

GENDER AND ESSENCE IN ARISTOTLE

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Is femininity part of the essence of every woman, and masculinity part of the essence of every man? The question sounds Aristotelian, but is it? Whether or not the question is Aristotelian, does it have a good, Aristotelian answer?

Aristotle's methodology suggests, I take it, that one begin an inquiry into a scientific question like this by reviewing the relevant *phainomena*. These may be observations, accepted opinions, or accounts of what we say, or would say, under these circumstances or those.

After we have reviewed the relevant *phainomena*, the next step, Aristotle supposes, is to sharpen up relevant definitions and then propose, in the terms thus defined, or redefined, a theory. The theory, in turn, must be checked against the pre-theoretical *phainomena*. At this checking stage some of the *phainomena* can be discounted as unreliable; some may be reinterpreted or redescribed. But the theory, if it is to be successful, must fit most of the *phainomena*; it must also lead us to a deeper understanding of the *phainomena* by giving us their causes and principles.

There is to be found in Aristotle's biological works a wealth of material that could count as *phainomena* for a theory of gender difference. Here is a sampling, taken from several parts of the *History of Animals*:¹

The privy part of the female is in character opposite to that of the male. In other words, the part under the pubes is hollow or receding, and not, like the male organ, protruding. (HA 1.14 493b2) Males have more teeth than females in the case of men, sheep, goats and swine; and in the case of other animals observations have not been made; but the more teeth they have the more long-lived are they, as a rule, while those are short-lived in proportion that have teeth fewer in number and thinly set. (HA 2.3 501b20)

As a general rule, . . . the male is larger and longer-lived than the female (except with the mule, where the female is longer-lived and bigger than the male); . . . Again the female is less muscular and less compactly jointed, and more thin and delicate in the hair—that is, where hair is found; . . . And the female is more flaccid in texture of flesh, and more knock-kneed, and the shinbones are thinner; and the feet are more arched and hollow in such animals as are furnished with feet. And with regard to voice, the female in all animals that are vocal has a thinner and sharper voice than the male; except, by the way, with kine, for the lowing and bellowing

of the cow has a deeper note than that of the bull. With regard to organs of defence and offence, such as teeth, tusks, horns, spurs, and the like, these in some species the male possesses and the female does not. . . . In other species such organs are found in both sexes. (HA 4.11 538a22)

. . . while within the womb, the female infant accomplishes the whole development of its parts more slowly than the male, and more frequently than the man-child takes ten months to come to perfection. But, after birth, the females pass more quickly than the males through youth and maturity and age . . . (HA 7.3 583b12)

In all genera in which the distinction of male and female is found, Nature makes a similar differentiation in the mental characteristics of the two sexes. This differentiation is the most obvious in the case of human kind and in that of the larger animals and the vivaporous quadrupeds. In the case of these latter the female is softer in character, is the sooner tamed, admits more readily of caressing, is more apt in the way of learning; as, for instance, in the Laconian breed of dogs the female is cleverer than the male. (HA 9.1 608a22)

. . . woman is more compassionate than man, more easily moved to tears, at the same time is more jealous, more querulous, more apt to scold and to strike. She is, furthermore, more prone to despondency and less hopeful than the man, more void of shame or self-respect, more false of speech, more deceptive, and of more retentive memory. She is also more wakeful, more shrinking, more difficult to rouse to action, and requires a smaller quantity of nutriment.

As was previously stated, the male is more courageous than the female, and more sympathetic in the way of standing by to help. Even in the case of molluscs, when the cuttle-fish is struck with the trident the male stands by to help the female; but when the male is struck the female runs away. (HA 9.1 608b8)

To me these *phainomena* suggest at least two, rather different, theories of gender difference. Some of them suggest what we might call a 'Complementarity Theory'. According to the Complementarity Theory there would be a collection of pairs of contrary features, F/F*, G/G*, H/H*, etc., such that one feature in each pair would go to make up a configuration that is one of two possible realisations of humanity. Thus a human being might be recessive in shape, gentle in temperament, quick to learn, soft in character and small in size; alternatively, a human being might be protruding in shape, aggressive in temperament, slow to learn, robust and confident in character and large in size. The first configuration would be a feminine realisation of humanity, the second a masculine realisation. In isolation each realisation would have drawbacks as well as advantages. Thus the male slowness in learning is partly a drawback and partly an advantage. It makes the male less adaptable, but also less brooding and spiteful. Male robustness, to take another example, is admirable, but it may bring with it a certain callousness, which is not at all admirable. Only when these two configurations are allowed

¹ I follow the Oxford translations of Aristotle, except where otherwise noted.

to supplement each other are the virtues of humanity maximised. In fact, so the story might continue, the well-being of human individuals will be maximised if those individuals are grouped together in various social arrangements that allow the two configurations of features to supplement each other in fruitful ways.

The other theory these *phainomena* suggest is a 'Norm-Defect Theory'. According to that theory, one of the two types is normative, the other, defective. In principle, either type could be taken as normative, though one might expect a male biologist in a somewhat macho society to consider the aggressive, confident, large-sized type of human being normative.

It is well to note that there are several passages in which Aristotle seems to accept a Complementarity Theory of human gender difference. Here is one from the discussion of 'friendship' (*philia*) in the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

Between man and wife friendship seems to exist by nature; for man is naturally inclined to form couples—even more than to form cities, inasmuch as the household is earlier and more necessary than the city . . . human beings live together not only for the sake of reproduction but also for the various purposes of life; for from the start the functions are divided, and those of men and women are different; so they help each other by throwing their peculiar gifts into the common stock. It is for these reasons that both utility and pleasure seem to be found in this kind of friendship. (ME 8.121162a6)

Much more typically, Aristotle seems to accept a Norm-Defect Theory. Thus Aristotle commonly asserts that men are naturally superior to women. He sometimes even maintains that women are, as it were, mutilated, or impotent, men. Here are two explicit expressions of male superiority:

Noblest of all are those whose blood is hot, and at the same time thin and clear. For such are suited alike for the development of courage and of intelligence. Accordingly, the upper parts are superior in these respects to the lower, the male superior to the female, and the right side to the left. (PA 2.2 648a9)

And it is clear that the rule of the soul over the body, and the mind and the rational element over the passionate, is natural and expedient; whereas the equality of the two or the rule of the inferior is always hurtful. The same holds good of animals in relation to men; for tame animals have a better nature than wild, and all tame animals are better off when they are ruled by man; for then they are preserved. Again, the male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules, and the other is ruled; this principle, of necessity, extends to all mankind. (Pol. 1254b4)

Here is a statement of the mutilation idea:

Just as the young of mutilated parents are sometimes born mutilated and sometimes not, so also the young born a female are sometimes female and sometimes male instead. For the female is, as it were, a mutilated male . . . (GA 2.3 737a27)

And here, finally, is an expression of the impotence idea:

Now a boy is like a woman in form, and the woman is, as it were, an impotent male, for it is through a certain incapacity that the female is female, being incapable of concocting the nutriment in its last stage into semen . . . (GA 1.20 728a17)

Sometimes Aristotle seems to waver between accepting the Complementarity Theory and accepting the Norm-Defect Theory. Consider this passage:

. . . people of a manly nature guard against making their friends grieve with them, and, unless he be exceptionally insensible to pain, such a man cannot stand the pain that issues for his friends . . . but women and womanly men enjoy sympathisers in their grief, and love them as friends and companions in sorrow. But in all things one obviously ought to imitate the better type of person. (NE 9.11 1171b6)

There is certainly something admirable and virtuous about the person who can bear great grief without crying. Or, at least, there may be. But there may also be something admirable and virtuous, I should have thought, about those who can express grief in the most natural way we have to express it and who can 'enjoy sympathisers in their grief, and love them as friends and companions in sorrow'. (I say this as one who cries rather easily.) In fact it seems to me that Aristotle shows at least some fleeting appreciation for the possibility of loving sympathisers as 'friends and companions in sorrow'. But if so, the appreciation is only fleeting. For immediately we are admonished to 'imitate the better type of person'. Instead of seeing these two patterns as complementary patterns of human response to grief, Aristotle makes one the norm and the other the defect.

That Aristotle should have been inclined to accept the Norm-Defect Theory is, no doubt, overdetermined. He lived in a male chauvinist society in which a popular version of the Norm-Defect Theory was widely accepted. He was not, by temperament, a radical or revisionistic thinker. Thus one is not-at-all surprised to find him giving expression to the Norm-Defect Theory.

More surprising, I suppose, is the evidence that he was somewhat attracted to the Complementarity Theory. In any case, it is not the sociological or psychological reasons for expecting Aristotle to opt for the Norm-Defect Theory that I shall be interested in, but rather the philosophical, and especially the metaphysical, reasons. Aristotle's understanding of human reproduction, and the metaphysical theory of generation that lies behind it, left Aristotle no way, I shall suggest, to accept the Complementarity Theory. On the contrary, his views on generation left him with no good option but to accept some form of the Norm-Defect Theory.

Before I try to establish that last claim I shall turn for a direct assault on the question of gender and essence. Could it be the case, within an Aristotelian framework, that there is such a thing as an essentially male human being, or an essentially female human being?

I take it to be one moral of *Metaphysics* Z4 that essence, *to ti en einai*, and *eidos*, form or species, are inextricably linked; either it is only the species

or form itself, the *eidōs*,² that has an essence, and its essence is given in the *logos* of that *eidōs*, or else individuals do have essences and their essence is given exhaustively in the *logos* of their *eidōs*. I shall take the second interpretive option, though I think that almost all of what I have to say could be accommodated to the first alternative as well. Thus, on the interpretation of Aristotle I shall assume, an individual human being (or an individual horse) does have an essence, and its essence is given exhaustively in saying what belongs to the *logos* of human being (or horse).

Our question about gender and essence thus becomes a question about gender and *eidōs*. In fact it is the question whether, for example, male human being, or female human being, could be, for Aristotle, an *eidōs*. That seems quite impossible. But why?

Aristotle devotes much of Chapter 9 of *Metaphysics* Iota to this question, but what he says there I find quite unhelpful. The central point, indeed the only point, seems to be that 'contrarities which are in the formula [that is, in the *logos*] make a difference in species [that is, a difference in *eidōs*], but those which are in the concrete material thing do not. . .'. (1058b1-3) Later on he says that "male and female are indeed modifications peculiar to 'animal', not however, in virtue of its essence [*kata ten ousian*] but in the matter, i.e. the body". (1058b21-3) To learn why being male and being female make a difference in matter, but not in *logos*, or *ousia*, we must look elsewhere.

When I started writing this paper I assumed that Aristotle takes being able to mate, sexually, as a touchstone for being of the same *eidōs*, where being a touchstone would amount to this: *x* and *y* are of the same *eidōs* iff either *x* mates naturally with *y* or *x* mates naturally with everything *l*. mates naturally with. If that were right, then clearly it could not be, on his view, that female human being is one *eidōs* and male human being another. But, as I actually look through the corpus, I don't find Aristotle saying that being able to mate is a touchstone for being of the same *eidōs*. He recognises that 'animals that are closely allied in their nature, and are not very different in species, copulate, if they are comparable in size and if their periods of gestation are equal in length'. (GA 2.7 746a30, Peck trans.)

Still, Aristotle clearly does think of the *standard* case of reproduction among animals as one in which a male and a female of the same *eidōs* unite and produce one or more offspring of that very same *eidōs*. Thus he goes on in the passage just quoted to say that 'such crossing is infrequent in the majority of animals'. Moreover, the sentence in which he concedes that there is a limited mating across species begins, 'the partners in copulation are naturally and ordinarily animals of the same kind', (*homogenesin*) Since what he is conceding here is limited mating across species, it's clear that 'of the same kind' (*homogenesin*) here comes to the same thing as 'of the same *eidōs*'. (Cf. 747b31) If males and females differed in *eidōs* simply by virtue of being male, or female, then fully *same-eidōs* reproduction, far from being the norm, would simply not exist.

² I use the Greek word '*tides*' in what follows as a reminder that Aristotle manages somehow to combine the idea of species with that of form.

This point, however, simply pushes our question back a step. If Aristotle had thought of women and men as differing in *eidōs*, he would, presumably, have developed a doctrine of complementary *eide*. Then the standard case of sexual union would be the case in which animals of appropriately complementary *eide* unite. Less than standard would be the union of, say, a wolf and a dog, the offspring of which might be fertile. Even further from the standard would be the union of horse and ass, the sterile mule. What objection would Aristotle have to such a theory?

Aristotle seems committed to the eternity of the biological species. They are eternal, he supposes, not because they have an independent existence as forms, but because there is, for any given species and any given time, an individual of that species alive at that time. Here is one of several passages in which Aristotle expresses the idea of such a metaphysical economy of nature:

Now some existing things are eternal and divine whilst others admit of both existence and non-existence. But that which is noble and divine is always, in virtue of its own nature, the cause of the better in such things as admit of being better or worse, and what is not eternal does admit of existence and non-existence, and can partake in the better and the worse. And soul is better than body, and the living, having soul, is thereby better than the lifeless which has none, and being is better than not being, living than not living. These, then, are the reasons of the generation of animals. For since it is impossible that such a class of things as animals should be of an eternal nature, therefore that which comes into being is eternal in the only way possible. Now it is impossible for it to be eternal as an individual (though of course the real essence of things is in the individual) — were it such it would be eternal — but it is possible for it as a species. This is why there is always a class of men and animals and plants. (GA2.1 731b24)

What assures us that, for any given time, there will be several horses alive, or several frogs, or several human beings? Aristotle's answer is very simple. Assuming that there are enough healthy individuals to start with, and famine and plague never wipe out the population, the species will be preserved by the fact that in normal reproduction the *eidōs* is passed on from parent to offspring. I shall call this the 'Doctrine of Reproduction by *eidōs* Transmission'—in Aristotle's slogan, 'Man is begotten by man', that is, human being is begotten by human being, (*anthropos anthropon genna*— 193b12, 198a26, 202a1, 640a25, 1033b32, 1070a28) This doctrine is a commonplace of Aristotle's metaphysics.

We must be clear how simple and direct Aristotle's doctrine is. His view is not merely that the *eidōs* is contained potentially in the parent; the *eidōs* that gets transmitted is the parent's own. Frogs beget frogs; human beings beget human beings. An actual individual of species, S, begets another individual of species, S.

In the background here is, of course, the rejection of Platonism. According

to Aristotle, postulating forms separate from the individuals that have those forms is a futile gesture. Timeless froghood couldn't generate any time-bound frogs. Never mind. Time-bound frogs do it themselves, naturally.

A second doctrine is relevant to this discussion. I shall call it the 'Doctrine of Paternal Agency'. It is the idea that in bisexual reproduction the father is the agent cause, where being the agent cause includes determining the form; the mother supplies only the matter. In fact what is crucial for my purposes is not paternal agency, as such, but single-gender agency. That is, it wouldn't matter for my purposes whether the mother or the father were the agent cause, so long as it was either the case that the father always is, or else the case that the mother always is. The important alternative ruled out is that the mother sometimes is and the father sometimes is. Aristotle can easily rule that out by noting, as he does, that male sex organs are very different from female sex organs and then adding, as he does, that form and function go together. (Cf., e.g., GA 1.2 716a23ff) Thus the male role in reproduction and the female role must be quite distinct from each other. Given the causal options Aristotle allows, only one will determine the *eidōs*.³

If we put the Doctrine of Reproduction by *eidōs* Transmission together with the Doctrine of Paternal Agency in Reproduction (or, for that matter, with the weaker Doctrine of Single-Gender Agency) we may conclude that gender is not included in *eidōs*. For the parent who is the agent cause (for Aristotle, the father) begets offspring of both sexes. If reproduction is by *eidōs* transmission, and the sex of the begotten may differ, as it surely may, from that of the begetter whose *eidōs* is being transmitted, then gender is not included in *eidōs*.

The conclusion that nothing is essentially male and nothing essentially female thus follows from the conjunction of these three Aristotelian ideas:

- (1) the idea that what is essential to a living being is included in the *logos* of its *eidōs*;
- (2) the idea that, normally, reproduction is by *eidōs* transmission;
- (3) the idea that in bisexual reproduction the father is always the agent cause, whether the offspring are male or female.

We have seen why, according to Aristotle, gender does not belong to essence. But what bearing does all this have on the question of whether one accepts the Complementarity Theory of Gender Difference or the Norm-Defect Theory?

If Aristotle had accepted the Complementarity Theory, he would have been obliged to say something about what gives stability to these two clusters of features, the female realisation of humanity and the male realisation. The

³ No doubt this is too quick. One might object that the differences between the male and the female sexual organs, even when coupled with the Aristotelian idea that form and function go together, do not require Aristotle to conclude that only one parent can determine the *eidōs* of the offspring. Why couldn't each pass on an *eidōs*, or each pass on part of an *eidōs*? In fact, in the *Generation of Animals* Aristotle discusses and rejects both those suggestions. As for each parent contributing a part, he says that there can be no such thing as part of an *eidōs*. As for each contributing an *eidōs*, he says that there would then be two children.

natural thing to try would have been to say that each cluster makes up an *eidōs*. But then, given the Doctrine of Reproduction by *eidōs* Transmission, one would have to say that female babies get their *eide* from their mothers and male babies get theirs from their fathers. The doctrine of Paternal Agency, of course, blocks this move (as would also, of course, the weaker Doctrine of Single-Gender Agency). Thus, given his other commitments, Aristotle cannot say that each feature-cluster constitutes an *eidōs*.

The most obvious alternative is the idea of natural failure. Aristotle thought it entirely natural that there should be monstrosities; but it is surely important to this naturalness that the number of monstrosities be relatively small. Monstrosities are an aberration in the general population, albeit an entirely natural aberration. What is produced always, or for the most part, is the way it ought to be.

When confronted with the phenomenon of stable gender-related feature-clusters, Aristotle reaches for the idea of a much more fundamental recalcitrance in nature than whatever is responsible for monstrosities. Here we are talking about fully half the population. Moreover, the irony is that this recalcitrance in the heart of things is necessary for the very perpetuation of the species, as Aristotle himself recognises. Thus when he claims that the 'first departure from type' is 'that the offspring should be female instead of male' (GA 4,3 767b6), he is quick to add that this departure is a natural necessity.⁴

The idea of natural failure leads, of course, straight to the theory of gender difference that I have called the 'Norm-Defect Theory'. As, I have reconstructed Aristotle, then, his main philosophical reason for accepting the Norm-Defect Theory of Gender Difference is that he needs to account for the stability of these two feature-clusters. It is not open to him to suppose these clusters are anchored in distinct *eide*, given his views on generation. His only option seems to be to understand the feature cluster of one of the two sexes as a natural failure. That, as it turns out, males are supposed to be successes, and females failures, is, I think, better explained by psychological and sociological factors, than by philosophical ones.

I shall conclude by asking whether Aristotle had any good reason to reject, or even to call into question, the central doctrine of his theory of generation, the Doctrine of Reproduction by *eidōs* Transmission!

Aristotle had at least two good reasons to call this doctrine into question. The first is the phenomenon of mules; the second is that of family resemblance. I have space to discuss only the first, and that only briefly.

Mules are a source of great discomfort for Aristotle, perhaps also an object of great fascination to him. It seems to him that the mule is a genuine *eidōs*. (GA 2.8 748a) By contrast, the offspring of other mixed-species matings seem to him not to constitute a new *eidōs*, but only a temporary aberration, something that will, so to speak, wash out in future generations. (GA 2.4 738b28)

⁴ To understand this move fully and to evaluate it responsibly one would need to consider more generally the role of the ideas of deficiency and failure in Aristotle's natural teleology.

Not surprisingly, Aristotle suggests in *Metaphysics* Z9 that the mule is an imperfect *eidōs* (1034a5); but an imperfect *eidōs* is still an *eidōs*. Where does it come from? The idea of simple *eidōs* transmission (mule begets mule) isn't right. It's horse and ass that produce mule.

In the previous chapter of *Metaphysics* Z Aristotle does try suggesting that what is common to horse and ass is the genus next above them, something without a name. Let's call it 'donkey-horse'. Then what happens when a mule is generated is that a donkey-horse mates with another donkey-horse and the offspring, appropriately enough, is a donkey-horse. *Eidōs* transmission, or at least *genos* transmission, is preserved. But this suggestion doesn't really work. We can say, if we like, that all horses and donkeys, as well as all mules, are donkey-horses, and that when donkey-horses mate they produce donkey-horses. But what we originally wanted to know was why when a certain variety of donkey-horse (what we would otherwise call a horse) mates with a different variety of donkey-horse (what we could otherwise call a donkey) the offspring will be, naturally and entirely predictably, yet another variety, in fact a sterile variety, of donkey-horse, namely, a mule. That's a regular and predictable outcome that the simple Doctrine of *eidōs* Transmission fails even to allow for, let alone, to explain.⁵

One might, of course, try saying that the mule is a degenerate *eidōs*. But that only sets things up for another embarrassment for Aristotle, since, as it seems, he fails to distinguish the offspring of male horses and female donkeys from those of female horses and male donkeys.

In strict English usage only the offspring of a mare and a he-ass should be called a 'mule'. The offspring of a stallion and a she-ass is called a 'hinny'. Mules tend to be larger, stronger and more highly prized than hinnies. If Aristotle had made a species-like distinction between mules, properly so called, and hinnies, he could have said that, whereas mules are degenerate donkeys, hinnies are degenerate horses. But he seems not to make any such distinction. Indeed he seems to suppose, as I have already indicated, that the offspring of the two kinds of union have the same *eidōs*. (GA 2.8 748a1) So he is left in the embarrassing position of saying that a single *eidōs*, albeit an imperfect or defective *eidōs*, is now degenerate ass, now degenerate horse.

So far as I can tell, Aristotle never deals satisfactorily with the problems that the mule poses for his metaphysics, or for his theory of reproduction. Mules remain a good reason for him to modify something, perhaps in a way that would allow for a different treatment of gender difference.

The other reason Aristotle had for calling his Doctrine of Reproduction by *eidōs* Transmission into question is the phenomenon of family resemblance. This is a matter that exercises him considerably in the fascinating third chapter of Book 4 of the *Generation of Animals*. I have no space to discuss the point. I shall just note that reflection on the fact that resemblances

⁵ Philip Kitcher has suggested I emphasise that the difficulty is even more serious than this. There are (obviously) three varieties of donkey-horse. V_1-V_1 matings produce V_1 offspring. V_2-V_2 matings produce V_2 offspring. V_3-V_3 matings produce V_3 offspring. And V_1-V_2 unions are normally without issue. Any satisfactory theory would have to explain these facts.

in nonessential features among offspring of the same parents are much more likely than among randomly selected members of the general population might have led Aristotle to complicate his genetic theory in a way that would mean giving up the simple story of reproduction by paternal *eidōs* Transmission; it might have, but it didn't.

Two and a half millennia after Aristotle we are, most of us, made extremely uncomfortable by Aristotle's blatant male chauvinism. We would like to think we are well free of that.

Certainly we have made advances in understanding gender difference. We have a genetic theory that is vastly superior to anything Aristotle envisaged. We have a much, much better understanding of the physiology of gender, including the role sex hormones play in the development of both the physiological and the psychological characteristics Aristotle was so interested in. We can link our genetic theory to a theory of natural selection. And we appreciate, much better than he ever did, the influence of society and culture on the formation of gender roles and the encouragement of sexual stereotypes. Still, for all that, we are a long way from having arrived at a theory of essence and gender difference that commands general respect and acceptance.

No doubt we do not find Aristotle's simple theory of reproduction by *eidōs* Transmission very attractive. We do not anymore think that the species are eternal. We hope to account for whatever stability the species have by appeal to modern genetics and to population biology. But perhaps an important part of our difficulty with gender identity lies in the fact that we learned to talk of essences from Aristotle; for us, too, 'essence talk' is most satisfactory when it can be linked easily with differences between two or more species under a common genus. When we are interested in differences, even quite general and stable differences, that are not differences between two species under a common genus, we, like Aristotle, are in trouble. Thus we still have difficulty conceiving well the difference between being a member of one human race rather than another. And we, like him, have difficulty understanding satisfactorily the difference between being a child and being an adult. Finally, we, like him, have problems thinking about what it is to be female, or male. Perhaps Aristotle's problem with gender difference is still our problem because, or partly because, we are so strongly indebted to his ways of thinking about essence and classification, and, within those ways of thinking, there is no obviously satisfactory solution.⁶

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