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Feminist Encounters with Plato: Appropriation, Disinvestment, and Constructive Complicity*

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ABSTRACT. This article examines two recent approaches to the feminist interpretation of the history of philosophy and recommends one of them for the study of Plato. Each is a variation of appropriation feminism, but both approaches engage cautiously with our philosophical inheritance out of a concern that we may unwittingly perpetuate its oppressive ideology. Cynthia Freeland, taking inspiration from Irigaray's disinvestment approach, favors a more detached approach to Plato and Aristotle and calls for a transformed conception of philosophy. I argue that this conception of philosophy is flawed because truth's importance is displaced by one or more non-alethic epistemic virtues. The second approach takes its inspiration from Spivak's postcolonial critique and seeks to confront problematic philosophers head on. Dilek Huseyinazadegan's constructive complicity approach, which she develops in her interpretation of Kant, also calls for a transformed conception of philosophy. But her method focuses less on questions of justification, and instead centers on our philosophical practices. I show how her method can be adapted to the study of Plato and outline what it means to enact a constructive complicity with him. I consider the possibilities of a full and fruitful engagement with our Platonic inheritance, one that draws on the inclusive, dynamic philosophical praxis within Platonic philosophy in ways that resist the impulses of exclusion and hierarchy that are also present in it.

KEYWORDS: feminism, ideology, methodology, praxis.

How have feminist philosophers taken up the history of philosophy in the West? Robin May Schott (2006: 46–47) argues that there have

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been three modes of relationship: one approach is negative, pointing out the misogyny of traditional philosophers' attitudes or the problematic, gendered interpretations of their concepts. Another approach concentrates on recovering the lost voices of women philosophers, even going so far as to create an alternative canon. A third approach tries to find positive resources in the history of philosophy, an 'inheritance' that could support the ambitions of contemporary feminists. Of this third approach, Genevieve Lloyd argues that feminists appropriating the history of philosophy are "opening up traditional texts to enrich cultural self-understanding in the present" (Lloyd 2000a: 245). Those who favor the 'disinvestment' approach, however, remain wary of appropriation. They do not "take ownership of" the tradition like inheritance feminists do, because "they see in this tradition the perpetuation of relations of dominance" (Schott 2006: 56).

Cynthia Freeland (2000) wishes to combine the virtues of disinvestment and appropriation in her modified inheritance approach. Dilek Huseynzadegan (2018) seeks a similar balance, but her 'constructive complicity' method moves in precisely the opposite direction of Freeland's. I want to see how it applies to Plato's texts and to our practices of interpreting them and teaching them. My provisional conclusion is that feminists who enact a constructive complicity with Plato can revisit the originary moment when philosophy sought to consolidate itself as a distinctive enterprise. In doing so, they can draw from our Platonic inheritance an inclusive, dynamic philosophical praxis that complicates other impulses within that inheritance that produce exclusion and hierarchy.

1. Freeland and a modified inheritance approach

Freeland's wide-ranging article is framed by a meditation on the state of feminist engagement with ancient philosophy at the beginning of the millennium. She argues that beliefs about what is the proper method of history of ancient philosophy are ideological because they exclude feminist concerns, and she cites an essay by Michael Frede (1988) as an example. Freeland goes on to criticize Charlotte Witt's de-

fense of the inheritance approach (Witt 1998) because it does not distance itself adequately from the problematic methods exemplified in Frede. Witt, after all, seeks to rethink the philosophical canon in ways that are both traditional and radical; on one hand, she uses the methods of Frede's true historian — i.e., “quite serious historical and contextualized study of why a figure from the past said what he did” (Freeland 2000: 379); on the other hand, she seeks “major shifts and revisions in the canon” (380). But in many respects, Freeland says, feminists using the inheritance approach to revisit canonical figure are doing just what philosophers have always done. For this reason, ideological worries persist (381).

Freeland is inspired by the kind of criticism that Irigaray and Deutscher have mounted against traditional history of philosophy. Because of the ‘limiting sexism’ in philosophy “permeates our very thoughts and words” (391), it would seem that every approach to the study of the history of philosophy will be problematic. Nonetheless, Freeland does not advocate Irigaray's disinvestment approach, saying that it is too obscure (*ibid.*). Her modified inheritance approach, then, utilizes only aspects of the disinvestment approach. Insofar as she includes ideological criticism, her method aims to “dismantle thoughts, views, or frameworks of the past that have contributed to and upheld modes of domination, and also, replace these frameworks by ones that are more epistemically convincing” (402). But in addition to this deconstructive phase, there is a more positive mode of investigation. Here questions of truth are subordinated, as she does not think it necessary to “advance [her] own ‘true’ view about anything” (*ibid.*). Instead, she assesses ancient views by asking: “Were they plausible, original, systematically well-worked out, persuasive, internally consistent, etc.” (*ibid.*). Finally, there is again more negative work for Freeland's philosopher: “At the same time, I want to point out, criticize, and reject their internal inconsistencies, assumptions, and arguments that served to undergird tendencies toward oppression or dominance” (*ibid.*).

Freeland seeks a framework for understanding what philosophy is, such that the study of the history of philosophy breaks from its prob-

lematic past. This new framework adjusts the relative positions of the epistemic virtues. On an “even more radical view of the value of the history of philosophy” (404) than she endorses, she takes cues from the history of art. Such historians of philosophy would examine ancient works like works of art to see if they are “just plain great” or “beautiful, creative, interesting, etc.” (*ibid.*). They would admire ancient texts not because they might be true now, or part of a history that leads to the present, but because they are simply dazzling and wonderful.

This “even more radical view” is not Freeland’s, as such. But her interest in it indicates the degree to which she resists the search for truth. For Freeland it doesn’t make sense to seek the ‘truth’ of a philosophical text any more than it would a work of art. This comparison between the history of art and history of philosophy shows up again in her final recommendation: “You look at the artist or writer’s intention, assess the work as a whole and how it functions in its context, and then you see what puzzle it solved; finally, as a feminist, you make of it what you will” (405–406).

I think Freeland is correct to see how feminist engagement with ancient philosophers invites us to rethink what philosophy is, both then and now, and to redraw the boundaries between what is philosophy and what is not. But I have concerns about Freeland’s moves in this area. To begin, I believe it is mistaken to get rid of truth at the outset, or to subordinate it within the field of other epistemic virtues. First, since the best assumption about ancient philosophers is that they wrote in, or as part of, an effort to get at the truth, it is vitally important to pose the very question that motivated the philosopher to produce it in the first place. Second, and related to the previous point, treating the history of philosophy as a succession of puzzles to be solved is curiously detached, and it seems to invite the wrong spirit to the discovery. Finally, one wonders how far Freeland’s subordination of the truth goes. How can she hold that ideologically-problematic texts are, among other things, false (cf. 368) and at the same time decline to put forward interpretations that she regards as true (cf. 402)? Let us not subordinate truth or refuse asking questions that aim at discovering it. Let us rather

contest the meaning of truth and interrogate the contexts out of which it emerges, the manner of its operation, and the purposes it serves.

Freeland's invocation of the other epistemic values is also worrisome. Coherence, systematicity, comprehensiveness, originality: these epistemic values are more determinate than truth; they are, as it were, 'thick' epistemic concepts. And they are more likely to be embedded in masculinist discourse than truth is. Consider these examples: the search for logical coherence and formal validity in an argument can be a way to avoid discussion of the truth of premises. Do we really want to laud the kindred epistemic virtues of 'neatness' or 'elegance,' given how abstract these can be, and how these are aesthetic terms as much as they are epistemic? One might conjure up a feminist critique of comprehensiveness, too; what first comes to mind is a psychoanalytic reading that shows that it stresses control, order, and hierarchy. Also originality has a rather antifeminist history around it. The value of (at least one conception of) originality tracks the rise of modernity and flowers in Romanticism's celebration of the individual. Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock (1981) have shown how it was used to relegate the artistic output of women to the status of craft. To privilege originality may be to emphasize individual genius in a way that sets the creative (male) artist apart from others and makes his work valuable in comparison to theirs. From these cursory considerations alone, the substitution of a farrago of non-alethic epistemic virtues for truth would seem to create at least as many ideological problems as it intends to avoid.

It is worth asking again whether, as a way to resist ideology, there are alternatives to jettisoning truth and celebrating non-alethic and non-epistemic evaluations of texts. Is it better for feminists to demote the concept of truth altogether? Or is it better for feminists to find improved conceptions of truth? In a fuller study, I would seek to comprehensively interrogate Plato's conception of truth to not only admit the problems it exhibits but also to enact a "constructive complicity between our position and his thought" (Huseyinzadegan 2018: 13). Instead, I will offer far more limited remarks about his *means* of arriving at truth: philosophy. This in turn will help us to think critically about

our own philosophical practices, as Huseyinzedegan urges. First, let me say more about the constructive complicity approach.

2. *Huseyinzedegan's constructive complicity approach*

Huseyinzedegan's recent article on feminist appropriation of Kant expresses reservations about Freeland's approach and recommends a different path for feminists who wish to claim an inheritance and appropriate elements of the tradition for their transformative work. In many respects it recognizes the same risks that Freeland identifies, but approaches them in an entirely opposite way. Instead of coolness and distancing, Huseyinzedegan affirms the need for full and comprehensive engagement. Might this orientation to Kant guide our study of Plato? Instead of detachment, our response would be to put Plato "into conversation with recent feminist, anti-racist, post- and decolonial scholarship" since we wish to point out "the complicated legacies of this particular canonical thinker" (Huseyinzedegan 2018: 4). This is what Huseyinzedegan means by engaging comprehensively, rather than selectively. By inheriting Plato's texts "*as a whole*" rather than piecemeal, constructive complicity is "reclaiming them in their entirety, the good, the bad, and the ugly" (13). Huseyinzedegan wants to follow Spivak's recommendation of constructive complicity because it "traces a line of continuity and complicity" between the positions taken by historical philosophers and "our post- and neo-colonial present" (14, citing Spivak 1999: 9).

What would it mean in our interpretation of Plato to refuse Irigaray's irony and Freeland's detachment and follow the recommendations of Huseyinzedegan? We must acknowledge some obstacles for this method or orientation at the outset. Plato offers rather little that can or should be appropriated by feminists. In addition, Plato's texts are more complicated than Kant's. On one hand, the dialogues are literary wholes, with themes and preoccupations internal to each dialogue; on the other, they form transdialogic groupings that implicitly and explicitly link up with one another. Finally, how can one draw the line between philosophy and non-philosophy, or know what Plato endorses,

when the texts are dramatic and multivocal? Thus what we find is that feminist interpreters of Plato are already compelled to heed many of the warnings Huseyinzadegan gives to Kantian feminists.

Evidence of this can be found in the essays collected more than twenty years ago in Tuana 1994. Let us consider only the essays that center on Book V of the *Republic* and the question of whether the recommendation that women serve as philosopher-rulers is feminist. Even the most affirmative answer to that question, by Vlastos, notes deep complexities. He holds that Plato is “unambiguously feminist” about guardian women while also being “unambiguously antifeminist” in discussing nonguardian women and “virulently antifeminist” in his own attitudes toward Athenian women (Vlastos 1994: 12). Annas, though, already showed the anti-feminist ground of the judgment in favor of feminist status (Annas 1976: 312), and many of the other essays in this volume also challenge Vlastos’ assumptions about the meaning of feminism. Spelman, for instance, asks pointed questions about the price of Plato’s feminism that affirms equality in some respects and denies it elsewhere (Spelman 1994: 104–105). As Schott later puts the point, the feminism in Plato requires that we “situate the egalitarianism of Book V of *The Republic* in relation to Plato’s inegalitarianism, which posits that different natures are rooted in different kinds of souls” (Schott 2006: 48). In short, Plato’s feminist readers are already deeply attuned to the complex ambivalence of the texts. Many of them already follow Spivak’s hope that we find paths other than the two, well-worn paths of “excuses and accusations, the muddy stream and mudslinging” (Spivak 1999: 4).

Nevertheless, while these interpretations exhibit none of the glibness against which Huseyinzadegan militates, the scholarship is not as intersectional as Huseyinzadegan’s method requires. And they don’t draw the lines from historical texts to our contemporary practices as overtly as she does. These early essays only *begin* to gesture toward the critical reflexivity that Huseyinzadegan calls on us to develop when we read canonical philosophers, and which requires us to acknowledge the depth of our embeddedness in problematic traditions and histories. Let

me now outline one way that feminists might engage Plato's complicated construction of philosophy.

3. *Enacting our constructive complicity with Plato*

Andrea Wilson Nightingale offers an ingenious study of Plato's effort to distinguish philosophy from other intellectual enterprises. Plato did so, first, by assuming that philosophy is a social practice — a way of life — marked by substantive ethical and political commitments. Nightingale also shows how Plato continuously worked over these ideas about philosophy's distinctiveness, but with his own 'mixed' texts. She writes that this persistence may be a sign of his awareness of his failures in attempting to secure philosophy's special status; or, alternatively, it may signal his awareness that firm borders between it and poetry and rhetoric was "unnecessary or, indeed, undesirable" (Nightingale 1995: 195). This makes Plato particularly instructive for the present.

For, though he defines philosophy in opposition to poetry and rhetoric, Plato deliberately violates the borders which he himself has drawn. The boundaries between philosophy and 'alien' genres of discourse are created, disrupted, and created afresh. The ambivalence of this originary gesture is, perhaps, appropriate, since philosophy in the West has persisted by reinventing itself again and again. And this reinvention is surely necessary, since the discipline must respond to the socio-political practices as well as the intellectual developments of its respective culture. (Nightingale 1995: 195)

Though she is not an avowedly feminist author, Nightingale's insights are consonant with the work of other inheritance feminists. Nye makes the same point that Nightingale does about how the boundaries of philosophy are always contested (Nye 1998: 108), and shares her optimism that this invites us now to take up the mantle and rework those boundaries again. What is more, Rooney believes that feminists are especially well placed to take up this work (Rooney 1994: 19), an opinion very similar to Lloyd 2000a: 248 (cf. Le Doeuff 1991: 29).

These suggestions imply that we inherit from Plato an essential unsettledness around the very question of what philosophy is, and thus that we inherit an invitation to make and remake those boundaries today. But if this is correct, do we not also inherit the impulse to create hierarchies anew and deepen lines of difference between 'real' philosophy and various pretenders? And does this not have real implications for how we organize human and cultural relationships across difference? For even as Socrates embodied a populist conception of philosophy, it is true that Plato articulated an elitist conception. Taking in the full Platonic inheritance, we see that even the disciplinary instability inherent in philosophy can work to exclude non-white or non-male practitioners (Sanchez 2011: 40), or place unfair burdens on them (Dotson 2012: 15). What might be done to mitigate such outcomes?

Dotson calls on us to take up a culture of praxis in place of a culture of justification. Such a stance has at least two components, she says:

- (1) Value placed on seeking issues and circumstances pertinent to our living, where one maintains a healthy appreciation for the differing issues that will emerge as pertinent among different populations and
- (2) Recognition and encouragement of multiple canons and multiple ways of understanding disciplinary validation. (Dotson 2012: 17)

We can see the first component in the work of Carlos Fraenkel (2015) who brings what he calls a 'culture of debate' to audiences not often exposed to philosophical conversation. His practice of engaging the marginalized (such as Palestinian students at Al-Quds University in Jerusalem, and members of the Mohawk Council of Akwesasne in Canada) shows the transformative power of philosophy. This is also clearly evident in the work of Wartenburg (2014), who has developed a philosophy curriculum for elementary school children. Dotson's second component may also help us enact our constructive complicity with Plato when intersectional work engages the history of philosophy creatively and responsibly. Consider the work of Enrique Dussel (1995). His transmodern outlook aims at dialogue between the West and the global South, but one that is centered on the voice of the oppressed. Purcell (2018) exemplifies a different strategy for securing dialogue. His

comparison of Confucian and Aztec philosophy operates without Western philosophy being one of the elements compared. As we move from our philosophical theorizations to concrete practices of teaching and researching, and back again, these endeavors show the power that philosophy has in improving relations with oneself and with others. But just as often we also see philosophy reproducing problematic power relations (cf. Lloyd 2000b, who shows how Australian colonialism inherits pernicious imaginaries from the history of modern philosophy).

4. Conclusion

In a later article, Freeland writes that “superficial errors can seem too easy to correct; subtle errors necessitate subtle strategies of response” (Freeland 2004: 46). I believe that constructive complicity provides such subtlety of response. It forces us to undertake the kind of critical reflexivity that is the hallmark of philosophy, but with more careful attention to the structures that support and condition this reflexivity and our self-awareness. Plato’s *Corpus* contains contradictory moods and incompatible gestures. Fully engaging it all means that we own this ambivalent inheritance. The inheritance can work for good or ill — or both of these at once. Facing this fully may mean that we are in a better position to create practices that empower and liberate, aid the formation and expression of agency, produce intellectual and moral virtue, and even inspire social and political transformation.

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