The debate over gender roles in the family and the church has never been more intense than it is at present. Much of the debate, of course, focuses on biblical exegesis. Complementarians argue that the Bible teaches that women are to be subordinate to men at home and at church and that women are not permitted to teach Christian doctrine to men. Egalitarians, in contrast, insist that the Bible does not teach the subordination of women but in fact teaches the full equality of men and women and permits women to occupy the full range of leadership and ministry positions that are also available to men.

Occasionally, however, the gender role debate bleeds over into discussions of metaphysics. One of the traditional arguments of complementarians, used to stave off criticisms that their view makes women inferior to men, is that women are equal to men as persons, but they have been given by God a different role in creation than men. Men have been given the role to lead in both family and church, while women have been given the role to follow the leadership of men and come alongside men as their “helpmeets.” Thomas Schreiner, for example, asserts, a crucial comment: 

Equality of personhood does not rule out differences in role.¹

Similarly, Raymond C. Ortlund states that “the Bible does teach the equal personhood and value and dignity of all the human race—men, women, and children—and that must be the only equality that matters to God,” but nonetheless, “God did not create man and woman in an undifferentiated way, and their mere maleness and femaleness identify their respective roles.”²

So we have here from both Schreiner and Ortlund (who echo the thoughts of other complementarians) the claim that the Bible teaches that women are equal to men in value and dignity (since they both share the imago dei), though they share different roles in the economy of creation, a role difference that requires the subordination of women to men. What I wish to point out here, though, is that the “equal value/subordinate role” distinction, whether taught by Scripture or not, is a point of metaphysics. So, for example, when Schreiner says, “Equality of personhood does not rule out differences in role,” he is making a metaphysical claim (albeit one that he believes is supported by Scripture). That is, he is making a claim about the nature of reality, a claim, in particular, about whether the property of being equal in value and dignity to X can be had by an individual who also has the property having a subordinate role to X.

It is this metaphysical claim that provides the foil for a recent article by Rebecca Merrill Groothuis.³ She argues that the metaphysical distinction

The Metaphysics of Subordination:
A Response to Rebecca Merrill Groothuis

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We have already seen that men and women equally are made in God’s image (Gen. 1:26–27). But I would also contend that there are six indications in Genesis 1–3 of a role differentiation between men and women. By role differentiation I mean that Adam has the responsibility of leadership and Eve has the responsibility to follow his leadership. Before explaining these six points I must make
made by complementarians between equality in being/value and subordination of role is logically incoherent. She asks,

But what if it is not logically possible for the same person to be at once spiritually and ontologically equal and permanently, comprehensively and necessarily subordinate? What if this sort of subordination cannot truthfully be described as merely a “role” or “function” that has no bearing on one’s inherent being or essence?

I believe we can choose between the two biblical interpretations [complementarianism and egalitarianism] by assessing each one in light of two fundamental premises. The first premise is theological: according to Scripture, women and men are equal spiritually and ontologically—a point that is uncontested in the gender debate. The second premise is logical: the foundational and indisputable law of noncontradiction, which states that A and non-A cannot both be true at the same time in the same respect.4

From the statement of these two premises, she goes on to say, “I will argue that given its nature and rationale, woman’s unequal ‘role’ entails woman’s unequal being.”5 If successful, Groothuis’s argument would indeed render the complementarian’s “equal value/subordinate role” distinction contradictory and incoherent. What I intend to do in this paper is to show that her argument is not successful. The distinction between a woman’s being subordinate in role but equal in value is not contradictory but coherent.6

Groothuis’s Argument against the Equal Value/Subordinate Role Distinction

In the context of presenting her case, Groothuis first outlines what she takes to be the central argument of complementarians regarding the equal value/subordinate role distinction. As she presents it, the argument goes like this:7

(1) Different function does not necessarily entail personal inferiority or superiority.

(2) Woman’s subordination and man’s authority involve different functions.

(3) Therefore the subordination of woman to man’s authority has nothing to do with female inferiority or male superiority; these are male–female role differences, pure and simple.

Neither Groothuis nor any other egalitarian disputes premise (2). It goes without saying that men and women, if women are indeed subordinate, have different roles or functions—the man leads and the woman submits. Perhaps surprisingly to some readers, though, Groothuis also admits the truth of premise (1). To her credit, Groothuis recognizes that there are many clear and controversial examples of functional subordination of one person to another that do not entail any inferiority of value or dignity of the one who is subordinate. Such examples would include the subordination of young children to their parents, the subordination of a worker to her otherwise equal co-worker while serving together on a committee, and the subordination of the Son of God to the Father during his incarnate ministry on earth. So, Groothuis grants that both premises of this complementarian argument are true.

What then is the problem? According to Groothuis, the argument is invalid. The conclusion does not follow from the premises. From the facts that woman’s subordination involves different roles than man and that there are legitimate examples of subordination that don’t entail inferiority of value, it does not follow that woman’s subordination to man doesn’t entail inferiority of value. We can recognize that some cases of subordination are free of implications regarding the relative values of the parties involved, while also recognizing that other kinds of subordination do have such implications.

The unproblematic kind of subordination Groothuis calls functional subordination, and the problematic kind she calls “permanent, comprehensive, and ontologically grounded” subordination. I will call this latter kind essential subordination. Apparently, what makes functional subordination unproblematic is that it is not permanent, comprehensive, and ontologically grounded. As Groothuis
puts it, functional subordination “is typically determined either according to an individual’s abilities (or lack thereof) or for the sake of expediency in accomplishing a specific task; therefore such subordination is limited in scope or duration.”8 It is also often not grounded in the nature of the subordinate one. So, a child’s subordination to his parents is merely functional because it is temporary and due to the child’s immaturity. The subordination of the worker to her co-worker is also temporary and is not grounded in the ontological nature of the worker, but simply serves the end of expediency. We may add that it would be likewise with the subordination of a soldier to his commanding officer. Also, with the subordination of most Israelites to the spiritual leadership of the Levites in the old covenant because, although this subordination was ontologically grounded in the levitical lineage, it served the expedient of certain (temporary) redemptive purposes of God and was not comprehensive in scope (i.e., Israelites were not under the authority of the Levites in every area of life).

As should be clear from the above, Groothuis considers the three properties of “permanence,” “comprehensiveness,” and “ontological grounding” together to constitute the necessary and sufficient conditions for essential subordination. That is, for an instance of subordination to count as essential subordination, it must exemplify all three of these properties. If any one of these properties is lacking in an instance of subordination, then that instance qualifies as functional, not essential, subordination. She confirms this point when she writes, “Subordination is necessarily personal [i.e., essential] and not merely functional when ... its scope is comprehensive, its duration is permanent, and the criterion for its determination is one’s unalterable ontology.”8 So, the three properties in question are the necessary and sufficient conditions for essential subordination.

With all this in mind, Groothuis insists that the conclusion of the complementarian argument for the equal value/subordinate role distinction does not follow from its premises. Though she does not put it this way, her point is that for the conclusion to follow, the complementarian needs something like the following disambiguations of premises (1) and (2):

1) Functional subordination does not necessarily entail personal inferiority or superiority.
2) Woman’s subordination and man’s authority involves only the functional subordination of women.

These modifications would give the complementarians a valid argument. However, Groothuis would argue that while (1’) is true, (2’) is false. Indeed, it is the burden of her article to demonstrate the falsehood of (2’), and, in her own terms, to defend the following argument:10

4) If the permanent, comprehensive, and ontologically grounded subordination of women is justified, then women are inferior persons.
5) Women are not inferior persons.
6) Therefore women’s subordination is not justified.

In what follows, I will lay out in more detail how Groothuis defends this argument. Moreover, in response, I will show two things: (i) that on Groothuis’s definitions of functional and essential subordination, she fails to demonstrate that woman’s subordination is anything more than functional; and (ii) that even if woman’s subordination were essential, and not merely functional, it would not entail that women are inferior to men in value or dignity.

Is Women’s Subordination Essential?

The first thing to note about Groothuis’s egalitarian argument against the equal value/subordinate role distinction is that her first premise—(4) above—presupposes the falsehood of (2’), the claim that women’s subordination constitutes merely functional subordination. In other words, it is crucial to her own argument that one grant that woman’s subordination is permanent, comprehensive, and ontologically grounded. I will grant (and I think most other complementarians will grant) that woman’s subordination is ontological,
being grounded in women’s femaleness. As Ort-
lund writes, “A woman, just by virtue of her woman-
hood, is called to help [i.e., be subordinate to men] 
for God.” Yet I will not grant, and I think that no 
complementarian need grant, that women’s subor-
dination is either permanent or comprehensive. If 
I’m right about this, then woman’s subordination, 
by Groothuis’s own criteria, is merely functional 
and thus unproblematic morally and ontologically.

I will first address the alleged permanence 
of woman’s subordination. Groothuis reminds the 
reader in numerous places that according to the 
complementarian view a woman’s subordination 
to men is “permanent”; it is “perpetual”; it is “life-
long”; it extends “throughout the life of a woman.” 
The question, of course, arises as to the refer-
ent Groothuis intends for the term “life” in these 
remarks. What life is she talking about in which 
a woman’s subordination is “permanent” and “life-
long”? It is evident that she intends the present, 
mortal life. At one point she writes, “No condition 
or context in this life nullifies her subordination to 
male authority.” Groothuis appears to acknowl-
edge here that most complementarians do not (or 
need not) extend the subordination of women to 
the next life. Because men and women will no 
longer be “given in marriage” in the age to come (cf. 
Matt 22:29–30), and because the whole church 
(men and women) will be the consummate bride 
of Christ, the subordination of women to men will 
presumably come to an end. Yet, Groothuis insists 
that women’s subordination is permanent, perpe-
tual, and lifelong. And it is this alleged permanence 
that, in part, makes woman’s subordination of the 
problematic essential variety.

But the question must be asked: why does woman’s subordination in this life warrant the 
designation “permanent”? Of course, the comple-
mentarian view is that woman’s subordination lasts 
throughout this life, but that hardly qualifies her 
subordination for the adjective “permanent.” The 
Scriptures are clear that our lives in this world and 
in this age are but a drop in the bucket compared to 
the never-ending life we will enjoy in the eschaton. 
A person’s “life” cannot be reduced to the infinitesi-
mally small slice of existence that we have here and 
now. A woman’s 70, 80, or 90 years on this earth 
are but an almost imperceptible moment in the 
 inexhaustible span of her eternal life. Yet Groo-
huis labels the subordination of woman in this 
“moment” as permanent and treats it as an unbear-
ably weighty burden that undermines her dignity 
and value as a person created in the image of God. 
Even if it were a burden to be borne, why not say 
with Paul that “the sufferings of this present time 
are not worthy to be compared with the glory to be 
revealed in us” (Rom 8:18; cf. 2 Cor 4:17)? In any 
case, the primary point to be made is that woman’s 
subordination need not be viewed as permanent. It 
is only temporary, lasting through the course of this 
short life, but ending in the next.

It needs to be mentioned in this connection 
that Groothuis nowhere provides us any reason to 
limit our consideration of whether or not a woman’s 
subordination is permanent to the limited param-
eters of this life. She gives no reason to ignore the 
afterlife in our definition of a woman’s “life,” and 
thus no clear reason to think that a woman’s subor-
dination is permanent in any significant sense. This 
being so, woman’s subordination lacks a necessary 
condition for being essential subordination. Hence, 
on Groothuis’s own criteria, woman’s subordina-
tion must be seen as merely functional.

A possible objection to my response at this 
point would be to pose the question of how 
a woman’s subordination could be merely temporary if it 
is, as I’ve admitted, ontologically grounded in her 
femaleness. Granted that the complementarian can 
allow that women’s subordination will not continue 
in the afterlife, it might be wondered if this differ-
ence is coherent. What makes it possible, in other 
words, that an ontologically grounded subordi-
nation could come to an end in the age to come? 
Though she probably did not precisely have this 
objection in mind, one of Groothuis’s comments 
could be taken as suggesting it. She writes,

[W]oman’s subordinate “role” is deter-
mmed exclusively and necessarily by her 
personal nature; that is, solely on account 
of her being female she must be subordi-
nate. Therefore woman’s “role” designates 
not merely what she does (or doesn’t do)
but what she is. She is female; she is subordinate.13

From this one might conclude that a woman's subordination must be truly permanent extending even into the afterlife. Such a conclusion would not follow, however. To see why, imagine a creature on an alien world that can live both on land and in the water. That is, the creature is amphibious. And suppose that it is by means of two completely different and independent faculties that the creature is enabled to breathe in the two respective environments. When living in the water he uses those faculties that enable breathing under water, while his other breathing faculty lies dormant. Likewise, when he lives on the land, he uses the faculty that permits him to breathe on land while his water-breathing faculty lies dormant. So, this creature has a faculty that fits him for a certain activity or function on land (or water), but when living in the other environment his other faculty is not used though it still exists. Similarly, why can't women, in virtue of their being or nature, have qualities that fit them for subordination in the present, earthly environment, but which are unnecessary and lie dormant in the afterlife because the conditions of life at that time are different? I see no reason why this could not be the case. Therefore, there does not seem to be any incoherence in supposing that a woman's ontologically grounded subordination is limited to this life.

I now argue that woman's subordination is not comprehensive, thus lacking another necessary condition for essential subordination. Groothuis is adamant that woman's subordination “is comprehensive (encompassing all that a woman does),” that “[n]o condition or context in this life nullifies her subordination to male authority,”14 that “[t]here is no area of a married woman's life that is not ultimately under the absolute rule of her husband,”15 and “there is no area in which a woman has any authority, privilege, or opportunity that a man is denied. The male is consistently advantaged with respect to the female, and the female is consistently disadvantaged with respect to the male.”16

The first question to be asked is just what exactly does Groothuis mean when she says that a woman's subordination is “comprehensive.” She is anything but clear on this point. Indeed, it appears that there are several different assertions here, none of which seems entirely free of ambiguity.

Of course, in her earlier work on this topic, some of Groothuis's expressions concerning the comprehensiveness of female subordination seem to indicate that her concern is with married women and not those who are single.17 If so, the first thing to say in response is that this would make any claim to the comprehensive nature of woman's subordination all the more suspicious. For even supposing that a married woman's subordination to her husband “encompassed all she does” or that there was “no condition or context in this life [that] nullifies her subordination to male authority,” why should we take these facts as indicating the “comprehensive” nature of woman's subordination (generically considered), or even the comprehensive subordination of any particular woman—given that there would be many single women who were not subordinate to a husband at all, and given that many of these married women were not subordinate to a husband prior to their marriages and won't be subordinate to men later when they become widows? In what sense would it be true of a married woman that there would be “no condition or context in this life [that] nullifies her subordination to male authority”? Apparently, it would be while she is married. But, in that case, we could think of innumerable conditions and contexts in this life before and after marriage in which a woman would not be subordinate to a man. We need some reason why subordination to her husband while married constitutes comprehensive subordination. In other words, to count as comprehensive subordination, does the subordination have to encompass all that a woman does throughout the entire span of her life on earth, or all that she does just while she is married? If it is the latter, the complementarian may ask why that kind of comprehensiveness makes her subordination essential and not merely functional.

At this point, Groothuis may ask, as she does in her article, what reason God would have in relegating married women to subordination at all?
Consider the Levites. They had a special status in Israel as the spiritual leaders of the community. No person from another tribe could occupy that position of privilege. Yet, according to Groothuis, their leadership status “was not permanent or inherent in the creational design but served a specific and limited function until the new covenant in Christ.” Unlike the Levites, however, “there is no discernable reason why God would have chosen men for permanently superior spiritual status. The only possible logical rationale would be that all men are spiritually superior to all women.”

But given that woman’s subordination is not permanent (as we saw above) or any more comprehensive than that of the Levites (see below, incl. footnote 20), it seems to me that Groothuis is ignoring the obvious. Why couldn’t the complementarian appeal to Eph 5:21–33 and say that during the limited context of this life God has ordained that the relation between husband and wife symbolize the relation between Christ and his church, relationships that in both cases involves subordination of the bride to the husband? This seems clearly to me to provide a coherent and logical rationale for woman’s subordination.

Secondly, if by “comprehensive” Groothuis means absolute, then the complementarian would not grant that even a married woman’s subordination is comprehensive in any relevant sense. Mainstream complementarians understand a husband’s authority as a relative authority that is itself subordinate to God’s authority. Thus, complementarians would not grant the notion that a wife should exist under “the absolute rule of her husband.” Suppose that a woman’s husband were an unbeliever and he forbade her to go to church or to pray at home, or commanded her to have an abortion. I dare say that most, if not all, complementarians would say that “she must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). A husband’s authority is not absolute and a wife, like every human being, answers ultimately to a higher authority.

But what about Groothuis’s assertions that “[t]here is no area in which a woman has any authority, privilege, or opportunity that a man is denied. The male is consistently advantaged with respect to the female, and the female is consistently disadvantaged with respect to the male.” Well, she is simply mistaken. There are numerous societal positions in which men are “disadvantaged” relative to women. No man has ever been or will ever be crowned Miss America. Women are consistently advantaged (and men disadvantaged) with regard to occupying the position of Queen Mother in a kingdom. And how about the head of the National Organization for Women or the Southern Baptist’s Women’s Missionary Union? These are positions reserved for women, (i.e., not open to men), and they are positions of authority, privilege, and opportunity.

If Groothuis were somehow able to discount these examples, however, it would not matter. Even if it were the case that there were no positions open to women and not men, the fact that there are positions open to men and not women would not mean that woman’s subordination to man is comprehensive. All of the ways in which a woman is not subject to her husband’s authority outlined above would still be the case. So, is woman’s subordination comprehensive in any way relevant to Groothuis’s thesis? It would seem not.

We have seen, then, that woman’s subordination is neither permanent nor comprehensive. By Groothuis’s own criteria, these facts disqualify it from being a case of essential subordination. The complementarian may consistently maintain that woman’s subordination is merely functional and that it is, therefore, morally unproblematic. Though I believe that this conclusion is enough to undermine Groothuis’s main thesis, I will show that even if woman’s subordination were essential, it would not mean that woman is inferior in value to man.
and ontologically grounded subordination of women is justified, then women are inferior persons.

Showing the truth of (2') renders the antecedent of (4) entirely moot because, even if (4) is true, it would not be the case that woman’s subordination is permanent, comprehensive, and ontologically grounded. Nevertheless, it is still an important metaphysical question as to whether or not (4) is true. I think it is not. Let us note that (4), if true, entails

(7) Essential subordination necessarily entails the inferiority in value and dignity of the one who is subordinate.

Groothuis clearly embraces (7). She contends that if woman’s subordination is essential—i.e., if it is permanent, comprehensive, and ontologically grounded—then it necessarily entails that women are inferior in value and dignity to men. She writes that “the nature of women’s inequality in ‘function’ implies, by logical necessity, women’s inequality in being.”22 She also says, “Because the subordination that is demanded by women’s unalterable (female) being is of comprehensive scope and permanent duration ... it implies an extensive and significant personal inferiority.”23

What is most striking about Groothuis’s assertions here is that she offers little by way of argument in their support. The most she does by way of explicit argument for (7) is found when she writes, “So while woman is said to be equal in her essential being, she is deemed subordinate precisely because of her essential being [i.e., her femaleness]. Yet the notion that woman is equal in her being yet unequal by virtue of her being is incoherent.”24 Elsewhere, she says virtually the same thing but with a bit more detail:

Regardless of how hierarchalists try to explain the situation, the idea that women are equal in their being, yet unequal by virtue of their being, is contradictory and ultimately nonsensical. If you cannot help but be what you are, and if inferiority in function follows inexorably from what you are, then you are inferior in your essential being.25

The apparent incoherence that Groothuis claims here, however, is derived from the way she insists on characterizing the view of her opposition. She frequently refers to the equal value/subordinate role distinction with phrases like “equal in being, unequal in role,” “equal being, unequal function,” “inferiority in function . . . equality in being,” and so on. Implicit in these characterizations is the notion that the woman’s subordinate function is inferior to that of the man’s. That is, it is assumed that the woman’s subordinate role is an unequal and inferior role—where “inferior” means “having less value and dignity.”

Now it may be the case that some complementarians have characterized their position the way Groothuis does, but if so, it is unfortunate and misleading. I dare say that complementarians generally would not want to say that the role and function that woman has in the family and at church is the least bit inferior in value and dignity to that of the man.26 With this in mind, and to demonstrate the flaw in Groothuis’s argument, we need to make clear the ambiguity in her chosen way of characterizing the complementarian view. What might it mean to say that women have “unequal roles” or “inferior functions”? Here are the possibilities:

(8) “Woman has an unequal/inferior role to that of man” = “Woman has a less valuable role than man.”
(9) “Woman has an unequal/inferior role to that of man” = “Woman has a subordinate position of authority to that of man.”

The complementarian could accept (9) and would roundly reject (8). Yet it is (8) that Groothuis needs to make her case. And if we clear up the ambiguity in the language of Groothuis’s argument, the incoherence that she alleges for the complementarian view is no longer obvious. For when she characterizes her opposition as holding that “woman is equal in her being yet unequal by virtue of her being,” all the complementarian need mean by this is that “woman is equal in her being yet subordinate in
authority by virtue of her being”—and this does not seem at all incoherent.

Of course, in response, she would likely want to claim that there is a logical connection between (8) and (9) such that the latter entails the former. This seems evident when she says, as quoted above, that woman “is deemed subordinate precisely because of her essential being. Yet the notion that woman is equal in her being yet unequal by virtue of her being is incoherent.” Note the immediate move from “subordinate” to “unequal” here—where by “unequal” she almost certainly has in mind something like the definition in (8). But what justifies this move? Why would (9) imply (8)? As far as I can tell, Groothuis gives us no reason to think it would. She simply assumes it.

In order to justify an inference from (9) to (8) and hold that even woman’s essential subordination to man entails her inferior value (and not just inferior rank), Groothuis would need to hold the following principle which I will call the Less Valuable Function Principle (LVFP):

(LVFP) Necessarily, for any two functions \( F_1 \) and \( F_2 \), if any person having \( F_1 \) is, in virtue of having \( F_1 \), essentially subordinate to a person having \( F_2 \), then \( F_1 \) is a less valuable function than \( F_2 \).

The basic idea here is that it is concomitant to the egalitarian’s rejection of the equal value/subordinate function distinction that they believe that people who are essentially subordinate necessarily occupy roles that have less value and dignity than the roles occupied by those to whom they are subordinate. When it comes to woman’s subordination to men, this means that the egalitarian must be committed to the view that the subordinate status of woman means that the roles they play in family and church are inferior in value to the roles played by men. In other words, they must hold that what a woman does in fulfilling her subordinate role is less valuable than what the man does in fulfilling his leadership role. It seems that Groothuis does in fact hold this view as indicated by statements such as, “Patriarchalists consign women to a permanently inferior status in a hierarchy of spiritual authority, calling, responsibility, and privilege”—likewise when she refers to woman’s subordination as a “deficiency” and being “disadvantaged,” and belonging to a kind of “caste system.”

The problem is that there is no clear reason to believe any of this. That is, there is no reason to think that a woman’s function as man’s subordinate is less valuable or important than man’s function as leader. More generally, there is no reason to think that LVFP is true, and at least some reason to think it is false. To make the point more forcefully, consider a couple of analogies.

First, consider an army engaged in war. To win the war, the army has certain goals and objectives that it must achieve. And to achieve these goals, the army needs to be structured in the most efficient way possible in order to get the right kind and amount of combat power to the right place at the right time. This inevitably means that different soldiers will perform different functions. And these different functions will undoubtedly mean that some soldiers will hold higher rank than others. There will be officers, non-commissioned officers, and privates. And those with the lower rank will be subordinate to those with higher rank. Nonetheless, each and every soldier, regardless of rank, has a job to perform that is crucial to the accomplishment of the mission. Let us even say that no component of the army and no individual soldier, regardless of rank, can hope to achieve the army’s objectives without all the others performing their functions as well. The soldiers in the army are interdependent. In such a scenario, what grounds would there be for saying that the function of the privates is less valuable than the function of the officers? Indeed, the officers could accomplish little or nothing without the contribution of the function performed by the privates. The function of the latter is certainly not inferior to the function of the former, even though the latter is subordinate to the former.

And lest Groothuis complain that the previous analogy involves merely functional subordination (which seems irrelevant in this instance), consider the following analogy. My favorite science fiction novel is a book entitled, *The Mote in God’s Eye* by Jerry Pournelle and Larry Niven. The novel’s
storyline involves the human discovery of a very interesting alien race. The alien race—the “Moties” they’re called—is broken down into several classes or castes, each with a vital function necessary to the well-being of the entire race. There are the leaders or “kings” who rule but are reclusive and socially ineloquent. They are served by a class of communicators who speak for and negotiate on behalf of the leaders. There is the warrior class who are dedicated exclusively to the martial arts. And there are the engineers who design and build things and who are assisted by other classes who perform manual labor. Each member in the Motie society belongs to its respective caste because it is ontologically and genetically fitted for the function it serves. In this alien society, regardless of what subjective attitudes the individual aliens may have, it could not be said that any caste or function was more valuable than another. Without the unique contribution of each and every caste, the Motie society would absolutely break down. And yet there were clear lines of authority and subordination that were ontologically grounded, permanent, and (presumably) comprehensive.

So, it seems to me that we have sufficient reason to reject LVFP. There is no good reason to think that essential subordinate function entails less valuable function. This, in turn, means that there is no good reason to think that there is a logical connection between propositions (8) and (9), and hence no clear justification for (7), the claim that essential subordination necessarily entails the inferiority in value and dignity of the one who is subordinate. All this to say that premise (4) of Groothuis’ argument against the equal value/subordinate role distinction is most likely false.

Conclusion

I have argued that Groothuis fails to show that woman’s subordination to man is essential and not merely functional. It is necessary and sufficient for essential subordination that it be permanent, comprehensive, and ontologically grounded. While I agree that woman’s subordination is ontologically grounded, it does not appear that it is either permanent or comprehensive. Moreover, even if woman’s subordination were essential, I have offered reasons to think that this would not entail that women were inferior in value to men. Groothuis’s argument for the contrary thesis presupposes that subordinate functions entail less valuable functions, but this does not appear to be the case as I showed by way of analogy.

In light of this, I cannot help but think that egalitarians, including Rebecca Groothuis, have adopted the LVF principle—thinking that leadership, authority, and political power are intrinsically more important than functions associated with being a follower or being without political power—moved by the fact that, in our fallen world, those in positions of authority tend to think that they are better and more important than those they lead and even, in some cases, oppress and exploit those they lead. Being in a position of authority does increase one’s potential to serve one’s own self-interest and that has to be why all of us, men and women alike, are prone to crave power and authority. But none of these sad facts implies that being in a position of authority really is, metaphysically speaking, more objectively valuable than being in a position of subordination. Perhaps we can say, then, that egalitarians, like feminists, have come to think that being subordinate is equivalent to being inferior because they have fallen victim to the same malady as James and John who asked Jesus to let them sit on his right and left hands in the Kingdom (Mark 10:35–40). If so, then they need to learn anew, along with the rest of us, the message of Jesus: “Whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all” (v. 44).30

ENDNOTES

4Ibid., 304.
5Ibid.
6There are a few things that Groothuis says in the course of her
article that are somewhat peripheral to her argument, but which deserve some mention and response. First, at one point, Groothuis takes complementarians to task for their alleged prohibition of women from performing what she calls “distinctively human activities.” Among those capacities that are unique to human beings and which demarcate us from animals is the capacity for “higher intellectual functions such as rationality, ethical reasoning and the ability to analyze abstract concepts” (ibid., 307–8). Groothuis rightly points out that both men and women share these higher intellectual functions. “Yet,” she says, “the doctrine of male rule presupposes that woman is uniquely designed by God not to perform certain distinctively human activities.” She continues,

By contrast, there are no uniquely human behaviors from which male humans must abstain in order to be true to their masculine being. No, masculinity is defined precisely in terms of certain distinctively human activities that only men are deemed fit to do—namely, the spiritual discernment and high-level cognitive/rational behaviors involved in making decisions and directing and taking final responsibility for one or more other human beings (308).

These claims can only be seen by complementarians as a straw man. There is nothing in the complementarian position (and I know of no contemporary complementarians) that requires women to abstain from these higher-level cognitive functions. For example, complementarians in fact expect women to make decisions. Even in homes where the husband is the leader as complementarians say he should be, women can and do make many small and large decisions—e.g., what to cook for dinner, what math or science problems to pose for homeschooled children, whether the neighbor boy who mowed the grass did a good-enough job to deserve his wage, how best to approach her husband about a complaint she has, and so on. Moreover, in single-parent homes women may certainly direct and take final responsibility for one or more other human beings, namely, the children.

The problem here is that Groothuis fails to distinguish between the exercise of a “distinctively human activity” and the venue or context of its exercise. Though complementarianism does require women to abstain from or limit the use of certain abilities in some contexts, it does not require that they abstain from their use completely and always.

Second, she insists that nowhere does Scripture use the term role or any synonym for it with reference to the responsibilities of believers toward God or one another.” Rather, “God’s concern for each of us is to be a righteous person and to use whatever gifts of the Spirit we have been given for the good of the church and the glory of God” (319). Here she defines the word “role” as “a part that is played or a particular function or office that is assumed for a specific purpose or period of time” (318). She also disavows any connection between a person’s assuming a role and who or what a person is by nature.

I think that Groothuis is mistaken on this point and obviously so. In Gen 2:18, for example, God created Eve to be a “helpmeet” or “partner” to Adam. Whether or not the concept of a “helpmeet” involves female subordination, it is very difficult to avoid the impression that being a helpmeet/partner is a role even by Groothuis’s own definition—though admittedly this role would be tied to human nature as such. And what, pray tell, is it to be a pastor or a deacon in a church but to assume a function or office for a specific purpose or period of time? And what is it to be a church member under the authority and leadership of a pastor (whether that pastor is male or female) but to assume a role, namely, that of a faithful and submissive church member? And what about the apostles’ instructions to masters and servants in the New Testament (cf. Eph 6:5–9; Col 3:22–23; 1 Pet 2:18–20)? It seems that being a master or a slave involves playing a role. As does being a wife or a husband or a parent or a king or a citizen. The Scripture seems filled with examples and imperatives regarding role-playing. And it is often the faithful playing of these roles that actually constitutes being a righteous person who uses his gifts for the good of the church and the glory of God.

This argument is found in Ibid., 317. I have renumbered her propositions in order to avoid confusion with the earlier complementarian argument.

*Ortlund, “Male-Female Equality and Male Headship,” 102 (emphasis added).

*Groothuis, “Equal in Being, Unequal in Role,” 317 (emphasis added).

*Ibid., 320 (emphasis in original).

*Ibid., 316, 317.


*Groothuis, “Equal in Being, Unequal in Role,” 327.

*See the language referenced in relation to note 15 above from Good News for Women. However, in private correspondence with Groothuis, she has assured me that it was not her intent, despite this language, to limit women’s subordination to marriage. This being so, much of the present paragraph is moot vis-à-vis Groothuis. Nevertheless, to cover all the possible ways in which she (or other egalitarians) could understand the scope of the comprehensiveness of women’s subordination, I think these points need to be made.

*Ibid., 328 (emphasis in original).


*This point is well-established in complementarian literature and is uncontroversial. E. g., John Piper and Wayne Grudem, “Overview of Central Concerns: Questions and Answers,” in Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism, 61: “Submission refers to a wife’s divine calling to honor and affirm her husband’s leadership and help carry it through according to her gifts. It is not an absolute surrender of her will. . . . Christ is her absolute authority, not the husband. She submits ‘out of reverence for Christ’ (Ephesians 5:21).”

*All of this shows that woman’s subordination is analogous to the relationship between the Levites and the rest of the Israelites—an analogy that Groothuis attempts to debunk by appealing to the fact that the Levites were not consistently advantaged with respect to other Israelites in that other Israelites could own land and the Levites couldn’t (see “Equal in Being, Unequal in Role,” 327). Given these counterexamples, women are not consistently disadvantaged either.

*Groothuis, “Equal in Being, Unequal in Role,” 305.

*Ibid., 317.

*Ibid., 310 (italics hers).

*Groothuis, Good News for Women, 55 (italics hers).

*This is not the first time that egalitarians have been challenged on
their misleading uses of terms like “unequal” and “inferior” in these contexts. See, e.g., Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth: An Analysis of More Than 100 Disputed Questions* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2004), 106.


28Ibid., 320, 327.


30I wish to thank Rebecca Merrill Groothuis and the editor of this journal for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.