 9). We need to be able to speak collectively – to use the pronoun 'we' without embarrassment – in a way that includes different gender (and other) identities without coercion or denial of differences of perspective. Kochin argues convincingly that meaningful political debate in modern capitalist societies is undermined by a peculiar conjuncture of moral absolutism and pluralism: My values are non-negotiable and so are yours, and our only choice in debate is when to hide our moral 'trumps' and when to play them (p. 11). Kochin makes a cautious case for the revival of the 'rhetorical situation', in which individual self-interest is taken for granted, but the purpose of political debate is to determine and act on collective interest. Of course, we cannot ignore rhetoric's bad reputation, the charges of deceit and amorality. This brings us back to Plato, whose "partial alienation from the rhetorical situation" as understood by his contemporaries makes the study of his work "a vital pro-paideutic for the revival of the rhetorical" (p. 17).

¹ See p. 82 for discussion of this debt.

The second part of this chapter (pp. 17-24) posits two ancient Greek ideals of masculinity: a heroic ideal, based on bravery and the control of fears; and a civic ideal, in which *sôphrosunê*, the control of desires, takes its place alongside bravery. Kochin draws on a range of dialogues to outline Plato's critique of the heroic ideal as a perversion leading to insatiable self-aggrandisement, and of the civic ideal as a deception, in which lip-service to *sôphrosunê* (which paradoxically, as Kochin points out, is also a distinctly womanly virtue) conceals the realities: that restraint now is simply a means to gratification later, or that individual self-aggrandisement is merely subordinated to the aggrandisement of the city. The gendering of these virtues is an obstacle to the understanding and achievement of true *human* excellence.

Chapter 2, "Plato's Psychopolitical Justifications", follows the problem of masculinity into the structure of the individual soul. Individuals are subject to conflicting desires, and Plato's project is to reconcile these desires to the authority of reason and the single criterion of the good of the individual as a whole. In Kochin's view, Plato's texts identify two main obstacles to this goal (p. 26): the authority of law, which comes between the individual and what is truly good for her or him; and the plurality of goods recognised by law, bound up in turn with the plurality of virtues and with the distinction of gender roles. Law conditions us, shaping our moral consciousness but at the same time creating a kind of moral alienation – the condition of the Cave (pp. 27-31). The *Republic's* account of justice in the soul is an attempt to grapple with this conditioning, to show the way to an understanding of our real self-interest (p. 35). Kochin discusses some of the notorious problems with this account – the status of the parts of the soul (p. 32); whether the identification of psychic harmony with *dikaïosunê* can be justified (p. 35) – and proposes that we can best understand the dialogue's idiosyncratic defence of justice by seeing it as an argument *ad hominem*, or rather *ad viros*: "by understanding the life of injustice as referring specifically to the life of *manly* injustice, we will see why Platonic justice entails abstention from injustice" (p. 36).

Chapter 3, "Manliness and Tyranny", reads the first half of *Republic* as setting the scene for the arguments for gender equality in Book 5. Books 2-4 are the "male drama", describing the education of male guardians, and doing so in a way that challenges traditional (poetic) accounts of the masculine ideal. The Achillean hero is assimilated to the tyrant who was evoked by Thrasymachus in Book 1 as the model of 'manly' injustice, and both are shown to be not manly but 'womanish' in their lack of self-control. Kochin defends this move against the charge of misogyny: Plato rhetorically "turn[s] male prejudice against itself" (p. 40), and 'regendering' particular behaviours is a step towards 'degendering' both behaviour and virtue itself (p. 41). Each of Socrates' male interlocutors represents a different aspect of the masculine disease, and their flawed conceptions of justice foreshadow arguments which will emerge later in the dialogue (pp. 42-48). The education of the guardians inculcates a manliness, *andreia*, which is, as Kochin puts it, "gentled", that is, selfless, devoted to the city, and without the passion of the Homeric hero (p. 52).

Major problems remain, however: The city as so far described is still too 'masculine', in its reliance on manly virtue for the prosecution of external war (pp. 55-57), and in the dubious position of the deceived and indoctrinated guardian-warriors, whose lives "can only serve as an example for those whose need for relief from their despotic desires outweighs their attachment to truth and their faith in the goodness of truth for life" (p. 59). This is the backdrop to the "female drama" of Book 5, with which the heart of Kochin's book, Chapter 4, "Justice and the Ungendered Self", begins.

The argument in *Republic* against separate roles for men and women is notoriously paradoxical: It is because in general men are better than women at *everything* that there is no justification for assigning women a specific social sphere. Kochin defends this argument as necessary in order to shift the basis of debate and show that “sex ought to be irrelevant for politics as Socrates understands it”. The claim that “*only* [my emphasis] if women are superior to men in nothing can their excellence be the same as the excellence of men” (p. 61) seems exaggerated, but Kochin suggests (without really making the case) that this is indeed the only argument available in Socrates’ particular rhetorical situation. The admission that women are inferior to men *in general* (though with exceptions) will later be revealed by Kochin as one of the root causes of the failure to attain true human excellence in Magnesia, the ‘second-best’ imagined city of the *Laws*. It is surprising that Kochin does not dwell on the acceptance of this damaging premise in the more idealistic *Republic*. Perhaps it would be impossible to persuade a male population raised in patriarchy to accept, even for the sake of argument, that women are men’s equals (though even this is not self-evident); but why should it be impossible to persuade Glaucon and Adeimantus? To put this another way, why at this juncture does *Republic* take the rhetorical path (allowing the argument to be governed by the psychic limitations of Socrates’ interlocutors) rather than the path of dialectic?²

Section 4.3, “Plato’s Coeducational Army”, returns to the difficult issue of external warfare as a characteristic activity of the just city. How can external savagery sit alongside internal harmony? How is aggression compatible with a move away from the ‘manly’ drive for aggrandisement? First, Kochin says, war is for ancient Greek cities “the fundamental human condition” (p. 67); without war, the just city would not be complete (and indeed the only war-free city envisaged in *Republic* is the not-fully-human “city of sows”). Moreover, by emphasising the instructive function of warfare and making the city’s warriors *sôphronistai* (moderators) rather than *kolastai* (punishers) of their enemies, Socrates in 466e-471c de-genders, and thus justifies, the practice: “the transformation of manly military practice into human educational practice makes war compatible with justice” (p. 71). This is an overstatement. Warfare is educational primarily because it provides education *in warfare*, as 466e-467a makes clear, and while the warriors will temper the violence of actual warfare between Greeks, they will continue to treat non-Greeks “as Greeks treat each other now” (471a). Weapons have not been laid aside, and Kochin’s description of the guardians as “veritable Socratics of the battlefield, who teach using a militant elenchus” (p. 72) is thus not literally accurate; as a metaphor, it is uncomfortably euphemistic.

Section 4.4 examines Socrates’ justification of communism, countering the suggestion that the unity of the guardians involves actual loss of selfhood (which would undermine any argument for the just city on grounds of self-interest). Kochin invokes Richard Kraut’s distinction between ‘proper interest’ and ‘extended interest’, arguing that the guardians retain a restricted individual proper interest while their unity is ensured through radical collectivisation of their extended interest: All have the same friends and kin. Communism is defended by identifying the desire for private property as a psychic disorder; in wishing to own material things rather than simply have the use of them when needed, we misdirect spirited desire towards merely appetitive goods (p. 75).

4.5 retells *Republic* 8’s story of the decline from just citizen to tyrant as a story of progressive re-infection with the disease of masculinity.

In 4.6 Kochin reads the Myth of Er as simultaneously acknowledging the limits of our moral choice in this life (since we are rooted in our contingent situation, and conditioned by our up-

² By contrast with 541a (see below on Section 4.7), where, as Kochin argues, Socrates shows a remarkable disregard for rhetorical practicalities.

bringing and regime) and urging us to choose, insofar as we are able, “to disaggregate our learned gender identities to find those qualities that make up human excellence” (p. 81).

Section 4.7, “Irony, Nature and Possibility: The Three Waves and the Teaching of the *Republic*”, expands the discussion of conditioning and choice, and brings the discussion of *Republic* to its conclusion. Socrates has made the case for communism and revealed the private, patriarchal family as unjust. But to persuade us that we might rationally choose to be citizens of the just city is one thing; to make us so is another. In order to remodel our familial bonds, the existing bonds must first be broken, and while the current configuration of those bonds may be wrong, the bonds themselves are good (p. 83). To break them by physical intervention, e.g. by sending parents away and appropriating their children, as Socrates suggests at 541a, would be a crime, and the prospect of breaking them by persuasion is extremely remote, in view of their strength and in view of varying human ability to grasp intellectually what is truly good (pp. 84-85). The just city is not impossible by nature: Indeed it would be the truest realisation of human nature, but it may in fact be unrealisable for us. The philosophical endeavour is blocked by the need to persuade.

While Kochin’s discussion of *Republic* is characterised by lucidity, his discussion of *Laws* is somewhat more opaque. Chapter 5, “The Rule of Law and the Goodness of the City”, examines the dialogue’s strange compromise between traditional social norms on the one hand, and Socrates’ ongoing critique of the masculine disease on the other. The Athenian Stranger starts from a critique of the existing Dorian constitutions, and a major strand in this critique is once again the diagnosis of their excessive ‘manliness’ (pp. 90-94). In spite of this, and by contrast with Socrates in *Republic*, he goes on to set up separate standards of excellence for men and women, and to institutionalise an inferior position for women. In Magnesia, the imagined ‘second-best’ city of the *Laws*, women are citizens, but are regularly segregated from men. They are allowed some public offices, but excluded from the highest, and in particular from the Nocturnal Council, the group which, in its quest for a truth which transcends the actual social situation, brings Magnesia closest to the philosophical aspirations of the *Republic* (see pp. 112-113).

Kochin outlines two related explanations for the gender inequality, which shows Magnesia’s failure to realise, or even aspire to (p. 95), true human excellence. First is the city’s peculiar status as a “family of families” (pp. 100-109). Where the city of *Republic* began with individuals, Magnesia begins with families, and retains them, in spite of the Athenian’s recognition of communism as the ideal (Kochin takes this as a concession to male anxieties about paternity). However, the laws of Magnesia strive for the greatest possible subjugation of the private to the public and to the collective interest, by (for instance) regulating marriage, transplanting the hearth-cult of Hestia from the home to the acropolis, and enforcing gender-segregated communal meals for both husbands and wives. Women’s subordination to their husbands and segregation denies them an equal place in the public sphere; at the same time, the invasion of the home by law and state deprives them even of the semi-autonomous private sphere they might enjoy in actual Greek cities. Kochin’s second explanation for the subordination of women in Magnesia lies in the authority of law itself (pp. 109-111). Where reason, the guiding principle of *Republic*, can judge individual capacities, law deals in generalities. Once it is accepted, as Socrates already did in *Republic*,³ that women are *generally* inferior, a city which endows law with final authority can make no provision for the rare individual woman who is a potential philosopher.

³ See above on Chapter 4.

The sixth and final chapter, “Patriarchy and Philosophy”, explores further the consequences of Magnesia’s gender inequality and the Athenian’s efforts to moderate traditional ‘manly’ virtue while falling short of transforming it. Kochin discusses Magnesia’s restricted acceptance of homoeroticism, a consequence of the city’s self-fulfilling judgement of women’s inferiority.⁴ By the standards of *Republic*, what counts for justice in Magnesia is no more than manliness (p. 117). Kochin develops more fully the argument that the authority of law, by its very nature (in other words, its generality), makes Magnesia unable to open philosophic education even to the occasional exceptional woman (pp. 118-121). The excessive self-love symptomatic of individual manliness is replaced by uncritical love for the city and its laws regardless of their goodness, a kind of collective manliness. Law is *in loco parentis* for the citizens of Magnesia, and just as the parents in *Republic* 541a must be sent away if their children are to be the germ of the just city, so “the law of Magnesia itself [...] limits the goodness of its citizens” (p. 125).

In Section 6.5, “The Problem of Reform under Patriarchy”, Kochin describes Magnesia’s limited (and covert) susceptibility to change. Reform is possible, but only under the guise of continuity, and arguments for change must always be couched in terms of existing ideals. Kochin suggests that the Athenian’s critique and limited reform of the Dorian ideal of manliness is an illustration of this technique. He closes with the observation that the second-best city will send out male ambassadors to other cities, but will receive both male and female representatives from them, and suggests – optimistically, but not quite convincingly – that to the men of the Nocturnal Council a female ambassador, as a sign of a city more successful than their own in attaining human excellence, will appear “not merely an envoy, but an inspiration” (p. 130).

In a brief Conclusion, “From Plato Back to Politics”, Kochin recapitulates Plato’s arguments for gender equality and examines their claims to attention in a modern political context. The argument for a unified conception of human excellence is relevant to modern attempts to reconcile “the needs of the community and the happiness of the individual” (p. 133), and Plato’s wrestling with the issue of gender reminds us of the difficulty, but also the necessity, of achieving “consent through rhetoric” (p. 134) on fundamental issues, of arguing through to an understanding of ourselves collectively which transcends individual grievance and redress. The dialogues offer us a choice of models for political transformation of gender relations. Kochin states that “Plato’s return to rhetoric and persuasion in his last work, the *Laws*, makes his own choice clear”. I find this judgement rather surprising in view of the manifold and deep-rooted problems Kochin has revealed in the city of Magnesia’s relationship to human excellence. He concludes rightly that Plato’s writings encourage us not to accept this choice (if such it is), but to “force ourselves to answer afresh both Plato’s questions and our own”.

The book is densely argued and would, for once, have benefited from some expansion (the Conclusion, in particular, adumbrates its points very briefly indeed). Footnotes tend to climb the page throughout, often halfway and sometimes to the three-quarter mark; many could be expanded across several pages or into articles of their own (e.g. p. 16, n. 20 debating Plato’s reformed rhetoric with Harvey Yunis; p. 33, n. 20 on appetitive and spirited desires; p. 105, n. 36 on the relationship between private and public in Magnesia; and p. 123, n. 24, a thumbnail reading of Livy’s *History*). The book is nicely produced, with few errors that I noticed (p. 128 ‘*eunomenais*’ for ‘*eunomoumenais*’ and p. 132 ‘Pausanius’ for ‘Pausanias’ are among the few). It has a valuable bibliography and is informed by wide reading of feminist theory and research in social studies and political science, as well as philosophical and historical scholarship.

⁴ I am not convinced by the claim that 951e shows the Nocturnal Council itself to be “somehow pederastic” (p. 114). It seems strange to assume that the only way a man in his thirties can “be pleasing” (*areskein*) to one of his elders is through sexual attraction.

Kochin's arguments have altered my own understanding of *Republic* and brought me slightly closer, I think, to an understanding of the *Laws*. I would have wished for a longer Conclusion, returning to the 'rhetorical situation', discussed briefly in Chapter 1, and showing what we can learn from the way Plato derives a critique of patriarchy from premises which are themselves patriarchal.

The book will be a vital point of reference for future discussions of these two dialogues in particular and of Plato's moral philosophy in general. Kochin helps us to understand *Republic* especially both as a document of its time, and as a text whose questioning of human identity is as powerful now as ever.

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