

Interview with Dr. Adriel M. Trott

EMMA ARVEDON AND SCOTTY GORDON

This interview was conducted with Dr. Adriel M. Trott, associate professor of philosophy at Wabash College, on February 7th, 2019 at the College of Wooster, prior to Dr. Trott presenting "The Matter of Sexual Difference in Aristotle's Biology" for the Phi Sigma Tau Honor Society Lecture.

Scotty: Thank you, Professor Trott, for coming to speak with us. This is a great honor for our journal and our school to have you here, and we're also very excited about your lecture.

Dr. Trott: It's a pleasure to be here. Thanks for having me.

Scotty: So just getting into what you're looking at in terms of Aristotle and how his biology and his metaphysics relate to sexual difference, one of the main themes I saw you looking at was different models of hylomorphism, different models of that form-matter distinction, and how those different models reflect different attitudes towards gender and how it is natural vs. constructed. Can you elaborate more on that?

Dr. Trott: Yeah, so I'm interested in the concept of nature in general, and I'm particularly interested in the ways that ancient thinkers are working through using nature as a ground to justify social order. So, my first book is about the way that Aristotle uses nature in the *Politics*. We see the ways people talk about politics, where they talk about it as either natural or, as you say, constructed or conventional, and that didn't sit well with me, because it seemed like you could say, 'if human decision is involved, then it's not natural, and therefore there's no real justification for it'. That seems like a more basic sense of nature, that it just could be opposed to reason, and I think you get this out of social contract theorists, so it's a very modern sense of nature as what's not involving human reason. So I found in Aristotle's *Physics* a way of talking about nature as an internal source of movement, this *archê kinêseôs*, this idea that natural things are things that move themselves. And so, reason then, for the human, isn't something opposed to nature; it's actually a way of fulfilling oneself, to become more what you are. So I was thinking about that as a way of understanding political life as not being about drawing boundaries that have to resist nature and overcome it, and say, 'nature is over there', in a kind of Lockean sense or Rousseauian sense, like we've left nature behind and now we're political—which, I'm sure you know, those ways of thinking about political life often lead to those exclusions of those who are more 'natural', and therefore not really 'political', or women and those who work with their bodies are considered more 'natural', and so not really capable of being in political life. So, one response that I received when I was working on that was, 'it might make sense for the *Politics*, but in Aristotle's biol-

ogy, it seems like he's really driving apart the form from the material', or 'he's making these distinctions that make nature look more like *technē* or artifice'. And while I had really resisted that in the reading of the *Politics*, I thought that that really did seem like a problem in the biological works. So this idea that we understand nature as a *technē* is the sense that nature is just a super-being that has made, and everything is made, and the making is always about imposing form or meaning onto some material stuff that makes it possible to be in the world. So, I started looking at those texts. I started thinking about them, and I was struck by how, even in the way that form works, it has this interdependence on various material forces and elemental forces, and I was like, 'this is so strange'. And then I went back and found the ways that people had responded and read that in Aristotle, and the kinds of acrobatics they had to go through in order to say, 'no, no, no, form can't really be based on material', and I thought that was really interesting too. So, Aristotle has this idea of 'vital heat' as the heat that makes the semen do the work, and I was like, 'well that sounds a lot like heat'. But scholars have argued, 'no no, that's a kind of more divine element, so it's not really material'. And I thought, 'that's a strange thing', like, all of the sudden we're introducing a fifth cause of 'divine elements' into Aristotle's causal structure? So I wanted to spend some time with that, and think through the idea that the thing that does the work of form has some way of being dependent on material. But the question you asked was about how this connects to gender and the significance of that for gender. So another thing Aristotle does in the biology—and I think we can trace our own continued ways of thinking in these ways back to Aristotle—he says that form is what the male is contributing and material is what the female is contributing. This is a little bit strange and complicated. There's a couple of different models people have had historically for thinking about sexual difference: one is this model we call the 'one-sex model'—maybe you've heard of this before?—the one-sex model is the idea that there really is only one true sex, and that's male, and female is the inverted male. And on that account there's a kind of sliding, like you have to work on 'being male' and you can slide into not being considered as male. So the sense of the one sex also makes the measure of sex a matter of degrees. Then there's the 'two-sex model', which comes up much later in the Renaissance. In the two-sex model, women have completely other capacities than the male does, but then those capacities are considered to be less significant or worthwhile, so it still justifies a kind of hierarchy. But I found that Aristotle is also in this strange place between the one-sex and the two-sex models, because on the one hand, he does talk about the difference in terms of degrees of heat; on the other hand, he talks about it in terms of form and matter, which seem like they have to be separate causes that do different work. So I wonder, what does this mean? Does this mean that form and matter really are a difference of degree, and if that's true, what does that mean to think of the difference of the causes as a difference of degree? And if it means no, actually the male and female really are a difference of kinds, then why is the distinction between them based on the degree to which they can heat? It seems like that's really a difference of degree. So I wanted to triangulate that and put those two together, and think about how difference might be working. So I refer to this as a 'Möbius strip' model of a relationship. The idea is that there is difference there, so it's not like what it is to be female is 'not male', or what it is to be material is just not form, but there's also a place where there's an interdependence between those things that resists the metaphysics behind a strict gender binary.

Emma: Off of that, while I was reading this, I was wondering how exactly, not necessarily non-binary people, but maybe how intersex people would fit in this?

Dr. Trott: I think that's what I'm trying to think about: why this model supposes we only have these two ends. Part of what I think is difficult for us to think about intersex people or non-binary people is that we don't have the conceptual apparatus; we don't have the metaphysics to think that, since our metaphysics is so binary and opposed. So, I'm hoping that this kind of model or this way of thinking about the relationship that I think can be found in Aristotle's biology can actually be a resource for thinking what doesn't seem to quite fit in the binary. There's a couple of issues and concerns and caveats that I want to have. This really gets to larger questions about how we think about difference, as I'm sure you've thought about. So if we think about difference as just like contradiction, X and not-X, then you are still thinking about what it means to be the second point in terms of the first and not on its own, and historically this has been the condition, this has been what it's meant to think sexual difference. Women are just not men. Anyone who is not "man" is somehow just opposed, and there's just no other way to think of that relationship. So there's that kind of problem. But I don't want to entirely collapse them either, because I think that just gets back to thinking in terms of the one pole. So I'm trying to hold those positions apart. I think that there are possibilities for thinking other kinds of difference that aren't just: you put yourself somewhere on a continuum, but a different way of thinking of relationship.

Scotty: Going back to the nature vs. culture distinction, the nature vs. convention distinction—which I guess is also a difference on its own—in your article about vital heat and material nature, you discuss a sort of debate between Judith Butler and Luce Irigaray. It seemed to me that there was some sort of tension between identifying distinct feminine or masculine elements in nature—whether or not they were normatively hierarchical or not—versus just saying it's conventional, just saying it's constructed. Do you think you could comment on that?

Dr. Trott: Yeah. I find that debate between Butler and Irigaray to be really productive, especially for thinking about this problem of difference. So Irigaray's book, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, is this mimetic reading practice in the history of philosophy. It's fascinating. She tries to read these places in texts in the history of philosophy by drawing out what's forgotten and unsaid and necessary for the argument to get off the ground. So for example, she has a piece on Aristotle's biology where she's playing with and pointing to the ways in which the account seems to depend on the material capacities that underlie. And she has this larger point that she's making out of this about how, while form has come to be considered as the place for meaning and significance and essence and so forth, to exist in actual substance in the world, it depends on material's work. But material gets elided and forgotten and erased. So Butler responds to this with the concern that while Irigaray is sort of making this move away from what has been forgotten, by positing it like that it still might work to make what it is to be material or female still this uncharacterized service to form or to male. There is this great piece by Åsta who argues that we have categories that we already hold onto that lead us to see and produce the world as if it is natural and given. We have categories of gender that is a strict binary and then we look at bodies and say they clearly fit into the categories. In a sense, Butler is saying that you already have the categories in your mind and then only the things that fit into those categories get picked up by your perception. So when that is happening at the level of gender, we only have the categories that allow us to see in these strict binaries and so we can't even compute the idea of a body that does not fit in, doesn't even show up in the way that that thing that doesn't fit into

time and space wouldn't show up for Kant. I found that engagement really productive for thinking about what it might mean to say that even material in Aristotle isn't just this stuff and that it already has its own power. What would it mean to think about it as already having its own power? No one pays attention to the *Meteorology* or *On Generation and Corruption*. I think that part of it is that it is hard to get to. What is this about and why should I care for it? I think another reason is it does not fit so easily into the way that we generally have understood the *Physics* and *Metaphysics*. There is something to be said for looking at those texts that complicate things and allow us to rethink the physics and metaphysics.

Emma: In your paper, it seems as if you end with talking about seeing material in a new way like as opposed or not opposed, but differently from how we have seen it with Aristotle. What do you think are the implications?

Dr. Trott: Some of them have already been said and I think that part of that is that it challenges the attachment—if you don't think of material as the other end of form, then it doesn't make as much sense to think of female as tacked onto material as the other end of male. I think that you are right that there might be other implications and possibilities. There is a lot of work being done in how forgetting of material or the treating of material as just stuff for the world leads to ways of opposing nature to history and culture. You could think about the ways in which we are destroying the Earth as thinking of material as what we can take up for ourselves and that it has no power of its own. That project of thinking about how the materiality of the Earth resists us in these moments. I just saw something about someone during the polar vortex last week who was joking on Twitter, some climate denier who was stating that it was not that big of a problem because we have fifty to one hundred years. The world is going to end in fifty to one hundred years and you think, 'Haha, that is not a problem'. That is pretty much about now.

Scotty: Going back to Butler's Kantian argument about perceiving and conceiving of gender, would you say that those who identify as non-binary or as outside of the binary in some way as having a different conceptual apparatus than most other people?

Dr. Trott: I do not want to pretend to speak for non-binary people. You could say that we have done them wrong by only giving them one metaphysical apparatus or set of ideas/ways of thinking. I do not know if it is so much that individuals can walk in the world and sort of select their way of seeing it in that sense. I think that those things are very much imposed on us through images, discourse, and all kinds of mythologies that it is not so much that individuals can resist them. We all become sites for reproducing them even as we are not aware of it. I do think that when we recognize that having this way of thinking makes it difficult for some people to live well that we now have the responsibility to find other ways of thinking.

Scotty: In this discussion of completely eliminating the boundary between convention and nature, do you see this as being related to Foucault's bioethics and biopower?

Dr. Trott: I have another article manuscript that I am working on that deals with Aristotle's *Politics*. I think that we have to find ways beyond biopower in ways that don't fall into the problems of the juridical institutional ways that he talks about power. I think that ways of thinking can support biopolitical projects and make us have those kinds of concerns, but I also think that we have to be careful to not just say biopower is a problem, therefore let's

overcome the body and ignore the body. The experiences and capacities of bodies are also matters for justice that we should be concerned with. We should not, in that Agambenian sense, include the concern in order to force out and bracket the concern [for the body] from the focus of political life. I think that can be just as bad for people who live in their bodies.

Emma: Do you think that this is bigger than just gender? Because when you are talking about living in a body and taking into consideration people who have disabilities/other things where you are seen as not meeting the expectation of what a body should be, concerns are being raised here.

Dr. Trott: The binary itself already sets up a sense of only having two kinds of bodies. We have this [view of] which is the better kind of body to be and this other body also does some other things that we need it to do. That already has a problem of a kind of hierarchy that it sets up. In an interesting way in the one sex model, I think that there is more ability to think those different spaces within because you can see that one can move away. Helen King wrote this book where she talks about these figures in ancient Hippocratic texts where a woman would be alone while her husband wasn't around anymore and she would start to grow a beard according to this legend. It was this sense that not having the social position actually changed her body. That kind of sense of fluidity actually is really productive and interesting, but it ends up still meaning that there is one sight of definition or reference that everything is measured in relationship to, which is not good. When you get the capacity for fluidity on that account, there is a cost and the cost is that it is measured in terms of being male.

Emma: Do you think that disabilities would fit into this sort of binary/sliding scale?

Dr. Trott: Yes, I think that it suggests that same sense of thinking of one notion that is often produced by our world, not given. People within disability studies talk about how it is not so much that people are disabled, but that the world is set up for some people that make them more able to get around in it. How could we change the world so that more people would be able to get around? If you start with the pull of what we have already decided it means to be able bodied or to have one way of getting around in the world.

Scotty: That covers about everything that I had to ask. Thank you very much for taking the time to be with us today. I believe I speak for both of us when I say we're very much looking forward to your lecture.

Dr. Trott: Thank you so much.