

Interpretation

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Gendered Origins: Some Reflections

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Arlene Saxonhouse, *Fear of Diversity: The Birth of Political Science in Ancient Greek Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), xiv + 253 pp., 29.95.

Arlene Saxonhouse has written a book which modulates the fashionable discourse of "difference" into discourse on "diversity." It is a difficult book to assess. Her readings of individual texts are subtle, nuanced, and always provocative. Her scholarship is meticulous, and the command of sources and extant literature is both impressive and rewarding. Yet despite these very real virtues the overall sense on completing *Fear of Diversity* is that the whole is somewhat less than the sum of its parts. Her interpretations do not gel into a compelling argument and her underlying thesis tends to become reductionistic, flattening out the very landscape it is meant to reveal.

The book begins with a line of argument generated most recently by feminist and deconstructionist critics of the Western philosophical tradition, namely, that the drive toward abstraction is not a progressive movement of mind, an organic unfolding of potentialities inherent in reason itself, but is a reaction to that aspect of reality which resists our ability to dominate and control. In this view, the fear that differences will result in chaos leads to the triumph of the "unseen" over what is seen, the creation in reason and speech of "natural and political worlds that can exist only if the senses are ignored" (Saxonhouse, p. xi). This fear issues in what Saxonhouse calls a "masculine model of rational omnipotence" and creates "visions of monistic simplicity" which marginalize all that is other. Her task in the book is to explore those texts which grapple with the "dangers of the extreme on either side" but particularly the danger inherent in striving for unity, the results of which are tragic in Saxonhouse's reading of the Greeks.

In an elegant, stylistic turn, Saxonhouse's book is, itself, a dramatic narrative replete with climactic confrontation and denouement. It is in this spirit that she begins with a "Tragicomic Prelude," a discussion of Aristophanes' *Ecclisiazusae*. This chapter is one of the strongest in the book and Saxonhouse's interpretation here should be circulated widely, given the current ideological climate. Aristophanes is presented as a prescient voice reminding us of the deep

and even tragic violations which occur when abstract calls for radical equality override natural impulse. In Saxonhouse's own words, the "denial of difference leaves us immobile and sterile." That recognition of differences as grounded in natural impulse may also lead to a hierarchical ordering, i.e., the beautiful is preferred over the ugly, the noble over the vulgar, etc., is an issue that stems from Saxonhouse's own treatment of the play but one she does not treat in enough detail. In fact this issue hovers in the background throughout the book. The question of what sorts of diversity are politically relevant and conversely how we are to sustain a civic culture which must to some extent abstract from individual preference and hence the visible and natural are not raised explicitly or treated in a sustained way. This may account for the sense one has on nearing the end of the book that the repeated references to diversity function more rhetorically than substantively.

It should be noted, however, that Saxonhouse does deepen the line of critique with which she begins in an important and even crucial way. Beginning with her discussion of Praxagora's polity and developing this more fully in her chapter on the *Symposium*,¹ she reminds us that politics and eros share a common ontological ground, and she will use this to argue that the negation of the erotic in the *Republic* leaves us without a genuine science of politics. Her reminder speaks brilliantly of the need to situate thinking about the nature of politics within the context of the deepest human needs and drives.

Saxonhouse's actual demonstration that, in fact, the fear of diversity was *the* driving motive for Greek thought begins with two chapters which juxtapose the pre-Socratics with three Greek tragedies. The playwrights Saxonhouse presents take the situation of "women" in its existential, social, and political dimensions as paradigmatic of the denial of difference. These voices function as the chorus within her dramatic structure, warning of the philosophical hubris inherent in those epistemologies which subordinate the differences which the senses perceive to the unity imposed by reason. And while her interpretations represent nuanced, layered, and reasoned responses to the texts in question, we meet here with a central problem of the book. Namely, as we move from chapter to chapter, we have an uneasy sense of equivocation as the drive toward unity is used interchangeably with the desire for abstract uniformity in the logical, epistemological, political, and even affective domains. The effect of this conflation is reductionistic, particularly since she identifies the drive for unity in all its manifestations as regressive. It would seem that a thesis of this sweep must go beyond its own hermeneutic for a compelling instantiation. Why this set of lenses for viewing the meaning and development of Greek thought and not another? What issues, problematics, phenomena does this thesis explain that other well-established views of similar scope cannot? Instead of raising the issue of comparative adequacy, however, Saxonhouse's argument devolves into a certain circularity. Her thesis informs her interpretations but becomes a procrustean bed with each subsequent twist providing evidence for her view.

We can see the problematic nature of this approach if we look at the inter-

pretations she offers for those Platonic dialogues that present Socrates' relation to the city of Athens, both literally and symbolically: the *Euthyphro*, *Crito*, *Republic* and *Symposium*. Saxonhouse does make an interesting point here, that the dialogues are much more ambiguous about the pursuit of unity than is usually assumed. Her readings do lead us to reconsider the texts from new perspectives, but they also lead to some questionable lines of descent. Her interpretation of the *Euthyphro*, for example, rests on the rejection of the view that the dialogue foreshadows the theory of forms. Rather, "the dialogue raises questions about the political implications of a philosophic drive towards abstraction such as entailed in the theory of forms" (Saxonhouse, p. 94, footnote). In this interpretation (and Saxonhouse does alert us to the fact that she is arguing against the prevailing view here) Euthyphro is heir to the tragic flaw of Sophocles' Creon. In her earlier chapter, "Women and the Tragic Denial of Difference," Saxonhouse advances the view that Creon's tyranny was that of the democratic ethos; his tragic error was the embrace of an abstract egalitarianism that denied all particularity and elevated an interchangeable uniformity over the specific and complex needs of individuals.²

Euthyphro carries through this negation of particularity, of nature, of multiple roles and relations in his willingness to prosecute his father: "the attempt to turn to the laws of the city is in this case the questionable use of the unified to deny the multiple" (Saxonhouse, p. 100). Euthyphro manifests "the longing for a simplicity of moral precepts that can include all: family members, the city and the gods" (Saxonhouse, pp. 98–99), and in fact he exhibits "the arrogance of a Heraclitus" who "can see the unity of all, whereas others see only what is complicated" (Saxonhouse, p. 99).

Socrates' job, given this reading of the dialogue, is to return Euthyphro to the complexity of particular relationships and individual traits. Saxonhouse here refers back to her discussion of Orestes who, in the final play of the trilogy, stands "shorn of all individuality" and receives abstract justice from citizens likewise shorn of any relation to him:

Justice has moved from the web of familial particularity of the father killing the daughter, the wife killing the husband, the son killing the mother, to the abstract city that tries Orestes' case before a group of strangers chosen by lot, that is, by the mere fact that they were citizens and had no particular relationship to Orestes or to the individuals who were murdered. A focus on the family forces the individual away from such abstractions of the polity and towards particular relationships and individual traits. It is for this that the Furies, as guardians of household justice, fight—and lose. While I certainly do not want to make an analogy between the Furies and Socrates, I do want to suggest that we can see both the Furies and Socrates of the *Euthyphro* as resisting the abstract unity of the city that draws individuals out of their particular familial ties. (Saxonhouse, p. 95).

One wonders about Saxonhouse's interpretation here, not only on the basis of the broader philosophical context but for reasons internal to the dramatic

structure of the dialogue itself. Given the concrete strokes with which Euthyphro is drawn, it is difficult to accept a genealogy in which he stands as the spiritual heir of Creon. Despite the future he portends for Socrates, and here of course is the irony, Euthyphro is anything but a tragic figure. Rather as the democratic “busybody” he is everywhere but nowhere. To see his “character” as spiritually unified by any drive, including Creon’s “longing for simplicity” or the epistemological “arrogance” of Heraclitus requires an extremely generous interpretation.

Yet this line is continued as Saxonhouse moves on to a discussion of the *Apology* in which she sees Meletus deepening Euthyphro’s position:

Meletus is concerned with a piety grounded in the needs of the city, a city he wants to see as a whole, unified and uniform, that is, a city like that in the *Republic*. . . . (Saxonhouse, pp. 103–4)

Again she sees the issues raised in the dialogue as manifesting the quarrel between uniformity and diversity, in this context, what it means to educate. Socrates stands in his particularity going to each citizen as a “father or older brother.” Meletus stands for the abstract uniformity of the laws. Certainly Saxonhouse is right when she points out: “The problem with acknowledging differences and complexity plagues Meletus again when he fails to recognize the difference between Socrates and Anaxagoras” (Saxonhouse, p. 106). What is more difficult to accept is that this inability to distinguish represents the political form of the motives which drive Parmenides and Heraclitus to metaphysical speculation. That judgements of life and death are made by those who can neither “add” nor “divide” rightly and that even a clear contradiction elicits no shame points to a very different problematic than that raised by Parmenides who, after all, rejected the way of Becoming, on one level, because its assumption denied the laws of thought.

Saxonhouse ends her chapter here with the *Crito* and interprets the personified speech of the laws as a completion of earlier attempts³ to remove the maternal as the ground of political and hence fully human being, i.e., the “abstraction of the laws” replacing the “eroticism of human bodies”: “The laws have established dependence on themselves for the existence of citizens; fathers and mothers are only accidental. It is a world Eteocles and Euthyphro would envy. No ambiguity nor impiety would shade the certainty of decisions to attack one’s brother or prosecute one’s own father” (Saxonhouse, p. 108). And in a coda to this point she writes:

The laws of Athens may have made Socrates a legitimate child, a citizen of the city of Athens, but they did not give birth to him any more than the earth could give birth to the inhabitants of a more ancient Athens or a fantastical Callipolis. A lie is a lie. A fatherland (*patris*) is not a father (*pater*). The laws speak of what is understood through the mind, the intellect, and of what is created through speech

or *logos*. They go beyond the senses that divide cities into fathers and families, into individuals and friends, and create a unity that we cannot experience with our senses. Like Zeno with his arrow, the laws ask us to ignore what the senses perceive and to accept what the mind tells us. (Saxonhouse, p. 109)

Saxonhouse's point here is certainly clear, but so is that of the laws. That they are the precondition for the biological family to function as a stable unit over time, protecting, nurturing, educating, and forming individual as well as social beings may not be just a patriarchal "power play." Certainly when viewed from historical perspective, Aristotle can bring the family back as a bulwark against conflict only because the laws have done their work (see Saxonhouse, p. 201).

Saxonhouse is quite right to draw our attention throughout the book to the very basic fact that the city is an abstraction and thus has an ambiguous relation to the rest of life. And she is right to remind us that two distinct possibilities emerge from this—a genuine but complex mediation which preserves the distinctions and multiplicities which give rise to the polis or the seductive possibility of dismissing what is "other." Saxonhouse continues to trace this latter course as she moves from the dialogues which deal with the death of Socrates, who stands idiosyncratically outside the egalitarian uniformity of the democracy, to the construction of the "beautiful city," whose founding requires that private be turned into public, female into male, and poetry banished by philosophy. Thus her discussion of the *Republic* takes place within the same thematic horizons as her earlier chapters. But in focusing, in particular, on the banishing of poetry to ensure simplicity and uniformity, Saxonhouse also shows that the city which can be in language only contains its own critique:

Socrates, having returned to life by going up from the Piraeus and away from the deathlike halls of Cephalus's house, can imitate those who are not noble, those who are not good, and even those who are not honest. In his own recitation of the *Republic*, Socrates becomes multisided; he becomes all the characters whom he portrays and he becomes whole and many-faceted, taking on multiple tasks rather than one.

Socrates becomes the democratic man. He is not the poet he seeks for his own city. Indeed, he is to be banished from Callipolis. (Saxonhouse, p. 143)

Democracy demands that the citizen be multidimensional. Not only is the citizen a shoemaker, but he is also a member of the jury and the *ecclesia*; he is a father and a member of the *boule*. No one pretends that the city that Socrates founds here is "democratic" in the Athenian (or any) sense of the term; indeed, it appears to be founded on principles that are explicitly antidemocratic. But within the structure of the dialogue that Plato writes, it is the character of Socrates who takes on for himself a multiplicity of roles. He attacks justice and then defends it; he is violent and he is humble; he does not one job, but the job of all the characters in the dialogue, giving their speeches and all their responses, their "yes's" and their

“no’s,” as well as his own speeches and the narratives in between. As he founds the city to serve as an antidote to the openness of democracy, Socrates takes on all the qualities of a multi-colored democratic man whom women and children find fair. (Saxonhouse, pp. 143–44)

Tyranny is for Socrates the end of the descending regimes. Callipolis is the beginning. The sterility of both comes from an excessive desire to make what is many one, to escape the tragedies as well as the comedies that plague a world where men and women must interact in the processes of birth and generation, where privacy must contend with community, where poets sing and where laughter is on occasion heard. Socrates may not openly laugh in the *Republic*, but Glaucon does, and even within the *Republic* Socrates recites poetry that was banished from his Callipolis. Socrates also welcomes the foreigner as he praises the festival of the Thessalians (327a); he lives as a public person and as a private man; he is a busybody interfering unwelcomed in everyone else’s affairs (*Apology* 31c); and he is a philosopher like the philosophers mentioned in the *Republic*, who cannot communicate what he sees in his trances. (Saxonhouse, p. 157)

Her chapter on “Callipolis” is not disappointing for what it says but, rather, for the narrowness of its parameters. That the education of *citizens* may require hierarchy and the “privileging” of certain cultural horizons, faculties of mind, and forms of expression is a “Platonic” question which should be addressed in the present cultural climate. And while it is true that in the practice of politics prudence takes precedence over synoptic vision, the relationship between these two is not as mutually exclusive as Saxonhouse seems to suggest. The discriminations we make, as she notes, are as important in producing the capacity to act as is the “embrace” of diversity and the role of abstractions is not negligible here.

For Saxonhouse the critique of the drive toward unity that is internal to the *Republic* is more openly articulated in the *Symposium* but so, too, perhaps, are the distorting effects of her thesis as the interpretive framework for the dialogue. In her reading, the culminating encounter of the *Symposium* (and the dramatic climax of her book) presents Alcibiades as the voice of that critique. He is political man rooted in the physical, the visible, the complex, and the erotic warning of the sterility engendered by the Socratic pursuit of the abstract.

It is the voice of the political man, Alcibiades, that reminds us of the complexity of human existence, the uneasy relationship between the seen and the unseen, and the awkward presence of a Socrates—whole and complete in himself—in that world. The Socrates of Alcibiades’ speech is similar to the spherical creatures inhabiting Aristophanes’ ancient history as well as Callipolis of the *Republic*. All appear immune to the longings, the *eros* of men, and they stand deathlike, needing nothing, wanting nothing, in their immobility.

In the end, both Aristophanes and Socrates portray humans who, having satisfied their *eros*, having attained their desired perfection, care nought for food.

Alcibiades shows us in the person of Socrates a unique example of such closure, one who disdains the food others crave, but who also poses for us the question of what role such an individual can play in human affairs. The analogies between Aristophanes' spherical creatures, Diotima's "beautiful itself," Alcibiades' Socrates, and Socrates' Callipolis leave us open for the reconsideration of the meaning of political unity that Aristotle will later present. (Saxonhouse, pp. 159–60)

For Saxonhouse, Aristophanes and Socrates share a common understanding of eros as the desire to be complete in oneself. Yet Socrates' speech comes on the heels of another speech in which Agathon has shown himself to be the master Sophist,⁴ and this juxtaposition is stunning in both its literary and philosophical impact. For we are shown the power of the dialectic to cut through the spell of beautiful discourse, discourse that delights, charms, and even seduces. While the dialectic offers no immediate delight and seems furthest from the language of a true lover, its forms alone lead to the apprehension of the Beautiful and the Good in themselves and hence the possibility of true happiness. It is through the dialectic that the nature of love is revealed, that love, like knowledge, is intentional in structure and wants what it does not have. The dialectic moves us away from the erotic union as described by Aristophanes, whose notion of eros is ultimately regressive and tragic. With its primary tense in the past and its primary object reflexive, the self in its pained and truncated state, Aristophanes' union is compelled and sterile, a "dead end," the longing for the net of Hephaestus.

Socrates' first question, whether love is something or nothing, takes us down a very different human and metaphysical path. By making proper distinctions, by "adding" and "dividing" rightly, the dialectic reveals the soul's true longing, a union which does not lead to a sterile collapse of self into the other but to a progressive and creative ascent. Eros, while still anchored in the awareness of our own finitude, now has a noetic dimension. Mediated by knowledge, by the ability to judge the nature of the object loved, eros is freed from the blind compulsion of Aristophanes' drive. Thus we are given in Socrates' speech a supremely optimistic view. Love is the foundation of the civilizing process itself and this is natural to the person, i.e., there is a sensuous and organic basis in human nature for the ascent to the Good.

Certainly from the perspective of the many, there is something idiosyncratic about Socrates as the ultimate lover; only from his vantage point would the charms of an Alcibiades be negligible. But Socrates is absolutely right in his appraisal of Alcibiades' charms both for himself and for the city of Athens and, indeed, the emphasis on juxtaposed narrative frames at the beginning of the dialogue serves to remind us of the disastrous effects of Alcibiades' shameless ambition. Thus it seems wide of the mark to reverse the import of the dialogue's warning as Saxonhouse does. Speaking of Alcibiades' characterizations of Socrates she writes:

Further, Socrates is like those destructive women, the Sirens, “enchanters of all mankind whoever comes their way” (*Odyssey* 12.39–40). Those who hear the Sirens during their travels have no chance of returning home, drawn instead to the destructive reefs surrounding their island. Men must either fill their ears with wax so that they cannot hear the Sirens’ song, or tie themselves to the masts of their ships so that they are not able to approach the seductive singers and thus destroy themselves. Alcibiades hears Socrates’ song and is enchanted, but like Odysseus, he escapes the death awaiting him on the treacherous reefs of philosophy and returns home to the political world. (Saxonhouse, p. 180)

When Aristophanes’ lovers found each other and became whole, they cared nothing for food nor for life itself. When Diotima’s philosophers gazed on beauty, they cared nothing for food nor for life itself. Socrates in Alcibiades’ speech cares nothing for food nor for honors nor for life itself. When Alcibiades gazes on Socrates, he too cares not at all for food or drink or the pleasures of political office. But he, along with Plato, perceives complexity, both attraction and repulsion, both beauty and deformity, virtue and arrogance. The political man, drunk and supported by the body of the flute girl, exists in a world that is complex and multiple. The Socrates of Alcibiades’ speech makes him feel uncomfortable in that world, but once he escapes from the spell of Socrates, he can stay in the world and report to and warn others about the dangerous and obscure beauty of his satyr. (Saxonhouse, p. 183)

The final section of the book presents Aristotle’s *Politics* as the denouement of the tragic confrontations of the Socratic dialogues. Saxonhouse argues, strongly and effectively, against interpreting Aristotle’s notion of the polis as an organic whole. Rather it is “a bringing together of discrete parts that have in common some trait or possession” (Saxonhouse, p. 189, footnote 1). And it is this notion of the polis which makes Aristotle the “hero” of the book:

The balancing of different claims, the order built on compromise and conflict over the meaning of the good life, the just and the unjust—these are the elements of the political world. *Politike* is born with the intrusion of the many, with the overthrow of Parmenides, with the open readmission, rather than the banishment, of what the eyes perceive. Aristotle observes the world around him in its great multiplicity of forms, and from that observation, political science emerges. (Saxonhouse, p. 187)

Saxonhouse explores the text in terms of the typologies and hierarchy that serve as preliminary models for a discussion of the particular form of sharing that is uniquely political. Her discussion of the analogies Aristotle provides for understanding the particular kind of unity of parts which make up the city is clear and insightful, and her emphasis on a regime as a taxis of parts reminds us in yet another way that diversity is the ontological ground of politics, namely, these parts will always make competing claims against one another such that shifting boundaries and criteria are built into the nature of the polity. The further consequence of this view is, of course, the notion that there is an

essential difference between the activity of politics and philosophical speculation. Politics *cannot* abstract from the ambiguities of praxis, and hence civic virtue is not primarily theoretical vision but “phronesis,” the apprehension within the common world of appearance of the mean. The question becomes then not how to unify but how to choose:

This complexity within both the individual and the city Aristotle is unwilling to yield for the sake of political or individual order and it is precisely this complexity to which he turns political philosophy; he asks not how to unify, but how to choose, in a world of multiplicity, the criteria that those sharing political power must share. Because the city is a unity of parts, we must engage in the science of politics. Were it, or could it be, one, there would be no political science and no political philosophy. (Saxonhouse, p. 224)

Yet this distinction, again, is not ultimately satisfying. Given the fragility of political life and the constant shifting of boundaries and criteria for claims of a political nature, we are thrown back, in a very real sense, to the question of a stable and common measure, Socrates’ and Plato’s question.

The study of politics reveals what and from where unity can emerge in a community that does not exist simply by nature, but which we must create through the exercise of our natural capacity to debate and make choices. And, most particularly, it reveals the fragility of that unity that does not come from nature but from human choice. (Saxonhouse, p. 214)

The fact that Saxonhouse does not explore the issue of a “common measure” for the exercise of our “natural capacity to debate and make choices” makes her own message abstractly appealing but devoid of real content. In fact, it is even difficult to judge the degree of diversity that Aristotle actually “embraces.” In her view his “embrace of diversity” leads beyond hierarchy to paradigms of sharing as the proper relation of the parts. This point is certainly contained in Aristotle’s notion of friendship as the relationship most conducive to political life. But his understanding of the preconditions for friendship leads to its own abstractions from diversity and again results in the marginalization of what is “other” within the political/public domain.

Fear of Diversity is a valuable warning against the ideological claims of an abstract egalitarianism. But the return to the senses does not necessarily prepare the way for a return to sense. The centrifugal forces currently at work reveal in a clear and frightening way just how fragile a common civic culture is precisely because it is an abstraction. Thus the task is not so much to simply warn against abstraction as such but to articulate a better “benchmark” for distinguishing between progressive and regressive forms of abstraction. Without making a proper argument, the book takes for granted that this distinction does not exist. On the contrary, questions of unifying principles, common measures

for public discourse, and education for habits of mind that can support the abstractions necessary for the exercise of citizenship are just as central to contemporary political discourse as is the “embrace” of diversity.

NOTES

1. Saxonhouse’s chapter here draws on an earlier article published in this journal, “The Net of Hephaestos: Aristophanes’ Speech in Plato’s *Symposium*,” *Interpretation* 13(1985):15–23.

2. It is worth mentioning Saxonhouse’s fuller interpretation of the play here. Antigone represents the same flaw as Creon. Ismene stands in relation to her as Haemon to his father, these voices representing the claims of a reality rooted in the specificity of nature as opposed to its negation.

3. Chapter 3 of the book, “Women and the Tragic Denial of Difference,” contains a discussion of Euripides’ *Ion* and the role of myths of autochthonous origins as an attempt to remove the female from political consciousness.

4. See Stanley Rosen, *Plato’s Symposium*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), chap. 6.