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# Aristotle, Females & Wind Eggs

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# Aristotle, Females & Wind Eggs

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## Misogyny

Aristotle has had a lot of bad press over his views about women -- frankly, his misogyny. In particular, it has often been remarked that this negative estimate of women permeates much of his thought -- not just his ethics and his politics, but even his biology. His misogyny ran so deep that even his science was tainted by it. So, at least, the story goes.



I want to suggest that, in part at least, the story runs the other way. It is not that his ethical and political views about women tainted his work in biology; it is rather that some simple biological observations made some of his characteristic views about asymmetry between the sexes just about inevitable.

The misogyny comes from the biology, not the biology from the misogyny.

## Misothely

The first point to note is that Aristotle does not have a low estimate of women, exactly, but rather a low estimate of *females*. His attitude might better be called one of 'misothely' (from the Greek *misein*, to disdain, and *thelys*, female).

His treatise on animal generation contains much evidence of this attitude:

## An infamous cascade of misothely

- "it is through a certain incapacity that the female is female"
- "the ... efficient cause, whereby that which comes into being is male, is better and more divine than the material whereby it is female"
- "the female always provides the material, the male that which fashions it"
- "the body is from the female, the soul is from the male"

## Whence this misothely?

Why would Aristotle be so locked into the idea that, in animal generation, females contribute matter, but males contribute form? Why would he think that females merely produce a sort of inert stuff, but males provide soul, that is, the powers of life? Why would he be so insistent on this absolute asymmetry?

## Wind eggs

The answer, I think, is wind eggs.

What the Greeks called 'wind eggs' are nothing other than the unfertilized eggs of fowl. (They are called 'wind' eggs because, according to a popular folktale, they have been fertilized by the wind!)

Supermarket eggs are wind eggs.



## Barnyard observation

Aristotle is very much aware of the phenomenon of wind eggs. He mentions them in connection with common hens, peahens, hen pigeons, hen partridges, geese, and shellducks. And the phenomenon is this: in these species the female, unaided, can produce a full-sized egg, but it won't be alive -- it won't produce a chick.

But, if the male of the species has added a microscopic amount of ejaculate to the process, the egg will be no greater in bulk, but it *will* be alive -- it will develop into a chick.

It seems impossible to resist the conclusion that (at least in these species) the females on their own can produce matter for life, but the males -- though they produce essentially no matter -- give life to the matter that the females produce.



## Moral

If Aristotle had stayed in his armchair and not gone poking around barnyards and ducks' nests, he would perhaps have got onto a better track in genetics. Field work, in science, is sometimes quite misleading!

So if you feel cross about our traditional western construction of gender, as well you might, then next time you go to the supermarket give the eggs a dirty look. It is largely their fault.