

ISN'T REASON GENDER NEUTRAL?

Paul Gibbs

Azerbaijan University, Baku, Azerbaijan

Abstract. Claims that reason knows no gender are, I will argue, largely a historical and males elf-deception, hiding an attitude biased in favour of men, through social conventions and power, behind a premise of gender neutrality to rationality. Confronting the deception does not necessarily require us to adopt 'gender relativism' about rationality, but this does help our contemporary understanding of identity and inequality.

The obstacles to a female philosophical cultivation of reason to a large extent spring from the fact that our ideals of reason have historically incorporated an exclusion of the feminine and that femininity itself has been partly constituted through such processes of exclusion. What emerges from a historical analysis of maleness of reason, however, helps to illuminate some of the perplexity of economic gender inequalities. This short paper will seek a conversation on this topic.

Keywords: gender, historical analysis, gender neutrality, philosophical cultivation.

GENDER BƏRABƏRLİYİ SƏBƏB KİMİ

Paul Gibbs

Azərbaycan Universiteti, Bakı, Azərbaycan

Xülasə. Məqalədə insan şüurunun onun ginsindən asılılığı haqqında hökmün əlsində tarixi bir yalan olması məsələləri müzakirə olunur. Bu yalan özündə rasionallığa münasibətdə gender neytrallığının arxasında sosial şərtlilik və güc yolu ilə kişilərin lehinə qərəzli bir münasibət gizlədir. Yalanla mübarizə mütləq rasionallıqla əlaqədar olaraq "gender relativizmini" qəbul etməyimizi tələb etməsə də, müasir şəxsiyyət və bərabərsizlik həqiqətlərini anlamağımıza kömək edir.

Qadın fəlsəfi şüurunun inkişafı yolunda əngəllər, əsasən bizim şüur ideallarımızın tarixən qadının kənarında tutulmasını özündə ehtiva etməsindən və mahiyyətcə, qadınlığın özünün elə bu cür təcrid prosesləri nəticəsində qismən formalaşmasından irəli gəlir. Bununla birlikdə, "kişi" anlayışının tarixi təhlilindən doğan nəticələr iqtisadi gender bərabərsizliyinin bəzi qaranlmaq məqamlarına aydınlıq gətirməyə kömək edir. Məqalədə bu mövzuda bəzi suallar təhlil edilmişdir.

Açar sözlər: gender, tarixi təhlil, gender neytrallığı, fəlsəfi təlim.

ГЕНДЕРНАЯ РАВЕНСТВО КАК ПРИЧИНА

Пауль Гиббс

Университет Азербайджан, Баку, Азербайджан

Резюме. Здесь мы обсуждаем утверждения о том, что разум не знает пола, в значительной степени являются историческим обманом, скрывающим отношение, пристрастное в пользу мужчин через социальные условности и власть, за предпосылкой гендерного нейтралитета по отношению к рациональности. Противодействие обману не обязательно требует от нас принятия «гендерного релятивизма» в отношении рациональности, но это помогает нашему современному пониманию идентичности и неравенства.

Препятствия на пути женского философского развития разума в значительной степени проистекают из того факта, что наши идеалы разума исторически включали в себя исключение женского рода и что сама женственность частично была сформирована в результате таких процессов исключения. Однако то, что вытекает из исторического анализа «мужественности» разума, помогает пролить свет на некоторые недоумения экономического гендерного неравенства. Эта короткая статья будет анализировать некоторые вопросы на эту тему.

Ключевые слова: пол, исторический анализ, гендерная нейтральность, философское воспитание.

In 2015, the McKinsey Global Institute (MGI) showed that narrowing the gender gap in the global labour market would not only be equitable in the broadest sense, but would also double women's contribution to global GDP growth between 2014 and 2025. A best-in-region scenario, in which all countries match the improvement rate of the fastest-improving country in their region, could add as much as USD 12 trillion, or 11% to global 2025 GDP, and USD 2.1 trillion to Western Europe's GDP in 2025. Why? There must be many reasons but I proposed here that philosophical prejudice in terms of the hegemony of rationality and its attribution to male might be pone reason.

Rational Knowledge

Rational knowledge is central to the definitions of humanity and of human dominance over animals and, based on that premise, in the human race it is those who are skilled at rationality who become superior to those who are not. The effect is to subordinate and disempowered women. The thrust of Helen Longino's (2005) argument is that it is the rhetoric of reason – the ways in which reason is bandied about as a qualification – is bestowed differentially on various types of person [6]. This makes an important point that acts as the scaffold of this paper.

Are the rational?

What are the characteristics of those who tend to be more rational than others? From the early philosophers of Greece, and perhaps before, those who were so endowed were male. To Greek men were ascribed the emerging power of rationality that transcended, transformed and controlled natural forces, whereas females have been associated with that which rational knowledge transcends, dominates or simply leaves behind. This distinction can be traced to the Platonic notion of the form–matter bipolar, where by maleness is aligned with the active, determinate concept of form and the female with indeterminate matter. At the root of this distinction is the difference between theory and practice, of abstraction and labour, which to a great extent has provided the paradigm of the hierarchy of importance of certain forms of knowledge and the power attributed to them.

Contemplation by the rational mind of something inherently freed from matter - Platonic forms – *episteme* – is somehow seen as men as more significant, valuable and of greater value than that which is of the body and of skills and crafts – *techne*. This is a powerful metaphysics and at heme that recurs throughout the subsequent history of Western thought in ways that both exploit and reinforce the long-standing association between maleness and form, and femaleness and matter. The argument is elaborated in the Platonicidea of the soul, in which the emerging forces of being endure a struggle between the

rational and the non-rational parts, the former being male and passions being female. The ultimate subordination of passion by rationality has justified man's domination of women.

After its medieval use by the likes of St Augustine, Aquinas and Avicenna to justify, *apriori*, the existence of God, rationality in the sixteenth century became central to the beginning of what has become known in the West as the Enlightenment (an interesting term, in our context). Bacon might have shocked those medieval philosophers by removing the distinction between form and matter. Perhaps this could have offered an alternative to the male dominance of the concept of rationality and the power it enabled, but Bacon's resolution actually compounded the difficulty by suggesting a new metaphor, in the form of the purpose of rationality of science, embodied in the male, being to seek control over Nature, embodied in the female. Bacon then argued that knowable nature is revealed through science, and that the rationality of scientific method is the exercise of male domination over female nature. This arrogance is disparaging of both Nature and women, and might be viewed problematically for the universality of scientific approach.

A less blunt version of this superiority argument was developed by Hume (often considered to be a feminist philosopher), who assumed that the soul is made up of both passive and active passions. The passive are associated with the rational, and are dominant in males, whereas the active are female attributes that need to be controlled by the former, and are dominant in females. This is still unacceptable, I suggest, but clearly points to an improvement on the contemporary view point: Longino (2005) shares with us the note written by Hume's contemporary, Rousseau, in *Letter to M. D'Alembert*, commenting that the exclusivity of the men's clubs in Geneva is due to them being 'exempt from having to lower their ideas to the range of women'.

Moving into the twentieth century, first with de Beauvoir's ambiguities in the one/others structure of genders and then the emergence of feminist criticism of the male appropriation of rationality, led by Haraway (1988), Braidotti (1994), Alcoff (1995), Longino (2005) and Phelan (2017). With their help, today we have arrived a place where we can affirm woman's equal passion for rational traits and their right of access to public places that are politically important; yet this apparent equality does not penetrate to the heart of the conceptual complexities of gender difference. What we need to do now is to avoid downgrading the traits traditionally associated with femininity and thus excluded from rationality. Being more caring, more compassionate or more altruistic should not only complement the masculine core notion of rationality or endorse the assumption that this is the only form of human excellence that deserves to be taken seriously; they should not be seen as compensatory female gender traits that, evidently, serve only to enhance the superiority of another.

Unless the structural features of our concept of gender are understood, any emphasis on supposedly distinctive styles of thought or morality is liable to be caught up in a deeper, older structure of male norms and female complementation. In large part, what the

suppression of womanhood is about is the affirmation of the strength of female differences to make good ‘the defects in’ male consciousness, providing it with a necessary feminine complement. Put simply, if women dare to assume qualities of rationality and objectivity, and if these are considered the right way of knowing, it is for women to assume masculine qualities, hence to become men. In so doing, women are left unknowing their own oppression, because those who have the power to shape our understandings are making their understanding that of others.

Far from transcending gender difference, past ideals of reason have helped to constitute it. The ideas of maleness have developed under the guise of supposedly neutral ideals of reason, to the disadvantage of women and men alike.

So, thinking again through a feminist lens?

It can be argued, as Marcia Homiak does, that feminists have good reason to accept Aristotle's ideal of rationality and the rational life. Her argument rests on the analysis that what is considered appropriate for a good, flourishing life is an interweaving of both rationality and compassion. Albeit attributed only to freemen in the version promoted by Aristotle, in fact this is a model of rationality of humanity for all genders. Her analysis does not accept the repugnant view that Aristotle holds on women themselves, and points to a position on a rational life that might be acceptable to feminists. She points out that the Aristotelian rational ideal, although excluding persons associated with the body and bodily functions rather than with contemplative activities, does not exclude emotions. Indeed, she argues that caring relationships ought to be in the context of an Aristotelian rational life and that being caring and compassionate should be expressed through a life lived according to the rational ideal, of the *phrónimos*— those who practise wise judgement and action.

This argument allows us to marshal forces as diverse as Heidegger (especially his notion of capitalistic busyness) and Habermas, Foucault, Arendt and MacIntyre, behind the idea that an overemphasis on scientific knowledge in the fields of politics and ethics impoverishes *praxis* (a consequence of the Enlightenment). In addition, the marginalisation of *phronēsis* remains a problem to this day across various disciplines in the social sciences, the natural sciences and economics. This is, of course, a sinister problem because (as Foucault so definitively argued) the privileging of certain forms of knowledge, so often masquerading as disinterested and scientific forms of knowledge, consolidates power among those who possess such knowledge. Feminist epistemologists have been particularly interested in the epistemic community, central to which is the significance of careful attention to the social and institutional structures that distribute the authority to make and enforce claims to know. What our analysis has shown is that what Phelan (2017) terms ‘epistemic authority’ has been denied to women and granted to men. This is a serious problem for us all. It is not just a philosophical problem but one that has everyday implications for claims of capability,

potentiality and practice in employment and economic values. For example, the idea that work somehow liberates women from the subrogation of Earth Mother is manifestly untrue. Moreover, as Phelan also suggests, the superiority of the gender difference is made explicit in inequality in multiple things, not least pay.

Where now?

Where does this leave us? First, we might ponder reason as authoritative, rather than authoritarian. This changes power, in some Foucaultian sense, from being political to being discursive. This is not to deny the ontological wrong of the historical legacy of superiority of men over women, based on a false reading of rationality and its manifestation in ways of being, but it does offer a way forward and prevents the incommensurability of feminism and a way of thinking.

Moreover, all radical philosophy is the result of the same basic epistemological wrong turn in the history of philosophy: the increasing tendency to privilege scientific knowledge (*poiesis*) and its associated skills (*technē*) over practical knowledge (*phronēsis*) is surely an example of this. And, through these priorities and their distinct methodology, it nonetheless pursues the same *praxis* that, put colloquially, speaks truth to power. This legacy is all too prevalent in the labour market, where the justification of gender stereotypes based on epistemic ideas of personal qualities excludes the reality of being and of knowledge and how this misappropriation of rationality serves to enhance males over females.

Yet this misappropriation does not make what is appropriate any less valuable. A full and better understanding of *phronēsis* – the way of being shown by the *phrónimos* – is complex, and transcends the notions of emotion-free decision-making. We can look to Aristotle and, indeed, to Hume to find examples of writers whose contributions can help to reassert the notion of humanity in our understanding of rationality and gender and, in doing so, to overcome the concerns over perpetuating gender difference outlined by Genevieve Lloyd (1995). If we can show that ideas of inequality fail adequately to describe how prejudice has arisen, then the structures for this inequality can be deconstructed and, in acting on the evidence of agency, fairness may be used more compellingly. Like Aristotle's notion of gnosis, rationality needs to be an expansive idea about reason that is open, not exhausted by a set of rules, accommodating diversity and incorporating dialogue and criticism. However, this may be a struggle.

I close on a note of realism. In contemporary times, manifestations of the subrogation of the feminine through authoritarian notions of rationality can be seen in an interesting research study by Stevens and Whelan (2019). This shows that men and women differ in their propensity to negotiate and in the outcomes achieved from their negotiation, and that this can have an important potential influence on the male–female wage differential. The authors conjecture that this lower propensity to reward distinctive feminine attributes is both

problematic in terms of the analysis and agency and potentially ‘driven by factors such as discrimination by employers’ [9] – and the participants in the study were academics.

References

1. Alcoff L. (1995). Is the feminist critique of reason rational? *Philosophical Topics*, 23, 2, 1–26.
2. Braidotti R.A. (1994). *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press.
3. Beauvoir, Simone de (2010) *The Second Sex*. Trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. New York: Knopf.
4. Haraway D. (1988) Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist Studies*, 14, 3, 575–599.
5. Lloyd G. (1995). *The Man of Reason: ‘Male’ and ‘Female’ in Western Philosophy*, London, Routledge.
6. Longino H. (2005). Circles of reason: Some feminist reflections on reason and rationality. *Episteme*, 2, 1, 79–88.
7. McKinsey Global Institute (2016) *Reinventing the workplace to unlock the potential of gender diversity*
<https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/mckinsey/featured%20insights/women%20matter/reinventing%20the%20workplace%20for%20greater%20gender%20diversity/women-matter-2016-reinventing-the-workplace-to-unlock-the-potential-of-gender-diversity.ashx>, (accessed 5.11.2019)
8. Phelan K. (2017). Questions of feminist epistemology. *Social Epistemology*, 31, 6, 514–529.
9. Stevens K., Whelan S. (2019). Negotiating the gender wage gap. *Industrial Relations: A Journal of Economy and Society*, 58, 2, 141–188.