

**The First Monstrosity:
Examining Gender Bias in Aristotle's Reproductive Framework**

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In a recent debate between Karen Nielsen and Devin Henry, we find opposing views about whether Aristotle's biological explanations and reproductive framework in the *Generation of Animals* point to sexism. The *Standard View* holds that Aristotle's explanation of reproduction points to gender bias or sexism¹ in that "Aristotle construes the female as deficient relative to the male." This idea ignores other important factors that may be relevant and that could provide an explanation of Aristotle's claims. In this paper, instead of focusing on social attitudes, I will examine the three passages from the *Generation of Animals* that the Standard View claims contain gender bias. By drawing from Aristotle's hylomorphic theory that it is better to have a combination of two things, a male and a female as well as form and matter, we may be able to rule out the implication of gender bias and uncover Aristotle's true intent in making these claims. I conclude Aristotle's explanatory model does not point to gender bias but rather simply to a causal framework with unfortunate titles; then I'll examine what the model would need to look like to truly be sexist. This is not to deny Aristotle's sexism but simply to show his model of reproduction on its own is not evidence of sexism.

Nielsen defends the Standard View in her paper, "The Private Parts of Animals: Aristotle on the Teleology of Sexual Difference".² This view is compelling upon first glance but when examined closely it's not without its problems. Let's examine the three specific claims that on the surface seem to be evidence for gender bias:

- I. The female is said to be the first monstrosity, "for monstrosity is actually a kind of deformity."³
- II. The female seems to be a 'deficient' male. The text tells us that "the female is like a deformity of the male and the menstrual discharge is like semen, but unclean."⁴
- III. Reproducing a male is the final cause or goal of reproduction, "Aristotle conceives of the process of generation as teleologically directed towards the production of male rather than female animals."⁵

We will start by looking at the first two passages and see if an explanation can be found for these claims that is not reflective of sexism. Aristotle's doctrine of hylomorphism that was first introduced in the *Physics* tells us that everything is a combination of form and matter.⁶ *Form* being an object's definition or appearance, that which makes it the kind of thing it is. One could imagine it as a guidebook or instructional manual for how the matter is to take the shape of and become the appropriate kind of object. To help explain the hylomorphic relationship in the context of reproduction, we can look at the forms of hot and cold and how they interact. Since both hot and cold are forms, we will need an example of matter. Take for instance if water is the matter or object that the forms of hot and cold are attempting to inform. There are three possible outcomes:

- (1.1) The hot fully informs the water and the result is hot water. This is a simple hylomorphic combination.
- (1.2) Another possible outcome is the water is not able to receive the form of the hot so it instead becomes cold. Aristotle tells us that "when a thing perishes it becomes the opposite of what it was;"⁷ we call this 'the first movement or motion', if the form is not able to inform the matter fully, the opposite form moves in and immediately tries to inform the matter. In this scenario hot is not successful in informing the water, so the form of cold steps in, and we see cold water produced as a result.
- (1.3) The last possible outcome is if the form of the cold encounters the water and is able to fully inform it, the result will be cold water.

These three outcomes are typical examples of a hylomorphic process with two forms.

1 In this paper I will use the two terms, *sexism* and *gender bias*, interchangeably.

2 Nielsen 374.

3 *Generation of Animals* 769b30 in Barnes (1991).

4 *Ibid.* 737a20.

5 Nielsen 374.

6 Ainsworth, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

7 *Ibid.* 766a14.

Now let's examine it in the context of reproduction. Here the male supplies the form and the female supplies the matter because Aristotle tells us that "the female always provides the material, and the male that which fashions it."⁸ The first possible outcome is that (1) the form of the male is successful in fully informing the matter, and thus a male is produced. The next possible outcome is that (2) the form of the male is not successful in informing the matter, so the first motion is towards the opposite. We know that "the female is the opposite of male"⁹ so a female would be produced. These first two possibilities are identical to what we witnessed in our example with the forms of hot and cold informing the water.

This is where we begin to see why the female is referred to as the *first monstrosity*. When we look at the motion we observed in case 2 of our hylomorphic combination with both the hot and cold or the male and the female, the first motion is towards the opposite. When we try to reproduce the form, and that attempt is unsuccessful we get the opposite. This is the first example of a deviation within the causal process. *Monstrosity* is simply another term for deviating from this norm where a form reproduces itself in matter and thus where the form male should reproduce the form male in matter. Aristotle provides many examples of other things that are *monstrosities*, not reserving the term only for the female. He even says that "for he who does not resemble his parents is already in a certain sense a monstrosity; for in these cases nature has in a way departed from the type".¹⁰ It's easy to see how Aristotle could classify many things as *monstrosities*. If a child is tall and their parents were short, that is a *monstrosity* according to the aforementioned quote. Female is a *monstrosity* in that it was produced the first time we strayed from the form, which happens to be the male. We could just as easily say that in the example of case 2, cold is the first monstrosity compared to hot in that causal process.

Where issues begin to arise is within the third or last possible outcome. With the water, the other form comes in and has a successful impregnation. The problem is that there is no female form. There is only one form, and it lies within the man and is able to produce both males and females based on whether it fully informs the matter or not. Within the context of reproduction, there are not two forms or options to choose from. There is one form (the male) and the result of an unsuccessful informing (the female). This seems to be contrary to hylomorphism because a female would not just be a combination of matter and form, it would be a half form, or a half informed male. Perhaps that does give merit to the claim of gender bias by those holding the Standard View. But conventionally what looks like gender bias here in this framework can be explained by the fact that we only have one form or one option. We see in a compelling way why Aristotle says that the female is the *first monstrosity* or *first deviation*. This is simply the result of a hylomorphic framework, one that we also saw in the context of hot and cold. Aristotle is not saying that the female is lesser or 'worse' than the male, in the same way he's not saying that cold is lesser or 'worse' than hot.

To prove that there is unquestionable gender bias in these claims, we'd have to ask, could we have two forms? The reason this claim of sexism arises in the first place is that, as we see in case 3 of the hylomorphic process, we are lacking two forms. If there were two forms, one for the male and one for the female then case 3 would be identical in both the reproductive model and in the example of hot and cold. Female would bring the form of female just as hot brings the form of hot and male brings the form of male. In this case there would be an argument for gender bias, but not in the way we typically think. If there were in fact two forms Aristotle would be choosing the form of the male over the form of the female, when he has both options. But that doesn't seem to be what we are observing here in this framework.

If there were two forms, one for male and one for female, we would run into a few problems when applying them to the reproductive process. We know that hylomorphism requires that there be form and matter. So where does the matter come from? Empirically, we posit the female as having the matter on the basis of the excess of menstrual fluid or matter that we don't observe in the male. But if we know that female has the matter, and we've just given female a form, shouldn't it follow that we would then get *self-reproduction* by the requirements of hylomorphism? Clearly we don't see this in nature so

⁸ *Ibid.* 738b17.

⁹ *Ibid.* 766b17.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 767a37.

we'd be taking a sophisticated framework and violating empirical observation, so this must not be the case. This raises further questions about reproduction, but for now we have an explanation of why Aristotle has the male bring the form and not the female.

The third claim of sexism lies in the notion that the teleological goal of reproduction is to produce a male. As evidence for this claim Nielsen quotes a line from the *Generation of Animals* that explains how anything that is not a male has “departed from the type.”¹¹ On the surface the claim that the goal is to produce a male, and that that would represent the successful completion of the process, seems sexist. In reality it's consistent with the example of the hot and the cold. It is an instance of a form attempting to fully inform some matter: the hot trying to inform the water and the male trying to inform the female matter. If this process is interrupted or if the form is unable to fully inform its intended recipient, we see a diversion to an opposite form that is able to inform it. If the form of the male is able to fully concoct the matter in a way that is similar to the form of the hot fully informing the thing that takes on the form of the heat, then the result would be an exact reproduction of the male. There exists no female form that could come into play. The Standard View seems to imply that Aristotle thought the telos is to reproduce a male. What leads to this belief? Let's examine what the telos could be in other steps of this reproductive process.

Even if the telos were to reproduce the male, isn't it true that the telos of hot is to reproduce hot and the telos of cold is to reproduce cold? The telos is always defined in terms of its appropriate purpose, clearly the outcome could be nothing else. It seems the Standard View misinterprets what is simply an *intermediary* step with the overall goal or telos of *reproduction*. Let us look at an example to help us better understand Aristotle's reasoning for suggesting the goal is to create a male, and why that is in fact not a sign of gender bias.

Take for instance a swordsmith forging metal to create a sword. To create a sword with the right amounts of strength, flexibility and durability, the swordsmith will have to utilize both hot and cold. Through the process of evenly heating and then quickly cooling you're able to manipulate the metal to the necessary requirements. What would the telos of hot and cold be in this context? The telos of cold *qua* cold is simply to produce cold, just as the telos of hot *qua* hot is to produce hot. But taken specifically in the context of a broader process, do we see the telos change? In the context of making a sword the telos of hot and cold isn't just to reproduce themselves, the telos would be to produce a strong metal or a flexible metal or whatever requirement the swordsmith is aiming for. The swordsmith is just taking advantage of hot and cold to meet their desired end.

Now compare this to the reproductive process. Is the telos of male being misidentified here? It's true that the telos of male *qua* male is to reproduce male just as the telos of hot *qua* hot is to reproduce hot. But when you place it into a context far wider than itself, the telos necessitates a change, it cannot stay the same when the parameters have changed. In the context of the process of reproduction, is the telos to produce a male, or is the telos to continue the species? In his paper, “How Sexist is Aristotle's Developmental Biology?”, Henry opposes the Standard View and agrees that “[F]or Aristotle the telos of sex determination is the preservation of the species.”¹² And does that continuation or preservation of the species not require both males and females? These intermediate steps that as a whole form the reproductive model each has a different telos taken on its own, but when you examine it *qua* contributing to the whole, the telos changes. The claim that “The telos is to reproduce a male” is then not evidence for gender bias but simply describes a step within a larger process that is being misinterpreted as the final goal of that larger process.

Here we see that the telos of a form changes in according to context. The telos's being hot *qua* hot is very different from its being hot *qua* aiding in the manipulation and creation of metal for a sword. That's what the Standard View has done here. It looks at the male in so far as it is male but it overlooks the male in so far as it aids in the preservation or continuation of the species. If you look at the telos of the intermediate step of the male form as trying to inform the female matter to

¹¹ *Ibid.* 767b7.

¹² Henry 262.

reproduce itself, then yes, that would be a clear example of gender bias. But when you look at the male form as part of a whole, the focus shifts and once you see the big picture it no longer resembles gender bias, but just a standard hylomorphic framework.

To understand the third claim as gender bias assumes there could be a female form. We don't have room to get into that with sufficient detail in this paper but I'll pose the question: What conditions would have to be in place to establish gender bias? Would there have to be a form for female? And if so what implications would that have on the hylomorphic process?

When you read the *Generation of Animals* without sufficient nuance, the gender bias in this reproductive framework seems vast. When you examine Aristotle's reasoning, you can recognize that this impression seems to be nothing more than an effect of a causal explanation that uses words like "monstrosity" and "deficient" that have certain negative connotations for modern readers. The *presentation* may be sexist but the *content* itself does not reveal sexist attitudes for this particular model. The content of this model of reproduction cannot be used as evidence for sexism, although sufficient evidence of his sexism may exist in other texts; this is simply part of a framework in which men and women are the result of a causal process. Anything is a *monstrosity*, or a *deviation* if the result doesn't resemble the exact male form and produce a male. Female just happens to be the *first monstrosity*. The female is not deficient in the sense that it was produced as the result of a failed teleological process. Aristotle does not offer a female form to choose from or favor over a male form. He's working with a framework that supplies just one form and working with what he's observed in nature. It's easy to misconstrue his words about the telos of male being to reproduce a male. When you put the claim in the context of reproduction or compare reproduction to other similar hylomorphic processes, it makes total sense. Obviously Aristotle doesn't believe that every process of reproduction should result in a male; there would be no way to continue a species if that were the fact. He even states in the *Generation of Animals* that female is a "natural necessity."¹³ The overall telos points to a complex reproductive process, and the Standard View picks one intermediary step that makes the idea sound sexist on the surface and misinterprets it. If the idea is that the goal is the continuation of the species, and not to create a male, is the claim sexist or simply a causal explanation?

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