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Modern Women—Modern Mothers: Resetting the Biological Clock

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Introduction

Let me begin this essay on feminism and Artificial Reproductive Technologies (ARTs) the way most feminists begin their own thinking, by quoting a man. G.K. Chesterton, in one of his essays, challenged the charge of the “equality feminists” of his day that the work specific to women was tedious, small and filled with drudgery, and that they were, therefore, in a condition of inequality with respect to men and their work. He countered, enviously, pointing to its wideness:

[W]hen people begin to talk about this domestic duty as not merely difficult but trivial and dreary, I simply give up the question. For I cannot with the utmost energy of imagination conceive what they mean. When domesticity, for instance, is called drudgery, all the difficulty arises from a double meaning in the word. If drudgery only means dreadfully hard work, I admit the woman drudges in the home, as a man might drudge at the Cathedral of Amiens or drudge behind a gun at Trafalgar. But if it means that the hard work is more heavy because it is trifling, colorless and of small import to the soul, then as I say, I give it up; I do not know what the words mean . . . I can understand how this might exhaust the mind, but I cannot imagine how it could narrow it. How can it be a large career to tell other people’s children about the Rule of Three, and a small career to tell one’s own children about the universe? How can it be broad to be the same thing to everyone, and narrow to be everything to someone? No; a woman’s function is laborious, but because it is gigantic, not because it is minute.¹

¹ *What’s Wrong with the World* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1910), 94-95.

It is the loss of the ability to see what Chesterton saw that so deeply marks much of feminist thought from its very beginning to our day, and which has made motherhood in particular—be it motherhood *tout court* or motherhood as it concretely presents itself—the obstacle to a woman’s equality with men.

ARTs and Early Feminism

I am aware that there are different feminisms, that there are those who make little of the body (liberal feminism, existential feminism, and radical feminism) and those who want to make much of it (post-modern feminism). These differences notwithstanding, they exist, for the most part, in view of two mutually agreed-upon villains. On the one hand, women have not had their equal share in the kind of work that men have been doing from time immemorial, namely everything that takes place outside of the domestic dwelling: tilling, hunting, mining, forging, building, writing, painting, sculpting, thinking (and let us add raping, pillaging, bombing, drilling, fracking, revolutionizing, and the like). In sum, men have always had, in Virginia Woolf’s words a “room of their own” to repair to where they could pursue “their own work,” and their own interests free from domestic demands (and noise!). On the other hand, the work that women have done from time immemorial has not only prevented them from these pursuits—unless they managed to get a thought in edgewise and scribble it down hastily on the kitchen counter between meals! This state of affairs has placed them in a position of deep dependence (especially economic) on the man (who, for his part, was “independent,” as it is always said). It is the second problem that makes the first problem so pernicious and which lead John Stuart Mill, the first feminist, to conclude that “the family is the school of despotism.”

In the attempts to identify the origins of the “subjection of women,” much has been said—starting, again, with Mill—about *the role of society* in producing its desired nefarious effect.² Simone de Beauvoir’s famous tome meant to show us how (and why) “one is not born but rather becomes a woman.”³ It is the work of society, she argued, which instills in girls their place as the “second sex” — as “Other”—defined by, subordinated to, and in function of the first sex. What is more, according de Beauvoir’s account—but Mill said it first! —the “construction” of sexual difference is so inconspicuous that it risks not being recognized for what it is. “Patriarchy is so powerful,” says one of Simone’s more radical followers, “that it has a successful habit of passing itself off as nature.”⁴ The insistence on this point shows how vehement the denial is (and must always be) that the roots of any of the alleged “inequality” could be found in *nature itself*.

It is hard not to notice, however, how nervous are those who hold the “social construction” theory when it comes to describing the bare facts of life. After making much of the projections of misogyny on the biology of the past—held by men such as Aristotle, and later Thomas Aquinas—according to which the woman contributed little to the newly conceived being, other than a passive nourishing terrain,⁵ Simone de Beauvoir passes through the biological facts as we know them now. There are two in particular which she finds disturbing. The first is that, even once biology has

² The “nature-nurture” question is a constant thread throughout J.S. Mill’s *Subjection of Women* (<http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/pdfs/mill1869.pdf>). Nature, according to Mill, being open to influence (*Subjection*, 12-14) can hardly been known for what it is. One would need to “subtract” whatever *could* be attributed to education in order to do so (*Subjection*, 13, 40). What is more, notwithstanding nature’s “openness” to nurture, the influence of the latter on the former is regarded by Mill to be of the pernicious kind, keeping nature in an “unnatural state” (*Subjection*, 33).

³ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2010), 283. Also, “woman” is a reflection of “what humanity has made of the human female” (48).

⁴ Cf. Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics*, 58.

⁵ *The Second Sex*, 23, 26, 27

discovered the egg, and especially that it contributes equally to the genetic make-up of the new being growing in the woman's womb,⁶ this contribution is still embarrassingly "passive" and "closed upon itself," with respect to the "tiny and agile," "impatient," sperm.⁷ What is more, in fertilization, the ovum is "violated," and suffers the "onslaught" of the competing sperm.⁸ In short, in Simone's description of the birds and the bees, in fertilization, as well as the sexual act itself, the woman has been "taken," "grabbed and immobilized," "violated," and "alienated" by another.⁹ The second fact is even more intolerable since it is more imposing on the actual life of the woman. It is the fact that she, as compared to all other females in the animal world, is the one *most* absorbed by the fact of maternity since no other progeny takes longer to "stand on its own two feet" than the human child. The human mother is in the "servitude of maternity."¹⁰ Indeed the human female body is the *most* problematic for Simone because the demands that her child makes on her are at odds with the fact that she belongs to the species at the top of a chain in which individual members acquire progressively more and more individuality and *ought to be* thereby less subordinated to the reproduction of the species.¹¹ She writes, "[H]er destiny appears even more fraught the more she rebels against it by affirming herself as an individual."¹² Simone does not consider the possibility that the co-existence of these facts—the woman's heightened individuality, on the one hand, and the fact that her child is that much more dependent on her to get on its feet, on the other—might in fact be co-determinative, as does Hans Jonas, for example.¹³ Maternity has "no individual benefit to the woman."¹⁴ For her the human female is simply a living, walking contradiction in terms. It appears then that even for Simone, well in advance of any education or socialization of the famous "girl who will become a woman," *the problem lies in her body*. It is her body that opposes her existence as a person.¹⁵ We find ourselves at the height of what Robert Spaemann calls modernity's "insurmountable stalemate" between nature (or body) and person (or freedom) where the bodily "object," subjected as it is to another's gaze because of its surface, —to use the terms of Simone's lover—proves fatal for freedom.¹⁶ It is against nature, and this ultimately – not just that pernicious socialization – that the woman resists and must resist.

⁶ The *equality* of the contribution of the egg, vis-à-vis that of the sperm, is all the more evident today. Cf. especially Stephen Talbott's "The Embryo's Eloquent Form," *The Nature Institute*, March 18, 2013. <http://natureinstitute.org/txt/st/mqual/embryo.htm>

⁷ *The Second Sex*, 28.

⁸ Talbott's account of embryology (cf. n. 9, above) corrects the usual picture which Simone is referring to, that of the egg suffering "the competitive sperm cells struggling aggressively to win the prize," and "breaking into" the sperm. According to Talbott, embryology now suggests something of a "courtship" involving "intimate chemical exchanges and signalings between the sperm and the egg aided by the other sperm cells" ("The Embryo's Eloquent Form").

⁹ *The Second Sex*, 35-36.

¹⁰ *The Second Sex*, 35.

¹¹ *The Second Sex*, 31

¹² *The Second Sex*, 44.

¹³ *The Imperative of Responsibility* (Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 130-35.

¹⁴ The lack of benefit begins with de Beauvoir's description of pregnancy as *alienation*: "Woman experiences an even stronger alienation when the fertilized egg drops into the uterus and develops there; gestation is, of course, a normal phenomenon that is not harmful to the women if normal conditions prevail: certain beneficial interactions develop between her and the fetus; however... gestation is tiring work that offers woman no benefit as an individual but that demands serious sacrifices. (*The Second Sex*, 42).

¹⁵ "Crises of puberty and of the menopause, monthly 'curse,' long and often troubled pregnancy, illness, and accidents are characteristic of the human female" (*The Second Sex*, 44).

¹⁶ Robert Spaemann, *Essays in Anthropology* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2010), 5.

She is the most deeply alienated of all the female mammals, and she is the one that refuses this alienation the most violently; in no other is the subordination of the organism to the reproductive function more imperious nor accepted with greater difficulty.

But resistance, as Simone infers, is at the very heart of human nature which is an “antiphysis,” a resistance “against nature.”¹⁷ (It is hard not to notice the *lack of equality* here, since it is primarily *women*, on account of *their bodies*, who have to do most of the resisting. The bodies of *men*, Simone herself notes, are not in opposition to their existence as persons.¹⁸)

One is not left to guess what *kind* of resistance to nature Simone offers to women. It is resistance to *maternity* which for the most part will take the form either of preventing it from occurring altogether or stopping it in its tracks should it occur. (Simone dedicates a chapter in her book to the need for access to contraception and abortion.¹⁹) But there are hints in Simone’s thought to suggest that it is not maternity *per se* that is the problem, were one able to imagine the possibility of it occurring in a different manner than it does now, with all of its humiliation and tyranny. Indeed in her treatment of the biology of reproduction she strategically presents the great *variety* of reproductive methods occurring in nature so that she can suggest that “the phenomenon of asexual multiplication and parthenogenesis are neither more nor less fundamental than those of sexual reproduction”²⁰ or that there is nothing to warrant “universalizing life’s specific processes,”²¹ lest we infer some normativity in the way we currently reproduce.²² This is her conclusion notwithstanding the consistent pattern of greater sexual differentiation and involvement of mothers with their young as you follow the *upward moving chain* of animal life in Simone’s own account. And it is a conclusion which serves to clear the way for her clear *preference* for forms of reproduction which occur at the very bottom of the chain: the a-sexual multiplication in bacteria and in protozoa, the hermaphroditic reproduction in plants, annelid worms and mollusks, the fertilization *outside* the female body of fish, toads and frogs (which allows the males to do the “childcare” as much as the females).²³ Never mind the fact that these forms of reproduction occur at the *lowest levels* where there is the *least amount individualization*, the very thing Simone is after. These “alternatives” all offer grist to the mill of the human work of resistance against nature.

Following de Beauvoir, there was one feminist who was willing to finally call a spade a spade and say that the problem feminists have is with biological reality as such. Taking up the intuition of Engels and Marx, Shulamith Firestone said that all the class antagonisms at the level of society are derived from the biological family which is “an inherently unequal power distribution,” by virtue of the natural reproductive differences and the division of labor they suggest.²⁴ Firestone shared de

¹⁷ Beauvoir suggests this when she says: “But the definition of man is that he is a being who is not given, who makes himself what he is...man is not a natural species: he is a historical idea. Woman is not a fixed reality but a becoming; she has to be compared with man in her beginning; that is, her *possibilities* have to be defined...”, and it is in her becoming that she should be compared with man; that is to say, her *possibilities* should be defined” (45).

¹⁸ “The male, by comparison, is infinitely more privileged: his genital life does not thwart his personal existence...” (*The Second Sex*, 44).

¹⁹ *The Second Sex*, 524-70 (“The Mother”).

²⁰ *The Second Sex*, 26.

²¹ *The Second Sex*, 26.

²² *The Second Sex*, 26.

²³ *The Second Sex*, 29-31.

²⁴ Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, p. 9

Beauvoir's view of human nature's stance with respect to its own nature.²⁵ But, writing twenty years later, she could envision more resources for her older sister's "antiphysis." Her science fiction vision of what had to come about in order to fulfill feminist goals is chilling not because of how aberrant it sounds, but because of how normal it has become (and is becoming):

[J]ust as to assure elimination of economic classes requires the revolt of the underclass (the proletariat) and ... their seizure of the means of *production*, so to assure the elimination of sexual classes requires the revolt of the underclass (women) and the seizure of control of *reproduction*: not only the full restoration to women of ownership of their own bodies, but also their (temporary) seizure of control of human fertility—the new population biology as well as all the social institutions of child-bearing and child-rearing. And just as the end goal of socialist revolution was not only the elimination of the economic class *privilege* but of the economic class *distinction* itself, so the end goal of feminist revolution must be, unlike that of the first feminist movement, not just the elimination of male *privilege* but of the sex *distinction* itself: genital differences between human beings would no longer matter culturally. (A reversion to an unobstructed *pansexuality*—Freud's 'polymorphous perversity'—would probably supersede hetero/homo/bi-sexuality). The reproduction of the species by one sex for the benefit of both would be replaced by (at least the option of) artificial reproduction: children would be born to both sexes equally, or independently of either, however one chooses to look at it; the dependence of the child on the mother (and vice versa) would give way to a greatly shortened dependence on a small group of others in general and any remaining inferiority to adults in physical strength would be compensated for culturally. The division of labor would be ended by the elimination of labor altogether (through cybernetics). The tyranny of the biological family would be broken.²⁶

We need not look just to Marxists to find such preferences. We are already aware of the general suspicion of the family in the tradition of liberalism. For Mill the family, being the "school for despotism" that it was, inculcated in its members patterns of thought and action that were incompatible with democracy.²⁷ Liberals disagree about the extent to which this is necessarily the case; and they disagree about the extent to which the private sphere of the family ought to be subjected to the principles belonging to the public sphere.²⁸ Nussbaum, for example, faulted Rawls for letting the family and other such "associations" off the hook, so to speak,²⁹ a fault which he would quickly amend.³⁰ But there is general agreement that the family is the suspected cause of all the alleged "inequalities" between men and women forbidden in a proper liberal democracy—especially those in the marketplace namely access to professions, representation in board rooms, and wage equality—since it has long perpetrated against women the "injustice" on account of its "placing on her shoulders" a

²⁵ "The 'natural' is not necessarily a 'human' value. Humanity has begun to transcend nature: "We can no longer justify the maintenance of a discriminatory sex class system on grounds of its origins in nature. Indeed, for pragmatic reasons alone it is beginning to look as if we *must* get rid of it" (*The Dialectic of Sex*, 10).

²⁶ *The Dialectic of Sex*, 11.

²⁷ Mill, *The Subjection of Women* (1869), ch. 2, 283-98.

²⁸ Tocqueville, unlike Mill, for example was not in the least bit disturbed at the stark opposition between democratic practices in public, and the undemocratic ones in the home, at least so far as the division of labor between men and women were concerned. See his *Democracy in America*, trans. H. C. Mansfield and D. Winthrop (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), II, III, 8-12.

²⁹ Martha Nussbaum, "The Feminist Critique of Liberalism," in *Sex and Social Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 65.

³⁰ Cf. J. Rawls, *Justice as Fairness. A Restatement* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001), 163, and *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 471.

“disproportionate share of the task of raising, nurturing, and caring for their children.”³¹ It thus seems almost *regrettable* when reference is made to the necessary role the family still must play in a liberal society. Says Rawls:

The family is part of the basic structure, the reason being that one of its essential roles is to establish the orderly production and reproduction of society and of its culture from one generation to the next. [A] political society is always regarded as a scheme of cooperation over time indefinitely; the idea of a future time when its affairs are to be wound up and society disbanded is foreign to our conception of society. *Reproductive labor is socially necessary labor* . . . the family must fulfill this role in appropriate numbers to maintain an enduring society (emphasis added).³²

Now, given the problems inherent in the family, once there are new “means of (re) production,” is there any reason, they should *not* be used? It is hard to imagine what they would be. Indeed they are *assumed* when, again, Rawls continues, saying: “[N]o particular form of the family (monogamous, heterosexual, or otherwise) is so far required by a political conception of justice so long as it is arranged to fulfill these tasks effectively and does not run afoul of other political values.”³³ But we might ask more. Given the problems inherent in the traditional family, as we have known it until five minutes ago, why wouldn’t these new “means of [re]production” become *preferable*, seeing as they are more in line with the political values of liberal democracy?

Now, the desirability of new means of reproduction is obvious when it comes to “other forms of the family.” But they are equally desirable on feminist terms. ARTs, of course, have played a significant role in the lives of the older generation of motherhood-deferring feminists who found themselves turning to fertility clinics in the eleventh hour, when the urge of motherhood finally caught up with them. But now they play a dominant role among young goal-setting professionally oriented women who can strategically *reschedule* motherhood without the nagging tick-tock of the biological clock,³⁴ while avoiding the terrible plight of the previous generation who had not thought things through and who often left their fertility clinics without the desired results,³⁵ or with results, but ones bearing all the complications of older eggs.³⁶ The latest trend in gift-giving to daughters graduating from law school is an example: gift certificates to have their *eggs frozen*, for use at a later date.³⁷ All of this, together with contraception, of course, allows women to “get their ducks in a row” and achieve an individual autonomous identity, apart from that of a wife and a mother,³⁸ and *on that basis—especially their childlessness*—to allow them to become the “equals” to men. Sara Richards explains it in her egg-freezing manifesto, *Motherhood Rescheduled*: “Instead of feeling like a victim paralyzed by

³¹ J. Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, 166.

³² *Justice as Fairness*, 162.

³³ *Justice as Fairness*, 163. Cf. also *Political Liberalism*: “[T]he government would appear to have no interest in the particular form of family life, or of relations among the sexes, except insofar as that form or those relations in some way affect the orderly reproduction of society over time” (457).

³⁴ Sara Elizabeth Richard, *Motherhood Rescheduled. The New Frontier of Egg Freezing and the Women Who Tried It* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013).

³⁵ Cf. Fleming, *Motherhood Deferred* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1994) and Zoll, Miriam, *Cracked Open: Liberty, Fertility, and the Pursuit of High Tech Babies —A Memoir* (Massachusetts: Interlink Publishing Group, Northampton: Massachusetts, 2013).

³⁶ Judith Schulevitz, “How Older Parenthood Will upend American Society,” *New Republic* (December 6, 2012).

³⁷ <http://julieshapiro.wordpress.com/2013/04/29/for-the-law-school-graduate-in-your-life-gift-certificate-to-have-your-eggs-frozen/>

³⁸ “Knot Yet,” 26.

anxiety, you feel more in command of your own destiny. It is that mindfulness that makes me do what I'm supposed to do to make my life go in the direction I want."³⁹ It's about adopting a "'take charge' attitude," which, she says, "is one of our most fundamental American values."⁴⁰

Naturally, "take charge" women could avoid motherhood altogether. There are those who promote "ethical childlessness" also for the purpose of women's equality, among other things.⁴¹ But since most women still do want to be mothers, with the help of egg freezing and the whole assortment of other ARTs that go with it, they can opt for motherhood *on feminist terms*, that is, at the end of long successful career. To put it in sociological language, instead of motherhood (and marriage), being "cornerstones" of an adult life, which radically define its course, marriage and motherhood will be "capstones," "crowning achievements," or "trophies" of a long adult life lived without them. They will be enjoyed, for the most part, but they will not alter the course nor the "equality" which has been achieved on account of their exclusion and controlled admission.

As for the children born to these mothers living for the first time outside of time, their rescheduled births will be "teaching moments," in line with the very educational horizon of "reproductive labor," by "ensuring [the future citizen's] moral development and education into the wider culture...[giving to him or her]...a sense of justice and the political virtues that support just political and social institutions," as Rawls said.⁴² Children will learn their lessons: how to leave their mothers alone, by feeding and caring for themselves. Most importantly their early institutionalization will keep them from noticing the implications of the "misfortune," of being born, as Locke called it.⁴³ Or to put it in the words of the current French Minister of the Family, Dominique Bertinotti, their early day care will "wrest from them every possible social, philosophical, familial, and religious determinism."⁴⁴ In time they too will become like their mothers, free and unattached, ending up just where they began!

The Women and Work issue

At the end of the day, the problem with motherhood for "equality" feminism is that it *comes at the wrong time*, getting in the way of the establishment of an independent subject. This is particularly clear in the recent debate over the women and work. That debate was sparked by a Anne-Marie Slaughter, a Princeton economist appointed to the Obama administration in his first term in office, who stepped down from that job and explained *heretically* in her *Atlantic Monthly* article "Why women still can't have it all" (July 2012). With an unusual frankness about her desire to be with her teen-age sons, Slaughter committed the unforgiveable sin and admitted to a few *real*—not "socially constructed"—gender differences, chief among which is the fact that women *don't feel the same way as men do about being away from their children*, notwithstanding the availability of around-the-clock nannies (for women like Slaughter, obviously). "Deep down I *wanted* to go home...[not just] I *needed* to go home," she says. And citing a recent study which found that women are *less* happy now than they were in 1972, and not only, but *relative to men*, Slaughter, made a sort missionary appeal to women to

³⁹ Richards, Sarah Elizabeth. *Motherhood, Rescheduled: The New Frontier of Egg Freezing and the Women Who Tried It* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013), 243.

⁴⁰ *Motherhood Rescheduled*, 10.

⁴¹ The French feminist E. Badinter, in particular, advocates for such childlessness (*The Conflict: How Modern Motherhood Undermines the Status of Women* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2012), 141.

⁴² *Justice as Fairness*, 162

⁴³ *The Second Treatise of Government*, VI. 56.

⁴⁴ Cited by Mons. Jean Lafitte, "Is Religious Freedom Possible in a Liberal Culture?" Washington, DC. Feb 22, 1013, http://www.familiam.org/pcpf/allegati/4200/Laffitte_speech.pdf, 11.

join her on the “happiness project.” “Let us rediscover the pursuit of happiness, and let us start at home,” she cries, rallying her new sisters.

In her article Slaughter makes an appeal for the “full range of women’s choices” in reverse, so to speak, where the “choices” in question are things like being home for dinner—even making it! —nursing an infant, pushing a child on a swing, watching a baseball game, or sitting down with a troubled teenager, things that involve *being with* one’s children, not just *managing* them. And she does so with a kind of argument—not just “choice,” we might add redundantly. Women are different when it comes to their children, and so are children when it comes to their mothers. This argument comes forward in the *kinds* of solutions Slaughter offered to her own plight and that of her younger sisters: flexible schedules, extensions on the tenure clock, recognition of family hours (dinner time, week-ends), and the long-overdue challenge of the idolatry of work (for everyone, men included). This all seems reasonable. Leaving aside for the moment that *mothers are already working* when they are “just” mothers and homemakers, women are different when it comes to their relation to (outside) work and family. Why not, then, Slaughter argues, make changes in the world of work so that they can contribute to it while not having to “give up on things that define them as women,” as she put it.

Slaughter, of course, is making her confession at the eleventh hour, joining millions of other women who have decided to cast off the expectation of others in the cause of abstract equality. But now, with her in their ranks, they have some authorized relief from all that “fatuous talk” and “airbrushing of reality” associated with “having it all,” as they have told her gratefully. But it wouldn’t last for long!

Any attempt to re-think the terms of the relation between woman and work is met with the most adamant resistance. It questions the unquestionable article of faith that the equality between man and women will be achieved only when women are doing the same things as men, at the same level of intensity and single-minded purpose, and with matching wages. It makes no difference that after decades of education in the curriculum of the “girl project,” young women themselves are deciding not to get on the famous “ladder,” knowing now full well that they *could* get to the top, or deciding to step down from it, like Slaughter—if you call going back to a full-time position at Princeton “stepping down.” It is simply *not allowed* to think that there is anything to this except “stereotypes” perpetuated by malevolent forces in society, by “the man,” so to speak, threatened as he is now by all of the progress towards women’s equality. And any evidence brought forward to suggest that it is better that infants have mothers who nurse and hold them, that small children have mothers who spend *quantity* time with them, that teenagers have mothers close at hand, or that mothers themselves, not doing these things, feel restlessly torn between work and family—all of this is inadmissible evidence. It gets in the way of the project of equality and of its “choice” which is of *one kind and one kind only*.

Facebook’s Sheryl Sandberg made that (one) choice perfectly clear in her book that was rushed to the presses in the wake of the Slaughter article. Her book, *Lean In*,⁴⁵ and now the many *Lean In* “communities” together with the influential *Lean In Foundation*, enjoins women to resist, in addition to all the external pressures, the *internal* obstacles which cause women to lean out when they have children or start thinking about having them: the “ambition gap,” “the self-doubt,” “leaving before they leave.” These obstacles really do seem to be there, but, these, she says, are nothing but the stubborn psychological effects of those all-pervasive stereotypes. There is nothing objectively *there* in the care of infants, babies, and young children that places anything on a mother that can’t be done by any other interchangeable adult. (After all, she grew up free to roam all over the neighborhood with her siblings

⁴⁵ Sheryl Sandberg, *Lean In. Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013).

and friends without a mother always “hovering about.”) Not even breast-feeding offers her evidence to the contrary. That fact just gets tossed into the realm of the “biological imperative” which does nothing but offer obstacles to be overcome through technological means. Sandberg doesn’t ask why it might be that this “was simply not something my husband was equipped to do.” In the face of this and all other kinds of “obstacles,” there are few questions. Rather, just a lot of *leaning away* from what is staring one right in the face. And all of this reasonless rhetoric so as to encourage women to *lean in*, to choose, that is, the (one) “choice” of the (one) “dream”: a future “without limits,” which for Sandberg is limited to holding a power job, unhindered by children and any remaining un-cooperative fathers.

The limitations of the “choice” and the “dream” it serves are even more clear by the kinds of policy changes that the Sandbergs and others like her want (and don’t want) in order to address the problems of women and work. In her recent book on “*The Conflict*” between feminist goals and certain nagging baby-friendly trends in America, the French feminist Elizabeth Badinter is annoyed by the family-friendly solutions that women such as Slaughter are calling for—the kind that exist in Scandinavian countries and in Germany—because these solutions go in the direction of women opting (sic!) to stay at home more rather than less.⁴⁶ In Sandberg’s terms they encourage *leaning out*. And since *leaning out* leads to an even greater “salary gap” the overcoming of which is the (one and only) measure of “equality” between men and women, the only acceptable solutions are those that make it advantageous for women to make the one (good) choice, solutions such as publically or corporately-funded day care (starting at infancy), longer-school days and years, “innovative summer camps,” and tax codes weighted in their favor, things which encourage women to “make the right choice.”⁴⁷

It is important to see that for all the talk about “choice,” there is always only one real acceptable choice for these authors. By way of flipping the terms of the debate around (as well as the burden), the issue isn’t really about whether “it’s ok” for women to work (and not feel guilty about it)—putting aside, once again, the fact that a mother is always already working *as a mother*. It is rather *whether or not she is allowed not to work*—especially not at a power job—and thereby be complicit in “wage inequality.” Obviously, no one would be caught dead saying she couldn’t. If we all are supposed to “chart our own course” that too must be an option, *so long* as it is chosen for no other reason than pure (empty) “choice.” Reasons such as the more powerful leaning of women and children towards more quantity time with each other, tied to the unique capacity of women to conceive, bear, and nurse children—the leading suspects in the “subjection of the woman”—are *not* legitimate. At the very least any social and political encouragement of a “gendered division of labor”—by making it less costly—should be eliminated just to “make sure” it is voluntary (as Rawls suggested).⁴⁸ To put it in other terms, the question is if there is any real legitimate and respectable choice for women other than to make common cause with the dominant idea of equality—*equality of sameness*—and serve the ideal

⁴⁶ E. Badinter, *The Conflict*, 136, 159.

⁴⁷ All of this is in step with the N.O.W. who has a history of countering such measures and, going back further, with the equity feminists who made their beds with the industrialists by helping them oppose laws against child labor and the protection of women from industrial abuse, thereby giving them a whole new pool of unencumbered, efficient workers.

⁴⁸ Proposals in the realm of tax law and social welfare regarding day-care, school hours and days, are offered, to push against the natural tendencies towards a sexual division of labor, and make sure, that where it still exists—it is not *actually* forbidden after all! —it exists for purely *voluntary* reasons. Writes Rawls: “To say that this division of labor is in this case fully voluntary means that it is adopted by people on the basis of their religion, which from a political point of view is voluntary, and not because various other forms of discrimination elsewhere in the social system make it rational and less costly for husband and wife to follow a gendered division of labor in the family” (*Political Liberalism*, 472). See also Anthony Giddens who insists on the same point in *The Transformation of Intimacy* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1992), 195.

household of its regime: a two full-time power career household, in thrall to the corporate economy (for most of its meals and consumer goods) and the State and its institutions for welfare (for the care and education of its A.R.T. assisted late-conceived children). Noting the affinity of “equity feminism” with the industrialized work place, especially as regards the hegemony of “choice,” Christopher Lasch wrote in one of his essays on women:

The [feminist] movement recognizes only one choice—the family in which adults work full-time in the [industrialized] marketplace. Its demand for state-supported programs of day care discriminates against parents who choose to raise their own children and forces everyone to conform to the dominant pattern as the irresistible product of social developments analogous to the development of technology, which automatically renders old ways obsolete. The two-career family represents ‘progress,’ and laggards have to fall in line. Such is the logic feminists have borrowed from the marketplace.⁴⁹

Let me note quickly here that notwithstanding all the talk about women “having it all,” family *and* work (in a power career), one has very little of the former (if not also, perhaps, of the latter). We know what has become of the home in the “work-life balance” when it is treated to the (one) official choice. It is not the work place that gets short shrift. It does not take much to imagine what becomes of the home when there are two full-time power-job careerists sleeping in the master bedroom. To put it in a nutshell, it becomes a place with nobody in it, where very little happens among those who sleep there, much less with their friends and neighbors. The home itself becomes a shell of its former self. If there is a baby, there is no nursing of the baby (in the well-appointed nursery), no taking walks to the park, no witnessing first steps (at the “wrong time”), no informal neighborhood clubs after school, no gathering of teen-age friends under watchful eyes, no real cooking (in the gourmet kitchen), no dinners with friends (in the non-existent dining rooms), no neighborly charity for sick friends or new mothers. In short there is no *quantity* time together. And there are definitely no un-organized and un-institutionalized children roaming around neighborhoods freely on bicycles; because there is no longer what Sandberg takes for granted when she did just that: an invisible maternal presence in the background. You really *can't* have it all. And neither, apparently can the children who are now in “safe environments” and “enrichment programs,” cared for, for the most part, by “qualified professionals,” but rarely by the ones to whom they belong.

But we could also speak about how little real work there is as well. If the home is effectively empty, what is it precisely we are working for? What is striking in Sandberg’s book is how she thinks about the careers she has and wishes for all of her *lean in* sisters. It is tautological. The reason to have a career is to have a career, or, at the very most, to “effect change” (i.e. more day care, longer school days and school years) so that other women can have a career to have a career. Nothing is said substantively about the *reason* for work, about what, or whom, it serves. There’s no mention even of just making a living for one’s own family. Work isn’t in *relation* to anything. Even within the work place itself, it is her hope that one day women won’t have to play by the “archaic rules” for women of negotiating from the point of view of the common good (using “we” language) and just look out for themselves (“as men do”). Now that the world of work has absorbed the home, Sandberg would take one of the initial feminist projects of domesticating the world to its polar opposite: every woman for herself.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ *Women and the Common Life: Love, Marriage and Feminism* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co, 1997), 118.

⁵⁰ We should also mention here the logic of corporate institutions themselves. As Lasch said, institutions “have a life of their own quite independent of the qualities of the people who manage them,” making it difficult for non-“lean in women”

The “Feminine Genius”

Naturally, women have always worked and always will. The question then is not about whether or not they work, but whether or not the work specific to them counts for work—whether it is “equal” to men’s work, that is—and whether or not that work has any relation to whatever work they do beyond that. These are the crucial questions. And their answers will determine to a large extent how and when women will have their children, now that that too is optional.

St. John Paul II is well known for what he had to say on this matter. Referring to the work specific to women, he spoke of the “genius of women,” tied to their capacity for motherhood by virtue of which they are “entrusted with the human being in a special way.”⁵¹ “A mother welcomes and carries in herself another human being enabling it to grow inside her, giving it room, respecting it in its otherness.”⁵² Her “genius” is her “sensitivity for what is essentially human.”⁵³ This is why he urged societies not to stigmatize or penalize financially women who do have children if they spend most of their time caring for them, and to ensure that women who do engage in other work have a work schedule so that they don’t have to choose between “relinquishing their family life or enduring continual stress, with negative consequences for one’s own equilibrium and the harmony of the family.”⁵⁴ He thought, moreover, that this “genius” belonged to women *as such*, regardless of whether or not they were physical mothers, and that it gave form to all of their activity. For this reason he urged women who engaged in other work to do so *from the point of their motherhood* (physical or spiritual) and thereby humanize structures which risk, more than ever, to dehumanize man, subordinating him to the norm of usefulness.⁵⁵ We might call to mind here the many women of the “maternalist movement” —all in the Democrat party—many of whom entered public life, and assumed positions of responsibility in the government of Franklin D. Roosevelt. These women promoted things that had as their horizon not androgynous individuals, but men and women as actual or potential fathers and mothers, together in a home with children. Pushing back against the industrialist tendencies to flatten these distinctions in the meat grinder of “equality” (of sameness), they saw in the distinct needs and responsibilities of men and woman *a bond to be strengthened*, not relaxed. To *that* end they proposed changes to tax and labor law—including the family wage and “mother’s pensions” for widows—and established countless institutions and campaigns that promoted motherhood and home life.

The rediscovery of the “feminine genius” by John Paul II, and by Chesterton and the “maternalists” before him, is refreshing to many women, for many reasons, not the least of which is that it puts the finger on something deeper than mere (empty) “choice.” It names what they experience, even when—especially when—they are exerting so much energy to stifle it, by *leaning in*.⁵⁶ Their “experience of deprivation,” as George Grant would call it, has in many ways opened them up

to make the work-place as we know it more family friendly (*Women and the Common Life*, 116).

⁵¹ *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 30.

⁵² *Evangelium Vitae*, 99.

⁵³ *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 30.

⁵⁴ CDF, *On the Collaboration of Men and Women* (2004), 13

⁵⁵ *Letter to Women*, 2

⁵⁶ The rediscovery of the “feminine genius” must, of course, include other rediscoveries. Writing about the sexual division of labor in *Women and the Common Life*, Christopher Lasch points to the real problem that set up the contemporary devaluing of the feminine genius at home and the jettisoning of it altogether in the work place. He credits Betty Friedan for putting her finger on it in her *Feminine Mystique*. Friedan’s point, says Lasch, was not so much to tell women to get out of the house and get a job, but rather to consider what had become of the home and the situation women now found themselves in for the first time—in the new version of the “stay at home mother.” When the suburbs were created, said

to another way of thinking about equality along the lines of the “feminine genius.” This is clear in the recent book *Cracked Open*⁵⁷ written by Miriam Zoll—who, among other things, worked for Planned Parenthood and served on the board of *Our Bodies Ourselves*.

Describing her independent, driven, and motherless life, up until forty, she writes:

By the time I turned forty, my career had become the center of my life and my purpose for living. It was the identity by which I measured my value and my worth...I began to feel the first pangs of motherhood. I was very careful to submerge these sensations, placed them far out of view behind all the other 'important' deadlines I needed to meet.⁵⁸

After Zoll succumbed to those “sensations,” knocked at the fertility clinic, and left empty-handed. She writes:

[J]ust because the doctor appointments, the injections, the egg transfers, and the dashed hopes are over, it does not mean that the trauma is over. The sense of violation that many women say they still feel years later, coupled with the deep, deep sadness of not having borne a child, lingers in our lives like a persistent mosquito buzzing in a dark room.⁵⁹

There are other “deprivations” associated with the fertility clinic, even if one doesn’t leave empty handed. There are sex-less procedures, degrading “collections” and “reproductive tourism” (looking

Friedan, the “traditional family” came into being as an entity now fully cut off from the world of culture and work; and it dwelt in a home that was now the full expression of the “haven in the heartless world” it had become at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. As for that home, not only did it stand at a distance from the centers of culture and work, it was not itself centered around any other meaningful hub— churches, town halls, greens—other than the shopping mall. Add to that the fact that the house itself had little land on which to grow food, and no work spaces in which to can and store it, or make anything else for that matter that was truly needful, much less to operate a cottage industry of any sort, and you had the recipe for the “comfortable concentration camp,” and the *ennui*, loneliness, and “nameless dissatisfaction” that so often filled it. Lasch connects the problem identified by Friedan to the general problem of the new economy which had “no other object than to keep people at work and thus to sustain the national ‘capacity to consume’ ...all without reference to the intrinsic quality of the goods and services produced or the intrinsic satisfaction of the work that went into them” (Lasch, 110), nor, for that matter, to the true satisfaction of those *for whom* one worked. The problem, according to Lasch, was that what was going on in the work place was affecting the home even if it was thought to be an island of domesticity far from the rat race of the new consumer economy. The work that was going on in the home was as unreal as the work going on outside of it, especially now that it was the prime target of all the new ready-to-use convenience items and appliances, not to mention the disposable and programmed-for-obsolescence products. This was what Friedan was getting at, said Lasch, when she described the excessive housewifery (in “spotless” houses) and obsessive attention on children that had all the telltale signs of make-work for bored women. In addition to the fact that work in the home didn’t seem to be very real, it was also cut off from any larger common purpose. This became particularly clear in childrearing. Surprisingly enough, thanks to the fathers of the fifties, who, as a result of their disenchantment with a “heartless world” were embracing the “new fatherhood,” as a “second but real career.” But just as the work they escaped from at the end of the day had become purposeless—devoid as it was of workmanship and real usefulness—so too would childrearing...eventually. What was one bringing up a child into? Says Lasch: “when adults devoted themselves exclusively to the child’s world, there isn’t much world for the child to grow up into in the next stage. In order for a father to guide his growing son, it was necessary for him to have a community of his own and be more of a man” (112). As with work, if childrearing wasn’t connected to anything else, it couldn’t justify itself and be satisfying. All the more so, as Friedan had suggested, for the one whose specific “genius” was tied so directly to the child. On this theme, see my article, “A Women’s Work is Never Done,” (*Humanum*, Spring 2013).

⁵⁷ *Cracked Open: Liberty, Fertility, and the Pursuit of High Tech Babies* (Northampton, Massachusetts: Interlink Publishing Group, 2013).

⁵⁸ *Cracked Open*, 61-62.

⁵⁹ *Cracked Open*, 186-87.

for surrogate mothers).⁶⁰ Then too there are also the concerns of those who left the clinic with the desired results but are noticing alarming trends in the children they brought into the world in this way.⁶¹ In the end Zoll makes a confession that would have de Beauvoir organizing a protest in her grave:

Ironically, for the first time in my life I had actually wanted my identity to be defined by my female biology. I wanted my daily routines to be dictated by an infant's needs rather than having to actively choose and construct a life.⁶²

There are many such confessions from feminists such as Zoll showing how much nature has come back to bite them, as they stood over it resisting it as de Beauvoir had advised. One would think that we have learned our lessons. But just as the alarms have started to ring there is a new resurgence of the old line supported this time with political force, such as the new health law which promotes delayed motherhood through the “right to contraception” *on the grounds of* “furthering the governmental interest in promoting gender equality.”⁶³ (We can presume a similar “right” to ARTs on those same grounds). There are also the other long-desired policy moves in the wings, policies to keep women from *leaning out*, when motherhood finally does come along. They are usually buried in claims about the educational needs of children, even babies. All of these moves will enable and entrench habits of *leaning in* by making motherhood easier to delay, more successful when it is finally entertained, and making it a negligible factor in the concrete life of a woman, when the desired baby finally arrives and has to be fed and cared for. It will make it harder for young women, therefore, to see that the issue is not just a matter of being more technologically strategic than their anguished fore-sisters, but of re-considering the whole feminist project root and branch, that calculating, lonely, and sterile project of “making our lives go in the direction we want.” We can only hope, then, that nature will bite back...again...and that there will be witnesses of a happier way: throwing oneself no holds barred into what Kierkegaard called the “most important voyage of discovery a human being undertakes,”⁶⁴ immersing oneself in life, with all of its twists and turns and all the necessary adjustments along the way.

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⁶⁰ A.T. Fleming’s account in her *Motherhood Deferred* is perhaps the most frank.

⁶¹ Cf. Judith Schulevitz, “How Older Parenthood will Upend American Society,” *New Republic* (December 6, 2012).

⁶² *Cracked Open*, 125.

⁶³ *The Affordable Care Act*, Health and Human Services.

⁶⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life’s Way*, edited and translated by H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988), 89.