

SHIT THAT
PISSSES ME OFF

PEG TITTLE



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Magenta

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Acknowledgements

Also by Peg Tittle

Critical Thinking: An Appeal to Reason

What If... Collected Thought Experiments in Philosophy

Should Parents be Licensed? Debating the Issues

Ethical Issues in Business—Inquiries, Cases, and Readings

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You Oughtta Need a Licence for That

We have successfully cloned a sheep; it's not unreasonable, then, to believe we may soon be able to create human life. Despite Frankenstein visions of a brave new world, I'm sure we'll develop carefully considered policies and procedures to regulate the activity.

For example, I doubt we'll allow someone to create his own private workforce or his own little army.

And I suspect we'll prohibit cloning oneself for mere ego gratification.

Doing it just because it's fun will certainly be illegal. And I expect it won't even be imaginable to do it 'without really thinking about it', let alone 'by accident'.

I suspect we'll enforce some sort of quality control, such that cloned human beings shall not exist in pain or be severely 'compromised' with respect to basic biological or biochemical functioning.

And I suspect one will have to apply for a license and satisfy rigorous screening standards. I assume this will include the submission, and approval, of a detailed plan regarding responsibility for the cloned human being; surely we won't allow a scientist to create it and then just leave it on the lab's doorstep one night when he leaves.

Thing is, *we can already create human life*. Kids and addicts do it every day.

And though we've talked ourselves silly and tied ourselves in knots about *ending* life—active, passive, voluntary, coerced, premeditated, accidental, negligent—we've been horrendously silent, irresponsibly laissez-faire, about *beginning* life.

We wouldn't accept such wanton creation of life if it happened in the lab. Why do we condone it when it happens in bedrooms and backseats?

It should be illegal to create life, to have kids, in order to have another pair of hands at work in the field or to have someone to look after you in your old age.

It should be illegal to create a John Doe *Junior* to carry on the family name/business.

It should be illegal to have kids because, well, it just sort of happened, you didn't really think about it.

And it *isn't* possible to create life 'by accident'—men don't accidentally ejaculate into vaginas and women don't accidentally catch ejaculate with their vaginas. (As for failed contraception, there's follow-up contraception.)

And it should be illegal to knowingly create a life that will be spent in pain and/or that will be severely substandard.

As for the screening process, we already do that for adoptive/foster parents. Why do we cling to the irrational belief that biological parents are *necessarily* competent parents—in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary? We have, without justification, a double standard.

Oh but we can't interfere with people's right to reproduce! *Right to reproduce?* Merely *having* a capability doesn't entail *the right to exercise* that capability.

(Re)Production, with its attendant responsibilities, should be a privilege, not a right.

And yes of course, this proposal, this argument for parenting licenses, opens the door for all sorts of abuses. For starters, who will design and administer the screening process? But look around: it's not as if the current situation is abuse-free. In fact, millions of the little human lives we've created so carelessly are being starved, beaten, or otherwise

traumatized. Millions.

To be succinct: the destruction of life is subject to moral and legal examination; so too should be the creation of life, whenever and however it occurs.

* * * * *

What's in a Flag?

I noticed at the beginning of the summer that one of the weekenders had hung a large Canadian flag in her cottage window. And two of the year-rounders had Canadian flags on poles. By the end of the summer, there were about fifteen. I was surprised. This is Canada. We aren't American. So what's with the flags?

Well, maybe that's it. It's to say we *aren't* American. Many Canadian tourists wear a Canadian flag on their knapsacks for the same reason American tourists wear a Canadian flag on their knapsacks. But then why not just fly an American flag with the red slash of "No!" through it? Maybe because that wouldn't be very nice. And, well, we're Canadian.

Furthermore, it's a small lake. Everyone here already knows these people are Canadian. (Though I don't actually know about the new summer people—*they* could be American.)

So again, what's with the flag? Are these people just saying they're proud to be Canadian? Well, they can't. They can't do that. How can you be proud to be Canadian? You can be proud of running a marathon in under four hours. That's an accomplishment. Being Canadian is just an accident. In order to be proud of something, you have to have had something to do with that something. It's nonsense for me to say I'm proud that we've walked on the Moon. Who's this 'we'? I had nothing to do with it. So I can't take any credit for it. So I can't possibly be proud of it.

So how can you be proud to be Canadian? Did you make Canada what it is today? I don't think so.

But, then, what *is* Canada? What does it actually *mean to be* Canadian? At one level (and to my mind, the only level), to be Canadian means to have been born within certain geopolitical boundaries. No one can take credit for where they were born. They weren't born yet. And if you were born here, you haven't even had to pass the citizenship test and memorize the oath of allegiance. (Does Canada even have an oath of allegiance? I have no idea. I was born here. I guess my allegiance goes without saying.)

Alternatively, being Canadian means to have lived within these certain geopolitical boundaries for a certain period of time under certain conditions. (They're the ones who have had to pass that citizenship test.)

For some, getting here, becoming a Canadian, is certainly an achievement, something to be proud of. But *being* Canadian is a little different than *becoming* Canadian.

Some might say being Canadian means you have certain values. Oh yeah? Like what? Well, Canadians are friendly. Right. Our government sells weapons. The guy I asked to please not let his kid drive his dirt bike up and down in front of my cabin all day

responded by trying to hit me with his pick-up next time I was out walking. And even if it were true that everyone, or even most everyone, who lives here *is* friendly, well I'm sure a lot of people who live in other countries are also friendly. Trying another possibility, a lot of people who live in Canada *don't* drink beer and get stupid over hockey. And a lot of people who don't live in Canada *do*. My point is there are no *uniquely* Canadian values. And even if there were, does subscribing to them mean I can take credit for them? An odd sort of question, isn't it.

When people say they're proud to be Canadian (or whatever), maybe what they really mean is that they're *happy* to be Canadian. Well, being proud and being happy are two different things. And frankly, I don't see the point in making a public proclamation of either one. The first is just bragging and the second is just stupid.

Unless it's like a gang colours thing. (In which case it's even more bragging and more stupid.) 'I'm Canadian' means 'I belong to this gang, this tribe'. Yeah so? Are you trying to make me say what gang I belong to? Are you trying to pick a fight?

Still, why not proclaim that you belong to any one of a number of groups you surely belong to—why not fly the horticultural society's flag or the auto association's flag? Why the *Canadian* flag? Because a nation has more power than a horticultural society or the auto association and you want to be sure people know you belong to the *big* gang, the *tough* gang? Why? I guess if someone's threatened you, you might want to announce that you're not alone, that someone's got your back. But I doubt anyone's threatened these people. And I doubt Canada's got their back. (*I* sure don't.) And anyway, if they really want to make someone think twice about attacking them, wouldn't they fly, say, the Hell's Angels flag? (Or, well, the American flag?)

(Yeah, but, the Home Depot had a sale on *Canadian* flags.)

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Casual Day at the Office

Every second Friday is 'Casual Day' at the office—the principal lets us wear jeans to school. I need two degrees to do my job, but apparently I just can't seem to dress myself.

In addition to infantilizing the subordinates, Casual Day underscores the tradition of hypocrisy, the tradition of pretending: financial advisors who work on your portfolio at home probably do most of their work in jeans and a sweatshirt; they just change, they just put on the facade, the uniform of authority and competence, when they're in their office. Do they think we're idiots? Do they think we judge a book by its cover, do they think we're fooled that easily?

Well, yes, they do. And they're right. Behold the power of a suit coat and tie: it says 'I'm to be respected'. Anyone up on charges who borrows a suit for his day in court knows that. Oh, but the judge would be a fool to be suckered in by that. Yes—and so are we.

We also fall for the laser-printed four-colour resume over the merely photocopied black-and-white one, the custom-made business card over a name and number written on

a piece of paper, the bass voice speaking with grave pauses over the soprano who inflects upward at the end of each sentence. We even have a word for prioritizing pretence over substance: professionalism.

Another disturbing thing exposed by Casual Day is that the more formal the attire, the more gendered it is. Formal dress is rigidly male or female: a three-piece suit and tie or a dress and high heels. Less formal attire is less gendered: slacks or jeans and a blouse or shirt. The most casual is completely ungendered: the old 'sweats'. The thing is this: a suit coat and tie outranks a dress and high heels. (Women wear pseudo-suits; men never wear pseudo-dresses.) So as long as formal attire is required, men will outrank women. A male teacher once said to me he was so very grateful for his suit coat and tie during his first year of teaching because it gave him the authority he needed to control his class. It didn't occur to him that female teachers can't depend on attire for the authority they need; nor did it occur to him that perhaps he thereby contributes to their 'inability' to control their classes.

As one who has often been reprimanded, and even suspended, for 'inappropriate attire', let me just say that I think the whole thing is rather pathetic: what does it mean when the word 'subversive' can actually apply to fabric choices?

* * * * *

Drugs and Sports—What's the Problem?

Here we go again—drugs and sports. What's the problem? No really, what exactly is the problem?

Some say those who've used cocaine should be banned from the Olympics because it's illegal. Well, there are many things that are illegal—shouldn't we therefore ban every athlete who's ever done something illegal?

If so, why? Haven't they already paid the penalty determined by whatever country they live in? The International Olympic Committee is not a criminal justice system.

Some call upon the moral character point: athletes are expected to be of high moral character—or at least of higher moral character than the rest of us. Why? Well, they're expected to be role models. Why? Why shouldn't we put the same expectations on, say, artists? Or CEOs? Or you and me?

And if we're going to call drug use immoral, well, let's consider as well reckless driving, negligent parenting, and a whole bunch of other questionable behaviours.

All of which is completely separate from the performance enhancement argument. But, cocaine, like marijuana, is hardly performance enhancing.

So let's consider steroids. And vitamin C. And spinach. All of which *are* performance enhancing. Is it a question of natural/artificial? But vitamin C tablets don't exactly grow on trees either.

Is it a question of degree? Okay—have we figured out exactly how much is too much? (Consider here flu medication and allergy puffers.) And too much for what?

For fair competition? Is that it—it's a question of fairness? Okay, what's fair? Equal

access to enhancements? Well then it's hardly fair for American athletes to compete with Ethiopian athletes.

Equal physical capacities? Well size 17 flipper-feet in the pool are hardly fair when others have only size 10. (Maybe there should be different classes of swimmer, according to foot size, just as there are different classes of wrestler, according to weight.)

Yeah, but that's hardly his fault, he was just born that way. Hm. Would it matter if his parents had intentionally chosen the big feet gene? What if *he* intentionally chose to grow bigger feet? Or to grow bigger muscles?

Merely by working out every day, one makes that choice. So are we back to the arbitrary line of artificialness? Or the very grey line of degree?

It makes one think that the whole idea of basing the win/lose decision on hundredths of a second and tenths of a centimetre is just a little bit—silly.

* * * * *

Mr. and Ms.

I'm in this world, okay, and the people identify each other by sex. All the time. It's like 'Female Person Smith' and 'Male Person Brown' or 'Person-with-Uterus Smith' and 'Person-with-Penis Brown'—I don't know the exact translation. But sex-identity is a mandatory prefix. They distinguish males from females. Before they do everything else. Before they do anything else.

It bothers me. It irritates me. It pisses me off. I mean, what's so damned special about my sex that it has to be part of my name? Surely my values, my interests, my abilities, my character—these aspects define my self more than my sex does.

And anyway shouldn't *I* be the one to decide what parts of my self are important enough to be part of my name? Maybe I want to be identified by my ovaries, but maybe I want to be identified by my occupation. Hell, maybe I want to be identified by my blood type.

The thing is, they consider it polite. Polite! To draw such relentless attention to details of my anatomy! In fact, they think that to call someone just by their name, without the penis/uterus prefix, is rude. So it's really hard to say anything. And it's even harder to *do* anything. I tried just saying "Dave" one time and everybody turned and stared at me. No kidding. I tried to hold my ground, but I heard myself say "Sorry, I mean, 'Mr. Brown'." And everybody smiled with relief.

I even tried variations once. I thought if I loosened up the custom a bit, it'd be easier to get rid of it altogether. Sort of like food that's dried onto dishes you haven't washed in a week. I put on my best smile and said "Dickhead Brown". Everybody turned and stared. Worse than last time. Again, I found myself saying "Sorry, I meant 'Penis Person, Male Person, Mr. Brown'."

Surely this can't be good, this obsessive marking of sex, this insistent separation of human beings into male and female. Talk about paving the superhighway to sex discrimination. I wanted to shout "Look, it's not like it has to be this way!" Why *not* just

call people by their names, ‘Dave’ or ‘Mary’? Too familiar for the formality-prone. Then how about using their surname, ‘Brown’ or ‘Smith’? Too rude for the etiquette-addicted. How about an all-purpose sex-neutral prefix like ‘Doctor’ but without the professional implications; how about just ‘Person’—‘Person Brown’ and ‘Person Smith’? As for the pronoun problem, they already have a sex-neutral pronoun: ‘it’. But, stupidly, it’s reserved for animals. Go figure. In this world, *animals* are accorded the respect of a sex-free identity, but *people* aren’t.

* * * * *

Profit and Loss—and Marbles

Years ago, Joseph Schumacher examined the ethics of unlimited growth and concluded that “Small is beautiful.” The business world, with no shortage of conglomerates and an increasing number of mergers, seems to have missed the message.

One might quip ‘Well, that’s because hedonistic greed governs the business mind’, but a quick survey of a second year Business class—in which not one student answered the question ‘Why is profit good?’ with ‘Because it gives me pleasure, it makes me happy, I wanna be a rich sonovabitch’—suggests that either denial starts early or something else is going on. (Or both.)

(Most students responded, by the way, with something like ‘Profit is good because it enables you to expand—to hire more people, to establish branches in other cities, to increase production.’ ‘And why is this expansion good?’ ‘Well, because then you can make more profit.’) (Can you say ‘circular’?)

The concept of limitlessness is ingrained in business policy and practice. Why is this so? Because profit is idealized in business policy and practice. People in business assume that making a profit is their purpose. (‘Non-profit business’ is an oxymoron, apparently.) Some even assume that making a profit is their *right*.

Defence of maximizing profit/growth often includes an appeal to the responsibility to shareholders. (Can you say ‘pass-the-buck’?) I put aside, for a moment, the question of why a business has more responsibility to its shareholders than to its stakeholders. (Distributive justice according to contribution is not the only option.) It was explained to me that if someone invests in your company, giving you money to use, you have an obligation to give them the best return on their money. The best? Again, this notion of *unlimitedness* appeared. Why not, I suggested, set a *fair* rate of return, and then include that as an expense, rather like the interest on a loan? ‘Well, why should people invest in your company if they can make more with another company—they’re taking a loss then.’ Thus was I introduced to the strange definition of loss.

In business, apparently loss is defined as the difference between what you get and what you might’ve gotten. The baseline is not an actual amount but, instead, some ideal amount. (And they say business people are realists.) The measure of all things is the maximum *potential*.

For the rest of us, loss is the difference between what you have at Time 1 and what

you have at Time 2. Yesterday, I had 10 marbles; today I have 7; so I lost a few—3, to be exact. Business people have a different arithmetic: if they get 10 marbles and they think they could've gotten 100, they 'suffer a loss' of 90 marbles. (I'd like to point out, by the way, that by their own reckoning, they've lost quite a few more marbles than I have.)

All of a sudden, someone's query about my purchase of a CD player—'How much did that set you back?'—made sense. At the time, I was puzzled by his use of 'set you back'. It didn't *set me back* anything—it *cost* me \$300. But if you use as a baseline some imagined million dollars you could make this year, buying the CD player will put you \$300 back from that million.

It's a very strange definition. It's a very dangerous definition. First, because it's not reality-based. (That in itself begs for the label 'schizophrenic'.) 'Could' is not the same as 'would'. And even 'would' is a far cry from 'will'.

Second, this definition of loss is simply illogical: you cannot lose what you never had. What is actually being lost is not a certain amount of money, but the *opportunity* to make a certain amount of money.

Third, it's very manipulative. The word 'loss' typically suggests cause for condolence: it suggests you do not have what you *should* have. But this definition entails a rather suspect sense of 'should have', it presumes some sort of entitlement that is, at least in my opinion, completely unjustified.

The classic symbol of business success is a graph with a jagged line on the diagonal up to the right: growth—unlimited growth. But surely there is a point at which we have enough. Don't we all learn, when we're about two years old, to 'say when'? (At that, I hear a student in the back quip, 'No, we didn't learn that lesson. That's why we're in Business.')

* * * * *

**I'm not a feminist.
Feminism is so over.
We live in a post-feminist world.**

It used to be that men pressured women to have sexual intercourse with them. And despite the fact that it meant risking years of unhappiness for us (unwanted pregnancy, unwanted children), for ten seconds of bliss or relief for them, we'd do it. How stupid was that?

Of course, without the weight of the patriarchy, fewer of us would've done it, but still. (And by 'the weight of patriarchy', I include the social bit of being raised to yield to men and the economic bit of having to marry one in order to have wanted children.)

But now? Nothing's changed. Damn right you're not feminists, as all you young things proclaim with revulsion. Because you're still servicing men. Only now it's with blow jobs. You're still trading your pleasure for theirs. (Your clitoris isn't in your throat.)

When a boy makes a girl come and keeps his own pants on, when a boy becomes popular (or a professional) because he knows what to do with his hands and his tongue,

then you can say it's so over.

* * * * *

On Demonstrations

Though I consider myself to be rather socially conscious, and while I have written many letters and cheques, I've never been part of a demonstration. For a number of reasons.

Let's consider first to whom the demonstration is directed. Perhaps primarily, it's meant for the people in power. It's meant to send them a message. But what possible message could be sent by a mass of people, some carrying signs, many shouting their contents. What's in a phrase, or even a complete sentence? If the goal is change, presenting claims without evidence, without argument, is surely insufficient. Do we really expect others to change their minds, their policies and practices, *without* evidence or argument? Do we really *want* them to be so stupid?

Perhaps the message is not in the signs but in the masses, in the show of numbers. Why are numbers important? Are we thus insisting the majority should rule? First, a demonstration, consisting of self-selected people, is hardly representative enough to justify claims of being *any* majority. Second, why should the majority rule? I know that our system of democracy is based on this principle, but consider it for a moment. 'Majority rule' is really an appeal to popularity. Should the opinion of the majority rule, no matter how ridiculous, immoral, or simply unsupported it is?

The only message masses can send is one of intimidation, one of threat: 'Listen to us or we'll beat down your door!' And the answer is Kent State or Tiananmen Square.

Perhaps the intended purpose of the demonstration is not to convert the people in power, but to convert others in the general populace to the cause. By merely proclaiming a position? I want people to agree with me for good reason. But the tool of persuasion here is not reason, it's peer pressure. (Or the promise of party time.)

In any case, demonstrations tend not to increase social responsibility among their participants but to decrease it. When three or more human beings are gathered together, something called the diffusion of responsibility kicks in and the chance of people/property damage increases. Unfortunately, many riots start as demonstrations. But then what can you expect, given that mass gathering facilitates *emotional* expression rather than, as argued above, *rational* expression—and given that the motivating emotion in the first place is anger and frustration.

To consider a third possibility, perhaps the intended audience of the demonstration is the media. But then we're just encouraging their bad habit of responding to and reporting about (only) spectacle. Aren't we tired of such sensationalist coverage? While a picture may be worth a thousand words, most of those words will have to be fairly superficial. After all, to demonstrate is to show. It is not to tell.

* * * * *

An End to War

At one time, bank tellers and secretaries had a certain prestige—the time when such positions were held by men. Schoolteachers used to be schoolmasters—before women entered the classroom. People who boast that many doctors in Russia are women fail to mention that doctoring in Russia, well, someone's gotta do it.

The thing is this: whenever women enter an occupation, it becomes devalued. It loses glory. It loses funding. It loses media coverage. It becomes unpopular, even invisible. So if we were serious, really serious, about ending war, we'd fill the military ranks with women. When becoming a soldier has about as much appeal as becoming a waitress (another archetype of the service sector industry)—

An added bonus would be that if the enemy army were (still) male, they'd start killing themselves. Because better that than be killed by a *woman*.

On the other hand, if the enemy army were (also) female, well, more often than not, the wars would probably just sort of fizzle out into some sort of stalemate. We just don't have the equipment for pissing contests. But since no one would really care, or even know, because it would be a woman thing, well, that'd be okay. We could live with that.

* * * * *

The Weather Report

Does anyone else find the weather report really, really irritating? All that drama! It's going to rain!! Oh how exciting. A low pressure weather front is moving in, grab the kids!! Get a life.

And the pseudo-scientific detail. 'The rain is going to be caused by water droplets, small spheres of H₂O, that are currently high up in the atmosphere, but that will eventually succumb to gravity, under normal conditions, and eventually reach us, possibly at 6:20 p.m. or maybe 6:21 p.m.' What's that all about?

Thing is, all that drama and detail distracts us from what's really going on with the weather. Notice the obsession with proximate causes? Is that because if they addressed the real causes, those remote causes like CFCs and fossil fuel consumption/emission, they'd have to address blame?

* * * * *

Women's Fiction

I finished a novel by J. D. Robb the other day and also happened to read the back inside cover blurb: “Nora Roberts is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of more than one hundred novels. She is also the author of the bestselling futuristic suspense series written under the pen name J. D. Robb. With more than 145 million copies of her books in print and more than sixty-nine *New York Times* bestsellers to date, Nora Roberts is indisputably the most celebrated and beloved women's fiction writer today.” Why the qualification *women's* fiction? My guess is that with those numbers, she's a highly celebrated and beloved fiction writer, period.

And what exactly *is* ‘women's fiction’? Fiction *by* women? Unlikely. Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* would be women's fiction then. As would be Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*.

Fiction *for* women? And what's that, fiction that women are interested in? As if all women are interested in the same things. We are as different from each other as we are from each man. It's painfully clear that not all women are interested even in feminism/sexism. Just as not all blacks are interested in racism. (Is *Mockingbird* ever called black fiction?) J. D. Robb's “Death” series, of which the book I read is part, is about a cop, murder, good and evil, justice—men aren't interested in these things? Since when? Her “Key” series, written under the romance writer pen name, Nora Roberts, is described thus: “Three women. Three keys. Each has 28 days to find her way through a dangerous quest. If one fails, they all lose. If they all succeed, money, power, and a new destiny await each of them. It will take more than intellect, more than determination. They will have to open their hearts, their minds, and believe that everything and anything is possible.” Success, money, power, destiny—of interest only to women? Hardly.

Even if Roberts *does* write about romance and love—well, I can see that men are not interested in romance, because that's a fantasy of love that has more benefits for women than for men; men prefer the other fantasy, porn, which has more benefits for them. But we're in big trouble if men aren't interested in love. (Women, take note.)

Or is ‘women's fiction’ fiction *about* women? Well, yes, Robb's and Roberts' fiction typically, if not always, features a female main character. So, what, when the main player is female, men aren't interested? Wow. Let me say that again: *when the main player is female, men aren't interested*. That explains a lot. It also predicts a lot.

(So fiction about men is men's fiction? I've never even heard the phrase ‘men's fiction’. Let alone heard it applied to fiction with male main characters. That would make *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Atlas Shrugged* men's fiction. I've certainly read a lot of men's fiction, then.)

And why is it that women are interested in both women's fiction and men's fiction, but men are interested only in men's fiction? That is, why is it that men are interested only in reading about members of their own sex? I suspect it's because it's not really, or not just, the case that they aren't interested in reading about women—it's that they don't consider women important/valuable. (Recall the Jane and John study done, what, thirty years ago? Two essays were presented to a large group of students, one written by ‘Jane Smith’ and one written by ‘John Smith’; the one by John Smith was given higher grades by both male and female students, despite being identical to the one by Jane Smith.)

According to an article by Katha Pollitt (“Invisible Women”), op-ed editors wonder where the women are. (“In nine weeks, only 20 percent of pieces [in *The Los Angeles Times* op-ed pages] were written by women”; all five of *USA Today*’s political columnists are male, all *Time*’s eleven columnists are male, one of six in print and two of thirteen online for *Newsweek*....) Pollitt lists fourteen women op-ed writers ‘off the top of her head’; I’ve heard of most of them—why haven’t the mentioned op-ed editors? It seems to support what I’m saying: when a woman is the main player, men just aren’t interested—it doesn’t even register on their radar.

And consider *Washington Monthly* blogger Kevin Drum who apparently mused upon the absence of women bloggers and, says Pollitt, got a major earful from women bloggers, “who are understandably sick of hearing that they don’t exist. ‘I’m staring you right in the face, Kevin,’ wrote Avedon Carol (sideshow.me.uk), ‘and even though you’ve said you read me every day you don’t have me on your blogroll.’” ‘Why are women so underrepresented?’ you ask. Because male gatekeepers don’t see them, aren’t interested in them, don’t consider them important or valuable. And is that because they’re writing women’s stuff? Like women’s fiction? About cops and murder and good and evil and justice?

* * * * *

In Commemoration of the Holocaust

I’m not saying it didn’t happen.

I’m not saying that, in *any* way, it was okay.

But I’d like to point out that a devout Jew would’ve done, would do, the same thing to the Germans—if God told him to.

‘Oh but God would never command such a thing.’

Take a better look at your *Bible*:

- “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live” - Exodus 22:8. (Eight million innocent people were put to death because of this command alone—but do read on.)
- “...Seven nations greater and mightier than thou; and when the Lord thy God shall deliver them before thee; thou shalt smite them, and utterly destroy them...” - Deuteronomy 7:1-2. (This meant genocide for seven nations: the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites - Deuteronomy 7:1.)
- “So Joshua smote all the country of the hills, and of the south, and of the vale, and of the springs, and all their kings: he left none remaining but utterly destroyed all that breathed, as the Lord God of Israel commanded” - Joshua 10:40. (This included Makkedah, Libnah, Lachish, Gezer, Eglon, Hebron, and Debir—in each of these cities he “utterly destroyed all the souls that were therein; he left none

remaining...as the Lord God of Israel commanded” - Joshua 10:28-40.)

- “And he [Moses] said unto them, ‘Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, “Put every man his sword by his side, and go in and out from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay every man his brother, and every man, his companion, and every man his neighbour.”’ And the children of Levi did...and there fell of the people that day about 3,000 men...” - Exodus 32:27-29.
- “Samuel also said unto Saul... ‘Thus saith the Lord of hosts... Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling....’ And Saul smote the Amalekites...and utterly destroyed all the people...” - 1 Samuel 15:1-3,7-8.
- “And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, ‘Avenge the children of Israel of the Midianites....’ And they warred against the Midianites as the Lord commanded Moses; and they slew all the males” - Numbers 31:1-2, 7.
- “And the Lord God said unto Joshua...he [Achan] that is taken with the accursed thing [he stole something] shall be burnt with fire.... And Joshua...took Achan...and his sons, and his daughters...and burned them with fire...” - Joshua 7:10, 15, 24-26. (This one in particular reminded me of the gas ovens. Can you spell ‘ironic’?)
- “And the Spirit of the Lord came upon him [Samson], and he went down to Ashkelon, and slew thirty men...” - Judges 14:19.
- “And the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him [*mightily* this time]...and he...slew a thousand men...” - Judges 15:14,15.

Need I go on? Religions are full of commands to kill, and the Jewish one is no different. In particular, ethnic cleansing (such as that of the Holocaust) has strong religious support. And, of course, the faithful are compelled to obey their God’s commandments. So if God had said, were to say, “Go ye and slay all who hath been born of the land that is Germany,” well, “Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones” - Psalms 137:9.

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Hockey Brawls and other Cockfights

Do you remember that all-out hockey brawl during which one guy beat another into unconsciousness? Shocking, everyone said, quite surprising. Indeed. Surprising it doesn’t happen more often. Just like that Somali kid incident.

Consider the similarities: both the military world and the sports world are nothing

but teams of hyper-emotional men who are fixated on winning at any cost.

‘Men, hyper-emotional? Haven’t you got that backwards? It’s *women* who are the emotional ones.’ Yeah right. Anyone who says men aren’t emotional hasn’t seen a game. Or a fight. What do you think motivates the players, the soldiers—the calm, cool voice of reason? Thinking for oneself, should this be possible, is openly discouraged on both the playing field and the killing field; success of the team depends on uncritical obedience.

The very structure of the league/legion is irrational: ‘the enemy’, the guys you are expected to beat, have never done anything to you and there’s little proof they ever will. Hell, the enemy changes at the flick of a hat—excuse me, a dollar: players are traded like the performing commodities they are, today’s good buddy is tomorrow’s target; and lest we forget, the Gulf War reminded us that any nation’s soldiers are really just mercenaries. (Hell no, we won’t go, we won’t fight for Texaco! Did you notice that the announcers are now saying *Molson Leaf Hockey*?) Given such a vacuum of rationality, no wonder the men are in emotional overdrive most of the time.

Oh, but I can hear the coaches protesting: ‘We *always* say winning isn’t everything, it’s how you play the game!’ Well, coach, actions speak louder than words: who gets the applause, who gets the trophy, who gets the money—the loser?

And how *do* they play the game? Like the real men they’re taunted to be—with all the aggression they’ve got. And if testosterone, and ten years of Ninja Turtles and big-boys-don’t-cry, and another ten years of how-far-d’ya-get isn’t enough, then put back a coupla six packs and pump some steroids to bring out the beast in you.

Oh sure, there are rules—there are fouls and there is the Geneva Convention. Right. Get serious. The only rule is Don’t-Get-Caught.

So why the surprise when the players do exactly what they’ve been trained to do: hate and hurt (and kill), for no real reason, and not care about it.

What do you expect at a cockfight?

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A New Three-Strike Law

There are over 2 million people in prison. Each week, there’s another thousand. (Those are American figures; in Canada, it’s somewhat lower.) We pay for their housing, food, medical care, education—about \$30,000 per year per prisoner.

So I propose a new three-strike law: first crime, you get rehab (maybe it was truly an accident; maybe you’ll change your mind about stuff; maybe you’ll grow up); second crime, you get prison (okay, this is punishment, pure and simple, because if that’s what it takes—); third crime, you get exile—you get kicked out.

Given your inability or unwillingness to follow the rules of this society, you should live in some other society, yeah? If you have found another society willing to take you, great. Bye. If not, we’ll escort you to a remote designated area. You’re on your own.

Really, it’s not as if the bar is set that high. Basically, you just have to pay for the stuff you use (via taxes for the stuff in common, such as roads and parks, and at the

check-out for everything else) and abide by a bunch of laws, most of which are pretty reasonable. Sure, some of our taxes are unjustified and some price tags are too high, but we don't have to say we agree, we don't have to serve in the military, we don't even have to engage in that bare minimum of participation, voting. And a lot of price tags are too low, given the actual materials and labor. So geez loueez if you want a free ride and you can't abide by a few rules, then I say get the hell out. We're tired of carrying you.

I wonder if the overwhelming sense of entitlement, which is what, I think, justifies much lawbreaking in the eyes of the lawbreakers, comes from a life of getting what you don't deserve and not getting what you do deserve (and, conversely, seeing others get what *they* don't deserve). For example, most 'kids' who live at home—do they still have to do daily chores to earn their allowance, not to mention their food and shelter? Every time I hear that kids expect their parents to just give them money—for everything—I think, wait a minute! You want it? You work for it! Slave at a minimum wage job for a year and save up for it.

As for not getting what you deserve, yeah it's hard knowing that people with ten times as much didn't work ten times as long or ten times as hard. They either had it given to them or they got it through grossly unfair salary differences (bonuses at work, golden parachutes, severance pay—I've been declared redundant, I've been fired, and I've quit, but I've never gotten more than a—well, actually I never got a farewell party either). But that injustice doesn't justify the other injustice. And anyway, all this addresses just theft and property damage in all its manifestations—economic violations of the social contract, if you will.

Other violations of the social contract, such as personal damage in all its manifestations (assault, manslaughter, and so on) are harder to explain. And, truthfully, I find these people easier to exile. If you have so little control over yourself or so much disregard for me, for my life, I'd rather you be somewhere else. Far away.

So, go! Let us escort you to our border. Cross over into this designated non-country, and you can do whatever the hell you want. If you're not killed first by others like you. Or by just trying to live without society, without the benefits of a couple thousand of years of others' work. Work that has given us ipods and cars, not to mention medical treatment, and shoes, and light bulbs, and flush toilets. But hey, you gave all that the finger. So make your own damn shoes. And be careful not to step in your own shit.

(I dare say you'll miss us a lot more than we'll miss you.)

* * * * *

Bang Bang

Ya gotta love Christmas. Peace on earth, goodwill toward men, and record sales of toy guns.

But, my friend says, her son, and all of his friends, will make a gun out of any old thing. The problem isn't the toys.

Okay, so it's the boys. Seems they're hardwired with a propensity toward killing.

Why is this not a problem? A stand-up-and-scream problem. Not a sweep-it-under-the-carpet boys-will-be-boys problem.

Why does it not bother parents that their son considers pretending to kill to be *fun*, that he derives psychological *pleasure* from *pretending to kill*?

Why does it not bother them that their son considers killing a *game*, an appropriate activity for make-believe?

Oh but ‘It’s just the noise and the chasing that’s fun, he doesn’t associate the action with killing’. Is that supposed to make it *better*? That he pulls a trigger on a gun and *doesn’t associate the action with killing*?? Maybe you should take him to an ER and let him see what a bullet does to a body. He might think *twi*—he might *think* then before so casually making that pulling-a-trigger motion.

I wonder whether parents would be as blasé if their son as repeatedly put his arm around someone’s throat and swiped a piece of stiff cardboard across it? Is it just that people have become desensitized to the shooting-a-gun action?

Further, I’m puzzled by the doesn’t-bother-me response not only because of the psychological and philosophical implications, but also because of the practical ones: first, once he’s fourteen or sixteen, the action (pointing a gun, even a toy one, at someone) becomes illegal (at least in the States). (Then again, it might be illegal at all ages; maybe it’s just that when a *kid* points a fake gun, no one presses charges.) (Because boys will be boys?) (So the men who do so are also boys?)

And, second, such an action may well get him killed. ‘Cuz I have to tell ya, since real kids have access to real guns these days, if I were walking down a city street and a kid jumped out at me pointing a gun, I’d shoot first and ask questions later. If I had a gun.

Which I don’t. So instead I’d just break out into a cold sweat and slowly raise my trembling hands. And then when the kid laughs and lowers his arm, telling me it’s just a toy, I’d haul him off to his parents and give all three of you a huge piece of mind. What right do you have to let your kid terrorize me like that? What the hell is wrong with you??

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Who Owns (the) Land?

I’ve somewhat unthinkingly agreed with indigenous claims that they got ripped off with regard to their land, that they didn’t get paid a fair price. But suddenly it occurred to me: what gave them the right to ask a price in the first place? That is, on what basis was the land theirs to sell? On what basis did they *own* it?

People seem to accept that since they were there first, they own it. But one, they weren’t there first, their ancestors were. And two, *were* their ancestors there? Can they *all* trace their genetic lineage back to the Clovis people? Or the Pedra Furada people? (It’s not certain which group was there first.) And even if their ancestors were there first, so what? We don’t use ‘there first’ to establish ownership of other things.

Typically, we own, and therefore can sell, what we make—what we add our labor to

(leaving aside, for the moment, the question of how we came to own the raw materials we added our labor to—because it's really the same as the main question here). But no one made land.

So, is the basis for ownership occupancy? But a person can technically occupy no more than, say, two cubic meters at a time. So we must be defining 'occupancy' in a somewhat broader way. How much broader?

Perhaps improvement should be the critical element. When one improves the land, one gains ownership over it. 'Course, then one has to define 'improvement'. My neighbour thinks cutting down trees and putting buildings on the land is an improvement. 'Improvement for whom' is but one question that needs an answer here. 'Improvement to do what' is another.

It makes me think that any criterion we come up will be relatively arbitrary...

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The Good Wife

The Good Wife, Desperate Housewives, The Trophy Wife, The First Wives Club...why in the 21st century do women continue to be so frequently identified as wives? That is, identified only in relation to a man? I once read a tv guide description of a movie that went something like "A man's wife gets kidnapped from their home..." Why in god's name didn't they just say a woman gets kidnapped?

We don't see a similar proliferation of tv shows and movies with 'husband' in the title. The word is emasculating. It would be so especially if it were in the context of *The Perfect Husband* or *The Trophy Husband* or some such.

Why don't people see that 'wife' is just as bad—just as subordinating, by its emphasis on ownership and possession, and just as effacing.

(They do. That's why the male writers, directors, and producers use it so often.)

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Why Don't We Have Professional Jurors?

A couple weeks ago I received a summons to appear for jury selection. So I dutifully drove to the courthouse on the day in question ready to establish my fitness to serve. No, that's not true. I drove to the courthouse on the day in question ready to answer their questions—and curious as to whether one or both lawyers would decide they'd rather not have me on the jury.

The judge welcomed us—all hundred of us, it was standing room only—and briefly described the upcoming trial and the jury selection process. He then said, "If there is

anyone with hearing problems who has trouble hearing what's being said in the court room, please raise your hand." No one raised their hand. But an elderly man sitting in front of me said loudly to his neighbour, "WHAT? WHAT DID HE SAY?" It was priceless.

We were a motley crew of housewives, electricians, social workers, administrative assistants, metal fabricators, and restaurant owners. I know, because as we were called one by one to stand before the lawyers, that information was provided to them. We weren't asked if we had any prejudices, if we had any issues with the law that had been broken, or if we would be able to render a fair decision. (Yes, but the relevant issue is whether my prejudices would get in the way; yes, I don't think possessing marijuana should be illegal, nor do I think selling it should be illegal—especially as long as selling alcohol is legal; and maybe, that depends on what evidence is presented and how it's presented—and your definition of 'fair'.) Which means that the lawyers' decisions to accept ('Content') or reject ('Challenge') were based solely on what we looked like and what we did for a living. So much for prejudices and rendering a fair decision.

Oh, and we were asked to look the accused in the eye. ("AAGH!")

And then, if we were accepted, we were asked this question: "Do you swear that you shall well and truly try and true Deliverance make between our sovereign the Queen and the accused at the bar, whom I have in charge, and a true verdict give, according to the evidence, so help you God." Well, ya should've asked that before. Because first, I don't know what the hell "true Deliverance make" means. Second, if we *knew* the *true verdict*, we wouldn't have to have a trial now, would we? And third, I'm atheist, so I'm not putting my hand on that—"Challenge!" both attorneys shout at once.

Well, no they didn't, actually, because I never got a chance to say any of that. The required thirteen jurors were selected before my name was called. And I have no idea why the chosen thirteen were chosen. Why was the college instructor rejected? Because she might ask too many questions and get too few answers and, therefore, hang the jury? Or because it would be too inconveniencing for her to be away from her job for two weeks? And why was the steelworker accepted? Because he smiled at the judge and seemed like an awshucks kinda guy? Or because his employer would reimburse him so the five dollars an hour we'd be getting paid wouldn't be quite so appalling. (Mind you, that's just if the trial goes on for more than ten days; for the first ten days, we aren't paid at all—which means it may well cost us to be a juror, given the ten days' lost income.)

What's even more appalling, of course, is that someone's future is at stake. Whether or not the accused spends time, possibly years, in prison is up to people who aren't even getting paid.

'Course why should they be? It's not like they're qualified. Their names were drawn out of a hat and they were chosen largely on the basis of their appearance.

So I have to ask: why don't we have professional jurors? That is, people who are trained not only to recognize and resist personal prejudice, but to recognize and resist loaded language. People who understand the difference between fact and opinion. People who know what an argument is, and the difference between an inductive one and a deductive one. People who can identify and evaluate unstated assumptions, and who understand relevance, the difference between correlation and causation, and the difference between necessary and sufficient conditions. People who know how to evaluate personal testimony, sources, and studies. People who are paid according to their

qualifications and contribution.

Seriously, why don't we have professional jurors? Is it because we want a jury of our peers to decide our fate? Why in the world would most people want that? Most people's peers couldn't tell the difference between good evidence and bad evidence if their—your—life depended on it! Is it because we think that in a democracy such decisions are best made by the common people? Right, well, maybe that's the problem with democracy.

We have professional judges; our judges are trained to be clear and critical thinkers (notwithstanding the one mentioned above). And since jurors often bear more responsibility for the judgements to be made in our courts, they too should be trained, qualified to do the job.

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Bambi's Cousin's Gonna Tear You Apart

Well, it's autumn. That time of year when the breeze gets brisk, the leaves start to fall, and good men from all walks of life wear something besides blue, brown, grey, and black: they wear orange. Hunter orange. Yes, this is the time of year when good men from all walks of life go into the forest to perform that masculine bloodwinner ritual involving beer, bullets, and Bubba. I don't understand hunting. I don't understand the desire to kill.

'Oh no,' the hunters say, 'it's not that, it's the excitement, it's the thrill of stalking an animal that's big and wild, and can tear you apart!' Yeah right. Like Bambi's cousin's gonna tear you apart.

'And it's the challenge! Deer are smart, you know!' I'd say the average deer has an IQ of what, four? So I have to ask, smart compared to who?

And the challenge. Give me a break. You hunt in a group, so already it's what, six against one? And you use dogs, and ATVs, you even use helicopters, to scare the animals out of the bush. And then you've got some geezer sittin' in a truck parked at the side of the road just waiting to pick off the first fear-frenzied creature that runs across. Oh, the challenge. (Then again, since he's probably been chugging brew all afternoon, I guess that *would* be a challenge.)

'It's not just all that—we like the meat.' Then why don't you go to a deer farm and just shoot one that's out grazing in the field? (Or a cow farm.) (Hey, I know! Get a job in a slaughterhouse!)

'Cuz it's gotta be wild.' Okay, how about a skunk?

Ah, but it's gotta be *big* and wild. Well, this bigger-is-better thing is completely illogical. Anyone can shoot a moose that's just standing there. If you really want to brag, hang a pair of chipmunk ears on your wall.

Speaking of which, why do fishermen mount the whole fish but hunters mount only the head? I mean, if it *is* size that counts, then let's hang the whole moose on the wall. (Or cow, as the case may be.)

Face it, you've been conned: hunting is just another big business. And like most big businesses, it feeds off, and into, pretty sick impulses. I was looking through a hardware store flyer one hunting season, amazed at all the essential hunting paraphernalia.

First, you've got your "Super Premium 200 Proof Doe-in-a-Can"—the scent of a doe in heat. The stuff is "collected at the peak of the doe's hottest second estrous cycle". Okay, how do they know she's at her peak? And who does the collecting? And how?

Then you've got your "shoulder length dressing gloves". I'm thinking sexy over-the-elbow black satin. Try "heavy duty poly gloves"—to "protect against mess, stains, and infectious diseases while dressing game". The picture shows a man with his arm up a deer's ass—he's "dressing game".

And you've got your "Rusty Duck Lubricant". Any guesses?

And then you've got your calls—your duck calls and your deer calls and your moose calls. I understand there were a lot of hunting injuries the year the "CM3 Moose Call" came onto the market. Well, what do you expect when some moron stands in the middle of the forest during mating season and yells out in moose language 'Come fuck me now!'

I was talking to one guy, a duck hunter, and I asked why he preferred to go hunting with a friend. I thought maybe hunting was just a cover for friendship between men who were too homophobic to just be with each other. But the guy said 'for security'. Given the moose call affair, I thought, good point. I mean last year alone, *how* many hunters were killed by ducks?

Not enough.

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Being There

I recently read a lament about work attitudes, about how more and more people seem to think that just being there is enough, that their paycheque is for putting in time rather than for actually doing anything, let alone for doing a *good* anything, that people feel no guilt about the mistakes they make, nor do they feel any desire to do better.

I'd like to offer some comments in defense, or at least in explanation, of that position. First, teachers give marks for attendance—for just being there. And no matter how many mistakes you make, you'll still pass. So, hey, who says the students don't pay attention?

Second, the job you've been hired to do is probably so trivial and boring, it's impossible to keep it without sending your brain out to lunch while you're there.

Third, showing initiative has, in my experience, backfired more often than not. Do a good job, yes, but be careful not to do *too* good a job, be careful not to do, or even point out, what your supervisor should've done. That's called insubordination and it's just cause for dismissal. Seriously. For example, when I worked at a detention centre, I noticed one night that the previous shift's reports had several spelling errors. I corrected them. For this, I was reprimanded (because the reports were used in court and, I was told, any changes would be suspect). So, later, when I saw a coworker collecting statistics in a

most onerous fashion (not only without computer assistance, but without using a symbol key—he'd write out the full referral agency every time rather than assigning, say, numbers to each of the six possibilities and providing a key), I did *not* make a suggestion to our supervisor. I guess you could say I showed no initiative; I guess you could say I displayed no desire for improvement.

Gone are the days when one gets a raise or a promotion for a job well done. The salary grid and the advancement ladder are based solely on number of years, on seniority—on how long you've *been there*.

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Marriage: a Sexist Affair

Marriage, by its very (traditional) definition, is a sexist affair: it involves one of each sex, one male and one female. And I suppose this is because, traditionally, the purpose of marriage was family: to start a family, to have and raise children.

This view is fraught with questionable assumptions, glaring inconsistencies, and blatant errors. I'll give one of each: the connection between having children and raising children is not at all necessary, hence the 'one male and one female' is not at all necessary; if the purpose of marriage is to have a family, why do couples who do not intend to have children nevertheless marry—and why don't couples routinely divorce once the children are raised; the marriage contract goes well beyond family concerns—indeed, it barely approaches family concerns—one pledges to love and honour one's spouse, not one's children.

Notwithstanding the very mistaken connection between marriage and family, I'd like to suggest another reason for the sexism in marriage. Assuming that marriage entails love, and love entails 'looking after', sexism makes things 'easier'. Needing to be looked after suggests that one is a child or perhaps an invalid, but if each person is looking after the other, well, you see the problem: how can a child look after—another child? (Makes marriages rather like the blind leading the blind.) (Not an entirely unapt analogy.) The solution is to make some sort of distinction, and the distinction is, surprise, sex: the husband is the father, he looks after his wife with respect to the male domain—he fixes things for her, he tells her stuff, he makes the money; the wife is the mother, she looks after her husband with respect to the female domain—she feeds him, clothes him, reminds him.

This sexist division also avoids a second problem: without it, they'd each feel, as indeed they are, treated like a child. How does a wife feel when her husband lets her know what colours go together? How does a husband feel when his wife changes the spark plugs? Inadequate, insulted, put down. No doubt responding with an eight-year-old's "I know that!" or "I can do it!" The sexist division of labour justifies ignorance and incompetence within a certain domain; it therefore allows people to remain children, without embarrassment, within a certain domain. And this enables the other to take care of them, in that domain, without offense. (I suspect, therefore, the more whole a person

is, the less feminine or masculine, the worse they fare in a marriage. And if women tend to be more whole than men, that would explain why men need marriage more than women do; I'm thinking of happiness/suicide studies—aren't unmarried men the worst off?)

Of course, one wonders how same sex couples look after each other. Do they all negotiate some sort of butch/femme split? Or—and wouldn't this be simpler, wouldn't it be healthier—does their concept of love between adults not entail, not require, such nurture? (Achieving a non-sex-linked 'I've got your back' kind of reciprocal looking after would be too difficult, I think, in our oh-so-sexist society.)

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I'm too drunk. No I'm not.

According to the Canadian Criminal Code, (self-induced) intoxication is no defence against charges of assault (33.1): if you're drunk, you're still able to form the general intent to commit said assault.

And yet, with regard to the sub-category of sexual assault, belief that someone is consenting is cancelled if that someone is intoxicated (273.1(2)): if you're drunk, you can't consent to sex.

So if you're drunk, you're capable of forming the intent to assault, but you're not capable of forming the intent to have sex?

Given that it's mostly men who do the assaulting, and it's mostly women who do the consenting (and given, it's my guess, that the lawmakers had men in mind for 33.1 and women in mind for 273.1(2)), is this some sort of 'protect the weaker sex' double standard?

If we expect men to foresee the effects of alcohol and to be responsible for their behavior while under its influence, we should expect the same of women. Yes, it may be morally scuzzy to have sex with someone who's drunk (and got that way of her own free will) and climbing all over you and moaning 'do me', especially when you suspect that if she were sober she wouldn't be quite so willing, but you're not her legal guardian. 'Yes' means 'yes' and if she regrets it the morning after, that's *her* headache. Doing something really stupid is the risk you take when you get drunk. (Which is why having a designated sober friend with you is a good idea.) Suppose she says, while drunk, that I can borrow her car. And suppose I do so. Is it really fair to later press charges of theft? Am I my sister's keeper? She said I could. Do I have to second guess her? She may well say I can borrow her car when she's sober too. Or not. Am I supposed to know?

The only way the difference can be justified is if in both cases we consider the man to be the agent, the only one doing the deed. In the assault case, that's fine. But in the case of sex? Well, okay, if she's the one done to, I guess he's the only one guilty of doing something. But the tricky part then is that whether or not what he does is legal depends on what she does. What if she moves her hips, just a bit...

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From *Romeo and Juliet* to ‘Ass’ and ‘Hole’

I filled in for a high school English teacher one day who had left the following instructions: “Have the students rewrite one of the two scenes from *Romeo and Juliet*—either the balcony scene or the fight scene—into contemporary English.”

“Okay,” I said to the class, “this can be lots of fun, let’s take a look. Open your books to the fight scene, please, and imagine it: you have these guys raging at each other, and they’ve been doing it for years; they’re going to fight now, and they’re going to fight so hard a couple of them end up stabbed to death. Now instead of shouting ‘A plague o’ both your houses!’, Mercutio would say, if it were today, he’d say maybe ‘Fuck you!’, right? Okay, go ahead, see if you can translate the whole scene.”

The students did indeed have lots of fun. The principal had hysterics. “Why did you take it upon yourself to introduce vulgarities into a lesson,” he asked. “I didn’t ‘introduce’ anything,” I responded, “we were translating Shakespeare. ‘Zounds, Shakespeare uses vulgarities all the time,” I added, seeing the need for further explanation. No matter, he asked me to promise never again to swear in class. “But I didn’t swear in class; I quoted a character who swore.” He smiled at me as if I were being silly. It’s what men do when they don’t understand what a woman has said. An hour later, exhausted by the attempt, I agreed never again to quote a character who swears. I then asked the principal to provide me with a list of words he considered swear words. He smiled at me again. “Look,” I persisted, “I’m promising to abide by your rules—but I’ll need to know what they are, *specifically*.”

Because it seems to me that what is and is not a swear word is rather arbitrary. True, most of our ‘bad words’ refer to religious characters (‘Christ!’ ‘God damn it!’) or bodily parts and functions (‘Shit!’ ‘Fuck!’). But if we had any shred of consistency about us, yelling ‘Angels!’, ‘Mucous!’, and ‘Birthing!’ would be just as bad.

Trying to find some semblance of logic, I once thought that our swear words are those words which refer to things we fear—hence the horror when they’re invoked in anger. That may explain ‘Jesus Christ!’ (at least, for Christians) but, well, I don’t know about you—I don’t live in fear of shit.

Then I thought perhaps swear words are things we want to keep special, sacred, and the offence is in the mention, the making common. Again, this works for the religious terms and maybe even the sexual terms, but defecation isn’t exactly a holy ritual.

To say they’re things we want to keep private, hence the offence at proclamation loud and clear, also doesn’t work. That taking prayer out of public schools was a battle suggests that religious words are *not* to be spoken only in private. Conversely, haemorrhoids, at least until Preparation H came along, seem to have been a matter of some privacy, but that word never made it onto the bad word list. And to say that swear words are our society’s unmentionables simply begs the question. Besides, yeast infections are pretty unmentionable too, but they don’t have swear status.

So I gave up. There is simply no rational explanation for what makes a word a swear word. Swearing, amazingly high on the social shalt-not list, is defined at worst by

whimsy, at best by custom. (And I doubt that I followed the same customs as the principal; certainly our sense of whimsy was different.)

Even more irrational is that context seems to be irrelevant. Swearing in anger, pain, or frustration, at no one in particular, seems to be as reprehensible as swearing at a specific person. I should think that the ‘Fuck!’ I yell when alone (say, whenever I hit my thumb with a hammer) is trivial compared to the ‘Fuck you!’ I yell at my neighbour (say, whenever he looks at me). But they’re both swearing; they’re both bad.

And yet, context *is* relevant: words are not intrinsically good or bad—it’s how we use them that makes them so. Consider ‘ass’. ‘The ass is a noble creature.’ In that case, the word’s okay. But if I say ‘You’re such an ass!’ then the word is offensive, and, if you like, a ‘bad’ word, a ‘swear’ word. Context creates meaning, and meaning is what matters.

Sometimes. Not only is the concept of swearing irrational, it’s terribly inconsistent. Consider the word ‘girls’. ‘The girls are here.’ That’s okay. But if the coach is reaming out his losing senior boys’ basketball team at half-time in the locker room and he says with disgust and derision, ‘Now *girls*, you’ve got to play with your eyes open!’ then doesn’t the word ‘girls’ become a swear word? Isn’t it offensive? Of course it is. To girls everywhere. (As well as, unfortunately, to the boys—except the ones who value girls and consider it an honour to be called one.)

At the end of the day, I saw the principal flipping through a dictionary with some frustration. Poor man probably thought if it’s in the dictionary, it’s okay. And then realized that the words ‘god,’ ‘damn’ and ‘it’ are in the dictionary. As are ‘ass’ and ‘hole’.

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Kids Behind the Wheel

The other day, I was walking with my dog on the gravel/dirt road I live on. It’s a back road that might see a dozen cars in a day. As one such car passed us, I noticed that a kid was at the wheel in dad’s lap. Proud dad, happy kid.

What is it with that? Why, of all the adult things, do parents push their kids into that one? Mis-asked the question. It’s not the *parents*, it’s the *dads*. And usually, it’s their sons, not their daughters.

Given that men are worse drivers than women (ask the insurance companies—why do you think young males pay such a high premium?), perhaps it makes sense: boys need all the practice they can get. But surely it would be better to take them to a go-cart track.

Proud dad, happy kid. I get the impression it’s not practice. Is it a rite of passage to manhood? But women can, do, and should drive as well. There’s nothing gender-specific about driving a car. So why would it be a rite of passage to *manhood*?

Maybe it’s the vroom vroom that confuses men. It’s a surrogate roar. They think they’re intimidating when they make a lot of noise. (Actually they’re just annoying. As hell.) And they want to be intimidating because—?

Or, also, attendant with a roar, maybe their primitive brain triggers the production of adrenaline, and the adrenaline makes them feel good. Perhaps that explains the appeal of the Indy. And the adolescent males who take the mufflers off their dirt bikes.

Or maybe it's the speed that confuses them, makes them feel like they're chasing prey (or fleeing predators) and again, their primitive brain produces feel-good adrenaline.

So why doesn't their modern brain recognize this and veto the primitive response? Noise and speed matter little to *homo sapiens* living in the 21st century.

Proud dad. Happy kid. Aren't you the grown-up. No, you're not. You shouldn't be behind the wheel until you're sixteen and then you should approach the task with fear and trembling. *Driving is not 'fun'. A car is not a toy. One wrong move and you could kill someone.*

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Short Men

I recently watched, with horrified amusement, a tv program about short men who choose to undergo excruciatingly painful surgical procedures (which basically involve breaking their legs and then keeping the bones slightly apart while they mend) in order to become a few inches taller.

Asked why they would choose to undergo such a drastic, and excruciatingly painful, procedure, they said things like "Do you have any idea what it's like to go through life as a short person? To sit in a chair and only your toes reach the floor—you can't put your feet flat on the floor? To not be able to reach stuff on the upper shelves in grocery stores? To be unable to drive trucks because you can't reach the pedals properly? To have people always looking down at you? Do you know what that's like?"

Well, yes, actually I do. I'm a woman. And in case you haven't noticed, we're almost all shorter than almost all of you. (So I've gone through my whole life unable to put my feet flat on the floor when I'm sitting in a chair, unable to reach the upper shelves in grocery stores, and unable to drive trucks because I can't reach the pedals properly. And I've gone through my whole life with people (read, men) always looking down at me.)

Since these men choose surgery instead of engineering (redesign the chairs, grocery store shelves, and trucks!), it would seem the real problem is that these poor guys can't take their rightful place over women. As one man, 5'6" before the surgery, said, "I'll be a better father and husband and son." Yup. Sure you will.

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