

YOU SAY YOU WANT A REVOLUTION? PRO-LIFE PHILOSOPHY AND FEMINISM

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I am a philosophy professor at the College of Saint Catherine — a small, Catholic liberal arts college for women. The focus at St. Catherine's is on its nature as a *women's* college. I am glad that St. Catherine's is a women's college, and very glad to teach there. What continues to frustrate and puzzle me, however, is an all too common notion at St. Kate's that to be pro-woman, one simply must be in favor of abortion rights. I teach Feminist Philosophy, and I am committed irrevocably to the value and importance of women. I see no way to hold the feminist values I do without being at once wholeheartedly pro-life.

I would like to explain my reasons for saying this in the following essay. In the course of my remarks here, I hope to accomplish four things. First, I will outline what I take to be the two major strands in contemporary feminist thinking. I will term one of them "Androgynous Ideal Feminism" and the other "Woman Ideal Feminism." Second, I will show that Androgynous Ideal Feminism is truly a wolf in sheep's clothing, that what many feminists call an *androgynous* worldview is in fact a worldview which posits what is *male* as what is valuable. Third, I will show that Woman Ideal Feminism may be a more honest and accurate mirror of authentic feminist thinking. Fourth, I will outline and briefly analyze the theory of one Woman Ideal thinker, Nel Noddings, in order to show that, despite her own pro-abortion stance, a careful and consistent reading of the principles which she espouses can only give rise to a worldview which embraces the distinctive value of women and a wholeheartedly pro-life point of view.

THE ANDROGYNOUS IDEAL FEMINISTS

What I am here calling the Androgynous Ideal Feminists include those feminists who describe themselves as "Liberal Feminists," some of the "Radical Feminists," and "Social Feminists." In contemporary feminist scholarship, these would be among the most discussed and credible versions of feminism.

Androgynous Idealists maintain that women will never achieve equality in the world until they have all the same rights and privileges which men currently enjoy. For example, Liberal Feminists point out that the ability to reason is the foundation for having rights, and women can reason as well as men can. In fact, say Liberal Feminists, women and men are *different* at all only because of social conditioning; there are no essential differences between men and women. Betty Friedan points out that boys and girls are treated differently from birth, and but for that, there would *be* no significant differences between men and women. Women are *not* intrinsically more intuitive, more emotional, more concrete or relationship-oriented than men.¹ We are simply reared to be that way.

What about the fact that biology dictates that it is women, not men, who conceive, generate, and nourish their young? Liberal Feminists consider such data irrelevant. Just as height and weight are incidental to who I am, so too are my sexual characteristics. In the ideal society which Liberal Feminists envision, there would still be physiological males and females, but physiology would be incidental. To facilitate equal opportunity for all, Liberal Feminists propose free contraception, abortion on demand, and twenty-four hour daycare.

Some Radical and Socialist Feminists take a different approach in their pursuit of the androgynous ideal.

These feminists acknowledge readily that the differences between men and women, both physiological and psychological, are significant and do much to determine the status of women. It is fine for the Liberal Feminists to maintain that women and men are equally rational and posit equal opportunity for all. But equal opportunity does not mean very much if Joe pursues his interests without ever getting pregnant or nursing his children, and Edith must pursue her interests while doing both of these things. This, say many Radical and Socialist Feminists, is not a fair race; men automatically have a head-start. Thus do the Radical Feminists say that gender is the source of all forms of oppression of women: gender structures how men and women dress, eat, work, have sex, and view themselves. If the problem is gender, then gender must be eliminated. Feminism's goal must be androgyny.ⁱⁱ Thus "The Feminists," an influential New York based Radical Feminist group, states: "The sex roles themselves must be destroyed. If any part of these role definitions is left, the disease of oppression remains and will reassert itself again in new, or the same old, variations throughout society."ⁱⁱⁱ

Many Radical Feminists acknowledge that physiological sex differences will be a major roadblock on the path to androgyny. The solution proposed by many Radical Feminists is straightforward: the physiological status quo must change. Shulamith Firestone is one influential Radical Feminist who insists that only technology can ultimately free women from subordination to men. Technology must keep striving toward the goal of error-free contraception and extra-uterine gestation. Only then, she says, can there be "the freeing of women from the tyranny of their reproductive biology by every means available, and the diffusion of the childbearing and childrearing role to the

society as a whole, men as well as women."^{iv} Radical Feminists such as Firestone want to achieve a world wherein genital distinctions between the sexes would no longer matter culturally.

The so-called "French Feminists" follow this line of thinking. Such thinkers as Monique Wittig, Christine Delphy, and Luce Irigaray maintain that, in the words of Wittig, "one is not born a woman." Central to this thinking is the tenet that the fact that women give birth is central to women's subordination. The ability to give birth is neither good nor natural; women have been systematically bred by patriarchy to do the "dirty work" of reproduction, much as cows have been bred to produce more milk.

Socialist Feminism picks up this thread of women's biology as problematic, and it too locates the source of oppression as women's ability to bear and nurse children. Thus, they claim, the sexual division of labor must be eliminated in every area of life. As Socialist Feminist Alison Jaggar puts it, "The one solid basis of agreement among socialist feminists is that to overcome women's alienation, the sexual division of labor must be eliminated in every area of life.... [W]e must remember that the ultimate transformation of human nature at which socialist feminists aim goes beyond the liberal conception of psychological androgyny to a possible transformation of 'physical' human capacities, some of which, until now, have been seen as biologically limited to one sex. This transformation might even include the capacities for insemination, for lactation and gestation, so that, for instance, one woman could inseminate another, so that men and nonparturitive women could lactate, and so that fertilized ova could be transplanted into women's or even into men's bodies."^v Jaggar maintains that these developments are already on the technological horizon,

and a welcome sight they are, too; as Gayle Rubin writes, "We are not only oppressed *as* women, we are oppressed by having to *be* women."^{vi}

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE ANDROGYNOUS FEMINIST IDEAL

The worldview proposed by the Androgynous Idealists is problematic. Whether Liberal Feminist, Radical Feminist or Socialist Feminist, the Androgynous Idealist says that she wants a world which mirrors better who women are, but in fact she ends up proposing a world in which only what is male is valuable. It is precisely this sort of thinking which ultimately denigrates women, and it is also the sort of thinking which leads many feminists to embrace abortion on demand. How so? Allow me to explain.

The Androgynous Ideal Feminists claim that women can never be empowered so long as they are the ones who get pregnant. Until the day of extra-uterine gestation comes (for it is coming, they say), women must at least have the power to get *unpregnant* at will. Women simply cannot compete fairly with men so long as they have so much weightier an investment in procreation. The only path to equality and dignity is the undoing of that tie, so that women will be able to walk away from their sexual encounters as easily as men can already do. Thus do Liberal, Radical, and Socialist Feminists advocate readily available contraception for all women, as well as abortion on demand and without apology.

One must question whether this is truly feminism at all, or whether this purported "feminist worldview" is truly a "masculinist worldview." When Simone de Beauvoir claims that "woman's misfortune is to have been destined for the reproduction of life," she is supporting rather than undermining a worldview which points out

what is male as what is really valuable. One might well wonder whether "equality" must really mean "sameness," whether there are feminists who envision, rather than an androgynous ideal, a world in which women and men are viewed as distinctive beings, equal in dignity and in nature but blessedly different in important biological and psychological ways. I will return, in the conclusion of this essay to this idea, but at this point I would like to turn to what I take to be the other major strand of thought in feminist scholarship today — those feminists whom I am calling "Woman Ideal Feminists." Unlike the Androgynous Idealists, the Woman Ideal Feminists propose that it is not women who need changing, but rather the world which needs to recognize the dignity and value which women possess and the unique contributions which only women can make to the world. Like the Androgynous Idealists, however, the Woman Idealists also support abortion on demand. In the following paragraphs, I would like to outline briefly and in general terms what I take the Woman Idealist worldview to be, then state their reasons for supporting abortion, and finally argue that, while the worldview of the Woman Idealists makes more sense of and is more respectful to women's experience than the Androgynous Ideal perspective, Woman Ideal Feminists are untrue to their own foundational principles in promoting abortion.

THE WOMAN IDEAL FEMINISTS

What I am calling Woman Ideal Feminism actually began as a reaction against the sort of Radical Feminism outlined above. Some Radical Feminists in the 1970^s became increasingly uncomfortable with the idea that women's own biological and psychological makeup was being blamed for women's oppression.

Their solution, however, was to flip the coin to its other face; *women* are not the problem, said these later Radical Feminists, so *men* must be. Thus do later Radical Feminist thinkers such as Mary Daly, Susan Griffin, Andrea Dworkin, and Catharine Mackinnon advocate a worldview which tends to see men as either monsters, necrophiliacs, rapists, torturers, and women-haters. Andrea Dworkin, for example, writes that "Men love death. In everything they make, they hollow out a central place for death, let its rancid smell contaminate every dimension of whatever still survives. Men especially love murder. In art they celebrate it, and in life they commit it."^{vii} If men would only disappear, say these Radical Feminists, the world would be perfectible.

I will not here dwell on this form of feminism, except to say that most women reject it outright and consider it empirically false. Most of us, after all, have either sons, brothers, fathers or husbands whom we do not view as rapists and women-haters. I mention this form of Radical Feminism at all because these thinkers do acknowledge what I think is a real problem with the androgynous worldview it criticizes: there *is* something wrong with a journey toward equality for women which begins by denigrating women's biological and psychological make-up.

Although both women have issued disclaimers, I take this to be one of the central insights of such feminists as Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings. These feminists are examples of what I am calling Woman Ideal Feminism. In her groundbreaking work *In a Different Voice*, Carol Gilligan proposes a vision of the world which is rooted in *woman's* distinctive ways of being and knowing. Gilligan points out that women tend to relate to the world differently than men do, that women tend to stress relationships and responsibility in their thinking, whereas men tend to stress rules and rights.^{viii} To so

relate to the world is neither inferior nor superior; it is just *different*. Perhaps such difference is a valuable and necessary complement to the more traditional male view of reality. If men typically see the world in terms of justice, fairness, rules and rights, and women tend to see it more in terms of relationships, needs and emotion, then men and women can cooperate to create a complete and harmonious picture of the world.

Nel Noddings has a similar view. She points out that we have lived for all too many years in a world which holds up what is typically male as what is truly valuable.

Theory is important, she claims, but so is practice; justice is imperative, but so is care. Any tenable worldview must acknowledge the value of objectivity and universalism, but it must also recognize the corresponding value of receptivity and relatedness. In her most well-known book, *Caring*, Noddings discusses her philosophy and her reasons for holding it.

In *Caring* Noddings inherits and builds upon the groundbreaking work of Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice*. Like Gilligan, Noddings' ideal is a feminine rather than an androgynous one. In her work Noddings suggests that relationships are of tremendous value in human life and their importance has been too long overlooked. Discussions of ethics, she says, have for too long centered solely on abstract principles and not enough on relational values. Human beings are not, she says, isolated atomistic individuals; we live and thrive in communities, in relational units.

Traditional ways of thinking, says Noddings, tend to overlook or minimize the hard work that caring is. All acts of caring concern a relationship between the one-caring and the cared-for. The one-caring attends to the cared-for in her deeds as well as in her thoughts.^{ix} Caring, then, is by no means simply a matter of holding warm feelings about someone, or of being generally

concerned. Real care demands actual encounter with specific individuals; it cannot be accomplished by good intentions alone.^x Of course, we are most likely to care for our own family and friends, but Noddings encourages us to take seriously the requirement to move beyond our intimate circles and extend our caring to the limits of our energy and ability.

Noddings' focus on caring relationships reveals that for her what truly matters in life is not only rules and principles but also individuals and relationships. For example, there is a difference between teaching my children the virtue of honesty in connection to principles on the one hand and teaching honesty in connection to persons and relationships on the other.^{xi} To be honest because lying breaks a moral rule is one thing, but to be honest because without honesty I can never form a true friendship is another. Lies distance us from one another, prevent us from knowing and being known. Casting the virtue of honesty in this light, says Noddings, does not just name a principle and describe a violation; it explains why relationships require honesty.

The latter approach is too often overlooked, according to her.

Education is crucial if human beings are to cultivate properly their natural tendency to care. Here Noddings agrees with Carol Gilligan's perception that there is a difference between men's and women's moral frameworks. Men speak the language of rights and women the language of responsibility. She points out in *Mapping the Moral Domain* that educators teach girls the language of justice and rights because it is the language they need to function in the world as it is now structured. But educators do not teach the language of care and responsibility to boys; in the world as it is constructed, boys do not need to speak this tongue because it threatens their success in the marketplace.

Women are predisposed to care, and so could function as natural teachers of how to care. Unfortunately, society is not interested in learning this virtue, and even more disturbing for Noddings, women are increasingly likely to repress their caring tendencies for fear that they will be scorned as "soft," "sentimental," or "emotional."^{xii}

Noddings believes that we must learn to take caring and relational ethics seriously if we are ever to find our way out of such thorny ethical issues as abortion. She defines abortion as a pregnant woman's decision to end her relationship with her unborn child. Abortion, according to Noddings, is too often construed as a conflict between a fetus' right to life and a woman's right to bodily integrity. All attempts to resolve the problem of abortion through such appeals to rights, says Noddings, are ultimately doomed because they are of no real help to a woman who must decide whether or not to have her baby. No woman ever, she would point out, made her decision whether or not to abort by plotting out a logical syllogism. Rather than approach abortion armed with the language of rights, Noddings suggests that we approach abortion with the language of relations. Whereas rights-talk presumes that what grounds human dignity is reason, relations-talk adds that the ability to reason alone is neither a necessary nor a sufficient criterion for human worth. Also important is another being's ability to call forth my caring.^{xiii}

Shifting our perspective in this way, she says, allows us to see the abortion problem in a new light. I am permitted to abort my child, says Noddings, *not* because my child lacks rights, but because she cannot respond to my caring in a way that I value.^{xiv} There simply is no relationship, says Noddings, when a woman is merely pregnant, especially in the first trimester. Without a relationship of care, there is no responsibility *to* care. Until an unborn child is

developed enough to respond to my caring, I bear no ethical responsibility for her. This is why, Noddings claims, "we do not hold funerals for lost embryos."^{xv} In fact, she says, most abortions occur precisely because the woman does not want a person to exist who will have a "response-based claim" on her.^{xvi} Choosing an abortion, says Noddings, is choosing to end a relationship before it has fully begun.

A RESPONSE TO NODDINGS

As I stated earlier, I find much to recommend in Noddings' philosophy. It is precisely because of her overall philosophy that her stance on abortion is especially astonishing. It is probably true that rights-talk has been less than helpful in society's struggle to come to a consensus about abortion. It is also probably true that the language of relations can be helpful in this discussion where the language of rights cannot. But when Noddings goes on to say that abortion is licit because it ends a relationship before it has begun, she is saying something that is both logically and empirically false. Logically, if no relationship has *begun*, then of course there is nothing to end. The only way I can possibly *end* a relationship if it has begun; I cannot end non-existent relationships. Empirically Noddings likens early abortion to early miscarriage and argues that we do not hold funerals for lost embryos. In fact, however, study after study reveals that women who suffer miscarriage report a deep sense of loss and sadness. Many psychotherapists currently recommend that such women hold, if not funerals, then some kind of ritual to honor the life that has been lost and the depth of that pain. Similarly, even the most cursory reading of contemporary women's studies literature will reveal a similar pattern emerging with abortion. Even among

women who remain putatively pro-abortion, there is a growing recognition of the need to mark an abortion with a ritual, one which allows the woman to acknowledge and grieve for her loss. Loss of what? Loss of what other than her child, and a relationship with that child? Such rituals are popping up all over the West, and Japan even has a name for it: *mizugo kuyo*. Such rituals exist because women know what Noddings denies: when a woman becomes pregnant, whether it be six days or six months, her body has become inextricably wedded to the body of another human being, her own child. Any basic obstetrics text will state that, from the moment conception occurs, a woman's entire body re-orientates itself to the protection and nurture of its new companion. Not even Noddings can deny this. What she *does* deny is that a woman has a relationship with this being. She bases this on her claim that relationships require both a one-caring and a cared-for, implying that no such relationship can exist unless the cared-for can acknowledge and even reciprocate care. This notion is a troublesome one. If Noddings is right about this, then it would also be morally licit to withhold care from a hungry child in Romania; I do not even *know* her, so surely she can neither acknowledge nor reciprocate my care. This sort of calculation of benefits and returns is surely *not* the care for which Noddings advocates; it looks much more like a sort of canny bargain that I make. Such quid-pro-quo is in fact the antithesis of caring, and much of Noddings' other work indicates that she *knows* that.

When Noddings claims that it is never helpful to pit the rights of the unborn child against the rights of the mother, she is right, but for the wrong reasons. Such pitting of mother against child is wrong because it misconstrues reality. It is simply not the case that what is good for the mother is bad for the child, or vice versa.

Abortion is not *good* for either of them; it hurts them both. This is the truth behind the Feminists for Life bumper sticker: "Every Abortion Has Two Victims: One Dead, One Wounded." Noddings' failure to see this hobbles her ethical vision and lessens her credibility.

CONCLUSION: WHAT'S A FEMINIST TO DO?

Unlike the Androgynous Ideal Feminists, and in line with the broad outlines of the Woman Idealist vision, I endorse a feminism which promotes equality without insisting on sameness. The differences between men and women are not a bothersome accident which technology must overcome, but rather something more profound and valuable. Women, according to this feminism, are not deformed non-male creatures; women are instead co-paradigms for the human race.

Here we can begin to see the outlines of a truly feminist view of woman: not-man, different from man, beautifully, passionately complementary to man. The world, according to this view, needs *not* to ignore or paper over the difference between men and women, *not* to construct bizarre utopias wherein technology will overcome these differences. Rather, the world needs to acknowledge these differences and re-form itself in the image of them, in other words, in the image of both women *and* men. To do so would be truly revolutionary, truly feminist.

The ethic of abortion on demand espoused by both Androgynous Idealists and Woman Idealists actually tells women that they simply cannot be the equals of men unless they chemically or surgically alter their bodies to *be* more like male bodies. The clear implication is that there is something *wrong* with the female body as it is naturally, that it needs fixing somehow. The ethic of abortion encourages (nay,

insists) that women must sever their traditional tendency to invest themselves sexually only in relationships which promise commitment and longevity, to take care to offer themselves only to those they can trust with their deepest vulnerabilities. When contraception fails (as all forms do), the abortion ethic offers a woman the "choice" to have her body surgically invaded and her unborn child dismembered and torn from her womb so that she will not have to lose a day in the public, competitive world — the male world. Yet the holders of the abortion ethic call themselves feminists and attempt to silence their sisters who disagree.

When the Androgynous Idealists propose their ideal world, the ability to abort freely is supposed to lead to a fairer, juster world for women. As we move ever closer to the sort of world they envision, are we in fact seeing a "kinder, gentler" world for women? No. In fact, it was only just recently reported that a crisis of epidemic proportions looms on the immediate horizon for China.

By the year 2025, men will outnumber women twenty to one. Why? Because China's oppressive policy of forced sterilization, contraception, and abortion has led to large-scale female infanticide and sex-selection abortion of female babies.

China is by no means alone. In India, in provinces so poor that there are no other medical facilities, not even an X-ray machine, there are ultrasound machines so that a woman can determine the sex of her child and abort her if she is a girl. And yes, even in the so-called "enlightened" Western nations, abortion is still done for sex-selection purposes; overwhelmingly, it is female, not male children who are aborted.

What is the source of an attitude toward women which causes such worldwide disregard for female life? What encourages the attitude that female life is cheap and expendable? I believe it is the attitudes of those who

imply with their words and their policies that the model of the productive and worthwhile human being is the male model, and strive to make women emulate that model as thoroughly as possible. For this reason I stand with those feminists who aver that women are unique human beings, with a strength and beauty all their own. Yes, women conceive and bear children, and it is sexual intimacy with men which makes this possible. The world, say these feminists, must acknowledge the power and beauty of this possibility and remake itself in the image of this fact.

What would this mean? It would mean a world in which every human being, male and female, took seriously the power and beauty of sexual communion. It would be a world in which humans agreed that violence solves nothing, and almost always begets more violence. It would be a world which valued and held in highest regard the ability to give birth and organized itself around the importance of that power. It would be a world in which both fathers and mothers would be expected to rear their children, and doing so would count in their favor in the marketplace. Never would children be treated as either a burden which society tires of paying for, or a hobby that had best be pursued on one's own time. It would be a world in which all human beings, male and female, adult and child, respected the bodily and spiritual integrity of themselves and those around them.

Feminists need to continue to struggle to secure the rights and dignity of women everywhere. They must continue to demand the creation of a world which respects the intrinsic dignity of women. Women have traditionally been the ones to decry war and violence of all kinds. As co-creators and preservers of life at its most vulnerable, women have historically been the ones to remind the world of the value of life and the cruel

futility of all forms of violence. Thus have women often been on the front lines of battles against capital punishment, the destruction of the environment and the fight against abortion. Women have much to teach the world.

I would like to close with a thought from — of all people — the Beatles, the rock group who, in the Sixties, saturated the airwaves of the West with this song among others:

You say you want a Revolution?

Well, you know —

We all want to change the world.

The Beatles to the contrary, not all people want to change the world. A whole lot of people want to change women, though. In fact, they demand such change as the price of a woman's equal status in the world. In order to compete in a world largely shaped and defined by men, such thinkers assume that a woman must re-create herself in man's image and likeness. When confronted with that view, feminists ought to reply with a resounding "No." Feminists must demand a real Revolution — one in which women and men work together, should to shoulder, to re-create the world in the image of women *and* men.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Betty Friedan, *The Feminist Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton 1963).

2. Alison Jaggar makes this point in *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Totowa NJ: Rowman and Allanheld 1983) 86.

3. Quoted in Jaggar 86.

4. Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: William Morrow 1970) 206.

5. Jaggar 132.
6. Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex" in Rayna R. Reiter, ed., *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (New York: Monthly Review Press 1975) 165.
7. Andrea Dworkin, "Why So-Called Radical Men Love and Need Pornography" in Laura Lederer, ed., *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography* (New York: William Morrow 1980) 148.
8. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press 1982). See also Mary Belenky, Blythe Clichy, Nancy Goldberger and Jill Tarule, *Women's Ways of Knowing* (New York: Basic Books 1987).
9. Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press 1984) 9. See also Chapter Two, passim.
10. A point made by Rosemarie Tong in *Feminine and Feminist Ethics* (Belmont CA: Wadsworth 1993) 110.
11. *Caring* 238.
12. *Caring* 236.
13. *Caring* 151.
14. *Caring* 151.
15. *Caring* 143.
16. *Caring* 152.

See, for example, Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton 1963).

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Jaggar 132.

Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex" in Rayna R. Reiter, ed., *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (New York: Monthly Review Press 1975) 165.

Andrea Dworkin, "Why So-Called Radical Men Love and Need Pornography" in Laura Lederer, ed., *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography* (New York: William Morrow 1980) 148.

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