The Difference Sexual Difference Makes in Aristotle’s Corpus

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In Aristotle on Sexual Difference, Marguerite Deslauriers showcases the ways that the biological treatises invite consideration of major themes and debates in Aristotle scholarship: the relation of the theoretical to the practical texts, of the soul to the body, of eidos to morphê, of the status and operation of species form, of material’s ability to affect form, of the directionality of influence of the psychological and the physiological, of the structure of deliberation, the extent to which practical reason can be divided from choice and action, and more. Many scholars of Aristotle treat both Politics and Generation of Animals as minor works that shouldn’t be consulted for insight into the central questions of Aristotle’s corpus. This book makes the emphatic case that both texts are indeed fertile domains for investigating concerns that pervade his work—a case that Deslauriers supports with wide-ranging references including but not limited to Posterior Analytics, De Anima, Metaphysics, Nicomachean Ethics and Rhetoric.

More than drawing together particular pieces of her reading of Aristotle’s view of sexual difference and its place in political life that she has made in other work (for example, that sexual difference is in the matter, not the form), Deslauriers argue for a coherent case of Aristotle’s treatment of female animals and of women citizens across his corpus. This monograph is the work of a scholar who has been thinking over these matters for decades, and it shows. The book is precise in its argumentation and its self-understanding of the stakes: to defend the importance of sexual difference for Aristotle. Deslauriers foresees objections and has replies grounded in specific passages that are not
easily dismissed. Whether one is convinced by her case or not, it must be reckoned with by scholars concerned, not only with the biological and political treatises, but also with how difference occurs within a species and how the body can bear on the functioning of the soul in Aristotle’s thought.

Deslauriers makes three distinct claims: 1) Aristotle believes that the bodies of women (not their souls) are responsible for their status as natural subjects ruled by men. Women’s defects are thus moral incapacities rather than intellectual ones. 2) Sex is a division in the matter, not a difference in form between male and female. 3) Aristotle affirms sexual difference; sexual difference is good both for the animal species and for the city-state. By extension, females and women are valuable and their defects are good for the structures in which sexual difference occurs: the reproductive couple, the household, the species, and the polis. Deslauriers argues that these defects allow women to carry out the tasks assigned to them.

In this review, I consider one specific aspect of each of the two foci of Deslauriers’ account of sexual difference in Aristotle: one of generation and the other of politics. I conclude with some reflections regarding the status of sexual difference in Aristotle on Deslauriers’ reading.

1 Sexual Difference in Generation

Deslauriers sets herself the task of explaining how the female animal can be described by Aristotle as marked by an incapacity (GA 728a18) and a defect (737a28, 775a15–16), without suggesting that the female has a different telos than the male (pp. 121–2). If the female fulfills a secondary end and not the same end as the male, she would be of a different form. Deslauriers argues that the male and female share a form which shares the goal of producing a generative residue, which both male and female do (p. 131). Their shared form in generative residue is materially differentiated between the male and female (p. 131).

Deslauriers argues that the female is a defect only from the perspective that the telos of animal generation is generating life and producing one capable of generating life; the female is not a defect from the perspective of being able to generate fertile residue, which explains how Aristotle could describe this defect as one only ‘as it were’. The male contributes the sensitive soul (p. 71), while the female contributes katamēnia, which isn’t inert matter, or even a more robust sense of potentiality for the sensitive soul, but rather the potential for nutritive soul (p. 72). Deslauriers supports this case with reference to Generation of Animals 2.4.74b29–741a4, which Peck translates as:
The *dynamis* of the nutritive Soul behaves in the same way. Just as, in the independently existing animal or plant, this Soul, which uses heat and cold as its instruments (for it is in these that its movement subsists, each several thing being formed according to some definite *logos*), at a later stage produces growth out of the nourishment supplied, so in precisely the same way at the very outset, this Soul, while the natural object is being formed, causes it to be set and constituted; since, as the matter from which the object derives its growth is identical with that out of which it was originally set and constituted, so too the *dynamis* which fashions the object is identical. If, then, this is the nutritive Soul, this it is which also generates the object. And this part of Soul it is which is the ‘nature’ of each several object, being present alike in plants and in animals one and all, whereas the other parts of Soul, while present in some living things, are absent from others.

Deslauriers reads this passage to argue that the female contributes nutritive soul in the *katamēnia*.

That shows that the *katamēnia* does not necessarily require a contribution from the male in order to become a being that nourishes itself; it only requires some vital heat. But it does require a contribution from the male in order to become an *animal*. This suggests that the potentiality for nutritive soul in the *katamēnia* is of a higher degree than the potentiality for sensitive soul, since it requires less to be realized. The *katamēnia* cannot, then, be inert matter. But its potentialities for soul are different from semen’s. Most importantly, it does not have the active potentiality for sensitive soul. (p. 72).

Before this passage, Aristotle is explaining how the new fetation differentiates its parts. Aristotle explains that parts are formed because the female contribution potentially includes the parts of the fetation, although ‘none of the parts is present in actuality in that residue’ (740b19–21). Aristotle continues by referring back to the formation of the animal that occurs when ‘a pair of factors, the one active and the other passive, come into contact in the way in which one is active and the other passive ... then immediately both are brought into play, the one acting, the other being acted upon’ and then explicitly associates the female with the passive and the male with the active role when he continues: ‘In this case, it is the female which provides the matter, and the male which provides the principle of movement’ (*GA* 740b24–5). Aristotle proceeds to emphasize the movement that does the actualizing work. Deslauriers’
reading of the passage she reads to make this case requires taking the phrase that opens the passage above, ‘The dynamis of the nutritive soul behaves in the same way’, to mean that the dynamis acts as the energeia, or the first actuality. Granted, this is an odd passage, focusing as it does not on the nutritive soul as such, but on its dynamis. But it is difficult to see how this case that follows an explicit distinction of male and female drawn around the contributions of matter and form can become a distinction between nutritive and sensitive soul, even if only in potentiality.

Deslauriers supports the view that the female contributes the potential for nutritive soul with reference to Aristotle’s claim that women can form wind-eggs, which shows that women can generate up to a point (GA 741a18). Deslauriers emphasizes Aristotle’s claim that ‘it is clear that potentially they possess Soul of a sort’ (741a24) to argue that the female contribution is the potential for nutritive soul, though the sense here seems to be that the material is potentially alive and includes a capacity to nourish, but not to make alive. Consider the case of the wind-egg. Deslauriers calls the wind-egg a ‘parthenote’, which is an egg that is fertilized without a male. I think it is more plausible that Aristotle calls wind-egg just what we call an unfertilized egg. If Aristotle thinks that the female contribution is material menses, the formed egg invites some explanation. We now know most bird eggs are fertilized internally by a male bird. So the wind-egg, which would be akin to the eggs we have in the fridge, shows substantial development, but it does not yet have life.

An important part of the interpretation that the female contributes the potential for the nutritive soul for Deslauriers is in reading the end of this passage where Aristotle says that the nutritive soul is present in plants and animals one and all, while the sensitive soul is not found in all (GA 741a3–4). Deslauriers shifts from the presence of nutritive soul in each living thing to the claim that the female contributes nutritive soul, which shifts from what the female animal is capable of to what the female contributes. In earlier work treating Aristotle’s Metaphysics, Deslauriers marks the distinction between the male and female animals and the male and female principles: the animals can share capacities while the principles differ. If that is the case, then the capacities of female animals are not sufficient to tell us the capacities of the female principle. This analysis leads Deslauriers to describe the difference between the male and female as a difference in morphē not eidos because the male and female bring the potential for different souls, which makes the difference in

the animals rather than the principles (p. 134). This interpretation depends on there being multiple *morphai* in an *eidos*, against the close to synonymous use of these terms in *Physics* 11.1 set in contrast to material.

Deslauriers is very careful to describe *katamēnia* as passive potential for nutritive soul (pp. 95–6), and that the nutritive soul cannot be actualized separately from the sensitive soul (pp. 131, 149), yet she also states, ‘When Aristotle implies that the female does not contribute soul, he means only that she does not contribute the active potentiality for the sensitive faculty’ (p. 149), and that ‘the female is precisely a latent form in the matter’ (p. 133), seeming to shift Aristotle’s account of the differences in contributions from male form and female matter to male active potentiality to female passive potentiality. Deslauriers acknowledges that Aristotle’s account ‘avoids any actual division of the faculties’ of the soul, ‘while permitting that division in potentiality’ (p. 143).

Deslauriers comes to conclude, ‘It is inaccurate to say that male provides form, the female matter. The female certainly does provide matter, and the male provides no matter, but the matter provided by the female is certainly informed’ (pp. 148–9). Deslauriers doesn’t just mean that the matter has become the conditional matter for this new being, but rather that the female contribution also involves form in the not fully developed soul, which she also argues is what the semen is contributing, since the semen, the fetaction and the embryo are only potentially informed (p. 149), even though Aristotle has described the semen as the active principle that joins with a passive principle to form the new animal at *GA* 749b22–23. What does it mean to say that the female contributes matter and the male form (*GA* 716a7–8, 729a10–11) if the meaning of the first is that it contributes nutritive soul potentially and the meaning of the second is it contributes sensitive soul potentially? Does this not make potential nutritive soul material and potential sensitive soul for m? (Even as Deslauriers seems to reject Aristotle’s explicit assignment of formal and material causal roles to male and female, she nonetheless offers an interesting case for why the rational soul enters from the material of semen, reading that passage to suggest that the outside that it comes from is not outside the semen but the fetaction (p. 148)).

Deslauriers is attempting to thread a needle between acknowledging Aristotle’s explicit statements about the contribution of the female as material and affirming a significant contribution from the female beyond deformity or mistake and, thereby, to establish the importance of sexual difference. In the service of giving more credence to the female role, Deslauriers seems to concede that material is inferior and that the female would be inferior if her contribution were material. Deslauriers sidesteps the thorny problem of how the difference between formal and material contributions occurs in degrees
of vital heat, which is to say, through material difference, as I have argued, because she doesn’t wholly accept the notion that female contribution is material and male is formal. In its place, she introduces an equally thorny question of what it means to have two formal contributions, even if potentially formal, still differentiated by material differences. In the service of elevating the status of the female contribution, Deslauriers seems to concede the lowly status of material, while nonetheless requiring material to be the source of formal differences, which seems to allow the material power to return.

Deslauriers’ reasoning seems to be self-undermining and ultimately circular. Sexual difference, and thus the existence of the female animal, is good because it separates out the inferior principle of matter from the superior principle of form (p. 150). Sexual difference, however, is both between matter and form and between contributions of differently developed form insofar as female contributes potentially nutritive soul and male potentially sensitive soul but also the moving cause. The difference between differentially developed form is not in the form of the male and female animals but in their material. What difference means and why it is required if it is merely between stages of development is not entirely evident. If the female contributes a lesser degree of form, her difference seems less necessary for establishing the superiority of form. If the female contributes material, the difference is needed, but the female seems more explicitly inferior because material is inferior. Material, however, and not form, is the site of these differences in the male and female animals. Deslauriers insists on this last point, and I agree. But I think the implications of this view are more profound than she allows. Her case shifts to the site of material difference to lessen the difference, but significant work is being asked of material whether it distinguishes between formal and material causes or vegetative and sensitive soul. In either case, material seems to be doing some form-making work.

2

Sexual Difference in Deliberative Capacity

As in her treatment of sexual difference in Aristotle’s account of generation, Deslauriers argues that a material difference underwrites women’s role in political life. She argues that her coldness gives women diminished thumos in her soul which makes her deliberative capacity lack authority, as Aristotle claims in Politics I.13. Deslauriers’ treatment of thumos and the way it traverses

the physiological and the psychological is an exemplary display of how the less well-known texts illuminate larger questions such as the extent and the way in which the body and soul are unified. Deslauriers contends that the deliberative capacity itself is not in the soul but depends on the body in order to be maintained, and thus bodily capacities affect its execution (p. 210).

Deslauriers rejects the notion that rational capacities determine bodies rather than bodies determine rational capacities because she rejects the two principles that would lead us to suppose that psychological differences produce physiological ones: first that the soul determines the body because the body is for the sake of the soul and the second that the higher faculties determine the lower ones so the lower capacities serve higher ones (p. 210). Deslauriers argues that if this were the case sexual differences would be explained by differences in rational capacities. She argues alternatively that matter can interfere in the exercise of the faculties of soul to show that political differences follow from material or bodily differences, not psychological ones (p. 213). Further, she rejects the view that deliberation is altogether faulty in women to argue for the lack of authority of it grounded in thumos.

While she ultimately rejects the view that diminished deliberation is due to coldness that prevents a decision from setting, the description of deliberation offered in consideration of that view strikes me as counter to the crucial differentiating aspects of Aristotle’s ethical theory. Deslauriers argues that deliberation is knowledge of a universal – ‘the universal judgments that are expressions of moral claims’ (p. 230) – and that ‘[p]eople do not literally perceive the good and the bad, the just and the unjust; but they have rational imagination, which allows them to represent to one another not only what is pleasant and unpleasant, but also what is just and unjust’ (p. 229). But Aristotle describes phronēsis as hitting a target in Nicomachean Ethics II.6.1106b32 and people being responsible for how the good appears to them in Nicomachean Ethics II.1. This descriptions suggest that it is very much an ethical perception of what is required in each distinct ethical situation – this is the very heart of the difference between virtue ethics, which expects that ethical situations are always singular, and deontology, which supposes rules can be universally applied. This critique is important because it points to the limits of the view that Deslauriers defends that supposes deliberation could occur without decision since deliberation involves an ethical perception of what a situation requires that results in a choice.

Deslauriers’ case is that a lesser degree of thumos impairs women’s capacity for decision making, such that the different degrees of heat in male and female produce the difference in thumos, which affects women’s ability to reach a deliberative judgment. She supports the view that thumos is physical and not
psychological by arguing that non-rational beings have appetite and *thumos*, that *thumos* is an irrational affect, and that in the discussion of the voluntary, thumotic desires are nonrational. If *thumos* makes one decisive and is thus necessary for rule, those with a lesser degree of heat and therefore *thumos* are less capable of rule. The lower heat in women means they have a deliberative faculty, but, lacking *thumos*, they cannot decide or act on their deliberations. Since their *thumos* makes them insufficient to rule, their place is in the household (p. 247). Here Deslauriers suggests what looks like a later Christian view that one might have a judgment and be unable to act on it, rather than an Aristotelian view that action and choice are the result of deliberation (*EN* 113a4–5). Aristotle does suggest that *akrasia*, the lack of power to follow through on the action one has determined for herself, is either a matter of having knowledge of the universal but not the particular (1147a3–4) or of having knowledge of two universals that are in conflict accompanied by a desire for one of them (1147a31–5). In neither case is a choice made but then not held. Further, if women’s lack of *thumos* prevents her from being decisive, it is hard to see what it might mean for her to deliberate without reaching an end.

Deslauriers concludes that the differences in the deliberative capacities are material differences and not differences in soul. Since the difference in the *Politics* is not tied to a difference between the formal and material cause, this material difference seems to be less of a problem for Aristotle’s theory of causation. And yet, it still seems to assign to material the power to affect rational capacities, which is to say, soul.

Deslauriers’ focus on women in *Politics* is largely occupied with how to develop a consistent reading of Aristotle’s claims that rule of men over women is both aristocratic and constitutional (which is often called political). Her case is that women engage in deliberation, and in this sense, the rule is political, but men make the decisions, and in this sense, the rule is aristocratic (p. 155). Deslauriers acknowledges that these appear to be in tension (p. 176). I’m not as convinced that Aristotle’s description of the rule of men over women as political, despite the fact that men rule permanently, does not include a hint of criticism or that for him, an aristocratic rule can be political toward those not included in the rule. Deslauriers defends her case with an interpretation of the Amasis footbath example that Aristotle invokes at *Politics* 1.12.1259b9. Deslauriers argues that the footbath shows that there is a natural sameness between men and women in sharing material, but that ‘a human being in assuming the shape and role of a man becomes a natural ruler’ (p. 178). The basis of the natural rule, Deslauriers concludes, ‘is the superiority of a non-essential feature’ (p. 178) – the shape of the footbath – while the sameness is exemplified in how both the statue and foot basin are from gold. On this
account, the material is the essential sameness, and the shape is non-essentially different in a way that produces a natural hierarchy. Deslauriers does proceed to offer a reading of a modified constitutional rule with reference to the way men’s aristocratic rule can become oligarchic in *Nicomachean Ethics* VII.I0, but the argument about the footbath is notable for drawing the unity of men and women around material and their difference around shape that is distinct from essence.

As she has shown that sexual generation and thus sexual difference is better for animal generation, so Deslauriers shows that sexual difference is of political benefit. One benefit is unity, while another is that it enables the exercise of human virtue across human activities in the household and the city (p. 187). To make this case, Deslauriers has to maintain that living well is a focus of the household in a way that aims to reduce the sense in which women are restricted from the full range of human activities. On her reading, sexual difference is a benefit for political life in Aristotle because it allows men the full range of human action by allowing the household activities to be the domain of some in order to enable others to engage in political activity. Similarly, sexual difference is a benefit for natural generation in the service of the male, who would be worse if it were mixed with the female (p. 128).

### 3 Concluding Remarks

One wonders what is achieved by this affirmation of sexual difference. Feminist philosophers of sexual difference have insisted that difference that is in the service of a privileged position is an impoverished sense of difference. Deslauriers shows quite explicitly that this sexual difference – the existence of female animals in generation and women in political community – is better because of what it allows for men. This difference doesn’t view females and women on their own terms and thus it is a difference that is reducible to identity, both by measuring difference by ability or lack of it and by placing difference in the service of a centered position. Deslauriers thus seems to be demonstrating the ways that Aristotle’s affirmation of sexual difference falls short of true sexual difference.

In the course of her argument, though, I find support for the view that material – associated with the feminine – appears to underwrite differences that Aristotle himself describes as that between form and matter, or soul and body, or between degrees of soul. For Deslauriers, that seems to make the differences less significant. While she makes that case to account for the political differences of men and women, she maintains that the female contributes
potential nutritive soul, rather than material, ceding the notion that material, which Aristotle explicitly associates with the female contribution, would be inferior. While material explains sexual difference in the *Politics*, even that power of material is a diminished power because it doesn't produce formal difference, but rather an inessential one. It is difficult not to wonder whether Deslauriers' reading affirms a normative and gendered metaphysics by making material a source of inessential difference and by seeming to acknowledge that a merely material contribution from the female would be inferior. I take Deslauriers to understand herself to be making the strongest case possible for Aristotle by showing how sexual difference is better than the lack of it. The problem is that it leaves intact a metaphysics that values form, which Aristotle associates with the male contribution, over matter, which he associates with the female contribution. Without attending to that normative framework, sexual difference in Aristotle falls short of true difference and Deslauriers' case demonstrates how.