

*Calypso's Recipe: On Biased Traditions in Philosophy*

In this lecture, I would like to give an overview of the ideas presented in my study *Calypso's Oath: On Biased Traditions in Philosophy*. The book presents my view of a number of famous classical texts, a view that has evolved over the decades between my student days and my position as a lecturer of classical languages. Reading as a woman, I have developed a perception of some classical texts that is fundamentally different from the standard.

Homer is a good illustration in point. He is the first author in the history of our western civilization to make a case for feminism. He presents this case in the *Odyssey*, which is the oldest work in Greek literature alongside the *Iliad*. In this epic tale Odysseus spends ten years away from home to fight the Trojan War, only to take as much time to return to his wife, Penelope. His return journey is a series of adventures. These include a seven-year period of living with the goddess Calypso, after which the gods decide that she should free him to go home. Zeus sends Hermes, messenger of the gods, to her with the decree. On hearing it, Calypso trembles with rage (*Odyssee* 5.118-120):

How cruel you are, you gods, and quick to envy above all others, since you begrudge goddesses that they should mate with men openly, if any one of them takes a mortal as her own bedfellow.

Although her reaction is emotional, Calypso follows with a line of reasoning that is both rational and presents an extraordinary criticism for the time. She attacks the double standards that begrudge goddesses the freedom to mate with mortal men, while the gods engage in all too many affairs with mortal women – especially Zeus.

In spite of her arguments, however, Calypso decides to release Odysseus. Although she still loves him, little is left of his love for her. He wants to return to Penelope, but lacks transportation. When Calypso informs Odysseus of her decision, she already has a full plan of action. She advises him to build a ship and she herself will supply all the necessary provisions. Initially distrustful, Odysseus makes her swear an oath to the sincerity of her intentions. She complies on the spot. Calling on heaven, earth and the underworld as her witnesses, Calypso reassures him and concludes her oath by saying (*Odyssee* 5.188/71):

But I am only thinking of and shall ponder on what I should  
devise for myself, if I were in your straits;  
for my mind is righteous and the heart  
in this breast of mine is not of iron, but has compassion.

The simplicity of her words evokes more an image of a homemaker's recipe than a moral stand based on principles. However, her statement 'for my mind is righteous' shows that, on principle, she sees it as a moral obligation to empathize with someone in need, and then to devise a solution by reasoning. Notice, that she uses no less than three verbs to outline her own thought process. Homer presents a Calypso, who bases her moral actions explicitly on the collective working of her mind *and* heart, her reason *and* her empathy.

Then, in a manner as impressive as it is light-hearted, the poet portrays a goddess who puts her principles into action. She personally hauls the sail and provisions on board the ship in her efforts to facilitate her beloved Odysseus' reunion with his Penelope. Her actions are a brilliant example of the nobility of spirit that moral laws sometimes require of us. In fact, a close look at her carefully weighed – though simply expressed – moral principle would reveal it to be much the same as Kant's categorical imperative: 'act only according to that maxim, whereby you can at the same time will it to become a universal law'.

Thus, even as early as 800 years before Christ, Homer put forward the most important and progressive principles of ethics: a critic on a double standard *and* the vision that a moral stand is based on rationality *together with* empathy. However, he did so through a female character, Calypso, and neither she – nor what she had to say – was taken seriously: in the history of ethics Calypso's message is never mentioned. Famous philosophers, such as Socrates, Cicero, Seneca and Augustine, ignored these ethical principles. All of them adhere a double standard as a matter of course. They focus primarily on rationality, and show little – if any – concern with empathy. What is more, their inability to integrate women as equals in their lives and works did much to set the course of the history of philosophy askew, a history in which women were relegated to obscurity.

Socrates, for instance, is usually regarded as a founder of ethics. With his intellectual approach to virtue he put full emphasis on reason; his view – one usually referred to as 'Socratic determinism' – was that anyone who knows what is right will behave in accordance with that knowledge. Socrates himself is seen as an exemplary philosopher in whom thought and action, theory and practice were in complete harmony: a model of rationality and justice. His image has defined the profile of the ideal philosopher.

Socrates' wife Xanthippe was accused of being unreasonably ill-tempered and reputed to be an impossible woman. Her indignation however had rational grounds. It was not so much that she was an impossible woman, but that she was burdened with an impossible task, which she nevertheless performed with commitment and empathy. Apparently Socrates did not realise that she had rational grounds for her anger. He remained convinced that he had never wronged anyone or failed in his duty, whereas in reality he did fail in his

concrete obligations to his wife and his children - obligations which he had consciously assumed in spite of his calling to philosophy. He deliberately fathered his children: the oldest boy when he was about 55, the two younger ones in his sixties, i.e. years after his calling to philosophy had manifested itself and which he considered incompatible with something so banal as earning money and therewith taking responsibility for the care of his family. The cupboards in his little house must have been very bare and it must have been almost impossible for Xanthippe to bring up their children. It was in fact she who paid the price for his calling to philosophy.

Many people believe that the famous roman orator and philosopher Cicero, with his ideal of humanity, embodies an ideal of civilization and solidarity. His fine words, however, are deceptive. Cicero was convinced that his ideal of humanity could best be implemented in his own Roman republic; but in reality this was a republic which pursued iron-fisted conservative and imperialistic policies. An investigation of the heroes glorified by Cicero in his 'Dream of Scipio' in the light of the historical facts reveals a shocking picture of Cicero himself, who, in his fervent patriotism, venerated heroes who showed no compassion or empathy whatsoever for the thousands of victims of those policies, whether they were adversaries or citizens of the Roman state itself. These heroes celebrated by Cicero contrasted starkly with his daughter Tullia whom he loved and adored so much and for whom he wanted to erect a shrine – in memory of her loving character and her empathy. The strange thing is that the 'Dream of Scipio' is still read today, but that editions of the text rarely make any mention of its moral implications. Reading Cicero's texts from a different angle reveals the suffering of thousands of people which is not mentioned by Cicero but is implicit in the texts; it may therefore lead us to revise our judgments.

And although at least Seneca's ideals went beyond an oppressive nationalism and his ethics did in fact have a cosmopolitan dimension, the concept of empathy was not on his list of desirable qualities. In his opinion every human being should be able to cope with every situation with the help of his rationalistic ideal of *apatheia* a complete control of the emotions. Many still see the much-read and much-praised account of his own forced suicide as a triumph of reason over emotions – the ultimate proof that Seneca himself was a master of self-control. In my analysis the text conveys that his overwhelming motivation was a desire for glory – a glory in which there was no room for his wife Paulina. She had decided to die with him and in one and the same stroke (*eodem ictu*) their wrists were cut open – but soon he advises her to leave the stage. In my view Seneca's death was not the ultimate proof of his *apatheia* and indifference to death, but of his ambition and desire for glory. He

also revealed himself as an egocentric and short-sighted husband – because by sending his wife away he deprived both of them of the authentic experience which love and shared lot can provide in an extreme situation. Together they could have given an unique example to humanity and gained well deserved glory into the bargain. A lost opportunity.

In Augustine's thinking, the crucial role played by rationality in the ethics of philosophers such as Socrates, Cicero and Seneca is only partly taken over by religion. He compares favourably with these older philosophers in that he regards empathy as an essential ingredient in the work of a shepherd of souls. But his repudiation of his own wife – with whom he had lived together for fifteen years and had a son Adeodatus/Godsend – that repudiation and his fundamental rejection of sexuality show not so much philosophical insight as a lack of self-insight and a lack of empathy towards his fellow human beings.

Socrates, Cicero, Seneca and Augustine became renowned for their achievements in the field of ethics and have been praised for their rationality. However, in many respects their personal lives and theories reflect egocentricity and lack of empathy. They all had double standards. In the texts I have examined, details about their relationships with women reveal an incapacity in all of them to develop balanced views. Not only with respect of their own wives and their own marriages, but also with respect to women in general and women's position in society. You might say that these leading authorities on moral philosophy had a blind spot in their perception of humanity where women were concerned.

Blind spots are not necessarily alarming – every era has its own blind spots. But it is important to identify and discuss them; otherwise we run the risk of hearing only the positive elements in the ideas of these teachers of ethics, while the negative characteristics also continue to have normative effects. It is high time we put an end to these biased traditions in philosophy and start to pay attention to the insights of women philosophers, from early champions of equal rights, such as Hipparchia and Olympe de Gouges, to present day thinkers, such as Hannah Arendt, Simone de Beauvoir and Martha Nussbaum.

Hipparchia in particular seems to me to deserve a separate introduction. She is an intriguing Greek philosopher from the late fourth century BC. She came from a well-to-do family, but - ignoring the wishes of her family - she gave up her comfortable life: took off her fashionable clothes, and, dressed in rags, joined a group of philosophers led by the Cinic philosopher Crates.

Although she and Aristotle were more or less contemporaries, these two thinkers had little in common. One of Aristotle's basic assumptions concerns the existence of a fundamental inequality of human beings. In his view, men were by nature superior to women, due to inherent characteristics. Within the male category, some men were superior to certain others. Slaves as a group were inferior, but again, a distinction had to be made between those who had become slaves through special circumstances, as was the case with prisoners of war for instance, and those who were slaves by nature.

It was in this category of the most despised of human beings that Hipparchia, a true early champion of human rights, placed herself by walking barefoot and dressed in rags, conveying in an ostentatious way that all human beings are fundamentally equal. I will quote two of her phrases from a debate with a certain Theodorus (Diogenes Laertius VI,96):

If Theodorus would not be blamed for doing something, Hipparchia should not be blamed for doing that same thing.

And when he asked if she was the woman who had abandoned her loom, she replied:

Yes, Theodorus, I am that person, but surely you do not think I have made the wrong decision in devoting to education that time which otherwise I should have wasted at the loom?

The context makes it quite clear that by 'education' she meant training in philosophy.

Well, if you think that through this act Hipparchia earned for herself an honourable mention of her name in philosophical works as well as a review of her views, you are sorrowfully mistaken.

If you take a look at the indexes of textbooks on the history of philosophy, you will find that practically no women are mentioned. This too often is still the case today. Yet, recent academic research has shown that there have been a large number of women philosophers in the whole course of history – Mary Ellen Waithe's four volumes *A History of Women Philosophers* for example or Mary Warren's excellent *Nature of Women. Encyclopedia and Guide to the Literature*. It is shameful to realize that the history of philosophy, a discipline which sets out to find universally valid insights, has been a history of apartheid.

While in the history of philosophy it often turns out that words like 'mankind' and 'human beings' actually referred only to 'men', and that as a result of this perspective women were excluded from philosophical discourse, political history presents even more harrowing examples of double standards. If there is one single period in history in which the misunderstanding about the concept of 'mankind' led to gruesome scenes it has to be the French Revolution. When it broke out in Paris in 1789, women fought and died side by side with men for

what they believed was a shared ideal of freedom, equality and fraternity, as formulated in the famous Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen / Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen. But it soon became clear that these 'rights of man' were certainly not intended for women as well. Women were excluded.

In 1791 the philosopher Olympe de Gouges published her *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne / Declaration of the rights of Women and the Female Citizen*. A year later she organized a demonstration of women to draw attention to their struggle for equality. This struggle was to lead to her death: on 2 November 1793, in the 'Hall of Equality' - how ironic – she was condemned to the guillotine. The sentence was carried out the next day.

However, Olympe de Gouges was also sentenced to another fate. While history books always devote a great deal of attention to the French Revolution and refer to many of the male protagonists, the name of Olympe de Gouges is very rarely mentioned. This militant woman philosopher and advocate of human rights for *all* human beings has become one of the many nearly forgotten minor figures in the history of western civilization.

Many names of women philosophers are to be found in more recent history. And surely the middle of the last century marked a definitive turning-point. From that point onwards it is impossible to imagine philosophy without women philosophers like Simone de Beauvoir and Hannah Arendt. However, the strange thing is that even in a recent edition of Hans Joachim Störig's popular *History of Philosophy* – used at many universities in Germany and the Netherlands - De Beauvoir is not mentioned at all and Arendt is referred to only briefly as a political scientist and a student of Heidegger. This is only one example of how the integration of women is still lagging behind in the academic philosophical world. Double standards are clearly applied all too often. The predominant monoculture of rationality, which is connected with the strong position of male philosophers, needs to be challenged; more attention should be paid to the positive value of emotions. On this score, Martha Nussbaum's oeuvre marks a turning-point in philosophical thinking. The idea that emotions actually imply value judgements is amply illustrated in her books by philosophical and literary texts, both old and recent. Nussbaum makes a strong case for using human feelings of empathy and compassion as a basis for morally responsible citizenship. In fact, this is the recipe of Calypso's oath dished up at a contemporary academic table, as I presented in my book *Calypso's Oath. On Biased Traditions in Philosophy*. Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2010.

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