

A History of Women Philosophers

Women Philosophers

Volume 1

Ancient Women Philosophers

600 B.C. – 500 A.D.

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1. *Text of On Human Nature*¹

From *On Human Nature* by Aesara,^{*} Pythagorean of Lucania:

Human nature seems to me to provide a standard of law and justice both for the home and for the city. By following the tracks within himself whoever seeks will make a discovery: law is in him and justice, which is the orderly arrangement of the soul. Being threefold, it is organized in accordance with triple functions: that which effects judgment and thoughtfulness is [the mind]^{**}, that which effects strength and ability is [high spirit],^{***} and that which effects love and kindness is desire. These are all so disposed relatively to one another that the best part is in command, the most inferior is governed, and the one in between holds a middle place; it both governs and is governed.

God thus contrived these things according to principle in both the outline and completion of the human dwelling place, because he intended man alone to become a recipient of law and justice, and none other of mortal animals. A composite unity of association could not come about from a single thing, nor indeed from several which are all alike. (For it is necessary, since the things to be done are different, that the parts of the soul also be different, just as in the case of the body [the organs of touch and]^{****} sight and hearing and taste and smell differ, for these do not all have the same affinity with everything.)

Nor could such a unity come from several dissimilar things at random, but rather, from parts formed in accordance with the completion and organization and fitting together of the entire composite whole. Not only is the soul composed from several dissimilar parts, these being fashioned in conformity with the whole and complete, but in addition these are not arranged haphazardly and at random, but in accordance with rational attention.

For if they had an equal share of power and honor, though being themselves unequal – some inferior, some better, some in between – the association of parts throughout the soul could not have been fitted together. Or, even if they did have an unequal share, but the worse rather than the better had the greater share, there would be great folly and disorder in the soul. And even if the better had the greater and the worse the lesser, but each of these not in the proper proportion, there could not be unanimity and friendship and justice throughout the soul, since when each one is arranged in accordance with the suitable proportion, this sort of arrangement I assert to be justice.

And indeed, a certain unanimity and agreement in sentiment accompanies such an arrangement. This sort would justly be called good order, whichever, due to the better part's ruling and the inferior's being ruled, should add the strength of virtue to itself. Friendship and love and kindness, cognate and kindred, will sprout from these parts. For closely-inspecting mind persuades, desire loves, and high spirit is filled with strength; once seething with hatred, it becomes friendly to desire.

Mind having fitted the pleasant together with the painful, mingling also the tense and robust with the slight and relaxed portion of the soul, each part is distributed in accordance with its kindred and suitable concern for each thing: mind closely inspecting and tracking out things, high spirit adding impetuosity and strength to what is closely inspected, and desire, being akin to affection, adapts to the mind, preserving the pleasant as its own and giving up the thoughtful to the thoughtful part of the soul. By virtue of these things the best life for man seems to me to be whenever the pleasant should be mixed with the earnest, and pleasure with virtue. Mind is able to fit these things to itself, becoming lovely through systematic education and virtue.

Aesara's soul is tripartite in structure. Its three parts are the mind, spiritedness, and desire. The mind affects judgment and thoughtfulness. Here, "thoughtfulness" should be understood in the purely analytic sense, not the affective sense. Spiritedness affects

* *Aἰσάρας* FP., *Ἀρέον* Th., *Ἀρέον* Heeren.

** ὁ νόος add. Heeren.

*** ἀ. φύγωντος add. Heeren.
**** ἄρρενος ὅργανα καὶ add. Wachsmuth.

than others. It is not clear whether Aesara means this in the moral sense that the better part of the soul produces morally superior outcomes of deliberation, or whether she means this in the purely pragmatic sense that the better part of the soul is better suited to the functions of the soul itself. Nevertheless, the principle arranges the parts so that the best part rules. Which part is the “best part” is determined by “the things that are to be done.” Different parts of the soul are best suited to different tasks. If each part of the soul had an equal “say” we would be constantly torn between acting rationally, acting on impulse, and desire-satisfaction. We would be in a constant state of unharmonious, tumultuous schizophrenia. The mind has the ability to harmonize itself with the other parts so that impulse and desire are appropriately satisfied. The mind learns to do this through experience and through the exercise of virtue which is the pursuit of the soul’s own excellence.

II. PHINTYS OF SPARTA

According to Stobaeus,² Phintys is the daughter of Kallicrates, and is a Pythagorean. The name Kallicrates is unknown, and Thesleff³ prefers reading “Kallikratidas.” Thucydides mentions Kallikratidas, as does Plutarch.⁴ Kallikratidas was an admiral who died during the battle of the Arginusae in 406 B.C. It is only the identification of Phintys as the daughter of this admiral that permits us to identify her as of Spartan nationality, and as a somewhat older contemporary of Plato. Two fragments from her book *On the Moderation of Women* have survived. These fragments incorporate the Pythagorean assumption that the natures of men and women, although having much in common, are in some essential ways, different.

1. *Text of On the Moderation of Women, Fragment I*⁵

A woman must be altogether good and orderly; without excellence she would never become so. The excellence appropriate to each thing makes superior that which is receptive of it: the excellence appropriate to the eyes makes the eyes so, that appropriate to hearing, the faculty of

hearing, that appropriate to a horse, a horse, that appropriate to a man, a man. So too the excellence appropriate to a woman makes a woman excellent. The excellence most appropriate to a woman is moderation. For, on account of this virtue, she will be able to honor and love her husband.

Now, perhaps many think it is not fitting for a woman to philosophize, just as it is not fitting for her to ride horses or speak in public. But I think that some things are peculiar to a man, some to a woman, some are common to both, some belong more to a man than a woman, some more to a woman than a man. Peculiar to a man are serving in battle, political activity, and public speaking; peculiar to a woman are staying at home and indoors, and welcoming and serving her husband. But I say that courage and justice and wisdom are common to both. Excellences of the body are appropriate for both a man and a woman, likewise those of the soul. And just as it is beneficial for the body of each to be healthy, so too, the excellences of the body are health, strength, keenness of perception and beauty. Some of these are more fitting for a man to cultivate and possess, some more for a woman. For courage and wisdom are more appropriate for a man, both because of the constitution of his body and because of his strength of soul, while moderation is more appropriate for a woman.

Wherefore one must discover the nature of the woman who is trained in moderation, and make known the number and kinds of things that confer this good upon a woman. I say this comes from five things: First, from piety and reverence concerning her marriage bed; second, from decency with respect to her body; third, from the processions of those from her own household; fourth, from not indulging in mystery rites and celebrations of the festival of Cybele; fifth, from being devout and correct in her sacrifices to the divine.

Of these, that which most of all causes and preserves moderation is being incorruptible with respect to her marriage, and not getting mixed up with a strange man. For, first, a woman who thus transgresses does an injustice to the gods of her race, providing not genuine, but spurious, allies to her

house and family; she does an injustice to the natural gods by whom she swore, along with her ancestors and kin, to share in a common life and the lawful procreation of children. She also does an injustice to her fatherland, by not abiding among those who were duly appointed for her. Then she is wont to sin over and above those for whom death, the greatest of penalties, is determined, on account of the magnitude of injustice; to sin and to commit outrages for the sake of pleasure is unlawful and least deserving of mercy. The issue of all outrage is destruction.

2. Women and Virtue

According to Phintys, some virtues are common to both men and women, while some are unique to either gender. Courage, justice and wisdom are common virtues or excellences to both men and women, although in her opinion, courage and wisdom are “more appropriate” to men than to women. It is not clear what Phintys means by this. Perhaps by “more appropriate” she means “suits the kinds of activities men typically engage in.” Phintys claims that temperance or moderation is more appropriately a woman’s virtue. If by “more appropriate” she means “suits the kinds of activities women typically engage in,” it is not difficult, given even a meagre acquaintance with women’s history, to see what she is saying. Phintys shows why, for women, doing moral philosophy the way men do it – theorizing about what some ideal state or perfect world might be like – requires that women ignore the realities of their social situation. *Given* that the social order already *is* the way it is, she raises the question whether it is our moral responsibility to live our lives according to whichever moral theory best takes into account our special circumstances. Phintys says that given the kind of public life men lead in the marketplace and the seat of government, courage and wisdom are essential virtues for men. If those virtues are not exercised, the community will suffer violence, deceit and trickery from other cities, as well as from its own members. Given that the kind of restricted life women lead at home where they take personal responsibility for raising the males who will maintain harmony in the city and with its neighbors, temperance is an essential virtue. Without it, they

could not be patient with children, and could not give so much of their energies to caring for others.

But perhaps this is not what Phintys was suggesting. Perhaps she is suggesting that the cultivation of the virtues of justice and wisdom in the souls of women are *limited* by the social roles permitted to each. These social roles reflect a universal (to that culture) understanding that women’s souls have *this* nature and men’s souls have *that* nature. The society structures its roles in such a way that men have very limited opportunities to learn much about developing the virtues of women, and *vice versa*. There are undoubtedly other, equally plausible explanations for what Phintys means by the statement that particular virtues are more appropriate to members of a particular gender. But this interpretation is attractive if we recall that according to Phintys, courage, justice and wisdom are common to both men and women. Presumably, this is why it is fitting for a woman to philosophize. But generally, the normative principle of *harmonia* is to be satisfied within the context of specific social responsibilities.

3. Women and Justice in the Home

Phintys describes the many injustices created by a woman who is unfaithful. When she married, she took an oath, together with her parents and all her relatives. The oath was to “the gods of her race” and the gods of nature for the purposes of securing divine allies and protection for the entire extended family. Unfaithfulness jeopardizes this protection and therefore jeopardizes her entire family. In addition to the injustice she commits toward her family when she jeopardizes their divine protection, she commits a civil offense against the country. Marriage transfers the wardship of a woman from her parents to her husband. The woman violates this wardship by “not abiding among those who were duly appointed for her.” This is a crime worse than those usually punishable by death. The unfaithful woman cannot hope for mercy, either, because the usual exculpatory claims (deceit, trickery, force on the part of her lover) are unavailable: her motivation to violate the law was the basest of criminal motives: pleasure.

4. Phintys' On the Moderation of Women, *Fragment II*⁶

One must consider this too, that she will find no purifying remedy for this fault, so as to be chaste and loved by the gods when approaching their temples and altars. For in the case of this sin most of all, even the divine spirit is merciless. The noblest honor and the chief glory of a married woman is to bring witness of her virtue with respect to her husband through her own children if, haply, they should bear the stamp of likeness to the father who sired them. This sums up the subject of moderation with respect to marriage.

My thoughts on moderation with respect to bodily decency are as follows: The woman of moderation must be clad in white, simply and plainly dressed. She will be thus if, indeed, she does not wear transparent or embroidered robes, or those woven from silk but, rather, garments that are decent and plain white. The main thing is that she be decent and avoid luxury and display; then she will not arouse ignominious envy in other women. As for gold and emeralds, she simply will not deck herself out in them, for then she would display the characteristics of wealth and arrogance towards ordinary women.

But the well regulated city, arranged throughout with a view to the whole, must be based on sympathy and unanimity. One must even debar the craftsmen from the city, those who make such ornaments. The woman of moderation must embellish her appearance not with imported and alien ornament, but with the natural beauty of the body; washing clean with water, she must adorn herself with modesty rather than these. Thus she will bring honor to the man with whom she shares her life, and to herself.

Next, women must make public processions from the house in order to sacrifice to the founder-god of the city on behalf of themselves and their husbands, and entire households. Moreover, it is not when the evening star has risen, nor in darkness, that a woman must make her expeditions to attend the theatre or to purchase wares for the house, but rather, as market-time approaches, just so long as it is light. This she must do decorously guided by one handmaid or, at the most, two.

Next, she must offer prayers of sacrifice to the gods to the extent to which she is authorized to do so, but must refrain from secret rites at home, and celebrations of Cybele. The common law prevents women from celebrating these rites because, among other things, such religious practices lead to drunkenness and derangement. But the mistress of the house, even presiding at home, must be temperate and untouched in the face of everything.

A woman can best fulfill the principle of *harmonia* through exercise of the virtue of temperance or moderation in her personal dress, public demeanor, and religious observations. Luxury and the display of wealth and arrogance are to be avoided because they endanger the harmony of the city through the arousal of envy in other women and in the flaunting of class differences. The temperate woman will consider how the well-being of the whole city is affected by her immoderate demeanor and dress. Even craftsmen who make the kinds of frivolous frills some women affect, should be barred from peddling those items in the city. Class differences must not be paraded by allowing oneself to be publicly accompanied by too many servants.

5. *Women and Religious Observances*

From Phintys' closing comments, it is clear that the practice of religious rites can lead to a violation of the principle of *harmonia*. It is not enough that women should exercise temperance and moderation in public, and with respect to their marital relationships. It must be exercised even in the privacy of their own homes at the very personal level of offering sacrifices to the gods. Too much praying, too much religious devotion, and the practice of secret rites is intemperate. This intemperance in prayer and sacrifice quickly leads to other forms of intemperance, including intoxication and mental illness. Religious practices can contribute to *harmonia*, but when the wrong kind of practices are engaged in, or when the right kind of practices are carried to excess, *harmonia* can be destroyed. It is the woman's responsibility to preserve *harmonia* through moderation even in the practice of religion.

III. PERITIONE I

There are two documents attributed to "Perictione," the first text is apparently a fragment from a larger work entitled *On the Harmony of Women*. The second text is a brief essay, *On Wisdom*. For reasons to be discussed in the following chapter, it seems correct to identify these works as the writings of two different philosophers and to identify the author of *On the Harmony of Women* with Plato's mother. However this identification is inconclusive. I shall follow Prudence Allen⁷ in identifying the author of *On the Harmony of Women* as Perictione I, and will refer to the author of *On Wisdom* as Perictione II. Perictione I seems to encourage philosophizing by women. If women exercise wisdom and self-control they can aspire to other virtues including justice and courage. She almost appears to adopt a utilitarian perspective on virtue: one exercises particular virtues in order to be able to develop other, higher virtues which will in turn bring happiness and harmony to herself and her family.

1. Translation of the Text⁸

One must deem the harmonious woman to be full of wisdom and self-control; a soul must be exceedingly conscious of goodness to be just and courageous and wise, embellished with self-sufficiency and hating empty opinion. Worthwhile things come to a woman from these – for herself, her husband, her children and household, perhaps even for a city – if, at any rate, such a woman should govern cities and tribes, as we see in the case of a royal city.

Having mastery over appetite and high feeling she will be

righteous and harmonious; no lawless desires will impel her.

She will preserve a loving disposition toward her husband and children and her entire household. As many women as

become lovers of alien beds become enemies of all at home, gentry and servants alike. Such a woman continually constructs lies and deceits for her husband and fabricates falsehoods about everything to him, in order that she only may seem to excel in good will and, though she loves idleness, may seem to govern the house. To such an extent, let these things be said.

But one must also train the body to natural measures concerning nourishment and clothing, baths and anointments, the arrangement of the hair, and ornaments of gold and precious stone. Women who eat and drink every costly thing, who dress extravagantly and wear the things that women wear, are ready for the sin of every vice both with respect to the marriage bed and the rest of wrongdoing. It is necessary merely to appease hunger and thirst, even if this be done by frugal means; in the case of cold, even a goat-skin or rough garment would suffice.

To wear cloaks extravagantly purpled by dye-baths of marine shellfish, or of some other lavish color, this is great foolishness. The body wants not to shiver and – for the sake of decency – not to be naked; it requires no more. But in its ignorance human opinion hastens towards the vain and excessive. So the harmonious woman will not wrap herself in gold or precious stone from India or anywhere else, nor will she braid her hair with artful skills or anoint herself with infusions of Arabian scent, nor will she paint her face, whitening or rougeing it, darkening her eyebrows and lashes and treating her gray hair with dye; nor will she be forever bathing. The woman who seeks these things seeks an admirer of feminine weakness. It is the beauty that comes from wisdom, not from these, that gratifies women who are well-born.

But let her not think that nobility of birth, and wealth, and coming from a great city altogether are necessities, nor the good opinion and friendship of eminent and kingly men. If these should be the case, it does not hurt. But, if not, wishing does not make them so. Even if these should be allotted to her, let her soul not pursue the grand and wonderful. Let her walk also apart from them. They harm more than they help, dragging one into misfortune. Treachery and envy and malice abide with them; such a woman would not be serene.

One must revere the gods in the confident hope of happiness, obeying both ancestral laws and institutions. After these [the gods = scl. Meineke], I say to honor and to revere one's parents, for they are and effect everything equally to the gods for their offspring.

2. Relationships and Moral Obligation

With respect to her own husband a woman must thus live lawfully and honorably: not considering anything privately, but preserving and guarding her marriage. For in this is everything. A woman must bear everything on the part of her husband, even if he should be unfortunate, or fail on account of ignorance or illness or drink, or cohabit with other women. For this error is forgiven in the case of men; for women, never. Rather, retribution is imposed. Therefore she must keep the law and not be envious. She must bear anger and stinginess, fault-finding, jealousy and abuse, and any other trait he may have by nature. Being discreet, she must handle all of his characteristics in a way pleasing to him. When a woman is loving towards her husband, and acts agreeably to him, harmony reigns; she loves the entire household and makes outsiders well-disposed towards the house.

But when she is not loving, then she wishes to see safe and sound neither the house nor her own children, nor the servants, nor any of the property but – as if she were an enemy – invokes and prays for total ruin. She even prays for her husband to die, on the grounds that he is hateful, in order that she may cohabit with other men; and whoever pleases him, she hates. But I think a woman is harmonious in the following way: if she becomes full of wisdom and self-control. For this benefits not only her husband, but also the children, relatives, slaves; the whole house, including possessions and friends, both fellow-citizens and foreign guest friends. Arrestingly, she will keep their house, speaking and hearing fair things, and obeying her husband in the unanimity of their common life, attending upon the relatives and friends whom he extolls, and thinking the same things sweet and bitter as he – lest she be out of tune in relation to the whole.

3. Moral Pragmatism and Faithful Wives

Perictione I applies her moral pragmatism to the question of marital infidelity by women. Like a legal realist who holds that the key to jurisprudence is what the courts actually do, Perictione I points to the judgments that society actually makes and asserts that these are the rules in accordance with which a virtuous woman must live.¹⁰ However unfeminist Perictione's conclusions may be, we see that they are derived from the philosophical premise that the normative principle *harmonia* is to be applied to the concrete circumstances of human life. Although her views (and those of the other Pythagoreans) present a view of woman's role which most contemporary thinkers do not share, we must understand this view as a pragmatic response to the question of moral responsibility in the face of an entrenched *status quo*.¹¹

4. Physical Beauty and the Moral Disorder of Women

Like Phintys and Theano II, Perictione adopts a different approach to ethical theory than male philosophers have. She shows no interest in an ideal theory, or in an examination of what society ought to be like. Her ethics is grounded in pragmatism. Given that society is the way it is, and given that women's roles are severely circumscribed, how might a woman satisfy the normative principle of *harmonia*?⁹

As unfeminist as her views about women's responsibilities to preserve marital fidelity are, they stand in marked contrast to the feminism of her views about personal care. She warns that excessive concern for creating the illusion of physical beauty contributes to the moral disorder of women. True beauty comes from