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WOMEN'S EQUALITY: THE FINAL REDEMPTION

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to correct a historical error, one that I will argue is at the heart of the contemporary feminist movement: the ancient claim, grounded in a flawed understanding of the reproductive act, that woman is inferior to man. I will show that the lineage of this can be traced as far back as the pre-Socratic philosophers, finally finding its earliest concrete expression in a claim most have either dismissed, forgotten, or never heard: Aristotle's argument that women are merely "malformed males" and are therefore "inferior to man". The theory found support in the first century with a historical interpretation of Genesis 2:18-23, traceable in particular to the Hellenistic Jewish philosopher, Philo (BC 13-AD 54). Philo's own theory about woman echoed that of Aristotle's; his legacy includes the vague feeling that Scripture itself declares that, since woman is created after man, she is necessarily subservient to him. She becomes, as it were, the "second sex". The combination of Aristotle and Philo proved too persuasive even for the mind of St. Thomas Aquinas and the theory accelerated and then spread through the university system inaugurated during the Middle Ages, subsequently informing the social structures and norms of Western civilization, going mostly unchallenged throughout human history, silently persisting even into the present time. This error represents what can be called a chronic "wound" in our intellectual tradition. And it is a wound that must be healed. I argue that the antidote is to correct this account and that it can be defeated on its own terms. Through the lens of Hebraic and Aristotelian-Thomistic anthropology, and building on the insights of St. John Paul II, I provide a robust, philosophically and theologically grounded account of man and woman from within the Catholic exegetical

tradition, showing that man and woman are both equally human, equally endowed with intellect, will, and freedom while at the same time reflecting two different ways of being in the world.

KEYWORDS

feminism, woman, genesis, creation, equality, difference

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feminizm, kobieta, rodzaj, stworzenie, równość, różnica

INTRODUCTION

At the heart of this paper¹ is the conviction that the contemporary feminist movement is at war with a historical error – Aristotle’s ancient claim – declared rather unequivocally sometime around 300 BC – that women are merely “malformed males” and are therefore “inferior to man”.² It is time finally to correct this clearly false assertion. For this was not a passing remark. Aristotle then sets about demonstrating it – and its corollary – that man (*qua* male) represents the prime analogue of what it is to be human. This claim, now hidden from view to the contemporary mind, is found at the origins of Western civilization. It has been variously assumed, buried and unacknowledged, dismissed and ignored as ancient history, or rejected as the meaningless claims of a sexist white guy who is no longer relevant. But the truth is that its impact has been reverberating throughout our history. I suggest that it is this very error that we – and feminists everywhere of every persuasion – have failed to acknowledge and adequately combat. It is why we are still at work on the effort to sort out what it means to say that woman is man’s equal. From where I sit, at least in the American context, it

¹ Some of the text and much of the research included here has been published previously in “The Journal of Religions”, in the article: D. Savage, *Redeeming Woman: A Response to the Second Sex Argument from within the Catholic Exegetical Tradition*, found at <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/11/9/474.33>

² Aristotle, *The Generation of Animals* (transl. by A. L. Peck), Cambridge 1942, p. 716a, 9-17. I hasten to say that I am not one to not reject Aristotle’s entire achievement as a result of this error, any more than I think we should throw out his legacy because he argued that the earth was at the center of the universe. Clearly, we stand on his shoulders in terms of his larger anthropological framework, as well as his ground-breaking advances in science and biology, in metaphysics, political theory, and ethics.

is apparent to me that women are still fighting the invisible and mostly unspoken assumption that the male of the species is normative for the species.

As I show in the paper but can only point to in this brief summary of my findings: the lineage of this assumption can be traced as far back as the pre-Socratic philosophers, finally finding its earliest concrete expression in the thought of Aristotle; its validity was confirmed by the first century Hellenistic Jewish philosopher, Philo (BC 13-AD 54) who argued that the same truth was discernible in Genesis. The combination of Aristotle and Philo proved too persuasive even for the mind of St. Thomas Aquinas and the theory accelerated and then spread through the university system inaugurated during the Middle Ages, subsequently informing the social structures and norms of Western civilization, going mostly unchallenged throughout human history, silently persisting even into the present time. This error represents what can be called a chronic "wound" in our intellectual tradition.³ And it is a wound that must be healed if woman is ever to arrive at that which she desires most: an unshakable, perduring respect for her person, the hope of a genuine sense of personal well-being and happiness, and the chance to become who she is meant to be. In other words, her birthright, which, it appears, is not yet hers to claim.

My argument here is that an authentically radical feminism is one that affirms **without apology or hesitation** – the nature of woman – both the human capacities she shares with man and the ones that differentiate her from him. It is time to insist that cultural norms and policies recognize woman for who she is *in her totality*, without bracketing or minimizing her astonishing capacity to bear and nurture human life – but inclusive of it. I will show that both reason and Scripture reveal that we need not imitate the proclivities of men to be fully human. We have our own proclivities, some of which we share with them – and some which constitute our unique and essential contribution to the tasks of human living. It is time those gifts earned the recognition and respect they merit. It is time to affirm woman *qua* woman.

In what follows, I offer a brief outline of Aristotle's argument and the basis of his claim, then turn, also briefly, to Philo's contribution, and then finally offer a sketch of my own proposal.

ARISTOTLE ON MALE AND FEMALE

Aristotle's metaphysical treatment of sex identity is complex, reflecting a synthesis of several interlocking elements. It begins with the category of opposites and his theory of contrariety. This framework also permits him to account for

³ *Ibid.*

a critical element in his theory of generation.⁴ The principles that serve as the basis for his sex polarity theory are deduced from his conclusions in both categories.

First, along with many of his predecessors, Aristotle argued that there were two pairs of primary opposites: cold and hot, moist and dry. The interaction of these primary opposites was understood to result in the four elements of fire, air, water, and earth.⁵ We need not linger over those distinctions. The pair of most interest to us here will be that of “cold” and “hot”.

Now in Aristotle’s account, in any pair of contraries, one is always in some sense a “privation” of the other. By definition, a privation is not a simple negation but refers to the lack of a quality or form normally required by the nature of a thing. That is, one side of the pair is “prime”; the other is defined by a lack of something required by the nature of the thing itself.⁶ Privation is complete non-being, with no identity of its own; it will only exist in reference to something that has a nature.⁷ But it lacks that which the prime instance possesses. For example, in our pair of contraries “hot and cold”, cold is defined in relation to heat; it is the privation (absence) of heat. And this example gives us a starting place with which to understand Aristotle’s account of sex identity and the basis of his arguments concerning the superiority of the male.

Aristotle argues that man and woman are in the same genus and species but that they are “contraries” within the species.⁸ And since, as he claims, in every pair of contraries, one is prime and the other is a privation of that which the prime possesses, this also must be the case with man and woman. It is this reasoning that leads him to conclude that woman is a “privation” of the male, that is, she is without human characteristics that, as a member of the species, she *ought* to possess. And thus, she is a “malformed male”.⁹ And, in Aristotle’s mind, this conclusion is directly supported, indeed “validated”, by his theory of generation.

It was common in Aristotle’s time to declare that the male of the species possesses greater heat than the female, actually an observable empirical fact.¹⁰ Aris-

⁴ Indeed, he himself makes the connection for us in the *Metaphysics* as he unfolds his theory of contrariety. At the end of his basic explication of contrariety, he states: “This is why the same seed becomes female or male by being acted on in a certain way”. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* (in:) R. McKeon (ed.) *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, New York 1941, p. Bk X, 9, 22-23: 1058-9. We will come to understand his meaning in what follows.

⁵ P. Allen, *The Concept of Woman*, Vol. 1: *The Aristotelian Revolution*, 750 B.C. – A.D. Grand Rapids 1997, pp. 93-94.

⁶ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* (in:) *The Basic Works*, p. Bk IX, 1004b, 27.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. Bk X, 1055-1056. See also, P. Allen, *The Aristotelian Revolution*, p. 91.

⁸ Aristotle’s account of contraries is laid out in the *Metaphysics*. See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, especially p. Bk X, 4.

⁹ Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, p. 716a, 9-17.

¹⁰ In a 2015 study, Dutch scientists found that women are more comfortable at a room temperature of 75-76 degrees Fahrenheit, whereas men prefer the temperature to be around 72 degrees. See B. Kingma, W. van Marken Lichtenbelt, *Energy consumption in buildings and female*

totle found in this biological “fact” – that the male possessed more heat than the female – clear evidence of the superiority of the male, arguing his greater heat is a constant and represents a “superior value” in reference to the relative coldness of the female. It is his theory of generation that leads him to this conclusion.

Aristotle argues that the male’s blood – and therefore his seed – is different from that of the female since it undergoes a process of purification only possible in the male due to his greater heat. He further declares that it is the presence of heat in the male seed that is the cause of the male’s fertility.¹¹ He argued that the coldness of the female made her infertile, stating elsewhere that the female “lacks the power to concoct semen out of the final state of nourishment because of the coldness of its nature”.¹² The male is characterized by the ability to “cause to take shape, and to discharge semen possessing the principle of the form [while] female is that which receives the semen but is unable to cause semen to take shape or to discharge it”.¹³ She provides only the material on which the heat of the male seed acts.¹⁴ Thus in the generative act, man provides the form; woman provides the matter.

As the reader is no doubt aware, these conclusions are themselves further grounded in Aristotle’s theory of hylomorphism.¹⁵ I assume that this audience is familiar with the theory and I will not take the time to unpack it. But we know that form is the active principle; it acts on the matter. Matter is the passive principle; it “receives” the form. Form is active; matter is passive. And, as we have already stipulated, Aristotle’s theory of generation leads him to conclude that man supplies the form, woman the matter. And so, inevitably, man, therefore, is active and woman is passive.¹⁶

Taken together, Aristotle’s theory of generation, and of contrariety, grounded as it is in the hylomorphic theory of composite substances thus can lead to only one conclusion: man is the prime instantiation of the species; woman is defined by

thermal demand, “Nature Climate Change”, August 2015, <https://www.nature.com/articles/nclimate2741.epdf>

¹¹ P. Allen, *The Aristotelian Revolution*, pp. 95-96.

¹² Aristotle, *Parts of Animals* (transl. by W. Heinemann), Cambridge-London 1937, p. 728a, 1327. Also quoted in P. Allen, *The Aristotelian Revolution*, p. 97.

¹³ Aristotle, *Parts of Animals*, p. 765b, 10-18. Also quoted in P. Allen, *The Aristotelian Revolution*, p. 97.

¹⁴ Aristotle, *Parts of Animals*, p. 641b. Also quoted in P. Allen, *The Aristotelian Revolution*, p. 91.

¹⁵ Though its validity has been questioned by some, it provides a very reasonable and coherent account of both living and non-living substances as well as a point of departure for many other important metaphysical conclusions. It is not under dispute here. It is his application of this theory to the nature of woman in relation to man, informed as it is by his account of contrariety as well as of generation, that is problematic.

¹⁶ The notion that matter is pure receptivity or passivity was introduced by Plato. One of Aristotle’s most important contributions to the history of philosophy was to argue that matter was not merely passive as in inert; he argued that it possesses a potency in relation to act.

lack. She is a derivative and incomplete instantiation of the species *humanum*.¹⁷ She is a “malformed male”.

Aristotle argues that, though women have the same kind of reason as men, since the higher reason has no authority over the lower, irrational powers in woman, her reasoning ability is necessarily inferior to that of man. Woman can form true opinions but cannot possess wisdom.¹⁸ With regard to virtue, woman can possess specifically womanly virtue but cannot be virtuous in the same way a man is. And since woman is by nature passive, she cannot be judged by the same criteria as man. Her virtue is to obey, man’s is to rule. A woman finds virtue, not in being clever, but in finding a clever man to obey.¹⁹

Such claims sound outrageous to modern ears; they have no place in our understanding of man and woman. Aristotle’s conclusions regarding woman in relation to man are ruled out of court by both sound reason and subsequent developments in scientific knowledge. While we can acknowledge the fact that he is operating with faulty premises, derived from the “scientific” account of the generation on offer at the time, (as well as those that reflect the prejudices of the era), there is no doubt that Aristotle’s convictions concerning the nature of woman in relation to man provided a starting place for the work of subsequent philosophers on questions of sex identity.²⁰

But it is also true that Aristotle is not the only one responsible for the persistence of the latent sex polarity theory we still encounter today. The impact of Aristotle’s work was accelerated by an interpretation of Scripture quite friendly to his account.

THE CRITICAL INFLUENCE OF PHILO

We have seen how Aristotle’s understanding of the act of generation proved fatal for his account of the nature of woman in relation to man; it can be said to be the starting place of his sex polarity theory. This error would persist for centuries, informing the thinking of many of Aristotle’s philosophical heirs. But it also makes an appearance in the thought of a very influential student of the Platonic tradition, the first-century thinker, Philo of Alexandria. It was Philo who introduced the theory of sex polarity into the interpretation of Scripture, thereby multiplying its impact on the trajectory of the Western intellectual tradition.

¹⁷ P. Allen, *The Aristotelian Revolution*, pp. 92-93.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 103-104.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 111- 11.

²⁰ P. Allen, *The Concept of Woman Vol II: The Early Humanist Reformation 1250-1500*, Grand Rapids 2002 p. 65.

Philo of Alexandria (13 BC – 54 AD) was a Hellenistic Jew and a contemporary of Jesus and of St. Paul. His significance as both a philosopher and a theologian is well-established; he was one of the most important Jewish authors of the period.²¹ He made many lasting contributions to our intellectual heritage. His significance is indisputable, extending well beyond our concerns in this paper. We will focus our attention on one particular text, his *Questions and Answers on Genesis*.²² It is here that we find his theory of sex polarity and his interpretation of Genesis 2, our main interest.

Now Philo was really a Neo-Platonist but he constructed a theory of sex polarity remarkably similar to that of Aristotle's. Though scholars dispute what influence Aristotle might have had on him, it is clear that Philo's account mirrored Aristotle's in almost every way, including its starting place in a similar understanding of woman's role in the act of generation. Without question, Philo's writings would be relied on by many future scholars as support for the Aristotelian concept of woman.²³

Though Philo's theory has some interesting nuances, it won't be necessary to provide a detailed description here; it would mean simply repeating much of what we have already learned about the Aristotelian account, at least in its conclusions. But, unlike his philosophical forbears, Philo developed a theory of sex polarity from two distinct but, for him, intertwined sources: philosophy and reason, and revelation.

The conclusions Philo reached through philosophy and reason are, at least in principle, based in science. Since he laboured under the same flawed scientific assumptions found in the earlier philosophical traditions, that woman's contribution to the act of generation was a passive one, we easily recognize his conclusions from this first source. He declares that "the matter of the female...produces the foetus...but the man provides the skill and the cause...the male provides the greater and more necessary part".²⁴ In other words, the man provides the form and the woman the matter. This is precisely Aristotle's conclusion, grounded in the same flawed biology, articulated in a different language.

But Philo's second source is scriptural, specifically the first two chapters of Genesis. We see his method at work in his interpretation of Genesis 2: 21-22, when woman is created out of man's rib. Here Philo seems to both discern and simultaneously validate a theory of sex polarity. He declares that this passage both reveals and confirms the inferiority of woman. This is thus, in Philo's account, a "first principle" derived from Scripture.

²¹ D. M. Scholer, *The Works of Philo* (transl by C.D. Yonge), Massachusetts 1993, p. xi.

²² Philo, *Questions and Answers on Genesis* (transl. by R. Markus), Cambridge 1953. Quoted also in P. Allen, *The Aristotelian Revolution*, pp.189-193.

²³ *Ibid.*, 190.

²⁴ Philo, *Questions and Answers*, ch. 47, pp. 242. See also P. Allen, *The Aristotelian Revolution*, pp. 189-193.

Why was woman created from the side of man and not from the earth? Because, says Philo, “woman is not equal in honor with man”.²⁵ Because woman is made from the side of man, we can say that she takes longer to come into being: “woman is a half of man’s body” and “since the moulding of the male is more perfect than, and double, that of the female, it requires only half the time...whereas the imperfect woman, who is, so to speak, a half-section of man, requires twice as many days...”.²⁶ At least in his account, Philo’s more philosophical conclusions are thus confirmed – indeed, *revealed* – by the Scriptural text. They provided what was taken as a first principle for subsequent interpretations.

Like Aristotle, Philo also cannot be held solely responsible for the legacy of sex polarity. But because of his great influence on subsequent scholars, both philosophers and Scriptural exegetes, his interpretation had an incalculable impact on the understanding of woman’s place in the created order: she was created second and is therefore secondary in importance and status.²⁷ It was this interpretation of Genesis 2 that moved forward in history; combined with other sources, it would come to justify the assumption that the revealed word of God illuminated man’s superiority over woman.

These two thinkers, Aristotle and Philo, taken together, shaped subsequent accounts of woman in relation to man. They will merge as important influences in the theories of sexual polarity found in two of the most influential thinkers writing and teaching at the height of the medieval period: the Jewish philosopher, Moses Maimonides and St. Thomas Aquinas.²⁸ The assumptions made by both Aristotle and Philo wound their way into the structures and methods of the academy just as the modern university began to take shape. And in 1255, Aristotle’s works became required reading throughout the University system at the time – and the rest is history. In this way his philosophy came to dominate and

²⁵ Philo, *Questions and Answers*, ch. 27, pp. 15-16.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, ch. 25, pp. 14-15.

²⁷ This is not to say that the Gospels, or the writings of St. Paul, or the authors of the other books of the New Testament were influenced by Philo’s understanding of woman as secondary and therefore inferior. There is no evidence to support that and it would be incorrect to suggest it. To offer a general interpretation of the passages in the New Testament where women are mentioned would be beyond our purposes here. Much more research needs to be done to offer an interpretation of such passages, especially those found in the letters of St. Paul, in light of the theory under consideration in this paper. Certainly, it is legitimate to speculate, perhaps even assume, that St. Paul would have been aware of the prevailing theory of woman’s role in the reproductive act and would have considered it to be valid; that was the science of his times and he would have been familiar with the Greek and early Jewish thinking on this score. But the hermeneutical key to St. Paul on such questions will be found, not in Greek categories, but in Hebraic anthropology and its understanding of the person as *per se* communal. We will come to this later in the paper.

²⁸ P. Allen, *The Aristotelian Revolution*, p. 190. See also L. Cortest, *Philo’s Heirs: Moses Maimonides and Thomas Aquinas*, Academic Studies Press 2017.

thereafter informed the structure and content of the academy from the 13th to the 15th centuries.²⁹

A brief word is necessary here about St. Thomas Aquinas. Certainly one of the most famous scholars to benefit from the not altogether toxic influence of Aristotle. And while he does not adopt Aristotle's error in total – his faith commitments did not permit him to do that – alas, he does in part, making a distinction between the level of nature and the order of grace. At the level of nature, Aquinas' account corresponds almost entirely to the sex polarity advanced by Aristotle. On the natural plane, woman is born imperfect in relation to man. Her being exists as a privation, she remains a passive participant in the act of generation and is also less capable of virtue and wisdom. But even as he accepts the Philosopher's basic scientific premise and his conclusions at the level of nature, Aquinas does not follow Aristotle's lead in important ways. Aquinas is operating within a horizon of grace, permitting him to maintain and leverage a fundamental premise of Catholic theology, that "grace perfects nature".³⁰ This gives him free reign to argue that, though woman starts life as a "lesser" creature, in the end, she may arrive at a full relation of sex complementarity with man. She has the capacity to develop, and, under the influence of grace, she can achieve full equality with man and be equally capable of infused wisdom and the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. In his account, man is not superior to woman in the realm of the divine; in heaven, man and woman are equal.

But of course, that didn't really solve the problem and so, here we are.

A more detailed analysis of this historical period is beyond our purposes here. Suffice it to say that it was inevitable that Aristotle's sex polarity theory, confirmed by Philo's Scriptural interpretation, would infiltrate any further discussion of the concept of woman. Had Aristotle's impact been more isolated and limited to the thought of just a few of the thinkers that populated the medieval period, things might not have developed as they did. But as history shows, Aristotelian arguments became a permanent feature of the infrastructure of the Western educational system. His theory of the concept of man and woman achieved "a decisive victory over the direction of human thought".³¹

This victory was achieved first through the spread of the university system when Aristotle's works became required reading across all of Europe. Then through the efforts of well-trained mendicant monks who were able to translate otherwise complex arguments into the language of the "man on the street".

²⁹ P. Allen, *The Early Humanist Reformation*, p. 65. Her chapter on Aristotle's influence on the academy: "Aristotelian Roots of Gender Identity," is worth reading in its entirety. So is all four volumes of *The Concept of Woman*.

³⁰ Since St. Augustine's treatise *On Nature and Grace* (Beloved Publishers 2014) in the fourth century, Catholic teaching has held to the doctrine that grace is not opposed to nature but is that which liberates and controls nature.

³¹ P. Allen, *The Aristotelian Revolution*, p. 413.

Through their efforts to educate the ordinary citizens of the countries in which they travelled, Aristotle's thought began to infiltrate the minds of the population and Western culture at large. In this way, his theory of sex polarity was widely disseminated, discussed, and written about as various authors, both scholarly and otherwise, took up the task of developing the theory further.

Aristotle's cosmological errors were ultimately rejected; his metaphysics and anthropology went with it. But it was already too late to change the trajectory of thought on what had become a pervasive theory of woman. By the sixteenth century, assumptions concerning the superiority of men over women were well-established in the familial, social, and political structures of the culture. Subsequent developments in theology and philosophy would do nothing to alter the course.³² With some exceptions, philosophers would spend the next several centuries trying to articulate the basis either of a sex polarity theory or some form of the sex unity theory. Descartes would merely neutralize the question. He rejected the hylomorphic structure of real things in the world, then posited two distinct substances, separating the body from the soul in his account of the person.³³ Descartes' person was mostly a *res cogitans*, a "thinking thing" barely attached to a body; no significant distinctions between men and women were possible in such a vision. After Descartes and the Cartesian revolution, only Immanuel Kant and Jacques Rousseau offered anything of substance to the question. Their accounts are very similar – and both devalue women.³⁴

In truth, the historical facts reveal that, in a sense, these errors took on a life of their own. From the medieval period, through the so-called Enlightenment period, and up until the 20th century, they served as the point of departure, sometimes explicitly, but usually not, for philosophers and theologians (and ordinary men and women) as they attempted to offer new grounds for explaining man's superiority over woman. The impact of these premises accelerated in the late 19th century when they were appropriated, distorted further, and weaponized by Frederic Engels; Engels' conclusions were subsequently tragically incorporated

³² Including Martin Luther's Reformation in the mid-sixteenth century, and the entire modern period, from Descartes (d. 1650) to Kant (d. 1804). See P. Allen, *The Early Humanist Reformation*, Part One and Part Two, and P. Allen, *The Concept of Woman, Vol III: The Search for Communion of Persons, 1500-2015*, Grand Rapids 2016.

³³ P. Allen, *The Search for Communion of Persons*, p. 248.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 340. It would not be until John Stuart Mill's famous essay *The Subjection of Women* published in 1869, that anyone spoke out formally and publicly against the generally accepted idea that woman should be subject to the dictates of her husband or father since according to the social norms of the time, it was understood that women were both physically and mentally less able than men, and therefore needed to be "taken care of". See J. Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, New York 1997. In England, it wasn't until 1870 that married women were allowed to own property. See M. B. Combs, 'A Measure of Legal Independence: The 1870 Married Women's Property Act and the Portfolio Allocations of British Wives', "The Journal of Economic History" 2005, Vol. 65, No. 4, pp. 1028–57. In the U.S., it was not until the passage of the 19th amendment in 1920 that women had the right to vote.

into the advance of Marxist thought.³⁵ Finally, they found their way into the existential atheism of Jean-Paul Sartre and his mistress, Simone de Beauvoir, whose own work served as the spark that launched the second wave of feminism in the mid-20th century.³⁶ It should surprise no one that when women finally began to find a path into the professional academic disciplines, they turned to sources other than Aristotle or Aquinas when searching for a way to articulate their concerns. But, unfortunately, the sources they relied on, both then and since, have not led them to any real satisfactory solution. The women's movement is in a sort of holding pattern as society tries to sort out what it means to claim that one even *is* a woman. Amidst competing accusations of toxic masculinity and femininity, the breakdown of the family evident in widespread divorce and fatherless homes, and the prevalence of violence and loneliness, our culture is simply confused, with no clear way out of the morass.³⁷ We are witnessing a rupture between the men and women of our time, fueled by ideology from all sides, questionable social science, and burdened further by anonymous sexual encounters. Ironically, the place that women occupy in the scheme of things remains a disputed question.

It is ironic to consider that in his much-contested work, *de Caelo*, - On the Heavens – Aristotle warns us that “the least initial deviation from the truth is multiplied later a thousand-fold”. It seems quite clear now that his own “initial

³⁵ F. Engels, *Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, Zurich 1884, chapter two, (the Family), section four, (The Monogamous Family). It is public domain now and is cited online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/origin-family/ch02d.ht>.

³⁶ The suffragist movement is considered the first wave of feminism. The second wave of feminism is said to have begun with Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, written in 1963. Friedan's account differs from that of the French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, author of *The Second Sex*. But Friedan dedicated her own book to de Beauvoir and considered herself to be in debt to Simone as her political and historical predecessor. De Beauvoir's existentialist argument that “woman is not born, she is made” provides the hidden philosophical underpinnings of current “gender” theory and its convictions that the existence of human nature is a myth and that “gender” is merely a social construct.

³⁷ See in particular the 2018 report from the American Psychological Association on Boys and Men. Intended to establish new guidelines for psychologists when working with boys and men in therapeutic encounters, it stipulated that “traditional masculinity” was, by definition, “toxic”. These guidelines were recognized immediately as an “ideology being substituted for a clinical diagnosis”. See S. Siglioto, *Rejecting Toxic Masculinity Isn't an Attack on Men*, “Public Discourse: The Journal of the Witherspoon Institute”, January 2019, <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2019/01/48967/>. The authors of the report were forced to retract or soften many of their claims within days of its publication though their assumptions live on in the culture. Here is a link to the revised report: <https://www.apa.org/about/policy/boys-men-practice-guidelines.pdf>. Perhaps predictably, these developments have led to additional claims about the existence of “toxic femininity” as well. Though accounts of this phenomenon are less substantive and varied, psychologists seem to be drawing similar conclusions. Toxic femininity appears when women display stereotypical, “traditional” feminine behaviors such as “passivity, empathy, sensuality, patience, tenderness, and receptivity”, behaviors also assumed to be the result of social conditioning alone. See <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/sex-sexuality-and-romance/201908/toxic-femininity>.

deviation from the truth” has had lasting repercussions that have reverberated throughout human history. It is time to acknowledge the ancient starting place of our confusion – and to offer a correction.

THE SOLUTION: REVISITING GENESIS 1 AND 2

We will now turn our attention to correcting this historical error. Again, I can offer just a sketch of what I propose is the antidote. Our point of departure is a claim that John Paul II makes in the theology of the body (TOB) but does not exploit. There, he declares that we can derive an account of the human person from the two distinct creation accounts found in Genesis 1 and 2. He argues that the first creation account reveals the meaning of man in the abstract, man *qua* man, that is, as an objective reality, created in the image of God. The second account reveals his meaning in the aspect of his subjectivity.³⁸ Some years ago now, I set out to see if JPII was right – and I discovered that, not only can his claim be demonstrated, when looked at through the lens of Aquinas’s metaphysical account of the person, itself refracted through Hebraic anthropology, it reveals the basis of a full account of man and woman, both their identities and their genius. I will show that, hidden in these texts is the truth about man and woman – both their equality and the nature of their difference, their meaning and significance. The two creation accounts reveal a vision of man and woman as equally and fully human, equally endowed with intellect, will, and freedom, with two distinct and complementary ways of operating in the world.

So, briefly. The starting place is Genesis 1:26-27. At 1:26, God says he will make man (*adam*) in his image and at 1:27 we read: “God created man (*adam*) in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female (*zâchâr* and *nikevah*) he created them”.³⁹ It is the term *adam* that provides the first point of departure for my hypothesis. For the reference here is not to Adam, the husband of Eve, but to man *per se*. My main argument concerns the meaning of the word *adam*.

Ancient Semitic thought would likely not have had the concept of a universal human nature, a term introduced by the Greeks.⁴⁰ And so it is necessary to take an

³⁸ John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: The Theology of the Body*, M. Waldstein (ed.), Boston 2006, p. 2:4.5, 136-137.

³⁹ I am indebted to Monsignor Michael Magee, chair of the Systematic Theology Department and professor of Sacred Scripture at St. Charles Borromeo Seminary in Philadelphia, for his help with the meaning of the original Hebrew texts and his affirmation of my hypothesis.

⁴⁰ Though Scripture scholars have maintained this for years, there are some who might be prepared to argue differently. For example, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI states quite forcefully in the “Regensburg Address” that biblical thought encountered the best of Greek thought at a very deep level, arguing that this “inner rapprochement between Biblical faith and Greek philosophical inquiry was an event of decisive importance”, and that the Greek translation of the Old Testament,

interim step through the lens of Hebraic anthropology, something I did not think I would have time for but may now. So I will take a brief excursus toward that; it honors the text and also allows us to draw some equivalencies to the metaphysical account of Aquinas – which is the basis of JPII's claim.

This admittedly brief excursus into Hebraic anthropology prepares us to return to our text and consider the meaning of *adam* and *ha'adam* in light of these two principles. We will take up the term *adam* first.⁴¹ We find it at Gen 1:26 when God says, “let us make man (*adam*) in our image”. We now know that the translation of *adam* as “man” does not adequately capture the actual meaning of the term. Indeed, as we will see in a moment, the only thing that comes close to its meaning in English translation is the signifier “man *as such*” or the familiar “man *per se*”. The Hebrew author of Genesis 1 is referring here to *adam* (itself taken from *adama* or earth) as an instantiation of the “corporate personality” referenced above. The creation of *adam* signifies the creation of the whole human race rather than merely an individual. But while *adam* contains all members of the community, it also retains connotations of personhood and concreteness. Here we see the significance of the “oscillation” between the one and the many so essential to biblical personalism. But unlike the signifier “man *per se*,” it is not an abstraction; the Hebraic reference is always to a concrete existent and therefore includes a bodily existence. And since this moment in the text is a reference to the creation of the first human being (and again, not the abstraction “man *per se*”), it must be interpreted to mean that the first human being was male. However, as we have seen, simultaneously contained within that existent, indeed, already present within *adam*, is the first woman. And while the connotation of *adam* extends to all of humanity, this reality can only take on a concrete existence through the creation of the first woman, something made clear in the very next passage.⁴²

the Septuagint, is itself an independent textual witness and a step in revelation history. If this is the case, and depending on when that encounter occurred exactly in history, it is certainly possible that these categories could have been at least inchoate in Semitic thought.

⁴¹ It is important to note that, though we have always thought of the main characters in these first two chapters of Genesis as Adam and Eve, only Eve is ever actually named – and even then, not until after the fall. The reference here is most certainly NOT to “Adam”, the husband of Eve.

⁴² Though *'adam can* be used to designate the individual man so called, and also another individual man, what is meant in a particular passage would be clear either from the context or from the use of the definite article with it: viz., if the reference is to *hā'adam*, it would refer back to some man already indicated from the context. In Gen 1:27, the “man” already indicated from the context is precisely the individual man who also stands for the collective: the word *'adam* mentioned in v. 26 is without the definite article and therefore can be said to indicate man *as such*. Thus, *'adam* is a reference to man *per se*, not to an individual or particular human being. A different word – either *hā'adam* or *'ish* – would have been used (both these terms are used in both the first and second creation accounts) if the intention was to refer to the individual man or that particular man the tradition has come to refer to as Adam, the husband of Eve. So, it is really not going too far to say that if there were a reference to the notion of man *qua* man in Hebrew it would be *'adam*.

At Gen 1:27 we read: “So God created man (*ha’adam*) in his own image, in the image of God he created him (*otho*); male and female (*zâchâr* and *nikevah*) he created them (*otham*)”.⁴³

The meaning of *ha’adam* is easily stated: *ha’* is a definite article and the reference now is to *the* man. The text has introduced a new level of specificity to the creation of *adam* but has now declared *adam’s* existence as embodied in manifestly masculine and feminine form. Thus the priceless dignity afforded the first *adam*, created in the image and likeness of God, is extended to *zachar* and *nikevah*. It is *zachar* and *nikevah* who are instructed then to “be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it” at Gen 1:28. Here we can anticipate the differentiation that will become more explicit in the second creation account (Genesis 2:22); Genesis 1 reveals that it issues out of a unity that already existed in the original “one”.⁴⁴ And so, though there is an order to creation that places man in the position of primacy, this in no way compromises the dignity or ontological status of woman. This order will repeat itself in Genesis 2 where it will become even more clear that woman possesses a value that mirrors that of man.

We are now prepared to consider John Paul’s claim that the first creation account is a reference to man in the “objective” sense, that is, man *qua* man, or man in the abstract. Does the text support such an interpretation?

The metaphysical anthropology of Aristotle, subsequently leveraged and further developed by St. Thomas Aquinas, though grounded in experience and observation of the human person, his powers and his acts, employs the method of abstraction, that is, it prescind from the individuating conditions of matter to arrive at more general, universal principles. All existing things are reflections of two principles, form and matter (if inanimate), soul and body (if living). Man *as such*, though an abstraction, is understood to be a union of these two principles, a union of both body and soul, possessing a rational nature, intellect, will, and freedom. This is “man” in the universal sense and every individual instantiation of a rational soul, both male and female, is an expression of this universal human nature.

We have seen that ancient Semitic thought did not have the concept of a universal human nature or the notion of a “substantial form”, that which makes something what it is essentially. These were terms introduced by the Greeks. But given what we now know about the meaning of *adam* as an expression of a “corporate personality” containing all of humanity, we can argue that it is perfectly legitimate to say that if there were a reference to the notion of man *qua* man in Hebrew it would be *’adam*. In this context *adam* is clearly a reference to man in the *univer-*

⁴³ *Otho* is a contraction of the untranslatable object marker (*oth*) and the masculine pronoun (*o*). *Otham* is the object marker contracted with the masculine plural pronoun (*am*). The grammatical gender is masculine, which is the “default” gender for a mixed group of males and females.

⁴⁴ J. Atkinson, *Biblical and Theological Foundations of the Family: The Domestic Church*, Washington 2017, p. 171. Dr. Atkinson is here referring specifically to Genesis 2 but, given (as we will see) that similar terms are used, this can also be applied to Genesis 1.

sal sense. So, when God says, “let us make *adam* in our image”, we can safely say that the reference is an approximate equivalent of our concept of man *per se*. That is, it can serve as an approximation of or reference to the creation of the instantiation of the “substantial form” that constitutes the human creature.⁴⁵

The significance of this conclusion in light of contemporary concerns for the “equality” of men and women would be hard to overstate. It provides the first explicit element in the solution to the problem under investigation here. It shows definitively, now in philosophical terms, that Scripture *itself* reveals man and woman to be equally human. Man and woman, here at the level of the species, are both instantiations of the same substantial form and are therefore equally endowed with intellect, will, and freedom. All men and women who, together, comprise the human species, are equally human in every respect. They are both ontologically absolute subjects, possessing individuality, human agency, and the powers and potencies definitive of the rational soul.

This analysis has shown that John Paul II is justified in arguing that Genesis 1:26-27 is concerned with the creation of man in the objective sense, a formulation that, though it corresponds to the categories employed in the metaphysical anthropology of the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition, finds a correspondence in the Hebraic account of the person. Both approaches demonstrate from Scripture that man and woman are equally human reflections of the principle of equal dignity. But this is not to say that they are interchangeable. We still need to consider that which differentiates them, a topic taken up in the next section of the paper. But it is important to make explicit the fact that these conclusions can be and have been drawn directly from the exegetical tradition that has itself, in many ways, maintained the theory that man is superior to woman. The above analysis has called that conclusion into question by leveraging the same categories used throughout history to arrive at it. The same method will be used in what follows.

The first account has established that man and woman are equal in dignity. In the second account, we begin to see what differentiates them. It is here that, according to John Paul II, God creates man and woman in their personal subjectivity. At Genesis 2:7, man (referred to here as *hâ'adam*, or *the man*) is fashioned from *adama*, from the earth; he is the first human being; we know now that he is a reflection of

⁴⁵ The word *'ish*, on the other hand, designates specifically the male, the concrete individual man, because the word *zâchâr* is the one used in an adjectival sense for “male” (it is related to the word for “remember,” perhaps because of the computation of genealogy through the male line). Sometimes *'ish* is also used in the sense of “each one, each man”. The word *'ish* is not used at all until Gn 2:23, right after the woman is created and Adam is naming her *ishshâh* - while saying this is because she is taken from the *'ish*. To avoid any illegitimate leaps in interpretation, the best way to maximize care and precision would be to say that, of all the terms available in Hebrew, the one that would have to be adopted to designate what later philosophy would refer to as man in the abstract would have to be *'adam*. It is this word that stands for “man” as the English language has traditionally and collectively used the word; it corresponds to the Greek *anthrôpos*, the Latin *homo*, the German *mensch*, or the Polish *człowiek*.

both the one and the many. Gradually he realizes that he is alone. And so, in a separate, creative act at Genesis 2:22, woman is *made* or *built* (*banah*) out of one of the man's ribs (*tsela*). Here God brings forth woman from the already existing *ha'adam*, who is himself made in the divine image. And thus both become the bearers of that image, both possess absolute value and dignity. The man declares "here at last is bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh". He recognizes woman as a person like himself. Indeed, she is his mirror image and, with her appearance, *ha'adam* awakens to his own subjective existence. Both God and the man are finally content that a proper helper (*ezer*) has been found.⁴⁶ But what must get our attention immediately is the fact that *it is not until this moment in the text* (Genesis 2:22) that the sacred author refers to man and woman *for the first time* as concrete subjects of existence, as real existing persons. They are *only* now *'ish and: man and woman as actual*. As John Paul II points out, there is no *'ish* without *ishshâh*, for it is not until *ishshâh* appears that the man, previously referred to *ha'adam*, is finally referred to as *'ish*. Though man maintains the place of primacy (*ishshâh* is made from *'ish*), the plain meaning of the text is clear: there is no concretely existing man without a concretely existing woman; they appear in the text together, at least in terms of their specific identity. It is ultimately these two persons who will be referred to as Adam and Eve.

In philosophical terms, when viewed through the lens of Aquinas' anthropology, this second account of creation can be seen as a description of the moment when signate matter and the principle of individuation have entered the picture. Man and woman (the *'ish* and the *ishshâh*) of the second creation account are the result of particular matter (earth; rib) being introduced; the substantial form or soul that makes man what he is *absolutely* (*adam*) illuminated in the first account has now found individuation and differentiation via the designated (common) matter that the form animates in the second. The complementarity that characterizes *the nature as such has now been embodied in two concretely existing beings, differentiated by two distinct but related kinds of matter*.⁴⁷

But the difference between man and woman is not reducible to merely the material element. Though a comprehensive treatment would take us too far from our purpose, this requires further explanation. From our analysis so far, we can conclude that both man and woman are equally human since both are an embodiment of a substantial form common to the species *humanum*. But both must be seen to be distinct instantiations of the species, made as they are of different signate matter. They are animated by souls that are "commensurated" or adapted to their individual person.⁴⁸ It is the meaning of "commensuration" that lends the clarity we need.

⁴⁶ J. Atkinson, *Biblical and Theological Foundations*, p. 170.

⁴⁷ Again, the philosophical principle at work here is that what is found in the effect must first be in the cause.

⁴⁸ In the creation account found in Genesis 2, we are no longer speaking of man in the abstract (*adam*) but individual persons. The Hebrew text includes reference to both *ha-adam* ("the human being" which, in Genesis 2, is a reference to a male at the level of the species, and *ish* and

This “commensuration” reflects both the universal structure of male and female and the personal structure of any one particular man or woman: man *per se* is a composite of body and soul, and each man or woman is a composite of *this* body and *this* soul. But gender is not reducible to matter; it has an ontological component since gender is the type of accident that is attributed to the subject *qua* subject, that is, to the whole composite of soul and body that constitutes the subject as a unity.⁴⁹ And so, here offering woman as our example, though matter is one of the things that differentiates woman from man, since woman is composed of both body and soul and since the soul of each individual woman is meant for her (that would be commensuration), she is in some essential way, a woman. That is, gender is an accident not merely of the matter, like the color of her hair or her eyes. Her woman-ness does not reside in her merely in the matter of which she is made. It is who *she is*, as John Paul II states, both physically and ontologically. And these same things can be said of man: he is in some essential way, a man. *Men and women are equal, composite creatures and, at the level of the individual person, differentiated by both the matter of which they are made and the soul that animates them. This is true of both of them.* And here we can say that John Paul II's claim that Genesis 2 describes man “in his subjectivity” is justified.

Let us pause here to highlight this important point: this account of the equality and difference that characterizes man and woman reveals that *neither the male nor the female of the species is normative for the species*. How so? Because at the level of man or woman *per se*, we are differentiated *in exactly the same way*. Both woman and man are equally human; the sexual difference that characterizes man and woman is rooted in a particular kind of philosophical “accident” driven by but not reducible to the matter of which they are made. Men and women are both

isshah, which refer to a concretely existing man and woman). At this point, matter (dust, man's rib) enters the picture. And, as Aquinas states, thus we enter the realm of accident. Aquinas explains gender as a type of (inseparable) accident. See Thomas Aquinas, *De Ente et Essentia*, (transl. by A. Maurer), Rome 1968, p. 68. But since this type of accident is said to be something attributable to the species, the categories of male and female, while certainly inseparable from the essence of the person, cannot be attributed to the species *per se*. To be “male” and “female” is a special kind of inseparable accident, perhaps even in a category on its own. See J. Finley, *The Metaphysics of Gender: Thomistic Approach*, “The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review” 2015, Vol. 79, No. 4, pp. 585-614.

⁴⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles: Vol. II* (transl. by J. F. Anderson) South Bend 1976, p. 81, 8. The author is indebted to Sister Prudence Allen and Monsignor John Wippel for pointing out this passage. Though it does not deal directly with the distinction between genders but with the individuation of the human soul and its continuing individuation after it is separated from the body at death. It is here that Aquinas introduces the notion of the commensuration of each soul to each body. Commensuration is a term that means literally to have the same measure. Aquinas means here that each body is adapted or accommodated, even interpenetrated in an equal measure by the soul intended for it. See also Aquinas, *De Veritate* (transl. by R. Mulligan, J. V. McGlynn), Indianapolis 1994, Q 5, 10 where Aquinas states: “the soul when joined to a body imitates the composition of that body”.

composite creatures, a union of body and soul, whose gender is an inseparable accident, (but an accident nonetheless), attributable to the composite itself. They are the same in terms of that which differentiates them from each other.

The implications could not be more significant. For here we have a philosophical demonstration, grounded in *Scripture*, that women do not have to act like men to be considered human any more than men have to act like women to be considered human. There is absolutely no risk to the “equality” of men and women in understanding their nature in this way. Man and woman are equally human but different, a fact immediately discernible in human experience and accessible to scientific analysis.⁵⁰ Thus is sex polarity of *any* sort put to rest; the historical error is corrected. Woman is redeemed, freed, at least in theory, from Aristotle’s claim that woman is a “malformed” male. But there remains the need to account for Philo’s contribution to this state of affairs. We need to reconsider the significance of the creation of woman at Genesis 2: 18-34. Here it will be shown that, when considered together, Genesis 1 and 2 illuminate more fully the meaning of the second creation account and its significance for our understanding of the creation of man and woman. In particular, such a reading will dispute Philo’s claim that woman is created second because she is “less honourable” than man. In fact, it will dispute the claim that woman is created “second” at all.

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Let us return first to the creation account found in Genesis 1. Here, let me simply assert the obvious: the author lays out a particular hierarchical order in which God clearly creates. It is clearly a hierarchy that is on its way *up*, from lower life forms to higher. We see a similar pattern in the second account. At 2:7, we read that *hâ’adam* is made from the dust of the earth. When, at Genesis 2:18, God sees that the man is alone, God forms every creature and brings them to the man to be named. Then God, realizing that none of the creatures correspond

⁵⁰ Though it will not be possible to include it here, it should also be noted at the outset that scientific research regarding what distinguishes men and women supports many of the conclusions found in the work of John Paul II as well as in this paper. See S. E. Rhoades, *Taking Sex Differences Seriously*, San Francisco 2004, pp. 22-26; A. Moir, D. Jessel, *Brain Sex: The Real Difference Between Men and Women*, New York 1991, pp. 68-112. For additional sources and a critique of brain organization theory as a whole, see R. Jordan-Young, *Brainstorm*, Cambridge 2010. The author’s general argument is that there are risks associated with attributing sex differences to hormones and that brain organization theory (found in these other sources) cannot account for all of them.

to the man's own being, and that it is not good for him to be alone, decides it is necessary to make a fitting helper ('ezer *kenegdo*') for him⁵¹ – then puts him into a deep sleep and forms the woman ('*issah*) from man's ('*ish*) rib (*tsela*).⁵² Upon awakening, Adam says, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Gen 2:23-24). As John Paul II points out, man recognizes in woman another *person*, a being equal to himself, a someone, not a something – a someone he can love, to whom he can make of himself a gift and who can reciprocate in kind. This seems fairly straightforward.

But there are several additional and important points to glean from considering these two chapters together. First, it is only when we come to the making of Eve that we see the final significance of the order introduced in the first account and brought to completion in the second.⁵³ Adam is made from the earth (*adama*) but Eve is made from Adam. Though it has troubled feminists forever – and is arguably the root of Philo's historical misinterpretation of this passage – the fact that Eve is created second is not to make her subservient. **For in the hierarchy thus established, woman is not created "second"; she is created last.** She is, in fact, made on the way *up* – the last creature to appear, a creature made, not from earth, but from something that arguably *already* contains a greater actualization than dust or clay.⁵⁴ It does seem as though she is made of "finer stuff". In any case, because of the order suggested by reading the accounts together, Eve can be seen as the pinnacle of creation, not as a creature whose place in that order is subservi-

⁵¹ The word *ezer* is translated in many different ways: a "suitable helper", "suitable partner". Perhaps the best is found in the Jewish Tanakh – a "fitting helper".

⁵² Though the word *tsela* is traditionally translated as "rib," it is not at all clear that this is correct. The basic meaning of the word in Hebrew is ambiguous and there are quite a few possibilities, including "plank," "side," and references to geographical and architectural terms. There have been many hypotheses concerning the word but the only thing that is really clear is that, if it does mean "rib," it does so only in this one passage. Several possible interpretations have particular appeal: if it is taken to mean "side" or "plank," it could be thought to be the source of the expression that woman is man's "better half"; or, given its proximity to the heart, it has been taken to stand for human interiority. Perhaps the most satisfying possibility is that it is a reference to sacral architecture since in some contexts *tsela* refers to the side portions of the sanctuary that are necessary for its stability and function. The conclusion can be drawn that the Yawhist author of the passage used terminology "designed to evoke associations with the construction of the sanctuary" to suggest that human beings "come to Fulfillment for which they are destined by creation only as man and wife and as God's temple". See G. J. Botterweck, H. Ringgren, H. J. Fabry (eds.), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Grand Rapids 2003.

⁵³ This interpretation is supported by Brevard Childs who states that "the creation of the woman, which is sequential in time, foreshadows a climax to the creation which resounds with joy at the close of the chapter". See B. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context*, Philadelphia 1985, p. 191.

⁵⁴ As St. Thomas himself argues, woman is as necessary to creation as the male of the species (*Summa Theologiae*, (transl. by Benzinger Brothers), New York 1947, I, 92, *sed contra*). Thus, woman cannot be thought of as a creature whose place in that order is subservient or somehow less in stature than that of man.

ent or somehow less in stature than that of Adam. For it is *only* at the moment of her creation that man realizes who he is. It is her appearance that reveals to man the nature of his own personhood.

This proposition is reinforced when we consider that the Hebrew word usually translated as “helper” is *ezer* which does not mean servant or slave.⁵⁵ When this word is used elsewhere in Scripture, it *has the connotation of Divine aid*.⁵⁶ Used here to express helper or partner, it indicates someone who is most definitely not a slave or even remotely subservient – there is the sense of an equal, a partner, help sent by God.⁵⁷ Thus, Eve is not to be his servant – a different word would have been used if that were the intention – but someone who can help him to live.

But an additional, equally significant insight appears when we consider the full meaning of this moment in the text. Woman is described as *ezer kenegdo*; *kenegdo* is a preposition that means “in front of”, “in the sight of”, “before” (in the spatial sense). Thus, we can conclude *from the text* that woman is not “below” man in the order of creation, nor is she above him. She stands in front of him, before him, meeting his gaze as it were and sharing in the responsibility for the preservation of all that precedes them. Woman and man are complementary creatures; both constitute the “other” for each other. And so, another misunderstood element in the tradition – that woman is subservient to man, sent to be merely his servant – is corrected. Woman’s significance is revealed in its full meaning. Woman’s place in the order of creation reveals her true nature and mission – that of help sent *by God* to man – and by extension, to all of humanity.

The man and the woman, now *’ish and ishshâh*, stand face to face with one another, poised to offer themselves as a gift to each other. They both possess intellect, will, and freedom, as well as the capacity for action and receptivity. But their gift of self is made possible by the very differences that characterize them. And

⁵⁵ This point is also made by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger in his 2004 *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World*, when he points out that “the term here does not refer to an inferior, but to a vital helper”. See in particular Footnote #5. I am using the word “servant” here as it is usually meant – as someone who occupies a lower rung on the ladder in any particular context. A different interpretation of the word servant is associated with being a follower of Christ, which, at this point in salvation history, cannot be invoked. But I do not mean to imply that woman is not to serve man. As St. Paul says in Ephesians 5, both men and women are to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. The question of the headship of the man in the family is not under scrutiny here and is a topic for further research.

⁵⁶ Excellent examples can be found in the Psalms: e.g., Psalm 30:11b, “The LORD will be **a helper** (*ezer*) to me”, or Psalm 121:1, “I will lift up my eyes to the mountains, whence comes **my help** (*ezri*)”. The name of the great scribe “Ezra” of the restoration of Israel under the namesake of the biblical book, seems to be the Aramaic masculine form of the same word. Persians, namesake of the biblical book, seems to be the Aramaic masculine form of the same word.

⁵⁷ In his very fine translation of these texts, Robert Alter translates *ezer negdo* as “sustainer” rather than helper, a word with a much closer meaning to that intended by the sacred author in my opinion. The author refers here to “helper” since that is the more traditional term used in most translations and makes my dispute with the usual interpretation more precise.

the gifts that each bring to the tasks of human living will be necessary to fulfil their mission, given to both of them at Genesis 1:27: to subdue the earth and fill it.

The Genesis account does reveal that it is man who, in a sense, gives woman her place. Importantly, we have seen that this place is one of “face-to-face” equality. But her significance transcends concerns for equality. For it is woman who reveals man to himself and, with that, the meaning of human life itself. Only with the appearance of woman does man’s self-gift become possible. And only with woman’s arrival does human community appear for the first time – and enter into human history.

Woman has sovereign importance, not independently of the place man occupies, but apart from it. For the simple fact is that *without woman, man has no future*. As St. Paul declares in 1 Cor 11:12, “For just as woman came from man, so man is born of woman; but all things are from God”. It is this cosmic reality that has been overlooked throughout the centuries; it reveals the import of woman’s “place”. For in fact, without her, *none of us have a future*. She points us toward what is above while we all engage in life here below.

Woman and man now are *both* redeemed and free to serve as partners in the great project of building a truly human civilization, ordered as it is toward eternal life with the God who created them. This is the understanding that must serve as the foundation for the rights of women. There is no need to fight for our place in the order of things. We simply need to take it. It is no ones to give to us – and it is no ones to take it away.

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