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BOOK REVIEW

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Most Important Job in the World

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Ann Crittenden, *The Price of Motherhood: Why the Most Important Job in the World is Still the Least Valued* (Picador, 2010, 322 pages).

Ann Crittenden's work *The Price of Motherhood* is an attempt to demonstrate two things: first that work in America is not compatible with motherhood and, second, how work can be "made" to "fit family life" (p. xii).

To demonstrate the former she makes the following economic observation: despite the importance within economics of human capital, the job that "produces" human capital the most, motherhood, is adversely affected by two disincentives: the mommy tax and the assumption that the husband is and ought to be the breadwinner on whom the wife is totally dependent (p. 11). The mommy tax is the "lifetime income a woman can expect [to lose] by becoming a mother" (p. xii). In economic language this is called an "opportunity" cost: the cost incurred by doing one thing rather than other. She notes that our society writes this off as proper to motherhood, which is defined as an unpaid "labor of love."

Furthermore, there is a tax on women who have minimal income because they are taxed at the husbands' upper tax bracket. Married spouses cannot file as individuals, and married filing separate is not equivalent. Woman's economic dependence on man in marriage is, she argues, one of the greatest risks for poverty. Crittenden's entire argument rests on divorce arrangements where, legally, the husband can leave without almost any sacrifice to his standard of living while the wife and children are left in squalor.

In her attempt to make work fit motherhood (and motherhood fit work as we have conceived it), Crittenden suggests that the government mandate that employees have a right to a year's paid leave by employers, and that employers provide full pay and benefits for part-time workers equal to the hourly wage of full-time employees. She also suggests that the government should include under the heading "workers" unpaid people who care for anyone,

making them eligible for unemployment/workers compensation “in the event of divorce... and job related injuries” (p. 263). Additionally, the government should add unpaid housework to its measure of GDP. She thinks that universal pre-school for all three- and four-year old children is a must, because “we have seen that quality early education is beyond the means of most parents, just as most parents cannot afford the full costs of primary or secondary education” (p. 264).

According to Crittenden, the government should allow the mother at home to deduct child-care expenses when she files her taxes independently, and the government should pay every mother a certain amount each year for each child she has (because statistically mothers are far more likely to spend money on their children than fathers, who spend it often on themselves – see pp. 110-130). Furthermore, the government should pay health care costs for all children and their primary caregivers. She also suggests that marriage be divided into two tiers: the married without kids and those with kids. Among the latter, all things are to be legally owned by the family and not the “head of household.” The spouses would split all the effects of divorce equally and not equitably. A single Federal agency in charge of post-divorce payments would allow for more efficient tracking and force “deadbeat” dads who withhold payments to pay.

Finally, the community and government should support and educate parents, and people with child-care experience should be considered with “blacks, Hispanics, Asian-Americans, and women” when it comes to diversity (p. 274).

Crittenden's conception of marriage is, from the beginning, essentially shaped by divorce. This is so much the case that the middle and final chapters are centrally concerned with divorce. Economic dependency (and any other dependency for that matter) are, and cannot but be, conceived as detrimental to the person (p. 110). This oppositional understanding of the relation between the sexes is her fundamental anthropological presupposition. Not only are man and woman essentially opposed to the full flourishing of the other (even if they may sometimes work well together), but authority is essentially arbitrary (p. 48), and freedom is not ordered to the Good. Moreover, children are seen as detrimental to “future freedom” (p. 162). Freedom is therefore conceived of in indifferent and individualistic terms from the beginning. This explains her understanding that having a baby is the choice of an individual woman (though this may be influenced by other factors), and not first of God and then the spouses.

All this being the case, Crittenden's economic argument requires qualification, since the bulk of her studies regard not healthy marriages (that is, marriages that from the beginning assume that two become one irrevocably) but “divorced” marriages. This focus results in statistical evidence that does not address good marriages but “broken” ones. In other words, her critique of marriage is not of marriage *per se*, but of marriage understood from the beginning in terms of divorce. This implies that anthropologically man and woman are best and most human when fundamentally divorced. It is the antithesis of communion in any real sense.

Moreover, Crittenden constantly refers to Sweden, Norway, and France as manifestations of her pro-feminine policies. However, these nations are even further below the replacement rate than the United States. Their “pro-family” policies have not led to an increase in progeny. This indicates, it seems to me, that what we are dealing with is not first policies, but worldview. Those nations, like America, concede that marriage ought to be understood in a fragmented way, in terms of divorce. Additionally, those nations are not economically better off than the USA (assuming of course that wealth is measured in the normal way – an assumption I would want to challenge). But my point is, that even in terms of family life, those nations are not better in obvious ways: divorce rates are high, marriage rates are low, and birth rates are

significantly below the replacement rate.

Crittenden states: “We’ve gone down the path of ‘equal’ treatment and it’s gotten us so far. But not far enough” (p. 44). Perhaps it is because of the path of equal treatment that we have not gone far enough? Perhaps it is because in order for woman to thrive in production – and because we have conceived of everything in terms of production – there is and cannot be a place for fruitfulness, in either its masculine or its feminine form. All of the cited studies address marriage or work conceived in terms of the modern worldview, in light of divorce and contraception. I would therefore propose challenging both the modern conception of marriage *qua* divorce and motherhood, fatherhood, and work *qua* production with the ideal of irrevocable faithfulness and fruitfulness.

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