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Women and Abortion: The ‘Feminist’ Mystique

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An associate professor of Church-State studies at Baylor University, Dr. Francis Beckwith stays current in philosophy, ethics, and legal issues. It is not strange to see him perusing the shelves of the nearest Barnes and Noble. In fact, this is where he found himself one recent fall afternoon, after a long day of lecturing and making another revision to his book, *Defending Life: A Moral and Legal Case Against Abortion Choice*. On an impulse, he stopped in to the bookstore on his way home.

Usually the store is pretty quiet, but on this occasion Beckwith encountered a long of people, snake-like, extending throughout the lower level. Curious, he moved toward the front to find the cause of the commotion. He suddenly realized with a start that this was none other than Betty Friedan, signing copies of her new book, *Life so Far*. Friedan, forty years Beckwith’s senior, was one of the best known voices in feminism. Her first work, *The Feminine Mystique*, ignited the Women’s Rights movement in the early 60’s. Friedan also helped found both the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League (NARAL) and the National Organization for Women (NOW).

Although Beckwith was familiar with Friedan’s work, he had never talked to her one-on-one. As he reaches the table, he introduces himself.

Beckwith: Good afternoon, Ms. Friedan, my named is Francis Beckwith, and I teach Church-State studies over at the university.

Friedan: It’s a pleasure to meet you. Strange, I seem to recognize your name.

Beckwith: Well, I have published many articles dealing with the topic of abortion. Perhaps you are familiar with those?

Friedan: Oh yes, that’s right. I have read some of those. An interesting perspective, if slightly skewed, in my opinion.

Beckwith: Actually, I am very interested in your opinion. If you have time later, I would enjoy chatting with you.

Friedan: I have a few hours before my flight leaves. Is there a place where we can get a decent cup of coffee?

Beckwith: Certainly, there’s a Starbucks right down the street. Why don’t we meet there at 6?

Friedan: Sounds good – I’ll see you there!

Later on that day:

Beckwith looks up from his table as he hears the elderly woman enter the coffee shop.

Beckwith: Here, Ms. Friedan, let me get your coat for you. I hope you don't mind, but I took the liberty of ordering you a cup of coffee.

Friedan (*chuckles*): I'll take care of my own coat - have you forgotten that I'm a feminist?

Beckwith: Point taken. Shall we begin?

Friedan: Well, what would you like to discuss? I have plenty of opinions to go around.

Beckwith: Why don't we start with what a constant theme in your writings, the autonomy of women. What does that entail? I know, historically, that you are not a radical feminist, so I'm curious to see how autonomy plays out in your beliefs.

Friedan: Well, simply speaking, I believe it is the inalienable human right of every woman to control her own reproductive processes. No man has the right to say to a woman, "You must bear this child," and certainly the state has no right to say this. This is a question of the basic personhood and dignity of women, violated forever if they cannot control their own reproduction.

Beckwith: So, am I correct to assume that you would elevate the personhood and autonomy of the woman over the personhood and autonomy of the life developing within her?

Friedan: Bluntly, yes. I am not opposed to motherhood. However, motherhood can only be enjoyed when women are free to make the decision to be mothers with a full conscious choice and with full human responsibility. No one – no father, husband, boy friend, or brother – has the right to make that decision for them. Only one voice is important on the question of whether a woman will bear a child, and that is the voice of the woman herself. This is her conscience speaking; it is her own conscious choice.

Beckwith: Do you view men as oppressive in this regard, as many of your contemporaries do?

Friedan: Oh goodness, no. Men are not the enemy, but fellow victims. The real enemy is a woman's denigration of herself.

Beckwith: Interesting. So what is so offensive about an unwanted pregnancy?

Friedan: The imposition of the fetus on the woman's body. Whether she wanted it there or not, it is hers to deal with.

Beckwith: So you contend that the fetus is part of a woman's body?

Friedan: Well, yes, I suppose.

Beckwith: I would challenge that assumption. The unborn entity within the pregnant woman's body is not a part of her body since it is truly unique, with its own individual gender, blood type, bone structure, and genetic code. Attachment to the mother does not necessarily mean it is part of the mother. So a woman's autonomy over her own body does not extend to an entity that is not part of her.

Friedan: You make a convincing point. However, I still would emphasize the woman's ultimate autonomy. You cannot tell me that, even if the fetus is not part of the mother's body, it ceases to be an intrusion on the mother.

Beckwith: Ms. Friedan, are you familiar with the term "special pleading"?

Friedan: No. Perhaps you'll enlighten me?

Beckwith: Creating a hierarchy of autonomies is an example of special pleading, a fallacy that occurs when someone selects pieces of evidence that confirm his position and rejects counterexamples that conflict. When the abortion-rights advocate appeals to a woman's right to control her own body, while ignoring the possibility that this may cause the death of another, this is special pleading. It is morally inconsistent to place gradations on individual autonomies.

Friedan: Well, that certainly complicates the feminist take on autonomy. Sir, despite my being firmly convinced of my position, you have offered something for me to consider. But our time is almost gone.

Beckwith: I will leave you with one thought to ponder. This idea comes from Professor Celia Wolf-Devine. She suggests that if masculine thought is naturally hierarchical and oriented toward power and control, then the interests of the fetus (who has no power) would naturally be suppressed in favor of the interests of the mother. But to the extent that feminist social thought is egalitarian, why should the mother's interests prevail over the child's? Feminist thought about abortion has been deeply pervaded by the individualism which the movement so ardently criticizes.

Friedan: Professor, I have enjoyed our little debate between two very differently minded individuals. I cannot say that you have convinced me to join the pro-life bandwagon, but you have, at least, appealed to my sense of logic. For that, I applaud you.

Beckwith: Thank you for your time, Ms. Friedan. I hope you will spend some time considering what we have discussed tonight. It was a pleasure philosophizing with you.

As they reach the door, Beckwith steps ahead and reaches for the door knob.

Beckwith: After you, Ms. Friedan, I'll get the door.

Friedan (*chuckles*): This well-seasoned feminist is much too old and tired to argue with you, Dr. Beckwith. Thank you.

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