

# *Ontologically Grounded Subordination*

## A Reply to Steven B. Cowan

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Steven Cowan has made the most philosophically informed defense to date of the claim that female subordination and male authority are merely functional differences of the sexes.<sup>1</sup> In this note I argue against Cowan's defense drawing upon insights from Natural Law in an attempt to show that complementarianism typically speaks of these functions as the *proper functions* of male and female designs, which therefore make men and women metaphysically unequal in being. Furthermore, I maintain that having the function *serving as a means to an end* is less valuable than having the function *having authority to direct the end*. Hence, Cowan fails to defeat the objection that *the claim that women are equal to men in being, but subordinate in role, is incoherent*.<sup>2</sup>

### *Womanhood and Proper Function*

As egalitarians see it, the central metaphysical concern is over whether subordination is essential to the personal identity of woman. If it is, then egalitarians are justified in claiming that woman's subordination is ontological, not merely functional. The burden of proof is to show that it is logically impossible for a person *X* to be at once ontologically equal with person *Y*, and yet functionally subordinate to *Y* by virtue of *X*'s ontology. Rebecca

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ABSTRACT: In a recent article Steven Cowan defended the claim that female subordination and male authority are merely functional differences. Drawing upon insights from Natural Law, I argue that complementarianism typically speaks of these functions as *proper functions* of male and female designs, thus making men and women metaphysically unequal in being. Furthermore, I maintain that the function *serving as a means to an end* is less valuable than the function *having authority to direct the end*. Hence, Cowan fails to defeat the objection that *the claim that women are equal to men in being, but subordinate in role, is incoherent*.

1. Steven B. Cowan, "The Metaphysics of Subordination: A Response to Rebecca Merrill Groothuis," *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 14 (2009): 43–53.

2. As originally claimed by Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, "'Equal in Being, Unequal in Role': Exploring the Logic of Woman's Subordination," in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity without Hierarchy*, ed. Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 301–32.

Merrill Groothuis shoulders the burden by connecting the complementarian norm of female subordination to male authority with the complementarian understanding of the created nature of maleness and femaleness.<sup>3</sup> In her words, “A man is fit to lead by virtue of his male nature. A woman is not.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, “Submission to male authority is the only ‘role’ that is deemed essential for every woman who would truly be feminine and fulfill the purpose for which God created womanhood.”<sup>5</sup> This “is not merely a role that is independent of and ontologically isolated from her being.”<sup>6</sup> The woman’s function is a special type, one that is specific to her nature and one where her function follows from her form. In philosophical parlance we might call this “proper function.”

Roughly, the notion of proper function means something is functioning properly if it is doing what it is *supposed to do*, that is, it is functioning well according to the way it was designed. This teleological insight is classically exemplified in Natural Law as a thing’s proper function, and it cashes out precisely what a thing ought to do to fulfill its nature. J. Budziszewski describes how: “If X is a thing’s function, then the good of the thing lies in the performing of X, and its highest good lies in the activity of performing X excellently.”<sup>7</sup> What warrants us in calling X a proper function? Inspired by Plato, Budziszewski suggests that “Its function is the activity it performs that nothing else can perform or that nothing else can perform well.”<sup>8</sup>

Another well-known application of this principle is found in Alvin Plantinga’s book, *Warrant and Proper Function*, where he argues that a necessary condition of warrant is the proper function of our cognitive faculties.<sup>9</sup> Plantinga’s insights about the nature of the design plan behind a thing’s proper function are instructive. A thing’s design will include both ultimate and specific purposes for some good.<sup>10</sup> The ultimate purpose describes the overarching good the design is supposed to accomplish, while the specific purposes are the goals that fulfill the ultimate purpose. Therefore, a design plan will include all of the conditions of how design *D* will work, how it should respond to certain circumstances, and to what end it will function.<sup>11</sup> The design plan also takes note of the surrounding context of *D*. To sum up,

3. Groothuis, “Equal in Being, Unequal in Role,” 301. She writes, “It seems that in both Aristotelian thought and evangelical patriarchy, the subordination of women to male authority follows from what is understood to be the created nature of maleness and femaleness.”

4. *Ibid.*, 303.

5. *Ibid.*, 319.

6. *Ibid.*, 321.

7. J. Budziszewski, *Written on the Heart: The Case for Natural Law* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 22.

8. *Ibid.*, 23.

9. Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

10. *Ibid.*, 13.

11. *Ibid.*, 22. The relevance of these considerations will emerge later in the paper when I consider contexts where female subordination lies dormant.

two conditions for proper function must be met by discerning *what a thing is designed to do*, and *how it is designed to do it*.<sup>12</sup> As we shall see, these are relevant to the gender debate<sup>13</sup> as the created natures<sup>14</sup> of the man and woman are often appealed to as the grounding of their specified roles.<sup>15</sup>

For complementarians the woman has been designed to be a “helpmate” for the man. The man, by contrast, has been designed to lead, provide for, and protect the woman. How well a man or a woman does these things determines how well they exemplify their manhood or womanhood. The ultimate purpose of this design is to give glory to God or to image his triune nature. Those who insist upon equal partnership fail to live up to what they were designed to do, and therefore bring moral blame upon themselves.<sup>16</sup>

By contrast, egalitarians see both male and female as corresponding exemplifications of humanity who have equal access to a variety of roles and functions that are best served by individual gifting. This does not mean every role and function is open to anyone regardless of gender. A man cannot obtain motherhood because he was not designed to be a mother, nor does he meet the necessary biological conditions to be a mother. Even if he were to have a sex change and obtain these biological conditions, he would only be meeting one of the two requirements for proper function (*how* a thing is designed (or redesigned) to function, not *what* a thing is designed to do). However, egalitarians do not see such gender-specific limitations in the area of leadership, particularly in the church or family. Women as well as men have been designed with the capacities to lead. These capacities, which include reasoning, moral judgment, spiritual worship, decision-making, and exercising authority, are essential to all human beings. Gender may influence how these leadership capacities are expressed, but they are not found in one gender but not the other. Egalitarians believe women can meet the conditions to lead if they have been gifted (naturally or spiritually), while complementarians reserve some leadership positions in the home, church, and maybe

12. *Ibid.*, 26–7.

13. For the purposes of this note, I will be using “the gender debate” as shorthand to refer to the debate between “complementarians” and “egalitarians” in evangelical theology.

14. I am using “creation” language to be synonymous with “design” language.

15. The Danvers statement, e.g., affirms, “Distinctions in masculine and feminine roles are ordained by God as part of the created order, and should find an echo in every human heart.” See *Biblical Foundations for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, ed. Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), 293. To my knowledge, I have not observed anything in the complementarian literature that indicates that these roles are “social constructions.” Perhaps this is because such language is thought to accommodate too much of postmodern or modern feminist thought. However, as an anonymous referee pointed out, there is nothing in principle wrong with thinking of the complementarian roles as social constructions ordained by God.

16. The Danvers statement declares “that a denial or neglect of these principles will lead to increasingly destructive consequences in our families, our churches, and the culture at large.” The negative consequences of flouting these masculine and feminine roles as ordained by God in the created order is precisely what makes this a moral issue, and one that is at home in a Natural Law normative system of ethics.

even society<sup>17</sup> for men, because women have been called “to help.”<sup>18</sup> In either scheme, the proper function weighs heavily.

The notion of proper function in complementarian literature can be found when contrasting same-sex relationships with heterosexual relationships. I take John Piper and Wayne Grudem to be competent representatives of this view:

Perhaps, if evangelical feminists, who do not endorse the justice of homosexual marriages, would agree that the basis of their position is not mere anatomy but also the *deeper differences* of manhood and womanhood, then they could at least understand why we are hesitant to jettison such *deeper differences* when thinking through the nature of justice in other relational issues besides who may marry whom. The point of our book is that Scripture *and nature* teach that personal man-

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17. There is disagreement among complementarians about the comprehensiveness of this restriction. In the version of his argument that appeared at the meeting of the Evangelical Philosophical Society, Cowan wrote of his desire to see Sarah Palin obtain high office, but other complementarians had cause for concern. In a blog post near the 2008 election John Piper wrote, “I am not able to say that God only speaks to the role of men and women in home and church. If our roles are rooted in the way God created us as male and female, then these differences shape the way we live everywhere and all the time” (“Why a Woman Shouldn’t Run for Vice President, But Wise People May Still Vote for Her,” *Desiring God*, Nov. 2, 2008, <http://www.desiringgod.org/blog/posts/why-a-woman-shouldnt-run-for-vice-president-but-wise-people-may-still-vote-for-her>).

Other complementarians have expressed similar reservations. E.g., Barbara K. Mouser in “The Womanliness of Deborah,” *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 11, no. 2 (2006): 19–36, asks, “Does Deborah provide an historical precedent that overturns the principle of male leadership in the home and nation?” Obviously, she presupposes that there is a principle of male leadership in the nation and infers it from Isaiah 3:12. She writes, “Isaiah tells us that the rule of women is a sign of degeneracy, not liberation.”

Similarly, Stuart W. Scott in his “Profiling Christian Masculinity,” *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 9, no. 2 (2004): 10–18, concludes that because God gave men authority in marriage and the church and leadership positions to men in Israel, “It is obvious that God has given man the role of ultimate leadership.”

Lastly, in an article titled “Able to Teach and Complementarian?” on the website of the Council of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, Kim Pennington writes that the Old Testament shows a pattern of male leadership for the nation, because Isaiah 3:12 is evidence that national female leadership is “unnatural and grievous to God” (“Able to Teach and Complementarian?” The Council of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, n.d., <http://www.cbmw.org/Resources/Articles/Able-to-Teach-and-Complementarian>).

Interestingly enough, Cowan’s enthusiasm for Palin’s aspirations to political leadership were edited out of the version of the article that appeared in *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*.

18. Raymond C. Ortlund writes, “God did not create man and woman in an undifferentiated way, and their mere maleness and femaleness identify their respective roles. A man, just by virtue of his manhood, is called to lead for God. A woman, just by virtue of her womanhood, is called to help for God.” See his “Male-Female Equality and Male Headship,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991), 91.

hood and womanhood are indeed relevant in deciding not only whom to marry but also who gives primary leadership in the relationship.<sup>19</sup>

As these “deeper differences” are relevant in determining the justice of same-sex marriage so they are relevant when determining the justice of roles of authority and subordination in marriage. The former is deemed unnatural and therefore condemned, whereas the latter is deemed natural and therefore commended. The roles of authority and subordination are thought to be the proper functions of manhood and womanhood as much as same-sex relations are thought to be improper functions of manhood and womanhood.

Groothuis protests that this just reduces to the proposition that “Women are meant to be in submission, to have their affairs directed by men.”<sup>20</sup> With regard to its justification she writes, “it appears to be on account of a prior assumption about the meaning and nature of womanhood that women are not expected or permitted to share authority equally with men.”<sup>21</sup> Whomever we side with, we ought to notice two things: first, woman is subordinate because of *the fact that she is a woman*. Second, her subordination flows from *the idea of what a woman is supposed to do and how she is to do it*. Roughly, these cash out in terms of “being” and “doing,” and I will separate these ideas under the terms *sexual identity*, and *sexual function*.<sup>22</sup>

### *The Problem of Equality*

If subordination to male authority is the proper function of the female sex, then it seems natural to question whether males and females share equality. But this is a fuzzy term that needs some development. It might be tempting to think of it in terms from our Western context of classical and modern

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19. John Piper and Wayne Grudem, “An Overview of Central Concerns: Questions and Answers,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991), 79 (emphasis added). The same sort of concern is also found in the very first question they address:

We are concerned not merely with the behavioral roles of men and women but also with the *underlying nature* of manhood and womanhood themselves. Biblical truth and clarity in this matter are important because error and confusion over sexual identity leads to: (1) marriage patterns that do not portray the relationship between Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:31-32); (2) parenting practices that do not train boys to be masculine or girls to be feminine; (3) homosexual tendencies and increasing attempts to justify homosexual alliances . . . ; (4) patterns of unbiblical female leadership in the church that reflect and promote the confusion over the *true meaning* of manhood and womanhood. (56, emphasis added)

20. Groothuis, ““Equal in Being, Unequal in Role,”” 301.

21. *Ibid.*, 303.

22. I borrow these terms from Daniel R. Heimbach, “The Unchangeable Difference: Eternally Fixed Sexual Identity for an Age of Plastic Sexuality,” in *Biblical Foundations for Manhood and Womanhood*, ed. Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), 279. I am using “gender” and “sex” language synonymously.

liberalism where ideas like “equal rights” and “equal opportunity” inform our notions of equality. No doubt these are significant, but it is the sense of human ontology that I want to focus on. Aristotle, echoed through Aquinas, categorized woman as a “misbegotten male” whose nature was thought to be “defective” thereby making her unfit for command.<sup>23</sup> I will not comment on the complex details of what each of these thinkers thought about women, except to note that female subordination and female inferiority were naturally thought to go together. It would be surprising to both to hear today’s complementarians claim that men and women are “equal in being.” The reason why is because sexual function and sexual identity were presumed to be bound together by nature as the former is the proper function of the latter.

However complementarians want to maintain some kind of demarcation between sexual identity and sexual function so that they can affirm that women and men are equal in their sexual identities, but “different” in their sexual functions. The problem lies in what exactly the “difference” is and how, given the metaphysics of womanhood described above, it is compatible with a view that neatly separates identity from function and maintains ontological equality.

The heart of Groothuis’s argument is meant to address this problem squarely:

Advocates of male authority seem to have difficulty acknowledging that the *reason* for the difference and the *nature* of the function determine whether such a difference can logically coexist with equality of being. As it happens, the reason for and the nature of woman’s subordination logically exclude woman’s equality.<sup>24</sup>

And this is because,

Patriarchy involves different functions, to be sure, but the different functions are grounded in supposed differences in the nature, meaning and purpose of manhood and womanhood.<sup>25</sup>

In short, it is not plausible to believe that men and women are ontologically equal, because manhood and womanhood are not ontologically equal. Obviously, manhood and womanhood are “different,” so they are not equal in the sense that they are not identical. But if we differentiate manhood and womanhood by a hierarchal features essential to manhood and womanhood themselves, and if we maintain that God designed men and women to fulfill these functions of manhood and womanhood, then we have a *prima facie* reason to believe that women are essentially inferior to men. Hence, complementarianism fails.

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23. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q.92, a.1, obj.1; Aristotle, *De Generatione Animalium*, 2.3, 737a; *Politics*, 1259b3.

24. Groothuis, ““Equal in Being, Unequal in Role,”” 315; emphasis original.

25. *Ibid.*

### *Cowan's Concession and the Conditions of Permanence and Comprehensiveness*

The most striking feature of Cowan's rebuttal is his concession that "woman's subordination is ontological, being grounded in women's femaleness."<sup>26</sup> Even when his task is to counter Groothuis's claims about the permanence of woman's subordination, he admits that it is "ontologically grounded in her femaleness."<sup>27</sup> However, Cowan does not believe this ontological grounding entails comprehensive subordination. He devises a thought experiment which imagines woman to be like an amphibious creature whose subordination is adaptive to her environment. He writes,

Similarly, why can't women, in virtue of their being or nature, have qualities that fit them for subordination in the present, earthly environment, but which are unnecessary and lie dormant in the afterlife because the conditions of life at that time are different? I see no reason why this could not be the case.<sup>28</sup>

So it may be possible that the creaturely conditions that contribute to female subordination in this life cease to exist in the afterlife.<sup>29</sup> Still, in this scenario, ontologically grounded subordination remains, because woman's female nature still provides the necessary conditions for subordination. Cowan's point about the failure "to distinguish between the *exercise* of a 'distinctively human activity' and the venue or *context* of its exercise"<sup>30</sup> does not overcome ontological inequality. The afterlife may be a place where female subordination to male authority lies dormant, but this does not mean females are thereby *ontologically* equal with males. Simply because subordination is not occurring in a given context does not mean that one is not fit for subordination, and this much Cowan seems to concede.

As to the "comprehensiveness" of female subordination it seems that the word in Groothuis's argument is fuzzy. Is it really all-encompassing when we say woman's subordination obtains in the home and church? Are not the spheres of business and politics available to women as contexts free from

26. Cowan, "The Metaphysics of Subordination," 45–6.

27. *Ibid.*, 46.

28. *Ibid.*, 47.

29. It is a point of contention among complementarians whether women are subordinate in the afterlife. Wayne Grudem argues that "The maleness of the Apostles established a permanent pattern of male leadership in the church," which makes for an eternal institution that is "100 percent male headship." In another place he concludes, "Therefore, for all eternity, we will see that Jesus has called to Himself a great family of God's people in which the highest leadership positions are not distributed equally to men and women, but are all held by men." See his *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth: An Analysis of More Than 100 Disputed Questions* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2004), 82, 172.

30. Cowan, "The Metaphysics of Subordination," 52n6.

subordination? It seems that they are.<sup>31</sup> Cowan finds it implausible that single women should be subordinate to male authority in all spheres of life. Secondly, he finds counterexamples where spheres of life are restricted only to women. Because no man is given the opportunity to be Miss America or the chairwoman of the National Organization of Women it seems that there are contexts where subordination does not obtain.

Yet like the afterlife, these contexts may be such that female subordination to male authority lies dormant, which again, does not imply that females are *ontologically* equal with males. With regard to Cowan's beauty queen, she may have the sex-specific privilege of entering a beauty pageant, but she might not properly participate in it without the endorsement of her husband, father, or pastor. If a wife did not want her husband to become a pastor, she may express her wishes, yet she is subject to the "final decision" of her husband. He may well ask her to submit to the role as a pastor's wife and would be entitled by his male authority to do so. These cases reveal that the central issue at stake is the nature of the woman's autonomy, not whether certain contexts are reserved only for one sex. In "dormant" contexts the woman has the latitude to direct her own affairs and initiate her actions. In "subordinate" contexts she cannot deny that someone else, her male counterpart, has authority over her interests. By contrast the man is entitled to direct his affairs accordingly while denying his female counterpart any authority over his interests.<sup>32</sup>

Furthermore, if a woman's proper function is to yield her autonomy to a man's, then there is good reason to suppose that an intrinsic feature of her agency is inferior to the man's. She is not like the man in that her authority to govern herself is not free from the constraints of the opposite sex. Her subordination is one-way. And if it is not the case that permanence and comprehensiveness are necessary for ontological subordination, one-way subordination certainly is.<sup>33</sup>

### *Essential Subordination and the Entailment of Inferiority*

If a woman's subordination is ontologically grounded and exemplifies her proper function, it follows that she is unequal with man in the metaphysical sense: she is inferior to the man *in being*. Despite protestations to the contrary, this principle is sufficient to undermine the claim that *women are equal in being, but subordinate in role*. They simply are not equal in being,

31. Though as I have noted, not all complementarians are in agreement about this.

32. Of course, the generous complementarian will not be dismissive of a woman's input, but my point is that the authority belongs to him and not to her.

33. I am indebted to Andrew Engen for this point.



and their “role” obtains just because their being is fit for subordination. It seems that Groothuis’s argument proves this metaphysical point.

This does not seem to be very clear to Cowan, however, and much is made over the matter of a woman’s value. Notice the shift in his understanding of inferiority in the premises of the argument. He argues that

(4) If the permanent, comprehensive, and ontologically grounded subordination of women is justified, then women are inferior persons entails

(7) Essential subordination necessarily entails the inferiority in value and dignity of the one who is subordinate.<sup>34</sup>

But this is fallacious. All that (4) claims is that women are metaphysically inferior to men. It does *not* “necessarily” entail inferiority in value and dignity. Egalitarians may believe that metaphysical inferiority naturally leads to viewing the inferior in a way that diminishes their value and dignity, but this view does not follow necessarily. We can imagine a race of creatures *R* that are inferior to a race of creatures *C*, and yet *C* is under the obligation to view *R* with value and dignity. How we ascribe value and dignity may be linked to metaphysical considerations, but it does not necessarily follow that value and dignity are diminished by an inferior metaphysical status. It is possible for value and dignity to be contingent matters, not a matter of logical necessity that presumes a one to one correspondence between metaphysical status and personal value and dignity.

### *The Less Valuable Function Principle*

Still there is Groothuis’s concern over whether complementarianism acknowledges a woman’s value and dignity. She writes, “The question before us is whether the patriarchal paradigm in fact acknowledges female humanity to be fully human, equal in value to male humanity.”<sup>35</sup> Groothuis argues that it is not acknowledged, because the woman does not have the autonomy to exercise authority in the home and church. Exercising authority is not a distinctly male capacity like the distinctly female capacity to bear children. Yet it seems that though woman is able to do these things she ought not to do them. She would not be functioning properly if she were leading, guiding, or exercising authority. The problem of acknowledging equal value between the sexes is found precisely in adhering to a hierarchy between the sexes, which seems to undermine the subordinate sex’s human value.<sup>36</sup>

34. Cowan, “The Metaphysics of Subordination,” 48–9. I have kept his enumeration for purposes of avoiding confusion in citation.

35. Groothuis, “Equal in Being, Unequal in Role,” 307.

36. On reviewing an earlier draft of this paper Rebecca Merrill Groothuis made the important point that *human* value is the issue here. Value per se depends on the need of the hour. After all,

In exploring this ambiguity Cowan wants to know whether

- (8) “Woman has an unequal/inferior role to that of man” = “Woman has a less valuable role than man”

or,

- (9) “Woman has an unequal/inferior role to that of man” = “Woman has a subordinate position of authority to that of man.”<sup>37</sup>

He raises a good question; why would (9) imply (8)? Any justification for (8) would have to include what Cowan calls the *Less Valuable Function Principle* (LVFP):

- (LVFP) Necessarily, for any two functions F1 and F2, if any person having F1 is, in virtue of having F1, essentially subordinate to a person having F2, then F1 is a less valuable function than F2.<sup>38</sup>

Cowan believes that there are no good reasons to think this is true, and some good reasons to think it is false. He draws an analogy from military service where privates and officers work together to accomplish a common goal. Some are in a leadership role and some are in a subordinate role. Each is dependent on the other to fulfill the tasks necessary for accomplishing a common goal. Thus, we can take Cowan to be saying that G.I. Joe is as valuable to the function of the military as General John.

Two responses can be made to this. The first is that the analogy does not include the criteria by which persons are assigned their rank in the essential subordination model. If it did, Joe would be a G.I. because it is fitting to his “Joe-ness.” Being a G.I. is his proper function. Conversely, John is a general because of his “John-ness.” Certainly, the military requires the most gifted and able people available to fulfill its various roles, and this would lead us to believe that “John-ness” is fit for command while “Joe-ness” is at least fit for following command, and perhaps shooting a weapon, or running fast, or being cannon fodder. In any event, even if the functions are of equal interdependent value, the two persons certainly are not equal in being.

The second response is that it is highly dubious to suppose that G.I. Joe’s function is as valuable as General John’s simply because they are interdependent. A hostile enemy would certainly have no trouble discerning which of the two is more valuable to the success of the army. While it would be tragic to suffer the loss of G.I. Joe, it would be far more detrimental to the purposes and goals of the army if General John were assassinated. The general’s organizational skills, the ability to influence, and the authority to command are rightly regarded as more valuable than that of the one who is organized, influenced, or commanded. To be sure, generals may see the privates as “valuable” because they are the mechanisms by which their direc-

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a horse has greater value than a man when it comes to hauling things.

37. Cowan, “The Metaphysics of Subordination,” 49.

38. *Ibid.*, 50.

tives are carried out, but greater value resides in the general's authority, and not only because of his command, but also because he does not have to do the things the privates do.

Sensing this analogy might be inadequate Cowan offers another analogy from a science fiction novel that describes the "Motie society," an alien race ordered into separate castes where ontological subordination exists, but the interdependent roles played by each are vital to the health of the society. This shows that inequality in being can coexist with equal value in role.<sup>39</sup>

This defense is more sophisticated, but there is a good reason and a powerful counterexample to reject it. Simply because a person's function is valuable in bringing about some social goal, it does not follow that that value is conferred on a person's dignity.<sup>40</sup> A prime example of this is the antebellum South where white slaveholders were dependent on black slaves to produce the region's most profitable good, cotton. Many economic arguments were employed against abolitionists to show that slaves were valuable to their slave-owners; however, *none* of these arguments demonstrated how the slaves were personally valuable. In fact, many presumed the slaves were fit for subordination by virtue of their race and argued that it would be ruinous to society if they were allowed to live free. If a person's proper function is to serve as a means to an end, then we have a strong *prima facie* reason to believe their personhood has an inferior value compared to one whose proper function is to define and command the end.

Thus we might restate the LVFP as Hierarchy's Less Valuable Function Principle:

(HLVFP) Necessarily, given the two functions, F1' *serving as a means to an end* and F2' *having authority to direct the end*, if any person having F1' is, in virtue of having F1', essentially subordinate to a person having F2', then F1' is a less valuable function than F2'.

This revision brings some clarity to the hidden definitions behind hierarchal functions that provide justification for inequality in value.<sup>41</sup> F1' devalues the status of persons who have F1' as ends in themselves. Persons who have F2' are able to affirm their own status as ends in themselves or whatever other end they might deem valuable. This does not entail that F1' is entirely without value; only that it is of lesser value than F2'.<sup>42</sup> I will leave it for discussion

39. *Ibid.*, 51.

40. Again, I am indebted to comments made by Andrew Engen on these points.

41. Notice that this applies to nonessential subordination as well. The principle can be applied to God and humanity too. Versions of Christianity that envisage created agents as a means to the end of God's glory is compatible with this. As for God, men, and women the application of the principle terminates in a "chain of command" theory of relationships.

42. On the best version of complementarianism the man will affirm the woman as an end in herself that it is to be valued through service and self-sacrifice. This usually is found in instructions on marriage and ought to be true in the church as well. My point in this section is

on whether HLVFP is a necessary truth, and remain open to the possibility of an example showing it to be a contingent truth.

### *Conclusion*

In this note I have labored to answer Steven Cowan's defense of the claim that *woman's subordination and man's authority involve only the functional subordination of women*. If such functions are *proper functions* according to man's and woman's divine design, then men and women are metaphysically unequal in their being. All that is required for subordination to be essential is for subordination to be ontologically grounded. Furthermore, I have tried to show that having the function *serving as a means to an end* is less valuable than having a function that *having authority to direct the end*. This critique may not apply to all forms of complementarianism,<sup>43</sup> but the variety that Cowan espouses fails to defeat the egalitarian objection that *the claim that women are equal to men in being, but subordinate in role is incoherent*.<sup>44</sup>

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just to show that essential functions of authority and subordination *simpliciter* are asymmetrical in value.

43. Complementarianism can be defended by an appeal to divine command ethics whereby male and female beings are not referenced for their prescribed roles. In this case, there is no essential difference between men and women that is logically prior to God's command. This seems to be logically defensible, but odd for a position so committed to upholding the essential differences between men and women to take.

44. I am grateful for the helpful comments made on this paper by Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, Doug Groothuis, Andrew Engen, and an anonymous referee.