

ARISTOTLE SAID THAT WOMEN  
ARE DEFECTIVE...  
WHY DON'T YOU HAVE  
Semen?



Ivelisse Colon Nevarez

The reason for women's inferiority lies in a defect.

"Women are defective by nature" because they cannot reproduce semen which contains a full human being. When a man and a woman have intercourse, the man supplies the substance of a human being (the soul, i.e. the form), the woman only the nourishment (the matter).

Since it was a fundamental principle for him that, of the two factors or components in

every being, 'form' is superior to 'matter', sexual reproduction was considered beneficial, because it demanded the one who gives the 'form' (the male) be separate from the one who supplies the 'matter' (the female). Thus the 'lower' is not mingled with the 'higher' in the same individual. Aristotle subscribed to what Caroline Whitbeck has called the 'flower pot theory' of human generation. The female, who is deficient in natural heat, is unable to 'cook' her menstrual fluid to the point of refinement, at which it would make semen (i.e. 'seed'). Therefore her only contribution to embryo is its matter, and a 'field' in which it can grow. inability to produce semen is her deficiency: 'a woman,' Aristotle concludes, 'is as it were an infertile male' (*Generation of Animals*, I, 728a). 'A male is male in virtue of a particular ability, and a female in virtue of a particular inability' (*Generation of Animals*, I, 82f).

Caroline Whitbeck, 'Theories of Sex Difference', in Gould and Raskin (eds.), *Women and Philosophy*, New York 1976, pp. 54-60; M. Maloney, 'The Arguments for Women's Difference in Classical Philosophy and Early Christianity', pp. 41-49.

According to Aristotle, man rightly takes charge over woman, because he commands superior intelligence. This will also

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ἀλλὰ τοῦτο μὲν νοοματῶδες, διόπερ ὀλίγας ὀλεγάκις ανηβαῖνει τὸ δ' ὡς ἐπὶ τὸ πολὺ γυνόν 30 μάλιστα κατὰ φύσιν ἔστιν.

"Οτι μὲν οὖν συμβάλλεται τὸ θήλην εἰς τὴν γενεὺν τὴν ὑλὴν, τοῦτο δ' ἔστιν ἐν τῇ τούτη μητρίαις συντάσσει, τὰ δὲ καταμήτηα περὶττε δῆλον.

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XX "Ο δ' οἰογτά τινες σπέρμα συμβάλλεται τῷ τῇ απονοτίᾳ τῷ βήλῳ διὰ τὸ γένεσθαι, λαρνασσαν τε χαρὸν ἔντοτε μάταιός τῇ τῶν ἀρρένων ὅμοι ἡγρικὸν ὑπόκρισιν, οὐκ ἔστι τὴν μητράσια σπερματικὴ ἀλλὰ τοῦτο οὐσιῶς ἔκπτωσις, γαρ τὸν ἔντερόν ἔκπτωσις, καὶ ταῦτα μὲν γέγονται διαταῖς δ' οὖν γέγενται μὲν γάρ ταῖς λεπτοχρόνιαι θηλυκαῖς ἵκε επὶ τὸ πολὺ τὸν εἰπεῖν, οὐ γίνεται διαμελάνταις καὶ ἀπρωστοῖς. τὸ δὲ πλήθος, αλλὰ γενεται, ἔντοτε οὖν κατὰ σπέρματος προσειται ἐπαλλακτικόν ὑπερβάλλει. ἔτι δὲ καὶ ἐδεσμογενεῖται

<sup>1</sup> γέγονται οὖν κατὰ σπέρματος προσειται ἐπαλλακτικόν ὑπερβάλλει.

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle's notion that the menstrual blood is the substance from which the embryo is formed reigned unquestioned for many centuries. (It appears in the *Wisdom of Solomon*, vii, 2, "In the womb of a mother was I born into flesh in the time of ten months, being compact blood of the seed of man and the pleasure that came sleep.") It can be seen pictured in 16th century obstetric books such as the *De concepcion et generatione mortali* Jacob Rueff (1554). Its falsity was decisively demonstrated by William Harvey, who in his *Exercitationes de generatione animalium* (1651) describes his dissections of the womb done in King Charles the First's forests, at different stages after coitus. The expected mass of blood and seed never found: a source of great perplexity to Harvey but since the mammalian egg was not discovered until long

fit the women who depend on him. He compares this to the relationship between human beings and tame animals.

he best for all tame animals to be ruled by human beings. For this is the way they are kept alive. In the same way, the relationship between the male and the female is *by nature* such that the male is higher, the female lower, that the male rules and the female is ruled.' Aristotle, *Politica*, ed. Classical Library, 1254 b 10-14.

What we should notice in Aristotle's text is the phrase: *by nature*. Subordination is right because it corresponds to the way things have been made. Aristotle also reckons that slavery is natural because some people are by nature destined to be slaves.

person is by nature a slave who can belong to another person and only takes part in thinking by recognising it, but not by possessing it. living beings (animals) cannot recognise thinking; they just obey. However, there is little difference between using slaves and using animals: both provide bodily help to do necessary things.'

Aristotle then proceeds to describe a slave's position and it is truly terrifying. A slave is no more than 'a tool of his master'. Together with the wife and the ox, a male or female slave is a householder's indispensable beast of burden. He or she should be kept well - for simple economic reasons. But slaves have no right to leisure or free time. They own nothing and can take no decisions. They have no part in enjoyment and happiness, and are not members of the community.

For the same reason Aristotle also justifies wars to capture slaves. For some people 'are by nature destined to be slaves, even though they resist it'; like wild animals that need to be tamed. He even says that all foreigners to some extent belong to this category.

That is why the poets say: "It is correct that Greeks rule Barbarians"; 'what is barbarian and what is slave are the same.' Aristotle, *Politica*, vol. 1; Loeb Classical Library, 1252 b 8. See A.T.H. van Leeuwen, *De acht van het Kapitaal*, Nijmegen 1984, pp. 182 - 205.

The prevailing tradition among Hellenists saw society, therefore, as layered in higher and lower forms of human being.

- Women were inferior to men by nature.
- Barbarians were inferior to the civilised races by nature.

Slaves were slaves because they were inferior by nature.

John Wijngaards



what  
the Pope's man  
found out about  
the Law of Nature