Plato and Aristotle took different positions on many important questions. One of these was the question of what rights and privileges the state should afford its female members. Plato argued for the equal treatment of women under the law. Aristotle argued against granting the same political rights to women as men on the grounds that women were morally inferior to men. Plato gave cogent arguments for his position; Aristotle found Plato's views absurd and argued persuasively for the opposite view. These arguments are presented and evaluated in the first two sections of this paper. In the final section, I argue that the differences in Plato's and Aristotle's views on the role of women in the state are a consequence of their different conceptions of the nature of the state.

I

Plato is a truly revolutionary thinker on the subject of women's rights. Women in fourth-century Athens led cloistered lives and had no political rights to speak of (full citizenship was restricted to Athenian property-owners, who were male adults), and few legal rights. Middle-class women, i.e., women whose husbands, fathers, and brothers were well-educated citizens enjoying a variety of political and legal rights, not only were denied these rights but also were poorly educated and were confined to the homes of their fathers and husbands. In the Republic, through his spokesman Socrates, Plato argues that in the ideal state these practices should be abandoned and that women should have the same political rights as men and receive the same education as men. Most importantly, women would be eligible to become guardians, i.e., rulers of the state.

The state envisioned by Plato has a tri-partite political structure; there is a common or artisan class which produces the goods needed by the whole society. This class, which is the most populous, has no share in governing the
city. There is a soldier or auxiliary class which protects the city and administers the programs of the ruling class. Some of its members become guardians. Since this class is closely associated with the rulers, Socrates often uses the term ‘guardians’ to refer to its members as well.

The guardian class, properly speaking, is made up of mature persons who have demonstrated excellence in the activities that are deemed most important in the state. These include martial arts, statesmanship, and philosophy. If the best citizens rule the state, it is assured of being the best possible state.

In Book 5, Socrates defends the proposal that women should be eligible to serve as guardians. Although this argument is often described as an argument for the equality of women, this description is misleading. Properly speaking, it is an argument for the equal treatment of women. The first argument Socrates makes for women guardians uses the analogy that was drawn earlier in the discussion between watchdogs and the guardians of the state:

Do we think that the wives of our guardian watchdogs should join in whatever guardian duties the men fulfill, join them in the hunt, and do everything else in common, or should we keep the women at home as unable to do so because they must bear and rear their young and leave to the men the labour and the whole care of the flock? (Republic 451d)

Socrates is taking advantage of the fact that no one would advocate the cloistering of female watchdogs because they must bear the young. Were Socrates’ listeners to explore the analogy further, they would find that the ways in which the state benefits from the equal treatment of women parallel those in which the owner benefits from using dogs of both sexes as watchdogs. In the first place, citizens are a resource that is partially wasted if females capable of assuming leadership positions are restricted to household positions. In the second place, if the potential for excellence of mind, character, and body is innate, as Plato believes, it is in the state’s interest that individuals possessing these characteristics pair off and produce offspring. (In the Platonic state, child-bearing is under strict state control. There are no traditional marriages or nuclear families among the members of the ruling classes. The rulers determine who may have intercourse with a member of the opposite sex and how often. If women are not tested by participation in political life, there will be no criteria for determining which women should be allowed to bear children.)

Arguments from analogy are structurally weak in that one can always challenge the appropriateness of the analogy. Not surprisingly, Socrates is not content to rest his case on such an argument. His next argument for women guardians takes the form of a counter-argument to an argument against his proposal, which he constructs for a hypothetical opponent. This opponent points out that Socrates and his friends have used the general principle, that each person in the state should perform the task(s) for which he or she is best suited by nature, to arrive at the political structure of the ideal
state. He then argues that this principle would prescribe different tasks to men and women. This argument, if sound, would be particularly telling against Socrates, since it would show that his position on women is inconsistent with one of his basic principles.

Fortunately, Socrates is able to show that the conflict is not genuine. He points out that the correct application of this principle depends upon making a distinction between differences which are relevant to the task in question and those which are not.

We might therefore just as well, it seems, ask ourselves whether the nature of bald men and long-haired men is the same and not opposite and then, agreeing that they are opposite, if we allow bald men to be cobblers, not allow long-haired men to be, or again if long-haired men are cobblers, not allow the others to be. — That would indeed be ridiculous. (Republic 454c)

If men and women “differ in this particular only that the female bears children while the male begets them,” then there is no reason to apply the different natures/different pursuits principle in a way which excludes either sex from the guardianship, for this difference is irrelevant to the ability to govern the state. Socrates shifts the burden of proof to his opponent: if there are relevant differences between men and women, he (the opponent) should show that these exist and what they are.

Socrates reinforces his position by going on to show that (1) the general claim that women are inferior to men in all pursuits is untenable (such a claim, if true, could be used as the basis for excluding them from the guardian class); and (2) females are like males in the relevant respects. In answer to the first claim, Socrates cites as counter-examples those activities such as weaving, which are generally believed to be activities in which females excel over males, since it cannot be the case that women are inferior to men in all pursuits if they excel in any pursuit.

Next, Socrates gets his listeners to agree that women, like men, differ among themselves with respect to the character traits that are relevant to various pursuits. Some women, for example, are naturally suited to be physicians; others, artists. Since there are differences in talents among women as among men, women like men should follow different pursuits according to their abilities. Some women are athletic, high-spirited, and lovers of wisdom by nature; these women, like the men who possess these characteristics, should rule the city.

At this point, we should note a certain ambiguity in Socrates’ argument. Although he rejects the very broad claim that women are inferior to men in all pursuits, he appears to accept the weaker claim that women are in general inferior to men. This makes it possible to give two interpretations of the argument that some women possess the characteristics that are relevant to
ruling and hence should be guardians. On one interpretation, a woman will be selected as a guardian if she is one of the best persons in the state; on the other, if she is one of the best women.

Men and women might be appointed guardians solely on the basis of talent and character. The point of the above argument would be to show that sex should not be considered in the appointment of guardians. The guardian class would be made up of the best persons possible, irrespective of their sex. This interpretation is supported by Socrates’ statement that “there is therefore no pursuit connected with city management which belongs to a woman because she is a woman, or to a man because he is a man . . .” (Republic 455d).

Socrates’ acceptance of the claim that women are generally inferior, however, raises the possibility that the members of each sex are to be compared only to each other in determining which individuals are best suited to be guardians. In this case, although the guardian class would be made up of the best men and the best women, it might not be made up of the best persons, if one sex was indeed superior to the other. This interpretation gains some support from Socrates’ frequent references to the female guardians as the wives of the guardians. Since there are no permanent marriages in the ideal state, the description seems quite odd. Socrates may use this expression to suggest that women are included in the guardian class as the best women in the state.

The watchdog analogy tends to support this interpretation. One of the advantages of assigning females the same tasks in the pack as males is its usefulness for selective breeding. Having shown that the different natures/different pursuits principle could not be used to exclude women from the guardian class, Socrates might be arguing from the principle that the state should maintain quality in future generations for the inclusion of women in the ruling classes. If so, he does not make this step explicit, but he does vacillate between speaking of the guardian class as made up of the best persons possible and made up of the best men and women.

Having shown that it is in the state’s interest to allow women to be guardians, Socrates easily establishes that they should receive the same training as men. “With a view to having women guardians, we should not have one kind of education to fashion the men and another for the women especially as they have the same nature to begin with” (Republic 456cd). If men and women have the same pursuits, they should have the same education. Returning to the topic of the scorn that he had earlier suggested would attend the sight of naked women exercising in public, Socrates now concludes that such sights will not be found ridiculous by sensible people, for “what is beneficial is beautiful.”

Despite some ambiguity in his argument for women guardians, in the Republic Plato seems to be a strong proponent of equal opportunity for women, a radical departure from the views of his contemporaries.
In later life, when he was less convinced of the social usefulness of constructing models of the perfect state and more concerned with formulating political programs which existing states could enact, Plato wrote the *Laws.* Here his program for women, like many of his more radical proposals in the *Republic,* is modified. The Athenian, who is Plato's spokesman in this work, advocates giving girls the same education as boys, but he seems to envision a society in which women have different activities from men. They apparently manage private households. (In the ideal state, members of the ruling classes do not have private households, hence the position of household manager does not exist.) During their child-bearing years, they seem to take little part in civic life and none in military life. Finally, women do not have the same legal rights as men: for example, women inherit family property only if they have no brothers, and married women are unable to initiate legal action.

In the *Laws,* the rationale for giving females the same training as males and for extending social institutions (like the public table) to women is explicitly nonfeminist. Since females are morally inferior to males, the Athenian argues, it is all the more important that their characters be shaped by a good education and by solid social institutions. In addition, the Athenian's greater pessimism about eradicating sexual lusts among the citizens leads him to endorse a program of sexual segregation beginning at age six and moral training to instill a sense of purity and modesty in female children.

In short, the *Republic*’s plea for equal opportunity for women becomes in the *Laws* a program of equal education. Although this represents a considerable loss in rights and privileges for the female population, were the Athenian’s educational program adopted, it would have constituted a considerable gain for women in fourth-century Athens.

Unlike Plato, Aristotle does not discuss at length the role of women in the state, but he does remark on this subject in various places, notably in the *Politics.* From these remarks the following picture emerges: women are morally inferior creatures who should live under the control of their fathers and husbands. Women definitely should not have any role in governing the well-run state.

The only Platonic thesis concerning women that Aristotle finds worthy of a counter-argument is the *Republic*’s community of wives and children. This institution, Aristotle argues, would dilute family ties to the point of extinction, instead of broadening them to include the whole society as Plato had argued, and the weakening of family ties would lead to increased lawlessness and chaos in the state. His rejoinder to Plato’s suggestion that women be freed from household responsibilities so that they may take an
active part in running the state is to insist that someone must take care of the
households.21

In the final chapter of Politics I, Aristotle discusses the virtues appropriate
to different sorts of people. He asks whether women and slaves are capable
of virtue and if so, whether they are capable of the same sort of virtue as free
men. He decides that they are not, or more precisely, that slaves are incapable
of virtue because they are incapable of deliberation and that women are
capable only of an inferior sort of virtue because their deliberations are
"without authority." This argument rests upon the connection between
virtue and deliberation which is established in the Ethics.22 Choosing the
act that one performs as a result of deliberation is a necessary condition for
acting virtuously, Aristotle argues. One can only deliberate about courses of
action that are in one's power to perform should one choose to do so. Since
the deliberative faculty of a woman is without authority, she is less capable
deliberation. Consequently, she is less capable of virtue than a man, and
should be ruled by her husband. Slaves are even worse off, for they have no
deliberative faculty and hence are completely incapable of human
ture.23

Since females differ from males in their capacity for virtue, it is right,
Aristotle asserts, contra Socrates, to define virtues differently for different
sexes. For example, courage in a man involves commanding, in a woman
obeying: "silence is a woman's glory but not equally a man's" (Politics
1060a24-30).

There are two senses in which women and slaves might be said to be less
able to deliberate than free men. The inability might be a result of their social
situation, or of some natural deficiency. On the first interpretation, the
claim is simply that, given certain political and social institutions, as, for
example, those of fourth-century Athens, women and slaves have less
freedom to determine their own actions and hence are less capable of virtue.
The deliberations of a woman are without authority, because the final
authority as to whether a course of action that she decides upon may be
performed is not the woman but her husband or father. Similarly, slaves are
incapable of deliberation because their actions are performed in compliance
with the desires of their owners. On this interpretation, anyone who found
himself in a slave's or a woman's situation would be similarly deficient in
virtue. Interpreted in this way, Aristotle's conclusion that women and slaves
are morally defective has some plausibility.24 So interpreted, however, it
cannot be used, even if true, to justify the judgment that women and slaves
should not have the same rights and privileges as free men in the ideal state.

On the second interpretation, the claim is that, given certain innate
characteristics, neither women nor slaves are fully capable of deliberation
and virtue, whatever their social and political situation. Aristotle must show
that this claim is true, because he advocates the adoption of social and
political institutions that impose restrictions on the freedom of members of
these groups. In the fifth chapter of *Politics I*, he does present an argument which purports to show that there are "natural masters and natural slaves." Here he draws an analogy between the relationship of the soul to the body and the relationship of master to slave: just as the soul should rule the body, so the master should rule the slave. When the soul rules the body, the body benefits as well as the soul; similarly, when the master rules the slave, the slave benefits as well as the master. This argument is not very persuasive. The analogy is a weak one; the relationship between soul and body would seem to be incomparable to the relationship between two or more human beings. Unfortunately for Aristotle's position, this is the only argument he offers to establish the natural inferiority of slaves. Aristotle does not offer a separate argument to show that women are inherently inferior to men. At one point in the argument for the subjugation of slaves, he includes women as another class that benefits from the rule of men. Later, in discussing the virtues appropriate to women, he seems to take the fact that the virtues, as popularly conceived, differ with respect to sex as evidence for the moral inferiority of women. Since the popular conception of virtue would be relative to the existing political and social institutions, Aristotle cannot legitimately cite it as evidence for the claim that women are inherently defective in their capacity for virtue.

In short, even if we accept Aristotle's analysis of virtue and agree that if social and political institutions restrict the freedom of groups within a state, the members of these groups will be less capable of virtuous action, we need not accept his claim that the moral inferiority of these persons under existing restrictive institutions warrants the perpetuation of political institutions that restrict their freedom.

A similar difficulty arises when Aristotle sets out the qualifications for citizenship in the best state. Here he makes no explicit mention of women—presumably he feels that he has eliminated the possibility that they would be citizens in his arguments against Plato. He does consider whether laborers, husbandmen, and mechanics should be allowed to be citizens. He excludes all three classes because the lives of such persons are not conducive to virtue. (Virtue requires both leisure and some prosperity, in Aristotle's view.) Aristotle makes no attempt to show that these persons are innately inferior. Moreover, they perform tasks that are necessary to the state's existence. What justification does Aristotle have for denying these persons the rights of citizenship? His principle of justice—equality for equals and inequality for unequals—might be cited in favor of this arrangement. If it were, then the 'equality' mentioned in the principle would simply be de facto equality, which, since it is determined, at least in part, by existing social institutions, would be compatible with gross inequities.

Aristotle ignores the question of citizenship for women. If pressed, he might give the following argument: the best political arrangement is one in
which only the persons most able to rule virtuously and be ruled are citizens. Women are morally inferior to men. Hence, women should not be citizens. Since men and women in Aristotle's state have different pursuits and women take no part in the crucial business of running the state, there is no reason to give the sexes the same education. Not surprisingly, when Aristotle turns his attention to education in the last book of the Politics, he is concerned with the education parents should provide for their sons. To sum up, Aristotle's "best state" had little to offer the fourth-century Athenian woman, whose lot would not have been significantly improved had Aristotle's proposals been implemented. This contrasts sharply with the gains she would have made if Plato's proposals had been realized.

III

The differences in the roles that Plato and Aristotle would assign women in the state cannot be accounted for by differences in their conceptions of women. Both believe that women are inferior. The difference can be traced to their different conceptions of the state. Plato's model for the state is that of an organism. Questions about what is good for individual members are answered with reference to the good of the whole. As Socrates puts it, "In establishing our city, we are not aiming to make any one group outstandingly happy, but to make the whole city so, as far as possible" (Republic 420b). Aristotle's model is that of a collection of individuals. Questions about what is good for the whole state are reducible to questions about what is good for its members as individuals. "The whole [state] cannot be happy unless most, or all, or some of its parts enjoy happiness" (Politics 1264b17).

In the Platonic state, the assignment of roles in the state according to the natures of its members ensures that the state is virtuous and happy. The happiness and virtue of the state guarantees the virtue of the individual. If it is in the state's best interests to utilize the talents of all its members, regardless of sex, it is, by definition, in the best interests of all the members of the state to do so.

Since Aristotle conceives his state as an aggregate of individuals, the relevant question here is not whether the state stands to benefit from ending sexual discrimination but whether its individual members stand to benefit. What is in the best interest of a given individual will be that which is conducive to virtue in his or her case. Many virtues require the arena of public life for their development, e.g., (male) courage is promoted on the battlefield. Women, however, have nothing to gain from political participation, because the virtues appropriate to their sex are not enhanced by such activities. Moreover, since to live virtuously is to be happy, according to Aristotle, and since men have a greater capacity for virtue, they have a greater capacity for happiness. Having made the paramount good the happiness of individuals in the state and having conceived some individuals as more capable of
happiness than others, Aristotle has set up a situation in which it makes sense to deny women the rights of citizenship.37

Since Plato conceives the state as an organism whose good transcends the individual goods of its members, he constructs his ideal state from the perspective of the state as a whole and not from the perspective of an individual within the state. Consequently, he transcends his misogynist prejudices.38 Aristotle, starting from the conception of the state as an aggregate of individuals, constructs his state from the perspective of an individual member of the state. Not surprisingly, the perspective he adopts is that of a free man, and the ideal state that he conceives is one which would secure the happiness of persons like himself.

NOTES

1. Plato does not argue for the equality of women. In the middle of the argument for equal treatment of women in the Republic, Socrates asks, “Do you know of any occupation practiced by mankind in which the male sex is not superior to the female in all these respects [which distinguish the naturally gifted]?” His interlocutor replies, “What you say is true, namely that one sex is much superior to the other in almost everything, yet many women are better than many men in many things, but on the whole it is as you say” (Republic 454d). According to the creation myth of the Timaeus, two kinds of human natures were created, male and female, and the latter were inferior (42a, 90e). Cf. Laws 781b. Nor is Plato, like many other fourth-century authors, above making misogynist remarks (Republic 395de, 549c-e, 605e; Laws 731d; Alcibiades I 121; Phaedo 117d).

2. There is evidence that Plato was not alone in raising the question of the political subjugation of women. It apparently had received enough discussion to motivate the conservative Aristophanes to write The Parliament of Women, which is a comedy ridiculing this view. Nonetheless, from the perspective of the prevalent views of the day, Plato’s proposals in the Republic are revolutionary. Moreover, Aristotle asserts that “no one else [besides Plato] has introduced such novelties as the community of wives and children and the public table for women” (Politics 1266a35).

3. Although a woman was called a citizen if her father was a citizen, she was not eligible to hold political or judicial offices. This contrasts sharply with the position of the male citizen, who stood a good chance of serving on the ruling Council. Although a father was protected by law from a son-in-law who spent his daughter’s dowry and then abandoned her, there is good reason to believe that Athenian women were not allowed to own property in their own right. See G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, “Some Observations on the Property Rights of Athenian Women,” Classical Review (1970): 273-278. For a general discussion of the social and political situation of Greek women, see Marylin B. Arthur, “Early Greece: The Origins of the Western Attitude Toward Women,” Arethusa 6 (1973): 7-58. W. K. Lacey describes the seclusion and education of Athenian women in The Family in Classical Greece (Cornell University Press, 1968), chapter seven.

4. In the second book, Socrates proposes a city made up of two classes, the producers (farmers, artisans, traders, merchants, etc.) and the guardians (soldiers and rulers) (Republic 372e-376c). In the third book, he divides the guardian class into two classes, the guardians and the auxiliaries (ibid. 413c-415c).
5. Socrates does not purport to show that women are men's equals but rather that they should not be excluded from public life.

6. Unless otherwise noted, G. M. A. Grube's translation of the Republic will be used (Plato's Republic, tr. G. M. A. Grube, Hackett Publishing Co., 1974).

7. Socrates does not develop the analogy at 451, but the development suggested here fits the subsequent discussion of sexual unions among the guardians. Socrates argues from the fact that Glaucus breeds his hunting dogs and pedigreed birds with care, to the importance of the state's directing the unions of the guardians (459a-e). Cf. Republic 424b.

8. Ibid. 454c-456a.

9. As Grube notes, this use of 'wife' 'obscures the fact that wives and husbands are treated on a footing of perfect equality," p. 112, n. 2.

10. The importance that Plato attaches to the latter principle is evident in Socrates' making it "the first and most important command of the god to the rulers" of the state (Republic 415b).

11. Ibid. 456e.

12. The opening pages of the Timaeus describe the chief magistrates in the ideal city as male and female (18de). If the Timaeus is a late work, as is widely believed, this would show that Plato believed throughout his life that the state should provide equal opportunity for women but lost faith in any existing state's doing so.

13. He gives up the institution of community marriages and advocates monogamous unions of males and females for those morally inferior beings who are unable completely to forego sexual relations (Laws 839a-841e).

14. This is suggested by the limitations put on the activities of women during their child-bearing years (ibid. 785b).

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid. 923de, 937a. The Athenian also makes marriage mandatory for an heiress; according to Greek law an heiress had to marry a relative of her father's; so too in the Laws (923de).

17. Ibid. 780e-781d.

18. Ibid. 794c, 802e, 835de.

19. In the Politics, Aristotle lists a number of ills he believes befell the Spartan state because it granted women more rights, including the right to own property, than Athenian women possessed (1269b13-1270a14).

20. Politics 1261a10-1246a40.

21. Ibid. 1264b5.

22. Nicomachean Ethics 1111b4-1113b14.

23. Politics 1260a12.

24. One might reject the claim that slaves and women are less able to deliberate than men even when their freedom is circumscribed, for one could argue that the ability to deliberate is a rational capacity which human beings have by nature, whether or not they are free to act on their deliberations. Cf. Politics 1259b27.


26. Aristotle recommends that these classes be made up of inferior and spiritless persons to avoid revolution in the state, which suggests they are not always made up of inferior persons (ibid. 1330a25-32). Cf. ibid. 1260b1-3.

27. Ibid. 1332b27.
28. When he speaks of women citizens, he is clearly using 'citizen' in the broad sense, which includes children as well, and means to refer to the daughters of 'citizens' in the technical sense.

29. Politics 1284a1-2.

30. Ibid. 1338a31; 1339a5-33. In describing the education of the guardians in the Republic, Socrates lapses into talk about boys and youths, but at the end of this discussion, he reminds his listeners that everything he has said about boys applies to girls as well (540c).

31. Wender attributes these differences to a difference in sexual preferences. Plato was homosexual and Aristotle heterosexual. Although I do not think we need look beyond their political theories to discover why Plato and Aristotle assign women different roles in society, if we should want a psychological explanation, Wender’s account is both plausible and provocative. Dorothea Wender, “Plato: Misogynist, Paedophile, and Feminist,” Arethusa 6 (1973): 75-90.

32. Republic 420c-421c, 423cd.

33. More precisely, wisdom is found in the state and in the individual rulers; courage is found in the state and in the auxiliaries; moderation and justice, in the state and in the members of all three classes (Republic 427e-434a).

34. Nicomachean Ethics 1115a33-35.

35. For example, feminine courage is shown in obeying (ibid. 1260a24).

36. Although Aristotle does not say that women have a reduced capacity for happiness, this follows from his identification of happiness with living virtuously. For this reason, Aristotle denies that boys are capable of happiness (ibid. 1100a1-3) and also denies that slaves are (ibid. 1177a3).

37. As argued above, Aristotle does not make a convincing case for the claim that women are morally inferior, but given this premise, his position is coherent.

38. Plato also refuses to design a state which maximizes the happiness of philosophers, who, because they are the wisest people in the state, will be forced to rule despite their desire not to rule (Republic 519d-521c).