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A New Feminism

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The following is adapted from the 154th Commencement address delivered at Hillsdale College on May 13, 2006.

Having recently written a book on manliness, I have been asked whether I have anything to say on femininity or womanliness. I do, but it takes the form of suggestions. I don't want to speak for women, as I think that each sex needs to speak for itself. It is quite natural for each sex to take its own side, and women will never simply accept a man's view—particularly not today, when they have acquired the habit of speaking for themselves. But I think they will listen, careful judges that they are, to suggestions from a friend.

How could a man be a friend to women? I notice that men who speak on behalf of the feminism of today—which I hope will become the old feminism—are tolerated even though they presume to put words in women's mouths. These men are manly defenders of the women who they say do not need to be defended by men. Though they act in manly fashion to protect women, they forswear the manliness that inclines them to perform this duty. With their deeds, they contradict their words.

For too long, manliness has been silent in its own defense; for too long, it has been silenced by the voice of feminism. Yet feminism in the phase that began in 1963 with Betty Friedan's book, *The Feminine Mystique*, was directed against femininity, not manliness. Femininity was the feminine mystique that had been imposed on women by men in order to subordinate women, even enslave them. According to Betty Friedan, the ideal of femininity set women on a pedestal where they would be admired



and adored by men. In this pose women were not masters or mistresses but servants who did little they wanted to do for themselves. Disabled and passive, they lived for their families and their husbands. Apparently admired by men, they were in fact controlled by men.

The feminists of the Sixties and Seventies were hostile to manliness more for its name, which seems to exclude women, than for its qualities. They attacked the male chauvinist pigs who wanted to keep manliness for themselves; these men were *sexists*—a new label then—for believing that only males can be men. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), an earlier and more fundamental book than Friedan's, had argued that women were not different from men by nature, but only by history. It was a history of oppression by men that kept women from being as aggressive and assertive as men are. With the title of her book, Beauvoir implies that men live a better life than women, that manliness is better than femininity. Since women are perfectly capable of manliness, that quality should no longer be named for one sex. Beauvoir renamed it "transcendence," a gender-neutral term. The gender-neutral society was born and manliness as the quality of a sex was demoted to masculinity, a title that signifies such homely features as the hair on your chest and your face.

Femininity Destroyed

Thus feminism, in its eagerness to claim manliness for women, destroyed femininity. We began to see gangster movies with lovely actresses playing the role of hit men. Some feminists denounced the manly passion for competition and war, but in doing so they had to be careful not to imply that women are unsuited for business or for the military. Since the Sixties, we have become used to seeing women in men's occupations. Yet the gender-neutral society created by today's feminism is not in fact as neutral as it claims. Despite its dislike of the *word* manliness, it is on the whole friendly to the *quality*, now under a new name, more neutral and prosaic, such as "leadership." On the one hand, the world seems to have been feminized, yet on the other hand, it is still a man's world, and in a strange way even more so, because both sexes are now engaged in employments that reward the manly qualities of aggression and assertiveness.

In sum, women have shown themselves capable in careers formerly closed to them, but

seem no longer to enjoy the pleasures of being a woman. They know how to imitate men but are confused about how to remain women while doing so. Having started from the rejection of femininity, women's identity necessarily becomes a search without a guide. To see confusion in action, all you have to do is watch the television show *Desperate Housewives*.

On that show you see that women have not really been liberated by the gender-neutral society. Men and women are not the same, as the gender-neutral society of feminism claims. Nor are men and women merely different. They are both same and different. Formerly society recognized the differences between the sexes, and with laws and customs accentuated those differences. Now society does the opposite: it recognizes the similarities and accentuates them. There is no society without social pressure in one direction or another. Whereas before women were *held back* from the careers they could have attained, now they are *pushed* further than they may want to go. In this new situation women do need an identity; they need a feminism to replace the tradition we once lived by. But they need a *new* feminism, one that does justice to the differences as well as the similarities between the sexes.

Finding a New Feminism

My first suggestion is to abandon Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* as the authority for women. Beauvoir taught women to seek independence or autonomy. These are fine-sounding words, but in practice they mean independence of one's husband and children. A few women may put such independence to good use, but for most it makes no sense to be deprived of a loving husband and to avoid or despise motherhood. Beauvoir's radical prescription of autonomy makes women uneasy; it is responsible for the fact that today so many women reject the label of feminist despite the benefits they believe they owe to feminism. Beauvoir thought that women could become equal to men only by becoming autonomous, as she believed men to be. She was moved, therefore, to deny that there was any natural or essential difference between men and women. And to be certain of this point, her followers insisted that there were no essential differences of any kind; to believe that essential differences do exist is a sin called *essentialism*. But the feminist rejection of essences too

George C. Roche III

Hillsdale College is sorry to announce the passing of its 11th president, George Charles Roche III.

President Roche died Friday evening, May 5, in Louisville, Kentucky.

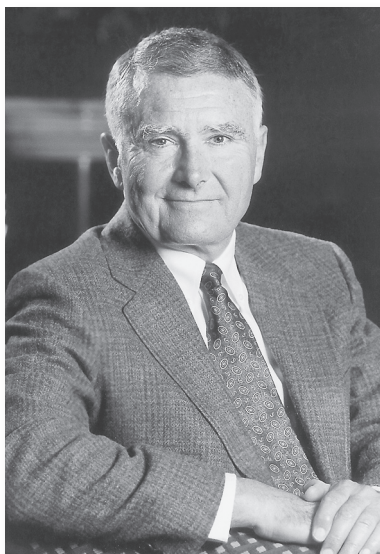
Born in 1935 in Colorado, President Roche was a graduate of Regis College and the University of Colorado, from which he received his M.A. and Ph.D. in history. He is the author of 13 books.

President Roche was appointed the 11th president of Hillsdale College in 1971. He served in that office for 28 years until November 1999. Under his leadership, the College continued and extended its policy of refusing all forms of federal government support. In 1977, efforts were made by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare to subject all colleges whose students received any form of federal aid to the full range of federal regulations. This included even those colleges that refused every form of direct aid.

Hillsdale College refused to agree. In 1984, it lost its case before the Supreme Court and faced the prospect of the loans of all its students and graduates being recalled. Rather than submit, the College organized a private loan fund on the guarantee of its own credit and began to supply privately based financial aid to replace the federal support.

Under the leadership of President Roche, the core curriculum of the College was expanded, its devotion to the traditional liberal arts curriculum increased, and its commitment to free market economics deepened.

The College's national speech digest, *Imprimis*, was launched early in the presidency of President Roche. Its national leadership seminars and its on-campus conferences were



May 16, 1935 – May 5, 2006

expanded under the titles Shavano Institute for National Leadership and the Center for Constructive Alternatives. The College's national reputation and academic standards increased significantly during this time, and its physical facilities were improved extensively. Its largest building, the George C. Roche Health Education and Sports Complex, and several other major buildings were completed during his presidency.

In a tribute to President Roche written for a gathering in his honor last November, Hillsdale College President Larry Arnn spoke of the moment when the federal Department of Health, Education, and Welfare threatened to call in all the loans of the College if it did not submit:

Having worked here for a while myself, I have some ability to measure the difficulty of that moment 29 years ago. It would take a strong-willed man to see the College through a moment like that. It would take shrewdness, and it would take fortitude. It was important for the College that those qualities were present in its leadership at that moment. Those of us who must now carry on are grateful that it was here.

President Roche is survived by his wife Dean, and former wife June; children George IV (Akiko), Muriel (Jeremy) Peters, Maggie (Chad) Murphy, and Jacob; sister Peggy Brockway; grandchildren George V, and Patrick, George and Mary Kate Murphy.

In lieu of flowers, members of the family request donations to the Foundation for Children with Autism at the University

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should be abandoned as contrary to common sense and productive of mischief. You can say that men and women are not different, but if you try to live your life by that belief you will make many unnecessary mistakes. To be for autonomy and against essentialism is over-dramatic theory unworthy of women's plain good sense. Nor is it beyond the capacity of philosophical women to say why it is wrong in theory.

A second suggestion following the acceptance of sex differences is to respect the manliness of men. Manliness is the character of men that makes them insist on being men, on distinguishing themselves from women and also from unmanly men. Manly men reproach unmanly men, but merely look down on women, who are excused from manliness. After all, they are women. To accept differences between the sexes is to tolerate this apparently irrational prejudice of men. "A man needs to feel he is important." I came across this statement in a professor's book made by an uneducated woman about her husband; in her embarrassment for him, she generalized the fault to all men. But it is true of most men and it may not be a fault. Human beings need to feel important so that they believe that what they do for good or ill matters in the grand scheme of things. Manly men who stand up for a country, a cause, or a principle help all of us to feel important. Women want to feel important as well, but usually in a different way; they want to be important *to* someone—to their children, to their man. Men, poor dears, have a more abstract sense of importance than women that is also more egoistic. Women may be vain, but men are conceited.

Women have an intuition of this difference, but today's feminism does not allow them to think about it. A new feminism would encourage women to consider how they differ from men and what this means for their lives. One thing it does not mean is that women should give up their careers and simply return to the kitchen. Women's careers are here to stay. No doubt many women would be relieved to learn that they are not required, out of duty to their sex, to take a man's job and work a man's hours for a man's pay. But careers should be open to women on an equal basis to men. The career part of the gender-neutral society has worked pretty well and to the satisfaction of both sexes. It would work better if there were less pressure on women to prove they are equal to men by imitating men. Women do not have to have the same careers, or

careers to the same degree, as men.

To accept this idea does not make women the second sex, subordinate to men. For the importance that manliness claims, and the self-importance that manly men easily adopt, does not receive or deserve automatic respect from women. Women can judge; they are great critics of others and of themselves. Manly men may initiate great enterprises in politics, smaller ones in business, and in courting be the first to make a pass—someone has to make the first move if the human race is to continue—but women are the best judges of men, particularly in private. Women judge and criticize their men, the ones they love. A judge does not initiate the case, but by judging the judge is elevated above the parties to the case. So coming second can be the superior role.

The Double Standard Reconsidered

Next, a new feminism might want to abandon the obsession with sex that is such a dubious feature of present-day feminism, whether radical or moderate. The women's movement hit the American scene just after the sexual revolution of the Sixties. As part of that revolution, women were for sure treated disrespectfully, enlisted, for example, as camp followers of the rock groups of that era. Yet for reasons of its own, feminism made an alliance with sexual liberation. Beauvoir and her radical followers believed that autonomy for women required them to be just as promiscuous as men, indeed as the most predatory men.

The traditional double standard of sexual morality had been higher for women than for men, but feminists posited that men could get away with anything. Rather than trying to elevate the standard for men's sexual behavior up to that of women, as nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century feminists proposed, the Beauvoir feminists proposed to lower the standard for women down to that of men. The result of abolishing the double standard has been to do away with any standard. Moderate feminists such as Naomi Wolfe have begun to have second thoughts about this result.

We know, of course, that the practice is not as bad as the theory, for most American women are more modest, and most men less bold, than they have a right to be according to the feminists. A new feminism might want to take account of this fact. It could point out that promiscuity is a man's game that women cannot by nature play on equal

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of Louisville, Attention: Development Office, The STAR Program, Fairfax Building, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY 40292 or to St. Rose of Lima School in Hastings, Attention: Mike Sweeney, 707 South Jefferson,

Hastings, Michigan 49058 (the school where his grandchildren attend).

The achievements of President Roche are remembered with respect on the campus. The College extends its deepest condolences to his family and many friends.

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terms. Women have three disadvantages: they get pregnant, they contract sexually-transmitted disease more easily and more seriously, and most important, they suffer more from heartache than do men. Men, with their abstractness, their obliviousness, their disregard, are furnished with the mental equipment for an exit strategy from sexual encounters, as women are not. The double standard accommodates this inequality between the sexes and deserves to be reconsidered.

More positively, it may be time to recover women's modesty as a virtue. Why do both sexes have to be ambitious for conquest? The moral authority of women is a heavy counterweight to the physical superiority of men. With that authority, women have a right to say no to any proposal or proposition from a (generally stronger) man that does not suit them, and be obeyed. But men's willingness to obey depends on women's being held to a higher standard of morality, especially sexual morality, than men. If a woman cannot say, "How dare you!" to a man, her defenses are sapped because without a moral objection she has only her whim to rely on. In response, a man will think and will say, "Why not? We are equal and so my desire is equal to yours." The feminists in their desire for unattainable equality threw away this advantage for women even as they made use of it. For the means they used to gain equality—*raising consciousness*—was designed to shame men, not convince them. It was an exercise of women's moral authority more effective than argument.

The present-day feminist notion of autonomy takes no account of women's domesticity. If women were autonomous, they would not want to live in a home. Let us not be too romantic about a home—much housekeeping is drudgery—but let us not sum it up as a necessary evil, either. To a woman, home is where your husband lives and where your children learn. In the best and also in the normal case, it is suffused with love. For the great majority of human beings, happiness is found in a happy home. To be the manager of a home is the moderate

and attainable ambition of most women; it is the place where they find honor and joy. It is where they most readily find "recognition," if we must use that word. The husband must make a contribution to the home, and there are tasks which by nature and convention are his; to these we may add, from them we may subtract, in particular cases after negotiation by the parties. The result is that each home will be its own. Yet the woman should want to be in charge and take responsibility for the home, for to give her husband an equal responsibility would be to lose her sovereignty over the whole. Does a prudent woman want to let her husband decide when the house is clean?

A Return to Happiness

The problem for a new feminism is how to combine home and career. This is obvious, but present-day feminism in its zeal to leave femininity behind does not address what is obvious about women. Its only idea is government-funded day care. Day care of some kind we need, to be sure, but the premise of government-funded day care is that work comes first. What if work and family are both first? This is what women mean, I think, when they say that they "want it all." The difficulty in combining work and family is not merely that they compete for a woman's time, though of course they do. It is that they require completely different attitudes. To be successful at work, a woman must have something of a man's ability to concentrate and to set aside distractions. To be a good mother, however, a woman must always be open to distraction and actually welcome the interruptions of a child who, in the first years at least, always thinks he is entitled to 100% of her time. How can these opposed attitudes be made into a rhythm of life, relieving rather than infringing on each other?

To return to happiness, women need to take their equality for granted and dismiss it from

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their present concerns. Perhaps that is how most women live today, but they are constantly prompted by the feminism of our time to yearn for an impossible, utopian equality between the sexes in which no differences are tolerated. We need to go back toward the sex roles of the past but not all the way. What we need are expectations—as I would call them—for women and for men, social conventions that give guidance in general but permit exceptions and encourage negotiation for different circumstances. Especially in private life we need to make it honorable again that a woman be a woman, and a man a man. Let the state be gender-neutral, but society needs the responsibility that comes from knowing what is expected of your sex.

My last suggestion for a new feminism is that it need not be so political as the feminism we have, the feminism whose slogan is that the

personal is the political. It would be better if the personal were *not* political, if women of our day were not required to advance the cause of woman. The “battle of the sexes” will never die, for men and women have different outlooks and will never quite see eye-to-eye. The old feminism tries to overcome that basic truth by compelling us to live under the aegis of gender neutrality. It sounds like liberation but it isn’t. A new feminism would accept the difference and make the best of it. A new feminism would have its problems too, but I believe it would come as a relief.



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