

# Teleology and Necessity in Aristotle's Account of the Natural and Moral Imperfections of Women

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## Introduction

Aristotle's focus in the ethical treatises is on the moral development of *men*, and in particular, on that of the future (male) citizens of the ideal city. Although the function-argument in *NE* I 7, 1097b22-1098a20 that leads up to Aristotle's definition of the human good or happiness in terms of rational activity of the soul in accordance with virtue is based on an identification of the type of functional activity that is characteristic or proper to humankind as a species, it becomes clear quickly that only a select, free-born, and well-educated group of men has the necessary natural and cultural prerequisites to actually reach this kind of human perfection, provided that this group receives the correct kind of habituation and moral instruction instilled through the laws of the ideal city.<sup>1</sup> Infamously, Aristotle excludes natural slaves and women from the life of happiness that requires the activity of practical wisdom and moral virtue.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, I turn to Aristotle's views about the natural character traits and moral development of women and lay out their biological underpinnings. I will argue that, even though Aristotle never states this explicitly, his ethical views about the moral deficiencies of women are causally grounded in and explained by his biological views about the physiological imperfections of women relative to male members of the human species.<sup>3</sup> In section one, I argue that, although *formally* identical to men (i.e. both men and women share the same human species form), Aristotle believes that women, as a result of what happens to

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<sup>1</sup> See *NE* I 7, 1098a12-15; cf. also *NE* I 3, 1095a2-7; *EN* I 9, 1099b29-1100a5; I 13, 1102a7-12; V 2, 1130b26-29; VI 12, 1143b21-23; X 5, 1176a26-29; X 9, 1179b7-10; *Pol* VII 13, 1332a7-b11 and VII 15, 1334b6-9.

<sup>2</sup> See *Pol* III 9, 1280a31-34; women are excluded indirectly from this kind of life by not being able (and/or allowed) to function as part of the ruling citizen-class: see *Pol* I 12 and III 1-3. On the possibility of women partaking in the life of happiness that involves the activity of theoretical wisdom, see section 2 below.

<sup>3</sup> Pace Henry (2007), 252; Deslauriers (2009), 215-216 and *passim*. Note that in discussing these issues, I will have little to say about Aristotle's sexism – which I believe is apparent both in his biology and his ethics – or about the extent to which his views are driven by empirical evidence or misogynistic ideology; on these issues, see especially Henry (2007), Horowitz (1976), Lloyd (1983), Mayhew (2004), and Nielsen (2008). My purpose is not to absolve or criticize Aristotle, but rather to gain a better understanding of his exclusion of women from moral virtue strictly speaking (and hence from happiness) by approaching this question from a biological perspective.

them under the influence of material necessity during embryogenesis, are imperfect members of the human species due to their colder *material* nature, which has repercussions for their ability – not to perform human functions as such, but to perform them *well* and therefore to acquire virtue and to perfect their human nature in a moral sense. Next, in section two, I explain the connection between the colder material nature of women, produced by material necessity, and their particular natural character traits as discussed in Aristotle’s biological treatises, and offer an account of how because of this particular character profile women end up with the ‘virtues of assistants’ and as naturally being ruled by men, as Aristotle claims in his *Politics*. And finally, in section three, I discuss the two most prominent moral deficiencies of women, namely the ‘lack of authority’ of their deliberative capacity and their weakness of will, and explain how these flaws are also likely grounded in their materially imperfect natural physiology.

## **1 The generation of women and their biological imperfection relative to men**

In order to understand the biological differences between men and women – some of which will be relevant for their moral development, or at least so I will argue below – we need to turn to Aristotle’s account of reproduction and sexual differentiation.

Reproduction is according to Aristotle a natural teleological process that involves the transmission of the species form from parent to offspring and that has as its end the (eternal) replication of the species, and thereby, ultimately, the participation in the eternal and the divine in the only way possible for mortal beings (see *DA* II 4, 415a27-b7).<sup>4</sup> In some (but not all) animals – and these include humans – reproduction takes place through sexually differentiated parents, where each parent supplies its own principle(s) of reproduction: the male supplies the form and the source of movement (in the form of potentials for form and form-transmitting motions imparted into the female, usually via his semen), while the female supplies the matter (in the form of her menses which already possess the species form in

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<sup>4</sup> I have benefitted from both Henry (2007), who argues convincingly that sexual reproduction does not have as its proper teleological end the production of male offspring, and Nielsen (2008), from whom I borrow my own version of her ‘degrees of perfection’-model according to which the female does not realize the species form to a lesser degree of perfection as Nielsen thinks, but is rather less able to perform some or all of the species characteristic capacities due to a difference in material nature.

potentiality). Now, even though in sexually differentiated animals the end of reproduction similarly lies in the production of viable offspring of the same species (or, more specifically, of the replication of their species form in another living being that also has the capacity to successfully engage in reproduction), and hence not in the production of *male* offspring per se, Aristotle holds that in these cases reproduction is ‘most natural’ (*GA* IV 3, 768a21: μάλιστα ... πέφυκεν) when the male principle is able to ‘dominate’ and is able to transmit the species form into the matter *in exactly the same way* as it is realized in him. As a consequent of this, reproduction in sexually differentiated animals is deemed to be most natural when reproduction results in *male* offspring that resembles its father in all his formal aspects, because in that case only will the male principle have succeeded in transmitting its own particular and distinctive form (*GA* IV 3, 767b15-23 and 768a21-28).<sup>5</sup>

In this way, Aristotle characterizes the birth of male offspring that is identical to its male parent as a form of success – i.e. as a natural teleological process running its natural course.<sup>6</sup> He does so not because sexual reproduction intrinsically aims at the production of male offspring,<sup>7</sup> but because the offspring that results when the process remains undisturbed is a perfect formal replica of what already has that identical form in actuality, which ‘happens to be’ the father – i.e. a *male* individual of the same species. On the other hand, Aristotle characterizes the birth and existence of female offspring (or even of male offspring resembling its female parent) as forms of imperfections or deviations from the replication of form, and explains their occurrence as the result of failures of the male principle to dominate the female menses and of material disturbances of the natural teleological process (*GA* IV 3, 767b7-13 and 769b3-13; *GA* IV 4, 770b16-17; cf. *GA* II 6, 743a29-32 and *HA* VIII 2, 589b29-590a11).<sup>8</sup> For with regard to whatever capacity the male principle does not succeed in leading the female menses to its own proper form (that is, to the species form *in the way that it is realized in him*), the developing embryo ends up with a deficiency, the most important of which is the incapacity to concoct *sperma*. As a result of this latter incapacity, the embryo

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<sup>5</sup> For Aristotle the causal factors involved in sexual differentiation are the same as the ones involved in familial resemblances.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Freudenthal (2002), 24.

<sup>7</sup> Pace Nielsen (2008), 377-380 and Witt (1988).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Aristotle’s explanation of the dysfunctional eyes of moles in terms of a deformity that happens during generation in *HA* I 9, 491b27-34 and *HA* IV 8, 533a11-12 (ὡς ἐν τῇ γενέσει πηρουμένης τῆς φύσεως) and his characterization of them as ‘imperfect’ in *HA* I 9, 491b27: ἀτελής and *DA* III 1, 425a9-11.

develops female reproductive organs and hence becomes anatomically speaking female (*GA* IV 1, 766a22-28; *GA* IV 3, 767b22-23 and 768a2-11).

The evaluative language that Aristotle uses in his depiction of the processes that lead to the generation of female offspring – especially in contrast to the language used to describe the process that results in male offspring – makes it clear that he not only thinks that one process is more natural than the other, but also that one outcome is better than the other, namely that it is somehow better to be born a male rather than a female. For humans this means that, even if the process of human reproduction aims at the production of another (viable, physically complete, etc.) human being regardless of its sex, men are somehow taken to be better (or more natural, more perfect etc.) instantiations of the human species form than women are.

Before clarifying in what sense exactly men are supposed to be better instantiations of the human species form than women are, let me first stress that of course *the existence of women* – and of female animals in general – does serve a teleological end and is good according to Aristotle. For even though the existence of females (or of sexually differentiated kinds more generally) is not, strictly speaking, conditionally necessary for the sake of animal reproduction (since it is possible – as some animals in fact do – to reproduce without the species being sexually differentiated), given that, of material necessity,<sup>9</sup> females do come to be, nature uses them for the better (*GA* II 1, 731b18-732a11, especially at 731b22-23: διὰ τὸ βέλτιον and 732a5: βέλτιον). In other words, the teleological function women and females serve is secondary to the material necessity of them ‘already’ coming to be.<sup>10</sup> Metaphorically speaking, formal natures ‘allow’ for the existence of females and hence of sexually differentiated kinds, because, as Aristotle explains, it is always better for a better principle to be separated from a worse one, and therefore, where possible and so far as possible, formal natures always separate them (cf. *Cael* II 8, 290a29–35). In this case, by allowing kinds to be sexually differentiated – which is possible in those animals that perceive *and* possess the capacity of locomotion – nature is able to separate the better and more

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<sup>9</sup> On the role of material necessity in causing the generation of women and of other deformed kinds, see Witt (2012), 103-104.

<sup>10</sup> The existence of women is thus not a matter of primary teleology, but rather of secondary teleology: see Leunissen (2010) on this distinction. For the principle that nature always does everything because it is necessary (and hence on my reading a case of primary teleology) or because it is better (and hence on my reading a case of secondary teleology), see *GA* I 4, 717a11-21. And, finally, see also Aristotle’s discussion of the female menses in *GA* II 4, 738a34-b4: like the female itself, the menses come to be of material necessity, but are then used for the good of reproduction as an instance of secondary teleology.

divine formal-efficient cause of reproduction from the material cause of reproduction by assigning the first to the male and the second the female. However, once sexually differentiated kinds are in existence – and they always have been, for Aristotle, and always will be<sup>11</sup> – the existence of females *is* conditionally necessary for their preservation (*GA* IV 3, 767b8-10: ‘the first [departure from the form that is being replicated] is that a female is born and not a male – but this is necessary in accordance with nature: for the kind that has been separated into female and male needs to be preserved...’).<sup>12</sup>

The reason why Aristotle considers women – just as all female animals – to be less perfect members of their species *relative to their male counterparts*, lies ultimately in a difference of the more and the less between their respective material natures. Specifically, due to what happens to them under the influence of material necessity during embryogenesis (crudely speaking, females are less concocted and therefore less shaped in accordance with the species form as realized in the male parent), females are born with a relatively cooler material nature than is typical (or natural and ideal) for her species and this has consequences for her own capacity to concoct blood into semen. For according to Aristotle, it is the female’s *incapacity* to concoct blood into semen that that defines her as female, whereas the male animal is defined positively, by his capacity to concoct blood into semen, which he possesses as a result from his relatively hotter material nature (*GA* IV 1, 765b8-17):

But the male and the female are differentiated by a certain capacity and incapacity: for the one that is able to concoct and to form and to discharge semen with a principle of form is the male (...), while the one that receives it and cannot form or discharge [this kind of semen] is the female. In addition, if all concocting is accomplished via heat, then it is also necessary that among animals the males are hotter than the females.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> That is, there was never a point in time at which formal natures decided, so to speak, to make use of the differentiation that occurs between some animals in their reproduction process to create females, with the purpose of separating the two sets of principles of reproduction; the question of why there exist females pertains to nature’s *hypothetical design* of animals. On this, see Leunissen (2010), 126

<sup>12</sup> See also *Pol* I 2, 1252a26-28: ‘those who cannot exist without each other necessarily form a couple, as male and female do for the sake of procreation...’ and, perhaps, *GA* II 5, 741b2-6: ‘in as many as in which the female and the male are separated, it is impossible for the female to produce offspring to perfection (γεννᾶν εἰς τέλος) by herself; for then the male would exist in vain, and nature does nothing in vain. For this reason the male brings to generation to perfection (ἐπιτελεῖ τὴν γένεσιν) in such animals.’

<sup>13</sup> See also *GA* I 20, 728a17-21: ‘and the boy resembles a woman in appearance, and the woman is like an infertile male: for it is through a certain incapacity (ἀδυναμίᾳ γὰρ τινι) that she is female, namely by not being

It is important to stress that this incapacity to concoct blood into semen does not make females defective animals or women defective humans without qualification: the incapacity that Aristotle picks out as a differentiating factor between males and females is not in fact an absolute lack, since the female is able to concoct blood well enough for it to still serve a function in the reproduction of her species,<sup>14</sup> but it rather refers to a *lesser* ability to perform a particular capacity that others – the males – can perform better and can do so well. In other words, when Aristotle characterizes the female as being ‘just like a disabled<sup>15</sup> male’ (*GA* II 3, 737a27-28: τὸ γὰρ θῆλυ ὥσπερ ἄρρεν ἐστὶ πεπηρωμένον) or ‘just like a natural deformation’ (*GA* IV 6, 775a15-16: ... ὥσπερ ἀναπηριαν εἶναι τὴν θηλυότητα φυσικὴν), he is not characterizing her as a deficient or dysfunctional member of her kind as such, but he rather means that *with regard to* the capacity to concoct blood and *relative to* the degree to which her male counterpart can realize this capacity, the female is imperfect.<sup>16</sup> And as indicated above, this difference between male and female animals or men and women is not a *formal* difference: both realize the same species form and hence possess the exact same set of soul capacities that characterizes them as the kind of (human) animal they are (see *GA* II 5, 741a6-9).<sup>17</sup> The difference is rather one in *material* nature (see *Meta* X 9): for what determines the difference between being able to concoct blood into semen and not being able to concoct it into semen (but only into menses) is a difference of the more and the less in the internal, natural heat of a given animal and hence in their material nature. Differences in material natures, as is well known from the biological works, can have repercussions for one’s ability to perform one’s functions. Thus, while women possess all the capacities that are characteristic for human beings and are capable of performing them, due to their relatively colder material nature there will be some that they will be able to perform less well than their male counterparts, including – first and foremost – the capacity to concoct blood

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able (τῷ μὴ δύνασθαι) to concoct the final stage of nutriment into *sperma* (...) on account of the coldness of her nature’ and *GA* IV 1, 766b16-18: ‘The female is opposite to the male, and it is female because of the inability to concoct (τῇ ἀπεψίᾳ) and the coldness of the sanguineous nutriment.’

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Aristotle’s characterization of some animals as bloodless: these animals do not, in fact, lack blood altogether, but rather possess a different kind of blood.

<sup>15</sup> I here follow Henry (2007), 254n.10 in interpreting *πεπηρωμένον* as implying a form of disability in this context.

<sup>16</sup> I here follow Witt (2012), 87, in interpreting disability or deformity as a ‘structural, functional, and teleological notion for Aristotle.’ Females are disabled and imperfect on the grounds that they do not fully or optimally develop their reproductive capacity *relative to* the standard provided by males.

<sup>17</sup> See Henry (2007), 260.

into semen. In short, in virtue of having been ‘cooked less’ (and thus of the male principles having been defeated more during the process of reproduction) and having a colder material nature, the female is less perfect than the male in the sense that she can perform the function of concocting blood less well than him.

In the sections below, I discuss some specific examples of how the relatively colder material nature of women affects their moral development and moral status, but let me conclude this section by offering a general argument for why such a difference in material nature may matter for one’s capacity to become morally virtuous and happy. Generally speaking, Aristotle conceives of moral development – and especially of the process of habituation – as a form of perfecting human nature, which involves realizing one’s own nature to the fullest such that one lacks nothing with regard to one’s proper virtue, whether this virtue belongs to oneself qua human or qua practitioner of a certain craft (see *Meta* V 16, 1021b14-23).<sup>18</sup> This kind of perfection of human nature evidently allows for degrees: there will be bad humans and good humans, just as there are bad flute-players and thieves and good ones, and only those who lack nothing with regard to their proper virtue and cannot be excelled in their kind are perfect. Now, in his function argument (*NE* I 7, 1097b22-1098a20), Aristotle identifies the proper function of humans as the activity of the rational soul in accordance with virtue (and if there are more virtues than one, in accordance with the best and most complete virtue), and consequently identifies the proper *virtue* of humans – the one that constitutes happiness – as performing this activity of the rational soul in accordance *well* or *finely*. If, for comparison’s sake, we suppose that the function of a horse is ‘to be good at galloping and at carrying its rider and at standing steadfast against enemies’ (for the example, see *NE* II 6, 1106a19-21), then it is easy to see how even small differences of the more and the less in the material nature of horses (even if formally speaking they are identical and all possess the same capacities) can make a difference for the extent to which they will be able to perform their function and hence for whether they will be able to perform this function well: for instance, those horses that have a relatively colder material nature relative to what is typical or ideal for their species will be less spirited and therefore less courageous when faced with enemies and more prone to flight, and those horses that are either too heavy or too skinny will not be able to excel at galloping. In other words, the

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<sup>18</sup> *NE* II 1, 1103a23-25; *Pol* VII 17, 1336b40-1337a3; *Pb* VII 3, 246a13-17; cf. *Protrepticus*, Iambl. IX 49.28-50.12.

material nature one has from birth might put one at a (dis)advantage relative to the achievement of one's functions, including the one that is characteristic and proper to one's species. In some cases, training or habituation might be able to correct for whatever natural imperfections one has due to one's particular material nature, but in other cases this might not be possible (cf. Aristotle's analogy between the amount of exercise it takes for a person to reach physical health in *Cael* II 12, 292b10-19: some people are naturally so far removed from health that they can never achieve it, no matter how much they exercise). And, I will further argue below, women belong to the latter class: due to their relatively speaking colder material nature, women – either always or for the most part – lack from the outset the natural prerequisites to be able to perform the relevant moral activities *well enough* to ever reach excellence or moral virtue of the kind specified in Aristotle's ethics. Sure enough, women can reach their *own* excellence or virtue (as defined relative to female humans), but it will be of a different kind from the human excellence available to (freeborn) men.

## **2 From natural character to the virtue of assistants in women**

### *The physiological underpinnings of the natural character of women*

As we saw above, Aristotle claims that the female is defined by her incapacity to concoct blood into semen, which he attributes to her coldness or lack of internal heat relative to her male counterpart. This lack of natural heat and colder material nature has several consequences for the physiology of female animals beyond the development of female reproductive organs, which also influence how well or bad they can perform their species characteristic functions relative to their male counterparts. Among the physiological differences of the more and the less that are characteristic of female animals, there are at least two that seem to be causally connected to their natural character profile and that are therefore – at least in the case of women – also potentially important for their moral development. For presumably, even though women cannot acquire full moral virtue, just as in the case in men, the more the natural character traits of women tend towards their natural virtues and the less they pull them away from the mean in feelings and actions, the easier their habituation towards their own kind of character virtues will be.

The first physiological characteristic that is potentially causally connected to the natural character profile of women is that the bodies of live-bearing females tend to be smaller and weaker than that of males (see e.g. *GA* I 19, 726b30-727a1 and *HA* IV 11, 538a22-24).<sup>19</sup> This is because, as I argued above, their birth itself is a result of the developing embryo not having received the proper or ‘natural’ amount of concoction (*GA* IV 2, 766b28-34; cf. *GA* II 6, 743a29-32), such that ‘nature departs from the type’ and the female comes to be as a kind of monstrosity (*GA* IV 3, 767b5-14). This weakness, conjoined with the natural coldness of women, also explains why they take longer to develop in the womb, but reach maturity and old age sooner than men (*GA* IV 6, 775a9-16).<sup>20</sup> In addition, women have inferior bodies because, among the live-bearing animals, women menstruate the most and thereby expel the residues that would otherwise have been used up for growth (*GA* I 19, 727a18-25):

It is necessary to consider the same thing to be the cause also for the fact that the bulk of the bodies is smaller in the females than in the males among live-bearing animals. For only in them is there a flow of menses out [of the body], and among them this is clearest among women: for among animals, women discharge the largest amount. And this is why her paleness and non-prominent blood-vessels are always conspicuous, and why *the shortcoming of her body compared to men* is obvious (τὴν ἔλλειψιν πρὸς τοὺς ἄρρενας ἔχει τοῦ σώματος φανερόν).

The shortcomings in the bodies of women, however, are not just restricted to their size and strength: in the *History of Animals*, Aristotle claims that in the male ‘the upper and front parts’ are ‘better and stronger and better equipped’ (κρείττω καὶ ἰσχυρότερα καὶ εὐοπλότερα), while in the female ‘the parts on the back and below’ are better developed, and that this pertains also to humans (*HA* IV 11, 538b2-7). This particular differentiation between the bodies of men and women is potentially relevant as a cause for differences of the more and the less

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Aristotle’s eugenic comments in *Pol* VII 16, 1335a11-17 and 1335b29-31: although Aristotle does not here explicitly connect being born female with being imperfect and weak, I believe that given his characterizations of females as such in the biological treatises suggests that that connection is certainly implied.

<sup>20</sup> That is, they take longer to ‘cook’ and therefore to grow and to develop all the necessary bodily parts, but once born cool down more quickly during the process of aging, which is basically a process of cooling and drying. Cf. *Pr* X 8, 891b21-24: ‘Why is it that males are for the most part larger than females? Is it because they are hotter, and this produces growth? Or is because they are complete, whereas [females] are mutilated? Or is it because the former grow to perfection over a long time, while the latter in a short [time]?’

between the natural character traits as they belong to men and women, as the front and upper part of the body is where most of the sense organs are located. The implication of Aristotle's remark may therefore not just be that males are better equipped in terms of defensive organs (think of horns and tusks, which are located on the front part of the head and which are typically larger or only present in males) while females are better at sitting around, but also that the sense organs in females are developed less well and are therefore functionally inferior to that of males. In other words, at least with regard to their perceptual intelligence, women may be less intelligent than men. I will return to this suggestion below and offer more evidence for Aristotle's presumed lesser perceptual intelligence of women.

The second physiological characteristic that is more explicitly causally connected to the natural character profile of women is that women – presumably also as a result of their lack of internal heat – have blood that is qualitatively different from that of men (*HA* III 19, 521a21-27):

The [blood] of females is different compared to that of males: for it is thicker and blacker (*παχύτερόν τε γὰρ καὶ μελάντερόν*) in females even when they are the same [as males] regarding health and age, and there is less on the surface in females, and there is a greater amount of blood on the inside. And among all female animals womankind has the most blood, and among animals the so-called menses are the most copious in women.

Earlier in the chapter, Aristotle had described human blood as the thinnest and purest of all animals (*HA* III 19, 521a2-3: ἔχει δὲ λεπτότατον μὲν αἷμα καὶ καθαρώτατον ἄνθρωπος), which means that it is both the moistest of all (i.e. relatively speaking, human blood is the most watery) and is the least earthy of all (i.e. relatively speaking, human blood is the least thick and fibrous). Elsewhere, Aristotle also claimed that human blood is the hottest of all animals (*De Inv.* 19, 477a15-25), and suggested that this kind of blood type – i.e. the one that involves the hottest, moistest, and purest blood – is best (see *PA* II 2, 648a9). However, relative to the blood type that is characteristic for humans as a species, the blood of *female* humans exhibits a certain type of difference of the more and less. For, given the lack of internal heat that defines the female, the blood of women will be less hot than that of men (cf. *PA* II 2, 648a11-13). In addition, as can be inferred from *HA* III 19, 521a21-27 quoted above, it will

also be less thin and pure: that is, I take it that the thickness and blackness of the female blood is due to a higher concentration of earthy particles or fibers in the blood than is typical for the human blood-type and hence than the blood-type that is ideally found in men. Thus, while women have *more* blood and therefore possess, relative to men, more fluids in their body (see *GA* IV 1, 765b17-18: ‘for it is on account of the cold and the inability that the female is more abundant in blood in certain parts’), the blood itself is of a lesser quality relative to that of men, for it is colder, earthier, and drier than theirs.<sup>21</sup> Both of these differences of the more and the less in the blood of women are themselves due to their inability to concoct blood enough and thereby to purify and condense it (see *GA* I 20, 728a26-30; II 3, 737a28-29; and IV 1, 765b28-36).<sup>22</sup> And, since Aristotle believes that natural character depends on the material properties of the blood (see *PA* II 2 and 4, *passim*), these differences of the more and the less that can be found in the blood of women will have consequences for the kinds of character traits they exhibit by nature.

If my interpretation of the material nature of the blood of women is correct, then it appears that women exhibit a *fourth* kind of character profile that complements the three character profiles discussed in *Pol* VII 7, 1327b18-38 and *PA* II 2, 648a2-11. Whereas the ideal man (who is most likely born and raised somewhere in Greece) has blood that is hot, pure, and thin (i.e. his blood is ‘well-mixed’) and is therefore naturally well-disposed towards courage and intelligence (which makes it easier for the lawgiver to lead him to virtue), women appear to occupy the exact opposite end of the spectrum<sup>23</sup> and share in the negative character traits Aristotle attributes in particular to two kinds of barbarians (for a schematic representation, see table 1 below). For just as the blood of the barbarians who live to the north of Greece and who are characterized as being spirited, but dumb, the blood of women

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<sup>21</sup> Women are thus moister than men in the sense that they have more fluids and possess a larger volume of blood (cf. *Pr* IV 25, 879a34-35: ‘now man is dry [in terms of having less fluids] and hot, while woman is cold and moist [in terms of having a lot of fluids]’), but their blood itself is actually less moist and drier (i.e., less watery and earthier) relative to the blood of men.

<sup>22</sup> Note that I am assuming here that the female’s inability to concoct blood into semen does not only affect the quality of her menses but also of the blood before it is turned into this kind of *sperma*. Cf. also *HA* III 19, 521a33-34, where Aristotle describes the blood of the old as ‘thick and black and scarce’: since aging is a process of cooling and drying, old people also seem to have a larger concentration of earthy particles in their blood.

<sup>23</sup> There is an interesting passage in the *Economica* in which the author suggests that the nature of men and women are supposed to complement each other with a view to a common life (*Econ.* I 3, 1343b26-1344a7; cf. also *NE* VIII 12, 1162a22-24, where Aristotle claims that man and woman each have a different function). He characterizes women as more protective because of fear, and men as more defensive because of courage (1343b30-1344a1: ἵνα τὸ μὲν φυλακτικώτερον ἦ διὰ τὸν φόβον, τὸ δ’ ἀμυντικώτερον διὰ τὴν ἀνδρείαν).

is relatively speaking dry, thick, and earthy. As a result of this, women – just like, in general, this particular group of barbarians – are deficient in perceptual intelligence (this is because, the purer the blood, the calmer and softer the organs of perception are, and this increases the accuracy in the reception and retention of the motions caused by the objects of perception in the sense organs, while lots of earthy particles in the blood causes hard sense organs and motions within them that disturb perception).<sup>24</sup> However, since women are lacking in internal heat, this dumbness is not compensated for by a greater amount of spirit. For just like the blood of barbarians living to the south of Greece, who Aristotle characterizes as intelligent, but spiritless, the blood of women is cold, which produces a lack in spirit and hence timidity, cowardice, and a state of always being ruled.

*Table 1: The four human character profiles, based on PA II 2-4, Pol VII 7, & HA III 19*

<b>Type of blood</b>	<b>Material properties</b>	<b>Natural character traits</b>	<b>Belongs to</b>
Hot, thin, and pure (= not earthy and moist)	Prone to boiling; sensitive to motions (= 'best' type of blood)	Courage, intelligence	Men, Greeks [Human Ideal]
Hot and thick (= earthy and dry)	Prone to boiling; hardness (less sensitivity to motions)	Strength, spirit, stupidity; independence	Northern barbarians; cf. bull, boar
Cold, thin, and pure (= not earthy and moist)	Prone to chilling; soft- and calmness (more sensitivity to motions)	Cowardice, timidity, intelligence; being ruled	Southern barbarians; cf. deer, bees
Cold and thick (= earthy and dry) [+ copious]	Prone to chilling; hardness (less sensitivity to motions)	Cowardice, timidity, stupidity; being ruled	Women

This very crude natural character profile is supported by Aristotle's discussion of the natural character traits of female animals and women in the *History of Animals*. In this treatise,

<sup>24</sup> Cf. *Pr* X 4, 891a29-32: '...and the bodies ... of women [breath] less [well] than those of men; for it [i.e. breath] is directed to the menses. And the smoothness [of their bodies] reveals the thickness of their flesh.'

Aristotle makes several important points about natural character traits as one of the four differentiae of animals (see especially *HA* I 1, 488b12–24; VIII 1, 588a18-b3; and IX 1, 608a11-b18), one of which is that in animals that are sexually differentiated, there also exists a differentiation in the character traits of the two sexes, and that this differentiation is most visible in the larger and more perfect animals, including humans (*HA* IX 1, 608a21-24; 608b4-8):

In as many kinds as there is a female and a male, nature has almost in the same way<sup>25</sup> set apart the character of the female in comparison to that of the male (σχεδὸν ἢ φύσις ὁμοίως διέστησε τὸ ἦθος τῶν θηλειῶν πρὸς τὸ τῶν ἀρρένων). And this is clear most with regard to humans and animals that possess largeness and the live-bearing four-footers. (...) And the traces of these character traits can be seen in all, but more clearly in those that have more character and mostly in humankind: for this [kind] has the most perfected nature, such that also those dispositions are most clearly [present] in them.

Aristotle offers a great many examples to illustrate this claim, and he does so largely by pointing out how the female differs from the male, who appears to be taken as a standard.<sup>26</sup> For instance, Aristotle characterizes female animals in general as ‘softer (μαλακώτερα), faster to tame, more admmissive to being handled, and more trainable’ (*HA* IX 1, 608a25-27), and claims that, with a few exceptions, the female is ‘less spirited, softer, more mischievous, less straightforward and more impulsive, and more thoughtful with regard to the feeding of the young’ (*HA* IX 1, 608a33-b2). Aristotle’s characterization of women – i.e. of human females – is worth quoting in full (*HA* IX 1, 608b8-16):

For this reason a woman is more merciful and easier moved to tears, and in addition more jealous and more criticizing, and more abusive and more ready to strike. There is also more despondency and more pessimism in the female compared to the male, and she is also more shameless and deceiving, cheats more readily and has a more

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<sup>25</sup> The ‘almost in the same way’ refers to how nature according to Aristotle has ‘set apart’ the sexes themselves; see *GAI* 23, 731a21-II 1, 732a11 and my discussion in section 1 above.

<sup>26</sup> Aristotle lists twenty seven female and six male character traits in *HA* IX 1, 608a11-b18.

retentive memory, and in addition she is more wakeful and idle, and in general the female is much less movable than the male, and requires less food. And the male is more helpful and, as we have said, more courageous than the female (...).<sup>27</sup>

With a view to the moral development of women, three things stand out in the depiction of the natural character traits Aristotle ascribes in this context of women and other female animals.

First, Aristotle seems to believe that female animals in general – including, presumably, human females – have the kind of character traits that make them naturally more suitable for *domestication* than males (see *HA* IX 1, 608a25-27 quoted earlier). There is thus already in Aristotle’s biological account of animals the suggestion that females are naturally more suited for being ruled by others (as is also implied by their lack of spirit, to which I will return below). In the *Politics*, Aristotle argues that this is indeed the natural role of females (*Pol* I 5, 1254a21-b14): in all living things, whenever one communal entity is formed out of multiple elements, Aristotle claims there naturally appears to be a ruling and a ruled entity, and it is natural and beneficial for the latter to be ruled by the former, as is evident with regard to body and soul, but also with regard to animals and humans, and female and male, for ‘the relation of male to female is that of natural superior to natural inferior, and that of ruler to ruled’ (1254b13-14: ἔτι δὲ τὸ ἄρρεν πρὸς τὸ θῆλυ φύσει τὸ μὲν κρείττον τὸ δὲ χεῖρον, καὶ τὸ μὲν ἄρρον τὸ δ’ ἀρχόμενον). For the marital part of household science, this natural differentiation between men and women means that a husband always rules his wife ‘in the way a statesman does’ (*Pol* I 12, 1259b1: πολιτικῶς), but without switching turns in ruling (*Pol* I 12, 1259a38-b1 and 1259b9-10; note that Aristotle here too appeals to the ‘biological fact’ that the male is ‘naturally more capable of ruling than the female’ in 1259b1-3 in order to justify this practice).<sup>28</sup> Women may rule over some things, such as perhaps rule over (parts of) the household,<sup>29</sup> but, for the most part, they are not supposed to rule over their husbands, and in cases where they do, this is due to external

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. *Ps.-Aristotle, Phgn* 5, 809a26-b14 for a very similar characterization of the female.

<sup>28</sup> This natural suitability of women for being ruled or domesticated also appears to extend to their sexual relation with men; see *NE* VII 5, 1148b31-33: ‘If nature is the cause, no one would call these people incontinent, any more than women would be called incontinent for being mounted rather than mounting.’

<sup>29</sup> See *NE* VIII 10, 1160b33-1161a3, where Aristotle argues that within households men should not be controlling (κυριεύων) over everything, but let whatever is suitable to women up to them to control, and *Pol* III 4, 1277b20-25, where Aristotle explains that it is the task of women to preserve the properties acquired by the man in household management.

factors such as their wealth and power, and not to their intrinsic characteristics or virtue (see *NE VIII 10*, 1160b32-1161a4). In addition, the fact that women are naturally ruled also means that the friendship between husband and wife is an unequal one that is based on the superiority of the husband as a ruler (*NE VIII 7*, 1158b11-14; *NE VIII 11*, 1161a22-25; and *EE VII 3*, 1238b24-25). And, as we will see below, this natural suitability for being ruled has important consequences for the kind of virtues women can acquire.

Second, many of the personality traits Aristotle ascribes to female animals and women in the *History of Animals*, such their shamelessness, impulsiveness, and lack of control regarding emotions involving pain or anger, seem rather negative and appear to be natural tendencies towards vice, and he also ascribes to them two traits that he elsewhere explicitly associates with moral deficiencies. These are, first, the relative more softness or weakness of women compared to men (see *HA IX 1*, 608a25: μαλακώτερον γὰρ τὸ ἦθος ἐστὶ τῶν θηλειῶν; and 608b1: μαλακώτερον), and, second, their relative lack of spirit (see *HA IX 1*, 608a33: ἄθυμότερον; 608b3, and 608b11; this trait appears to be connected also to their cowardice: see 608b15-16).<sup>30</sup> Starting with the natural weakness or softness of women as a character trait, this is not mentioned elsewhere in the biological treatises, but is, of course, explicitly attributed to women in the context of an analysis of weakness of will ‘due to softness’ in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE VII 7*, 1150b1-16). I will discuss this trait and its relation to weakness of will in women further below in section 3. The second trait, namely the relative lack of spirit in women, is one that we already discussed above as being responsible for making it difficult for Asians to be led to virtue, because their lack of spirit makes them naturally timid and cowardly and prone to living a politically slavish life (see *Pol VII 7*, 1327b18-38). People with these character traits are therefore not suitable for living the life of a citizen in the ideal state. For without (much) spirit, women – just like Asians – lack the necessary natural prerequisite for the development of the virtue of courage and, more generally, lack any strong incentive to action, which explains their idleness and their being difficult to move.<sup>31</sup> In addition, lack of spirit means that women are not easily roused by emotions that involve spirit, such as anger, revenge, and irascibility (see *NE VII 6*, 1149a25-b26),<sup>32</sup> and are more

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<sup>30</sup> See also Mayhew (2004), 93, who singles out these two traits as having priority in Aristotle’s characterization of the female.

<sup>31</sup> See Heath (2008), 255-258.

<sup>32</sup> Being less prone to anger might make women also less sensitive to concerns about justice (see Burnyeat 1981, 79 on *NE V 8*, 1135b28-29) or the fine (see *NE III 8*, 1116b30-31).

prone to plot in secret (cf. *NE* VII 6, 1149b13-15). Further, since spirit is thought to engender a kind of desire for self government and independence (*Pol* VII 7, 1328a6-7),<sup>33</sup> its absence reinforces the natural suitability of women for being ruled and dominated, as well as for needing protection from the part of men.<sup>34</sup> And finally, although lack of spirit does not seem to prevent women from forming friendships (Aristotle defines spirit as the capacity for forming friendships: *Pol* VII 7, 1327b40-1328a5), these relations may not extend beyond the members of the household so as to include communal friendships.<sup>35</sup> Lack of spirit thus seems to hold back women from performing the kind of actions and forming the kinds of bonds that are constitutive of the political, virtuous life that makes men happy.

Third, in contrast with the rather negative portrayal of female personality traits, Aristotle at first sight appears to be more positive in the *History of Animals* when describing their intellectual traits: females are easier to train (*HA* IX 1, 608a27: μαθητικώτερον), more thoughtful when it comes to feeding their young (*HA* IX 1, 608b2: φρονιστικώτερα), and are more retentive in their memory (*HA* IX 1, 608b13: μνημονικώτερον). However, these three characteristics do not necessarily entail that women have a better developed perceptual intelligence than men do. As explained above, women most likely have less sensitive sense organs on account of the high amount of earthiness in their blood (and possibly also as a result of their upper and front body being less fully developed), and this must surely influence their learning ability. The fact that female animals are easier to train might just mean that they are less spirited compared to males and therefore more obedient and less feisty regarding their trainers, while their thoughtfulness regarding feeding their young could just mean that females care more about this than the males do, not that they are more resourceful in finding food. And finally, concerning the retentiveness of their memory (which might also just refer to the fact that females are more resentful and hold a grudge longer),<sup>36</sup> in his *On Memory*, Aristotle distinguishes between those who possess retentive memory and those who are capable of recollecting, and associates the former with people who are slow or sluggish (οἱ βραδεῖς) and the latter with those who are quick and smart (οἱ

<sup>33</sup> See Koziak (2000), 87-88 on what she calls ‘martial *thumos*’.

<sup>34</sup> In the biological treatises, Aristotle appeals to the fact that males are stronger and more spirited (τὸ ἄρρεν ἰσχυρότερον καὶ θυμικώτερον) in order to explain why they alone, or they more than females, possess defensive parts, while thereby implying that females are less able to use such parts on account of these deficiencies: see *PA* III 1, 661b26-33 and *HA* IV 11, 538b15-24.

<sup>35</sup> On love or friendship of mothers for their children and other forms of family friendship, see *NE* VIII 1, 1155a16-19; *NE* VIII 2, 1161b16-27, *EE* VII 6, 1240a35-36; *EE* VII 8, 1241b1-9; and *GA* III 2, 753a7-17.

<sup>36</sup> See also Mayhew (2004), 96 for this suggestion.

ταχεῖς καὶ εὐμυθεῖς), thus suggesting that having a retentive memory is a characteristic of less intelligent people (*De Mem* 1, 449b6-8; cf. *DA* II 9, 421a23–26, where Aristotle states that humans with relatively harder flesh are ‘naturally less endowed with respect to intelligence’ or *dianoia* than their fellows who are ‘soft-fleshed’). Aristotle does not say anything here – nor anywhere else, as far as I can tell – about the theoretical intelligence of women, but in the *Politics* he is adamant that women, too, must be educated (*Pol* I 13, 1260b15-16; cf. *Pol* VII 16, 1335b11-12 on women also equally needing to receive physical exercise), although there is no specification of what their educational program exactly entails.<sup>37</sup> And although the limitations in their perceptual intelligence will likely diminish the level of experience women can reach and thereby possibly the speed by which they are able to grasp universals (*Meta* I 1, 980b25–981a5 and *APo* II 19, 100a3–9), there are no biological reasons for excluding *in toto* theoretical reason – and hence the possibility of acquiring theoretical wisdom – to women.<sup>38</sup>

Regarding the natural character traits of women and the prospects for their moral development, then, we can draw at least the preliminary conclusion that whatever kind of virtues of character will be available to them, their habituation will not be easy, as their natural character traits skew women toward inactivity and in the direction of vices or at least in the direction of feelings and actions that are on the deficiency side of the mean.<sup>39</sup> As Aristotle puts it in the *Eudemian Ethics* (*EE* VII 2, 1237a3-7), women – compared to men – are simply ‘further away on the road towards virtue.’<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. Reeve (2012), 253.

<sup>38</sup> It has been objected that because the rational capacity of the soul is not embodied, it is not possible to offer any physiological explanations for limitations of that capacity in women: see e.g. Modrak (1994), 209-210. However, to the extent that even theoretical reasoning in humans involves not just the activity of the active intellect, but also that of the passive intellect and of imagination (see *DA* I 1, 403a3–10; *DA* III 7, 431a14–17; and *DA* III 8, 432a8–9) and hence depends on bodily functions, it, too, may be positively or negatively affected by the specific material nature and bodily structures of humans. And if the material nature and bodily structure of women is different from that of men, and if by ‘different’ in these cases Aristotle mostly seems to mean ‘less perfect’, it is likely that Aristotle considers the rational capacity of women – at least for the most part – to be functionally inferior to that of men.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. *Pr.* I 11, 860b8-12: ‘But why is it that when the summer comes with a Boreas and dry, as well as the late autumn, it benefits those who are phlegmatic and women? Is it because the nature of both is excessive in one direction, such that the season, by dragging it into the opposite direction, establishes well-mixedness?’

<sup>40</sup> Here is the full quote: ‘As a human being one is well-suited and on one’s way [towards virtue] (εὐθέτως δὲ καὶ πρὸ ὁδοῦ ἄνθρωπος ὢν) – for things that are good without qualification are by nature good to him – and similarly a man compared to a woman and a naturally talented person compared to one without talent (ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ ἀνὴρ ἀντὶ γυναικὸς καὶ εὐφυῆς ἀφυσῶς), and the way forward is through pleasure: it is necessary that what is good should be pleasant.’

*The character virtues in women as the virtues of assistants*

The only place where Aristotle explicitly addresses the question whether women can acquire moral virtue is *Politics* I 13. There it is brought up in the context of a discussion about whether natural slaves can have virtues that go beyond the use of their body as a tool and that are more honorable ‘such as temperance, courage, justice, and other such dispositions’ (*Pol* I 13, 1259b22-25). For Aristotle, the question whether women – and children – can have such character virtues is ‘almost the same’ as asking this question about slaves (*Pol* I 13, 1259b29-31), and so he discusses these cases together. For both women and natural slaves, it needs to be established, first, whether in fact there are such things as character virtues of them, and, second, if so, which (type of) virtues they should have, such as, for instance, whether women should be ‘temperate and courageous and just’ (i.e., whether they should have the same virtues – and have them in the same way) as is the case for men.

Note that from the outset, however, the question is limited to whether women and natural slaves can have virtues *of character* (i.e. the virtues that belong to the perceptive part of the soul and that go beyond merely having bodily virtues) rather than intellectual virtue or moral virtue in a strict sense that would require a unified state of both (*NE* VI 13, 1144b31-32). Since strictly speaking, one cannot have virtue of character without also being practically wise, and since acquiring the latter is not possible for women or natural slaves (only freeborn men and perhaps even only rulers can possess the virtue of practical wisdom; see *Pol* III 4, 1277b25-26: ἡ δὲ φρόνησις ἀρχοντος ἴδιος ἀρετὴ μόνη), it seems that whatever character virtues Aristotle ascribes to women, they must somehow be of a different kind than the ones he ascribes to men. In any case, they cannot amount to more than to what Aristotle elsewhere characterizes as natural virtues, that is, stable dispositions of the soul that dispose one towards feeling and doing the right thing just like moral virtue, but that can be acquired and possessed individually and that do not require practical wisdom (see *NE* IV 13, 1144b32-1145a2). Hence, whatever these natural virtues of character turn out to be, women will only be *partially* able to perfect their nature through habituation.<sup>41</sup>

Aristotle’s way of dealing with this question of whether slaves and women can have virtues of character and whether those are the same as the virtues that pertain to men is

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<sup>41</sup> Reeve (2012), 104.

rather complex, so let me trace his explanatory strategy in some detail: First, Aristotle claims that the method for answering these questions should be *general* (i.e. the explanations should be given at the highest level of generality), since in both cases the questions can be reduced to whether ‘natural rulers’ and ‘those who are naturally ruled’ have the same virtues or not (*Pol*I 13, 1259b32-34). Next, Aristotle reasons that, given that (a) ruling and being ruled are different in kind and not different by the more and the less and that (b) it is implausible for a unity of ruler and ruled to have the one share in the virtues of character while the other does not, the conclusion must be that both share in virtue, but that their virtues must be different in kind (*Pol*I 13, 1259b34-1260a4). Third, with this conclusion in place, Aristotle turns to the structure of the soul as he believes considering it will also immediately lead to this conclusion (*Pol*I 13, 1260a4-14). For just as in the soul there is a ruling part and a part that is being ruled, namely the rational and the non-rational part of the soul, and these two parts each have their own virtue (i.e. intellectual virtue, respectively, virtue of character), so this is the case with every other pair of natural ruler and person ruled (whether free person and slave, man and woman, and father and child): they too have each their own virtue that is characteristic for them (and that is hence different from the virtue the other person has). Furthermore, the type of virtue that each ruler and person ruled has corresponds to the type of rule they exercise or undergo (i.e. whether the type of rule is tyrannical, political, or kingly), and what type of rule is being used depends on the way in which the various parts of the soul are present in those ruling and being ruled (i.e. it is presumably the psychological condition of the person ruled that determines what kind of rule the ruler should exercise). And finally, Aristotle proposes that we must assume that the same necessarily holds for the virtues of character as well, as follows (*Pol*I 13, 1260a14-20):

That it is necessary that all have a share in them, but not in the same way, but rather in as much as is sufficient for each with regard to one’s own function. It is therefore necessary that the ruler has complete virtue of character (for his function is unqualifiedly that of a master craftsman, and reason is a master craftsman), and each of the other ones [should have virtue of character] as much as pertains to them.

In other words, only the ruler possesses virtue of character in the strict sense (as he also possesses practical wisdom), while those who are being ruled possess virtues of character

that are different in kind (and also somehow of a lesser kind), but appropriate to the specific function performed by the person ruled. Aristotle's *general* answer to the general question is thus that *all* have a share in character virtue, but that the virtues – such as temperance, courage, and justice – are not the same in kind for the ruler and the ruled (*Pol* I 13, 1260a20-24).

Regarding the particular character virtues of women, Aristotle's argument entails that their type of virtue should correspond to the type of rule by which they are ruled, and the type of rule by which men rule over women is supposed to be determined by the particular way in which the parts of the soul are present in women, which is different from the way in which those very same parts of the soul are present in natural slaves and children (*Pol* I 13, 1260a10-12: *καὶ πᾶσιν ἐνυπάρχει μὲν τὰ μόρια τῆς ψυχῆς, ἀλλ' ἐνυπάρχει διαφερόντως*). The relevant part of the soul that turns out to differentiate women, slaves, and children from freeborn men is not the perceptive part of the soul to which the character virtues belong, but rather the deliberative part of the soul (*Pol* I 13, 1260a12: *τὸ βουλευτικόν*), to which belongs the intellectual virtue of practical wisdom. Notoriously, Aristotle claims that women have this part (unlike slaves, who lack it entirely), but that it is 'without authority' (*Pol* I 13, 1260a9-14; a13-14: *τὸ δὲ θῆλυ ἔχει μὲν, ἀλλ' ἄκυρον*). I will say more below in section 3 about what I think that it means for a deliberative capacity to lack authority, but for now it is clear enough (a) that Aristotle introduces it as a psychological deficiency that is natural and characteristic to all women (just as it is natural and characteristic to all natural slaves to lack the deliberative capacity and to children to have it, but in an undeveloped way); (b) that he takes this psychological deficiency to be the ground for why women are ruled in the particular way they are; and (c) that this type of rule has repercussions for the kinds of virtues women can and should have.

Earlier (see *Pol* I 12, 1259a38-b10; b1: *πολιτικῶς*), Aristotle had characterized the type of rule of husband over wife as the rule of a statesman, that is, as the rule between equals,<sup>42</sup> but explained that, in the case of husband and wife, the wife does not take turns ruling. This is so, perhaps not only because she is naturally submissive because of her lack of spirit (a deficiency women have relative to men with respect to their *perceptive* soul), but also, as is suggested here, because she is incapable of ruling her husband as a consequence of another

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<sup>42</sup> Cf. *Pol* III 4, 1277b7-9, where Aristotle characterizes this type of rule as belonging to those who are 'similar in birth and free.'

naturally occurring psychological deficiency, this time pertaining to the *deliberative* part of her soul. Because of the way in which these two soul parts are thus realized in women, they end up remaining in a permanent state of being ruled and are ruled in a manner that is fitting for them, i.e. in a statesmanlike manner (which is importantly different from the type of rule that needs to be applied to natural slaves).<sup>43</sup> As for their character virtues, this entails that, as Aristotle explains here, the virtues of women are not identical to the virtues with the same name that belong to men, as the virtues of men are those ‘characteristic of the ruler’, while the virtues of women are those ‘characteristic of an assistant’ (*Pol* I 13, 1260a20-24; a23: ἡ μὲν ἀρχικὴ ... ἡ δ’ ὑπηρετικὴ).<sup>44</sup> The fact that women have – or should have – the virtues of assistants does not mean that they are only to be developed for the sake of serving their husbands well: for political rule is for the sake of the ruled and only accidentally for the ruler himself (*Pol* IV 7, 1278b37-1279a1). However it does mean that – as in the case of the virtues of the child, who is both biologically and morally imperfect<sup>45</sup> – their virtues do not belong to them in relation to themselves, ‘but in relation to the end and the leader’ (*Pol* I 13, 1260a31-33). That is, the virtues of women are virtues not because they are good for women as such (although they might certainly benefit from being ruled well in virtue of being easy to rule, in the sense that it contributes to their preservation and biological flourishing: see *Pol* I 5, 1254b10-13 and *Pol* III 6, 1278b17-30), but because they are good for women in relation to the household of which they are part and in relation to the husband who forms the head of the household and is her ruler. And, as a particular example of such a virtue that is proper to women, but not to men, Aristotle mentions silence (*Pol* I 13, 1260a28-31; 30-31: “Silence brings an adornment for a woman,” but for a man that is not the case’).<sup>46</sup>

Later in the *Politics*, Aristotle reaffirms this view that the virtues of men and women differ in kind in the same way as the virtues of the ruler and of the ruled are different, and that some are proper to one but not the other (*Pol* III 4, 1277b20-25):

[J]ust as the temperance and courage of a man and of a woman are different [in kind, and are not one in form]; for a man would seem to be a coward, if his courage were

<sup>43</sup> On the virtues of women being those of subjects to rule, see Deslauriers (2003), 216-221

<sup>44</sup> Cf. *Pol* III 5, 1277b13-20 on the virtues of the ruler and those of the ruled being different.

<sup>45</sup> I take καὶ in *Pol* I 13, 1260a31 to indicate that what is now said about the child already was presumed to apply to the woman.

<sup>46</sup> For virtues that are proper to women, see also *Rb* I 5, 1361a5-7: ‘of women, the virtues of body are beauty and stature, of soul, temperance and a love of work that is not vulgar.’

such as the courage of a woman, and a woman [would seem to be] garrulous, if she had the decency just as that of a good man, since also the art of household management is different for a man and for a woman: for the function of the one is to acquire, and of the other to protect.<sup>47</sup>

The habituation and education of women, then, will focus on their role in the household, and ultimately also on the kind of constitution of the city of which the household is part (*Pol* I 13, 1260b14-16): ‘for the virtue of a part needs to be determined by looking at the virtue of the whole, and both children and women should be educated with a view to the constitution.’ Women make up half of the free population of the city, and even if they are not part of the citizenry, their virtue or vice will affect the virtue of the city as a whole.<sup>48</sup>

The upshot of Aristotle’s discussion of natural character and the character virtues is thus that women suffer *natural* deficiencies in both the perceptive part of the soul (i.e. a lack of spirit) and the rational part of the soul (i.e. a deliberative capacity that lacks authority) and that these two together explain why women are so far removed from the unified psychological disposition that constitutes full virtue that the latter will – always or for the most part – be outside their reach and why it is natural for them to be ruled. Women can acquire individual character virtues (which are presumably natural virtues), but they are of a distinctively different kind (and not merely different by the more and the less) from the ones that can be acquired by freeborn men, as they are proper to freeborn people who – although considered to be an equal part of the household – need to be ruled and rule politically, given the way the deliberative capacity is present in them. This also means that even those character virtues that are the same in name for both men and women will not share the same standard for what state (of the perceptive part) of the soul will constitute the mean. In addition, the perceptive part of the soul of women – with all its constitutive capacities – will have to be trained to be obedient, not to the women’s own practical reason which is defective in a manner that I will specify further below, but to that of the male leader of the

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<sup>47</sup> Cf. *NE* VIII 12, 1162a22-24, where Aristotle explains that man and woman each have their own function in the household through which they both contribute to the common good.

<sup>48</sup> In *Pol* II 9, 1269b12-1270a11 Aristotle discusses Sparta as an example of where women were granted too much license and thereby caused harm to their city.

household,<sup>49</sup> who is superior to her and who – ideally – has practical wisdom (or perhaps is in the process of developing it: at least his practical reason does not have any natural deficiencies that preclude him from acquiring practical wisdom).

### **3 The physiology of the moral deficiencies in women: ‘lack of authority’ and weakness of will**

As we saw above, Aristotle attributes to women the character virtues of assistants, on the grounds that women are naturally ruled and because – just as the deliberative capacity is present differently in women from the way it is present in men, as in women it is ‘without authority’ – so too their character virtues must be present differently in them. However, even though women can – and ought to – develop their own proper character virtues (and when they do, will be ruled well and will contribute to the happiness of their household and state), they cannot develop *full* virtue and therefore become happy in the relevant, moral sense. For, as we said above, the latter requires the development of the intellectual virtue of practical wisdom, which is a virtue that belongs uniquely to freeborn men or perhaps even only to the rulers among them (as the intellectual virtue of those who are being ruled is true opinion: see *Pol* III 4, 1277b25-29). Women, on the other hand, are by nature suitable for being ruled rather than rule and, at least in the ideal city, are also by law or convention excluded from taking the role of ruler of cities. Women may well be clever, that is, they can possess the natural, but morally blind, counterpart to practical wisdom (see *NE* VI 13, 1144b1-17), and perhaps even acquire theoretical wisdom (if society grants her the education and leisure to do so), but in practical matters they ultimately depend on the rule of their fathers or husbands and therefore cannot act as autonomous moral agents. In this section, I turn to two psychological factors already mentioned above – namely the lack of authority of the deliberative capacity of women and their weakness of will – that contribute in particular to the *moral* dependence of women on men with the aim of specifying their physiological

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<sup>49</sup> See Deslauriers (2003), 216-217, who suggests that natural subjects can have a kind of full virtue by borrowing the practical wisdom from their natural rulers, while only possessing the virtue of the appetitive part of the soul in themselves. However, if my account of Aristotle’s moral psychology in (Leunissen, forthcoming) is correct, then women cannot have *full* virtue of any kind, and certainly not the kind the activity of which constitutes happiness, since that requires a proportionate, balanced relation between the perceptive and rational parts *of one and the same soul*.

underpinnings and their role in causing women to be morally deficient and dependent on men.

Starting with the lack of authority of the deliberative capacity of women: as I stressed above in section 2, it is important to realize that this is not simply a deficiency women have relative to the deliberative capacity of men, which causes their decisions to be rendered void simply as a matter of convention (for instance, because, in the society that Aristotle wrote about, men did not grant women any authority in matters concerning the city)<sup>50</sup> or as a result of a ranking of her field of authority that puts her below that of men (for instance, because the tasks women have authority over are for the sake of – and hence inferior to – the tasks men have authority over).<sup>51</sup> Instead, as the context makes clear, Aristotle is making a statement about the souls of women (and about the souls of natural slaves and children) and the ways in which their parts of the soul are *naturally* present in them (see *Pol* I 13, 1260a10-12 quoted above). Just as the absence of the deliberative capacity in the natural slave is a lack they have by nature and from birth, and just as the as of yet imperfect condition of the deliberative capacity of the child is a natural condition children have due to their biological immaturity, so too the ‘lack of authority’ of the deliberative capacity of women must be a natural, psychological differentiation. As I will argue in this section, I take the ‘lack of authority’ of the deliberative capacity in women to pertain to the lack of power *her* own decision has in overruling desire in the production of action, such that, if a woman’s perceptive part of the soul is not virtuous, her knowledge of the good and the quality of her deliberations will not be able to correct for her imperfections in character, and her actions will be the result of ‘weakness of will due to weakness’.<sup>52</sup>

In the context of Aristotle’s psychology of action, the term *kurios* often refers to the factor that has the efficient causal power to enact motion. Sometimes it refers to a human being as a whole, who possesses the principle for his own actions and is therefore responsible for them (see *NE* III 5, 1114b31-1115a2 and *EE* II 6, 1223a4-5: ὅσων πράξεων ὁ ἄνθρωπος ἐστὶν ἀρχὴ καὶ κύριος; cf. also *NE* III 1, 1110a5-6, for a tyrant being in control of someone else’s actions, and *NE* III 5, 1113b32-1114a4 on the drunk). Other times, the term

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<sup>50</sup> This is argued by, for instance, Swanson (1992).

<sup>51</sup> This interpretation is proposed by Deslauriers (2003).

<sup>52</sup> See Fortenbaugh (1977), 135-139 and Modrak (1994), 213 for similar interpretations but with a different explanation for why women suffer from this type of weakness of will.

refers more specifically to the capacities of thought and appetite, as for instance in the following text (*NE* VI 2, 1139a17-20):

There are three factors in the soul that control action and truth (τρία δὴ ἐστὶν ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ τὰ κύρια πράξεως καὶ ἀληθείας), perception, thought, and desire. Of these, perception is no principle of action, for it is clear that animals have perception but no share in action...

In what follows, Aristotle goes on to identify decision – understood as ‘thought combined with desire or desire combined with thought’ as the principle of motion, and then claims that humankind is such a principle (*NE* VI 2, 1139b4-5; on thought and appetite being in control of motion, see also *DA* III 9, 433a4-8; a6-7: κύρια τῆς κινήσεως). And, according to Aristotle’s natural scientific explanation of weakness of will in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE* VII 3, 1147a24-b12; 1147a24-25: ἔτι καὶ ὧδε φυσικῶς ἄν τις ἐπιβλέψειε τὴν αἰτίαν), what the incontinent person no longer has when he is being affected is not the universal belief about the good, but the belief about particulars that controls action (1147b10: κύρια τῶν πράξεων; cf. *NE* VII 1, 1145b12-13 for Aristotle’s general characterization of the incontinent as someone who knows what he is doing because of his passion is bad). In his case, instead of the belief about particulars, it is the appetite that leads him on, for ‘[appetite] is capable of moving each of the [bodily] parts’ (*NE* VII 3, 1147a34-35).<sup>53</sup>

The psychological theory that explains the efficient causal power of thought and appetite in human action is provided in the *De Anima*. As Aristotle explains, all animal locomotion and action (also) in the non-moral sense involves desire and some kind of cognitive activity (whether of practical thought or of imagination) as their efficient causes (*DA* III 10, 433a17-21). In humans, these primary efficient causes are appetite (i.e., a non-rational desire) and wish (i.e. a rational desire issued by practical thought, as the outcome of deliberation). Now in the case of a virtuous person, the apparent good that is the object of appetite coincides with the real good that is the object of wish, and the two capacities

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<sup>53</sup> See also *Dim Somm* 2, 463b23-31, where Aristotle discusses cases in which movements produced by, for instance, one kind of weather-phenomenon are overruled by a more ‘authoritative motion’ (κυριώτερα ταύτης ... κινήσις) stemming from another weather-phenomenon, such that the first no longer comes about, even if it had already produced signs in humans receptive to them; see perhaps also *GA* II 6, 744b13 (τῆς κυριωτάτης ἀρχῆς) and *LA* 6, 707a8 (ταύτην τὴν τῆς κινήσεως κύριον), where Aristotle refers to the heart as being the (most) controlling principle of motion.

produce the same locomotion or action. However, there are also cases – such as in the weak-willed or incontinent person – where ‘the intellect orders and thought says to flee from something or to pursue it’, but where ‘one is not moved’ and acts in accordance with appetite instead (*DA* III 9, 433a1-3), such that the motions issued by wish ‘lose’ from those issued by appetite. For, as Aristotle explains, sometimes appetite ‘wins and moves it [i.e., wish], while at other times it [i.e. wish] [wins and moves] that one [i.e. appetite], like a ball, desire against desire’ (*DA* III 11, 434a12-14). For physiologically speaking, both wish and appetite produce heatings and coolings of the blood, which in their turn make the *pneuma* in the blood expand or contract, and these expansions or contractions then make the body move. However, as Aristotle explains in the *Metaphysics*, one cannot at the same time act in accordance with both wish and appetite if they are contrary to each other (*Meta* IX 5, 1048a21-24): one will have to have more authority than the other. In other words, whenever wish and appetite are not on a par in producing the same physiological changes in the human body, then whichever of the two has the greatest power will ‘win’. And when appetite wins out, it will make the body move in accordance with its desire, and weakness of will results (*DA* III 11, 434a14).<sup>54</sup> Aristotle stresses though, and this is important, that ‘by nature the higher [desire] is always stronger in ruling and moves [the lower desire]’ (*DA* III 11, 434a14-15: φύσει δὲ ἀεὶ ἡ ἄνω ἀρχικωτέρῃ καὶ κινεῖ). I take this to mean that by nature and hence in the ‘normal’, non-perverted person, the wish that is issued by the deliberative part of the soul has *more power* (i.e. is a stronger efficient cause) than appetite, the desire that belongs to the non-rational, perceptive part of the soul, such that even in cases of conflict wish is prone to win. My suggestion, then, is that in women, the natural case is the reverse: that is, the natural advantage that wish has over appetite in freeborn men is not present in women, and instead wish is less controlling, if not powerless, compared to the controlling power desire has over the actions of women. As a consequence, women are naturally more prone to weakness of will due to weakness than men, who are – thanks to the natural power of their wish – naturally more prone to continence.

Aristotle never spells out what exactly the lack of authority in their deliberative capacity means for women (besides the fact that this qualifies them for being ruled in the manner of a statesman), but perhaps since the deliberative capacity of women is capable of

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<sup>54</sup> There are also cases in which neither the cognitive factor nor desire are in control of the motion, in which case the motion is non-voluntary: see *DM* 11, 703b9-11.

issuing choice, but is not capable of issuing the kind of choice that has the ‘authority’ or power to overrule contrary desires, she is dependent on the authoritative choices of her father or husband not just in general for offering her guidance on what actions to perform, but also for the development of her particular virtues of character. Support for this suggestion can be found in Aristotle’s account of the rational capacities in *Meta IX 2*, 1046a36-b7 and *Meta IX 5*, 1047b35-1048a24. Rational capacities<sup>55</sup> can only be found in ensouled beings that possess their own principle of motion and rest – i.e. that possess their own internal efficient cause – and can be realized in opposite directions (e.g. medical science can be actualized in the direction of health and of disease). And, as Aristotle explains, ensouled beings can themselves determine in which direction to realize their rational capacities, for what *controls* which of the contrary actualities will be produced is their desire or choice (*Meta IX 2*, 1046b7-24 and *Meta IX 5*, 1048a10-11: ἀνάγκη ἄρα ἕτερόν τι εἶναι τὸ κύριον· λέγω δὲ τοῦτο ὄρεξιν ἢ προαιρέσειν). Character traits, that is, the natural capacities for character humans have from birth constitute such rational capacities that can be realized in opposite ways and that can therefore be made better or worse through habituation (see *Pol VII 13*, 1332a40-b3): that is, the development of the psychological disposition that constitutes character virtue depends on the direction in which desire and/or wish realize the individual natural character traits and on their successes in overcoming any natural tendencies among them in the direction of vice. Since in women the desires are naturally stronger than wish (even if compared to the desires of men, they are less strong or intense due to the lack of spirit in women) and since these desires are naturally skewed towards vice (such as cowardice, laziness, etc. due to this very same lack of spirit in women), they require the intervention of the authoritative choices of their husbands and fathers in order to overrule these desires and in order to develop the natural virtues of assistants. If this account is true, then it also means that, while the *male* child will grow out of his natural imperfection regarding his deliberative capacity (that is, if provided with the appropriate kind of diet, physical exercise, habituation and education, he can become both biologically and morally perfect), no change in conventions or education can restore the natural lack of authority in the deliberative capacity of women.<sup>56</sup> Producing character virtue in women thus involves

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<sup>55</sup> As opposed to irrational ones, which are found in all kinds of natural entities and which can only be realized in one direction: e.g. fire can only move upwards.

<sup>56</sup> The fact that the efficient causal power of the choices of women is naturally weak certainly has consequences for the role(s) women are supposed to (and allowed to) play in society according to Aristotle, but I believe that

habituating the natural character traits of women in the direction of the natural virtues, while making their desires obedient to the choices of their male guardians.

Is there any evidence, then, that Aristotle believed women to be naturally prone to weakness of will, which is the second factor I mentioned as contributing in particular to the *moral* dependence of women on men? The following passage, which deals with weakness as a character trait naturally found in women, suggests that there is (*NE* VII 7, 1150b1-3; 12-16):

Someone who is deficient with regard to the things the many withstand and are capable [of withstanding], that person is weak and effeminate (οὔτος μαλακὸς καὶ τρυφῶν); for effeminacy too is a kind of weakness. (...) But [it is surprising] if someone is defeated by and is not capable of withstanding things against which the many are capable of resisting, when this is not because of the nature of one's stock or because of disease, such as the weakness among the Scythian kings<sup>57</sup> that is due to their stock and that sets the female apart from the male (ὡς τὸ θῆλυ πρὸς τὸ ἄρρεν διέστηκεν).

In this context, weakness refers to the inability to withstand pain and potentially other physical discomforts most people – or most men – are capable of resisting (see *EE* II 6, 1202b29-36 and *NE* III 7, 1146a14-15),<sup>58</sup> but women are not (cf. *NE* IX 11, 1171b10-11 where Aristotle suggests that ‘women and effeminate men’ indulge in their pain and love to share it with others). When found in men this kind of weakness is ‘surprising’, not pardonable, and categorized under the rubric of ‘weakness of will due to weakness’ (ἀσθένεια), which Aristotle describes as not staying with the result of one’s deliberation due to passion (*NE* VII 7, 1150b19-21)<sup>59</sup> and which ought to be contrasted with weakness of will due to impetuosity, where passion keeps one from deliberating. However, in women (and in the Scythian kings, among whom weakness runs in the family) the opposite seems to be the case: it would not be surprising to find this kind of weakness among them, as it is part of

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if women lack conventional authority over men, they do so in virtue of a natural lack of authority that belongs to their own deliberative capacity.

<sup>57</sup> The Scythians were considered to be the most effeminate people according to the Greeks: see Hipp *Airs, Waters, Places* 17-22.

<sup>58</sup> See Mayhew (2004), 98-99. Of course, weakness may also occur naturally in men (in which case it perhaps can be detected physiognomically by the presence of straight eyebrows: see *HA* I 9, 491b1415).

<sup>59</sup> Plato also associates effeminacy and weakness with cowardice, another trait Aristotle associates with women: see *Rep* IX 590b3-4.

their natural differentiation from men, and therefore should be pardoned. Aristotle also associates it with plotting (*NE* VII 10, 1152a18-19), which as we already saw is a natural character trait of women, and argues that the natural version of this kind of weakness is harder to cure than the habituated one (*NE* VII 10, 1152a27-33), which implies that it is very hard for women to overcome this natural trait and change it for the better.

Aristotle does not mention in the *Nicomachean Ethics* whether women by nature also suffer from weakness of will due to impetuosity, but in the *Generation of Animals* (see *GA* IV 5, 774a3-6) he associates weakness of will with regard to sexual intercourse (and which is therefore driven by sexual appetites,<sup>60</sup> and not by spirit) that is found in a certain group of women (τῶν γυναικῶν ὅσαι πρὸς τὴν ὀμιλίαν ἀκρατεῖς) with the presence of an excess of seminal residue in them. This seems to suggest that this kind of weakness of will is due to a diseased condition of the body, rather than a normal or natural one that can be found in all women (*GA* IV 5, 774a5-6): ‘for once the seminal residue has been excreted’, on account of the woman having had many children, ‘it no longer produces the desire for this sexual intercourse’ οὐκέτι ποιεῖ τῆς ὀμιλίας ταύτης ἐπιθυμίαν.<sup>61</sup> This condition might be more common during puberty, for in *HA* VII 1, 581b11-21 Aristotle explains how young girls during puberty are vulnerable to their developing sexual impulses and therefore need to be put under surveillance, lest they develop bad habits (and a more licentious character: see *Pol* VII 16, 1335a22-24) as a result of giving into them. However, Aristotle quickly adds here that this also applies to boys (*HA* VII 1, 581b17: καὶ οἱ ἄρρενες), so that perhaps in both men and women an excess of seminal residue (as occurs, for instance, during puberty) produces such strong sexual appetites that it makes them vulnerable to weakness of will due to impetuosity.<sup>62</sup> (It should be added, though, that the lack of spirit in women, as discussed above, possibly affects their deliberative process in a way that resembles neither types of weakness of will: given that they lack any incentive for action, women may take a long time to conclude the deliberative process – if they ever reach a conclusion at all – which would result in inaction, rather than in incontinence.)

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<sup>60</sup> The experience of sexual appetites in itself is natural for both men and women (cf. perhaps *Pol* I 2, 1252a27-29, where Aristotle states that both men and women have natural impulse to come together for procreation), and is acceptable in moderate degrees and if experienced at the right time, in the right way, etc. (see *NE* III 11, 1119a16-19).

<sup>61</sup> See also *HA* VII 1, 582a25-2, where Aristotle reports that women who are sexually lustful become more ‘sedate and temperate’ (καθίστανται δὲ καὶ σωφρονίζονται μᾶλλον) after having given birth to three children.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. *HA* VII 1, 582a22-23 where Aristotle refers to ‘the more lustful among men and women’: the natural character flaw can be found among both genders.

In sum, it looks like Aristotle believes that women suffer from a natural, pardonable version of weakness of will due to weakness, such that (even minor) pain can keep them from following through on the outcomes of their deliberations. However, weakness of will due to impetuosity is *not* among the natural conditions of women.

## Conclusion

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