

1 Introduction and Methodology

Based on evidence from across the Aristotelian Corpus, this Element aims to counter the view that Aristotle, in stark contrast with Plato in his *Republic*, thought women morally and intellectually inferior to men. While, unlike Plato, Aristotle thought of women and men as significantly different, there is more agreement with Plato about the ability of women to achieve the best life than has usually been recognised. Aristotelian principles even suggest that women are well-suited to philosophical pursuits.

The usual starting point for discovering what Aristotle thought about women is *Politics* 1, where he declares that men are natural rulers. The only hint of an explanation for the subordination of women is that their capacity to deliberate is ‘unauthoritative’ (*akuros*, 1260a13), a ‘Delphic’¹ statement that lends itself to numerous interpretations. There are two key schools of thought: an intrapersonal interpretation and an interpersonal interpretation.² According to the intrapersonal view, women are physiologically and psychologically impaired by being chronically weak-willed. Their deliberative faculty is not in control internally. According to the interpersonal reading, women are unable to control those outside themselves to make their decisions have any immediate external impact. Interpreters sometimes reach for clues in Aristotle’s biological and zoological works for the rationale behind the subordination of women, something beyond a mere statement of fact about their psychological or social condition. If the body is the actualisation of psychological capacities then a different body would appear to point to a different underlying psychology. This Element will provide an analysis of these connections, beginning with the bodies of women in Aristotle’s biological works as reproductive and sentient, before turning to female psychology and character. It will then turn to Aristotelian practical philosophy. My central conclusion is that Aristotle’s claims about women in this section of the *Politics* have been misunderstood and that this misunderstanding has excessively influenced the general picture of Aristotle’s attitude to women.

Aristotle did not write a treatise on women.³ His remarks on female human beings range broadly across works on zoology, embryology, anatomy, politics, rhetoric, ethics, and literary theory. We find information about the make-up of male and female bodies in Aristotle’s embryology, where he describes their conception and formation, the male ending up drier, larger, and more sinewy.⁴ Another place to look for more information about the bodily condition of women is Aristotle’s account of the sense organs (*Sens.* 1.436b18–437a16, *Juv.* 3.461a10–21; *DA*

¹ Pangle (2013: 68). ² Terminology first employed by Fortenbaugh (1977).

³ Levy (1990: 397); Mulgan (1994). ⁴ Connell (2016: ch. 8.3).

2.19.421a17–22, *PA* 2.16.660a11–13). The next area of his biological thought of interest is the account of the consistency of blood, where Aristotle is explicit about the differences between male and female varieties (*PA* 2.2). And finally, the *History of Animals* gives an account of the character and intellectual capacities of female as opposed to male animals and contains a small section on women's character (*HA* 8.1).⁵

Before a detailed analysis of Aristotle's texts, it is helpful to give the explanatory framework in which these discussions occur. The *HA* provides broad facts about males and females that Aristotle has either observed in their natural setting or heard from other thinkers.⁶ What we get here resonates with ideas found in Greek literature at the time about the character of women and the frustrations their subordinated lives often entail. Thus, women are said to be sensitive, compassionate, caring, and intelligent as well as scheming and spiteful. Aristotle's other works on biology and physiology are explanatory rather than merely descriptive, but none focus on explaining sex differences. There is also no explanatory account of ethology, that is, animal character, in the section of *HA* where the statements about women's characters occur. Thus, any attempt to provide Aristotle's reasons for these variations remains speculative.

The *Generation of Animals* provides two explanations of sex difference, one in terms of final causes and another in terms of material causes, the backdrop being that although the separation of male and female animals is 'for the better' in one way, it is also accidental in another way.⁷ Many of the physical variations between the sexes are not for any purpose in nature but are side effects of generative functions.

The *Parts of Animals* is focused on the functionality of body parts. Overall, the account is about what is 'for the best' and thus one can find that blood consistency facilitates intelligence and character for all human beings according to their rational essence (*EN* 1.7). The accidental differences in blood consistency between members of the same kind, which are non-teleological, can be used to help account for the differences between the capacities and potential characters of men and women noted in the *HA*; these differences will be very slight.

While Aristotle's biological works seek theoretical knowledge, his practical philosophy is prescriptive, aiming to improve the lives of people in communities. Aristotle's ethical works are written for a male audience and prescribe the best life in terms of active virtues and theoretical activities. The *Politics* is

⁵ I follow the numbering of the Books of the *Historia Animalium* restored by Balme (Aristotle 1991a).

⁶ These are preliminary *historiai* of the differentiae of animals (Karbowski 2014b: 100).

⁷ Connell (2016: ch. 8).

concerned with a citizen population's best life: virtue and happiness (*Pol.* 7.1.1323a23–34; 1323b20–35). Citizens are often the minority in a given community and consist of those capable of sharing in rule and political judgement (*Pol.* 3.1.1275b17–20; 3.6.1279a9–13). The idea of citizenship is fluid and can include women as well as men.⁸ The work assumes that the role of women in the aims of a good government is to be citizen wives, participating in heterosexual partnerships with a view to procreation and the raising of citizen children. Aristotle's style in these works is looser than in the scientific ones. He quotes from literature, for example poetry, in an attempt to engage the men training for and currently involved in legislative and political life.

It is important to realise that Aristotle does not have a reductive view of human emotional and cognitive capacities. Humans are deliberative (*HA* 1.1.488b24), which means that they are in principle able to control even extreme desires (*EN* 7.5.1149a12–16). They determine their lives through reason and are not at the mercy of their bodies like other animals are.⁹

2 Aristotle's Account of the Female Body

This section begins with a description of how sexual differentiation at conception results in differently textured bodies. It will then discuss the subsequent differences in the heart, sense organs, blood, and overall bodily structure. To what degree these differences are functional rather than accidental will be touched on before ending with some general comments on the condition of female bodies in Aristotle's biology.

It is Aristotle's usual procedure to note and analyse differences between types, starting at the broadest grouping and ending with 'ultimate species' (*atoma eidē*, *PA* 1.1). Males and females within a kind have the same form and so sex difference exists below the level of species (*GA* 1.23.730b33–34b1; *Metaph.* 10.9). The philosophical reason for documenting these differences is to elucidate reproduction. In aid of this, the *HA* collects data on morphological differences, times of sexual maturity (5.14), mating habits (5.2–8), gestational lengths, and numbers of young per birth (*HA* 5.15–20, 33; 6). Other differences

⁸ Citizens in some cities are the children of male and female citizens (*Pol.* 3.2.1275b22–3). This is said to be Pericles' law at *Ath. Pol.* 26.4. Both children and women can be free, which is why 'political activity is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition of being a free person for Aristotle' (Lockwood 2018: 109). Aristotle also mentions the possibility that citizens be those that carry arms (*Pol.* 4.13.1297a41–b1) or hold office (3.1.1275a19–23), but commentators do not think that he believes these requirements are absolutely necessary for citizenship. See Kraut (1997: 133).

⁹ '[H]uman beings do many things against habit and nature, if reason persuades them that they ought' (*Pol.* 7.12.1332b6–8). Deslauriers (2009) argues that the idea of the body determining the powers of rational soul is an untenable interpretation of Aristotle (220–23).

between males and females within a kind include size, strength, presence of defensive organs, temperament, character, skill, ability to learn, and capacity for intelligent action (*HA* 4–8). These differences are not so clearly related to reproduction and look to be side effects of teleologically directed processes.

2.1 The Reproductive Body of a Woman

Male and female animals differ from the point of conception, which is a colder mixture in the case of the female (*GA* 4.1–2). This affects the formation of the first part in the embryo, the heart, where the nutritive soul resides and which brings about the construction of the rest of the bodily parts (*GA* 2.4.740a15–21). Although male and female animals very often have morphological and physiological differences when fully developed, the fundamental difference between them is in their hearts (*GA* 4.1.766a35–b5).¹⁰ Due to their hearts' different heating capacities, they are ultimately distinguished by their ability to concoct the final nourishment into male semen (e.g. *GA* 1.20.728a18–25; 4.1.766a30–33). Female animals are unable to do this, instead producing a less concocted, colder generative residue that serves as material (*GA* 2.4.738a37–b3). Foetal development in both the male and female proceeds from a network of blood vessels that form a framework for the rest of the body (*GA* 2.6.743a1–3; *PA* 3.5.668b24–6). Aristotle thinks that blood contains all the parts of the body potentially, being the ultimate nourishment (*GA* 1.19.726b1, 2.4.740a21; *PA* 2.2.651a15, 4.4.678a7). This blood can then be carried to each extremity and the bodily parts formed from it. Male animals will have hearts that are better able to concoct and so the blood will be more compacted and thicker, which will make their blood vessels tougher and their flesh harder (*HA* 4.11.538a22–b24).¹¹

This accords with certain data in Aristotle's zoology; that is, that female animals tend on the whole to be smaller¹² and to have less energy (*HA* 8.1.608b12–15). In supporting his idea that menstrual blood is the female animal's spermatoc contribution, Aristotle proposes that the more delicate appearance of female bodies is due to residues being bled out of the body rather than being used to construct and maintain a stronger, more sinewy one.

¹⁰ Connell (2016: 270–80); Deslauriers (2009: 217–18).

¹¹ Leunissen takes this to mean that female bodies are for Aristotle 'less shaped in accordance with the species form as realised in the male' (2017: 149), but there isn't any evidence for female animals being incomplete in the sense of their body parts remaining unshaped. As Aristotle puts it, an animal is complete once it has a male or female body (*GA* 2.4.737b10–12; see also *GA* 1.1.715a20–21). While he does talk about the female as incomplete, this is with respect to the ability to concoct semen into its final form, i.e. male semen, and not with respect to the articulation of her own body parts (Connell 2016: 118–19).

¹² Exceptions include fish, insects, and egg-laying quadrupeds (*HA* 4.11.538b24–8; *GA* 1.16.721a17–20).

Furthermore, females are not veiny in the same way as males are and they are finer (*glaphurōtera*)¹³ and smoother (*leiotera*) because the residue going towards those [characteristics/parts] is discharged together in the menses. (*GA* 1.19.727a15–18)¹⁴

Due both to initial development and subsequent physiology, female animals generally have more delicate flesh.¹⁵ The same ideas explain why females have less bodily bulk (1.19.727a19), smoother bodies, and tend to lack external parts such as hair, horns, and tusks (*HA* 4.11.538b15–24; *PA* 3.1.661b31–662a5). Furthermore, it seems that female flesh is ‘smoother’ because there is more fluid in it (*hugrosarkotera*; *HA* 4.11.538b9). This follows from the fact that the female heart will not dry up the flesh as much as the male heart does.

In *On the Parts of Animals* Aristotle states that blood consistency affects character and sensation (2.4.651a13–14). Due to a heart that is less able to concoct, female blood will be more plentiful and thinner, leading to tendencies towards fearfulness.

Those with very watery fluid are more fearful. For fear is a cooling. Having such a blend in the heart, the way is prepared for this feeling. (*PA* 2.4.650b27–30)

Boldness is associated with thick blood. Just as fear chills, temper heats. Earthier blood retains and builds this heat, becoming ‘like embers in the blood’ (651a3). These fibres, when combined with heat, thicken the blood, making animals more prone to boldness and quick locomotive reactions (*PA* 2.2.648a2). Female blood lacks these earthy fibres. This relative lack of fibres means that female blood is less able to support boldness. But this also means that it is more fluid and ‘purer’, facilitating perceptive sensitivity and intelligence.¹⁶

It happens that some of these animals [with thin blood] have very fine (*glathurōteran*) intelligence (*dianoia*), not because of the coldness of blood but due to its being thinner and pure. For those [animals] with thinner and purer fluid have a more mobile perception (*eukinētoteran* . . . *aisthēsīn*). (*PA* 2.4.650b18–24)

¹³ Aristotle uses this term to mean something elegant, precise, refined, or smooth; see, for example, *HA* 5.27.555b11; *PA* 3.1.662b8. Cf. *Phgn.* 5.809b5–7.

¹⁴ All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

¹⁵ Their flesh will differ because their blood vessels do (*GA* 4.1.764b28–33).

¹⁶ Leunissen’s idea that female blood makes female animals less intelligent than male animals comes from one passage at *HA* 3.19.521a23, which states that female blood is ‘thicker and blacker’ than male blood (2017: xxviii, 154). I take it this refers to external menses. One difficulty for her interpretation is that the female blood cannot be both ‘thick’ and unconcocted, since concoction is what causes the thickening.

Sex differences for Aristotle, then, include the heating capacity of the heart, the texture of flesh, body size, external parts, and the consistency of blood (or its analogue). Male and female animals also develop different reproductive and copulatory organs (*GA* 1.2–11.716a24–721a26), which are for the ends of generation. Sexed variations in other body parts are comparable to differences that one might find within a kind more generally. For example, blue jays' wings might vary slightly in length or colour due to the material conditions in which they were initially constructed. In the case of blood consistency, these are parts that form and continue to be produced after birth, like hair and nails (*GA* 2.6.745a11–16). Because it is constantly being remade, blood is affected by environmental factors such as diet and climate. Although blood consistency is required for the type of animal in each instance,¹⁷ minor variations (whether maintained throughout life or changing within a lifetime) are accidental.

2.2 The Sentient Body of a Woman

In general, Aristotle thinks that humans (both men and women) have the right sort of heat in their heart to facilitate intelligence (*GA* 2.6.744a30–31). Cognitive capacities are not only affected by the blood and heart but also by the nature of the sense organs.¹⁸ These organs are the channels by which animals represent and experience the external world. Sensing is a sort of knowing (*GA* 1.23.731a33–4); the more and better an animal's senses, the better it is able to know.

There are two ways in which the senses can be measured for effectiveness – their distance capacity and their ability to discern differences or detail (*GA* 5.1.780b12–17). Humans are best at 'accurately perceiving the differences in the objects perceived' (*GA* 5.2.781b19; see also *HA* 1.15.494b16–17). This is due to the fact that 'in humans the sense organ is pure and the least earthy and corporeal, and besides that, nature has given them, for their size, the thinnest skin of any animal' (781b19–22; Cf. *GA* 5.5.785b8–9). The thinness of the skin in humans ensures that each of their sense organs is more sensitive (*DA* 2.9.421a17–26; *PA* 2.16.660a11–13; 2.13.657a33–4). Skin covers the eye (*GA* 5.1.780b22–9), ear (5.2.781b17–23), the inside of the nose (5.7.781b1–6), and the sensitive flesh on their bodies by which they perceive the sense objects of touch. Good vision depends on the skin (on the pupil) being thin (*GA* 5.1.780a26–9). Furthermore, Aristotle is clear that 'to hear and smell accurately means to perceive as well as possible all the differences in the objects

¹⁷ For blood consistency as teleological see Deslauriers (2009) and Connell (2018).

¹⁸ Knowledge is crucially linked to perception (*Metaph.* 1.1.980a22–30). Furthermore, the rational faculty depends on the faculty of imagination based on perception (*DA* 3.8.432a4–9; *Mem.* 1.449b31–450a1).

perceived'. With these senses also, 'the ability to perceive the differences well' is due to the sense organ, 'just as it is in the case of sight, being pure and clean itself, and so must the membrane round it' (*GA* 5.2.781a17–21).

The ability to discern differences more accurately is directly related to intelligence and said to be the result not only of thin skin but also of soft flesh:

With respect to touch, humans discriminate more accurately than other animals. For this reason, the human is the most intelligent (*phronimōtatos*) of the animals. A sign of this is that within humankind, people are clever or dim according to the sense organ [of touch] and according to no other. For those with hard flesh are naturally dim and those with soft flesh (*malakosarkoi*) are naturally intelligent. (*DA* 2.9.421a20–26)

Female animals generally, and women in particular, have thinner skin and softer flesh than their male counterparts.¹⁹ Leunissen states that female sense organs are 'hard' and insensitive. However, Aristotle clearly considers the largest and most important sense organ, the skin, to be smoother and softer in females.²⁰ This means that female human beings, according to Aristotelian biology, are better arranged for the perceptual accuracy necessary for intelligence than men are.²¹ Another possible effect of this extra sensitivity is that female animals generally, including female human beings, feel pleasure and pain more, or more acutely. Aristotle never explicitly says this, but when it comes to moral weaknesses, it is implied that women are more prone to err due to their bodily desire for pleasure and the absence of pain.²² This might also mean that they feel more, or more acutely, other bodily pleasures such as those gained from painting, music, and the smell of flowers (*EN* 3.10.1118a2–11).

Another aspect of the condition of women is their bodily proportions. Part of what makes it possible for human beings to be intelligent is the structure of their body and its subsequent orientation.

Human beings are the only animals that stand upright, and this is because their nature and essence is divine. Now the business of that which is more divine is to think and to be intelligent; and this would not be easy if there were a great deal of the body at the top weighing it down, for weight hampers the

¹⁹ Generalising across animal kinds, the author of the *Physiognomics* notes that 'when flesh is hard and constitutionally firm, it indicates dullness of sense' (806b21). This text also provides a feminine picture of the 'good natural parts' including 'rather moist and tender flesh' and 'a thin skin' (807b11–16).

²⁰ Leunissen (2017: 155–6) actually needs this point to support her claim that woman are congenitally akratic (due to 'softness', see Section 4 below).

²¹ Leunissen says that, for Aristotle, women's sense organs are 'developed less well and are therefore functionally inferior', but her reference is to *HA* 4.11.538b2–7, which is about defensive organs, such as horns and tusks, and not sense organs (Leunissen 2017: 154).

²² See Section 4.

motion of the intellect and of the common sense. (*PA* 4.10.686a27–32, after Peck trans.)

While all humans have this upright posture, because female humans are lighter on top, they are even better shaped for intellectual pursuits. As Aristotle explains, those who are more ‘dwarf-like in nature’ are ‘deficient with respect to possessing intellect’ (*PA* 4.10.686b23–7). This condition is when upper portions of the body are large (686b3–23), which is generally true of males.

In all animals the upper and front parts of the males are better, stronger and more fully equipped than the females, in some females the rear and lower parts are stronger. This also applies to human beings. (*HA* 4.11.538b2–5)²³

The upper portions of the male body are more developed; ‘the male is more dwarf-like than the female’ (*Long*. 6.747a32–3). Ergo, males are deficient with respect to possessing intellect in comparison with females.²⁴

The human body must be a particular way, structurally and physiologically, in order to facilitate intelligence. This capacity is what distinguishes humans from other animals and, although there is no particular organ of the body in which it is actualised, a human body, with its sensitive flesh and senses, upright orientation, and organs that allow for speech and rational communication, are required.²⁵ Women have all the structures and organs needed, and in some ways their bodies are better arranged than those of males.

2.3 Women’s Bodies as Teleological: A Critique

A well-regarded contemporary theory proposes that differences between men, women, and natural slaves are designed by nature to allow for political communities. The idea is that nature, which aims to bring about the *polis*, divides human beings into ‘functional distinct subgroups’.²⁶ This section will explain why this is not a viable way to connect Aristotle’s biology to his politics. The first reason to be cautious about natural purposes for sub-kinds within a species is that Aristotle does not normally explain accidental variations within a kind in terms of his essentialist teleology. Admittedly, sex difference does aim towards the broader ends of generation in all kinds in which it exists. The main features

²³ All translations of *HA* 4–6 are from Peck (1970).

²⁴ Aristotle says that those with dwarf-like proportions have poor memories (*Mem.* 2.453a32–b3). See also *Phgn.*, where it is noted that ‘a good memory is signified when the upper parts are disproportionately small and are delicate’ (5.808b9–10). Leunissen (2017: 153) thinks that women are more dwarf-like than men, but the texts contradict that conclusion. I thank Mor Segev for this insight.

²⁵ Connell (2021). The only difference in terms of speech is a higher pitch of voice (*HA* 4.11.538b13–14; *GA* 5.7.786b17–18).

²⁶ Karbowski (2012, 2014b, 2019).

required for this are the generative parts and the capacities to produce the differentiated generative products (seeds).²⁷ The differences between male and female bodies extend beyond these and include, as noted above, the textures, temperature, and structures of those bodies. In human beings, Aristotle occasionally notes that different climates and localities produce groups or types of people that differ from one another (*Pol.* 7.7). Is it the case that differences such as these, between the sexes and between people living in different localities,²⁸ are intended by nature in order that humans reach their ends?

The view that these differences are teleological rests on the idea that *polis*-dwelling is a constraint on our species that means that it can't make all humans rational to the same degree. Thus, 'nature will have to engender human beings with different natural talents, skills, and ultimately rational aptitudes in order to have enough people suited to the various tasks of the polis'.²⁹ These groups are then likened to the sorts of bees produced through a series of generations: king, worker, and drone.³⁰

So that it happens that the leaders, i.e. kings, generate the same [as themselves], and generate another kind (this is the 'bee' kind [i.e. workers]), and bees generate another [kind], drones, but do not generate their own kind, but they are deprived of this. Since that which is according to nature always has an order, because of this, drones are necessarily deprived of generating even another kind.³¹ This very thing appears to happen. For they are generated but generate no other, but generation will have its limit in the third number. And thus this is finely/beautifully established by nature so that these kinds always remain in existence and never fail, though not all generate. (*GA* 3.10.760a27–b2)

The comparison with bee generation works as follows: just as there are three types of bee to do different jobs in the hive and this is part of their 'nature', so also – it is claimed – there are three different types of human being for Aristotle.

[N]ature must distribute different tasks in the polis and the household to different individuals. This implies that mankind (*anthrōpos*) will naturally divide into subkinds with different roles in the household and the polis, just as

²⁷ On females as teleological see Connell (2016: ch. 8.5–6).

²⁸ Aristotle also notes variations within kinds in other animals due to differences in locality or climate (*HA* 7.8; 7.13.598b31–599a1; 7.19, 28–9).

²⁹ Karbowski (2012: 341–2). Compare Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (1932): 'We decant our babies as socialized human beings, as Alphas or Epsilons, as future sewage workers or future ... He was going to say "future World controllers," but correcting himself, said "future Directors of Hatcheries," instead'. For Karbowski, Aristotelian nature is like the designer of the hatcheries.

³⁰ Karbowski (2019: 222). Aristotle called the queen bee the 'king'.

³¹ Aristotle thinks that animals can generate another unlike the parent only up to three generations, otherwise this would go on to infinity, which is impossible (*GA* 1.1.715b12–16).

bees fall into natural subcategories with distinct roles in the hive. (Karbowski 2019: 227)³²

However, the comparison of human men, women, and slaves with three types of bee is questionable. For Aristotle, bees' method of generation keeps its three types in existence: kings produce kings and drones; drones produce workers, and workers are infertile. Bees' way of reproducing is fine or beautiful because it accords with mathematical proportion (*GA* 3.10.760a12–13). This 'caste-system' is unique in nature, which is what makes bees 'divine'.³³ A pattern of triple breeding is simply not the case for humans or any other animal. In the generation of animals, there are certain aspects of human reproduction that are singled out, notably their uniquely variable gestational period (*HA* 9.4.584a36–b1; *GA* 4.4.772b7–8; 776a22), but the morphology of two sexes that is produced in each generation is not at all unusual.

There are many other social animals; some are even political (e.g. cranes, *HA* 1.1.488a8; 9.10.614b18–30). In all of these, there is differentiation between male and female. But this does not entail different tasks for each. This makes the fact of the *polis* a much stronger 'natural' consideration in morphological and psychological development in humans than is evident in the texts.³⁴ Furthermore, to fit to a rigid teleological programme, the 'female' type of human on this reading should ideally be unable to undertake anything but simple means–ends reasoning, so as to be completely under the control of her husband. But, in fact, she has a deliberative capacity. And 'why did nature, which is supposed to do nothing in vain . . . give her a deliberative faculty at all' if she wasn't supposed to use it?³⁵

The next problem is that there are both male and female slaves. If nature were really intent on producing three types of human, designed to carry out particular tasks, then men should produce men and women and women should produce slaves, who are themselves unable to breed; this would be just like the case of bees. Instead, women produce both men and women and slaves can reproduce since they also produce both men and women; and in any case, the 'generation' of slaves does not seem possible since those with the bodily morphology of slave are 'often' not slaves and vice versa (*Pol.* 1.5.1254b25–38). There is

³² I mostly engage with Karbowski (2019) as it is the most up-to-date version of this position. Very similar points are made in Karbowski (2012, 2014a).

³³ Lehoux (2019).

³⁴ There is no space here to argue against the idea of the *polis* as essential to humans; however, we may note that 'For a human is more by nature a coupling (*sunduastikon*) than a political (*politikon*) being' (*EN* 8.12.1162a17–18), and Aristotle only evokes the management of the household: 'it is absurd to argue, from the analogy of animals, that men and women should follow the same pursuits, for animals have not to manage a household' (*Pol.* 2.5.1264b4–6).

³⁵ Scott (2010: 115).