# Aristotle's Account of the Subjection of Women

Dana Jalbert Stauffer

The University of Texas at Austin

*In recent years, several studies have argued that Aristotle saw the associations of the household as voluntary, mutually beneficial, and directed toward lofty aims. These studies have brought out genuine complexities in Aristotle's understanding of the relationship between the public and private spheres. But, in their characterization of Aristotle's view of the household, they miss the mark. While Aristotle discusses marriage and family in other places, he examines the hierarchical aspect of the relationship between men and women most fully in* Politics *I. Close examination of* Politics *I reveals that Aristotle thought that the subjection of women in the household was rooted in force.*

For Aristotle, the best and highest form of human community is the political community. Other types of community, such as the household, are subordinate and inferior to the *polis*. The household is subordinate to the political community because the aim of life in the household is the mere preservation of life, or the satisfaction of life's daily needs, whereas the aim of membership in the political community is to live well. It is in the political community that man fulfills his *telos* or end by exercising his nature as a political animal. The household is also inferior to the political community in the character of its rule. In the household, one man rules, by virtue of his age and his sex, monarchically at best and tyrannically at worst. In the political community, it is possible for citizens to choose their rulers on the basis of merit; to share collectively in deliberation; and to share in rule itself, and thus to experience a form of republican government. The importance of the household, for Aristotle, lies in the fact that it liberates free men from concern with daily needs and provides them with the leisure to devote their time and energy to politics.

This is how Aristotle seems, at least, to present the relationship between the city and the household, or between the public and private spheres, in the *Politics*. In recent decades, some political theorists have found Aristotle's exaltation of the political a refreshing alternative, and a helpful corrective, to the tendency of modern liberal democracies to undervalue the political. However, at the same time, a number of excellent studies have challenged the conventional understanding of Aristotle's view of the public and private spheres, charging that it is too simplistic. Arlene Saxonhouse (1985), Judith Swanson (1992), and Darrell Dobbs (1996) have argued that Aristotle's treatment of the household is both more positive and more complex than is generally appreciated. They assert that while Aristotle says that the political community is the natural end of all human association, he also indicates that the household is in some respects the

superior form of community. While conflicts of interest often characterize the relationship between citizens, stronger and firmer bonds, such as the shared interest of parents in the welfare of their children, unite the members of the household. In the political community, citizens vie for supremacy regardless of the merit of their claims, whereas the hierarchy in the household is rooted in nature. Saxonhouse, for example, writes that Aristotle sees the household as "a cooperative adventure in which the friendship between the members comes from a common concern for the welfare of the unit" (1985, 87). The family "appears to order itself naturally" and "to be founded on a natural hierarchy that the city composed of supposed equals can only pretend to approximate" (85). Dobbs writes that, in Aristotle's view, "the complementarity of man and woman" provides the basis for their association in the household.

> The man and woman who share unselfishly in the work of procreation—who do not misconstrue the spousal relationship as merely an alternative mode of seeking comfort and security—are naturally excepted from the structures of domination that haunt both partners in self-centered, security-seeking relationships. (1996, 77-78)

Not only did Aristotle see the household as more natural than the political community in these ways, they argue, he also saw an important role for the household in sustaining political health. Far from viewing the household as aimed solely at the satisfaction of daily needs, Dobbs (1996) and Swanson (1992) contend, Aristotle regarded the household as the primary vehicle of moral education, the political community's most serious task. Stephen Salkever goes so far as to deny that Aristotle sees any difference between the aims of the household and those of the city: "For Aristotle . . . both *polis* and *oikia*, when truly, rather than nominally, such, aim at that virtue or excellence that is distinctly human" (1991, 175).[1]

Studies such as those of Salkever and Saxonhouse have succeeded admirably in bringing out the complexity of Aristotle's view of the relationship between the public and private spheres—a complexity that is not always noted by interpreters of Aristotle, but clearly there. For example, when Aristotle asserts that the abilities to perceive and communicate about the good and bad and the just and unjust make us "political animals," he adds that "association in these things makes a household *and* a city" (1253a18).[2] Clearly, then, the distinction between the aims of the household and the political community is not as stark as he suggests elsewhere. Rather, the aims of household and city overlap. Just as concern with the satisfaction of life's basic necessities is hardly absent from political life, neither is reasoning about the good and bad and the just and unjust absent from the household.

These studies show persuasively, in my view, that the conventional understanding of Aristotle's view of the private sphere and its relationship to the public sphere is too simplistic. However, in maintaining that Aristotle saw the household as an institution in which men practice a mild, mutually beneficial rule over willing subordinates, these studies introduce a distortion of their own. Their arguments draw heavily on Aristotle's discussions of marriage and family in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. And although the *Ethics* contributes to our understanding of Aristotle's overall view of the household, it is first and foremost to the *Politics* that we must look for his understanding of the political dimension of the relationship between man and woman. For it is in the *Politics* that Aristotle deals centrally with questions of hierarchy and authority—of why some rule and others obey.

In the *Politics*, Aristotle appears to present the subjection of women as part of a wholly natural social and political order. But careful study of Book I yields a much more complicated picture. Several interpreters have argued that Aristotle's treatment of slavery, in particular, has

been misunderstood (e.g., Nichols 1983; Ambler 1985, 1987; Lord 1987; Davis 1996; Frank 2004). They maintain that although Aristotle holds that slavery could be natural under certain conditions, careful examination of Book I reveals that, in his view, slavery as actually practiced in Greece is rooted in force rather than in nature. Those who have made this argument concerning Aristotle's treatment of slavery, however, have stopped short of drawing a parallel between Aristotle's view of slavery and his view of the status of women. If anything, these interpreters argue that Aristotle means to draw a contrast between slavery and the subjection of women (see, for example, Ambler 1987, 398-99).

Aristotle does not, it is true, equate the subjection of women with slavery. But he does indicate important similarities between the two. While he gives the general impression that the household came about through the voluntary cooperation of all of its members, he quietly indicates that force played a considerable role in the origins of marriage. Moreover, Aristotle indicates that, in his own day, the household had not entirely transcended its brutal beginnings; the threat of physical force that helped bring about the rule of men over women continued to underlie and to shape the relations between the sexes.

To be sure, these are not the conclusions to which one is led by a cursory reading of Book I. To see the complexity in Aristotle's argument concerning the status of women requires a willingness to approach Book I with fresh eyes. Moreover, coming to appreciate that complexity, far from giving one a comprehensive interpretation of Book I, opens up a new and difficult question: Why does Aristotle give the superficial impression that he regards the subjection of women—and, indeed, the household order in general—as much less problematic, and much more natural, than he indicates it is in the fine print, so to speak? Before attempting to address

that question, however, let us first turn to the arguments of Book I with a view to uncovering Aristotle's true account of the subjection of the women.

## The Household's Beginnings in *Politics* I.2:

## Women, Slaves, and the Judgment of Euripides

Aristotle's description of the development of social and political life in the second chapter of Book I is one of the most famous parts of the work. It is the closest parallel in Aristotle's *corpus* to the accounts of man's emergence from the state of nature offered by modern political philosophers such as Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. Aristotle's account appears to be diametrically opposed to those of the modern philosophers, who depict free and equal beings living independently and apolitically, and forming political communities only after rational calculation suggests that self-preservation requires it. Aristotle gives the impression that human beings entered into association with one another in the household spontaneously and voluntarily, and that the growth of households led to the development of villages, which led, in a smooth progression, to the rise of cities. He appears to trace the household back to the natural human impulses to procreate and to cooperate with other human beings in the satisfaction of daily needs; and he seems to say that the roles that men, women, and slaves play in the household are in full harmony with their natures.

Underlying these surface impressions, however, are indications that the development of domestic and political life was not altogether smooth or peaceful.[3] Aristotle's account of the relationship between men and women begins with an identification, at the beginning of Chapter Two, of the two basic associations from which the household develops.

> Necessarily there must first be a union of those who cannot exist without one another, female and male, for the sake of reproduction—and this not out of choice, but, as in the other animals and plants, out of a natural impulse to leave behind something that is the same as oneself—and the natural ruler and subject, on account of security. For the one who can see, by means of the mind, is by nature ruler and master, the one who can work, by means of the body, is by nature a slave. On this account, the master and slave have a common interest. (1252a26-34)

Aristotle thus locates the origins of the ruler-ruled relationship in the benefit, common to both ruler and ruled, derived from the rule of intelligence over the physically able. He presents the association between male and female as distinct from the association between ruler and ruled. The latter might be described as the joining together of "brains" and "brawn," while the former is rooted in the impulse to procreate. As Wayne Ambler points out, even Aristotle's characterization of the male-female association refers to the sexes in the abstract; it does not address the relationship between men and women in its complexity (1985, 167). In particular, it does not explain why men rule over women, in addition to procreating with them (cf. Davis 1996, 19; Dobbs 1996, 77).

How and why does the association between man and woman take on a hierarchical character? Aristotle begins to answer this question by commenting on male rule among "barbarians," or non-Greeks.

> By nature the female has been distinguished from the slave. For nature makes nothing in the manner that the coppersmiths make the Delphic knife—that is, frugally—but rather it makes each thing for one purpose. For each thing would do

> its work most nobly if it had one task rather than many. Among the barbarians the female and the slave have the same status. This is because there are no natural rulers among them but, rather, the association among them is between male and female slave. On account of this, the poets say that "it is fitting that Greeks rule barbarians," as the barbarian and the slave are by nature the same. (1252a34-b9)

Here, Aristotle introduces the teleological view of nature for which he is known. According to this view, a purposive force has arranged the world in the best possible way. Since the division of labor allows each worker to do his or her work "most nobly," nature must have created each thing with a view to one task. Now, one might well use this reasoning to justify the place of women in the household. One might conclude that women are born to a role and a purpose different from that of men. And, given the importance he has just assigned to the procreative impulse in bringing men and women together, one might expect Aristotle to identify procreation as the task, or purpose, to which women are naturally directed. But Aristotle brings in his teleological view of nature here not to support the claim that nature has distinguished the female from the male, but rather, to support the claim that nature has distinguished the female from the slave. If each type of human being has been created with a view to one purpose, he reasons, then the common practice of using women as slaves is unnatural. In this way, Aristotle directs our focus not to the naturalness of the subjection of women, but rather to the fact that, among non-Greeks, the status of women is unnaturally low.

It is noteworthy that the aspect of the life of non-Greeks that bespeaks their incivility and justifies their subjection, in Aristotle's view, is their treatment of women.[4] But why exactly, in Aristotle's analysis, do non-Greeks ignore the natural distinction between woman and slave? In what, precisely, does the barbarism of the barbarian consist? According to Aristotle, there are no

natural rulers among the barbarians. But only barbarian women hold the rank or position (*taxis*) of slave. Among barbarians, then, naturally slavish men are nevertheless masters in rank. The principle of rule is clear enough: in the absence of "brains" to merit rule over "brawn," "brawn" prevails; men rule by virtue of their superior strength. Outside of Greece, then, men rule women because they are stronger than women, and they use that strength to assert their authority.

This passage seems to indicate that the rule of Greek men over their women, by contrast, is not a matter of brute strength. Aristotle seems to say that this very fact—that, in Greece, relations between the sexes are determined by a higher principle than "might makes right"—establishes the Greeks' greater civility. Hence the judgment of Euripides: "it is fitting that Greeks rule over barbarians." This line comes from Euripides' play *Iphigenia at Aulis*. The play takes place as the Greek army impatiently awaits a favorable wind to take them from Aulis to Troy. A prophet has declared that the gods will not send a favorable wind until the general Agamemnon makes a sacrifice of his daughter, Iphigenia. After initially begging her father for mercy, Iphigenia suddenly declares that she will martyr herself for the sake of Greece:

> Sacrifice me, I say to Greece, and win Troy. This is my memorial, my marriage, my children, my duty, all you could wish for me. It is fitting that Greeks rule barbarians. They are born to be slaves as we are to be free. (1629-35) [5]

As Michael Davis (1996, 17) and Harvey Mansfield (2006, 205, 209) note, there is irony in citing, as proof that Euripides believed that the Greeks are especially civilized in their treatment of women and therefore deserve to rule, the words of a girl who is about to be sacrificed by her father. It is true that Iphigenia is not forced to sacrifice herself; she goes willingly. But what considerations lead her to that choice? Iphigenia "decides" to offer herself up to the army only once it has become clear that the Greek army is going to kill her one way or another, and the

only question is whether Achilles is going to die defending her—and with him, any chance of Greek victory. Faced with this choice, Iphigenia chooses to comfort herself with the thought that her death will benefit Greece. Far from making a decision free from the pressure of force, then, Iphigenia acquiesces in the face of overwhelming force.[6]

In explaining her decision, Iphigenia argues that, in dying, she contributes to the noble aim of the war, which is to protect the women of Greece from the barbarians. A few moments earlier, however, Agamemnon points out that the army clamors for Iphigenia's blood, and that if they do not get it, they are likely to turn on Argos and slay him and his family in their beds. The great cause on behalf of which Iphigenia believes herself to be dying, the cause of "Greece," is in reality a conglomeration of city-states just as ready to fight one another as they are to struggle in common against Troy. He says that the alleged concern to protect the women of Greece from the barbarians is not a genuine concern but a pretext offered by the Greek army for a war they want to fight for the sake of vengeance. Helen herself was not kidnapped, but ran off willingly with another man; she is not an innocent victim, but a "whore" (71-72; 435).

This is hardly a story that bespeaks the civility of the Greeks toward women, or the Greek transcendence of the role of brute force in male-female relations. It is hardly the play of a poet who believes in "Greece." Could all of this have been lost on Aristotle when he approvingly cites Iphigenia's assertion that "it is fitting that Greeks rule barbarians" as *the* judgment of the poets on Greece? At the very least, Aristotle's use of this quote weaves into his account a thread of doubt as to the genuine superiority of the Greeks (cf. Ambler 1987, 393; Frank 2004, 101). He leaves us wondering whether the early Greek treatment of women was really so different from that of the barbarians, or whether it, too, did not fall short of nature's dictate that women ought to be distinguished from slaves.

## The Formation of the Household: Wives, Oxen, and the Case of Perses

Continuing his account of the origins of the household, Aristotle says that the household "first arose from these two associations," male-female and ruler-ruled. Once again, he cites a poet as evidence.

> Thus rightly Hesiod spoke the line, "A house first, then a wife, and then an ox for plowing," for an ox stands in for a servant among the poor. This association, that has come about by nature with a view to the daily things, is a household, which is why Charondas calls the members of a household "peers of the mess" and Epimenides of Crete calls them "peers of the manger." (1252b10-15)

Earlier, Aristotle said that male and female were drawn together by the natural impulse to procreate. Now we learn that the union of men and women in the household exists to satisfy daily needs, especially the need for food. The role of women in the household, then, is multifaceted; they are mothers, maids, and cooks. But if "nature makes each thing for one purpose," then the question arises: What is the relationship of women's multifaceted role in the household to nature? And if the subordinate, multifaceted role of women is natural, what are the grounds of its naturalness? If "brains" and "brawn" are brought together by the mutual benefit each derives from the rule of the former, what brings men and women into a hierarchical association with one another, with a view to the daily needs of life?

To answer this question, several interpreters look to the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Dobbs 1996, 75, 78-79; Salkever 1991, 181; Saxonhouse 1985, 84; Swanson 1992, 52-55). There Aristotle suggests that marriage is rooted, like the union of "brains" and "brawn," in complementary abilities.

> The love between man and wife seems to be in accord with nature. For the human being is by nature more a coupling being than a political one, insofar as the household is older and more necessary than the city, and the human being has procreation more in common with the other animals. Among other animals the association goes just this far, whereas human beings live together not only for the sake of procreation but also for the things of life. For from the beginning the tasks are divided, the husband and wife each having their own; they help one another by each contributing his or her own part to their common life. (1162a16-24)

As Aristotle presents marriage in this passage, husband and wife each contribute to the needs of the household in accord with their respective abilities. Not only tasks, but authority, too, are divided and distributed on the grounds on natural suitability. "For the husband rules on account of merit, and in the realm that requires a man. Whatever realms are suited to a woman, he gives to her" (1160b33-35).

In the *Ethics*, then, Aristotle roots marriage in a natural complementarity between man and woman. In the *Politics*, however, Aristotle points to a different account of the origins of marriage. To illustrate how the household grows out of the two basic associations of male and female and master and slave, as we noted, he quotes Hesiod: "A house first, then a wife, and then an ox for plowing." This line is from Hesiod's *Works and Days*, in which Hesiod advises his brother, Perses, about how to put a life of degeneracy behind him. Hesiod urges Perses to a life of honest work as the only reliable protection against destitution. Contrary to what we might expect given Aristotle's argument, Hesiod does not counsel Perses to get a woman with a view to procreation. (Indeed, far from encouraging Perses to fulfill this natural impulse, Hesiod cautions against such entanglements: "Do not let any sweet-talking woman beguile your good sense with

the fascinations of her shape. It's your barn she's after," 372-374).[7] Rather, he counsels Perses to get a woman to work for him, to drive his plow.

> First of all, get yourself an ox for plowing, and a woman—for work, not to marry—one who can plow with the oxen, and get all necessary gear in your house in good order, lest you have to ask someone else, and he deny you, and you go short, and the seasons pass you by, and your work be undone. (405-409)

If Perses follows his brother's advice, then, he will *not* "take" a woman with a view to procreation. Rather, Hesiod advises Perses to get a woman because, as Aristotle helpfully points out, male slaves are expensive. Like an ox, a female slave is cheap help. There is no suggestion that Perses will acquire a female servant with a view to her interests, or even with a view to a common good that might arise between the two of them. Moreover, there is no suggestion that he will allow her a sphere of her own authority, or that he will assign her tasks on the basis of natural suitability; even if women are naturally suited to "getting household gear in order," are they naturally suited to ox-driving?

The account of the origins of marriage pointed to by this reference to Hesiod is, thus, quite different from the account offered in the *Ethics*. In both the *Ethics* and the *Politics*, Aristotle begins his account of marriage by observing that males and females are drawn together by a natural impulse to procreate. But men and women have been procreating for as long as human beings have existed. His reference to the Hesiod quote in the *Politics* suggests that the household formed—and women came under the rule of men—not because such an arrangement was mutually beneficial, but rather, because men began to enlist women forcibly in the satisfaction of their own daily needs (cf. Mansfield 2006, 208-209; Nagle 2006, 85-86).

Why might Aristotle present marriage differently in the two works? In the *Ethics*, Aristotle considers marriage in the context of a discussion of love and friendship. His primary concern is not the basis of men's rule over women, but the character and basis of the friendship between husbands and wives. Thus, it makes sense that he would focus on the common goods that are potentially present in marriage, for such goods are foundations of marital affection. But such common goods are not necessarily present in marriage, nor is it likely that marriage began with a view to such goods. This is not so important in the *Ethics*, and it may even be essential to an account of friendship in marriage to refrain from looking too hard into the precise reasons that men rule. But in the *Politics*, one of Aristotle's main aims is to illuminate the nature of the hierarchies that exist in the political community and its subordinate communities. Thus, it makes sense that he would indicate in this work, albeit quietly, the true origins of male rule (cf. Saxonhouse 1982, 206).

## Polygamy and Savagery: The Character of Early Household Rule

If Hesiod gives us insight into how the early household formed, Homer gives us insight into how it functioned. Moving forward in his account of the development of political community, Aristotle argues that households gradually joined together to form villages.

> Just as all households were ruled monarchically by the oldest, so too were the villages, on account of kinship. This is what Homer means in saying "Each ruled over his children and wives," for they lived dispersed from one another. Thus did ancient men live. (1252b19-24)

This line comes from Homer's account in the *Odyssey* of the Cyclops. These one-eyed creatures appear as the epitome of barbarism; they eat their guests. Homer's description of the way of life

of the Cyclops is unequivocal: uninterested in the affairs of their neighbors, each of these brutes exercised a lawless rule over his family (*Odyssey* IX.112-115). In addition to indicating the despotic character of early patriarchal rule, Aristotle's reference to Homer's description of the Cyclopian household introduces an interesting wrinkle into the argument, for each of the Cyclops ruled over his children and wives or bedfellows (*aloxon*), in the plural, suggesting that these early patriarchs were polygamous. This is significant. It underscores the brutality of the conditions in the early household, and the abysmally low status of women. Michael Davis goes so far as to conclude that "prior to the polis, there are no husbands and wives. By itself, the household cannot preserve the distinction between women and slaves" (1996, 24).

If the households of early patriarchs resembled those of the Cyclops then, at some point, the household underwent a major change from polygamy to monogamy. How and why might this have happened? If the early patriarchs were a law unto themselves, it is not likely that a constriction of their power resulted from a revolution from within. Perhaps, as populations grew, the men who found themselves without women objected to the hoarding of women by the patriarchs; perhaps this coincided, as Davis suggests, with the rise of political authorities who could establish laws regulating the behavior of individual patriarchs (1996, 24-27). In support of this, Aristotle concludes Chapter Two by remarking that, although everyone has in himself an impulse toward political community, the first founder of a city should be regarded as a great benefactor because it is in the city that virtue and justice develop. Without virtue and justice, man is the most savage of all animals, especially with respect to food and sex (1253a29-39). The emergence of political life, then, allows the household to become more than a means for savage men to gratify their desires.

If we have any lingering doubt about whether the early Greeks treated women as property, confirmation comes in Book II of the *Politics*. Having moved on to other matters, Aristotle momentarily drops the façade that he constructed in Book I of the superior civility of the early Greeks. Considering the possibility that one should not necessarily regard changes in laws as bad, he remarks, "One might say that the facts themselves are the proof, for the ancient laws were overly simplistic and barbaric. The Greeks used to carry weapons and buy their wives from one another" (1268b38-42). It is telling that the two practices went together; when men are constantly armed, it is a sign that their society relies heavily on the threat of force to sustain law and order.

In sum, Aristotle's aim in Chapter Two of Book I is to show that the city arose naturally, out of subordinate associations that are themselves natural. But the details of his account of the formation of the household indicate otherwise. After arguing that women's position in the household should be completely distinct from slavery, having a different aim and basis, Aristotle indicates that, in the early household, the man-woman relationship was not completely distinct from the master-slave relationship, either in its origins or in the character of the rule to which women were subject. The association between men and women in the early household aimed at the satisfaction of daily needs, and it was directed primarily to the needs of the ruler rather than to those of the ruled.

## The Rule of Men, Understood in Light of Its Origins

If the manner in which men acquired wives and governed them in the earliest times did not accord with nature, perhaps this should not be a surprise. For Aristotle says in Chapter Two that "nature is an end (*telos*), and we say that a thing's nature is what it is when its generation has

reached its end, whether it be a man or a horse or a household" (1252b32-34). If the household began barbarically, it also became more civilized as political life developed. The domination of men by women gradually became less despotic and less extreme (Dobbs 1996, 86; Nagle 2006, 30). The crucial question, though, is this: After the emergence of political life brought with it "virtue and justice," how much more civilized did patriarchal rule become? Did the household of the *polis* transcend its barbaric beginnings?

In the rest of Book I, Aristotle speaks to the character of household rule in the life of the developed *polis*. He continues to characterize the rule of men in ways that suggest that superior physical strength lies behind their rule. The first relevant remark comes in Chapter Five, in Aristotle's discussion of slavery. The question Aristotle considers in this chapter is whether any human beings can be rightfully described as natural slaves. Aristotle first has recourse to the general concepts of ruler and ruled; rule and obedience, he says, are necessary and advantageous. Whatever is constituted by a number of things and yet becomes a single thing has a ruling and ruled element, he argues, such as musical harmony (1254a17-32). The difficult question, of course, is whether this sort of union ever exists between human beings. Aristotle notes that in animals, at least in the best animals, the soul rules over the body. In the well-ordered human being, the soul rules over the body, and reason rules over the other parts of the soul. That this is natural and good is shown, he says, by the fact that it is good for the body to be ruled by the soul, and harmful to both if the order is reversed. The same is true, he notes, of human beings' rule over animals: being ruled by men ensures preservation for tame animals. Next, he says, "further, the relation of male to female is one of superior to inferior, and ruler to ruled. And it must be the same way for all human beings" (1254a32-b16).

Aristotle appears here to confirm the naturalness of slavery and the subjection of women. But on what grounds? There is an important difference between what Aristotle says about the rule of male over female and what he says about the other natural hierarchies: In the rule of the soul over the body and of human beings over animals, a common good derives from the rule of the superior element. Aristotle says that men are "superior" and women are "inferior," but he does not say that the rule of men results in a good common to both sexes. Most important, the primary meaning of the word he uses for superior (*kreitton*) is not wiser or more virtuous, but stronger, mightier, and more powerful (Liddell and Scott 1997, 449; see also Davis 1996, 24). Now, if Aristotle had indicated clearly in Chapter Two that the subjection of women originated in a common good between men and women, we might be inclined not to place much weight on Aristotle's choice of this word. But, in light of what we have seen, we have to wonder: Is Aristotle saying that the rule of men over women is natural in the same way that the rule of a soul over a body is natural? Or is he saying that it is natural in a different sense—perhaps in the sense that the rule of the stronger is natural? By using the word *kreitton*, and by neglecting to affirm that a common good derives from the rule of males over females, Aristotle leaves the precise reason that men "naturally" rule over women ambiguous (cf. Ambler 1987, 398; Matthews 1986, 18-19).

After discussing slavery and acquisition in the middle chapters of Book I, Aristotle returns to the topic of women in Chapter Twelve. He asserts that slaves, children, and wives are each ruled differently: a slave is ruled despotically, a child monarchically, and a wife politically. "For the male," Aristotle writes, "unless, I suppose, he is constituted contrary to nature, is fitter to command than the female, and the elder and mature is fitter to command than the younger and immature" (1259b1-4). As Saxonhouse hastens to point out, although these lines provide a

rationale for the rule of men over women, Aristotle admits here that reality does not always correspond with nature's intention. At least in some cases there is a departure from nature—that is, a husband is less fit to rule than his wife, but he rules anyway. "We cannot be assured that nature is in control at all times" (Saxonhouse 1985, 71; see also 1986, 413; Nichols 1992, 30). Aristotle's assertion about the naturalness of male rule, like his doctrine of natural slavery, does not justify the *status quo*; it sets up a standard for judging it. Beyond this, though, if the male is by nature "fitter to command" (*hegemonikoteron*), the key question is, of course, fitter *in what way*? In light of Aristotle's earlier statement that the relation of male to female is that of "stronger to weaker," we have to wonder: Are men fitter to command in the sense that they are smarter and better? Or are they fitter to command in the sense that their superior strength gives them the ability to enforce their commands? Once again, Aristotle leaves the precise character of the natural basis of the subjection of women unclear.

Aristotle pairs this ambiguous explanation of the naturalness of male rule with the statement that rule of husbands over wives is political. With this statement, the problematic character of the status of women comes most clearly to the fore. Earlier, Aristotle said that men rule their households as kings (1252b20-21). His new statement that husbands rule their wives politically seems to revise that account. By characterizing the rule of men over women as political, Aristotle acknowledges that women are not children any more than they are slaves; they are, in some important sense, the equals of men. For a thinker who appears to advocate unreservedly the subjection of women, such an acknowledgment is striking. And if not for the complexities and nuances that we have observed in his treatment of the subjection of women thus far, this acknowledgment would come as an abrupt and rather drastic shift. When it is read, however, in light of the complexities and nuances that we have observed, Aristotle's

acknowledgement is no surprise at all; rather, it reads as a first step in the full and final surfacing of a problem that Aristotle has been quietly indicating, but struggling to avoid confronting directly, all along.

Aristotle gives only indirect indications of why the rule of husbands over wives should be understood as political. Of kingly rule, he says: "It is necessary that a king differ from his subjects by nature, but be of the same stock. This is the case of the elder and younger and parent and child" (1259b14-17). If it is not appropriate for husbands to rule their wives monarchically, it could be because husband and wife are not "of the same stock." Perhaps the fact that the bond between husband and wife is conventional, and weaker, than that between parents and children makes men less likely to use unbridled monarchical authority benevolently over wives than over children. But kingly rule also requires that the ruler differ from his subjects "by nature"; perhaps husband and wife are not different enough in their natures to justify such rule.

As soon as Aristotle indicates that marital rule is political, he acknowledges a difficulty in understanding it in this way. Aristotle explains that although the rule of a husband is political, it lacks the main characteristic of political rule—namely, that it is temporary (cf. Bradshaw 1991, 563-64). Free citizens take turns ruling and being ruled, Aristotle says, "since the members of a political association wish by their very nature to be equal and to differ in nothing" (1259b5-6). And yet, Aristotle continues, "when one rules and the other is ruled, he [the ruler] seeks to differentiate himself in external appearances and speeches and honors, just as Amasis said in the story of his footpan. The male always stands thus in relation to the female" (1259b6-10). Aristotle's reference to Amasis, punctuated by his remark that the male "always" stands thus in relation to the female, helps us to see why marital rule cannot be characterized simply as political. Amasis was a man of low birth who became king of Egypt. He had a footbath made of

gold, and when he became king he had it melted down and reshaped into a statue of a god. When his subjects worshipped the statue he told them, "If you can worship one day what you urinated into the day before, you can defer to me as your ruler" (Herodotus ii.172). Amasis seeks deference from his subjects, then, despite the fact that he is not necessarily superior to them. By directing us to this story as a way of understanding the relationship between husband and wife, Aristotle seems to be suggesting that, even though men rule their wives as equals, nevertheless, as rulers, men seek the marks of inequality—"distinctions in external appearances and speeches and honors."

Now, if the members of a political association "wish by their very nature to be equal" and "to differ in nothing," the first question that arises is why those who rule such an association would seek to create distinctions between themselves and their subjects. The answer would seem to be that, without such distinctions, it is impossible to rule. The members of a political association merely "wish" to be equal; rule, even political rule, requires a degree of inequality. But a second question also arises that is much harder to answer: Why would the ruling member of an association of equals be *entitled* to distinctions of any sort? Amasis comes to power by chance, and he seeks deference on the grounds of his insight that the distinction between the high and the low, or between the ruler and the ruled, is a matter of form rather than of substance. But if Amasis' insight applies to men and women—if men are not intrinsically superior to women—then how is the permanent rule of men over women justified (cf. Saxonhouse 1985, 72; Mulgan 1994, 188; Dobbs 1996, 78; Nichols 1992, 29-31; Swanson 1999, 237-238; Nagle 2006, 167-170)?

This question becomes the central focus of Chapter Thirteen, the final chapter of Book I. In this chapter, Aristotle finally confronts squarely the question: Why should the head of the

household rule over his wife, children, and slaves—especially his wife? He approaches this question by way of the questions of whether and how subordinate members of the household can possess virtue. First, he asks whether it is possible for slaves to possess virtues such as moderation, courage, and justice. "For if it is [possible for slaves to possess these virtues], then how are they different from free persons? But if it is not possible, it is strange, since they are human beings and share in reason" (1259b26-28). After beginning in this way, Aristotle wonders if the same question might not be raised with respect to women and children, adding:

> And more generally we must investigate about the natural subject and the ruler, whether virtue is the same or different. For if it is necessary for both to have gentlemanliness, on what account could we say that one must rule and the other be ruled, once and for all? (1259b32-36)

Aristotle's use of the word meaning "once and for all" (*kathapax*) suggests that he is thinking especially of women, for only in the case of women has he explicitly raised the permanence of their subjection as a problem. He stresses that the difference in the virtue of ruler and ruled cannot be simply a matter of degree: "being ruled and ruling differ in kind, not by greater and less" (1259b36-38).

The answer at which Aristotle seems to arrive in Chapter Thirteen is that men and women have different kinds of virtue: "It is clear that it is necessary for both to have virtue, but also that their virtues must differ, just as those who are natural subjects differ [from those who rule by nature]" (1260a2-4). But this conclusion is beset with difficulties. The reasoning that leads Aristotle to it begins from "the nature of the soul."

> For in the soul there is naturally a ruling and ruled part, and we say of both reason and the irrational part that there is virtue in each. It is clear that the same thing

> holds in other things as well, just as by nature most things are ruling and ruled. The free person rules the slave, the male the female, the man the child, but they do so differently. All have the parts of the soul, but they have them differently: the slave is wholly lacking in the capacity to deliberate; the female has it, but it lacks authority; the child has it, but it is incomplete. (1260a5-14)

Once again, Aristotle offers a rationale for the subjection of women. But its meaning, like that of similar statements that have preceded it, is not entirely clear. As Saxonhouse points out, the phrase "the female has reason, but it lacks authority" may mean that women's reason lacks authority in her own soul, or it may mean that women's reason lacks authority in the world, i.e., with men (Saxonhouse 1985, 74; see also Dobbs 1996, 85; Levy 1990, 404-405; Nichols 1992, 31; Smith 1983, 475-77; and Zuckert 1983, 194; cf. Achtenberg 1996; Homiak 1996). In support of the latter reading, Saxonhouse points to Aristotle's final literary reference in *Politics* I. To illustrate that certain virtues are specific to women, he cites a line from Sophocles' *Ajax*: "To woman, silence is an adornment" (1260a30). This line seems to mean that women should submit silently to the commanding reason of their husbands. And yet Ajax speaks this line to tell his wife Tecmessa to keep quiet when she is attempting to give him life-saving advice, advice that he does not take, to his great detriment. The quotation expresses quite aptly, then, that women's reason may be sound, but nonetheless lack authority with men (Saxonhouse 1985, 74-75; see also Davis 1996, 26; Nichols 1987, 132-33; cf. Modrak 1994; Kraut 2002, 214-15). This interpretation of Aristotle's remark would seem less plausible if it required us to conclude that, after arguing throughout Book I that men are morally and intellectually superior to women, suddenly, in the last chapter, Aristotle calls the basis of male rule into question. But our examination of Book I has revealed the continuity in Aristotle's account of the rule of men. By

saying that women "have reason, but it lacks authority," Aristotle once again allows himself to be interpreted in different ways. He could mean that women are intellectually inferior to men, or he could mean that men's superior strength lies behind their rule.

From his assertion that men, women, children, and slaves possess reason in different ways, Aristotle extrapolates that they must also possess moral virtue differently.

> So then we must suppose that it is necessarily similar in the case of the moral virtues: it is necessary for all to have them, but not in the same way, and each must have as much as is enough for his own work. Thus it is necessary for the ruler to have complete moral virtue . . . while the others must have as much as falls to them. So it is clear that there is a moral virtue of all of those we have spoken of, but that the moderation of the man and the woman is not the same, nor is their courage or justice, as Socrates suggested. Rather, there is a ruling and a serving courage, and the same is true with respect to the other virtues." (1260a14-24)

The fact that free men, women, children, and slaves have different "works," or tasks, seems to provide the grounds for asserting that their virtues differ. And yet, in explaining how the differences in the tasks of each of these groups bear on their possession of moral virtue, Aristotle falls back into the language of degree: Each of these groups must have "*enough* virtue for his own work," and each of the subject members of the household must have "*as much* virtue as falls to them." Aristotle thus leaves us to wonder whether the difference between the ruling and the serving forms of courage, for example, is primarily one of substance or of mere degree (see also Salkever 1990, 186). Moreover, Aristotle here speaks of which virtues are *necessary* in men, women, and children. The original question was whether it is possible for women and slaves to

possess the moral virtues in their full-fledged forms. The conclusion Aristotle draws, then, does not answer this original question. Finally, Aristotle says only that "we must suppose" (*upolepteon*) that it is necessary that men, women, children, and slaves possess the moral virtues in the same ways in which they possess reason. The question is, what is the necessity dictating what "we must suppose?" Must we suppose that men, women, and slaves possess the moral virtues differently because they *do,* in fact, possess them differently? Or must we suppose that they possess the moral virtues differently because it is only on that basis that the household order will be vindicated as natural? By neglecting to clarify these aspects of his argument, Aristotle stops short of affirming decisively that the household order has a solid basis in nature.

## Conclusion: The Household, the City, and Nature

Aristotle's ostensible intention in Book I of the *Politics* is to establish the naturalness of the political community and of its constituent parts, the village and the household. But, as we have seen, the details of his account of how the most basic element of the social order came into being in Chapter Two tell another story: the rule of men over women in the household began in force. In the rest of Book I, Aristotle continues to speak in ways consistent with the view that the basis of male rule is superior physical strength. He offers a number of rationales for the naturalness of the subjection of women. But those rationales are both ambiguous in their meaning and conspicuously limited. In particular, Aristotle never affirms that the strongest rationale for the naturalness of an association—namely, that it serves a common good—applies to the rule of men over women in the household. Finally, in the concluding chapter of Book I, he raises the question of the justice of the household order, and the answer he offers to that question is incomplete at best.

Aristotle seems to have thought that, within the context of developed political life, some reform of the household was possible. He tries to bring his readers to see that treating women as slaves violates nature, and he encourages them to rule their wives as equals. He seems to have thought that the household had the potential, then, to become more like the community that Saxonhouse, Dobbs, and Salkever envision, full of mutual affection and aimed at a common good. Still, Aristotle's efforts to improve the status of women indicate that he did not think women *were* typically accorded sufficient respect. On the contrary, his efforts on this front suggest that the tendency of household rule is toward despotism and exploitation rather than toward republicanism and benevolence.[8]

While Aristotle thought that the household might be improved, he gives no indication that he thought that the association of men and women in the household could ever become one of genuine equality. If this is true, and if it is also true that Aristotle doubted the justice of the hierarchy within the household, one might well wonder why Aristotle did not favor abolishing the household, as proposed, for example, by Socrates in Plato's *Republic*. Aristotle takes up this Socratic proposal directly in Book II. Against Socrates' claim that abolishing private families would allow all of the citizens to feel as though the city was one big, united family, Aristotle argues that the real consequence of abolishing the private family would be that no one would feel strong connections of kinship with anyone else. Just as wine becomes weaker when it is diluted with water, he argues, so, too, feelings of love or friendship are weakened when they are spread out among an entire city or class of citizens (1262b17-22). Rather than experiencing all of their fellow citizens as their own kin, people living under such a system would experience nothing and no one as their own. Aristotle argues that this is objectionable on two grounds. First, to subject citizens to such an arrangement would be to deprive them of the pleasure that human beings

naturally take in what is their own. He says that the difference between the pleasure that human beings take in what is common and the pleasure that they take in their own is "inexpressible" (*amutheton*). This is true by nature; nature makes us love ourselves (1263a40-1263b1). Nature further directs us toward loving our family members by pointing them out to us. Aristotle remarks that Socrates' scheme would not work because the guardians would be able to identify their children through family resemblance (1262a14-24). Not only does nature instill in us a preference for our own, then, but it also obstructs attempts to prevent such a preference from developing.

Aristotle seems to have judged that, even if the household is not natural in all respects, it is natural in *this* respect, that it expresses the powerful tendency to love and to take pleasure in one's own. On this reasoning, the household is rooted not only in the nature of men but in human nature, for the tendency to love and to take pleasure in one's own is certainly not limited to men.[9] In addition, Aristotle seemed to have thought that the household was essential to the health of the political community. He argues that abolishing the household as Socrates proposes would have grave political consequences. First, it would make the city weaker, for friendship is what prevents a city from splitting into factions (1262b7-9). Second, it would lead to neglect. People give the least care to what is common, he observes; they love and care for what is their own (1261b33-38, 1262b22-23). If wives and children were held in common, crimes against family members and incest would increase (1262a25-32, 1262b29-35). Fathers, too, would cease to concern themselves with education. In a city in which each man has 1,000 sons, Aristotle says, no one is the son of any one man, but each is the son of all equally; the result will be that all sons will be neglected (1261b38-40; see also Zuckert 1983, 193; cf. Saxonhouse 1985, 80-84).

Finally, Aristotle notes that an experience of private ownership, both of goods and people, is necessary to the experience of moral virtue. One needs private property in order to be generous by using one's property to help friends and family members, and one needs the existence of the private family to be moderate by abstaining from other men's wives (1263b7-14). Without the division of interests among men created by private possessions, it seems, there can be no possibility of self-overcoming or of self-restraint. Abolishing the private household, then, would undermine one of the greatest benefits of political community—namely, that it allows moral virtue to develop and flourish.

These points can help us to understand why Aristotle does not voice his criticisms of the household order more loudly. As problematic as the household may be, it is a crucial support to political life. And yet this is not to say, as has been argued by many interpreters of Aristotle, that in accepting and endorsing the private household, Aristotle simply sacrifices women and slaves so that free men can reap the rewards of political life (Arendt 1958, 31, 37; Coole 1988; Elshtain 1981; Nussbaum 2001, 370; Okin 1979; Spelman 1994; Zuckert 1983, 195). It is true that the household provides free men with at least a partial liberation from concern with practical necessities, and Aristotle does argue that such liberation is necessary for human beings to devote themselves fully to political life and to the pursuit of virtue (1328b33-a2, 1278a8-11). But one of the things that my examination of Book I of the *Politics* has shown is that the development of virtue and justice that takes place in the political community benefits the weak at least as much as it does the strong. In giving expression to man's political nature, the political community opens up the prospect of more civilized relations among all of those who live within it. The development of virtue and justice restrains and moderates men, and thus acts as a check on their

authority. The growth and flourishing of political life is, for this reason, a good common to both women and men, even if they partake of that good in different ways.

Aristotle may well have judged, then, that the natural impulses leading human beings into households are so strong, and that attempts to abolish the household are so impracticable, that a radical transformation of the traditional social structure would not be possible. On this view, blatantly exposing the defects of the household order would not bring about radical reform. But it would weaken and undermine the strength and health of the very thing that most improved the household, the political community. If such was his reasoning, then Aristotle's task in discussing the household in Book I of the *Politics* was exceedingly delicate. He had to present the household in such a way as to indicate its inferiority to the political community, and to bolster the supremacy of political authority over domestic authority. But he also had to present the household as a fundamentally good thing; he had to tread lightly, in other words, on its flaws. Still, Aristotle aimed to do more in the *Politics* than foster politically and socially salutary views. He also sought to convey the truth. And so, while he shined a brighter light on the more positive, attractive aspects of the household than he did on its uglier ones, he shined at least a dim light on all of them. Our understanding of Aristotle's account of the household in the *Politics* will remain defective and incomplete unless we see that, within that account, Aristotle indicates that the hierarchy in the household rests in no small part on superior physical strength.

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[1] See also Salkever (1993, 1006); Saxonhouse (1985, 85; 1982, 203); cf. Nichols (1992, 15-16); Zuckert (1983). For a helpful review of the arguments of Swanson, Salkever, and Nichols, see Lindsay (1994). Mulgan (1994) provides a broad review of the schools of thought concerning Aristotle's view of women.

[2] All references to Aristotle's works are to the Oxford Classical Text editions. Translations are my own.

[3] For an excellent general discussion of Aristotle's treatment of the naturalness of the city, and of why Aristotle seeks to defend the naturalness of the city despite his awareness that it is not natural in all respects, see Ambler (1985).

[4] "Every step in improvement has been so invariably accompanied by a step made in raising the social position of women, that historians and philosophers have been led to adopt their elevation or debasement as on the whole the surest test and most correct measure of the civilization of a people or an age" (Mill 1988, 21-22).

[5] References to *Iphigenia at Aulis* are to the edition of Slavitt and Bowie (1998), with minor modifications of the translation.

[6] Lest we take this as an isolated incident, Euripides provides additional insight into the Greek treatment of women through the explanation of Clytemnestra, Iphigenia's mother, of how their household formed: Agamemnon not only killed Clytemnestra's first husband and took her by force, he tore her infant from her breast and smashed its head on the stones beneath his feet. Clytemnestra's brothers came to her defense but her father decided, on reflection, to give her to Agamemnon as a wife (1342-52).

[7] References to *Works and Days* are to the edition of Lattimore (1991).

[8] At the same time, the prospect of women enjoying a higher status in well-developed political communities opens up dangers of its own. In Book II, Aristotle argues that the women of Sparta dominated the men, owing to the tendency of warlike societies to be obsessed with sex (1269b23-31). While Sparta's lawgiver imposed strict military training and rigorous moral discipline on Spartan men, he failed to assign any education to women, leaving them idle,

undisciplined, and extravagant (1269b19-23, b39-a9). The influence of Sparta's corrupt women was so great, according to Aristotle, that it led to the downfall of that regime. "What difference does it make whether women rule, or whether the rulers are ruled by women?" he asks. "The results are the same" (1269b32-34). If it is not desirable for women to be slaves, it is also not desirable that they be tyrants. And yet, even in his characterization of the situation in Sparta, Aristotle is careful to distinguish the status of Spartan women from that of actual rule; as much as Spartan women may have "ruled" Spartan men, exerting influence over them as objects of erotic attraction, the fact remains that they were not themselves rulers—they did not share in actual political power.

[9] For an ancient expression of this point, see *Oikonomicus* IX.18-19.

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