

# PLATO *and* SEX

STELLA SANDFORD

# **Plato and Sex**

**Stella Sandford**

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First published in 2010 by Polity Press

Polity Press  
65 Bridge Street  
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press  
350 Main Street  
Malden, MA 02148, USA

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ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-2640-6 (hardback)  
ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-2641-3 (paperback)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 10.5 on 12 pt Palatino  
by Toppan Best-set Premedia Limited  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by MPG Books Group Limited,  
Bodmin, Cornwall

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## **Plato and Sex**

For Ilya and Felix, because some of us do prefer our  
human children

## Acknowledgements

In the long gestation of this book I have benefited from the comments, criticisms and suggestions of colleagues (especially Éric Alliez, Christian Kerslake, Stewart Martin and Peter Osborne) at the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy staff seminar at Middlesex University, and of participants at the research seminars and philosophy societies at various universities, notably the Center for Psychoanalysis and Philosophical Anthropology at Radboud University, Nijmegen, and the Philosophy Departments at Middlesex University, the universities of Dundee, Reading, Sussex, Lancaster, Hertfordshire and South Stockholm University College. For productive conversations (in person and in print), inspiring ideas and critical debates I would like to thank, in particular, Kathleen Lennon, Peter Osborne and Alison Stone, as well as the two anonymous readers of the manuscript.

An earlier and shorter version of Chapter 1, 'Thinking Sex Politically: Rethinking "Sex" in Plato's *Republic*', was published in *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 104, No. 4, Fall 2005 (special edition on Thinking Politically, edited by Alberto Moreiras). Material from Chapter 2 was published, with a different emphasis, as 'The Origins and Ends of "Sex"', in Ray Brassier and Christian Kerslake, eds., *Origins and Ends of the Mind: Philosophical Essays on Psychoanalysis*, University of Leuven Press, Leuven, 2007. Chapter 3 was developed out of 'Sexually Ambiguous: Erōs and Sexuality in Plato and Freud', *Angelaki* Special Issue, 'Encounters with Ancient Thought', ed. John Sellars, Vol. 11, No. 3, 2006, and Chapter 4 from ' "All Human Beings are Pregnant" ': The Bisexual Imaginary in Plato's *Symposium*.

*sium'*, *Radical Philosophy* 150, July / August 2008. The chapters of the present book will, I hope, be read as the final and overriding versions of these earlier attempts.

The advantage of taking a long time to complete a book (this one twice very happily interrupted by the birth of a child) is the opportunity afforded for thought to develop, against the precipitate demands of intellectual industrial production. Even so, I am grateful to a series of editors at the Polity Press, but especially the last, Emma Hutchinson, for their patience and continued support over several years.

Finally, for everything, I thank Peter.

*Stella Sandford*  
*London, May 2010*

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## Introduction

Plato *and* sex? What is the nature of this relation? As this book aims to show, it is neither obvious nor simple, despite the brevity and apparently descriptive form of my title. This is not a book about Plato's views on sex or sex 'in' Plato. The 'and' in the title – *Plato and Sex* – is as much disjunctive as conjunctive. Rather, the book stages what I hope is a productive confrontation between aspects of Plato's philosophy and issues in the contemporary philosophy of sex and gender, via discussions of the modern reception of the relevant aspects of Plato's dialogues in philosophy (especially feminist philosophy) and feminist and psychoanalytical theory, and the conceptual presuppositions in that reception. The result, I hope, is new interpretations of particular passages in the dialogues and, simultaneously, a contribution to the contemporary philosophical debate on sex.

Here 'sex' means sex difference – the difference between the sexes (male and female) – in distinction from 'gender' (a category describing historical, cultural and institutional demands or norms), from 'sexual difference' (a specifically psychoanalytical concept, referring to subject positions within the symbolic order), from 'sexuality' (sexual desire and/or its orientation) and from sexual intercourse. It is important to make these *conceptual* distinctions, even if, ultimately, we do not hold that the different concepts name discrete things or phenomena, and even if it is obvious that they form a conceptual constellation in which they depend on each other. For it is important to be able to say what is specific to the *concept* of sex even if, ultimately, we are not able to identify any decisive empirical

referent for it. Of course making these conceptual distinctions has its consequences. In particular, distinguishing sex from gender predisposes us to think of sex as a biological phenomenon, a natural given, in opposition to the cultural construction of gender norms. The analytical priority of the category of gender in Anglophone feminist theory from the late 1960s left sex, understood in that way, temporarily untheorized, and the critique of the sex/gender distinction, which put sex back in the spotlight, was perhaps the most important development in late twentieth-century feminist theory.

Although the category of sex was the object of certain French feminist discourses from the 1970s – notably in the work of Christine Delphy and Monique Wittig – it was not until the 1990s, subsequent to the publication of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) that Anglophone feminist theory really sat up and took notice of sex, although the question of *sexual difference*, inspired largely by the work of Luce Irigaray, was prominent, especially in 'continental' feminist philosophy. This is a description of the dominant trajectories in feminist theory, and of course there are exceptions to them. Simone de Beauvoir, the most influential figure in the history of feminist theory, did not work with a sex/gender distinction and may easily be read as the first critical theorist of sex.<sup>1</sup> Sex was the central analytical category of Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*, which was more influential in the 1970s than its current status in feminist theory might suggest; one of its main aims was to 'attack sex distinctions themselves'.<sup>2</sup> And of course some Anglophone feminists were already focusing on sex before Butler's intervention, especially those influenced by Wittig and Delphy. However, since the 1990s, the far-reaching influence of Butler's work means that the question of the ontological status of sex has become one of the most fundamental issues in contemporary feminist theory. Is there such a thing as 'sex'? If so, what kind of a thing is sex? Are sexes natural-biological kinds, or political categories or medico-legal or cultural constructions?<sup>3</sup>

As will become obvious to readers of this book, my own theoretical sympathies are with those for whom 'sex' is a problematic object, not a natural given. But this does not mean, as it does for some, that 'sex' is subsumed under the category of 'gender'. The now classic argument to this effect in Butler's *Gender Trouble* is that categories such as 'sex' and 'gender' are productions of specific formations of power that 'create the effect of the natural, the original, and the inevitable'.<sup>4</sup> More specifically, the production of 'sex' as the idea of a 'natural', prediscursive origin is an effect of the cultural apparatus

of gender, such that 'sex' is, effectively, to be thought under the sign of gender: 'If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called "sex" is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all.'<sup>5</sup> Some years prior to this Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna argued, in Kessler's words, 'that "gender" should be used exclusively to refer to anything related to the categories "female" and "male", replacing the term "sex", which would be restricted to reproductive and "love-making" activities'. The rationale for this was that it 'would emphasize the socially constructed, overlapping nature of all category distinctions, even the biological ones'.<sup>6</sup> Kessler and McKenna's and Butler's position would seem to be that to continue to speak of sex is to collude in what Butler called 'the fictive construction of "sex" ' as the natural foundation of gender and of the stable identity of the sexed subject itself. Gender, on the other hand, in many ways a more complicated category, could be understood, at least for Butler, as the site of possible resistance to or transformation of the 'gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined'.<sup>7</sup>

If I continue to speak of sex and to insist in this context on the *conceptual* distinction between sex and gender (amongst other things), this is not for the purposes of distinguishing between any allegedly empirically determined entities or actually existing phenomena that are the referents of the concepts. It is because it is necessary to make the distinction in order to specify the peculiarity of the concept of sex – of the way in which this concept has functioned and continues to function in various texts and in the everyday worlds of men, women and children. This is not an anti-Butlerian point; far from it. It has Butler's argument in *Gender Trouble* as its condition of existence.

So what is the specificity of the concept of sex? This is not, first of all, a question about the ontology of sex – it does not ask what sex is, or whether it is, or what kind of a thing it is. It asks how 'sex' actually functions as a meaningful element in discourses of many different kinds, what 'sex' actually *means* when it is employed, as if unproblematically, in everyday speech and more formal contexts. Of course 'sex', like any other concept, has a history, and that history is complicated in being multi-lingual; so much so that significant issues arise in translation. The history of the concept of sex is as yet unwritten, but this book works with the presumption that we might speak very broadly of the 'modern' concept of sex to

characterize the popular, hegemonic view that operates today, as a way of acknowledging that the presumptions of, say, the past 200 years may not have been shared by the ancient world.<sup>8</sup>

One might expect that 'sex' would function differently in different discourses, but the peculiar thing is that by and large it does not. The peculiar functioning of the concept of sex is such that it tends to figure in the same form in both popular discourses and – the relevant arena here – philosophical texts. I refer to the modern, popular, hegemonic concept of sex as the modern 'natural-biological' concept of sex because of the presumptions that constitute it, not to commit it to a particular disciplinary-scientific origin or ontological status. According to the presumptions that constitute the modern natural-biological concept of sex there simply *is* sex duality (the exclusive division between male and female) and that duality is naturally determined.<sup>9</sup> As such, its referent is presumed to be a natural and not a historical object, and the possibility that the concept is, precisely, modern, is hidden. I contend that this concept has no purely descriptive function in relation to human being, although the presumption in its use is, precisely, that it does. The main reason for thinking this is that the constitutive and exclusive duality of its terms – 'male' and 'female' – is empirically inadequate to the phenomena that it would allegedly encompass without remainder, meaning that its duality is in fact normative and prescriptive. This is as true of the uncontentiously sexed infant who allegedly embodies one term of the sex duality as it is of the inter-sexed infant who will be made to conform to one. Further, the modern natural-biological concept of sex functions in relation to human being to refer to a natural foundation for existence, such that it offers itself as a naturalistic explanation for some aspects – sometimes even *all* aspects – of human psycho-social existence and behaviour, from the choice of children's play objects, to the choice of sexual objects; from the colours and clothes that toddlers prefer to the life choices and professional capabilities of adults. Thus the modern natural-biological concept of sex functions as something both naturally determined and naturally determining and it is effectively impossible to separate these two aspects. In allegedly describing a natural foundation for human existence the modern natural-biological concept of sex prescribes a duality, the nature of which is taken to be more or less determining of aspects of that existence. This is its specificity in distinction from the concepts of gender and sexuality, for example, which are often conceived as determined by sex.

It is because sex is conceived in this way that it tends to appear as an unproblematized and untheorized referent in philosophical discourse in general, including much feminist philosophical discourse, and in discussions of Plato's dialogues, in particular. This determines the interpretation of certain passages and arguments in Plato's dialogues where the issue of sex seems to arise. What could be less surprising? Not just in the case of the mainstream literature on Plato, which is hardly concerned with sex or gender, but also in the feminist literature, defined by its interest in the latter. What could be less surprising than that feminist philosophers, battling against the presumptive determinism of sex difference, should interpret Book V of the *Republic* in these terms; that, battling against the denegation of all things female or feminine in the history of philosophy, they should read the *Symposium* through the lens of sex?

But this book began with the curious suspicion that, surprisingly, Plato's texts did not yield or support the presumption of the modern, natural-biological concept of sex in their interpretation, precisely where one would most expect them to. It developed into the thesis that certain passages and arguments in Plato's dialogues may be interpreted in such a way, indeed, as to *contest* this conception of sex. This is not the claim that an alternative, perhaps ancient Greek, concept of sex animates Plato's dialogues, nor that the dialogues reveal or even support, speculatively, a theory of sex or of sexual reproduction. (It is not, then, like Thomas Laqueur's claims about the alternative model of sex in the ancient period, which he opposes to the modern account of sex.<sup>10</sup>) It also does not involve the claim that the relevant passages of the dialogues *aim* to do anything that can now be interpreted in terms of the contestation of the modern natural-biological concept of sex – it has nothing to do with Plato's intentions, whatever they may have been. Rather the claim is that certain important passages in these texts do, from the standpoint of the present, nevertheless contest the modern natural-biological concept of sex, understood in the way outlined above, in being recalcitrant to its imposition upon them.

The approach to Plato through which this book attempts to make good this claim needs to be specified in order to understand the nature of the claims in each chapter, and to distinguish it from other approaches. It is perhaps too early to write the history of feminist interpretations of Plato, but it is possible to characterise the broad trends in the literature to this point, some of which parallel the broad trends in the history of feminist philosophy more generally.

First, interpretations from the liberal feminist tradition, with its central concepts of equality and rights, read Plato – principally the *Republic* and, to a lesser extent, the *Laws* – and judge him according to the requirements associated with these concepts. This work – often from political philosophers and theorists in its earliest instances – tends to focus on Plato's explicit mention of women (women's nature, women's defining characteristics, women's capacities and proper role) and those aspects of the dialogues that might reasonably be judged to be of most concern to women (for example, arrangements for the care of the children of the Guardian class in the *Republic*). The title of Gregory Vlastos' famous essay – 'Was Plato a Feminist?' – might seem to sum up the guiding question of this tradition of criticism, but feminist work (notably that of Julia Annas) very quickly went beyond this.<sup>11</sup> Foregoing anachronistic questions about Plato's sexual politics or personal intentions, much of the feminist literature in this tradition focused on the place and nature of the female Guardians in the *Republic* and (what seemingly contradicts this) the instances of sexism or misogyny in his work and attempted to show either how the latter is related to his philosophy as a whole – even to Western philosophy as a whole – or how it is fundamentally unrelated.<sup>12</sup>

This dovetails with the literature from what is sometimes called the 'sexual difference' tradition.<sup>13</sup> This is most famously associated with Luce Irigaray, whose own work on Plato offers interpretations of aspects of the dialogues which span both extremes of the critical feminist compass of this tradition – from the archaeological reconstruction of the suppressed feminine or female in Western thought out of moments in Plato's dialogues, to the coruscating criticism of Plato as the founding philosopher of the (masculine) metaphysics of the same, covering over sexual difference and man's maternal origins.<sup>14</sup> But this tradition also contains an extremely broad range of other positions and theoretical commitments, from Arlene W. Saxonhouse's feminist essentialism to David Halperin's Foucaultianism.

If these are the two most articulated traditions, there are, of course, contributions to the feminist literature that do not fit into either: for example, the more recent, often Derridean, readings claiming to discover theoretical resources for feminism in concepts reappropriated from the dialogues. Mine is also a feminist approach that does not fit into either tradition, but neither is it an attempt to appropriate concepts from Plato. In confronting particular passages in Plato's dialogues from the standpoint of a particular position in



the contemporary philosophy of sex and gender the aim is not to read the former through the latter but to create a short circuit without a protective fuse. The aim is not to establish the relation between Plato and 'sex' but to prise it apart, even break it – to relieve the texts of the imposition or presupposition of 'sex' in their modern reception. In this I make no claim to discover their 'original' meaning. It is 'sex', not Plato's philosophy, which has to answer for itself today.

Four of the five chapters in this book focus on a few passages from Plato's *Republic*, *Symposium* or *Timaeus* where the question of sex seems to arise. After expounding these passages in some detail, each attempts to show how the modern reception of these passages – in both mainstream and feminist philosophical literature and in feminist and psychoanalytical theory – presupposes the modern natural-biological concept of sex in their interpretation, before suggesting alternative interpretations.

Chapter 1 focuses on Socrates' arguments, in Book V of the *Republic*, for the equal education of women in the Guardian class and for their participation in the rule of the polis. In the main interpretations of these passages hitherto, despite their often significantly different conclusions, there is a common presumption that what Socrates must oppose with his arguments is his interlocutors' assumption that sex difference – one's being male or female – determines for which function or job (*ergon*) one is naturally fitted. However, through an analysis of, and a comparison between the functions of, the classical Greek concept of '*genos*' and the modern English concept of 'sex' – the latter often used to translate *genos* in these passages – this chapter argues that, *strictly speaking*, the modern natural-biological concept of sex, understood in the way outlined above, is absent from these passages. It argues that what Socrates must oppose is not the idea that sex difference is determining, but a conception of men and women as different in every aspect of their physical, social and psychical existences, where 'men' and 'women' are constituted ontologically by a set of manly and womanish characteristics, respectively, rather than by their being-male or being-female. Beyond Socrates' arguments in Book V of the *Republic*, the idea that men and women are constituted in this way sheds an interesting light on the prohibition of womanish behaviour for men in ancient Athens, and thus on the arguments to that effect in the *Republic* and *Laws*. In demonstrating the possibility of distinguishing between the conceptual pairs male/female and man/woman in Plato's *Republic*, Chapter 1 endorses the possibility

of an alternative ontology of 'men' and 'women' as primarily social and political categories, one that sits uneasily with the professed modern faith in the natural determining role of sex.

Chapter 2 concerns the account of the origin of human beings in Aristophanes' speech in the *Symposium*. That account seems to offer a mythical explanation for the non-mythical fact of sex duality – the derivation of the two sexes from a race of humans originally divided into three – and indeed that is how it is usually interpreted in the philosophical literature, where the question of the status of sex itself is not at issue. This chapter argues, however, that Aristophanes' story is more complicated than this interpretation suggests. Its implicit postulation of the cosmic principle of the division of all things into male and female and its thematization of originary hermaphroditism suggest an interpretation that problematizes, rather than explains, the origin of male and female. The chapter then examines the reception of Aristophanes' myth in the psychoanalytical theories of Freud and Lacan, where sex *is* a central and contested category, to show how they seemed to take on this problematization in their own 'mythic' accounts of sex. In relation to Freud this involves a discussion of his enduring commitment to the theory of anatomical bisexuality and his speculative biological account of the origin of sex inspired by Aristophanes' tale. An interpretation of Lacan's brief references to Aristophanes' speech in the *Symposium* then lead, via a discussion of the conceptual distinction between 'sex' and 'sexual difference' in psychoanalytical theory, to an interpretation of the mythic role of 'sex' in Lacan's theory of sexualization. Finally this chapter asks, in the light of the difficulties posed by even the most 'scientific' use of the concept, whether the modern natural-biological concept of sex can ever escape a mythic function.

Chapter 3 centrally concerns not the modern natural-biological concept of sex but the modern popular conception of *sexuality*, such as it was identified by Freud. It aims to demonstrate the same kind of conceptual imposition in the interpretation of Plato's concept of eros via the modern popular conception of sexuality as in the interpretation of aspects of the *Republic* and *Symposium* via the modern natural-biological concept of sex discussed in the previous two chapters. It begins with Freud's claim that the enlarged concept of sexuality in psychoanalysis coincides with Plato's concept of eros, and with the difficulties inherent in the translation of the Greek '*erōs*' with the vocabulary of 'the sexual' and of 'love'. These difficulties bear directly on a central issue in the interpretation of Socrates'



speech in the *Symposium*: is *erōs* a specifically sexual passion or a metaphor for some more general desire or existential force? This chapter investigates both Socrates' account of eros and Freud's psychoanalytical concept of the sexual drive, the latter forged in opposition to what Freud called the (restricted) popular conception of sexuality. Freud's enlarged conception of sexuality, along with the related concept of sublimation, is often mooted, even if only to be dismissed, as a possible interpretative key to Socrates' account of eros in the *Symposium*. However, this chapter tries to show the way in which the persistence of the presumption of the restricted popular concept of sexuality in discussions of Socrates' account continues to determine one particular debate concerning eros in such a way as to prevent an appreciation of what may be its conceptual specificity – namely, its constitutive ambiguity.

Chapter 4 focuses on another intriguing aspect of Socrates' speech in the *Symposium* – the metaphors of pregnancy (specifically male pregnancy) and birth. A survey of the literature, feminist and otherwise, on this topic identifies a common interpretative strategy across widely different and even opposing interpretations of these metaphors in their attempts to separate out what properly belongs to the male from what properly belongs to the female. The chapter argues that this interpretative strategy fails to do justice to the literary specificity and complexity of these images in the *Symposium*, images that work and are constituted precisely by refusing this separation. Instead of presuming sex and the distribution of what is proper to the male and what is proper to the female as the literal ground of the images in the *Symposium*, this chapter investigates instead the possibility that the images can be interpreted as saying something about 'sex' and the distribution of masculine and feminine identifications. Rather than distinguishing between the metaphorical image (the illusion of male pregnancy) and its presumed literal basis (the reality of sex difference), the chapter suggests a reading of the images of pregnancy and birth as aspects of a complex structure of fantasy, in the interpretation of which the opposition reality–illusion is inadequate. In this way the images of pregnancy and birth are interpreted not as the metaphors or fantasies of a man, but in terms of the fantasmatic structure of sexed subjectivization – 'being man' – itself.

The final chapter, Chapter 5, focuses on three passages in the *Timaeus*. In the last of these, almost at the very end of the dialogue, there seems to be an account of the origin of sex difference. This account refers back to two previous passages in which the origin of