

## How Did Aristotle Get It Wrong About Women and Slaves?

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*Politics*, Aristotle said men are cut out by nature to rule and women are cut out by nature to be ruled.<sup>1</sup> Husbands are heads of families and men run the *polis*. He also said some people are natural masters and others are natural slaves.<sup>2</sup> The natural masters should rule the natural slaves.

Aristotle is wrong about both of these things. Women and men are equal and slavery is morally wrong.

How did Aristotle get it wrong on these questions? He was not a stupid man. What made him make these mistakes?

One answer to this question is that Aristotle was a man and he owned slaves. Aristotle himself recognized that this made it likely for him to go wrong about women and slaves. In *Ethics*, he says people often go wrong when it is in their interest to do so. This is why it is so hard to be just. Everyone knows that justice is giving people what they deserve. The hard thing about doing justice is figuring out how much each person deserves. This is particularly hard, Aristotle says, when we ourselves are involved because everyone rates themselves too highly.<sup>3</sup>

Self-interest leads people astray, but lack of information can also lead to wrong conclusions. Aristotle got it wrong about women and slaves because of two facts about the world that he *couldn't* know. I think if he had known those facts, his legal ideas about women and slaves would have been different.

Aristotle got it wrong about slaves because he had never seen machines. He says that if the loom could weave by itself and the guitar pick could play music, there would be no need for slaves.<sup>4</sup> It is having machines

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that makes it possible for us to see that slavery is morally wrong. Take machines away and I'm not sure we would see the moral point as clearly.<sup>5</sup>

If Aristotle could see machines I think he would change his mind about slavery. His comments on the subject always sound forced to me, as if he halfway did not believe them himself. He starts with a very simple observation. He says people have slaves because certain things must be done that people do not want to do for themselves.<sup>6</sup> When Aristotle says slavery is natural, what he means is that everyone would like to have a slave. Even a slave, he says, would like to have a slave.<sup>7</sup> Our love of machinery proves this.

The problem with slavery is that no one wants to be a slave or thinks he deserves to be a slave. Aristotle sees this problem. He says it is clear that some people can plan things and some people can't. From there, it is not far to say that some people are cut out to be masters and some are cut out to be slaves, but Aristotle realizes that people disagree about who is and who is not a natural slave.<sup>8</sup> Mostly, Aristotle says, slaves are taken in wars. Everyone who is conquered becomes a slave. This is not based on people's nature. It's just what happens.

Slavery does not make moral sense to Aristotle but his fantasy about looms that can weave by themselves is the only way he could see how of the dilemma. For us, machines are not a fantasy. If Aristotle could have seen machines, I think he would have said slavery was wrong and if he had been able to see the legal history since his time, I think he would have said it was wrong for men to rule women.

Aristotle had almost no recorded legal history. He was among the first to start recording legal history. We have 2300 years of recorded legal history and that history shows us two things. First, if men rule and women are ruled, the law will abuse women. Second, men will deny that they are making laws that abuse women. Men will see whatever law they make as doing what is "natural"; they will see it as doing what is "in women's own best interest".

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<sup>5</sup> This is part of Lenin's meaning in *On Imperialism* when he says that capitalism can continue only because colonials can be treated as slaves.

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Aristotle was not an idealizer. He did not think the world was perfect or perfectable. Some badness is unavoidable, he says.<sup>9</sup> One of the unavoidable bad things in the world is that men *think* they are smarter and more capable than women. Men think it is natural for them to rule and for women to be ruled. Women are aware that men think they are smarter and more capable than women. Women laugh at men for thinking this.

When Aristotle says it is “against nature” for a wife to want to rule more than her husband, he is saying men expect to be in control of women. They expect that when a husband and wife go for a drive, the man will do the driving. They expect that when a husband and wife watch TV, the man will hold the remote control. They expect that when there is dirty housework to be done, the wife will do it, not the man. None of this is right. But it is what men expect.

In *The Second Sex*, De Beauvoir points out that women play along with men. The reason it is against nature for a wife to want to rule more than her husband is that most men do not marry women who want to be in charge than they do and most women do not marry men who do not want to be in charge less than they do. As de Beauvoir says it does not matter what people think. What they say and do is what counts.

Whether it is natural for men to rule is not the issue. Our recorded legal history shows that it is morally wrong for men to be in charge. Without history, that moral wrongness is hidden. All anyone can see is what Aristotle saw: men think they are more fit to rule than women. With history, even men can see that they should not rule women. They do it badly. Now that large numbers of women are getting an opportunity to rule, we will see if they are any better at the task than men have been.

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<sup>9</sup> *Sophistical Refutations* 165b 37-38.