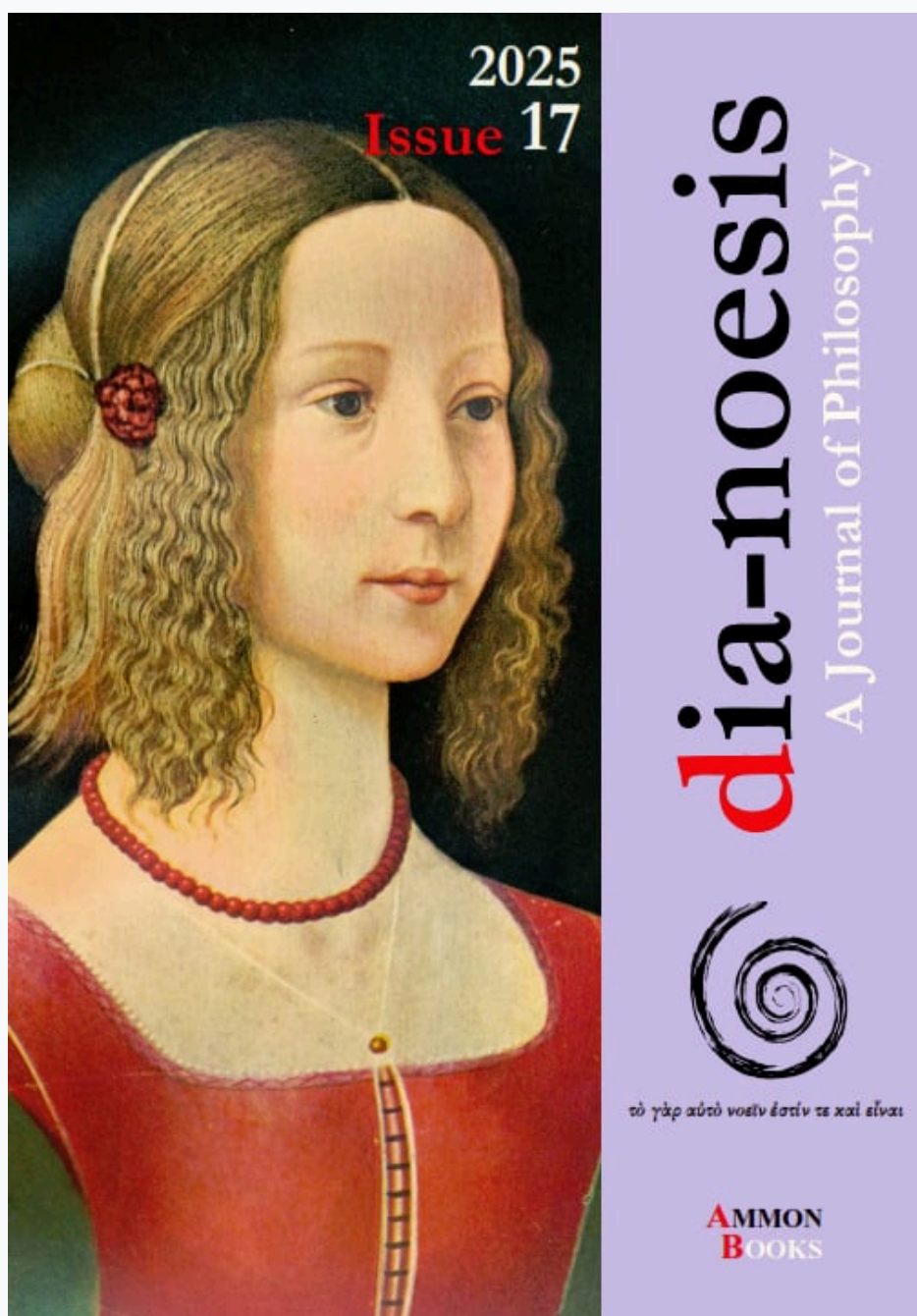


## dianoesis

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The image of woman in philosophy







2025

Issue 17



# dia-noesis

A Journal of Philosophy



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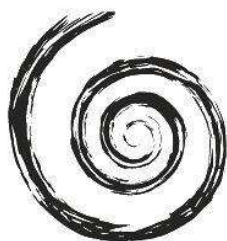
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# **The image of woman in philosophy**

Guest Editor: Anna Griva

**Issue 17**  
**2025**

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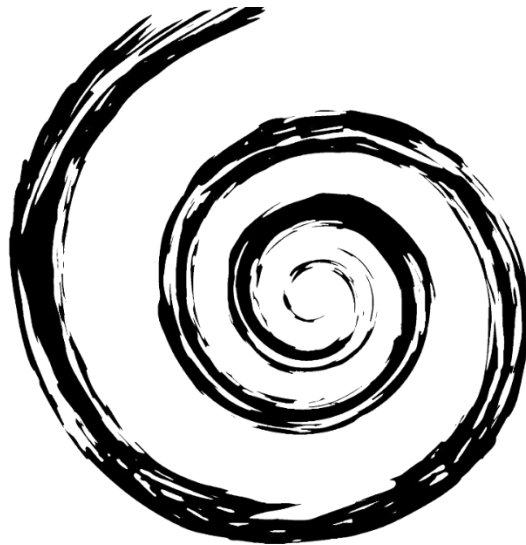
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# *Articles*

## **The image of woman in philosophy**

Guest Editor: **Anna Griva**





## Reconstructing Hypatia

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### **Abstract**

Hypatia has gone down in history as the female philosopher who was murdered by the angry fanatical Christian mob in Alexandria and signaled the end of the free thinking and expression of the ancient world, including the philosophical and scientific activities. This article aims at the reconstruction of this quasi-mythical quasi-historical woman based on the available information of the philosophical material of her famous student Synesius, as well as on the works of her contemporary astronomers and mathematicians. The texts used are the *Commentary* of her father and collaborator, Theon, on the *Almagest* of Claudius Ptolemy, the work *Arithmetica* of Diopantus and the *Commentary* of Eutocius on the *Conics* of Apollonius of Perga. After the study of the recent research of historians of science, I present here my suggestion concerning the unknown ontological system of Hypatia as well as a working hypothesis about the possible presence of Hypatia's ideas in the later published *Commentary* of Eutocius. Lastly, I conclude to a philosophical and scientific profile of Hypatia and I give some comments regarding the widely accepted anti-christian and feminist profile of her.

**Keywords:** *Hypatia, Synesius, Almagest, Diophantus, Eutocius, Conics, Apollonius of Perga*



## 1. Introduction

*This article is devoted to all the women of the past who have not been recognized for their work due to the male-dominated ideology and also to all the women of the present in various places in the Earth who are not allowed to exercise their basic rights in education.*

Even only the utterance of the name of the great philosopher and scientist of the late Antiquity triggers a lot of reactions to most of the people from the period of Enlightenment until now, since she has become a widespread feminine symbol of the independence of thought against the despotic power of theocracy. Such a perception of Hypatia, though correct in general terms, is simplistic, since it is necessary for a comprehensive picture of her to take into account a lot of parameters which affected that period, the boundary between two diametrical epochs.

Are we right if we relate her with the contemporary feminist theories? Was her gender one of the parameters which affected her tragic end? Was Hypatia a typical representative of the ancient pagan way of life in opposition to the already dominant Christian atmosphere of belief and allegiance? Which were those elements of the character and behavior of Hypatia that irritated the great attack against her?

In this article I try to present in juxtaposition the two profiles of Hypatia (350/370–415), her profile entailed by the few real evidences available to us and the other profile as it has been formulated by her reception in the period after the Enlightenment until now. Lastly, I end up with some conclusions about the distance or proximity between these two figures of a woman who unambiguously dared to work in an environment which proved to be dangerous for free expression of ideas and theories.

In Chapter 2, I present the image of Hypatia as it was constructed by the psychological and conceptual needs of a European society striving to face the conservatism of the Christian church, the usual target of the liberal Enlightenment

scholars. The form of Hypatia was further cast in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by the feminist groups so that she appears as a symbol of the endeavor of the women to find their rightful position in the society.

In Chapter 3 I present the philosopher Hypatia through the epistles and the hymns of her great student Synesius, the later bishop of Cyrene, whose works indicate his intense influence from both the Neoplatonic doctrines and the so-called *Chaldean Oracles*. Since he has not referred to any other teacher except Hypatia, the respectful Lady, it is reasonable to rely on the extensive ontological and cosmological descriptions of Synesius in order to reconstruct the unknown Hypatia's system.

In Chapter 4 I present the scientist Hypatia as she emerges from the main astronomical and mathematical texts related to the titles of works survived in *Suda*. Another important footprint in our research is the commentaries of her father Theon whose she was the main supporter and collaborator. In this way I will try to make visible her possible involvement in scientific activities and extant commentaries under the names of other authors. In this regard, I give a synoptic presentation of her astronomical and algebraic activities based on the existing literature and lastly, I give my own contribution to a possible involvement of Hypatia in the *Commentary* of Eutocius on the *Conics* of Apollonius of Perga, based on a number of passages of the commentaries of Theon on the *Almagest* of Claudius Ptolemy and on the *Elements* of Euclid.

## **2. The reception of Hypatia in the Enlightenment and afterwards**

The period of Renaissance signified the return of the integrated ancient scientific and philosophical thought on the stage after centuries of a dominant theocratic system, Catholicism in the West and Orthodoxy in the East. Indeed, in Medieval Times the relative activities had to be exhibited in forms that would not appear hostile to the religious framework. In spite of the restrictive environment, important Me-

dieval philosophers and scientists (either in Byzantium or later in the West) managed to present innovative works but they could not question the entire ideological structure. Scholars as Nicephorus Gregoras in Byzantium and the Franciscan philosophers of science in England prepared the great revolution of thought of the Renaissance. The contribution of Pletho and the Greek scholars exiled later from Constantinople is also unambiguous<sup>1</sup>. In the end of Renaissance the historical science is revived, Platonic views have come into light in balance to the scholastic Aristotelian views and a new paradigm emerged concerning the nature of motion and the heliocentric system<sup>2</sup>. This was the first phase of the great change in the European thought, integrated in the Enlightenment.

According to Dzielska (1997), Enlightenment is the period of the re-emergence of Hypatia in the texts of the philosophers and the books of the novelists. Indeed, she was the most suitable personality to support the new ideological schema, without the necessity of resorting to the historical details of her life or her works. The title of the historical essay of the Irish freethinker John Toland (1670-1722) *Hypatia or the History of a most beautiful, most virtuous, most learned and in every way accomplished lady, who was torn to pieces by the clergy of Alexandria to gratify the pride, emulation and cruelty of the archbishop commonly but undeservedly titled St Cyril* (1720) is eloquent about his opinion concerning the Christian Church of Alexandria as the predecessor of the corrupted Catholic Church. He narrates in this work that the male humans have been stigmatized irreparably through this abominable crime<sup>3</sup>. We can mine from these words the very early relation of the killing of Hypatia to her sex, an approach, which will become more intense in the 20<sup>th</sup> century narratives.

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<sup>1</sup> Wilson N. G., *From Byzantium to Italy: Greek Studies in the Italian Renaissance*, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Koyre, *From the closed world to the infinite universe*, 1968.

<sup>3</sup> Dzielska M., *Hypatia of Alexandria*, Trnsl. Kousounelos G., Enalios, 1997, p.18.

Within this context, Voltaire (1694-1778) writes in his work *Examen important de Milord Bolingbroke ou le tombeau du fanatisme* (1736) that “this brutal murder was executed by the dogs of Cyril followed by a fanatic gang”. She was murdered, Voltaire says, because she believed in the Greek gods and in the capabilities of the human spirit without imposed doctrines<sup>4</sup>. For Voltaire, the murder was the result of the great fight between the violence of the religious fanaticism and the nobility and independence of the Greek spirit.

Edward Gibbon (1737-1794) in his work *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* says that Hypatia was killed due to her belief in the Greek religion. The organization of the slaughter by Cyril, according to Gibbon, is an additional evidence of the development of Christianity as the critical cause of the decline and fall of the ancient world<sup>5</sup>.

Later, in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the English physician, protestant and anti-Catholic philosopher John William Draper (1811-1882) deals with the relationship between religion and science. His book *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science* (1874) examines the possibility of coexistence between religion and science. He dismisses at last any possibility of their harmonization and he presents the history of science as the “narrative of the conflict of two contending powers, the expansive force of the human intellect on the one side, and the compression arising from traditional faith and human interests on the other”. For Draper the development of Christianity is the main cause of the repression of science<sup>6</sup>. “The Greek philosophy is represented by Hypatia, while the ambitions of the Church by Cyril... After the murder of Hypatia the position of philosophy in the intellectual metropolis of the world was determined; henceforth science must sink into obscurity and subordination. Its public existence will no

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p.19.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p.22.

<sup>6</sup> Reuben J. A. *The Making of the Modern University: Intellectual Transformation and the Marginalization of Morality*, 1996, p. 34.

longer be tolerated. Indeed, it may be said that from this period for some centuries it altogether disappeared”<sup>7</sup>.

Additionally, Bertrand Russell, in his Work *History of Western Philosophy* (1946), remarks that “the chief claim of St. Cyril to fame is the lynching of Hypatia, a distinguished lady who, in an age of bigotry, adhered to the Neoplatonic philosophy and devoted her talents to mathematics... After this, Alexandria was no longer troubled by philosophers”<sup>8</sup>. We see that Russell follows the perception of the typical contrariety between the religious obscurantism and the scientific domain which can operate only under the freedom of thinking.

The popularity of Hypatia was increased during the 19<sup>th</sup> century due to literature. She becomes the central heroine in the poetry of Charles Leconte de Lisle (1818-1894). In his drama *Hypatie et Cyrille* (1857), Cyril declares: “My daughter, wake up, the Lord invites you./ Your gods are dead, their impure worship is rejected:/ Confess at last the one and only holy truth”. Hypatia answers: “Souls are guided toward the unique ideal:/ I have not forgotten Timaeus and the Phaedo;/ Did not John speak as Plato once did?/ The words differ little, the meaning is the same./ We both confess the supreme hope,/ And the God of Cyril, respected in my heart,/ Like the Attic Bee, spoke the truth.” He refers in his poem *Hypatie* (1874) that the deceitful Galilean (implying Jesus Christ) condemned her and that after her fall the body of Venus and the spirit of Plato returned to the blue sky of Greece. We can perceive a slight drift in the thought of Leconte. We can observe at first in his drama the panhuman vision of Hypatia, as she includes in her cosmological system all the religions, even that of the Christian God of Cyril and John the evangelist who in fact inherits the Platonic truths. Later in his poem Leconte calls Jesus deceitful in obvious hostility to the Platonic philosophy and the Greek mythology.

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<sup>7</sup> Draper J.W., *History of the Intellectual Development of Europe*, 1869, pp.324-325.

<sup>8</sup> Russell B., *History of Western Philosophy and its Connection with Political and Social Circumstances from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*, (1946), p. 387.



Diodata Saluzzo Roero (1774–1840) in her poem *Ipazia ovvero delle filosofie* (1827) gives a quite unhistorical tale about Hypatia who concludes to convert to Christianity persuaded by Cyril and killed at last by a fanatic priest. We can see here another attempt of the Italian poet playwright and author, member of the *Accademia degli Arcadi*, to reconcile the late antiquity philosopher with Christianity. The affinity of the feminist movements to the personality of Hypatia continues in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: The author Carlo Pascal (1886–1926) in his work *Figure e Caratteri* (1908) notices that the murder of Hypatia was an anti-feminist act which marks the beginning of a change in the treatment of women, as well as the decline of the ancient civilization in general<sup>9</sup>.

The English feminist and social campaigner Dora Russell (1894–1986) published a book on the inadequate education of women and inequality with the title *Hypatia or Woman and Knowledge* (1925)<sup>10</sup>. Russell remarks in the Preface of the book: “Hypatia was a University lecturer denounced by Church dignitaries and torn to pieces by Christians. Such will be probably the fate of this book: therefore it bears her name. What I Have written here I believe, and shall not retract or change for similar episcopal denunciations”<sup>11</sup>. She mentions in the beginning of her book that there is indeed a sex war in all the ages: “I cannot bring myself to look upon Medea as some elemental being from a dark and outrageous past. As for Jason he never did appear to anybody as other than an ordinary male”<sup>12</sup>. Apparently the choice of the name of Hypatia for the title of Russell’s book comes from the fact that Hypatia was a philosopher persecuted by the people of Church due to her courage that in spite of being a female she continued to teach philosophy, astronomy and mathematics. Hypatia became through her unbelievable end the symbol of a woman, who did not hesitate to accomplish her educating work within an environment which did not endure the free expression of philosophy and science, often identified with

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<sup>9</sup> Booth C., *Hypatia: Mathematician, Philosopher, Myth*, 2017, p. 25.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 26–7.

<sup>11</sup> Russell D., *Hypatia or Woman and Knowledge*, 1923, Preface.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p.1.

magic. Hypatia was the last link in the chain of free education and she was a female link; similarly, in the times of Russell, females were trying to be accepted in free education mainly impeded by the conservative powers of the Church. Hypatia was the most appropriate person to signal the recovery of the natural way of life, which stopped violently with the slaughter of the Greek philosopher.

### 3. Hypatia as a philosopher

Hypatia's philosophical orientation, the curriculum she used in her lectures and the theoretical or experiential character of her 'school' are greatly disputed. Some support that she preferred the rationalistic approach of Porphyry, and others the theurgic paradigm of Iamblichus. Hypatia was a very capable mathematician and astronomer, as well as a philosopher keen on dialectics, head of a School of Neoplatonic orientation, following the Platonic doctrines as enriched by the Neoplatonic interpretation and commentaries. At the same time she was aware of the theories and the method of Aristotle, as well as the sayings of other philosophers. He was a famous teacher offering courses in public, according to Damascius' *Vitae Isidori reliquiae*. Damascius admires her mainly as mathematician, remarking that her mathematical achievements were highly esteemed in the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> century<sup>13</sup>. Socrates Scholasticus (380-440) records in his work *Ecclesiastical History* that she undertook the philosophical School of Plotinus<sup>14</sup>. This information is valuable concerning her philosophical system. She is positioned clearly in the Neoplatonic movement established by Plotinus (c.204-270) and continued by Porphyry (c.234-c.305) and Iamblichus (250-325). We know that the Neoplatonists were

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<sup>13</sup> Dzielska M., *Hypatia of Alexandria*, Trnsl. Kousounelos G., Enalios, 1997, p.109.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p.109.

trisected in the School of Athens<sup>15</sup>, School of Pergamum<sup>16</sup> and School of Alexandria<sup>17</sup> of Hypatia.

The Neoplatonic School after Iamblichus operated in a mixed fashion, on the one hand through philosophical reasoning and on the other hand in terms of apocryphal practices and theurgy. Another factor to be taken also into account for the understanding of the spiritual atmosphere of that period is the diffusion of an apocryphal text, the *Chaldean Oracles* or *Words*, appeared in the end of 2nd century A.D. attributed to two shady figures, Julian the Chaldean and his son Julian the Theurgist. They have affected greatly all the consequent Neoplatonic thought, especially Iamblichus, Proclus and Damascius. It is reasonable to suppose that the *Oracles* had been studied by Hypatia, based on an additional supporting evidence: the terms and descriptions in the hymns of Synesius are very similar to the extant fragments of the *Oracles*.

Moreover, the influence of the personality of Theon, father of Hypatia and head of the Museum of Alexandria and great commentator of Euclid and Claudius Ptolemy on her daughter was inevitable. Among Theon's lost works are those men-

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<sup>15</sup> It was founded by Plutarch the Athenian (350-430) who refounded the Platonic Academy. The next leaders were Syrianus (-437), Proclus (412-485). The last seven Neoplatonists were the schoolmaster Damascius (458-550), Isidore of Gaza, Hermeias and Diogenes from Phoenicia, Priscianus from Lydia, Eulamius from Phrygia and Simplicius from Cilicia, who were compelled by Justinian to close the School and go to the Persian court of Khosroe I. Asclepigenia (-485) daughter of Plutarch, was a prominent teacher of Proclus.

<sup>16</sup> It was founded by Aidesius (d. 355) student of Iamblichus and teacher of Maximus of Ephesus, Chrysanthius of Sardis, Eusebius of Myndus, Priscus and Julian the Great. Sosipatra (c. 1st half of 4th century) was initially wife of the philosopher Eustathius of Cappadocia (student of Iamblichus and Aedesius) and later of Aedesius. Her son Antoninus was a philosopher and theurgist in Canopus, Egypt, contemporary of Hypatia.

<sup>17</sup> After Hypatia, there were some important philosophers in Alexandria, who worked not in public and taking more precautions after the crime against Hypatia. Among them: Ammonius of Hermiae (440-517/536), son of Aedesia and teacher of Simplicius (c.480-c.540), Damascius, Olympiodorus the Younger (495/505 – d. 565) and John Philoponus (490-c. 570), Isidore of Alexandria (c. 450-520) teacher of Damascius.

tioned by *Suda*: *On Signs and Observation of Birds and the Sound of Crows*, *On the Rising of the Dog-Star (Sirius)* and *On the Inundation of the Nile*, being indicators of a man who is not simply an astronomer but he also believes in the astrological influence of the stars on the Nile as well as in the science of omens. Theon is also recorded in the *Anthologia Palatina* as the author of poems of astrological content. Theon's name also appears in the *Catalogue of Codices of Greek Astrologers*<sup>18</sup>. Therefore the influence of Theon on Hypatia was possibly not only scientific but also apocryphal or we could better say that the science in Hellenistic times in Alexandria included the apocryphal sector.

Since none philosophical text of Hypatia herself has survived, the only way to get a sense of the theories developed, the methods used, the possible ceremonies held in her school is through the texts of her students. The most famous of her students is Synesius, a prominent person of the society of Cyrene. Synesius was a man prolific in writing and he is often very confessional about the behavior and relations of his associates in the School of Hypatia, where he attended from 390 until 396 and afterwards in the years 401-402, 404, 407 and 410-412<sup>19</sup>. Synesius is the author of a number of books, as *Dio*, *On dreams*, *On an astrolabe*, as well as of 159 epistles and 10 hymns. The hymns are richest in philosophical concepts of Neoplatonic scent, sometimes in Christian guise. The epistles capture with utmost clarity the events of his time, such as the everyday life of the people and the public relations between prominent persons mainly aiming at mutual support. They also include valuable information about various philosophical ideas and ritual acts. Synesius appears through these letters as an emotional, spontaneous, enthusiastic man, dedicated to his revered teacher, whom he considers a spiritual summit. He is also bound by bonds of spiritual love with his partners as shown by the worshipful way in which he addresses them. He is a model of a man who combines inner study with outer action, since he is a member of

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<sup>18</sup> Dzielska M., *Hypatia of Alexandria*, Trnsl. Kousounelos G., Enalios, 1997, pp. 141-5.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 62.

Hypatia's circle, delving into philosophy, astronomy and construction of scientific instruments, while he is also an official of Cyrene (an embassy envoy to Constantinople, with requests for tax relief concerning his region) and subsequently a spiritual representative of the Christian community of his country as bishop of Cyrene.

Synesius in his Epistle 137 to his associate Herculan refers to their teacher characterized as the leader of the philosophical rituals (*ῥογια*); in this regard, she is considered as a high priestess of rituals through which the student of philosophy is led to the final stage, that of theurgy, where he becomes initiate in an absolute union with the divine. He describes their course of philosophy offered by Hypatia as the tool for digging up their spiritual eye<sup>20</sup>. Additionally, in his Epistle 143 to Herculan he begs him not to reveal the rituals they shared in the School, a clear indicator that there was a secret course of lessons and rituals offered only to the prepared<sup>21</sup>. This information, combined with the information about public teaching (*δημοσίᾳ ἐξηγεῖτο*) of Hypatia mentioned by Damascius, lead us to suppose reasonably of a mixed system

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<sup>20</sup> "We have seen with our eye, we have heard with our ears the lady who legitimately presides over the mysteries of philosophy. And if human interests join those who share them in a bond of union, so a divine law demands of us who are united in mind, which is the best part of us, to honor each other's qualities... Goodbye then, study philosophy, and go on digging up the eye that is buried within us." (Livius.org)

<sup>21</sup> "You have not kept your promise, my dear friend, the promise which you made that you would not reveal those things which ought to remain hidden. I have just listened to people who have come from you. They remembered some of your expressions and begged me to reveal the meaning of them. But according to my custom I did not pretend to them that I understood the writings in question, nor did I say that I knew them. You no longer need any warning from me, my dear Herculan, for it would not be enough to convince you. Rather look up the letter which Lysis the Pythagorean addressed to Hipparchus, and when you have found it, oblige me by reading it frequently. Perhaps you will then experience a complete change of mind in regard to you uncalled-for revelation. 'To explain philosophy to the mob,' as Lysis says in his somewhat Dorian dialect, 'is only to awaken amongst men a great contempt for things divine.' How often have I met, time and time again, people who, because they had rashly listened to some stately little phrases, refused to believe themselves the laymen that they really were!" (Livius.org).



of lessons like in the School of Pythagoras, where there were two classes of students, one for the *listeners* and the other for the *mathematicians*. The presence of rituals apart from theoretical analysis does also show the double method of Hypatia, as the head of the School in Alexandria. In this regard, she seems to be a theurgist philosopher, as was later the case of Proclus, who also combined dialectics with mystical experience.

Synesius in his Epistle 4 to his brother Euoptius expresses his enormous respect for their teacher Hypatia and to the whole chorus of companions who enjoyed hearing her divine voice<sup>22</sup>.

The other indirect evidence about the philosophical concepts involved in the courses offered by Hypatia are the 10 hymns of Synesius. We can locate in them many descriptions found previously in the *Oracles* and later in the detailed analysis of Proclus in his *Platonic Theology* and his Commentaries on the Platonic dialogues. Obviously, it is not an undue supposition to consider that the main influence on those parts of Synesius' philosophical and mystical works is Hypatia's lectures and initiatory ceremonies; thus we can conclude that her courses of lessons were full of special ontological truths with a characteristic Neoplatonic scent.

In **Hymn 1**<sup>23</sup>, Synesius addresses to the God, calling him a father and a principle moved by itself (a view reminiscent of the Platonic soul as a self-moving being) and also a distributive principle of beings, endowing to each category of them features and functions. God is also the most pure unity (henad) of all unities, the first monad of the monads, the element that bridges the extremes through its henadic nature of each of them. It is reasonable to suppose that this description of the nature of the One was a part of the main body of the Neoplatonic system of Hypatia, which appears in similar

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<sup>22</sup> "...give my regards to the Most Reverent and God-loving philosopher, and to the blessed circle who enjoy her divine voice; and above all, to the most holy father Theotecnus and our companion Athanasius" (my own translation).

<sup>23</sup> Dzielska M., *Hypatia of Alexandria*, Trnsl. Kousounelos G., Enalios, 1997, pp.61-63.

terms later in the ontology of Proclus. Then he speaks of a hierarchy of intellects under the one intellect, of the descent of the intellect into the matter, but also of the peculiar state of the intellect which, though it is an indestructible begetter, has in a sense been entrapped in matter and divided from the rest of the divine rulers. What distinguishes the intellect in relation to the other begetters is its unity and completeness (wholeness); it is a whole in every way, it lacks nothing, it is a whole diffused within the whole. Then he addresses to his soul and speaks of the final union to the father in terms of a chorus, like a chorus of the god within the god, an image very close to the chorus of the students of Hypatia described before in Epistle 4.

In **hymn 2**<sup>24</sup>, an interesting cosmology is offered by Synesius, which, in my opinion, indicates relevant views of Hypatia's cosmological system: the ether reaches the fire and the moon constitutes the limit of the world. Beyond the eighth spheres, some stars move in the opposite direction, clearly implying the reverse movement of the unmoving stars, where is the territory of the great intellect, which, through its wings, delimits the ends of the ruler of the world. After the begetters, the ageless angels follow, who occupy the middle position, looking both towards the intellect from which they grasp the principle of good and towards the ends of everything. In the depths of the world, nature gives birth to a noisy and thoughtful multitude of demons. From this race of demons, come the heroes but also the breath that animates the earth with its multifaceted forms.

Then a significant description of God follows, as both father and mother, male and female at the same time, a 'feminist' concept compatible with the Neoplatonic circles where the woman had an equal share with man in matters of wisdom and spiritual leadership<sup>25</sup>. God is also described as the

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<sup>24</sup> Dendrinios M., *Hypatia, Astronomy, Mathematics and Philosophy in the Twilight of the Ancient World*, Armos, 2021, pp.67-69.

<sup>25</sup> Sosipatra was the head of the School of Pergamum, Asclepigenia, daughter of Plutarch of Athens, was the teacher of Proclus, and Aidesia, wife of Hermes and mother of Ammonius, was a famous person of the time.

aion<sup>26</sup> of aions, showing here the embodiment of the more general Mediterranean perception of aions, of those beings who shape time and govern various cosmic levels, a term already used in Gnosticism. God is also the center of beings and the unit of immortal numbers, the *pre-inessential* (προα-νούσιοι), that is, those that precede the non-essence that is the source of essence, thus introducing an ontological suggestion about numbers quite original; in my opinion, this theory about the ontological structure of numbers could be the tip of the ‘iceberg’ of a Neopythagorean system developed by Hypatia based on Pythagorean ideas circulated in Alexandria. Such a system seems to complete the current scientific-mathematical image of Hypatia as a commentator on Diophantus’ *Arithmetic* and *Conics* of Apollonius of Perga, to be discussed later.

The hymn proceeds with a wish for the soul to stay away from indelicate passions (within the framework of Platonic prudence) so that it does not weigh down its feathers, reminiscent of the image of the winged soul of the Platonic *Phaedrus*. The end of the hymn is again marked by an orgiastic dance among the shoots of the God on the earth.

The **3rd hymn**<sup>27</sup> is the longest of Synesius, constituting essentially an extensive teaching. There is a reference to the four-elementary structure of the world from earth, water, air and ether. Later he speaks of the demonic elements of matter (a train of snakes, a winged serpent, a demon of matter, a cloud of the soul) from which he asks to be protected. The system described by Synesius can be attributed, in the major part, to his teacher, Hypatia. It is clearly a polytheistic system as can be deduced from his continuous reference to a number of gods and demons. The torches in the hymn represent the central fire, the inner core of the divine, which not even the gods have the authority to gaze upon. The intellect descends into matter and, although it reaches the bottomless pit, it fixes its gaze on the unprecedented species, possibly referring to the good.

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<sup>26</sup> Aion (αἰών) is a Greek name for the entities of time.

<sup>27</sup> Dendrinos M., *Hypatia, Astronomy, Mathematics and Philosophy in the Twilight of the Ancient World*, Armos, 2021, pp.80-87.

God is characterized as father of all fathers, father of himself (*αὐτοπάτωρ*), fatherless (*ἀπάτωρ*), the one that is prior to the one, the seed of beings, the center of all things, the *pre-inessential* intellect. God is also characterized as an intellect covered by its own rays, the root of the worlds, the light that shines both upwards and downwards, the eye of itself, that beyond the gods, that beyond the intellects, an intellect that bears the intelligibles, the guide of flows, the source of sources, the principle of principles, the root of roots, the monad of monads, the number of numbers, unit and number, intellect and intellectual, the intelligible and the pre-intelligible, the one and everything, the one through all, the one before all, the seed of all, the female and the male –as in the previous hymn– and finally a dancer in the ineffable depths. It is also called the giver of birth and the birth, the illuminant and the illuminated, the nature of natures, reminding of the Aristotelian characterization of God as an intellect that thinks of itself. It is also the manifest and the hidden, that which has been divided but remains undivided, recalling the Pythagorean opposite pairs.

The hymn then refers to the birth of a child by the father and to the creation by the will of this child of an ineffable intermediate nature which is a pre-essential being, that is, a being that precedes every essence (*προούσιον ὄν*). The child reminds us of Christ in the Christian theology, but it is more compatible to the first and second intellect in Proclus (*Platonic Theology* 5:5) and also to the paternal intellect (fr. 37,39,49,108,109), the second intellect (fr.7) and the intellect from intellect (fr.5) in the *Oracles*. Synesius' triadic reference of the father, the child and the intermediate nature should not be confused with the corresponding Christian 'persons' of the Triadic God, since they are placed more meaningfully in the philosophical context of Neoplatonism, where the triads play a central role in Iamblichus and later in Proclus. The ontological system of Proclus<sup>28</sup> includes indeed a triad of or-

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Dendrinou M., "Integrated dialectic in Plato's Parmenides: a comparative analysis of Proclus' and Ficino's Commentaries on Parmenides", *Dia-noesis: A Journal of Philosophy*, 16, 2024, pp. 189-210. <https://doi.org/10.12681/dia.39539>

ders of the higher beings: intelligibles–intelligibles and intellectuals–intellectuals, where the second order is a mediator between the two extremes and each of them also triadic, as well as a lower triad of orders of beings: supermundane–supermundane and mundane–mundane, where again there is a mediator connecting the two extremes. Synesius insists in the monad-triad or the triad-monad. He praises both the monad and the triad since the monad exists as triad and the triad exists as monad. Synesius' triad, obviously Neoplatonic in nature, can reasonably be considered to originate from his teacher's system, and thus we can contend that the triad is a prominent feature of Hypatia's ontological system too.

The hymn then describes a primordial birth of the child, in which some beings, called aions, take part. Neither the time with its deep flow did see this birth, indicating that the time existed even before the appearance of being, since the will of the conceived child created the pre-essential being. This primordial time, the old aion, did not discern this child at the moment it emerged from its swaddling clothes, and then a new aion is born. This contrast between deep-flowing time (the old aion) and the new aion is very interesting, as it sheds additional light on the ontologically indeterminate time in which the one-being of the second hypothesis of the Platonic *Parmenides* participates (Plato, *Parm.*, 151e-152a).

The father to whom Synesius addresses is the father of the worlds, the father of the aions and the creator of the gods. He is praised by the guides of the worlds, the intellects under the form of the stars, the beings around the world, the beings within the world, the beings of the zones (ζωναῖοι), those outside the zones, those who direct the parts of the world and the thresholds, but also the heroes and finally the soul itself and all the plants and animals of the earth. The father, according to Synesius, undertakes the genesis of mortal things as images of ideas, up to the ultimate part of the world; this theory, maybe formulated under the influence of his teacher, is obviously of Platonic origin. Besides, the next two references show in the most eloquent way his Greek education, which is in complete contrast to the dominant Christian concepts: (1) regarding the issue of evil, it is clearly stat-

ed that it is not lawful –that is, it is outside the divine law– that different parts of being could be in conflict with each other, (2) regarding the issue of the duration of the world, he follows the Greek cyclical concept of time, according to which the world is eternal, far from the eschatological Judeo-Christian concepts of the end of the world. Are these positions perceptions also of Hypatia about the evil and the duration of the world? It is quite reasonable, since both concepts are consistent to the general ancient Greek view. Also, Synesius' reference to the active gods who have undertaken the protection of the town of Chalcedon shows the continuation of the classical Greek concept of protective gods.

The hymn of Synesius closes with interesting descriptions of the origin, nature and operations of the human soul, which could reasonably indicate the continuity of Platonic concepts within the School of Hypatia, whose Synesius was a member: God the Father placed the soul in the world and through the soul sowed the intellect in the body. Within the sensible world, the soul, instead of its actual nature as a servant of the divine will, became a slave, as it succumbed to the magical arts of matter. The soul tries to save itself from this entrapment by opening its twin wings, the appropriate gifts for escaping from matter. That is why the soul turns to God, asking for hollow wings to use them to fly, aiming at cutting the bond that holds it in the earth and loosening the buckle that holds the twin passions<sup>29</sup> (perhaps of anger and madness) with which the cunning nature bends souls to the earth. The best for the soul is to avoid the fate of the body and with a huge leap to return to its source, but there is also another possibility for the soul: to be preserved for a time as bodily shadow in Hades until it returns again in some new body. Synesius, living amidst material cares and pains, asks in the end, to unite with the light and not to enter again into the destruction of earthly things, implying his liberation from the cycle of reincarnations. But as long as his soul remains in the bonds of the earth, may the fate of gentleness accompany

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<sup>29</sup> The twin passions: maybe the anger and the unwisdom corresponding to the spirited and appetitive parts of the Platonic soul.

it. All these wishes seem to be a part of ceremony used in Hypatia's School and directed by his beloved teacher.

In **hymn 4**<sup>30</sup>, the father god is characterized by additional references: good of goods, star of stars, world of worlds, idea of ideas, thus constituting the innermost core and nature of the worlds, stars, goods and ideas. Then the father of the aions and the noetic worlds is declared as the source of a breath that drips like ambrosia on the masses (*ὄγκοι*) of bodies and lights up a second world. The term *masses* reminds us of the structure of the sensible world in the form of masses referred to in the 7th hypothesis of the Platonic *Parmenides*<sup>31</sup>. The worlds in the Neoplatonic context are distinct levels of existence flowing from the absolute One. In this context, the second world is the soul between intellect and matter.

Of particular interest is then the deep philosophical interpretation of the unprecedented and primitive glorious offspring. It seems to be the Christian Son but, taking into account the series of the other terms and functions, is more related to the Orphic Phanes Erikepaïos. This intermediate principle is described on the one hand masculine as a *kouros*, and on the other hand feminine as a mother or a daughter or a sister, who has been extracted from the hidden root. This offspring is *logos* (the *word* or the *cause*) born to the begetter father, a feature dominant in both Heraclitean ontology<sup>32</sup> and Christian theology. It inherits the basic property of the begetter, its generative nature, since the begetter father as the seed of all things makes his offspring also a begetter. It is an ontological principle that allows all three natures, and the corresponding worlds, the highest, the middle and the youngest,

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<sup>30</sup> Dendrinis M., *Hypatia, Astronomy, Mathematics and Philosophy in the Twilight of the Ancient World*, Armos, 2021, pp. 91-94.

<sup>31</sup> "Such masses of others would be others of each other, if others exist and one does not exist." "Certainly." "There will, then, be many masses, each of which appears to be one, but is not one, if one does not exist?" "Yes." (*Parm.*, 164d).

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Vertzagia, D, "Anthony A. Long. Selfhood and Rationality in Ancient Greek Philosophy: From Heraclitus to Plotinus. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022". *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, 8 (1), 2023, pp. 339-353. <https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.34784>

to enjoy the good gifts and the fruitful life that poured out by the father god. It is this seed that gives movement to the celestial spheres, just as in the *Timaeus* the soul of the world, torn like a chi<sup>33</sup>, activates the two opposing spheres of the planets and the unmoving stars. Similarly, in the hymn the glorious offspring of the father flows in two opposing directions, holding together the celestial cavity and the indestructible path of the aions. It also gives life and distributes the different works to all categories of beings, the celestial, the aerial, the epichthonian and the subchthonian. The offspring of the father is the master and regulator not only of the animate but also of the inanimate. It is also characterized as a second sun and the generator of an afterglow, referring to the sun of the Platonic *Republic*, where the sensible sun is the image of the true Sun, the absolute Good. It is also intellect of the intellect, soul of the soul, and nature of natures.

We can see in the above described cosmological system the triadic nature of the Neoplatonic orders as well as the triadic structure (empyrean, ethereal and material) of the world (fr.203) in the *Oracles*, while a class of entities, called Iynges, are meant as summits of fire, ether and matter (fr.76). If we relate this system to Synesius' teacher, Hypatia, we can suggest that she has been deeply influenced from the *Oracles*, as Iamblichus and later Proclus.

In **hymn 9**<sup>34</sup>, Titan appears, an entity enriched with very interesting properties. Titan (supposedly the Saturn-*Kronos* related to time-*chronos*) is a being that got to know the offspring of the god, in juxtaposition to the old aion (in hymn 3), who had not seen the primordial birth. When the father's offspring was manifested and spread, it had such power that it created 'spaces' where neither Titan nor the corrupting forces of matter had access. Nevertheless, Titan had the important role of distributing the 'spaces' where the gods reside. We can take *Titan* either as a comprehensive term including all the order of Titans or as the superior Titan, that is, Saturn. Saturn plays a critical role in the *Platonic Theolo-*

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<sup>33</sup> Letter X of the Greek alphabet.

<sup>34</sup> Dendrinós M., *Hypatia, Astronomy, Mathematics and Philosophy in the Twilight of the Ancient World*, Armos, 2021, pp. 98-99.



gy of Proclus, representing the summit of the intellectuals. It is also interesting that a millennium later the Titans and especially the couple of Saturn and Venus play a central part in Plethos' cosmology. Apart from the supercelestial gods, according to Pletho<sup>35</sup>, there is the order of Titans, who are the illegitimate children of Poseidon; they are not inferior to the previous ones in substance differing only in the aim, since Titans, with Saturn as the head, are assigned the creation of the mortal beings. Between the supercelestial gods (intellects) and the irrational species of the universe (entirely dependent on matter) is the rational soul including the stars, the demons and the human souls. Human beings uniting immortal and mortal nature are created through Saturn and Venus, with their immortal part guided by the Olympian Pluto. How can we explain that the Synesius' Titan, a being aware of the primordial birth and privileged by distributive powers concerning the gods, acquires again, a million years later in Pletho, special generative powers under the supervision of Saturn and Venus? The importance of Saturn as a reverent god in Proclus is foreshadowed in Synesius privileged with the observance of the first birth and getting a more decisive position later in Pletho. If we attribute the narration of Synesius' hymn 9 to his teacher Hypatia, could we suggest the existence of a possible closed tradition with scattered clues, which included the Chaldean wisdom appeared in the *Oracles*, the Neoplatonic philosophy of Iamblichus, Plutarch of Athens, Syrianus, Hypatia, Proclus, Damascius and later Psellus and Pletho? This suggestion is intensified by the characterization of Hypatia by Psellus as the 'Egyptian wise woman'.

#### 4. Hypatia as a scientist

In the 10th century *Suda* Lexicon, Hesychius' 6th century material about Hypatia refers: "She wrote a Commentary on Diophantus, the Canon of Astronomy and a Commentary on the Conics of Apollonius". This information from *Suda*, the

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<sup>35</sup> Pletho, *Traité des lois*, pp. 106-8.

Epistle 15 of Synesius about a scientific instrument and his work *On an Astrolabe* are the only recorded evidence for the scientific activities of Hypatia. Therefore, what follows is an attempt to reconstruct her as a scientist based on the above titles, the texts of Synesius and a number of ancient commentaries of other authors, where we suppose with high possibility that she has been involved.

Researchers who have contributed essentially on ancient mathematics and the possible contributions of Hypatia are Waithe (1987) and Cameron (1990) on the Commentary of Theon on the *Almagest*, and Heath (1910) and Deakin (1994) on Diophantus' *Arithmetica*. Besides, McKinney (2010) has studied extensively the Comments of Theon on the Euclid's *Elements* and on the *Almagest*, as well the Comments of Eutocius on the *Conics* of Apollonius of Perga.

### Synesius' works

In Synesius' Epistle 15 to his teacher Hypatia he describes a densimeter, an instrument used to measure the density of liquids. The description, offered in detail, is the first record of such an instrument. Synesius asks Hypatia to order the casting of copper for the instrument, so that he can then purchase it. Since Synesius addresses Hypatia indicates her definite involvement not only in theoretical philosophy but also in the technology of physical instruments<sup>36</sup>.

In his *Essay on an astrolabe* Synesius writes to the person receiving that gift: "I am therefore offering you a gift most befitting for me to give, and for you to receive. It is a work of my own devising, including all that she, my most reverent teacher (Hypatia), helped to contribute, and it was executed by the best hand to be found in our country in the art of the silversmiths" (Livius.org, trnsl. by A. Fitzgerald). Synesius says explicitly that he designed the astrolabe with the help of Hypatia. Therefore, it is certain that all of Theon's astronomi-

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<sup>36</sup> Dendrinis M., *Hypatia, Astronomy, Mathematics and Philosophy in the Twilight of the Ancient World*, Armos, 2021, pp. 25-26.

cal knowledge about the astrolabes was passed on to his daughter and from her to her student<sup>37</sup>.

### Hypatia's *Canon of Astronomy* and the *Commentary* of Theon on the *Almagest* of Claudius Ptolemy

Hypatia was the main collaborator of her father Theon concerning astronomy and mathematics. It seems that she helped her father a lot in his great commentaries on the *Almagest* of Claudius Ptolemy, on the *Elements* of Euclid, as well as on the *Conics* of Apollonius of Perga. There are also definite indications that Theon studied the work of Diophantus<sup>38</sup>, something which fits to the information of *Suda* that Hypatia had commented on Diophantus.

The mentioned in *Suda* work of Hypatia *Canon of Astronomy* is probably related to Theon's *Commentaries* on Ptolemy's *Draft Canon*, and may have been written by Theon in collaboration with his daughter, without excluding the possibility that it is another work by Hypatia herself, now lost<sup>39</sup>.

According to Waithe<sup>40</sup>, Theon was already working on his *Commentaries* on the *Almagest* when he asked Hypatia to review the manuscript. Hypatia then realized that her father's comments on Book III raised many conceptual, methodological and mathematical issues that neither Theon nor even Ptolemy had noticed. To clarify these issues, Hypatia recalculated the mathematical values of astronomical events described by ancient astronomers, including Ptolemy. The *Astronomical Tables* offered by Theon as the *Draft Tables* of Ptolemy are, according to Waithe, the work of Hypatia *Canon*

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p. 135.

<sup>38</sup> Christianidis J., and Skoura I., "Solving problems by algebra in late antiquity: New evidence from an unpublished fragment of Theon's commentary on the *Almagest*", *SCIAMVS* (14), 2013, 41-57.

<sup>39</sup> Dendrinos, Markos, *Hypatia, Astronomy, Mathematics and Philosophy in the Twilight of the Ancient World*, Armos, 2021, pp. 134-135.

<sup>40</sup> Waithe, Mary Ellen, *Ancient Women Philosophers: 600 B.C.-500 A.D.*, 1, Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers. [Commentary to Book III of Ptolemy's *Syntaxis Mathematica*], 1987, pp. 184-5.

*of Astronomy*. Working on the mathematical and astronomical issues of Theon's initial Commentaries, the final form of the Commentaries in Book III was created, which, according to Waithe, should be considered as work of Hypatia. Waithe does not rule out that something similar happened with the final composition of Theon's Commentaries concerning also the remaining books of Ptolemy.

After the study of the conflicting views concerning the identity of the author of the *Commentaries* of Theon on Ptolemy's *Almagest* (*Mathematical Syntax*), my opinion is that we must pay serious attention to the significant change in the headings of the Commentaries in Books I, II, III and IV. The headings in Books I and II of Theon's Commentaries are: "Of Theon of Alexandria, a memorandum to the first (second) book of the *Syntax* of Ptolemy, of his own edition". The heading in Book III is: "Of Theon of Alexandria, a memorandum to the third book of the *Mathematical Syntax* of Ptolemy, of an edition subsidiarily read by my daughter Hypatia, the philosopher". The heading to Book IV is: "Of Theon of Alexandria, a memorandum to the fourth book of the *Mathematical Syntax* of Ptolemy". The distinction between the terms *edition* [ἐκδοσις] (compilation and presentation of a text by someone) and *commentary* [υπόμνημα] is particularly important. According to Rome, these headings distinguish Theon's original edition from an edition after the involvement of Hypatia.

Let us look now that part of *Almagest* which, based on the suggestions of Knorr (Cameron<sup>41</sup>), constitutes the most likely active intervention of Hypatia in Ptolemy's commentary. This is the part of Book III, Chapter 1, where the total number of degrees of the celestial circle (360°) is divided by some sexagesimal number: 365 days, 14 minutes and 48 seconds [τξε ιδ' μη"]. Divisions with a sexagesimal number as a divisor are also found in various places in the commentaries on the remaining books of the *Almagest*, an indication that Hypatia has possibly left her mark there as well.

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<sup>41</sup> Cameron A., "Isidore of Miletus and Hypatia: On the Editing of Mathematical Texts", *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 31, 1990, 103-127, p. 108.

### *Arithmetica* of Diophantus

We know from *Suda* that Hypatia has written a Commentary on the work of Diophantus. Hypatia's commentaries on Diophantus' *Arithmetica* probably extend throughout the work. According to Heath (1910), there are notes, observations, and interpolations in the various versions of manuscripts that may have also included comments of Hypatia.

Based mainly on Heath and his analysis of problems of the book II (1-7, 17, 18), considered as inserted passages that probably belong to Hypatia, but also on Deakin's analysis, who speaks of the insertion of two student exercises at the beginning of Book II (these are problems 6 and 7), we could suggest that the problems II. 1-7, 17, and 18 are some of the problems introduced by the great mathematician. We must not forget that these are speculations of researchers based on similarities and differences among the various manuscripts, since no work entitled as hers has survived.

If we look at these problems one by one, as they appear in a standard edition of Diophantus' *Arithmetica*<sup>42</sup>, we can read that the problems 1-7 and 17 of Book II are listed as spurious, another indication that they are part of the creative intervention of the possibly first commentator; that is Hypatia. An additional indication of the connection of problem 7 with Hypatia is, according to Deakin<sup>43</sup>, that a 9-word phrase in the Greek text is identical to a corresponding one in Euclid's *Data*, the publication of which was undertaken by Theon, with whom his daughter collaborated closely.

### *Commentary* of Eutocius on the *Conics* of Apollonius of Perga

No attempt has been made so far to assess the possible commentaries of Hypatia on the *Conics*, until my presentation (Dendrinos, 2021) of a hypothesis based on a common pas-

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<sup>42</sup> *Diophantini Alexandrini*, 1843.

<sup>43</sup> Deakin M., "Hypatia and Her Mathematics", *The American Mathematical Monthly*, Volume 101, Number 3, 1994, 234–243, p. 240.

sage concerning the so-called *compounded ratio* (συγκείμενος λόγος) in Eutocius' Commentaries on *Conics*, Theon's Commentaries on Euclid's *Elements*, and Theon's Commentaries on the *Almagest*.

As McKinney<sup>44</sup> points out, the concept of compounded ratios appears twice in Euclid's *Elements* VI.23 and VIII.5. Indeed, in the VI.23 it is proved that equiangular parallelograms are to one another in the ratio compounded out of the ratios of the corresponding sides, whereas in the VIII.5 there is an analogous proposition for the case of numbers. Thus, the idea of compounded ratios could be regarded as a generalization of the duplicate and triplicate ratios.

McKinney observes that the definition of the compounded ratio in Eutocius' Commentary on the *Conics* is the same as the definition 5 of the Book VI of Euclid's *Elements*<sup>45</sup>, adding that this definition is not included in the typical editions of Euclid's *Elements* but only in the edition of Theon, which obviously includes also comments and additions of Theon. For McKinney the specific definition seems disappointing and deficient<sup>46</sup> and he refers that the integrated definition of the consisted fraction is found only in the Comments of Theon on the *Almagest*<sup>47</sup>. The mentioned passage (the translation is mine) is as follows: "A ratio is said to be compounded of two or more ratios, when the quotients of the ratios multiplied together form a certain quotient of ratio. Let AB to DG have a given ratio, and DG to EZ another ratio; I say that the ratio of AB to EZ is compounded of the ratio of AB to DG and the ratio of DG to EZ if the quotient of the ratio of AB to DG multiplied by the quotient of the ratio of DG to EZ forms the quotient of the ratio of AB to EZ"<sup>48</sup>.

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<sup>44</sup> McKinney C. B. P. Conjugate diameters: Apollonius of Perga and Eutocius of Ascalon, Ph. D. dissertation, University of Iowa, 2010, p. 96.

<sup>45</sup> The definition VI.5 exists in Theon's Comments on *Elements*, edition of Heiberg but in the edition of Green Lion (McKinney, 2010, p. 100-101).

<sup>46</sup> McKinney C. B. P. Conjugate diameters: Apollonius of Perga and Eutocius of Ascalon, Ph. D. dissertation, University of Iowa, 2010, p.101.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p.105.

<sup>48</sup> Commentaires de Pappus et de Theon d' Alexandrie sur l' Almageste (1967-1984) Λήμματα, pp. 532-535.

At this point I start to develop my theoretical assumption aiming at locating the possible intervention of Hypatia in the Commentary of Eutocius on the *Conics*. At first we have to take into account the known research collaboration of Hypatia with her father Theon on the *Almagest*, as well as on the mathematical issues concerning the *Elements* of Euclid. Theon wrote, as we saw previously, his Commentaries on the *Almagest* with Hypatia as a collaborator and additionally as editor especially concerning the Commentaries on Book III of the *Almagest*. In the context of the 11th proposition of Apollonius' *Conics*, Apollonius introduces the term *compounded ratio*, following the terminology of Euclid's *Elements*, since he was a famous student of Euclid. The issue of *compounded ratio* is therefore an issue that begins (from the sources we have) with Euclid and then proceeds to Apollonius' *Conics*, then to Ptolemy's *Almagest*, then to Theon's Commentaries on the *Almagest* and finally to Theon's Commentaries on Euclid's *Elements*. However, the definition of the *compounded ratio* is not found in the standard editions of the *Elements* but only in Theon's Commentaries on the *Elements*, as well as in Theon's Commentaries on the *Almagest*. When does the same definition reappear? In Eutocius' Commentaries on Apollonius' *Conics*. It seems, therefore, that Eutocius used Theon's Commentaries on these two works, as these definitions do not appear in the other surviving editions of Euclid's *Elements*, but only in Theon's both Commentaries on the *Elements* and Commentaries on the *Almagest*. We also know for certain, as we saw through Hesychius' reference in *Suda*, that Hypatia also wrote Commentaries on Apollonius' *Conics*, thus before Eutocius. It was also common in antiquity for commentators to use the texts of earlier commentators on the same subject. It is therefore reasonable that Eutocius consulted and used Hypatia's earlier Commentary for his own Commentary, or, in other words, Hypatia's Commentary was possibly revived through Eutocius' Commentary. Hypatia's study may be scattered throughout the extant Commentary of Eutocius, but we could assume with a high degree of probability that the parts of Eutocius' Commentary that refer to the *compounded ratio* echo or are the same as some correspond-

ing passages of Hypatia's Commentaries on the issue of *compounded ratio*, a concept first defined by Theon, and which his collaborator and daughter would have been informed or even contributed to a large extent.

## 5. Conclusions

Who was Hypatia and what does she represent? Was she the brave person who dared to turn against the dark powers of illiteracy imposed by the Church? Was she a dispassionate philosopher who was not afraid of any threat, determined to integrate her work of illuminating any apprentice oriented towards her independently of their religious faith? Was she a martyr for the sake of science and freedom of thinking or a martyr for the sake of Hellenism dishonestly attacked by the emerging Christianity? Who persecuted her, the official Church or a violent mob without the authorization of the episcopate?

After the presentation of her numerous activities and the reactions to her work we can answer calmly and unaffected, as much as possible, by the great crime against her.

I think that she did not have this end exclusively due to her gender, but we can reasonably argue that her gender increased the rage of her opponents. The Christian fathers had introduced another standard for the right woman, as a servant of the Church and also as a follower of the male members who were the legal representatives of the new religion. The role of the female priest recognized in the ancient ceremonies and mysteries<sup>49</sup> as well as in the gnostic movements was rejected by the Orthodox, leading some women who needed a close relation to the divine to the ascetic and monastic life. The ascetic ideal was not alien to the pagan way of thinking and it was widely used in the Neopythagorean cycles. Hypatia possibly embraced this style of life as we can conclude if we take into account that she never married and she never was involved in erotic relations, based also on the

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<sup>49</sup> Cf. Griva A., *Aphrodites: Aspects and Cults of the Goddess Aphrodite during the Archaic Period with Sappho as a Guide*, Smili, 2022.



occurrence of her abrupt rejection of the man who fell in love with her. She is referred persistently as the most beautiful and clever woman of her times. Charles William Mitchell (1885) has painted her naked in a position full of sexual attraction but we may doubt that this erotic connotation has a correspondence in reality since it is more reasonable to imagine her covered in her white garment, the characteristic cloth of a philosopher. The paintings are a good source for taking information about the way of the reception of the historical persons in different times and not so much about the real appearance of them in their time, as we see also in the famous *Academy of Athens* of Raphael with the various philosophers of the antiquity. We cannot answer with certainty if she would be killed in this way by the Christian mob in the case she was male. The rage of the attack indicates, in my opinion, the anger and the violence of a male crowd against a female who dared to share her theories with a male audience, giving the impression of the despicable, for them, implied superiority of women versus men.

History is a branch which has often suffered from interpretations taken for granted as they were facts. This is more intense in cases where the historical evidence is poor and the personality under study is specifically attractive as a novel character, as Hypatia. Therefore, we must be very careful and precise in our assessments following a balanced way in coordination with the poor available information, separating clearly our suggestions from the real facts. Very often, we meet the largely imaginary image of the last defender of the Greek national religion against the advancing Christianity, an image largely adopted by the analysts and writers of the Enlightenment era accompanied with an intense anti-Christian rhetoric. On the contrary, Hypatia is presented as a simple servant of ratio stripped of her ancestral religion, as Dzielska describes her: "Nowhere in the sources Hypatia is mentioned as a devoted pagan, while her lectures, although described in mystical-religious terminology, do not include magical rituals that are particularly characteristic of the groups that cultivated the post-Iamblichian philosophical tradition. She made no attempt to gain the favor or achieve the subjugation of the

numerous divine powers—gods, demons, and heroes. Her circle did not use magical methods to understand the nature of the world; there is no mention of sacrifices to the gods, the use of cult objects, the performance of night services, statues that came to life, and the like. Even John of Nikiou, although he presents her as an ordinary witch practicing black magic, does not mention anything about cultic practices on her part... They (the members of the group of Hypatia) may also have read and recited texts of Christian content”<sup>50</sup> and elsewhere: “Hypatia felt no attraction to Greek polytheism or local cults... She felt no obligation to support her Platonism with magic and ritual practices, oracles or sorceries”<sup>51</sup>.

It is surprising how Dzielska, after such a thorough study, arrives at such an image of Hypatia. In an era when theurgy, rituals and magic were the natural complement to the rational approach, especially in the Neoplatonic line that Hypatia followed, how does Dzielska conclude with certainty that Hypatia distanced herself from the common practices of the time? How is it possible that a person described as a leader of the ‘mysteries of philosophy’ is stripped of ritual practices, invocations of divine entities? Isn’t it reasonable that she was attracted of the worship of her own gods (Greek polytheism) instead of reciting Christian texts? Dzielska’s description seems to me to be a complete distortion of reality, at a time when the power and allegorical meanings of the Greek gods were insurmountable and frequently discussed by her Neoplatonic ancestors and later ones. It is almost certain to me from the indications we have that in their secret sessions the invocations of the names of the gods and demons would have been on the agenda, and it was one of the reasons why these sessions were secret. Moreover, there is an indication, nearly a certainty, of her involvement in polytheistic rituals if we are based on the way her student Synesius handles the invocations in his hymns, despite his simultaneous Christian status, as well as on his everyday language in his epistles, as in the Epistle 136 to his brother Euoptius (also a bishop)

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<sup>50</sup> Dzielska M., *Hypatia of Alexandria*, Trnsl. Kousounelos G., Enalios, 1997, pp. 123-4.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, p. 156 (the translation is mine).

where he invokes the god Zeus ( $\nu\eta\ \Delta\acute{\iota}\alpha$ ). The secrecy of Hypatia's teaching and the commitment her students had undertaken not to share it (see Epistle 143) could also be due to the fact that the theological framework within which their so-called 'philosophical rituals' operated was indeed the ancient Greek pantheon. Such a sharing would indeed be very dangerous after the events of the destruction of the Serapeum<sup>52</sup>.

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## Philosophical aspects of the truth in the *Orazione XV* of Caterina da Siena

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### Abstract

This article will focus on the references to truth (*verità*) in the work *Orazioni* by the 14th-century Italian mystic, theologian, and philosopher Caterina da Siena. Within the dense and philosophically structured reflections of the *Orazioni*, truth is a term that recurs and acquires fundamental importance for understanding the worldview of the Italian philosopher. It can also be seen within a broader framework of philosophical perspectives on the relationship between parts and the whole, as well as on the participation of humans in the cosmic unity. We will particularly focus on *Orazione XV*, in which a more complete presentation of the term truth is provided through a clear reasoning process.

**Keywords:** *Caterina da Siena, female medieval mysticism, Orazioni, the philosophical concept of truth, mystical experiences, ecstasy*

# 1. Caterina da Siena: her life, her work and the particularity of the *Orazioni* in the corpus of her writings

One of the most famous mystics from Italy during the Late Middle Ages is Caterina da Siena (1347-1380), who gained great fame as a healer, prophetess, mystic, philosopher, and even as an ambassador of the Pope. From an early age, she had the desire to dedicate herself completely to God, despite the opposition of her parents. As her biographer and confessor, Raimondo da Capua<sup>1</sup>, writes, when she was six years old, she received the blessing of Christ in a vision.

At the age of seven, she asked Virgin Mary to give her Jesus as her husband, and by the age of twelve, she had dedicated herself to an ascetic life, consuming little food and water. She entered the Order of the Sisters of Penance of St. Dominic, which primarily accepted elderly widows. Her fame spread widely due to her mystical experiences, which primarily involved the stigmata and her secret marriage to Christ, but also her elevation during a state of ecstasy. Caterina claimed that she always saw the wedding ring from Jesus on her finger, and she also recounted that he opened her chest, took her heart and offered his heart to her – that was the reason for a large mark on her chest. In one of her mystical experiences, she said that she abandoned her body and traveled to Hell and Purgatory.

Sometime, Caterina left the monastery and formed a circle of laypeople and clergy, both men and women. It was then that her fame as a healer and prophetess spread, with reports claiming that a single touch from her could cure even the most serious illnesses. At the same time, she wrote hundreds of letters<sup>2</sup> and also dictated the *Dialogue* (*Dialogo*)<sup>3</sup> while in ecstasy.

<sup>1</sup> See Raimondo da Capua, *Legenda maior sive Legenda admirabilis virginis Catherine de Senis*, Edizione critica a cura di Silvia Nocentini (Edizione Nazionale dei Testi Mediolatini d'Italia, 31, I, 19), Edizioni del Galluzzo, Firenze 2013. In detail about the life of Caterina cf. Vauchez A., *Caterina da Siena, Una mistica trasgressiva*, trad. L. Falaschi, Laterza, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. “Database Epistolario Katerina da Siena” (<https://www.dekasisime.it/>), part of the project of Istituto storico italiano

Some bold positions expressed by Caterina are intriguing, such as her views on human free will<sup>4</sup> and the unity of the soul with God in a state of ecstasy<sup>5</sup>. At the same time, she fought for the reconstruction of the Catholic Church during a period of corruption and crisis, engaged in intense political action. She accompanied the representative of the Dominicans to a meeting with the Pope in Avignon. Her influence on Pope Gregory XI played a significant role in his decision to leave Avignon and return to Rome, thus ending the so-called "Babylonian Captivity". She even negotiated peace with Florence. After the death of Gregory XI and the achievement of peace, she returned to Siena<sup>6</sup>.

In this study, we will focus on Catherine's work *Orazioni*. These are a certain number of short "orationes et postulationes", formulated by her during her numerous ecstasies, recorded by her close friends and students and gathered dur-

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per il medio evo (ISIME), which started in 2015, in collaboration with Provincia Romana dell'Ordine dei frati Predicatori, aiming at the edition of the *Epistolario* of Caterina da Siena.

<sup>3</sup> Caterina dictated the *Dialogo* between the end of 1377 and October 1378, while political and ecclesiastical life were in deep crisis. Her questions were posed to God Himself, and therefore the *Dialogo* is a record of what she understood directly from God. The main theme of the *Dialogo* is the identity of God, who is Mercy that leads to salvation. It is a "mystical writing" full of insights and philosophical truths, which her followers commonly referred to as *Il Libro* (The Book). The title *Dialogo* comes from the observation of Raimondo da Capua, who, while translating the text from the vernacular into Latin, noted that the work is structured as a dialogue between the Creator and a soul created by Him. The *Dialogo* is the work that led Pope Paul VI to declare Caterina «dottore della Chiesa» (Cf. the edition Santa Caterina da Siena, *Dialogo*, Prefazione di Timothy Radcliffe, Presentazione di Giuliana Cavallini, Testo critico curato da Giuliana Cavallini, Introduzione, versione in italiano corrente e note di Elena Malaspina, Edizioni Studio Domenicano, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Concerning free will: Carnea M. F., "Sul concetto di libertà e autorevolezza volitiva. Raffronto tra Caterina da Siena e Tommaso d'Aquino", *Reportata*, 2011 (Last accessed: <https://mondodomani.org/reportata/carnea01.htm>)

<sup>5</sup> You can find information regarding the subject in the study: Tagliafico A., "Elementi peculiari della dottrina spirituale di Caterina da Siena", *Alpha Omega*, 16: 3, 2013, pp. 453-470.

<sup>6</sup> For the political thought and action of Caterina Cf. Pajardi P., *Caterina la santa della politica*, Martello, 1993.



ing the last period of her life. Since they were ecstatic experiences, we understand that they were not consciously dictated by Catherine, while we are not sure that she checked the text that was recorded after the end of each of her ecstatic experiences. The manuscripts containing these peculiar "prayers" include explanations regarding the place, time and context in which each of them was performed. They were published as an appendix to her letters in the edition of Aldus Manutius of 1500<sup>7</sup> and also in the editions of *Dialogo* by Girolamo Gigli<sup>8</sup> and Innocenzo Taurisano<sup>9</sup>. Gigli collected and modified the *Orazioni* using a manuscript by Tommaso Buonconti of Pisa<sup>10</sup>, a pupil of Catherine.

An introductory note, which appears in the edition of Aldus Manutius, informs us that these are recordings made in Avignon, Genoa and Rome, while at the same time it is pointed out that none of the innumerable speeches that Catherine made in a state of ecstasy in Siena, Florence and Pisa and in many other places in Italy are included. The number of *orazioni* that have survived varies between 22 (in the manuscripts, in Latin) and 26 (printed by Aldus Manuzio, in vernacular). Fawtier has studied this work thoroughly, especially with regard to dating, and has reached convincing results<sup>11</sup>. His main finding was that these texts constitute a selection among the countless prayers formulated by Catherine,

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<sup>7</sup> *Epistole devotissime de Sancta Catharina da Siena*, Aldo Manuzio, Venezia 1500.

<sup>8</sup> *L'opere della serafica Santa Caterina da Siena nuovamente pubblicate da Girolamo Gigli. Tomo primo quarto Il dialogo della serafica Santa Caterina da Siena composto in volgare dalla medesima, essendo lei, mentre dettava ai suoi scrittori, rapita in singolare eccesso, ed astrazione di mente diviso in quattro trattati*, Siena, Stamperia del Pubblico 1707.

<sup>9</sup> Santa Caterina da Siena, *Dialogo della divina provvidenza*, a cura di Innocenzo Taurisano, Libreria Editrice Fiorentina, Firenze 1928. It should be noted that in the edition of Taurisano, the prayers are given the interesting title "elevazioni" which likely suggests the spiritual elevation that Caterina's prayers lead to, as well as the transition during ecstasy to another level of existence.

<sup>10</sup> Capecehatro A., *Storia di S. Caterina da Siena e del papato del suo tempo*, Tip. liturgica di S. Giovanni, 1886, p. 272.

<sup>11</sup> Fawtier R., *Sainte Catherine de Sienn: essai de critique des sources*, E. de Boccard, 1930.

while the criterion for this selection is not clear. Furthermore, the degree of reliability of these recordings is reasonably an open research question.

Regardless of the extent to which the *Orazioni* constitute the “authentic” recordings of Catherine’s discourses and our ability to verify this, the texts themselves constitute an important source for understanding female mysticism in the Late Middle Ages, as well as the philosophical background that constitutes it. Of particular interest in the *Orazioni* is the fact that the discourse is not only a descriptive and experiential discourse regarding the contact of man and divine, but also a formulation of relationships between concepts in a framework of axiomatic propositions, reasoning and definitions. All these elements form the basis of an original philosophical discourse, dense in meanings, which can be read together with other philosophical texts that belong to the broader category of philosophical mysticism.

## **2. The *Orazione* 15 and the concept of truth: a philosophical approach**

In this text we will explore one of the fundamental concepts that constitute the philosophical core of the work, the concept of truth through the *Orazione* 15, where the reasoning of the text requires a purely philosophical approach<sup>12</sup>. In order to have a better overview of the commentary, I consider that it is appropriate to quote both the original text and my own translation into English. The text will be divided into three parts based on the different semantic core of each part. At the end of each part, the commentary will follow, which will include references to other parts of the *Orazioni*, when it is necessary to illuminate the passage under consideration.

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<sup>12</sup> The text is quoted according to the edition: Santa Caterina da Siena, *Orazioni*, a cura di Giuliana Cavallini, 2a edizione, Ed. Cantagalli, 2005.

## Part 1

Verità, verità, e chi sono io che tu dàì a me la verità tua? Io so' colei che non so'. Adunque la verità tua è quella che fa e parla et adopera tutte le cose, poi che io non so'. La verità tua è quella che porge la verità, e con la verità tua dico la verità. La verità tua eterna porge la verità in diversi modi a diverse creature, e non è separata da te la verità tua, anco tu se' essa verità. Tu, deità eterna, Figliuolo di Dio, venisti da Dio per adempire la verità del Padre eterno e neuno può avere verità se non da te, verità e chiunque vuole avere la verità tua si conviene che niente gli manchi della tua verità, altrimenti non potrebbe avere la verità, la quale verità neuno difetto può patire.

### Translation

Truth, truth, who am I to whom you give your truth? I am she who I am not. Therefore, your truth is that which acts and speaks and handles all things, since I am not. Your truth is that which gives the truth, and with your truth, I speak the truth. Your eternal truth gives the truth in different ways to different beings, and it is not separated from you, your truth, while at the same time, you are that truth. You, eternal deity, Son of God, came from God to fulfill the truth of the eternal Father, and no one can have the truth except from you, truth, and whoever wants to have your truth is convinced that nothing is missing in them from your truth, otherwise, they could not have the truth, which can have no flaw.

### Commentary

Caterina addresses the truth, posing a question that will serve as the starting point to explore the nature of truth and the relationship of humans to it. She wonders about who she is, defining her relationship with the truth. She is the one to whom the truth is granted. Otherwise, there is no way for

her to speak of herself. Without the truth, she is the one who is not; that is, she cannot have any ontological existence, and she cannot attribute any property to herself<sup>13</sup>. Therefore, everything that defines her actions, words, and relationship with things is the result of the fact that the truth was granted to her, that is she partakes in the truth<sup>14</sup>. The truth gives the truth<sup>15</sup>, that is, it gives itself to the human beings, and only then they can speak the truth, if they partake in it. The truth is eternal, as Catherine often repeats within the *Orazioni*<sup>16</sup>, and within eternity, there is the imperishable and the unchanging for her. The truth is given to different beings in different ways, but this part of the truth that is given is never separated from the truth as a whole. It thus seems that the participation of beings in the truth does not affect the truth as a whole.

Next, Catherine addresses Jesus, whom she calls "eternal deity"<sup>17</sup> who fulfilled and completed the eternal truth of the eternal Father<sup>18</sup>: therefore, the end (purpose) of the divine plan is fulfilled when, through truth (who is Jesus), the human partakes in the truth (of the Father), who is the Idea of truth from which every shared truth arises. Therefore, Jesus is the emanating truth, but he is also identified with the source of truth, and the human who possesses the truth es-

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Plat. *Republic*, 509b, where all things are known through participation in the Ideas, which in turn participate in the Good: "Καὶ τοῖς γιγνώσκομένοις τοίνυν μὴ μόνον τὸ γινώσκεισθαι φάναι ὑπὸ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ παρεῖναι, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸ εἶναι τε καὶ τὴν οὐσίαν ὑπ' ἐκείνου αὐτοῖς προσεῖναι, οὐκ οὐσίας ὄντος τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ, ἀλλ' ἔτι ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας πρεσβεῖα καὶ δυνάμει ὑπερέχοντος" ["In like manner, then, you are to say that the objects of knowledge not only receive from the presence of the good their being known, but their very existence and essence is derived to them from it, though the good itself is not essence but still transcends essence in dignity and surpassing power"], (Translation: Perseus Digital Library).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Ps.* 32,6; *Ps.* 32,9.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *Jn* 1,16-17.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *Orazioni* IV, VIII, X, XIX, XX, XII.

<sup>17</sup> It is interesting that Caterina chooses the phrase "eternal deity" ("deità eterna"), which in the Italian language is feminine, just as the noun "truth" ("verità") is.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. also *Dial.* XXI καὶ *Dial.* LXXXVII.

entially partakes in the truth of Jesus, and thus of the Father. In this participation, no part of the truth can be missing from the one who wants<sup>19</sup> to partake in the truth, since the truth is perfect and cannot have any lack or flaw when granted to the one who partakes in it.

## Part 2

A questo modo l'hanno e beati, e quali perfettamente senza difetto veggono la verità tua per l'eterna tua visione che hanno partecipando la visione tua, con la quale tu medesimo ti vedi; imperciò che tu se' quello medesimo lume col quale tu ti vedi e col quale se' veduto dalla creatura tua, né tra te e colui che ti vede è alcuno mezo che rappresenti te a colui che vede te. Adunque, mentre che i beati partecipano te, partecipano et il lume et il mezzo con che tu se' veduto; e perché tu stesso sempre se' quello medesimo lume, quello medesimo mezzo e quel medesimo obietto partecipati da loro ne l'unione che fanno in te, però si fa una medesima cosa della visione tua e della visione della tua creatura in te, non obstante che uno più perfettamente vegga e un altro meno perfettamente, però che questo è per la diversità di coloro che ricevono e non per la diversità della visione tua.

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<sup>19</sup> At this point, Catherine addresses the issue of free will in a very clear way: only that being which chooses the truth participates in it. Catherine has expressed herself very clearly regarding the relationship between free will and divine grace in one of her most famous letters: "Noi siamo uno giardino, e veramente orto, del quale giardino e orto n'è fatto ortolano, la prima Verità, la ragione col libero arbitrio; la quale ragione e libero arbitrio, con l'aiutorio della divina grazia, à a divellare le spine de' vizii, e piantare l'erbe odorifere delle virtù". [We are a garden, and indeed an orchard, and the gardener of this garden and orchard is the First Truth, the Reason with a free will. And this Reason and the free will, with the help of divine grace, uproot the thorns of flaws and plant the fragrant herbs of virtues.] (All'Abbate Martino - Lettera 67). All the excerpts from the *Letters* of Caterina presented in this study follow the edition: *Epistole della Serafica Vergine S. Caterina Da Siena Scritte da Lei a Pontefici, Cardinali, Prelati ed altre persone ecclesiastiche tratte fedelmente da' suoi migliori esemplari e purgate dagli errori dell'altre impressioni colle annotazioni del P. Federico Burlamacchi della Compagnia di Gesù*, Tomo I, Tipografia e Libreria Pirota & C., Milano 1842.

### Translation

In this way the human beings possess you, are possessed by you, and blessed are they, and those who perfectly, without flaw, see your truth through your eternal vision, in which they partake, with which you are beheld. This is why you are that same light with which you see yourself and with which you are seen by your creation. Between you and whoever sees you, there is no intermediary which represents you to the one who beholds you. Therefore, while the blessed partake in you, they also partake in the light and in the medium through which you are beheld. And because you yourself are always that very light, that very medium, and that very thing that partake in the unity created within you, an identical thing is created by your vision and by the vision of your creation within you, even though one sees more perfectly and another less perfectly, because this exists due to the difference of those who receive and not because of the difference of your vision.

### Commentary

Those who see the truth, which is eternal, see it eternally. The vision of the truth is equivalent to partaking in it. Those who partake in the truth partake in all the attributes of the truth. The vision of the truth is, in reality, the vision of the truth by itself. The truth is the light with which it sees itself and its creation<sup>20</sup>. Nothing intervenes between the truth and

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. also: "Io Caterina, serva e schiava de'servi di Jesù Cristo, scrivo a voi nel prezioso sangue suo, con desiderio di vedere in voi il lume della santissima fede, il quale lume ci mostra la via della verità, e senza questo lume veruno nostro esercizio, nè veruno desiderio o operazione non verrebbe a frutto, nè a quello fine per lo quale cominciassimo ad operare, ma ogni cosa verrebbe imperfetta, lenti saremmo nella carità di Dio e del prossimo". [I, Caterina, servant and slave of the slaves of Jesus Christ, write to you with His precious blood, with the desire to see within you the light of the most holy faith, which shows us the way of truth. Without this light, no effort, desire, or action could bear fruit, nor would it reach the goal for which we would begin to work, but everything would

the beings that partake in the truth, since, ultimately, the light with which the truth sees itself and sees its creation is the truth itself. Therefore, whoever partakes in the truth also partakes in the medium with which the truth sees itself. Thus, everything creates a unity within the truth, without anything intervening to enable the participation and union. The vision of the truth by the creation and the vision of the creation by the truth are the same thing within the truth. The difference in the way someone sees the truth is a consequence of the differences in the imperfect beings, but in no way the truth is affected by how one sees it, perfectly or imperfectly. The fact that the otherness of living beings is emphasized as the cause of the different visions of the truth raises the issue of how the individual soul is structured, as well as the individual limits that determine the knowledge of the truth—issues that will be more clearly addressed in the third part of Orazione XV.

In this part of the text, the mystical perception of participation and, ultimately, the absolute unity between parts and the whole is recalled<sup>21</sup>, when one follows the mystical path of knowledge, which in this case is participation in the truth. Furthermore, the mysteries are traditionally linked with the above position: the initiates partook in allegorical representations related to the myth of a deity who usually died and was reborn, symbolizing the destiny of the soul after death, but also unity that govern all beings. The initiates believed not only that the deity was present during the rituals, but also that they themselves somehow partook in the deity. In a

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be imperfect, and we would be slow in the mercy of God and of our neighbor] (A frate Raimondo da Capua - Lettera 101).

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Plat. *Parmenides*, 145b7-145e6. Also, Alexander of Aphrodisias presents, as a kind of mixture of elements, the so-called fusion (*krasis*) according to the Stoic Chrysippus. In this case, the components permeate each other so completely that every particle of each one participates in all the components of the mixture. Long A. A., *Hellenistic Philosophy*, MIET, 1990, p. 256. Cf. Long, A. A., Vertzagia D., “Antiquity Revisited: A Discussion with Anthony Arthur Long”, *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, 5, 1, 2020, pp. 111-122. <https://doi.org/10.12684/cjp.23324>; Dendrinis M., “Integrated dialectic in Plato’s *Parmenides*: a comparative analysis of Proclus’ and Ficino’s Commentaries on *Parmenides*”, *Dia-noesis: A Journal of Philosophy*, 16, 2024, pp. 189-210. <https://doi.org/10.12684/dia.39539>.

philosophical context, a passage from Plotinus' *Enneads* is indicative, and it can be read as shedding light on Caterina's text:

... δύο οὐκ ἦν, ἀλλ' ἐν ἧν αὐτὸς ὁ ἰδὼν πρὸς τὸ ἑωραμένον, ὥς ἂν μὴ ἑωραμένον, ἀλλ' ἡνωμένον...

["... there were not two, but the one who saw was one with the seen, as if it were not something visible, but something with which the person unites..." <sup>22</sup>]

### Part 3

Sì come l'anima che è in questa vita in stato di gracia riceve la verità tua per lo lume de la fede, con la quale fede vede che le cose che ci predica la chiesa tua sonno vere, e non di meno diverse anime, secondo la diversità delle loro disposizioni, in diversi modi ricevono questa verità, più e meno perfettamente, né per questo è diversificata la fede, anco è una medesima fede in tutti; così ne' beati è una medesima visione, avegna che più e meno perfettamente da diverse creature sia ricevuto, come detto è. Amen.

### Translation

Since the soul that is in this life in a state of grace receives your truth through the light of faith, by which it sees that the things proclaimed by your Church are true, and since very different souls, according to the diversity of their dispositions, receive your truth in different ways, more or less perfectly, neither for this reason the faith is differentiated, but the faith is the same for all. Thus, in the blessed ones, there is the same vision, which is received more or less perfectly by different creations, as has been said. Amen.

### Commentary

Participation in the truth happens through the means of faith in the truth of Christian teachings in a state of grace. As

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. the broader passage from the *Enneads* from which the referenced phrase originates (VI.9.11.5-15).



has been said, the means that leads to participation in the truth is also truth, so faith itself, as both process and means, is truth<sup>23</sup>. We can reasonably conclude that faith is not a subjective conception (Plato would call it a "δόξα"), but it is an objective and indisputable knowledge in which the human partakes.

Just as participation in the truth is perfect, so also is participation in faith perfect and the same for all, since faith is the truth. The different vision of the truth by different creations is not due to differing faiths, but to the different inclinations of each one, which lead to perfect or imperfect vision. In any case, the truth and the faith-truth are not affected by the perfect or imperfect vision from the side of the creations. The inclination is a disposition of the soul towards the vision of a greater or smaller part of the truth. Therefore, throughout the entirety of the Orazione XV, we understand that the human being is determined by an inherent predisposition to knowledge, which operates in parallel with the divine grace and the free will. Catherine seems to explore the complex nature of humanity, involving in its formation the transcendent factor, natural characteristics, and individual freedom.

### 3. Conclusions and Further Research

Through the philosophical approach of the Orazione XV, we could shape the characteristics and relationships of the truth as follows:

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. also 2 *Tm* 3,15.

**TRUTH** → HUMAN = TRUTH → MANIFESTS IN → WORDS → ACTIONS  
→ HANDLING OF THINGS



**PROPERTIES OF TRUTH**

→ ETERNAL AND IMMUTABLE

→ GIVEN DIFFERENTLY TO DIFFERENT BEINGS DUE TO DIVERSITY OF:

- DIVINE GRACE
- INDIVIDUAL INCLINATION
- FREE WILL

→ PERFECT

→ SOURCE (FATHER) = MEDIUM (LIGHT = FAITH = OBJECTIVE KNOWLEDGE) = EMANATING (JESUS) = TRUTH

→ PARTICIPATION IN THIS IS PERFECT, SO WHOEVER PARTICIPATES IN IT PARTICIPATES ALSO IN THE SOURCE, IN THE MEDIUM, AND IN THE EMANATING

We therefore observe both the density of meanings and the multi-layered considerations presented during the Late Middle Ages within the framework of female mysticism. Regardless of the extent to which the records of Catherine's writings represent a "faithful" reproduction of what she said in a state of ecstasy or have undergone changes and transformations by her disciples, we must be certain that the texts absolutely reflect the world, the spiritual quests, and the fundamental ideas of the Italian philosopher and theologian.

In the frame the research interest that has emerged in recent decades regarding the approach to the lives and works of women in the Middle Ages, a broad field of study is opened, within which interdisciplinary methods will be applied. For example, Catherine's work can involve the collaboration of theologians, philosophers, social scientists, historians, and gender theorists. Specifically, regarding philosophical studies, it is worth noting the generally dense and coher-

ent reasoning, which triggers a further research of relations and conceptual associations between different philosophical contexts, as was shown in the passage from the *Orazioni* under examination.

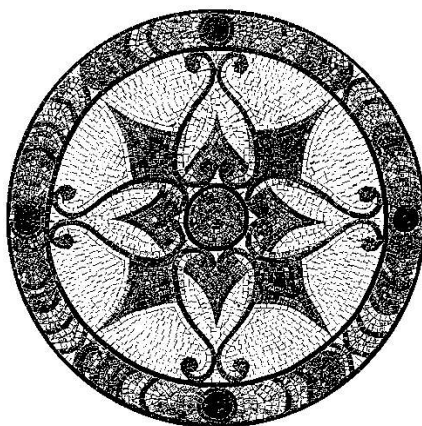
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## Judith Butler on Gender Performativity

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### Abstract

This article examines Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, a pivotal concept in contemporary feminist and queer theory. Originating from Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) and further developed in *Bodies That Matter* (1993), the theory challenges traditional distinctions between sex and gender by arguing that both are socially constructed through performative acts. Butler critiques the binary notion that biological sex pre-determines gender identity, instead proposing that gender is continually constituted through repeated social performances within a regulatory framework Butler calls the "heterosexual matrix". Drawing on J.L. Austin's speech act theory and Jacques Derrida's concepts of citationality and iterability, Butler asserts that gender is not an inherent trait but an effect produced through iterative acts. The article also explores Butler's engagement with Louis Althusser's concept of interpellation to explain how individuals are assigned gender identities at birth. It highlights how normative gender constructs are maintained through social rituals and coercive mechanisms, but also how these norms can be destabilized through subversive repetitions, such as parody and drag. The discussion underscores Butler's view of agency as emerging within the discursive constraints of gender norms, offering a pathway to challenge and transform these structures through performative resignification.

**Keywords:** *Judith Butler, Gender performativity, citationality, iterability, interpellation*

In 1990, the American philosopher Judith Butler published *Gender Trouble*,<sup>1</sup> a work whose deconstruction of biological sex and exploration of the performative construction of gender identity was to have a profound impact on feminist thought and politics. As Athena Athanasiou notes, this book laid the groundwork for a “feminist queer politics that transgresses the normative boundaries of identity politics”.<sup>2</sup> Three years later, in 1993, Butler published *Bodies That Matter*,<sup>3</sup> in which they further developed the concept of gender performativity as an ongoing process, linking it to the ideas of “iteration” and “citationality”. The following article seeks to explore Butler’s views on the performative construction of gender.

### The distinction between sex and gender

An important aspect of feminist critique is the distinction between sex and gender. In contrast to sex, which is seen as an innate biological characteristic of human beings, gender is understood as a socially constructed concept. Gender refers to the cultural meanings assigned to the biologically differentiated body, categorized as male and female, within a particular society (*BM*, xiv). This distinction is crucial because it opens up the possibility of redefining gender. As a result, the roles and attitudes traditionally associated with the male sex—and which constitute the cultural myth of “masculinity”—can be challenged, deconstructed and abandoned, in contrast to the “femininity” attributed to the female sex (*GT*, 10). Feminist theorists of the 1980s have shown that gender is not inher-

<sup>1</sup> Butler J., *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York & London: Routledge, 1990) (henceforth: *GT*).

<sup>2</sup> Athanasiou A., “Επίμετρο: Επιτελεστικές αναταράξεις: Για μια ποιητική της έμφυλης ανατροπής” [Afterword: Performative Disturbances: Towards a Poetics of Gender Subversion], in Judith Butler, *Αναταραχή φύλου: Ο φεμινισμός και η ανατροπή της ταυτότητας* [*Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*], trans. Karabelas G., ed. Kantsa V. (Athens: Alexandria, 2009), p. 217.

<sup>3</sup> Butler J., *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York & London: Routledge, 1993) (henceforth: *BM*).

ently given, but is rather the product of complex social relations based on the structures of male domination.

For Butler, however, even when gender is understood as socially constructed, the distinction between sex and gender is underpinned by a “belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex, whereby gender mirrors sex” (*GT*, 10). In fact, gender norms “institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire” (*GT*, 23), by establishing a “compulsory order” between the categories of biological male, social masculinity, and heterosexual practice and desire. The same “compulsory order” also exists between the female sex, social femininity, and heterosexuality. Desire thus reflects or expresses gender through heterosexual practice, while gender similarly reflects or expresses heterosexual desire.

Essentially, gender as a binary relation is maintained and regulated through the establishment of “compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality [...] in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire” (*GT*, 30). The internal cohesion or unity of each gender, both male and female, thus requires a stable heterosexuality. Gender is not a stable essence, an identity in itself, but its internal cohesion or unity is the result of a “regulatory practice that seeks to render gender identity uniform through a compulsory heterosexuality” (*GT*, 42). The gender norms that regulate gender identities are socially constituted within what Butler calls the “heterosexual matrix” (*GT*, 36)

### Deconstructing Biological Sex

Furthermore, in the distinction between sex and gender, sex is often treated as “given”, without considering how it is ascribed to an individual, by what means, whether it has a particular “history”, or whether it is produced and sustained by various scientific discourses. In other words, it overlooks the fact that sex itself is a discursive construct shaped by a matrix of knowledge and power in Foucauldian terms. As a



result, the distinction between sex and gender ultimately serves to maintain the stability of the gender binary by securing an unquestionable, pre-discursive existence for sex. For Butler, it is essential to question the immutability of biological sex in order to show that “this construct called ‘sex’ is as culturally constructed as gender”, and thus to show that the distinction between the two does not exist at all. Therefore, it makes no sense “to define gender as the cultural interpretation of sex if sex itself is a gendered category” (*GT*, 11)—that is, if sex is also a cultural construct, like gender.

Sex is not a “bodily given on which the construct of gender is artificially imposed”, but rather “a cultural norm that governs the materialization of bodies” (*BM*, xii). It is not only something permeated by cultural constructs; it is itself a construct. In this sense, sex is a political construct, just like gender. However, the exclusion of sex from the process of gender construction is necessary for this construction to maintain its power. Without this exclusion, gender construction would lack its basis of legitimacy and, consequently, its necessity (*BM*, 4).

According to Butler, the longstanding dominance of gender norms produces the specific phenomenon of a “natural sex”. These “sedimented” gender norms are associated with a “set of corporeal styles”, which, by concealing their cultural origins, appear as a natural consequence of the sexed dimension of bodies. Thus, instead of sexed subjects producing a set of gendered bodily styles (masculine or feminine), as is commonly assumed, the opposite happens: a “set of corporeal styles”, stereotypically ascribed to the male or female sex, produces coherent gendered subjects (*GT*, 178). For Butler, then, the “being” of gender is an effect rather than a generative cause (*GT*, 43). There is no “essence” or “identity” that gender expresses or externalizes. Gender is not a “locus of agency from which various acts follow”, but an effect (*GT*, 179).

## Gender as Performativity

If there is no inherent gender identity underlying gender expressions, how is our sense of gender constituted? According to Judith Butler, gender is formed through performative acts—that is, through the process of performativity. Gender identity does not exist prior to or independently of behavior; rather, it is behavior itself that “performs” and actively produces what we recognize as gender. Thus, what is traditionally perceived as an “expression” of gender is, in fact, the very process through which gender is created, manifested, and brought into existence.

Butler adopts the concept of “performativity” from J.L. Austin, who, in his groundbreaking book *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), distinguishes between two types of linguistic utterances. The first, “constative” utterances, are statements that describe, record, or assert something, such as “The cat is on the mat”, and can be evaluated as true or false. The second, “performative” utterances, are about doing something through the act of speaking itself.<sup>4</sup> For example, if a mayor declares during a wedding ceremony, “I pronounce you husband and wife,” this statement itself brings about the marital union. In the case of performative utterances, the spoken word is not merely descriptive but an integral part of the action it triggers.

Similarly, for Butler, gender is not something whose existence is merely affirmed by language. Instead, gender is the result of a continuous series of performances. There are no inherently male or female bodies; a body becomes male or female through the performance of acts, gestures, or expressions that hegemonic discourse associates with these genders. Gender is thus constituted through “discursively constrained performative acts that produce the body through and within the categories of sex” (*GT*, xxix). In this sense, gender is an act (*GT*, 179).

The body is gendered through the repetitive and compulsive performance of certain gendered behaviors. As Butler

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<sup>4</sup> Austin J. L., *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 5.

explains, “[t]his repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established” (*GT*, 178). Gender is not a timeless essence but an identity constructed over time through a “*stylized repetition of acts*” that includes “bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds”. This ceaseless repetition produces the “illusion of an abiding gendered self” (*GT*, 179). For Butler, what we perceive as an “internal” feature of our identity is something actively anticipated and produced through bodily acts; “at an extreme, an hallucinatory effect of naturalized gestures” (*GT* xv).

The foundation of gender identity lies in “the stylized repetition of acts through time and not a seemingly seamless identity” (*GT*, 179). For instance, behaviors or gestures that appear to signify “masculinity” are not mere expressions of an underlying male identity. Instead, these actions, through their repeated performance, actively generate that identity. Male identity, therefore, does not pre-exist its effects; it is itself an effect.

Some of the ways in which we perform our “gender” are inherent to discourse (grammar, linguistic style and code, etc.), while others are explicitly or implicitly imposed on us by institutions such as the family, school, work, the media, and our environment. However, the most effective way in which gender is imposed on us is that it feels “natural” to behave in a certain way, for example, “as a boy.” Being a “boy” is taken as absolutely for granted, as something that speaks for itself and bubbles up from within. As Butler notes, the performance of gender is “a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization” (*GT*, xv). Gender is a construct that generally “conceals its genesis” (*GT*, 178).

Consequently, there is no such thing as a “real” or “true” gender. Gender is an imitation without an original, a “citation” without a definitive source. Since gender is merely the result of repeated acts, there is no “pre-existing identity by which an act or attribute might be measured” (*GT*, 180). Thus, there are no inherently true or false, authentic or fabricated acts of masculinity or femininity. The assertion of a

true male or female identity turns out to be a “regulating fiction”—a constructed narrative that, although fictional, serves to regulate and shape the behavior of bodies (*ibid.*).

### The Concept of Interpellation

To describe how gender is assigned to a newborn (or even in the prenatal period), Butler uses the concept of “interpellation.”<sup>5</sup> One meaning of the verb *interpellate* in English is “to address a person in a way that presupposes a particular identification and assigns them an identity,” such as “the interpellation of a person as an Americanasian.” According to Butler, the medical interpellation that declares to an infant’s parents, “It’s a girl!” or “It’s a boy!” shifts the infant’s status from an indeterminate “it” to a gendered “she” or “he.” This act assigns the identity of girl or boy and introduces the child “into the domain of language and kinship” (*BM*, xvii). In essence, we are conscripted into gender at or even before birth; we are recruited into this system before we are aware of it.

To return to Austin’s distinction between *constative* and *performative* utterances, this particular act of interpellation is not merely *constative*. It does not simply describe or determine the biological sex of an infant on the basis of whether it has a penis or a vagina. The fact that an infant has certain physical characteristics does not automatically make it a “boy” or a “girl”. Assigning gender on the basis of physical characteristics lacks any naturalness. The distinction between the two genders—“male” and “female”—and the association of the first with the penis and the second with the vagina is neither prediscursive nor “natural.” Rather, it is an arbitrary or contingent construct that exists exclusively within the framework of discourse.

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<sup>5</sup> Butler draws this idea from Louis Althusser (1918-1990), who uses the term “interpellation” to describe the “calling” of an individual to his social and ideological position by an authority figure (see Louis Althusser, “Ideology and ideological state apparatuses (Notes towards an investigation)”, in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, Trans. Brewster B. (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1971), pp. 173-183.

Butler, in line with other poststructuralist philosophers, argues that our perception of reality is inextricably linked to language; reality itself is constituted by language. For example, only speakers of languages that distinguish between “hill” and “mountain” can and do perceive reality according to this distinction. Similarly, the distinction between man and woman, and its association with certain physical characteristics, is not a self-evident truth, but a linguistic construction. Consequently, it is not the materiality of the body that determines its gender, but the way in which this materiality is shaped and defined by language. As Butler states, “what is material never fully escapes from the process by which it is signified” (*BM*, 38). Sara Salih underscores this point, noting that “Butler is not refuting the ‘existence’ of matter, but she insists that matter can have no status outside a discourse that is always constitutive, always interpellative, always performative.”<sup>6</sup> In this context, the interpellation “It’s a boy!” or “It’s a girl!” is not merely a constative or descriptive statement; it performs the very reality it names. By invoking and repeating a recognized social convention, the interpellation “produces” the infant as a “boy” or “girl”.

This founding performative interpellation, which marks the infant’s body as male or female, functions as a guideline that determines which of the two genders the individual should embody and perform in the course of their life. For example, the interpellation “It’s a boy!” forces the “boy” to constantly “cite” or “repeat” the norms exclusively associated with male gender and thus incessantly perform his gender. In Butler’s words, the “boy” or “girl” is forced to “cite” these norms “in order to qualify and remain a viable subject” (*BM*, 177). This constitutive performative act not only defines the body as gendered, but also sets limits on what this body can and cannot do in the future. The gendered interpellation thus functions both as a framework of identity and as a restriction on the possibilities of existence.

Masculinity or femininity is not a matter of choice, but rather the result of the “forcible citation” of a norm with a

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<sup>6</sup> Salih S., *Judith Butler* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 80.

“complex historicity,” intricately tied to “relations of discipline, regulation, [and] punishment” (*BM*, 177). The performance or enactment of gender is not something a subject freely chooses; it occurs “through certain highly regulated practices” (*BM*, xii) and “under and through the force of prohibition and taboo” (*BM*, 60). The threat of ostracism or even death controls and compels “the shape of production” of the gendered subject. But, as Butler emphasizes, this does not “determine it fully in advance” (*ibid*).

### Beyond the Mere Constructivism of Gender

It has already been mentioned that the gendered subject is a construct for Butler, a position that seems to align her with the constructivist perspective. However, as she notes, this construct is not an act that “happens once and whose effects are firmly fixed” (*BM*, xviii).<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, gender performance functions through the exclusion and erasure of acts and gestures that do not fall within the realm of acceptable gender and are “strictly speaking, refused the possibility of cultural articulation” (*BM*, xvii). Those bodily forms that cannot be assigned to either of the two accepted genders, such as intersex or transgender bodies, are negated, excluded from the category of the human, and relegated to “the domain of the dehumanized and the abject”—the outcast (*GT*, 142). Naturalized gender “operates as a preemptive and violent circumscription of reality” (*GT*, xxiii). Consequently, the performative interpellation “It’s a boy!” is actually a command (“You are a boy!”) and a threat: “If you want to be a real subject with a real identity, you should behave like a boy!”

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<sup>7</sup> In fact, according to Athena Athanasiou, Butler’s perspective “marks the epistemological shift from a theory of social construction to a theory of the performative materialization of gender” (Athanasiou A., “Εισαγωγή: Υλοποιώντας το έμφυλο σώμα” [Introduction: Materializing the Gendered Body], in Butler J., *Σώματα με σημασία: Οριοθετήσεις του “φύλου” στο λόγο* [*Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”*], trans. Marketou P., Athens: Ekkremes, 2008, p. 10).

In short, constructivism often fails to account for the violent exclusions and abjections inherent in the construction of gender. Individuals who do not conform to normative gender constructs are treated as anomalies, denied subjectivity, and stripped of the possibility of a livable life. Gender functions as one of the norms that make a “subject” viable, qualifying a body “for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility” and, ultimately, as human (*BM*, xii). Failing to “do” gender “properly” often entails violent and punitive consequences. As Butler observes, “indeed, we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right” (*GT*, 178). The coercive nature of sex imposes upon individuals the obligation to perform the gender assigned to them at birth—a performance they are compelled to repeat indefinitely. Gender, Butler argues, is a “cultural fiction” (*GT*, 178), akin to religion, with harsh and violent repercussions for those who refuse to conform. We are all familiar with the denigration, bullying, violence, and exclusion of those who do not conform to the prevailing gender norms. Therefore, it is not enough to simply assert that gender is constructed; its construction actively produces both the intelligible and acceptable forms of gender, as well as the unintelligible forms that are rejected and excluded.

Identification with the normative “ghost” of male or female gender is achieved through the rejection of anything that deviates from it. As Butler notes, “the materialization of a given sex will centrally concern the regulation of identificatory practices such that the identification with the abjection of sex will be persistently disavowed” (*BM*, xiii). The “outside” implied by “abjection” acts as a “threatening specter” for the subject—a constant reminder, a “bugaboo,” that ensures the subject remains aligned with prescribed norms. The fear of the consequences of engaging in actions or gestures that contradict the assigned gender serves as a powerful deterrent against non-conforming gender practices.

For Butler, constructivism falls short when it comes to the role of a constitutive “outside” in the formation of the gendered subject. In particular, it overlooks the “constitutive force” of “exclusion, erasure, violent foreclosure, [and] abjection” both in the creation of gender identities and in the

questioning or undermining of their legitimacy (*BM*, xvii). As Butler notes, “the limits of constructivism are exposed at those boundaries of bodily life where abjected or delegitimated bodies fail to count as ‘bodies’” (*BM*, xxiv).

### Iterability and Citationality

The process of the infant’s “boyification” or “girlification” does not end with the initial performative interpellation “It’s a boy!” or “It’s a girl!” Instead, “that founding interpellation is reiterated by various authorities and at various intervals over time to reinforce [...] this naturalized effect” (*BM*, xvii). Daily life demands the constant performance of gender through specific acts and gestures—how we speak, dress, interact, and even whom we love or how we express that love. Gender is not a static effect, but a recurring and iterative one. In this context, Butler extends the concept of gender performativity by introducing the ideas of “iteration” and “citationality,” inspired by Jacques Derrida’s interpretation of J.L. Austin’s work. As Butler states in *Bodies That Matter*, “[i]t is in terms of a norm that compels a certain ‘citation’ in order for a viable subject to be produced that the notion of gender performativity calls to be rethought” (*BM*, 177).

Let us now examine what Derrida means by the terms “iterability” and “citationality.” For Austin, not all utterances in the form of performative speech acts are “felicitous.” Two key elements are crucial to the success of a performative speech act: the presence of the “right” context and the intention that animates the utterance. Thus, “a performative utterance, for example, [can] be in a peculiar way hollow or void if it is said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy.”<sup>8</sup> For instance, an actor’s declaration “I pronounce you husband and wife” cannot effect a marriage because it lacks the appropriate context required for such a performance. In his essay *Signature, Event, Context*, Derrida challenges Austin’s view by arguing that the decoupling of a performative utterance from a particular context or

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<sup>8</sup> Austin J. L., *How to Do Things with Words*, p. 22.



intention—as in the case of theatrical performances or other creative appropriations—is not a sign of “infelicity” or failure. Rather, it reveals a structural feature inherent in all linguistic signs. A sign functions as a sign precisely because its existence does not depend on a fixed context, a specific intention, or a particular sender or receiver. It can be repeated, reproduced, or appropriated across countless contexts by an infinite number of people.<sup>9</sup> A sign that could only be used once would, by definition, not be a sign. This detachment of a sign from a central, controlling context or intention allows for its infinite reinterpretation in different contexts. This process ensures that its “citation” is never merely a repetition but is always determined by difference. Derrida uses the term “iterability” to describe this inherent coupling of identity and difference in the act of citing or repeating a sign.

### **The Provocation of Gaps and Fissures through Repetition**

Derrida’s insights into “iterability” and “citationality” have proven particularly influential for Butler. According to Butler, the performance of gender norms operates through citationality and iteration. As mentioned earlier, gender performativity is not a singular act but a persistent reiteration of a gender norm—or set of norms (*BM*, xxi). Norms materialize sex through their “forcible reiteration” (*BM*, xii). This ritualized practice of iteration produces the “naturalized effect” of sex (*BM*, xix). As Butler eloquently puts it: “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (*BM*, 43–44). Reiteration stabilizes gender by creating a “gender effect,” similar to how the repetition of a sign establishes it as a sign—something cannot be a sign if it cannot be

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<sup>9</sup> Derrida J., “Signature Event Context”, translated by Alan Bass, in *Limited Inc* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p. 12. Cf. Kakoliris G., “Jacques Derrida’s Deconstruction of Western Metaphysics: The Early Years”, *Dia-noesis: A Journal of Philosophy*, 4, 2017, pp. 43–62.

repeated. At the same time, however, repetition destabilizes gender, since no iteration is ever completely identical to another. In this sense, while repetition consolidates the regularity of the norms of “sex,” it also brings this regularity into a “potentially productive crisis” (*BM*, xix).

Although the gendered self is structured by “repeated acts”, these acts lack a coherent foundation that connects them “internally” and are characterized by “occasional discontinuity”. According to Butler, “[t]he possibilities of gender transformation are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic repetition,” which reveals the illusion of an indissoluble identity as a “politically tenuous construction” (*GT*, 179). As Sara Salih observes, “hegemonic racial and sexual norms may be destabilized by subjects who do not fit neatly into the categories of white heterosexuality.”<sup>10</sup> Since gender is neither “real” nor “natural,” it remains mutable and open to revision. This existing reality of gender could be “made differently and, indeed, less violently” (*GT*, xxiii). Current gender arrangements are not inevitable and can be transformed.

### Subversive Citations

While Butler acknowledges that it is impossible to completely escape gender norms, she emphasizes that they can be changed through iterative or citational processes. When gender norms are inserted into new contexts, their meanings shift. For example, masculinity or femininity, when removed from a heterosexual context, can be “re-enacted” and “re-signified” in gay or lesbian contexts, such as in the case of butch or femme lesbians. Instead of viewing butch identity as a simple adoption of masculinity that reintegrates lesbianism into heterosexual norms, it redefines “masculinity” or “manhood” by linking it to a culturally recognized “female body.” Furthermore, the “dissonant” coexistence of masculinity with-

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<sup>10</sup> Salih S., *Judith Butler*, p. 95.

in a “female” body challenges “the very notion of an original or natural identity” (*GT* 157).

An illustrative example of the subversive aspect of iteration and citationality is also exemplified by the appropriation of the term “queer” by those very individuals against whom the term was used as a taunt, a way of incriminating, pathologizing and insulting. Through its citation, the term was detached from its original context of utterance, which was one of exclusion and denigration, resulting in a social and political re-signification that offers new possibilities of existence. In this case, a performative interpellation that had been used to exclude and dehumanize a population was able to be transformed into a linguistic sign of affirmation and resistance (*BM*, xxviii). As Butler notes: “the subject who is ‘queered’ into public discourse through homophobic interpellations of various kinds *takes up* or *cites* that very term as the discursive basis for an opposition” (*BM*, 177). A different order of values, a political affirmation came about and was acquired “from and through the very term which in a prior usage had as its final aim the eradication of precisely such an affirmation” (*BM*, 176). This example explains why “citationality” holds, for Butler, some political promise in our time (*BM*, xxviii).

In both *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*, Butler refers to parody and drag as forms of queer performance that expose the performative nature of all gender identities. Just as drag operates as an (often exaggerated) imitation of one of the sexes, the realization of gender by individuals similarly involves an act of “imitation”. Through their stylized and exaggerated performances, drag queens and drag kings do not merely replicate the femininity or masculinity of the two supposedly natural sexes. Instead, they reveal “*the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency*” (*GT*, 175). Drag is therefore not a “secondary imitation that presupposes a prior and original gender”. Rather, gender itself is “a constant and repeated attempt to imitate its own idealizations” (*BM*, 85).

The mimicry of women and men in drag demonstrates that gender is a form of obsessive, imposed imitation: “all

gender is like drag”. Drag not only mimics gender but also “dramatizes” the signifying gestures through which gender is enacted. By thematizing gender through parody, drag reveals the *performative* construction of what is often assumed to be a natural, “original, and true sex” (*GT*, 85). Drag does not reproduce a prototype; rather, it exposes the absence of one altogether, demonstrating that gender consists solely of layers of performance. As a production grounded in imitation, “gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin” (*GT*, 175). In this way, the “parodic proliferation” of gender undermines hegemonic discourse and its claims about the naturalness or essentialism of gender identities (*GT*, 176).

However, Butler acknowledges that citation is not inherently subversive. She warns that “drag may well be used in the service of both the denaturalization and reidealization of hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms” (*BM*, 85). For instance, she points to Hollywood film parodies such as *Victor/Victoria* (starring Julie Andrews), *Tootsie* (starring Dustin Hoffman), and *Some Like It Hot* (starring Jack Lemmon). In these examples, drag is appropriated within the context of “high het entertainment,” effectively neutralizing its subversive potential. As a result, the boundaries between “straight” and “non-straight” identities are reabsorbed into the dominant discourse, leaving hegemonic norms intact (*BM*, 85).

### Subject and Agency

By performatively constituting “the identity it is purported to be,” gender “is always a doing.” However, it is not the doing of a subject that “precedes the act” (*GT*, 33). Instead, “the ‘doer’ is variably constructed in and through the deed” (*GT*, 181). The gendered subject does not exist “behind” the gender expressions it performs, acting as their cause or creator. Rather, it constitutes itself as a gendered subject through these performances (*GT*, 33). In this sense, the subject is not the author but the effect of its acts. Butler builds on Foucault’s notion that regulatory power not only governs subjects

externally but also operates as the normative and regulatory force through which subjects are constituted (*BM*, xxix). A “subject” does not consciously adopt or embrace a gender norm. Instead, the enforced, repeated enactment of that norm is necessary to make someone a viable, gendered subject—that is, to make someone “become” the gendered self that they “are.” The formation of the subject thus depends “on the prior operation of legitimating gender norms” (*BM*, 177).

Butler’s conceptualization of gender identity as a product of performativity has sparked significant critical debate, particularly regarding the notions of resistance and subversion. Her framework rejects the idea of a voluntaristic subject who acts as the agent of its own actions. This raises a pressing question: How can there be resistance to prevailing gender norms—and the possibility of transforming them—if there is no subject who consciously undertakes it? More specifically, how can resistance emerge if the subject is nothing more than the creation of those norms? Where, then, does resistance come from if “there is no ‘doer behind the deed’”?<sup>11</sup>

According to Butler, the infinite process of iteration and citation creates the conditions for subversive repetition and, consequently, for agency. Even if “we”, as subjects, are inextricably linked to the discursive conventions that constitute us, this does not mean we are incapable of resisting or reformulating them. The subject’s relationship to these conventions—and their potential subversion—is not external to them. Butler rejects the idea of a universal, supra-historical, transcendental subject as an agent of action. Instead, aligning with Foucault, she argues that the subject is not only “grounded” in history and culture but also historically and culturally constituted.

The subject, traditionally understood as the origin and cause of action and the basis of knowledge, is, in fact, a thoroughly historical construct. However, this does not imply a form of historical and cultural determinism from which the subject cannot escape, as Seyla Benhabib seems to argue in her critique, when she asks: “How can one be constituted by

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<sup>11</sup> Jagger G., *Judith Butler: Sexual Politics, Social Change and the Power of the Performative*, London & New York: Routledge, 2008, p. 35.

discourse without being determined by it?”<sup>12</sup> According to Butler, the very conventions that shape the subject also provide the possibility for their subversion through processes of iteration and citation. In her response to Benhabib in “For a Careful Reading”, Butler observes: “Gender performativity involves the difficult labor of deriving agency from the very power regimes which constitute us, and which we oppose”.<sup>13</sup> Agency, therefore, does not spring from an external source but is immanent to the discursive regimes that both implicate and enable it. As Butler argues, “the practice of ‘critique’ is implicated in the very power-relations it seeks to adjudicate”.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, Butler rejects the notion of an “ontologically intact reflexivity”<sup>15</sup> or any psychic resources existing beyond the subject’s discursive constitution that could serve as the basis for resistance and subversion. Agency does not emerge from an abstract, ahistorical “quasi-transcendent self”. Instead, it resides in the signifying and resignifying possibilities inherent within discourse itself. As Butler asserts, “‘agency,’ then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition” (*GT*, 185). In this way, they shift the locus of agency from the subject to discourse, conceptualizing discourse as the “horizon of agency”.<sup>16</sup> The potential for agency depends on the capacity for resignification through the reiteration and citation of the discourses that have constituted us as the subjects we are. As previously mentioned, the path to transformation lies in those “repetitions that subvert dominant gender norms in the hope of destabilizing and displacing these regimes”.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Benhabib S., “Subjectivity, Historiography, and Politics: Reflections on the ‘Feminism/Postmodernism Exchange’”, in Benhabib S., Butler J., Cornell D., Fraser N., *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, New York & London: Routledge, 1995, p. 110.

<sup>13</sup> Butler J., “For a Careful Reading”, in Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, Nancy Fraser, *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, op. cit., p. 136.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>15</sup> Butler J., “Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of ‘Postmodernism’”, in Benhabib S., Butler J., Cornell D., Fraser N., *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, op. cit., p. 46.

<sup>16</sup> Butler J., “For a Careful Reading”, p. 135

<sup>17</sup> Jagger G., *Judith Butler*, p. 34.

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**Can ‘Ardhanarishvara’ resolve the Ontological  
Dualism of Prakṛti and Puruṣa?**  
*A Study in Non-Binary Ontology and fluid  
identity in Indian metaphysics*

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**Abstract**

In classical Indian metaphysics, particularly in the Samkhya tradition, the ontological bifurcation of Prakṛti and Puruṣa is very prevalent. This bifurcation, though crucial to Indian ontology and soteriology to explain existential queries, gives rise to persisting philosophical questions regarding the nature of the interrelation of the two. The relation between the two seems intertwined and distinct at the same time. In this context, this paper examines whether the concept of ‘Ardhanarishvara’ can be an ontological solution to this dualism, i.e., ‘*Can Ardhanarishvara resolve the Ontological Dualism of Prakṛti and Puruṣa?*’ ‘Ardhanarishvara’ -the composite deity uniting both Shiva and Shakti-defies the austere bifurcation of material and conscious aspects by illustrating the coexistence of opposites. Rather than seeing this figure as a mere piece of theological iconography, the question



turns to Ardhanarishvara as an embodiment of symbolic metaphysics. This paper is intended to provide ‘Ardhanarishvara’ as new windows to a non-binary ontology and fluid identity of understanding that remaps identity, embodiment, consciousness, and salvation.

**Keywords:** *Prakṛti, Puruṣa, Ardhanarishvara, Indian Metaphysics, Samkhya, Non-duality, Gender Philosophy, Tantric Hermeneutics*<sup>1</sup>

## I

The ancient Indian philosophical traditions are marked by sophisticated logical and metaphysical systems trying to explain the nature of the universe, reality, existence, and consciousness. One of the most prominent among these is the Samkhya system, considered to be the oldest school of thought in Indian traditions, which is marked by strict dualism and holds that there exist two fundamental and eternal principles, i.e., Puruṣa, translated as pure consciousness, and Prakṛti, as original or primordial matter underlying every existence. This dualism has profoundly influenced later Indian philosophical and theological thinking. Many times, this dualism is also symbolized and understood as the matrix of ‘Man’ and ‘Woman’ in nature. This research work is carried out in the context of understanding the nuances of masculinity and feminism in Indian philosophical traditions, with special reference to the symbol and concept of ‘Ardhanarishvara’. The research also intends to provide a solution to many metaphysical questions associated with ‘dualism’ through the lens of the concept of ‘Ardhanarishvara’. To grasp the radical potential of Ardhanarishvara as a response to ontological duality, one must first confront the metaphysical assumptions embedded in the Samkhya conception of *Prakṛti* and *Puruṣa*.

The methods used for this research are mainly qualitative, hermeneutic, and comparative, examining dualism and the figure of ‘Ardhanarishvara’ from scriptural, philosophical, and

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<sup>1</sup> The methods and approaches used to interpret and understand tantric texts and practices.

symbolic perspectives of Indian and Western thoughts. In a move to make available the linkages of early Indian texts and contemporary philosophical frameworks, the present research aims to demystify the dense meaning behind ‘Ardhanarishvara’ and how it has relevance in contemporary concerns about identity, gender, and ontology today.

### **Prakṛti, Puruṣa and and Ardhanarishvara Prakṛti and Puruṣa**

In classical Indian metaphysics, Prakṛti and Puruṣa appear as the basic metaphysical categories, especially in Samkhya philosophy propounded by Sage Kapila. Prakṛti, the original, unconscious and active source of all material existence, also referred to as *jada padārtha* (matter), is defined by its dynamic interplay of the three guṇas (qualities) -sattva (balance/equilibrium), rajas (activity), and tamas (inertia) - whose constant transformations create the world of manifestation. The following verse from Samkhya Karika says it all:

**Sanskrit Shloka (verse):**

**प्रकृत्यः सुविमर्शः सत्त्वरजस्तमांसि च।<sup>2</sup>  
उपादानं निमित्तं च समन्वयः कारणं च ते॥**

**Transliteration:**

*‘Prakṛtyaḥ suvimarsaḥ sattva-rajas-tamāṃsi ca /  
Upādānaṃ nimittaṃ ca samanvayaḥ kāraṇaṃ ca te ॥’*

**English Translation:** Prakṛti is what produces tangible effects; it comprises Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas. It is the material cause (upadana) and instrumental cause (nimitta); it is the unifier and the original cause.

Puruṣa, on the other hand, is the pure witness (*Sakshi*), a passive, unchanging consciousness untouched by the fluctuations of Prakṛti. Samkhya liberation (kaivalya) is gained when Puruṣa realizes its complete difference from Prakṛti and dis-

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<sup>2</sup> Īśvarakṛṣṇa, Sāṃkhya Kārikā 3.

identifies with her modifications, i.e, *citta-vriti-nirodha*. The following Verses from Samkhya Karika say it all:

Samkhya Karika (Verse 17)<sup>3</sup>  
 पुरुषास्तु केवलाः साक्षिणो निरपेक्षाः  
 शुद्धाप्यकर्तारः  
 भवन्ति बुद्धेर्धर्मान् प्रतिपश्यन्ति तद्भावान्॥

**Samkhya Karika Verse 17 (trans.):** The Puruṣas (selves) are many, which are untainted, being purely passive witnesses (sakṣin) free from activity. Though they are inherently pure, they transform (functions) of the intellect (buddhi) through thought, causing the illusion of engagement.

The following verse explains the connection or interplay between Prakṛti.

Samkhya Karika (Verse 18)<sup>4</sup>  
 संयोगः कारणं पुंसोमुक्तेः सैव सत्त्वानां  
 तन्निवृत्तिः कैवल्यं प्रकृतेः पुरुषस्य च॥

**Samkhya Karika Verse 18 (trans.):** The union (ostensible) of Puruṣa and Prakṛti is the cause of the experience for the individual soul and its bondage. However, when it is fully understood, it is the cause for liberation (mukti). Breaking such union is generally called ‘Kai-valya’, i.e., final liberation of both Prakṛiti and Puruṣa.

Some key points to understand from these verses are that Puruṣa is eternally pure, inactive, and only a witness (*sākṣī*), while the evolution of the entire universe is the result of Prakṛiti’s activity. These two realities are posited as eternally distinct and independent. The *Samkhya Kārikā* of Īśvarakṛṣṇa describes *Prakṛti* as the primal cause (*mulaPrakṛti*) and all evolutes (*vikāras*) - from *mahat* (intellect) down to the physical

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<sup>3</sup> Īśvarakṛṣṇa, Sāṃkhya Kārikā 17.

<sup>4</sup> Īśvarakṛṣṇa, Sāṃkhya Kārikā 18.

elements - as her manifestations. In contrast, *Puruṣa* is the “witness” (*sākṣī*) who, through its mere proximity (*sannidhāna*), triggers the evolution of *Prakṛti* without engaging in it. Misidentification or misunderstanding of the relationship between *Puruṣa* and *Prakṛti* is the cause of the soul’s bondage and release. The full understanding of *Puruṣa*’s separation from *Prakṛti* is known as *Kaivalya* (Liberation). Thus, *Puruṣa* and *Prakṛti* are fundamentally different: *Puruṣa* is a non-doer, pure consciousness (*akarta*). The dynamic principle that generates the material universe is known as *Prakṛti*, or the doer. A famous metaphor from the *Samkhya Karika*<sup>5</sup> describes this relationship: the lame man (*Puruṣa*) and the blind man (*Prakṛti*) collaborate to gain motion, though they are essentially different. This famous metaphor from the *Samkhya Karika* uses the image of a lame man and a blind man to show the connection between *Puruṣa* (pure consciousness) and *Prakṛti* (primordial matter). Despite his immobility, the lame man symbolizes *Puruṣa*, who is awake but passive. Though he is unaware, the blind man, who stands in for *Prakṛti*, can act. When they work together, the blind man bears the lame man on his shoulders, signifying *Prakṛti*’s behavior under *Puruṣa*’s direction. Their natures are eternally different, even though their experiences seem to be similar. A similar picture for understanding this metaphor is as follows:



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<sup>5</sup> Īśvarakṛṣṇa, *Sāṃkhya Kārikā*.

<sup>6</sup> "The Friendship Between the Blind and the Lame", Osho News, 2021.

**Ardhanarishvara:**

The concept of Ardhanarishvara, a composite deity encompassing both male and female characteristics, represents a powerful critique of this dualism and gestures towards an integrated and holistic view of life.

According to classical texts:

ततो ब्रह्मा हरं देवं सर्वलोकपितामहम्।<sup>7</sup>  
अर्धनारीश्वरं देवं ध्यात्वा सृष्टिमचिन्तयत्॥

**English translation:** “Then Brahma meditated upon Hara, the Lord of all worlds and the grandsire of beings, in his form as Ardhanarishvara (the Lord who is half woman), and contemplated creation.”

अर्धं नारी सदार्धं च शिवस्य परमात्मनः।<sup>8</sup>  
तस्मात्तस्योपरी व्याप्ता शक्तिरित्यभिधीयते॥  
शक्त्याविष्टस्तदा देवः ससर्ज जगतीं प्रभुः॥

**English translation:** “The woman is the ‘eternal half of Shiva’, the ultimate Self.

Therefore, it is said that Shakti pervades his upper part. The universe was thus created by the Lord, who was filled with Shakti.”

Semantically, Ardhanarishvara is ‘Ardha’ + ‘Nari’ + ‘Ishvara’. Ardha means ‘half’, Nari means ‘woman’, and Ishvara means ‘God or supreme’. Translating as “the Lord who is half woman,” Ardhanarishvara offers a singular portrayal of the synthesis of opposites, i.e. unity of ‘man and woman’. Ardhanarishvara symbolizes the inseparability and interdependence of the masculine and feminine energies; iconistically shown as a deity split vertically, with one half representing Shiva (the male principle) and the other Parvati (the female principle). This form challenges strict binaries and supports a

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<sup>7</sup> Shiva Purāṇa, Rudra-saṁhitā, Sṛṣṭi-khaṇḍa 17.

<sup>8</sup> Skanda Purāṇa, Kāśī-khaṇḍa, 35:10–11.

more complex ontology, pointing towards ‘fluid identities’.<sup>9</sup> So it acts as a great metaphysical statement about the nature of reality, and not just a theological or artistic or aesthetic figure. The following picture can be referred to as ‘Ardhanarishvara’.



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The etymology and significance of ‘Ardhanarishvara’ have their roots deeply embedded in a variety of scriptural, Puranic, and philosophical texts. The *Shiva Purana* and *Linga Purana* present accounts of the origin and meaning of the conjoined form. The *Shiva Purana* accounts for it to be said that Shiva, realizing the pivotal role played by the feminine principle in the act of creation, takes the form of Ardhanarishvara, representing the crucial role played by Shakti (the feminine power) in the cosmic order. The *Linga Purana* goes a step further by envisioning Ardhanarishvara as the primordial source from which the entire creation develops, thereby furthering the synthesis of dual principles inherent in existence. The following shlok (verse) can be referred to for better clarity:

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<sup>9</sup> The idea that an individual’s sense of self is not fixed or static, but rather changes and evolves. This can encompass various aspects of identity, including gender identity, social roles, and personal beliefs.

<sup>10</sup> "Ardhanarishvara Image", Pinterest.

Sanskrit (original):

अर्धनारीश्वरं देवं प्रणिपत्य महासुराः।<sup>11</sup>  
ततो विश्वस्य सर्गाय प्रचक्रुः स महाद्युतिः॥

Transliteration:

“*ardhanārisvaram devaṃ praṇipatya mahāsuraḥ  
tato visvasya sargāya pracakruḥ sa mahādyutiḥ*”

**English Translation:** “Having bowed to the Lord Ardhanarishvara by the Asuras (Devils), the great beings initiated the creation of the universe with great splendour.”

This Verse clearly shows that Ardhanarishvara is acknowledged as the *primal deity* who stands at the threshold of creation, symbolizing the unity and mutual interdependence of dual principles. Only after recognizing and calling upon this duality-in-unity is creation possible. In terms of philosophy, the Pratyabhijna school<sup>12</sup> of Kashmir Shaivism, in particular, resonates with the image of ‘Ardhanarishvara’. This school, which was developed by theorists such as Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta, maintains that the ultimate reality is the undivided, all-encompassing consciousness of Shiva, which creates the universe based on its own free will (svatantrya). According to this theory, the world’s apparent dualities and multiplicities are branches of the non-dual divine consciousness. The fundamental idea of the Pratyabhijna philosophy is the process of recognition, or pratyabhijna, or realizing that one is not different from Shiva. In other words, all creation is non-dual from Shiva (*Sat-chit-Anand, Truth-Consciousness-Bliss*) at the ultimate level. The awareness removes the apparent dualities, which is also consistent with Ardhanarishvara’s symbolic meaning, which holds that the male and female are not two distinct entities but rather a part of a single reality combined within them.

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<sup>11</sup> Liṅga Purāṇa, I, 88.3.

<sup>12</sup> The Pratyabhijna school of Kashmir Shaivism emphasizes "recognition" or "direct knowledge of oneself." The realization of one’s own actual nature as the divine consciousness, Shiva, is emphasized in this non-dualistic philosophy.

Indian philosophical tradition enriched by logic has some differences or investigations in Samkhya philosophy, despite its significance, because of its dualistic structure. The rigid Puruṣa-Prakṛti dichotomy raises questions about the nature of their relationship regarding consciousness and physicality. In particular, one might question how passive matter (Prakṛti) can generate action without Puruṣa's action and how passive consciousness (Puruṣa) can perceive the world without actively interacting with Prakṛti. These problems have led to a wide range of interpretations and critiques in the field of Indian philosophy. Some metaphors, like the moon's (Puruṣa) reflections in river water, make the Puruṣa believe that water is the real moon. Though metaphors don't exactly work in philosophy, and again, questions arise about how an entity that is pure consciousness can make such a mistake or blunder. To explain the dualism of Samkhya, Ardhanarishvara presents a different viewpoint, which proposes a theory that matter and consciousness are both sides of the same reality rather than opposites, as provided by Ardhanarishvara's embodiment of synthesis. The ontological frameworks of Kashmir Shaivism lend support to this integrative process. By offering a more sophisticated model of reality that consists of 36 tattvas (principles) that unite both the material and transcendent aspects, the Pratyabhijñā school explains the ontology of Samkhya. By connecting the absolute and the relative, this model explains how individual consciousness emerges from the complex universe. According to this model, Ardhanarishvara represents the union of opposites and the dynamic interplay between the static and dynamic aspects of reality, pointing to 'fluid identities'.

In contemporary philosophical thought, particularly within post-structuralist and feminist frameworks, there is a critical examination of 'binary oppositions' and 'fixed identities'. The idea that gender is a fixed or necessary identity is contested by Judith Butler's concept of 'performative gender'. According to Judith Butler,

*“Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal*



*over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being”.*<sup>13</sup>

This statement emphasizes Butler’s main argument that gender is a collection of socially controlled and culturally reinforced behaviors that, taken as a whole, give the appearance of a cohesive gendered self rather than a stable identity or characteristic. Also, she contends in ‘Gender Trouble’ that gender is a result of recurrent social performances- stylized behaviors, gestures, and conversations that gradually give the appearance of a stable identity. Accordingly, gender is something that one does and is constantly enacted within cultural norms rather than something that one is. By Butler’s own words, one can understand the above context, i.e.,

*“There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results.”*<sup>14</sup>

A contemporary contextual example from the legal domain can be referred to here for more clarity:

“Recent socio-legal changes in India are strongly reflected in this theoretical understanding. The Supreme Court of India’s 2014 landmark ruling in *NALSA vs Union of India* (2014) upheld transgender people’s constitutional rights and confirmed that gender identity is not limited to the male/female binary. The judgment emphasized the right to self-determined identity, aligning with Butler’s view that gender is a performative and socially regulated enactment rather than a fixed essence. The judgment says:

*“Recognition of transgenders as a third gender is not a social or medical issue but a human right issue.”*<sup>15</sup>

By this judgement, the Indian judiciary promoted flexible and self-identified gender realities and brought a legally recognized non-binary category into the public perception. Consequently, this choice is consistent with Ardhanarishvara’s

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<sup>13</sup> Butler, 1990: 33.

<sup>14</sup> Butler, 1990: 25.

<sup>15</sup> National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India, AIR 2014 SC 1863.

ontology, which rejects rigid gender dualisms and affirms the simultaneity and coexistence of opposites within a single entity. The legal system has started to acknowledge that gender is a lived spectrum that is performed and embodied differently by each individual, just as Ardhanarishvara unites Puruṣa and Prakṛti. The Shaiva metaphysical position that liberation arises from unity rather than separation is reflected in the Supreme Court's emphasis on dignity, identity, and nondiscrimination and points towards fluid identity." The philosophical claim that fluid identity is ontologically sound and not just politically required is reflected in and reinforced by this legal development. Thus, the symbol can be used as a metaphysical archetype for new forms of inclusivity and gender justice.

Also, another thinker and deconstructionist, Gilles Deleuze, contends that the prevalence of binary oppositions, such as self/other, identity/difference, and male/female, has profoundly influenced Western metaphysics and constrained our understanding of being and becoming. Deleuze criticizes this propensity to value identity over difference in his book 'Difference and Repetition', contending that conventional wisdom minimizes difference to a secondary or derivative idea. Deleuze promotes a philosophy of becoming, where difference is fundamental, creative, and constitutive of reality, as opposed to arguing for stability in polarities. By advocating for a non-binary, fluid ontology that connects with symbolic figures like Ardhanarishvara, who embody unity without erasing difference, he challenges the idea that identities are fixed or oppositional. In his own words –

*"Difference is not what distinguishes one thing from another but what allows one thing to be generated about another."*<sup>16</sup>

Thus, Ardhanarishvara represents a 'fluid, integrated being' that is united in co-creative balance rather than split between roles or hierarchies. It affirms the mutual interdependence and ontological unity of masculinity and femininity rather than opposing them. In this way, the representation of Ardhanarishvara foreshadows and expands upon current

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<sup>16</sup> Deleuze, 1994: 41.

criticisms of gender essentialism by providing a ‘*non-binary metaphysical model*’ in which duality is complementarity rather than contradiction. A contemporary contextual example can be referred to make the above clearer:

Through the Deep Ecology philosophy, modern ecological thinkers like Arne Naess advocate for a change in perspective from one that is anthropocentric to one that is ecocentric. In his words,

*“The well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman life on Earth have value in themselves... independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes.”<sup>17</sup>*

This is consistent with the symbolic meaning of Ardhanarishvara, which holds that nature (Prakṛti) is sacred and co-eternal with consciousness (Puruṣa), rather than being less important. As a counterbalance to the extractive logic based on binary thinking, Deep Ecology’s recognition of interdependence reflects the ontological synthesis personified by Ardhanarishvara.”

Beyond philosophical discussions, Ardhanarishvara is still relevant in today’s social and cultural contexts. The symbolism of Ardhanarishvara provides a potent framework for comprehending the interdependence and unity of disparate elements in a time when consciousness of gender fluidity, non-binary identities, and ecological interconnectedness is growing. It promotes a more inclusive and holistic worldview by challenging the dichotomous thinking that frequently underlies social and environmental issues. Additionally, a major theme in this discourse is the idea of *sahabhava*, or simultaneous becoming. It captures the idea that dual principles are dynamically interwoven, constantly influencing and being influenced by one another, rather than just coexisting. This idea, which emphasizes the relational and processual nature of reality, is consistent with the philosophical insights of both Indian traditions and modern thought.

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<sup>17</sup> Naess, 1973: 95-100.

Also, according to the *Bṛihadaranyaka Upanishad*, Puruṣa dividing himself into male and female parts is what causes this androgynous form. All life is created when these two halves copulate. Exactly – *“He was as large as a man and a woman closely embracing. He divided this self into two; hence, it came to be that husband and wife were born. Therefore, as Yājñavalkya said, this body is one half of oneself, the other half is the wife.”*<sup>18</sup>

This passage from the *Bṛihadaranyaka Upanishad* describes the primordial androgynous being (Puruṣa) who divides into male and female, and from this division, sexual union and all creation emerge. It forms an early and profound metaphysical statement on the origin of duality and the necessity of union.

The *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* also discusses Rudra, the precursor of the Puranic Shiva, the creator of everything and the source of Puruṣa (the male principle) and Prakṛiti (the female principle).

*“He is the cause, the lord of the organs. He has no progenitor or controller. He is the one God, hidden in all beings, all-pervading, the inner self of all; He presides over all actions, and dwells in all beings; He is the witness, the knower, the only one, without a second.”*<sup>19</sup>

This passage portrays Rudra as the ultimate source of all creation, encompassing both the male principle (Puruṣa) and the female principle (Prakṛiti), thus aligning philosophically with the non-dual union later symbolized in Ardhanarishvara.

In the Shaiva Tantric tradition, this metaphysical dualism is profoundly reconfigured in the symbolic form of Ardhanarishvara. Ardhanarishvara represents the radical notion that the masculine and feminine, consciousness and energy, are not two incompatible principles but are permanently merged into a single, indivisible reality, in contrast to Samkhya’s rigid division. A truth that transcends binary classifications is graphically communicated by the image of Shiva and Parvati sharing one body, with Shiva occupying the right side

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<sup>18</sup> Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad 1.4.3.

<sup>19</sup> Shvetāśvatara Upanishad 6.11.

and Parvati the left: life is a dance of inseparable polarities rather than a battlefield of opposites.

Hence, Ardhanarishvara performs a philosophical intervention into inflexible dualisms in addition to his theological role, providing a vision in which liberation is found in the profound understanding of nature rather than in retreating from it. It is noteworthy that in Shaiva metaphysics, Shiva without Shakti is inert (*shava*), emphasizing that pure consciousness is non-functional without the dynamic energy of manifestation.<sup>20</sup> Ardhanarishvara, therefore, becomes an emblem of non-binary ontology, where the real is not split into mutually exclusive substances but is understood as the co-arising of consciousness and manifestation, masculine and feminine, transcendence and immanence. The Ardhanarishvara represents a constructive and generative power. Ardhanarishvara symbolizes male and female principles cannot be separated. It conveys the unity of opposites in the universe. The male half stands for Puruṣa, and the female half is Prakṛiti. Ardhanarishvara harmonizes the two conflicting ways of life: The spiritual way of the ascetic, as represented by Shiva, and the materialistic way of the householder, symbolized by Parvati. It conveys that Shiva and Shakti are the same. A human being is not a pure unisexual organism. Each human organism bears the potentiality of both male and female sex. Neurohormonal mechanisms greatly influence sexual behavior. The modern world has come to understand the concept of “Ardhanarishwara” as it aspires to resolve the paradox of opposites into a unity, not by negation, but through positive experiences of life. The matching of opposites produces the true rhythm of life.

Seen from this lens, Ardhanarishvara transcends its religious iconography to function as a profound metaphysical symbol: a challenge to any system that absolutizes separation, and a call toward a holistic vision of being where differences do not imply division, and unity does not erase plurality. Yet this metaphysical clarity gives rise to philosophical tensions. If *Puruṣa* is entirely passive, how does it encounter *Prakṛiti*? Why does it not remain forever aloof? The metaphor of a lame man (*Puruṣa*) riding on the shoulders of a blind man (*Prakṛiti*) is often

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<sup>20</sup> Kūrma Purāṇa I.24.43.

invoked, but it merely gestures toward interaction without resolving the paradox. Moreover, if liberation (*kaivalya*) is the realization of the ontological distinctness of *Puruṣa*, then what is the existential status of their entanglement in the first place? This brings into question the very viability of dualism as an absolute ontological stance. One may argue, as many Vedantins did, that Sāṃkhya's dualism ultimately collapses under the weight of its metaphysical commitments. *Yet what if the goal is not to collapse the dualism but to reconceive it? What if the tension between Prakṛti and Puruṣa is not a metaphysical error to be corrected, but a dynamic polarity to be symbolically and ontologically integrated?* Again, the solution can be found in the concept of Ardhanarishvara.

The figure of Ardhanarishvara emerges not as a theological supplement but as a philosophical intervention. Unlike Sāṃkhya, the *Śaiva* tradition, particularly in the *Tantric*<sup>21</sup> and *Kashmir Śaiva* branches, does not maintain a strict separation between consciousness and matter. Instead, *Shiva* (aligned with consciousness) and *Shakti* (as dynamic power) are seen as co-constitutive. The *Tantras*, especially those in the *Trika* school, articulate a *non-dual* ontology where *Shiva* is not separate from *Shakti* but manifests through her. The universe is thus neither illusion (*māya*) nor inert materiality but the pulsation (*spanda*) of divine consciousness. According to Spanda Karika:

“*Na hi śaktiḥ śivāt pṛthak.*”  
“*Śakti is not different from Śiva.*”<sup>22</sup>

In this context, Ardhanarishvara ceases to be a mere anthropomorphic deity. It becomes a visual metaphysics - an icon whose very form expresses the simultaneity and mutual dependence of polarities. The male and female halves are not to be seen as static binaries but as fluid modalities or fluid

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<sup>21</sup> In the Śaiva Tantric tradition, Ardhanarishvarais not merely a theological symbol but a profound philosophical assertion of the non-duality of existence, where Shiva (consciousness) and Shakti (energy) are seen as inseparable and co-constitutive, challenging strict dualisms such as those found in classical Sāṃkhya metaphysics.

<sup>22</sup> Abhinavagupta, *Tantrāloka* I.41-45.

identities. Ardhanarishvara is not half-and-half in a numerical sense; rather, it represents a simultaneity of being-a non-binary ontology or *being-becoming ontology* that disrupts the dualistic grammar of Samkhya. Shiva is not merely the silent witness; he is manifest only through Shakti, just as Shakti has no form without Shiva. Their division is conceptual; their unity is ontological.

One finds similar echoes in the *Pratyabhijna* philosophy.<sup>23</sup> Of Kashmir, especially in the works of Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta. According to Abhinavagupta, the supreme reality (*Param-Shiva*) is not an inert absolute but a self-luminous consciousness (*citi*) that wills, manifests, conceals, and reabsorbs the universe through its divine play (*līlā*). The dichotomy between observer and observed, knower and known, can be overcome not by reducing one to the other but by recognizing their shared origin in conscious power. In this schema, *Prakṛti* and *Puruṣa* are not separate substances but aspects of the same divine unfolding.

What Ardhanarishvara does, then, is to dramatize this ontological insight in visual and symbolic form. The left and right, the soft and the severe, the receptive and the projective, the adorned and the ascetic - all coexist in a figure that is not schizophrenic but integrated. The unity is not imposed; instead, it is inherent. In other words, it is not a fusion of opposites but the recognition that opposition itself is a limited perspective. Moreover, the *symbolism* of Ardhanarishvara allows for a critique of rigid gender binaries. While the figure is traditionally depicted as a combination of male and female bodies, its philosophical force lies in its non-duality. Gender here becomes a modality of expression; it is not a fixed and rigid identity. This resonates with Judith Butler's argument that gender is performative, not essential. Ardhanarishvara anticipates such a view by embodying the performative simultaneity

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<sup>23</sup> It emphasizes the recognition of one's true divine nature, which is ultimately Shiva. It proposes that liberation (moksha) is achieved through self-recognition, not by becoming something new, but by removing the veils that obscure our inherent divine potential.

of gendered expressions. The figure does not oscillate between man and woman; it is both, and neither, and more. It is:

चम्पेयगौरार्धशरीरकायै कर्पूरगौरार्धशरीरकाय।  
धम्मिल्लकायै च जटाधराय नमः शिवायै च नमः शिवाय॥

**English translation:** “Salutations to Her whose half-body is of the color of champaka flowers (golden-yellow), and to Him whose half-body is as fair as camphor.

Salutations to Her with well-arranged hair (in a braid), and to Him who bears matted locks.

Salutations to Sivā (the goddess) and salutations to Siva (the god).’<sup>24</sup>

The two halves of Ardhanarishvara are described in this verse in a poetical and devotional manner: The left side, which is usually connected to Pārvatī, is described as having braided hair and a champaka color, which is golden. The camphor-white right side (usually Siva) has matted hair (jaṭā).

In Indian philosophical aesthetics (*rasa* theory), this simultaneity also reflects the principle of *Sringara* (mother of all other *rasas*), the erotic as the unity of opposites - a *rasa* that includes both union and longing. Abhinavagupta, in his *Locana* and *Tantrāloka*, emphasizes the aesthetic experience (*rasa*) as a path to recognizing one’s identity with supreme consciousness. Just as in art, the viewer transcends the duality of subject and object, in *Ardhanarishvara*, the metaphysical viewer is invited to transcend the binaries of self and other, consciousness and matter. At a metaphysical level, therefore, *Ardhanarishvara* is not a compromise between *Prakṛti* and *Puruṣa* but a reimagining of their relation. It represents what one might call a *differentiated unity*, not a homogenization but a co-penetration. In this vision, *Puruṣa* is not liberated from *Prakṛiti* by isolating itself but by recognizing *Prakṛiti* as its dynamic expression. This is not the Samkhya goal of detachment but the *Shaiva* ideal of *samāvesa* - immersion, re-integration, re-cognition (*pratyabhijñā*). Such a metaphysics also offers an

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<sup>24</sup> Ardhanārīśvara Stotra, verse 2



ecological insight. The strict separation of spirit and matter, self and world, has often led to the instrumentalization of nature. Contrarily, Ardhanarishvara ontology views nature as divine manifestation rather than as dead matter, and as self rather than as other. Because of its unity, Prakṛti is revered. With its proposal for a relational, respectful, and participatory way of living in the world, this viewpoint has important ecological implications. In an era where binary thinking is increasingly being questioned in the fields of gender and identity, as well as epistemology, ethics, and political theory, Ardhanarishvara is a premodern yet remarkably contemporary figure.

## II

### Philosophical reflections on duality across world traditions and Ardhanarishvara

The imagery of Ardhanarishvara signifies not just theological completeness but an ontological structure: all phenomena arise through the interaction of complementary forces. Shiva alone is inert without Shakti; Shakti without Shiva lacks direction and consciousness. Together, they constitute being itself. This symbolic duality necessitates comparison with related philosophical ideas from various philosophical traditions. This section of the paper is dedicated to the comparison. An analysis of this kind identifies important similarities and differences that highlight the unique depth of the Ardhanarishvara doctrine.

- 1) The ancient Chinese philosophy of **Yin and Yang**, foundational to Daoist metaphysics, is perhaps the most immediate cross-cultural analogue. The *Dao De Jing* explains that:

*“The Dao produced One; One produced Two; Two produced Three; Three produced all things. All things carry the Yin and embrace the Yang.”*<sup>25</sup>

In this context, the masculine (Yang) and feminine (Yin) are dynamic, interdependent forces rather than moral opposites.

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<sup>25</sup> Laozi, *Dao De Jing* §42.

Each creates, defines, and constrains the other; neither is possible without the other. The universe's many forms are created by the interaction of Yin and Yang. Yin and Yang are regarded as co-eternal and co-creative, much like Shiva and Shakti. The subtlety, however, is in the structural contrast: the Shaiva conception sees Shiva as an ultimate, immutable consciousness with Shakti as its inseparable dynamism, whereas Daoism stresses the fluid, ever-shifting balance of forces without a fixed ontological anchor. As a result, Ardhanarishvara proposes a unifying consciousness at the root of opposites, providing a deeper metaphysical basis than Daoism's more processual dualism.

2) Through Love (Philia) and Strife (Neikos), **Empedocles** introduced the concept of cosmic dualism to Greek philosophy. All change in the universe is explained by these two forces, which alternately bring the four elements—earth, water, air, and fire—together and drive them apart. According to him,

*“First of all, there was Love among the elements, and Strife as well; and these have never ceased their motion among them.”<sup>26</sup>*

Empedocles' 'Love' and 'Strife' are not co-existent within a single being, even though they roughly represent the idea of basic dualistic principles. Rather, they have an external effect on matter. In contrast, Ardhanarishvara internalizes both concepts into a single, cohesive subjectivity; this is a more personal and ontological duality as opposed to a merely cosmological one.

3) The **Platonic tradition**, too, offers a relevant comparison. In the *Symposium*, Aristophanes recounts the idea that originally human beings were spherical creatures, each comprising two beings, who were split apart by the gods. Ever since, human beings have sought to reunite with their lost halves.

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<sup>26</sup> Empedocles, DK B17. Cf. Kaluđerović, 2023.

*“Each of us, then, is a ‘matching half’ of a human whole... and each of us is always seeking the half that matches him.”<sup>27</sup>*

While this idea emphasizes longing and incompleteness, Ardhanarishvara posits completeness within the being itself. Unlike the Platonic myth of separation and yearning, Ardhanarishvara embodies a primordial, unbroken unity.

The wholeness of hybrid embodiment is being affirmed more and more in contemporary ethical discourse, whereas Platonic dualism highlights the yearning for lost halves. The UN and other international human rights organizations have defended the dignity of intersex people and fought against medical procedures that are not consented to. In the UN’s own words,

*“Intersex children are often subjected to irreversible and harmful medical practices in an attempt to ‘normalize’ them. Such practices can cause permanent physical and psychological harm.”<sup>28</sup>*

A binary metaphysics that is unable to accept ontological ambiguity is reflected in this worry. In contrast, the picture of Ardhanarishvara celebrates the union of the spiritual and biological polarities as wholeness rather than illness. The deity argues that embodied difference can lead to unity, providing a metaphysical counterargument to medical essentialism.

4) Turning to **Christian theology**, one finds less conceptual room for the integration of male and female principles within God. Nevertheless, in Gnostic traditions, there are intriguing parallels. The Gnostic text *Pistis Sophia* describes Sophia (Wisdom) as a feminine emanation from the divine. Some Valentinian Gnostics envisioned the Pleroma (the divine fullness) as composed of paired male-female aeons, such as Christ and Sophia, whose union reflects a divine harmony. One Gnostic source states:

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<sup>27</sup> Plato, *Symposium* 191d.

<sup>28</sup> United Nations Human Rights Office, 2015.

*“From the union of the male and the female aeons there came forth the Fullness, the Pleroma.”*<sup>29</sup>

Though ultimately rejected by orthodox Christianity, this vision mirrors, to some extent, the necessity of both masculine and feminine energies in the divine realm, echoing ideas found in the conception of Ardhanarishvara. However, again, the distinction remains: Gnostic dualism often treats the material (associated with the feminine) as inferior to the spiritual (masculine), while Ardhanarishvara asserts no such hierarchy. Shakti is not the degraded material world but the living owner of consciousness itself.

5) In **Persian philosophy**, particularly within Zoroastrianism, dualism appears in the form of Ahura Mazda, the god of light and order, versus Angra Mainyu (Ahri-man), the destructive spirit of chaos. This is a dualism of good and evil, sharply opposed and cosmically antagonistic. As the *Avesta* states:

*“Truly, there are two primal Spirits, twins, renowned to be in conflict. In thoughts and words and deeds, one is the better and the other the bad.”*<sup>30</sup>

In contrast, Ardhanarishvara’s duality is not ethical or oppositional but existential and creative. It expresses a vision where Shiva and Shakti are coessential, mutually sustaining, and unified in a harmonious whole, rather than being in conflict. Their duality signifies integration, not division.

Thus, in comparing Ardhanarishvara to world philosophies, several conclusions emerge. First, while many traditions recognize duality—whether cosmic, ethical, or metaphysical—few internalize it as radically and harmoniously as Ardhanarishvara does. Second, Ardhanarishvara transcends mere opposition by depicting duality as an inseparable, positive unity rather than a tension or conflict. Finally, compared to Samkhya’s rigid dualism, Ardhanarishvara presents a more dynamic and relational ontology, in which the two principles are eternally conjoined in a creative interplay. This vision ultimately

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<sup>29</sup> “Valentinian Exposition”, in Robinson, 1990: 589-593. Cf. Griva-Dendrinos, 2023.

<sup>30</sup> Yasna 28-34 (Insler, 1975: 31).

suggests a metaphysics of intimacy and balance—a world where opposites do not destroy but complement one another, and where the deepest truth of being lies not in isolation but in union.

### III

To investigate the philosophical potential of Ardhanarishvara as a metaphysical resolution to the dualism of *Prakṛti* and *Puruṣa*, a plural methodology is required - one that honors the symbolic density of the image while maintaining philosophical rigor. The challenge lies in approaching Ardhanarishvara not as a mythic relic or religious icon but as an ontological proposition - an embodied metaphor that performs philosophy. This necessitates an interdisciplinary approach: part hermeneutic, part phenomenological, part comparative, and part historically grounded in Indian metaphysics. A hermeneutic reading allows us to situate Ardhanarishvara within its textual and iconographic context, notably in the *Shiva Purana*, *Linga Purana*, and *Skanda Purana*, where the emergence of the deity is narrated as the union of *Shiva* and *Pārvatī*, signifying the non-duality of *Puruṣa* and *Prakṛti*. But beyond these mythic narrations, we also find philosophical extrapolations in *Āgamic* texts and later Tantric literature, which articulate the *non-separability* of these principles in cosmology and soteriology. Phenomenologically, the icon of Ardhanarishvara may be seen as a *phenomenon* that exceeds its form. It demands not merely to be looked at but to be *beheld*, to be internalized. The *darsana* of Ardhanarishvara is not only visual but existential. The viewer is implicated in its dual unity; one is not outside it but within its polarity. This is evident in the liturgical practices and devotional meditations where the aspirant does not worship the male or female aspect separately, but as a simultaneous recognition of both. Here, we see an enactment of *advaita* not as an abstract metaphysical claim, but as a lived non-binary consciousness. At a comparative level, the metaphor of androgyny or gender duality is not unique to Indian thought. One finds it in Plato's *Symposium*, in Aristophanes' myth of the

original double-beings, as well as in the alchemical *coniunctio oppositorum* of the Western esoteric tradition. Carl Jung interpreted such symbols as archetypes of the integrated psyche - the *anima* and *animus* in union. Yet what makes Ardhanarishvara philosophically unique is its refusal to psychologize this union. It is not merely inner balance or psychological harmony. It is ontological simultaneity - an assertion that Being itself is not binary but intermodal, co-creative. The methodological emphasis, therefore, must fall on the symbolic itself, not as ornament or embellishment, but as a site of epistemic legitimacy. In Indian aesthetic theory, *dhvani* (resonance or suggestion) is regarded as more powerful than *vācya* (denotative meaning). The symbol of Ardhanarishvara operates through *dhvani*. It does not say; it suggests. It does not argue; it embodies. The challenge for the philosopher, then, is not to decode it into propositional logic, but to let it *displace* the need for such logic in certain modes of knowing.

In this sense, the method employed here is also an *epistemic decolonization*. Much of contemporary ontology remains steeped in categories inherited from Western metaphysics - substance, essence, form, matter, dualism, monism. But the Indian metaphysical imagination offers other categories - *tattva*, *bhāva*, *Shakti*, *liṅga*, *spanda*, *maya* - each carrying layers of implication that challenge Cartesian bifurcations. The symbol of *Ardhanarishvara*, rooted in these indigenous categories, proposes an alternate metaphysical grammar. One where duality is not necessarily contradiction; where unity is not sameness; where the One is not an erasure of the Many. The significance of this symbolic-philosophical approach is manifold.

First, it provides a way to think beyond binary oppositions, not just in metaphysics, but in ethics, identity, and epistemology. The modern world is marked by dualisms: mind and body, reason and emotion, man and woman, self and other, nature and culture. The impulse to resolve these oppositions has often led to the dominance of one pole - reason over emotion, man over woman, culture over nature. Ardhanarishvara suggests another possibility: the co-arising of difference and unity, not as dialectical resolution, but as ontological intimacy. Second, this approach recuperates the philosophical value of

image and myth. Too often, philosophy has privileged the conceptual over the symbolic, the rational over the intuitive. But in traditions such as Tantra, image and form are not distractions from truth but disclosures of it. The body of Ardhanarishvara is a metaphysical text, a *sarira vakhyam* (bodily commentary), revealing that *prakasa* (illumination) and *vimarsa* (reflective awareness) are not separate but co-originating. This has implications for pedagogy, for philosophy as a lived practice, and for the role of aesthetic experience in philosophical knowing. Third, and most crucially, this symbolic resolution has consequences for how we understand *mokṣa* or liberation. In Samkhya, liberation is the cessation of contact between *Puruṣa* and *Prakṛti*. In Advaita, it is the realization of the non-dual *Brahman*. But in *Ardhanarishvara*, liberation is not escape from the world but recognition of its divine polarity. This is closer to the Tantric ideal of *jīvanmukti*, where one attains liberation while still embodied, not by denying the world, but by divinizing it. *Prakṛti* is not to be overcome, but embraced as *Shakti*. *Puruṣa* is not to detach, but to immerse in recognition.

Thus, the results of this investigation imply that Ardhanarishvara offers more than just a theological symbol; it offers a conceptual revolution—a symbolic metaphysics that undermines ontological dualism through form rather than argument. It is a graphic thesis about how polarity is interdependent. Ardhanarishvara sees an embrace where Samkhya sees resistance. Symbols imply simultaneity where logic requires separation. This is a philosophical strength rather than a weakness; it is a gateway to a metaphysics of intimacy, inclusion, and interbeing.

Such a vision is desperately needed in a time of metaphysical, political, and gendered polarization. Philosophers are not only called to criticize binary thinking, but also to unveil what is beyond binary terms. Ardhanarishvara does not provide us with a blueprint; it also offers a mirror that allows us to see not half.

### **Fluid Identity in Indian Thought: Beyond Essentialism**

Essentialist metaphysical categories have long been criticized in Indian philosophy, especially in the non-dual Shaiva and Shakti traditions. According to the Kashmir Shaiva thinkers, particularly Abhinavagupta, reality is a dynamic unfolding of consciousness (spanda) that is constantly moving and never static. Shiva and Shakti, the knower and the known, are ultimately separated by a conceptual abstraction rather than an ontological split. Similarly, despite coming from a Buddhist background, Nagarjuna's Madhyamaka<sup>31</sup> Philosophy offers notable similarities. By arguing that all phenomena are empty (sunya) of self-nature, Nāgārjuna challenges the concept of svabhava (intrinsic essence). Existence is relational, dependent on other existents, and thus fundamentally fluid. The Ardhanarishvara icon can be seen as a Shaiva-symbolic corollary to this insight: neither masculine nor feminine exists in isolation; each finds identity through relational integration. Thus, fluid identity is not a modern invention but is deeply embedded in Indian metaphysical imagination.

### **Post-Structuralism and the Challenge to Binaries**

In Western philosophical developments, thinkers like Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, and Judith Butler dismantled binary logics that had long structured Western metaphysics. Deleuze's critique of the "arborescent" (tree-like) model of thought in favor of a "rhizomatic" model emphasizes multiplicity, non-linearity, and interconnectedness. Butler's notion of gender performativity denies any stable, pre-discursive essence to gendered identity. These critiques resonate with the figure of Ardhanarishvara. The half-male, half-female form is not a compromise between two fixed identities; it is a destabilization of the very notion of fixed identity. It performs gender, not by choosing sides, but by collapsing the frame within which such

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<sup>29</sup>Meaning "Middle Path" in Sanskrit, is a Mahayana Buddhist school of philosophy founded by Nagarjuna. It emphasizes the concept of śūnyatā, or emptiness, which signifies that all phenomena, including concepts and



sides are constructed. Moreover, in Deleuzian terms, Ardhanarishvara could be seen as a “becoming,” a continuous movement between polarities rather than a static being. In the figure’s body, masculine and feminine cease to be categories of essence and become modalities of expression within a singular field of being.

### **Ardhanarishvara as Performative Ontology**

Beyond simply embodying the fluid integration of Prakṛti and Puruṣa, Ardhanarishvara can be interpreted as enacting a performative ontology. This is an ontology where being is not a fixed substrate but an ongoing performance, an emergent relationality. The very split in the figure - the visual contrast of Shiva and Shakti - is not an ontological assertion of difference but a dramatization of relationality. As Butler suggests regarding gender, repetition and performance are the means through which identity materializes. This view is also upheld by Alok Vaid-Menon, a gender non-conforming artist and activist, who describes identity as a performance rather than an essence:

*“I am a work of art, not biology... I am not a man or woman—I am an experience.”<sup>32</sup>*

The non-binary ontology of becoming that Deleuze articulated and that the Ardhanarishvara iconography foreshadowed is embodied in their performances. Alok’s expression defies categorization, confirming what Ardhanarishvara portrays: identity as simultaneity, not subtraction; as co-presence, not opposition. This is similar to Shiva and Shakti sharing one body without dissolution. Such activism is not far from the image of Ardhanarishvara, which provides the metaphysical foundation for lived opposition to essentialism. Similarly, Ardhanarishvara performs the eternal becoming of existence, where the polarity of principles is neither eradicated nor ossified but constantly enacted. The metaphysical implication is profound: the world is not a static assembly of self-contained essences but a dance (līlā) of mutually constitutive forces.

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<sup>32</sup> Vaid-Menon, 2020: 15-27.

### **Toward a Non-Binary Indian Ontology**

The classical Indian systems, particularly Advaita Vedanta<sup>33</sup> and Kashmir Saivism already resists binary divisions at the deepest level. Brahman is beyond all dualities; Shiva is both transcendent and immanent; Shakti is both form and formlessness. Ardhanarishvara symbolizes this non-binary ontology visually and symbolically. It challenges the Samkhya rigidity without abandoning the insight that relationality is constitutive of existence. Prakṛti and Puruṣa are not eliminated but re-understood as mutually informing modalities of a single ontological continuum. In this vision, binary distinctions - male and female, spirit and matter, self and other - are provisional, functional, and relational, but not absolute. Reality is a tapestry of becoming, a co-arising (sahabhava) forces that never stand still.

This insight has immediate consequences for how we think about liberation (mokṣa). Mokṣa is not the flight from Prakṛti into Puruṣa (as Samkhya might propose) but the recognition that Prakṛti and Puruṣa are interwoven manifestations of the same divine play.

### **The Power of the Image**

Ardhanarishvara operates at the level of dhvani (suggestive meaning) rather than vācya (literal meaning). The image invites intuitive, participatory knowledge rather than purely discursive analysis. This is congruent with Abhinavagupta's understanding of aesthetics (rasa) as a mode of non-dual realization. In the aesthetic experience, the distinction between subject and object dissolves; similarly, in the darsana (vision) of Ardhanarishvara, the viewer participates in the dissolution of ontological binaries. The epistemological implication is striking: symbolic imagery can carry metaphysical knowledge as profoundly as rational discourse. Seeing becomes knowing; participating becomes being. Consequences for Modern Philosophy Ardhanarishvara's metaphysics offers an approach to thinking that acknowledges diversity while avoiding

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polarization. It is a vision of embodied transcendence, dynamic unity, and relational multiplicity. The symbolic-metaphysical insights of Ardhanarishvara provide a desperately needed alternative in a time of identity politics, ecological crises, and divisive discourses. They suggest a way of being in which fluidity is not instability but vitality, unity is not sameness, and difference is not division. Thus, Ardhanarishvara is more than just a mythological artifact; he is a living philosophical idea that stimulates, enlightens, and challenges modern thinking.

### **Conclusion: Toward an Ontology of Relational Being**

A radically integrative view of life is suggested by the philosophical study of Ardhanarishvara as a solution to the ontological dualism present in Prakṛti and Puruṣa. Unlike the conventional systems, like Samkhya, which maintain an eternally rooted division between matter and consciousness, Ardhanarishvara proposes a system in which opposing forces are dynamically and eternally interconnected rather than antagonistic. This syncretism is a basic ontological claim that being is relational, fluid, and co-constituted; it has more than just a theological appeal. The metaphysical assumption that transcendence of embodiment or withdrawal from the world is the path to liberation is defied by Ardhanarishvara. Rather, it implies that authentic liberation (*Kaivalya*) is through the acknowledgment of the sacred interplay between the poles of being. Shiva and Shakti are not two; they are not one; they are the co-unfolding of unity in difference, or we can say difference in unity and unity in difference, i.e., *Bheda-Abheda*.<sup>34</sup> The image of Ardhanarishvara, its smooth fusion of the masculine and feminine, the transcendent and immanent, is the ontological intimacy, presenting an image where duality's very tension is the site of its overcoming.

By bridging Indian metaphysical understanding with post-structuralist conceptions of identity and relationality, this

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<sup>34</sup> In a metaphysical sense, the reality is both unity and difference within itself. Here, this word is not taken exactly in the sense of the Vedantic tradition.

research positions Ardhanarishvara as a symbol that strongly resonates with modern discourse. In an intellectual environment that is more attuned to the limitations of binary thinking within gender, politics, epistemology, and ecology-Ardhanarishvara offers a model of thinking beyond oppositional structures. Its thinking does not facilitate homogenization or the erasure of differences, but instead facilitates the acknowledgment of difference as a type of relational unity, a sacred dance, and not an opposition.

The philosophical importance of aesthetic and symbolic modes of knowledge is also reaffirmed in this analysis. Ardhanarishvara's mythological and visual power transcends simple decoration and engages in metaphysical inquiry; it is a unique form of metaphysical epiphany. By interacting with Ardhanarishvara, one actively participates in an existential recognition of reality's non-duality rather than merely reflecting on a religious icon. The divine vision appears here as an ontological and epistemological phenomenon.

Ardhanarishvara invokes a metaphysical transition: from fixed being to fluid becoming, from identity to co-arising, and from substance to relation. It invites us to view the world through a lens of greater unity rather than distinction, where Shiva is Shakti and Shakti is Shiva-not in union, but in a vibrant, imaginative dialogue. Therefore, the representation of Ardhanarishvara in Indian philosophy not only resolves an old philosophical conundrum but also offers a profound outlook for the future: a metaphysical understanding of relational being, an acceptance of unity in diversity, and an exhortation to live in a way that promotes our understanding, liberation, and way of living within the sacred fabric of existence itself. Men as women's complements and women as the complement of men at the utmost level. One needs to understand that the two are the faces of the same coin. Hence, Ardhanarishvara can be seen as the solution to find a way between the dual metaphysical philosophies. The image below says it all:



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<sup>35</sup> "Puruṣa and Prakṛiti", Digital Plus

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## Manosphere and hashtag feminism: Highlighting aspects of digital public discourse on gender relations

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### **Abstract**

The article seeks to critically examine two distinct yet interconnected premises of digital reality nowadays which are highly indicative trends in the contemporary field of gender and gender relations; i.e., manosphere and hashtag feminism. The manosphere, as a rather safe digital space for the construction and emergence of hybrid forms of masculinity that further complicate the debate on male hegemony, is directly linked to contemporary men's rights activists, the so-called incels. Conversely, hashtag feminism, a popular online protest tactic against gender inequality, sexist practices and forms of gender-based violence, is linked to a number of claims about the characteristics of modern feminist action on social media. Despite their emergence within the scientific community, primarily in the context of feminist sociology, and the heated debates they have provoked in the context of digital public discourse, these phenomena have not yet received significant attention from philosophical thought.

**Keywords:** *manosphere, incels, hashtag feminism, sexism, gender relations*



## Introduction

In the context of the broader discussion on the forms of sexism in late-modern reality and the relevant debate in the digital public sphere regarding the demands for their transcendence, several phenomena emerge that are highly indicative of the contemporary trends in the field of gender and gender relations. The present paper seeks to undertake a critical examination of two distinct yet concomitant premises that are extant in the contemporary digital environment; namely those of manosphere and hashtag feminism. These contemporary phenomena, although having been highlighted in the scholarly community, primarily in the context of feminist sociology, and having been the subject of fierce controversy in digital public discourse, they have nevertheless not been extensively discussed from a philosophical perspective. The article thus seeks to critically analyse the aforementioned concepts, with a particular focus on the ideological constructs regarding women, while undertaking a preliminary philosophical exploration of their ontological foundations.

## Understanding the premises of manosphere

The manosphere can be defined as a set of digital sites and groups where men exchange views on various topics, primarily contemporary women and gender relations. As Ging, Lynn and Rosati have argued, this space is a ‘toxic brand of digital men’s rights activism’.<sup>1</sup> The manosphere has been the subject of considerable criticism from feminist thought and practice, who have accused it of being a particularly dangerous digital/social phenomenon. On the one hand, the manosphere has moved away from traditional family law rhetoric, men’s rights and mental health; on the other hand, it has adopted a more hostile, violent, sexist, racist and homophobic discourse, through which a gross misogyny is further encouraged. Concurrently, it appears to engender the conditions for deviant, even criminal, behaviour on the part of lonely or es-

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<sup>1</sup> Ging D., Lynn T. & Rosati P., 2020: 838.

tranged men.<sup>2</sup> To illustrate this point, consider the analysis of Jones, Trott and Wright on the case of the autonomist group with members mainly from North America and Europe, Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW).<sup>3</sup> This analysis demonstrated that in these spaces, an unadulterated misogynistic discourse is used that, under other circumstances, could act as a repellent to normalise overtly anti-feminist attitudes. Furthermore, it revealed an attempt to incorporate elements of rational thought into their members' rhetoric through the deliberate and often distorted and/or falsified allusion of scientific, historical and philosophical arguments.<sup>4</sup>

In a similar vein, the research conducted by Ging, Lynn and Rosati on the propagation of manosphere rhetoric in diverse digital environments, including Urban Dictionary – a digital repository of colloquial expressions and idioms in English – has revealed a persistent and pervasive presence of anti-feminist and misogynistic linguistic elements within contemporary vernacular discourse.<sup>5</sup> On this basis, Jane's assertion regarding the significance of directing public and scholarly attention towards gendered hate speech propagated digitally is both valid and relevant.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, it is imperative to undertake a comprehensive study of this phenomenon, encompassing the language employed, irrespective of its abhorrent nature or its transgression of established 'limits of public discourse'. The necessity to address this issue directly, as articulated by Jane, pertains to the potential for "unexpurgated ugliness", stemming from the numerous avenues for self-replication attributable to the anonymity of users, the pervasive dissemination of hate speech within the digital domain, and its overtly deleterious character, which would not be countenanced in other contexts.<sup>7</sup> This finding lends further credence to the hypothesis that a pervasive social sentiment hostile to women is deeply entrenched, and furthermore, that

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<sup>2</sup> Farrell T. et al., 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Jones, C., Trott V. & Wright S., 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Jones, C., Trott V. & Wright S., 2020: 1917.

<sup>5</sup> Ging D., Lynn T. & Rosati P., 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Jane E.A., 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Jane E.A., 2014: 567.

gendered digital discourse of this nature has not yet garnered the requisite public attention.

All the above constitute aspects of a phenomenon that has been designated ‘gender trolling’. This is defined as a distinct and identifiable form of aggressive online behaviour, with its primary focus being its overtly anti-feminist and, in many cases, misogynistic character.<sup>8</sup> In this context, Massanari analyses the most emblematic cases of exploitation of the digital environment for the expression and dissemination of sexist and abusive discourse and content against women.<sup>9</sup> These include #Gamergate, a campaign of systematic harassment of women and minorities engaged in online gaming in 2014, and “The Fapping”, a case of dissemination of illegally obtained sexual material featuring celebrities on cyber platforms in the same year. She characterises these cases as ‘toxic technocultures’ on the basis that they are defined by an aggressive attitude towards the Other and characterised by an outdated and myopic reading of theories of evolutionary biology; an approach that forms the basis for the perception of masculinity as a “peculiar form of rationality”.<sup>10</sup>

It is on the basis of the aforementioned that Banet-Weiser and Miltner rightly argue that the patriarchal trends in the digital environment in general should not be treated separately, but as a unified totality that, overall, makes anti-feminist and often misogynistic ideas, attitudes and behaviours increasingly popular.<sup>11</sup> In her seminal study, Ging demonstrated the importance of the nexus between technological capabilities and social media, which engender a secure environment conducive to the evolution of hybrid manifestations of masculinity.<sup>12</sup> These, in turn, serve to further obfuscate the discourse surrounding male hegemony. Of particular pertinence in this context is the utilisation of the renowned concept of the ‘blue and red pill’ from Lana and Lilly Wachowski’s iconic film “The Matrix” (1999). In this cine-

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<sup>8</sup> Mantilla K., 2013: 563.

<sup>9</sup> Massanari A., 2017: 329-330.

<sup>10</sup> Massanari A., 2017: 333.

<sup>11</sup> Banet-Weiser S. & Miltner K.M., 2016: 173.

<sup>12</sup> Ging D., 2019.

matic work, the protagonist is presented with the option to select between two pills; the blue pill, which symbolises the acquiescence to a life of illusion, and the red pill, which signifies the unveiling of a ‘real reality’ that is, by its very nature, repugnant. As Ging emphasises, the prevailing rhetoric and philosophy of the red pill, which is constantly invoked by incels as a general way of thinking, is used as a common metaphor in order to ‘awaken’ men from what is perceived as the fallacious, deceptive and ultimately pernicious ideology of feminism.<sup>13</sup> The objective is to unify all informal communities and individual users of the manosphere in opposition to the threat of being indoctrinated by contemporary feminist discourse.

Prominent in the manosphere are the contemporary men’s rights activists, the so-called ‘incels’ (a neologism derived from the initials of ‘involuntary celibacy’, the condition that characterises the informal members of this digital subculture). In the opinion of incels, the voluntary or involuntary abstinence from sexual relations that they currently experience can be attributed to the perceived failure of contemporary women to meet the standards set by incels themselves. This perceived failure is particularly salient in the context of an unbridled sexual liberation and pervasive sexualisation, as well as the strengthening of feminist ideology, all of which are objects of incels’ opposition. Bratich and Banet-Weiser’s study posits that the incels community is associated, among other things, with the failure of the highly popular community of pick-up artists (i.e., ‘experts’ in teaching how to seduce a woman) to fulfil its initial promises and expectations that learning effective practices in flirting would bring the coveted erotic and sexual ‘conquests and successes’.<sup>14</sup>

A consequence of all these factors is a peculiar complication of the commonly accepted, so far, association of power and domination with the notion of ‘hegemonic masculinity’.<sup>15</sup> In particular, incels, who self-identify as ‘beta males’ (betas), attempt to challenge the monological articulation of masculin-

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<sup>13</sup> Ging D., 2019: 640.

<sup>14</sup> Bratich J. & Banet-Weiser S., 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Connell R.W., 2005; Connell R. & Messerschmidt J.W., 2005.

ity as substituted in the case of dominant males. Along with feminists and social rights advocates, these males are held responsible for the condition they themselves experience, namely the deprivation of sexual and other pleasures.<sup>16</sup> The claims regarding the marginalisation and disadvantage of beta males in relation to dominant forms of masculinity must be rejected on the basis that, as Ging argues, it is more likely to be a case of hybrid masculinities whose self-victimisation allows them to distance themselves from contemporary hegemonic masculinity while, at the same time, using, as they see fit, existing gendered hierarchies of power and inequality in the digital world.<sup>17</sup>

As a tangential remark, it is evident that Ging's methodology is congruent with Connell's theoretical framework. According to the eminent Australian sociologist, hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the establishment of a gendered practice that embodies the currently accepted response to the legitimacy of patriarchy. This ensures (or is perceived to ensure) male dominance and female subordination, whilst controlling a hierarchy of masculinities that is established in such a manner as to maintain these gendered relations.<sup>18</sup> This is the reason why hegemonic masculinity exerts its dominance not only over women, but also over 'subordinate masculinities' (i.e. homosexual men). However, it is also an 'unstable construction' that frequently gives rise to contentious disputes regarding what constitutes the 'right masculine' way for a man to live, while also providing a means of exploring how men participate in the ideological structures that support and reproduce women's subordination.<sup>19</sup> Despite the fact that hegemonic masculinity does not appear to be the most common form of masculinity performed and practised, it is nevertheless supported by the majority of men who benefit from the total subordination of women. As an interest group, men

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<sup>16</sup> Ging D., 2019: 640.

<sup>17</sup> Ging D., 2019: 651.

<sup>18</sup> Connell R.W., 1995: 77.

<sup>19</sup> Connell R.W. & Messerschmidt J.W., 2005: 832; Bauer E., 2024.

tend to support hegemonic masculinity as a means of defending patriarchy and their dominant position over women.<sup>20</sup>

It is therefore imperative that the concept of hegemonic masculinity, particularly in the context of ‘masculinity in crisis’,<sup>21</sup> be comprehended as an amalgamation of diverse masculinities and a hierarchical structure of manliness. The notion of a hierarchical structure of masculinities persists in functioning as a hegemonic framework and a reference model, predominantly perpetuating established masculinity paradigms rather than merely a pattern of domination characterised by violence. However, a more comprehensive understanding of gender hierarchies necessitates an acknowledgement of the agency of non-dominant groups, as well as the various socio-cultural dynamics that can develop within and across gender hierarchies.<sup>22</sup>

Returning to the subject of incels, it is evident that the hybrid character of masculinity they invoke is consistently reproduced in the context of the overarching objective of countering feminism and excluding women from the manosphere, notwithstanding the ideological, strategic and aesthetic differentiations and disparities that exist within it.<sup>23</sup> Ging’s argument posits an oscillation between hegemonic and subordinate forms of masculinity. This oscillation is reflected in the predominance of a discourse based on a simplistic genetic determinism to explain male and female behaviours in relation to sexual choices, practices and behaviours. The engagement of the manosphere with the scientific field of evolutionary biology and psychology is characterised by a blatantly myopic and superficial interpretation and recycling of various theories to ultimately support a particular set of ideas. The underlying principles here are that women are “irrational, hypergamous, hardwired to pair with alpha males, and need to be dominated”.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Connell R.W., 1995: 82.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Horrocks R., 1994; Robinson S., 2000.; Walsh F., 2010.

<sup>22</sup> Connell R.W. & Messerschmidt J.W., 2005: 845-848.

<sup>23</sup> Ging D., 2019: 653.

<sup>24</sup> Ging D., 2019: 648-649.

In response, the incels have developed a unique lexicon characterised by sexism, misogyny and racism, reflecting the theoretical concepts of evolutionary biology and psychology in practical, real-world contexts. Offensive terms such as ‘friendzone’ (whereby a man is ‘relegated’ to the position of a woman’s ‘friend’ because she has no intention or desire for ‘more’ between them) and ‘cuck’ (a weak or powerless man whose partner is cheating on him) are used in an offensive manner. Furthermore, the use of insidious comments and compliments aimed at undermining a woman’s self-confidence, known as ‘negging’, and the adoption of a defensive posture by a woman in response to unwanted male attention, termed ‘bitch shield’, serve not only to denigrate women in general but also to facilitate the establishment of informal or non-formal communities and networks.<sup>25</sup>

It is evident that the advent of novel technological possibilities and the intricate structure of social networks have led to a substantial escalation in the potential for the unregulated propagation of anti-feminist ideologies and information. The result of this is a peculiar transnational homogenisation of ‘ubiquitous wronged’ incels that not only sticks to a virulent outcry against feminism, but slides, in many cases, into a sweeping misogyny and emotionally charged personal attacks.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, it is the so-called ‘geek masculinity’, a version of manliness that emerges within the ‘computer geek community’ and which both accepts and rejects, in an utilitarian way, several aspects of hegemonic masculinity.<sup>27</sup> According to Banet-Weiser, the concept of white geek masculinity is characterised by the presence of ‘casual sexism’ and a sense of white privilege within the context of ‘bro culture’, which can be defined as a subculture and discourse that perceives men of the same age as ‘bros’.<sup>28</sup> This combination of characteristics is further compounded by a pronounced technological focus. It is evident that, despite the prevalence of digital spaces dominated by white males that advocate for

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<sup>25</sup> Ging D., 2019: 649.

<sup>26</sup> Ging D., 2019: 644-645.

<sup>27</sup> Massanari A., 2017: 332.

<sup>28</sup> Banet-Weiser S., 2018: 134.

policies aimed at redressing what they perceive as ‘collective injustice’, the incels’ subculture is progressively deviating from the conventional activism of the men’s rights movement, as it has evolved over the preceding decades. Instead, it is more indicative of an ideological tendency that functions as a conduit for the articulation of collective male anger and the re-establishment of male gender sovereignty and its concomitant privileges. This process primarily occurs through the expression of their purported loss, but also through the alignment with the broader ideological-political arsenal of the alt-right.<sup>29</sup>

Incels’ prominent rhetorical vehicle for ‘reclaiming their power’ is the view that the contemporary disadvantaged position of men is largely due to a pervasive ‘reverse sexism’, which is essentially the expression of a generalised misandry that manifests itself in multiple ways in various aspects of social life.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, misandry is a term frequently employed by various incels and men’s rights advocates to support any feminist resistance as hatred against them.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, it is crucial to recognise the intricate relationship between the notion of ‘misandrist feminism’ and the present-day milieu, which is characterised by unregulated mass media, digital technologies and social networks. In this specific context, three notable trends are evident. Firstly, there has been an escalation in the expression of polarised opposing views and groups, which are termed ‘vertical collectivism’. Secondly, the phenomenon of ‘outrage culture’ is worthy of consideration. This is defined as an expression of generalised discontent. Thirdly, there is a tendency towards the propagation of unproductive rhetoric of gender bias, which often leads to the cultivation of a peculiar sexist set-off against men. The most notable manifestation of this phenomenon is the verbal attacks directed towards men, which primarily centre on the sexual aspect of the recipient (e.g. disparaging remarks pertaining to a man’s sexual performance in relation to expectations connected with pornography standards). Notwithstand-

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<sup>29</sup> Ging D., 2019: 648-649.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Liotzis V., 2025.

<sup>31</sup> Ringrose J. & Lawrence E., 2018: 688.



ing the pervasive nature of these discourses, it is a particularly contentious aspect of such attacks that, in certain instances, they occur under the ideological umbrella of the so-called 'hashtag feminism'.

### **Specifying the features of hashtag feminism**

It is important to acknowledge the unique opportunity for expression that the rise of social media has provided for various social groups and communities, including feminist movements and actions of all types. These have constituted the so-called 'fourth wave of feminism'.<sup>32</sup> In fact, as demonstrated by Reagle's thought-provoking analysis, the realm of online feminism appears to predominantly adopt, potentially as a form of defence and resistance, the demand primarily present within the geek community for a fundamental level of understanding on gender issues, often referred to as 'the obligation to know'.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, it could be argued that the field of contemporary feminism is most visible on the digital platform of Twitter, precisely because of the possibilities for free and uncensored expression of personal thoughts that it affords. Furthermore, Foster's research posits that the utilisation of Twitter by women to accentuate and contest sexist discourses and practices functions not only as an informal form of collective action, but also engenders a positive psychological effect on them.<sup>34</sup>

In this regard, Golbeck, Ash and Cabrera analysed the use of relevant hashtags on the social media platform Twitter by female scientists, such as #DistractinglySexy, #iLook-LikeAnEngineer and #GirlsWithToys.<sup>35</sup> This practice is based on addressing various sexist stereotypes by creating informal digital communities, whose main focus is to support each other and raise awareness of the multiple difficulties these women face. As clarified by Vickery et al., real change in re-

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<sup>32</sup> Cochrane K., 2013; Chamberlain P., 2017; Rivers N., 2017.

<sup>33</sup> Reagle J., 2015: 703.

<sup>34</sup> Foster M.D., 2015.

<sup>35</sup> Golbeck, J., Ash S. & Cabrera N., 2017.

gard to various manifestations of sexism, including online harassment, cannot be achieved solely through individual actions.<sup>36</sup> Instead, it necessitates, and concomitantly signifies, more extensive structural and systemic social transformations that transcend the confines of the contemporary digital milieu. In any case, this digital activism, which has been captured as ‘hashtag feminism’, operates in a divergent manner in dissimilar social contexts. This is evident from the research conducted by Brantner, Lobinger and Stehling on how the #DistractinglySexy case was handled in the British and German media.<sup>37</sup>

A particularly intriguing study is that by Lutzky and Lawson on the utilisation of hashtags such as #Mansplaining, #Manspreading and #Manterruption in English-language Twitter discourse.<sup>38</sup> The research concluded that their inclusion in tweets is done in a context of highlighting individualised evaluations regarding what constitutes a ‘correct/approved’ gendered behaviour. However, it is important to note that according to their findings, regarding this particular digital public sphere (i.e. the so-called ‘Twittersphere’), there is also a critique of these terms in relation to their sexist orientation and a concern to limit the stigmatisation of such practices to men only.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, this is a dimension that was also highlighted in Bridges’ research, according to which the use of ‘mansplaining’ in social media moves beyond its ‘narrow’ conceptual framework and becomes a vehicle for removing the attempt to ‘verbally repress’ women through a defiance of the ‘authoritative pragmatics’ of the term, a post-negotiation of a gendered and ideologically charged concept, and a redefinition and transformation of the meaning of the term in question to reflect different points of view in a pluralistic way.<sup>40</sup>

At this juncture, it is pertinent to recall the provenance of the well-known neologism ‘mansplaining’. The term can be

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<sup>36</sup> Vickery J.R. et al., 2018: 389-390.

<sup>37</sup> Brantner, C., Lobinger L. & Stehling M., 2020.

<sup>38</sup> Lutzky U. & Lawson R., 2019.

<sup>39</sup> Lutzky U. & Lawson R., 2019: 10.

<sup>40</sup> Bridges J., 2017.

traced back to the “Men explain things to me” text by Rebecca Solnit on the TomDispatch website on 13/4/2008, which subsequently formed the basis for her renowned book of the same name six years later.<sup>41</sup> According to the eminent American author, the term ‘mansplaining’ is employed to denote the ‘explanation’ proffered by a male individual, predominantly on subjects pertaining to women’s lives. This ‘explanation’ adopts a paternalistic stance, simultaneously disregarding or diminishing the experience and knowledge of women on the subjects in question.<sup>42</sup> The concepts of ‘manspreading’ and ‘manterruption’ are also neologisms. The former refers to the habitual practice of men sitting with their feet open, both in private and public spaces, without regard for the rest of the social environment. The latter is predicated on the broadly observed tendency of men to intervene and interrupt conversations more frequently than women. This practice is imbued with a specific gendered dimension, in the sense that its ultimate purpose and, essentially, basis is to attempt to dominate in a dialogue and to deconstruct and/or invalidate a woman’s opinions and stances.<sup>43</sup>

It is an obvious assumption that all such actions are accompanied by reciprocal responses. For instance, Risam’s study addresses the prevalent criticism that the online feminist movement, particularly the informal community on Twitter, harbours a more radical, essentially aggressive, trend that has been stigmatised, particularly through traditional media, as ‘toxic femininity’ on Twitter.<sup>44</sup> The concept of toxic femininity can be considered a counterpoint to the recently popular concept of toxic masculinity, which is used to describe patterns of excessive/abusive behaviour of cis-gender men (i.e. men whose gender identity coincides with their biological sex or, simply put, heterosexual men). It is evident that these attitudes and behaviours are associated with adverse

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<sup>41</sup> Solnit R., 2014.

<sup>42</sup> Rothman L., 2012.

<sup>43</sup> Lutzky U. & Lawson R., 2019: 3.

<sup>44</sup> Risam R., 2015.

social and psychological consequences for the individual, as well as for women and LGBTQ+ people.<sup>45</sup>

However, Risam has expressed scepticism regarding the escalation of a dogmatic, aphoristic and often aggressive discourse, even when it takes place in the context of humour.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, she hypothesises that this phenomenon can be attributed to the fragmentation of feminist thought, resulting from the emergence of various intersectionally oriented movements that deviate from the fundamental common claims of feminist ideology. As she asserts, the notions of ‘toxicity’ are, in essence, by-products of the very privileges that the movement seeks to challenge, as well as serving to subvert the crucial concept of intersectionality.<sup>47</sup> This undermining is regarded as a process of moving away from an inclusive conception of femininities and further marginalising the individual and collective agents of action that are identified and operate on the basis of this feminist perspective. Consequently, this process contributes to the reproduction and reinforcement of both racial and gender differences.<sup>48</sup>

However, Loza rebuffs the prevailing assertions concerning feminist endeavours within social networks, particularly those centred on the concept of “balkanization of feminism”.<sup>49</sup> This term refers to the internal diversification of the feminist movement stemming from persistent discord surrounding the question of “who owns feminism”. Conversely, she perceives these disputes as merely a component of the evolution of a novel liberation movement that is not inherently ‘feminist’ by definition, but rather founded on “a history of oppositional consciousness”. This approach engenders the optimal conditions for the formation of social alliances centred on the racial, gender and class inequalities that are rooted in white supremacy, patriarchy and capitalism, respectively.

In this context, the research by Ringrose and Lawrence on forms of feminist humour in social media is of particular im-

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<sup>45</sup> Cf. Salter M., 2019.

<sup>46</sup> Risam R., 2015.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Crenshaw K., 1989; 1991.

<sup>48</sup> Risam R., 2015.

<sup>49</sup> Loza S., 2014.

portance.<sup>50</sup> This research demonstrated how, through the use of irony and sarcasm, a misandric discourse is articulated, framed by a binary gender antagonism. While the utilisation of humour as a medium for addressing sexism is a commendable practice and a form of activism aimed at challenging gender stereotypes, these researchers identify significant limitations of this approach in the context of various ‘styles of feminism’. These limitations become particularly evident when this targeting is expressed through a gender antagonistic logic that perpetuates dualism, enclosure and exclusion.<sup>51</sup> The question arises as to whether the manner in which gender differences are articulated ultimately serves the demand for an intersectional and inclusive feminism, or whether the reversal discernible in the anti-male and sometimes violent memes they study is not merely another ‘feminist joke’ (these memes are digital files which are characterised by an evident tendency towards the depiction of anger, frustration, and rage in relation to sexist discrimination, with the utilisation of motifs pertaining to female potency and supremacy constituting the primary thematic elements.); rather, it is a manifestation of ‘white feminism’.<sup>52</sup> It is important to note that white feminism is, by and large, a feminist trend that advocates for a non-disciplinary prioritisation and highlighting of issues of concern to all women. Consequently, this approach overlooks the demands of the most disadvantaged groups, including black, poor, and elderly women.

As Ringrose and Lawrence typically highlight, this “white female rage” and reversal of violence towards men fails to answer the key question of which women are speaking out and about which men.<sup>53</sup> The crux of the issue is the utilisation of a misguided and outdated paradigm of sexual conflict, wherein both men and women are collectively stigmatised on the basis of their biological distinctions. This approach, however, serves to constrain the ambit of feminist discourse/humour, which, in principle, is indispensable for a

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<sup>50</sup> Ringrose J. & Lawrence E., 2018.

<sup>51</sup> Ringrose J. & Lawrence E., 2018: 686-687.

<sup>52</sup> Ringrose J. & Lawrence E., 2018: 694.

<sup>53</sup> Ringrose J. & Lawrence E., 2018: 700-701.

comprehensive understanding of contemporary issues and the analogous feminist perspective. However, it is important to note that the “ironic misandry” present within humorous memes functions not only as a rhetorical response to the plausible anger surrounding the reproduction of the patriarchal order in the contemporary world, but also as a medium of communication among feminists that contributes to the desired outcome of fostering solidarity among the movement.<sup>54</sup>

Notwithstanding the plethora of criticisms levelled at the contemporary digital landscape, which have been persuasively articulated by the aforementioned research, Digby had judiciously dismissed the long-standing erroneous supposition that feminists harbour an inherent animosity towards all men.<sup>55</sup> In particular, as the eminent American philosopher noted, instances of anti-male sentiment among feminists have been documented, though these have largely been isolated incidents primarily involving women experiencing a ‘feminist awakening’ that enabled them to comprehend the impact of male domination on their lives.<sup>56</sup> Such circumstances frequently gave rise to feelings of anger towards the source of the harm, often resulting in a range of criticisms of men that, although anticipated, were sometimes expressed in an undeservedly generalised manner. As Digby observes, while feminists may perceive women as a group that generally experiences the paternalistic domination of men, this cannot be equated with a general hatred against them.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, he adds that the instances where feminists make derogatory generalisations about men are not due to some universal and vague hate, but to self-evident resentment of men with misogynistic attitudes; a sentiment also expressed by women “who don’t call themselves feminists”.<sup>58</sup>

The aforementioned factors may provide a potential explanation for the problematic contemporary discourse on men that is currently being disseminated through social media

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<sup>54</sup> Ringrose J. & Lawrence E., 2018: 690.

<sup>55</sup> Digby T., 1998: 16-17.

<sup>56</sup> Digby T., 1998: 15-16.

<sup>57</sup> Digby T., 1998: 15.

<sup>58</sup> Digby T., 1998: 28.

and the digital public sphere in general by a select number of radical feminist activists. While these voices do contribute to the articulation and ‘simplification’ of radical feminist critiques of various issues, ranging from patriarchy and male privilege to female sexualisation and rape culture, there are instances where they transition into an essentialist-oriented accusation against all men collectively. This accusation remains unrefuted by the frequent yet seemingly pretentious reference to the absence of any intention to incriminate collectively and to the fact that any accusations do not pertain to all men as a whole (NotAllMen).

As Digby would have posited, to a certain extent, it is justifiable for an individual subjected to collective animosity to respond with hostility and a sense of retribution.<sup>59</sup> This response is particularly salient when the oppressive conduct in question is pervasive and protracted, manifesting in a manner that appears to be representative of the entire membership of the dominant group. As is evidenced in cases of ongoing hate and persistent discrimination, a black person may develop a sense of vindictiveness towards all white people without exception. Correspondingly, a woman may feel hatred towards all men. As the American philosopher noted, “it is the hateful oppression which gives rise to reciprocating hatred”.<sup>60</sup> In this sense, it is to be expected that there are instances where this ‘feminist rage’ slips into the reductive logic of gender oppositionality and is accompanied by generalised negative excoriations and characterisations of men.<sup>61</sup> This misandrist discourse, however, has been shown to overlook the positive experiences of many women in relation to men, perpetuate an outdated sex oppositional approach and, to some extent, undermine the prospect of a more inclusive feminism, in the sense of the productive inclusion of ‘male allies’.<sup>62</sup>

Digby contends that, in the majority of instances, feminist criticisms of men are not rooted in essentialist thinking, as these critiques are not intended to be regarded as universal

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<sup>59</sup> Digby T., 1998: 28.

<sup>60</sup> Digby T., 1998: 28.

<sup>61</sup> Digby T., 1998: 21-22.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Digby T., 1997; Jardine A. & Smith P., 2012.

principles, and furthermore do not imply or presuppose a pervasive animosity.<sup>63</sup> It is evident that this position is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, it fails to acknowledge the ideological underpinnings of certain feminist perspectives and how these are intertwined with their individual objectives. Secondly, it operates under the assumption that all opinions and discourses are systematically evaluated within the context to which they refer. This may indeed be an ideal situation, or at least a desirable condition, which is clearly what should be sought in public debate. However, when the American philosopher was defending a wide range of feminist practices, he failed to consider the highly confrontational context created by the spread of manosphere ideas. This has inevitably led to various forms of excessive and/or unfair verbal attacks. It is certain, yet, that this social context raises serious concerns regarding the creation of more solid and emancipatory conditions for gender relations.

### Concluding thoughts

The proliferation of the manosphere, in general, and the emergence of select marginal expressions of hashtag feminism, perpetuate a myopic disposition characterised by gender aversion and, at times, overt animosity. These phenomena also give rise to an overtly problematic reified conception of gendered subjects and relations. The question arises, therefore, as to how the concept of reification should be understood in this context. The concept of reification was originally developed by Lukács in a collection of his writings under the title *History and Class Consciousness*.<sup>64</sup> For the renowned Hungarian Marxist, reification signifies an ontological comprehension of quotidian life, wherein interpersonal relationships are regarded as the embodiment of a tangible entity.<sup>65</sup> Honneth raises the issue of instrumentalist management of people and deriving benefit from them as if they have an

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<sup>63</sup> Digby T., 1998: 27.

<sup>64</sup> Lukács G., 1923.

<sup>65</sup> Honneth A., 2008: 19.



‘object dimension’.<sup>66</sup> This is a critique of the idea that the adoption of the capitalist way of life by any subject necessarily leads to the understanding of itself and the world that includes it as an object. For Honneth, the fundamental concept of Lukács’ reification is encapsulated in the observation that, within the expanding domain of commodity exchange, subjects are compelled to function as autonomous observers, as opposed to active contributors to social life.<sup>67</sup> This is due to the fact that the reciprocal calculation of the advantages that others might confer for their own benefit necessitates a purely rational and non-emotional disposition.

Consequently, reification should be comprehended as a process through which the ‘real humane’ perspective is neutralised to such an extent that it eventually becomes an objectifying mode of thinking.<sup>68</sup> However, the equation of reification with objectification by Lukács, as Honneth consistently asserts, does not suffice as a conceptual construction.<sup>69</sup> This is because, if it were valid, human sociality would have been extinguished entirely. It is for this reason that this particular contested concept should be redefined in relatively different terms. According to Honneth, reification should be understood as the ‘forgetfulness of recognition’, i.e. the process by which awareness of the extent to which people owe their knowledge of other people to a prior attitude of empathic engagement is lost.<sup>70</sup> In this sense, reification can be defined as the process by which knowledge is formed through cognitive acts that are not grounded in prior recognition.<sup>71</sup> According to the approach of the highly influential German philosopher, it could be argued that the reification in the field of gender constitutes an essentialisation of gendered subjects and relations, based on the forgetting and/or silencing of the fact that the gender dimension of humans may constitute a fundamental dimension of their existence that is articulated with all

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<sup>66</sup> Honneth A., 2008: 22-23.

<sup>67</sup> Honneth A., 2008: 24-25.

<sup>68</sup> Honneth A., 2008: 54.

<sup>69</sup> Honneth A., 2008: 55.

<sup>70</sup> Honneth A., 2008: 56.

<sup>71</sup> Honneth A., 2008: 59.

other aspects of life, but not the sole premise of human nature.

In a similar vein, it could be argued that this ‘gendered oblivion of realisation’ corresponds, to a certain extent, with the manner in which the famous Slovenian philosopher Žižek reinterprets Sloterdijk’s original work on cynicism<sup>72</sup>. In essence, Žižek’s assertion posits that cynicism can be conceptualised as a form of performative behaviour, wherein an individual may ostensibly adhere to a particular belief while concurrently exhibiting actions that appear to contradict that belief.<sup>73</sup> This ‘as if’ syndrome is defined as an attitude to life that affects the way an individual perceives herself or himself and the world as a whole. It can thus be posited that the field of the manosphere is characterised by a, in Žižek terms, pervasive ‘gendered cynicism’. This is evidenced by the tendency of incels to focus on the human behaviours of women while simultaneously behaving as if they do not consider themselves to be truly human. This behaviour can be attributed to a deficient attribution of the agent/subject status to them. Conversely, in the context of hashtag feminism, only in a limited number of cases can a corresponding cynicism be discerned. However, due to its defensive orientation, as well as its clearly less aggressive and more constrained nature, it cannot, by all means, serve as a counterbalance to the broader, bicultural and intercultural phenomenon of misogyny.

Anyhow, it is evident that both manosphere and hashtag feminism, as manifestations and phenomena of the postmodern era, are aspects of a bi-historically and cross-culturally evolving power struggle in the field of gender. On this basis, a particular focus of this debate should be on exploring how the incels’ thesis of generalised misandry, which has been reproduced in a totally abusive manner, has become a key justification for those who oppose feminism. Digby long ago posited that the impetus for anti-feminist rhetoric is rooted in a fear of the culturally and politically ‘apocalyptic vision’ of feminist social change.<sup>74</sup> This fear is manifested in a persis-

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<sup>72</sup> Sloterdijk P., 1983.

<sup>73</sup> Žižek S., 1989: 25-26.

<sup>74</sup> Digby T., 1998: 17.

tent defensive mechanism that takes the form of an attack on women, as evidenced by the historical precedent of the men's rights movement and the contemporary actions of incensed incels.

In this regard, Digby has correctly observed that feminist struggles to overcome men's exclusive control of resources have demonstrated that the containment of patriarchal logic and the weakening of the "symbolic content of manhood" have led to the mitigation of individual sexist anchors for both women and men.<sup>75</sup> This has been evident in the relative acceptance of female sexual emancipation and the reluctant disconnection of masculinity from the patriarchally defined social role of exclusive provider of goods ('breadwinner'). Consequently, given that the aforementioned objectives remain at the forefront of the pursuit of substantive gender equality, and that feminism has historically served as the most effective means of achieving them, it is imperative to resist the allure of the various myopic aphorisms and vulgarities that proliferate in the contemporary digital landscape. Instead, there is a need to amplify our support for the absolutely equitable demands of feminist thought and practice.

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<sup>75</sup> Digby T., 2003: 273; Cf. Vo D., 2024.

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Philosophical interpretations of the image of  
women as performative act of gendered body  
and as bodily orientation in space:  
M. Merleau-Ponty - J. Butler  
- S. Ahmed - Deleuze

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**Abstract**

This article deals with the issue of the image of women through the body and physicality in general in a dia-phenomenological sense. That is, through M. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, J. Butler's phenomenological approach to the relation between the "construction" of gender and the performative act, S. Ahmed's Queer Phenomenology and the orientation of queer things or moments in space and finally Deleuze's topology of the body. The woman as an image will be linked to the image of the body which is both an object and a subject of the action which concerns its position in relation to gender. The body exists in space together with its sexuality which emerges from its performative action of body not only as biological being but as also sexual being through performative act.

**Key-words:** *Phenomenology, body-image, gender, performative act, body-orientation, construction of gender, trans-nomadic, queer phenomenology*



## Introduction

As early as the "La structure du comportement"<sup>1</sup> and later in the "La Phénoménologie de la perception"<sup>2</sup>, M. Merleau-Ponty puts the body at the center and introduces us to concepts such as *spatiality*, *bodily*, *proper body*. It is via this medium that the body presents us with a phenomenon in which there is identification of both subject and object. In the first part of "Phénoménologie de la perception", part III, entitled "La spatialité du corps propre et la morticité"<sup>3</sup>, Merleau-Ponty examines the relationship between the body proper and spatiality. Consequently, he conceptualizes specific actions of bodily components as a unified bodily scheme (*schéma corporel*). M. Merleau-Ponty expands the concept of bodily scheme beyond of sensory-motor or kinesthetic function of body. This leads us to a second definition:

"On s'achemine donc vers une seconde définition du schéma corporel: il ne sera plus le simple résultat des associations établies au cours de l'expérience, mais une prise de conscience globale de ma posture dans le monde intersensoriel, une «forme» au sens de la Gestaltpsychologie"<sup>4</sup>

This definition has deep examined by physiology, and it don't include an ontological position. M. Merleau-Ponty uses it to clarify that the spatiality of body is beyond a kinesthetic situation. The physical shape as form constitutes a "new place of existence"<sup>5</sup>. Psychologists have observed that body shape is dynamic. According to M. Merleau-Ponty, this dynamic means that the body as such "appears to me as a posture" during an action to be performed. Consequently, the

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<sup>1</sup> Merleau-Ponty M., *La structure de la comportement*, Presses Universitaires de France, 1942.

<sup>2</sup> Merleau-Ponty M., *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Gallimard, 1945.

<sup>3</sup> Merleau-Ponty M., (ed.), *La spatialité du corps*, Gallimard, 1945, pp.114-172.

<sup>4</sup> Merleau-Ponty M., *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Gallimard, 1945, p.116.

<sup>5</sup> Merleau-Ponty M., *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Gallimard, 1945, p.116.

spatiality of the subject in action is not a "spatiality of position"<sup>6</sup> but a "spatiality of situation"<sup>7</sup>. The performance of any physical activity is determined by the accuracy of the positions of my bodily parts and the completion of my activity. Hence the bodily form assumes a value beyond its 'biological essence'. At this point it is worth mentioning that in Lacanian field psychoanalysis and in Dolto's theory of the body and the subject in the psychoanalytic clinic, the wholeness of the body is imaginary, because of "stadium of mirror" of lacanian theory of human's development. The physical shape is common to all subjects while the imaginary "body image" is specific to each subject. The activation of the body as a subject is always related, we would say, to a performative act. The bodily figure follows the performance while the "body image" makes the performance unique for each subject. This means that on the one hand the phenomenon of the subject's bodily through the bodily figure has the consciousness as its intentionality and on the other hand the "body image" has the unconscious as its intentionality. At this point it is worth mentioning that in psychoanalysis of Lacanian field, and in Dolto's theory of the body and subject in psychoanalytic clinic, the wholeness of body is imaginary. The body's shape is common to all subjects, but the imaginary "body's image" is unique for each subject. The activation of the body is always associated with a performative act. The bodily form follows the performance of body, and the imaginary "body's image" makes unique the body's performance for a subject. That is, on the one hand, the phenomenon of the subject's bodily as bodily form has an intentionality towards consciousness, and the other hand, the "body's image" has an intentionality towards unconscious.<sup>8</sup> That is, for Dolto the bodily figure is idiomatic. And it imparts the existence of the human species. My reference to a particular position of my body in space us-

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<sup>6</sup> Merleau-Ponty M., *La Phénoménologie de la perception*, Gallimard, 1945, p.116

<sup>7</sup> Merleau-Ponty M., *La Phénoménologie de la perception*, Gallimard, 1945, p.116

<sup>8</sup> Mitrou Y., *Performance art: unconscious, body, performative act*, Barbounakis, 2020.

ing the adverb "here" means in fact, as M. Merleau-Ponty points out, that "I establish the first coordinates to anchor my energetic body within an object, that is, the state of the body in relation to its work to be performed"<sup>9</sup>. The body and the bodily space it occupies will be related to all that exists around it because it is not only an object but also a subject which is characterized by its performative actions; the body thus acquires an ontological style. It then happens to "be in the world through its bodily form"<sup>10</sup>. The body is space, and the body proper defines the subject-body through the "shape-background" structure. All bodily schemes that appear or disappear to us need a background that will support their visibility or non-visibility. Thus, our apparition in the world is bodily, as the subject couldn't exist without the body. So, the body-subject activated through its bodily scheme and acquires a body proper. The spatiality of body exists because of its performative orientation, is the case with spatial positions. Their discrimination requires an "oriented space"<sup>11</sup>. The "body image" as an imaginary totality is present in every action, like the "body shape". Thus, if there is a bodily orientation then both follow that orientation.

We will demonstrate that the image of gender in general and the image of woman in particular, through this phenomenological approximation are a performative act and a bodily orientation as well. In the *Phenomenology of Perception* (*Phénoménologie de la Perception*:1945), as we have mentioned, the body assumes a central and fundamental role as the ground of perception and experience of the world. For this reason, the influence of M. Merleau-Ponty on feminist philosophers such as Simon de Beauvoir and later Judith Butler and S. Ahmed, is decisive. Thus, the way is opened for the new theories of gender and feminist approaches to the image of women which were based on the concept of the

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<sup>9</sup> Merleau-Ponty M., *La Phénoménologie de la perception*, Gallimard, 1945, p.117

<sup>10</sup> Merleau-Ponty M., *La Phénoménologie de la perception*, Gallimard, 1945, p.117

<sup>11</sup> Merleau-Ponty M., *La Phénoménologie de la perception*, Gallimard, 1945, p.118

body introduced by the phenomenology of M. Merleau-Ponty and the psychoanalysis of the Lacanian field<sup>12</sup>.

In contrast to Cartesian separationist thinking, where the body is treated as one object among others in the physical world, Merleau-Ponty argues that the body is our "means of being in the world" - a body-subject rather than merely a body-object. The body is already imbued with meaning and perception; through it we inhabit the world. Perception, according to Merleau-Ponty, is not an abstract, intellectual fact, but an embodied experience. The body is what places us in space, allows us to move, interact and perceive the world. Therefore, there is no separation between the "I" and the body - the body is the "I", it is the place of being. Also, the body in the *Phenomenology of Perception* is gendered. That is, it appears with an orientation. He characteristically states:

“Cherchons à voir comment un objet ou un être se met à exister pour nous par le désir ou par l’amour et nous comprendrons mieux par là comment des objets et des êtres peuvent exister en general”<sup>13</sup>.

While Merleau-Ponty does not analyses gender in the terms developed later in feminist theory, it does provide a basis for an embodied understanding of gender. His approach to gender focuses on how gender is experienced through the body rather than as a biological or socially imposed identity in isolation. For Merleau-Ponty, gender is not an external category imposed on the subject, but something that is *inhabited* - it is a way of being in the world. Gender, like every other dimension of embodied existence, arises from the lived way in which the individual relates to his or her body and the world. It is not merely physical or social, but existential.

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<sup>12</sup> Lacanian field is the field of jouissance which characterizing lacanian psychoanalysis.

<sup>13</sup> Merleau-Ponty M., *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Gallimard, 1945, p.180

Trans. Mitrou Y., “Let us try to see how an object or a being comes to exist for us through desire or love, and we will then understand better how objects and beings can exist in general”.

### **From the body as gendered being and construction of gender to woman's image in J. Butler's theory**

Although Merleau-Ponty does not extensively analyze gender in the terms developed later in feminist theory, he does offer a foundation for an embodied understanding of gender. His approach to gender focuses on how gender is experienced through the body, rather than as a biological or socially imposed identity in isolation. Thus, gender in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is not an external category that is imposed on the subject, but something that is *inhabited*—it is a way of being in the world. Gender, like every other dimension of embodied existence, arises from the lived way in which an individual relates to his or her or its body and to the world. It is not merely physical or social, but existential. The concept of the bodily scheme introduced to us involves ontological features. Bodily spatiality is not an extensibility of the body as an object but is an ontological unfolding of the body as a *living subject*.

The influence of Merleau-Ponty's thought on feminist theory was particularly strong. Merleau-Ponty's philosophical position was a source of inspiration for Simone de Beauvoir, particularly in her work, *The Second Sex*, where she examines how women experience their bodies in a world that identifies them as 'other'. S. Beauvoir relies on phenomenology to demonstrate that women's bodies are not a biological destiny, but a historically and culturally shaped experience. So, for her, body is not a natural fact. Later, theorists such as Judith Butler revisit ideas of embodied subjectivity, deconstructing fixed gender categories. Butler, though critical of some phenomenological presuppositions, builds on the phenomenological understanding of gender as lived experience to advance a theory of gender as performative act. After all, she subscribes to the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty's conception of and position on the gendered body as an historical idea which co-authored by cultural environment rather a natural species. Then the body appears as “Être sexué” (gen-

dered body). M. Merleau-Ponty analyses these conditions in part V of *Phenomenology of Perception* entitled “Le corps comme Être sexué” and he examines the relationship between gendered body and desire for sexual pleasure as body’s hedonism.<sup>14</sup>

The body in Merleau-Ponty is not only a carrier of passive experience, but also a potential agent of action, movement and meaning-making. Hence the body becomes a carrier of resistance to the concept of “silent thinking of the body” (la pensée muet du corps) and he suggests that the body knows and acts beyond reason. Gender, in this light, is not a final, fixed category, but a constantly negotiated mode of being. We would also add that it has a bodily orientation. That is, at the same time, as a subject it is the bearer of a performative action, and it is oriented towards an object in space as well. Both states relate to the gendered appearance of the body they co-create. The “living body” is the body that appears as a “living subject” which is defined through its act. Embodied experience, then, can also become a field of resistance against dominant normative principles that try to limit the concept of gender to narrow, biological or social definitions. The gendered body emerges as a synthesis of image that includes the spatiality scheme, a bodily orientation and a performative act. Therefore, every image of a woman is a function of the gendered body. In the phenomenology of perception Merleau-Ponty concludes that we are our body. This conclusion follows from the view of the body as a living subject. It essentially refers to the body’s relation to the lived world. In the other side, in lacanian psychoanalysis, the body relates with the unconscious of subject, and we are not our body, but we have our body. The subject of unconscious doesn’t know what to do exactly this body. For us the gendered body, its orientation and its performative action have an intentionality to subject’s unconscious as well.

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<sup>14</sup> Vavouras E., “Hobbes hedonism in front of classical hedonism and the free market’s way”, *Dia-noesis*, 13, 2022, pp. 85-114.

In beginning of J. Butler's essay<sup>15</sup> on performative acts and gender constitution she has written:

"Philosophers rarely think about acting in the theatrical sense, but they do have a discourse of 'acts' that maintains associative semantic meanings with theories of performance and acting. For example, John Searle's 'speech acts,' those verbal assurances and promises which seem not only to refer to a speaking relationship, but to constitute a moral bond between speakers, illustrate one of the illocutionary gestures that constitutes the stage of the analytic philosophy of language. Further, 'action theory,' a domain of moral philosophy, seeks to understand what it is 'to do' prior to any claim of what one ought to do."<sup>16</sup>

So, she introduces us in phenomenological theory of acts of Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and George Herbert Mead where social reality constituted by social agent "through language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social sign". The traditional phenomenological position suggests the existence of a choosing and constituting agent prior to language who acts as unique source of constituting acts.

J. Butler subscribes to a more radical approximation of issue of construction that considers the social agent as an object rather than as a subject of constitutive acts. The philosopher is influenced by philosopher by M. Merleau-Ponty's "Phenomenology of Perception" and subscribes to his teaching on the body a living subject that "comes to bear cultural meanings". In same essay, J. Butler will write:

"[...] the body is understood to be an active process of embodying certain cultural and historical possibilities, a complicated process of appropriation which any phenomenological theory of embodiment needs to describe. In order to describe the gendered body, a phenomenological theory of constitution requires an expansion of the conventional view of acts to

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<sup>15</sup> Butler J., "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory", *Theatre Journal*, 40:4, 1988, pp. 519-531

<sup>16</sup> Butler J., "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory, *Theatre Journal*, 40:41988, p.519

mean both that which constitutes meaning and that through which meaning is performed or enacted”<sup>17</sup>

J. Butler’s view of constitution of gender is performative acts which have similarities with theatrical performative acts. She has examined the ways in which bodily acts construct gender and that there are many possibilities for its cultural transformation “through such acts”.<sup>18</sup> J. Butler subscribes to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the body, where it is a historical idea and a set of possibilities that continually materialized. This means that its appearance in the world with intentionality the perception does not need an inner substance, and that its expression in the world relates with a set of historical possibilities which are in potential determined. The body is not “a self-identical or merely factual materiality but it is a materiality that carries meaning”<sup>19</sup>. This meaning is “fundamentally dramatic”<sup>20</sup>, J. Butler refers in her essay. The dramatization of meaning is a result of potentiality possibilities within historical conventions which are determined at each age. Thus, our body is made by us as embodied being. So, the body is a historical situation as Beauvoir has claimed and Butler agrees, and the same time she explains that this historical situation emerges from three elementary structures of embodiment: doing, dramatizing, reproducing. J. Butler refers characteristics:

“This doing of gender is not merely a way in which embodied agents are exterior, surfaced, open to the perception of others. Embodiment clearly manifests a set of strategies or what Sartre would perhaps have called a style of being or Foucault, “stylistics of existence”. This style is never fully self-styled, for living styles have a history, and that history conditions and limits possibilities. Consider gender, for instance, as a *corporal style*, an act, as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where performative itself carries the double-meaning of dramatic and non-referential.”<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> Butler J., p.521

<sup>18</sup> Butler J., p.521

<sup>19</sup> Butler J., p.522

<sup>20</sup> Butler J., p.522

<sup>21</sup> Butler J., p.522



What does it mean that a woman is in a “historical situation”? It means the body undergoes cultural construction through various conventions that limit actions, performances, and perceptions of the body. J. Butler concludes that gender, as a “cultural significance” of the sexed body, is shaped by various acts and their cultural perceptions. Thus, sex and gender cannot be distinguished. We consider that theory drawn by phenomenology of body, anthropology and theory of performance and theatrical performative act. So, the image of woman emerges through the gendered body and performative acts of which is the bearer and their cultural perception. J. Butler writes:

“As consequence, gender cannot be understood as a role which either expresses or disguises an interior ‘self’ is conceived as sexed or not. As performance, which is performative, gender is an ‘act’ broadly construed, which constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority. As opposed to a view such as Erving Goffman’s which posits a self which assumes and exchanges various ‘roles’ within the complex social expectations of the ‘game’ of modern life. I am suggesting that this self is not only irretrievably ‘outside’, constituted in social discourse, but that the ascription of interiority is itself a publically regulated and sanctioned form of essence fabrication.”<sup>22</sup>

The culture punishes and marginalizes those who can’t or doesn’t want to accept the imaginary essence of gender and the socially imposed image of gender and therefore of woman. As a technical image of constructivist happiness.<sup>23</sup> This fact is enough to understand that there is social knowledge that gender is not an ontological sense but that the true or falsity of gender is a social imposition.

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<sup>22</sup> Butler J., p.528

<sup>23</sup> Mitrou Y., “The construction of happiness in the world of technical images”, *Flusser Studies* 37, 2024.

### **Becoming woman as a Transversality**

The cultural and social stigma of bi-polar stands even in our days as a power formation which tends to reproduce itself masqueraded in identity politics and false activism of various types as the same power formation, repeating incessantly the separation, inequality, prejudice and exemption not only against women but also against what stands beside woman as queer, black people emigrants, minoritarian of every kind. Power formations necessarily appear in the vertical and hierarchical topology and in a striatum a rigid plane of authority.

Deleuze and Guattari in "A thousand Plateaus"<sup>24</sup> supersede the system of bipolar identification of gender as male and female, with the "becoming woman" which opens the flow of -n- sexes as Deleuzoguattarian theory requires. "Becoming woman" is more than a gender theory; it represents the fundamental form of becoming that resists transgressions against state power in the era of late capitalism. Our aim is to show how power formations operate today and how the eidetic change of the political topology from verticality to transversality responds to them. It is equally important to consider which are the practical and political issues that arise in postmodern culture and hegemonic global society.

Transversality can form in relation to women a war machine; a woman procreates and supports life and also fills the nature-culture gap whenever it is needed, while her allies are lined up around her. She never accepts or legitimizes a war of Power formations, because she and her allies must fight against the destruction of the Earth, her proper metonymy. Transversality is also linked to enunciation and autopoiesis; it is characterized by Deleuze and Guattari as trans-monadic and transitive. The woman transversely subsumes - through a non-excluding connectivity, not only the human beings, but all the other entities in the world, organic and inorganic, animals, stones, crystals and stars. A woman can be aligned in series of beings, body to body, because she is embodied, en-

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<sup>24</sup> Deleuze J., Guattari, F., *Capitalism et Schizophrénie.2. Mille plateau*, Les Editions de Minuit, 1980.

gendered and embedded, she doesn't need to absorb, to annex, to conquer she only cares for continuity and uninterrupted flow. Man is a cartographer and an explorer, but the woman the cartography itself; more than being related with the earth is the personification of the primordial Earth, the Gaia, ever resisting to Chaos and the ecological destruction.

There is an intersectionality, a reciprocal intervention between form and content -as Deleuze requires- with transversality as form and the becoming woman as the content. Female's exception from all the dominant systems of occident Metaphysics now is reversed and gives priority to female *pensée sauvage*. As Levi-Strauss designates in his book "The Raw and the cooked"<sup>25</sup>, speaking about the position of the female there is always a double opposition between the bipolar gender [only male and female], amid a tertiary system where the female stands against the oppression of all the entities by the male patriarch the phallogocentric Ego. So, there are three terms: the binary male, the tertiary male, female and the opposition of the female -the female seeking a new equilibrium through culture or Art. And it is indeed the political unconscious which resists all dualities, and it is tied to the female as the position of primal regression. The return of the repressed produces a tertiary position -neither male nor female, -as byproducts of Patriarchy but as the gender of free identification.

Transversality responds and also highlights the primordial importance of practical and political issues to Guattari's conceptual work. As we will see, Guattari conceived of transversality in relation to the Leninist cut; it thus is linked to democratic centralism and to the subject-group. That is counted as a characteristic of the Openness of Deleuze and his understanding of an all-inclusive gender emerging from disjunctive choices. The transversality is also linked to enunciation and auto-poesis; it is characterized by Guattari as trans-nomadic and transitive. The notion of transversality will also be posed in relation to the becoming of the woman

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<sup>25</sup> Lévi-Strauss Cl., *Mythologiques Le cru et le cuit*, Plon Paris, 1964.

for the mechanical formation of a war machine against state power.

Transversality from the other side is as a conceptual and pragmatic motor for the generation of heterogeneity including the writing he undertook with Deleuze. It promotes the rupture and redistribution of hierarchical structures, the mobilization of operations of deterritorialization across the social and cultural field, and it gains a ‘chaosmic’ dimension in the later writings, but its ‘origins’, however, are to be found in Guattari’s early work at the Psychiatric “Clinique de la Borde” and in militant Marxist movements in the 1950s and early 1960s. This is an initial and necessarily provisional effort to embed the concept in a social and therapeutic pragmatics and thus counter a debatable tendency towards a dilution or diffusion of transversality in theoretical abstraction, where it risks becoming a synonym for a generalized sense of creative differentiation.

Womanhood is also used as a critical concept for literary criticism. Transversality has been introduced by Deleuze in the second edition of *Proust and Signs*.<sup>26</sup> The concept concerns the kind of communication proper to the transversal dimension of machinic literary production. Transversality defines a modern way of writing that departs from the transcendent and dialectic presuppositions of the Platonic model of reminiscence and envisions an immanent and singularizing version instead. Woman is the gravitational center of the *Recherche du temps perdu* saga, a multifaceted woman (Odette-Albertine, Mme Verdurin, Duchesse de Guermantes) represents the always missing *objet petit a* of desire<sup>27</sup> where implicitly or explicitly, consciously or unconsciously can constitute both the lack and the excess. By her nature in procrea-

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<sup>26</sup> Deleuze G., *Proust et les Signes*, Press Universitaires de France, 1971.

<sup>27</sup> The lacanian object of *jouissance* which functions as an accumulator of it. Cf. Kobow, B. S., “The Erotic and the Eternal: Striving for the Permanence of Meaning”, *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, 6 (2), 2021, pp. 213–236. <https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.26714>

tion woman is the one capable to do the expenditure of everything she has for stabilizing the flow of human becoming, at any expense.

Also called the “anti-logos style”<sup>28</sup>, the transversal assembles heterogeneous components under a unifying position of the woman, the only female prerogative-which is far from being total-Plato living in a society of men erects his magnificent mental edifice only trying to imitate the Idea, and reproduce what is stable and transcendent, but at the cost of ignoring subordinates and excluding women.

Women. Plato’s critique focuses on the on the issue of intelligence always coming before, where the disjunctive use of faculties merely serves as a prelude for the unifying dialectic found in a single logos. In the contrary in modernity and post-modernity a simulacrum reminiscence departs from subjective associations and culminates in an originating viewpoint: Unification at the expense of what is called “The second sex” by Simone de Beauvoir in her famous non arithmetical paradigm; “one sex only with only one gender”, the second is just a solidified part of man’s shoulder, the male is the sole actant in the Platonic “Politeia” of today of today. On the contrary in literature, -Proust for example- seeks the disjunctive use of faculties unhinged from this transcendent and dialectic model and works on an immanent principle where intelligence always comes after and what is laid before us is the becoming woman adumbrating the line of flight for every human being.

The transversal dimension of fiction fundamentally counters the principles of the world of attributes. If logos, analytic expression, and rational thought are identified with the male side of bipolar gender, then characteristics, signs and symptoms from menstruality to “a male a l’aise”, and then pathos, hieroglyphs, ideograms and phonetic writing, they constitute esoteric disposition of the female. Where order has collapsed in states of the world, the viewpoint provides a formula by which art and fiction can constitute and reconstitute a new beginning to the world. Such a beginning is nec-

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<sup>28</sup> Bryx A., Denosko G., “Deleuze dictionary”, *Academic Dictionaries and Encyclopedias*.

essarily singularizing; the transversal dimension or the never-viewed viewpoint draws a line of communication through the heterogeneous pieces and fragments that refuse to belong to a whole, that are parts of different wholes, or that have no whole other than style. From a rounding milieu or from an interzone with its contiguous in the middle, they are both unequivocally immanent.

The ephemeral images, memories and signs, the odors, flavours and drafts of particular settings are swept along at various rhythms and velocities in the creation of the non-totalizing transversal dimension of becoming minoritarian - where female stands *au lieu* of every minority that is not reproductive, imitative or representative, but depends solely on its functioning. For that reason, becoming woman preempts the interaction of human with the post-human, the cyborg, the schizoid the transgressive, the queer, the non-binary.

Deleuze finds third parties that will communicate aberrantly between partial objects of hermaphroditic bodies and plants. The famous apiarian bestiary of Deleuze shows how he always prioritizes the simulacrum, the artifact, "the false". When Luce Irigaray<sup>29</sup> speaks for a gender fashioned culturally and socially, she does not mean that it is a trope of the logos, she had been the first to deconstruct all the grammarology of huMAN and has changed once and for all, he too she and it.

Rather, it is a line of passage, a zig-zagging flight or even the narration of involuntary memory, that productively transverses the entities. Transversality is machinic and becoming woman on the horizon of species evolution. The female war machine produces partial objects and resonances between them. Becoming woman can be understood as an essential singularity, which is superior to the partitioned objects, and yet not beyond them. Woman, Gaia Nature can easily be interjected and change place between them.

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<sup>29</sup> Luce Irigaray is a Belgian feminist, philosopher, linguist, psychoanalyst, and cultural theorist. Who examines the uses and misuses of language in relation to woman

### Orientation of gendered body in space and the woman's image in Queer Phenomenology

We will explore the construction of the image of women through the lens of queer phenomenology, drawing, on Sara Ahmed's<sup>30</sup> redefinition of orientation, directionality and embodiment. She argues that the image of women, as historically and culturally situated, functions as a site of heteronormative orientation, and queer phenomenology offers a context for critically destabilizing and redefining this image. Through the analysis of visual culture and spatial theory, we will show how images of women are not merely representations, but material forces that are shaped and shaped by the normative lines of desire. The image of women has long been a battleground for ideological, cultural and political investments. From classical image to contemporary advertising and digital media, the female image is not only represented but also oriented - positioned to be seen, consumed and evaluated through dominant gaze. S. Ahmed will write:

Following lines also involves forms of social investment. Such investments “promise” return (if we follow this line, then “this” or “that” will follow), which might sustain the very will to keep going. Though such investments in the promise of return, subjects *reproduce the lines that they follow*. in a way, thinking about the politics of “lifelines” helps us to rethink the relationship between inheritance (the line that we are given as our point of arrival into familial and social space) and reproduction (the demand that we return the gift of the line by extending that line)<sup>31</sup>

Queer phenomenology, as articulated by Sara Ahmed, offers a critical method for examining how bodies and images acquire meaning through the directions in which they are viewed and the spaces they inhabit. We propose that the image of women is not a constant image but a potential, direc-

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<sup>30</sup> Ahmed S., *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Duke University Press 2006.

<sup>31</sup> Ahmed S., *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Duke University Press, 2006, p.17.

torial phenomenon that participates in the orientation of subjects within heteronormative and patriarchal spatialities.

### **The Image of Woman as a Site of Orientation**

Traditional phenomenology, particularly in the work of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, emphasizes the intentionality of consciousness and perception. Both consciousness and perception are always of something. This relation between subject and object is not neutral, and in gendered visual culture, it is often mediated by what Laura Mulvey<sup>32</sup> calls the “male gaze”. The image of woman, then, is often constructed to follow with male subjectivity, offering a line of sight that sustains heteronormative orientation. S. Ahmed’s queer phenomenology challenges this by asking: what happens when bodies do not follow these lines? In *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Ahmed theorizes orientation not only as a spatial but also a social relation—how bodies are “directed” toward certain objects, values, or futures. In Chapter I, S. Ahmed considers “how spatial orientations are shaped by others’ social orientations”<sup>33</sup>. The image of woman, in this sense, is an object toward which heteronormative desire is oriented, and which orients viewers in return. The queering of the image of woman, then, does not simply mean a replacement of content but a reorientation of the very structure of perception. Disorientation becomes a critical strategic. Ahmed has showed, the orientation is about making the strange familiar through the extension of bodily lines and that queer disorientation returns us to the strangeness of the familiar images of women that disrupt normative cues—through abstraction, performance art, or queer aesthetics—invite disorientation and the possibility of new alignments. Disorientation becomes a critical strategy. Images of women who disrupt normative cues—

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<sup>32</sup> Mulvey L., “Visual pleasure and narrative cinema”, *Screen*, 16:3, Autumn 1975, pp. 803-816

<sup>33</sup> Ahmed S., *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Duke University Press, 2006, p.23.



through abstraction, performance art, or queer aesthetics—invite disorientation and the possibility of new alignments.

Consider, for example, the work of artists like Claude Cahun<sup>34</sup> or Zanele Muholi<sup>35</sup>, whose self-representations trouble fixed identities of gender, race, and sexuality. These images resist being “lined up” with normative expectations, instead cultivating ambiguity, multiplicity, and resistance. Such artistic strategies resonate with queer phenomenology’s emphasis on the sideways and the oblique. The image of woman, far from being a neutral representation, is a mechanism of orientation—both produced by and productive of *social* spatiality. Through the lens of queer phenomenology, we can understand this image as a site where bodily directions, habitual alignments, and normative investments converge. By engaging with queer methods of disorientation and re-orientation, we can begin to re-imagine the image of woman not as an endpoint of vision, but as a starting point for new trajectories of thought, desire, and embodiment. The image of woman is not a mere reflection of gender but a powerful structure of orientation, one that organizes vision, desire, and social space. Across time and media—from classical sculpture and Renaissance painting to Instagram selfies and digital cinema—images of women have been repeatedly positioned to align with dominant gazes, often serving as symbols of aesthetic pleasure, reproductive value, or moral virtue. This repetitive alignment is not accidental but deeply political. Visual culture produces the social values. As we have already mentioned above, Laura Mulvey’s foundational essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” claimed that mainstream cinema constructs woman as “to-be-looked-at-ness”<sup>36</sup>, that is, as “sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups

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<sup>34</sup> Claude Cahun was a French surrealist photographer, sculptor, and writer in the early of twentieth century. Her work explores gender identity and the unconscious

<sup>35</sup> Zanele Muholi is a famous South African artist and visual activist working in video, photography and installation. Her work includes the documentation of lives of South Africa’s Black lesbian, gay, trans, queer and intersex communities.

<sup>36</sup> Mulvey L., “Visual pleasure and narrative cinema”, *Screen*, 16:3, Autumn 1975, p. 808.

to strip-tease, from Ziegfeld to Busdy Berkeley, she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire.”<sup>37</sup> Thus, the camera’s gaze—often aligned with the male protagonist—invites the spectator to look at women as aesthetic objects, rather than narrative agents.

Queer phenomenology, as developed by Sara Ahmed, provides a critical framework for understanding how such images are not only consumed but also produced through orientations: ways of turning toward or away from certain bodies, spaces, and futures. This paper aims to apply queer phenomenology to visual and spatial representations of womanhood in order to reveal the normative lines that direct perception and bodily experience and to explore the political potential of disorientation as a queer strategy of resistance. They also reinforce a set of habitual orientations: how a body should sit, what it should wear, where it should be placed.

Ahmed’s notion of orientation becomes especially relevant here. To be oriented is to have one’s body directed in a certain way—to face certain possibilities and not others. The image of woman becomes a tool of orientation, one that disciplines not only the gaze but the very direction of bodily being. Girls and women are subtly taught to position themselves in accordance with these images—to “line up” with expected futures.

### Disorientation and Queer Image

In the beginning of conclusion of Ahmed’s book writes:

“Moments of disorientation are viral. They are bodily experiences that throw the world up, or throw the body from its ground. Disorientation as a bodily feeling can be unsettling, and it can shatter one’s sense of confidence in the ground or one’s belief that the ground on which we reside can support the actions that make a life feel livable.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Mulvey L., “Visual pleasure and narrative cinema”, *Screen*, 16:3, Autumn 1975, p. 808.

<sup>38</sup> Ahmed S., *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Duke University Press, 2006, p. 157.

In other words, the moments of disorientation produce a potential site of resistance. So, disorientation is the possibility of another direction, as Ahmed has shown us. This act of turning away from the normative path—of refusing to align with dominant gazes—can be found in many queer artistic and cultural practices like in artwork of Claude Cahun which we mentioned above. Often cross-dressed, masked, or ambiguously presented, Cahun subverts the image of woman by resisting both binary gender norms and heteronormative desires. In a similar way the artwork of South African visual activist Zanele Muholi in *Somnyama Ngonyama* uses the black female body as a site of defiant self-representation. Through highly stylized self-portraits, Muholi challenges the power over her image, confronting histories of racial and gender objectification. These artistic interventions demonstrate that images can also be tools of queer phenomenology—means of reorienting perception, disrupting norms, and making visible the social mechanics of alignment.

## Conclusions

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology offers a radically different framework for understanding the body and gender. Rather than being treated as objects of external study or social constructs cut off from experience, they are recognized as embodied ways of being in the world. The philosopher invites us to reflect on our relationship to the body, not as something we have, but as something we are - and therefore to understand gender as an experience, not a given.

In the context of the present study, it is necessary to acknowledge the important contribution of J. Butler in his approach to the study of sexuality through the performative agency of the gendered body. Butler's philosophical framework, which draws on Merleau-Ponty's concept of the phenomenology of the body, offers a unique lens through which we can examine the complex dynamics of human sexuality. The same could be said about S. Ahmed's queer phenomenology and the concept of orientation that she introduces

based on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. By combining these phenomenological approaches, we study the issue of the image of women in a dia-phenomenological way, namely by combining the above philosophical positions and linking the image of women with the gendered body, its orientation and its performativity.

Finally, the topology of the body in Deleuze-Guattari is the body without organs as an imaginary image that forms a place of potential expression and freedom and at the same time of passage à l'act to chaos. Here the gendered body is multiple and produces the logic of the situation and at the same time this is produced through its lacks as a "machine of desire". Transversality responds and also highlights the primordial importance of practical and political issues to Guattari's conceptual work. As we will see, Guattari conceived of transversality in relation to the Leninist cut; it is linked thus to democratic centralism and to the subject-group. Transversality is also linked to enunciation and autopoiesis; it is characterized by Guattari as trans-monadic and transitive. The notion of transversality will also be put in relation with the becoming woman for the machinic formation of a war machine against state power That is counted as a characteristic of the Openness of Deleuze and his understanding of an all-inclusive gender emerging from disjunctive choices. Transversality defines a modern way of writing that moves away from the transcendental and dialectical presuppositions of the Platonic model of reminiscence and envisions an immanent and singularizing version instead.

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**A Legacy of Philosophy, Science,  
and Myth of Hypatia of Alexandria:  
Synesius of Cyrene and the  
Construction of Her Memory**

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**Abstract**

Hypatia of Alexandria, a prominent philosopher, mathematician, and astronomer of late antiquity, was murdered in 415 AD in an event that has been widely debated by historians. While some accounts depict her brutal killing as an attempt to erase her influence, Hypatia has remained a significant cultural and intellectual figure throughout history. Her legacy has been shaped by various narratives, from the Enlightenment ideal of science's struggle against religion to her portrayal as a martyr of knowledge. The study explores how Hypatia's contributions to mathematics, astronomy, and philosophy have been overshadowed by her tragic death and how literary and historical sources, including Synesius of Cyrene's letters, have influenced perceptions of her life. Additionally, it examines her role in the political and cultural conflicts of Alexandria, her association with Neoplatonism, and the erasure or survival of her written works. By analyzing ancient and modern interpretations, this paper highlights the evolving representation of Hypatia as both a historical figure and a symbolic construct in intellectual history.

**Keywords:** *Hypatia of Alexandria, Neoplatonism, Intellectual legacy, Historical reception, knowledge, religion*

## Introduction

Hypatia of Alexandria died in 415 AD. Some accounts explain that she was attacked in the street by a group of monks, dragged to a public square and killed. Her body was cut into pieces, and according to some sources, it was burned and its ashes spread across the city. Her memory was thus radically erased. The details of this murder, however, have not found unanimous historical confirmation. Hesychios speaks simply of violence and an uncertain fragment of the History of Philosophy of Damaskios reports that his eyes were put out<sup>1</sup>.

Hypatia survived the *damnatio memoriae*. She is one of the figures of Antiquity whose memory has remained alive throughout all the eras of Western culture. She has not only aroused the interest of scholars and learned people since she has inspired more than one literary work.

*The Library of Alexandria and the Serapeon, or house of relief, which was part of it, had been burned and destroyed in the fourth century by the Christians, – who, moreover, massacred in the streets the famous Hypatia, a Pythagorean philosopher<sup>2</sup>. These are, no doubt, excesses that cannot be blamed on religion, – but it is good to clear the reproach of those unfortunate Arabs whose translations have preserved for us the wonders of Greek philosophy, medicine and science...<sup>3</sup>*

Les filles du feu by Gérard de Nerval (1854) is one of the many literary examples that willingly puts Hypatia on stage to evoke the fragile symbiosis of wisdom and power, or to hold a discourse on the attempts to control knowledge, or even to eliminate it. For G. de Nerval, or for other modern authors, it was not a question of knowing the person of Hypatia better or

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<sup>1</sup> Harich-Schwarzbauer H., “Erinnerungen an Hypatia von Alexandria: Zur fragmentierten Philosophinnenbiographie des Synesios von Kyrene”, in: Feichtinger B. & Wöhrle G. (eds.), *Gender studies in den Altertumswissenschaften: Möglichkeiten und Grenzen*, Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2002, pp. 97-108

<sup>2</sup> Dendrinis M. & Griva A. “Neoplatonic and Gnostic Resonances in the Martyrdom of Cyprian of Athenais Eudocia”, *Dia-noesis*, 14, 2023, pp. 20-38.

<sup>3</sup> Nerval G. de, *Les filles de feu — Les Chimères*, Gallimard, 2005 [1854]:32.

of discovering historical truths. G. de Nerval uses the figure of Hypatia in a discourse on the destruction of knowledge by the Christians and to praise the role of the Arabs in the transmission and preservation of the learned literature of Antiquity<sup>4</sup>. In the long history of the reception of knowledge, recognizing that the contribution of women scientists has always been difficult, although the Alexandrian philosopher was already a subject of literature during her lifetime, particularly of committed literature. Depending on the case, she was instrumentalized by historiographers, by historians of philosophy or by literary scholars<sup>5</sup>. Thus, Hypatia became a symbol of the annihilation of the wise, pure and immaculate woman or, on the contrary, of the demonic seductress<sup>6</sup>. In Byzantium, she represented the learned woman; in the Age of Enlightenment, she embodied the fight of Science to free itself from theology<sup>7</sup>. For theologians, she was a timeless figure of the demonic and magic. Today, she represents the successful symbiosis of science, wisdom and femininity. This complexity has embarrassed scholars. Thus, for Christian Lacombrade, whose opinion has long dominated research, Hypatia's cruel death gave her an importance that her philosophical knowledge would never have given her: "*Hypatia owes more to her horrible end than to her works for not having been forgotten, unlike her Athenian rival Asklepiogeneia*"<sup>8</sup><sup>9</sup>. The sources of Antiquity bring another tone: they do not question Hypatia's remarkable works. Whether

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<sup>4</sup> Dzielska M., *Hypatia of Alexandria*, Harvard University Press, 1995:1-17.

<sup>5</sup> Hose M., "Der Bischof und die Philosophin: Inszenierung des Paares in den Briefen des Synesios an Hypatia", in: Heitmann A. et al. (eds.), *Bi-textualität: Inszenierungen des Paares: Ein Buch für Ina Schabert*, Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2001, pp. 323-333.

<sup>6</sup> Rougé J., "La politique de Cyrille et le meurtre d'Hypatie", *Cristianesimo nella storia: Ricerche storiche, esegetiche, teologiche*, 11, 1990, pp. 485-504.

<sup>7</sup> Papaioikonomou A., "Christianity and Rationalism: Maximus the Confessor vs. Descartes", *Dia-noesis*, 14, 2023, pp. 39-52.

<sup>8</sup> Mehr ihrem schmachvollen Tod als ihren Verdiensten verdankt es Hypatia wohl, heute nicht wie ihre athenische Rivalin Asklepiogeneia vergessen zu sein.

<sup>9</sup> Lacombrade C., "Hypatia", *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, 16, 1994, pp. 956-967.



opinions about her are positive or negative, Hypatia was recognized as a Platonic philosopher, in the ancient sense. Platonic philosophy included several sciences (such as Geometry, Stereometry and Astronomy) and these disciplines opened the way to sublime knowledge<sup>10</sup>. Depending on the case, the testimonies of Antiquity emphasized one or another aspect of her teaching. She was thus considered either as a mathematician, or as an astronomer, and then again as a philosopher.

In scholarly interpretations and literary quotations about Hypatia, the love of a student for his teacher is always at the center of the interest she arouses. In the 18th and 19th centuries, in particular, the legend of the virgin philosopher, the object of men's desire, crystallized in scientific treatises<sup>11</sup>. These writings also reflect the imagination of the interpreters, who, attracted by the phenomenon of the "pure and untouchable" Platonist, projected their desires and wishes onto the person of Hypatia.

What has been transmitted to us about the Alexandrian philosopher is largely based on fragments and selective texts that favored the invention of legends<sup>12</sup>. These are primarily literary texts that must be read in the context of a long tradition. Today, this aspect is most often ignored when researching the historical figure of Hypatia. In what follows, main focus of this paper is the ancient transmission regarding Hypatia, in order to explain why the evocation of her scientific work is so relegated to the background.

### **Resources of Hypatia's scientific work**

Hypatia lived at a time of cultural upheaval. Her exact date of birth is not known. She taught and was influential from about 380/385 until her death in 415. Originally from

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<sup>10</sup> Knorr W. R., *Textual studies in ancient and medieval geometry*, Birkhäuser, 1989: 756-762.

<sup>11</sup> Cameron A. & Long J., *Barbarians and politics at the court of Arcadius*, University of California Press, 1993: 44-49.

<sup>12</sup> Harich-Schwarzbauer H., "Hypatia von Alexandria: Das Kleid der Philosophin", *Moderne Antike — Antike modern, Metis. Zeitschrift für historische Frauenforschung und feministische Praxis*, 7/14, 1998, pp. 31-38.

Alexandria, she was the daughter of the astronomer Theon. It is not known how she came to philosophy, or who her teachers were, apart from her father. Information about her is mostly fragmentary. While there are biographies of some Neoplatonists such as Plotinus and Proklos, written by one of their students, there is no such description of the philosopher's life. What is available, however, is the literary correspondence of Synesius of Cyrene, who presented himself as a student of Hypatia and thus sheds light on some aspects of her life. Synesius was a contemporary of hers who, as an author, used refined and subtle methods of description<sup>13</sup>. In his correspondence, which comprises a total of 156 letters, we find seven letters addressed to Hypatia and a few addressed to others in which he speaks of her, as he also does in his treatise *Peri dôrou* (*Speech to Paionios*)<sup>14</sup>. Older research concludes that this correspondence describes everyday life and, therefore, that it comes from the author's estate and testifies to a very real epistolary relationship. Against this thesis, we can think that it would rather be a well-organized corpus of letters, deliberately addressed to Hypatia, but which would constitute a sort of biography, simply written in an unusual form. In his letters, Synesios somehow makes Hypatia the central character of a philosophical and esoteric circle (of male listeners). He gives himself the role of a very close disciple of Hypatia who, little by little, loses his importance and finally feels ousted. In Synesius' literary fiction, Hypatia appears as a woman of great technical knowledge, who exercises political authority among the powerful of the city and who extends her influence beyond her region<sup>15</sup>.

The philosopher is probably the object of Synesius's exalted imagination when he compares his relationship with his teacher to that of Diotima and Socrates and when he expresses his ardent desire for a harmony of soul mates with this

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<sup>13</sup> Garzya A. (ed.), *Opere di Sinesio di Cirene: Epistole, operette, inni*, SAN, 1989:136.

<sup>14</sup> Garzya A. & Roques D. (eds.), *Synésios de Cyrène*: Tomes II et III, correspondances, Les Belles Lettres, 2000, pp. 137.

<sup>15</sup> Hose M., "Synesius und seine Briefe: Versuch einer Analyse eines literarischen Entwurfs", *Würzburger Jahrbücher für die Altertumswissenschaft*, 27, 2003, pp. 125-141.

extraordinary woman. Unfortunately, we have no clue as to whether the letters were really sent to Hypatia and whether the philosopher read them. There is no evidence of any replies from Hypatia. In letters 46 and 81, there is mention of an echo from the philosopher, but it does not directly refer to a letter<sup>16</sup>. No contemporary author and no testimony about Hypatia mention Synesius as having been her student. Being the only one to speak of his friendship with Hypatia, we are thus reduced to believing what he himself writes in his letters. No external element allows us to confirm the existence of the friendship staged between the two philosophers. Of course, a privileged relationship with Hypatia could have been invented out of whole cloth by Synesios in order to give himself importance and thus perpetuate his own memoria<sup>17</sup>.

Synesios' letters concern the years 395-413. If we consider that he died in 413 (the commonly accepted date), we cannot expect to find in his works any mention of the murder of Hypatia. In the middle of the 5th century, the historian of the Church, Socrates of Constantinople, on the contrary relates precisely the cruel death of the philosopher which he places in the year 415, thus making an indirect accusation on the instigator of the murder<sup>18</sup>.

The story of Hypatia's death is set in the context of the great rupture of the Roman Empire, at the end of the 4th and beginning of the 5th century, which materialized in different ways depending on the region. In Alexandria, it was accompanied by particularly violent events. It is impossible to find the exact dates of Hypatia's life, but her birth is placed between 350 and 370. Thus, in 392, in Alexandria, she had to witness the destruction of the Sarapieion. The sanctuary of Sarapis, a Greco-Egyptian deity with a mixed character, integrating both traditional Egyptian and Dionysian elements, was one of the symbols of Alexandrian culture. The pagan philosophers opposed this destruction with force and violence, which also

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<sup>16</sup> Hose 2003, p. 126.

<sup>17</sup> Karlsson G., *Idéologie et cérémonial dans l'épistolographie byzantine*, Almqvist & Wiksell, 1962, pp. 56-58.

<sup>18</sup> Lacombrade C., *Synésios de Cyrène, Hellène et Chrétien*, Les Belles Lettres, 1951, p. 43.

harmed Greek knowledge: the sanctuary housed the "daughter library" as well as the statues of famous sages and poets of Greece (among them Pindar, Protagoras, Plato, probably Homer, Thales, Heraclitus, Demetrius of Phaleron). According to Christian sources, the philosopher priest Olympios boasted of having killed several Christians with his own hands. Hypatia is never mentioned in the history of this conflict<sup>19</sup>.

Hypatia is noted to be absent from the documents relating to the destruction of the Sarapieion. It is claimed that she had good relations with Bishop Theophilus who reigned over Alexandria at the time. This would be the reason why she would not have taken part in the defense of the Sarapieion against the Christians: there is no source to confirm this allegation.

Synesios presents Hypatia as an unapproachable and inaccessible being<sup>20</sup>. This representation of the philosopher has always aroused the curiosity of scientists for the character, and no doubt it has also interested as an object of male desire (that of the author of the letters). Synesios uses in his letters to Hypatia the conventions of ancient epistolary writing in which the central motif is separation, which is at the origin of the correspondence itself. These letters are also defined as an expression of friendship. Through this literary convention, the recipient becomes the alter ego of the one who writes the letter.

Synesios addresses the philosopher with the highest titles: Mother, Sister and Mistress; Hypatia becomes for him a sort of leader of a divine circle and at the same time a coryphaeus<sup>21</sup>. His membership in this esoteric group appears repeatedly in his correspondence with other "disciples" of Hypatia. Thus, in letter 136, he recalls sentimentally the time spent with Hypatia. During his stay in Alexandria, he is said to have visited Kanabos in the Nile Delta with his co-disciples.

The letters addressed to Hypatia all evoke the distance that gradually grew between Synesios and his Mistress. A quick

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<sup>19</sup> Evieux P., Isidore de Péluse, *Beauchesne*, 1995, pp. 56-59.

<sup>20</sup> Hose M., "Der Bischof und die Philosophin: Inszenierung des Paares in den Briefen des Synesios an Hypatia", in: Heitmann A. et al. (eds.), *Bi-textualität: Inszenierungen des Paares: Ein Buch für Ina Schabert*, Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2001, pp. 323-333.

<sup>21</sup> Hose 2001, pp. 234-240.

inventory of the epistolary analyses shows the renewed complaint about the lack of response and the regret of not being able to be the friend (and the recipient of her letters). This motif is used effectively in the letters to Hypatia. It gives the impression that the “disciple” had, at the beginning, a flawless relationship with the philosopher, then, at the end, he no longer receives any news or even the slightest sign of life from the one who was his mistress. His desire for a union of soul-mates with the master remains his highest goal. The tension caused by this (unfulfilled) desire is felt in all the correspondence that Synesius sent to Hypatia.

Synesius’ letters aroused great interest among the Byzantines, as can be seen from the rich manuscript tradition<sup>22</sup>. This enthusiasm is attributed in particular to the cheerful nature of the future bishop of Ptolemais, a characteristic that manifested itself on all occasions, and especially in his correspondence where he expressed his desires and weaknesses. Since Hypatia was considered by the Byzantines as an exceptional being, Synesius’ letters must certainly have been read as a biography, in order to get an idea of her life. That is to say, it is very likely that they must have been understood as forming a coherent whole. If these letters were so successful, it is because they suggest more than they provide concrete elements, capable of destroying the illusion of the desire for symbiosis with this divine woman. This deconcretization is generally recognized as one of the characteristics of the epistolary writing of late Antiquity<sup>23</sup>. Through the masculine Ego desiring letters to Hypatia, this deconcretization becomes a means of seducing and retaining the reader. It allows him to get closer to the highly unreal character of the philosopher, to understand the correspondence of Synesios and to be able to enter himself into this hermetic circle that he describes<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> De Marnef H. & Cauellat G. (eds.), Nicephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos, *Ecclesiasticae historiae*, Paris, 2000 [1576], pp. 12-18.

<sup>23</sup> Karlsson G., *Idéologie et cérémonial dans l'épistolographie byzantine*, Almqvist & Wiksell, 1962. Also, Knorr W. R., *Textual studies in ancient and medieval geometry*, Birkhäuser, 1989, pp. 78-80.

<sup>24</sup> Lacombrade C., *Synésios de Cyrène, Hellène et Chrétien*, Les Belles Lettres, 1951, pp. 34-45.

It would be a mistake to believe that the letters describe who the historical Hypatia was, how she behaved as a philosopher and what impression she made. On the other hand, the letters show very well what characteristics were attributed to her and what projections she was the object of. Furthermore, it should be emphasized that the use of the literary letter to speak of the philosopher is unique in its kind and differs from the tradition of biographies of philosophers. The *Letters to Hypatia* segment the biographical material in a strange way: they highlight the Hypatia's notable achievements, without however situating these specific moments of her literary life in time. Thus, it is recognized that Hypatia, beyond philosophy, carried out astronomical work (including in practice), that she had skills as a literary critic and that she was granted authority within the political elite of Alexandria<sup>25</sup>.

The other sources say nothing about her private life, except that she was assassinated and that she did not marry<sup>26</sup>. The same is not true of her scientific and philosophical achievements. Some sources, in particular Socrates of Constantinople, speak of her philosophical knowledge, remarkable and very extensive, other authors, among others Philostorgios in his *Historia Ecclesiastica*, highlight her astronomical work. No source explicitly speaks of Hypatia's relationship with religious practices (such as manticism, theurgy, etc.), while her father Theon's interest in these matters is reported in Malalas' *Chronographia* and in the encyclopedic dictionary (*lexicon*) of *Suda*. If one admits that it was a family tradition, then it should not be excluded that Hypatia had practiced religious rites. The silence of the sources on this question can possibly be explained by the political upheaval in Alexandria at that time.

The destruction of the Sarapieion in 392, under the rule of Bishop Theophilus, was immediately followed by the exodus of the pagan cult leaders and philosophers, and then, in 413, under Bishop Cyril, by a pogrom against the Jews, two years

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<sup>25</sup> Lacombrade C., "Hypatia", *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, 16, 1994, pp. 956-967.

<sup>26</sup> Mogenet J. & Tihon A. (eds.), *Le "Grand Commentaire" de Théon d'Alexandrie aux tables faciles de Ptolémée: Livre I. Histoire du texte*, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1985, p. 34.

before Hypatia's murder<sup>27</sup>. If we assume that the pagan philosophers and the faithful of the cult did not wish to end up as martyrs, they must have, on the other hand, refrained from publicly and ostentatiously practicing their cult after 392. The historian of philosophy Damaskios notes that Hypatia did not free herself from discursive thought and therefore practiced a truncated form of philosophy<sup>28</sup>. This judgment underlines the author's preference for hieratic philosophy; this seems questionable, however, if we accept that nothing transpired outside the religious practices of the philosophers, any more than from the esoteric domain. Hesychios of Miletus is the only one to cite Hypatia's writings, in a catalogue of pagan knowledge, the *Onomatologos*, which he wrote in the 6th century and which the patriarch Photios took up in the 9th century in his Library. Photios was later expurgated, and the story about Hypatia only appears in the 10th century in the Byzantine dictionary of the *Suda*. This series of transmissions, which starts with Hesychios, shows how important Hypatia was, for having "survived" the many censorships of the sources. Hesychios is also the only author who establishes a direct and categorical link between the philosopher's work in astronomy and her death: "*she was killed out of jealousy, because of her extraordinary superior wisdom, but especially for what related to astronomy*". The writings listed by Hesychios relate to the field of mathematics and astronomy. No philosophical writing is mentioned. But the fact that Hypatia was an author is, without a doubt, a documented fact. The commentary (probably on the *Arithmetica*) of Diophantus, who lived in the 3rd century AD in Alexandria, and that of Apollonius of Perge (3rd/2nd century BC) on the Conic Sections (Konika) are as much evidence in favor of Hypatia.

The third work, which appears in the *Suda* with the title *Astronomikos Kanon*, continues to pose a problem for scholars; the preposition *eis* (which means "about") is almost always affixed to the title, which would mean that it is a commentary by Ptolemaios (on the *Procheiroi Kanones*). Furthermore, Theon, Hypatia's father, in the preface to the third volume of

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<sup>27</sup> Mogenet & Tihon 1985, pp. 90-91.

<sup>28</sup> Karlsson 1962, p. 5.

his commentaries on the *Mathematike Syntaxis* of the astronomer Ptolemaios, expressly notes that she is the author of this text: *Θέωνος Ἀλεξανδρέως εἰς τὸν τρίτον τῆς μαθηματικῆς Πτολεμαίου Συντάξεως ὑπόμνημα ἐκδόσεως παραναγνωσθείσης τε φιλοσόφῳ θυγατρὶ μου Ὑπατίᾳ*<sup>29</sup>. Based on this testimony, some claim that Hypatia wrote the third volume (and probably all the other volumes). Others say, on the contrary, that Hypatia is only responsible for the commentaries on the text. This question remains open today. Current knowledge (of the published texts) does not allow us to decide. On the other hand, it is easy to see that, until today, the tendency has been to reduce Hypatia's participation in the writings.

## Epilogue

Today, no one disputes the fact that Hypatia was an author. But her status as co-author of her father's works, which was attributed to her until the 19th century, still fuels fierce debate. It is surprising that, precisely at the end of the 19th century, Hypatia's written works were discussed and questioned: the text of the *Suda* was then changed and Hypatia was only granted commentaries and not a single treatise on astronomy. The fact that there are no philosophical works (in the strict sense) by Hypatia should not be used to minimize her importance, since in Antiquity, the highest knowledge was transmitted orally. The power of orality had long been advocated by the Pythagoreans and had become a foundation of the Platonic tradition. If we consider the persecution of pagan philosophers in Alexandria and, of course, the discourse on the golden rule of silence – a discourse that comes to light in Hypatia's contemporary, the epigram writer Palladas – the non-existence of Hypatia's philosophical works (in the strict sense) could be explained by the prudence of the philosopher who knew (thanks to the Platonic tradition) that the written word risked being abused and profaned by interpreters<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> Mogenet & Tihon 1985, p. 9.

<sup>30</sup> Hahn D., *Unter falschem Namen: Von der schwierigen Autorschaft der Frauen*, Suhrkamp, 1991.



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## Feministic Approach of Saint Poetess of *Varkari Sampradaya: An Appraisal*

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### Abstract

Feminism seeks not to divide genders but to empower women to progress alongside men, challenging social inequalities and asserting women's autonomy, identity, and equal rights across all spheres of life. Its core aim is to transform gender-biased societal mindsets and patriarchal structures, promoting an egalitarian society. In *Maharashtra*, the *varkari* sect embodies values of humanism, liberty, and gender equality. Amid periods of moral decline, the teachings of *varkari* saints offered ethical direction. Notably, female saint-poetesses of the *varkari* tradition, from the 13th century, used devotional literature as a tool to resist social injustice and advocate for women's dignity. Their spiritual and literary contributions provided a progressive voice in a deeply patriarchal society and continue to inspire today. This paper evaluates the role of these saint-poetesses in furthering women's emancipation, highlighting how their legacy aligns with feminist ideals and remains vital in ongoing struggles for gender equality.

**Keywords:** *Female saint poetess, Liberty, Equality, Reverence, Gender or Class discrimination, Egalitarian society, Bhakti Movement, Mystic*

## Introduction

Feminism does not mean separating women from men and establishing an independent domain for women. Rather, it encourages women to recognize their own strength and walk alongside men in the journey of progress. Feminism rejects social disparities between men and women. According to the Webster dictionary, 'Feminism is the belief in political, economic and social equality of women and men.'<sup>1</sup> Feminism is not merely about advocating for women's rights; it is about establishing a distinct identity for women. It encompasses women's position in the family, her right over her own body, and struggle for equality in political, social, educational, and other spheres of life. The purpose of this ideology is to change the mindset of the society built upon gender inequality. Thus, the core objective of feminism is to dismantle the patriarchal politics that places women in a secondary position. Simone de Beauvoir in her work "The Second Sex," expresses feminism as follows, 'gender is a social construct rather than biological reality. She proposes that women are characterised as "the Other," secondary to men, and their oppression is the result of societal construction.' Her feminism underpins freedom, individual agency, and the need for women to become subjects rather than objects, in their own lives.

Feminism has rejected both the subjugation and the deification of women, striving to recognize and reassess their identity as human beings. The objective is not to take power out of men's hands which would not bring changes in society rather destroy the very notion of this kind of power. This ideology is fundamentally rooted in humanism and equality. Feminism respects and acknowledges every woman as an individual being. It emphasizes the dignity of a woman's individuality, all forms of liberty and equality. Feminist movement is not just about women's rights rather it is an effort to change men's mindsets. It also focuses on the complex rela-

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/feminism>

tionships that exist in society in the form of gender discrimination, race, class, and caste on both theoretical and practical levels. Thus, Feminist ideology is not only limited to Western societies but also found in the writings of social reformers of the 18th and 19th centuries in India; who tried to expose the reality of the women passing through the societal exclusion especially the deprivation of education. During the medieval times, women were allowed to express her thoughts on a spiritual level openly. Indeed, the reality of women's status before the arrival of the British in India was astonishing.

In India, Saints and great leaders especially from Maharashtra ((one of the Indian states located at western coast) played very important role who advocated feminist principles like gender equality and women's liberty over a century such as Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, Savitribai Phule, Principal Gopal Krishna Agarkar, Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and others. Dr. Ambedkar, the advocate of social justice, states that, 'I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved.'<sup>2</sup> For Mahatma Gandhi feminism is an inseparable bond connecting every woman in the world. Mahatma Phule was the first thinker who had a belief that to destroy the patriarchal structure of the society, women need to be educated and empowered and he practically applied this in his thought and action being real *karmayogī*<sup>3</sup>. The feminist movement in India acknowledged that it is difficult to separate fight for women's liberation from the struggles of other oppressed and marginalized groups or class as both experiences' oppression.

In India orthodox Hindu society not only denied lower castes and women. The Bhakti movement stands out as one

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: *Writings and Speeches* series, Volume 3, published by the Government of Maharashtra.

[http://drambedkarwritings.gov.in/upload/uploadfiles/files/Volume\\_03.pdf](http://drambedkarwritings.gov.in/upload/uploadfiles/files/Volume_03.pdf)

<sup>3</sup>A *karmayogi* is one who controls his or her senses with the mind and performs actions (*karma*) without attachment to the fruits or results of action. Swami Vivekananda, '*Thoughts on Gita*, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition, Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata, 1963, 978-81-7505-033-4. Cf. Puradkar Rina A. Pitale, "Saint Jnaneshwar: A Spiritual Leader of Varkari Sampradaya (Sect) of Maharashtra; a Retrospection", *Dia-noesis: A Journal of Philosophy*, 15, 2024, pp. 93-102 <https://doi.org/10.12681/dia.38174>

of India's earliest intersectional movements. The central principle of it emphasized devotion to God and sought a direct, personal connection with the divine, often bypassing the intricate rituals prescribed by Brahmanical traditions. Moreover, the movement strove to make spiritual practice accessible to all, especially women and marginalized communities who had long been excluded. In doing so, it not only transformed spiritual expression but also challenged the social boundaries of gender, caste, and class, promoting a more inclusive spiritual path. In *Maharashtra*, the *Varkari* sect or *sampradaya*, promotes humanistic values, liberty, gender equality, principle of inclusiveness which demonstrate a real liberal perspective that need to be valued even today where there is full of discrimination everywhere, thus, their teachings become more significant. When moral values in society were declining and social distortions were emerging, the spiritual and ethical philosophy of *varkari* saints need to be reuttered for rejuvenation of the social fabric. The role of female saints in the *varkari sampradaya* needs to be acknowledged, they raised their voices against social exploitation, through their writings especially through their *abhangas* from 13th century onwards like *Mahadamba*, *Kanhopatra*, *Nagi*, *Bahinabai*, *Nirmala*, *Bhagu*, *Venabai*, *Muktabai*, *Janabai*, and *Soyarabai* made their contribution. Most of these female saint poetesses, except a few exceptions, most of them did not belong to upper-caste society, which is very important fact to keep in mind. But still they followed the path of devotion and acquire liberation by themselves without the support of patriarchal society and rigid customs. They sought a rightful place within their orthodox religious traditions and wrote high-quality poetry despite being deprived of formal education. Along with spiritual lenses, their compositions also challenged the male-dominated society. Their works reflect independent, reflective thinking, the courage to question rigid traditions, and a rebellious nature that shook patriarchal mindsets. These female saint poetesses, broke the constraints of their time and produced remarkable literary works that

remain significant even today. The *varkari sampradaya*, with its philosophy of “rejecting all forms of discrimination,”<sup>4</sup> provided a space for women who had been marginalized in social and spiritual spheres, allowing them to become important part of the mainstream devotional movement. This research paper tries to evaluate the role and contribution of these saint poetess belonging to the *varkari sampradaya* (sect) in Maharashtra during medieval period till date for the upliftment and emancipation of women. This *Bhagavata Sampradaya* grants equal rights and liberty to all men and women belonging to different caste, class and religion. As a result of it, women actively participated in the Bhakti movement, which rejected all kinds of caste, class, and gender discrimination. Not only did they engage in it, but they also claimed that God had immense grace upon them.

### Saint poetess Janabai of 13<sup>th</sup> Century

*Varkari Sampradaya* not only emphasized divine grace but also wholeheartedly acknowledged the abilities and equal rights of women. Women’s literary contributions have been accepted acknowledged even today, the hymns (*Abhangas*) of *Muktabai* and *Janabai* are recited in religious discourses and sermons. The female saints of the *Varkari Sampradaya* used their devotional hymns (*abhangas*) to advocate for women’s equality and upliftment. Saint *Janabai* says...

*"Do not be saddened by being born a woman,  
Sages and saints have accepted me."*

*"The veil from my head has slipped onto my shoulders,  
Now I shall walk freely in the bustling marketplace."*

*"With cymbals in my hands and a veena on my shoulder,  
Who now can restrain my heart?"*

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<sup>4</sup> ‘भेदाभेद भ्रम अमंगळ’ Neurgaonkar S. K., Shri ‘Tukaram Maharajanchi Sartha Gath’, *Abhang* 21 Pracharya Dandekar dharmik va sanskrutik vagmaya prakashan mandal, Pune-3, 1978



*"I have set up my abode in the marketplace of Pandharpur,*

*O people, anoint my wrists with oil!"*

*"Jani says—O Lord, I have become fearless,*

*I have set out for Your home, O Keshava!"<sup>5</sup>*

She contributed more than three hundred poems or *abhangas* of which focus on everyday domestic chores and today also in the villages of *Maharashtra* many women sing these *abhangas* while performing their daily chores. Her hymns (*abhangas*) reflect an assertive and rebellious form of feminism. Her verses reflect on the limitations placed upon her due to her status as a servant (*dasi*) of Saint *Namadeva* who taught her to read and write. The themes that are consistently woven throughout her poetry vividly expresses the relentless and exhausting nature of domestic work and the constant struggle she faces being a woman. It was *Janabai* who shaped the widely accepted image of '*Lekurvālīya Vitthala*'<sup>6</sup> (the motherly figure of Lord *Vitthala*; incarnation of Lord *Vishnu*) who cherishes all devotees like children. Her journey, from servitude to literary and spiritual prominence, attests to the inclusive nature of the *varkari* tradition and its open acceptance of women and oppressed classes. In contrast to the commonly melancholic narrative of womanhood expressed in phrases like '*A woman's life is a tale of suffering*', *Janabai* takes a remarkably optimistic stance. She does not lament being born a woman; rather, she embraces it with pride, saying:

<sup>5</sup> 'स्त्री जन्म म्हणोनी न व्हावे उदासा साधू-संता ऐसे केले जनी॥ डोईचा पदर आला खांद्यावरी । भरल्या बाजारीं जाईन मी ॥१॥ हाती घेईन टाळ खांद्यावरी वीणा । आतां मज मना कोण करी ॥२॥ पंढरीच्या पेठे मांडियेले पाल । मनगटावर तेल घाला तुहमी ॥३॥ जनी म्हणे देवा मी झालें येसवा । निघालें केशवा घर तुझें ॥४॥' Susie J. Tharu, Ke Lalita, "Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present Vol. 1", The Feminist Press New York

<sup>6</sup> 'लेकुरवाळ्या विठुरायाची' 'विठु माझा लेकुरवाळा । संगें गोपाळांचा मेळा ॥' Ra-hirkar Gopal Sankar '*Sakal Sant Gathā*,' 3 rd edition, 1887, Jnāneśvari Press Pune.

*"Do not despair for being born a woman;  
Saints and sages have blessed me as one."*<sup>7</sup>

Saint *Janabai* not only accepts her womanhood openly but also finds spiritual fulfilment within it. This perspective continues to inspire not only to women belonging to the *varkari sampradaya*, but also allows them to blend devotion with self-acceptance till date. Many of her *abhangas* reflect and expresses her dissatisfaction she faces due to discrimination as women. She condemns this injustice openly in patriarchal society and also encourages other women to raise their voices too. She try to instil the value of self-awareness among them, by urging them not to lose hope simply because they are born female. She envisioned that the divine Lord is assisting her in everyday chores. She did not see tasks like grinding grain, fetching water, booming or braiding hair as exclusively feminine work. Instead, she imagined the male deity, Lord *Panduranga*, Lord *Vitthala* performing these tasks as well.<sup>8</sup> She found freedom and power in her life through bhakti. In one of her abhang she says, Lord *Vitthala* becomes not only a woman but a serving woman, the lowest within the lowest caste.

*'Jani has had enough of Samsara  
but how will I repay my debt?  
You leave your greatness behind you  
to grind and pound with me.  
washing me and my soiled clothes,  
proudly you carry the water  
and gather dung with your own two hands.  
O Lord, I want*

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<sup>7</sup> 'स्त्री जन्म म्हणोनी न व्हावे उदास! साधू-संता ऐसे केले जनी!' Susie J. Tharu, Ke Lalita, "Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present Vol. 1", The Feminist Press New York.

<sup>8</sup> *'Jani sweeps the floor the Lord collects the dirt, carries it upon his head, And casts it away. Won over by devotion, The Lord does lowly chores! Says Jani to Vithoba, how shall I pay your debt?'* (Abg- 1373, p.g.196), Sakal Sant Gathā, Gopal Sankar Rahirkar, 3 rd edition, 1887, Jnāneśvari press pune.

*place at your feet*  
*says Jani, Namdev's dasi.*<sup>9</sup>

Oh! Lord, you become a woman; this perspective planted the seeds of gender equality in every household during the 13th century. Therefore, if the men in Maharashtra contributing or extend helping hand to household chores and revered the women, one could argue that the moral foundation was laid by saint *Janabai* centuries ago.

*Marathi* saint literature writer Tara Bhavalkar states that women hold a significant place in the *varkari sampradaya* as well as her contribution has enriched the saint literature. Most importantly, all of them revered Lord *Vitthala* as their dear companion. Different relationships were formed with Lord *Vitthala* sometimes as a mother, as a father, a friend, or a brother. This deep connection with Lord *Vitthala* is beautifully expressed through the hymns of the *varkari* saints. One of the important observations is that they perceive their revered deity, Lord *Vitthala*, in a feminine form. Lord *Vitthala* is often called as "*Vithu Mauli*" (Mother *Vitthala*). Nowhere such example is found where a male deity is perceived and worshipped in a feminine form. The qualities of compassion and maternal affection seen in the image of Lord *Vitthala* allow devotees to see him as a nurturing, caring and loving mother. Just as a child demands attention from his mother and feels restless without her, devotees of *varkari sampradaya* also experience a similar longing for Lord *Panduranga*. Even Saint *Dnyaneshwar*, a founder figure in this tradition, is addressed as *Māuli* (mother). Even everyone in this sect affectionately refer to each one as *Māuli*, underscoring the *sampradaya's* deep association with feminine divinity and maternal love.

Every year, millions of *varkari's* undertake annual pilgrimage (*vari*) to *Pandharpur* in Maharashtra. Just as men leave their homes with enthusiasm for this month-long journey during *ashadi vari*, woman also participate in it with equal zeal. Given the familial responsibilities placed upon

<sup>9</sup> Susie J. Tharu, Ke Lalita, 'Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present Vol. 1', *The Feminist Press*, New York.

women, it is indeed a challenge for them to stay away from home for such an extended period. However, in *vari* we come across a large number of women accepting and overcoming this challenge, demonstrating their unwavering devotion and strength. *Sant Tukaram* has aptly described a woman who is deeply entangled in household responsibilities with the words, 'The procession is heading to *Pandharpur*, but she has only reached to the doorstep.'<sup>10</sup> However, according to the teachings of saints, many women have accepted the path shown by the saints of *Varkari Sampradaya* as an unwavering path to attain spiritual realization while simultaneously managing their household duties i.e. without renunciation of the worldly responsibilities. When we take into consideration what might be the reasons behind this, it is evident that the philosophy of *varkari sampradaya* encourages large-scale participation of women in the *Vari*. In fact, compared to other states in India, Maharashtra rank first in such movements and reforms advocating for women's rights and freedom at familial, social, and cultural levels. A significant portion of the credit goes to the philosophical and ethical values of *varkari* tradition.

The tradition of making sacred texts accessible to the masses, initiated by Saint *Dhyaneshwar* and later carried forward by Saint *Eknath*, was continued by saint *Bahinabai*. *Bhagavata Sampradaya* granted women the freedom to claim this right, which is a significant aspect of its inclusive nature.

### Saint poetess *Muktabai* of 13<sup>th</sup> century

*Muktabai*, a revered mystic poetess and a prominent figure of the Bhakti movement in medieval India, was the younger sister of the 13th-century saint *Dnyaneshwar*, founder of bhakti movement and saint *Nivruttinath*. She made an eternal mark on the area's literary and spiritual landscape. She

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<sup>10</sup> 'आवा चालली पंढरपुरा, वेसीपासुनि आली घरा' (Abhang 4199) Neurgaonkar S. K. Shri Tukaram Maharajanchi Sartha Gath, Pracharya Dandekar dharmik va sanskrutik vagmaya prakashan mandal, Pune-3, 1978

has contributed 41 *abhangas*. In *Marathi* language, "*Mukta*" means freedom, she represents freedom from rigid Brahmanical (upper class) traditions and societal constraints, encouraging a path of deep, personal devotion beyond conventional norms. Thus, Generations after generation continue to be inspired by *Muktabai's* life and poems or *abhangas*, which transcend beyond space and time. Saint mystic poetess Muktabai's teachings underlines the universality of devotion. She supposes that the path to God transcended all religious boundaries, and ceremonial rituals. Her *abhangas* praised the oneness of all living beings and the divine presence that exists within each soul. Her *abhangas* speaks to the divine through the lens of love and devotion. She employs rich metaphors and vivid imagery to portray the soul's deep longing for union with the divine. Her verses convey the joy and bliss that arise from this spiritual connection, touching the hearts of her listeners and awakening a deep sense of reverence and inner realization. She endured exclusion and discrimination, yet rose above it to become one of the most revered and enduring Bhakti saints in *Maharashtra*. Her writings reveal a profound compassion for the marginalized and oppressed. She used her *abhangas* to challenge social injustices and the rigid norms of her time. Her heartfelt *abhangas* showcases the ethical values; empathy, equality, and justice, offering hope and a voice to the common people. Her *abhangas* became a beacon of comfort and strength for those striving for freedom from societal limitations.

In the face of adversity and societal discrimination, she remained unwavering in her spiritual path. She endured opposition from conservative religious authorities who viewed her progressive ideas as a threat. Yet, her steadfast devotion and profound faith carried her forward, establishing as a symbol of courage and perseverance. Her messages of love, unity, and acceptance offer guidance in a world often divided by conflict and exclusion. Her *abhangas*, are kept at high pedestal due clarity and deep insight, continue to inspire people from all strata's. Thus, a timeless truth that surpasses religious and cultural barriers the divine essence that exists within every soul. They are not merely poems but vehicles

of divine communion, enabling individuals to connect with the eternal.

She authoritatively instructed saint *Dnyaneshwar* and pointed out the arrogance of Saint *Namdeva*. At the same time, she was aware of her own independent identity and did not hesitate to call herself a "free-spirited woman," without any sense of shame or inferiority. She writes,

*"I am the daughter of the True Guru, with devotion as my only kin.  
Though a woman, I remain unattached.  
I have cast away the sari of worldly life,  
Along with its ornaments—nose ring and bangles."*<sup>11</sup>

Saint poetess *Muktabai*, at the age of seventeen or eighteen became the spiritual guide or guru of *Hathayogi Vateshwar Changdev*, who was eighty-year-old. She was also the spiritual guide of *Visoba Kechar*, who later became guru of saint *Namdeva*. Saint *Muktabai* is known as 'Adishakti' or 'Adimaya'. *Muktabai's* verse, "An ant flew to the sky and swallowed the sun. Another wonders a barren woman had a son" reflects a powerful challenge to the prevailing norms. This spirit of bold resistance is what sets *Muktabai* and other women of the Bhakti movement different from the mainstream.

This highlights that women in the *varkari sampradaya* were granted not only the right to devotion but also the authority to guide others. They reject the gender discrimination as well as age-based hierarchies from its very inception time. Saint poetess *Muktabai* even contributed to lay the foundation of this Sampradaya; when saint *Dhyaneswar*, distressed by the social humiliation he faced, hesitated to step forward, it was saint *Muktabai* younger sister of saint *Dhyaneswar* who encouraged him by saying, "Open the doors!"<sup>12</sup> and de-

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<sup>11</sup> 'मी सद्गुरुची लेक भाव एक। बाई मी निःसंग धांगडी फेकिली प्रपंच लुगणी। नाकी नखकडी॥' Gole Ravindra, 'Abhang Setu', Maharashtra Rajya sahitya ani Sanskruti Mandal, Mumbai

<sup>12</sup> 'ताटी उघडा ज्ञानेश्वरा' [https://abhangvani.com/sants/sant-miktabaai/sant-muktabaainche-abhang#google\\_vignette](https://abhangvani.com/sants/sant-miktabaai/sant-muktabaainche-abhang#google_vignette)

fined sainthood in the process. She states that ‘A yogi is of pure heart and endures the insults of the people, you are a saint.’<sup>13</sup> Thus, she advised that saints must remain calm like water, even when the world turns into a raging fire, stating:

*"The world has become fire;  
Saints must remain cool like water."*<sup>14</sup>

Through such words, she established a guiding principle for saintly conduct. She thus, stands as a powerful symbol of the spiritual authority granted to women within the *varkari sampradaya*. Saint *Muktabai*'s spiritual authority was accepted not merely because she belonged to a so-called high caste, but she proved it with her abilities and potentials as we have discussed earlier. Government has released postal stamp figuring her.

### Saint poetess Vithabai of 13<sup>th</sup> century

The inclusion of women from lower castes among the community of saints underscores how gender plays a role in shaping the identity of a sampradaya. One such woman was forced into marriage despite her lack of interest, leading to mistreatment by her in-laws and husband. During the 18th century, saint poetess *Vithabai* left her oppressive husband and found solace in Lord *Vitthala's devotion*. She fearlessly tells her husband:

*"Your authority extends only over my body,  
You hold no power over my soul!"*<sup>15</sup>

A verse attributed to *Vithabai* vividly captures the experience of a young girl being coerced into sexual relations, likely with an older man: ‘My husband pulls me into a secluded place in order to enter into sexual relation. He brutally as-

<sup>13</sup> ‘योगी पावन मनाचा, साही अपमान जनाचा’  
[https://abhangvani.com/sants/sant-miktabaai/sant-muktabaainche-abhang#google\\_vignette](https://abhangvani.com/sants/sant-miktabaai/sant-muktabaainche-abhang#google_vignette)

<sup>14</sup> ‘जग झाले वन्ही संती सुखे व्हावे पाणी’ [https://abhangvani.com/sants/sant-miktabaai/sant-muktabaainche-abhang#google\\_vignette](https://abhangvani.com/sants/sant-miktabaai/sant-muktabaainche-abhang#google_vignette)

<sup>15</sup> ‘तुझी सत्ता आहे देहावारी समज, माझेवरी तुझी किंचित नाही’  
<https://marathi.indiatimes.com/-/articleshow/14514767.cms>

saults me in the midst of the night when he drags me there.’ According to Tara Bhavalkar, such an unvarnished and truthful portrayal of a sexual encounter by an Indian woman is rare. She argues that the verse’s bluntness adds to its authenticity and reflects the suffering endured by these saint-poets. However, such references to sexual violence or domestic abuse might also serve to highlight the householder dimension of the *varkari* tradition. These narratives not only reveal the challenges faced on the spiritual journey by these saint poetesses being women but also affirm that still the path of spirituality remains attainable and meaningful.

### Saint *Soyarabai* saint poetess of 14<sup>th</sup> century

Saint *Soyarabai*, the wife of *Dalit* (untouchable) saint *Chokhamela*, and saint *Nirmala*, sister of saint *Chokhamela* both belongs to the so-called untouchable community, voiced the injustices faced by their community through their *abhangas*. *Soyarabai*’s *abhangas* depict the bold and even radical tone. With the support of their families, both saint poetesses pursued spiritual liberation through devotion to Lord *Vitthala*. Though *Soyarabai* composed many verses, only sixty-two are known today. In her *abhangas*, she expresses her anguish and dissatisfaction with God for the suffering imposed on the untouchable community. She often referred to herself as "*Chokha*’s *Mahari*." Her poetry or *abhangas* consistently revolves around the hardships of the marginalized and their unwavering devotion to the divine. Themes of unity and the embracing of difference are powerfully articulated in her work as follows:

‘All the colours have merged to be one. God of colours himself is coloured in this colour.

The distinction between I and You have eliminated upon seeing the Lord of *Pandhari*

There is no place for discrimination. Anger and Lust too have disappeared.



Though you are embodied you are formless. I see you in constant state of meditation.

There remains no difference between the spectator and the gaze, says *Chokha's Mahari*.<sup>16</sup>

One of the most oppressive customs women endured was the taboo surrounding menstruation, which led to their exclusion and humiliation. Saint poetess *Soyarabai* was among the first voices to challenge this custom or practice. She courageously raised her voice and took a firm stance against menstrual taboos, making a powerful declaration in her verses, rejecting the notion that menstruation made women impure. She strongly condemned menstrual taboos, questioning the purity associated with bodily functions:

*"They call it bodily impurity,  
Yet the soul remains pure and wise.  
If bodily impurity is born with the body,  
Then who remains truly pure?"*

She further challenges the notion of menstrual impurity by highlighting its biological necessity:

*"Without menstruation,  
Nobody is ever created in this world."*<sup>17</sup>

This reflects a scientific understanding of human birth while questioning societal taboos she possesses being illiterate and untouchable. The pain of oppression experienced by

<sup>16</sup> 'अवघा रंग एक झालारंगि रंगला श्रीरंग। मी तूण गेले वाया पाहता पंढरीच्या राया॥  
नाही भेदाचे ते काम पळोनि गेले क्रोध काम। देही असोनि विदेही सदा समाधिस्त पाही॥  
पाहते पाहणे गेले दुरी म्हणे चोखियाची महारी॥'  
[https://shabdyatri.com/literature/awagha-rang-ek-zala-meaning/#google\\_vignette](https://shabdyatri.com/literature/awagha-rang-ek-zala-meaning/#google_vignette)

<sup>17</sup> 'देहाचा विटाळ म्हणती सकळ। आत्मा तो निर्मळ शुद्ध बुद्ध॥ देहाचा विटाळ देहीच जन्मला। सोवळा तो झाला कवण धर्म॥ विटाळावाचून उत्पत्तीचे स्थान। कोण देह निर्माण नाही जगी॥'  
[https://www.santsahitya.in/soyarabai/dehasi-vital-mhanti-sakal/#google\\_vignette](https://www.santsahitya.in/soyarabai/dehasi-vital-mhanti-sakal/#google_vignette)

marginalized women also depicted in her *abhangas*. Similar kind of expressions are found in the *abhangas* of saint poetess *Bhagu* from the *Mahar* caste (untouchable community), emerging through her compositions.

*"In Your presence, O Lord, people torment me. Then what is the purpose of my life?"<sup>18</sup>*

Though this complaint is directed towards God, it's written expression sheds light on the contemporary social reality. Female saint poetess has also documented their experiences regarding their husbands. *Namdev's* wife, *Rajai*, openly questions her husband, who has renounced worldly life and become immersed in devotion to Lord *Vitthala*, *"Having tied a loin cloth, you have become a renunciate. But who will take care of our household?"<sup>19</sup>* She does not stop here, she further criticizes by saying: *"You have abandoned worldly reputation and bodily attachment."<sup>20</sup>*

### Saint poetess Kanhopatra of 15<sup>th</sup> century

The hymns (*abhangas*) of other saint-poetesses *Kanhopatra* promotes feminist ideals. Her compositions serve as a reminder and recognition of self-identity, autonomy, and self-determination. Her bold and defiant hymns emphasize that a woman is a mature individual in her own right. The composition of saint *Kanhopatra* depicts ideals throughout her hymns or *abhangas*. During 15<sup>th</sup> century, the courtesan *Kanhopatra*, was not accepted by mainstream society, but faced no such discrimination at the doorstep of the divine. Her *abhangas* frequently portrays her struggle between her

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<sup>18</sup> .‘तुज असता मज गांजिती जन। मग काय जिणे देवा तुझे?’  
<https://marathi.indiatimes.com/-/articleshow/14514767.cms>

<sup>19</sup> ...‘लावोनी लंगोडी झालेति गोसावी। आमची ठेवाठेवी कोण करी?’  
<https://marathi.indiatimes.com/-/articleshow/14514767.cms>

<sup>20</sup> ‘सांडिला लौकिक देहभाव’  
<https://marathi.indiatimes.com/-/articleshow/14514767.cms>

profession and her devotion to Lord *Vitthala*, the patron deity of the *varkari*'s. She portrays herself as a woman totally devoted to Lord *Vitthala*, earnestly urging Him to free her from the painful chains of her profession and from the bondage of *samsara*. She expresses the deep shame she endures and her exclusion from society due to her occupation and social status. She expresses disgust for the society which adored her as an object of beauty rather than as a human being, and abhorred her profession. She recounts how she has been subjected to the desires and gazes of others. In one of her *abhangas* she states that Lord *Vitthala* is saviour of the fallen<sup>21</sup>; thus, urges Him to save her as well. This depicts God answers to personal devotion rather than any ceremonial ritualistic practices:

*O Narayana, you call yourself  
savior of the fallen...  
My caste is impure  
I lack loving faith  
my nature and actions are vile.  
Fallen Kanhopatra  
offers herself to your feet,  
a challenge  
to your claims of mercy.*<sup>22</sup>

Saint *Kanhopatra*'s *abhangas* reveal her deep sense of vulnerability along with a strong resolution to 'stay pure in the midst of turbulence'. She compares herself to food being de-

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<sup>21</sup> पतित तूं पावना। म्हणविसी नारायणा॥१॥ तरी सांभाळीं वचना। ब्रीद वागविसी जाणा॥२॥ याती शुद्ध नाही भाव। दुष्ट आचरण स्वभाव ॥३॥ मुखीं नाम नाही। कान्होपात्रा शरण पायी ॥४॥ <https://www.santsahitya.in/kanhopatra/patit-tu-pavana/>

<sup>22</sup> दीन पतित अन्यायी। शरण आले विठाबाई॥१॥ मी तो आहे यातीहीन। न कळे काही आचरण॥२॥ मज अधिकार नाही। शरण आले विठाबाई ॥३॥ ठाव देई चरणापाशी। तुझी कान्होपात्रा दासी॥४॥ <https://www.santsahitya.in/abhang-gatha/kanhopatra-abhang/> Mulchandani Sandhya, 'For the Love of God Women Poet Saints of the Bhakti Movement' Penguin Random House India Pvt.Ltd, July 20, 2019, ISBN: 9789353055813, 9789353055814.

voured by wild animals, a very powerful and emotional expression never used by any male saints, when challenged patriarchy. she firmly believed in the unconditional grace of Lord *vitthala*. Her devotion represents spiritual egalitarianism, resonating deeply with feminist thought seeking dignity, agency, and equality in a deeply patriarchal world through the path of bhakti.

*If you call yourself the Lord of the fallen,  
why do O Lord not lift me up?  
When I say I am yours alone,  
who is to blame but yourself  
if I am taken by another man?  
When a jackal takes the share of the lion,  
it is the great, who is put to shame?  
Kanhopatra says, I offer my body at your feet,  
protect it, at least for your title<sup>23</sup>.*

She is the only female saint poetess mystic whose *samadhi* (mausoleum) lies within the precincts of the temple of *Pandharpur*. As per all versions of the legend, a *tarati* tree which symbolizes the transformation have originated at the burial on the site where saint *Kanhopatra* was laid to rest. This tree is revered by pilgrims in her memory. She is the only female *varkari* saint who has attained sainthood solely on her devotion, without the support of any guru, especially male *varkari* saint, or *parampara* (tradition or lineage). This is nothing but the indication of casting off the order of patriarchy and accepting the onus to change and recreate a new society where there are no labels or borders i.e the world of co-existence and co-operation for the growth and progress of society. She was the contemporary to saint *Namadeva* and saint *Chokhamela*. According to Deshpande, *Kanhopatra*'s poetry embodies the awakening of the marginalized and the emergence

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid पतित पावन हमणविसी आधी। तरी का उपाधि भक्तांमार्गे ॥१॥ तुझे म्हणवितां दुर्जे अगसंग।उणेपणा सांग कोणाकडे ॥२॥ सिंहाचे भातुके जंबुक पे नेतां।थोराचिया माथां लाज वाटे ॥३॥ हमणे कान्होपात्रा देह समर्पण करवा।जतन ब्रिदासाठी॥४॥ <https://www.santsahitya.in/abhang-gatha/kanhopatra-abhang/>

of female artistic expression, inspired by the *varkari* tradition's emphasis on gender equality. In the realm of devotion, only love for God mattered, no social status or background could diminish a true devotee's worth. As saint *Tukaram* affirmed, '*In this very embodied body, with these very eyes, I shall witness the bliss of liberation.*'<sup>24</sup> This philosophy applies equally to all devotees, irrespective of their caste, gender, or social position.

### Saint *Bahinabai* saint poetess of 17<sup>th</sup> century

Moving beyond devotional compositions, in the 16th century, Saint poetess *Bahinabai*, who regarded saint *Tukaram* (*Shudra*, lower caste) as her spiritual mentor or guru belonging to lower caste, faced intense suffering from her husband who belongs to upper caste; brahmin. She articulates her devotion through her *abhangas*:

*"The stone is Vitthal,  
Tuka appears in my dreams,  
Where is the distance between the two?"*<sup>25</sup>

Saint mystic *Bahinabai*, who once lamented that a woman's body was a burden, later found the strength to embrace it:

*"I have shed my shame,  
Now I am fearless!"*<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> 'याचि देही याचि डोळा भोगीन मुक्तीचा सोहळा' Neurgaonkar S. K., Shri Tukaram Maharajanchi Sartha Gath, Pracharya Dandekar dharmik va sanskritik vagmaya prakashan mandal, Pune-3, 1978

<sup>25</sup> '...पाषाण विठ्ठल स्वप्नातील तुका। प्रत्यक्ष का सुखा अंतरावेहोई उदंड सेवा सुख देही। साक्ष या विदेही आहे मज...' <https://bookstruck.app/book/157/9792>

<sup>26</sup> 'स्त्रीचे शरीर, पराधीन देह न चाल उपाव, विरक्तिचा' <https://marathi.indiatimes.com/-/articleshow/14514767.cms>

Such words highlight the empowerment these women gained or found in the cultural tradition of *varkari sampradaya*. Saint *Bahinabai* translated ‘*Ashvaghosha’s Vajrasuchi*’ into *Marathi*, a powerful critique of caste discrimination accessible to the common people. She proclaimed that, ‘*Bahinabai* is hoisting the flag of triumph,’ affirming her authority to interpret and speak on spiritual matters, despite being a woman. This reflects the strong self-assurance she had gained from the Bhakti tradition, which was originally established by Saint *Dnyaneshwar*.

The *vari* (annual pilgrimage to *Pandharpur*) offers women a sense of liberation beyond its spiritual and philosophical meaning. For an ordinary woman, *vari* serves a rare opportunity for freedom. It provides an escape from daily chore but more than that a chance to share joys and sorrows, and the freedom to dance, sing, and embrace everything without fear. In a world where women often endure predatory gazes, the *vari* or *varkari sampradaya* offers safety to her, revered as ‘*Mauli*’ a mother figure. More than just a religious journey, the *vari* allows woman to rediscover herself. Women belonging to this *sampradaya* resonate deeply with saintly figures, saint mystics *Janabai*, *Bahinabai*, *Muktabai*. *Soyarabai Vithabai* and other female saint poetesses who represent the everyday struggles of daily chores, societal customs they pass through. These saint poetesses used devotion as a medium of self-expression, turning to spirituality to assert their voices. This inner transformation came from the *varkari’s* ethical, spiritual, and humanistic values rooted in their tradition.

## Conclusion

Female saints of the *varkari* tradition produced *abhangas* that deeply align with modern feminist thought, they were proto-feminist. During the *Bhakti* movement, the concepts of feminism or women’s empowerment were not explicitly articulated but their *abhangas* are loaded with immense devotion, compassion, and spiritual strength that requires for emancipation and empowerment of women. Their poetry or *ab-*

*hangas* challenged traditions, questioned societal norms, and redefined relationships, faith, and personal identity, breaking themselves free from the constraints of caste, class, gender, occupation, and social stigmas. Their *abhangas* reflect common notions of domestic struggles, societal oppression, existential crises, discrimination, and the balance between household chores and spiritual pursuits. Their compositions serve as guiding lights even today for contemporary women. Such rebelliousness requires immense resilience, clarity of thought, and inner strength which is seen in the *abhangas* of these saint poetesses. The voice raised by these female saints of *varkari sampradaya* was not just personal but represented the collective struggles of their social groups. Their *abhangas* were both spiritual and deeply rooted in their feminine identity. Their voices resonate even today, encouraging women to fight for their rights and not flight. Each of these mystic saint-poetesses carved a unique path to ultimate truth.

In the *vari* processions, women walk alongside men as equals, without fear of discrimination; this shows that the *varkari* tradition has preserved this spirit of equality with deep reverence. Women were never denied a place or top position in the *varkari* sect; in fact, their bond with Lord *Vitthala* was deeply personal, as they communicated with Him freely. They openly expressed and addressed their burdens and pain before Lord *Vitthala*, creating vivid poetic imagery of their struggles. The compositions of female saint poetess reflect their life experiences, emotions, and aspirations. Thus, *varkari sampradaya* grants women the freedom of self-expression, which has been instrumental in the upliftment of women. Unlike the societal norms of discrimination, *varkari's* uphold the principle that "another's wife should be revered as *Rukhmini Mata* (*Vitthal's* consort as *Rukhmini* Mother)," ensuring women's safety and dignity. Scholars like *R.C. Dhere*, *Anne Feldhaus*, *Eleanor Zelliot*, *Susie J. Tharu* acknowledge that *varkari* movement played a significant role in women's liberation, defying patriarchal norms and establishing egalitarian society.

The philosophy reflected in the *abhangas* of *varkari* saint poetess is the store house of human values and ethics. Learn-

ing of this philosophy will help to establish peace and harmony with egalitarian principles. The *abhangas* of the *varkari* saints resonate with Martin Buber's *I and Thou*, where love is understood as a commitment of the self (the "I") towards another (the "you"). In this view, true love cannot exist without recognizing the equality of all who love. One needs the presence of "Thou" to fully become "I." A person becomes truly complete not just through self-reflection, but through genuine connections with others, connections that include the entire community, regardless of caste, gender, or religion. A person's completeness is derived from his or her authentic relations with others, inclusive of the community at large, rather than from their relationships with themselves irrespective of caste, gender and religion. Among the *varkari* tradition they have community feeling where each one related by trust, faith, oneness and eternal love despite of differences. This is 'we feeling' and not 'I feeling'. It's a sect marked by acceptance and inclusion of everyone, regardless of caste, gender, or religion. Philosophy of *varkari* strongly emphasis the ontological value where humans are valued because they are humans and not because of their status or position in their life, they believe that once ontological value is lost there is loss of sense of humanitarianism in life. So, it is necessary to be preserve it. They participate with each other when they come together for singing the *abhangas*, *kirtan* and *dindi* (group of devotees collectively participate in annual pilgrimage to *vari*) or *palkhi* (papanquin which carries sacred foot prints of saints both male and female) on the way of *vari* (pilgrimage to *Pandharpur*) during *Ashadhi devashayani* and *Kartiki prabodhini Ekadashi* (Eleventh lunar day of bright fortnight) which are the major ones. They also prostrate to each other irrespective of age, caste, gender, and religion<sup>27</sup>. The ideal person, according to the *varkari* saints, is one whose heart is filled with divine love upon encountering any living or non-living being the world. One of the *abhang* of

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<sup>27</sup> 'एक एका लागतील पायी रे वर्ण अभिमान विसरली याति॥ एक एक लोटंगणी जातीनिर्मळ चिते जाली नवनिते॥...' Rahirkar Gopal Sankar 'Sakal Sant Gathā,' *Abhang* 1335, 3 rd edition, 1887, Jnāneśvari Press Pune.



saint *Dnyaeshwar* depicts this oneness, ‘जे जे भटे भूत । ते ते मानिजे भगवंत । हा भक्तियोगु निश्चित । जाण माझा ॥ ११८ ॥’<sup>28</sup> and ‘विश्वात्मके देवे’<sup>29</sup>, which states that whole world is one family without any discrimination.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Dandekar S.V., ‘*Jnandeva: Jnaneshwari*’, Ed. published by Swanand, 1953, Pune

<sup>29</sup> Ibid ‘Universal God’ Chpt. 18 of *Jnaneshwari*, Pasayadana

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## The status of women in ancient Greek philosophy: from Plato to Plotinus

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### Abstract

The present paper focuses on the status of women according to the ancient philosophers and specifically from Plato to Plotinus. Initially, a general reference is made to the aspect of women through Plato's philosophy and in particular the dialogues *Symposium* and *Republic*. In the second part a reference is made to Xenophon's *Economics*, a philosophical dialogue, which presents how education can awaken a woman's capabilities. Although Xenophon is not a platonic philosopher, he lived at the same time as Plato and shares with him the influence of Socrates' teaching. In the third part we examine the way Platonic philosophers viewed women through the case study of the eclectic Platonic Plutarch, who through historical examples highlights the virtues that women can also demonstrate. The fourth and final part of this paper refers to the way women were seen by the Neoplatonists and, in particular by the founder of the school, Plotinus, who recognizes no difference in the prospects of an embodied soul depending on gender. At the end, a brief reference is made to the Neoplatonic Hypatia, who through her actions offered a living example of women's contribution to philosophy and to philosophical and public life.

**Keywords:** *Diotima, female mysticism, Hypatia, Neoplatonism, Plato, Plotinus, Plutarchus, Xenophon*

## Introduction

Philosophy traditionally has never been a female issue: from antiquity till Christian times, there are very few female figures who are attested to having developed philosophical activity – which is to be expected, given the patriarchal character of the society of those times – while there is rarely any reference to women in general in philosophical texts. This paper studies the status of women in philosophy from Plato and his contemporary Xenophon, to Platonic philosophers, such as Plutarch, and of course to Neoplatonism and especially to its proponent, Plotinus, while this discussion concludes with a sort reference to Hypatia. The purpose of the paper is to demonstrate the significant contribution of the students of Socrates and especially Plato, but also of the successors of platonic philosophy, to the recognition of women's abilities and potential, a perception that was destined to define modern thought through the Renaissance and Humanism.

### I. Woman in Plato's philosophy

Plato's philosophy includes several innovative elements for his time, including his perception of the value and position of women<sup>1</sup>. For example, in the dialogue *Meno* (c. 385 BC), Socrates, discussing the issue of virtue with the young aristocrat who gave his name to the work, leads him to the assumption that virtue is common to men and women regardless of the field in which it is practiced, because it equally consists of good administration, administration with prudence and justice<sup>2</sup>. While the Platonic Socrates is aware of the different nature of women and men in terms of their biological characteristics, he believes that this does not imply differences in their virtues,

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<sup>1</sup> Annas J., *Plato: Everything you need to know*, Greek trans. Leontsíni E., Athens: Elliniká Grámmata, 2006, 62-63.

<sup>2</sup> R. S. (ed.), *Plato's Meno*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press Bluck, 1961, 1-8, 11-22· Scott D., *Plato's Meno*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 79-87· Taylor A. E., *Plato, The man and his work*, Greek trans. I. Arzoglou, Athens: Morphotikó Ídrima Ethnikís Trapézis, 1992, 165-181.

capabilities and abilities and that they could and should serve equally with the ultimate goal of the common good<sup>3</sup>.

SO. *But tell me only about virtue, Meno, do you think that it is one in man, another in woman and in others, or the same also about health and size and strength? Do you think that health is one in man and another in woman? Or does it have the same "kind" everywhere, as long as it is health, whether in a man or in anyone else it is found?*

MEN. *It seems to me that health is the same in both man and woman.*

SO. *And size and strength? If a woman is strong, she will be strong having the same general character and the same strength. By the same, this is what I mean: strength does not differ in anything as to being strength, whether it is found in a man or in a woman, or do you think that it differs in anything?*

MEN. *Not me.*

SO. *But will virtue as to being virtue differ at all, whether it is in a child or in an old man, in a woman or in a man?*

MEN. *I think, Socrates, that this is no longer quite the same as the others.*

SO. *But what? Didn't you say that it is a virtue for a man to govern a city well, and for a woman a house?*

MEN. *Yes, I said so.*

SO. *Is it possible for anyone to govern a city or a house or anything else, if he does not govern it wisely and justly?*

MEN. *Certainly not.*

SO. *And if they govern justly and wisely, will they not govern with justice and temperance?*

MEN. *It is obvious.*

SO. *So the same things are needed, if indeed both the woman and the man are to be good, justice and temperance.*

MEN. *It is obvious<sup>4</sup>.*

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<sup>3</sup> Mossé C., *I yinaíka stin arkhaía Elláda*, Athens: Papadíma, 2008, 141-151.

<sup>4</sup> Plato, *Meno* 72d-73b, *Platonis opera*. V. Burnet J. (ed.), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967-68.

The issue of women's value is being discussed again in the *Symposium* (385 BC-), a philosophical discourse which refers to love<sup>5</sup>. Regarding specifically the status of women, this dialogue contributes in two ways to the issue: by referring to the figure of Diotima and by treating love as a tendency of the soul towards the Good.

Socrates begins his speech by stating that everything he knows about love, was taught to him by Diotima of Mantinea in Arcadia. The significance of the reference to her is that she is the only woman who is presented through the Platonic dialogues as teaching Socrates himself and represents the feminine element of wisdom, something extremely rare in ancient Greek philosophy<sup>6</sup>. Diotima is one of the most enigmatic figures in ancient literature, as there are no other known references to her by ancient writers - at least not in a way that is directly connected to her personality and philosophy. Thus, it remains unknown whether she was indeed a historical figure or a literary invention. It is possible that she was a priestess of the time associated with women's mystical traditions (e.g., the Eleusinian Mysteries), who was involved in purification rituals and mysteries. This possibility is reinforced by Socrates' statement that: "And to the Athenians, who had once offered sacrifices before the plague, she granted them a postponement of the disease for ten years"<sup>7</sup>. It is possible that, even if her existence was attested by other writers, she was eliminated by Christian copyists and scholars, since female participation in philosophy, religion, and the mysteries was considered from a threat to heretical, especially if it was related to pagan elements of faith and ritual. As a historical person, she must have been part of the circle of the Pythagoreans, with whom other women were associated, about which little is known<sup>8</sup>. However, the fact

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<sup>5</sup> Taylor, 1992, 250-279.

<sup>6</sup> Yeorgopoulou N., *The Platonic myth of Diotima*, Athens: Gkélmpesis, 2005, 42-45.

<sup>7</sup> Plato, *Symposium* 201d. Cf. Futter, D., "Lear on Irony and Socratic Method", *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, 8 (1), 2023, pp. 111-126.

<sup>8</sup> The most famous of these was the Pythagorean Theano (6th century BC). She wrote on ethics, marriage and the education of women. Other well-known were Phindis/Philtys, Myia, Damo and Arete, who wrote philosophical and ethical works, see Spandagou E. R. & Travlou D., *The*

that she was a priestess and possibly a Pythagorean philosopher allows the Platonic Socrates to make the transition to metaphysical search. Regardless of whether she was a historical or a fictional person, she functions as the persona of the philosopher in order for him to present ideas that are not and could not be proven through logical means.

Through Diotima, Plato conveys the metaphysical theory of love, which is essentially a theory of the elevation of the soul to the Good<sup>9</sup>. Eros, who is presented as the child of Poros and Penia, is always in quest and never in a state of completeness. The journey of conquering the other begins with a physical attraction, as desire for physical union with the other and the procreation of offspring. For some people, however, whose soul has not sunk into matter to such an extent that they are excluded from the possibility of remembering the origin of their soul, love is characterized by elevations, which make it evident that in its true form it is a desire for immortality through the ascension of the soul to the higher spiritual level, the vision of the Good. Thus, through love, the soul is led to the knowledge of the good and the true. What is important to point out in the context of the present study is that there is no suggestion that the love for the Good and the ascension to it concerns only the souls of men – rather than all souls without exception, regardless of the body to which it was united during its incarnation.

Diotima: “*Now,*” she said, “*those who are pregnant physically turn to women in preference and in this way manifest their love, seeking, as they imagine, to secure future immortality and posthumous fame and eternal happiness by the acquisition of children; on the contrary, the others, who are*

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*Mathematicians of Ancient Greece: Biographical Details and Works of the Mathematicians of Ancient Greece from 900 BC to 550 AD*, Athens: Aethra, 1994.

<sup>9</sup> Halperin D. M., “Why Is Diotima a Woman? Platonic Eros and the Figuration of Gender”, *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*, N.Y.: Princeton University Press, 1990, 257–308. Nye A., “The Hidden Host: Irigaray and Diotima at Plato’s Symposium”, *Hypatia*, v.3, n.3, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, 45–61.



*pregnant in the [209a] soul — for there are not lacking those who are pregnant much more in the soul than in their body, offspring that the soul is fit to conceive and bring into the world. What then is the offspring that is fit for it? Prudence and virtue in general—yes, these are the things that poets in general and those craftsmen who are renowned for being inventors bring to the world; and the greatest, he said, and most beautiful creation of prudence is the orderly government of cities and households, what we call prudence and justice’.*<sup>10</sup>

The most revolutionary concept for his era regarding the status of women is presented in the *Republic* (c. 380 – 374 BC). According to his concept of the proper structure and constitution of a state, sharing spouses is required and permitted, in order to produce children with the best genetic prospects for the sake of the state. Furthermore, contrary to the dominant view of the time and especially that concerning women of the upper class (which included the philosopher himself), it is argued that despite the physical – biological difference between men and women, specifically with regard to the process of reproduction, there is no other differentiation regarding the abilities or the receptivity of the soul to virtue. The social roles of women are not affected completely by nature and thus women do not fall sort of men at least to the activities not having to do with the bodily strength, as to be educated and to govern, just like men, and therefore can and have to participate in every activity of the state, practice every profession, and, since they have the same predispositions and inclinations as men, as well as similar abilities and virtues, they can serve in every position of the state and become guardians or even philosophers - rulers<sup>11</sup>.

– *Do you know anything now about what people do in which men do not possess all these qualities in a much*

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<sup>10</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 208e - 209e, *Platonis opera. III*. Burnet J. (ed.), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967–68.

<sup>11</sup> Plato, *Republic*, E, 455d-456c, *Platonis opera. IV*. Burnet J. (ed.), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967–68, · Taylor, 1992, 310-348.

*higher degree than women? Or should we sit and talk at length about weaving and the art of making sweets and cooking, in which women seem to be something, and in which it would be their greatest shame [455d] to fall below men?*

– *You are really right in saying that in all things, in one respect, one sex is much inferior to another; indeed, there are many women who are superior to men in many things; but on the whole it is as you say.*

– *There is, then, my friend, no work of the kind mentioned in the administration of the state which belongs to a woman because she is a woman, nor to a man because she is a man, but the natural dispositions are equally divided in both sexes, and the woman is equally formed by nature to take part in all professions, [455e] and the man also, only in all things the woman is a weaker creature than the man.*

– *This is certain.*

– *So, shall we assign everything to the man and leave nothing to the woman?*

– *How is this possible?*

– *But there are indeed, we will say, women who are made for medicine and others not, and some who are apt to music and others the opposite.*

– *How not?*

– *[456a] There are also some who are fit for gymnastics and for the works of war, and others who are not at all fit for them, and do not even love them.*

– *I believe it.*

– *And what? Women love philosophy and others hate it? Or are some men of the same temperament and others of the opposite?*

– *That is also true.*

– *So, are there women who are fit to guard the city and others who are not; or did we not take men with such natural abilities when we chose them to guard our city?*

– *With them, indeed.*

– *So, both men and women are equally fit to guard the city, with the only difference being that one is stronger or weaker than the other.*

- *It seems so.*
- *[456b] Such women, then, should be chosen to live with such men and to guard the city with them, since they are fit for it and have the same natural disposition.*
- *No more.*
- *And should we not assign the same tasks to the same natural dispositions?*
- *The same.*
- *So here we are again, after the round we have made, and we agree that it is not at all unnatural to give the wives of the guards' gymnastics and musical education.*
- *Certainly not at all.*
- *So, we were not imposing impossible things, even similar to a simple wish, [456c] since this law is in accordance with nature; but on the contrary, the way things are done today is much more, as it seems, something against nature.*
- *So, it seems.*
- *But the point was not to prove that what we maintain is not only possible, but also the best?*
- *Indeed.*
- *And that they can be done, have we already admitted?*
- *We have.*
- *That they are the best, is not what now remains for us to agree on?*
- *And certainly.*
- *So, in order for a woman to be able to guard the city, will we need to give her a different education from that of men, since [456d] she has also been endowed with the same natural predisposition?*
- *Not different.*
- *And what is your idea about what I am going to ask you.*
- *Which?*
- *Do you have the idea that one man is better and another worse; or do you think they are all alike?*
- *Quite the opposite.*
- *So, in the state that we were founding, do you have the idea that our guards, by the education we have described,*

*made better men than the scythe-cutters with the education they also received from their art?*

- *How ridiculous is your question.*
- *I understand; are they not [456e] better than their other fellow citizens?*
- *And much better.*
- *But what? and will not the women be the best among other women?*
- *Of course, they too.*
- *And is there anything better for the city than to have the best women and men in it?*
- *There is none.*
- *And will music and gymnastics achieve this, when they are presented in the way [457a] that we have said?*
- *How not?*
- *So not only can it be implemented, but the best for the city is the law that we have prescribed.*
- *Indeed.*
- *Therefore, the women of the guards must be stripped, since instead of any other dress they will be dressed in virtue, and will take part in the war and in the other guarding of our city, and they will have no other work to do; only we will put the women in the lighter of these, than the men, on account of the weakness of their sex; [457b] and he who laughs at the stripping of the women, who will be exercising for the best purpose, "will immediately reap the fruit of the knowledge of the ridiculous," and he does not know, it seems, either why he laughs or what he is doing; for the saying is and will always be perfectly stated that what is beneficial is beautiful and what is harmful is ugly.*
- *Thus, it is absolutely.*

## II. The status of women in Xenophon

Xenophon (c. 430-355 BC) as a philosopher also started, like Plato, writing under the strong influence of the personality of Socrates. This impact determined the content of his philosophical works *Memorabilia*, *Apology of Socrates*, *Symposium*,

and *Economics*. The latter is a dialogue between Ischomachus, a literary persona of the author himself, and Socrates, where the two of them are discussing the daily life of a landowner and the optimal way of managing of his estate and property. In this treatise, it is interesting to focus on the way in which the woman is presented and her contribution to *oikos*<sup>12</sup>.

When one initially reads the *Economics*, gets the impression that the personality of the woman is outlined negatively, as a person without knowledge and will. More specifically, Ischomachus states that “she was not quite fifteen years old and came to my house, while in the previous period she had lived under strict supervision, so that she could see as few things as possible, hear as few things as possible, and ask as few questions as possible”<sup>13</sup>. This reference is open to many interpretations: while it has been argued that Xenophon expresses an idealized view of the position of women in the past<sup>14</sup>, it could also be argued that, conversely, he is criticizing Athenian society, which kept young girls isolated from the world and uneducated, since this choice constituted an impediment to their intellectual development. Such a conjecture could be valid, given the critical spirit that we see in Xenophon’s entire work, not only in the philosophical but also in the historical, as well as his philolaconism. Whereas, in Athens, girls received a very limited education, which mainly included domestic arts and very basic knowledge of reading and writing, without any prospect of participation in public life, in Sparta the education provided to women was almost the same as that received by men and mainly included physical education, sports, dance,

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<sup>12</sup> Pomeroy S. B., *Xenophon, Oeconomicus: A Social and Historical Commentary*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994, 31–36, 41–45; Vavouras E., “The political and economic philosophy in Xenophon’s *Oeconomicus*”, *Dia-noesis: A journal of philosophy*, 6, 2019, pp. 85-95.

<sup>13</sup> Xenophon, *Oeconomicus*, 7.5, Introduction, summary, translation, comments Dimitriádou - Toupheí E., Thessaloniki: Zítros, 2007; Vavouras Elias, “The political philosophy as a precondition and completion of political economy in the Ways and Means of Xenophon”, *Dia-noesis: A journal of philosophy*, 9, 2020, pp. 183-198.

<sup>14</sup> Pomeroy, 1994, 247.

music and other skills, that allowed active participation in public events and gave freedom and a say in the affairs<sup>15</sup>.

On the other hand, the young girl in the dialogue does not differ much as a person from the slave with whom Socrates converses in the Platonic *Meno*<sup>16</sup>: just as there the philosopher invites a slave to solve together a mathematical problem, following a step-by-step approach, so here Ischomachus invites his wife to find out together a solution for the optimal way of managing their household. And as in the *Meno*, so in the *Economics* the conclusion is drawn that the process of leading to the solution proves that knowledge pre-exists, even if unconsciously, in the human soul and therefore knowledge essentially constitutes a recall of all the knowledge that the soul possessed in the pre-incarnated phase of its existence. Thus, through introduction to the dialogue process the individual develops the skills of thinking and deliberating, becomes aware of its abilities and activates its skills. This is achieved through education, which begins with an apprenticeship relationship, until the apprentice reaches the level of self-activity. The ultimate goal of education must be to consolidate the concept of justice, which, as in Plato, is identified with self-interest, and the safeguarding of the common good<sup>17</sup>.

Certainly, a differentiation is recognized regarding the level and subject of learning, which depends on the nature of each person. The learning process and content must be in accordance with the nature of the learner, because then it will be more effective. In particular, the purpose of education must be to utilize and improve one's own nature to the greatest extent possible. The nature of each person, of course, primarily includes gender. For example, the fact that the wife is considered uneducated, is attributed to her excessive confinement within the home. However, education also depends on the particular

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<sup>15</sup> Blundell S., *Women in Ancient Greece*, Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1995, 113-159.

<sup>16</sup> Plato, *Meno*, 82a – 85c. Bedu-Addo J. T., "Recollection and the Argument 'from a Hypothesis' in Plato's *Meno*", *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, v. 104, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, 1-14.

<sup>17</sup> Lee Too Y., "The Economies of Pedagogy: Xenophon's Wifely Didactics", *The Cambridge Classical Journal*, v. 47, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 65-80.

personality of each individual. What is most important to emphasize is that, in any case, according to Xenophon, education includes everyone, men and women, free and slaves, an idea which of course must have been quite pioneering for the time and society of his time<sup>18</sup>.

[7.14] *To this, Socrates, the woman replied: "What help," she said, "can I offer you? What is my power? Everything depends on you, while my mother told me, it is my work to be wise."*

[7.15] *"Yes, woman," I said, "by Zeus; my own father advised me the same. But it is characteristic of wise people, both men and women, to try to preserve their possessions as best they can, and to add as many other goods as possible to them, in an honest and just manner."*

[7.16] *"Do you really see anything," said the woman, "that, if I do it, I can help to increase the goods of our house?"*

*"Yes, by Zeus," I said, "try to do as well as possible these tasks for which the gods made your nature capable and our habits approve"*<sup>19</sup>.

### III. The status of women in Platonic philosophers: the case of Plutarch

The Platonic tradition continued mainly through the Academy, but also beyond and outside of it. Philosophers, who were initiated into Plato's teaching, attempted in the following years to rescue and interpret his works – while perforce, of course, due to the era, incorporating extraneous influences and thus introducing an eclecticism. This chorus of intellectuals includes Plutarch from Chaeronea in Boeotia (45 - 120 AD), who is considered an eclectic Platonist, as his philosophy combines Platonic elements with Pythagorean and Stoic doctrines. The collection "Moralia" includes more than seventy works with

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<sup>18</sup> Pomeroy, 1994, 57-59.

<sup>19</sup> Xenophon, *Oeconomicus*, 7.14-7.16.

essays, dialogues and speeches covering topics of theoretical and practical philosophy<sup>20</sup>.

Plutarch follows Plato and the Platonic tradition when declaring that the nature of woman is not at all different from that of man, so that there are women who have by nature capabilities and abilities equal to those of men: for example, they can successfully participate in all levels of education and experience philosophical love, which leads to the knowledge of the Good. Even sexual attraction does not exclude the ascension to which philosophical love leads, because it can evolve into philosophical love, since the two lovers, the man and the woman<sup>21</sup>, can equally help each other in reacquainting themselves with the higher and best part of their existence<sup>22</sup>.

Plutarch often refers to the relationship between woman and man, between husband and family, and above all in his works “On Married Life” (“Coniugalia Praecepta”) and “Virtues of Women” (“Mulierum Virtutes”). In the former, he addresses advice to a young couple, Polaine and his wife, on achieving marital harmony. The spirit that runs through the work is that the two spouses should function as complements, demonstrate mutual appreciation and respect and share their social

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<sup>20</sup> Walbank F. W., “Plutarch, Biography, Works, & Facts,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Specifically on the concept of moral education in Plutarch, the role of education in character formation, the role of mothers, educators and politicians as moral teachers and the way in which Plutarch arrives at his positions having been influenced beyond Plato’s teaching by those of Aristotle and the Stoics, see S. Xenophontos, *Ethical Education in Plutarch Moralising Agents and Contexts*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Here it becomes apparent that the philosopher is referring to the erotic attraction felt by a man and a woman, which is very different from the erotic attraction felt by a student towards his teacher as we see it in Platonic philosophy. Apart from the fact that the erotic attraction to which Plutarch refers is between two equal individuals, these are individuals of different sexes - a differentiation that is possibly due to the fact that in this era the position of women in society is improved compared to that of classical times, women have somewhat greater freedom of participation in philosophical schools and erotic attraction to individuals of the same sex (meaning men) is no longer considered as the norm.

<sup>22</sup> Plutarchus, *Moralia*, trans. Babbitt F. C., Cherniss H., Sandbach F. H., Einarson B., Lacy P. H. De, Helmbold W. C., Clement P. A., Hoffleit H. B., Pearson L., Minar E. L. Jr., & Fowler H. N., the Loeb Classical Library, 1927, IX, 751E.



surrounding- a view that contradicts the social isolation that Xenophon presented as characterizing Athenian society. The quintessence of marriage, according to Plutarch, lies in the spiritual union of the spouses ("For not only bodies are a union, but also manners and knowledge and life as a whole have some common use and harmony")<sup>23</sup>.

According to Plutarch, a woman should be characterized by prudence and sobriety, but not by blind submission and lack of will. A clearer picture of the virtues that are considered to be characteristic of women is presented in the work of the same name, "Virtues of Women" ("Mulierum Virtutes"), providing specific examples of women from Greek and Roman history, which demonstrate the equal moral superiority of the female sex to that of men. The poet Telesilla of Argos stood out for her boldness and sobriety when, after her fellow citizens were defeated in battle with the Spartans, she gathered the women and organized the defense, forcing the latter to retreat (*When there were no men, woman proved to be brave*)<sup>24</sup>. Brutus' wife, Porcia, proved to be faithful and brave, since she did not betray her husband during his involvement in the conspiracy, while after its failure, she committed suicide (*not only did she act bravely, but also, she spoke philosophically about virtue*). Moreover, he also cites similar examples in the *Parallel Lives*, such as Cleopatra, Olympias, Alexander the Great's mother, and the mother of the Gracchi, Cornelia. Through these examples, Plutarch wants to make it clear that women can demonstrate moral virtues, just like men, and be role models for all people<sup>25</sup>. This respect and appreciation for the female personality is not so much a sign of the ethics of the era, but rather a legacy of the platonic philosophy, which focuses on the human soul, while gender is a subordinate factor to the nature of the human.

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<sup>23</sup> Plutarchus, *Moralia*, IX.

<sup>24</sup> Plutarchus, *Moralia*: "Lacaenarum apophthegmata".

<sup>25</sup> Warren L., Reading Plutarch's Women: Moral Judgement in the *Moralia* and Some Lives", *Ploutarchos*, v. 15, Coimbra, Portugal: Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra, 97-108.

#### IV. The status of women in Neoplatonism

##### A. In Plotinus

Plotinus of Lycopolis in Upper Egypt (c. 203 – 270 AD) is considered the founder of Neoplatonism. His philosophy is summarized in his synthetic treatise, known as *Enneads*. Although he is essentially based on platonic philosophy, in his attempt to continue and interpret it by purifying it of external philosophical elements that had been added over the years, he ends up with a new ontological system, where the Good or One is recognized as the first principle, followed in descending ontological order by Mind, Soul and finally Matter.

Due to the platonic basis of his philosophy, he follows the Academics and Platonists when focusing on the issue of the soul and its union – or, to be precise, reunification – with the One, ignoring the subordinate factors related to the incarnation, such as gender. According to him, every soul has the possibility of reacquainting itself with the Divine through education, practicing the virtues and inner purification. Differences arising from gender are linked to the body and therefore matter, which means that they constitute an obstacle and must be ignored and overcome- as we will see in specific passages below. After all, all incarnated souls remain, according to Plotinus, connected to the Cosmic Soul, which implies the ultimate unity of all things and any differences are only superficial<sup>26</sup>. Additionally, all souls possess the same powers, such as reason, intellect, and wisdom, face the same passions, and are governed by the innate tendency to approach the One. Plotinus, therefore, recognizes an essential equality between men and women on a spiritual level and a belief that every soul, regardless of gender, has the potential to achieve union with the One.

In fact, every time there is a reference in Plotinus' work to woman, it functions as an example to something- because he

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<sup>26</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, III, 7, 11, *Plotini opera*, Henry P. / Schwyzer H.-R. (eds). Bibliotheca Augustana, Leiden 1951. O'Meara D., "The hierarchical ordering of reality in Plotinus", *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, L. P. Gerson (ed.), N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 75 – 76.

finds no reason to refer separately to the genera<sup>27</sup>. For instance, at some point he argues that the union of a soul with a body is not always incidental, because each incarnation offers some lessons to the soul to be learned: sometimes the union of a soul with a female body occurs, if this soul in a previous incarnation committed violence against a woman, so that the current incarnation functions for the soul as a lesson learned. This might sound problematic nowadays, but we must not fall into the trap of anachronisms and interpretations outside a certain temporal and ideological framework · so in this case too, we must always keep in mind that Plotinus's purpose is to reinforce the Platonic position that everything must contribute to the enhancement of the goodness of the soul in order to achieve its reunion with the Good.

*“Do not think, then, that a man becomes a slave or a prisoner, or that he suffers bodily injuries by chance or without reason; but he himself once did what he now suffers. A man who kills his mother will be killed by his child when he is reincarnated as a woman; and he who rapes a woman will be born to experience rape himself”*<sup>28</sup>.

For Plotinus, the relationships between people are a serious issue and are even linked to the cosmic order. The way of behaving and the events that arise either from this or from circumstances determine the fate of each person.

*“Moreover, the fortunes of parents and the birth fortunes of their children, the dispositions of children and their relations with the fortunes of their fathers, even events that have not yet happened, as well as the deaths of brothers, the relations of women with men, and everything connected with them, all these go hand in hand with the articulation of fate. How, then, could the relationship of each person to the stars*

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<sup>27</sup> Wilberding J., "Women in Plotinus", *Women and the Female in Neoplatonism*, Leiden: Brill, 2022, 43–63.

<sup>28</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, III, 2, 13.

*be such that, what is said to happen by the fathers, is true?”<sup>29</sup>.*

In another case where a woman is used as an example, the topic of discussion is love. According to Plotinus it is common and natural for men to experience love towards women. This, however, does not mean that it will act as a brake on the philosophical life, because even physical attraction can act as an impetus for the elevation of the soul through love. Beauty is a creation of the One and the erotic attraction towards it, is essentially an attraction of the soul towards the One.

*“Whence, then, does the beauty of Helen, the most beautiful, or of women who are similar to Aphrodite in beauty, come? And whence does the beauty of Aphrodite herself come, or if some beautiful man or God appears to men, or even if he does not appear, but has something beautiful that is seen by them? Is not this form omnipresent, reaching to what is made by its creator, just as it is said in the arts that artificial creations come from craftsmen?”<sup>30</sup>.*

Elsewhere, women are mentioned along with children and friends as factors that create emotional bonds and therefore cause passions in the soul, affecting the memory and mental clarity of the individual. Obviously, of course, Plotinus is referring mainly to men, which we must keep in mind that it is reasonable and expected given the patriarchal nature of society and the majority of the audience that constituted his students<sup>31</sup>.

*“And what about friends, children, and wife? And the homeland, and the things that belong to a man, and even the city? Can a man remember them without passion, or does passion determine his memory of them? Perhaps this passion is inherent in man himself, and the passions of men are*

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<sup>29</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, III, 1, 5

<sup>30</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, V, 8, 2.

<sup>31</sup> It should be noted that Plotinus’ treatises are written records of his teachings and discussions with his students at the school.

*connected with the seriousness and importance of things, according to the external relation that each one has to them*"<sup>32</sup>.

Therefore, Plotinus recognizes the important presence of women in both society and philosophy, and this perception was also reflected in his school. In fact, there were common people as well as members of the Roman aristocracy, both men and women, such as the emperor Gallienus, as well as his wife Salonina. The empress was not the only case of a female student, as Porphyry testifies – despite the fact that women's participation in philosophy up to that time was limited<sup>33</sup>. Women in Plotinus' circle included Geminina (Gemina), a Roman aristocrat and patroness of Plotinus, who provided him with shelter and hospitality for many years in Rome, and her daughter (whose name is not preserved). The two women seem to have attended his teachings and actively participated in philosophical gatherings. The fact that there are no direct references to other women in his school may be due to the lack of historical sources or to the social reality of the time, as the presence of women was not considered a widespread trend in the philosophical schools of the time. On the contrary, their presence in Plotinus' school validates the connection of theoretical principles with everyday practice, projecting a belief in the spiritual equality of people, men and women.

## **B. In the Neoplatonic School of Alexandria: the case of Hypatia**

As we reach the end of this paper, there should be at least a brief mention of the most important representative of the Alexandrian Neoplatonic School, Hypatia (c. 360–415 AD), best known for her tragic end at the hands of the fanatical religious mob of Christians, who condemned women's

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<sup>32</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, IV, 3, 32.

<sup>33</sup> Michalewski A., "Women and Philosophy in Porphyry's Life of Plotinus", *Women's Perspectives on Ancient and Medieval Philosophy*, Chouinard Is., McConaughy Z., Medeiros Ramos Al. & Noël R. (eds), Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland AG, 2021, 211–217.

involvement in philosophy and the sciences as well as their presence in public life.

Due to the fact that no works of hers have been handed down, any knowledge about her person comes from secondary sources. Thus, we know that her philosophical approach was influenced by Plotinus and Proclus and had as its main points of reference Plato and Aristotle (whose philosophy the Neoplatonists considered preparatory to that of the former), especially with regard to issues surrounding the soul, immortality, and the relationship of man with the Divine. She also taught mathematics and astronomy, mainly focusing on the works of Diophantus, Euclid, Ptolemy and Apollonius, while she also dealt with the applied issues of these sciences, as it seems that she proceeded with calculations and dealt with astronomical instruments, such as the astrolabe and the hydraulic clock<sup>34</sup>.

The most reliable and contemporary source is the Constantinopolitan Christian historian Socrates Scholasticus (*Ecclesiastical History*, c. 440 AD). He acknowledges that “*she managed to achieve such progress in philosophy and the sciences that she far surpassed all the philosophers of the time*” and that “*those who wanted to study philosophy frequented her*”<sup>35</sup>.

The Neoplatonic philosopher and last head of the Academy of Athens, Damascius (6<sup>th</sup> century) refers to Hypatia’s spirituality and testifies that she “*possessed all philosophical knowledge and taught lessons on Plato and Aristotle*” despite her profound knowledge of platonic and aristotelian philosophy, she did not limit her interest and references to a single philosophical school<sup>36</sup>.

Her student and bishop of Ptolemais, Synesius of Cyrene, in his *Epistles*, describes her as “*my wise mother, teacher and benefactor*”, showing that their relationship was an applied case of platonic love, where respect and admiration enhance

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<sup>34</sup> Dendrinós M., *Ipatía: Astronomía, Mathimatiká kai Philosophía sto likóphos tou arkhaíou kósmou*, Athens: Armós, 2021.

<sup>35</sup> Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 7,15, trans. Zenos A.C., Schaff P. & Wace H. (eds), Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1890.

<sup>36</sup> Damaskios, *Vitae Isidori reliquiae*, Zintzen C. (ed.), Göttingen: Hildesheim Gg Olms, 1967.

the spiritual elevation of the student<sup>37</sup>. The emotional closeness that Synesius confesses that he felt to her, shows that her teaching included not only academic lectures, but more practical issues, such as solving scientific questions as well as life guidance.

Therefore, the case of Hypatia illustrates the position that runs through the entire Platonic and Neoplatonic tradition regarding the position of women. The Alexandrian philosopher was a living example that the value and contribution of women are the same as that of men<sup>38</sup>, as their souls possess the same abilities and potential, and above all the ability to acquire knowledge and truth.

## Conclusions

The development of philosophical thought from Plato to Plotinus shows that, despite the patriarchal social structures of the time, there was a gradual and significant recognition of the spiritual equality of the sexes. Plato paved the way for the philosophical acceptance of women, promoting the equality of souls regardless of sex and supporting the participation of women in education, politics and philosophy. Xenophon, although less radical, implies through the didactic function of dialogue the possibility of educating women, even within the narrow social frameworks of his time. Plutarch goes a step further, presenting historical figures of women who embodied virtues equal to or superior to those of men, while Plotinus adopts the Platonic view of the soul and completely frees it from physical and social distinctions, emphasizing the inner path towards the One. The case of Hypatia, finally, constitutes the strongest argument in favor of the spiritual equality of the sexes, as it proves in practice that women can not only participate in philosophy, but also excel in it.

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<sup>37</sup> Synesius of Cyrene, *The Epistles*: Epistle 16.

<sup>38</sup> Deakin M. A. B., "Hypatia and Her Mathematics", *The American Mathematical Monthly*, v. 101, n.3, Abingdon-on-Thames, U.K.: Taylor & Francis, March 1994, 234–243. Dzielska M., *Hypatia of Alexandria*, Translated by F. Lyra, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995, 132–133.

The philosophical approach to female nature from antiquity to late Neoplatonism constitutes a gradual shift from social marginalization to spiritual equality. Through the philosophy of Plato, Plotinus, and other Platonic thinkers, it becomes clear that the abilities of the soul, though affected by the gender, are equally distributed to both sexes and therefore the ability to access truth, knowledge, and virtue is common to all. This study demonstrates that, although women are rarely mentioned or highlighted in ancient philosophy, where they are, their position is equal – and often exemplary. This philosophical tradition is not simply a theoretical legacy, but a foundation of thought that has profoundly influenced the Western humanist ideal and continues to inspire the search for equality to this day.

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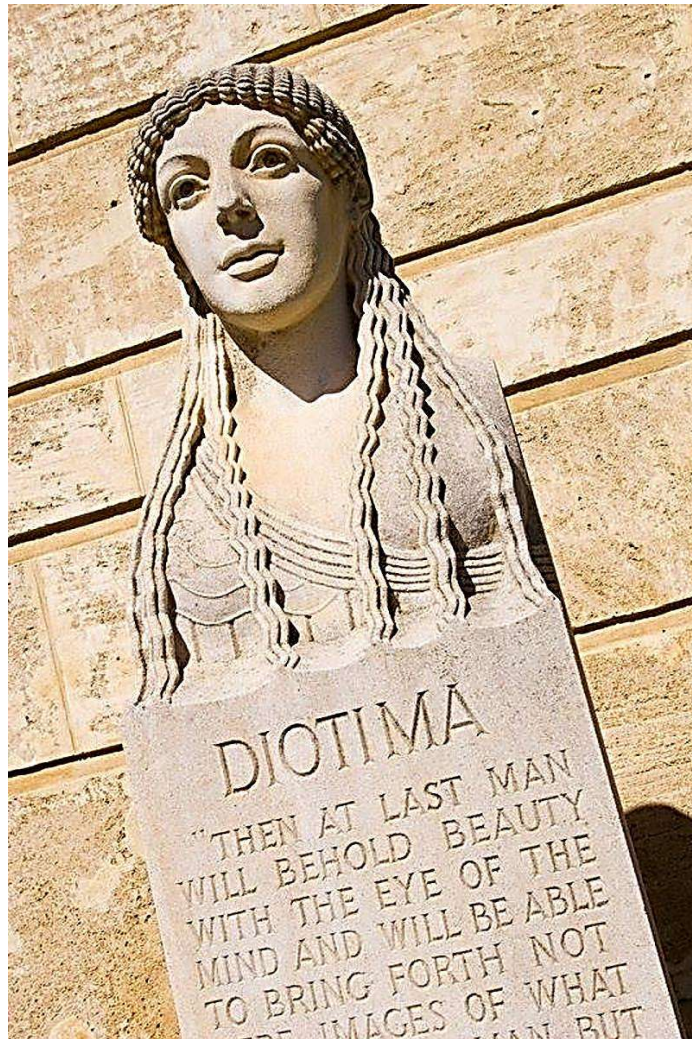
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## DIOTIMA

"THEN AT LAST MAN  
WILL BEHOLD BEAUTY  
WITH THE EYE OF THE  
MIND AND WILL BE ABLE  
TO BRING FORTH NOT  
THE IMAGES OF WHAT  
MAN, BUT

## Diotima: the feminine perspective in a symposium of men on the topic of love (Plato, *Symposium*)

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### Abstract

This article focuses on the figure of Diotima in Plato's *Symposium*, examining the philosophical depth and symbolic significance of her presence within a predominantly male discourse on the nature of love. As a female figure and spiritual teacher of Socrates, Diotima offers a radically different interpretation of love—one that transcends mere physical or aesthetic desire and redefines it as a means of spiritual elevation and philosophical pursuit of the Good and the Truth. Her contribution marks a pivotal moment in the dialogue, as it shifts the emphasis from the object of desire to the very process of intellectual and spiritual self-realization. The article explores Diotima's function and rhetoric as a female presence within a philosophical context dominated by male voices, highlighting the uniqueness and enduring relevance of her role in Platonic thought on love.

**Keywords:** *Diotima, Socrates, Plato, Symposium, philosophy of love, the Good, truth, female voice*

## 1. Introduction

Plato's dialogue *Symposium* is one of the most significant works of ancient Greek philosophy, presenting a variety of perspectives and interpretations regarding the phenomenon of love. Through the voices of individuals from diverse philosophical and social backgrounds, the dialogue explores different conceptualizations of love. Within this framework, the presence of Diotima—a female figure who introduces a new dimension to the discourse on love—becomes central and multifaceted.

The present article aims to examine the portrayal of Diotima in the *Symposium* and to analyse the female perspective she offers on love within a male-dominated environment. Through her philosophical teachings, Diotima challenges traditional notions that confine love to mere aesthetic and physical desires, instead presenting it as a spiritual and philosophical pursuit of the good and truth. The primary objective of this article is to highlight the philosophical significance of Diotima's approach and her contribution to the Platonic dialogue while also investigating the importance of a female figure's presence in the male-dominated philosophical discourse of the *Symposium*. Finally, this study seeks to explore how Diotima integrates the values of philosophical thought and spiritual ascension into love, offering a more comprehensive understanding of it.

## 2. Love in Platonic Philosophy

One of the most beautiful texts on love—enriching not only philosophical thought but also literature—is offered by Plato in his *Symposium*, written around 384 BCE. Plato also examines love in the *Phaedrus*, composed between 386 and 367 BCE. However, his conception of love cannot be understood in isolation; rather, it must be viewed as an integral part of the Platonic system, which encompasses epistemology, ontology, ethics, and political philosophy.

Many have questioned how Platonic dialectic can be reconciled with love—how an intellectual process can coexist with emotion or even passion. If one considers that the essence of dialectic lies in questioning, and that questioning is not a static but a dynamic intellectual act, then it becomes evident that reason and love are not necessarily in opposition. The emotional perspective of things constitutes a fundamental aspect upon which human behavior, including inquiry and dialogue, is founded. In other words, for Plato, the *idea*—the true understanding of the world—becomes accessible only to those who ask questions, driven by friendship and love for the world (see K. Georgoulis, *Prolegomena*, pp. 4-7).

According to Plato, the world of Ideas is the authentic world. The world in which humans live is merely an imitation, a reflection of the true reality. In line with Platonic dualism, humans possess a dual nature: they have a perishable body (*σῆμα*) and an immortal soul. But how can a human, being material, bodily, and earthly, gain access to the world of Ideas while existing in the physical realm? The answer lies in the immortal soul, which, upon being incarnated in the body, potentially carries with it the knowledge it once acquired in the world of Ideas. However, during the process of incarnation, the soul falls into a state of forgetfulness—it forgets what it once knew. This is why education and intellectual exercise are necessary, allowing the soul to recollect what it has previously encountered in the realm of Ideas.

Thus, truth is the lifting of forgetfulness, and knowledge is a process of recollection (*anamnesis*), a dynamic act in which the soul retrieves its prior understanding. However, not all individuals reach the same level of awareness. Why is that? According to Plato's tripartite theory of the soul, the soul is divided into three parts: *epithymetikon* (the appetitive), *thymoeides* (the spirited), and *logistikon* (the rational). The highest level is the *logistikon*, corresponding to the philosophers or philosopher-kings in *The Republic*, who are the ones best suited to govern the city. However, this rational faculty is not equally developed in all individuals. It is not merely a matter of natural endowment but also of one's inclination towards inquiry and reflection.

Education, dialectic, and philosophical contemplation do not appeal to all people equally, nor are many capable of enduring the arduous journey they require. Consequently, only a few can attain the vision of the Good, and even fewer can effectively communicate it to others. Yet, as Plato powerfully conveys through the *Allegory of the Cave* in *The Republic*, it is the duty of the enlightened individual—even at the risk of their own life—to share their knowledge and not to keep it solely for themselves.

Within this framework, love (Eros) serves as the force that binds the two worlds together—the world of Ideas and the sensible world, or the realms of Being and Becoming—as well as the soul with Being itself. Love is a progression toward truth, which is why philosophy is, at its core, the philosopher's love for Ideas.

In the *Phaedrus*, the reader is given the opportunity to complement the understanding of love presented in the *Symposium*. However, in contrast to the *Symposium*, where the focus is on the passionate madness of the beloved (the student), the *Phaedrus* shifts attention to the lover (the teacher). Specifically, prompted by a rhetorical speech previously delivered by Lysias, Socrates engages in a discussion with his student, Phaedrus, on the themes of love and rhetoric, while walking along the banks of the Ilissus River.

In the section of the dialogue that concerns love, Socrates contrasts Lysias' argument, which associates love with irrational passion and extols the self-control of the non-lover. Unlike Lysias, Socrates identifies positive aspects in the so-called erotic madness. He views it as a source of inspiration, a force that elevates the lover beyond the earthly realm, leading to a form of transcendence and spiritual ascent.

Socrates distinguishes *Eros* from mere desires. Desires, he explains, are of two kinds: innate and acquired. Innate desires pertain to the pursuit of pleasures, whereas acquired desires are directed toward the pursuit of the good and therefore originate from *Logos* (Reason). At this point, Plato provides a more comprehensive view of philosophy and the

teacher-student relationship, as well as a striking allegory of the soul<sup>1</sup>.

According to this allegory, the soul is likened to a chariot-eer (Reason) guiding two winged horses: one noble and beautiful (representing *Thymos*, the spirited element) and the other unruly and ugly (representing *Epithymia*, the appetitive element). The charioteer—*Logos*—must control both, keeping them in balance. This imagery aligns with Plato's tripartite theory of the soul and underscores the leading role of the rational part (*Logistikon*).

Within this framework, Socrates presents philosophy as an act of teaching, where knowledge is transmitted from the *one who knows* (the teacher) to the *one who learns* (the student). This process is characterized by direct, face-to-face communication, a dynamic exchange of ideas akin to the *sowing* and *cultivation* of thought (*Phaedrus* 276a,e). In a broader sense, this teaching process is an *erotic dialogue*—not in a physical sense, but as an intellectual engagement driven by love for wisdom. However, just as seeds require fertile soil, philosophical instruction requires a receptive and well-prepared soul. Since philosophy resides within the soul, it serves as a means of nurturing and guiding it—a true *psychagōgia* (soul-leading) (*Phaedrus* 277a).

Philosophizing, according to Plato, constitutes an *erotic* process: just as a lover relentlessly seeks to attain the object of their desire, so too does the philosopher pursue knowledge and seek out young, receptive souls to enlighten. In this way, Plato highlights the role of the teacher-lover—the philosopher—who, through dialogue with students, aspires to spiritual elevation and immortality. Thus, philosophical work is not a solitary endeavor but rather a *dialogical* and *interactive* process.

The philosopher is not detached from human affairs, nor does philosophical thought exist in a political or social vacuum. This is why philosophy requires a philosophical environment (*philosopheion*), and Plato inaugurated this tradi-

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<sup>1</sup> «[...] εοικέτω δὴ συμφύτῳ δυνάμει ὑποπτέρου ζεύγους τε καὶ ἡνιόχου. θεῶν μὲν οὖν ἵπποι τε καὶ ἡνιόχοι πάντες αὐτοὶ τε ἀγαθοὶ καὶ ἐξ ἀγαθῶν, [246b] τὸ δὲ τῶν ἄλλων μέμεικται».



tion with his Academy—a model of philosophical initiation alongside a teacher or within a school. This tradition persisted throughout antiquity and remained influential until Christianity became the dominant religious paradigm.

Plato further elaborates on this view in his *Seventh Letter* (353 BCE), where he reinforces the argument presented in the *Phaedrus* regarding the superiority of oral discourse in the learning process. He describes philosophy as a *daily, arduous practice* aimed at guiding the soul toward enlightenment. To reach this level of understanding, the soul must break free from the rigidity of conventional thought, engage in dialectical exercise, and find its way toward the realm of Ideas (*Seventh Letter*, 341d, 344b; Vavouras, 2020).

In concluding this brief exploration of Plato's texts on *Eros*, it is important to recall that love and death constitute two fundamental aspects of life, which Plato examines extensively in his works. In particular, the *Symposium* can be seen as a counterpoint to the *Phaedo*. Whereas the *Phaedo* is concerned with death in general and the death of the teacher (Socrates) in particular, the *Symposium* centers on love in general and the love of the student for the teacher (while in the *Phaedrus*, the focus is on the teacher's love for the student).

These two aspects of life—*Eros* and *Thanatos*—form a dialectical pair, illuminating philosophy's role as a *meditation on death* (μελέτη θανάτου). At the same time, *Eros*, especially in its highest and most noble form, serves as a vehicle for immortality, linking the finite human experience to the eternal pursuit of truth and the divine.

### 3. A Symposium of Men

First of all, the work refers to a real symposium that follows the symposium culture of ancient Greece. According to this tradition, symposia served as a form of male entertainment with a specific ritual and process, in which, after dinner, wine drinking followed under specific rules, along with poetry recitations and libations in honor of the gods. In Pla-

to's *Symposium*, the occasion arises from the poet Agathon, who won at the Lenaia festival in 416 BCE. The discussion revolves around love. Each of the participants presents their own perspective on the nature of love (Cf. Vassi, 2021, p. 23).

First to speak is Phaedrus, who explores the cause and history of love while focusing on male friendship. He is followed by Pausanias (180c–185c), who examines the nature of love (Cf. Carson, 2019, p. 41). He distinguishes between *heavenly love*, which has a spiritual dimension (and is limited to male friendship and the male gender), and *common love*, which refers to physical attraction. The physician Eryximachus (185c–188e) then discusses the power of love throughout the world. After him, Aristophanes (189a–193d), Agathon (194e–197e), and finally Socrates takes the floor, with whom the discussion reaches its climax. Our reference will be limited to these three.

The comic poet Aristophanes conveys to the symposium's participants an ancient myth concerning human nature with an anthropogonic character. According to this myth, humans originally had four legs, four arms, two torsos, and two faces. There were three sexes: male, female, and androgynous, and their origins were celestial: males were born from the sun, females from the earth, and androgynous beings from the moon. With this anatomical structure, humans did not walk but moved in a circular motion, using all eight limbs, and their shape was spherical. However, they were powerful creatures and attempted to ascend to the heavens and challenge the gods.

At a council of the gods convened by Zeus, it was deemed unwise to annihilate the human race, as this would deprive the gods of the honors, temples, and offerings they received from them. Instead, they decided to weaken them. Thus, humans were split in two, and certain remnants of this misfortune were left on their bodies as a reminder, such as the navel ("a monument to their ancient suffering").

According to Aristophanes, humans seek their "other half" ("since their nature was cut in two, each long to reunite with its other half"), and Zeus repositioned their sexual organs on

their bodies to enable intercourse, reproduction, and the continuation of the human race. Likewise, in the case of male-to-male unions, physical intimacy provides satisfaction (*plēsmónē*) allowing them to continue their lives and activities. In Aristophanes' version, love is innate to humans, representing a force and tendency to restore the original unity, to heal the flawed human nature that was fragmented—to make two into one ("Thus, love is an innate force in humans, the guide back to our ancient nature, attempting to make one out of two and heal human nature").

The praise of love continues with the tragic poet Agathon taking the floor, introducing a methodological issue into the discussion, following the principles of rhetorical art. The previous speakers began by discussing the benefits of love, but Agathon reverses the order. He first considers what love *is* before addressing its advantages. Plato grounds Agathon's argumentation in sophistic reasoning, a modern way of thinking that challenges tradition. That is why Agathon, in his attempt to define love, disagrees with all previous speakers.

Love, according to Agathon, is not the oldest of the gods, as Phaedrus claimed, because the cosmos was not originally governed by Love but by Necessity. Challenging tradition, as conveyed in the poetry of Hesiod and Parmenides (noting, "if what they say is true," 195c), he argues that there would have been no mutilations and violence if Love had ruled the universe—only peace and affection. He is likely referring to the castration of Uranus by Cronus, Zeus imprisoning Cronus and the Titans, and the binding of Prometheus. These were all acts of Necessity ("Even the gods obey Necessity").

Love, Agathon asserts, has no connection to violence. Love is a young god who associates with the young. Furthermore, Love does not harmonize opposites, as Heraclitus' theory of "counter-harmony" suggests, which Eryximachus endorsed. Nor does Love possess a dual nature, as Pausanias claimed, because Love is singular, unified, and always good. Finally, contrary to Aristophanes' depiction, Love has nothing to do with ugliness—its essence is perfection and beauty.

According to Agathon, Love is the happiest of the gods, the most beautiful and the best<sup>2</sup>. He is youthful, delicate, slender, full of grace and charm. Love dwells in souls<sup>3</sup>—but not all souls. He resides only where tenderness exists, withdrawing from places marked by harshness.

Next, Agathon speaks of the virtues of Love in a very different manner than the previous speakers. Phaedrus earlier praised courage, and Eryximachus, wisdom. For the rhetoricians and sophists, virtue is divided into justice, temperance, courage, and wisdom or prudence. Agathon refers to these forms of virtue.

Initially, he connects Love with justice, because the condition of Love allows what two people agree upon, and each willingly serves Love, rather than being coerced. He then mentions prudence<sup>4</sup>. At this point, Agathon arbitrarily concludes that the dominion of Love over pleasures is an element of temperance. Love is also brave because, in the contest between Love and Ares (the god of war), Love wins. Finally, regarding the virtue of wisdom, Agathon praises the art of poetry and the wisdom of Love in transforming lovers into poets. Furthermore, Love's wisdom lies in creating life through love, but also in mastering all the arts. Thus, even Apollo, the god of measure, harmony, and prophetic art, must be considered a disciple of Love. Likewise, the Muses for music, Hephaestus for metallurgy, Athena for weaving, and even Zeus, who governs gods and men, are all connected to Love. In short, Agathon elevates everything to Love for the beautiful. Previously, Necessity reigned, but once Love was born, life was restructured, and the romantic inclination toward beauty became the source of all good.

The dialogues of the five participants prepare the ground for Socrates' version of Love in the text.

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<sup>2</sup> «ευδαιμονέστατον εἶναι αὐτῶν, κάλλιστον ὄντα καὶ ἀριστον» [195 b].

<sup>3</sup> «ἐν γὰρ ἡθεσι καὶ ψυχαῖς θεῶν καὶ ἀνθρώπων τὴν οἴκησιν ἰδρύται» [195e].

<sup>4</sup> «πρὸς δὲ τὴν δικαιοσύνην σωφροσύνης πλείστης μετέχει» [196 c].

#### 4. Diotima, the persona of Plato's Socrates

Socrates, as always, using questions, brings to the forefront and into a discussion among men the perspective of a woman, Diotima, a priestess from Mantinea, who initiated him into the concept of love<sup>5</sup>. Thus, Diotima and Socrates become the mediums through which Plato communicates his own version of Love—not as a fleeting act, but as a perfect idea.

According to the myth, the birth of Love coincides with the birth of Aphrodite, which is why Love is considered a follower of Aphrodite, and its nature is related to beauty. Love is the offspring of the meeting of two completely different figures: Poros (Abundance) and Penia (Poverty). Penia seeks to cover her poverty, and Poros is the one who fills the void. The meeting of these two worlds will give rise to Love. Due to his mother's poverty, Love is poor and homeless<sup>6</sup>. Due to his father's nature, being the son of Metis (Wisdom, abundance, intelligence), Love inherits the desire for beauty and goodness. Diotima's description of Love reminds Alcibiades of Socrates himself. In love, bold, and an eloquent speaker, Socrates is often barefoot, dressed in worn clothes, but he knows how to charm souls. Also, he claims that he knows nothing, just like the foolish ones. However, he has awareness of the ignorance of what he does not know, a trait that distinguishes him from the foolish and constitutes a form of wisdom. In Plato's philosophy, the philosopher will never attain absolute wisdom, but he can approach it, extending the boundaries of his knowledge.

Love is the desire for beauty, and therefore, it does not possess beauty, as Agathon claims. According to Diotima/Socrates, whoever does not consider that something is lacking to them, will not desire what they do not imagine is

<sup>5</sup> «Ταῦτα μὲν οὖν τὰ ἐρωτικὰ ἴσως, ὦ Σώκρατες, κἂν σὺ μυηθείης» [210a].

<sup>6</sup> «ἄτε οὖν Πόρου καὶ Πενίας υἱὸς ὢν ὁ Ἔρως ἐν τοιαύτῃ τύχῃ καθέστηκεν. πρῶτον μὲν πένης αἰεὶ ἐστὶν καὶ πολλοῦ δεῖ ἀπαλός τε καὶ καλός, οἷον οἱ πολλοὶ οἶονται, [203d] ἀλλὰ σκληρὸς καὶ αὐχμηρὸς καὶ ἀνυπόδητος καὶ ἄοικος, χαμαιπετὴς αἰεὶ ὢν καὶ ἄστρωτος, ἐπὶ θύραις καὶ ἐν ὁδοῖς ὑπαίθριος κοιμώμενος, τὴν τῆς μητρὸς φύσιν ἔχων, αἰεὶ ἐνδεία ξύνοικος».

missing. Furthermore, Love is not a god, is not beautiful, is not wise, and is not happy. But it is neither human, nor ugly, nor foolish, nor unfortunate<sup>7</sup>. In the dialogue between Socrates and Diotima, the nature of Love is clarified [202d-202e]<sup>8</sup>:

*Socrates:*

- *So, what can Love be? – I asked. – Mortal?*
- *Ah, no, not at all.*
- *Then what is it?*
- *Just like the previous ones, – she said. – Something between the mortal and the immortal.*
- *What is it, finally, Diotima?*
- *A great demon, Socrates. And this is because the entire race of demons is between gods and mortals.*

Three elements that are initially revealed in Socrates' speech about Love are (Vassi, 2021, p. 27):

a) Relativity, meaning that there is no love without an object (he asks Agathon, "Is Love love of nothing or of something?" [200e]). Love is born in all humans, as we are all lovers of certain things. The object of love can refer to either matter and the body or to the spirit.

b) Incompleteness, the need to fill or cover a gap, and

c) The space between gods and humans, as the realm of love. Love is the mediator. It conveys to the gods the matters of humans, and to humans, the matters of the gods. Just as the philosopher, among humans, is between ignorance and wisdom. Therefore, Love is the means (medium) of commu-

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<sup>7</sup> «καὶ οὐτε ὡς ἀθάνατος πέφυκεν οὐτε ὡς θνητός, ἀλλὰ τότε μὲν τῆς αὐτῆς ἡμέρας θάλλει τε καὶ ζῇ, ὅταν εὐπορήσῃ, τότε δὲ ἀποθνήσκει, πάλιν δὲ ἀναβιώσκειται διὰ τὴν τοῦ πατρὸς φύσιν· τὸ δὲ ποριζόμενον αἰὶ ὑπεκρεῖ, ὥστε οὐτε ἀπορεῖ Ἑρῶς ποτὲ οὐτε πλουτεῖ. σοφίας τε αὖ καὶ ἀμαθίας ἐν μέσῳ ἐστίν» [203 e].

<sup>8</sup> - *Τί οὖν ἄν, ἔφην, εἴη ὁ Ἑρῶς; θνητός;*  
 - *Ἦμιστά γε.*  
 - *Ἀλλὰ τί μὴν;*  
 - *Ὡσπερ τὰ πρότερα, ἔφη, μεταξὺ θνητοῦ καὶ ἀθανάτου.*  
 - *Τί οὖν, ὦ Διοτίμα;*  
 - *Δαίμων μέγας, ὦ Σώκρατες· καὶ γὰρ πᾶν τὸ δαιμόνιον [202e]μεταξὺ ἐστὶ θεοῦ τε καὶ θνητοῦ.*

nication between "being" and "appearing," between the sensible and the supersensible, between the mortal and the eternal. Love is the cohesive force of the universe: as it is between the two parts, it fills the gap between them in such a way that the universe connects itself with itself into a unified whole.<sup>9</sup>

According to Diotima, through love, a person aims for immortality. There are two ways to achieve this: one concerns physical immortality through reproduction. This is the love between man and woman, which leads to procreation and the renewal of life, as well as the individual's personality. The other way concerns "soul-based" offspring and refers to people who remain in historical memory through their virtues and deeds. Through these two ways, Plato dynamically perceives human existence. This dynamic is highlighted in Plato's epistemology by knowledge as recollection, as continuous practice and education. The renewing vitality is the only way that opens the horizon of immortality to the mortal being.

In the course of her analysis, Diotima distinguishes three successive stages in love: physical love (207b-208e), spiritual love (209a-209e), and the love of knowledge (210a-212a). Naturally, the path is from matter to spirit, from the body to intellect, just as in the gradation of the three parts of the soul: from the desirous to the spirited and from there to the rational. In the Symposium, Plato attempts to equate the beautiful with the Good. Erotic madness is initially activated by the allure of external appearance. One begins with the human body and realizes that the beauty of one body is grounded in all bodies. Along the way, the beauty of the soul is discovered. The person then perceives the beauty of souls and the beauty of customs and laws. The last category before the ideal world is the world of knowledge and the various sciences.

Diotima / Socrates concludes from the specific types of love to the contemplation of the idea of beauty, of absolute beauty. Platonic love is a force that draws the soul towards the

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<sup>9</sup> «[...] ὥστε το παν αυτό αυτό ξυνδεδέσθαι» [202e].

Ideas. The person who desires this contemplation must be captivated by the Idea of the beautiful and be trained in it from their youth. Therefore, in Plato's philosophy, Love provides the soul with the drive and will necessary to achieve the truth, knowledge, and, ultimately, immortality. Here I quote verbatim the words of Socrates, in translation, with which he concludes his speech, and which constitute the supreme praise of love in this Platonic work:

*"These things, therefore, Phaedrus, and you others, Diotima said to me, and I believe them. And because I believe them, I try to persuade others that there is no better helper in humanity than Love to obtain this treasure, immortality. For this very reason, at least I say that every person must worship Love, and I myself highly esteem the erotic and devote myself to it with great dedication, encouraging others to do the same, and I praise the power and courage of Love, both now and always."*<sup>10</sup>

The text continues in the second part with the Bacchic entrance of Alcibiades into the symposium and the dramatic conflict of two elements on the horizon of real life: Socrates as the ascetic of love and Alcibiades as the symbol of the physical expression of love. At this point, philosophically, there is a shift from the previous speeches about love to love as a real event. Essentially, in this section, Plato provides tangible evidence and testimonies for the arguments that preceded.

## 5. Diotima and the Incorporation of the Feminine Element in Philosophy

In the *Symposium*, Diotima is presented as a wise woman from Mantinea, an area in Arcadia known for its connection to religious and mystical practices. Plato portrays her as a priestess and an expert in matters of love and initiation, emphasizing that she taught Socrates about the nature of love. Her status as a woman from the countryside and her connec-

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<sup>10</sup> Plato. *Symposium*, translated by V. Dedousis, G. Kordatos, Library of Ancient Authors I, Zaharopoulos, Athens, n.d., 218 b.



tion to divination and religion give her knowledge a revelatory character.

Many scholars have debated whether Diotima was a real person or a literary invention of Plato. The lack of other references to her outside of the *Symposium* leads to the conclusion that she likely did not exist as a historical figure but instead represents an allegorical figure used to enhance the theme of the dialogue. As we know, Plato often uses fictional characters to facilitate philosophical analysis, so Diotima may be a created figure embodying the idea of feminine wisdom. In this context, Diotima's origin (Mantineia, Arcadia) and her role (priestess) are symbolically used to emphasize her connection to the divine and mystical knowledge, which are essential elements for the spiritual dimension of love.

Indeed, in the philosophical dialogue on love, Diotima plays the most decisive role, as she provides the deepest analysis of love through a progressive process of knowledge and spiritual elevation. (Cf. for example, the analysis of Annas, 1981; Mulgan, 1993; Flacelière, 1995; Kudo, 2010; Berg, 2013; Futter, 2023). Her voice gives love a dimension that transcends the level of personal attraction, highlighting its philosophical and divine nature. As we have analyzed, Diotima offers Socrates the philosophy of love as a spiritual quest that goes beyond physical desire. This love is a continuous journey toward truth and beauty, with the body functioning merely as a springboard for the transition to the intellectual and spiritual dimension of the good (*agathon*). The fact that she is a woman and not an Athenian further strengthens the idea that her wisdom comes from an external, almost supernatural, source. This offers a contrasting element in Plato's dialectic, as it presents a knowledge that does not come from the classical male philosophical tradition (Cf. Nussbaum, 2015, σ. 123).

If we consider feminist theory, as presented in the works of Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva, we will notice that the concept of feminine wisdom is often linked to the transcendence of established androcentric narratives. Diotima, as a model of the philosophy of love and spirituality, embodies this feminist element, proving that women

are not only bearers of emotions but also central figures in thought and wisdom. Contemporary feminist interpretation, again, identifies in Diotima's work a contrast with the traditional, male-centric discourse that emphasizes physical love merely as a biological need. In contrast, Diotima emphasizes the spiritual and moral dimension of love, an interpretation that incorporates the "feminist" approach to gender and love, focusing on the psychic and spiritual union rather than the physical or sexual one. According to this perspective, Diotima's feminine wisdom in the *Symposium* functions as a tool for deconstructing the limited male discourse on love, opening the way for the recognition of the multifaceted nature of human relationships and the spirit. Diotima calls for us to view love not only as an emotional or physical union but as a higher, purifying, and elevated process of spiritual connection.

For example, in the *Cambridge Companion to Plato* (see specifically Suzanne Obdrzalek, "Love and Philosophy in Plato"), we read that Diotima, as a woman, despite the social and political conditions of the time, is presented as a bearer of purifying and spiritual wisdom that leads humans toward truth and higher knowledge. Diotima, in this view, is not just a teacher of love but also a priestess, which places her in a position directly connected to religiosity and the mystical dimension of philosophy. This feminist "reading" of Diotima highlights the potential for women to hold positions of power, whether in religious or philosophical contexts, and to deeply shape the thought and understanding of human existence and the world around them. Therefore, Diotima is recognized as a figure that "resides" both in the religious and philosophical sphere, representing a *novum* for the incorporation of the feminine element into philosophical discourse.

Similarly, Heather Hardy (Hardy: 1995) argues that Diotima's figure functions subversively in relation to traditional views on love and female identity. She claims that Diotima's philosophical contribution allows Plato to explore the possibility of female participation in intellectual and philosophical activity, which was traditionally considered a male-dominated space. Plato's choice to assign a central role to a female fig-

ure, who assumes the role of teacher to men, serves as an indirect acknowledgment of the possibility of transcending gender divisions in the realm of knowledge and philosophical thought (Sherman, 1999, p. 475). In this way, Diotima can be seen as a precursor to a conception that recognizes gender equality, contributing to the foundation of a different approach to the position of women in philosophy and intellectual discourse. Given this, Diotima's presence in the *Symposium* serves a deeper role: it deconstructs the entrenched stereotypes that associate wisdom and philosophy exclusively with male thought. At the same time, it paves the way for a more inclusive and egalitarian view of the spiritual quest, free from gendered constraints.

Also interesting is the approach of Angela Hobbs (Hobbs: 2006). According to her, Plato uses female metaphors, such as pregnancy and midwifery, to describe the philosophical process and the search for knowledge. She specifically refers to Diotima, the female philosopher who appears as Socrates' teacher, and how her "voice" offers a subversive feminist perspective. Hobbs argues that Plato does not seek to appropriate or conceal the feminine element but uses both masculine and feminine imagery to show that philosophy transcends gender distinctions and frees both men and women from unnecessary physical and cultural limitations. This approach highlights the complexity of Plato's thought on gender and philosophy in general.

In contrast to this view is Marilyn Friedman's (Friedman: 1976) interpretation. Friedman analyzes the contradiction in Plato's work, where women are often presented in roles related to religious or supernatural knowledge but not with everyday philosophical or political power. Women, such as Diotima, embody the idea of "knowledge," but through religion, not through rational philosophy, which is practiced by men. Philosophy itself in Plato's works is often considered "masculine," and women who engage with it appear in acceptable, limited roles related to the divine or transcendental aspects of thought. This reinforces social stereotypes about the position of women in the ancient Greek world and the rejection of women's philosophical capability beyond these

restrictions—religious and sacred. In this context, the female “voice” remains constrained by social stereotypes.

Similarly, Fiona Leigh (Leigh: 2015) observes that, although Diotima’s presence is unique and highly significant, she is integrated into a world of philosophical discussions that is predominantly male and confined to specific frameworks. Nancy Sherman also emphasizes that, while Diotima has an exceptional and multifaceted role in the *Symposium*, her philosophical contribution is embedded in a limited and socially defined context. Plato may recognize Diotima’s wisdom, but he keeps her within the narrow confines associated with religiosity, mysticism, and femininity. This limits her full philosophical existence and underscores her role as a “mediator” rather than as an equal member of the philosophical community.

## 6. The “Diotima Problem” and Plato’s Intentions

The presence of Diotima in the *Symposium* is one of the most interesting and widely discussed aspects of the dialogue, as it brings the feminine element into philosophical thought. Diotima’s role is fundamental because: 1) she is the only woman who expresses philosophical views in Plato’s work, even though these are conveyed through Socrates’ narrative, 2) she introduces a unique perspective on love, linking it not to physical attraction, but to the pursuit of truth and the good, and 3) she represents a different type of wisdom, combining mystical and religious knowledge with pure philosophical analysis.

Plato’s choice to assign this role to Diotima provides a transcendent legitimacy to his ideas, as Diotima is portrayed as a source of authentic and universal knowledge that surpasses Socrates’ personal views. Thus, his ideas on love acquire greater weight and authority, as they do not appear merely as philosophical theories but as the teachings of a mystical and wise figure, which elevates love to an essential and fundamental force for spiritual progress and philosophical understanding of the world.

This raises a critical question as to whether, through Diotima, Plato reproduces, rather than challenges, the limited possibilities for women in the realm of philosophy. His decision to make Diotima a priestess may reflect the belief that philosophy—especially the philosophy of love and truth—was accessible to women only through a “divine” channel, such as religious or spiritual inspiration, and not through pure, rational thought. In this context, Diotima’s wisdom may be seen as “legitimized” or accepted only because of her sacred role, which limits the philosophical recognition of women in ancient Greece (McClure, 1995, p. 110; Sacks, 2009).

However, it can also be argued that the presence of Diotima, despite her priestly identity, underscores the possibility for a woman to teach men, even in a domain as central and male-dominated as the philosophy of love. Plato may use the role of the priestess to lend greater credibility to her teachings, while simultaneously highlighting a woman’s capacity to participate in intellectual dialogue, even if this participation requires a special, “divine” status. Perhaps the reference to Diotima as a priestess can be seen as a window to a more spiritual, philosophical female presence in ancient Greece, while remaining faithful to the social and religious structures of the time (Cf. Rees, 1992, p. 84).

Therefore, it is true that Diotima’s status might reinforce patriarchal views on philosophy, but at the same time, her philosophical teaching transcends these boundaries and opens a path for the recognition of women as bearers of spiritual and philosophical wisdom, even within the traditional social frameworks of the era (Cf. Pomeroy, 1984, p. 112).

## 7. Conclusion

It is clear that the Platonic Socrates uses Diotima to impart a transcendent and almost mystical dimension to his views. Through the “mask” of Diotima: 1) the ideas about love do not appear as personal opinions of Socrates, but as wisdom that originates from a higher source, 2) her presence adds a symbolic depth: love is a force that requires wisdom,

knowledge, and inner understanding. Therefore, Diotima is not merely a teacher of love, but a guide who helps Socrates and the other participants in the *Symposium* realize that love is not just a matter of personal desire or sexual attraction, but a process of seeking the divine. Essentially, Diotima teaches that love is a ladder leading to the understanding of the good and the truth, beyond the material and the ephemeral. Thus, Diotima becomes the vehicle through which Plato presents love as a philosophical force that unites the human and the divine. Through her wisdom and authority, these ideas gain universal significance, transcending the narrow confines of social and sensual approaches.

In conclusion, Diotima represents a radical conception of the feminine element in Plato. Her role is not decorative but essential, as she, transcending the gender hierarchies of the time, reveals a deeper philosophical truth: the quest for knowledge and truth is a creative process that surpasses the biological and social categories of gender.

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## The Image of Woman in Democritus

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**Abstract:** In this study, I will attempt to present Democritus's perception of women through the surviving fragments. We will see that Democritus presents a negative to derogatory perspective on the female gender. However, perhaps things are not so simple. The philosopher's criticism of women has two parameters that should not escape us. First, the woman as a basic part of the family symbolizes the lack of free time, which is a necessary condition for the development of high human pursuits, such as philosophy and science. Second, the woman as an object of erotic desire constitutes the greatest expression of the dominance of the humblest passions over rationality. From these findings, perhaps female nature receives Democritus' philosophical attack not for its own essential characteristics, but on a symbolic level as the personification of the departure from philosophy and right reason.

**Keywords:** *Democritus, woman, gender, ethics, politics, eudaimonism, human nature*



## Introduction

Democritus is known as the philosopher of the atomic theory that characterizes modern physics. However, few know and even fewer have researched the other important aspects of his work, such as ethics or politics. Within the scattered ethical or political passages of his work<sup>1</sup>, we can discern his perspective on women on a realistic and symbolic level. In order to be able to draw safe conclusions, we must look back at the text and proceed with a demanding interpretative project, as from minimal information we must construct a valid argument. The purpose of this study is to present Democritus's perception of the female gender, to develop a critique of whether his positions are derogatory or progressive, but also to integrate the extracted material into a broad philosophical system. Do Democritus' views on women conceal a symbolic character that deciphers the basic axes of his ethics? Does woman constitute a philosophical tool for constructing broader arguments of a eudaimonistic character?

## The etymology of the term woman

ΜΕΓΑ ΕΤΥΜΟΛΟΓΙΚΟΝ, s.v. γυνή·

... ἥ, ὡς Δημόκριτος, γονή τις οὔσα, ἣ γονῆς δεκτική.

“ “Woman” ... or as Democritus claims, is called so, because she is someone who can give birth, that is, she is receptive of sperm”.

DK68B122a

In the passage DK68B122a there is an etymology of the term “woman” attributed to Democritus. According to this interpretation, woman has received her name from her ability to

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Aalders G. J. D., ‘The Political Faith of Democritus’ *Mnemosyne* 3, 1950, pp. 302-313, at p. 302; Natorp P., *Die Ethika des Demokritos*, Marburg, 1893), p. 53; Nestle W., *Vom Mythos zum Logos*, Stuttgart, 1940, p. 203.

be fertilized and give birth to offspring<sup>2</sup>. Also, the term *γονή* from which the term *γυνή* etymologically derives indicates that the woman is receptive to sperm (*γόνῃς δεκτικῇ*), that is, she is a female womb for fertilization by male sperm (*γόνῃ τις οὔσα*). Regardless of whether the etymology given by the ancient dictionary is correct or whether it was actually formulated by Democritus, the interpretative rendering of the term *γυνή* leads us to conclude that the woman takes her name from her reproductive capacity. If indeed this etymological interpretation belongs to Democritus, this perhaps means that the philosopher attributed to the woman some specific characteristics that constitute her definition, her form, her species. Therefore, woman cannot be defined under any other condition than by her organic capacity to accept sperm and give birth to offspring. The definition of woman in the philosophical sense indicates what we should expect from the being woman, in order to complete her form, her essence. Consequently, no other property structures the form of woman, except for the natural

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. LSJ *γονή*, ἡ, (γενέσθαι)

A offspring, οἱ οὐ τι παίδων γ. γένετο κρειόντων II. 24.539; γ.

Ἀρχεισιάδαο *Od.*4.755; τέκνων δίπτυχος γ. two children, *E.Med.* 1136:

pl., εἰσι χάτέροις γοναὶ κακαὶ *S.OCl*192; γ. κατηκρούς φύσαντες

*Id.Ant.*641; of animals, ταύρων γοναὶ *A.Fr.*194; ἐν... τετρασκελεῖ γ., i.e.

among quadrupeds, *S.Fr.*941.10; fruits of the earth, *Pl.Ax.*371c.

2 race, stock, family, *A.Ag.*1565 (lyr.); ὧ γονῇ γενναῖε *S.OCl*1469, cf. *El.*156

(lyr.); ἅ Δαρδάνου γ. *E.Tr.*1290: pl., μηδὲν ὦν γοναῖσι *S.Aj.*1094; parent-

age, ἐξευρεῖν γονάς *E.Ion*328.

3 generation, τρίταισιν ἐν γ. *Pi.P.*4.143; τρίτος... πρὸς δέκ' ἄλλαισιν γ.

*A.Pr.*774; τριτοσπόρῳ γονῇ *Id.Pers.*818.

II that which engenders, seed, *Hes.Op.*733, *Hdt.*3.101, 109, *Hp.Genit.*3,

*Arist.GA*726a18, etc.: pl., *Pi.N.*7.84, *S.Ant.*950 (lyr.).

2 organs of generation, generally, *Hp.Art.*45, *Mochl.*1 (also restricted to

the womb, *Ruf.Onom.*193, *Gal.*2.889); πρὶν... μητρὸς ἐκ γονῆς μολεῖν

*E.Ph.*1597.

III act of generation, *Pi.I.*7(6).7; κατὰ φύσιν γονὰς ποιεῖσθαι *Aeschin.*3.111.

2 of the mother, child-birth, *E.Ph.*355, *Theoc.*17.44.

3 of the child, birth, ἐκ γονῆς *Hp.Epid.*4.31; γονῇ φῶναι γεραιτέρῳ *S.*

*OCl*1294; γοναὶ ζῶων *Arist.Mu.*399a28.

4 cure for sterility, *Paul. Aeg.*3.74.

IV Pythagorean name for unity, *Theol.Ar.*6.

<https://lsj.gr/wiki/%CE%B3%CE%BF%CE%BD%CE%AE>

property of reproduction and fertilization. Therefore, the natural completion of woman or the philosophical definition of her form also indicates what a woman must do above all in the development of her life, that is, to give birth and be fertilized. One could say that a woman can certainly do many things in her living existence, however, if she does not fulfill the reproductive and fertilization requirements of her philosophical definition, she is not a woman in the full meaning of the term. If this etymological definition belonged to Democritus and was invested with philosophical significance, then his perception of the female form should be approximately this.

### **The image of woman: appearance and speech**

*Δημοκρίτου. κόσμος ὀλιγομυθίῃ γυναικί·  
καλὸν δὲ καὶ κόσμου λιτότης.*

“Democritus: Few words are an ornament for a woman,  
while beauty is also imparted by the simplicity of her adornment”.

DK68B274

Regarding women’s external appearance, Democritus supports the expression of simplicity in the passage DK68B274. A woman should not exceed the measure in terms of her adornment, her clothes and jewelry should express a decency. Beauty is identified with simplicity and simple adornment (*κόσμου λιτότης*). Female beautification is in no way rejected, on the contrary it is considered as a necessary complement to the female form, what is rejected is the excess of measure, the excessive adornment that falsifies the authenticity of the female image.

From the same perspective, a woman’s verbal expression must be measured, few words are an ornament for a woman (*κόσμος ὀλιγομυθίῃ*). Beauty is identified with measured speech. One could say that Democritus notes that a woman must remain in the obscurity of socio-political developments and not intervene in things through words. However, Democritus views rhetoric with great suspicion as the utterance of false

speech that is inconsistent with actions, whether it concerns women but mainly male political orators and demagogues<sup>3</sup>. Rhetorical persuasion - as a characteristic feature of democracy - is a deliberate distortion of the truth and a tool for promoting political self-interest under the manipulation of the majority. Rhetoric, as used in democratic regimes, is opposed to virtue, in the sense that it distances people from the truth or the common good and confuses the relationship between thought and action. Therefore, the few words in connection with right actions is Democritus's admonition for both men and women in terms of achieving virtue and, by extension, happiness.

However, the passage DK68B110 shows that Democritus does not in any way approve of women's practice in the art of rhetoric (*γυνή μὴ ἀσκέιτω λόγον*), because such a thing would have destructive results (*δεινὸν γάρ*)<sup>4</sup>. This, in conjunction with the previous data, perhaps confirms that Democritus places women in the background of socio-political life away from political participation and important decision-making. But again, if this passage is combined with DK68B273, it is likely to refer to the evil nature of women who are more prone than men (*γυνή πολλὰ ἀνδρὸς ὀξυτέρη*) to evil thoughts (*πρὸς κακοφραδοσύνην*). Therefore, women should not practice the art of rhetoric, because having a greater tendency towards evil, they could cause more negative results with the weapon of persuasion than men. But why are women prone to evil, what is the substance of this evil that women embody?

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. DK68B44: *ἀληθόμυθον χρὴ εἶναι, οὐ πολὺλόγον*. "It is right to speak the truth and not many words."; B48; B53a; B55; B63; B67; B82; B85; B86; B113B115; B115c; B145; B150; B153; B153a; B177; B192; B225; B302,33.

<sup>4</sup> DK68B110: *γυνή μὴ ἀσκέιτω λόγον· δεινὸν γάρ*. "A woman should not practice speaking; for that is destructive". Cf. Thuc. 2. 45: *εἰ δέ με δεῖ καὶ γυναικειάς τι ἀρετῆς, ὅσαι νῦν ἐν χηρείᾳ ἔσσονται, μνησθῆναι, βραχείᾳ παραινέσει ἅπαν σημανῶ. τῆς τε γὰρ ὑπαρχούσης φύσεως μὴ χείροσι γενέσθαι ὑμῖν μεγάλη ἢ δόξα καὶ ἥς ἂν ἐπ' ἐλάχιστον ἀρετῆς πέρι ἢ φόγου ἐν τοῖς ἄρσεσι κλέος ᾗ*. "If I must also speak of female virtue, in relation to those who will henceforth live as widows, I will include all that I have to say in a brief exhortation: your glory will be great if you do not appear inferior to your natural character, and especially if as little as possible is said about each of you among men, whether for praise or for blame". Cf. Sophoc. *Antig.* 61-62.

## Democritus blinds himself so as not to look at women?

*Democritus excaecando semetipsum,  
quod muli concupiscentia aspicere non posset et doleret,  
si non esset potitus, incontinentiam emendatione profitetur.*

“Democritus, by partially blinding himself, admits with this corrective action his lack of restraint, because he could not look at women without desiring them, and because he was filled with sorrow because he could not exploit them erotically.”  
DK68A26 (Tert. Apolog. 46)

To delimit female vice, we must also refer to other textual data that can clarify it. According to an anecdotal report, Democritus blinded himself, or rather, he deliberately limited his visual capacity (DK68A27: *ἐκουσίως σβέσαι τὰς ὀψεις*) through bronze mirrors or shields that directed the reflection of the sun's incandescent rays into his eyes<sup>5</sup>. This admittedly

<sup>5</sup> Plutarch interestingly relays the information about Democritus' self-blinding, but then directly disputes this fact. Cf. DK68A27 (Plut. *De curios.* 12 p. 521D): *ἐκεῖνο μὲν ψεῦδός ἐστι τὸ Δημόκριτον ἐκουσίως σβέσαι τὰς ὀψεις ἀπερεισάμενον εἰς ἔσοπτρα πυρωθέντα καὶ τὴν ἀπ' αὐτῶν ἀνάκλασιν δεξάμενον, ὅπως μὴ παρέχῃσι θόρυβον τὴν διάνοιαν ἔξω καλοῦσαι πολλάκις, ἀλλ' ἐῷσιν ἔνδον οἰκουρεῖν καὶ διατρίβειν πρὸς τοῖς νοητοῖς ὥσπερ παρόδιοι θυρίδες ἐμφραγεῖσαι.* "This information is false, namely that Democritus blinded himself of his own will, after turning his eyes to incandescent bronze mirrors and receiving the reflection of heat from them, so that his intellect would not be disoriented by external representations, but would allow the intellect to dwell within him and concentrate on rational activity: it is like the windows facing the street are closed with shutters." Cf. DK68A22 (Cic. *Tusc.* v 39, 114): *Democritus luminibus amissis alba scilicet discernere et atra non poterat at vero bona mala, aequa iniqua, honesta turpia, utilia inutilia, magna parva poterat, et sine varietate colorum licebat vivere beate, sine notione rerum non licebat. atque hic vir impediri etiam animi aciem aspectu oculorum arbitrabatur, et cum alii saepe quod ante pedes esset non viderent, ille <in> infinitatem omnem peregrinabatur, ut nulla in extremitate consisteret* "Democritus, after losing his sight, truly could not distinguish white from black. However, he could distinguish good from evil, just from unjust, honest from shameful, beneficial from harmful, great from small. Without the variety of colors, he could live happily, while without the knowledge of things he could not. This man maintained that the vision of the spirit is obstructed by the vision of the eyes and, while

strange action was intended to prevent him from being diverted by the pleasures, activated by the sense of sight, from the search for theoretical truth. From this perspective, Democritus favors the rational path to science and rejects the uncertain knowledge of sensory data, which distorts the truth and disorients the wise man from his goal. One of the references (DK68A23) says that Democritus' act of limiting his visual acuity (*ita radiis solis aciem effodit luminis*) had political motives, as he no longer wanted to see bad citizens having a good time (*malis bene esse ne videret civibus*)<sup>6</sup>. This is not incompatible with his political theory which suggests the extension of ethics to politics and the assumption of governance of the political community by wise or virtuous citizens over selfish and unwise ones.

However, the deliberate limitation of vision, if it really occurred, seems to have had as its cause the limitation of visual images that disorient the wise and disrupt the intellectual process. The fragment DK68A26 adds the information that the main visual data that Democritus wanted to limit were women (*mulieres concupiscentia aspicere*), who aroused his erotic

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others did not see what was before their feet, he wandered with the power of the mind to the ends of the world”.

<sup>6</sup> DK68A23 (Gellius, *Noctes Atticae*, X 17): *luminibus oculorum sua sponte se privasse, quia existimaret cogitationes commentationesque animi sui in contemplantis naturae rationibus vegetiores et exactiores fore, si eas videndi inlecebris et oculorum impedimentis liberasset [...]*

*Democritus Abderites physicus philosophus  
clipeum constituit contra exortum Hyperionis,  
oculos effodere ut posset splendore aereo.  
ita radiis solis aciem effodit luminis,  
malis bene esse ne videret civibus.*

“Democritus [...] of his own accord deprived himself of eye-sight, because he believed that the thoughts and meditations of his mind in examining nature's laws would be more vivid and exact, if he should free them from the allurements of sight and the distractions offered by the eyes [...]

Democritus, Abdera's scientist,  
Set up a shield to face Hyperion's rise,  
That sight he might destroy by blaze of brass,  
Thus, by the sun's rays he destroyed his eyes,  
Lest he should see bad citizens' good luck;“

Trnsl. [https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Gellius/10\\*.html#1](https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Gellius/10*.html#1)

passion and led him to mental unrest and inability to control himself (*incontinentiam emendatione profitetur*)<sup>7</sup>. Here there is an identification of woman with the greatest human passion, erotic attraction and desire. This passion is so great that it forces Democritus to limit it drastically through the loss of vision, because he was not able to impose restraint within himself and let rationality dominate the passions. What can all this mean? First, that Democritus puts erotic pleasure with the other sex in the place of the powerful human passion. Erotic passion is stronger than the pleasures of the belly or the other senses. Secondly, that he confesses his own inclination towards erotic pleasure with women, his sensual nature cannot resist the female form. The woman constitutes the sensual stimulus that can cause great disturbance in the movement of the atoms of the soul and loss of restraint and self-control. Either the desire for the female form or the inability to fulfill this desire disrupts the order in the movement of the atoms of the soul and this in turn reduces the full development of phronesis. The undertaking of self-blinding constitutes an admission of the wise man's defeat by erotic passion and a corrective movement towards regaining the control of rationality over the passions.

### Democritus as an experienced lover?

ἀλλὰ καὶ κόρης ἀκολουθούσης τῷ Ἱπποκράτει  
τῇ μὲν πρώτῃ ἡμέρᾳ ἀσπάσασθαι οὕτω «χαῖρε κόρη»,  
τῇ δ' ἐχομένῃ «χαῖρε γύναι». καὶ ἦν ἡ κόρη τῆς νυκτὸς  
διεφθαρμένη.

“But also, the girl who followed Hippocrates on the first day he greeted her thus “hello, girl”, while on the next day “hello, woman”; the girl had lost her virginity during the night”.  
DK68A1.81-83

Nowhere in the available fragments is there a recorded love affair between Democritus and a woman either as a momentary pleasure or as a conjugal relationship. As far as we know, he

<sup>7</sup> DK68A26 (Tert. *Apolog.* 46).

never married, nor did he have children. However, there is one point where Democritus seems to recognize a woman's erotic experience at a glance<sup>8</sup>. In one of his meetings with the father of medical science, Hippocrates, Democritus turned his gaze to one of the doctor's followers and greeted her as "girl" (*χαῖρε κόρη*), that is, as a chaste girl who has not had sexual intercourse with a man. The next day, as soon as he saw the girl again, he addressed her as "woman" (*χαῖρε γυναῖ*), that is, as someone who has completed sexual intercourse and has lost her virginity. This incident shows, first of all, Democritus' experience with sexual relations with women. The wise man is so experienced in this field that he can diagnose the erotic "corruption" of a woman after the first sexual intercourse. Secondly, it confirms the special relationship that Democritus has with the female sex as something that attracts his undivided attention. It is a powerful passion that is observed throughout the entire spectrum of fragments and defines his character. Democritus, although he does not have a formal relationship with a woman, is undoubtedly a womanizer, a man who usually flirts and seduces or tries to seduce women with the aim of sexual intercourse. Also, regardless of whether this results in sexual intercourse, he is seen, as we saw earlier, by female figures, he likes to see beautiful women. The image of a woman as something inescapably attractive creates various mental, intellectual and corporal reactions in him.

### Admiration of women and erotic disappointment

*Δημοκρίτου ... εἶδωλα ἐσθῆτι καὶ κόσμῳ  
διαπρεπέα πρὸς θεωρίην, ἀλλὰ καρδίας κενεά.*

"Democritus: Women are attractive figures who attract attention thanks to their clothes and jewelry, but they have no heart."

DK68B195

The attractive influence of women on Democritus continues in DK68B195, where the philosopher confesses once again the

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<sup>8</sup> DK68A1.81-83.



admiration that the female form arouses in him. It is true that the first term of the sentence is missing, so we can make many assumptions about it<sup>9</sup>, however the reference to clothes (ἐσθῆτι) and jewelry (κόσμῳ) but also to the lack of a heart (καρδίας κενεά), one of the centers of all human activity along with the brain, has a rather literal meaning and is addressed to women. Women, then, are attractive idols (εἰδωλα), visual forms that come into sensory contact with the eyes and cause admiration because of the beautiful clothes and jewelry that adorn them. But, unfortunately, this amazing external appearance of the woman is not in harmony with her inner emptiness, as she has no heart, that is, she lacks high emotions or otherwise does not have the same depth of feelings of love, as a man. The depiction of the female form by Democritus through a few words is truly amazing. The woman is a shining idol, a magnificent visual form, perhaps real, but at the same time false; as all idols, partake of reality and illusion. This beautiful form forces you to see her, to admire her, the clothes and jewelry she wears intensify this visual effect (διαπρεπέα πρὸς θεωρίην). But in the end, it has the fate of all idols, that is, it lacks real substance, real feelings.

Furthermore, the references in the text lead us to the indication that Democritus has experienced some erotic disappointment with a woman. There is at the same time an obvious admiration for female beauty and a disappointment that this beauty does not transform into feelings of love. The heart is the center that maintains the flame of life<sup>10</sup> and the point of concentration of emotions<sup>11</sup>, a cornerstone for the functioning

<sup>9</sup> There is also the view that DK68B195 is not about women, but about human forms in the visual arts, painting, sculpture, and it suggests a view that parallels the Platonic (and Socratic?) view of art as being three degrees from truth. However, this view does not seem to have strong support in the specific passage where the reference to clothing, jewelry and heartlessness seems more appropriate for women. Zuckerman V. G., “Mimesis and the bodily sign in Xenophon’s *Memorabilia* 3. 10” in Marsico C. (ed.) *Socrates and the Socratic Philosophies, Selected Papers from SOCRATICA IV*, Nomos, Baden-Baden, 2022, pp. 296-297.

<sup>10</sup> DK68B1: ἡ καρδία τὸ ἐμπύρευμα τῆς ζωῆς εἶχεν ἐγκείμενον τῷ βάθει. Cf. DK68A105.

<sup>11</sup> DK68B262: ἐγκάρδιον.

of the human organism. The statement about the absence of a heart in female figures undoubtedly shows a very great bitterness on Democritus' part, stemming from a relationship with a woman. The philosopher was hurt or betrayed erotically so much that he now distrusts the existence of true feelings on the part of women. His individual bad experience now acquires a universal connotation. It is a very harsh, universal statement about women, namely that they are internally empty. Not only do they have limited feelings, but the center of feelings, the heart, is completely absent from them. They are completely empty, heartless, beautiful images without any essential substance and emotional value, just like any image, of course, which if we stay only in the phenomenon and not in the essence that lies within it or in the symbolism that it exudes, is simply an idol, an optical illusion of truth.

### Woman and children as a bulwark in philosophical life

*Δημόκριτος δὲ γάμον καὶ παιδοποιίαν παραιτεῖται  
διὰ τὰς πολλὰς ἐξ αὐτῶν ἀηδίας τε  
καὶ ἀφολλκὰς ἀπὸ τῶν ἀναγκαιοτέρων*

"Democritus renounces marriage and childbearing, because these are causes of unpleasant events and create needs that keep people away from the most important issues".

DK68A170

But again, is only an isolated love disappointment enough for the universal condemnation of woman as a heartless illusion? Is there something more structural in the philosophical pessimism about woman? DK68A170 perhaps gives us a possible answer. Democritus renounces family life because he considers it an obstacle to achieving a more important goal. This goal is the discovery and knowledge of the causes of things<sup>12</sup>,

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<sup>12</sup> DK68A170: *Δημόκριτος γοῦν αὐτός, ὥς φασιν, ἔλεγε βούλεσθαι μᾶλλον μίαν εὐρεῖν αἰτιολογίαν ἢ τὴν Περσῶν οἱ βασιλείαν γενέσθαι*. "So Democritus, according to tradition, said that he wanted more to discover a causality for something than to become the king of the Persians."

that is, science or better, philosophy. The wise man needs free time to engage in the highest things and married family life filled with constant cares and suffering negates this perspective.

Having children is a result of the primordial natural process of reproduction and perpetuation of the species. All living beings participate in the reproductive process and take care as best they can for the upbringing of their offspring. In fact, in order for their offspring to develop properly, all living beings make great sacrifices and run great risks or sorrows if their children suffer any harm. All species raise their offspring selflessly without expecting any benefit from them. The same is true for human reproduction, but people have the illusion that they will derive some benefit from their offspring, which is why they are often dissatisfied with the possible ingratitude that they will show to their parents, but this is not normal for Democritus<sup>13</sup>.

Democritus renounces marriage and having children, because he considers that these manifestations of human social life constitute insurmountable obstacles to the realization of the free life of the wise man. Children and marriage create needs, which lead man away from the goal of tranquil bliss. Finding the truth of things requires dedication and tranquility, and the prospect of married life nullifies the ultimate goal of scientific research free from conventional bonds<sup>14</sup>. Democritus represents the ideal of the scientist-philosopher, who focuses undividedly on research and "worldly" life (women, children, marriage) constitutes an obstacle - as a deprivation of free time - to scientific activity.

Raising children is a matter of great uncertainty. In order to achieve the proper upbringing of a child, one goes through great anguish and care, which almost never cease. Also, the failure of upbringing is identified with the greatest failure in one's life. The pain of improper upbringing is incomparable to any other and leads parents to constant unhappiness<sup>15</sup>. Democritus even goes so far as to directly urge us not to have children, because their acquisition is equivalent to labor,

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<sup>13</sup> DK68B278.

<sup>14</sup> DK68A170.

<sup>15</sup> DK68B275.

danger, misery and sorrow. On the contrary, the benefits of child-rearing are meager and meaningless<sup>16</sup>.

Raising children is so difficult that the wise man urges adoption as an ideal solution. In the case of adoption, the person concerned does not risk as much as in natural reproduction, because in this way he chooses any child that corresponds to his constitution and his expectations, so that he will not be disappointed later. Adoption ensures right choice and certainty, while natural reproduction involves chance and the possibility of failure-disappointment<sup>17</sup>.

Under these circumstances, the woman as a permanent companion and pillar of family life is rejected by Democritus. At this point, the female gender is disapproved of as part of the family reality, which diverts the wise man or scientist from the continuous investigation of the nature of beings. The same image is present in other anecdotal stories about other wise men of antiquity, such as e.g., Thales of Miletus<sup>18</sup>, who also comically rejected married life and children, apparently having behind his funny sayings the idea that the activity of wisdom is disturbed by the arduous and time-consuming family environment. In fact, in Thales' excerpt, the motif of adoption appears again, as in the case of Democritus. Of course, under this reasoning, perhaps, the reverse could also be true, that is, a female philosopher or scientist rejected the family, the male husband, the children, etc. in order to dedicate herself to the contemplation of knowledge. Democritus should not have disagreed with this reverse case, if of course there were women with this

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<sup>16</sup> DK68B276.

<sup>17</sup> DK68B277. Vavouras E., *Democritus, Ethics – Politics: atoms - nature – city*, Zitros: Thessaloniki, 2020, pp. 309-311.

<sup>18</sup> Diog. Laert. 1.26: οἱ δὲ ἄγαμον μείναι, τῆς δὲ ἀδελφῆς τὸν υἱὸν θέσθαι. ὅτε καὶ ἐρωτηθέντα διὰ τί οὐ τεκνοποιεῖ, διὰ φιλοτεκνίαν εἰπεῖν. καὶ λέγουσι ὅτι τῆς μητρὸς ἀναγκαζούσης αὐτὸν γῆμαι ἔλεγεν, «οὐδέπω καιρός». εἶτα, ἐπειδὴ παρήβησεν ἐγκειμένης, εἰπεῖν, «οὐκέτι καιρός». "Some say that he remained unmarried and that he adopted his sister's son. When asked why he did not have children, he said that he did so because he loved children. And they say that when his mother pressured him to marry, he said, 'It is not yet time for me to do so'; later, when his adolescence passed and she insisted on marrying, he told her, 'There is no longer time for me to do so'."

philosophical or scientific profile, which was extremely rare in his time.

### Woman and human nature

But, if we focus on the Democritean view of human nature<sup>19</sup>, nowhere is there a separation of the two sexes, male and female, in terms of its structure and function. Everywhere Democritus speaks of human as a single entity<sup>20</sup> and not of man or woman. Human nature is structured by atoms and void, like every living or inanimate being in the natural world. Each part of the body consists of atoms of different texture and shape<sup>21</sup> and performs a different function within the overall human organism. The atoms of the material soul<sup>22</sup> are qualitatively superior to the atoms of the body, because firstly they have the ability of self-motion and secondly due to their smooth, very small and spherical size they can penetrate every part of the body and move it<sup>23</sup>. The atoms of the soul constitute

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Naddaf G., *The Greek Concept of Nature*, New York: State University of New York Press, 2005), pp. 152-161; Davison J. A., 'Protagoras, Democritus, and Anaxagoras', *The Classical Quarterly* 3, 1953, pp. 33-45.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. DK68B165; B124; B34.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Balme D., 'Greek Science and Mechanism II. The Atomists,' *Classical Quarterly*, 35, 1941), pp. 23-8; D. Furley, *The Greek Cosmologists vol 1: The Formation of the Atomic Theory and its Earliest Critics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, pp. 155-156; A. Gregory, 'Early ancient atomism: Similarities and differences' in Zilioli U., (ed.) *Atomism in philosophy: a history from antiquity to the present*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. pp.23-38.

<sup>22</sup> Warren J., 'Democritus, the Epicureans, Death, and Dying', *The Classical Quarterly* 52, 2002, pp. 193-206; C. C. W. Taylor, 'Democritus and Lucretius on death and dying' in A. Brancacci, and P. M. Morel (eds.), *Democritus: Science, The Arts, and the Care of the Soul*. (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2007), pp. 77-86; Piergiacomini E., 'Conflicts of Atomisms. Some Major Differences between Democritus and Colotes', *Elenchos* 37, 2016, pp. 147-180.

<sup>23</sup> Edmunds L., 'Necessity, Chance, and Freedom in the Early Atomists,' *Phoenix*, 26, 1972, pp. 342-57; Hasper P., 'Aristotle's Diagnosis of Atomism,' *Apeiron*, 39, 2006., pp. 121-155.

the motive cause<sup>24</sup> of every part and process within the material body.

Furthermore, for Democritus, the soul is identified with the mind (DK68A101: *ταὐτὸν ψυχὴν καὶ νοῦν*. Cf. A101; A101a; A105a; A106; A107; A113). The movement of the soul produces intellectual process and the intellectual process in turn affects the movement of the soul (DK68A135, 70-71: *περὶ δὲ τοῦ φρονεῖν ἐπὶ τοσοῦτον εἶρηκεν ὅτι γίνεται συμμετρῶς ἐχούσης τῆς ψυχῆς κατὰ τὴν κοῆσιν*. Cf. A135, 73; B160). The right movement of the atoms of the soul is established when there is phronesis and rational thought, while in turn rationality is impossible without the harmonious movement of the atoms of the soul at the right intervals<sup>25</sup>. Intellect presupposes a calmness and symmetry in the material structure of the soul, while irrationality is a product of material disorder and turmoil (DK68B191: *ἐκ μεγάλων διαστημάτων κινούμεναι*). Every sensory data is received by the sensory organs of the body, but then comes into contact with the atoms of the soul that are scattered in every part of the human organism. The senses receive the data, but the soul, as identical with the rational mental process, decodes them and gives them meaning. The knowledge of the senses is a dark and uncertain knowledge (Cf. DK68A22; A23; A26; A27; B9; B11), because it cannot by itself produce safe and substantial conclusions, while the knowledge of the mind is a genuine knowledge, because through the rational critical ability it evaluates the cognitive data and gives them meaning appropriately<sup>26</sup>. The mind therefore has primacy in cognitive function, but without the data of

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<sup>24</sup> Barnes J., 1984. 'Reason and Necessity in Leucippus' in L. (ed.) *Proceedings of the 1st International Congress on Democritus* Benakis, Xanthi, 1984, pp. 141-158; Berryman S., 'Democritus and the explanatory power of the void,' in Caston V. and Graham D. (eds.), *Presocratic Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Alexander Mourelatos*, London: Ashgate, 2002, pp. 183-194; Taylor C. C. W., 'Democritus', in Rowe C. & Schofield M. (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Political Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 122-129; Luchte J., *Early Greek thought: before the dawn* (London: Continuum, 2011, pp. 163-168.

<sup>25</sup> Warren J., *Epicurus and Democritean Ethics: An Archaeology of Ataraxia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2002, pp. 44-58.

<sup>26</sup> Taylor C. C. W., 'Pleasure, Knowledge and Sensation in Democritus', *Phronesis* 12, 1967, pp. 6-27.

the senses there could be no possibility of knowledge and rational thought<sup>27</sup>.

None of this excludes the female hypostasis. Woman and man have a common human nature and can understand and perceive the data of reality in the same way. Under the common term man or human nature, man and woman are exactly the same anthropologically, they have no difference in terms of cognitive ability and the movement of their soul that leads to happiness<sup>28</sup>. Democritus does not naturally degrade woman, but endows her with the same human abilities and elevates her to a level of absolute natural equality.

### Woman and virtue

Under the same terms, the equality of women is also signaled in terms of the prerequisites and conditions for achieving virtue. Democritus does not exclude female nature from the aretaic perspective, but includes it on an equal footing with man as a human being. The Democritean conception of virtue is directly related to the movement of the atoms of the soul and the intellectual process. The virtuous human, whether male or female, can form a proper order in the movement of the atoms of his soul and a rationality that stems from it. But how is this material order created within the soul? Avoiding excess and deficiency in the choice of pleasures (DK68B207)<sup>29</sup> is the first element of virtue. Excess and deficiency oppose the right measure<sup>30</sup> and this creates internal unrest in human

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. Ganson T., 'Democritus against Reducing Sensible Qualities,' *Ancient Philosophy*, 19, 1999, pp. 201–15; Baldes R. W., 'Democritus on Visual Perception: Two Theories or One?' *Phronesis*, 20, 1975, pp. 93–105; Kahn C., 'Democritus on Moral Psychology' in Benakis L. (ed.) *Proceedings of the 1st International Congress on Democritus* (Xanthi, 1984), pp. 309–316

<sup>28</sup> Kahn C., 'Democritus and the Origins of Moral Psychology Source' *The American Journal of Philology*, 106, 1985, pp. 1–31.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Casertano G., 'Pleasure, desire and happiness in Democritus' in L. Benakis (ed.) *Proceedings of the 1st International Congress on Democritus*, Xanthi, 1984, pp. 347–352; Mejer J., 'Democritus and Democracy', *Apeiron* 37, 2004, pp. 1–10, at p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> Dudley J., 'The ethics of Democritus and Aristotle' in Benakis L. (ed.) *Proceedings of the 1st International Congress on Democritus*, Xanthi, 1984,

nature. Every pleasure must be enjoyed in the right degree (DK68B191: *μετριοτήτι τέρψιος*)<sup>31</sup>, because any deviation from the right measure can be destructive. Also, pleasures are separated by Democritus into corporal and intellectual, of which the latter are more qualitative than the former. The superiority of intellectual pleasures consists in the direct relationship that they have with the formation of the right movement of the soul and in their long-term power (DK68B211: *ἡδονὴν ἐπιμείζονα*). The pleasures of the mind create symmetry in the movement of the soul, but also last longer than the corporal ones. On the contrary, corporal pleasures create disorder and unrest in the structure of the soul and are transitory, as soon as the pleasure passes, their potential benefit also passes (DK68B235: *ἡδοναὶ βραχεῖαι, τέρψις βραχεῖα*)<sup>32</sup>.

The virtuous man has reached a level of natural completion that allows him to choose the right measure between excess and deficiency, but also intellectual pleasures over corporal ones. However, this aretaic development has another structural precondition. No choice can be made without a rational process about good and evil<sup>33</sup>. Man is free to choose both good and evil, he is absolutely free and at the same time responsible for his well-being and destruction. However, only choosing the right leads to happiness (DK68B191: *βίου συμμετρίῃ*)<sup>34</sup>, one

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pp. 371-384; Stewart Z., 'Democritus and the Cynics' *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 63, 1958, pp. 179-191, at. 183.

<sup>31</sup> DK68B70; B71; B72; B191; B233; D. Wolfsdorf, *Pleasure in ancient Greek philosophy*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 13-17.

<sup>32</sup> DK68B37; B129; B189; B146; DK68B211; DK68B235.

<sup>33</sup> Gosling J. C. B., Taylor C.C.W., *The Greeks on Pleasure* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1982), pp. 27-37; D. Wolfsdorf, *Pleasure in ancient Greek philosophy*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 13-17; McGibbon D., 'Pleasure as the "Criterion" in Democritus', *Phronesis*, 5, 1960, pp. 75-77.

<sup>34</sup> Guseinov A. A., 'The Ethics of Democritus' *Soviet Studies in Philosophy* 26, 1987, pp. 53-65; Kourtoglou O., Vavouras E., & Sariannidis N., "The Stoic Paradigm of Ethics as a Philosophical Tool for Objectifying the Concepts of Organizational Ethics, Corporate Social Responsibility, and Corporate Governance", *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, 9 (2), 2024, pp. 119-143.



cannot be happy by making wrong choices<sup>35</sup>. The right reason is the one that judges and weighs the data and ensures the right decision. Happiness without rationality cannot exist. Happiness presupposes the dominance of reason over the passions and the senses, just as the animate material mind dominates and controls the irrational body<sup>36</sup> (DK168B31: σοφίη δὲ ψυχὴν παθῶν ἀφαιρεῖται).

Feminine nature is not treated as something different from the totality of human nature. Woman can become as virtuous as man, because she shares the same degree of rationality as him. If she perceives the right measure between excess and deficiency and if she proceeds to choose what is good for human nature, she can reach the goal<sup>37</sup> of happiness. Virtue does not depend on physical strength or physique, where women differ from men, but on the ability of rationality and phronesis, where there is absolutely no difference between the two sexes. Both women and men can develop phronesis to the maximum extent and become wise, so that they make right choices and transmit symmetrical movement to the atoms of their soul, which is equivalent to a condition of happiness<sup>38</sup>. Conversely, both sexes can equally make incorrect choices under the dominance of irrationality and fall into the kinetic turmoil of the

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Berryman S., 'Democritus', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2023 <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/democritus/>; Vlastos G., 'Ethics and physics in Democritus' in Furley D. J., and Allen R. E., (eds.), *Studies in Presocratic Philosophy*. Volume 2: *Eleatics and Pluralists*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975, pp. 381–408; Guthrie W. K. C., *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Vol. 1, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962, pp. 496–497; Michaelidis K. P., 'Human, a small world. The nexus between human and world in Democritus', in Benakis L. (ed.) *Proceedings of the 1st International Congress on Democritus*, Xanthi, 1984, pp. 127–136; Taylor C. C. W., *The Atomists Leucippus and Democritus: fragments: a text and translation with a commentary*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press., 1999, p. 227.

<sup>36</sup> Vavouras E., 'Hobbes' hedonism in front of classical hedonism and the free market 's way out', *Dia-noesis: A Journal of Philosophy*, 13, 2022, pp. 85–114.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Hirsch U., 'War Demokrits Weltbild mechanistisch und antiteologisch?' *Phronesis*, 35, 1990, pp. 225–244.

<sup>38</sup> Michaelidis K. P., 'Human, a small world. The nexus between human and world in Democritus', in Benakis L. (ed.) *Proceedings of the 1st International Congress on Democritus*, Xanthi, 1984, pp. 127–136, at p. 132.

atoms of the soul, but at the same time into unhappiness<sup>39</sup>. According to Democritus, women and men are absolutely equal in both happiness and unhappiness. Democritean ethics does not recognize any distinction between the two sexes in its application.

### Woman and political governance

*Δημοκρίτου. ἀνδρεῖος οὐχ ὁ τῶν πολεμίων μόνον,  
ἀλλὰ καὶ ὁ τῶν ἡδονῶν κρέσσων.*

*ἔνιοι δὲ πολίων μὲν δεσπόζουσι, γυναῖξι δὲ δουλεύουσιν.*

“Democritus: Brave human is not only one who is more powerful than his enemies but also one who is more powerful than pleasures. But there are some men who, while governing cities, are slaves to women”.

DK68B214

The pattern of Democritean ethics is also transferred to politics, as these two philosophical areas are communicating vessels. The political governor must have all those ethical resources that will allow him to make right decisions. Before one deals with the happiness of the political community, one must first of all become happy himself. Being happy means first of all that rationality governs the passions and pleasures, which allows the choice of what is good for human nature. Politics cannot be defined otherwise than as relations of dominance and subordination of the parts of the state with the aim of the happiness of the political whole<sup>40</sup>. According to Democritean ethics, as we have seen, people are not equal in terms of aretaic integration. There are humans who are distinguished by their wisdom (DK68B197: *δαήμονες*, B236: *ἀνδρὸς εὐλογίστου*) and the rightness of their choices, and others who are unwise<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Nill M., *Morality and self-interest in Protagoras, Antiphon and Democritus*, Netherlands: Brill, 1985, p. 79.

<sup>40</sup> Procopé J. F., ‘Democritus on Politics and the Care of the Soul’, *The Classical Quarterly*, 39, 1989, pp. 307-331, at 310-311.

<sup>41</sup> *ἀνόητοι, ἄξύνετοι, ἀνοήμονες, νηπίοισιν*, DK68B235; B54; B58; B76; B98; B71; B73; B75; B76; B78; B79; B113; B292. Cf. Zatta C., ‘Democritus

and have wrong decisions. At the political level, those who decide wrongly cannot govern those who decide rightly, and it is not possible for the unwise to govern the wise<sup>42</sup>. The different level of phronesis and virtue of citizens also determines their political position. The virtuous should be in positions of political governance and the non-virtuous should accept their guidelines<sup>43</sup>.

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and folly: The two wise Fools' *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme Et Renaissance*, 63, 2001, pp. 533-549.

<sup>42</sup> Ferwerda R., 'Democritus and Plato' *Mnemosyne* 25, 1972, pp. 337-378, at p. 371.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. DK68B47: νόμῳ καὶ ἄρχοντι καὶ τῷ σοφωτέρῳ εἵκειν κόσμιον. "It is proper to submit to the law, to the political governor, and to the wisest."

DK68B49: χαλεπὸν ἄρχεσθαι ὑπὸ χειρόνους. "It is unbearable to be ruled by someone worse than you."

DK68B56: τὰ καλὰ γνωρίζουσι καὶ ζηλοῦσιν οἱ εὐφύες πρὸς αὐτά. "Those who have the appropriate nature for achieving good things know and pursue them."

DK68B58: ἐλπίδες αἱ τῶν ὀρθὰ φρονεόντων ἐφικταί, αἱ δὲ τῶν ἄξυνέτων ἀδύνατοι. "The hopes of those who think rightly are achievable, while those of unwise men cannot be realized." Cf. B292.

DK68B75: κρέσσον ἄρχεσθαι τοῖς ἀνοήτοισιν ἢ ἄρχειν. "It is better for unwise men to be governed than to govern."

DK68B214: ἀνδρεῖος οὐχ ὁ τῶν πολεμίων μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ ὁ τῶν ἡδονῶν κρέσσων. ἔνιοι δὲ πολλῶν μὲν δεσπόζουσι, γυναιξὶ δὲ δουλεύουσιν. "Brave is not only he who is more powerful than his enemies, but also, he who is more powerful than pleasures. But there are some who, while ruling cities, are slaves to women."

DK68B254: οἱ κακοὶ ἰόντες ἐς τὰς τιμὰς ὀκόσωι ἂν μᾶλλον ἀνάξιοι ἐόντες ἴωσι, τοσοῦτωι μᾶλλον ἀνακηδέες γίνονται καὶ ἀφροσύνης καὶ θράσεος πίμπλονται. "When non-integrated by nature citizens assume political offices, the more unworthy they are of it, the more impious they become, full of recklessness and impudence."

DK68B263: δίκης καὶ ἀρετῆς μεγίστην μετέχει μοῖραν ὁ (τιμὰς) ἀξίας τὰς μεγίστας τάμων [τοῖς ἀξιώτατοις] (?). "In justice and virtue, the one who bestows the most important and greatest political offices on worthy citizens, has the greatest share."

DK68B265: οὕτω καὶ τὸν ἄρχοντα. οὐ γὰρ ἐπὶ τούτῳι ἡρέθη ὡς κακῶς ποιήσων, ἀλλ' ὡς εὖ. "The same applies to the political governor. That is, he was not elected to wrong the political body, but to benefit it."

DK68B267: φύσει τὸ ἄρχειν οἰκίμον τῷ κρέσσονι. "By nature, political governance belongs to the superior."

DK68B302,21: δεῖ δὲ τὸν ἑτέρων μέλλοντα ἄρξειν αὐτὸν ἑαυτοῦ πρῶτον ἄρχειν. "He who is going to rule others must first rule himself."

In this equation of virtue-political governance, women are not left out, as they are also rational beings to the same extent as men. Therefore, political ability does not represent only one gender, but extends to every virtuous human. If the prerequisite for right political governance is ethical integration, a woman as a virtuous human, who subordinates passions to rationality and chooses rightly between good and evil, can undoubtedly politically direct a civil society as a virtuous politician<sup>44</sup>. The principles of Democritus' political philosophy unequivocally anoint women as potential political agents and make them absolutely equal to men on statesmanship.

However, there are some passages that show that perhaps Democritus demeans women in terms of political governance. DK68B214 mentions that there are some politicians who, while we see them governing cities (*ἐνιοι δὲ πόλιν μὲν δεσπόζουσι*), are slaves to women (*γυναιξὶ δὲ δουλεύουσιν*). This reference shows that Democritus probably considers women to be destined for the home and that only men can engage in the greatest undertaking of politics (DK68B157: *πολιτικὴν τέχνην μεγίστην οὔσαν*). Also, for a woman to govern a man seems to be extremely demeaning to him in the eyes of many who make up the political community. However, things are not so simple, the first part of the passage refers to the necessary precondition for assuming political governance, which is bravery against enemies (*ἀνδρείος οὐχ ὁ τῶν πολέμιων μόνον*). However, as Democritus informs us, bravery consists primarily in the inner rational dominance of man over his pleasures (*ἀλλὰ καὶ ὁ τῶν ἡδονῶν κρέσσων*)<sup>45</sup>. The virtue of bravery is not separated for

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DK68B302,21: *ὁ ἀρετὴν τιμῶν πρῶτην ἀλήθειαν τιμᾷ καὶ μάλιστα ὡς ἀγαθοῦ παντὸς ἡγεμόνα οὔσαν*. "He who appreciates virtue appreciates truth above all else, with the idea that it is the governor of every good thing."

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Warren J., 'Democritus on social and psychological harm', in A. Brancacci, and P. M. Morel (eds.), *Democritus: Science, The Arts, and the Care of the Soul*, Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2007, pp. 87-104.

<sup>45</sup> *ὁ τῶν ἡδονῶν κρέσσων*: Cf., Plat., *Gorg.*, 491d-e: ΣΩ. Τί δέ; αὐτῶν ὧς ἐταῖρε, τί; ἢ τι ἄρχοντα; ἢ ἀρχομένους; ΚΑΛ. Πῶς λέγεις; ΣΩ. Ἐνα ἕκαστον λέγω αὐτὸν ἑαυτοῦ ἄρχοντα· ἢ τοῦτο μὲν οὐδὲν δεῖ αὐτὸν ἑαυτοῦ ἄρχειν, τῶν δὲ ἄλλων; ΚΑΛ. Πῶς ἑαυτοῦ ἄρχοντα λέγεις; ΣΩ. Οὐδὲν ποικίλον ἀλλ' ὥσπερ οἱ πολλοί, σώφρονα ὄντα καὶ ἐγκρατῆ αὐτὸν ἑαυτοῦ, τῶν ἡδονῶν καὶ ἐπιθυμιῶν ἄρχοντα τῶν ἐν ἑαυτῷ. "So.: Do they govern

men and women, but applies to both sexes as a common denominator. Women as human beings can think rationally and dominate over their pleasures. Therefore, they can be brave and, consequently, govern cities. The reference to some politicians being enslaved to women is probably related to their enslavement to aphrodisiac pleasures, which include desire and lust for the female sex and not to women as political governors. The vast majority of politicians in Democritus' time were men, so the enslavement to pleasures mentioned in the passage is personified as enslavement to women<sup>46</sup>.

Also, the passage DK68B111 moves along the same interpretative line. Democritus said that the greatest dishonor (*ὑβρις εἶη ἂν ἀνδρὶ ἐσχάτη*) for a man is to be ruled by a woman (*ὑπὸ γυναικὸς ἄρχεσθαι*)<sup>47</sup>. If we take the meaning of the sentence literally, the conclusion will be drawn that a man should never be subject to a woman and that, when this happens, it is tantamount to the greatest shame or dishonor. Therefore, political governance must be a matter for men and women are not only incompetent for such a thing, but completely unsuitable, to the point that, if they were to find themselves in a position of political power, it would arouse feelings of shame. But here too we should not choose such an obvious

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*themselves, my friend, what do you think? Are they rulers or ruled? Cal.: What do you mean by that? So.: I mean that each one should be the ruler of himself; or is that not proper, that one should govern himself, but should be the ruler of others? Kal.: What do you mean, govern himself? S.: Nothing complicated, but exactly what is recorded as the opinion of many, that one should be prudent and temperate with regard to oneself, absolute master of one's pleasures and desires". Cf. Gorg. DK82B11a (Pal. 13): οἱ κρείττονες τῶν τῆς φύσεως ἡδονῶν.*

<sup>46</sup> Cf. *De Pac.* 103, where Isocrates identifies the passion for power (*ἥδεσαν τὴν ἐξουσίαν*) with beautiful courtesans (*τὴν φύσιν ὁμοίαν ἔχει ταῖς ἐταίραις*), who make men desire them erotically and thus fall into destructive irrationality (*ὥς παραφρονεῖν ποιεῖ τοὺς ἀγαπῶντας αὐτὴν*), that is, the subordination of reason to passions. The identification of pleasures and more generally of passions with women, who dominate humans (*ἀπατηλαί τινες δέσποιναι προσποιούμεναι ἡδοναὶ εἶναι*), just as beautiful women seduce men erotically and prevent them from doing useful works, is also found in Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* (1.20-21).

<sup>47</sup> DK68B111: *ὑπὸ γυναικὸς ἄρχεσθαι ὑβρις εἶη ἂν ἀνδρὶ ἐσχάτη*. "The ultimate dishonor for a man is to be ruled by a woman". Cf. Soph. *Antig.* 677-680; Plat. *Men.* 71e.

and hasty interpretation. The word *hubris* undoubtedly has an ethical content and is related to the transcendence of natural limits, of the right measure. Hubris is opposed to phronesis as a moment of irrationality, as a moment of the domination of passions over rationality<sup>48</sup>. Therefore, the meaning of the term is not political in the literal sense, that is, that it is a dishonor for a man to be politically governed by a woman or conversely that it is improper for a woman to take a political position within a civil society, even if she is wise or virtuous. On the contrary, the meaning of the fragment is ethical in the sense that it is the utmost excess of natural rightness or natural measure for reason to be governed by the humblest aphrodisiac passions, which are personified in woman. Therefore, it is an excess of the right measure for a man to subordinate the rational element of his nature to the humblest erotic passions of desire for a woman. This position is consistent with previous interpretative attempts on the relationship of the term woman with the tendency towards erotic pleasures and the circumvention of rational process of phronesis.

### Woman as the personification of the strongest human passion

*κάκ τῆς χρήσεως τοῦ πυρὸς αἱ τέχναι προσφευρέθησαν, δι' ὧν ὁ  
κόσμος κοσμεῖται καὶ τὰ ἡδέα ἡμῖν καὶ τερπνὰ καὶ ἀβρότατα γίνεται  
δίκην γυναικὸς ἡμᾶς καταθέλγοντα καὶ τρυφερωτέρους ἀπεργαζόμενα, ὃ  
καλεῖ πλάσιν γυναικὸς ὁ ποιητής.*

“From the use of fire were discovered the arts, which offer pleasure, delight and refined behavior, which attract us strongly, just like woman, and make us more susceptible to pleasures, which the poet defines as the irresistible nature of woman.”

DK68B5

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<sup>48</sup> Cf. Plat. *Phaedr.* 237e-238a: δόξης μὲν οὖν ἐπὶ τὸ ἄριστον λόγῳ ἀγοῦσης καὶ κρατούσης τῷ κράτει σωφροσύνη ὄνομα· ἐπιθυμίας δὲ ἀλόγως ἐλκούσης ἐπὶ ἡδονὰς καὶ ἀρξάσης ἐν ἡμῖν τῇ ἀρχῇ ὕβρις ἐπωνομάσθη. “The dominance of opinion, which through reason leads to the best and dominates, is called prudence; while the dominance of desire, which, by dominating us, leads us irrationally to pleasure, is called hubris”. Cf. Theogn. *Eleg.* 379; Xen. *Cyr.* 8.4.14.

Based on all these findings, we come to the conclusion that woman in Democritus is the personification of the strong erotic passion, of erotic pleasure. Tzetzi's reference to DK68B5 confirms this version again. Democritus here refers to the discovery of fire, which was the cause for the creation of the new arts, which make people more refined (*ἀβρότατα*) and more prone to pleasures (*τὰ ἡδέα ἡμῖν καὶ τερπνὰ*). The arts are the path to well-being, to the development of a life without physical strain and labor. The arts raise the standard of living<sup>49</sup>, but at the same time they also increase voluptuousness (*τρυφερωτέρους*), softness and lack of hardness. However, the convenience they provide attracts humans strongly (*καταθέλγοντα*), to the point where they cannot resist their attraction for promised comforts. Up to this point there is nothing inconsistent in the development of the passage, however the attraction that the arts exert on man is likened by Democritus to the irresistible attraction (*δίκην γυναικὸς*) that feminine nature exerts on man (*πλάσιν γυναικὸς*).

It is surprising that Democritus uses the attraction that a woman exerts on a man to show how much the arts attract people, but also how much the pleasure created by them leads to softness, just like erotic pleasures. From this passage it is clear that the reference to woman has a symbolic use and is related to Democritean ethics. Woman is identified with erotic pleasures, which must be overcome by human rational ability. Also, Democritus's insurmountable admiration for feminine nature is highlighted once again. The nature of woman is irresistible, almost poetic, it is very difficult to resist this sublime natural beauty, this powerful attraction of beauty and the erotic desire for pleasure. There is a real confession of Democritus about the influence that woman exerts on him as a man who desires her incessantly, but also as a philosopher who struggles to free himself from this powerful influence of erotic passion

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<sup>49</sup> Cole T., *Democritus and the Sources of Greek Anthropology*, Cleveland: Western Reserve University Press, 1967, pp. 40-41; Kouloumparitsis, L., 1984. 'Physics and Anthropology in Democritus' in Benakis L. (ed.) *Proceedings of the 1st International Congress on Democritus*, Xanthi, 1984, pp. 67-85, at pp. 80-81.

through rationality. If he really managed to escape the shackles of female charm, he did so with difficulty, perhaps he really blinded himself, in order to achieve the impossible. But still woman is as sweet and desirable as human civilization itself<sup>50</sup>. If there is something with which the progress and development of the arts can be compared, it is the pleasure that emanates from woman. The entire human condition and the significant achievements of technological development<sup>51</sup> barely compare to the natural female form and the erotic pleasure that emanates from it. We really do not know if there is a greater hymn to woman in the history of philosophy in the sense that all human civilizational activity pales before it.

### Democritus dies among women

κάνταῦθά φησιν [Asklepiades], ὥς λόγος ἔχει Δημόκριτον ἀσιτήσαντα  
τέσσαρας ἡμέρας πρὸς τῷ ἀναιρεῖσθαι γίνεσθαι καὶ αὐτὸν  
παρακληθέντα πρὸς τινων γυναικῶν ἐπιμεῖναι ἡμέρας τινὰς ἐν τῷ βίῳ,  
καὶ ἵνα μὴ γένωνται ταύταις δυστυχῶς τὰ κατὰ κείνους τοὺς χρόνους  
Θεσμοφόρια λελυμένα, φασὶν αὐτὸν ἀπαλλάττειν κελεῦσαι, καθίζειν δὲ  
πρὸς τοὺς ἄρτους, καὶ τούτους καταπνεῖν ἄτμον τὸν γινόμενον. καὶ ὁ  
Δημόκριτος ἀποσπασάμενος τὸν ἀπὸ τοῦ ἵπνου ἄτμον ῥώννυται τε τὰς  
δυνάμεις καὶ ἐπιβιοῖ τὸ λοιπόν.

“And there he [i.e., Asclepiades, a first century BC medical writer] says that there is a story that Democritus had fasted for four days and was on the point of death when some women begged him to remain alive for a few days, so that the Thesmophoria, which were then being celebrated, should not be spoiled by an ill omen.<sup>46</sup> He told them to go away, and sat by the loaves which were being baked so that the vapour blew on him.

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<sup>50</sup> For the conventional form of human civilization and civil society cf. Kahn C., ‘The Origins of Social Contract Theory in the Fifth Century B.C.’ In Kerferd G. B. (ed.) *The Sophists and Their Legacy: Proceedings of the Fourth International Colloquium on Ancient Philosophy* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1981), pp. 92-108; Robitzsch J. M., ‘Democritus on Human Nature and Sociability’, *Ancient Philosophy* 44, 2024, pp. 1-15.

<sup>51</sup> Iribadjakov N., ‘The philosophical-historical and sociological views of Democritus’ in Benakis L. (ed.) *Proceedings of the 1st International Congress on Democritus*, Xanthi, 1984, pp. 415-422



And Democritus regained his strength by inhaling the vapour from the oven, and so lived on for the remaining time”<sup>52</sup>.

DK68A28

Of great interest is also the way in which Democritus died, among women. When Democritus reached a very old age (possibly 109 years old) he decided to die voluntarily, abstaining from food for a few days. Because those days coincided with the festival of Thesmophoria, some women of the house in which he was staying (or his sister DK68A1.84-91) begged Democritus to somehow postpone his voluntary death, so as not to tarnish the festival. He agreed on the precondition that they place him next to warm bread - or honey according to another version (DK68A29) - so that he could breathe the steam or the smell they gave off and remain in existence. The women obeyed Democritus's exhortation and the philosopher was able to stay alive for a few more days until the festival was over, revived by this paradoxical trick.

Even the last days of Democritus' life have the air of a scientific experiment, as the trick with the smell of bread or honey is probably related to his theory of respiration<sup>53</sup>. Democritus

<sup>52</sup> Taylor C. C. W. 1999. *The Atomists Leucippus and Democritus: fragments: a text and translation with a commentary*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp. 65-66.

<sup>53</sup> DK68A106: Δημόκριτος δ' ὅτι μὲν ἐκ τῆς ἀναπνοῆς συμβαίνει τι τοῖς ἀναπνεύουσι λέγει, φάσκων κωλύειν ἐκθλίβεσθαι τὴν ψυχὴν· οὐ μέντοι ὡς τούτου γ' ἔνεκα ποιήσασαν τοῦτο τὴν φύσιν οὐθὲν εἴρηκεν· ὅλως γὰρ ὥσπερ καὶ οἱ ἄλλοι φυσικοὶ καὶ οὗτος οὐθὲν ἄπτεται τῆς τοιαύτης αἰτίας. λέγει δ' ὡς ἡ ψυχὴ καὶ τὸ θερμὸν ταῦτόν, τὰ πρῶτα σχήματα τῶν σφαιροειδῶν. συγκρινομένων οὖν αὐτῶν ὑπὸ τοῦ περιέχοντος ἐκθλίβοντος, βοήθειαν γίνεσθαι τὴν ἀναπνοὴν φησιν. ἐν γὰρ τῷ ἀέρι πολὺν ἀριθμὸν εἶναι τῶν τοιούτων ἃ καλεῖ ἐκείνος νοῦν καὶ ψυχὴν· ἀναπνεόντος οὖν καὶ εἰσιόντος τοῦ ἀέρος συνεισιόντα ταῦτα καὶ ἀνείργοντα τὴν θλίψιν κωλύειν τὴν ἐνοῦσαν ἐν τοῖς ζώοις διέναι ψυχὴν. καὶ διὰ τοῦτο ἐν τῷ ἀναπνεῖν καὶ ἐκπνεῖν εἶναι τὸ ζῆν καὶ τὸ ἀποθνήσκειν· ὅταν γὰρ κρατῇ τὸ περιέχον συνθλίβον καὶ μηκέτι θύραθεν εἰσιὸν δυνήται ἀνείργειν, μὴ δυναμένου ἀναπνεῖν, τότε συμβαίνει τὸν θάνατον τοῖς ζώοις· εἶναι γὰρ τὸν θάνατον τὴν τῶν τοιούτων σχημάτων ἐκ τοῦ σώματος ἔξοδον ἐκ τῆς τοῦ περιέχοντος ἐκθλίψεως. τὴν δ' αἰτίαν, διὰ τί ποτε πᾶσι μὲν ἀναγκαῖον ἀποθανεῖν, οὐ μέντοι ὅτε ἔτυχεν, ἀλλὰ κατὰ φύσιν μὲν γήραι, βίαι δὲ παρὰ φύσιν, οὐθὲν δεδήλωκεν. “Democritus says that breathing has the effect of

believed that the material atoms of the body and especially the soul or mind that make up the human organism are renewed through the process of breathing<sup>54</sup> through the respiratory passages of the nose or mouth, but possibly also through the pores of the skin. As long as a person is young, these pores are open and the atoms are renewed smoothly, but as a person ages, the pores, in combination with the pressure exerted by the external air<sup>55</sup>, close and there is an imbalance in the atoms that are lost and those that enter through breathing, with the result that the human organism gradually declines and ultimately death occurs as a condition of non-renewal of the internal atoms by the influx of atoms from the external world. This trick with the smell is perhaps based on this biological theory with the aim of proving that the atoms that come out of the food through the steam may also contain nutrients, as they enter through the respiratory system or the pores of the skin into the human being. In this paradoxical way, Democritus managed to prove that his theory of breathing is valid, because he managed to

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preventing the soul from being squeezed out, but he does not say that nature acts for that purpose; in general, he, like the other natural scientists, makes no use of that cause. He says that the soul and the hot are identical, consisting of spherical atoms, and when these are separated out by the squeezing of the surroundings, help comes from breathing. For in the air there are a great number of atoms of that kind, which he calls mind and soul; when one breathes in these come in along with the air and, by resisting the pressure, prevent the soul which is in the animal from slipping out. That is why life and death depend on breathing in and out. For when the pressure of the surroundings gets the upper hand and there is no further external supply to resist it, i.e., when the animal cannot breathe in, then death occurs; for death is the loss of those atoms from the body through the pressure of the surroundings. But he gave no explanation of the reason why everything must die, not in a chance fashion, but naturally of old age, or by violence contrary to nature". Taylor C. C. W. 1999. *The Atomists Leucippus and Democritus: fragments: a text and translation with a commentary*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, p. 104; Arist. *De Anima*, 403b25-404a16; *De Partibus Animalium*, 652b8-15; Philoponus, *Commentary on the De Anima*, 68.20-69.5.

<sup>54</sup> Augustin M., Pellò C., "Life and Lifeforms in Early Greek Atomism", *Apeiron* 55: 4, 2022, pp. 601-625.

<sup>55</sup> Peixoto M. C. D., "Life, Birth and Death in Democritus. Atomistic Reflections Between Physics and Ethics", *Peitho / Examina Antiqua* 1: 8, 2017, pp. 141-153.

prolong his life with the smell of food, which apparently brought atoms into him from outside. Women, therefore, are also present in Democritus' last moments as the impetus for this strange experimental incident. The philosopher's relationship with women is special and multifaceted until its remarkable end.

## Conclusions

1. From the discussion of the issue so far, it emerges that the image of woman in Democritus has two aspects. First, at a superficial glance, Democritus seems to adopt the view of his time and to place the woman within the home as a being destined for the birth of children and their upbringing. The woman should not talk much and, moreover, should not question the dominance of the man for any reason. Also, the woman should remain in the background, far from the field of development of socio-political life and particularly from political offices. Furthermore, the woman is surrounded by a veil of ethical degradation and a tendency towards erotic pleasure, which is the greatest cause of disorientation from the path of virtue and wisdom. Second, with a more thorough reading, this first impression seems to be shaken. The texts demonstrate to us that the term woman takes on a symbolic content, related to erotic pleasure in general. Democritus personifies in woman the dominance of passions over rationality, something that disrupts the smooth movement of the soul's atoms and intellectual function. Therefore, the meaning of most passages is not literal, but symbolic, as they represent the rational battle of the philosopher, the natural scientist or more generally the virtuous man or politician against the humblest passions, which torpedo their most important undertaking.

2. This observation is reinforced by the Democritean view of virtue and happiness. Democritus nowhere excludes woman from the direction of happiness. Woman is a human being who can reach aretaic integration through rational choices that will create a proper order in the movement of the atoms of the soul. Woman's rational ability allows her to be virtuous and

happy, because human value is determined by human choices and not by human gender. Since a woman participates in reason and her soul can move harmoniously, she is no different from a man in the perspective of happiness. Discerning the right measure and choosing long-term and more beneficial intellectual pleasures over short-term corporal ones can make a woman integrated according to the order of nature and happy according to the rightness of virtue.

3. Also, the participation of women in the process of virtue paves the way for their equal participation in politics and specifically in the governance of the state. Democritus says that only those who have mastered their pleasures with rationality can rightfully claim political governance, only the virtuous or the wise have a share in power, while the wicked and the unwise must be in a position of submission, since they are the prey of their humble passions and their decisions are wrong. If a woman can be wise or virtuous, she clearly must be placed in a position of political governance vis-à-vis men who are unwise and non-virtuous. Democritus' eudaimonistic<sup>56</sup> perspective on virtue, which does not exclude women from happiness, validates her inclusion in politics. Also, this view does not exclude women from education<sup>57</sup>. Democritus, when referring to the education of young people, does not speak specifically about boys, but about children in general. Children, whether male or female, must be taught self-respect and mutual respect (DK68B179: αἰδώς) through the persuasion of laws or the imitation<sup>58</sup> of virtuous acts, so that they can

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<sup>56</sup> Annas J., 'Democritus and Eudaimonism' in V. Caston and D. Graham (eds.), *Presocratic Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Alexander Mourelatos*, London: Ashgate, 2002, pp. 169–182; Johnson M., 'The Ethical Maxims of Democritus of Abdera' in Wolfsdorf D., (ed.) *Early Greek Ethics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020, pp. 211–242, at pp. 232–238.

<sup>57</sup> Lenz F., 'ΕΘΟΣ ΔΕΥΤΕΡΗ ΦΥΣΙΣ: A New Fragment of Democritus?' *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, 73, 1942, pp. 214–231; Tortora G., 'Φύσις and διδασχὴ in Democritus ethical conception' in Benakis L. (ed.) *Proceedings of the 1st International Congress on Democritus*, Xanthi, 1984, pp. 387–397

<sup>58</sup> DK68B39: ἀγαθὸν ἢ εἶναι χρεῶν ἢ μιμεῖσθαι. "One must either be virtuous or imitate a virtuous man"; B53; B79; B154; B184; B194; B208; B302.32; Cf. Luria S., *Democritus*, Nauka publishers: Leningrad, 1970,

become part of the political organization and subsequently develop any political activity.

4. Is Democritus, after all, misogynist or phallocrat? One could easily accuse Democritus of misogyny by adopting a superficial reading of his positions. However, if we deepen our analysis, especially under the development of his philosophical system, we will find that this accusation is frivolous to unfounded. Democritus is not only not an opponent of women, but he is a pioneer and radical thinker who includes women in every realization of his philosophical proposals. Women are treated equally with men as wise, virtuous or political humans and receive an equal share in virtue, happiness and political governance or in other words in human individual and political fulfillment. Democritus stands against the conventional views of his time that placed women in the background of socio-political life and limited the horizons of their happiness, making them a living tool of male pursuits. The presentation of the Democritean positions scientifically and philosophically negates this marginalization and includes women equally in every aspect of integrated human life.

5. Any opposition of Democritus to female nature occurs either on a symbolic or personal level. Woman either symbolizes the intense erotic pleasure, which reason combats within human nature, or symbolizes family life, which constitutes an obstacle to the fulfillment of the ideal of wisdom and science. If we put a woman in the position of the wise or virtuous person, the same rejection would apply on her part to man as a source of pleasure or disorientation from the philosophical life. Undoubtedly, Democritus had his own personal experiences with women either at the level of erotic disappointment or at the level of voluptuous attraction towards them. The anecdotal reports about his bitterness or his attempt at self-blinding show that there was an intense contact with the female sex, which marked him indelibly. However, Democritus' philosophical suggestions are not drawn into these personal feelings, but propose the equal valuation of both sexes in terms of achieving

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comment 562,1; Voros F., 'Democritus' Educational Thought', *Paedagogica Historica*, 15, 2006, pp. 457-470.

material order in the movement of the atoms of the soul and therefore in the achievement of virtue and happiness.

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## *Philosophical Notes*





## The Witches of the Reich: The Dimension of Female Mysticism in Nazi Ideology

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### Abstract

The article investigates the rich, but also ambivalent phenomenon of female mysticism within the context of the Nazi ideology. The Third Reich showed two positions towards women who were interested in the sector or the spiritual area. On the one hand, some forms of mysticism were incorporated into the nationalist and racial narrative of the regime; on the other hand, women who were linked to independent spiritual movements were often looked at with a good deal of skepticism, and at times, persecuted. Of particular interest is the position of Heinrich Himmler, who wanted to ‘renew’ the medieval witch-hunt as proof of a ‘lost’ Germanic tradition, while the regime prohibited other activities like astrology and theosophy. From a philosophical point of view, the article aims to explain how these policies are a manifestation of a larger fear of the Nazi regime towards independent female spirituality and its possibilities of knowledge, freedom, and power.

**Keywords:** *Mysticism, National Socialism, Occultism, Philosophy, Gender, Ideology, Suppression, Esotericism*

## Introduction

Mysticism was the most controversial part of Nazi ideology, for it came to be combined with both propaganda and Third Reich cultural conditioning. Of all its parts, that between mysticism and feminine spirituality is particularly melodramatic, for at some times the Nazi rhetoric included and accommodated it and at others sought to suppress it actively. Here, the image of the "witch" occupied a singular position both in Nazi ideology and in philosophical constructs of gender and spirituality. The witch existed as a doubly symbolic figure: insofar as she represented ancient Germanic spirituality destroyed by Nazi ideology, she was something lost to be found again; as a force beyond control and malevolent, however, she needed to be held down.

SS leader Heinrich Himmler took an interest in medieval persecutions of witches and interpreted them as evidence for a mass annihilation of the "true" German spiritual masters by Christianity and Aryan enemies of the race. According to this, the Nazi regime had special archives of information on the persecutions of witches, viewing them as the victims of some historical conspiracy directed against the German people. At the same time, however, the Nazi apparatus imposed strict control over mystical and occult practice and held that independent female spirituality was incompatible with the regime's need for ideological discipline. The female questing for esoteric knowledge and wielding occult power was perceived as a potentially dangerous figure, because she overstepped the boundaries of her function as guardian of racial purity and mother. Thus, Nazism found itself in a contradictory position: while it attempted to revive some sort of prehistoric Germanic spiritual heritage, it attempted to repress all forms of female mystical pursuits not within its domain.

### The Role of Mysticism in Nazi Ideology

The Nazism ideology synthesized a range of mystical and occult elements, most of which drew on German esoteric traditions, Theosophy, Ariosophy, and Pan-Germanism. There was a "primordial" German religiosity revived in the Third Reich, the ideological foundation on which it established its racially purified concept of identity. Racial identity, then, as the Nazi regime fantasized it, was not only a biological or anthropological construction, but also one that was elevated to the spiritual realm and was required in order for the "true" German people to be reborn. In keeping with this logic, ancient German spirituality was interpreted as a higher, pre-Christian wisdom corrupted by foreign contamination.<sup>1</sup>

The reassertion of this spirituality was necessary to the re-establishment of a lost "balance" and national consciousness, as racial purity must be coupled with the re-establishment of a "pure" form of thought and belief.<sup>2</sup>

A revival of this spirituality was held to be essential to the restoration of a lost "balance" and a consolidation of national consciousness, insofar as racial purity had to be matched by the recovery of a "pure" mode of thinking and believing. Its focal point was the connection to the ancient pagan traditions of the Germanic and Scandinavian peoples, recorded in the Eddas, the Sagas, and the prehistoric ritual symbols of the ancestors of the Aryan peoples. This appeal to the beginnings was not merely a cultural enterprise but a search for spiritual rebirth, in which old mythological myths and rituals were interpreted as power codes, organically linked with the German "soul." Particular emphasis was placed on concepts of destiny (Wyrd), honor (Ehre), ancestor worship (Ahnenkult), and belief in the metaphysical space of blood (Blutmystik), which was

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<sup>1</sup> Goodrick-Clarke, N. *The Occult Roots of Nazism: Secret Aryan Cults and Their Influence on Nazi Ideology*. New York 1993: NUY Press

<sup>2</sup> Kurlander, E. *Hitler's Monsters: A Supernatural History of the Third Reich*. New Haven 2017: Yale University Press.

perceived as the carrier of genetic along with spiritual heritage.<sup>3</sup>

The return to the ancient symbols was an essential element of this spirituality, since it was the retrieval of an obtuse wisdom inherent in the magical nature of writing and language. The runic tradition, through its inscribed inscriptions and ritual uses, was a kind of primordial veritas capable of calling upon the cosmic powers and re-opening communication with the lost principles of the Aryo-Germanic heritage. Some of the runes were believed to be bearers of power and energy, and their usage spread from war ceremonies to daily activities that sought to reinforce "racial memory."<sup>4</sup>

Parallel with this, the religiosity of ancient Germans was conceived as having an intimate relation to nature and the cycles of nature. That earth was conceived as a sacred material and vehicle of racial consciousness served to reemphasize the close link between the race and the soil, the cycles of the year, and nature's materials. Sacred hills, forests, and rivers were infused with metaphysical significance as loci of initiation and rebirth within. It also explained the obsession with bringing back rituals at the solstices, harvest festivals, and festivals marking the change of season as symbolic ceremonies of rebirth of the country.<sup>5</sup>

This prehistoric spirituality was not static, nor was it confined to religious ceremonies. Instead, it was conceived of as an ongoing connection that had to be reestablished not just through ceremonies and symbols, but also through the cultivation of an interior spiritual discipline. The most ideal representation of such revival was the individual who was able to attune himself to the ancient teachings of power, dignity, and purity of faith, freeing themselves of all outside influence which can corrupt their genuine attunement with the destiny of the race. The women affiliated with the above were greeted with

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<sup>3</sup> Hakl, H. T. *Unknown Sources: National Socialism and the Occult*. London 2001: Holmes Pub Group Llc

<sup>4</sup> Flowers, S. E. *The Northern Dawn: A History of the Reawakening of the Germanic Spirit*. Zurich, 2017: Arcana Europa Media LLC

<sup>5</sup> Pennick, N. *Runic Lore and Legend: Wyrdstaves of Old Northumbria*. London 2019: Destiny Books



ambivalence. On the other hand, there were women who were regarded as bearers of "ancient knowledge" and identified with the mother goddess and the nationalist renaissance of Germanic heritage. They were incorporated into a broader discourse that portrayed them as priestesses of ancestral wisdom, capable of transmitting the spiritual heritage of the German nation. These women were described as having an inner connection with natural and metaphysical powers and, therefore, to act as intermediaries between ancestors and the living world. Here, the female figure assumed the position of divine protector of the land and the people, paralleling the matriarchal cults of ancient Germanic societies and emphasizing the woman's role as the source of life and spiritual continuity.<sup>6</sup>

This was a pre-Christian mythology and myth origin of the relationship, in which the woman's presence was not just passive but active as the owner of mystical and cosmic forces. The woman's identification with nature and the cycles of life were given some importance, as they were said to be the cause of racial as well as spiritual equilibrium. In this construct, the mother goddess in the form of Frigg, Freyja, or the more general notion of feminine deity was attributed as a symbol of ancient order, fertility, and wisdom pertaining to the ancestral legacy of the German people. However, the cult image of woman as goddess did not necessarily correspond with an improvement in her political or social status. On the other hand, whereas Nazi ideology for a time absorbed some of the features of female mysticism, it also required strict separation between what could be allowed to women in their sphere and independent exercises of religiousness on their own part. The woman could be worshiped as guardian of life and tradition, but her intimate participation in occult or mystic practice beyond the reach of the regime was unthinkable.<sup>7</sup>

There were, of course, women who practiced occult or theosophical belief not included in the official state orthodoxy and towards which they were met with suspicion or even hostility.

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<sup>6</sup> Rosenberg, A. *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts*. München 1930: Hohenstein-Verlag

<sup>7</sup> Koonz, Claudia. *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family and Nazi Politics*. New York 1987: St. Martin's Press.



Their spiritual practices, far from being recognized as a means of upholding the German spiritual tradition, were perceived as threatening the ideological discipline the Nazi regime sought to exercise. Women who indulged in spiritualism, astrology, mediumship, or theosophy were typically stigmatized and persecuted because these forms of spirituality were seen as corrupting influences or as indicators of foreign influence.<sup>8</sup>

This paradox represents the inner tension of the Nazi reaction to women's mysticism: it valued its significance as a link with the "lost" ancestral heritage on the one hand, yet constrained women's spiritual autonomy on the other hand, fearing independent practice or reading that would disrupt the regime's narrowly circumscribed ideological schema. So the woman was only received as a bearer of a mysticism that was beneficial to the state narrative and supported nationalist and racial identity but not as an autonomous initiate or keeper of an autonomous esoteric tradition.<sup>9</sup>

On the contrary, the Christian and rationalistic dogma of the Nazi state perceived mystical activities as a threat to the new "scientific" and militarized order since they brought in an uncontrollable, irrational factor which was able to destroy strict discipline and the operability of the state apparatus. While Nazi ideology drew selectively from mysticism, it was a technocratic and militaristic ideology in which science and biology were to be employed for the establishment and preservation of racial purity by the state. Any form of independent spiritual quest that would divert the individual from this rigorously defined ideology was seen as a disruptive element, likely to destabilize the nation.<sup>10</sup>

Christian rhetoric, specifically the more traditional types, had a symbiotic but competitive relationship with the Nazi state. The Nazi state liked Christianity's role to morally discipline the masses along with maintaining a strict social order

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<sup>8</sup> Treitel, C. *A Science for the Soul: Occultism and the Genesis of the German Modern*. Baltimore 2004: Johns Hopkins University Press.

<sup>9</sup> Sherrat Y. Hitler's Philosophers. New Haven 2013: Yale University Press.

<sup>10</sup> Rosenberg, A. *The Myth of the Twentieth Century*. Munich 2011: Hohenstein-Verlag.

by hierarchy and obedience to authority. However, there were certain Christian values, in specific ones that promoted universal brotherhood, charity, and individual morality, which stood against the absolute racial and statist logic of Nazism. The outcome was the embrace of a secularized form of Christianity that was discipline-oriented and focused on national unity, and diluted those aspects that had the potential to resist the ideology of the state.<sup>11</sup>

At the same time, the rationalist Nazi state ideology expressed in its biopolitics and racial hygiene policies demanded exclusion of any "irrational" practice that could not be incorporated in the official state epistemology. Idealization of science as a means of society governing and racial heritage rendered mystical practices unacceptable because they could neither be confirmed nor controlled according to Nazi criteria of scientific legitimacy. Thus, such activities as divination, astrology, occultism, and forms of spiritual direction were not only seen as useless but also harmful, because they may encourage a search within for the spirit beyond the restrictions imposed by the regime. Besides, the Nazi regime was based on an unyielding materialist and functionalist philosophy in terms of human resources. Society existed as a machine in which each individual was expected to serve specific functions either military or industrial. According to such an ideology, anything religious that could not be converted into state policy especially those encouraging a single person or inner propensity towards life was seen as unnecessary or even devastating. Mystical traditions, particularly those with an esoteric bent, placed the individual in dialogue with metaphysical forces outside the state's control, potentially exercising free will and religious autonomy something the Nazi state constantly tried to stamp out.<sup>12</sup>

The fear of the potential risk that these activities posed led to campaigns of repression against spiritualists, occultists, and astrologers, especially during political and military crises. These activities were most often associated with "foreign"

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<sup>11</sup> Kater, M. H. *The Nazi Party: A Social Profile of Members and Leaders, 1919-1945*. Cambridge 1983: Harvard University Press.

<sup>12</sup> Proctor, R. N. *Racial Hygiene: Medicine under the Nazis*. Cambridge, MA 1988: Harvard University Press.

influences such as Judaism, international Freemasonry, or Bolshevism used as a cover for marginalization and repression. Thus, while the Nazi regime took some of the mystical elements selectively into its own thought, its overall stance toward independent mysticism was hostile because it was regarded as a threat to the discipline and order required by the new "scientific" and militarized order.<sup>13</sup>

### **The 'Witches' of the Third Reich**

The "witch" figure had a special place in Nazi imagination. Top Nazi SS leader Heinrich Himmler was particularly drawn to the witch persecution of medieval women and interpreted it as a Catholic Church conspiracy against "ancient German traditions." Himmler therefore established a special research institute dedicated to the collection of records of witch trials all over Germany, viewing the women who were persecuted as victims of a "Judeo-Christian" repression of ancient Germanic religiosity. Himmler believed that the murder of witches by the Catholic Church was just one stage in a broader movement of stripping the German people of their ancient tradition and imposing upon them a foreign, monotheistic religion whose interests were adverse to the "true" German spiritual tradition. For this reason, he tasked SS researchers and historians with the job of systematic documentation on medieval witch trials, establishing the Hexen-Sonderkommando a special committee tasked with mapping cases of female witch accusations and linking these cases to the persecution of German racial and spiritual traditions.<sup>14</sup>

This research study was based on witch trial records from across Germany and other regions of Europe, attempting to establish that the women accused and executed as witches were not evil occultists, but guardians of an ancient Germanic

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<sup>13</sup> Weindling, P. *Health, Race and German Politics between National Unification and Nazism, 1870-1945*. Cambridge 1989: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>14</sup> Harrington, J. F., "Himmler's Witch Hunt", *History Today*, vol. 69, no. 9, 2019, pp. 10-17.

knowledge that was antithetical to "Judeo-Christian" values. Himmler believed most of these women were members of a spiritual elite, possessing knowledge of nature, healing, magic, and the inner principles of the world and that their extermination signified the loss of a valuable treasure of knowledge for the German people.<sup>15</sup>

Simultaneously, Himmler also sought to merge the cult of the "witch" into the ideational structure of the SS and provided her a new role: that of being a priestess of restored Germanic religiosity. In this regard, certain women from Nazi esoteric organizations or the SS ritual practice were viewed as spiritual heirs of the medieval witches and were integrated into ceremonies with the intention of restoring the ancient Germanic mystical tradition. Certain of these rituals involved the recreation of old pagan traditions, in which the woman played the role of an intermediary between human and natural forces.<sup>16</sup>

The "witch" of Nazi occultism was not only symbolically charged, but was drawn into a kind of racial revisionism that claimed the Catholic Church and the Inquisition had engaged in the systematic massacre of women of German descent as part of an ancient conspiracy to stifle German religious liberty. This perception enabled the propaganda of continuous historical persecution of Germans by foreign powers and contributed to the story of national re-emergence led by the Nazi leadership.<sup>17</sup>

Himmler, inspired by the dream of reviving a "pure" Germanic past, wanted to recast the witch from an image of victimized persecution to that of resistance and racial survival. In SS records, the "witch" was depicted as a woman possessing occult wisdom, who had access to an archaic lore of life and nature, and as a victim of foreign influences which had

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<sup>15</sup> Badger, W., & Purkiss, D., "English Witches and SS Academics: Evaluating Sources for the English Witch Trials in Himmler's Hexenkartothek", *Preternature: Critical and Historical Studies on the Preternatural*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2017, pp. 125-157.

<sup>16</sup> Weitzel, F., *Die Gestaltung der Feste im Jahres- und Lebenslauf in der SS-Familie*. Wuppertal, 1989.

<sup>17</sup> Monter, W., "The Historiography of European Witchcraft: Progress and Prospects", *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 2, no. 4, 1972, pp. 435-451.

predominated medieval Europe. This revisionism was only one aspect of Nazism's broader effort to construct a counter-narrative of history that would be appropriate to its racial and ideological agenda. But at the same time, there were women who became members of the Nazi occult movement, accepting or even developing mystical and esoteric concepts in line with Nazi ideology. One of the best known was Savitri Devi (Maximine Portaz), a philosopher who advanced a belief that linked Nazism with Hinduism, viewing Hitler as a manifestation of the divine Vishnu and advocating a divine racial hierarchy. Her thinking was informed by Indian mysticism and doctrines of karma and reincarnation. Savitri Devi went to India, where she got involved with nationalist movements and wrote several books, the most visible among them being *The Lightning and the Sun*, in which she foresaw the re-establishment of the Aryan racial regime on the strength of an apocalyptic war which would restore nature's order to things. The philosophy of Savitri Devi was based on her conviction that the world is governed by a strict racial and spiritual law whereby the higher races have a divine mission to conquer and lead the rest of mankind. Influenced by Hindu notions of karma, she believed the Aryan people had fallen into decay due to racial mixture and moral degeneracy, and that they would require a purifying destruction if they were to regain "primordial purity." There, she declared that history works through three types of men: the men of lightning (vehicles of divine order and warlike superiority), the men of the sun (keepers of spiritual and racial purity), and the men of darkness, bringers of corruption, decay, and destruction of higher values.<sup>18</sup>

Her ideology was founded upon the belief that Adolf Hitler was a divine incarnation who had come to the world to lead the Aryans in the restoration of the natural order. She likened Hitler to the god Vishnu, to his final incarnation, Kalki, who, in Hindu mythology, at the end of each cosmic cycle, appears to destroy the degenerate world and prepare the way for a new golden age. She believed that the Second World War had been a necessary but incomplete attempt at this cosmic rebirth, and

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<sup>18</sup> Devi, S., *The Lightning and the Sun*. 1958.

that the struggle for the rebirth of the Aryan race was yet to be.<sup>19</sup>

After the defeat of Nazi Germany, Savitri Devi did not abandon her beliefs but rather dedicated herself to the guarding and spreading of Nazi mysticism, with a focus on the spiritual vision of National Socialism. She traveled all over Europe and the Middle East, where she encountered pro-Nazi groups and Hitler fans. In her post-war paintings, such as *Pilgrimage*, she describes going to sites associated with Hitler's life and activities and giving them a spiritual aura. She believed that Hitler's presence had left energetic imprints on these sites, and that devout Nazi believers might derive energy from going there.

In the 1950s, Savitri Devi deepened her associations with neo-Nazi movements and emerged as one of the first postwar esoteric Nazism figures. She collaborated with Otto Skorzeny and Hans-Ulrich Rudel, both escaped SS officers who fled to Latin America and were involved in efforts to restore the Nazi movement. She also associated closely with Colin Jordan and John Tyndall, leaders of British nationalism who attempted to resuscitate National Socialism in Europe.<sup>20</sup> Although deeply rooted in Nazi racial ideology, Savitri Devi's philosophy included strong mystical elements that set her apart from other postwar Nazis. Rather than political action in isolation, Devi preached an internal Nazism, for racial faith and spiritual devotion that was just as important as political action on the exterior. Towards this, she stressed education of the future generation especially because she was convinced that the revival of Nazism could not be achieved through war conquest by means but through a profound cultural and spiritual awakening.<sup>21</sup>

Devi believed that the Aryan race needed to be restored to the original Indo-European tradition, lost during Christianization and through the prevalence of the "degenerate" elements

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<sup>19</sup> Goodrick-Clarke, N., *Black Sun: Aryan Cults, Esoteric Nazism, and the Politics of Identity*. New York 2002: New York University Press.

<sup>20</sup> Devi, S. & Fowler, R. G., *Forever and Ever: Devotional Poems*. Atlanta 2012: The Savitri Devi Archive.

<sup>21</sup> Evola, J., *Revolt Against the Modern World*. Rochester 1995: Inner Traditions.

of Western culture. In her opinion, the development of a new generation of demigods men and women who would achieve the ideal of the *Übermensch* was the only means through which the Aryan race could be preserved. Her vision of racial and spiritual purification was imbued with strong ascetic and isolating connotations, since she believed that unadulterated National Socialists should live as monastic-warriors, renouncing the moral precepts of modern society and the degradation of mass culture.<sup>22</sup>

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Other than Savitri Devi, some other prominent women who were engaged in Nazi mysticism include Gudrun Himmler, who was the daughter of Heinrich Himmler. Gudrun was brought up under the ideological environment of occult Nazism and remained dedicated to the ideology of Nazi mysticism through and after the fall of the regime. Her father, a passionate proponent of the revival of a pagan, racial religion, raised her on Aryan supremacist doctrine and mystical exercises tailored to the inner SS. Gudrun was active in *Stille Hilfe*, an organization that gave aid to fleeing Nazis after World War II,

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<sup>22</sup> Yockey, F. P., *Imperium: The Philosophy of History and Politics*. London 1948: The Dominion Press. Cf. Vavouras E. "Machiavelli's Ethics on Expansion and Empire", *Conatus* 2023, 8, pp. 703-723. <https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.35110>; Cf. Janssen J., "Ethics as a Means to Power", *Dia-noesis: A Journal of Philosophy*, 15, 2024, pp. 59-80, <https://doi.org/10.12681/dia.38166>

<sup>23</sup> Devi, S., *The Impeachment of Man*. Atlanta 2008: Noontide Press

and played a key role in perpetuating the occult and ideological dimensions of Nazism during the postwar period.<sup>24</sup>

Gudrun Himmler was not only an eye-witness to Nazi occultism during the postwar era but a prominent member of the effort to preserve and rebuild the ideological and esoteric elements of Nazi mysticism. Gudrun grew up within an environment where racial purity and spiritual renewal were accepted as fundamental principles, and accordingly, developed early on a fanatical love for her father and for the "mission" of the Third Reich. *Stille Hilfe* ("Silent Help") was the main means through which Gudrun Himmler remained in service to Nazi ideology. The group was initially formed to help fugitive SS officers and other Nazi leaders who were being pursued as war criminals. Practically, however, it was also a kernel for the preservation of the esoteric elements of Nazi ideology because many of those protected by the organization were individuals directly associated with occultism and the racial-mystical teachings of Nazism. *Stille Hilfe* ("Silent Help") was the main means through which Gudrun Himmler remained in service to Nazi ideology. The group was initially formed to help fugitive SS officers and other Nazi leaders who were being pursued as war criminals. Practically, however, it was also a kernel for the preservation of the esoteric elements of Nazi ideology because many of those protected by the organization were individuals directly associated with occultism and the racial-mystical teachings of Nazism.<sup>25</sup>

Gudrun herself never doubted that her father and his vision of the resurrection of the Aryan race were an unfinished mission. It is because of this that she sought to create a cultural continuity of Nazi mysticism through the dissemination of the racial doctrines to which she was subjected as a child. She participated in secret meetings of former Nazis after the war, where

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<sup>24</sup> Schröm, O., & Röpke, A. *Stille Hilfe für braune Kameraden: Das geheime Netzwerk der Alt- und Neonazis*. Berlin 2002: Ch. Links Verlag.

<sup>25</sup> Lebert, N., & Lebert, S., *My Father's Keeper: Children of Nazi Leaders—An Intimate History of Damage and Denial* 2001 Boston: Little, Brown and Company.



ritual elements of occult Nazism were reenacted in a bid to preserve the lost legacy of the Reich.<sup>26</sup>

Apart from her clandestine activities, Gudrun also engaged in spreading the ideology through official channels of propaganda. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, she began to pen pieces and for neo-Nazi and the revival of Himmler's occult ideology-related publications. She reinstated in her work the myth that the SS was not just a military formation instead, an "order of initiates," tasked with the defense of Aryan wisdom. Her obsession with salvaging her father's occult activities encouraged her to collaborate with many circles of neo-Nazi esotericists, particularly in Germany and Austria. By virtue of these affiliations, she ensured that the ideas that had been passed to her would not die but, instead, pass on to the next generation of Nazi esotericism followers. She personally stayed in contact with former SS personnel who had fled to Latin America and preferred an international network of Nazi and occultist groups to be formed.<sup>27</sup>

Over the years, Gudrun Himmler gained a reputation among neo-Nazi groups as the "daughter of the Order" a figure of almost sacred status, the final living connection to the Nazi occult inner circle. Despite the transformation of postwar German society and the prosecution of right-wing extremist groups, she managed to maintain influence, particularly through the continued activities of Stille Hilfe, which provided support to former SS members and funded legal defenses for war criminals arrested decades after World War II.<sup>28</sup>

Until the final years of her life, Gudrun Himmler was a stubborn supporter of her father's ideology. Even when the operations of Stille Hilfe began to be discovered by German authorities and were deemed illegal, she insisted she was simply defending "innocent men" who had served Germany. She never

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<sup>26</sup> Hauck, S. A., *Hyperaktive Kinder zur Stille führen mit Hilfe musiktherapeutischer Techniken: Eine empirische Studie in der Grundschule*. Norderstedt 2007: Books on Demand.

<sup>27</sup> Gerosa, K., *Das karge Leben: Vom harten Los der Bergbauern in Südtirol: Fünfundzwanzig Jahre Stille Hilfe für Südtirol e.V.* (Rosenheimer Raritäten). Rosenheim 1995: Rosenheimer Verlagshaus.

<sup>28</sup> Levenda, P., *Unholy Alliance: A History of Nazi Involvement with the Occult* (New and Expanded Edition). New York 2002: Continuum.

expressed regret over her beliefs and, until her death, was a believer in the racial-mystical ideology of the SS.<sup>29</sup>

Another female figure that was involved in Nazi occultism was Maria Orsic, and she led the Vril Gesellschaft. From some available records and conjecture, the Vril Society had a relation to the Thule Gesellschaft and was part of research that tried to find means of contacting supernatural or alien life, as well as utilizing occult forces for designing Nazi technology. Maria Orsic is said to have had a strong impact in certain SS circles, but the details about her activities are still controversial, with some regarding the stories about her as postwar occult mythologies.<sup>30</sup>

The contradictory nature of accounts on Maria Orsic presents it difficult to fully establish her role in the Nazi occult world. According to some reports, at her direction, the Vril Gesellschaft developed an esoteric code based on the unification of the ancient Germanic and Eastern mystic traditions to awaken a supranormal power associated with the Aryan race. They believe that Orsic was well aware of ancient wisdom and occult practices that might either initiate a higher energy known as Vril, believed by her sect followers to be an essential force likely to change the world.<sup>31</sup>

These theories assert that Orsic was well versed in ancient knowledge and magical practices that were able to evoke a higher energy known as Vril, something that the members of her cult believed to be one of the key forces that could re-create the world. These allegations are not founded on formal documents, but on a number of unauthenticated reports that Orsic was in constant contact with top SS officials intrigued by the occult possibilities of the Vril Gesellschaft. Some of these reports say that the group had tested telepathic communication experiments with a view to communicating with extraterrestrial or supernatural entities which could provide them with

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<sup>29</sup> Ryback, T. W., *Takeover: Hitler's Final Rise to Power*. New York 2022: Basic Books.

<sup>30</sup> De Lafayette, M., *Maria Orsic, Nikola Tesla, Their Extraterrestrial Messages, Occult UFOs*. New York 2011: Times Square Press.

<sup>31</sup> De Lafayette, M., *Maria Orsic, the Woman Who Originated and Created Earth's First UFOs. Vol. 2*. New York 2013: Times Square Press.

technology for the purpose of creating advanced weaponry systems.<sup>32</sup>

They claim that Orsic and the Vril Gesellschaft also had access to a system of sacred symbols and ancient texts through which they deciphered communications transmitted from a realm greater than earth. These messages were said to include blueprints for the building of aircraft based on anti-gravity principles designs that, according to some theories, were the source of the so-called "Nazi UFOs," a postwar urban myth claiming that Nazi Germany developed advanced flying machines using extraterrestrial or supernatural technology. Although no historical accounts verify these speculations, Maria Orsic is regarded by Nazi occult sympathizers as the central figure in the effort to discover "ancient forces" that might be utilized in the establishment of a new Aryan empire. Her mythology depicts her as a charismatic, almost otherworldly woman, believed to know secret things and to have been initiated into mystery rituals, where participants sought to access the power of the universe through meditation, symbolic patterns, and energetic codes.<sup>33</sup>

One of the most widely circulated rumors about Orsic is that she disappeared under mysterious circumstances shortly before the fall of the Third Reich. There are some theories that the Vril Gesellschaft disbanded in 1945, as the war was already being lost for Nazi Germany, and that Orsic herself left Berlin under unknown circumstances. Later rumors placed her in secret Nazi facilities in South America, with some speculating that she escaped to an underground facility in Antarctica another theory closely associated with postwar occult mythology. Even though there is no concrete evidence of her doings, the myth of Orsic continues to be a subject of research and myth-making among those interested in Nazi occultism. These Vril stories have also been tied up in general conspiracy narratives about hidden technologies, secret esoteric knowledge, and continuations of Nazi occult ideologies post-World War II. Orsic

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<sup>32</sup> Sepehr, R., *Occult Secrets of Vril: Goddess Energy and the Human Potential*. Los Angeles 2019: Atlantean Gardens.

<sup>33</sup> De Lafayette, M., *Extraterrestrials Messages to Maria Orsic in Ana'kh Aldebaran Script to Build the Vril*. New York 2013: Times Square Press.

has alternately been presented as some mystical individual restoring former Aryan capabilities, or mythologized person invented in an effort to serve post-war continuity with occult Nazism.<sup>34</sup>

Additionally, there were women who participated in mystical rituals conducted by the inner circle of the SS, designed to reinforce racial cohesion and promote an inner discipline inspired by ancient Germanic and Indo-European traditions. These women were either the wives of high-ranking SS officers or members of circles that supported the revival of pre-Christian German spirituality. In some cases, they assumed the role of priestesses in ceremonies connected to the SS solstice celebrations an attempt to link Nazi ideology to the pagan roots of Germany.<sup>35</sup>

The involvement of women in Nazi occultism proves to be a multi-faceted dynamic in which some engaged actively in seeking metaphysical and mystical explanations justifying the Nazi racial order and others used these ideas to underpin postwar Nazi mythologies. The interconnectedness of Nazi mysticism with the search for a higher order and its upkeep even after the war proves that these women were involved in the maintenance of the occult dimension of the Nazi vision.<sup>36</sup>

### **Philosophical Aspects of Female Mysticism and Nazi Gender Ideology**

Nazi ideology was founded on a patriarchal concept of gender, in which the woman's solitary paramount function was mother and bearer of racial procreation. Any activity outside this function highly independent spiritual activity was problematic since it held the possibility of deviance from the ideologically strictly defined pathway advocated by the Nazi

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<sup>34</sup> Stanley, M., *Maria Orsic: Winged Muse*. New York 2020: Independently Published.

<sup>35</sup> Alabaster, L., *Maria Orsic: The Orsic Project*. New York 2020: Independently Published.

<sup>36</sup> Thor, V., Krone, C., et al., *The Path of Vril: Venusian Secrets of Longevity and Rejuvenation*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2018.

regime. Female spirituality, except when mobilized for racial reproduction or the affirmations of mass National Socialist identity, was in doubt, more frequently associated with liberal or even disintegrating forces. The regime's concern with the biological role of women accompanied a more general rejection of women's autonomy, whether within the sphere of labor or within the sphere of spiritual and cultural expression.<sup>37</sup>

Nazi propaganda constructed a system of domination over the female role by promoting a double image: the "ideal" woman was the mother, loyal wife, dedicated to family and fatherland; meanwhile, any manifestation of female spiritual independence could be labeled as degenerate or subversive. Nazi policy here tightly restricted women's education and access to knowledge and instead reinforced a discussion that equated femininity with the domestic and reproductive sphere.<sup>38</sup>

Nazi biopolitics here drew upon knowing women as racial purifiers, positioning women at the centre of the nationalist discourse. Lebensborn initiatives reinforced this policy further by promoting the production of "racially pure" children and deterring women from any pursuit that was not aimed at bringing this about. At the same time, any religious quest that could not be reconciled with the state-sanctioned National Socialist way was relegated to the sidelines as it was viewed as threatening the homogeneity and discipline of the German nation.<sup>39</sup>

The idealistic conception of femininity as a state servant and racial servant excluded the possibility of independent self-realization outside the duties reserved for women. Individuals desiring an active role in mental existence or independent religious traditions were eyed with distrust since they were considered to be jeopardizing the very foundation of the National Socialist state. Fearing any form of uncontrolled spiritual

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<sup>37</sup> Roland, P., *Nazi Women of the Third Reich: Serving the Swastika*. London 2020: Arcturus Publishing.

<sup>38</sup> Roland, P., *Nazi Women: The Attraction of Evil*. London 2018: Arcturus Publishing.

<sup>39</sup> Wyllie, J., *Nazi Wives: The Women at the Top of Hitler's Germany*. London 2020: St. Martin's Press.

activity, the Nazi government enforced strict control over cultural and intellectual life, removing women from knowledge production sites and confining them to a passive reproductive role in society.<sup>40</sup>

Philosophically, the suppression of women's mysticism can be interpreted as a reaction to women's independent thinking and experience. Mysticism was an area of expression that was beyond the control of male science and male religion. The Nazi effort to control or repress such a practice, then, can be seen as a reflection of the regime's overall repressive machinery against other forms of knowledge and power. Nazi ideology was built on a strictly hierarchical world view, where all forms of knowledge and social function had to be accommodated within the racial and nationalist program. Mysticism and other competing knowledges were a danger to this order because they contained subjective experience and inner spiritual practices that could not be controlled or directed by the state.<sup>41</sup>

Feminine mysticism, in particular, provided women with a means through which they could achieve a form of religious independence outside of their limited place within National Socialist society. In a philosophy where women were predominantly described as racial reproduction carriers and defenders of male dominance, any form of religious endeavor that was not advantageous to these interests was seen as dangerous. Mystical knowledge was often at odds with the Nazi ideal of "correct" scientific and ideological education, as it was typically not transmitted through institutionalized, male-dominated networks, but through personal experience, ritual, and inner insight.<sup>42</sup>

The suppression of women's mysticism not only entailed the direct eradication of independent spiritual movements but also encompassed the destruction of any narrative that portrayed

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<sup>40</sup> Stephenson, J., *Women in Nazi Germany*. New York 2001: Pearson Education.

<sup>41</sup> Eischeid, S. J., Lagelee, E., & al., *Mistress of Life and Death: The Dark Journey of Maria Mandl, Head Overseer of the Women's Camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau*. New York 2023: Independently Published.

<sup>42</sup> Brown, D. P., *The Camp Women: The Female Auxiliaries Who Assisted the SS in Running the Nazi Concentration Camp System*. Atglen 2002: Schiffer Publishing.

women as independent spiritual agents. Women who claimed access to knowledge outside the state-run framework were considered dangerous, as they undermined the dogmatic construction of reality used by the Nazi state. Occult and mystical movements which allowed women to access direct spiritual experience independent of male-controlled institutions were targeted by both state repression and propagandistic mechanisms.<sup>43</sup>

Philosophically, what can be said of the strategy is in terms of epistemological control that is, an attempt by the Nazi state to circumscribe and define allowable types of knowledge. Women's mysticism based on experiential knowledge of the world rather than on the positivist, linear thinking promoted by the regime was a different type of knowledge that was inevitably undisciplined. In National Socialist ideology, all that was known had to be functional in relation to specific goals, primarily racial and social purity. Anything working outside these parameters was considered to be dangerous to the maintenance of ideological discipline.<sup>44</sup>

The control of female spirituality by the banning or prohibiting of other types of knowledge is a part of a broader Nazi state policy to absolutely limit the boundaries of what was permitted in society. The woman, potentially able to access an independent worldview in the context of female mysticism, needed to be returned to the austere National Socialist system, where her only recognized value resided in her racial and biological role. When such reintegration was out of the question, spiritual questioning itself came to be targeted, either by explicit acts of repression or by propagandistic stigmatization of mystical thought as irrational and subversive.<sup>45</sup>

So understood, Nazi policy on female mysticism was more than a question of sexism or authoritarianism, but a question of control of knowledge and control of thought. The

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<sup>43</sup> Hahn Beer, E., & Dworkin, S., *The Nazi Officer's Wife: How One Jewish Woman Survived the Holocaust*. New York 1999: William Morrow.

<sup>44</sup> Anděl, S., *Aufseherin: Women of the Third Reich*. New York 2020: Independently Published.

<sup>45</sup> Harvey, E., *Women and the Nazi East: Agents and Witnesses of Germanization*. New Haven 2003: Yale University Press.

suppression of women's spiritual autonomy and the reduction of femininity to biological reproduction alone were indispensable tools for the preservation of the ideological purity of the regime. Thus, the destruction of female mystical traditions was not merely an attack on women's status, but also a calculated effort to construct a monolithic, state-controlled system of thinking a system where there could be no room for other ways of comprehending the world.<sup>46</sup>

### Conclusion

The study of the intersection between female mysticism and Nazi ideology is that of the more deeply and more complexly problematic enough to involve both the employment of occultism as an ideological construction tool and the suppression of women's religious agency. While the Nazi state selectively drew on mystical elements to be used in its racial and cosmological ideology, it maintained strict control over manifestations of spirituality, particularly when these conflicted with the ideological discipline of the state. When the woman was introduced as a priestess of racial purity or as an intermediary of lost Germanic spirituality, she was tolerated and incorporated into the propagandistic narrative. But when her spiritual journey took on autonomous aspects and was no longer dedicated to National Socialist goals, it was considered perilous and likely to be shunned or repressed.

This paradox is a microcosm of the broader Nazi ideology of knowledge, power, and gender. Nazism's effort to control thought and spirituality was not unique to the female experience—it was part of a broader agenda to construct a monolithic, state-controlled world in which inner life and individual questioning were perceived as dangers. Female mysticism, with its experiential form of knowledge, affinity for natural and metaphysical forces, and access to a tradition outside the control of contemporary power relations, was an unacceptable alternative one that had to be absorbed or effaced.

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<sup>46</sup> Adele-Marie, W., *Women as Nazis: Female Perpetrators of the Holocaust*. New York 2020: Independently Published.



In the postwar period, the mystical and occult currents that had survived under Nazi ideology were themselves objects of investigation, reinterpretation, and mythologization. The female practitioners of Nazi mysticism were deified by some postwar esoteric communities or excluded as survivals of a "degenerate" ideology that had been ultimately defeated. But the fact of their presence and their roles in the occult and ideological context of Nazism documents the deep interconnectedness of power, knowledge, and gender and the complexity of the relationship between mysticism and totalitarian regimes.

The philosophical dimension of this analysis transcends the historic conditions of Nazism and reveals a larger problem: the ongoing struggle between free spiritual inquiry and the need for authoritarian commands to define and impose kinds of knowledge and experience. Over time, feminine mysticism has been an alternative site of resistance to patriarchal and authoritarian commands. That even a state which tried to use occultism in an effort to root itself ideologically still repressed autonomous feminine spiritual activities is evidence that individual inner life can be a lasting threat to any attempt at monopolizing influence in the sphere of knowledge.

Therefore, the study of Nazi ideology and female mysticism is less an exercise in historical contemplation, but rather a scholarly inquiry into the tension dynamic of politics, gender, and religion. It is in this perspective that it will be readily obvious that any attempt at creating an authoritarian model of existence will eventually be confronted with its own internal paradoxes.

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## Wife Material in a Household Context as presented in Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*

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### Abstract

In this research, certain characteristics of Ischomachus' wife are reviewed anew, as she is presented in Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*. Although this topic has received considerable attention in recent years, many aspects of it have been overlooked or investigated with the binoculars of a contemporary moral compass that either underestimates the innovations the text brings to gender relations or overestimates these innovations as an attempt at a fruitless assimilation of womanhood into the male norm. We will examine how certain traditional values of womankind as seen in antiquity are transmitted to the male reality and how, in an innovative way, Xenophon exploits normativity to bring about the best practical outcome that counters the dominant notion of the superiority of the male gender. At the same time, we will take a closer look at unexplored moments in the text where Xenophon indirectly criticizes sophistical teaching and challenges the old phobia that trembled before a woman with masculine elements. It will be shown that Xenophon throws out hints to the reader to address these issues by utilizing literary references.

**Keywords:** *Xenophon, Oeconomicus, Women in Ancient Greece, Classical Antiquity, Female presentation in Classical Texts, Classics, Practical Philosophy*

Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* is a work that, despite its title, does not only deal with the proper management of the *oikos*, its growth and the proper arrangement of the income it brings. At the same time, issues related to agriculture (γεωργία) as an art (τέχνη) and science (ἐπιστήμη) are brought to the fore, a didactic method of learning through observation is proposed, mentions are made of the acquisition of leadership skills, godly plans and the female nature (φύσις cf. 7.22) are investigated and thus how feminine abilities cooperate with those of men<sup>1</sup> for the proper management of the household.<sup>2</sup> The administration of the household, of course, extends to the political level, since often in Xenophon the proper care of one's own affairs is often causally correlated with a possible correct political life and career.<sup>3</sup> This relationship is clearly realized gradually, for in order for one to reach a healthy political activity it means that the individual has first properly arranged his domestic obligations, a process that requires the simultaneous cooperation of the wife. For Xenophon it is fairly obvious that politics is inherently interwoven with economics,<sup>4</sup> and economics without one wife's

<sup>1</sup> Cf. 3.15: νομίζω δὲ γυναῖκα κοινωνὸν ἀγαθὴν οἴκου οὕσαν πάνυ ἀντίροπον εἶναι τῷ ἀνδρὶ ἐπὶ τὸ ἀγαθόν = "But I hold that a woman who is a good partner in the household is a proper counter weight to the man in attaining the good" (translation by Carnes Lord). The word ἀντίροπον is here, I believe, key. I think Lord's translation catches the spirit but misses the mark. According to Liddel and Scott (1996) s.v. ἀντίροπος the word in this passage has the meaning of "equivalent to" thus empowering the notion of equal responsibility of the two genders when undertaking a task. In Sophocles' *Electra* (120) the word is used by Electra when describing the weigh that she and Orestes must bear, which is manifested by both the suffering and the soon-to-be murder of the usurper couple, a commission which both, representing their respectable genders, must complete.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Hobden (2016) 152, Foucault (1990) 154.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Memorabilia* 3.4 as cited by Foucault (1990) 153, cf. Aristotle, *N. E.* 1162a.17-19: ἄνθρωπος γὰρ τῇ φύσει συνδυαστικὸν μᾶλλον ἢ πολιτικόν, ὅσω πρότερον καὶ ἀναγκαιότερον οἰκία πόλεως. Cf. Vavouras E., "The political and economic philosophy in Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*", *Dia-noesis: A journal of philosophy*, 6, 2019, pp. 85-95.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Hobden (2016) 161: "...economic activity is once more intertwined with political life". Cf. Vavouras E., "The political philosophy as a

support is faulty economics.<sup>5</sup> We are to explore the dynamics of the woman's position in the so-called "Ischomachus' household", how she effectively helps with the well-being of the *oikos*, and what behaviours attributed to genders are applied or subverted in a way these goals are to be achieved. Upon further inspection we shall realize that the key-element of good management is ruling, and this is augmented thoroughly by Xenophon with a plethora of paradigms.

## 1. Narrative Structure

Structurally the main segments of the text that dwell on the wife's obligations for better household maintenance are chapters 3 and 7 to 10. We ought here to consider how Xenophon presents these inner dialogues and how they serve the long-structure of the whole *opus*. The narrative of the work is multiple and polyphonic, so through various inquisitive methods and teachings we hear about the dialogue of Socrates with Critobulus, which contains within itself, as if in a drawer, the dialogue between Ischomachus and Socrates, which ultimately ends in the conversation between Ischomachus' wife and himself. Moreover, this conversation also has the reminiscence of the admonitions that the wife's mother gave to her and next to it the consonant advice the father of Ischomachus offered is aptly inserted.<sup>6</sup> This multi-layered structure of the work serves the multifaceted inquiry for economics and, in its intricate way, simultaneously constructs the "economy" of the narrative. Xenophon's narrative method, despite its lexical and phraseological repetitions, is masterful. What follows is a scheme that depicts the branching of the embedded dialogues:<sup>7</sup>

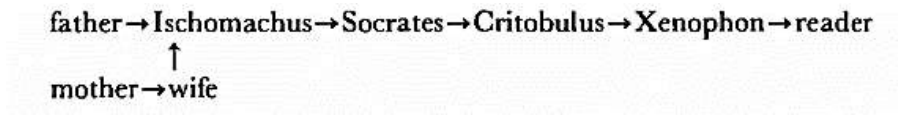
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precondition and completion of political economy in the Ways and Means of Xenophon", *Dia-noesis: A journal of philosophy*, 9, 2020, pp. 183-198.

<sup>5</sup> *Oeconomicus* 3.15.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Hobden (2016) 154. Murnaghan (1988) 13 quotes Humphreys to point out the fact that the dialogues between males are set outdoors and have moral themes whereas when the interlocutor is female the discussion is centered upon practical issues.

<sup>7</sup> Pomeroy (1994) 18.



## 2. The Young Bride's Essentials.

At this point in the work where we have a flashback in time, Ischomachus' wife appears, presumably shortly after her marriage to Ischomachus. To view this woman in complete, we must first investigate her situation before she enters marital reality. Furthermore, we must examine here to what extent this image of the premarital position of the woman reflects either Xenophon's or the more general perception that a high-class citizen would have in this era. Shero (1932)<sup>8</sup> distinguishes the standard assumptions for a girl's status in 5<sup>th</sup> century BC Athens in 6 points and then demonstrates what Ischomachus' teachings and methods would bring new to the table. These 6 norms are as follows:<sup>9</sup>

- 1) The girl is a mere child before marriage (7.5).
- 2) The girl would have lived a sheltered life, without education.
- 3) The choice of husband was not something the girl would have a say in it.
- 4) The married couple would have minimal intellectual companionship (cf. 3.12).
- 5) The woman's faculty of operations is indoors.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Shero does identify Ischomachus with Xenophon and her wife with Xenophon's wife, Philesia, citing Diogenes Laertius. Although it is safe to assume Xenophon was inspired by his personal experience when describing the ideal wife, we should not overemphasize on the author's personal life and its possible impact on the work.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Too (2001) 69-70: "He asks what his wife could possibly know as she comes into his household at the age of fourteen and having lived a very restricted existence in her parents' house, no doubt in keeping with the conventional gendering of the 'indoors' as the female sphere".

<sup>10</sup> Shero (1932) 20 additionally cites that "it has been contended that the *Oeconomicus* was in part a reactionary protest against the increasing freedom from restraint which women were enjoying in the fourth centu-

6) Her commandments of indoor activities were absolute so that the efficiency or inefficiency of household affairs were her responsibility.

Of all the points above the second one is the one who holds, I think, the most value. Truly, since the girl hasn't received any essential education prior to the marriage, the whole accountability of her teachings lies upon Ischomachus, and her potential failure or effectiveness upon the issues concerning household dealings will ultimately be based on the husband's right or wrong didactics. Indeed, just like in horses and cattle it is evident that their behaviour is the result of the domestication that a good shepherd or hostler shall provide, in the same way the husband shall be the one who must be diligent enough to oversee that his wife is appropriately educated in order to supervise the indoor activities.<sup>11</sup> But even the ideal Ischomachus succumbs to the consequence of such a faulty situation where the wife seems deficient. But there is a twist. When she is asked for an utensil of which she has no knowledge of its whereabouts, Ischomachus takes upon himself the culpability of this small inconvenience since he feels responsible for not educating appropriately in regards of order.<sup>12</sup> This and other instances provide proof that reading Ischomachus as a pedantic and exceedingly priggish kind of man who patronizes this seemingly innocuous girl falls flat and reveals more about the reader's way of understanding than any of the work's conspicuous marital dynamics that proposes.<sup>13</sup>

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ry", but this opinion is overly baseless and hypothetical and surely does not represent what Xenophon had in mind when writing the treatise.

<sup>11</sup> *Oeconomicus* 3.11-12.

<sup>12</sup> *Oeconomicus* 8.1-4. Ischomachus' wife feels shame for her rather insignificant failure, but Ischomachus reassures her not to worry since he is the one who "had failed to instruct her about the virtue of order". Cf. Strauss (1970) 140.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. e.g.: Shero (1932) 19 and Too (2001). Oost (1997) 235 with more sobriety notes that: "Much of the priggishness of Ischomachus is probably due to his role as teacher rather than as "male chauvinist"".



### 3. Marital Domestication and Conversation

We've seen that in a way the girl's education is parallelized with the one of animals (3.11-12) that are to be domesticated.<sup>14</sup> Indeed in 7.10 words such as ἐτετιθάσευτο ("had been domesticated") and χειροθήης ("tame")<sup>15</sup> are applied when referring to the young maiden's presentation before Ischomachus right when he feels it is the right time to initiate his teachings upon her. This choice of words is not, I believe, the result of some condescending attitude with which Ischomachus is predisposed towards her, and of which he was previously accused by scholars.<sup>16</sup> Rather, they seem at first glance to function simply as a rhetorical metaphor that helps to enforce Ischomachus' narration that usually encapsulates vocabulary that derives from the agricultural region.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, in order to clear away any suspicion that these words carry a derogatory meaning, we ought just to read the following phrase: ἐτετιθάσευτο ὥστε διαλέγεσθαι ("had been domesticated to the extent that we could have discussions"). It has been noted that the choice of the word διαλέγεσθαι seems to tone down the use of wording that pertain to animal activities.<sup>18</sup> By this expression we are also to see "the alacrity with which the wife's intelligence mature".<sup>19</sup> Her abil-

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Pomeroy (1994) 272 who cites other passages where words about domestication are used when referring to men "taming" their wives.

<sup>15</sup> Other possible translation could be "docile and submissive", Cf. Scaife (1995) 230.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. e.g.: Scaife (1995) 226: "On the contrary, from a widely held though by no means universal current perspective it is hard not to be struck by a good deal of condescension and paternalism in the approach taken by Ischomachus" and Oost (1977) 235: "...the Oeconomicus, with all its condescension toward the child wife".

<sup>17</sup> Scaife (1995) 231 n. 15 thinks the expression has a ritual connotation and is used to imply the consummation of the marriage. This is interesting, of course, but requires that we view the expression as "enigmatic" which Scaife thinks is the case.

<sup>18</sup> Glazerbook (2009) 239 n. 34.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Gini (1993) 483-4 who nevertheless appears to be excessive when trying to prescribe psychological nervousness to Ischomachus who observes this rapid mental transfiguration. Too (2001) 70 contrasts the wording with previous archaic poets, assuring that besides its domesticating connotations the woman is presented in novel and good terms: "Yet

ity to converse is significant, of course, even more so if we keep in mind that Critobulus agreed with Socrates that there is not a person he is discussing less than his wife, even though she is the one managing the οἶκος (3.12). Moreover, the term is not usually applied when discussing relationships between a husband and a wife. By this way it is evident that Ischomachus wants to treat her wife as an equal, not as her subordinate.<sup>20</sup> The term διαλέγεσθαι is also prevalent in *Memorabilia* and has a special meaning to Xenophontic Socrates. According to Socrates himself, he with his company dwell upon the activity of διαλέγεσθαι by selecting matters and topics and categorizing them by their kind.<sup>21</sup> Considering then the fact that having a conversation was generally believed to be an exercise pertaining to men, and adding to this Aristotle's<sup>22</sup> assertion that talking is the distinguishable factor that separates men from beasts, then it is safe to assume that women in general terms were believed to be something less than human. Hence, Ischomachus' wife's ability to converse and engage to dialectics seems bit by bit far more subversive since by it she is transforming herself or is at least educated by her husband into doing so, in order to become a fully civilized being. It is no wonder that her prominence in the dialogue is intensified from this point forward.<sup>23</sup>

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unlike the various caricatures sketched in Semonides, poem 7, the tamed wife is the disciplined, non-consuming woman".

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Glazerbook (2009) 239 who is mistaken in saying that "[Ischomachus] first taught her how to carry on a conversation". Ischomachus didn't teach anything her wife prior to that point and she Cf.ms pretty capable to carry a conversation by herself without any essential guidance, Cf. Gini (1993).

<sup>21</sup> *Memorabilia* 4.5.12, Cf. also Strauss (1970) 149-150 who supposes that Socrates took this method from Ischomachus only to correct himself later by saying that this is a "deliberate exaggeration that is meant to counteract the amazing neglect of the *Oeconomicus* on the part of those who are concerned with 'the Socratic problem'".

<sup>22</sup> *Pol.* 1253a9- 18.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Pomeroy (1994) 272-273.

#### 4. Self-control and Temperance as Wifely Gifts

But Ischomachus' wife is seemingly unprepared up to this point for the teaching she shall receive from her husband. She is barely fifteen when she is married. In addition, she has minimal education or training that would assist her on house managing (7.4-6).<sup>24</sup> It is therefore, as already stated, the husband's responsibility to guide her to proper behaviour and govern her so that her conducts in household management are suffice. Her condition should not be of course surprising neither to Socrates nor the reader and Ischomachus himself comments that he deems it adequate if she had come to him having knowledge of weaving and controlling her appetites. Indeed, her upbringing consisted of living "previously under diligent supervision in order that she might see and hear as little as possible and ask the fewest possible questions".<sup>25</sup> This education pattern seem to be in line with contemporary beliefs on raising young girls and is perfectly exemplified by Pericles' maxim "that a woman's virtue lies in being least talked about by men" (Thuc. 2.45).<sup>26</sup> And yet the young girl does take a piece of advice from her mother,<sup>27</sup> that she should be moderate and practice self-control.<sup>28</sup> Self-control (*sōphrosūnē*) is a pervasive notion that runs through Greek thought from Hesiod to Plutarch<sup>29</sup> and is thought to be traditionally a female characteristic.<sup>30</sup> Greek culture was fixed in

<sup>24</sup> Foucault (1990) 154.

<sup>25</sup> *Oeconomicus* 7.5-6: Καὶ τί ἄν, ἔφη, ὦ Σώκρατες, ἐπισταμένην αὐτὴν παρέλαβον, ἥ ἔτη μὲν οὐπω πεντεκαίδεκα γεγονυῖα ἦλθε πρὸς ἐμέ, τὸν δ' ἔμπροσθεν χρόνον ἔζη ὑπὸ πολλῆς ἐπιμελείας ὅπως ὡς ἐλάχιστα μὲν ὄψοιτο, ἐλάχιστα δ' ἀκούσοιτο, ἐλάχιστα δ' ἔροιτο;

<sup>26</sup> As cited by Hobden (2016) 172.

<sup>27</sup> Murnaghan (1988) 12 thinks that realistically the education she receives from her husband should have been given to her by her mother, but this is not provable nor is there any testimonies that give any adequate insight to what a typical girl education would look like in 5<sup>th</sup> B.C. Athens. Additionally, the decision to have the husband act as a preceptor further reinforces the novelty of Ischomachus', and thus Xenophon's, marital guidelines. Cf. also Glazerbook (2009) 239 n. 33.

<sup>28</sup> *Oeconomicus* 7.14: ἐμὸν δ' ἔφησεν ἡ μήτηρ ἔργον εἶναι σωφρονεῖν

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Scaife (1995) 229.

<sup>30</sup> Pomeroy (1994) 275.

the idea that women (just like children) appeared to be deficient in relevance to self-restraint, thus making them more prone to eagerness and consequently more dangerous to be driven by their passions. Murnaghan (1988), 12, claims that children and women could defy their physical liabilities and be more like men and that this is exactly what Ischomachus aims to do to her wife, thus eliminating their differences and her personality. But this is hardly Xenophon's point, who is making sure that it is imprinted on us that women and men are equally flawed. In the *Symposium*<sup>31</sup> it is stated by Socrates that women (and children) are not inferior to men except that they lack judgement (γνώμης) and strength (ἰσχύος). Hence any man should counsel his wife with courage and then instruct her to do whatever he wishes with her newly skills.<sup>32</sup> Oost (1977), 228, thinks that this Socratic statement is surprising and that the first assessment might not apply in full force to Ischomachus' wife. This is of course incorrect, since it confuses γνώμη (knowledge) with διάνοια (understanding) while Xenophon himself cares to make the discretion clear.<sup>33</sup> Following the young girl's assessment that the only rule she has received is to be self-restrained, Ischomachus immediate response is that his father gave him

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<sup>31</sup> *Symposium* 2.9-10: Ἐν πολλοῖς μὲν, ὧ ἄνδρες, καὶ ἄλλοις δὴλον καὶ ἐν οἷς δ' ἡ παῖς ποιεῖ ὅτι ἡ γυναικεία φύσις οὐδὲν χείρων τῆς τοῦ ἀνδρὸς οὐσα τυγχάνει, γνώμης δὲ καὶ ἰσχύος δεῖται. ὥστε εἴ τις ὑμῶν γυναῖκα ἔχει, θαρρῶν διδασκέτω ὅ τι βούλοιτ' ἂν αὐτῇ ἐπισταμένην χρῆσθαι. Cf. Too (2001) 79: "[...] the Xenophontic Socrates [...] is well disposed to women because he interrogates women's biological difference as the basis for her supposed inferiority with respect to men".

<sup>32</sup> Too (2001) 73 takes in regard Antisthenes' following joke concerning Socrates' wife Xanthippe, who is the most difficult of all women and yet he has managed to educate her, and thus stages Socrates as a *par excellence* expert on wifely didactics, rendering Ischomachus as an inadequate interlocutor on these matters. But the argumentation that follows ultimately falls flat.

<sup>33</sup> Especially in chapters 20 and 21. The point being that διάνοια in the context means that Ischomachus' wife has a better and clearer way for judgement by her nature (*physis*) rather than thing being a result Ischomachus' instructions, Cf. Gini (1993) 484. The instructions are of course what Socrates in the *Symposium* tells his drunk company to give to their wives (διδασκέτω) so that they may earn the knowledge (γνώμη) they lack.

the same advice (7.15). In this way he reassures her not to worry about her doubts on what she could possibly contribute to their common estate, since she has no knowledge nor experience in house affairs except her mother's admonition that her ἔργον is to behave with prudence (σωφρονεῖν). Ischomachus' response was for some time wrongfully disregarded.<sup>34</sup> He defines self-control as something which they should both crave to because it contributes to the whole *oikonomia* of the house since it includes that both "act in such a way that their property is in the best possible condition, but also so that their property accrue, fairly and justly, as much as possible".<sup>35</sup> Helen North<sup>36</sup> remarks on the novelty of this idea that brings new meaning to *sōphrosūnē* in relation to men and women. Truly, Ischomachus assures his wife that prudence which was commonly attributed to women can extend beyond its traditional boundaries if that means that a house estate can be more effectively maintained and their shared prosperity is to be preserved.

## 5. Gods and Marital Labor

Ischomachus wants her wife to be constantly updated that they are to be tested together in equal terms, for he has shown that moderation and temperance is to be practiced by them both without its traditional restriction to female nature. Their struggle is common, and this is emphasized by the use of terms such as *κοινωνία* and *κοινωνός*<sup>37</sup> that pronounce their incipient partnership and reinforce the idea that the house, the finance and eventual children are common to them both.<sup>38</sup> Responding to his wife's hesitations, Ischomachus

<sup>34</sup> Scaife (1995) 227.

<sup>35</sup> *Oeconomicus* 7.15: ἀλλὰ σωφρόνων τοί ἐστι καὶ ἀνδρὸς καὶ γυναικὸς οὕτω ποιεῖν, ὅπως τά τε ὄντα ὡς βέλτιστα ἔξει καὶ ἄλλα ὅτι πλεῖστα ἐκ τοῦ καλοῦ τε καὶ δικαίου προσγενήσεται. Cf. Kourtoglou et al. (2024) 123-124.

<sup>36</sup> As cited by Glazerbook (2009) 240, Cf. also Scaife (1995) 227 n. 8.

<sup>37</sup> *Oeconomicus* 7.11-13.

<sup>38</sup> Scaife (1995) 226.

makes a lengthy<sup>39</sup> reference to how the customary law and nature coincide in the division of labor that is undertaken by each of the two sexes. This division is made in accordance to physical and psychological criteria that govern the idiosyncrasy of women and men. Subsequently, these properties of the sexes are examined with a dose of essentialism, and it logically follows that their given physical traits designates the woman to stay inside and be engaged in raising children, making fabrics and preserving the fruits brought in by the man. Correspondingly, the man is burdened with the assigned obligation to stay outside the house in order to care for the conveyance of all the raw foods and materials that will be preserved and processed under the supervision of the woman (7.19-25). Also, this couple has been constructed by nature in such a way as to benefit themselves the most, because through their union the preservation of the species is insured. Moreover, offspring are born who will care for the aging couple through the process of procreation (7.18-19). As far as the physical attributes go, the man is endowed with natural strength and resilience while the woman lacks power and endurance. In terms of psychological differences, the woman is more affectionate but also timid, which helps in raising children, while the man lacks a sense of danger so that he can more effectively protect the common property (7.20-26). Scaife<sup>40</sup> makes two very apt observations based on these god-given characteristics that define the couple: The first being that “...natural differences instituted by gods lead directly to a division of labor” and the second that “such complementary deficiencies and competencies on both sides render the marital partnership more beneficial”.<sup>41</sup> What follows is the subversive part that this distribution of qualities presents. Ischomachus says that certain qualities are equally bestowed on both the female and male sexes. These are

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<sup>39</sup> Too (2001) 74-75 makes an infelicitous attempt to prove that Ischomachus is an idle chatter with his *μακροὶ λόγοι* and fits the profile of the *ἀδολέσχης* whose character is analyzed in Theophrastus.

<sup>40</sup> Scaife (1995) 227.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Too (2001) 70: “Husband and wife now constitute a co-operative partnership which divides responsibility for the greatest benefit of both involved”.

memory, diligence, and temperance. He even goes so far as to claim that no one can say with certainty which of the two sexes is superior in these areas (7.27-30). In fact, whichever sex prevails in temperance also has the divinely given power to impose itself on the other. These views were very likely to have sounded very insurrectionary to the Athenian ear. It is certainly not a given that every male Athenian would have listened with favor to the idea that there was a possibility that his wife, let alone due to her divinely ordained nature, could appear superior to him (7.42).<sup>42</sup> Indeed, in the classical and archaic perception, the woman constituted a danger and a constant worry for the household, because she appeared as a bottomless pit whose needs were never satisfied. Her existence was defined by a perpetual consumption of all the goods that the man offered and brought into the home.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, Ischomachus also seems innovative when he speaks of mutual benefit that comes equally from the woman's side.<sup>44</sup> In this regard, Xenophon agrees with Plato (*Republic* 456A)<sup>45</sup> that there is no moral basis behind biological differences, nor that biology alone can define as an indicator the value and merit that a human being can offer. From the moment Ischomachus leaves open the issue of which of the two companions will prove more useful or contribute more, the overturning of the archaic era's traditional perception that saw the differences in women and men in absolute terms is activated.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, I do not agree with Murnaghan's view<sup>47</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Oost (1977) 235: "But Ischomachus/Xenophon goes beyond this, and at least envisions the possibility that, in her own sphere of course, woman may be or become the superior of man".

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Glazerbook (2009) 241 who provides plenty of citations from archaic poetry, also Too (2001) 67-68.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Too (2001) 70: "The wife is the individual who now conserves, rather than devours, the resources of the estate. Her responsibility is to guard what the husband brings in from outside as the fruits of his ploughing, sowing, planting and herding, and the resources of the estate".

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Pomeroy (1994) 37-38.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. also Pomeroy (1994) 36: "In contrast to Greek philosophical and literary traditions,

Xenophon is the first Greek author to give full recognition to the value of women's work" and Too (2001) 70: "The husband at first implicitly inscribes his new bride within the misogynistic anxieties about the wife as

that Xenophon does not have a positive assessment of women but rather holds an optimism about human nature. Is woman excluded from human nature or does she exist as something other than it?

## 6. Marital Order and Xenophon against the Sophists

Proceeding from the order of nature regarding the works that each sex must perform, Ischomachus talks about the congruence of nature and conventional law the latter of which does not contradict but complements the divine law and planning. However, while god has defined the couple as shareholders in the upbringing of children, it is the law that has made them shareholders in a common home, making the second partnership a secondary convention that does not, however, deviate from the nature's design (7.30). Scaife<sup>48</sup> also notes that: "Social arrangements support essential human nature by making attractive those very tasks for which divinely established natures have fitted us, so that we will want to do them". He also adds that the use of comparative adjectives (κάλλιον / αἴσχιον) makes the violation of these conventional behaviors less severe and that it is noteworthy that the shameful deviation from typical conventional behavior is made by the example of a man. To help this argument, I will add that even the divine punishment that supposedly comes to every violator of men's deeds which god has imposed is mentioned by Xenophon with a grain of doubt (7.31: ἴσως τι). This convergence between nature and law also seems to function as a way for Xenophon to aim a jab at the sophists that believed that conventional law places limits on our natural desires and capabilities. This hidden polemic against the sophists is also concealed in another part of the play. When Ischomachus teaches his wife about the benefit that comes from having all household utensils arranged in an orderly

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the consuming, empty vessel in order to displace it with the image of her as the clean slate upon whom he will set down his teachings".

<sup>47</sup> Murnaghan (1988) 14.

<sup>48</sup> Scaife (1995) 228.



manner (8.17-23), he wants to give her the impression that no object is so contemptible that it is not worthy of a rhythm and order that will make it beautiful. Indeed, to quote Strauss' paraphrase of the passage:<sup>49</sup> "Such arrangement, however, is not only good but beautiful as well. It is a beautiful sight if every kind of thing, however humble, is ranged in rows and separate from other kinds; no grave or solemn man, but only a wit, will laugh at the suggestion that a well-ordered array of pots and pans deserves to be called graceful." The solemn or grave man (σεμνός) is of course used to picture Ischomachus himself. The word used by Xenophon to describe the witty man (χομψός) is applied along with its derivatives (e.g.: κομψεύομαι) by Plato when he refers to the sophists and their discourse, which is often branded by rhetorical jargon and snarky remarks that are usually devoid of truth's sanctity.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, the pots (χύτρας) that constitute Xenophon's example of beautiful order but will nevertheless be laughed at by the witty man, are precisely the same object that the sophist Hippias considers inappropriate to mention in a very sacred matter, such as that of beauty, which is the subject in the homonymous platonic dialogue. Socrates ironically replies to Hippias that such examples would not be presented by a witty man (οὐ κομψός) but by someone who seeks the truth.<sup>51</sup> The word similarities are uncanny, a case of dependence between the texts can be made.

<sup>49</sup> Strauss (1970) 144.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. *Gorgias* 521d, *Laches* 197d.

<sup>51</sup> *Hippias Major* 288c-d: ἐρεῖ τοίνυν μετὰ τοῦτ' ἐκεῖνος, σχεδόν τι εὔοῖδα ἐκ τοῦ τρόπου τεκμαιρόμενος: ὦ βέλτιστε σύ, τί δὲ **χύτρα** καλή; οὐ καλὸν ἄρα; Ἰππίας: ὦ Σώκρατες, τίς δ' ἐστὶν ὁ ἄνθρωπος; ὡς ἀπαίδευτός τις ὃς οὕτω φαῦλα ὀνόματα ὀνομάζειν τολμᾷ ἐν **σεμνῷ** πράγματι.

Σωκράτης: τοιοῦτός τις, ὦ Ἰππία, οὐ **κομψός** ἀλλὰ συρφετός, οὐδὲν ἄλλο φροντίζων ἢ τὸ ἀληθές. (I have marked with bold and italics the words that are identical with Xenophon's text).

## 7. Manly Intelligence (*andrikên dianoian*)

There are in fact other signs that demonstrate that Ischomachus' wife is a woman of high intelligence and can, through her actions, even subdue Ischomachus himself. She can see through Ischomachus' lies and in domestic trials she appears as a harsh judge who, with impartiality, does not spare even her husband (11.25). It is not clear whether she acquired this ability from her *physis* or from the teachings of Ischomachus, but either way, she can easily dissect his rhetoric and see behind his mendacious attempts.<sup>52</sup> Socrates playfully praises her and points out that she has a manly intelligence.<sup>53</sup> This phrase has been interpreted in various ways. According to Strauss, it denotes the virile concern that makes a being a good protector of his estates.<sup>54</sup> Others interpret the phrase negatively because they think that for Xenophon a woman's virtue is simply to be obedient and to be completely assimilated to her husband's demands and needs, thus eliminating her femininity.<sup>55</sup> Only Glazerbook<sup>56</sup> evaluates the phrase positively, but even he does it only after admitting first that it is condescending: he also cites Skinner's opinion, who correctly assesses that the phrase means high praise. All these assessments miss an intertextual clue that sheds more light on how positively Ischomachus' wife is lauded and how this is wrapped up in a subversive way that is rooted in literary tradition. Indeed, a masculine intellect, or designs befitting men, characterized only one woman from the mythological tradition, a character whose appearance on stage always ter-

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<sup>52</sup> Gini (1993) 484.

<sup>53</sup> *Oeconomicus* 10.1: Καὶ ἐγὼ ἀκούσας, ἔφη ὁ Σωκράτης, ἀποκρίνασθαι τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτῷ ταῦτα, εἶπον· Νῆ τὴν Ἥραν, ἔφην, ὦ Ἰσχόμαχε, ἀνδρικήν γε ἐπιδεικνύεις τὴν διάνοιαν τῆς γυναικός. = "On hearing that his wife had replied to him in this way," said Socrates, "I spoke, 'By Hera, Ischomachos,' I said, 'you display your wife's manly understanding.'", translation by Carnes Lord. Other male models are also used by Ischomachus that help promote the concept of rectitude and leadership, Cf. Pomeroy (1994) 302, Glazerbook (2009) 243.

<sup>54</sup> Strauss (1970) 153.

<sup>55</sup> Scaife (1995) 225 and Too (2001) 79.

<sup>56</sup> Glazerbook (2009) 243.

rified Athenian viewers with her gender-transgressive behavior. Clytemnestra, the primary evil of intemperance, is presented in Aeschylus as having γυναικὸς ἀνδρόβουλον κέαρ,<sup>57</sup> and Sophocles is probably referring to her when he writes: ἀνδρόφρων γυνή<sup>58</sup> (the italics are mine). Xenophon here masterfully takes the primary characteristic of one of the most hated women and instills it in the innocent little creature that is Ischomachus' wife. He confirms to us that with proper and methodical teaching one does not need to fear androgynous behavior displayed by women, but that with directive and targeted education, women will be able to undertake jobs of equal value to men, since they share the same intellect.

### Conclusions

Oost says that “the *Oeconomicus*, with all its condescension toward the child wife, treats woman better than any other work of Xenophon, perhaps more than any other work of ancient Greek literature”.<sup>59</sup> The second part of his statement certainly finds us in agreement. Xenophon by no means supports completely the blown-out patriarchal ideology of ancient Athens regarding the sexes.<sup>60</sup> He follows his own path and approach which has as its *modus operandi* ruling and how one can acquire it so that it may be applied to the traditional feminine condition. We would not say that he treats the subject as an essentialist, at least in absolute terms. Xenophon truly believes that a woman is potentially a queen, like the one who rules over a swarm of bees (7.32). The point is that as a queen she has a range of responsibilities that must be undertaken with due diligence, of which prudence (σωφροσύνη) is an essential component. In addition, she must be

<sup>57</sup> Agamemnon 10.

<sup>58</sup> Fr. 857 N. = 943 P.:

<sup>59</sup> Oost (1977) 235 cf. Scaife (1995) 230: “[...] it has been hopefully suggested, the relative absence of outright misogyny stems from the fact that Xenophon was a social liberal, not afflicted with that low view of women otherwise so prevalent in classical Athenian literature and life”.

<sup>60</sup> Contra Scaife (1995) 226.

taught the art of leadership in order to exercise it in an effective manner. The most ideal form of leadership is that of the royal type, for: “Surely we should not be ashamed to imitate (*mimêsasthai*) the Persian king” (4.4). The Persian king functions as a model of action that is transmuted into the woman through the example of the queen bee. The couple itself is a microcosm of the actions that the Persian king performs on his own subjects.<sup>61</sup> Therefore, I do not believe that Murnaghan’s (1988) view is valid, which claims that women simply conform to the male space and do not gain their own autonomy. The woman as marital complement balances and assists the estate work and can even potentially surpass her husband in restraint and care. The fact that this transcendence occurs in the “patriarchal” model of labor that is divided into τὰ ἔνδον for women and τὰ ἔξω for men is beyond the point and should not detract from the much more valuable and groundbreaking views expressed throughout all of Socratic works of Xenophon concerning female nature which is extolled in an accumulative fashion in the *Oeconomicus*.

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<sup>61</sup> Cf. Pomeroy (1994) 238–40.

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## The Neutrality of Dasein and the Shame in the Female Experience: A Feminist Philosophical Analysis

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### **Abstract**

In this paper I examine the convergence of gender neutrality and the gender binary through the philosophical framework of Martin Heidegger and the critical responses of prominent thinkers such as Jacques Derrida and Simone de Beauvoir. The focal point of this inquiry is the gender-neutral concept of Dasein, which has permeated and, in some ways, helped shape contemporary queer theory, particularly through the work of scholars like Judith Butler. While there is no singular or definitive approach to this issue, in this paper I explore the various factors that shape the existence of an individual within the world, especially in the context of *Mitwelt* (being-with-others). By situating Heidegger's ontological arguments alongside social and biological dimensions of existence, I argue that the societal norms in conjunction with embodied experiences elucidate the ontology of Dasein as a being thrown into a preexisting world.

**Keywords:** gender, neutrality, Dasein, ontology, Heidegger

## Introduction

The intersection of phenomenology and feminist theory has prompted significant discourse, particularly in the work of feminist phenomenologists engaging with Heidegger's concept of Dasein. Central to this debate is the tension between Heidegger's notion of Dasein as a genderless, existential being and the realities of gendered existence, especially for women. While Heidegger himself does not directly address sex or gender in his seminal work *Being and Time* (1927), his brief engagement with the question "What is woman" in his 1923 Freiburg lectures, later published in *Ontology- The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, reveals historical underlying assumptions about the nature of gender and the constructions of womanhood. Heidegger quotes historical figures like St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, presenting man as the rational, God-reflecting being, while leaving the question of woman unanswered, suggesting a subtle critique of the rigid separation of the genders.

The debate surrounding Dasein and gender centers on whether Heidegger's concept of a gender-neutral Dasein excludes or transcends the complexities of the lived female experience. Feminist scholars like Jill Drouillard argue that because Dasein is thrown into the world without predetermined qualities or a clear plan, it rejects essentialist views of women as biologically predisposed to certain roles, such as motherhood. Furthermore, Jacques Derrida's readings of Heidegger suggest that the "originary positivity" of Dasein- its potential for transcendence- requires the erasure of gendered categories, allowing for the neutralization of sexual difference to reveal the true nature of existence.

Yet, the notion of Dasein as neutral and detached from social constructions is complicated by the lived realities of women, who have been historically socialized within a framework that demands recognition primarily through their relationship to men. The phenomenon of *Mitsein*- being with others- is crucial for understanding this framework in ways in which women's existence is shaped by external recognition and objectification. Simone de Beauvoir's feminist critique draws on Heidegger's

ideas, arguing that women are often relegated to the status of the “Other” in patriarchal societies, requiring a form of recognition that traps them within fixed, objectified identities. The relationship between existential guilt and feminine subjectivity, as well as the pervasive sense of shame that characterized much of women’s lived experience, will be explored to understand how these emotional states reveal both the limitations and possibilities of Dasein as a social and embodied being. In particular, the emotional registers of guilt and shame—central to Heidegger’s account of existence—are reexamined here through the experiences of women, who often carry the burden of these affects in disproportionate and socially mediated ways. Drawing on the works of Beauvoir, Derrida, Bartky, and others, I aim to uncover how shame operates not merely as a moral or emotional response, but as a mode of being shaped by the demand for recognition within a gendered *Mitsein*.

Through this inquiry, I argue that the phenomenological neutrality of *Dasein* offers an opportunity to rethink subjectivity in ways that resist gender essentialism. At the same time, I assert that neutrality must be contextualized within the embodied, historical, and affective experiences of women. Only then can we grasp the full scope of what it means to be a gendered being-in-the-world, and the ways in which guilt, shame, and recognition disclose both the limitations and possibilities of existential freedom.

### **Dasein and Womanhood**

There has been a debate amongst feminist phenomenologists on what Heidegger’s genderless Dasein means for women within the context of Heideggerian thought. Heidegger himself does not mention anything about sex or gender in *Sein und Zeit* and the only time he explicitly mentions women is in his 1923 Freiburg lectures that were later published as *Ontology - The Hermeneutics of Facticity*. He poses the question “Problem: What is woman?” and he proceeds to quote St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and others in a historical depiction of misogyny with passages in which they describe man as an



intellectually superior being that mirrors God through his display of rationality and prudence.<sup>1</sup> The question “What is woman” is never answered but I believe that by listing these quotes that attempt to define man in a completely different manner than woman, he showcases his belief of the unnecessary separation of the genders. Jill Drouillard notes that Dasein has no plan; we are thrown into the world with no a priori qualities and no blueprint, which means that we cannot come into the world with a contemplative nature that is supposedly highly rational. Based on this claim, women cannot be thrown into the world with a predisposing nature for fecundity and an inherent feeling of shame and guilt in the case in which childbearing it is not realized.<sup>2</sup>

In the *Metaphysical Foundations of Logic* (1928), a work that was published after *Being and Time* (1927) and in which he explores existence through a metaphysical lens, Heidegger mentions women as he addresses the pre-historical state of the world and whether it is related to Dasein. He distinguishes the ontic-existential concept from the ontic-natural concept. The ontic-natural (human) concept that indicates the origins of the being is deemed as pre-philosophic, while Dasein holds an ontologically metaphysical essence that enables it to transcend from the world.<sup>3</sup> The limit of the pre-philosophical world is its duality. The fact that it consists of men and women. “The transcendence of Dasein surpasses itself as a being; more exactly, this surpassing makes it possible for Dasein to be something like itself”.<sup>4</sup> The transcendental quality of Dasein that surpasses itself is what makes it ontologically metaphysical and at the same time distinguishes it from the pre-philosophical human concept. This ability of Dasein entails nonetheless the possibility of it becoming “something like itself”. Something that resembles the human qualities of the ontic-natural conception of being that is perceived like the same within itself, but at the

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<sup>1</sup> Heidegger M., *Ontology - The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, translated by John van Buren, Indiana University Press, 1999, pp.18-21.

<sup>2</sup> Drouillard J., “Heidegger on being a sexed or gendered human being”, *Gatherings: The Heidegger Circle Annual*, 2022, pp. 162-164.

<sup>3</sup> Heidegger M., *Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, 1928, pp.180-181.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p.182.

same time inherently different when we are confronted with the different processes that lead to a being's creation. The totality of possibilities that Dasein has, when it's thrown into the world, cannot be limited the predispositions that dictate a "natural" duality as it is presented in pre-philosophical traditions.

The gender-neutral Dasein shall not be considered a negation nor an abstraction; Heidegger himself has noted that it is an "originary positivity (ursprüngliche Positivität) and power of essence [être] (Mächtigkeit des Wesens)." Derrida in "Geschlecht" points out that the genderless Dasein does not need a lack of sex for its being, only a lack of predetermined, pre-dual sexuality. He supports that sexual division is the one that leads to negativity and neutralization is the effacement that is required for an "original positivity to become manifest." Dasein is not the existent, but existence has its originary source (Urquell) and its internal possibility in the neutrality of Dasein. Derrida interprets it as the division of the sexes that leads to negativity and neutralization is the only way for original positivity to manifest itself. Dasein exists only for itself (unwillen seiner), in its ipseity, in its own Selbstheit. This ipseity is neutral, but it does not entail the isolation of the individual within an existential solitude as "if the philosophizing being were the center of the world." Derrida points out that every manifestation of Dasein is gendered (corps propre) because there is no Dasein without its own body.<sup>5</sup> The factual dispersion (faktische Zerstreuung) of Dasein in its own Leiblichkeit und damit in die Geschlechtlichkeit, supports this fluidity of gender within an obviously sexed body.

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<sup>5</sup> Derrida J., "Geschlecht: sexual difference, ontological difference", *Research in Phenomenology*, 1983, pp.72-75; Kakoliris Gerasimos, "Jacques Derrida and René Schérer on Hospitality", *Dia-noesis: A Journal of Philosophy*, 6, 2019, pp. 23-42.

### Mitsein; the recognition of another

“Dasein is fascinated with its world. Dasein is thus absorbed in the world.”<sup>6</sup> Here, Heidegger points out that Dasein can never be found detached from the everydayness of the world. It is essential for Being-one’s-Self (Selbstein) for a Being-with (Mitsein) and a Dasein-with (Mitdasein to exist). The essence of Dasein is in the manifestation of its existence. A definite being that exists as an individual amongst other definite beings within a world that condones many positive possibilities of existence rather than hostile Hegelian cases of recognition. The Mitsein seems to be a characteristic of Dasein. Not just a Being-there-too (Auch-da-sein) as mere coexistence, but a togetherness and a cooperative nature that Mitsein involves. The being shares the with-world (Mitwelt) with others and its salience when it comes to Dasein is obvious by the presenting of Being-alone as a lacking state that needs to be part of the Being-with.<sup>7</sup> So Dasein is meant to exist within a world of other Daseins and even in its solitude it cannot evade the practices of coexisting in a Mitwelt.

It seems however that when Dasein acts within the world it is not itself. Being-with-one-another is only possible because of the positive existential mode of Dasein that works within an environment. Empathy for example is not a prehistoric existential concept but nevertheless we could support that it tempers with the integrity of Dasein that leads to its drifting from itself. It alters its understanding of the stranger that can only be possible through a hermeneutical approach that allows for a positive existential condition.<sup>8</sup> Mitdasein is a part of the world in a way that establishes its possibility for individuality, but at the same time, by straying from itself within it, it is prone to the susceptibility of the Mitwelt and the other Mitdaseine that work within it. Either way, Dasein cannot completely lose itself through the prementioned modes. Inauthenticity and failure in standing by one’s self does not entail the

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<sup>6</sup> Heidegger M., *Being and Time*, transl. by Macquarrie J. & Robinson E., Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Oxford, United Kingdom, 1962, p.149.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, pp.156-157.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p.164.

complete loss of the essence of the Being. It does not devalue the facticity of Dasein, “just as the ‘they,’ as the ‘nobody’ is by no means nothing at all.”<sup>9</sup> The existence of others as they-self is the proof of the everydayness and averageness of Dasein. “The Self of everyday Dasein is the they-self, which we distinguish from the authentic self.”<sup>10</sup> For the sake of this line of argument I will not go into what constitutes an authentic self, but its nevertheless a crucial part to the understanding of Being. The “they” is the component of realization when it comes to existence, but its everydayness is also the reason the Being “misses itself and covers itself up.”

Heidegger acknowledges the existence of others within the world to contradict the cartesian idea of an I that is separated from the world in a solipsistic way. His Dasein is not detached from the mundane everydayness as it interacts with others within a Mitwelt. In Heidegger’s idea of Mitsein, women ought to take part in the (masculinist) world. Simone de Beauvoir appropriates these Heideggerian concepts in her *Second Sex* as she argues in favor of the emancipation of women not in a way that a woman would cease to exist as a recognition of the other (in this case of a man), but in a way that she is not limited by her relationship with him. Beauvoir mentions Hegel master-slave relationship as one that requires recognition by each other for-itself, but differentiates the recognition process when it comes to women. Women require recognition in an object-like manner that is based on specific fixed qualities as essentially in-itself. She does not consider hostility a necessity for recognition as Hegel and Sartre do, but a necessity is the distance between the others and the self that will aid the creation of a genuine human relationship.<sup>11</sup>

Heidegger avoids using the terms “human” or “man” when he discusses Dasein’s essence in a conscious effort to create universality and homogeneity that can be limited by using language of sexual difference. It leaves space for the individual to

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p.166.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, pp.167-168.

<sup>11</sup> Bauer N., “Being-with as being-against: Heidegger meets Hegel” in *The Second Sex*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2021, pp.130-133.

cultivate a unique identity within its neutral essence.<sup>12</sup> This unique type of existence that Dasein allows, encourages a flourishing of an unbiased relationship between the Mitdaseine as they are limited by their gender. However, Simone de Beauvoir supports that woman is socialized to lose herself in the Mitsein by letting others (men) dictate their identity. This demand for recognition that Being-with involves, creates space for judgment from the other on an impulse to be altered by the other.<sup>13</sup>

### The Ontology of Dasein's Guilt in Women

In this part of the paper, I will proceed under a positive assumption of guilt that involves the notion that guilt can serve as an indication that women are more in touch with their authentic selves. In *Being and Time* II.58, Heidegger focuses on guilt. Researchers have separated his ideas on guilt on three categories: ontic, ontological and factual. The ontological or existential guilt is what Heidegger calls "primordial" guilt as it is a quality of the being itself. Factual guilt is concerned with normative demands in particular everyday situations and ontic guilt involves Dasein projecting itself onto one of the possibilities of Being. Guy Elgat suggests that ontic guilt functions as a bridge, connecting the abstract nature of ontological guilt with the specific conditions of factual guilt. He also asserts that "ontic guilt makes factual guilt possible."<sup>14</sup> Given the central role of responsibility in factual guilt, I will be focusing primarily on the other two types of guilt (ontological and ontic) as they offer deeper insight into the existential structure of the female subjective experience.

The phenomenon of guilt exists in conjunction with a primordial idea, which means that it is not "arbitrary and forced

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<sup>12</sup> Seol M., "Heidegger's Fundamental Ontology and Feminist Philosophy: Issues of Sexual Difference and Neutralization", *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 2024, p.12.

<sup>13</sup> Bauer N., "Being-with as being-against: Heidegger meets Hegel" in *The Second Sex*, p.144.

<sup>14</sup> Elgat G. *Heidegger on Guilt: Reconstructing the Transcendental Argument in Being and Time*, p.917

upon Dasein”.<sup>15</sup> Guilt is therefore a Being-the-basis that requires a “not”; the “not” does not signify a lack of existence, on contrary it signifies its very existence as its thrownness, which is released from its basis to itself. Dasein as “Being-the-basis of nullity” determines the projection of one of the possibilities that could manifest through its thrownness. It is not something that vanishes after substantial progress has been made, but it exists as an obscure characteristic of Dasein. Guilt for Heidegger exists before morality and outside the notions of good and evil. The Dasein is not guilty because of its mistakes or its lacunae but because of the authentic acknowledgment of its own inauthenticity, because of the way it projects one specific potentiality authentically but does not project one of its other possibilities.<sup>16</sup> Ontological guilt therefore is not at all negatively charged as would be factual guilt which is based on actions, but its nullity can be considered a positive in terms of its understanding of the limits of its authentic projection.

Specifically in the case of women, feelings of guilt appear more frequently and with greater intensity. The way women are thrown into the world seems to not always be based on freedom. Hye Young Kim mentions the similarities of Heidegger’s with Kierkegaard’s guilt of knowing that is based on the metaphor of Adam in the Christian tradition.<sup>17</sup> Even if that is the case, Heidegger places guilt outside of morality<sup>18</sup> which would mean that he places himself outside of this religious doctrine that relates to guilt. However, Being-guilty is the reason that conscience is possible, because when the Being is closed off, whilst it is thrown, it presents its projection (the Being-guilty itself) “as something which at bottom we are to understand”.<sup>19</sup> This means that the primordial feeling of guilt strengthens the understanding of the possibilities of Dasein,

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<sup>15</sup> Heidegger M., *Being and Time*, p.326.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p.333

<sup>17</sup> Kim H. Y., “Is Guilt a Feeling? An Analysis of Guilt in Existential Philosophy”, *Comparative and Continental Philosophy* Vol.9 No.3, 2017, p. 239

<sup>18</sup> Swazo, N. K., “Werner Marx and Martin Heidegger: What “Measure” for a Post-metaphysical Ethics?”, *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, 9 (2), 2024, 249–281.

<sup>19</sup> Heidegger M., *Being and Time*, p. 332.

which would potentially mean that if someone were to contemplate on their personal path, then this person would have more profound understanding for their authenticity. Perhaps the feeling of guilt that many women feel in terms of the lives they experience is exactly that. Dasein itself is not gendered, but when it is thrown into the world, it embodies these specific gender conforming roles and subsequently paths that people who are especially bound by them are able to understand them better. This is not limited to just women, but it involves all who are conscious of their paths because of the understanding of their thrown authenticity. Guilt, in this way, becomes a trace of self-understanding, an existential echo of the possibilities that could have been.

### **The disclosing of the self and shame in Simon de Beauvoir's thought**

Simon de Beauvoir was notably exposed to Heidegger's ideas through Corbin's translation of *Being and Time*. Although Corbin translated Dasein as "human reality" (réalité humaine), which has been characterized as too anthropological, the notion of disclosedness (Erlossenheit/devoilement) as the openness of the Being that enables accessibility to the Being itself as well as other Beings has found fertile ground in De Beauvoir's thought. De Beauvoir's dismissal of the idea that there is "female essence" agrees with the fact that Dasein is thrown into the world not in a fixed manner but becoming through its openness to possibilities<sup>20</sup>.

De Beauvoir explores the idea of existing as oneself also in *She Came to Stay* through the story of Francoise, who felt strongly that she was herself when she was little, but she was unable to understand why that was the case. Trying to understand whether she could exist as a jacket by continuously uttering "I am old, I am worn" just because she is able to utter it and realizing that she could not speak in terms of self ("I")

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<sup>20</sup> Gothlin E., *The Cambridge Companion to Simon de Beauvoir*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 47-53.

for no one else except herself.<sup>21</sup> But the fact that the self exists as a sole manifestation of different possibilities does not mean that the self exists uninterrupted by factors outside of itself. In becoming, de Beauvoir speaks of “anatomic destiny” which is “profoundly different in man and woman, and no less different is their moral and social situation”.<sup>22</sup> Based on this “anatomical destiny” women are positioned in a socially primitive and restricted freedom, which in sexual activity entails notions of “service” rather than pleasure. In Heideggerian terms, the Dasein is thrown into the world and as part of the world it moves towards the world with more involvement through its intelligible understanding of it.<sup>23</sup> Understanding the traditionally sexist social structure is something that happens to the Dasein when it is inauthentically disclosed in the world. This exposure to inauthenticity is the reason that shame is such a vast part of the female experience, and particularly the female sexual experience.

The young girl quickly finds out that her body is not actually hers and its value exist not in itself but in the gaze of others. There begins a journey of reclaiming one’s body within the patriarchal society, but its achievement of the reclaimed sexuality is not guaranteed. The body is not merely a thing, but a situation, “an instrument of our grasp upon the world, a limiting factor for our projects”.<sup>24</sup> The embodied experience of a woman as a process of becoming is although different as De Beauvoir supports in that it is a continuous lesson in shame. Shame exists in the lived body which itself exists within a social and political framework. In a society that perpetuates the feeling of shame in women, “she is afraid of becoming flesh and afraid to show her flesh.”<sup>25</sup> This shame of one’s body that stems from the alienation from the body and consequently

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<sup>21</sup> de Beauvoir S., *Philosophical Writings*, Illinois: University of Illinois, p. 42

<sup>22</sup> de Beauvoir S., *The Second Sex*, London: Jonathan Cape Thirty Bedford Square, 1953, p.368

<sup>23</sup> Heidegger M., *Being and Time*, p. 118, 119

<sup>24</sup> de Beauvoir S., *The Second Sex*, p .61

<sup>25</sup> Guenther L., “Shame and the temporality of social life”, *Continental Philosophy Review*, Vol. 44 No.1, p.12.



from the self itself, is a consequence of society's restless conditioning in the axiological importance of women's attributes that has historically placed the female body in the highest positions when ranked. Lisa Guenther points out that "shame is a way of getting stuck in an impossible moment that I can neither inhabit nor flee, a time that goes nowhere and yet, precisely because of this ambivalence, still retains a transformative potential".<sup>26</sup> The uncertainty that encompasses shame does not exist in a specific incident but lurks in the shadows of experience, unsure of the projection of its existence.

### Shame and Feminine Masochism

Having examined shame through Beauvoir's existential framework, I now turn to how Sandra Bartky conceptualizes shame within a more socially situated critique of femininity. Here I will draw a distinction between Heideggerian primordial guilt and women's experience of shame as it is described by later feminists. Sandra Bartky in *Femininity and Domination* mentions that Dasein has some a priori characteristics of existence like understanding (Verstehen) and state-of-mind (Be-findlichkeit). The states-of-mind that are based on emotion "constitute a primordial disclosure of self and world" and are a necessity for human existence. This means for Bartky that pure recognition cannot be fully achieved when it comes to Daseine.<sup>27</sup> She mentions that the differences between women and men in a social environment cannot be neglected and that a genderless approach within a traditional male dominated filled as philosophy is just "a male subject in disguise".

The process of recognition entails different effects for women than men. For example, the feeling of shame is more prominent to women than men. That's not to say that they have some kind of exclusivity to specific emotions, but that they experience them in a more profound way. Within a social totality

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p.15

<sup>27</sup> Bartky S. L., *Femininity and Domination; Studies in the phenomenology of oppression*, Routledge, Chapman, and Hall, Inc, New York, 1990, p. 83.

that subordinates and oppresses women, the feelings of shame and guilt are related to the different weight that recognition holds between the different genders. Bartky explains this by suggesting that women are more prone to “the blissful loss of self in the sense of merger with another; the pervasive apprehension consequent upon physical vulnerability, especially the fear of rape or assault”.<sup>28</sup> This is remarkably interesting as for the importance of the embodied human experience that inevitably takes place within a social environment. The physicality of human experience has historically involved an objectification of the female body and consequentially its recognition by another within a *Mitwelt* does not have the same starting points. The idea that the female body is merely a spectacle (which has only been supported by the art world), creates a sense of powerlessness even in an individual’s recognition of itself. Shame is therefore an emotion that is based on internalized gender-biased views that women have come across, before they would even come across a situation that would require mutual recognition. Bartky quotes John Deigh when he defines shame not as “a reaction to a real loss, but as a reaction to a threat”. A threat on a woman’s body and identity. Therefore, even if guilt preexists shame as for Heidegger it is primordial, it can be considered that is rooted deeper than guilt in the social experience, as it is “an experience of violation of trust in oneself”.

Shame can be a very a powerful driving force of behavior. Sexual desire has been linked throughout history to shame and this is the case especially in the case of women. The exploration of sexuality through shame is essential in understanding the masochistic dimension of sex for many women. The fetishization of male domination that stems from the internalization of sexist social concepts is both rooted in shame and creates shame as a result. This web that has been woven through the centuries around women’s experiences may never be disentangled. The female urge to always look presentable is a bondage that lies within unattainable standards that encourage this vicious cycle of negative emotions. Bartky notes that “feminine masochism, like femininity in general, is an economical way of

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p.84.

embedding women in patriarchy through the mechanism of desire, and while the eroticization of relations of domination may not lie at the heart of the system of male supremacy, it surely perpetuates it.<sup>29</sup> Feminine masochism can also dictate simple everyday choices such as makeup and clothing as well as plastic surgery and sexual desire. From the literal extreme pain that females endure to conform to a societal ideal, to their misguided ideas about sexual intimacy that are based on internalized sexism. The hateful and alienated approach to one's body is surely not a monopoly of women, as it is involved in many situations of oppression, where the oppressed individual feels a detachment from one's body and identity. These are so deep-rooted that even realizing their falseness does not suffice for their end. Women as well as queer people are more inhibited as they have historically been taught to believe that their sexual desires are shameful. Bondage and rape fantasies are not unusual for many oppressed individuals

## **Conclusion**

The discourse surrounding gender -whether advocating for a strict separation between the sexes or promoting a universal, gender-neutral approach- has gained significant attention in the recent decades. Central to this discussion is Heidegger's concept of Dasein, which, due to its fundamentally unhistorical nature and its "thrownness" into the world, suggests a framework that is, in theory, gender neutral. This notion has deeply influenced feminine theorists like Judith Butler, who supports the idea that sex and gender are both socially constructed rather than biologically determined. This theory has been proven particularly useful in understanding the fluidity of gender identity, offering a more inclusive framework for individuals who identify as transgender and non-binary as it permits a wider spectrum in the embodied experience for the individual within a social construct.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p.51.

However, while this approach may provide valuable insight, it is not without its complexities and limitations. Most notably, the biological differences between the sexes- such as hormonal variations that shape women's menstrual cycles and men's twenty-four-hour cycles- cannot be disregarded. These biological rhythms, while not deterministic, can influence emotional and behavioral patterns, and their role in human experience warrants acknowledgment. In dismissing such differences, there is a risk of ignoring how these bodily functions can contribute to the forming of social interactions, particularly in contexts where women have historically been either defined by or denied recognition of their biological functions. Thus, while crucial to avoid reducing individuals to their biological sex, it is equally important to create the space that respects and acknowledges these biological realities without stigmatizing or silencing them.

In addition to biological considerations, the concept of Dasein overlooks the historical context in which individuals, particularly women, exist. Heidegger's concept<sup>30</sup> assumes that Dasein enters the world without prior engagement with the social structures and history that has shaped human existence. For women, this means a failure to recognize the history of gendered oppression that has influenced their identities, experiences and rights. While Dasein offers the potential for a free, unencumbered existence, it neglects the weight of intergenerational trauma and the systematic barriers that women have faced throughout history. This lack of historical consideration is not necessarily something negative, but it does present a gap when applying it to gender studies, where historical injustices must be factored into contemporary understandings of identity and power.

Rather than dismissing the neutrality of Dasein outright, this inquiry has argued that it can be reappropriated as a site of potential: a starting point from which the self can emerge not as fixed, but as becoming. However, this potential must be grounded in an acknowledgment of the specific ways bodies

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<sup>30</sup> Papacharalambous C., "Other's Caress and God's Passing By: Levinas Encountering Heidegger", *Dia-noesis: A Journal of Philosophy*, 11, 2021, pp. 77-94.

are gendered, disciplined, and rendered intelligible within sociohistorical contexts. Shame and guilt, in this light, are not just emotional residues but ontological markers—signposts of the constraints and openings through which feminine existence is negotiated. Ultimately, I believe that there is merit in both approaches: embracing gender neutrality while recognizing the intricacies of women's experiences. It is vital to support the individual's right to establish themselves within a society in ways that are not biologically dictated, but at the same time we should be vigilant in acknowledging the centuries of women's oppression, the violent disenfranchisement and the immense abuse women have suffered through history. Thus, the challenge lies in balancing these two perspectives- respecting the fluidity of gender while remaining mindful of the historical realities that continue to shape women's existence.

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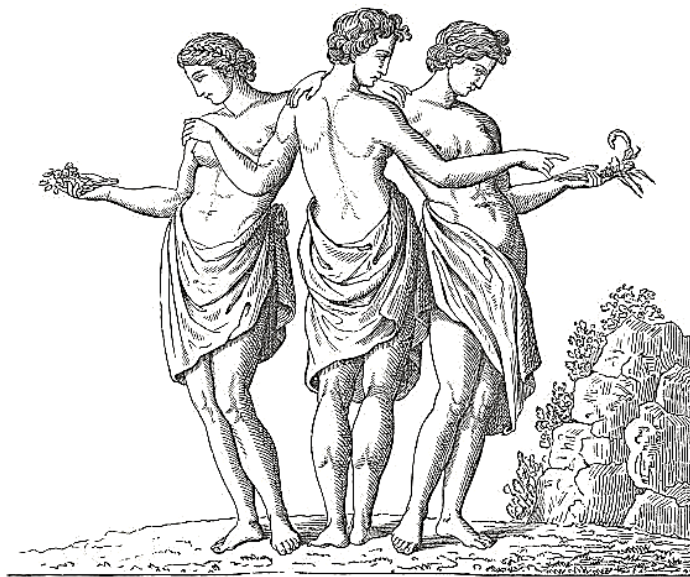
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## The Female and Women in Origen

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### Abstract

Origen of Alexandria, the prolific Christian theologian and philosopher of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, presents an interesting anthropology regarding genders. This article will endeavour to outline his approach to the topic of genders, more specifically to his portrayal of the female in relation to the male and his original theory of the transcendence of sexes and genders both in his protology and in his eschatology or in his exegesis of biblical literature. But is this theory as subversive as it appears to be when it comes to the stereotypical picture of the female and women at his time? Can his 'angelic' prototype be related to modern gender theories? Are women and the feminine exalted in his anthropology or still remain in their traditional framework?

**Keywords:** *Origen, Christian, anthropology, gender theory, female, women, biblical exegesis, asceticism, protology, eschatology, sexes, the binary, the non-binary, angelic prototype*



## Introduction

Origen of Alexandria (3rd century), perhaps the most prolific theologian and philosopher of the Early Christianity, developed an interesting anthropology regarding gender. The aim of this paper is to explore Origen's usage of the female and the feminine as well as the place he assigns to women in his anthropology. In his allegorical interpretation of the Genesis, he regards the creation of humanity according to God's image as non-corporeal and associates it with God creating the first human-beings as male and female in perfect union<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, he considers the two genders as merely allegorical or grammatical conventions that allude to the two non-material components of human existence but also correspond to the counterparts of a primordial and eschatological perfect couple (Christ and the faithful) whose re-union will eventually restore God's image in humans<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, Origen not only advocates a quintessential human nature (humans created in God's image) beyond gender distinctions, as most scholars point out, but he goes on to transcend the very concept of gender-also sexuality or any physical or social restriction- as part of humanity's fallen state which is characterized by distinctions and categorization<sup>3</sup>. This means that he does not refer to a non-binary state of being, as any notion of gender (therefore being a man or a woman or else) cannot determine one's identity since in the perfect human, it can only be only allegorical and contrary to a state of divine unity. His transcendence of any gender identification is of a strictly theological basis<sup>4</sup>. His distinctly stereotypically gen-

<sup>1</sup> *Comm. Matthaeum*, XIV, pp.1225.

<sup>2</sup> *Comm. CCant.*, IV, 9.2 in *SC* 376, pp.582-584. Also, *De Princ* ,I: 5-6, *PG*, v. 11, pp.115. *CCCant* I.2, *SC*, 376, pp.176-177, *ibid*, *SC* 376, pp. 250-257.

<sup>3</sup> *CCels.*, in *PG*, v. 11, pp. 1070.

<sup>4</sup> In *CCels.*, 4.18, in *PG*, v. 11, pp.1070: he asserts that since the angels are superior to humans, then if humans are perfected, they will become equal to angels. He evokes the extract from the Gospel according to which in the resurrection humans do not marry but the righteous ones become equal with angels providing their moral conduct is virtuous in deed and in speech.

dered language when it comes to male and female is purely restricted to language and does not define any theologically accepted human identity<sup>5</sup>.

### Contemporary research on the 'gender theory' of Origen

It is understandable that Origen's anthropology regarding gender has attracted the interest of modern scholars. More specifically his references to women and the feminine (in his protological, postlapsarian and eschatological anthropology, as well as the allegorical usage of the feminine in his mystical theology) were scrutinized carefully.

Namely, Emanuela Prinzivalli claims that Origen's protological anthropology (two narratives of the creation of the male-female human in Genesis) places gendered relations onto a new basis and reduces the male dominance at least on a spiritual as well as an individual level but also when it comes to the collective conscience of the Christian community. More specifically, in the first narrative the primordial human nature consists not of two separately 'male' and 'female' identities but as a unique coupled one 'in God's image', while in the second narrative man and woman are formed (not created from nothing but shaped) from vile materials. This second couple is led into apostasy and is punished. Among them, Eve is blamed the most for this Fall. Prinzivalli places this interpretation into the frame of Origen's Alexandrian Platonizing dualism and it aims directly against Gnosticism. What is noteworthy is that the woman is the one who receives God's harsher punishment and the dichotomy of the sexes comes after the Fall. Therefore, in the Genesis, the feminine represents the pre-existing Church which is united with the Logos right from the beginning. Since women's 'inferior' external (corporeal and social) state is the result of previous

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<sup>5</sup> His reference is clearly to 'names' or declinations, not real genders (*Comm.CCant.*, 9.2 in *SC* 376, pp. 582-584. See also, *ibid.*, 9.3, pp. 582.

faults (the Fall in Eden) and thus, is able to evolve, it does not correspond to an inherent internal sort of inferiority<sup>6</sup>.

As to the usage of the male and the female in Origen's allegorical interpretation of biblical texts, Prinzivalli observes that with the scene of the self-sacrificial unity of the Son with the Church in the Song of Songs, Origen's male readers are rendered more 'feminine'. At the same time, women would be consoled with the equal value that is attributed to them<sup>7</sup>.

Ilaria Ramelli highlights Origen's view that God-the Christ transcends both sexes but the Christ in his human dimension –(i.e. a model of humanity)- is neither male nor female, whereas she notes that the Christ took on himself all the human nature (both genders). According to this refined Christ-centred anthropology, the binary model will be lifted in end times and we shall return to the genderless existence of angels and the christic ideal<sup>8</sup>. The 'robes of skin' (Gen.3:21) are not the body generally speaking, but the gendered mortality to which sin resulted<sup>9</sup>. In this view, what is the most interesting aspect is that Ramelli bases her argumentation on this type of Origenian gender-independent anthropology in order to prove that Origen reflects the first Christian community's custom of accepting the priestly ordination of women, since the criterion for spiritual gifts, according to Christian theology, is not the differentiation of genders but spiritual and moral purity, so in order to be ordained a minister of the Church, being a virtuous human-being is deemed as more important than being a man or a woman<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, Ramelli emphasizes the fact that Origen's allegorical method ruled out a misogynic kind of hermeneutics of biblical narratives as well as the exclusion of women from the Church's leadership<sup>11</sup>. Finally, although Origen makes use of allegory that identifies the male with positive aspects of the human nature and the

<sup>6</sup> Prinzivalli (also: *Hom. in Genesim, Comm. in Genesim, Hom. in Jesu Nave IX*, 9).

<sup>7</sup> Prinzivalli (also: *Comm. CC III.9,3-4* (SC 376, 582-584). *Comm. in Matthaeum. XIV*, 17).

<sup>8</sup> Ramelli, pp.314 and pp.319 (also: *Gal. 3:28*).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, pp.320.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, pp.321-322 (also: *Comm. Corinth. 14:34-35*).

<sup>11</sup> Ramelli, pp.323.

female with negative ones, he judges as the primary culprit of the Fall not the female nature as such but ethical choice<sup>12</sup>.

Lavinia Cerioni asserts that in Origen we come across the co-existence of the dichotomy of the sexes according to the paternalistic model of the ancient world, with the metaphorical usage of the female as an intellectual category that transcends this traditional binary model<sup>13</sup>. However, Cerioni recognizes originality both in Plato and in Origen in their gender 'continuum' that transcends the antithesis between a 'defective' and 'inferior' femininity and a 'perfect' and 'superior' masculinity. In her theological anthropology, she sees variable gendered roles not only at the level of allegory but also of ontology<sup>14</sup>. Therefore, one of the Son's 'ἐπίνοιαί' is Sophia, an aspect of the Son which not only symbolically but also hypostatically (ontologically) feminine, but also has male traits (for instance steadiness). In reality, souls are also hypostatically female regardless of the physical sex with which they are attached<sup>15</sup>.

Anna Navrozidou considers the use of the male and the female in the hermeneutics of Gen. 1:27 (male-female genderless first human-being) and Gen.2 (first couple with two distinct sexes and reproductive functions) contradictory and problematic<sup>16</sup>, on the one hand because the creation of Eve as a by-product with the mere purpose of procreation comes in contrast with Origen's views on liberty, whereas the inclusion of the woman into the symbolic couples that represent cosmic harmony disengages binary differentiation from procreation<sup>17</sup>. On the other hand, Navrozidou is interested in how Origen sees the female nature and spots a tension between the spiritual and the carnal role. Lot's daughters for instance embody the negative side in literal hermeneutics, since they were not successful in their roles as free souls –

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, pp.325.

<sup>13</sup> Cerioni, pp.12.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, pp.10 (also: *CCels.*, 4.18, about Christ's soul as a mother feeding the faithful with 'her milk' and in: *Comm. CC* 2,4,6 about female souls as 'perfect men').

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, pp.3.

<sup>16</sup> Navrozidou, pp.30.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, pp.27 (also: *Hom. in Genesim, Comm. in Genesim*).

(despite the fact that they accomplished the female role of procreation). On the other hand, Sarrah transcended the restrictions of her fleshly ‘deficiency’ as a barren old woman and became a mother, thus becoming a free soul<sup>18</sup>. Here, the regulating factor for giving a woman value is free will<sup>19</sup>. Equally interesting is Navrozidou’s observation about the 5th Homily on Lot, according to which Lot’s male soul is in harmony with his spirit, so its masculinity is associated with its rationality, whereas his wife’s soul is female because she is enslaved in the flesh. Thus, women are associated with lust and unfaithfulness<sup>20</sup>.

Martens claims that Origen in his identification of the female with the pre-existent Church, he stresses that the latter, since she is a ‘female’ is prone to infidelity and sin. Therefore, she abandons her initial matrimonial union with the Logos, since He will eventually be united with her flesh (the divine-male will be united with the female human nature), after He has chased her as though she were an archetypically unfaithful female. In this union, God’s initial promise will be accomplished and they will ‘become one flesh’ (‘ἔσονται εἰς σάρκα μίαν’)<sup>21</sup>. So, he thinks that Origen allegorizes the feminine in a negative manner<sup>22</sup>. As for Origen’s perception of sexual desire, he observes that in the end times, the human with the male and the female re-united will no longer have the need for carnal desire or any sort of desire, since he/she will be complete and not in need of anything in his/her union with the Christ<sup>23</sup>.

Jacobsen considers that Origen ‘de-sexualizes’ the female symbolism of Sophia (one of the Son’s dimensions (ἐπίνοιαι) so that he expresses his opposition to the Gnostic sect of Valentinianism<sup>24</sup>. While Sophia is represented as a female that bears in her womb before all aeons all the created things and

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, pp.30.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, pp.27.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, pp.28.

<sup>21</sup> Martens, pp.530 (also: *Comm. in Matthaeum*.14:17: ‘ἐν τῷ κατ’εἰκόνα ἀμφοτέροις χαρισάμενος’).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, pp.534 (also: *Comm.CC*).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, pp.533 (also:1 *Cor.* 15:23).

<sup>24</sup> J acobsen, pp. 1 (also: *Princ.*1,2.5).

subsequently gives birth to them through the primordial act of creation and despite the fact that he observes a frequent alternation of male and female titles for the Christ, the scholar does not see in Origen the intention of a 'gendered' representation of the hypostatic relation of the Father with Sophia as a relation of procreation<sup>25</sup>.

Sarah Coakley, referring to Origen's faulty association of Jesus' message of love with the platonic eros and asceticism, adheres that this celibacy ideal is hostile to contemporary feminism as it allegorizes women as symbols of materiality, physical desire and sees them as mere instruments of procreation<sup>26</sup>. In her view of Origen's 'gender theory, all sexual identities should be subdued to divine desire. Origen's platonizing Christianity might be novel when it comes to gender but it cannot be linked to any modern gender theory as in him God is the ultimate goal, although the two genders can be seen through a different physical and social lens<sup>27</sup>. Among her remarks is Origen's sexualized imagery in his triadology ('Origen, Contemplative Elitish and the Romans 8 Model') (in *De Oratione*), where the Holy Spirit becomes female symbolically in prayer as its role there is presented as a woman's labour<sup>28</sup>. Its effect in prayer is a wondrous transcendence of spiritual sterility. In his *De oratione* he makes allusions to the dangers resulting from womanish lust and beauty. Coakley sees an eroticised triadology<sup>29</sup> but holds that this gendered symbolic language needs cautious interpretation ('footnotes')<sup>30</sup>. All in all, she sees a demanding and complex renegotiation of gender in Origen, whose 'gender theory' is emancipating when it comes to social roles but providing it is beneficial for one's mystical ascent<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, pp.5 (also: *Comm. in Ioannem καὶ Comm.CC*).

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, pp.9.

<sup>27</sup> Coakley, pp.10 comments on the concept of orientation prioritizing the orientation toward God and godly desire.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, pp.127.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, pp.130-131.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, pp.131.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, pp.132.

## The male and the female in Origen's anthropology and the transcendence of genders

According to my reading of Origen's texts, of great interest is his notion that in the Genesis creation story, the reference to the creation of male and female in the first narrative (Gen 1: 26-27) (ἐποίησεν) is distinguished from the 'shaping' (ἐπλάσεν) of bodily man (Adam) and woman (Eve) from Adam's side (*Gen.* 2 4-25). Only the former, i.e., the male and female creation defines humanity in God's image. Thus, fleshly man and woman as distinct sexes do not pertain to the first creation of humanity according to God's image<sup>32</sup>. Origen clearly states that by no means is the woman according to the divine image nor is the man so, but 'those who excel (διαφέροντες) are called male, the second ones female'. In his *Commentary in Matthew*, he clearly states that this union of male and female is not an allusion to real marriage but is only an allegorical way for God to define the perfect human prototype in the male-female syzygy<sup>33</sup>. This primordial couple is the 'interior homo' created in God's image, so the male and female are qualities of the interior human<sup>34</sup>.

But what or who is God's image according to whom humans were made? It is the Christ, the Logos. He is described as being above all three grammatical 'genera' whereas the 'woman' is His Church but also the 'perfect soul' which is also the 'spouse' with whom He will become One flesh<sup>35</sup>. This prospect is linked by Origen with God's creation of mankind intending to be reformed anew into His likeness<sup>36</sup>. The latter could be attained through dominance over carnal desires.

<sup>32</sup> *Comm.Evang. Matth.* XIV, in *PG*, v.13, pp.1225.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, See also *Comm.CCant.*, I.2, in *SC* 376, pp.176-177.

<sup>34</sup> *Hom. Gen.* I,13, pp.158. See also *Selecta, PG*, v.12, pp. 93-96, where he asserts that the 'κατ' εἰκόνα' refers to the human soul and all its superior traits, the cognitive power, the ability to judge and do good, the inclination towards justice.

<sup>35</sup> *Comm. CCant.*, IX. 9, 3, in *SC*, pp.582-583.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* See also *Hom. Gen. I.13*, pp.158 'Si anima coniuncta spiritui atque eius, .....coniugio copulata declinet..

Consequently, the male and the female are presented as intellectual categories or components of human existence which define the core human existence and their harmonious union in a form of spiritual matrimony blessed by God is a prerequisite for humanity's spiritual ascent, the multiplication and generation of virtues and the accomplishment of humanity's destiny as God's image to reach similitude with God.

However, this unified male and female, the first part the male-like spirit can prevent the soul from slipping into debauchery and fornication, even from becoming a cheating 'harlot' (meretrix) that is more inclined to pleasure like Eve who 'formicated' with the devil and because of her deed, the couple male and female broke and fell into the state of the sexed separated and distinct physical man and woman<sup>37</sup>. Therefore, the primordial state of union of male and female does not have to do with sexual or physical characteristics but has a spiritual meaning, whereas the postlapsarian separated couple with their distinct sexual characteristics are associated with procreation and sinful sexuality<sup>38</sup>.

Moreover, although this symbolic language would allude to a ubiquitous state of male and female and marriage as the prototype of this perfect harmony between the two genders, Origen cannot escape the stereotype of the feminine being associated with receptiveness but also with lustfulness and prostitution, therefore a weak and inferior character<sup>37</sup>. It is implied that without the male, the feminine cannot stand on its own, but must be tied in 'marital union' with the male. Without the male, all spiritual products of the union of the female (the soul) will be deemed illegitimate children. The female soul is thus highlighted only as existing in couple with the male spirit. Otherwise, it cannot attain its destination, that is procreation, in this present instance the generation of legitimate offspring, that is superior spiritual assets<sup>37</sup>. Besides, whatever is associated with the woman (as well as with the man in their sexed nature) is profane and fleshly.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., pp.1229 and pp.1225. See also, ibid., pp. 1207 (ἀνομία), pp. 1230 (Συναγωγή), pp. 1251 (μοιχεύσασα τω διαβόλῳ). See also *Hom.Luc.* XXIII.



Thus, the binary distinction (the two) is more apt to the man-woman opposition but the non-binary One, the united male-female prototype is what pertains to the divine image. This would imply 'equality' also in the degenerate fleshly-sexual differentiated humanity, but the associations implied for the woman are much more negative in comparison to the ones for the man. This again clearly denotes that there is a distinction between the gendered female and the sexed woman. The female prototype is undoubtedly superior to the fleshly sexed woman<sup>38</sup>.

The 'Fall' narrative is also crucial in understanding Origen's stance, since it is Eve's choice to betray God's will and succumb to the serpent's temptation. As a consequence, the primordial couple lose their ethereal bodies and fall into a material bodily existence. They are vested with their 'δεσμάτινοι χιτῶνες' ('tunicae pellicae'=skin cloaks), a heavier sort of body, prone to biological decay and death and can only reproduce through sexual intercourse and labor. The prelapsarian equality and spiritual nature of the two genders is disrupted by the Fall, which is the result of the female weakness, that is the weakness of the soul<sup>39</sup>.

Therefore, Origen advocates the pre-eminence of an a-sexual state where the spiritual-masculine and the psychic-feminine aspects are in perfect union through an ascetic attitude throughout our lives. He stresses the importance of self discipline and the restriction of all physical sexual urges in view of a superior in nature spiritual growth<sup>40</sup>. This is the ascetic renunciation ideal promoted mainly by the Alexandrian theological school that resulted on a practical level in the founding of numerous monastic communities in the Egyptian desert<sup>41</sup>. The question is: could this be revolutionary when it

<sup>38</sup> *Comm. Ioan.*, 1.9.

<sup>39</sup> *C Cels.*, IX, pp.1095 About sex distinction as the result of the Fall in PG 11,388-391. Δεσμάτινοι χιτῶνες are the mortal and corruptible bodies with which God vested the first sexed postlapsarian humans. Actually, in the *Selecta in Genesim*, Origen adheres that they are vested with death because of their sin. *Comm. Gen.*, III.16.

<sup>40</sup> *De Principiis*, 1:8, pp. 140-141.

<sup>41</sup> Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* VI.18.

comes to the way he views the social constructs of gender and women's position in the Church and society in general?

Whereas we know from Eusebius of Caesarea that many of Origen's catechumens were women in the Catechetical School of Alexandria, which means he had an inclusive approach as far as their Christian education is concerned, among his theological views are-judging from his reference to Paul in his *Commentary on I Corinthians* 14, 34-35 about the fact that female prophets never spoke in public- indicative of his accord with the mainstream belief of his era, according to which women were viewed as the 'weak sex'<sup>42</sup>. This is further supported by the fact that his allegorical interpretation of the *Bible* denotes the feminine as an equal element in regard with the male, but with an inclination towards fleshly and emotional weakness as we saw above<sup>43</sup>.

On the other hand, he still retains the stereotypical depiction of the feminine as the more feeble part of human identity, although its primordial and divine state is portrayed as ultimately androgynous, or rather beyond gender distinction. The ascetic ideal is linked with a divine gift that involves the renunciation from earthly marriage<sup>44</sup>. Despite the fact that 'pure celibacy' is the perfect state, he did not dismiss marriage but regarded it as necessary for procreation. When it comes to the spiritual realm, marriage is seen as a metaphor or an allegory which alludes to the ascete's mystical union of the soul (regardless of one's sex) or the Church (the bride) with Christ the Logos (the bridegroom), especially in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*<sup>45</sup>. In terms of its social and everyday practice, marriage is considered to be only a concession for those - either men or women - who cannot embrace celibacy thus making themselves 'eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven'<sup>46</sup>. Celibacy is the state that brings one to

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<sup>42</sup> *Comm. I Cor.*, in *PG*, v. 14, pp.823. In the *CCels*. V. III, pp.44.

<sup>43</sup> *Comm.CCant.* VI, 2.

<sup>44</sup> *Comm. Matth.* XIX.,12.

<sup>45</sup> *Comm. CCant.*, III, 9.2, *SC* 376, pp.582-583. Also *ibid.*, pp. 584-585. Also, I. 2, pp. 176-177.

<sup>46</sup> *Comm. Matth.*, XV ( *Matth.*19:12).

the primordial resemblance with God's image, the Christ and is therefore for those with a higher calling.

As indicated above, the ultimate marriage will be with the Logos who is above all genders and gender distinctions<sup>47</sup>. This union will be attained through the practice of the virtues which have a feminine-like quality as to their grammatical typology and which will also be the offspring of this union<sup>48</sup>. This is because in the Christ we are 'neither male nor female' but humanity is all one regardless of sexes and genders<sup>49</sup>. What is more interesting, is the maternal (therefore female) role assigned to the Christ Spouse who breast-feeds His beloved with spiritual fruit<sup>50</sup>. The soul is shown as chasing the perfumed and spiritually charming Bridegroom and fervently longs for his lips and breasts. The imagery is clearly sensual and gender roles are reversed but Origen warns those of us who have not got rid of fleshly sensuality (the 'exterior and fleshly man') to abstain from reading the Song and invites those who are turned towards the 'homo interior' to perceive the deep spiritual truths<sup>51</sup>.

This call for the divine marriage is a struggle towards the eschatological vision of a sexless existence of human-beings. In the end-times after the Resurrection the resurrected bodies will be transformed into a spiritual body that will have a more refined quality similar to the ethereal bodies of angels and identical to the sexless bodies that the very first human noes (intellects) had when they were created according to God's image. Our bodies will no longer be physical but they will be transformed into glorified, incorruptible ones as Paul wrote in *I Corinthians* 15:42-44. As Jesus prophesied, 'in the resurrection, they neither marry nor are given in marriage,

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<sup>47</sup> *Comm. CCant.* III.9.3, SC 376, pp.582-583. Cf. Terezis C. A., "Aspects of the presence of the Aristotelian Logic in Western and Eastern Christianity. The "middle places" according to Boethius and Holobolus", *Dia-noesis: A Journal of Philosophy*, 14, 2023, pp. 67-84; Papaoikonomou A. D., "Christianity and Rationalism: Maximus the Confessor vs. Descartes", *Dia-noesis: A Journal of Philosophy*, 14, 2023, pp. 39-52.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., pp.130-131, also pp.84.

but are like angels in heaven', so sexuality and procreation will no longer be necessary. We will have become non-sexual, like angels with no sex differentiation. Therefore, humanity will have returned to the prelapsarian state when we existed in a non-corporeal state with no division into male and female. The latter was the consequence of sin. In the Resurrection, this division will be abolished altogether and humanity will be brought back to their initial undividedness when it comes to sexes.

### A critical approach to contemporary research

In my opinion, Prinzivalli is accurate in claiming that Origen recognizes humanity's primordial identity as a coupled male and female in perfect union, she rather gives little or no value to Origen's persistence in using stereotypical language, particularly regarding the female's supposed inclination to weakness or fleshly sin<sup>52</sup>. Even the female in the primordial coupled human nature is presented as the second one and the male as 'excelling' ('οἱ μὲν διαφέροντες ἄρρεν, οἱ δὲ δεύτεροι θῆλυ') and it is associated with the soul which cannot stand on its own unless it is coupled with the male<sup>53</sup>.

On the other hand, Lavinia Cerioni, makes a good point in asserting that in Origen both the paternalistic dichotomy of sexes and the non-binary approach co-exist in a way, as the restoration theory also applies to the transcendence of gender distinction whereas in many other instances he retains all the stereotypical language of his time and considers gender distinction to be necessary for our current postlapsarian state. However, her view that gender indefiniteness transcends the antithesis between the 'superior' male and the 'inferior' female in the *Commentary of the Song of Songs* is not supported by Origen's other passages such as the *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* where the female is seen also under a negative scope<sup>54</sup>. Even in the *Commentary in the Song of*

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<sup>52</sup> *Hom. Gen.* I.13, pp.158. *Comm. Matth.* XI, in *PG.*, v. 13, pp.1251.

<sup>53</sup> *Comm. Matthaëum.* XIV, pp.1225.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

*Songs*, Origen adheres that his use of gendered language is strictly grammatical and warns the readers not to associate what they will read with the real male or female genders<sup>55</sup>. She also argues that the Christ as Sophia could be regarded as ontologically feminine despite Origen's clear statement that such a viewpoint is held by the Gnostics and Origen does not regard it as not valid. She claims that this statement is only there because of his desire to oppose the Gnostics who assign ontological gender assets to non-bodily divine aspects. He clearly claims it is about 'naming' and not about being. If he would assign a feminine ontology to dimensions of the divine, why should Origen clarify that it is about 'names' and not essentially the feminine, not only in the *Commentary in the Song of Songs* but also in other passages such as the *Contra Celsum*<sup>56</sup>? Note also that in the *Commentary on the Song of Songs* the 'genera' used are 'for the inclination of the feminine gender', therefore, we have to do with grammatical and linguistic traits and not hypostatical ones<sup>57</sup>.

Besides, although Anna Navrozidou makes a goof point in claiming that Origen's view on genders is contradictory and problematic since Eve is viewed as a 'tool' for procreation, whereas the male and female couple is disengaged from reproduction, I would add that the latter aims at a spiritual sort of 'procreation' but only on the premises that the female stays coupled with the male. Nonetheless, Navrozidou is correct in claiming that in Origen there is a tension between the spiritual and the carnal role of the two genders. Fleshly women are indeed associated with lust and unfaithfulness, but if they stay coupled with the Christ, they can fight this tendency<sup>58</sup>.

Other researchers point out Origen's dual stance towards the feminine. Martens draws the plausible conclusion that

<sup>55</sup> *Comm.CCant*.IV. 9, in *SC* 876, pp.582-584.

<sup>56</sup> *CCels*. 5:39: Οὐ γὰρ παρὰ τὸ θηλυκὸν ὄνομα καὶ τῇ οὐσίᾳ θήλειαν νομιστέον εἶναι τὴν σοφίαν καὶ τὴν δικαιοσύνην, ἅπερ καθ' ἡμᾶς. See also, *Comm. Cant.* 3, 9, pp. 2: *Et sicut hic sapientiam non ideo aliquam feminanm dici putabis, quia femineo nomine appellari videtur.*

ἐστὶν ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ..

<sup>57</sup> *Comm. CCant*. IV: 9, in *SC* 376, pp. 582-584 and *ibid*.

<sup>58</sup> *De Principiis*, I.6, pp. 116-117. *Ibid*, II, p.2.

Origen allegorizes the feminine also in a negative way<sup>59</sup>. Jacobsen makes the accurate point according to which Origen desexualizes the female, since he portrays a human-being above genders<sup>60</sup>. Cloakley's view that Origen's celibacy ideal is hostile to the modern feminist theory since women are still an image of materiality and physical desire and associated with procreation is partly true, since Origen's double attitude could not be entirely on a par with the modern Feminist theory which largely relies on the non-theocentric idea of human rights<sup>61</sup>.

Finally, Ilaria Ramelli is perfectly right in supporting that Origen's gender-independent anthropology echoes the first Christian community's custom of accepting the priestly ordination of women, since the criterion for spiritual gifts, according to Christian theology, is not the differentiation of genders but spiritual and moral purity which he also emphasises as the primary vehicle for salvation<sup>62</sup>. However, Ramelli's view that Origen's allegorical method ruled out a misogynic kind of hermeneutics of biblical narratives as well as the exclusion of women from the Church's leadership could not be altogether true since there are still some remnants-(as mentioned above)-that place the female as second in the primordial pair or associate it with negative tendencies if disengaged from the male<sup>63</sup>. According to her, although Origen makes use of allegory that identifies the male with positive aspects of the human nature and the female with negative ones, he judges as the primary culprit of the Fall not the female nature as such but ethical choice. This could be right but since she identifies it with the inherent dependency of the second in the pair female-like pre-existent Church to stay in union with the male-like sovereign spirit or the Christ her act of autonomous behaviour that is seen as fornication seems to also play a part

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<sup>59</sup> Martens, 533.

<sup>60</sup> Jacobsen, 9.

<sup>61</sup> Cloakley, 9.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, pp.321-322 (also: *Comm. Corinth.* 14:34-35).

<sup>63</sup> Ramelli, pp.323.

in this ethical choice ultimately since the divine Logos could not ever make such a choice<sup>64</sup>.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, in Origen's gendered theological language, the feminine is seen both positively and negatively. In his aspiration to depict the unified pair male-female as the primordial and quintessential archetype of humanity that will be restored in the end-times, although he portrays the female as part of the perfect couple that makes up the essence of humanity in God's image, the female is nonetheless presented as second and it cannot escape the stereotypical connotations of the Greco-Roman world altogether. Therefore, Origen draws his imagery from stereotypical depictions of women, as either mothers or potentially weak or even sinful adulteresses (even whores). In his archetypal description of the first human-beings but also in his postlapsarian and eventually in his eschatological anthropology, sexuality and the biological sex distinction are seen as the degenerate forms of a higher spiritual state of sexlessness and an absence of sexual differentiation. Thus, we cannot esteem Origen to be a genuine adherent of the equality of sexes as we know it in today's discussion about genders, since his view is that a spiritually advanced way of ascending towards the divine is the renunciation of sex differentiation and the material sexuality in general, but seek a spiritual sort of Eros that puts our gendered-surely also our sexual- natures aside.

One could argue that this is indeed a 'non-binary' approach of human-sexuality but on a totally different level, namely a spiritual one which does not yet deny the postlapsarian state of division. The latter can only be transcended through prayer, asceticism and a Christian spiritual life whose aim is to subjugate all sexual or physical passions.

On the other hand, it is of great importance as a step forward that even on an allegorical or a metaphysical level the male and the female are seen as primordially equal and he opposes to non-Christian views of his time that degrade

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid, pp.325.

women. But this should be seen strictly on the basis of his Christian theological heritage. In the first place, his belief in the transformative power of the Christ that leads to a unity that transcends all distinctions including the ones that sexual differentiation entails, as well as his eschatological vision of resurrected humanity echo Paul's 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus'.

Origen does not aspire to refer to social gender roles or promote a certain sort of sexuality. On the contrary, his anthropological portrait of the male and the female juxtaposed with the distinction of man and woman in fleshly terms aims at propagating a transcendent anthropological model beyond genders and sexes. His angel-like eschatological resurrected human-being beyond any notion of gender where it does not really matter whether one was born as either a man or a woman could offer a very broad terrain for study to a modern gender theorist. The ontological nucleus of the human-existence is no longer dependent on one's sex or social concept of gender but goes far beyond it. His optimism is noteworthy in his adamant faith that the perfect human-nature can be attained in spite of the restrictions of corporeality and social norms. In his theology, matter is eventually spiritualized so that humanity's divine image is finally restored. This very ideal applies also to the distinction of sexes. In the end, all shall be one in God.

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# Articles





## Knowing: *The Zone of Interest* from a Philosophical Point of View

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**Abstract:** Watching the film *The Zone of Interest* by Jonathan Glazer, one cannot overlook the philosophical ideas that permeate it, just as one cannot help but admire the way the director unfolds these ideas on screen: harsh, bordering on brutal, ironic, wonderfully repellent. Rudolf Höss, as commandant of Auschwitz, knows—but this awareness of reality does not touch him. Hedwig Höss chooses not to know, or to ignore, wrapped in the veil of a paradise that exists only as a morbid construction in her mind. The film is haunted by Platonic and Aristotelian notions of *eidenai*—awareness, distortion, perversion, selective perception. At the heart of the hell of Auschwitz lies Hedwig’s garden, a living representation of her disturbed psyche. How does Robert Musil put it? Depending on the perspective from which one approaches the subject of humanity, many partial truths emerge.

**Keywords:** *Cinema, Plato, Aristotle, Zizek, Nietzsche, knowledge, subjectivism, ethical systems, fetishist disavowal, visualization, terrifying irony*

## On People Naturally Desiring to Know (Plato, Aristotle)

The infinitive of the verb *οἶδα*, which means "I know," *εἰδέσθαι*, is first encountered in Plato.<sup>1</sup> We are at the point where Plato, having divided the soul into three parts—one with which we learn, one with which we feel anger, and the irrational part with which we desire (material) pleasures<sup>2</sup>—proposes the type of pleasures that correspond to each of these three parts.

He begins with the third part, attributing to it the greatest pleasure: financial gain, since this allows access to all the material pleasures one desires. For this reason, he characterizes it as *philokerdes* (money loving or profit-loving). As for the second part of the soul, Plato believes that it is entirely devoted to the pursuit of dominance, victories, and good reputation. He characterizes it as *philoneikos* or *philotimos* (victory loving or honor loving). Reaching the first part—the one through which we acquire new knowledge—Plato considers it to be always fully oriented toward the effort to know the truth, indifferent to money or fame. Based on this, he suggests the characterization *philomathes* or *philosophon* (knowledge loving or wisdom loving). It so happens that in each person's soul, one of the three parts predominates. From this, it follows that there are three kinds of people: those who love wisdom (*philosophers*), those who love victory (*ambitious* individuals), and those who love wealth (*profit-lovers*). And these, respectively, are what they each consider most important in life, disregarding the others. For example, for the ambitious person of the second category, knowledge means nothing unless it brings him honor and fame. On the other hand, the philosopher—the person of the first category—considers the knowledge of truth to be

<sup>1</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, 582 b, Now, think about it. Here are three men. Which of them has most experience of all the pleasures we have mentioned? Does the lover of profit learn about the nature of truth itself? Do you think he has more experience of the **pleasure of knowledge** than the lover of wisdom has of the pleasure of gain?' Edited by Ferrari G. R. F., *University of California, Berkeley*, translated by Griffith T., Cambridge University Press. First published 2000, 3rd printing 2018.

<sup>2</sup> This part of the Platonic soul seems to align with what Freud, in his own trisection of the psyche, 2,400 years later, would call *Id*.

incomparably more important than the goods that secure pleasures for the person of the third category.<sup>3</sup>

It is precisely this knowledge of truth, this yearning to know, this longing to understand the mysteries of nature and the world, both natural and human phenomena, this thirst for solutions—like another Oedipus<sup>4</sup>—that Plato calls *eidénai* (to know). And it is evident that he considers it far more significant than all other goods that life and the world can offer.

Equally evident is that the type of person oriented toward knowledge—the philosopher, in other words—is clearly a superior type of human being compared to all others, regardless of what they have achieved and, consequently, enjoyed in their lives. Thus, Plato, although his main focus here in the *Republic* is different, paves the way for what Aristotle will later call the *theoretical life* in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (-323 BCE), identifying it with ultimate happiness (*eudaimonia*). He describes the person who lives such a life as a *theoretical being*, and as such, clearly superior to all others.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, 580d – 583c.

<sup>4</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipous Rex*, ὦ πάτρας Θήβης ἔνοικοι, λεύσσετ', Οἰδίπους ὄδε, ὅς τὰ κλείν' αἰνίγματ' ἤδει καὶ κράτιστος ἦν ἀνὴρ. Inhabitants of our native Thebes, behold, this is Oedipus, who knew the riddles [*ainigma* pl.] of great renown [*kleos*], and was a most mighty man. translated by Jebb R. C., Revised by Sens A., Further Revised by Nagy G., 2020. Cf. Pappoikononmou Antonis D., “Leadership and power: the psychopathology of Shakespearean Richard III, *Dia-noesis: A Journal of Philosophy*, 15, 2024, pp. 81-92, <https://doi.org/10.12681/dia.38173>

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1177a-b: And we think happiness has pleasure mingled with it, but the activity of philosophic wisdom is admittedly the pleasantest of virtuous activities; at all events the pursuit of it is thought to offer pleasures marvelous for their purity and their enduringness, and it is to be expected that those who know will pass their time more pleasantly than those who inquire. And the self-sufficiency that is spoken of must belong most to the contemplative activity. For while a philosopher, as well as a just man or one possessing any other virtue, needs the necessities of life, when they are sufficiently equipped with things of that sort the just man needs people towards whom and with whom he shall act justly, and the temperate man, the brave man, and each of the others is in the same case, but the philosopher, even when by himself, can contemplate truth, and the better the wiser he is; he can do perhaps do so better if he has fellow-workers, but still he is the most self-sufficient. And this activity alone would seem to be loved for its own sake; for nothing arises from it apart from the contemplating, while from practical activities we gain more

However, for the purposes of this article, let us now examine the text commonly referred to as *Metaphysics*, specifically its beginning. And Aristotle Writes: All men by nature desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses; for even apart from their usefulness they are loved for themselves; and above all others the sense of sight. For not only with a view to action, but even when we are not going to do anything, we prefer seeing (one might say) to everything else. The reason is that this, most of all the senses, makes us know and brings to light many differences between things.<sup>6</sup>

"All men by nature desire to know," then. Given that Aristotle structures his texts based on a goal he sets from the very beginning—in this case, the path to knowledge, a journey with a specific starting point and a defined end [ΤΕΛΟΣ] each time—it is crucial here to examine how this journey is realized, what its stages are, and what the interpretive keys to it are. After all, in Aristotle's theory, the ultimate stage—the goal—is always the attainment of knowledge, not of particular, individual phenomena or problems [καθ' ἑκαστον], but of universal truths [καθ' ὅλου]. That is, a comprehensive answer that contains the solution to as many questions or riddles as possible—reducing, in other words, as many phenomena as possible into fewer explanations. Therefore, it is important here to follow how this journey unfolds in his philosophy.

This opening phrase is key: it means that all humans have a natural inclination toward knowledge, a tendency to learn in order to resolve their uncertainties. This is the primary prerequisite. Without it, any discussion about knowledge as a goal would be meaningless. Humans experience wonder, formulate and pose questions to themselves—since there is no other audience—hypothesize, and then attempt to answer, sometimes through myths, religions, much later through sciences, and occasionally through a combination of all of the above. What is particularly significant here is that Aristotle, with the pronoun

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or less apart from action. And happiness is thought to depend on leisure; translated by Ross W. D., Batoche Books, Kitchener, 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, translated by Ross W. D., Book A, Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1924.

"all" [Πάντες]—in contrast to Plato, who perceives philosophical and scientific discourse as the privilege or capability of a very specific group (namely, the first category of people he describes in *The Republic*)—considers this power of decoding and classifying experiential data to be common to all humans. Human nature, therefore, is deeply connected to knowledge. If we were to consider knowledge as an autonomous domain, independent of human existence and experience—a realm to which humans contribute rather than the other way around—then humans, or more precisely, human nature, is the bridge, the path leading to knowledge.

This path, as previously mentioned, is not, as in Plato's view, the concern of a select few, nor is it an ascent toward the heavens where the Good resides. Rather, it is an earthly process of daily engagement with the world, with external experience, through the senses.<sup>7</sup> This is precisely the meaning of the next phrase: An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses. The senses, after the natural inclination toward knowledge, are the second prerequisite for acquiring knowledge. Aristotle, with his well-known tendency to categorize things by importance, identifies vision as the most significant sense. That is, our natural desire for knowledge is proven by the appreciation we have for our senses, and the most important of them is sight. Sight provides us with knowledge, not through identification but through differentiation. In other words, by identifying differences between perceptions, we can highlight similarities. These similarities form the raw material for the creation of concepts. In the process of concept formation, we isolate the differing elements among comparable perceptions, focusing our analysis on similarities. For instance, among the available perceptions or memories of trees, we disregard individual differences—both between different tree species and among trees of the same species—and, by emphasizing

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<sup>7</sup> This difference, after all, between the two philosophers (knowledge through the ascent to the sky, the realm of the Good, in Plato; knowledge through the observation of the data of experience, in Aristotle), is also the true subject of the famous painting by Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino, known as *The School of Athens*, which, however, he himself signs with the phrase *Causarum Cognitio* (Seek Knowledge of Causes).



their common features (roots, woody trunk, branches, leaves), we form the concept of "tree." Aristotle calls this method of concept formation *inductive reasoning*.<sup>8</sup> Only through concepts, according to Aristotle, can humans attain knowledge of universals—that is, the type of knowledge we characterize as scientific.

### On People's Natural Disinterest in Knowing (Žižek)

Slavoj Žižek's theory of *eidénai* is deeply influenced by Lacan's Four Discourses theory. In her exceptional study on Lacan, Catherine Clément<sup>9</sup> speaks of the need to manage the Real.<sup>8</sup>

Clément draws a highly interesting parallel between the Real and the Freudian *Id*, considering them both excessive and uncontrollable. This correlation has significant implications. The Real is so terrifying that it is impossible to experience it without the necessary filtering function of the Symbolic. Otherwise, the attempt to comprehend it would lead to madness. In other words, the Symbolic serves to protect humans from a reality they are incapable of assimilating. Expanding our discussion beyond the scope of this article, we refer to the cases in which, according to Clément, an individual encounters the Real without the protective function of the Symbolic: madness and murder. Here, the Real has penetrated in such a terrifying way that it drives the subject to insanity or at least to a perception of things that borders on the consciousness of the impossible. For Lacan, as analyzed by Clément, the impossible is a part of the Real, even if it appears, by definition, to be outside it. It is true that the Real contains much of what we literally and

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<sup>8</sup> Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1139b For it, proceeds sometimes through induction and sometimes by syllogism. Now induction is the starting-point which knowledge even of the universal presupposes, while syllogism proceeds from universals. There are there for starting-points from which syllogism proceeds, which are not reached by syllogism; It is therefore by induction that they are acquired. translated by Ross W. D., Batoche Books, Kitchener, 1999.

<sup>9</sup> Catherine Clément., *The lives and legends of Jacques Lacan*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer, New York: Columbia University Press, 1983.

metaphorically consider and label as inconceivable. This is precisely why the Real, contrary to common intuition, cannot truly be described, written, or fully understood.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, through the inclusion of elements of the impossible and the unthinkable, Lacan arrives at a conception of the Real that cannot exist in our minds unless it has passed through the gates of madness, psychosis, or mania. Ultimately, what an individual experiences as the Real is what can be filtered through the function of the Symbolic and assimilated by their cognitive structures. However, even this process of symbolization has its limits—the vast majority of the Real will always remain beyond comprehension, as it is impossible for a being that is a mere fragment of the Real to fully grasp the very Real that encompasses it.<sup>11</sup>

The crucial point here is that, as mentioned earlier, Lacan's thought, excellently analyzed by Clément, deeply influences Slavoj Žižek and his own analyses of the problematic relationship between the Real and reality. Here, we will examine two of his works in which his theory of the Real (as what is) and (human) reality is thoroughly explored: *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* and *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates*. Regarding human—and specifically subjective—reality, and how it can be revealed as a

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<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche F., *The gay science*, Chapter 373 Would it not be rather probable that, conversely, precisely the most superficial and external aspect of existence-what is most apparent, its skin and sensualization-would be grasped first-and might even be the only thing that allowed itself to be grasped? Translated, with Commentary~ by Kaufmann W., Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, Inc. New York, 1974, p. 335.

Nietzsche F., *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Chapter 19 These "good men"-they are one and all moralized to the very depths and ruined and botched to all eternity as far as honesty is concerned: who among them could endure a single *truth* "about man"? Or, put more palpably: who among them could stand a *true* biography? Translated by Kaufmann W., and Hollingdalb R. J., Vintage Books a Division of Random House, Inc. New York, 1989, p. 138. Cf. Ojimba A. C., "Nietzsche's Intellectual Integrity and Metaphysical Comfort", *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, 9 (1), 2024, pp. 109-130. <https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.34391>

<sup>11</sup> Clément C., *The lives and legends of Jacques Lacan*, Translated by Arthur Goldhammer, New York Columbia University Press 1983, pp. 168-169.

deliberately distorted version of the Real, adapted to individual needs, psychological and intellectual structures, and the almost infinite ways in which the Real can be experienced, Žižek references Mary Shelley's classic novel *Frankenstein* in *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*.<sup>12</sup> To highlight the nightmarish relativity of the Real at an intersubjective level—and how even the slightest shift in perspective can transform an entire perception of what is assumed to be a single, objective Real—Žižek points to Shelley's groundbreaking literary decision in the middle of her book. As he notes, Shelley did something unprecedented in literature at the time (1818): she gave the monster a voice, allowing it to speak for itself and narrate the story from its own perspective. This choice aligns perfectly with a liberal, democratic, and anti-authoritarian stance, which holds that all viewpoints and interpretations should be heard. In the novel, Frankenstein's creature is no longer merely a "thing," a horrific object that no one dares to face, but a real subject with fully articulated thoughts and speech. As a result of this unprecedented subjectivization, the ultimate criminal now has the opportunity to present himself as the ultimate victim. What is ultimately revealed is that the monstrous murderer is, in reality, a deeply hurt and desperate individual, yearning for company and love.<sup>13</sup>

John Barth, in his remarkable -second- novel, *The End of the Road*, addresses the same theme—the extreme, almost monstrous subjectivism with which the singular Real is perceived, interpreted, and ultimately confronted—in a profoundly revelatory manner. However, for Barth, the Real is not dealt with through symbolization but through fiction, which, in many respects, serves the same purpose or is at least equivalent. His approach also carries strong existentialist undertones, introducing the American literary audience to this perspective. As Barth states: In life, there are no essentially major or minor characters. To that extent, all fiction and biography, and most historiography, are a lie. Everyone is necessarily the hero of his own life story. *Hamlet* could be told from Polonius's

<sup>12</sup> Žižek S., *Violence, six sideways Reflections*, Big Ideas/Small Books, Picador, New York, 2008.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

point of view and called *The Tragedy of Polonius, Lord Chamberlain of Denmark*. He didn't think he was a minor character in anything, I daresay. Or suppose you're an usher in a wedding. From the groom's viewpoint he's the major character; the others play supporting parts, even the bride. From your viewpoint, though, the wedding is a minor episode in the very interesting history of *your* life, and the bride and groom both are minor figures. What you've done is choose to *play the part* of a minor character: it can be pleasant for you to *pretend to be* less important than you know you are, as Odysseus does when he disguises as a swineherd. And every member of the congregation at the wedding sees himself as the major character, condescending to witness the spectacle. So, in this sense fiction isn't a lie at all, but a true representation of the distortion that everyone makes of life. Now, not only are we the heroes of our own life stories -- we're the ones who conceive the story, and give other people the essences of minor characters. But since no man's life story as a rule is ever one story with a coherent plot, we're always reconceiving just the sort of hero we are, and consequently just the sort of minor roles that other people are supposed to play. This is generally true. If any man displays almost the same character day in and day out, all day long, it's either because he has no imagination, like an actor who can play only one role, or because he has an imagination so comprehensive that he sees each particular situation of his life as an episode in some grand over-all plot, and can so distort the situations that the same type of hero can deal with them all. But this is most unusual. This kind of role-assigning is myth-making, and when it's done consciously or unconsciously for the purpose of aggrandizing or protecting your ego -- and it's probably done for this purpose all the time -- it becomes Mythotherapy. Here's the point: an immobility such as you experienced that time in Penn Station is possible only to a person who for some reason or other has ceased to participate in Mythotherapy. At that time on the bench, you were neither a major nor a minor character: you were no character at all. It's because this has happened once that it's necessary for me to explain to you something that comes quite naturally to everyone else. It's like teaching a paralytic how to

walk again. Now many crises in people's lives occur because the hero role that they've assumed for one situation or set of situations no longer applies to some new situation that comes up, or -- the same thing in effect -- because they haven't the imagination to distort the new situation to fit their old role. This happens to parents, for instance, when their children grow older, and to lovers when one of them begins to dislike the other. If the new situation is too overpowering to ignore, and they can't find a mask to meet it with, they may become schizophrenic -- a last-resort mask -- or simply shattered.<sup>14</sup>

From one perspective, the entire *noir* tradition in cinema and literature follows precisely this line of giving voice—much like Shelley did in *Frankenstein*—to the main character, allowing us to delve into their soul and mind. The significant caveat, of course, is that this protagonist usually operates mostly at the limits of illegality, never fully crossing the line—at least not without some major moral justification, such as protecting a vulnerable woman (*Drive* (2011), *Blade Runner* (1982)).

Anthony Burgess and Stanley Kubrick similarly follow this noir tradition in *A Clockwork Orange*, giving the protagonist-anti-hero Alex the stage to present events from his own perspective—calmly, coldly, without hesitation, dilemmas, or remorse. Just as Nabokov does the same with Humbert in *Invitation of a Beulah*—though Kubrick does not follow his adaptation. The audience is free to challenge Alex's words while watching the film. The way a criminal perceives himself and his actions is a fascinating theme in literature, theater, and cinema, masterfully explored by Patty Jenkins in *Monster* (2003). The same can, under certain conditions, apply to life. Countless are the interviews we have watched of people who have repeatedly committed crimes, and often with great interest. What sparks our curiosity is what these people say about themselves and their actions—what explanations, in other words, they offer. It is the moment when the genius, the fool, the naïve, the villain, the paranoid, the liar, the coward are revealed.

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<sup>14</sup> Barth John., *The End of the road*, Avon Books, A division of The Hearst Corporation 959 Eighth Avenue New York. 1958.

Returning to Žižek, the Slovenian thinker points out that when Svetlana Stalin emigrated to the United States in the 1960s, she wrote memoirs portraying her father, Joseph Stalin, as a loving father and compassionate leader, shifting the blame for most of his crimes onto his corrupt associates, especially Lavrentiy Beria. With a touch of humor, Žižek notes that later, Beria's son, Sergo, wrote a biography of his father, depicting him similarly as a devoted family man who merely followed Stalin's orders while secretly trying to limit the destruction. Žižek cites Hannah Arendt to argue that figures like Stalin were not embodiments of absolute evil, as Erich Fromm suggested<sup>15</sup>, since the gap between their self-perception and the horror of their actions was vast. The experience that we have of our lives from within, the story we tell ourselves about ourselves in order to account for what we are doing, is fundamentally a lie- the truth lies outside, in what we do.<sup>16</sup> The extent to which the distorting action of our eyes can reach is shown in the following quote by Žižek: Isn't it strange that the same soldier who slaughtered innocent civilians was ready to sacrifice his life for his unit? That the commander who ordered the shooting of hostages can that same evening write a letter to his family full of sincere love? This limitation of our ethical concern to a narrow circle seems to run counter to our spontaneous insight that we are all humans, with the same basic hopes, fears, and pains, and therefore the same justified claim to respect and dignity.<sup>17</sup> Žižek continues: refusing the same basic ethical rights to those outside our community as to those inside it is something that does not come naturally to a human being. It is a violation of our spontaneous ethical proclivity. It involves brutal repression and self-denial.<sup>18</sup> So, in relation to the question we posed—how is it possible for a person not to feel any guilt, even for the most heinous actions—the answer is directly linked to whether that person is aware of their actions.

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<sup>15</sup> Fromm E., *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, Chicago, San Francisco, 1973.

<sup>16</sup> Žižek S., *Violence, six sideways Reflections*, Big Ideas/Small Books, Picador, New York, 2008, p. 47.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

If this awareness is selective, as in the case of Svetlana Stalin, then we should not be surprised that in *The Zone of Interest*, the wife of the commander of the Auschwitz Concentration Camp, Hedwig Höss (Sandra Hüller), completely indifferent to what is happening at her husband's "work" just a few dozen meters away, experiences her life in their rather luxurious home as a paradise she doesn't want to leave under any circumstances.

Žižek does not directly challenge the philosophical tradition of Plato and Aristotle<sup>19</sup> regarding *eidénai* (knowing), but he emphasizes that ... the real event, the very dimension of the Real, was not in the immediate reality of the violent events....<sup>20</sup> This means that the Real and reality are—often—two entirely different things. Distancing is essentially the mental process that intervenes between these two spheres. It is a process that, to some extent, characterizes all of us—and, of course, even more so, serial criminals who feel completely at ease with their actions, as well as the thoughtless—such as the case of the commander's wife in *The Zone of Interest*—who, whether demonstratively or not, are capable of ignoring the monstrous aspect of a certain part of Reality.

Žižek refers to the example of the Soviet Union, which inspired many Westerners and fueled their hopes for the construction of a new world: The Soviet experience : "building socialism in one country" certainly did cumulate misery and atrocity," but it nevertheless used enthusiasm in the heart of the spectators (who are not themselves caught up in it).<sup>21</sup> This means that, in order for admirers of the Soviet project to be inspired by its vision, they had to overlook significant parameters that would render the entire endeavor of dubious effectiveness and ultimately questionable morality. The ethical

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<sup>19</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 982b12-22, For it is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize; they wondered originally at the obvious difficulties, then advanced little and stated difficulties about the greater matters [...] And a man who is puzzled and wonders thinks himself ignorant [...]; therefore, since they philosophized order to escape from ignorance, evidently, they were pursuing science in order to know, and not for any utilitarian end.

<sup>20</sup> Žižek S., *Violence, six sideways Reflections*, p. 52.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

system proposed by the Soviet Union required devotion and, in part, the disregard of certain collateral phenomena that could be considered crimes.

This is what Lawrence Durrell articulates in *The Alexandria Quartet*: History sanctions everything, pardons everything - even what we do not pardon ourselves.<sup>22</sup> Or what Arthur Koestler points out in his much-discussed book, *Darkness at Noon*: Had not history always been an inhumane, unscrupulous builder, mixing its mortar of lies, blood and mud? [...] He has discovered a conscience, and a conscience renders one as unfit for the revolution as a double chin. [...] My point is this, one may not regard the world as a sort of metaphysical brothel for emotions. That is the first commandment for us. Sympathy, conscience, disgust, despair, repentance, and atonement are for us repellent debauchery. [...] The greatest temptation for the like of us is: to renounce violence, to repent, to make peace with oneself. Most great revolutionaries fell before this temptation... [...] The temptations of God were always more dangerous for mankind than those of Satan. As long as chaos dominates the world, God is an anachronism; and every compromise with one's own conscience is perfidy. [...] ... sell oneself to one's own conscience is to abandon mankind. History is a priori amoral; it has no conscience. To want to conduct history according to the maxims of the Sunday school means to leave everything as it is. [...] In the opposite camp they are not so scrupulous. [...] Such peculiar birds as you are found only in the trees of revolution. [...] Truth is what is useful to humanity, falsehood what is harmful.<sup>23</sup>

Žižek argues that all ethical systems fundamentally require such an act of overlooking, or distancing, or, as psychoanalysts would say: *repression*. What would we have to say, he wonders—quite rightly—about the animals that are slaughtered for us to eat? Who among us could continue eating meat if they first visited a pig farm, where these unfortunate creatures spend their lives half-blind, unable even to walk, fattened up

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<sup>22</sup> Darrell L., *The Alexandria Quartet*, Klea, edit Faber and Faber, 2005, p. 848.

<sup>23</sup> Koestler A., *Darkness at noon*, translated by Daphne Hardy, Bantam Books, New York – Toronto – London – Sydney Auckland, 1968.



merely to be slaughtered? Even if some would continue, it is certain that they would only do so by first managing to forget what they had seen, in an act of suspending their own perception. This forgetting entails a gesture of what is called fetishist disavowal: "I know, but I don't want to know that I know, so I don't know." I know it, but I refuse to fully assume the consequences of this knowledge, so that I can continue acting as if I don't know it.<sup>24</sup> At one point, Kubrick told journalist Robert Ginna (regarding the ambiguity in *2001: A Space Odyssey*): Nobody likes to be told anything. Take Dostoyevsky. It's awfully difficult to say what he felt about any of his characters. I would say ambiguity is the end product of avoiding superficial, pat truths.<sup>25</sup> Obviously, there is a logical inconsistency in such a stance, especially from a moral perspective. How can I overlook some of the consequences of my actions? Is such a thing even possible? Žižek tells us that questioning this contradiction—this ethical system that generates ethical problems in itself—is not the proper philosophical stance. On the contrary, what appears to be an inconsistency, a failure to realize the full consequences of our ethical position, is actually the very condition that allows us to adopt such an ethical stance in the first place. What if such an exclusion of some form of otherness from the scope of our ethical concerns is consubstantial with the very founding gesture of ethical universality, so that the more universal our explicit ethics is, the more brutal the underlying exclusion is?<sup>26</sup>

Žižek analyzes this critical relationship between reality and the Real in a particularly interesting way in his work *Welcome to the Desert of the Real! Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates*.<sup>27</sup> Citing what Badiou calls a "passion for the Real," Žižek identifies the great difference between the 20th century and the one before it: the 20th century's desire to actualize the New Order by setting aside or demystifying the

<sup>24</sup> Žižek S., *Violence, six sideways Reflections*, p. 53.

<sup>25</sup> *The Artist Speaks for Himself*, by Robert Emmett Ginna, first published by Entertainment Weekly, 1999.

<sup>26</sup> Žižek S., *Violence, six sideways Reflections*, p. 54.

<sup>27</sup> Žižek S., *Welcome to the Desert of the Real! Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates*, First published by Verso 2002.

utopian ideals of the past. The ultimate and defining moment of the twentieth century was the direct experience of the Real as opposed to everyday social reality - the Real in its extreme violence as the price to be paid for peeling off the deceptive layers of reality.<sup>28</sup>

This is the raw realism of the 20th century, or at least the attempt at raw realism. Žižek continues: In the trenches of World War I, Ernst Jiinger was already celebrating face-to-face combat as the authentic intersubjective encounter: authenticity resides in the act of violent transgression, from the Lacanian Real - the Thing Antigone confronts when she violates the order of the City - to the Bataillean excess.<sup>29</sup> However, in today's Western world, reality, as Žižek defines it, lacks its hard core; it is a rather virtual, theatrical reality. On today's market, he says, we find a whole series of products deprived of their malignant properties: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol. [...] And the list goes on: what about virtual sex as sex without sex, the Colin Powell doctrine of warfare with no casualties (on our side, of course) as warfare without warfare, the contemporary redefinition of politics as the art of expert administration, that is, as politics without politics, up to today's tolerant liberal multiculturalism as an experience of the Other deprived of its Otherness (the idealized Other who dances fascinating dances and has an ecologically sound holistic approach to reality, while practices like wife beating remain out of sight)?<sup>30</sup> Virtual Reality simply generalizes this process of offering a product deprived of its essence: it provides reality itself, stripped of its essence, of the hard, resistant core of the Real—just as decaffeinated coffee has the smell and taste of real coffee without actually being real coffee, so too is Virtual Reality experienced as reality without actually being real.<sup>31</sup>

What interests us most here is the fact that this blending or convergence of virtual reality with Real reality ultimately abolishes Real reality itself. Žižek brings up the example of

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p.p. 5-6.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p.p. 11-12.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

television coverage of the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> as a characteristic case of the abolition of Real reality through its visualization—or, more precisely, through experiencing Real reality as virtual. For the overwhelming majority of people, the collapse of the Twin Towers was an event on their television screens: people, in endlessly repeated footage, running frantically toward the camera with a massive cloud of smoke behind them from the crumbling skyscrapers. ... was not the framing of the shot itself reminiscent of spectacular shots in catastrophe movies, a special effect which outdid all others, since -as Jeremy Bentham knew - reality is the best appearance of itself?<sup>32</sup>

But in what, precisely, does the visualization of the reality of the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> consist, beyond the obvious impact of their being recorded by television cameras? Žižek argues that this is a prime example of witnessing a reality from which its hard core was missing. The erasure of horror continued, as the Slovenian philosopher observes, even after the collapse of the Twin Towers. While the number of victims-3,000- is repeated all the time, it is surprising how little of the actual carnage we see - no dismembered bodies, no blood, no desperate faces of dying people . . . in clear contrast to reporting on Third World catastrophes, where the whole point is to produce a scoop of some gruesome detail: Somalis dying of hunger, raped Bosnian women~ men with their throats cut. These shots are always accompanied by an advance warning that 'some of the images you will see are extremely graphic and may upset children'- a warning which we never heard in the reports on the WTC collapse.<sup>33</sup>

Similarly, just as Žižek remarks on how little of the actual massacre we see at the Twin Towers—essentially no blood—it is equally striking in the film *The Zone of Interest* that the horror of the concentration camp is never directly depicted. There is not a single shot from inside the camp, except for one contre-plongée (low-angle) shot of the camp commander, Rudolf Höss, with only the sky in the background. Is this not yet further proof, Žižek wonders, of how, even in this tragic

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

moment, the distance which separates Us from Them, from their reality, is maintained: the real horror happens *there*, not *here*.<sup>34</sup>

With all this, we arrive at *The Zone of Interest* (2023), a film by Jonathan Glazer starring Christian Friedel (Rudolf Höss) and Sandra Hüller (Hedwig Höss), based on the novel of the same name by Martin Louis Amis (2014). Both the book and the film are based on real events that took place during World War II at the infamous Auschwitz. In the film, the very title (*Interessengebiet*) serves a dual role: on the one hand, it is the euphemistic phrase the Nazis used to refer to the site of the suffering of thousands of Jewish prisoners of Nazi Germany, as well as the surrounding area; on the other, it hints at a selective perception of the Real—focusing only on certain aspects of it in order to construct a reality that resembles a psychotic distortion, refraction, or hallucination.

But let's start from the beginning. It is 1943 in Nazi Germany, specifically in the home of Auschwitz's commandant, Rudolf Höss, where he lives with his wife and their four children. Let's take a moment to examine the masterful way in which Jonathan Glazer reveals the true setting of the film. Initially, we see an idyllic shot—like something out of a Renaissance painting—of a family bathing in a calm river, with the only disturbance being the constant hum suggesting the operation of a nearby factory. Then comes a nighttime shot of the house, framed tightly enough to provide limited visual information beyond the house's features. Only in the next (morning) shot, when the camera is positioned across the courtyard, do we finally see that at the end of the yard there is a wall topped with barbed wire—indicating the presence of a camp right next door.

Even more astonishing is the way the director leads us to this realization. With masterful precision, he shifts the focus inside the house, then to the garden, first to the wife and the household staff, and later to the wife's mother, who arrives to visit and is joyfully welcomed by the family. Through this gradual buildup, Glazer delays the revelation of the horror just

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

a little longer. After all, the calm faces of everyone involved give no indication of something sinister.

Early in the morning, the children blindfold their father to surprise him with a birthday gift -a canoe. Immediately afterwards, the maid calls the children to get ready for school, and the father leaves for work, just like millions of others at that hour. Two ragged men, seemingly prisoners, bring carts of supplies for the house. One maid receives the supplies, while another hangs clothes on the line. This is the everyday routine of a large middle-class family.

Sixteen minutes have already passed before we finally see three men entering the house, accompanied by Höss—one of them in uniform—giving us our first opportunity to grasp what is actually happening. The women in the kitchen chat casually about “women’s matters,” while in Höss’s office, the men discuss “men’s matters” related to the camp. One of the visitors explains to Lieutenant Colonel Höss how a new furnace works—likely to be installed at the camp. But rather than referring to the transportation and cremation of prisoners’ corpses, he speaks of “cargo” and “pieces,” as if dealing with objects.

However, Höss does not appear fully focused on “work.” Something else seems to be occupying his mind. It takes nearly half an hour of film before we learn who Höss truly is, what he has done so far, and the situation he is facing. Moreover, it is his wife’s reaction to this situation that will ultimately reveal the meaning of the film’s title in the mind of its creator.

The next morning, through a letter from regional governor Fritz Bracht to Martin Bormann, the head of the Nazi Party Chancellery, we learn that Höss is not merely the commandant of this hellish place but also its true architect and mastermind. As stated in the letter, Höss has already “worked hard” for four years, accomplishing “great work” with “unprecedented results.” The governor requests that Bormann appeal directly to Hitler to cancel Höss’s reassignment to a clearly inferior position as deputy director of a similar camp in Berlin. This is something Höss’s family is evidently unaware of. And this is precisely what has been troubling him from the beginning.

Between this revelation and the moment Höss informs his wife, Hedwig, about his impending transfer, the arrival of her mother takes place. The elderly woman is warmly received, and her presence serves to develop the film's theme on two levels: first, it allows the director to intensify Hedwig's "happiness," making the moment of her husband's announcement even more difficult; second, it provides an opportunity to showcase the only truly sane response to the surrounding horror.

Hedwig Höss, filled with joy and pride, shows her mother around the garden in a slow, sideways tracking shot reminiscent of Kubrick and Tarkovsky. Yes, she lives in a beautiful, comfortable house with servants at her disposal, a large and well-maintained garden with stunning flowers and organic vegetables, a greenhouse, and a swimming pool. A little farther away, there is not, of course, the camp of horror but the river where they can bathe. Yes, it is paradise, and she is utterly happy. What does Rudi call her? The *queen of Auschwitz!* And, of course, she cannot even imagine having to leave all this behind.

The elderly woman is indeed impressed by the garden, but as she walks through it, she occasionally glances at the camp's wall. When the tour reaches its midpoint, she speaks again. She seems somewhat aware, or at least suspicious: *Is that the camp's wall?* she asks, seemingly rhetorically. *Yes, it is,* comes the confirmation. And immediately: *We planted more vines at the back so that, as they grow, they will cover it.* It is well known that the Nazis had long-term, as well as grand, plans. They had come to stay.

Hedwig then turns her back to the wall, attempting to end the conversation there. But the elderly woman has not yet said her final words. "*Perhaps Esther Silberman is in there*", she suggests. "*Who is that?*" Hedwig asks, perplexed. We soon learn: she was the woman who used to clean their family home and read books to them—hinting that Hedwig's family was likely illiterate. The elderly woman does not seem particularly surprised or even deeply disturbed by this thought. Her next words reflect the views of the average – politically ignorant – German voter of the Nazi party: "*God only knows what they*

were up to. *Bolshevik things, Jewish things*.' "Yes, yes," Hedwig agrees. And then another travelling shot for the continuation of the garden. A gunshot is heard in the background, momentarily distracting the elderly woman, though not Esther. She is too busy tending to the dog. The next shot is yet another masterpiece: the camera frames, in successive close-ups, the flowers, while from behind the house come not the buzzing of insects, as one would expect in such shots, but the threatening voices (of officers) and the screams of pain and despair (of prisoners) from an incident unfolding inside the camp. The final framing slowly dissolves into a deep red model, strongly reminiscent of *A Clockwork Orange* by Kubrick—red from real, not fictional, blood.

However, the matter does not truly end there. The elderly woman will have the chance to realize, by the following afternoon, what is roughly happening on the other side of the wall. She has fallen asleep on one of the loungers in the garden when smoke—likely from burning flesh—and gunshots force her to wake up abruptly. And that night, almost secretly peeking from the curtain of her room towards the camp across, she has already made her decision: she quietly gathers her things and leaves in the dead of night, without informing anyone, turning her back on the madness of the Höss family.

In what seems to be the next day, or at least a holiday—since the yard is full of children, presumably from friendly couples—Höss announces the news to his wife. They must leave, as he was informed a week ago that he is being transferred to Uraniemburg (a concentration camp near Berlin), where he will assume the position of Deputy Director. Hedwig is initially stunned, then furious, demanding an explanation. Höss—the terror of Auschwitz—stoically endures his wife's outburst, understanding her distress and disappointment. But there are no explanations, nor any way to avoid the transfer.

In the next scene, this time with the river as a backdrop, Glazer handles the subject with masterful finesse. Höss stands at the edge of the small pier, gazing at the horizon beyond the river. He is disappointed, and it shows, but he must come to terms with the decision. Hedwig softens, and the couple has the opportunity to discuss the situation calmly and "civilly"

against the romantic backdrop of the river, making decisions about their future.

Hedwig tells her all-powerful and utterly unscrupulous husband that she will not follow him. "*I will stay here to raise the children. They will have to drag me away from here!*" she declares firmly. Höss—one of the most infamous Nazi criminals—though disappointed that his wife is not joining him, once again accepts her decision with stoicism. "*This is our home, Rudolf. We live just as we always dreamed!*" "*In the East,*" says Hitler, "*is our Lebensraum (living space).*" And, pointing toward the house: "*That is our Lebensraum!*" Realizing that her husband has already consented, she relaxes even further. "*I will miss you,*" she says and bursts into tears. Höss briefly takes her hand to comfort her and then leaves.

Rarely does one encounter such a scene in cinema—one of pure, terrifying irony. The more *human* the couple's conflict appears, the more *civilized* their resolution, the more repulsive their agreement becomes. What kind of person is this—Hedwig—who fights tooth and nail not to leave a place that reeks of blood and burnt flesh, a hellhole that has already surpassed the limits of all brutality?

Since the rest of the film revolves around the issue of Höss's reinstatement, further development of the subject is beyond the scope of this article. However, there is one point worth noting. When the high-ranking officer, likely a general, announces to Höss the final decision that he will remain as commandant at Auschwitz, we finally learn the reason behind his initial removal. In a conversation between the general and the younger officer, immediately after their meeting with Höss, the general reassures him: "*Calm down, he won't send them all up the chimney. You'll have the workers you need.*"

This implies that Höss was removed because, even by Nazi standards, he was so ruthless, so bloodthirsty, that his presence there became impractical and ultimately unprofitable for the country's wartime economy.



## Epilogue

In this article, we have attempted to outline what we consider to be the central theme of *The Zone of Interest*: the selective perception of Reality and the mechanisms that make it possible. The film's uniqueness, compared to the hundreds of others with a similar subject—the atrocities of the Nazis—lies precisely in this fragmented perception of Reality and the process of shaping a reality for private use.

Moreover, the way the film's creator approaches the subject -the cinematic narrative- mirrors the way its protagonists think. It remains discreet in its depiction, except in the case of Höss's vomiting near the end of the film. However, this is likely due to the anxiety of returning to his position and home, rather than a Freudian-model<sup>35</sup> hysterical repression of an overwhelming reality.

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ΙΩΑΝΝΗΣ ΜΗΤΡΟΥ

# PERFORMANCE ART

*ασυνείδητο, σώμα,  
παραστασιακή πράξη*

ΕΚΔΟΣΕΙΣ ΜΠΑΡΜΠΟΥΝΑΚΗΣ

**Influence and Preservation  
- Utilisation of Human Resources protecting  
Tangible Cultural Heritage, supported by the  
Ministry of Culture in Greece**

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**Abstract:** Cultural Heritage defines a country. The preservation of Cultural Heritage is linked to the principles it has as a country and as a society. Citizens, based on these values, feel safe and stable. Tangible cultural assets are physical objects or structures that have artistic, historical or cultural significance. In Greece, according to the law, the protection and preservation of Cultural Heritage is assigned to the Ministry of Culture. The responsibility for achieving this goal lies entirely with the Ministry. By extension, the burden of this responsibility falls on the employees of the Ministry and its services throughout the territory. This study investigates the influence and protection of Tangible Cultural Heritage through the utilisation of Human Resources. The qualitative research tools of questionnaires are combined in

the research, so as to explore the contribution of Human Resources to the protection of culture. The research sample consisted of employees of the Ministry of Culture in Greece who work to preserve the Cultural Heritage. The study utilised 603 anonymous Greek respondents. It also involved a survey that took place online using Google Forms. SPSS software was used to process and analyse the primary data. These findings provide valuable insights for the Ministry of Culture and its directors to better support and sustain Tangible Cultural Heritage by leveraging Human Resources, to develop partnerships with institutions and citizens using innovations, while also further expanding the understanding of the need to utilize staff and external factors, as on this issue limited research has been conducted.

**Keywords:** *Cultural Heritage; Human Resources Management; Preservation; Protection; Tangible Cultural Heritage*

## 1. Introduction

Cultural heritage is a link to the past. It also offers a sense of identity and continuity for current and future generations. Preserving cultural heritage is relevant in many contexts. It links communities to their past. It fosters a sense of identity and belonging among individuals and communities, reinforcing cultural pride (Karjalainen, 2020). It is about recognizing the distinctive path the ancestors of communities walked to shape their present and then towards the future.

Cultural heritage monuments are invaluable educational resources that enhance cultural literacy and promote knowledge and appreciation of diverse cultures and histories (Szczepanowska, 2013; Price et al., 2016). Each culture has its unique modes of expression, belief systems and values. It also leads to the rich diversity of the global human family while demonstrating its lineage tracing back through the ages.

Its preservation can contribute remarkably to community and peacebuilding, local economy boost, environmental sustainability, and promote intercultural dialogue (Szczepanowska, 2013; Price et al., 2016).

Tangible cultural heritage is of historical significance. These assets serve as a physical record of human history (De Paolis et al., 2022; Havinga et al., 2020). Many researchers (Pai et

al., 2025; Halkos et al.,2024) agree that the preservation of tangible cultural heritage is an important factor and is directly linked to society. Its protection is influenced by using human resources effectively in the Ministry of Culture. Human capital utilization brings the best possible results. According to Papalexandri, N. and Bouradas, D. (Papalexandri et al., 2016), Human Resources Management, as a documentation, is defined as the administrative function that implements, supervises and studies a set of activities and actions that are directly and closely linked to the development and evolution of the vital factor of an organization (Papalexandri et al., 2016). Moreover, the department's executives are connected, and it is useful to help the top management to meet and achieve the goals (Papalexandri et al., 2016).

Cultural heritage could be characterized as complex and multifaceted, which is also evident from its evolution over the years (Whitehead et al., 2019). It is essentially a type of heritage that no one disputes must be preserved at all costs (Gantzias, 2008). The term "cultural heritage" was first introduced by the UNESCO International Convention, which was signed in 1954 in Hague (Papapetropoulos, 2017). In a European context, cultural heritage has been defined by UNESCO, whose main role is to define the concept of "heritage" that will be acceptable to all states (Calligaro, 2014). UNESCO is internationally the largest organization for the protection of cultural heritage, which is why it has established two very basic axes around this issue (Papadopoulou et al.,2018).

Due to the great value of cultural heritage, efforts are constantly being made to protect it. In Greece, the methods of protecting cultural heritage are described in the Law. The goal is to create a combination between the protection of natural resources and cultural heritage (Papadopoulou et al.,2018). Special mention is also made of how monuments and archaeological sites are highlighted and interconnected, declaring all areas, which include buildings of historical, artistic and architectural value, as monuments and archaeological sites. The Ministry of Culture bears the burden of responsibility for protecting the Tangible Cultural Heritage. In addition, the issue of protecting and preserving it with the contribution of employees

presents particular interest and significant results. The human resources of the Ministry of Culture are actively involved in this project.

The research questions focus on whether the personnel of the Ministry of Culture in Greece are effectively utilized for the preservation of Tangible Cultural Heritage and whether its employees consider themselves to be contributing to its preservation. Additionally, the question of whether the institution develops permanent partnerships with citizens and other public institutions to preserve the Tangible Cultural Heritage was studied. Moreover, the limitations of the present study are discussed, and directions for future research in this field are suggested by the authors.

## **2 Results**

Research led us to very interesting results. The study examined the real value of the contribution and influence of human resources in the preservation and protection of Tangible Cultural Heritage in Greece. Additionally, research took place on the Internet, and the entire sample is among a set of employees of the Ministry of Culture. The employment category is related to whether the personnel of the Ministry of Culture in Greece are utilized effectively for the preservation of Tangible Cultural Heritage. Also, the position of responsibility is related to whether the employees of the public institution consider themselves to be contributing to the preservation of the Tangible Cultural Heritage.

According to the law in Greece, the protection of the Tangible Cultural Heritage is assigned to the Ministry of Culture, by extension, to the personnel who serve in it. The contribution of human resources is important and of primary importance (Han, 2019).

Furthermore, the research concluded that the employment category is related to whether the public institution develops permanent partnerships either with citizens or other public institutions to preserve Tangible Cultural Heritage (Tuan et al., 2008). Structures of architectural and historical value

(churches, temples, castles, and ancient ruins); artifacts from the past (tools, pottery, clothing, and jewelry) and archaeological sites (burial grounds, ceremonial sites, and settlements) are some of the most common examples of tangible assets of a community or society. Citizens are aware. They honor and love the country's heritage. So, they are available and cooperative so that protection becomes a goal and achievement.

### **3 Discussion**

#### **3.1 Human resource management**

Human Resources Management, depending on the organization's size, presence and objectives, is an integral function that brings together a series of important and special activities that have as their central axis the management of human resources and the human factor.

##### **3.1.1 Defining Human Resources Management**

Human Resource Management as a term is the function of an organization that deals with the attraction and training of its potential, its evaluation and reward, having as its guiding principle the labor relations and the health, safety and justice that exists within the organization and considering the person - the entity - each unit as the most important factor in achieving and fulfilling these goals of the organization (Samouilidis et al., 1995).

One of the main goals is improving the organization's performance and competitiveness in the labor market and society. The development of the production process and the continuous improvement of the quality of its results is a constant will, motivation and commitment of the organization itself. Also, the supervision of the observance of legal and labor relations is a primary issue that is taken care of and set by the organization for its good and orderly operation.



Human Resources Management, as documentation, is defined as the administrative function that implements, supervises and studies a set of activities and actions that are directly and closely linked to the development and evolution of the vital factor of an organization (Papalexandri et al., 2016). Also, the practices adopted by the organization must be in line with its respective strategy. Finally, the department's executives are connected, and it is useful to help the top management to meet and achieve the goals of both the organization's effectiveness and social justice towards its employees (Papalexandri et al., 2016).

The process of creating a work environment that enables its staff to maximize their potential is called personnel management. It is a system that begins with the emergence of a job position and includes the creation of teams with the aim of their development and improvement through training and development programs (OECD, 2018).

Employee performance is one of the most important functions for the advancement of an organization. Managing their human resources is one of the most difficult challenges they are called upon to overcome. Within this context, management executives need to synchronize many different factors to achieve the desired result and help the organization differentiate itself and stand out from its other competitors. After all, the course of the organization itself depends mostly on the performance of its employees.

### **3.1.2 Factors influencing Human Resource Management internationally**

The different countries have differences in many ways, which influence the attractiveness of foreign investors in each country. Several factors that can influence human resource management in an international environment have been identified by global management researchers. Specifically, four main pillars, four factors, have been identified:

- the political–legal system,
- culture,

- the economic tax system and
- education – human capital (Terzidis et al., 2004).

Culture, defined as the set of important issues that binds the members of a community, is the most important factor influencing human resource management in a country where the organization's facilities are located. Mainly regarding issues of social or religious content, regarding the social environment and how it operates, as well as the ideals on which one is worth relying.

Human capital refers to the productive capabilities of employees, that is, the knowledge, skills and experiences that have an economic impact on the organization (Kourtoglou et al., 2024).

The laws of a particular country usually reflect social norms regarding how lawful behavior is defined. The political and legal system often dictates requirements on issues such as pay and raises, benefits or incentives and pharmaceutical benefits, and the bureaucratic procedures of hiring or even firing.

Differences in several economies can and do have a major impact on remuneration systems in international businesses, which seek to develop a system of international wages and rewards respectively that maintains cost controls, but at the same time makes it allows the local economy to enter the international arena of competition.

Several factors, such as the organization's international strategy and the local regulatory legal framework, the organization's institutions and shareholders themselves, local markets and national culture, influence the design of employee compensation packages. Human resource managers aim and try, using the best possible practices that are applied internationally, to balance the above factors with the constraints imposed by the local environment (Rasbury, 2008).

In conclusion, the differences that countries present between them directly affect the various types of human resource management systems. These systems need to be developed to address each specific situation appropriately. The extent to which these differences affect the organization is directly linked to how the same organization participates in international markets.

### 3.2 Cultural Heritage

As a concept, Cultural heritage, not only in the Old Continent, but also all over the world, could be described as complex and multi-faceted. This is also evident from its progress over the years. As a result, a plenitude of different dimensions and aspects is included (Whitehead et al., 2019).

As a term, cultural heritage refers to buildings, monuments, and spaces that have great anthropological and ethnological, but also scientific and archaeological value. It is essentially a type of heritage that no one disputes must be preserved at all costs, so that it can be passed on unscathed to future generations of people (Gantzias, 2008). It achieves this through Charters, Directives and International Resolutions, mainly of the last decades. Immediately after the end of World War II, states began to cooperate in order to be able to achieve the great task of preserving cultural heritage. This task was carried out with the valuable assistance of UNESCO to protect and respect it in cases of armed conflict (Calligaro, 2014).

At that time, the protection of cultural property during wars was also established (Papapetropoulos, 2017). The signing of this treaty came after the massive destruction of cultural property caused by World War II and after the intense concern about the destruction that was to come (Francioni, 2012; Konsola, 1995). UNESCO began to contribute greatly to the signing of various conventions, declarations and recommendations, which ultimately led to the existence of a common international law. Its great contribution to the preservation, exploitation and collection of cultural and natural heritage was also the preamble to the World Heritage Convention, which was signed in 1972. Moreover, this convention is one of the most important that have been signed to date (Rodwell, 2012).

According to the provisions of the World Heritage Convention, it is emphasized that it consists of three categories. The first includes monuments, such as architectural works, structures and elements of an archaeological nature, works of painting and sculpture, inscriptions, combinations of various features that have historical value, cave dwellings and of course

anything deemed worthy of protection in the context of science and art.

The second category includes various groups of buildings, such as separate or connected buildings, whose location and architecture have great value from a scientific, historical and artistic point of view, due to their homogeneity. Finally, the third category includes landscapes, such as natural or human creations, as well as areas in which there are archaeological sites of great aesthetic, historical, anthropological and ethnological value (UNESCO, 1972).

### **3.2.1 Cultural Heritage protection in Greece and internationally**

Due to the great value of cultural heritage, efforts are constantly being made to protect it. It is the totality of material manifestations of a community's heritage. These are what someone can see, touch, and experience directly

The great value of culture is pointed out. It is mentioned as one of the most important development resources. At the same time, it can be a framework through which can promote new business actions and work. To ensure maximum benefits for society, various measures have been established. They aim to protect and promote cultural heritage. (Papadopoulou et al., 2018).

Special mention is also made of how monuments and archaeological sites are highlighted and interconnected, declaring all areas, which include buildings of historical, artistic and architectural value, as monuments and archaeological sites. The so-called "Protection Zones" are also established for archaeological sites and monuments, and at the same time, their visitation and conservation are particularly promoted to achieve their harmonious integration into modern life and to upgrade environmental conditions.

However, the implementation of the program for the promotion of historical landscapes is also very important, as well as the promotion of the integration of protected monuments into the wider landscape to which they belong, so that the

natural character of the areas is highlighted simultaneously with the cultural element (Papadopoulou et al., 2018).

The location of cultural sites and infrastructures is also included in the protection framework. In this area, the provisions focus on ways to strengthen cultural infrastructure through the creation of new facilities that will have an international reach (Papadopoulou et al., 2018).

Additionally, there is a concern for the organization of culturally timeless routes. In order to do this, programs to organize cultural walks and visits to museums are promoted. These specific routes are directly related to the urban fabric. In other words, the programs are connected to cultural elements.

The first is actions to protect and utilize the world's cultural and natural heritage, and the second is to promote each culture (Papadopoulou et al., 2018). Their main technical advisor on the presence of political heritage is the International Council on Monuments and Sites, ICOMOS. This is a governmental and international organization which focuses on ways to promote methodology, technology, theory and information related to protection, but also to the promotion of historical monuments throughout the world (Papadopoulou et al., 2018). UNESCO and ICOMOS have established April 18 as World Heritage Day since 1983, to raise awareness among citizens around the world about its value. One of the best examples of actions to raise citizens' awareness of the value of cultural heritage is the "European Cultural Routes", as well as the program called "Europe, a Common Heritage", which is based on the effort to establish a common European cultural identity and on the protection of the environment, to raise citizens' awareness about it.

The European Union's actions also include the European Capital of Culture, an institution established in 1985, following a proposal by the then Minister of Culture, Melina Mercouri. The aim is to reach out to European people and, at the same time, to exploit the diversity of European cities. As far as Greece is concerned, the main state cultural body is the Ministry of Culture.

Regarding development and cultural policy, it focuses mainly on achieving the promotion and preservation of

cultural heritage, and of course, on the promotion of modern-day culture. Finally, it also undertakes the protection of archaeological monuments with the help of local communities. Regarding development and cultural policy, it focuses mainly on achieving the promotion and preservation of cultural heritage and, of course, on the promotion of modern-day culture. Finally, it also undertakes the protection of archaeological monuments with the help of local communities.

However, beyond the Ministry of Culture, the action of local and regional governments is also important, which offers valuable financial assistance, safeguarding and promoting the cultural monuments of each region. Of course, there are not only public bodies that are active in the cultural field, but also important associations, clubs, private cultural institutions, as well as banks' cultural institutions. A broader human narrative embodies the diversity of human expressions, beliefs and values.

### **3.2.2 Management of Tangible Cultural Heritage in Greece**

The management of Tangible Cultural Heritage in Greece is enshrined in the Greek Constitution, which is based on texts drawn up by European institutions and international organizations. In addition to this, there is the very important Trust Law, which is of great value, as it ensures the proper management of every archaeological project. The legal framework, whether directly or indirectly, concerns the protection and promotion of cultural heritage (Papageorgiou et al., 2010).

The most crucial legislative framework is, of course, Law 3028/2002, which can eliminate the integrated and mainly systematic management of cultural heritage. How the institutions and laws are implemented depends mainly on the respective bodies, whose role is very important initially for planning and then for the programming and implementation of cultural activities, so that any problems that arise can be successfully addressed. In Greece, most of the competent bodies belong to the state and present specific characteristics in terms of their legal form, how they manage cultural heritage, their autonomy and the implementation of actions (Korka, 2018; Papoulias, 2013).

The most important body that ensures the existence of strategic planning and planning is the Ministry of Culture. It also ensures that actions are implemented to highlight the cultural heritage of each era. At the same time, it also ensures the dissemination of modern culture. The Ministry of Culture includes the central service, supervised bodies that are responsible for managing cultural heritage, as well as regional services (Presidential Decree 131/2003).

Moreover, there is the International Council of Museums, with the Greek section ICOM, which was founded in 1983 and includes 500 members and organizations. Its main goal is to organize seminars, international conferences and scientific meetings, to publish basic manuals in the Greek language, to create archives and a library and generally to develop museology. Furthermore, it cooperates with all the Higher Educational Institutions of the country, but also abroad, as well as with many other institutions and organizations (International Council of Museums, 2025).

## **4 Materials and Methods**

### **4.1 Data Collection and Analysis**

The Tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage of any country is valuable. In Greece, its protection is basically the responsibility of the Ministry of Culture and, by extension, its employees. The objective of the research is to study the preservation and safeguarding of tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

The Ministry's Human Resources Management has a very important role. Initially, the employees of the Ministry of Culture of Greece and secondarily the ministry itself, in collaboration with other local or non-local bodies choose, in accordance with the laws, the methods and rigor to be adopted and determine the procedures for the protection of culture.

Table A1. Gender (of the sample).

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Men	173	28.7	28.7	28.7
Women	430	71.3	71.3	100.0
Total	603	100	100.0	

The study took place with an online questionnaire. In our research, 603 Greek employees took part. The entire sample consists of employees of the Ministry of Culture. The characteristics of the sample are presented in Table A1. We can see that the sample has 173 men and 430 women. The sample is made up of participants of various ages from 18 years and above. Female respondents accounted for 71.3% of the sample.

Also, the study engaged an online questionnaire, which had been taken place with Google Forms from the 1st of February 2024 until the 11th of March 2024. The answers were anonymous.

Objective methods and random sampling techniques were used to collect the sample, which is satisfactory. The questionnaire can provide predictions for the rest of the similar population as well (Morse et al., 2013).

Different scales to measure the variables were included in the questionnaire. The works of several authors were adapted to set it up. Most of the items were measured using a Likert scale, where 1 pointed out 'never' and 5 suggested 'always'. Research questions guiding this study were answered with editing by SPSS.

Table A2. Experience (in years) at the Ministry of Culture.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 1-9	97	16.1	16.1	16.1
10-18	124	20.6	20.6	36.7
19-27	243	40.3	40.3	76.9
28-36	127	21.1	21.1	98.0
<=37	12	2.0	2.0	100.0
Total	603	100.0	100.0	

According to Table A2 only 16.1% have been working for less than 9 years at the Ministry of Culture but the



overwhelming majority of 63.3% of the respondents have been working for more than 20 years.

Table A3. Central Service or Regional Service (of the Ministry of Culture).

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	123	20.4	20.4	20.4
	480	79.6	79.6	100.0
Total	603	100.0	100.0	

At the central service of the Ministry of Culture are working 20.4% of the respondents and most of them (79.6%) are working in Regional Service which are in each Prefecture of Greece.

Table A4. Employment Category (of the sample).

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	151	25.0	25.0	25.0
	No	452	75.0	75.0	100.0
Total		603	100.0	100.0	

Regarding the participants' employment category in cultural services, Table A3 shows that 25% of the participants hold a position of responsibility, while on the contrary, 75% do not.

## 4.2 Reliability Statistics

The research tool provides us with a set of variables that were studied. The original eighty-seven correlated variables had a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.939.

Table A5. Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of items
.939	87

A Cronbach's Alpha of 0.935 was presented by the final nineteen correlated variables. The tree-factor solution was clean. They explained 63,62% of the total variance.

Table A6. Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of items
.935	19

A high value of 0,880 had been presented with The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy. It used the Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

Table A7. KMO and Bartlett's Test

Mean		Variance
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy		.880
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx.Chi-Square	8382.377
	Df	171
	Sig.	.000

When evaluating the averages of the variables in the questions studied, it appears as a result that more than half of the Ministry of Culture employees who participated in the survey state that the staff is utilized and actively contributes to the preservation of tangible cultural heritage either as units or in collaboration with other public or private bodies.

Table A8. Scale Statistics

Mean	Variance	Std. Deviation	N of items
50.38	178.209	13.349	19

The results revealed three factors. The first factor presents the role of cooperating institutions and the collaboration of the Ministry of Culture in Greece and its employees with associations, local bodies and businesses for the preservation of Tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage. Secondly, it displays Human Resources and applied innovations. Therefore, it presents the collaboration of the Human Resources of the Ministry of Culture with institutions and citizens for the preservation of tangible cultural heritage using innovations.

The last factor exhibits the contribution of Human Resources to Cultural Heritage. Specifically, tangible and intangible

cultural heritage is highlighted by human resources who contribute to its promotion and visibility.

- The role of cooperating agencies (variance 47.58%),
- Human Resources and applied innovations (variance 10.04%) and
- The contribution of Human Resources to Cultural Heritage (variance 6.00%)

The first factor, the role of cooperating agencies, describes 47.58% with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.932, and the KMO had a high value of 0.869. In particular, it includes employees who believe that the Greek Ministry of Culture develops very good collaborations with non-governmental organisations, groups, associations and businesses for the preservation of Intangible Cultural Heritage. They also consider that they contribute a lot to the preservation of the Tangible Cultural Heritage. In addition, the cooperation of the employees with the local social agencies for the preservation of the material cultural heritage is considered satisfactory.

The second factor, Human Resources and applied innovations, describes 10.04% with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.843, and the KMO had a high value of 0.852. Especially employees who consider themselves to be utilised for the preservation of tangible cultural heritage and believe that their contribution is important. They also consider that the institution develops good partnerships with citizens and with other public bodies for the preservation of material cultural heritage. At the same time, these collaborations are functioning at a good to satisfactory level, and the organization is implementing innovative management and change programs to promote Cultural Heritage.

Finally, in the third factor, the contribution of Human Resources to Cultural Heritage, describes 6.00% with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.749, and the KMO had a value of 0.705. Particularly, it presents the employees who consider that the training and the monitoring of the training activities contribute to the promotion of cultural heritage as a central element. They also estimate that suitable human resources are sufficient for Cultural Heritage. In addition, they advocate that the staff is utilized in terms of highlighting both the Tangible and

Intangible Cultural Heritage and consider that as employees they contribute to its preservation.

### 4.3 Independence Test

The chi-square analysis of contingency tables, as early as 1949, is one of the most frequently used nonparametric procedures in psychology and the social sciences in general. According to D. Lewis and C. J. Burke (Lewis et al., 1949), researchers who used the chi-square test cited almost nine common errors made. Moreover, it offers an updated review of potential pitfalls when editing the chi-square test. It also examines supplementary and alternative approaches.

Firstly, the test investigated if employment category (responsibility position) is related to whether personnel of the Ministry of Culture in Greece are leveraged in the preservation of the Tangible Cultural Heritage. The null hypothesis was that the two variables were independent. H0: Employment category does not affect the fact that personnel are utilized in the preservation of the Tangible Cultural Heritage.

Table A9. Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	4.477 <sup>a</sup>	4	.345
Likelihood Ratio	4.319	4	.365
Linear-by-Linear Association	2.796	1	.095
N of Valid Cases	603		

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 6.51.

An alternative hypothesis was that these two variables are dependent. H1: Employment category affects the fact that personnel are utilized in the preservation of the Tangible Cultural Heritage. There is a correlation between employment category and the fact that personnel of the Ministry of Culture in Greece are utilized in the preservation of the Tangible Cultural Heritage, with a moderately strong and statistically significant relationship with prices ( $X^2=4.477$   $p<0.345$ ,  $V=0.086$ ).

Secondly, the test examined whether employment category (responsibility position) is related to whether employees of the

Ministry of Culture in Greece consider themselves contributing to the preservation of Tangible Cultural Heritage.

Table A10. Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	19.131 <sup>2</sup>	4	.001
Likelihood Ratio	20.676	4	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	14.869	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	603		

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 5.01.

The null hypothesis was that the two variables were independent. H0: employment category does not affect the fact that employees consider themselves contributing to the preservation of Tangible Cultural Heritage.

An alternative hypothesis was that these two variables are dependent. H1: Employment category affects the fact that employees consider themselves contributing to the preservation of Tangible Cultural Heritage.

There is a correlation between employment category and the fact that employees of the Ministry of Culture in Greece consider themselves contributing to the preservation of Tangible Cultural Heritage, with a moderately strong and statistically significant relationship with prices ( $X^2=19.131$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $V=0.178$ ).

As well, test examined if employment category (responsibility position) is related to whether the Ministry of Culture in Greece develops permanent partnerships with citizens with the aim of preserving Tangible Cultural Heritage.

Table A11. Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	7.550 <sup>2</sup>	4	.110
Likelihood Ratio	7.579	4	.097
Linear-by-Linear Association	2.693	1	.101
N of Valid Cases	603		

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 11.02.

The null hypothesis was that the two variables were independent. H0: employment category does not affect the fact that the Ministry of Culture develops permanent partnerships with citizens with the aim of preserving Tangible Cultural Heritage.

An alternative hypothesis was that these two variables are dependent. H1: Employment category affects the fact that the Ministry of Culture develops permanent partnerships with citizens with the aim of preserving Tangible Cultural Heritage. There is a correlation between employment category and the fact that the Ministry of Culture in Greece develops permanent partnerships with citizens intending to preserve Tangible Cultural Heritage, with a moderately strong and statistically significant relationship with prices ( $X^2=7.550$ ,  $p<0.110$ ,  $V=0.112$ ).

Finally, the research examined whether the employment category (responsibility position) is related to whether the Ministry of Culture in Greece develops permanent partnerships with other public institutions with the aim of preserving Tangible Cultural Heritage.

The null hypothesis was that the two variables were independent. H0: employment category does not affect the fact that the Ministry of Culture develops permanent partnerships with other public institutions with the aim of preserving Tangible Cultural Heritage.

Table A12. Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	10.189 <sup>a</sup>	4	.037
Likelihood Ratio	10.072	4	.039
Linear-by-Linear Association	3.327	1	.068
N of Valid Cases	603		

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 5.76.

An alternative hypothesis was that these two variables are dependent. H1: Employment category affects the fact that the Ministry of Culture develops permanent partnerships with other public institutions with the aim of preserving Tangible Cultural Heritage.

There is a correlation between employment category and the fact that the Ministry of Culture in Greece develops permanent partnerships with other public institutions with the aim of preserving Tangible Cultural Heritage, with a moderately strong and statistically significant relationship with prices ( $X^2=10.189$ ,  $p<0.037$ ,  $V=0.130$ ).

## 5 Conclusions

The research examined the real value of employees' contribution to the preservation of Tangible Cultural Heritage and the proper utilization of Human Resources among a set of employees of the Ministry of Culture. The Ministry of Culture bears the burden of responsibility for this protection. The human resources of the Ministry of Culture are actively involved in this project. This study confirms that this utilization, as well as the contribution of employees of the Ministry of Culture in Greece, play a crucial role in the promotion of Tangible Cultural Heritage. The promotion of cultural monuments and their effective management are not only influenced by the adequacy of human resources but also by the stable and effective collaborations of the organization with the local community and groups, and associations. The findings are in line with the literature emphasizing the importance of the contribution and utilization of personnel in the preservation of culture and its main elements internationally (Tuan et al., 2007; Theodosiadis, 2022).

The first application of this study was carried out on employees of the Ministry of Culture throughout Greece and from different employee specialties. Self-reported information was the primary source of data used in this study. Although it has various biases and limitations. Participants might answer in a way that they believe is positive or acceptable due to social desirability bias. That can have an impact on their self-reported metrics as well.

Despite its contribution, limitations are being in the research; most notably, it is limited to a specific group of employees of the Ministry of Culture of Greece. Different

educational and cultural backgrounds could provide distinctive perspectives on the elements that affect the emergence of Greek Cultural Heritage as a central element.

In the issue of the protection and preservation of Tangible Cultural Heritage from the perspective of workers has been emerged several findings have emerged from this study for future theoretical development efforts (Mendoza et al., 2023). Avenues for further investigation are created by this acknowledgement to confirm the results in many cultural contexts. Thus, our understanding of how different countries manifest with the aim of corresponding comparison is being augmented.

From a technical perspective, further studies, either with a sample targeted by employee speciality or with larger sample sizes, should be conducted. Future research could build on this work by investigating comparable approaches in various cultural and/or geographical contexts to increase the relevance of these findings. Finally, using mixed-method techniques should likely be considered by future studies to validate self-reported data and guarantee accuracy, in order to reduce limitations. Overall, future research could be based on the present findings. It could also advance a more comprehensive understanding of the variables affecting the preservation of cultural heritage in different situations and demographics while addressing the limitations.

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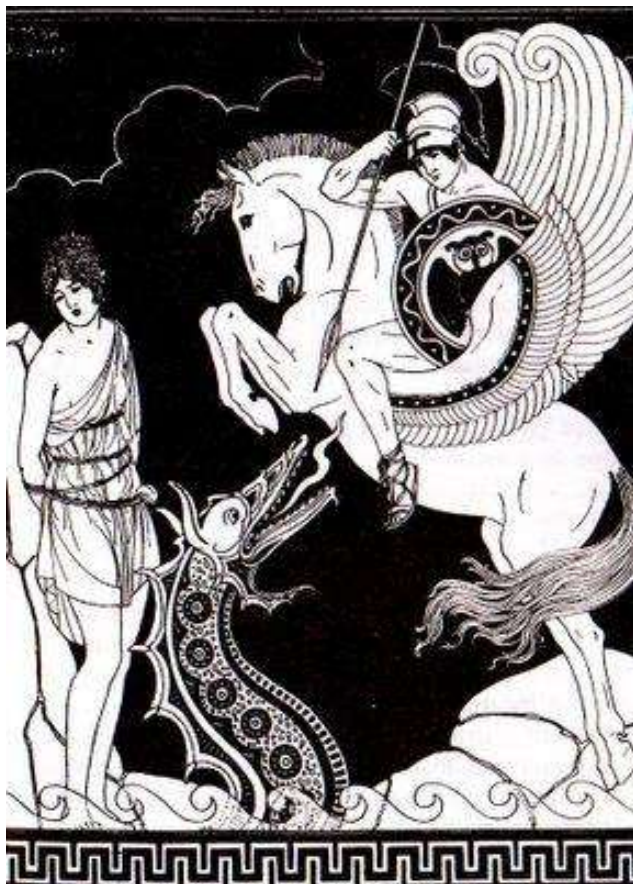
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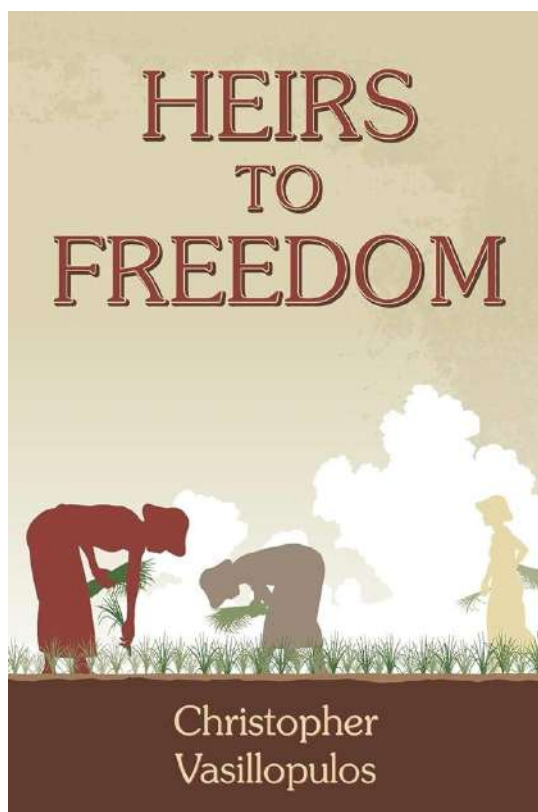
## *Philosophical Notes*





## *Heirs to Freedom*

Christopher Vasillopoulos,  
Dog Ear Publishing, Indianapolis 2014, pp. 452.



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It seems only proper that when writing about a novel, the first thing that must be explored is if this novel conveys any novel-ty at all or if its novelty is exhausted in the presence of just one more story. In the case of the *Heirs to Freedom*, there is a complete affirmation of this fact, which facilitates breaking the chain of our reading habits. So, what is surprisingly ‘novel’ about this novel? The first, unassuming answer could be that its novelty lies in its perspective, but one might reasonably argue against why exactly another perspective, in the vast and ruffled sea of other perspectives, would be such a valuable asset. Especially if, as for Derrida, what I, the reader, interpret as read in the text is the essential thing. That is, if my perspective is equal, if not superior, to the perspective of the writer/storyteller. In such a case, my perspective, the reader’s perspective, would become indispensable, with the vehemence of an unrestrained force. Cunningly, Professor Vasillopoulos has predicted that when he upholds through the lips of one of his heroes: “*We wish to communicate, and we wish not to be hurt by having the content of the message ridiculed or treated disrespectfully... So we wrap our message in ambiguity. In lieu of making as clear a statement as our abilities allow, which after all only rarely requires a Newton or a Locke, we scatter hints. These we hope will become a trail for the right investigator... If it doesn’t, nothing is lost, or rather, less is lost than if a clear rejection follows a clear message*”. Let us then try to decipher this message but let us do that as Derridean readers and also as investigators. To achieve this aim, I will temporarily undertake the attempt to highlight several aspects of the book which, in my estimation, will lead closer to what I would eventually rather call a mature, genuine and brilliant trip than a doubtful and obscure destination.

For the main character of the *Heirs of Freedom*, Gideon Gibson, this is a trip comparable with the trip of the Buddha, the enlightened one. Not from a metaphysical but mostly from a psychological and historical point of view. His meeting with the old stinky man dying near his beloved dog leads to a revelation like that of the young prince Gautama

when he first walked out of his protected life and palace. For Gideon the initial revelation is the pain of the black man and gradually, even more purely, that of the naturally distressful situation of every man, even the one who is seemingly happy and successful. The human condition, the problems and misfortunes, the agonies and the conflicts, the discord with what consists our ontological reality, bear the traits of a cosmic mishap, of an anomaly. Although men make endless efforts for the telos of eudaimonia, as Aristotle observantly assures us, and they try to shape chaos into order, their strife for security and order proves exactly this, how insecure their human life truly is. The Charleston of Gideon's time is nothing less than a case study for human psychology and for what human action aims at, therefore a diachronic, not only a certain time and place connection. In this context, a plethora of great discussions among the characters of the book is initiated in Gideon's Charleston, similar ones to the plenteous and glorious philosophical discussions in the symposia of ancient Athens. With the method of Socrates and Plato every argument can be visited and revisited and no conclusive theses are attempted, not because there cannot be any but because it is disrespectful to reality to say that it is you, the writer, who has full possession of the truth. Thus, the book does not waste our reading time with nebulous or, quite the contrary, despotic answers; it does not submit a doctrine; it does not fall in the temptation to preach. But it does a lot to educate us and it enhances our will to reach truth through search by our own means. Christopher remains an educator and it is evident that he has a true admiration for the virtues of the New World, for pragmatic men who embody these virtues, men capable of political friendship but also of deep and enduring emotions for their wives, their sons, their properties, and the community and institutions that surround them. Liberty and Prosperity become the new apostle-principles, opening the door for the next centuries, the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>, and the realization of a rapid progress on every level but not predicting the demoralization of the human being who initiated this progress. Although not one-sided at all, and although its "Russian side", in terms of the depth of



tragedy and of grandeur, cannot be even slightly neglected, this is also a genuinely American novel. But being American, it comes to belong to the whole western world and to comprise such a vigorous and unambiguous reference to its ideology and value system.

In this exquisitely dialectical confrontation within transformative historic events, parts of the early American history are lucidly becoming bare through the juxtaposition of many confronting ideas and points of view. Fostering frequently an ideology of progress and growth, this is more than a unique and very comprehensible reading of capitalism and of its later foundations; it brings to light characters that serve not only our curiosity to take a look at the time but at the essence of the New World. Gideon's son, Alexander, is such a model, as a prototype of the *Homo Economicus*. In a way, he is a subverted Marxist, as much as capitalism can be comprehended as a subverted form of Marxism, in the sense that it may, occasionally at least, still fail to recognize human value per se and be one that narrows man's existence down to economic terms. Alexander does not always fall in the trap; as a matter of fact, he stands out as the worthy son of a great father and he sustains the author's inner conviction that such men, pragmatic men, are capable for more than ploughing fields and hoping for piles of money. After all, property creates responsibilities, it makes you a man. And manhood takes precedence in this immensely motivating debate among the heroes of the particular novel. But how does this become possible or, better, why is it necessary?

Before we return to that point, it is imperative to expound the tremendously important relation between necessity and freedom, in the *Heirs of Freedom*, and how property belongs to that scheme. For Christopher Vasillopoulos, obligation, which is a form of necessity, does not bind you only; it proceeds dynamically to render you radically free. That is how you become an heir to freedom, by obligation. This is quite an excellent paradox: being an heir means the opportunity of a choice between obligation and no obligation, i.e. to accept the heritage, which here, in this case, is freedom. And what freedom would that be in a world of

such strife? It would be the ontological opportunity, not to say luxury (which would not be an overstatement whatsoever), to acquire the freedom of doing well (as in the sense of the ancient Greek “eu prattein”). Without obligation I would be a subhuman, a slave to my possessions. With obligation I can rise above it, consequently I can act well, freely and well. All is explained in the same context: not as self adulation but **as a way to be me**, as a way to attain rights to freedom. Love for my wife, my friends, my sons is deterministically connected with possession. I love them as they are mine. Same with things: I love my property as I gain from it, it is *my* (*my* as a derivative concept of *me*) possession and it brings me good things. Possession and identity lean close together. Both people and things can become possession. And possession, material or not, is dangerous because it can become the eventual possessor of the human owner, thus messing restrictively with his identity. My need can enslave me, where I would be thought to be free among my possessions; due to my need I become blind, confined, poor. So, this book has to turn, as it does, into a treatise on human love, love as need and as possession, love with the target of maturing and growing as freedom and identity.

In the issue of identity, being *me* is being a *man*, in the author’s conceptualization of the term. He firmly believes that men without privilege must be men of merit to be men at all. For Vasillopulos manhood is almost a synonym for nobility, not from a gender point of view, but used to denote the subjective source of action. Nonetheless, the author of this generously expressive book provides portraits of women (almost in Modigliani’s manner), who shine out their inner passion and tame the absurdness of human existence into a fully understandable, warm, magnificent and memorable landscape. The author’s focal point frequently regards mothers, whereas women who love/need their husbands and are equally loved/needed by them receive a persistent attention as well. Professor Vasillopulos brings us closer and closer to this secret of the human heart in many different pages, by pointing out that love as need leads you to

freedom, it relieves you from the burden of being a possession, by being also a master of yourself, your things and your people. That is how the everlasting controversy is resolved. By understanding relationships to such a great extent the particular novelist measures the chaotic abyss of the human need and reveals the abstruse character of human love. "*It is a "mutual possession"*" he writes. "*Between man and woman*". "*Free, happy and free, they belong*".

Since manhood is always at play, not to say at havoc, let us confront with a functional contradiction which is that, for heroes like Todd, who is black, to act like a man (in the above frame) is to act like a white man. Todd knows that he has no other means but to break violently the chains of the protection that he receives from Gideon and to rupture his connection with his quite prosperous present in order to retrieve the value that *naturally* should belong to him. His fierce denial of the "reality" of custom and law brings us to the realization, which I think Christopher stresses as most significant, that freedom should be always seen as a necessity, an *Anagke* in its most dramatic ancient Greek form. It is quite common to say that the heroes of a book are prisoners of time and place. Here this is not the case and we come in front of the door of this returning and dazzling paradox: Freedom becomes indeed a necessity at every step, at every action that follows our will, at every decision that is taken. Our agony may be due to the fact that we *need* to act in that self liberating way. These men are not prisoners, actually they are free men in the making, men who are transforming their existence according to principles, not mere feelings. Thus their manhood, their nobility, is the manifestation of their need to become free, to serve their inner paradox, to resolve the most intense conflict. For Vasillopoulos no answer is of an automated form. Can a slave do more than a bale of hay? Sarah, Alexander, and others certainly can. The aftermath is that the qualities of men's souls vary, not just their talents, as Schopenhauer prudently predicts. The book shows the value of nobility, depicts men who can be real not only fictional, men of principle, ideal but real men simultaneously. It strongly emphasizes the transition from

childhood to manhood: The English who become Americans, the Slaves who become Free, the Sons who become Men and Fathers. Only man eventually is capable and worthy of liberty and property. Only man may be entitled to his personal point of view against the overall point of view of the society where his time-place existence was found. Is the conflict inevitable? Christopher Vasilopoulos, acting wisely, doesn't provide all the answers. He carefully poses the problem in a philosophical manner, guiding our attention to this Aristotelian question: without purpose is there meaning in anything?

This book, in the multitude of orientations that it provides, unwaveringly aims to be a character study inside and outside a cultural context. It often takes the form of a hypertext, e.g. when it mentions Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* and *Othello* or other books. Some of its heroes write or recite poetry. All these contribute to the impression of an open-ended and lavish work, a work that does not remain restricted in its "own story". Carrying ideological influences from ancient Greek philosophy and tragedy and with a unique and original contribution to the international thematology of drama on its own, the *Heirs of Freedom* share the belief that man is a social animal and that happiness comes from activity as the Stagirite upholds. Hence, this story becomes able to portray how the human condition exceeds the narrow context of History and historicity. Man's individual story is as great as the record of humanity's collective efforts. What man does matters, not where he comes from, it is action not hereditary nobility or the color of the skin that determines personal or race value. In this story it is diagnosed anew, centuries after Euripides, that there is an inherent dualism in the human soul: there is cruelty and there is kindness and compassion. The human being stands often aghast at the awareness of these conflicting powers. Reality may seem meaningless, and human activity comes to the rescue, to mask the meaninglessness of existence, as Heidegger insists before his *Kehre*. Together people, lovers, become more human, through the wisdom of different perspective. People have to find their other halves.

It is important for them to find two persons: a) themselves, b) their mates. Often by finding their mates, their companions in existential fighting, they find themselves. *"The reward of intimacy is the confirmation of the unconfirmable, the sense of ultimate worth"*, Christopher laconically confirms.

For the particular problem of slavery, let us be reminded that Aristotle discerns the feasibility of friendship between master and slave, although he has been accused as monolithic on the issue of slavery by many scholars. It seems that oppression is the inability to become aware of this option, that friendship is possible even between two totally different social beings, as friendship always is necessitated primarily on an ethical level, before becoming political. In a world where there can be, literally, no black and white, the white master Gideon becomes a friend of his black slaves. The author maintains that: *"to be men, to have free choice making souls, required a free culture, one that rewarded free expression and punished servility"*. Despite the culture wherein we are born, which limits us, some still opt for free action and expression, perhaps because they are strong enough to resist. But some others are not, and they are not to blame. Christopher, as the educator that he is, tolerantly and with the virtue of an impressive discrimination, teaches us that there is a path to doing things differently inside a homogenized environment. He wants us to make the laborious efforts that are required in order to adjust to ourselves and to truth-reality, not to the environment where we are found in.

The writer, as the creator of a cosmos, in this book tries to impart reason to the unreasonable by exposing the constitution of both, shedding light on aspects of the former as well as of the latter. That is why throughout the book abound discussions on several political, theological, financial and philosophical issues. To ignore one of those is to ignore the total conception of this marvelous storytelling. In an unequal world, where there are so many variations and extents of strife, the strife of the master along with the strife of the slave, the strife of the two sexes, the strife of boys and

the strife of men, all strife, irrespective of where it comes from, seems to be primarily strife for dignity and for belonging. People who don't belong may as well revolt, just like Todd. What is sought at every step, from Gideon, from Sarah, from the human being in general, is "*constancy in a world of flux, impervious to man's fickle and facile nature*". Constancy and safety are sought in reason, in love, in the State and in the political situation but Christopher's heroes are willing to give up constancy and safety for what they think right, exactly because this is the heaviest price. As the Spanish existentialist Ortega y Gasset concludes some decades ago "*yo soy yo y mi circunstancia*" i.e. I am I and my circumstance. The addition of circumstances to my personality, to what I am, means that I have to shape my life where I am with what I am there. Vasillopulos seems to cherish this idea, pointing with consistency to the practical side of our lives, not to theoretical jargon. Therefore, can I either change myself or the circumstance? Which one of the two is the immovable condition? The author as usual does not become conclusive, he hangs on to his decision to respect our own ability of thinking and making a concrete decision.

The same scheme, with the indispensable lever of obligation in mind, is applied in relation with the most important institutions of the era: the State and the Church. Christopher Vasillopulos, as a political scientist and as a philosopher with a rare understanding of the phenomenology of the human condition, has a profound knowledge of the ever changing (and at the same time, most solid) institutions, the State and the Church, both institutions dressed with the glory rather than the actual spirit of the era of Reason. He does not deal with his issue with an overwhelming emphasis until he reveals his desire to make it explicit that no absolutes can be pursued. Beyond "reasonable" doubt, a world of reason is a quest even today, not only in the era of Gideon's Charleston. Professor Vasillopulos remarks that: "*sometimes we expect too much of people because we expect too much from Reason*". The same goes, or should go, with institutions. The proper function of these great two institutions structurally must be guiding to the benefit of

man. If they fail somehow to serve his needs, then they should be at least re-examined if not substituted and re-invented. The core of the author's thought, though, is again directed towards relations: liberty plus property in Politics; liberty plus choice in Church. Both relations lead to bonding and solidarity in the respective communities. What is actually made manifest here is freedom as freedom from another's will, therefore from the constraint of tyranny, not from obligation and necessity. One's soul and one's political status are defined by the portion of freedom one has access to, as only a free man can consider himself a man at all, therefore a man able and responsible for the opportunity for choice. Hence, no slave seems to be able (able as in an opportunity-given ability) to be happy, for no slave can be a man, not while his soul is not his. Accordingly, only a free man can be a Christian for only a free man can choose his cross. Choice and freedom become key words in this parade of concepts and practices; among them, property, obligation, possession, love, and belonging. In the cases of the State and Church, belonging seems again to be freedom, not slavery, due to the free will of the doer who expresses himself through it.

There is no doubt that a sense of rightness (rectum) is indeed essential to societal order. However, *"the state cares little for reasons and much for results"* as Christopher brightly remarks. Coercion and law are major issues. Do we obey the law when we don't agree with it? What is the criterion of disagreement, opinion or knowledge? Do we have the right to resist the law? What is the exact distance between the Kantian terms of *Legalität* and *Moralität*? Ought law to be more than conflict resolution? Do we take men as we find them or do we teach them? The former option would mean that we would have to see morality as second to legality and become restrictive and punitive to violators, while the latter would signify our duty to render them equal partners in our social life. In the *Heirs of Freedom* Thomas Hobbes constantly confronts Jürgen Habermas: can political communication, if any communication at all, be reached if every participant does not participate freely and equally? In this story we are confronted with the fact that often men seek

stability even if stability does not offer them optimum conditions, otherwise said even if there is confusion about right or wrong. Many black people in the story of the *Heirs of Freedom* only know custom, not justice in that sense.

As an epilogue to this review, I must distinguish the fact that during the ending of this book, several references to excellence suddenly gather and abound. Christopher condenses the references to this uncomplicated and straightforward one: *“excellence has to exist”*. I notice out this single phrase instead of any other more inspiring and articulate ones in the story, while there are many, because I want to keep the core of its meaning. Love for the Ariston (the excellent) is more important than aristocracy. Excellence resides in every human activity, in thinking, in commerce, in human affairs. Excellence is not exclusively an Aristotelian quest, otherwise the *Heirs to Freedom* would not have been written. This book raises a question about the existence of the superiority that we, as human beings, can not only dream of but make real, superiority to our life conditions, to ourselves, to our eras. Like a language game borrowed from Wittgenstein, Christopher Vasillopulos does not want us to leave the theatre yet before we get his message. I agree so much with him *“words are a trap for the flesh of the mind”*. I must confess: I was surprised that Professor Vasillopulos wrote a novel instead of a philosophical book. Now I am not anymore. A philosophical book would fail to do three things: a) be more inclusive, i.e., speak to us all, b) address real life conditions and practical people like the ones we really and eventually are, c) use the unuttered.







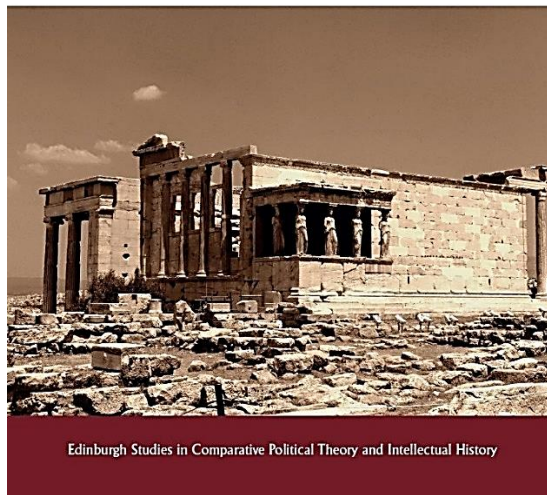
## What is Prometheanism?

### *Ancient Greek Democracy and American Republicanism*

#### ANCIENT GREEK DEMOCRACY AND AMERICAN REPUBLICANISM

Prometheus in Political Theory

Michail Theodosiadis



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What is Prometheanism? How is Prometheus related to human politics? Does Prometheanism offer an answer to the political problem? Human creation was flawed from the beginning. Epimetheus - brother of the Titan Prometheus - undertook to distribute the properties to living beings before their exit into the world. But afterward, he reflected on his actions; he realized that he had given every creature remarkable abilities to survive, except for man. This is also represented by the symbolic meaning of his own name. Epimetheus had forgotten men entirely, granting them no special power at all. While all creatures could survive, men remained alone, unarmed and inadequate, condemned to certain annihilation. Prometheus was stunned by the mistake of his unwise brother and undertook the task of saving man (ἀπορία οὖν σχόμενος ὁ Προμηθεὺς ἥντινα σωτηρίαν τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ εὔροι). In order to achieve this, he had to transgress, that is, steal fire and wisdom of technique from the gods, giving it to humans (κλέπτει Ἡφαίστου καὶ Ἀθηνᾶς τὴν ἔντεχνον σοφίαν σὺν πυρὶ). Thus, humans, with the sponsorship of Prometheus, became related to the gods, as they could construct through fire and the wisdom of technique all kinds of artefacts (clothes, houses, languages, weapons, etc.) that replaced natural deficiencies (Cf. Plato, *Protagoras*, 320c-323c).

Man with the gift of Prometheus became responsible for his fate. Only he was responsible for the right use of these gifts, he could succeed or fail, he was responsible and therefore absolutely free from good and evil. So, Prometheanism is related to the free human choice between good and evil and liberation from any heteronomy. But still, people could not behave politically, as they did not possess political art, and therefore, they annihilated each other, motivated by their natural individualism and hedonism. Political art came later as a result of the awareness of man's responsibility as part of the political community (Cf. Vavouras, 2025, pp. 10-11). Individual self-preservation and happiness pass only through the political state. Prometheanism precisely reflects man's responsibility towards himself, which has no substance without the well-being of the political community. Responsibility for my choices also means responsibility for the common good. Without the common good, there is no individual good (Vavouras, 2024).

## Introduction

Theodosiadis' *Ancient Greek Democracy and American Republicanism* (2025a) presents a nuanced and thought-provoking contribution to the study of democratic traditions, bridging ancient Greek thought with American political history. His political Prometheanism does not only imply political participation; it also challenges "concealed" or "apocalyptic" optimism, rooted in the idea of endless progress and/or human perfection. The author also calls into question pessimistic (or despotic) worldviews, such as those promoted by Thomas Hobbes and Sir Robert Filmer. Instead, he advocates for a melioristic – or hopeful – approach to democracy, which emphasises self-limitation and prudence, as safeguards against moral transgression in democratic governance. This perspective is built upon a thorough examination of philosophical insights from Aristotle, Thucydides and Plato. The author moves on, explaining in a convincing way how this "melioristic" (in his own words) spirit that we identify in ancient Greek democratic strands of political philosophy influenced American republicanism.

In this book Theodosiadis discusses a political tradition that emphasises civic responsibility and active participation in political decision-making. This tradition is often tied to the concept of populism. For Theodosiadis, this very idea found clear expression in the American cooperative movement (otherwise called "the Populists") of the late nineteenth century. The author develops his views on American Populism by considering Christopher Lasch and the works of other significant scholars, such as Lawrence Goodwyn and Gene Clanton. In addition to construct a "populist" narrative based on the ancient Athenian example of Greek democracy, Theodosiadis reflects on Hannah Arendt's interpretations of Aristotle. He follows Lasch's critique of the optimism of "modern liberalism," that is, the contemporary obsession with unlimited economic expansion and to individual liberty (pp.5-6), which he considers detrimental to the civic spirit of democracy.

### **The Promethean human: and human agency and limits**

Prometheus symbolises human agency and self-governance (p.1). The author elaborates on Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, as well as on Protagoras' version of the myth (15-16). At the same time, he reflects on other classical tragedies, including Euripides' *Trojan Women*, *Medea*, *Orestes*, and finally on Aesop's fables. Echoing Arendt and Lasch, Theodosiadis calls into question contemporary interpretations of Prometheus, such as those pursued by Percy Bysshe Shelley and George Gordon Lord Byron. In the liberal and Romantic imagination, Prometheus is considered an archetype of resistance against absolutism (p.4-5). According to the myth, the Titan who stole fire from the gods and gifted it to humanity, enabling humans to protect themselves from destruction (as in the Protagoras myth), is punished by Father Zeus. In the liberal imaginary, this act of punishment reminds us of the cruel means of repression employed by absolute rulers against those who defy their power and strive for social justice. Therefore, freedom fighters between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe are portrayed as "Promethean" martyrs against political oppression. (ibid.) However, Theodosiadis highlights another aspect of the myth: borrowing perspectives from Arendt and Castoriadis, he reminds us that Prometheus does not exclusively symbolise resistance to authority; the fire of Prometheus was the fire of political freedom, that is, of political knowledge and inclusion (pp.15-6). By considering this, Theodosiadis defines the concept of tyranny beyond the liberal/contemporary understanding of the term; the tyrant is not simply the one who imposes absolute power and restricts individual liberty; tyrants prohibit political interaction; they remove the people from the political realm, and render themselves absolute owners of the *politeia* (pp.4-5, pp.83-87). According to this minograph, this civic idea of political inclusion and participation is vividly echoed in the American colonial experience, particularly in northern states of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. To a degree, this emphasis on direct involvement in the

process of decision-making was (for Theodosiadis) one of the main ideas behind the American Revolution.

As explained earlier, Theodosiadis' so-called political Prometheanism does not only advocate self-government. The author elaborates on Lasch's scepticism of the idea of progress. He reflects on Lasch's intense rejection of optimism, espoused by ideologies advocating moral perfection or endless and uninterrupted progress (as noted earlier). Thus, he constructed a view of political Prometheanism anchored in a "tragic vision" of life. The fire Prometheus gifted to humanity "was excessive (*āgan*) for the nature of the mortals (*thnatous*). Because of this, Prometheus created in the minds of men and women false promises ('blind hopes'), "that they can set up ambitious plans which their frail (human) nature could barely afford." (p.19). Hence, Theodosiadis (echoing Lasch and Castoriadis) highlights the importance of obtaining a moderate perspective on democracy, suggesting that humans when they are free to act without being supervised by an absolute ruler, who can restrict their freedom to make decisions, are capable of committing atrocities, the so-called *hubris*. This term refers to "arrogance and imprudence," or to "the frantic impulse for exaggeration, which leads to the violation of all moral limits." (p.18). But more importantly, *hubris* leads to "major injustices and atrocities, such as the concentration/extermination camps or the enslavements of peoples" and often describes "the exaggeration of the *demos*, specifically its potential slide into insanity." (ibid.). This second aspect of political Prometheanism owes a lot to Friedrich Nietzsche's interpretation of the myth: human reason has its limits. Therefore, the development of an ethic of self-limitation and a hopeful (or melioristic, according to Theodosiadis' terms) – rather than optimistic – view of life and human reason is necessary. In one of his previous works he wrote the following: "[w]hat prompted the Gods of Mount Olympus to chastise Prometheus is not simply his act of theft as such." (Theodosiadis 2021, p.74) The gift of fire, an "archetypal symbol of god-like power, knowledge and intellectuality, according to Bachelard ... allowed humanity not simply to overcome the dread of suffering and violent death. Simultaneously, it shaped the illusion of human perfectibility, that (for

instance) knowledge and common effort could constitute men and women capable of living the eternal and indestructible life of the Gods.” (ibid.) This assumption merits further interpretation. As Northrop Frye (1964) argued, Prometheus’ fire “symbolizes the raising of the human state to a quasi divine destiny, becomes more purely a “Prometheus complex.”” (p.viii) The Prometheus complex, we read in Bachelard, (1964) is the human tendency which impels us to know “to prove decisively that we have attained the intellectual level that we have so admired in our parents and in our teachers.” (ibid.) In the same way, humans who receive the divine *thnatos āgan* knowledge are sometimes propelled to imitate the gods, or to overcome them, as Theodosiadis (2025) argued by making references to Nietzsche and Nasr. (pp.19-20)

### **The French and the American Revolutions: hope (meliorism) vs optimism and pessimism.**

By considering this argument, the author “corrects” Arendt, for whom it was the “social question”, namely, poverty and economic deprivation, the main reason behind the authoritarian shift of the French Revolution (pp.31-46). Instead, Theodosiadis argued that the Great Terror in France owes more to the “philosophical optimism” of the intellectual elites, who laid the ideological foundations of the revolution. This optimism advocates perfection; it was a “secular utopia” (p.46), standing at odds with the melioristic (or hopeful) worldview of political Prometheanism. This take on the French Revolution, plagued by optimistic illusions about human reason, is far from novel. It has much in common with the conservative critics of Edmund Burke and Joseph de Maistre, who – as Theodosiadis does – accused Jean Jacques Rousseau’s theories and the secular agenda of the French Revolutionaries for shaping mindsets in which political terrorism found immediate justifications, thus facilitating the Revolution’s Jacobin turn (p.163). In his own words, “Rousseau’s theory” played an important role “in establishing the groundwork for the emergence of this ‘apocalyptic’ optimism,” and “created the appropriate conditions for

the justification and glorification of mass violence.” (p.50). His “philosophy was widely read and disseminated to the public by militant leaders (including Marat, Robespierre, Brissot and so on)”, who “borrowed from the same philosopher viewpoints of practical use for their attempts to construct an anti-absolutist and anti-royalist narrative.” (p.51). To substantiate his position, Theodosiadis places due weight on the secularisation process, and (more importantly) on the dechristianisation policies of the Jacobins, who rejected the notion of “original sin,” replacing it with Rousseau’s natural goodness, which (as the Genevan philosopher claims) is always corrupted by the means of society, that is, by the institutions of the *ancien régime*, in the context of France (p.165, p.170) However, to claim that “the institutions of the *ancien régime* corrupt and deprive man’s perfect goodness, often leads to troubling assumptions. One could consider the defenders of the aristocracy – and even worse, those who were wrongly accused of siding with the aristocracy, as, for instance, the moderate liberal Girondin group – not simply as political opponents whose objectives must be questioned and/or condemned; they may be labelled as “conspirators” and “traitors” who mislead “the citoyens,” or more importantly as “enemies of the human species (*hostis generis humani*) to use Jacobin terminology,” who have to be exterminated through brute force.” (p.170). The novelty of Theodosiadis’ work rests firstly on the perspectives upon which he bases his critique: the French Revolution, he assumes, was anti-Promethean. In short, it dismissed Aeschylus’ warning that political knowledge is *thnátous āgan* and, therefore, should always be accompanied by an ethic of meliorism and self-limitation. While conservative thinkers in the light of the violence and destruction spread by the Revolution itself criticised Rousseau and condemned democracy as a ticket to chaos and instability, Theodosiadis (2025) emphatically argues that moderation (or meliorism) is *sine qua non* of democratic thinking itself. (p.164) Democracy is bound to “ethical memory” and *parrhesia* (the right to speak in the assembly, to denounce falsehood and reveal the truth) (p.16, p.179). That is, democracy – as a vivid expression of political Prometheanism – rests on dialogue and understanding, on *action* – as Arendt (1998)



would argue –, whose ultimate objective is the *eudaimonia* and the *eu zein* of the *politeia*. (p.15) Through dialogue and experience, Theodosiadis explains in Chapter 4, democracy erects fences against *hubris*. Moreover, by reflecting on American republicanism, Theodosiadis argues for a nuanced religiosity to provide solid moral grounding against the prevalence of *hubris* in the political realm (pp.143-7). Echoing Lasch and Tocqueville, he criticises Castoriadis’ secularism (p.61), assuming that transcendent values provide concrete anchoring to moral thinking. More importantly, dialogue – or *parrhesia* – could lead to practical wisdom (or prudence), as Aristotle argued (p.35). Political experience (or “ethical memory”) “often contains moral lessons, which in order to be fully construed “[t]here must be public discussion, to show how experience is to be interpreted”, Theodosiadis argues (2025, p.16) by citing John Stuart Mill (1998, p.23). For Aristotle, “[t]o be human is to thrive in a polis, a political society, discussing the good and the bad, the just and the unjust” (Rubin 2018, pp.9-10). Dialogue “sheds light on aspects of an experience, which often contain important moral lessons. In the absence of *parrhesia*, these lessons could be left concealed.” (Theodosiadis 2025a, p.17) As Aristotle argued, “speech is designed to indicate the advantageous and the harmful, and therefore also the right and the wrong” (Politics 1252a. 14-16).

As we see, Theodosiadis’ intense scepticism to optimism in the context of political Prometheanism does not philosophically justify pessimism, which he associates with political despotism and authoritarianism. In short, political pessimism is attributed predominantly to Hobbes and regards the mistrust of popular rule and democracy in his political philosophy (Cf. Vavouras, 2016). More particularly, these assertions are built upon critical reflections on Arendt’s and Leo Strauss’ views on Hobbes (pursued in Chapter 2). Theodosiadis considers Lee Ward’s (2002, p.18) approach to the English philosopher. For Ward, Hobbes’ ideal commonwealth is founded on a unity “of the representer,” that is, of the Sovereign themselves, with those represented. This unity, Theodosiadis (2025a) explains, comes at the expense of the represented. (pp.68-9) This type of “political representation,” according to the author, is a form of

*substitution*. It replaces participation and self-government with managerial expertise and authoritarian rule. Therefore, Theodosiadis' critique of optimism is rooted in a melioristic (or "hopeful," as Christopher Lasch would have framed it) view of life and humanity. Such an approach to democracy can be identified in the republican mindsets not only of Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin and others who laid the foundations of the American Revolution. "[T]he American Founding Fathers," in Theodosiadis' words, "did not share Rousseau's enthusiasm for the innate benevolence of men and women, nor did they endorse the idea of total emancipation of mankind." (p.52) The French, in contrast, shared "'Rousseau's belief in innate human goodness', which (in their view) was undermined by the corrupt and oppressive *ancien régime*." (p.169) For Rousseau, the natural goodness of man "is always corrupted by means of society." (p.170) Therefore, the French leaders attempted to bring into existence a new society "within which Rousseau's natural love and benevolence would be able to manifest itself." (p.171). Theodosiadis quotes Camus (2000), who assumed that the leaders of the Revolution (by drawing on Rousseau) pursued "the final liquidation of the principle of divinity," (83) "under the supposition that the world could be remodelled in a way that man's angelic goodness would become a living reality." (Theodosiadis 2025a, p.168). The "'tyranny and injustice of men shall have banished from the earth'" (quoted in Hampson 1983: 144) and "all men would live as brothers" (Hampson 1983: 263).

### **The contemporary relevance of Theodosiadis' "Political Prometheanism"**

In Theodosiadis's eyes, a "populist hope" conveys the authentic message of political Prometheanism. This view was also espoused by those who laid the foundations of the "Populist Movement", of the so-called "the second declaration of independence." (Theodosiadis 2025a, p.219, p.231) Moreover, Theodosiadis places paramount importance on the role of cul-

tural memory and tradition in his analysis. Emphasis on cultural memory, he explains, is one of the third elements of political Prometheanism (p.1).<sup>1</sup> Specifically, as elucidated in Chapter 5, he argues that the rise of the Populist movement is attributed to cultural heritage, namely, the enduring values and norms that sustained the republican ethos of political engagement, originally transported to the New World by the colonists through the Mayflower Compact. The French Revolution, on the other hand, thanks to its ardent optimism, attacked cultural memory and property, unleashing an uncompromising violence that corrupted and destroyed the political freedom its architects aspired to materialise. In our contemporary world, where tradition and cultural memory are often associated with “reactionary conservatism,” Theodosiadis reminds us that emancipatory politics must be anchored in a cultural past. They are, in other words, manifestations of inherited ideas that find direct expression in social mobilisations.

Furthermore, Theodosiadis incorporates abolitionist and feminist approaches to political Prometheanism. In his words, “the Populists were not exclusively concerned with wealth redistribution, but also with issues related to democratisation, including female suffrage, the secret ballot, eight-hour working day initiatives and public referendums” (p.229). Here, the author presents the movement as an example of how politics and economics can go together, challenging Arendt’s view on the social question. More importantly, Theodosiadis provides a description of a movement that attempted to challenge prevailing social norms on gender, expanding therefore the “blaze of Prometheus’ fire” to include women and blacks, whose access to the political realm was denied or marginalised (as he emphatically writes in Chapter 5). We see, for example, the female Populist orator Mary Lease writing in the *Kansas City Star* that the “Wall Street owns the country . . . It is no longer a government of the people, for the people, by the people, but a government of Wall Street, for Wall Street, and by Wall Street. The great common people . . . are slaves, and monopoly is

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<sup>1</sup> As we have already explained, the first principle revolves around the notion of human agency and potential, and the second on the inherent limits of human action respectively.

master.” (Quoted in Clanton 1991, p.44; cf. Theodosiadis 2025a, p.234). The inclusion of abolitionist and feminist perspectives also makes it relevant to contemporary debates, as we understand how deprived groups have historically fought for their voices in participatory – or Promethean (in Theodosiadis’ terms) – politics.

Finally, Theodosiadis (2025a) clarifies that his version of Prometheanism “is not anti-liberal at heart; it does not necessarily advocate for conservative communitarianism, radical egalitarianism or anarchism; nor does it generally align with anti-parliamentary politics.” (p.10) In other words, political Prometheanism is a flexible concept. It does not advocate a specific political agenda and “can be compatible with a type of liberalism that (1) does not sacralise modernisation and unlimited economic expansion; (2) does not approach these notions with unwarranted optimism, as if they represent the ultimate achievement of social perfection or infinite progress; and (3) does not adhere to “political representation” in such a way as to denounce direct participation (action).” (ibid.) In this regard, political Prometheanism may integrate, as the author seems to imply, concepts of contemporary liberalism, and more importantly, non-western cultural elements. As the Theodosiadis argues, “political participation is not highlighted only in Western philosophical systems of thought, rooted in modern interpretations of the Athenian *polis*.” (ibid.) He, thus, briefly mentions one of his previous studies (2022; cf. 2025b) on Byzantium, suggesting that this book is “part of a series of monographs and articles” he is “planning to publish on the concept of political Prometheanism,” and that “[most of these monographs/articles] will “explore systems of popular involvement beyond classical Greece and Western modernity.” (Theodosiadis 2025a, p.10.) We have also seen the author directing our attention to native American cultures (pp.195-6), a normative claim that probably materialised very little in American republican history. Theodosiadis’ recurring critique of the western exceptionalism in a field that is rarely encountered is more than welcome.

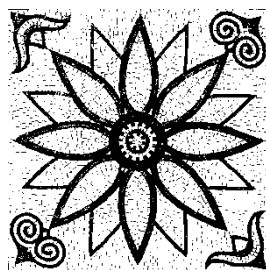
## Conclusion

Theodosiadis' *Ancient Greek Democracy and American Republicanism* (2025a), demonstrates a remarkable capacity to engage with an extensive corpus of literature while critically evaluating different arguments and viewpoints in a balanced and nuanced way. The book adds greatly to our understanding of the range of democratic possibilities, based on ancient and modern paths taken (or not taken at all). The author offers a compelling critique of contemporary liberalism's faith in unrestrained progress. In this way, he goes on re-evaluating the philosophical underpinnings of the French Revolution, whose destruction is attributed to rampant and exaggerated optimistic worldviews, rather than to economic deprivation. Moreover, he revisits the republican ideology of the American Revolution and moves on to the Populist movement, shedding light on its underappreciated democratic potential. Crucially, Theodosiadis values the role of cultural memory and tradition in political Prometheanism. He underscores the role of religion in sustaining an ethic of self-limitation, breaking thus from the commonly held view in the West that democracy is inherently rooted in radical secularism. By incorporating abolitionist and feminist perspectives, the book makes the concept of Prometheanism particularly relevant to ongoing debates about inclusion and political agency. Theodosiadis' political Prometheanism, with its emphasis on hope, dialogue and ethical memory, aspires to challenge the impasse of "modern liberalism."

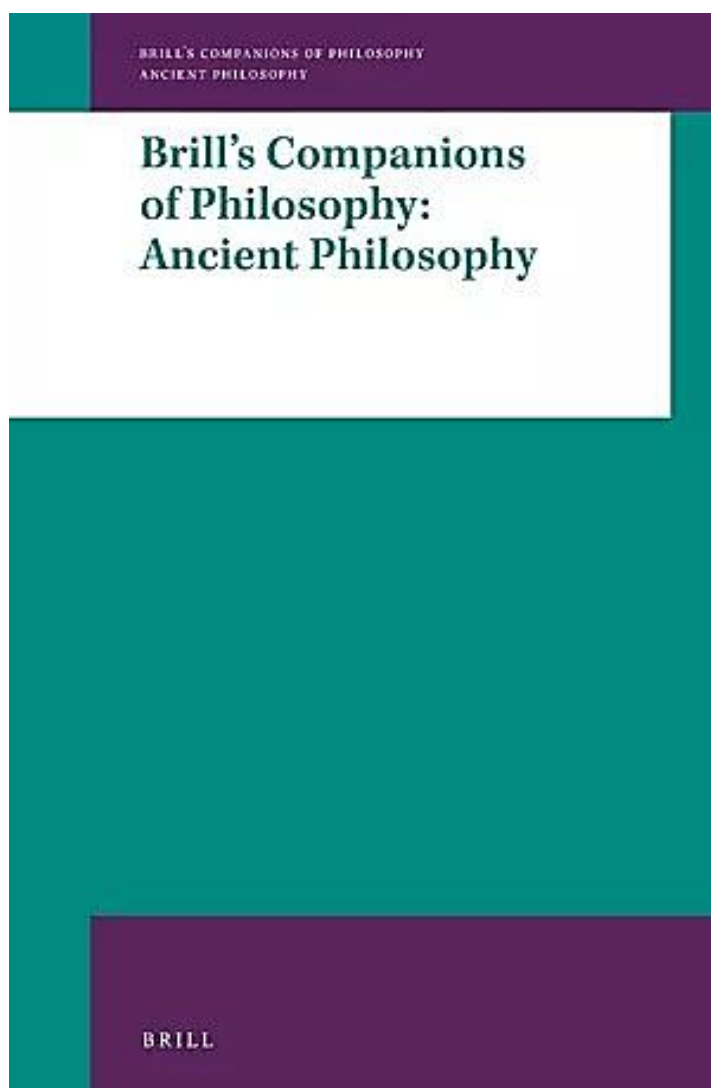
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