
Feminism in Biology and Belief

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As feminism has become more hotly-contested in today's society, the need to analyze the movement's claims from a scientific and theological perspective has developed. Labor statistics and sociological research reveal that income inequality persists between the sexes. Neuroscience and evolutionary psychology show that subtle differences exist between male and female brains, and these slight variations can potentially be traced to the differing selective pressures between the genders. Ultimately, the biological differences that favor power differentials must be overcome to remedy inequality and injustice. Although Christians have historically upheld these differences and viewed women as inferior, a more modern theological understanding demonstrates that the body of Christ and the imago Dei is best reflected when gender representation is equal.

In recent years, the feminist movement has regained traction in the public arena in what some commentators have deemed "fourth-wave feminism." Each wave of feminism is essentially an iteration of the pursuit of women's rights with a differing goal and perhaps differing methods for obtaining the desired ends. First-wave feminism of the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries focused on the effort to gain suffrage, higher education, employment rights, and property rights for women.¹ Second-wave feminism of the 1960s expanded the focus to include reproductive rights and equal access to leadership roles in the workplace for women, as well as justice for spousal rape and inequalities faced by racial minorities.² Third-wave feminism synthesized many of the goals of feminism and some other social justice movements to analyze oppression, femininity vs. masculinity, race, and colonialism in ways that challenged feminism concerned mainly with white, middle-class goals.³ The fourth wave of feminism is associated with an

online cultural shift that calls for greater social justice, an awareness of intersectionality, and dissolution of the notion that only women can participate in the feminist movement. As influential and well-known as the movement is, much of the rhetoric on feminism has devolved into colloquialism, willful misunderstanding on either side, and a lack of educational rigor in favor of emotional appeals. Backlash and controversy surround the movement at every turn. Even feminists themselves seem to have difficulty agreeing on their goals and priorities. From a religious standpoint, feminism is even more perplexing, as Christians can with ease select certain Scriptures to support whatever they believe the "Biblical" stance on gender relations to be.

Considering the current environment, it seems necessary to methodically examine whether or not the feminist movement is valid given the data we have on both social institutions and human nature, and how Christian theology can inform our

¹ McHugh, N., 2007.

² Mccray, J., 2015.

³ McHugh, N., 2007.

conceptualization of gender relations. While it appears that patriarchal societies and gender relations were favored by evolution, theological and philosophical reasoning supports the contention that we must overcome our biology to yield a more just society.

The Goal of Gender Equality

It will serve us well to examine what evidence exists for gender equality in our current society. One of the most oft-cited statistics claims that women make seventy-seven cents on the dollar as compared to earnings by men.⁴ However, several factors make it difficult to ascertain the validity of this number. On average, women work less hours per week than men, which might be one unbiased reason why they would be paid less; contradictory to what many feminists believe, too, is the fact that the wage gap diminishes in size as women work in professions in which men and women work in equal numbers. Facts such as these lead many people to deny the existence of the wage gap altogether. Simply because the wage gap diminishes, though, does not mean it disappears entirely. Sociological research analyzing fifty years of U.S. census data on gender and pay across various professions found that wages drop as more women enter a previously male-dominated profession.⁵ As co-author Paula England explained in an interview with journalist Claire Cain Miller in *The New York Times*, a job “just doesn’t look like it’s as important to the bottom line or requires as much skill” once greater numbers of women adopt the work.⁶ It is clear that statistically significant discrepancies do exist and that they are a source of division and frustration to many—but what are the reasons for this? Quite possibly, we can trace the gender hierarchy

present in our own society to gender differences that were evolutionarily favorable for our ancestors. Given how the ability to survive in a prehistoric society would often depend on physical strength and resources, it makes sense that specialization of roles by the genders could enhance the survival of both men and women and thus allow them to produce more offspring.

Aside from the fact that feminist ideas are so contentious in the public forum, why bother to examine them from a biological perspective? The fact stands that certain disparities and patterns in society suggest that gender bias does exist and does have an influence on professional outcomes between men and women. Research done by Harvard Ph.D. candidate Heather Sarsons revealed that only 52% of female economists secured tenure while their male counterparts secured tenure at a rate of 77%.⁷ It is doubtful that female economists are significantly less skilled than their male counterparts, so Sarsons argues that the issue deals more with gender biases that impact how the different genders are given credit for their work. For economists to obtain tenure, it is crucial that they frequently publish research. Working in groups lessens the burden on each co-author, and thus it is common for economists to work on research in groups rather than to solo-author research. Sarsons suggests that the reason female economists obtain tenure when they publish on their own, but not with other co-authors, is because they are not given credit for their contributions in a group setting. If other men are involved in the research published by women, they will gain the chief majority of the credit while it is assumed that the women contributed little. Sarsons supports her contention by providing data which shows that women

⁴ Kessler, G., 2014.

⁵ Levanon, England, Allison, 2009.

⁶ Miller, C. C., 2016.

⁷ Sarsons, H., 2015, p. 17.

secure tenure at half the rate that men do when they author all their research in groups—but they obtain tenure at equivalent rates when they solo-author all of their research.

Of course no economist would admit to such an overt bias, and indeed economists may not even be aware that they are guilty of discrimination—such is the insidious nature of psychological biases, particularly when it comes to gender. Many biases toward women involve beliefs that women are gentler, more emotional, more sensitive, and less rational than men. These are not generally seen as negative biases, and Sarsons wisely notes that the biases she observes do not result from an outright dislike of women. After all, if “taste-based discrimination” were the only source of bias, then female economists would never be tenured, and that is certainly not the case.⁸ Male economists do not dislike female economists, on the whole; instead, they are more likely to doubt them and to minimize their contributions due to their conceptualization of femininity and how it relates to skill in male-dominated positions. While such biases are not outright derogatory in nature, they can still—and more often than not, do—have unfavorable impacts on women.

From our examination of society, it is clear that gender biases are quite real, and they do have a deleterious impact on just treatment toward women. With the existence of gender biases now established, the next important step is for people to ask: are these biases valid? Do they exist as a result of our culture and socialization, or are they innate to humanity? Are men and women truly different and better equipped for different work and different places in the social hierarchy, or is gender equality something we should collectively pursue to remedy a

The Biological Connection

An examination of neurology may be helpful in answering such questions. After all, if men and women can be shown to have fundamentally different brains, then one could begin to build support for the idea that gender hierarchy is natural and even preferable. One theory that has been proffered is evolutionary neuroandrogenic theory (ENA theory), which claims that androgen exposure leads to subtle but important differences in both cognition and behavior between the two sexes. How did these differences arise? ENA theory suggests that our female ancestors selected for mates that were loyal and could adequately provide, because this provided the greatest chance for reproductive success. From an evolutionary perspective, this created a selective pressure that led males to respond in one of two ways: to comply and therefore to serve as a loyal mate, or to rely on “alternative reproductive strategies” such as deception or force.⁹

It certainly seems plausible that our biology had a huge influence on how our institutions—and society at large—originally formed. For reproductive success to be maximized, women may have deferred to men. Just as ENA theory would suggest, specialization of women as caregivers and men as providers could have allowed for improved survival of offspring and the generation of greater numbers of offspring. Are these roles simply cultural, though, or did they create selective pressures that influenced the two genders to express different genes relating specifically to cognition and mental abilities? Was the development of gender roles in primitive societies a natural consequence of biology,

⁸ Sarsons, H., 2015, p. 21.

⁹ Ellis, 2011.

or did it occur simply because it helped these societies to function optimally?

Before we discuss potential gender differences in cognition, it is worth noting that there are indeed well-documented differences in structure between male and female brains. The overall size of the brain and the size of different brain regions, as well as the composition of neurons, the neurotransmitter content, the morphology of dendrites, and the number of receptors all differ between men and women. However, the current body of literature contains discrepancies as to the exact differences in brain structure between genders; some literature even suggests that these differences serve to prevent differences in cognition rather than cause them.¹⁰ It is also important to note that neuroscientists often assume that neurological processes are not “dependent on social influences.”¹¹ In contrast with this claim, ethicist Courau builds a cogent case in support of a social influence on the development of the brain. At birth, an average brain weighs less than 50% of its final adult weight. Considering the plasticity of the young brain, it stands to reason that cognition, emotion, life experience, and socialization may all have an enormous impact on how the brain develops. Although it is not certain that socialization and other interdependent forces would solidify certain patterns of behavior for the rest of an individual’s life, we certainly cannot rule out that possibility; that is to say, we have no reliable way of demonstrating that one’s innate disposition for certain behaviors is the ultimate deciding factor dictating how the individual will think and act throughout his or her lifetime. When applied to the gender question, it becomes

clear that we cannot simply assume that specific patterns of gender relations are hard-wired into our psyche. Factors such as “life-style, social class, ethnicity, age, and many more” all have an impact on how we develop individually, and thus how we learn to conceptualize our gender identity as well.¹²

Particularly damning to the idea that gender differences can be explained by hard scientific inquiry is the claim from neuroethicist Robyn Bluhm that “fMRI research examining sex/gender differences in emotion is strongly influenced by stereotypes about women and men.” She claims that researchers will go to great lengths with both their methods and their interpretation of data to confirm that “women are more emotional than men.”¹³ Furthermore, if gender differences were a reliable feature of our biology, then why are there so many people in the world who feel conflicted about gender roles? Although certain traits may be expected from each gender, a great deal of people experience dissonance because they do not fit the mold precisely. A review of men’s psychological issues released by the American Psychological Association found that, in particular, there is a correlation between men who feel conflicted about their gender roles and violence toward women carried out by these men.¹⁴ While more research needs to be done to determine the exact nature of the relationship between the two factors, the authors suggest that the emotional and psychological issues resulting from gender role conflict influence men to lash out through sexual harassment, dating violence, perpetuation of rape myths, and the use of brute force to coerce women into

¹⁰ Joel, D., 2011.

¹¹ Courau, T., Quinn, R. A., Haker, H., and Wacker, M., 2015, p.73.

¹² Courau, T., Quinn, R. A., Haker, H., and Wacker, M., 2015, p. 77.

¹³ Courau, T., Quinn, R. A., Haker, H., and Wacker, M., 2015, p. 78-79, quoting Bluhm, 2012.

¹⁴ O’Neil, J. M., and Denke, R., 2016.

sex.¹⁵ Perhaps gender roles are not inherent to our being. Instead, as men and women experience psychological conflict due to the feeling of not fitting the gender expectations of our society, they respond with exaggerated behaviors associated with their proper gender roles. For example, consider how some men with homoerotic feelings respond with heightened homophobia and hateful rhetoric due to their inability to reconcile their sexuality with their conceptions about masculinity. In the words of the authors, the body of literature supports what feminists have claimed for years: that “restrictive gender roles” are a source of “potential mental health issues for both men and women.”¹⁶

Considering all the evidence presented for and against the idea of gender differences being rooted in our biology, what can provide the final adjudication? At best, comparison of the evidence tips the scales in favor of the conclusion that no statistically significant gender differences in cognition exist. At worst, one is simply left to say that the evidence is inconclusive, given how many of the studies contradict one another. Where does this leave Christians who wish to use an understanding of biology to inform their theology?

The Biblical Perspective on Gender

For Christians to make any determinations about gender roles, they must first determine two questions: how to interpret the Bible, and whether God calls us to obey our biology or instead to overcome it. According to theologian Dr. Adrian Thatcher, we typically derive our theology not only from Scripture, but also from other sources such as tradition, reason, and experience.¹⁷ Each of these sources may

have certain flaws, though. On the issue of sex, Scripture tends to contradict itself. As far as tradition goes, Christianity has historically been anti-Semitic; does this mean we are justified in discriminating against Jewish people? Certainly not. Reason and experience are both highly subjective, and they can be molded to fit whatever conclusion one wishes to draw. How instead should we think about gender from a theological standpoint? Thatcher suggests we seek the aspects of religious tradition that are “life-giving,” which includes anything from religion that gives us joy, strengthens our resolve, and helps us to be overcome by our potential for love. If we use love as our standard, relying on insight from the Trinity and the Incarnation to provide a framework, we will do the best we can at thinking about sex theologically.¹⁸ As for the relation of biology to theology, Thatcher argues that “how men and women think about their relations [...] should not be based on biology.”¹⁹ He makes the point that relations of gender are universal but constructed, and the gendering of people is mainly mediated through institutions. Thus, while in all societies we can anticipate the existence of mores dictating how two people of different genders ought to relate to one another, these expectations will differ from culture to culture. Even if biological gender differences exist, they have little correlation to the direct duties expected of each gender in any given society.

Our bodies are still an integral part of our religious experience, though. Lilian Calles Barger, president of The Damaris Project, observes that “the body is the location in which spirituality is lived out.”²⁰ She goes on to say that “what we need is a spirituality that honors the body we have

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ O’Neil, J. M., and Denke, R., 2016, p. 68.

¹⁷ Thatcher, 2011.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 50.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Barger, L. C., 2003, p. 101.

and comprehends its social meaning but does not reduce us to it.” Spiritual experiences transcend our biology, but they are still chained to it. Excepting the mysteries of the afterlife, we cannot understand spirituality except through our own physical framework. These ideas do present issues for feminists. After all, female bodies are distinct from male bodies, regardless of gender identity. One cannot deny that these different bodies are, in general, equipped somewhat better or worse for particular tasks. On average, men have greater physical strength. Sex influences behavior in some ways—but rather than obeying the impulses of our biology, we will do better to recognize our predispositions and overcome them where they interfere with just treatment and equality. One need only to look to the ancient world to see how deferring to our notions of science as a guide for moral thought can lead to great injustice. According to Greek, Roman, Jewish, and Christian thought for the greater part of history, there were not actually two separate sexes—there was only one, which was the male sex. The Greek author Galen taught that men and women possessed the same set of genitalia; women’s penises were simply inverted inwards, and their testicles and scrotum were tucked inside.²¹ Both men and women ejaculated, with men’s semen being hotter than that of women, and fertilization occurred when their semen joined and implanted itself in the woman’s scrotum.²² Ancient thought did not view these physical differences as two discrete variations, however, and instead conceptualized differences in both physical structure and virtue on a spectrum that was correlated with perfection. Thus, more masculine persons were considered perfect, whereas

more feminine persons were considered imperfect, and intersex persons fell between the two in both physical structure and level of perfection.²³ In this line of thinking, all women were merely imperfect men. This conceptualization of sex and how it relates to gender is, of course, laughably inaccurate from a scientific standpoint. Unfortunately, this flawed understanding also led to mistreatment and marginalization of women in their society. Since women had less hot semen, and heat was equated with strength, women lacked “strength, whether of mind, body or moral faculties.”²⁴ They were inferior to men, and were to be treated thusly.

Though many Christians do not realize it, this is the thinking that permeates Scripture. In the time of Jesus, men were elevated above women. While “Greek and Roman men were thought to embody ‘physical and political strength, rationality, spirituality, superiority, activity, dryness, and penetration,’” women embodied the opposite—all of which were considered as negative qualities.²⁵ Women were no better than slaves or animals, and they were required to obey male authority.²⁶ The social hierarchy was well-established, and women were at the bottom. What do we see in Scripture, with regards to status and hierarchy? A consideration of the treatment of eunuchs in Scripture can serve as an excellent place to look. In the ancient world, the separation of sexes served as the foundation of legal and religious systems. Eunuchs were neither male nor female, though—they were a gender of their own, and an intermediary of sorts. They were above women, but they had been robbed of the essential elements that would distinguish them as men; they could not be categorized

²¹ Thatcher, 2011.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., p.8-10.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 29-30.

as either gender and thus posed a huge threat to the system. In Matthew 19, however, Jesus commends both eunuchs those who choose to model their lives after eunuchs. He goes on to say in Matthew 19:14 that those who are childlike will inherit the kingdom of God.²⁷

If Jesus called his followers to subvert the hierarchy, and if Jesus elevated the lowly, then why would we think that today's Christians are exempt from such instruction? How can we affirm a hierarchy of gender which requires women to be submissive always, when Jesus commended those who modeled their lives after womanish, untrustworthy eunuchs—a direct threat to the Roman social hierarchy?

The Incorporation of Gender into Theology

Theologian Karl Barth argues that Adam and Eve are a model of the Trinity in the sense that they are a plurality who joins to become one, just as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are three-in-one. He bases this notion on Genesis 2:24, which calls man and woman to become one flesh. Strengths of this view include the advancement of the position of women by elevating their status from the helpers of men to equal participants in the image of God. Barth's conceptualization also incorporates human sexuality into the *imago Dei*, whereas many other Christian interpretations have devalued sexuality.²⁸ However, the idea does stress that women are fundamentally different from men, and thus they are constrained to serve in a limited number of roles that must be unique to their sex.²⁹ Furthermore, our vocations can only be realized in relationships with the

opposite sex; thus, women must always be constrained to particular roles, or they will be denying the complementary relationship designed by God which leads to the greatest good for all parties. Consider also that many passages of Scripture seem to speak of marriage disparagingly, such as Luke 20:34-35, 1 Corinthians 7:8, and 1 Corinthians 7:28.³⁰ There can be no more complementary, unified relationship possible between male and female than marriage—so if we are to find our purpose in God through complementary relationships, then why would we find Scriptures urging us to avoid marriage? Barth's view may be supported by selective verses, but it directly contradicts much of what Scripture says about the ideal relations between man and woman.

Another issue with Barth's view is that it creates a gender binary which excludes intersex persons and those with gender identity disorder.³¹ While this may seem to be a minor flaw at first glance, the implications are troubling—it suggests that intersex persons cannot participate in the image of God. Since God created humanity in his image, does this mean that intersex persons are less than human? Such an idea is grotesquely unjust and dehumanizing—but it is the logical conclusion resulting from the rigidly gendered “social view of the *imago Dei*.”³²

In startling contrast to Barth's view, Thatcher instead argues that the body of Christ is androgynous. He relies on Ephesians 5 to demonstrate this premise. Since both men and women belong to the Body, and “the body of Christ is a single body,” this means that the Body is simultaneously intersex and beyond

²⁷ DeFranza, 2015.

²⁸ DeFranza, 2015.

²⁹ Thatcher, 2011.

³⁰ Thatcher, 2011, p.80.

³¹ DeFranza, 2015.

³² DeFranza, 2015, p. 3-4.

gender.³³ Although Christ incarnate has a biologically male body, his body houses a divine presence that belongs to neither sex because the metaphorical body of Christ is both male and female. As a result, either sex can accurately represent the body of Christ; it goes beyond the animalistic divisions of sex, and therefore we should not constrain it to simply male representation. Consider also how Genesis 1:27 states that “in the image of God he created him; male and female, he created them.” The wording suggests that both male and female equally reflect the *imago Dei*. As a result, anyone who insists on having only men serve in positions of power in the Church is guilty of idolatry. Christ requires that we have both male and female representation in the Church to avoid idolatry.³⁴

Conclusion

We will conclude with where we started: a look at the understanding of feminism in today’s world. A misconception exists that all feminists wish for women to eschew family life in favor of corporate success. Although feminists often advocate for women’s rights not to have children and instead to focus on their careers, many feminists—if not a majority—still celebrate the unique nurturing bond of motherhood

and distinctly feminine qualities. Thus, feminism is not about upending the current social hierarchy so much as it is about improving the overall position and prospects of women, whether they choose to pursue competitive careers in male-dominated fields or simply to stay at home and to raise children. Those who oppose feminism are, in many cases, threatened by the prospect of how feminism might upend the social order and present an affront to the nurturing of children and the values of family life, but such a view does a disservice to feminism. While feminists still uphold the right for women to choose these traditional values and roles, they advocate for women’s further right to not be constrained by their sex. After all, sex is a feature of humanity that is shared with animals. Since humans are elevated above animals in the eyes of God, we must look to affirm the qualities of humanity that go beyond our animalistic impulses. The common humanity of both men, women, and intersex persons is the reflection of God, and thus we must transcend the rigidly gendered framework in our religious institutions if we wish to fully understand what it means to be the *imago Dei* and to bring about the social justice so greatly needed in our world.

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³³ Thatcher, 2011, p. 138.

³⁴ Thatcher, 2011, p. 138-143.

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