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The contingency of unequal power relations in marriage

Summary

In the traditional marriage there is an unequal power relationship between the spouses. The husband is in the dominant role and his wife is subordinate to him. Presumably this state of affairs would be justified if a relevant universal difference could be found between men and women such as would entail male domination. Can such a difference be found? This paper considers some of the affirmative claims from the Christian tradition, from Aristotle, from Rousseau, and (more particularly) in recent years from sociobiologists concerning the natural tendencies of the respective genders — claims which aim to justify male domination. It then briefly considers and rejects the claim that even if there are no relevant natural differences that justify the unequal power relationship in marriage, someone has to have the power in the relationship. Lastly, I suggest that an equitable marriage where husband and wife have equal power is to be preferred.

Die voortbestaan van ongelyke magsverhoudings in die huwelik

Daar bestaan in die tradisionele huwelik 'n ongelyke magsverdeling tussen die verskillende eggenote. Die man is in die dominante rol en die vrou in die ondergeskikte rol. Hierdie magsverdeling sou geregtig kon word indien daar 'n relevante universele verskil tussen mans en vrouens bestaan wat manlike dominansie tot gevolg het. Die vraag is dus of so 'n verskil wel bestaan? Hierdie artikel bekyk sommige aansprake wat poeg om manlike oorheersing te bevestig, byvoorbeeld die aansprake van die Christelike tradisie, van Aristoteles, Rousseau, en meer spesifiek, die resente biologiese aansprake betreffende die natuurlike neigings van die verskillende geslagte. Voorts word die aanspraak dat al sou daar nie relevante natuurlike verskille tussen man en vrou wees wat die ongelyke magsverskille in die huwelik regverdig nie, een van die partye tog die maghebbende in die verhouding moer wees, oorweeg en verwerp. Ten slotte word voorgestel dat 'n meer gelykberegtige (regverdige) huwelik, waar man en vrou gelyke magte het, verkieslik is.

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In the past the idea that a husband ought to have the power in the marital relationship was entrenched. The wife (and children) took the husband's (father's) name and status and, within broad limits, were subject to his discipline. The husband's wants, wishes or preferences usually took precedence over those of his wife and children. He had the power and the privileged position within the family. He was ultimately responsible for making important family decisions such as where they would live, the kind of lifestyle they would have, the friends they would or would not have, and so on. No one would deny that such an unequal power relationship predominated in the past; indeed, it appears to persist in many marriages today. The question arises: how, if at all, is this to be justified?

1. Biblical sources

There are a number of texts to be found in the New Testament which suggest that male dominance in marriage is ordained by God and as such is morally right. They assert the dependence, subordination and, in some cases, the inferiority of women. To quote one of the many examples available, Paul writes: "For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman but woman for man" (Corinthians 1, 11: 8-9). No doubt it will be objected that it is wrong to interpret such passages in a way that takes little or no account of the culture of the time in which they were written. It could be pointed out, for instance, that Paul's strictures concerning women occur within the general context of patriarchy, as well as against the background of the circumstances of the cities of Corinth and Ephesus at that time (Hannon 1967: 53). Furthermore Paul does make some comments about women which seem to support a more egalitarian outlook (eg Corinthians 7: 3-4; Ephesians 5: 21). Nonetheless it would be wrong to minimise Paul's evident attitude in favour of male dominance, particularly where marriage is concerned. His views have been very influential. They are regarded by many twentieth-century Christians as justifying what they see as the God-given male dominance over women.

One way of demonstrating the moral irrelevance of an appeal to divine (or Pauline) authority on this matter is the following: either there is a good reason for the divine command that women should be subordinate to men or there is not. If there are 'bad' reasons for God's command then why do rational people have to accept the claim that they should obey? The more likely alternative is that God has good reasons for such commands. But then if there are good reasons for commanding *A* rather than *B*, surely, it is because those reasons are good reasons that one should do *A*, not merely because God says so. In other words, we require good reasons for male dominance in marriage if we are to accept this. Perhaps the good reasons can be found in the fact that the power arrangement in marriage reflects the natural state of things. Let us now consider some of the naturalistic arguments which have been put forward to support this view.

2. Naturalistic arguments for male dominance

It has been argued that men dominate women because men are naturally dominant, and that women are dependent upon men because they are naturally inclined to dependence. Some philosophers, like Rousseau (1911: 321), concentrate on the superior physical strength of men to justify the claim of natural male dominance. For others, like Aristotle (*Politics* 1259-1260), female subordination is largely due to psychological differences between the genders; it is mainly a woman's lack of rationality that entails her subordination. Both views have their counterparts in modern times.

Let us first consider the overt sexual differences in the physical make-up of males and females. Rousseau (1911: 321) writes: "But for her sex, a woman is a man; she has the same organs, the same needs, the same faculties". But 'her' sex for Rousseau is not a mere contingency; rather, it determines the entire nature and role of the subject. Everything else follows and ought to follow from a person's sex. Thus he says that a female ought to have a different education, moral values, role in society, and function in the domestic household from that assigned to a male. In other words, as a result of the sexual difference, males and females have (or rather 'ought to have') quite different ways of being human and this in turn requires the domination of women by men.

Along these lines, Rousseau suggests in Book V of *Emile* that by the end of his (ideal) education, the young man ought to be able to support himself. He ought to be familiar with the arts and the sciences, with government, the law and public affairs in general and he ought to have an independent faculty of judgement. When it comes to marriage, Emile is told by his tutor: "You hope to be a husband and a father: have you seriously considered your duties? When you become the head of a family you will become a citizen of your country" (Rousseau 1911: 412). Marriage for Emile ought to involve his proper inclusion in the body politic, whereas his wife and children ought only to be connected to society through him.

In contrast, a woman's education ought to be quite different. Rousseau (1911: 349) suggests that this is because "the works of genius are beyond her reach, and she has neither the accuracy nor the attention for success in the exact sciences". Rousseau adds that she is specially made "by nature" for man's delight! As a result she is to be trained, "[t]o be pleasing in his sight, to win his respect and love [...] to make his life pleasant and happy, these are the duties of woman for all time, and this is what she should be taught while she is young" (Rousseau 1911: 328). Thus Rousseau is in no doubt that the sexual difference between a man and a woman requires that a wife be subordinate to her husband.

In recent times, a more complex and plausible attempt to make the same general point is given by some sociobiologists (for instance Ridley 1994; Wilson 1978). They claim that, due to the long evolutionary past, neurological and physiological differences between the sexes have emerged and they suggest that these are the cause of the many divergences in the social behaviour of men and women. The neurological differences referred to include the subtle but significant differences in the way the brains of males and females develop. Among the physiological differences alluded to is the fact that from an early age most females are smaller and physically weaker than males of the same age. Adult males are taller and have broader chests as well as a higher muscle-to-fat ratio, and so on. They are also stronger than adult females: it is considered that the muscular strength of the average adult woman is about two-thirds that of a

man. No doubt such things make a difference to the relative strength of men and women.

I want to make two further points here, and return to both later in this discussion. First of all, if distinctions regarding justified domination were to be made along these lines, the criterion of differentiation would be greater strength, not sex. So whatever distinctions are made on these grounds could apply alike to men and women. Secondly, social influences also need to be taken into account. From the earliest years, cultural proscriptions begin to interact with neurological and physiological differences in shaping the experiences of boys and girls. This presumably leads to a difference in the expectations of the sexes in respect of dominance and subordination within marriage. Before we consider the question of why this might justify male domination in marriage, let us consider some of the innate psychological differences that are purported to exist between the sexes.

Significant psychological differences between the sexes were suggested by Aristotle (*Politics* 1259-1260a). He claimed that a woman is not a fully rational being when compared with a man. He also suggests that the virtues are different in a woman: "temperance, fortitude, and justice are not the same in a man as in a woman; a man's fortitude is shown in ruling, a woman's in obeying". It appears, to Aristotle, that this shows why the male ought to have the power in the marital relationship. In *Politics* (1259b) he asserts: "The male is naturally more fitted to command than the female (except where there is a miscarriage of nature)".

We might think that Aristotle's general point is vindicated in modern times by the psychological contrasts between the sexes that have been discovered in the responses of members of each sex to psychological tests, among other things. Or, to put the point more circumspectly, it is claimed that although there are no consistent differences in the average scores of males and females on IQ tests (Archer & Lloyd 1982: 32-3), when the results are analysed according to the type of ability involved, consistent differences between the sexes are found. As Shafer (1987: 361) points out: "females [...] have greater verbal ability than males [while] males outperform females on tests of visual-spatial ability and arithmetic reasoning".

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We could go further and suggest an explanation for this difference along sociobiological lines. In the long hunter-gatherer period “[m]en needed superior spatial skills to throw weapons at moving targets [...] women needed [verbal] skills for success at making allies within the tribe, manipulating men into helping her” (Ridley (1994: 243-4). Over the very long stretch of evolutionary time, male and female brains became hard-wired to respond in ways consistent with these gender-related tasks so that, in our day, boys tend to have developed their latent visual perception to a greater extent while girls tend to be more fluent speakers and to have better verbal memories.

Other psychological differences between the sexes have also been found. For our purposes, the most important of these is aggression. Males are generally more aggressive than females (Archer & Lloyd 1982: 34). Studies conducted on children in several different societies have borne this out. In all of those tested (from various cultural backgrounds) it has been found that boys are likely to play more roughly and more likely to attack each other, to fight each other and to fight back when attacked, than girls are (Maccoby & Jacklin 1974: 352-3). They are also more prepared than girls are to cause injury to others.¹ Most importantly, it is suggested that aggression is associated with competitiveness and the drive to dominate others. Aggression is manifest in trials of strength or battles of will (which can be seen in activities such as sport, politics, and — most obviously — warfare). We might thus think that this could imply that being dominant in the marital relationship is a manifestation of the male psychological tendency towards aggression.

If males are naturally more aggressive than females, this has implications for our discussion. If males naturally have greater competitiveness, ambition and drive to dominate, coupled with a greater physical strength, this helps to explain why the typical male

1 This tendency is also reflected in the fact that, throughout the world, almost all violent criminals in prison are male; see Archer & Lloyd 1982: 31; *Annual Abstract of Statistics* 1994: 73, 84.

assumes that he ought to be the dominant spouse. The cause lies within his nature. Moreover, the biologically greater strength and drive to dominate of males might seem to make it futile for women to try and compete with them in this regard. Such a competition would seem to be doomed to failure since the woman is always naturally disadvantaged. Thus we might be tempted to conclude that a woman should just accept her subordinate status within the marital relationship.

An alternative explanation of male aggressive behaviour can be given in terms of nurture rather than nature. Perhaps male aggression is mainly due to social conditioning. As Broderick (1988: 42) writes:

Underlying attitudes [...] are largely formulated at an early age [...] these first years in the family are the foundation on which all that follows must be built.

In other words, there are no significant natural differences between the sexes that would account for male aggression; however, any slight strands within their nature that are present are encouraged by their socialisation.

This does not seem to be a basis for an adequate explanation. Why should adults throughout the world condition children in the same way? For in all societies, as we noted, males are generally more aggressive than females. This brings us back to the sociobiological type of reason. The dominant/subordinate roles that exist in marriage today, de Beauvoir (1988: 85) contends, are an inheritance from the very long period in which human beings lived in hunter-gatherer societies. She points out that in all known earlier societies, "While man hunts and fishes, woman remains in the home". During the long hunter-gatherer period the sexes had different roles. The role differentiation was essentially due to the fact that women had frequent pregnancies and had to breast-feed their babies. This meant that they needed to stay near the home, gathering vegetable foods, while the men went on hunting expeditions for meat (Morgan 1985: 165). As a result, females evolved a more gentle and passive social character, while males became tougher and more aggressive. And because physical strength and aggression were the ways in which

power was expressed in these primitive societies, males became dominant.

In addition to this, there is quite different empirical evidence supporting the claim that males are naturally more aggressive/dominant than females (Maccoby & Jacklin 1974: 243-7). First, a similarly strong inclination towards dominance is found in males of other closely related primates, for instance in apes (Barash 1982: 238). Obviously this cannot be explained in terms of human conditioning or socialisation. Moreover, the tendency of males to dominate is found in very young animals of many different species when there is little evidence of any conditioning at all. Secondly, aggression and the attempt to dominate have been shown to vary according to the level of testosterone present in a male; males are found to be more or less aggressive according to their testosterone levels (Archer & Lloyd 1982: 140-2). Females also become more aggressive if they receive this hormone (Archer & Lloyd 1982: 112-7). So it seems that hormones play a significant role in shaping aggressive/dominant masculine behaviour.

However, while few of us would deny that some role differences are connected with our biological or psychological natures, in a discussion of the causes of male domination in marriage there can be no doubt that the causal explanation is much more complex. This brings us back to a cause touched upon earlier: the way males and females are socialised. Rousseau seemed to acknowledge this. If it were true, as he claims, that "a woman is naturally made to be a man's helpmate", there would be no need for society to take all the trouble to ensure that a subordinate role develops in the girl through her upbringing and training. What is the purpose of different types of education and other social pressures, if adult males and females are naturally the way they are? One can hardly justify the existence of different types of education for boys and girls by claims about what they are supposed to achieve, if it would have happened anyway without a particular education.

Just as children are presented with a more or less consistent picture of how they are expected to behave when adults, men and women are similarly subject to social pressure of various kinds to make them behave in stereotypical ways. Thus it has "[o]ften [...]

been impossible for the sexes to trespass on what has been regarded as the other's territory" (Radcliffe Richards 1986: 190). We have been socialised into accepting particular stereotypes in which men have the more dominant role. In their working lives, men generally tend to have more opportunities, more resources, more status and more power than women and these expectations may accompany them into the marital relationship. In other words, the power that men possess in their lives outside the home gives them certain advantages within the home (Ferree 1990: 870).

From the above account, we may conclude that there is considerable empirical evidence (physiological, psychological and sociological) which is relevant to any attempt to explain of the strong tendency towards male dominance. Does this justify the commonly held view that husbands ought to have the power in the traditional marriage?

But there is also much fault to find with the arguments above. First, the allegedly superior physical strength of males in comparison with females is not universal. The empirical data represents only an average. Some wives are stronger, taller, or broader, than their husbands. Not all men conform to the expectations of the masculine stereotype. But — to adapt a point made by Radcliffe Richards (1986: 203) — one cannot deride a weak man on the grounds that he ought to be stronger than his wife in order to have the power in the marriage and claim that men should have the power because they are physically stronger. If all men were stronger there would be nothing to deride. But if there is thought to be something to deride, some husbands at least are, by the criterion of natural strength, unable to have the power in the relationship.

This point also applies to the alleged psychological differences between the sexes. A significant number of females will, for instance, be more spatially-visually adept than males; the evidence suggests that a quarter of all females tested have greater spatial-visual abilities than 50% of males (Maccoby 1967: 336). Similarly, tests for differences in male and female levels of aggression refer only to average results. Personal experience will have shown us that many wives appear more aggressive than their husbands and many husbands seem more gentle than their wives. Furthermore, many

other empirically revealed differences suggest no more than a tendency on the part of one or other of the sexes towards certain attitudes, propensities, or kinds of behaviour. Social conditioning, no doubt, could moderate, suppress or reinforce some or most of these differences if this were thought to be desirable. There are many case studies which show that a girl brought up in a way that teaches her to be independent of males in tasks requiring visual-spatial dexterity will have greater skill in this area than a girl brought up in a home which encourages dependence on males.² And the same is true *mutatis mutandis* where boys are raised in a home in which domestic independence is encouraged.

We should also note that no differences existing can explain more than a small number of the roles that males and females typically perform within the traditional household. An innately superior visual-spatial ability might explain, for instance, why the husband is more likely to be the handyman in the home (putting up shelves) or why he is more likely to fare better in performing tasks such as driving the car, which may require superior visual-spatial ability. But it cannot account for the fact that driving the car is regarded as almost exclusively the function of the husband. For, as I have suggested, the relevant psychological tests suggest that at least a fair proportion of wives will be as genetically advantaged in this area as their husbands.

Moreover, if superior visual-spatial ability explains why husbands perform certain household functions, one might wonder why there is not a corresponding female influence over household tasks that employ the wife's innate advantages, like greater verbal ability. Why isn't she expected to represent the household at meetings or in family matters that require the ability to speak or negotiate? The point is: even if we accept a general psychological explanation for the source of the differences between the sexes, we could argue that these differences are not reflected within the traditional marital relationship, where women do not appear to have the same opportunity to

2 See *Social Trends* 1994: 118.

make the most of the naturally superior talents which they are alleged to possess.

The last and most important point is that the few dissimilarities which may be suggested by differences in biology, psychological tests, and the like, do not entail a moral conclusion that the husband ought to have the power in marriage. To believe that they do is a clear instance of the fallacious move of switching directly from talking about what is the case to talking about what ought to be the case.³ Most philosophers accept that the claim that men and women are by nature different (if this is indeed the case) does not itself entail or justify the value judgements that are thought to follow from it (Hare 1963: 51-6; Mackie 1977: 64-73). Furthermore, since aggression, for instance, is not generally regarded as a desirable characteristic, why should the mere fact (*sic*) of a man's being naturally more aggressive provide a moral justification for his dominance in the marital relationship?

Surely an issue of this kind should be decided (rationally) by relevant criteria, and it is not obvious that a natural tendency to dominate is such a condition. It is not clear that we would agree to it, say, from behind Rawls's "veil of ignorance". Furthermore, it seems to add an unfair advantage to the natural advantage which one member of the couple already has. To paraphrase Radcliffe Richards (1986: 203): if you were really setting out in an unprejudiced way, rather than reinforce a natural tendency, you would arrange for the protection of the weak. Or you might try to reduce the power of the strong. The last thing you would do is to encourage institutions like patriarchal marriage, which seems to force the weak to depend upon the strong.

3 Similarly, Aristotle, Rousseau, *et al*, switch from claims about 'what naturally is the case' to claims about 'what ought to be the case', presumably in the belief that the latter can be deduced directly from the former.

3. Someone needs to have the power in marriage

We have seen that there appear to be no compelling reasons for accepting male dominance in marriage. We need now to consider the oft-made claim that someone has to have the power in the marital relationship in order to resolve conflicts when they occur. The argument seems to be that if no-one is in authority, the marital relationship may be threatened when disputes arise.

To be in authority is to be in charge of other people or in a position to regulate their behaviour. This is usually in accordance with agreed rules, laws, and standards. Thus umpires, referees, teachers, are typical figures in authority. The umpire in a tennis match is required to uphold the rules in order for the game to proceed. Anyone playing the game is presumed to have accepted the umpire's authority. When the umpire makes a decision, for instance, that a ball is 'out', such a decision is final and must be abided by. In a similar way, it is sometimes argued that this sort of authority needs to be conferred on one of the partners in a marriage. One of them must have the right to make decisions when necessary, and the other is expected to abide by these decisions. In this way conflicts can readily be resolved.

We might challenge the analogy that, like an umpire in a tennis match, a marriage requires one partner or the other to be in authority. In the case of tennis, given the conflict of interests, a neutral third party would seem necessary to ensure that those engaged in the activity adhere to the rules. But if the analogy with marriage were to hold, one of the competitors in the game would need also to serve as the umpire and decide how the rules apply. But then the umpire would not be an impartial observer. More importantly, a married couple is not engaged in a competitive game where an important point of the activity is that there should be a winner and a loser. Clearly the analogy does not hold.

Another way in which we might dispute the assumption that one of the spouses has to be in authority is by considering another type

4 See Telfer (1971: 224) for more on this point.

of relationship that does not require someone to be in authority — friendship. Friendship is (or rather is supposed to be) a relationship between equals. In such a relationship, X and Y will want to do things together, to share intimacies, to do things for each other;⁴ they will act in ways which promote each other's well-being, and so on. On the other hand, if Y were to use the relationship to gain power over X, we would say that Y has misunderstood a key aspect of friendship. To be X's friend should mean that Y recognises X's worth as a person, that the relationship is not valued merely as a useful instrument for Y's own ends. None of this is intended to suggest that X will not fall out with Y, or that friends are not supposed to have conflicts. However, their arguments are not expected to be about their relative power and status within the relationship. Friendship implies an absence of power struggles of this kind; friends are not expected to vie with each other for dominance. If this is so, why should such a struggle be necessary in a marriage?

It might be objected that the analogy between marriage and friendship is also false. Although in a good marriage the spouses will be friends, marriage involves more than friendship. Marriage is a legally binding commitment that is meant to be exclusive and permanent. Friendship typically lacks these features. Since the spouses are joined by a legally binding contract, doesn't this mean that one of them needs to have the power in the relationship in order to resolve any serious differences? (We will return to the discussion of friendship shortly).

Another way in which one might dispute the assumption that one of the spouses has to be in authority is by considering the type of long-lasting legally binding relationship that is expected to endure, yet where it is not thought that someone needs to hold the power, such as a business partnership. Like marriage, a business partnership is given legal recognition and is expected to endure.⁵

Once again, however, it can be objected that this is not a good analogy. In the first place (unlike a marriage contract), in a business contract it is usual for the participants to set their own terms (eg an

5 See Mill 1975: 472.

expense account, company car, and a percentage of the profits of the business). If these conditions are not met, there may seem little point in continuing with the partnership. A second difference is that business partnerships do not need to be enduring in quite the same way as marriages. For instance, it might be sensible to sell a flourishing business at a profit. It would be absurd to consider dissolving a flourishing marriage. There are, of course, many other differences between the two kinds of relationships. However I think that enough has been said to suggest that even if a business partnership does not require someone to have the power, the arguments for this do not transfer easily to marriage.

4. Both partners have the power in marriage

What kind of power relationship ought there to be in a good marriage? It was noted earlier that in friendship, when important decisions have to be made, it would be unsatisfactory for one of the friends always to dominate the other. Furthermore, while there is much more to the marital relationship than to friendship, nonetheless in a good marriage one of the conditions that needs to be met is that the spouses are friends.⁶ This involves, for instance, their doing things for each other and doing things together (like pursuing a joint project). They need to value each other and to have a selfless concern for the other. Most importantly, as was noted, in friendship there needs to be an absence of power struggles. Decisions that affect both friends need to be mutually acceptable. The same general point applies to a good marriage. This point requires further discussion.

In the marital relationship there are few actions that one might choose to take which are simply self-regarding; most of one's actions will impinge in some way on the life of one's spouse. In order to preserve the friendship between the couple, when resolutions have to be reached, both parties need to be actively and equally involved in the decision-making process. Thus important marital decisions need to be the outcome of discussion in which both partners are able to argue their case on an equal footing and thus to contribute equally to

6 See Dowling 1998: 50-61 for more on this point.

the final decision. For this to occur, both partners need to have to have a full understanding of the issue. Both need to know the possible solutions to the problem (ie whose interests will be furthered or harmed by a proposed course of action). Furthermore, both will have to be prepared to be sensitive to any possible damage to the partner's interests as a result of the decision. The general point is: in a good marriage, as in friendship, neither partner will force his or her own will on the other. In which case, both in effect have the power in the relationship. The challenge therefore is for the partners to agree on a way to deal with such conflicts before they arise so that neither is compromised by the other.⁷

5. Conclusion

This paper has argued that there is nothing in the physical or psychological natures of males or females to suggest that we should accept that marriage ought to be based on an unequal power relationship between husband and wife. Perhaps the most compelling argument for one of the spouses to be in authority is that a means of settling disputes is required. It has been argued that, difficult as it is when mutually acceptable decisions have to be made, the rational alternative would be for both spouses to participate equally in the decision-making process so that both, in effect, can have the power in the relationship.

7 See Telfer 1971: 223.

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Acta Academica 1999: 31(3)

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