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Anatomy of a Sneer

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Life and Books and Everything - Clearly Reformed

Are male and female distinctions rooted in given biological realities or are “man” and “woman” simply designations we choose for ourselves based on our own feelings and sense of identity?

In this episode, Kevin reviews an article written by USA Today’s Nancy Armour about transgender people competing in professional sports.

Transcript

[Music] Welcome back to Life in Books and Everything. Today I want to read my latest article "World Opinions" and just to remind you, alert you again, that hopefully sometime this summer well I'm going to take a little bit of a break from the podcasting and the articles and then when we re-engage at the end of the summer, beginning of the fall, hoping to have separated out these readings into its own platform so that it doesn't get jumbled up. Life in Books and Everything is partially long interviews and then short articles that I read so we're going to try to separate the two but for now they're in the same place and today I want to read "World Opinions" latest article that I've written entitled "Anatomy of a Sneer" watch for three ways progressive activists push their opponents into a corner.

In 1776 the English historian Edward Gibbon released the first volume of his massive work "The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire." As a quintessential example of Enlightenment history with the assumed superiority of his then current age of reason over the religious superstitions of earlier centuries Gibbon's six-volume magnum opus was a not so thinly veiled attack on Christianity as the chief culprit in Rome's demise. Gibbon faulted Christianity for undermining the tolerant regime of pagan religion and plunging Europe into a millennium long dark age. When asked for his reaction to the decline in fall, the Christian apologist William Paley replied tersely "Who can refute a sneer?" USA Today's Nancy Armour recently published an opinion piece entitled "What ESPN's Sam Ponder calls Fairness is Plain Old Bigotry." Samantha Ponder is a well-known sports broadcaster with many high-profile television responsibilities to

her credit.

Ponder is also a Christian. The reason for Ponder's denunciation is that Ponder recently voiced her disapproval of trans women "that is biological males who now identify as women, participating in women's sports." "It is not hateful," Ponder said, "to demand fairness in sports for girls." Armour of course thinks Ponder's position, which is shared by an overwhelming majority of Americans, is simply bigotry. While I hesitate to try to refute a sneer, Ponder's article is such a succinct and virulent summary of typical arguments that I thought it might be useful to analyze the case she makes.

For starters, let's consider what the debate over transgender athletes and sports is about. There are three questions we should be debating. One, what is a woman? That's the starting place.

Our male and female distinctions rooted in given biological realities, or our man and woman simply designations we choose for ourselves based on our own feelings and sense of identity. Two, can men become women, and vice versa? We speak of someone transitioning from male to female, but we rarely stop to ask whether a change of appearance and a change of hormones actually turns a man into a woman. Three, do men, even ones who now identify as women, possess inherent advantages in athletic competition? This is the question of fairness.

Is it fair for biological men to compete against biological women in sports? While at one level, these questions may deal with philosophical or theological issues, most fundamentally, they are matters of science. Until very recently, each of these three questions would have been answered relatively easily, just based on a shared understanding of biological givens and physiological realities. But these are not the questions armor seeks to address or even contemplate.

Instead, she follows a predictable outline meant to silence opposing viewpoints and to paint her opponents as dangerous harmful people. While armor's article is not important in its own right, and this whole kerfuffle will likely be quickly forgotten, it's worth noting how progressive activists push their opponents into an ideological and rhetorical corner. We can identify these arguments quote unquote with three words, vocabulary, virtue, and victim.

Let's start with vocabulary. Armor's title and first sentence make clear that those who disagree with her are bigots. That is, her opponents are not honest, reasonable people, they are motivated by quote hate, fear, and ignorance.

They traffic in quote a cesspool of transphobic tweets. Ponder and those like her may talk about fairness, but to use armor's words, that's a sham, a bogeyman argument. Armor's strident vocabulary does the arguing for her.

Ironically, she is the real bully in this debate, asserting that if you dare to disagree with her position, you are an ignorant, hateful monster. So vocabulary second, virtue, armor attacks Ponder's character, claiming that she wants quote to see the transgender community marginalized out of existence. Unlike armor, who virtuously advocates for women's sports, Ponder doesn't actually care about fairness.

Notice that the evidence used to support this claim is almost entirely about what Ponder has said not to have done online. That is, she didn't use her platform to express outrage. She didn't use Twitter to urge her followers to call the representatives.

She didn't tweet about ESPN's videos about Title IX last year. Virtue has come to be redefined in almost entirely digital terms. What people are like in private, how they treat people, what they may do outside the public view, these things don't count for virtue.

Good people express the right outrage and send out the right tweets. So vocabulary virtue and then victim. According to armor, Ponder speaks out quote of an inordinate amount of privilege to pile on a group that is already among the most vulnerable in our society.

End quote. People who oppose transgender athletes or disagree with transgenderism more broadly have committed harm against transgender people and may even be responsible. Armor suggests should someone from the trans community commit suicide.

This is undoubtedly the hardest argument to refute because it is the most emotionally charged. Virtually no human being on the planet wants to see another human being commit suicide. And yet we have to muster up the courage to disagree with the assumptions behind the argument.

Assumptions like individuals are not moral agents responsible for their own actions or the assumption that intellectual and personal disagreements are tantamount to harm or the assumption that unqualified acceptance and affirmation are the only things that count as love and support. Those are the assumptions behind armor's arguments and the claim to victim status. Besides all this, it's worth observing that suicide rates have skyrocketed in this country at the same time that acceptance for newfound identities and sexualities has grown.

Perhaps traditional morality is not to blame for a current age of anxiety. In the end, there may be no way to effectively refute a sneer, but dissecting the anatomy of the sneer is at least a start. As Christians, we should not give up on reason and rationality, even if the world increasingly seems to have little place for either.

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