



# Humanum

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BOOK REVIEW

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## Almost Beyond Feminism

KATRINA TEN EYCK

**Suzanne Venker and Phyllis Schlafly**, *The Flipside of Feminism: What Conservative Women Know – and Men Can't Say* (WND Books, 2011).

**Daphne de Marneffe**, *Maternal Desire: On Children, Love, and the Inner Self* (Back Bay Books, 2005).

At issue in the two books is the question of the relationship between women and work. The authors approach it from opposite sides, so to speak; Venker and Schlafly are self-described “conservative women” who want no place in the feminist movement, while de Marneffe is a self-proclaimed feminist who is seeking to delve further into what best serves women. However, both books are pursuing a topic that, despite nearly a century of feminism, remains a point of tension, if not contention. And the tension, as all of the authors recognize, is suffered most keenly by working mothers.

Venker and Schlafly set out to show that the situation and history of women as presented by feminism is little more than a mythology that has its source in the unhappy lives of a few women (Betty Friedan, for one). Not intending to deny real oppression suffered by any woman, they do reject the narrative that feminism is the force that has single-handedly reversed the fortunes of women. Rather, the two authors argue that the feminist movement has crafted an ideology that, now fully permeating the atmosphere of our society, has become a roadblock to any constructive thinking about women's equality and is even detrimental to women's happiness. Venker and Schlafly borrow Jessica Valenti's definition of feminism: “Feminism is a structural analysis of a world that oppresses women, an ideology based on the notion that patriarchy exists and that it needs to end.” Feminism presumes that the family has oppressed women by keeping women subservient in the home and away from self-actualizing careers that grant financial independence.

The core of the argument is found in the second chapter of the book, “Feminism 101: Uncensored,” along with a brief overview of some of the beginnings of the modern feminist

movement, the so-called second-wave feminists, which are distinguished from the early suffragettes, who, outside of seeking the vote for women, shared very few ideals with the second-wave feminists and those who have followed. The rest of the book draws out this argument as it focuses on the various areas influenced by feminism: dating and sexual relationships, marriage, women and work, politics and law, and the sidelining and deprecation of men's role in culture. In the final chapter, the two authors rehash the toll feminism has taken on culture, and offer a their vision of a better path for women.

Venker and Schlafly argue that the feminist movement has created something of a mythology that is now accepted as historical fact. Beginning with works like Betty Friedan's book *Feminine Mystique*, a social problem was "manufactured," namely that "society is to blame for the plight of the American housewife," who is bored, depressed and wasting away in "comfortable concentration camp" (p. 29). According to Friedan, and many feminists since, a woman who chooses to do the menial tasks of caring for the domestic concerns of her husband and children has forfeited any real contribution she could make to her society, wasted her intellectual resources, and failed to thrive both as a woman and as a productive member of society. So long as the housewife was not paid for her work, the feminist movement, at least the more radical side of it, could see nothing more than slavery. Similarly, radical feminist bemoaned pregnancy, and the humiliation and servitude to which it consigned women. In this way, a history of oppression was fabricated, when in fact American women are some of the most privileged people on the planet. Venker and Schlafly suggest that the typical American housewife was far from feeling oppressed, as was much more engaged in her society than the feminists ever allow. Furthermore, the social forces that would bring women more into the workplace were already in motion before feminism arrived on the scene.

Central to the feminist movement's idea of liberation, and moreover what has become "politically correct" thinking in general, is that every dimension of a woman's life ought to be under her control: whether she works, has children, and does or does not remain at home to raise them. They saw the housewife as determined by structures more powerful than her, and wished to secure the freedom of self-determination of the sort they presumed that men enjoyed. Feminists interpreted equality for women to mean that women should be treated as men are treated; in fact, for all practical purposes, considered *as* men. Differences in her psychology, physiology, and biology were ignored for the sake of securing her equality on masculine terms. And this is exactly what Venker and Schlafly take issue with: the feminist understanding of who a woman is, when taken to its ultimate conclusion, will radically alter society by displacing the family as the governing social form. This leads to radical social instability, the effects of which we are already seeing.

The biggest impact is on young women and the American family. No longer are marriage and family the aims that govern a woman's choices, even if they are still the goals that she holds most dear. Thus a young woman pursues a career, dates (or what passes for dating in a hook-up culture), and generally prepares for adult life as though she will never marry and bear children. This might entail an expensive education, various sexual relationships, moving far away from her family and support network, working long hours in a demanding profession, and spending no time learning about tasks related to the home or child care, let alone understanding her own fertility. Hence, when marriage and children do come, the woman finds that family life conflicts with the path she has been traversing.

Juggling a demanding career alongside marriage and family is not only difficult, it can often bring unhappiness to women, their children, and their husbands. Working mothers suffer extreme tension and guilt as they divide themselves between caring for their children and home and the demands of work. This in turn places stress on marriages, which too frequently

end in divorce. Indeed, one of the slogans of the feminist movement is that *women no longer need men*. No wonder that men are not sure what to expect from a liberated woman or how to relate to her. In a situation where all difference is denied, and each individual is considered to be autonomous, it is difficult to find a form that could reunite the family. The remedy often proposed by feminists is better child-care services, funded by the government. In the final account feminism costs a great deal: women conceive of themselves as victims, children are raised in day-care centers, men have become superfluous to the family, women are unhappy and often burdened by guilt, divorce has skyrocketed, government (the caretaker of the oppressed) has become bigger and more intrusive, and the unique value of motherhood is denigrated. Feminism contributed massively to social instability.

Clearly, Venker and Schlafly cast doubt the feminist movement's claim to have brought progress for women. They point out that they term "progress" simply means that feminists have succeeded in gaining public and government support for their agenda, not that women are happier, healthier, or better contributors to culture. In fact, insofar as feminists reject any concept of nature, they also reject any standard by which one could measure progress. Thus, what progress has come to mean is that the family, moral norms, and "nature" have been deconstructed, and that women are earning more money, have more access to power, and can take (technological) control over their reproduction. But what is systematically overlooked is the question of happiness, and the fact that many women, perhaps even most women, when it comes to the way in which they live their own lives, simple do not want the life of a liberated women – divided between work and children, and relying on the government to fill in the gaps.

Venker and Schlafly argue that the famous "glass ceiling" simply does not exist. Rather, most women simply do not want to invest the number of hours that positions at the top require (and most men who do are supported by a wife who is caring for the economy of the home). Rather, many women find the home and childraising to be interesting, full of joys along with the struggles, and even to be a realm in which they feel fulfilled. Despite feminism, women still want marriage, and are willing to sacrifice work and independence to have it. For these women, the progress of feminism runs counter to their own aspirations.

Venker and Schlafly expose a deep cynicism at the heart of feminism, a fear of dependence, of sacrifice, and of any binding relation to another that asks of a woman to give herself freely. Unfortunately, however, this critique is couched in a polemical, dialectical style that simply falls short of an adequate critique of feminism. Feminists are depicted as self-serving conspirators out to destroy society, as though none of them were genuinely seeking true freedom. The authors advocate a return to conservatism, which they define as believing in a given moral order, human nature, and fundamental differences between men and women. However, they fail to offer a robust definition of any of these, nor do they seek to reflect on what true femininity might be. They leave unquestioned whether the socio-economic forms that preceded the feminist revolution truly valued women, the family, or even men. They acknowledged that the past century has seen a dramatic change in socio-economic forms (which they credit for much of women's advancement in the workplace), due to two world wars and numerous technological developments, without ever questioning what these changes have meant for the family, or whether they might have set the stage for the success of the feminist rhetoric. They seem to suggest that a return to a modified version of the 1950s would serve culture well.

Venker and Schlafly fail to explain why feminism was able to convince a generation. If the early, more conservative decades of the last century were so satisfactory, why have we had the immense cultural upheaval of the past sixty years? They champion the conservative value of

sacrifice, arguing that women cannot “have it all” as the feminists promised, but can have a good deal of it over time, if they make the appropriate sacrifices at the appropriate times. However, the exhortation to sacrifice does not really engage the central question: how is one’s own “self-fulfillment” related to serving the life of another? In their lack of nuance and failure to give more than a moralistic exhortation, Venker and Schlafly leave themselves open to the critique that they are just as unreflective as the women of the second wave.

On the final page of their book, Venker and Schlafly invoke Abraham Lincoln who, apparently, once said that “most folks are only as happy as the make up their minds to be.” The authors’ final, and unconvincing, conclusion is: “For women, the answer lies in our decision to be satisfied” (p. 183). In this strangely stoical conclusion, Venker and Schlafly seem to suggest that the answer to what ails women is to shut down her desire for “more,” her desire for self-determination, and, instead, to satisfy herself with the limitations that nature, biology, and the moral order lay upon her. However, it is precisely this desire – a very natural desire – that the feminists have cherished and wished to unfetter from artificial limitations so that it might bloom in freedom. In fact, the desire for self-determination and for freedom is part of that which opens the human person up to the world, that sets the will into motion, that gives the possibility of making responsible choices. It would seem to be an essential part of what it means to be human.

Is it really enough to critique feminism without showing that the very thing feminists cherished most is answered more profoundly by obeying the limitations of nature than by restructuring society according to a blueprint that denies any idea of nature or feminine difference? Venker and Schlafly would like to have accomplished just that; but without a deeper reflection on nature, freedom, and desire they do not have the tools for the task.

Ironically, Daphne de Marneffe’s book goes much further in critiquing feminism, simply because she takes the concerns of feminism seriously while at the same time paying attention to what she found to be common among women: the desire to mother their children, which she labels as “maternal desire.” What sets de Marneffe’s book apart is that she allows her experience of maternal desire, which contradicted much of what she believed about women and work, to lead her to explore the many questions around this topic. Her book has something of contemplative style about it. She has pondered, studied, researched, and evaluated her own experiences as well as many of the current claims being made about women and work in light of the discovery of this desire to mother her children. She weaves together in her book personal experience, psychological theory and studies, philosophy, and works of fiction as she seeks to understand the meaning of this desire.

In many ways, de Marneffe, along with the countless examples of women she invokes, serves to exemplify the picture of modern women influenced by feminism that Venker and Schlafly painted. She is an ivy-league educated psychologist who embarked on a successful career only to discover that she could not balance work and children because her immense desire to mother her children continually interfered with doing her job. She shows exactly the way in which the technological and sociological changes of the past century have made “mothering” a choice and not a fate. However, once it became a choice, women bear the burden of the choice as never before. There is pressure on women both to have and not to have children, pressure to keep her children from affecting her work, pressure to be a good mother; she is responsible to plan her fertility and her career in a perfect harmony, and is left without support to deal with the pain of failing to do so.

The women of today, de Marneffe observes, are not dealing with overcoming a model of womanhood that pressured women to remain in the home; rather, she is stuck in a model that

overtaxes her by demanding that she do it all: career, marriage, and mothering her children. And while women's career interests and desire to have children is affirmed, what is not affirmed, what is not spoken of is that some women, nay *many* women, desire to stay at home with their children.

De Marneffe sees that the desire is difficult to speak about precisely because it does not fit neatly into the societal ideas about progress and self-growth in identity. Discovering who one is, according to dominant ideas, is a matter of progressing in one's education and career, learning about what one likes to do, what one is good at, and playing that role within society. Motherhood, on the other hand, cannot be measured in the same terms of progress, but rather has to do with "becoming" (p. 16). Motherhood no longer fits into our cultural framework because of the "sense that preserving one's selfhood depends on shutting out an interest in children" (p. 17). But this means that mothers are caught in a vicious place. Society affords no space to motherhood, little support for mothers, and no public dialogue about it.

De Marneffe's critiques of feminism resonate with Venker and Schlafly, without however reaching to the same conclusions. She values feminism for aiding women, although it has failed to account for maternal desire, and is perhaps responsible for the current stopgap measures on any public discussion about or acknowledgment of the public value of motherhood. De Marneffe accounts for the forgetting of motherhood by the fact that it, more than anything else, distinguishes woman from man and can become the basis for treating women differently than men. De Marneffe is not unaware of the many forces that altered the economy, and with it life in the home and our understanding of motherhood. When the center for producing goods (cloth, soap, candles, etc.) moved from the home to the factory, the mother's role underwent a reduction. Previously, she had shared in her husband's work; now their work devolved into separate spheres. De Marneffe treats the historical changes that radically impacted the family with more nuance than Venker and Schlafly, and thereby indicates the possibility for a critique of the both the feminine sphere/motherhood and the masculine sphere/fatherhood. De Marneffe also faults feminism for failing to attend to the complex history of motherhood, tending instead to collapse childcare with housework (drudgery), and a recent type of sentimental femininity with motherhood, facilely rejecting the entire lot in crafting a new sphere for women.

By focusing on maternal desire de Marneffe wishes to restore some of the complexity and nuance to the way in which we speak about women. She firmly believes that feminism deconstructed a model of femininity that was inadequate. She sees feminism as championing and securing for women the dignity of determining their own lives. However, it failed women in painting motherhood as inimical to self-development. She writes, "the challenge is to formulate a way of thinking about the self that does justice to mothers' *range* of goals; the particular facet of that challenge that concerns me is understanding mothers' desire to care for their children as a feature of their self-development and self-expression, rather than as its negation" (p. 25).

What emerges in de Marneffe's account of maternal desire is the fact that mothering a child does not undermine a woman's development. Her chapter "Pleasure" is given over to examining the many ways in which mothering children is pleasurable for women precisely because it is the discovery of meaning in relationship to another. De Marneffe describes motherhood as an *integrating* experience, one that is capable of "knitting together our physicality, our unconscious wellsprings of desire and need, and our conscious intention and awareness" (p. 94). Motherhood calls upon the whole of a woman, which is precisely why *coerced* motherhood is so detrimental to the mother and the child. Although society rarely tends to value the skills that motherhood requires, de Marneffe points out that "What many

mothers find satisfying in mothering is precisely such an exercise of skills, and the contribution that exercising those skills makes to the complexity and richness of oneself and one's child" (p. 114). De Marneffe is adamant – motherhood at its best is the discovery and development of one's self in being with one's child. Moreover, it is essential for a culture to flourish, and hence must be protected; women must be supported in their decision to mother.

However, as de Marneffe points out in the very next chapter, there remains a strange and difficult ambivalence surrounding motherhood. It exists in the fact that the same mothers who delight in their children can also feel as though their children are keeping them from another, richer life. It is also found in the messages that women should not be too affected by their children, or the embarrassment a woman feels in admitting to a desire to have children. Perhaps it emerges in women's feelings about their perception of their own mother. De Marneffe has her finger on two realities in this chapter. One is the tension that exists between a culture that ascribes little meaning to motherhood and the rich experience of being a mother. The other is the simple fact that motherhood alone cannot and does not fulfill a woman. Her desires extend beyond motherhood, like a wound that cannot be healed, even by all the beauty she discovers in her children and her motherhood.

De Marneffe's work is in fact too large and too vast to give sufficient treatment in a short review. Her research is thorough and her discussions of each topic are thought out and often full of insight. She is to be admired for her attention and patience with a topic that our society makes very difficult to think about. However, I would like to venture two critiques of her work. The first is what I perceive to be a contradiction between her experience and her manner of speaking about women. As de Marneffe beautifully shows, a woman fully experiences motherhood when she no longer tries to control *how* she will become herself, but grants another being a determinative power over her. She shows how the mother becomes more than she could have expected in becoming a mother. The experience of being a mother surpasses her desire to become one. In a certain sense, in choosing to become a mother, a woman chooses more than she is aware of; she chooses to receive a superabundant reality. The experience of motherhood seems to suggest that human fulfillment is more than a matter of self-determination; rather, that it has to do with freely choosing to welcome the presence of another and be changed accordingly. Fulfillment is more than self-determination and determination by another, freedom is more than autonomy.

However, the standard definition of person that we as a society have adopted is that of a self-determining individual. De Marneffe herself employs this definition everywhere: women are responsible for determining their lives, and must be given full space to do so. This is best summed up by a woman's procreative rights, which, for de Marneffe, should be expanded from the right to abortion and birth control to the specific rights in the work force that affirm a woman's choice to have children (sufficient maternity leave, flexible work hours, funded child care, etc.). Thus, she herself tends to reduce motherhood to one decision among a host of decisions that a woman can make to determine herself.

This comes out most clearly in her chapters on abortion and women in adolescence. De Marneffe describes pregnancy as a relation to another, about which a woman must decide whether to "involve" herself further or not (p. 245). (Notably, de Marneffe recognizes her position would be barbaric if personhood were ascribed to the fetus, an ascription she rejects). She describes adolescence as a time of learning the management and control of one's body, and laments that most teenage girls exercise this control in a shallow concern with physical appearance instead of the richer possibilities now available to her.

If, as de Marneffe recognizes, the reality of motherhood is not allowed to enter public

consciousness, it is precisely because motherhood exceeds the categories we have accepted for speaking about persons and society. It is not accidental that maternal desire is disregarded in our society; this disregard has everything to do with the inadequate vision of the human person as a self-defining, autonomous individual. We cannot think about motherhood without allowing it to revise our understanding of what a woman, a man, a child, and so on really are – and ultimately our understanding of reality itself. Maternal desire, both in de Marneffe's book and in our society, is very much in danger of simply being reduced to one more element we must manage in our attempt to make ourselves whatever we choose.

This leads to the second criticism. De Marneffe fails to spend adequate time examining the wondrous fact that maternal *desire* exists at all. She certainly goes a long way in showing its persistent nature, and that even the most radical feminists felt it keenly (often realizing their desire too late, bitterly regretting their barren wombs in their later years). This desire, which opens a woman to welcoming and cherishing the existence of one who is irreducibly other to herself, is something that should make us stop and ponder. Despite the dominance of technological thinking that attends only to how to manipulate the other for the greatest effect, and sees everything as available matter for use, there exists in women (and men) the desire to receive and welcome another who cannot be controlled. Motherhood, as de Marneffe acknowledges – when it becomes a matter of manipulating children for the mother's self-fulfillment – is destructive of both the child and the mother.

At its best, maternal desire is the desire to welcome another being who is free, and to nurture that life into its full freedom. This openness to the freedom of the other and the presence of the desire that makes it possible is striking. However, de Marneffe tends to make it into something that must be managed and controlled, which once again is inadequate to what we see in the desire itself. Openness to another cannot be managed, organized, and placed within an effective plan, precisely because this openness implies allowing something greater than the self to enter in. If desire means openness, and maternal desire means an openness that is characterized by a welcoming love, then this desire is profoundly contradicted by a society that is filled with technological managers pursuing maximal efficiency.

De Marneffe has hit upon the theme that has the possibility of revising all of our thinking about work and economy, but it is precisely here that she does not go. Ultimately, maternal desire is for her something that mainly concerns women, and not the cornerstone upon which all of culture could be built; it is not, as it should be, the source for a constructive criticism, a feminine criticism, of our technological society. It should open for us the need for a maternity not only as an option for self-fulfillment for some, but as a condition for the fulfillment of the human person. It is remarkable that de Marneffe has seen so far, and lamentable that she refused to allow herself to see the ultimate meaning for all of culture implied in the universal experience of motherhood: "When I saw him and heard him cry, I was overwhelmed with emotion, and when the nurse placed him in my arms I felt that I had *knowledge* of something very powerful that made life completely comprehensible" (pp. 93-4).

