



Should You or Should You Not Be A Feminist?

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October 28, 2022

Bryan Caplan is a professor of Economics at George Mason University and recently wrote a new book “Don’t Be A Feminist.” The book is a collection of bite-sized essays about affirmative action, workplace relationships and harassment, nationalism, and what he describes as the new phenomena of “discouraged suitors.” Most essays don’t mention feminism at all or even specially focus on women, but every essay does point to how we ought to promote fair treatment in society and avoid prescribing discrimination as a solution for perceived sexism or racism, hence the book’s subtitle “Essays on Genuine Justice.” A motivated person could mow through the book over a rather long lunch break, which is how I read it.

In my conversations with friends and colleagues about the book, one person actually described it as “dangerous.” No one else went that far with their critique, but I think if pressed, supporters of feminism would be inclined to agree that denouncing feminism in the way that Bryan does is dangerous.

Before reading Bryan’s book, feminism wasn’t something that I thought too much about because it largely feels like women have won equality in opportunity in America. Feminism always felt like a cause of the, albeit not-so-distant, past that only occasionally needed to be tapped into in times of infrequent unfairness. Feminism would come in when, for example, medications were not tested for unique effects on women or when society reflected on the unfair treatment of female celebrities, like Britney Spears, by the media.

Bryan argues that even these infrequent cases of injustice aren’t justification for the broader belief of feminism, which he defines as “Society generally treats men more fairly than women.” He walks through the many tradeoffs and issues that both genders struggle with and largely concludes that men and women are both treated unfairly by society in different ways that equal out in total unfairness incurred. He even suggests that the case could be made that women are perhaps often treated more fairly than men most of the time, but Bryan would have to write a sequel to sufficiently prove that point.

Enforcing quotas based on general sexuality or ethnicity will not correct the reasons that people who make up those various groups are not able to presently compete based on merit alone.

Bryan is a classical liberal and has a great appreciation for atheist and agnostic philosophers while I, although a strong believer in the free market, let my political philosophy be mostly guided by my Catholic faith. Although Bryan and I come from two different perspectives, I find

myself agreeing with his description of American society because of his sensible inclusion of relevant statistics and rational way of explaining our present situation.

The presumption of a hawkish Human Resource department has made men *and* women generally skittish about workplace relationships, friendships, and even casual conversations. In turn, men's willingness to mentor young women in their field has dropped dramatically.

The cultural commentary on power disparities in romantic relationships has moved from a thoughtful understanding of how people connect and allowance for reasonable critique to attacking anyone famous or notable who dares to have a consenting adult relationship that isn't a union between people of the identical social class, ethnicity, or age. Bryan identifies pitfalls of feminism and encourages people sympathetic to his argument to speak up if they are in a position to do so and to encourage merit-based systems more broadly.

Check out the interview below where James Broughel and I pepper Bryan with questions about makeup, workplace dating, sexual harassment, and the existence of the patriarchy.

TRANSCRIPT (lightly edited for clarity)

James: Hi everyone, this is James Broughel. I'm a senior research fellow at the Mercatus Center and I'd like to welcome Professor Bryan Caplan. Bryan is professor of economics at George Mason University and also a New York Times best-selling author. And he happens to be a former teacher of mine as well. I sat through both Brian's PhD micro and public choice classes, and I can honestly say he's one of the best teachers I've ever had. And it's worth enrolling in the PhD program just to sit through Bryan's class, cause it's truly a riot.

I'd also like to welcome Patricia Patnode, my colleague from the Mercatus Center. Patricia and I both recently read Bryan's recent book, "Don't Be A Feminist: Essays on Genuine Justice" and that's what we're here to discuss today.

Welcome Bryan.

Bryan: Happy to be here.

So I figured, in honor of chivalry I would let Patricia ask the first question. So Patricia, why don't you take it away.

Patricia: Bryan, I'm sure you are aware, on #Econ Twitter the field of economics has had a very turbulent week with a lot of different #MeToo allegations against different people in the profession and criticism of how things are handled overall by the different institutions and the dissatisfaction with some of the power imbalances in the field that may lead to the conditions for women to be sexually harassed.

I believe in your book, although you make the case for not being a feminist, that it could be permissible to identify as a feminist in a country like Saudi Arabia where women are broadly treated as less valuable than men. Would it be appropriate for a woman in economics to identify as a feminist, because they feel like they are in a similar situation where they're treated as less

valuable, and their opinions and experiences are not being accounted for by the institutions they are having to deal with every day?

Bryan: So I would say you should never identify as a feminist based upon how you personally feel because feelings are not a way of figuring out truth. The first thing you need to do is calm down and put your feelings aside and then see if it really is true that the accusations are in fact accurate?

But just to back up. Whether or not you should identify as a feminist of course depends upon what a feminist means. This is the first question that I deal with in the essay. There is a very common view that feminism is just the view that men and women should be treated equally. This is one that you can see in a lot of dictionaries and Wikipedia. And yet, as I point out there's just no way this can be a correct description of the way people use the English language, because the vast majority of people who say they are not feminists also believe that men and women should be equal. Right?

So then, a lot of what I do in the book is say: Well what would a reasonable definition be? Going back to what you were saying about Saudi Arabia, I say that the definition that fits actual use is something along the lines of "feminism is the view that our society generally treats men more fairly than women." Then if you accept that, which I think is very close at least to how people really use the word, it's one where almost all feminists, of course, do believe that society treats men more fairly than women, and out of non-feminists at least there is doubt about whether that's true.

Once you've got the definition down, then you can go and look at the facts on the ground and see what's really going on. My view is that in economics today, on balance, I think that men are treated less fairly than women. This does not mean that for any individual case that this is so. But that would be where I am starting.

I don't actually know any of the details of the accusations. I do think that there's a strong tendency for the accusations to be exaggerated and unfair, and also just to ignore the possibility of honest misunderstandings.

When the early #MeToo scandal came out over Roland Fryer, I do know the details of that case, and I think he was treated very poorly indeed. Economists just lost sight of some of the main things that we've known, which is that: First of all, if you treat one set of accusations as just being almost certainly correct, then this creates strong incentives for people to overstate to exaggerate. It makes people remain silent in the face of these accusations because they are afraid. Then you get a very distorted picture of what's going on.

James: Are you confident that George Mason University is doing everything it can to make women feel safe in its academic environment?

Bryan: I guess I'm confident that it's not doing everything, because that would require that the only thing we do is try to make women feel safe, which is a crazy high bar. If every day, every minute of every day, you say look, "We don't have any time for math. We don't have any time for economics. Because we just need to do everything that we can to make women feel safe."

I would say, well first of all, at a minimum you might say “Well, what can we do to make people feel safe?” Even that of course is a crazy high bar. That’s what I thought was so terrible about COVID policy. There was an exclusive focus on protecting people from COVID, to the neglect of every other goal in life. How about having time with friends? How about getting to go shopping, or getting to enjoy a vacation? These are all things that are also valuable, and a reasonable person would balance these rather than say there is only one thing that matters and we’ll max it out.

The bottom line is, I don’t think there’s any school in the world, there is not a single human being, who does everything they can to make women feel safe. And thank God, because otherwise that would be pretty much the end of any kind of a normal life.

James: You chose to dedicate the book to your wife and your daughter and you structured the first essay in your book as a letter to your daughter giving her advice not to be a feminist. I’m curious why you chose to make that dedication and to structure that first essay that way.

Bryan: Well obviously they are the two most important women in my life and since the book was called “Don’t Be A Feminist,” that was on my mind. In terms of why the first letter is called “Don’t Be A Feminist: A Letter To My Daughter,” I will say the main reason I got really interested in this was when I had my fourth child, which was my first daughter, about 10 years ago. Very quickly, I did start thinking “Well what am I going to tell her about feminism?” I do know that based upon her demographics if no one intercedes, then probably she will be a feminist, because it’s the standard view for the young women in her social class. At the same time, I knew that I had a lot of doubts about the view and thought that it was much less intellectually defensible than most people do. I spent about eight years writing this essay in my head. The primary motive of the essay really is just to stop my daughter personally from being a feminist. If the book sells no copies, no one else likes it, if I just stop her from being a feminist I’ll consider the book to have been a tremendous success. I spent a month of my life and I avoided this unfortunate outcome in my view.

I did want to go and write it this way because, obviously I love my daughter very much. My goal in writing this is not to oppress her. It’s not to mistreat her. Rather, it is to go and have a real, honest conversation with her.

The way that I begin the book is by saying, “Look, you know the kind of parent I am. That’s the kind that you can go and ask me an honest question and I’ll give you an honest answer.” Then I thought that this was a good topic to do that on. Really, there’s so much fear involved in the conversation that it’s hard to really have it. But I’ve got tenure, so I thought I would stick my neck out, and so that’s what I did.

James: So I also have a daughter who’s in first grade and I kind of think if I were to write a letter to her like this and dedicate it to her, I might say something like, “Even if you don’t necessarily agree with all these views, it’s in your self-interest to kind of go along with them. It’ll help you get ahead. Later on maybe when you’re more established, you can kind of abandon the ideology if you want.” What do you think about that kind of strategic perspective?

Bryan: I actually talk about that in the essay. I say it's true that if you very loudly say, "I'm not a feminist" or "I'm an anti-feminist" that you are deliberately antagonizing a whole lot of women in whatever area you're working in who will not like it and will not like you. But I say that, a much better route than going and pretending to agree with them when you don't is just to not talk about this stuff at all and focus on being a really good and successful employee or contributor. Be a team player. And then I also do advocate finding people that you sense are also not on board and allying with them.

Most obviously, one of the most noted negative effects of #MeToo is that males are now very reluctant to mentor females. The evidence on this came from feminist researchers saying, "Oh no, now men don't want to mentor anymore." And the obvious reason is they are afraid. And what I tell my daughter is try to go and turn down your personal ear dial to make it clear that whatever is true about mentoring women in general that you are different and that you are someone that has a sense of humor, that wants to get along with others, that does not assume the worst of others. I think that that is at least as good of a route to success, is just trying to find men that are interested in mentoring, and make them feel comfortable so they mentor you. I think they are probably better allies overall and you also don't have to be dishonest. So that would be my overall view.

I think you are right that you don't want to be lightning rod of negativity. You don't want to deliberately antagonize people. The real success secret to success in work is to keep your eyes on the prize. There are a few people who manage to succeed purely by being political, but there's way more people who want that job of being the commissar than there are commissar positions. So, it's better to try to excel and make friends.

Patricia: We all cannot be Ann Coulter. That's the long and short of that, I think.

Bryan: That's probably an easier slot to get because there's not that many right-wing women fighting for that job. Maybe for that one there's like ten women who want it for every slot. I think for being say Naomi Wolf or Naomi Klein there's probably like a hundred or a thousand women who want that job for every such job.

Patricia: So I want to go back to that fear—maybe fear is a strong word—that men have with interacting with women one-on-one or professionally. That was a very hot topic, with the "Mike Pence Rule," where he wouldn't take meetings with women alone after work hours. I thought that was actually pretty appropriate. I didn't think there was anything that crazy about that. But that could be seen as a lack of openness to mentoring someone in that way.

You talk about this in your essay in the book "The Discouraged Suitor," about how overzealous zero-tolerance policy is hampering romance, and workplace romance, and romance between people that maybe are interacting because they have some professional connection. I think that's a very good practice in general to have almost an asexual workplace. Because I think it protects everyone from uncomfortable situations, especially with people who don't have their social radars completely in tune. But it seems like you disagree with that I was wondering if you could explain why.

Bryan: I'll stick my neck out and say I think that true love is super important. It's one of the very best things in life, and almost any rule that gets between people and true love, I'm going to say "Hmm, well. This is true love."

I was teaching some students this summer and when they were saying this is totally unacceptable, and I said "Well, what if it's true love?" They were just stunned by the question. Because, if there is a rule saying you can't, but what if two people totally love each other, in that case are you really going to stick with the rule?

What I would say in general is just like I was telling James, it's true that if you just go and say there can be a totally a sexual workplace, and we crush the slightest sign of anything else, then you do avoid a lot of uncomfortable situations. However you also crush tons of good stuff, like people being comfortable around each other. If you crush anything that is the slightest sign of that, then you don't just crush the thing itself, you crush anything that could lead to that thing. You crush anything that could lead to the thing that could lead to the thing.

In Jewish thought, there's this idea of fences around the law. We don't do anything that might possibly get us close to doing anything that might get us close to anything that might get us close to anything that would be wrong. It is a mentality where you are maximizing, or where you are trying to minimize just the bad thing without thinking about all of the stuff you're giving up.

It's true that in earlier generations, one of the main places that people met spouses was on the job. To say that all of those relationships were not actually of great value seems pretty strange to me. You can say well they could have met people someplace else. Alright, well it would have been harder, and probably some of those people would have never met anyone.

I think a lot of what's going on here is that people are way too focused on people with low social anxiety. They figure, oh well, if they can't meet people in one place they'll just quickly, easily go over and meet them in another place. In the real world though, a lot of people have very high social anxiety. They are not comfortable talking to strangers. They're not comfortable doing online dating. One of the few ways they could get comfortable even think about asking someone out is to see them every day for a long time. Then to go and say, "No, that's totally unacceptable because someone might be uncomfortable." To me it's like, well what about the things that you're losing out on? What about the greater loneliness? It really is the case that some people if they couldn't go and date a coworker they might never wind up being with anyone. It's a horrible loss.

James: How about a supervisor-supervisee relationship or a professor-student relationship, is that different?

Bryan: Right, so again that's one where I know people are very touchy about it. Well I say look, the idea that this could only be a bad thing is just crazy. A lot of people actually like this kind of thing. It's not one where it is all just someone that is taking advantage of their higher position to go and emotionally abuse or push someone else around. Very commonly it is welcome. And just to assume that it is not seems to be a very strange thing that almost no human society actually accepted until a couple of decades ago.

When I was talking to my students about this, they were saying “Well there could be a power imbalance.” I said, “Well some people like a power imbalance.” They said, “Well when you put it that way yeah I guess some people do.” It’s kind of odd because students in their late teens they think of themselves as incredibly open minded about every possible kind of human relationship, except for a giant pile of relationships that have existed throughout almost all of human history and now are suddenly unacceptable under any circumstances.

My honest view of these things is that really the rules should be paired all the way back down to: Is there a specific accusation demonstrable of actual mistreatment. And if you don’t have that, then say “Well otherwise then you are both adults, and it’s between you. If you don’t like it, then find another professor or find another job.” I know it’s not a popular view, but I didn’t write this book to be popular.

I’m always thinking: What is being lost? What is being lost? If you say that it is totally illegitimate for someone to ever date a former professor, well there’s a whole lot of such marriages. So should we look at those and say wow, that those are people who despite the fact that they seem to like the situation, they were abused and this was terrible. Right? Or you could say, no, no, no of course the ones that we see are the successful ones but there are other ones that were bad, in which case yeah that’s probably true. But there’s an old saying, you’ve got to kiss a lot of frogs. The fact that there are some bad relationships doesn’t mean it is not a good idea to go and get rid of the thing in general.

Just think about how many bad relationships get started in bars. Therefore we should never let relationships get started in bars? That’s one where I’d say the case is in many ways stronger. People start out intoxicated. They make some bad decisions. They get in a bad situation. If someone were asking me should I meet people in bars, I’d probably say no it’s probably a bad idea in my opinion. But at the same time you go and say well let’s just go and shut down all the open bars because there could be some be some bad things that could happen there.

That’s not good enough. First of all, they’re adults and they should be able to make up their own minds about the risks. Second of all, always be thinking about what could go right. A lot of things can go right in relationships with power imbalances. It’s just a modern prejudice to act like these have to be bad.

Patricia: Would it be fair to categorize it as the unknown tradeoffs of preventing such relationships in a lot of different institutions? Adult relationships. Those unknown tradeoffs are likely if not certainly of higher value than the potential harm that we think that we might be preventing. So the black box of unknowns goods is of higher value than the black box of unknown harms that we think that we are preventing?

Bryan: I would just start with how was the world in the past. We don’t have to speculate about things that are totally unknown. We can just say, well 40 years ago this kind of thing was normal. Is it really true that men or women were on average less happy with the situation? I don’t think there’s much evidence to that’s so. We know that there’s a lot of very successful relationships that started off in the past in ways that people now disapprove of. We have that. So

on the other hand of course there were a lot of complaints that people had about earlier periods. I'm totally not going to deny that.

In a way, there's sort of an economic argument about trying to censor television channel which is if you don't like it you can just change the channel. If you do like it you can enjoy it for your whole life. I'd say a lot of that applies at least similarly to relationships, where we can say look if there's something about a relationship that doesn't appeal to you then you just say no and very likely that ends it. On the other hand saying that it's automatically not allowed means that something that could have been really great for you is then off the table. Obviously there are people who will say well sometimes it's hard to say no. Sometimes it is but I think that normally that is not so.

Also based upon when I've talked to people who know what things were like in the 60s and 70s, as I think I say in the book. I've asked people who were young in the 60s, "So what was sexual harassment really like in the 60s?" And they'll say, "OK well there was a lot of stuff that people would consider horrifying today." Alright fine, OK I expected that. But what would happen in the old days if there was a guy who was badly bothering a woman. They'd say, "Yeah the normal thing was she would go and complain to her boss who would tell him to knock it off and he would."

All right, and then what if that didn't work? Well actually the first thing is you just tell him to knock it off directly and then he usually does. Second thing is you go to your boss and then he tells him and he knocks it off and normally he does. And then the last one is if none of that works then you find another job. Of course there might be [a situation] where the person you're complaining about is the boss. This was not a perfect system. There are no perfect systems. I don't see though that this was a worse system than the one we have today. It was probably a much better one than we have today.

Patricia: I mean there's also a whole niche market of being able to sue for various things that are now considered illegal and workplace violations, so I mean so there are some more trade-offs to consider today. I was just wondering as a young person who uses dating apps, you both are too old to understand any of this.

Bryan: I've read research Patricia.

Patricia: I feel like dating apps, especially in Washington DC, are a helpful way for people to soft-launch interest in one another without crossing that inappropriate professional network. So you could see that you like someone and then they give you the confirmation before you even begin to talk or ask someone out in person. Does that sound like that tracks with what you are saying, like maybe that is the market solution to people not being able to ask one another out in their professional networks?

Bryan: I would say we just had a fortunate coincidence, because if you look at the data on how people meet their spouses, if it weren't for online dating, probably we'd just be dying off right now. Because online dating has totally replaced workplace dating, which used to be a very big deal. So we're very fortunate that it's out there. But part of the reason why online dating has

grown so big is that we have just crushed some of the other options. For some people it's probably a fine substitute, but for other people it's not such a great substitute.

There are some people who just do not come off well on a dating app, but who do look better if you get to know them for a longer amount of time. There are some people where if you work with them for a year you will see their virtues, but you would never swipe. Which way do you swipe? Swiping left on people, correct. Good is left? Swiping left is good?

Patricia: No, swiping left is bad.

Bryan: Ok, swiping left is bad. Then swiping right on someone. There are some people that almost everyone will swipe [left] on because they don't have a lot of immediate appeal, but if you work with them for a year you will see their virtues. And those people are having a very tough time. Of course, they don't talk about it because there is so much pressure on people just to shut up about it. But that doesn't mean there isn't a major loss from that.

James: One thing I've been thinking about lately is this idea of makeup. The libertarian in me says people should be able to wear whatever they want, but then on the other hand there's a part of me that says it's a little unfair or even a little strange that women are expected to walk around with paint on their faces and do their nails, hair and clothes, and spend all this time on that. Is this just an unfairness that they have to deal with in life? What's your position on makeup?

Bryan: I'm not clear that there is an expectation. It's a way that you can go and get more positive attention for yourself, which some women take advantage of and others don't. The idea that this is just totally normal and all women are doing it is just obviously wrong. There's plenty that don't. I would say that it's true that women put a lot more effort into their appearance than men do. It's not that men put in zero, women put in more.

If you do basic economics on this, I think it's a pretty obvious reason. A man could go and multiply the amount of effort he puts into his appearance tenfold and it probably would not help him much in any sphere of life, whereas a woman who put ten times as much effort into her appearance would probably find that her life is better in a lot of ways. I would think of this as an advantage that women have, which is just that you have the opportunity to go and put in some effort and get a result. Whereas men don't have that opportunity. Then you can decide, do I want to put in the effort or not?

This sort of does go to this question that people sometimes think of society treats men more fairly than women, because men so often think of women as sex objects and are not seen in that way in return. You could say, "There is so much more to me than my appearance. Why is it that people care so much about that?"

I point out in the book this is one of the many feminist complaints for which there is an obvious parallel male complaint, namely that men are regarded as "success objects." This is one where a man could be great in a lot of ways, but if he doesn't have a good job and has no prospects of getting one, then he's considered to be pretty undatable.

When you put it this way, then you can say well in both cases the complaint come down to human beings are superficial. Men are superficially put a lot of value upon looks, women superficially put a lot of value on earnings. So in terms of which one is more or less unfair, this is actually one in the book where I say well, probably, this is one where women actually have a somewhat better case, just because you can say success actually is less superficial than looks. Success actually often does follow from having good character traits, such as a good work ethic, or honesty, or determination, whereas attractiveness there is some element of that. But nevertheless it does seem like, being successful is more reflective of deeper traits than being attractive. It's one where at least I'll say probably there's a bit of an edge that I'll give to women for their complaint being a little bit more justified.

James: Is this just somewhat a case of “two wrongs don't make a right.” I mean, if the popular jock in high school gets all the girls, or the successful CEO gets all the girls, should we just say, “People are superficial. That's the way it is. Just deal with it?”

Bryan: Well, people are superficial, and try to not be. It's very different from the feminist complaint, which really does point fingers and say men are being terrible, men are being superficial. You'll notice that when I talked about the definition of feminism, I say the reasonable definition is “the view that our society generally treats men more fairly than women,” I didn't say that it's the view that “society treats men fairly and women unfairly,” because obviously everyone in society is treated unfairly. There's no such thing as a person who receives fair treatment all the time.

So if you just said no feminism is not comparative. Feminism is just the theory that society sometimes treats women unfairly. Well then I would say again that's a view all human beings hold, because anyone with two eyes knows there's some women who have not received fair treatment. But it doesn't make any sense to say this is the feminist view. Because do you also admit there's a lot of men who get unfair treatment? Well sure. Then why not just call it the anti-unfairness view or something like that?

There have been a few people who have accused me of whataboutism in the book, saying well women have a complaint, what about the bad treatment of men? Right and I agree. If I were trying to say that women's complaints are totally without merit, then it would be that reasonable to say “Hey just because men have some reasonable points doesn't mean that women don't have reasonable points.” Maybe they do, let's take it case by case. But it doesn't make sense for it to be a social philosophy or even to call it feminism unless there's something special and especially bad about the treatment that women are getting. And that's not whataboutism, that's just saying if you're going to disproportionately focus on the problems of half of society, you really ought to be able to show that they actually have more serious problems than the rest of society.

James: Do you recommend something like a cost-benefit test for fairness?

Bryan: Let's see. It depends upon what the question is. if the question is “Is one gender treated more fairly than the other?” then, yes. Then do what I did in my book. Let's make a list of all the main complaints and let's assess them one by one and try to come to some reasonable understanding of what the net is.

On the other hand, with the normal meaning of saying we need to do a cost-benefit analysis of fairness, would be to say, “Well sure it’s unfair, but maybe it’s justified in terms of the cost-benefit analysis.” There’s something to that too, of course. You could say, “Look I’m running a business here, I don’t care about whether every little thing is fair. I want people to feel like they’re treated pretty fairly, but if it’s a matter of I’m going have to give up half my profits so that everyone can feel like their life is perfectly fair, then I’m not going to do it.”

And of course, in a broader sense, you might say suppose you’re paid some extra money to put up with some unfairness. Is it still even really unfair? I’ll tend to say, that’s a good question. Probably not. If someone says, “Look this would be unfair but I’ll give you some compensation. It’s unfair that I’m asking you to work on the weekend, when that’s not in your job description. But I’ll tell you what, I’ll give you a bonus.”

Well it would have been unfair if there wasn’t a bonus, but since there’s a bonus, alright great. Everything is great. Everything is perfect. Not only is it that the unfairness passed a cost-benefit test but it in fact ceased to be unfair by virtue of how you handled the issue. Thank you, boss.

Patricia: I wanted to ask about. I don’t know if it’s always true that women are more attracted to successful men. I think successful is a very subjective term that could mean a lot of different things to different people. Like a farmer in Iowa that owns land and has a take-home income of \$50,000 a year. Because he has land and it is a very socially valuable thing. Where I live in Iowa—I live in Iowa half the time, like basically half the year—success is very relative. That is overlooked. The genre of beauty in men and women is also very overlooked. I was a little annoyed when you say women are attracted to more successful men. I don’t even know what successful means. It’s hard to get a definition of that.

Bryan: I never said “always” and that would be a crazy thing to say, right? To say, “People always prefer X.” Whatever X is, that sentence is wrong. Even if it’s air, there’s some people who choke themselves voluntarily. So even that’s not true, bizarrely. As a statistical generalization, the idea that on average women prefer more successful men. Women put a lot of value on success. Men put a lot of value on attractiveness. I think that is very well established. In terms of what counts? Or how relative is it? The answer is it is a mix of the two.

There are some kinds of success that have great social value throughout all of American society. The first one, money. It’s very hard to find some subset of American society where money is considered a negative. If you really look hard, you could find these people, but they’re rare. And the other one is actually fancy educational credentials. In almost every in every subculture, being more educated is considered better than being less, and going to more prestigious schools is considered better than going to less prestigious schools.

But then on top of it of course you’re right, there are a lot of other kinds of success. There are people that regard some kinds of jobs as being dirty or low. For example, a plumber who makes a million dollars a year still might be considered less successful than a college professor who makes \$100,000 because he’s not making his money in the right way. He’s making his money in a dirty or socially disfavored way.

There's that kind of thing going on. There are other kinds of success. There are some people who just consider lawyers to be not very worthy people. Sure, he makes a lot of money, but he's a lawyer, yuck.

Something else that is actually a big deal in dating right now is political ideology. It seems to be more important than ever before in the data. There are people who say, "He may be rich, he may be a Princeton grad. But he's a Democrat, yuck. I wouldn't even give him the time of day." Again, you might consider that kind of a sort of success. Being the world's champion dungeons and dragons player—there is a subculture where that counts for something. It's a pretty small subculture. But if you have a very high income I'm going to be considered attractive in a wide range of subcultures. Other things have real niche value, like in most of the world it doesn't count for anything.

And obviously the same thing goes with physical attractiveness. There are a lot of differences of opinion about what is physically attractive and what is not. There is also however some very strong statistical reliabilities that people generally do consider and agree on as to what's physically attractive. There's a great documentary from a while back called "The Human Animal" going over some things that at least in every known human society, they are considered a plus for attractiveness. Things like having clear skin. Researchers couldn't find any society where they prefer scarred or pockmarked skin to clear skin. Also, having healthy white teeth. I guess in Japan there is the tradition of blackening your teeth, but in almost every society clear white teeth are considered to be more attractive. And then obviously things on body shape like the "V" shoulder shape for men and the hourglass shape for women are very commonly, in almost all societies considered more attractive than alternative body shapes.

That does not mean that there are not some people who disagree, of course. This is purporting to be a book where social science plays a big role. Social scientists almost never have any universally true generalizations. All we work with are statistical generalizations about what's typically the case.

Patricia: Do you think that there are any patriarchal systems that are still operating in the United States?

Bryan: It depends upon what you mean by "patriarchal." If you just mean are there any systems where men have a large majority of the top positions, then I'd say practically every system in the United States remains like that. So yes, look at politics, still very heavily male dominated. Business, again the very top levels. Top levels of politics. Top levels of business. Top levels of science. Even top levels of the arts are going to remain very heavily male dominated. So if that's all it takes to be patriarchal, then I'd say that almost every area that people talk about it is still patriarchal.

Which is why I'd say that isn't really a satisfactory definition of patriarchal. I would say that for in order for it to really count there needs to also be men in those positions that are unearned ones. One where even though men have actually not performed better than women they still get set aside a large majority of the better spots.

My current view of American Society is the other way around. Even though men are still more successful, we have a system that favors women and this leads to a larger share of women in those top positions than we would get in a meritocracy. Obviously this is a statistical generalization, it does not apply in every single case. I'm not saying that every woman at the top has failed to earn it.

But I do think there is now a strong pressure for quota-ism and tokenism to say we need to go and find some women here to be at the top with us, otherwise we will look bad. Of course, the way that you do that is by lowering standards.

Now again, if we go to other human societies, the clearest case one is where you have government by hereditary dictatorship where the oldest male relative gets to be the ruler. Well yeah, that's not meritocracy is it? It's one where you're just going and picking the oldest male ruler, one after another the other, and the question is not even: Who would be the best dictator out of the children of the current dictator? It's a really high level of non-meritocracy when you are doing it that way.

A question that has been raised, and I think it is a very fair one is who, for example, are the female composers that have been unfairly ignored in western classical music from 1600 to 1900? It's just very hard to find any women that anyone will even pretend with a straight face were in the league of Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Mozart, Wagner, Verdi. You can ask, "Why is that?" It's a good question. There are probably a lot of reasons for differences in different kinds of achievements.

If you go to Charles Murray's book Human Accomplishment, he has two very interesting graphs. One of them looks at Jewish achievement before and after Jewish emancipation, roughly before 1800 and after 1800. Remember, Jews even in Europe would only be a couple percent of the population. Before Jewish emancipation, Jewish achievement was almost nothing, and then almost as soon as Jewish emancipation happens, Jews wind up getting to like 20% of all measured achievements notable in science, math, humanities and the arts. On the other hand, he also has a similar graph for women showing that when there is a move towards much greater equality for women, we don't see the same spike in superlative female achievements. Again, you could say that there's something else is going on, but it's the kind of paired graphs that make you wonder. It can't always be the case that there is always a massive hangover for a demographic that previously was being mistreated. Some groups almost seem to almost explode with achievement as soon as you pull the glass ceiling off of them.

The other thing I will mention that I draw pretty heavily on in the first essay. It's important to remember that men predominate at the bottom of society as well as the top. It's strange to describe a system like that as patriarchy. So if men are more likely to have the really good jobs but they also are much more likely to be in jail, to be homeless, to commit suicide. It doesn't seem like a system that favors men in general. It seems like it's one where either men do really well or really badly. It's not even clear why you should consider men overall to be more fortunate in this system, regardless of what brought it on.

James: I don't know if you've read Richard Reeves's book, from the Brookings Institution, "Of boys and Men." It just came out recently. I just finished reading it.

Bryan: I think I know the thesis, but I haven't read the book.

James: At one point he discusses how if college admissions were based solely on merit, there would be far more women in top schools than men. This suggests that there already is some implicit affirmative action going on for men to cater to women's preferences because they don't want to go to schools that are 60 percent women, or whatever the statistic might be. Do you think that this makes sense? Should we have affirmative action for me just to give more of the guys a fighting chance, or should we just have pure meritocracy, where whoever earns a place gets it and that's it?

Bryan: It's probably a little complicated. I think at the very top STEM schools they would be very highly male dominated, if you went purely on test scores. But if you go down a tier, then I think what you're saying is correct.

In terms of what should be done? As long as we have publicly funded schools, then I think that the rule of not having affirmative action and just saying we are going to have admissions based upon objective academic performance is the least bad alternative. If we had an actual free market then I would say they've got a right to do it however they want.

There is a reason why it's so common for bars to have different prices for men and women for the cover charge. This is almost certainly a profit maximizing thing where we say men have to pay to be here women don't. Why, because we figured out we make more money if we do it this way. Men are willing to pay to meet women and women are not willing to pay to meet men, roughly speaking. In terms of the fairness of it, it's one where I think you could easily say well, I think this isn't really very fair. But it's one where you could say I will pay extra in order to go and have the fair treatment. Or people could say oh well it's unfair but I don't really care that much, and so I will just live with it.

Overall, it's the kind of thing where when the government is involved, just the iron rule of: We're doing this by meritocracy because anything else takes us down to a very dark road. I think that makes sense. For private businesses, they definitely have a right to do it, in terms of how big of a deal is it? Probably it depends upon how much is at stake. For a cover charge, I think it's such a trivial thing. It's not really one that it makes sense to complain about. If it were something that were bigger then at least I could understand people being upset about it. But probably in the end I would say, well if you don't like it start your own business that does it differently.

James: So we'll just do a couple more questions. Do you want to go Patricia?

Patricia: The Biden Administration has a notable focus on getting women to reenter the workplace and more women to enter certain positions like certain STEM jobs where there are fewer women than men. You touched briefly on what are some of the dangers of not letting the most qualified person do the job, and we casually know that you want the most qualified surgeon to perform your surgery, like that's a pretty obvious one. But what are some broader societal

dangers of this type of policy being adopted by let's say every private firm is valuing these social qualities more than these quantitative values?

Bryan: Historic job performance matters in any job people pay for. Take something as simple as food delivery. You might say "What difference does it make if the food delivery person is incompetent? It's just one meal." Well when it's my meal, I care a lot and if it's a whole system where the competence is low then I don't even want to order food anymore.

Competence is always important. When you are focusing on demographics instead of competence, that does lead to bad results. Maybe not the end of the world, but should it be the case that we have a regulation unless it causes the end of the world? I think that we should have a different bar for it. I know that James has worked on cost-benefit analysis and its rarity in regulation. Yes, cost and benefits do definitely matter.

A lot of this is there is a massive double standard because any job where women are underrepresented, especially if it's high-status, there's a lot of pressure to get them in. But, there's almost no pressure to ever go and consider men in jobs, even ones that are higher status like nursing. There's very little interest in figuring out ways to get occupations to be more accepting of male nurses, or male teachers of young children.

On the one hand I would say just the common sense advice of: keep an open mind and judge people on their merits, that's great. But if you go forward and say "If you're not getting 50-50 then obviously you didn't have an open mind and obviously you didn't judge people on the merits," well I'd say "Hold on here. How do you know what I did? Other than having a dogmatic assumption that meritocracy would lead to equal 50-50 distributions, what have you got?"

In terms of just trying to help people to find better matches for themselves, that again I'd say makes perfect sense. The idea that everyone is already perfectly matched to the ideal job for themselves is crazy. It's a complicated world, people are always finding new and better alternatives for themselves, which must mean there's lots of other ones that remain undiscovered. The best book along those lines that I know of though is not from the Biden administration. It's this book by Warren Farrell "Why Men Earn More," which just goes through 25 important differences between male-typical occupations and female-typical occupations, which he talks about not to go and make anyone feel bad, but just to go and make people aware about how they could go and find a better job. Look there's 25 differences between jobs that men and women typically do that he says first of all explain the higher earnings. But if you're a woman and you want extra money, you can go and find one of these 25 things that you're willing to go and compromise on and then likely you can find a better job.

For example, STEM jobs pay more, so it's like well have you considered STEM jobs? No, I don't like STEM. Right, the Farrell approach then says, alright fine you don't like STEM. Let's try something else then. Are you willing to work irregular hours? No, I don't like irregular hours. Are you willing to do a job that is in the outdoors regardless of the temperature? OK, yeah I don't mind that. All right, well then Farrell says all right well then I've got an opportunity for you. There's a bunch of jobs that pay extra because they're outdoors and they're not comfortable all the time and you can make some more money by switching over there.

Of course, the book is interesting is that it works for men as well. Men can go and say oh wow I didn't realize that I had been focusing so exclusively on money and that there's a bunch of other jobs that I could do that pay less but give me a better quality of life. Honestly, I think when people read the book a lot of what they'll realize is I was taking it for granted that things were so much better for other people that I had it very badly and now I understand that a lot of the reason why I'm dissatisfied is that there's some offsetting good things that I have. But again, of course you may also realize oh OK I didn't know that I could go and have this kind of job and that was open to me and I can make more money with that.

James: One question I have is we were on a panel together at the Cato Institute recently talking about regulation and populism. One of the points you made that really resonated with me was about how libertarians need to be more welcoming and friendly and "smile more" and we have a tendency to alienate people. I definitely agree with that. I think I could take some of that advice myself sometimes. But I wonder, is titling a book "Don't Be A Feminist" consistent with that message? What are your thoughts on that?

Bryan: That's a great question. The correct answer is: quite possibly not. So maybe I really messed up. I thought about that pretty hard. Part of what I did is I tried to get a cover that would show the real feelings behind the book. I don't know if you can edit in a copy of the book cover at this point, but either way, the cover shows me homeschooling my daughter and we're both happy, and I'm trying to go and teach her what she needs to know to be the best Vali Caplan that she can be.

I think that if you look at the cover of the book, you will realize that the idea that this is motivated out of anger or some desire to upset other people. It's just not true, that's not what I'm going for. In terms of why I did it this way, honestly the main reason is that I couldn't think of any better title that would accurately capture what the thesis is. I could have given a totally different name and then have misled people about what the book was about. But I said look, I would rather go and be truthful and risk alienating someone than just do a bait-and-switch, and people would say hey, this isn't what I bought the book for. So that was mostly my thinking.

You know honestly a lot of the theme of the book is I'm not angry at people for being feminist. I'm saying that the view is mistaken and you should just apostatize from it if you already belong or you should just not convert if you haven't done it yet. I don't see that as being inherently unfriendly, to say look there's a view that's mistaken. Of course, if I were abusive it would be a different matter. I'm not abusive. I'm not there to go and yell at people. I guess I have what you could consider some unkind words for feminist elites where I do think that, as I say in the book, that they are going and heavily pushing self-pity and anger and are treating men especially unjustly, but also just all critics unjustly.

Nothing would make me happier than for them to read the book and just say, "That was very convincing. You've changed my mind. Can we be friends?" If that ever happens, I will go and buy lunch for whoever changed their mind. Even if someone didn't change their mind if they just said they want to go and talk about it, I would be totally happy to do that.

James: Alright one last question. This is a tough one. What's your favorite Morrissey song?

Bryan: Oh wow, yes. So I didn't know that you knew I was a huge Morrissey fan.

James: It's in your book in one of the chapters.

Bryan: Oh yeah, that's right. Oh gee.

James: Maybe I stumped you on this one.

Brian: There's so many good choices. I'm tempted to start with "Trouble Loves Me." I like that one a lot. "Alma Matters." That one has some very nice economics in it if I'm remembering the lyrics correctly. So that one is up there. Let's see. Other ones that are really good. Actually, now I remember. The one that I actually love the most is "The Last of the Famous International Playboys."

James: Good choice.

Bryan: That's the one where as soon as it comes on, you say oh yeah this is great and I can't help but sing along. If you know the background of the song, it's all about the Kray brothers. There's a great movie about the Kray brothers starring Tom Hardy playing a double role. So that one is very cool as well. So I'll go with "The Last Of The Famous International Playboys." Great song. You a fan too James?

James: Yeah, I like The Smiths a lot. I used to play in a band and people often compared us to The Smiths cause the singer was kind of a crooner.

Bryan: I also like Morrissey's more recent albums, I saw him perform live about five years ago and he likes to do almost all new songs, which, at the time I actually hadn't heard them. Then I got the albums, like no I was wrong they were great songs. I just wasn't ready for him. But now that I've heard them. Like one album ago there's the one where he sings "I recommend you stop watching the news because the news contrives to frighten you to make you feel small and alone to make you feel the world isn't your own."

So yeah, Morrissey's anti-news just like me and that's great.

James: Well, thank you so much Brian for spending an hour with us talking about your new book it's "Don't Be a Feminist, Essays on Genuine Justice."

Bryan: You can get the book on Amazon it's \$12 for the paperback \$9.99 for the ebook and despite record setting inflation, I did not raise the price. So buy now!

James: Great. Thank you so much Bryan.

Bryan: Great pleasure.