

Retrieving the Power of the Question: Aristotle's Inquiries Concerning Sexual Difference

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Abstract

Although sexual difference manifests in innumerable problems that compel our immediate attention – in the multiplicity of discourses that surround, infuse, and delimit it; in the repeated, sometimes compulsive performances that give rise to its various forms and deformations; in the institutionalizations that seek to codify and regulate its possible meanings and relevance; in the increasingly many domains where it serves as an axis of problematics and a locus of contestations – may one yet pose the question: Is sexual difference still, if it ever was, a question? In the midst of a plentitude of voices that structure, if not saturate, the fields in which sexual difference either plays a pivotal role or maintains an almost muted insistence, may one yet wonder whether sexual difference is or can be primordially understood as (a) question? In seeking to retrieve a certain suppressed, if not forgotten ethos of questioning comportment toward the fundamental disquietude of sexual difference, this paper proceeds toward an investigative engagement with Aristotle's inquiries concerning sexual difference.

Although sexual difference manifests in innumerable problems that compel our immediate attention – in the multiplicity of discourses that surround, infuse, and delimit it; in the repeated, sometimes compulsive performances that give rise to its various forms and deformations; in the institutionalizations that seek to codify and regulate its possible meanings and relevance; in the increasingly many domains where it serves as an axis of problematics and locus of contestations — may one yet pose the question: is sexual difference still, if it ever was, a question? In the midst of a plentitude of voices — and silences — that structure, if not saturate, the fields in which sexual difference either plays a pivotal role or maintains a muted insistence, may one yet wonder whether sexual difference is or can be primordially understood as (a or in) question? Is there yet, even if not today, then perhaps on the horizon onto which this day may open, which is to say, perhaps according to one or many horizons eclipsed in and through the horizon that is “our” day, the opportunity for a rigorously questioning engagement with sexual difference *as question*?

In seeking to retrieve a certain suppressed if not altogether forgotten ethos of questioning comportment toward the fundamental disquietude, that is, (the) question, of sexual difference, this paper will certainly be a venture. For, while particular ethico-political problems concerning sexual difference emphatically and irrepressibly call for our utmost attention, perhaps a more fecund mode of responsiveness involves, if only as a provisional and inceptive first step, returning to another horizon of inquiry in order to radically problematize what we name by both “problem” and “sexual difference” in our various engagements with problematics of sexual difference. Proceeding, then, toward an investigative engagement with Aristotle’s inquiries concerning sexual difference will not be easy, especially since what it is to question and thus to investigate will itself have to be called into question. Nevertheless, this paper will venture such an engagement with Aristotle’s inquiries in the hope that they will manifest as exemplary modes of sustaining and illuminating sexual difference in its questionability and thereby afford us, as inheritors of these exemplary inquiries, an opportunity for reorientation: a reorientation that may facilitate, perhaps encourage, other manners of response to and responsibilities toward what Aristotle elaborates, paradoxically, as the properly ambiguous and ambiguating status of sexual difference.

When beginning to proceed along an Aristotelian trajectory, we may do well to recognize that we are, ineluctably, already in the middle of things. With respect to our specific trajectory, although the passage may seem obstructed almost from the very first moment, even foreclosed by contradictions that would impede any passing whatsoever, we may, by acknowledging that we are already in the midst of a densely textured network of pathways of inquiry, proceed via an openness to the subtle dynamics of Aristotle’s textual performance. Consequent upon such an affirmation, this complicated if not confounding performance may itself emerge as our path and guide. More precisely, were we to isolate Aristotle’s “observations” concerning sexual difference and identify them as discrete

formulas meaning to record and lay bare simple discoveries pertaining to significant divisions inhering in the natural world, we would surely be struck by the seeming mutual exclusivity of certain sets of such “statements” – most emphatically, by the contradiction between those that situate sexual difference as a regionally relevant determination pertaining only to particular modes of generation and those that figure sexual difference as a universal¹ stratagem of the self-reproduction of *physis*. For instance, toward the beginning of *Generation of Animals*, Aristotle claims that “among the blooded animals, with a few exceptions, the individual when completely formed is either male or female,” (715a20-23) and shortly thereafter attests that “those ... which arise from putrescent matter, although they generate, produce something that is different in kind, and the product is neither male nor female,” thereby evincing sexual differentiation as qualified in scope (715b4-7). However, shortly thereafter Aristotle recounts that “in cosmology too they speak of the Earth as something female and call it ‘mother,’ while they give to the heaven and the sun and anything else of that kind the title of ‘generator,’ and ‘father’ (716a14-18), and in the second book of *Generation* proclaims that all “things are alive in virtue of having in them a share of the male and of the female, and that is why even plants have life,” thereby suggesting that the scope of sexual differentiation is all-encompassing (732a13-15).

Are we to read Aristotle as immured in a simple contradiction and thus find ourselves at an impasse from which we may proceed, *if* we are to proceed, only by dismissing one side of the contradiction? Irrespective of what decision(s) we may come to and/or compulsion(s) we may heed when considering this issue, it should be noted that the contradiction is openly displayed. It may be that this refusal of dissimulation is crucial to Aristotle’s engagement with sexual difference *as (a manner of) question*. For, despite the alternative readings that Aristotle’s text may admit, *that* Aristotle’s considerations of sexual difference may amount to or turn upon a contradiction itself calls into question, however marginally, any further elaboration of the scope, essence — if there is one —

and status of sexual difference. This initial manifestation of contradiction, however independently unproductive, may be extraordinarily helpful precisely as a disturbance that, finding echoes throughout the ensuing investigations and haunting their margins, delimits the space of inquiry. At the very least, such manifest contradiction may call into question any conclusions that would base themselves upon the ensuing investigations. No matter what is to be made of and/or allowed to arise from Aristotle's inquiries concerning sexual difference, such contradiction grants the possibility of recalling that these inquiries may be based on the dubious acuity of Aristotle's "observational" powers or may be stained by a failure of systematization. Consequently, any (symbolic, cultural, institutional, etc.) structures that would found themselves on Aristotle's "findings" would be based on quite tumultuous tectonics. Any edifice resting on these eminently questionable foundations will be itself openly subject to question insofar as we can always recall, in a most discrediting tenor, that Aristotle's inquiries into the scope, which is to say, in a certain respect, into the very phenomenality of sexual difference, may be fundamentally contradictory.

Moreover, and quite crucially, that Aristotle unhesitatingly allows this contradiction to appear, that he does not attempt to resolve the contradiction one way or another, that he does not seek to extricate himself from this apparent contradiction or absolve himself of the responsibility for its repercussions throughout the proceeding discussions (quite to the contrary), itself suggests that Aristotle is attempting to open a space for engaging sexual difference *as (a persistent and insistent) question*. In its inexhaustible questionability, sexual difference may be thought as intractably marked by and calling for a certain hesitancy, as urging cautious care (both acknowledged passivity and ever renewed scrupulousness), as calling for a thinking attuned to its being-in-question, that is, perhaps, an interminable and embodied thinking. From the outset, Aristotle inscribes sexual difference with the figure of a question mark, or more precisely, allows sexual difference

to manifest as itself inscribed with such markings, thereby setting the stage for sexual difference to emerge throughout his account, irrepressibly, *as question*.

That Aristotle is open to that which in its very ambiguity will call into question his counting of and accounting for sexed bodies itself suggests that his inquiries will not be simply asking after sexual difference in order to lay to rest once and for all our questions concerning sexual difference. *Perhaps* anachronistically, one might say that his inquiries concerning sexual difference pursue an anti-metaphysical agenda. Thus, if we are to follow Aristotle's inquiries, what we name by "question" must be called into question. For, emerging within such inquiries as a *locus of questionability*, sexual difference is not an axis of problems to be solved or a perplexity to be resolved, but rather calls into question the policy-analytic enframing that would pose "questions" of sexual difference as discrete, calculable problems amenable to full resolution and/or explanation, as problems that, precisely because they are posed in this way, may themselves be quite problematic in ways with which they are ill-equipped to negotiate. Do we yet know, have we yet developed any facility with, what it is to inquisitively engage sexual difference *as question* or to investigate the texts of those who engage sexual difference in this manner? Are we yet in a position to rethink the manifold relations between and among questions and answers? In remaining open to sexual difference *as question*, Aristotle does not interrogate sexual difference as if he were a sovereign inquisitor standing over and against the questioned, demanding of *physis* that it *answer to* him, i.e., unfold and stabilize itself qua sexually differentiated and offer up "answers." Rather, insofar as Aristotle's inquiries are themselves resolutely open to sexual difference *as (a stuttering, unformulated, yet immensely significant) question*, they implicate themselves in the domain of the questioned, refuse a facile distinction between questioner and questioned, and thereby allowing us to pose the questions: What is it to question or to become involved with phenomena in virtue of their questionability? What is the *dynamis* of

sexual difference *as question*? What is it to question or inquisitively engage the *dynamis* of questions?

However fruitful it may be to tarry with this apparent contradiction and allow its effects to resonate more fully, we have as yet only taken a hesitant first step, perhaps only a stutter step, along the path(s) of Aristotle's inquiries concerning sexual difference. How shall we proceed? Not wanting to allow this apparent contradiction to prohibit further investigations of Aristotle's inquiries and the phenomena they delimit, we may perhaps proceed by repudiating the contradiction as such, i.e., by deciding to accept one side or the other – either sexual difference as regional or as pertaining to the whole. And yet, in doing so we would face the overwhelmingly difficult decision as to which side of the contradiction to repudiate, a decision that cannot but seem, in any outcome, *manifestly* unjustified. Thus out of a desire to avoid such coarse and overt injustice, we may proceed along a path of reading wherein Aristotle's apparently contradictory "observations" are situated as agonistic moments of a more complex account in which they are reconciled – "reconciliation" meaning the bearing and sustaining of tension within a whole, perhaps even a productive and harmonious bearing and sustaining of that which seems, and may otherwise be, incommensurable and/or mutually canceling. Within such an account, while one may acknowledge that *physis* emerges as sexually differentiated only regionally, one may, if so inclined, also speak "figuratively" of all things having in them a share of male (i.e., "form") and female (i.e., "matter"). Does not Aristotle suggest as much when he claims that "the male provides the 'form' and the 'principle of the movement,' the female provides the body, in other words, the material" (GA 729a9-12; see also *Physics* 192a13-16), or again, when he attests that "the creatures which cannot move about, like the Testacea and those which live by being attached to some surface, are in their essence similar to plants, and therefore, as in plants, so also in them, male and female [in their separateness] are not to be found, *although they are called male and*

female just by way of similarity and analogy, since they exhibit a slight difference of this sort” (GA 715b17-22; emphasis added)?

So *if* we are to avoid, or at least for the sake of proceeding, momentarily evade the attribution of a flat contradiction to Aristotle and so avoid or evade rendering a simple decision with regard to this contradiction, we may attempt to proceed by elaborating (i.e., instituting) a discrete contrast between (1) a certain “phenomenological” Aristotle who simply reports his findings concerning sexual difference among those beings to whom and to which this distinction pertains and (2) a certain “rhetorical” Aristotle who, attempting to bespeak the self-reproducing developments of *physis*, employs a phenomenally-based language in a loosely figurative fashion. However, yet again we are confronted by an impasse (are we ever going to take a sure step forward?) inasmuch as we are tempted to accuse the “rhetorical” Aristotle of insidiously imposing a dimorphic order of sexual difference upon that which resists, or minimally, is in some sense foreign to such organization. Perhaps, we might say, Aristotle’s metonymic extravagance amounts to an illicit transposition, an underground smuggling as it were, of what may be an eminently human mode of social organization, that is, sexual differentiation, into his account of *physis* as a whole. That is, we might accuse Aristotle of anthropomorphizing nature. Does Aristotle’s rhetoric not betray him when he maintains that Testacea “*are called* male and female just by way of *similarity and analogy, since they exhibit a slight difference of this sort*” (GA 715b20-22; emphases added)? Does this formulation not suggest that Testacea are called forth in their sexual differentiation precisely by and for those acclimated to dividing the world up in this manner? And does Aristotle not insist in *De Anima* that “*imaginings are for the most part false,*” which would suggest in our context that his figuration of the all-pervasive character of sexual difference is *merely* figurative, a false/dissimulative way of speaking (428a16-17)?

If one were to consider Aristotle's statements concerning the all-pervasiveness of sexual differentiation "rhetorical," one may then wonder what motivates this rhetorical flourish. Could it be that Aristotle's "rhetorical" proclivities manifest a desire to maintain a sense of security, specifically, security in the belief that *physis* is ultimately ordered, thus, in principle, cognitively and practically hospitable? Might it be a desire for *physis*' comprehensive availability that impels Aristotle to project sexually differentiated order onto it? Precisely in virtue of its ability to call forth the ordering operations of Aristotle's discourse, might *physis* stand revealed as, at least in some respect, determinate disorder or perhaps as involving a principle of radical indiscernability? Does Aristotle not repeatedly insist that *physis* does nothing in vain,² that *physis* constitutes a harmonious whole,³ and that, ultimately, "any business of Nature's always has an orderly arrangement" (GA 760a32-34; see also *Physics* 252a12ff)? In such insistences, as in his insistences on the universal scope of sexual differentiation, can we not discern a compulsion that bespeaks the motivating force of disavowal? More precisely, can we not detect the repudiation of *physis*' disorder or aspect of radical indiscernability in and through the excessive affirmation of its orderliness (sexed or otherwise)? Does the insistent desire to impose a totalizing order upon *physis* not register its lack of or limited order, its abrasiveness to full and final determination? The temptation here is to deem *physis* a screen upon which an emphatically — although perhaps not exclusively — human mode of social differentiation, that is, sexual differentiation, is projected and to consider such projection as repressing and concealing an underlying experience of and worry about the partial disorder or indiscernability of *physis*. For, it would seem that an obstinately stabilizing discourse such as Aristotle's must bear an experience or phantasy of ineradicable disorder or indetermination which it seeks to purge.

However, *if* we are patient and willing to read Aristotle's inquiries as pervaded by a rigorously questioning ethos responsive to, indeed mimetically acknowledging, the questionability of the phenomena with which he is concerned, and consider that this phenomenologically rigorous adherence accounts for his refusal to exorcise the risks

incumbent to his resolute openness, we may come to think that the aforementioned accusation, although hardly baseless, remains limited and limiting. Could it be that the utter questionability of Aristotle's articulations, what may even be their courting of such accusations, is an immanent necessity and disclosive in its own right? Might such criticism of Aristotle's hasty repudiation of nature's excess not be itself hasty, signaling a refusal to heed the possibility that Aristotle's acknowledgment of *physis*' partial indiscernability, its exorbitant significance, manifests in the rigorously questioning ethos of his inquiries, indeed in their *manifest* availability to such accusations? Might not such a line of criticism, in its rush to retrieve the "repressed" elements of Aristotle's discourse and the phenomena with which they correspond, pass over Aristotle's exemplary manner of giving voice to the problematic status of his subject matter? Further, to the extent that such criticism figures "*physis* itself" as primordial chaos, as if *physis* were determinately knowable in its pervading Disorder, as if inquiry could unproblematically determine *physis* to be, in the final analysis,⁴ absolutely or at bottom disordered, as if *physis as such* were knowable, indeed knowable otherwise than through the relatively orderly informations of *ta physei onta*, does it not exemplify the metaphysical vice of which it would accuse Aristotle? Perhaps the anti-anthropomorphic gesture, the analysis of *physis* as a screen, rather than deepening our questions itself enacts a screening – concealing/unconcealing – of *physis* in which *physis* is made to appear as a bare material substratum or disaggregated flux onto which and over which order can be only imaginatively projected. Would such a gesture not idealize the human capacity for projection and preemptively vanquish the resistance and provocations of *physis* it means to recover? Moreover, despite aiming to resist the totalization of *physis*, specifically its overlaying by a bipolar schema of sexual difference, would such a line of criticism not reproduce, indeed covertly displace, the totalizing and specifically binaristic impulses at which it is targeted? Does it not reduce polyvalent differences into simple binaries and enact its own manner of totalization through its simplifying divisions of matter (the screen) and form (the projected order), order (the projection) and disorder (*physis* itself)?

Would not *physis* as a phenomenally manifest principle of becoming, as both exceeding and informing the predictive, calculative, or otherwise cognitive capacities of its investigators, itself suffer repression through the analysis of Aristotle's "repression"? And so too the "properly" ambiguous and ambiguating status of sexual difference? For, precisely in the effort to retrieve the "truth" of *physis*, does not the analysis of sexual difference as a merely imaginative projection reduce it to a mere chimera, an fantasy mapped onto an undifferentiated and indefinitely pliable screen of *physis*, a mere covering the removal of which would lay bare, simultaneously, the naked truth of *physis* and the tendentially self-absorbed character of human being? Are the operations of phantasmatic projection self-initiating and self-sustaining, i.e., feats of sovereign consciousness? Are they fully identifiable in abstraction from their eliciting occasions? Would their banishment not sweep away features of the phenomena to which they are responsive and to which, albeit perhaps excessively, they adhere? Indeed, is phantasy merely projective overlaying, fundamentally self-enclosed and instrumental? Can we not detect in such criticism an evasion of the disquieting disturbance of sexual differentiation, even thereby an evasion of the interfolding of Being and beings?

What is crucial to underscore at this point is that though the concerns to which these and suchlike readings give rise may be mitigated, though we may find more compelling ways to proceed as we seek to follow the developments of Aristotle's investigations, each path of reading remains insuperable, an irreducible option for interpreting Aristotle's inquiries into sexual difference. Each path, however internally problematic and/or in tension with other moments of Aristotle's text(s), is not implausible. Perhaps the tangled web they weave, the disorientation to which they collectively conduce, elaborates and seeks to elicit a confusion "proper" to the subject matter. At the very least, as individually insuperable and collectively incommensurable, such readings call each other into question.

Attempting to come to terms with the apparent contradiction manifest in Aristotle's claims concerning the scope of sexual difference, we identified three options the benefits and drawbacks of which were briefly considered: stopping at the contradiction, i.e., refusing to follow Aristotle any further; deciding in favor of one pole or the other of the contradiction; and a variant of the second option, situating the two poles of the contradiction as, respectively, "phenomenological" and "rhetorical." If having to decide between reading Aristotle as merely contradictory or merely "metaphorical" is less than desirable, perhaps we can allow repulsion to serve as an impulsion to read otherwise. Having seen the difficulties and dead ends to which the aforementioned paths of reading lead, we may now be more inclined to follow a more complicated yet perhaps more fecund path of inquiry into the status of Aristotle's competing claims concerning the scope of *physis*' sexual differentiation. Although the possibilities that he has succumbed to a flat contradiction or to merely figurative expression are ineliminable, could it be that we are as yet unable or perhaps unwilling to abide with the very questionability of claims leveled forth in a less than obvious mode of questioning? Are we yet in a position to attune to that which is devoid of the habitual markers of a question, yet precisely as unrecognizable or only obliquely so, all the more (a or in) question?

Perhaps Aristotle's "observations" (those noted heretofore and those detailed in the following) are best understood as neither simple reports on phenomena nor "merely rhetorical" but rather as moments of a pedagogically self-conscious performance that aspires to figure forth the transience and essential incompleteness of its various developments, thereby imitate the self-showing of beings by nature in their coming-to-pass, and so achieve objectivity otherwise. If Aristotle's "observations" unfold in imitative intimacy with the coming-to-pass (i.e., generation, destruction, and transformation) of beings by nature, if they seek to mime the provisional stabilizations (i.e., in-formations or en-matterings) of beings by nature that in turn disclose *physis* as irreducible to any assemblage, e.g., systematic organization, of particular beings, then

these “observations” may be thought, like *physis*, as irreducible to the order of representation, never fully objectifiable. Mimetically corresponding with the transience – indefinite self-deferring and -differentiation – of *ta physei onta*, the coming-to-pass (away) of these “observations” may be best understood as, like particular natural beings, partial and provisional moments of an ever-unfolding, unthematizable whole. The resonance – one might say the ontological proximity – of Aristotle’s discourse with its “objects” perhaps testifies to the exorbitance of his subject matter and to the insuperable untimeliness of his inquiry – always too soon and too late. (May this be a way in which Aristotle intimates a certain belonging of thinking in or to nature?) Perhaps the manifest dissonance of Aristotle’s claims that sexual differentiation pervades life itself with his claims that sexual differentiation is restricted in scope marks, i.e., makes manifest, an inconsistency internal to his phenomenological accounting, perhaps even intimates the limits, and so internal necessities, of any such accounting and cautions against, while acknowledging the temptation of, ignoring and overstepping them. Perhaps Aristotle’s suggestion is that adequate phenomenological accounting will be structured like *physis*, e.g., will involve upsurges of provisional formations that are eventually released and transformed as they yield to the rhythms of composition and decomposition articulating the evolving – thus discursively irrecoverable – whole. It may be that manifestly succumbing to contortions, convolutions, and confusions is how the measure, i.e. *physis*, is kept in view, how inquiry marks its fidelity to and dependence on that which gives itself. Such “observations,” then, may allow certain formations, dispositions, structures, and tendencies to emerge, capture our attention, and then, once recognized as essentially partial, fade into the oblivion from which they were wrested, perhaps leaving only the faintest trace, if any remnants whatsoever, of their upsurge. Perhaps Aristotle’s ambition is to allow sexual difference to shine forth, i.e., phenomenize, as just emergent from and already receding back into the concealment from which it can never fully extract itself, that is, to allow sexual difference to manifest ambiguously, incompletely,

questionably. As such, sexual difference would manifest in its irreducibility to the audacious discourses seeking to identify and define it “as such.”

If we proceed along the interpretive pathways projected by these suggestions, we may be able to discern Aristotle’s effort to illuminate and sustain of sexual difference *as question* in another apparent contradiction, namely, in his oscillation between disclosing sexual difference as part and as function. At some moments in Aristotle’s account, the essence of sexual difference — if there is (just) one⁵ — seems to concern not physiological parts but functions. As Aristotle explicitly maintains, it is “clear then, that the male and the female are a principle,” that is, an *arché*, a cause and/or beginning, that which *functions* to bring forth (GA 716b11-12). Furthermore, Aristotle makes plain (or so it would seem) that “the female always provides the material; the male provides that which fashions the material into shape, this, in our view, is the specific characteristic of each of the sexes: that is what it means to be male or female,” thereby suggesting that the functions of information and providing that which is to be in-formed are essential to sexual difference (GA 738b20-24). In light of statements such as “the faculty . . . is the essence of what is meant by male” (GA 741a17-19), it seems, moreover, that when Aristotle claims that “a bull immediately after castration has been known to mount a cow and effect impregnation, because the passages had not yet been drawn up,” physiological parts are considered accidental to the (functional) essence of sexual difference – if there is one (GA 717b3-5).

And yet, Aristotle contends that “some males do not emit semen,” and thus, so it seems, should not be spoken of as male insofar as maleness relates to the en-souling or informing function of “setting” and imparting movement within the “maternally” provided material (GA 738b11-12). However, they are spoken of as male nonetheless, which suggests that sexuation may be irreducible to function. To be sure, this manner of speaking is “popular” and Aristotle maintains a certain reserve with regard to it, but here

as elsewhere Aristotle is by no means prone to repudiate “popular” discourses on the grounds of their conventional or traditional character. Indeed, lending his voice to this traditional manner of speaking, Aristotle declares, in seeming opposition to the functional understanding of sexual difference, that physiological parts are that “in respect of which the male will differ from the female” (GA 738b11-12). Openly exhibiting the tension between, thus the questionability of, accounts of sexual difference (including his own) that would identify its essence — if there is one, that is, if the apparent contradiction between accounts of this essence, or as in Aristotle’s more capacious discourse, the vigilantly sustained tension inhering in such accounting, does not indicate that there is no essence of sexual difference, at least as essence is predominantly understood — as either a matter of physiological parts or functions, Aristotle claims, “now male and female differ in respect of their *logos*, in that the power or faculty possessed by one differs from that possessed by the other; *but they differ also* to bodily sense, *in respect of* certain physical parts” (GA 716a19-23; latter emphases added). Moreover, in claiming that “with castrated animals . . . although the generative part alone is destroyed, almost the whole form (*morphé*) of the animal thereupon changes so much that it *appears* to be female or *very nearly so*,” does Aristotle not seem to suggest that the distinction between male and female pertains, albeit in a qualified manner (“very nearly”), irrespective of “proper” physiological and functional distinctions, thus that sexual difference can be considered in terms of outward appearances rather than as a matter of parts or functions (GA 716b5-10; emphases added)?⁶ Yet, while characterizing sexual difference as in a certain way “superficial,” does not Aristotle’s claim give voice to an experience of the excessive signifi- cance of sexual difference, to a suggestion that sexual difference remains irrepressibly significant? Nevertheless, in *De Anima* Aristotle insists that “it is not when we are in a state of accurate activity in connection with the sense object that we *say* ‘This appears to me as a man’, but rather whenever we do not clearly perceive whether it is a real or illusory man” (428a17-20). In light of this, one may wonder whether the rhetoric of appearances in this last passage from *Generation* means to suggest the inadequacy of

what it states and thereby hint at Aristotle's continuing perplexity regarding sexual difference. Adding to the complexity, Aristotle later contends that "no male creatures make a habit of taking trouble over their young," seeming to render sexuation as neither part nor function nor outward appearance but rather as disposition (GA 759b7-8).

It may be that, in accord with his mimetic strategy, when Aristotle asserts/defines the essence of sexual difference in terms of physiological parts, then function, then outward appearance, then disposition, he means to allow these formulas to arise as competing, mutually questioning developments of a self-differentiating whole in which they can be seen as individually and severally incomplete, exquisitely questionable. Perhaps only by allowing such formulas to arise, take a stand, and come into question when confronted by others with which they are incompatible and which, through their mutual contest, reveal all such formulas as experientially informed yet outstripping experience, and indeed so far outstripping experience as to audaciously assert their exclusive title to essence, can Aristotle more fully explicate and explore the status of sexual difference *as question*. Although Aristotle's oscillation over how to properly determine the essence of sexual difference may indicate nothing more than his confusion or an excessive interest in recording every extant opinion, and these possibilities are not to be taken lightly, such oscillation may also evoke, especially through the foregrounding of phrases such as "we speak of," "we hold," and "we call," the perhaps necessary but if so, insufficiently appreciated inconsistency of social discourses surrounding, infusing, and delimiting sexual difference. In part, what may be at stake is a suggestion that immensely significant distinctions in the natural (and social) world do not amount to "natural kinds," thus that a certain manner of scientific inquiry may conceal what it fervently seeks to reveal: nature "as such." Again, Aristotle may be underscoring the multiplicity of registers of sexual difference in order to reveal that each formulation of the essence of sexual difference, taken in isolation, is not the whole, and to suggest, less directly, that even were they added together or somehow synthesized, essence would not be attained – it is hardly clear

how such formulas could be reduced or systematized, nor is it clear what *could* confer authority on a claimant to the reducing discourse. What are the “problems” that could be solved equally well or better and what are the important insights that could be preserved or augmented by a reducing discourse? By foregrounding the differential emergences of sexuation within *physis*, Aristotle may be seeking to reveal the irreducibly aspectual nature of his subject matter, thus the irreducibly perspectival character of his inquiry (and those analogous to it, though here an enormous question opens up), indeed to expose the whole, *physis*, as making available and partaking of yet exceeding each and all definite discourses. Insofar as the account as a whole gestures toward the partial and provisional character of each of its moments, insofar as, enveloped in the whole, each formula can be seen to both stake a claim and gesture beyond itself, both compel our concern and point toward its dissolution and clearing of space for differential emergences and the concerns pertaining thereto, Aristotle’s discourse mimics the motility of nature and suggests that such motility, although not amenable to exhaustive systematization, is hardly abrasive to thinking, indeed seems to welcome it indefinitely. Such a discourse cannot but be in tension with itself, cannot but continually risk articulations of sexual difference that obscure the phenomena(lizations) to which it means to attend. Such a discourse would indeed be a venture as it would need to both activate and amplify certain tendencies of, thus possibilities for attending to, sexual difference inhering in *physis* (notice the intimacy of activity and passivity in dis-covery) and disclose the irreducibility of sexed phenomenality to its various schematizations and conventional articulations. As Aristotle maintains in *De Anima*, “perception is, but imagination is not, always present” (428a11-12).

If we are to proceed along this path of reading, that is, *if* we are disinclined to consider Aristotle as having succumbed to mere contradiction or given himself over to “rhetorical” flourishes, we will have to attend closely to the gestures with which he seems to figure forth the partial and provisional status of his claims, to the eruptions of manifest (self-

remarking) disquietude that traverse his counting of and accounting for sexually differentiated bodies. With this in mind, we may return to the issue of sexual difference as an imaginative projection and seek to take Aristotle at his word when he speaks of sexual difference as an analogy. Recall Aristotle's statement that "the creatures which cannot move about, like the Testacea and those which live by being attached to some surface, are in their essence similar to plants, and therefore, as in plants, so also in them, male and female are not to be found, *although they are called male and female just by way of similarity and analogy*, since they exhibit a slight difference of this sort" (GA 715b17-22; emphasis added). Unfolding via analogy, extending its reach without losing touch with its primary significance(s), finding application beyond its "proper objects" whereupon a shudder recoils through the calm confidence in its conceptual closure, hardly haphazard in its reiteration yet manifestly undecided in its reach and consequently in its significance, bearing a question of the future and so of the fate(s) of its past as it trespasses ever so slightly beyond its proper domain, sexuation here designates not a division of nature "at the joints" but an imaginative schema that admits of the more or less, that can be in a variety of ways inhabited, partaken of, participated in. As analogy, that is, as a manner of gathering and manifestation that is intimately intertwined with yet irreducible to *logos*, sexual difference names an imagistic schema (or a number of such schemas) the disclosive power or authority of which is tied to its imagistic character, its facility in bodying-forth: concretizing without reifying, articulating without totalizing, revealing while maintaining reserve. Bound to but not entirely determined by the weight of past experiences and their cultural mediations, keyed to contemporary experience the imagistic elaboration of which they have been compelled to undertake, such schemas of sexual difference are precariously poised between the orders of creation and discovery. As analogically extended, sexual difference *perhaps* allows *physis* to manifest itself in a way that may not otherwise come to pass. As analogy, at least when felicitously such, sexual difference suggests a relation of harmonious supplementarity obtaining between human beings and *physis*. It suggests the freedom of *physis*, or at least its lasting

underdetermination, and the resonance and even kinship of the freedom of the human, emblemized by its exorbitant imagination, with the freedom of *physis*. Analogy may not be simply self-consumed projection but the activation of possibilities for self-manifestation (both of the human and of *physis*) inherent in *physis*. Sexual difference irrupts, irrepressibly though not exclusively, as phantasmagoria.

Rather than a strictly determinable division given by nature, sexual difference seems to be, at least among certain beings (i.e., those “*like* the Testacea” and “*similar* to plants” — crucially here, the question of the domain of beings to whom or to which sexual difference pertains analogously is itself pervaded by analogy, and as such is far from rigorously discernable), pervaded by the ambiguity of image and analogy, that is, marked by the noetic distance that analogy both shows forth and attempts to bridge. Insofar as what is most knowable comes forth through analogy, its analogical conditions of emergence may be intractable, indefinitely deferring the immediacy or presence of what it figures. So, when Aristotle notes that “*they speak* of the nature of the Earth *as* something female . . . while *they give* to the heaven and the sun and anything else *of that kind the title* of ‘generator’ and ‘father’” (GA 716a15-19; emphasis added), we may do well to heed the various intimations that analogy at once confers and defers intelligibility. Likewise, when Aristotle suggests that *physis* “acting in the male of semen-emitting animals uses the semen as a tool” (GA 730b19-21) and that “like a good housekeeper, Nature is not accustomed to throw anything away if something useful can be made out of it,” we may do well to attend to his manner of analogically deploying the language of what is most known (tools and housekeepers) in order to gesture at what is, inversely, most knowable, perhaps even a condition of possibility for both knowing and the known, and as such least immediately accessible, i.e., *physis*’ self-(re)production (GA 744b18-20). Here again analogy is employed to at once confer and defer intelligibility. Perhaps *only* via analogy can the correct proportions of intelligibility and ambiguity be attained and wonder maintained.

Perhaps the analogical imaging forth of sexual difference is not an unabashed projection onto a bare substratum or screen of *physis*, but rather, at least sometimes, a manner of (or at least legible as) granting the self-differing and -deferring developments of *physis* manifestation in their indefinite multiplicity. The analogy of sexual difference seems to bespeak an inability to decisively determine the differential order(s) whereby *physis* manifests itself and thereby bespeak the essential incompleteness of phenomenological inquiry. Notice that when Aristotle speaks of *physis*' self-differing, he often does so in an analogical discourse that itself inscribes sexual difference as a sort of analogy. For instance, when he claims that "Nature resembles a modeler in clay rather than a carpenter; she does not rely upon contact exerted at second hand when fashioning the object which is being given shape, but uses the parts of her own very self to handle it," not only does Aristotle allow certain operations of *physis* to emerge while remaining in a certain respect concealed through the mediation of images of artisans, the "she" that marks the sexual differentiated character of *physis* "herself" appears, i.e. juts to the fore, as itself a sort of analogy (GA 730b28-32). If certain of *physis*' operations must be, at least at times, figured indirectly, i.e., with the aid of familiar images, then the accessibility of *physis* may come into question precisely by means of its manifest accessibility. Similarly, if *physis*' sexualization emerges either through or at least as intimately connected with analogy, the accessibility of sexual difference in general may be called into question. Having noticed that sexual difference arises analogously in a particular context, we may well ask, and perhaps seek to sustain as a question, whether and to what extent it does so elsewhere. If sexual difference emerges analogically in connection with beings incapable of locomotion, and especially if it does so in connection with *physis* as such, can we be certain that as it pertains to locomotive beings it is devoid of any residue of analogy? Are we yet certain of the markers of questionability, e.g., the markers of analogy?

With these possibilities of reading open, and open to each other in their mutual contestations, sexual difference may appear in its “properly” ambiguous and ambiguitating status, i.e., *as question*. Reading Aristotle in this “comprehensive” manner may allow us to question and reconsider what appear to be – and no doubt are, but are perhaps not just – moments of thoughtlessness, indeed moments of docile conformity to patriarchal social norms, e.g., his notoriously insidious and ridiculous comments about women and females generally. When Aristotle speaks of females as weaker, when he deems menstruation a deficient manner of concocting as compared with semen (728a19-23; 728a26-30) and figures it in terms an essential lack (737a28-31), generally, when he depicts females as imperfect analogies of the male model, we should certainly take pause over and are rightly outraged by such egregious abuses, though we may yet wonder whether here too a certain manner analogical speaking is in play, and if so, whether here too such a manner of speaking means to underscore, or at least makes legible despite itself, the essential inadequacy of such images and analogies (to consider this would hardly amount to a defense). When females are depicted as less “developed” than males, as not quite male, as the lack of fulfillment of the male standard, as deformities (737a28), and as defined by an inability (728a26-30), could it be that Aristotle is again engaged in a self-questioning manner of speaking, that he is – or, on the basis of the reading strategy he makes available, can be seen to be – bringing forth culturally prevalent images for (re)consideration? Could it be that here too Aristotle is attempting to – or can be seen to – bring into relief certain images that display the divergence of image and phenomenon, that testify to both the exorbitant proclivities and cultural sedimentation of the imagination, that allow phenomena to explicitly exceed their imagistic contouring, that allow sexual difference to exceed any articulation through which it would be illuminated, let alone stabilized and defined?

That Aristotle does not offer an argument to support the primacy and priority of the male, indeed never offers any argument whatsoever to justify thinking about sexual difference

in one way or another, seems significant. How noteworthy that, though ordinarily prone argumentative rigor, when investigating sexual difference Aristotle consistently refrains from offering anything other than “descriptions,” and competing ones at that. Even his account of the essence of maleness is *manifestly* circular: a male concocts semen because it is hotter and is known to be hotter because it concocts semen. Is this circularity something Aristotle might simply glance over?

Yet we may wonder, where are the markers of analogy and what would be the point of analogical subtlety with respect to these depreciating depictions of females? Why is it that in these disparaging statements the self-declaration or pronounced legibility of analogy is conspicuously absent? And even if such statements abounded with overt indicators of their analogical status, why risk such analogies? What would be the point of the strategy? One might also ask, why does Aristotle not engage with women when in dialogue with his predecessors? Surely there were women who had something to say about generation, if not *physis* “itself,” as well as about the various other topics he broaches. Although accusing Aristotle of invidiously imposing social norms on a norm-free natural world would belie a modern bias, investigating the sources and stakes of his activation of specific phenomenal possibilities and silence concerning others seems to be a proper phenomenological investigation in its Aristotelian determination, thus an appropriate manner in which to inherit Aristotle’s inquiries.

Hopefully this venture to return to Aristotle and so forego, if only for a moment, directly concerning ourselves with the many vexing and pressing questions pertaining to contemporary problematics of sexual difference will have facilitated an initial attunement to the persistent intertwining or mutual enveloping of sexual differentiation and various manners of questioning, or at least will have generated a few questions concerning what we take to be a question or an inquiry, what we understand by sexual difference, and what it might mean for sexual difference to emerge and be sustained *as or in question*,

and thereby will have prepared the way for a more incisive return to contemporary matters. What Aristotle's inquiries give to be seen is that, in its insistent questionability, sexual difference may bind us, as it seems to have *sometimes* bound Aristotle, to a reflexively questioning comportment that is far from imprisoning or insular but rather a source of phenomenological rigor and sensitivity. Recurring again and again as an axis of problematics, conducive to thinking yet ever redoubling its enigma, sexual difference as attended in such inquiries provokes further questions and manners of questioning, further thought and manners of thought, thus in its binding power demonstrates itself to be, potentially, a force of liberation that may initiate or facilitate other manners of response to and responsibilities toward its fundamental disquietude. Aristotle's inquiries into sexual difference seem concerned to facilitate the development of our *dynamis* as questioning beings and to prepare us to engage the interminable work of negotiating with sexual difference, as if these belonged together. Although it is far from clear what the *dynamis* of questioning is or what our *dynamis* as questioning beings may be, let alone who or what falls within such a "we," to follow Aristotle's lead is to wonder whether by engaging such questions we may prepare for a radical return to pressing contemporary concerns involving sexual difference.

End Notes

I would like to thank Anna Katsman for her invaluable comments on the substance and style of an earlier version of this essay.

¹ Universal in the sense of *katholu* (*kata* = according to, *holon* = the whole), that is, according to the whole.

² See *Generation of Animals*: 739b19-20; 741b4-6; and 744a37-744b2.

³ As Aristotle avers, “what nature takes away from one place she puts on at the other” (750a3-4), “nature makes good the destruction by sheer weight of numbers” (755a32-33), and “nature because she has taken away from their numbers makes up for it by giving them more in the way of size” (760b26-28).

⁴ As if *physis* would admit of analytic exhaustion, as if in its phenomenal unfolding *physis* were not continually offering itself otherwise. Insofar as *Physics* Beta suggests that movement names the becoming of beings by nature (198b20ff), and insofar as movement or becoming indicates the continual unfolding of the interminably unknown (see *Physics* Gamma), beings by nature will remain inexhaustible by analysis and the status of *physis*' ultimate order(ing) and/or disorder(ing) will remain questionable. In order to tarry with the properly indiscernible status of *physis*' ordering and disordering, we may do well to heed Aristotle's arguments in *Physics* Gamma; for, it is here that *metabole*, the becoming that infuses the actuality (*energia*) of beings by nature is articulated by *genesis* (becoming, and in context of *Physics* Alpha and Beta, coming into an informed state) but only insofar as *genesis* retains its essential link with *psthora* (passing away) and *kinesis* (the changing of that which, in light of the intimacy of *genesis* and *psthora*, can be said to come-to-pass) such that *physis*' ordering operations are fundamentally indiscernible from its disordering. The destruction of a particular being amounts not to a simple annihilation but to the generation of another particular being that takes the form of the first being in its de-constitution, which is to say, in its constitution otherwise.

⁵ As Aristotle reminds us, “there are some terms whose formulae too are equivocal” (Physics 248b19).

⁶ Although, *eidos* regularly denotes “outward appearance” and *morphé* usually denotes “shape,” in this context, especially in light of the rhetoric of appearances, it seems that *morphé* calls to be read as “outward appearance,” thereby, perhaps, suggesting a certain confluence between these two terms.

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