

God and Gender Ideology

The Genesis of Gender: A Christian Theory, Abigail Favale, 2022 Ignatius Press, pp. 251, \$17.95 paperback.

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Until recently, everyone knew what defined males as males and females as females. It was biology, not preference—irrespective of whatever one’s sexual orientation might be. A man might dress as a woman or a woman as a man, but that changed nothing about them ontologically. It was all appearance (and sometimes deception). A woman was a female human being with egg gametes; a man was a male human being with sperm gametes. You were born a male or a female, not “assigned a gender” as you could be assigned a name. Yet very quickly, it seemed, that all changed, and we are sternly instructed to

use only someone’s “preferred pronoun.” One can even lose one’s employment over such matters. How did this happen and how serious is the change?

Professor Abigail Favale is uniquely qualified to write on gender ideology, since she learned it from the big names in her graduate work and taught it in a small Quaker college for several years. (She now teaches at Notre Dame.) But doubts emerged about the coherence of what she was teaching. She then unexpectedly converted to Catholicism and began to see her former views in a radically new light. This well-written, sometimes poetic, and philosophically astute book is the fruit of her reflections, which she traces through her own story and individual reflections on her experience of what it means to be an embodied human being who is female. Although the subtitle of this book is “A Christian Theory,” anyone, religious or otherwise, who questions the regnant gender ideology or is open to the natural law tradition should welcome her work.

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Favale emphasizes that gender ideology rejects all teleology and divine ordering of the physical world. Unlike the teaching of biblical cosmology, there are no objective categories of gendered being. We have bodies, but as Simone de Beauvoir writes in *The Second Sex*, “Nothing is natural” for human beings. Like Jean-Paul Sartre, she taught that there is no human nature, since there is no God to create it. One is not born a woman, but becomes one due to social conventions. If so, then women are free to deconstruct ideas of masculinity and femininity and reconstruct them according to their subjective preferences irrespective of any biological imperatives. Judith Butler, a leading gender theorist (and one of the worst academic writers on record, as Favale notes), claimed that gender is not innate, but rather “performed” in various ways, none of which is natural or intrinsically good.

Thus, one’s biological sex has nothing to do with gender or how one expresses one’s sexuality. They are wholly unrelated normatively. That is, nothing about one’s body has any moral authority over how it is expressed. Therefore, how one dresses or

what one does with one’s body sexually is relative to the individual’s desires and not accountable to any sacred order. This gender ideology was behind the then Supreme Court nominee Ketanji Jackson’s refusal to answer the question posed in her Senate confirmation hearing, “What is a woman?” The same phenomenon was on display in Matt Walsh’s documentary and book *What is a Woman?* Thus, the morally neutral body can be transitioned from male to female as one wishes and through the agency of surgery and hormonal treatments. Males and females, even minors, are taken to irrefutable experts who encourage them to transition to the opposite sex.

Favale explains the developing rationale of gender ideology clearly and fairly and contrasts it clearly with a Christian view, which is thoroughly teleological and moral. A personal God made humans in his image and likeness, male and female (Genesis 1). They are equal in value, but different in nature with respect to sexuality. Gender ideology is desperate to deny this created difference and complementarity. Secular feminism teaches that women’s childbearing ability is a

hindrance to social achievement. Therefore, pregnancy must be controlled through abortion. The very nature of women that makes them unique and special is taken to be an obstacle to achievement and deemed a detriment. That, from a teleological view, is deeply unnatural and not conducive to human flourishing. In fact, it leads to countless fetal deaths.

But without God and teleology, anything goes. Ask Michel Foucault, one of the most influential philosophers in the West. Favale writes: “In 1977, Foucault formally petitioned the French government to decriminalize consensual sex with minors. He did not merely propose lowering the age of consent; he proposed abolishing it altogether.” (76) She finds therein a *reductio ad absurdum*. “If your philosophy leads you there, there is something rotten at the root.” Sadly, many today find no absurdity but only the logical conclusion of their godless and meaningless worldview. All sexual restraint is oppressive. How else can we explain “Drag Queen Story Hours” and “Family-friendly drag shows” and the like?

Favale is a young, observant Catholic, who is a professor with

four children. She does not romanticize childbearing or child-rearing. (Her description of postpartum depression is rather harrowing.) She also mentions that her husband is primarily responsible for their children. But her view is that sexual intercourse is reserved for heterosexual married couples who should be open to children since the sex act “is ordered toward” procreation. Sexual intercourse should, then, be reserved for seasons within marriage when children are desired. So, Favale advocates fertility awareness methods or FAM, which let women heed the rhythms of their bodies in connection with sexual intimacy. This, of course, is the historic Catholic view, and Favale makes a strong case for it by telling the biblical story of sexuality in the insightful and poetic chapter “Cosmology.” She claims that by separating sexual intimacy from the possibility of childbearing, birth control (and especially the Pill) made sexual pleasure autonomous from marital responsibility and the demands of child-bearing and child-raising. Sexual enjoyment became a right shorn of any moral responsibility. If pregnancy accidentally

occurred, then, in order to protect the right to sexual freedom without hindrance, abortion had to be made available.

Favale repeatedly argues for what could be called *the divine natural goodness of female physical being*, and, therefore, she argues against birth control, abortion, and gender ideology. She is forthright (and right) in claiming that “bodily autonomy” (a shibboleth of the pro-abortion movement) “does not, as it turns out, exist for women in the same way it does for men. Women, by their very physiology, have bodies that are open to life, bodies that welcome the stranger in before the will can bar the door. Like it or not, that is what women’s bodies are designed for. A man can have sex until he dies from exhaustion; he will never get pregnant. . . . He is fertile, but his fertility does not open his body to the body of another.” (112)

Favale notes that feminists follow the thought of de Beauvoir and Margaret Sanger, founder of Planned Parenthood, “locating women’s oppression in their biology and advocating for a vision of ‘health’ that pathologizes fertility.” (91) Favale astutely notes that de Beauvoir seemed to hate

being a woman, since she deemed everything uniquely female to be oppressive, even the bearing of a child, something she never did. Neither did she ever marry, despite her long-term (and nonexclusive) erotic relationship with Sartre, who also never married.

Favale critiques gender ideology for taking all teleology out of nature and replacing a *correspondence* view of truth with a *constructivist* view—the inversion of the Genesis account of reality in which God names things according to what they objectively are (Genesis 1). Adam does the same when he is called to name the animals (Genesis 2). She notes, “Most gender theories hold that what we think of as ‘reality’ is a linguistic and social construction. Our use of the words ‘woman’ and ‘man’, so this theory goes, creates the illusion that sex is binary.” (43, 206) Reality is not pliable enough to accommodate the linguistic revisions required of constructivism. In her chapter, “Sex,” she makes a strong case that one cannot truly change sexes and discusses the condition of intersex in this regard, showing that it is exceedingly rare and does not support gender ideology, since intersex people

are still male or female despite abnormalities.

Given her commitment to the objective binary of male and female, Favale rejects using the wrong pronouns for those who desire or demand it. While realizing that “using sex-based pronouns, rather than gender-based pronouns, is undoubtedly disruptive and likely offensive to most trans-identified people,” she asserts that, if “I use pronouns that conflict with sex, I am assenting to an untruth. More than assenting, in fact; through my own words I am actively *participating* in a lie.” (206)

Although much more could be said about this compelling and discerning book, we conclude with the author’s insight that both “narrow-minded traditionalists [on gender] and postmodern genderists fall prey to the same error: defining manhood and womanhood by stereotypical caricatures and policing those stereotypes, assessing how well individuals conform, or fail to conform, to a fantasized ideal. Part of countering the gender paradigm must be a greater openness to the variability within the categories of “man and woman.” (215-216) That is,

this false idea is that a female is not truly a female if she exhibits stereotypically masculine behaviors, such as, say, St. Joan of Arc or vice versa. How one expresses one’s maleness or femaleness is placed on a spectrum, but, gender ideology to the contrary, gender itself is not a spectrum. But must be placed within the male-female binary, which is based on the objective realities of biology and divine design.

Abigail Favale saw the light of nature about gender, and, in *The Genesis of Gender*, she shines that light on this contentious and controversial matter. For this, we are in her debt.