

The Dialogue

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AXIOTHEA: Lasthenia, your beard is slipping.

LASTHENIA: Why thank you.

AXIOTHEA: Did you get the mathematics done?

LASTHENIA: No. And I tried so hard, Axio, after you left last night. I worked at it for another *two hours*. It's just not clear at all. Can you help me again tonight?

AXIOTHEA: Alright--I should be able to get away.

LASTHENIA: Wonderful!!

AXIOTHEA: Lasthenia, *please* be more discreet passing these notes back and forth. People will begin to notice us.

LASTHENIA: Well maybe it's time they did. I get so angry--none of the other students have to pass notes, they murmur freely to each other whenever they have something to say. Which is all the time.

AXIOTHEA: None of the other students have soprano voices.

LASTHENIA: None that we know of. Haven't you wondered about that new student? The one who sits in the back--never says a word-- Also has a beard.

AXIOTHEA: Stop now, Plato has come in.

LASTHENIA: See that's the problem with this disguise. Not only does it cut us off from the men, it cuts us off from each other too.

AXIOTHEA: But otherwise we couldn't be here, and we'd be even more cut off. Now *please!* If Plato sees us, he'll think we aren't paying attention, and I'd hate to offend him so!

LASTHENIA: Do you think he's going to continue with the concept of justice? I was thinking about that on my way here this morning. And I think the problem is that we associate justice with goodness. Look what happens if we *don't* do that--something can be just without necessarily being good.

AXIOTHEA: That's an interesting idea. So the person to whom the guns were entrusted gives them back when the owner, though no longer in his right mind, requests them--the action can indeed be just, but not good.

LASTHENIA: Yes--and it can be *just* to charge everyone the same amount (or to charge anything at all) for medical services, but not *good*.

AXIOTHEA: But that doesn't get us any closer to defining justice, to deciding what is and is not just.

LASTHENIA: Well to me, it's a lot like mathematics.

AXIOTHEA: Meaning you don't understand it?

LASTHENIA: Very funny. No, meaning it's a matter of equations, of strict equivalences.

AXIOTHEA: Go on.

LASTHENIA: Well that's all very fine with numerical relations, but it's impossible in human relations--unless we treat people like numbers. An example: for one child, taking away a toy is punishment, for another, the mere suggestion of it is enough.

AXIOTHEA: Because the children are different emotionally, the impact will be the same even the action needs to be different.

LASTHENIA: Exactly, because numbers just have quantity, but people have quality as well--emotional quality, physiological quality, situational quality.

AXIOTHEA: Hm. So are we saying justice has no place in human relations?

LASTHENIA: Good goddess, Aristotle's getting up to speak. If he rants and raves about women again like he did yesterday, I swear I won't be silent this time.

AXIOTHEA: No, Lasthenia, you mustn't! If you speak out, all will be lost!

LASTHENIA: If I *don't*, all will be lost. If he's allowed to continue, uncontested, he will soon persuade the others--you know how he can talk. And he's rich too.

AXIOTHEA: So?

LASTHENIA: Well, don't you see? Plato is getting old--unless he names a successor, the Academy will close, then Aristotle will open his own school. He knows Plato will never ask him to carry on the Academy, his ideas are too different. And as far as I know, he hasn't named anyone--has he sent any word to you about it?

AXIOTHEA: To me?

LASTHENIA: Well why not? You heard what Speusippus said he said about you, "Axiotheo alone has the mind bright enough to grasp my ideas."

AXIOTHEA: Yes but that doesn't mean he's going to name me his successor. Sometimes I think he knows I'm really Axiothea--and he knows as well as I that if the next director were a woman, the state would stop its funding. And unlike Aristotle, my father is not physician to the King--I have no private backing to keep a school going.

LASTHENIA: What about Samothea? She was head of the Hyperborean University in Cornwall.

AXIOTHEA: True enough--I don't know how she managed--I would think enrolment as well as funding would decrease--but she's a Briton, things must be different there. No, Plato would be wise to name Lycurgus or Demosthenes.

LASTHENIA: Those airheads? Maybe they speak well, but they say nothing.

AXIOTHEA: How would you know? You never listen--you're always too busy distracting me with these notes!

LASTHENIA: I listen when there's something worth listening to--and Aristotle is not worth listening to.

AXIOTHEA: Give him a chance.

LASTHENIA: A chance? Did you *hear* what he just said? Axio, I have to speak out!

AXIOTHEA: No, Lasthenia, be careful of winning a battle only to lose a war--the time isn't right!

LASTHENIA: The time is never right!

AXIOTHEA: That's not true. Wait until this mess with the Macedonians has passed. Everything's at loose ends now, our voice will get lost.

LASTHENIA: But when everything's tight, there's no room for our voice.

AXIOTHEA: No, listen, we have to wait until the men feel secure. If we rise now, we're just one more threat--their response will be irrational, flung out of fear. When things are settled, when they are sure of their own position, then they can listen to the arguments about ours.

LASTHENIA: No! They were 'secure' last century. And look what happened. Already Aspasia and Diotima are unacknowledged, forgotten. We hear only of Socrates, not of the women who taught him. And yet Diotima's social philosophy and her theories on nature have never been surpassed. And Elpinice and Aglaonice--what has happened to them, to their work? The surer the men get of their 'position', the surer they are to 'put us in ours'! Perictyone alone is remembered, her papers are still read--but only because she's Plato's mother; you watch, as soon as he's dead, she'll be buried too!

AXIOTHEA: No, that won't happen, I don't believe it!

LASTHENIA: It will! Axio, it has! Who is credited with the golden mean concept? Pythagoras, not Theano! She was brilliant! Mathematics, medicine, physics, psychology--named successor to his Institute at Croton--but is her name ever mentioned? And Theoclea, and Myla, Arignote, Damo-- Axio, it's gone on long enough! *We have* to do something, we *have* to speak out!

AXIOTHEA: *We?*

LASTHENIA: No--you're quite right--*you!*

AXIOTHEA: *Me?! You're crazy! Why me?*

LASTHENIA: Well no one knows me from a hole in the ground. But if *Axio*--if Axio stands up as a *woman*-- Why Plato, he'll *have* to acknowledge you-- you're his favourite--he'll have to *support* you! And so will all the other students--either that or retract their past judgements, admit error--and you know how unlikely that is.

AXIOTHEA: Oh Lasthenia, I don't know. You don't know what you're asking. As I said, I think Plato knows. And if I expose myself, I expose him. I'd be putting him in a very awkward position. You're right, he *is* old, and what with the way things are, he may lose the Academy altogether if I--no--I *owe* him, he's let me attend his classes, even though I *am* a woman.

LASTHENIA: *You'd* be putting *him* in an awkward position? Look at us! Plato has given you *less* than you deserve--that is no cause for gratitude! You owe him nothing!

AXIOTHEA: But Lasthenia, you're exaggerating about Aristotle. His system of formal logic, remember his seminar last week? You must admit that what he proposes is an excellent way of thinking.

LASTHENIA: Does he think *we're* capable of it?

AXIOTHEA: His three types of soul, vegetative, sensitive, rational--



LASTHENIA: Ask him which type women have.

AXIOTHEA: Happiness as the aim of all human action--

LASTHENIA: *Whose* happiness?

AXIOTHEA: Lasthenia, he's *not* that bad!

LASTHENIA: Axio *listen* to him! "For the female is, as it were, a mutilated male"--not that bad?? Axio, I beg you--think of Arete. She's eleven now. In a few years, she'll be ready to come to the Academy--she can't learn everything from her father. She's very bright, you know that. I gave her Perictyone's paper *On Wisdom* to read a fortnight ago--do you know, she understood it? and questioned very well! Do you want her to bind her breasts too, paste on a beard and learn to swagger--do you condemn her as well to silence in school?

AXIOTHEA: Alright. Alright. Maybe it *is* time. But Lasthenia, I can't stand up to Aristotle.

LASTHENIA: What do you mean you can't stand up to Aristotle! For a man interested in empirical data, he seems positively blind to the reality of women--just tell him the facts, tell him what we can do, what we are. And his logic--it's so weak, even *I* could make it collapse.

AXIOTHEA: But look at who's here--why they'll laugh--I can't speak. I'll squeak.

LASTHENIA: Axio, I've heard you speak. You're intelligent, you're articulate--you *can so* speak. Just pretend you're speaking to me Axio, as you do every evening--go, you can do it!

Notes:

There seems to be some controversy over the status of women in 4th Century Athens. French (p. 144), footnoting Chicago (p. 123), describes women on a par with slaves, a state of affairs which required women to disguise themselves as men in order to attend school. An item in Lefkowitz, "two of Plato's women disciples were said to have worn men's clothing" (Diog. Laert. 3.46), seems to support this, and many other fragments in Lefkowitz seem to me to reveal an attitude of misogyny and a reality of women as second class citizens. But Davis (p. 186-194) and Boulding (p. 258-265) say this view is inaccurate, and they describe classical Greece as a free state: women could and did hold property, have the right to unilateral divorce, contest and succeed in courts, carry on a business, and attend schools (undisguised).

I wrote "The Dialogue" to be in 359 B.C.--Plato would be around 68, Aristotle 25, Arete 11. Also, some kind of upheaval involving Macedonia was imminent at that time.

The opening discussion between Axiothea and Lasthenia concerning justice stems from *Book I* of Plato's *Republic* in which he posits the following situation: "Suppose that a friend when in his right mind has deposited arms with me and he asks for them when he is not in his right mind, ought I to give them back to him?"

Of interest - again after I finished the piece, I read (again in Carroll) that Axiothea had become a teacher of philosophy, and that "her reputation has suffered from the association of her name with that of Lasthenia" (p. 312) who, he goes on to suggest, became 'promiscuous' with the male students (including Speusippus), but 'nevertheless' "possessed some reputation as a philosopher" (p. 312).

Axiothea (4th Century B.C.) - a Philasian, student of Plato; Plato did indeed praise Axiothea as described (French p. 144, footnoting Chicago p. 123), but as indicated below, it's unclear whether or not he knew she was a woman (even if she was disguised, he might've known)

Lasthenia (4th Century B.C.) - a Mantinean from Arcadia, student of Plato

Aglaonice (5th Century B.C.) - astronomer, astrologer

Arete (370-340 B.C.) - head of a school in Cyrene with many distinguished students, a prolific writer (40 works attributed to her include pieces on philosophy, agriculture, and history), daughter and disciple of Aristippus of Cyrene

Arignote (6th-5th Century B.C.) - daughter of Theano and Pythagoras

Aristoclea a.k.a. Theoclea a.k.a. Themistoclea (6th Century B.C.) - head of priesthood at Delphi, taught Pythagoras, Pythagoras' sister

Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) - studied at Plato's Academy from 367 to its closing (Plato's death) in 347; in 334 he opened his own school, the Lyceum. The line ascribed to Aristotle in "The Dialogue" ("the female is, as it were, a mutilated male") is from his "De Generatione Animalium". I have since read "a woman is, as it were, an *infertile* man" (my emphasis)--assuming that to be a translation of the same line, I cannot judge Aristotle as harshly. However, his overall misogyny seems to survive various translations. The other ideas ascribed to him (formal logic, the three types of soul, happiness as the aim of all human action, the emphasis on empirical data) are indeed his.

Aspasia (470-410 B.C.) - taught Socrates rhetoric and philosophy

Damo (6th-5th Century B.C.) - daughter of Pythagoras

Demosthenes (4th Century B.C.) - student of Plato, orator

Diotima (5th Century B.C.) - taught Socrates social philosophy and philosophy of love

Elpinice (5th Century B.C.) - intellectual

Lycurgus (4th Century B.C.) - student of Plato, orator; I chose to have Axiothea suggest Lycurgus as Plato's successor only because I was sure he was one of Plato's students at the time, but my choice became ironic as I later read that Lycurgus "wanted to bring the women under his laws"--they resisted and he gave up (Lefkowitz); however, another item (in Lefkowitz) placed Lycurgus in the 7th Century B.C., so since there was probably more than one person by that name, the one quoted above is perhaps not Plato's student; and after all of that, I later read that Speusippus was Plato's successor (Carroll, p.311)

Myia (6th-5th Century B.C.) - daughter of Theano and Pythagoras

Perictyone (5th Century B.C.) - philosopher, writer (works include *On Wisdom* and *On the Harmony of Women*, which deals with the relationship between body and spirit, thought and action), mother or sister of Plato

Plato (427-347 B.C.) - directed a school called The Academy in Athens, Greece (opened in 387 B.C.); philosophy, physics, mathematics, and natural sciences were studied there

Pythagoras (582-500 B.C.) - philosopher, known for the 'golden mean' concept, directed a school in Croton (around 530 B.C.)

Samothea - a Briton, invented letters, astronomy, science, and was head of the Hyperborean University at Cornwall where Pythagoras is supposed to have studied

Socrates (470-399 B.C.) - Plato's predecessor, immortalized in Plato's *Dialogues*

Speusippus (4th Century B.C.) - student of Plato, and his successor

Theano (540-510 B.C.) - brilliant mathematician, and expert in early psychology, physics, and medicine, Pythagoras' successor as head of the Institute, supposed originator of the 'golden mean' concept, wife of Pythagoras

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