Vulnerability and Its Power:

Recognition, Response, and the Problem of Valorization

by

Anna F. Bialek

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Department of Religious Studies at Brown University

Providence, RI
May 2016

This dissertation by Anna F. Bialek is accepted in its present form by the Department of Religious Studies as satisfying the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Date_____ _____

Mark Cladis, Advisor

Recommended to the Graduate Council

Date_____ _____

Thomas A. Lewis, Reader

Date_____ _____

Stephen Bush, Reader

Date_____ _____

Bonnie Honig, Reader

Date_____ _____

Kevin Hector, Reader

Approved by the Graduate Council

Date_____ _____

Peter Weber, Dean of the Graduate School

Curriculum Vitae

Anna F. Bialek was born in Berkeley, CA on October 6, 1987. She attended the Princeton, NJ public schools for her primary and secondary education, after which she matriculated at Princeton University in the fall of 2005. She graduated from Princeton in 2009 with an A. B. (*summa cum laude*) in Religion with Highest Departmental Honors, and a certificate in Creative Writing. She then began her graduate education at Brown University in the fall of 2009, where she has pursued studies in the Religion and Critical Thought subfield of the Department of Religious Studies.

At Brown, Bialek has taught in undergraduate courses in religious ethics and modern Western religious thought, and as an advisor to an independent study on trauma theory. She has also served as an advisor to undergraduate students pursuing major fellowships during and after their time at Brown. Bialek has been the recipient of the Chancellor Thomas A. Tisch Fellowship for Graduate Studies, the Pembroke Fellowship, Brown University's Presidential Award for Excellence in Teaching, an Honorary Graduate Fellowship at the Cogut Center for the Humanities, and an American Fellowship from the American Association of University Women. Since 2013, she has also served on the Advisory Council of the Department of Religion at Princeton.

In addition to her academic pursuits, Bialek has worked as an advocate for victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, and child abuse since 2011. Prior to becoming a victims' advocate, she worked as a sexual health educator and counselor from 2003-2009.

Acknowledgements

To say that someone has taught you something about vulnerability isn't always a compliment, but I have the great fortune to be able to mean it as such. This project is a product of an extraordinary community of teachers, mentors, friends, and family who have been willing to render themselves vulnerable with me toward an indeterminate future, and without whom its determination here would be much less in many ways. I owe its merits to them, with my deep thanks.

I am very grateful to the members of my committee for their guidance of this project. Mark Cladis has been an advisor, teacher, mentor, and friend of the highest order. His direction of the project honored even its most nascent formulations with generous and critical engagement, as his capacious conception of its possibilities allowed me to pursue unusual lines of inquiry that have been deeply productive for my understanding at many turns. Tal Lewis has been a patient and insightful guide to the practices of thinking and writing, and a great source of intellectual inspiration and direction as I developed scattered interests in religious ethics, feminist thought, and Christian theology into a research program. Steve Bush is the most incisive reader and thinker I have ever met, and this project has benefitted since its earliest versions from his critical eye and ear, as well as his constructive voice. Bonnie Honig's contributions to my thinking appear on nearly every page of this text, and her advising and example as I find my footing in feminist thought has been an indispensible privilege. Kevin Hector

was my first teacher in religion, and I have been learning from him ever since. I am very thankful for his willingness to serve on my committee, and for his engagement of the project from its early stages.

My deep thanks go to the other outstanding teachers and colleagues who have guided my studies and the development of this project. At Brown, Susan Harvey, Nancy Khalek, Nicola Denzey-Lewis, Paul Nahme, Andre Willis, Sharon Krause, Ariella Azoulay, Tim Bewes, Dave Estlund, and Michael Steinberg have provided me with great inspiration, insight, and intellectual community. Beyond Brown, conversations with Leora Batnitzky, John Bowlin, Beth Eddy, Eric Gregory, Jennifer Herdt, Paul Jones, Chuck Mathewes, Levi McLaughlin, Jim Wetzel, and Joe Winters have all marked turning points in my thinking about the topic, and I am grateful for their engagement with the work. I continue to owe a debt of the deepest gratitude to my undergraduate advisor, Jeff Stout. None of my work would be possible without his teaching, and I seem only to accrue further debts as the years go on.

This research was generously supported by fellowships from the American Association of University Women and the Cogut Center for the Humanities. Portions of this project were presented at sessions of Princeton University's Gender, Sexuality, and Religion Working Group; the Pembroke Seminar; the Brown-Yale-Princeton-Princeton Theological Seminary Ethics Colloquium; and the Cogut Center Fellows' Seminar at Brown. It benefitted greatly from their participants' engagement and comments, and I am grateful to the organizers of each for the opportunity. My many thanks also to the administrators of the AAUW, the Pembroke Center, the Cogut Center, and the Religious Studies Department at Brown, who make these occasions—and everything else—

possible. Nicole Vadnais and Tina Creamer in Religious Studies require additional thanks for their unflagging support and good humor.

I have had the great pleasure to write this dissertation in the company of many wonderful fellow students. My deep thanks go to the members of the Religion and Critical Thought program at Brown, past and present—Niki Clements, Jon Sozek, David Lê, Megan McBride, Caroline Kory, and Alexis Glenn—as well as dear colleagues beyond it—Alda Balthrop-Lewis, Michal Ben Noah, Shira Billet, Nic Bommarito, Karida Brown, Emily Dumler, Molly Farneth, Clifton Granby, Rachel Gross, Jonathan Gribetz, Paul Gutierrez, Sarit Kattan-Gribetz, Alex King, Elizabeth Jemison, Michael Lamb, Isabelle Laurenzi, Ferris Lupino, Daniel May, Gustavo Maya, David Newheiser, Daniel Picus, Noga Rotem, Eli Sacks, Michael Sawyer, Kerry Sonia, Yana Stainova, Andrew Starner, and Kevin Wolfe. Their fellowship, criticism, and friendship is a great gift. My special thanks to Molly Farneth for her comments on drafts and many years of conversation on the topic.

My deep thanks go also to Chloe Angyal, Molly Borowitz, Molly Ephraim, Rebecca Foresman, Richa Gawande, Elizabeth Kassler-Taub, Jordan Kisner, Callie Lefevre, Zack Mezera, Jocelyn Parr, Josh Schenkkan, and Jonathan Weed for their extraordinary friendship and exceptional support through this project and all else. I love and admire each of you immensely, and am perpetually astounded by the continuation of our relationships into ever more promising determinations. Thank you especially for your late-stage editing, proofreading, and good cheer.

My deepest thanks go to my family, whose love, care, and friendship give me more reason to hope for the promise of vulnerability than anything else. These gifts have been

multiplied by their extraordinary intellectual companionship, which marks the pages of this project and all others I write. While I was reading deeper into gender theory and Christian theology, my brother Max became one of the best analytic philosophers I know, as great a source of technical advice in this vein as dry humor (and sometimes technical advice about the nature of humor). My thanks to him also for finding me a wonderful sister, Brittany. My mother, Charlotte, taught me all of the best lessons I have learned about care, and I am grateful for her decades of practical instruction and years of rich discussion on the theme. I hope that this project allows me to share some of what she has taught. It was also made possible by her careful editing and comments on earlier drafts, for which I owe her special thanks. My father, William, has long exemplified the life of deep thinking and critical inquiry I have hoped to lead. As I have pursued it, he has become my closest companion in its joys and guide to its challenges. I am more grateful for this, and much else, than I can say.

Shortly after I began working on vulnerability, mourning, and care, I lost my two biological grandfathers, Jacques Bialek and Tjeerd van Andel, within the space of one month. In the intervening years, I have lost my stepgrandfather, Keith Brueckner, and my stepgrandmother, Marjorie van Andel, as well. With Rose Bialek and my two living grandparents, Elsa Dekking and Kate Pretty, their lives, love, and wisdom have inspired me deeply, and my considerations of vulnerability particularly. This dissertation is dedicated to them.

Contents

Introduction

There is a question often posed in playwriting classes to help authors develop a better entry into their work, a way for the audience to feel invested in the story and the characters who enact it: *Why this day?* Why are we watching these people on this day, and not another? What is the occasion for our entry into their lives? Establish an answer to this question in the first scenes, the conventional wisdom suggests, and the rest can follow smoothly. Obscure the answer, or be unsure of it yourself, and no amount of character development, dramatic arc, or spectacle in later acts will captivate the audience as well as it might have otherwise. Some additional seats will be empty after intermission.

And so curtains rise on something rotten in the state of Denmark, recent deaths and impending arrivals, the appearance of unknown visitors and prophecies of danger, tragedy, or misfortune to come. The king has died, the war has ended, the dead must be buried—hence this day. A celebration approaches, a party is soon to start, a beloved family member is about to return home—hence these days, too. From the promise of a stranger glimpsed and now desired to the prospect of a payment coming due, an occasion is established to show that this is a day to watch, *the* day to watch, an occasion worthy of elevation to the stage.

Samuel Beckett might display the principle best in his long mockery of it in *Waiting for Godot*, a play where the anticipation of occasion becomes the occasion itself. We are assembled to watch *this* day, we learn early in the production, because Godot is to arrive,

at this spot, near this tree, on this evening. His arrival is both the occasion and the condition for the story—nothing can happen until he appears, the characters insist, and thus nothing does, in a variety of ways, for Godot fails to appear. His presence is marked only by its expectation at the outset and when a young boy brings a message saying that Godot will come tomorrow, a moment that some directors stage as a climax of the play.[1] The audience might nearly wonder if Beckett got the wrong day, having so well established why *some* day and having it turn out not to be this one.

Vulnerability presents a similar problem of catching things on the right day: it offers an opportunity to intervene *before* something might happen, before that to which we are vulnerable wounds us in whatever ways it may. In this way, it seems to present a paradigmatic form of ethical imperative: if we know that we are susceptible to harm of some kind, we should try to prevent, reduce, or mitigate the realization of that susceptibility. Insofar as we can recognize our susceptibilities, we can begin to anticipate their realization, to wait for it as one might wait for an impending arrival. But by discovering the scene before the arrival of whatever is anticipated, we might make something of the wait, even something that mitigates the potential horror and devastation in what we are waiting for. It is in this period of waiting that we might find an opportunity to remake our lives as we want them to be, and thus the anticipation of an occasion can become an occasion in itself. It is an occasion to make more of the intervening acts, to find possibility, community, and opportunity before our susceptibilities are realized, and the space of vulnerability is closed. My aim in this work

[1] Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1954).

is to present vulnerability in these terms, against its recent recovery as a state akin to a wound itself, already closed and determined and in need of care and protection.

Many recent philosophical and theological investigations of vulnerability have begun in scenes and occasions that seem to recall the playwright's question as much as any philosopher's. Instead of beginning with conceptual problems derived from neighboring literatures or lacunae in the same, they begin with scenes of wounding, disaster, and devastation that beg questions of what will happen next in the drama itself, on the day in question, even more than in the procession of the argument. Kristine Culp opens *Vulnerability and Glory* with reports of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti; Adriana Cavarero begins and ends most chapters of *Horrorism* with explicitly titled "scenes" of suicide bombings and other forms of contemporary violence; Judith Butler moors *Precarious Life* in the attacks on 9/11 and the "unbearable vulnerability that was exposed" in the event.[2] William Connolly begins *The Fragility of Things* with the Lisbon earthquake, a scene that is famously inspiring of philosophical inquiry and still as compelling and urgent in Connolly's telling as if centuries hadn't passed since the disaster.[3] Erinn Gilson begins *The Ethics of Vulnerability* with vignettes of illness, police action after 9/11, and the resettlement of Cambodian refugees, naming these "scenes of vulnerability," though they are also, notably, scenes of wounds and destruction of various kinds.[4] In each, the reader is set immediately in a scene of devastation, disaster, and

[2] Kristine Culp, *Vulnerability and Glory* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010); Adriana Cavarero, *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence*, translated by William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Judith Butler, *Precarious Life* (London: Verso, 2004).
[3] William Connolly, *The Fragility of Things: Self-Organizing Processes, Neoliberal Fantasies, and Democratic Activism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013).
[4] Erinn Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 2.

wounding and asked to respond, or to think with the author about how to respond. We are asked, in Butler's words, to "find a basis for community in these conditions" instead of meeting them with an anger that fuels revenge or isolation.[5] We are asked to take them as occasions to consider what might be found in the rubble, what might be learned from wounds, and what might come of these horrors besides further violence, war, and destruction.

In the generation of writing on vulnerability just prior to this one, authors seemed less inclined toward setting scenes in this way, establishing the occasion for their work instead from within the history of philosophy. Robert Goodin's *Protecting the Vulnerable* begins with a discussion of the concept of obligation in modern thought focused on Kant and Hume.[6] Margaret Urban Walker's *Moral Understandings* begins with the theatrical heading "Mis-en-scène" but sets its scene in the corridors of philosophy and the definitions of morality found therein, instead of in city streets, hospitals, and disaster sites.[7] Martha Nussbaum's *Fragility of Goodness* gives no worldly occasion for the text beyond the classical literature with which it is engaged and the history of scholarship on it, though she is hardly an author known to shy away from opening her work with vivid scenes.[8] Alasdair MacIntyre's *Dependent Rational Animals* begins in the history of philosophy as well, arguing for a recovery of vulnerability in a Western philosophical tradition that has, in his view, largely ignored it.[9] All of these beginnings well establish why the reader should continue beyond the first pages, and for

[5] Butler 2004, 19.
[6] Robert Goodin, *Protecting the Vulnerable* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1985).
[7] Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral Understandings: A Feminist Study in Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1998).
[8] Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986) and *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
[9] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* (Peru, IL: Open Court Publishing Company, a division of Carus Publishing Company, 1999).

works of philosophy, they are as successful in captivating the reader as any portentous ghosts or witches might be on the stage. But they bear a stark contrast to more recent work on vulnerability that almost uniformly opens with scenes of wounds, disaster, and devastation; the sense of urgency that they provoke; and mourning, grief, and the danger of its tendency toward despair.

The word *vulnerability* comes from the Latin *vulnus*, a wound, signifying that to which the vulnerable are susceptible. These recent texts begin in wounds of many kinds, from the mortal to the metaphorical, and take them as starting points for a discussion of our susceptibility to wounding and the ethical imperatives and opportunities it might present. In this way, they seem to start from the playwright's question as much as a philosopher's, establishing a dramatic motivation before an explicit theoretical one. Why this day? Because today we have lost a great deal; because today we must bury bodies and rebuild cities; because today we confront wounds that might not have seemed possible yesterday, that we might have escaped or avoided if we had known of their possibility, and that now beg something from us in the hours and days to come, even if we do not yet know quite what. The philosophical investigations that follow are thus beholden to many things: the day itself and the wounds present; the possibilities for response, both caring and retributive; and the lessons that might be learned for the future about our vulnerability to further wounding, and the possibility of its mitigation. These authors thus seek to learn about vulnerability from its realization in wounds, while simultaneously responding to the wounds themselves. They borrow urgency from the latter task to fuel the former, motivating the investigation of vulnerability and the obligations that might attend it by the imperatives of the wounds themselves.

Is this a promising move, or mainly a perilous one? We needn't have seen many plays to know that scenes of wounding, death, and disaster can lead to many things, some productive, and some destructive—revenge and retribution as well as healing, mourning in many forms, disputes over laws and norms whose contradictions and insufficiencies are laid bare in death where they might be more hidden in life, and so on. For Cavarero and Butler, the destructive potentials of these scenes are what demand a reconsideration of vulnerability. Where vulnerability is considered an embarrassing weakness, escapable with sufficient strength and destruction of what threatens, its revelation in death and wounds "can fuel the instruments of war," in Butler's words, begging the elimination or domination of that to which one now knows oneself to be vulnerable.[10] This violent alliance of retribution and preparation for what may be to come learns the wrong lessons from wounds and death, they contend, by focusing on the perpetrators of violence instead of the victims and turning opportunities to care and mourn together into confrontations with whatever or whomever we hold responsible for these wounds. When the effort to prevent future wounds by rendering ourselves invulnerable thus combines with vengeful impulses to seek justice, and if not justice, retribution of other kinds, further violence is perpetrated in the name of protection, preparation, and carefulness. The language of "preemptive strikes" and the actions of the United States in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere in the "war on terror" display this disturbing combination well, these authors contend, and require a reconsideration of vulnerability and its demands. Reconsidered against its construal as an escapable, embarrassing weakness that should and can be overcome, vulnerability might provide both an antidote to retributive violence and

[10] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 29.

stronger forms of community and relation, everyday as well as on days of more spectacular wounding and mourning. Where we accept that we all live with vulnerability, exposed to each other and thus substantially susceptible to the recognition, response, and caring or harming actions of others, we might find different ways to respond to the realization of vulnerability in wounds. Wounds can appear as opportunities to care, to heal, and to learn how to live better in the future as vulnerable people, not by escaping vulnerability but by mitigating its harmful effects, perhaps, and maximizing its productive potential: forging relationships and community through our vulnerability to each other, instead of seeking the destruction of others who might harm us, and if not their destruction, isolation from them.

Both Butler and Cavarero's arguments thus conceive of vulnerability as a productive concept for the critique of certain power dynamics often revealed in the kinds of scenes to which they turn: dynamics of mastery over others as the only means of personal protection, and conceptions of power as potentially held fully by individuals or singular entities like nation-states, if only others could be sufficiently dominated, subjugated, or controlled. Power dynamics of these kinds are largely associated in contemporary philosophy and religious thought with modern Western idealizations of an independent, autonomous, sovereign subject, both in a Kantian sense of possessing rational self-sufficiency, and in a Hobbesian sense of seeking individual sovereignty in the face of constant threat by perpetually attempting to eliminate what threatens. These ideals of the sovereign subject deny the inescapability and pervasiveness of vulnerability, promoting at least a constant pursuit of invulnerability (in Hobbes's case) if not promising or assuming the possibility of its achievement (in Kant's).

Many strands of Western philosophy and religious thought have sought to destabilize this sovereign subject in various ways, from German Romantic and Idealist accounts of sociality and dependence for our formation on families, communities, and nations, to existentialist accounts of the priority of our relation to the Other and the precedence of political life, lived with others, to any life as an individual (in Levinas and Arendt, respectively), to recent arguments in feminist thought—influenced strongly by both of these prior movements—for *relationality* defined as a conception of the self constituted in and by relationships. Authors like Carol Gilligan, Nel Noddings, and Eva Feder Kittay writing in the feminist ethics of care have developed this last view substantially, and as a substantial alternative to more prominent ethics of individual justice and rights. Butler and Cavarero's work on contemporary violence has explored similar themes, finding relationship and a relational constitution of the self in the process of mourning, care, and other non-violent responses to wounds and vulnerability. Simultaneously, critiques of sovereign subjectivity and its effects have flourished in Christian thought, from turns to agape and its ethics of love and relationships to a more recent resurgence of attention to Christ's vulnerability as a model of non-sovereign power, love, and life constituted in and by relations with others.

This project considers four authors writing in these veins, from both secular philosophical and theological frameworks: Carol Gilligan writing in the feminist ethics of care; Butler and Cavarero on vulnerability, precariousness, and contemporary violence; and Sarah Coakley's theology of Christ's self-emptying in the incarnation and resulting vulnerability.[11] In each, vulnerability is posed as an alternative to ideals of individual,

---

[11] Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy, and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell

dominative forms of power, and recast as a potential foundation of communities that thrive on our exposure to one another instead of seeking to overcome it. Each author thus construes vulnerability as a concept and experience with liberatory and critical potential, when properly understood apart from, and against, models of individual, sovereign power. One aim of this project is to assess these claims, the thoroughness of each author's critique of sovereign ideals, and the potential for an ethics and politics built from their conceptions of vulnerability.

In Gilligan's and Cavarero's discussions, vulnerability is recast against sovereign ideals as not only inescapable, but also ethically demanding, situating anyone who confronts it in a scene where any action or inaction constitutes a form of response. They argue from this basis that vulnerability demands care because anything else would be a kind of wound, thus defying the sovereign subject's imperative to minimize interaction so as to avoid its violent potentials. Their arguments each present rich engagements with the sovereign subjective view, and thus offer us an opportunity to do the same in these pages. But their proposals of vulnerability's "demand" of a caring response, I suggest, indicates their entrapment in the framing of individualistic ethical thought. They retain the individualist's paradigm of interaction with others as always reducible to an *encounter*, and their definition of an imperative to respond refers to the right action within this encounter. However, they thus fail to consider the dynamics of the relationship as it extends over time, a failure that both introduces a substantial danger into their proposals of domination in care and misses a significant opportunity to critique and reframe an individualistic perspective more thoroughly.

Publishing, 2002).

To consider this opportunity further, I turn to Judith Butler's account of vulnerability in mourning and Sarah Coakley's argument for the cultivation of vulnerability following Christ's example. These discussions both undermine the structure of the sovereign subject's encounter by turning to examples of relation in which such an encounter is impossible. In mourning, Butler suggests, one finds that one *was* vulnerable to the other by finding that they are no longer there to respond, whether in care or violence. The frame has been shaken, or broken through: the mourner tries to encounter the other, to continue their conversation, and finds that there is no response. This lack of response is wounding, as Gilligan and Cavarero would suggest, but is not exactly a wound perpetrated by the other, or at least it would be strange to say so. In this way, it seems to define a space in which one is vulnerable without the possibility of a reply. One waits for the reply of the other, but must act, and act with others, before it comes, as it may never come.

Similarly—though both authors might be unhappy with the association—Sarah Coakley's discussion of Christ's vulnerability and its example for Christians defines vulnerability as a "space" in which others may be present, but in which both the vulnerable and those with whom he or she is in relation must remain only present, instead of trying determine and close the space in some way. Such determinations need not be violent in their intention, but may seek to protect the vulnerable from the risk of being so "open." Care appears by these lights as this kind of determination, as does the sovereign subject's efforts to fortify himself against others' abilities to impose. Both efforts to foreclose (or never develop) the "space" of vulnerability render it difficult to form a

relation with God, Coakley argues, by closing the space in which "God can be God."[12] I suggest that a similar claim might be made from this model about the cultivation of vulnerability in relationships with other human beings. Where we seek to close the space between us in either violence or care, we foreclose the possibility of the relationship in its continuation over time, as an ongoing negotiation of being present together. Drawing on Butler's subversion of the possibility of response in mourning, I thus seek to develop a conception of vulnerability as an indeterminate condition instead of an ethically demanding one, at least where its ethical demand is defined as a response that closes or ends its possible continuation.

However, by naming its potential determinations in the things to which we are susceptible, vulnerability provides a significant framework for an ethical demand to act in response to those potentials. Care may be the right response in many cases, but what I seek to show in my criticisms of Gilligan and Cavarero is that the demand of vulnerability cannot be so universally defined. Moreover, it cannot be defined without the possibility of its renegotiation, contestation, and critique, all of which are part of the practice of waiting in the "space" of vulnerability for what may be to come. These practices of waiting are suggested in turn by the practices of cultivating vulnerability in contemplative prayer in Coakley's account, as I will suggest.

The urgency of wounds, then, makes them a distracting model of the ethical import of the susceptibility to wounding. Wounds contract even long-continuing relationships into an encounter that demands immediate attention and response. Scenes of dramatic wounding in particular suggest that our responsibility is only to act, and not to negotiate

[12] Coakley, *Powers and Submission*s, 34.

at all. Where discussions of vulnerability hew too closely to the *vulnus*, then, they risk the over-determination of a condition that might be more promisingly left open, indeterminate, and able to continue over time. Gilligan and Cavarero both make this tempting mistake, though Cavarero particularly might be forgiven for doing so in the face of the devastating scenes to which she attends. She might also be well guided, then, by the playwright, who understands that after establishing an occasion to watch, one must continue into the next scenes.

Chapter One

Resisting Individualism "In a Different Voice": Relationality in Carol Gilligan's Ethics of Care

Feminists have no monopoly on arguments against the idealized sovereign subject of modern Western thought, in any of its guises. The idea that adult human beings are normally independent, autonomous, and self-sufficient in body and mind has faced objections from many corners, from German Romantics skeptical of Kant's conception of rational autonomy to contemporary democratic theorists arguing against liberal individualism and the policies of self-sufficiency that seem to flow from it. The *ideal* of fully independent, autonomous, and self-sufficient human beings has faced objections from many corners as well, from British Romantics like Wordsworth and Coleridge critical of the striving liberal individualism of their time to contemporary criticisms of perpetual violence in pursuit of this image of human fulfillment, as I will discuss further in the next chapter. These are not feminist arguments, necessarily, nor do they all support feminist aims. Some even contribute to the denigration of women and girls by reinforcing prejudices of feminine weakness, explicitly maintaining an understanding of women as rationally, physically, and morally inferior to men regardless of the conception of the subject assumed for the comparison. Most argue for the normalization of forms of human dependence, relation, and interconnection in some way, but many still condemn or ignore apparent examples of these relations in traditionally female roles as somehow lesser than what they seek to describe. Some cast dependence on mothers, for example,

as a merely natural and almost primitive version of relationship or sociality, relegating maternity to the status of a prototype at best, and one rarely understood as such by the women who fulfill it, in further evidence of their inferiority. Some seem hardly to have noticed the maternal relationship at all, or other examples of women supporting, caring for, and forming relationships with others in ways that might demonstrate substantial forms of connection and social constitution against sovereign subjectivity and the philosophical standards it bears. The subject in many of these arguments continues to be male, and the arguments continue to ignore women, devalue their lives and capacities, and denigrate their traditional roles and labor—let alone any potential beyond them—just as well as the views that they oppose.

Conversely, feminists have hardly agreed that an independent, autonomous, self-sovereign individual isn't precisely the figure to exalt against traditional conceptions of women as weak, inferior, dependent, and incapable. Much of feminist thought and activism has been occupied with claiming characteristics of the sovereign subject for women, both in descriptive claims of women's equal possession of these attributes, or equal potential to cultivate them, and in normative claims of women's desert of the rights and justice accorded to individuals recognized as such. From Mary Wollstonecraft to Simone de Beauvoir to Shulamith Firestone and Betty Friedan, women's lack of recognition as or resemblance to the independent, autonomous subject is posed as the critical problem for women, and thus the necessary focus of feminist efforts. Women are capable of self-sufficiency, rational and physical autonomy, and independence of thought and body, these authors argue (if in substantially different ways), and any lack of these attributes is a barrier to women's equal standing with men. By these accounts, denying

women their attainment, often by convincing them that they are unable to attain them altogether or refusing to recognize them where present, is a key form of women's oppression and subjugation. For Beauvoir, for example, "what peculiarly signalizes the situation of woman is that she—*a free and autonomous being like all human creatures*—nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other," in which she is not a "free and autonomous being" but something else, and something lesser than this individual. To "attain fulfillment," Beauvoir explains, women must recover their independence, freedom, and autonomy to emerge from their "state of dependency."[13] Others argue that women's acquiescence to dependency is also to blame,

[13] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, translated by H. M. Parshley (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1952), 35, emphasis mine; quoted from Ellen K. Feder and Eva Feder Kittay, "Introduction" in *The Subject of Care: Feminist Perspectives on Dependency* (Lanham, MD and Oxford, UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002), 1. I use this quotation, in this translation, because of its relation to the dependency arguments of the ethics of care and its citation by care theorists in these terms. A later translation expresses the existentialist bearings of the original French more fully: "But what singularly defines the situation of woman is that being, like all humans, an autonomous freedom, she discovers and chooses herself in a world where men force her to assume herself as Other: an attempt is made to freeze her as an object and doom her to immanence, since her transcendence will be forever transcended by another essential and sovereign consciousness. Woman's drama lies in this conflict between the fundamental claim of every subject, which always posits itself as essential, and the demands of a situation that constitutes her as inessential. How, in the feminine condition, can a human being accomplish herself? What paths are open to her? Which ones lead to dead ends? How can she find independence within dependence? What circumstances limit women's freedom and how can she overcome them?" Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2011), 17. While this language accords less exactly with care theory's vocabulary of dependency, it still expresses a related point, not problematically dissimilar to the concerns of the ethics of care. I quote it here in full not against the care theorists' invocation of Beauvoir but as a revision to my own. Her individualism is significantly different from the Kantian or Hobbesian sovereign subjectivity to which I am largely referring in these paragraphs, and they should not be confused. Beauvoir's is an existentialist individualism (unsurprisingly), conducted in the language of transcendence and immanence instead of sovereignty and justice. Freedom and independence are defined by the perpetual transcendence of past freedoms and independence; dependence is thus antithetical to existence as a subject altogether, because it "freeze[s] her as an object and doom[s] her to immanence" (ibid.). This argument is simultaneously a rejection of *sovereign* subjectivity in various forms (including Kantian and Hobbesian forms) and an embrace of individualism that many who reject sovereign subjectivity would reject as well. In its emphasis on individual freedom and independence in particular, care theorists such as Ellen Feder and Eva Feder Kittay find it similarly objectionable to Kant and Hobbes; all (Kant, Hobbes, and Beauvoir) assume that human beings are normally "free and autonomous," instead of dependent on others and in need of care. All cast dependence and need, then, as defects that justify certain kinds of subjugation, instead of normal attributes of human existence that should demand care without subjugation. A more thorough analysis of Beauvoir's existential individualism and its relation to arguments against individualism broadly and sovereign subjectivity in particular is beyond the scope of this chapter, regrettably.

keeping them from fully realizing their potential and taking their places alongside men. For Wollstonecraft, for instance, women participate in their own subjugation by pursuing frivolities and vices that take them far from any development into independence and autonomy, rendering them useless as individuals, unable to think for themselves, and thus undeserving, by these standards, of equal status with men.[14] Women have natural disadvantages, Wollstonecraft suggests, with inferior minds and weaker bodies that are harder to cultivate into autonomous individuals worthy of equal standing. But instead of acquiescing to these disadvantages they must simply work harder to overcome them, she argues, cultivating themselves as individuals possessing of the attributes that would justify their equal rights and respect. Later feminist authors have emphatically abandoned Wollstonecraft's ascription of natural disadvantage, arguing for fundamental equality between men and women of the potential to attain rational and physical independence. But these later arguments still reinforce a feminist assumption of the sovereign subjective ideal, or at least the normalization of the independent, self-sufficient, rationally and physically autonomous individual as the subject of ethical and political thought—and, indeed, the subject we find in ethical and political life, living in our neighborhoods, teaching in our schools, sharing our streets, and composing the citizenry of our states. Sovereign subjectivity remains the norm, and women's low standing is described as a result of not having attained it, whether by women's own failures or the impositions of others or some combination of the two.

[14] Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009). See especially chapters two and three. For Wollstonecraft, the problem of women's cultivation is even more pressing because women are at natural disadvantages to men in their physical capacities, in ways that make it more difficult, in some cases, to become independent thinkers. But this natural difference should not be used as an excuse for failure, she insists, nor for the diversions and failure to *try* that exacerbate it. Women may find themselves often unable to achieve the capacities of men, in her view, but they should be able to attain sufficient self-development to count as independent individuals with rights that must be respected by all others.

This chapter concerns a movement of feminist thought that seeks to resist these norms, locating the critical problem for women in the standards and assumptions of sovereign subjectivity themselves. In the ethics of care, the failure of women to resemble the sovereign subject is recast as a failure of the sovereign subject to resemble the lives of women: coherent, mature, and exemplary in their own ways, but obscured and largely incomprehensible by such standards of normative (male) subjectivity. Early entries in the ethics of care by Carol Gilligan, Nel Noddings, Sara Ruddick, and others thus sought to consider the lives of women and girls anew, apart from individualist standards by which they appear consistently inferior to men.[15] What they found, in Gilligan's language, was a "contrapuntal theme," a "different voice" concerned with the needs of others and the relationships that respond to them, relationships in which lives are constituted and fulfilled instead of only interrupted, disrupted, and threatened.[16] This "relational voice" should be understood to express a different, but not inferior, morality, a worthy alternative and complement to the ethics of individual rights and justice that have been dominant in Western thought and society for so long (2).[17] In turn, its description and valuation should allow a substantial redescription and revaluation of women's lives, made legible and potentially praiseworthy by its standards.

---

[15] Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), Nel Noddings, *Caring: A feminine approach to ethics and moral education* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1984), and Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press 1989).

[16] Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, 2. Hereafter in this chapter cited in text with page numbers only.

[17] The language of a "relational voice" is primarily Gilligan's; Noddings prefers the language of "the voice of the mother," and Ruddick uses similar constructions related to maternity, though less captivated by voice (e.g., "maternal *thinking*" instead of "the voice of the mother"). However, the language of a "relational voice" has come to be more common than these other formulations in the ethics of care. For a helpful discussion, and example, of the embrace of this language, see Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006), chapters 1-3.

In this chapter and the next, I will consider the description of this "relational voice" and the critique of sovereign subjectivity that it enacts and entails. Through an analysis of the work of Carol Gilligan, I will suggest that the relational voice of the ethics of care embraces vulnerability to others as ethically demanding, and promising, instead of strictly perilous and necessary to escape. When vulnerable to each other, we have the opportunity to respond to each other's needs, finding solutions to problems through greater involvement in each other's lives instead of isolation and separation that defuses the violent potentials of vulnerability along with more positive ones. The ethics of care then enjoins us to respond with care, making productive and peaceable use of vulnerability where norms of sovereign subjectivity might justify its exploitation, or only enjoin the subject *not* to act where he might be interested or tempted to act violently and exploitatively. The ethics of care thus situates vulnerability at the fulcrum of its critique of the sovereign subject, I will argue, by arguing for the continuation and exacerbation of vulnerability in relationships as the defining condition of the ethics it derives from the voices of women and girls. In this way, it offers one of the most prominent and substantial reclamations of vulnerability in recent ethical thought, and a promising starting point for our discussion.

I will focus in these chapters on the first articulation of this "relational voice" of the ethics of care in Carol Gilligan's foundational *In a Different Voice*, a text that set the terms of the conversation and remains one of its most incisive accounts. It is also one of the most criticized on feminist grounds, however, imbued with the politics of its time and a difficult language of gender difference that subsequent research has cast as nearly offensive and obsolete, as I will discuss. It is tempting, then, to try to define my scope

more narrowly, bracketing Gilligan's feminist project as an historical point and moving on to the ethical theory as a separate matter. But to do so would be to mistake the significant entanglement of arguments against individualism and for the revaluation of women in Gilligan's project, and well beyond it. Thus I begin with a consideration of the relation between the two by way of introduction to the ethics of care as a whole, before turning more closely to Gilligan's argument and the relational ethic it describes.

Feminism, Individualism, and the Ethics of Care

The ethics of care began with an account of the exhaustion of individualism in philosophy, science, and society. To Gilligan, Noddings, and others, this perspective increasingly appeared to create more problems than it solved and to exclude more people than it counted, with a substantial bias against women in its exclusions. Western thought and society have for too long taken the individual as their basic unit, these authors argue, constructing norms, laws, and ways of knowing based on separation, isolation, and almost constant efforts to avoid or end relationships. Relationships, in turn, have been assumed always to threaten these states, recast as positive ideals of "independence" and "freedom." Nations have been founded on these and other rights of the individual; government understood as a necessary, if unfortunate, bargain for individual security at the controlled expense of some individual freedoms. Ethics has been construed as the adjudication of encounters between individuals in terms of their rights and due; philosophy more broadly has undertaken methods of reasoning that reflect similar assumptions of separation, encounter in the form of conflict to be resolved, and resolution by universally applicable principles. Psychologists have naturalized these ways of thinking as rational and emotional maturity, generally defined as a path from a simple

egotism through the repeated failure of relationships into a self-conscious independence and conception of the self, able to secure stable occupation of the position through the reasoned adjudication of conflicts. Education has been described in terms of the cultivation of individuals into self-conscious possessors of the necessary knowledge and faculties of an independent subject, not in terms of the work of teachers nurturing and caring for their students in complex relationships of mutual recognition, dependence, and support. Liberation and power critique in feminist and other struggles has often been described in terms of individual rights and justice as well, not in terms of the relationships on which these movements depend, and the mutual recognition and dependence that they appear to seek when viewed by different lights.

Starting from the individual and seeking only a more stable, self-sufficient, and self-conscious individuality contributes to the denigration and subjugation of women, these authors argue, because it ignores and condemns the lives of women, often devoted to others in substantial labors of care, support, and the provision of needs. Simultaneously, they contend, the failure of dominant ethical and political theories to recognize women in caregiving roles reveals a deep inconsistency in the theories themselves. Societies supposedly composed of independent, self-sufficient individuals whom women fail to resemble are actually significantly dependent on women's care as mothers, wives, daughters, teachers, nurses, and in other supporting roles. While norms of sovereign subjectivity ignore or condemn women in these roles, then, they also substantially rely on them: a contradiction that has been particularly devastating to women, and more broadly damaging to the networks of relationships, care, and support on which we all depend. Recognizing and revaluing the lives of women thus reveals a

larger need to recognize and revalue dependency, vulnerability, and the relationships that respond to these conditions.

As an argument against sovereign subjectivity, then, the ethics of care presents the following proposal: Western philosophy, science, and society must stop ignoring the many examples of human vulnerability and dependence that challenge individualist norms but have conveniently resided in traditionally feminine domains, allowing the continuation of individualist fantasies so long as women are sufficiently excluded, ignored, or devalued. When women's lives and labor are brought into view, human beings no longer appear normally independent, autonomous, and self-sufficient, nor do these attributes appear obviously ideal. Dependency and vulnerability appear instead increasingly inescapable, and the relationships that support and respond to it appear increasingly valuable. A different ethic, an ethic of care that describes and recommends these relations, should then take the place of dominant theories of individual rights and justice that fail to account for these dynamics of human life—or should at least take a place alongside them, offering complementary insight and instruction where individualism doesn't serve or even well articulate our lives, relationships, communities, and societies.

As a feminist argument, this is a more complicated proposal. Its authors argue that women's subjugation is partially a result of the devaluation and exclusion of care, dependence, and relation from dominant ethical and political thought and, no less, dominant social norms and forms of public recognition. This exclusion renders women abnormal, inferior, and often invisible, they contend, such that women's work goes unrecognized and uncompensated, their thinking misunderstood and often dismissed as

irrational, and their experiences largely inarticulable, and thus unavailable for debate, critique, or praise. Recognizing and revaluing women's lives and labor in caregiving roles seems an obvious improvement over women's diminishment in and for them. But many feminists recoil at the recovery and revaluation of women in these positions, and the definition of a "feminine morality" based on precisely the lives and labor that they identify as states of oppression necessary to escape.[18] To many feminist thinkers and activists, the arguments of the ethics of care appear to entrench roles traditionally forced on women, instead of encouraging emancipation from them and lives beyond them. Care theory may offer a substantial account by which traditional roles can be recognized and valued, but such recognition and value marks steps backward for feminism, some suggest, chalking a line, at best, past which women will not advance.

Such objections are often framed through or accompanied by criticisms of the characterization of gender, femininity, and feminism in the ethics of care. The ethics of care developed self-consciously within "difference feminism," a vein of feminist thought that argues for the revaluation of women as substantially and significantly different from men, but not inferior to them. Contrasted with "equality" or "sameness" feminism, in which the equal rights and respect of women are sought through an argument for women's similarity to men (or inconsequential difference from them, or both), difference feminism has been routinely subject to criticism throughout the last century of feminist debate, criticism to which the ethics of care is largely subject as well. Some argue that women are descriptively too similar to men in any ways relevant to fair treatment, equal status, and freedom from domination for difference feminism to be effective or even

[18] Noddings, *Caring*. The language of "feminine morality" has been alternately embraced and abandoned by authors writing in the ethics of care due to concerns about gender essentialism, as I discuss at greater length below. Noddings herself addresses the problem on page 2 of this volume.

plausible. Others argue that women's differences are unproductively emphasized where they might be used against the very cause they seek to promote, fueling traditionally oppressive claims that women belong in certain spaces and not others, for example, and thus reinforcing divisions that many feminists aim to disrupt. These traditional structures have also made the category of "women" to which difference feminists attend significantly classed, some critics suggest, reflecting a particular socio-economic, cultural, and racial category without admitting it, or looking beyond it. Still others have argued that difference feminism requires dangerously naturalized and essentialized concepts of sex and gender, ignoring substantial variations within any group plausibly recognized as "women," and likely excluding some who identify as women but fail to resemble the norm sufficiently.[19]

This last concern of gender essentialism is one to which the ethics of care has been particularly vulnerable, especially in its earlier versions. With language of the "different voice of women and girls" in Gilligan, "the voice of the mother" in Noddings, or "maternal thinking" in Ruddick, implications of the existence of an essential female person, perspective, or nature seem pervasive in, and even foundational to, these discussions.[20] But women do not speak in one voice, critics argue, and to suggest as much is to reiterate powerful justifications of oppression and to erase a diversity of experiences by assimilation. There simply is no singular, essential voice of women and girls to hear, nor would that voice be necessarily a mother's or a mother-to-be's. Similarly, there is no essential voice of mothers, and assimilating the many different

[19] See Ruth Grouenhout, *Theological Echoes in an Ethic of Care* (South Bend, IN: The Erasmus Institute of Notre Dame, 2003), 2-5 for one of the best summaries of difference and sameness feminism and the ethics of care.
[20] Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*; Noddings, *Caring*; and Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*.

voices, experiences, and perspectives of mothers into "maternal thinking" or the "mother's voice" will exclude and erase important differences and particularities in turn. These assimilations sound much more like the arguments of traditional oppressors than feminist proponents, critics suggest, justifying differences on the grounds of an essential female nature and blunting the opportunity for critique of their social origins and enforcement: women want and do certain things *as women*, naturally and inescapably; women engage in caregiving, and should, according to their sex; mothers think, speak, and act in ways determined by their reproductive capacity, and thus should maintain traditional familial and social structures that respond to this biological determination or are purportedly products of it; and so forth. As this last example suggests, the problem is exacerbated where claims of difference imply or are supported by some form of biological determinism, the idea that women are and necessarily will be certain ways, naturally, biologically, and not due to acculturation and social formation. Such a claim can encourage differences observed between the sexes to be treated as entirely inescapable, limiting the space for their critique as constructions of the way we think, act, and organize ourselves. The frequent invocations of "women's voices," "women's reasoning," "feminine morality," and "women's experience" in the ethics of care are thus hard to hear, for some readers, without resonating with these traditional forms of oppression and denigration, or at least one form from this array.[21]

[21] See R. L. Smith, "Moral Transcendence and Moral Space in the Historical Experiences of Women," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 4 (1988); Joan Tronto, "Beyond Gender Different to a Theory of Care," *Signs* 12 (1987) and *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993); and J. Auerbach, *et al*., "Commentary on Gilligan's *In a Different Voice*," *Feminist Studies* 11 (1985). For a helpful review of these and other criticisms of Gilligan in particular, see Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, "Gilligan and the Ethics of Care: An Update," *Religious Studies Review* 20 (1994).

Many authors in the ethics of care have made substantial replies to these concerns. From the start, Gilligan and Noddings distanced themselves from ascriptions of biological determinism, gender essentialism, and innate difference, arguing that the "voices" of women and mothers that they identify are neither biologically determined nor essential nor innate, nor even the voices of only women and mothers. Men and boys sometimes speak of similar concerns in similar ways, they suggest, and any gendering of this voice and view is not essential to its integrity as an ethical perspective, even if it is important to some of the feminist aims of the account. "The different voice I describe is characterized not by gender but theme," Gilligan writes in the opening of *In a Different Voice*, "its association with women is an empirical observation…but this association is not absolute." Rather, "the contrasts between male and female voices are presented here to highlight a distinction between two modes of thought and to focus a problem of interpretation rather than to represent a generalization about either sex."[22] In later work in the field, the focus on women is explained on empirical grounds that increasingly refer

[22] The passage is worth quoting in full: "The different voice I describe is characterized not by gender but theme. Its association with women is an empirical observation, and it is primarily through women's voices that I trace its development. But this association is not absolute, and the contrasts between male and female voices are presented here to highlight a distinction between two modes of thought and to focus a problem of interpretation rather than to represent a generalization about either sex. In tracing development, I point to the interplay of these voices within each sex and suggest that their convergence marks times of crisis and change. No claims are made about the origins of the differences described or their distribution in a wider population, across cultures, or through time. Clearly, these differences arise in a social context where factors of social status and power combine with reproductive biology to shape the experience of males and females and the relations between the sexes. My interest lies in the interaction of experience and thought, in different voices and the dialogues to which they give rise, in the way we listen to ourselves and to others, and in the stories we tell about our lives." Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, 2. See also Noddings, *Caring*, 2-3. This opening passage of Gilligan's should be taken seriously by those who seek to criticize her ascription of different voices to the different sexes, though as her later addition of further disclaimers suggests, the implication of gender essentialism in the work as a whole is hard to ignore. And as we will see in Bonnie Honig's treatment of Gilligan, the alignment of different voices with natural sex difference may have other effects on the structure of its critique, helping to "sediment the levers of critique," Honig argues, in ways that encourage the recapitulation of exclusion in her theory. See chapter 2.

to traditional social structures, roles, and norms than any innate or essential femininity.[23] It is because women have often held caregiving positions that the ethics of care might be described as a "feminine morality," these authors suggest, not because it belongs to women essentially, innately, or biologically. Anyone who chooses or is placed into caregiving roles might develop similar perspectives from similar experiences, and might have much to add to the women's accounts from which the ethics of care has largely been developed thus far. However, because women have held most of these positions for generations, care has become their story more than others'.[24] The particular entanglement of oppressive efforts to force women into these roles and the denigration of care in ethical and political thought that then delegitimizes their lives and labor is not irrelevant, but there is still a gap between this gendered history and an essential gendering (or gender essentialism) of the ethics of care.

I find this last view to be sufficiently compelling to continue thinking with the ethics of care, though I cannot defend the point more thoroughly here. Rather, I offer this sketch of feminist disagreements around individualism and sovereign subjectivity to suggest the gendered contouring of the discussions to come, both within the ethics of care and in the other models of relationality and vulnerability to be considered in subsequent chapters. The roles of gender, feminism, femininity, and power critique in these

---

[23] See especially Eva Feder Kittay, *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality and Dependency* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999); also Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*; Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*; and Rosemarie Tong, "Love's labor in the health care system: Working toward gender equity," *Hypatia* 17.3 (2002).

[24] See, for example, Eva Feder Kittay: "Care of dependents is not inevitably nor exclusively the province of women. But it is *mostly* women who are dependency workers. Care of children, and the raising of children is not exclusively the work of mothers. I have witnessed, firsthand, how competent a father can be in the daily, hands-on care of a dependent child, and I am convinced that there is nothing inherently gendered about the work of care. Nonetheless, to ignore the *fact* that most of the care of children is done by mothers, and to call this work of caring for children parenting rather than mothering is a distortion that serves women poorly." Kittay, *Love's Labor*, *xii-xiv*.

discussions are complex, bound in traditional associations of vulnerability and dependence with women's roles and capacities (or lack thereof), but not limited by them, and often specifically motivated by their critique. Thus although I remain skeptical of much of the gendering of the ethics of care, particularly where it tends toward assimilations and essentialisms, I find myself persistently sympathetic to its premise that women—or many women, at least—know something about dependence and vulnerability that others don't, that others haven't learned or haven't had the occasion to learn, or that others have been instructed to unlearn and suppress wherever it arises. Whether "women know" as women, or as people acculturated into certain roles, or both; whether "women *know*" as rational thinkers, or as bodies that reproduce and care for their offspring, or both (or neither); whether "women know" is even a coherent phrase—whether "women" are an identifiable group who can collectively know something while the group of "not women" do not, and whether "knowledge" is a concept that could make such statements meaningful—I will not begin to argue, nor am I inclined to do so. Indeed, I find such statements about women as such, let alone "women *knowing*," as exhausted as strict individualisms, if not more so, and often as destructive, if not more so as well. However, the confluence of history and tradition associating women with vulnerability, dependence, and care suggests that arguments against the sovereign subject on these grounds, and arguments on these grounds altogether, will be gendered arguments to some extent, and thus the role of gender might as well be tracked explicitly. To begin, then, with the ethics of care seems more appropriate than it might otherwise, since there are few discussions that derive questions about these concerns with more explicit reference to gender, however challenging that reference may be.

I turn in the sections that follow in this chapter and the next, to Carol Gilligan's articulation of a "relational voice" and the ethics of care she derives from it, an ethics attendant to vulnerability where a sovereign, individualist ethics seeks its escape. Through a reconstruction of the role of vulnerability in her account, I will suggest that Gilligan's argument for a relational ethics of care overemphasizes the figure of the caregiver, her responsiveness to vulnerability, and the supposed demand of vulnerability to which she responds in ways that blunt Gilligan's critique of individualism and open a path toward domination of the vulnerable in care. But these problems are well seen through Gilligan's own initial framing of relationality against individualism, I will argue, in ways that suggest an important role for vulnerability in ethical thought and the promise of a relational ethics built on its experience and consideration.

The Individual and the Relational Self in Carol Gilligan's Moral Psychology

In a "Letter to Readers" at the opening of the 1993 edition of *In a Different Voice*, Carol Gilligan writes that her current students "are incredulous" when she tells them of the conditions of critique, contestation, turmoil, and opportunity on university campuses at the time when she started work on the book: "I began writing *In a Different Voice* in the early 1970s…at the height of the demonstrations against the Vietnam war, after the shooting of students at Kent State University by members of the National Guard, [when] final exams were cancelled at Harvard and there was no graduation. For a moment, the university came to a stop and the foundations of knowledge were opened for reexamination" (*ix*). Simultaneously, she writes, "the underpinnings of relationships between women and men and children were similarly exposed" with the 1973 Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade* and the growing availability of safe and effective birth

control for women, as well as the larger "resurgence of the Women's movement" that both supported and was supported by these changes (ibid.). The range of opportunity for women was broadening in many spheres, and legal and medical advances related to women's reproductive capacities in particular, Gilligan argues, exposed critical assumptions about gender and gender roles for reconsideration. Women could now escape pregnancy's wholesale determination of their lives in many circumstances, and thus ask a broader set of questions about their hopes and desires to which they could "assert their own answers" as never before (70). As Gilligan writes later in the book, "the relationships that have traditionally defined women's identities and framed their moral judgments no longer flow inevitably from their reproductive capacity but become matters of decision over which they have control" (ibid.). The foundations of women's lives, family structures, and society beyond them were thus opened for reexamination as well, as "the dilemma of choice enter[ed] a central arena of women's lives," and women's ways of choosing, reasoning, and understanding choices entered new arenas in turn.[25]

For Gilligan, a psychologist interested in the development of moral reasoning and decision-making, these openings suggest a particular problem within her discipline that takes a similarly reflexive form: as women increasingly have opportunities to make significant lifecycle decisions and construct their lives as they choose, their modes of reasoning about such concerns can and should garner greater interest from psychologists who have traditionally conducted studies of "human" psychology with only male

[25] Gilligan explores the historical context of her development of the ethics of care more fully in the semi-autobiographical volume *Joining the Resistance* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2011) and then with the legal scholar David A. J. Richards in *The Deepening Darkness*, a broader-ranging book on contemporary political problems that seem to have outlasted their possible defeat in major changes during the 60s and 70s (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009). For a more focused consideration of the ethics of care and political change at its beginning and in relation to contemporary politics, see Richards's *Resisting Injustice and the Feminist Ethics of Care in the Age of Obama: "Suddenly…All the Truth Was Coming Out"* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

subjects. Especially at a moment when dominant moral and ethical norms are being called into question, psychologists may have much to learn from broadening the scope of their research in this way. However, earlier studies had produced theories of moral reasoning and its development in which women often appear hardly to mature at all, or to have a jumbled process of development with progressions and regressions into adulthood. Thus conversely, and in conjunction, the exclusion of women's voices from traditional inquiries seemed to require reexamination as well before the products of these inquiries were taught and applied further. It is both incoherent and unproductive, Gilligan argues, to grant women the opportunity to make significant choices for themselves, "in their own voice," and simultaneously tell them that their capacity to choose is immature and insufficient (70). Moreover, it inflects "their own voice" with a similar incoherence, a conflict between the opportunity and need to make critical choices for themselves, on the one hand, and the norms that seed doubt in their capacity to do so, on the other. "While society may affirm publicly the woman's right to choose for herself," Gilligan writes, "the exercise of such choice brings her privately into conflict with the conventions of femininity" (ibid.). Where science reinforces these conventions with claims of women's inferior capacity to reason, it requires reconsideration at multiple levels.

In a Different Voice pursues this project toward the development of a new theory of moral reasoning, aiming to describe the thinking of women and girls where it has otherwise gone unrecognized, poorly recognized, or viewed as explicitly lacking. The text presents a series of arguments about psychological research and research methods; their entanglement with philosophy, social norms, policy, and law; and the modes of critique of these institutions offered by the supposedly neutral standards of scientific

inquiry, or required against the same. These arguments emerge from what Gilligan describes as a project of "listening" to the voices of women and girls apart from the findings of prior studies, which rendered them "an aside, a curiosity" to human psychology, in which the human is "assumed to be male" (18). Theories of psychological development put forward by such projects produced significantly strange results when applied to women and girls—strange, at least, to the growing group of scientists and others questioning traditional assumptions of women's intellectual and psychological inferiority to men, which were apparently confirmed by these findings. Gilligan's hypothesis—along with that of other psychologists, feminist activists, and philosophers at the time, most notably the psychologist Jean Baker Miller—was that these standards of maturity and development must be inadequate if they are producing such results, and are in need of redevelopment on the basis of studies that include female subjects.[26] In Gilligan's language, they failed to hear women's voices, and in this failure, they fueled further failures to listen. Gilligan sought to listen, and to hear.

What she discovered, she reports, was a voice substantially different from that of men and boys, "a contrapuntal theme" attending to relationships, care, and

[26] Jean Baker Miller's research on women's psychology in the 1970s seems to have provided a blueprint for Gilligan's work, though this connection has been rarely explored in the feminist ethics of care as it emerged in philosophy, gender studies, and other fields. Gilligan cites Miller at critical points in her argument in a way that makes the usual naming of Gilligan as the founder of this line of inquiry in psychological research, let alone the ethics of care, less compelling. Because I am primarily interested here in the development of arguments for relationality in the ethics of care, I maintain the focus on Gilligan instead of turning to Miller, and further attention to this earlier work is unfortunately beyond the scope of the discussion here. However, a fuller rereading of Miller's work would be a fruitful and important contribution to the ethics of care in both its more constructive and more historical forms; in particular, it might yield new ways of thinking about the relationship between feminism and gender theory on the one hand, and psychology and psychoanalysis on the other, at a moment when versions of these alliances have more often aided entrenchments into differing camps than dialogue between and among writers with similar aims but very different training, and resulting sensibilities. In particular, the discussion of Freud in Miller's work seems to have far more to say with Lacanian theorists than against them, despite its apparent distance from the kinds of feminist and gender analysis that have drawn on Lacan and related thinkers in recent years. See Jean Baker Miller, *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976).

responsibilities to others where men and boys more often attended to individual rights, justice, and the development of personal freedom and independence (1). Methods of reasoning appeared different as well, with male subjects generally rendering moral dilemmas more abstract while female subjects approached their particularities, and even sought to add more. With these different approaches and concerns, women and girls also responded differently to the practices of psychological research: when given a situation and asked to reason through it, for example, they often asked questions back to the researcher instead of offering their assessment, appearing "evasive and unsure" as they requested further detail about the scenario, or expressed an inability to judge without it (28). They didn't give clear verdicts with logical justifications, but rather sought to reason with the interviewer and the scenario in ways that made their answers to the given problem, conceived only as such, appear disorganized and confused. Taken together, these tendencies in the voices of women and girls appeared as forms of failure and immaturity on the scales of development used by researchers. But viewed as "a different voice" instead of an inferior one, Gilligan argues, they sound like new and potentially enlightening forms of moral reasoning, worth hearing at a moment when traditional moral standards seemed insufficient, and worth recovering from castigation and exclusion in psychology, philosophy, and society at large.

The text presents the findings of three studies of moral reasoning that Gilligan and her colleagues conducted over a period of ten years. In the first study, college students were interviewed during their senior year and five years after graduation about their "view of self and thinking about morality" in relation to their "experiences of moral conflict and the making of life choices" (2). In the second, pregnant women in their first

trimester considering the possibility of abortion were interviewed about their situation and deliberations about ending the pregnancy. They were then interviewed one year after making the choice, with interviewers asking them to reflect on their decision, that period of their lives, and where their lives had gone (or taken them) in the intervening year (ibid.). From these two studies, Gilligan began to develop many of the hypotheses about men's and women's different modes of decision-making that would come to form her articulation of the ethics of care. In the third study, the "rights and responsibilities study," these hypotheses "were further explored and refined" through interviews with male and female subjects at nine different ages, from 6 to 60, matched at each age for "intelligence, education, occupation, and social class" (3). In this study, subjects were asked about their "conceptions of self and morality, experiences of moral conflict and choice, and judgments of hypothetical moral dilemmas," such as the dilemma faced by a "Mr. Heinz," who cannot afford medicine for his sick wife and contemplates stealing it "to save her" (3, 25). Subjects were asked to explain their thinking as they determined whether he should steal the drug and whether he would be right or wrong in doing so, and then to consider how their thinking about this story did or did not accord with the definitions of morality that they gave elsewhere in the interview—a method of questioning that turned some interviews into interrogations, Gilligan argues, with researchers seemingly trying to catch subjects' inconsistencies in aggressively skeptical ways.

The story of Mr. Heinz and the content and format of the interviews in the third study were drawn from research on moral reasoning and development conducted by Lawrence Kohlberg from the 1950s through the publication of Gilligan's work. Gilligan

collaborated with Kohlberg on some of this research, and it was through this work, in part, that she began to develop the arguments that ultimately became *In a Different Voice* and the ethic of care first articulated therein.[27] Kohlberg's theory thus stands as Gilligan's most immediate opponent as well as a significant influence, and Gilligan's work is largely constructed as a critical counterpart to it. It requires, then, at least a brief articulation to understand Gilligan's project. However, because my interest here is in Gilligan's work and not Kohlberg's, I will offer her analysis of it, bracketing many significant questions about his work and the faithfulness and charity of her interpretation.

Kohlberg describes the maturation of moral reasoning and judgment from childhood through adulthood in six stages.[28,] In the first, "pre-conventional" stages, a person engaged in moral reasoning is concerned with the consequences of an action *for him- or herself*: how he or she might avoid punishment, how his or her needs might be met by an action and its effects, and what benefits it might bring to him or her.[29] They possess what Gilligan calls an "egocentric understanding of fairness based on individual need," as opposed to the "conception of fairness anchored in the shared conventions of societal agreement" found in stages three and four (27). In these "conventional" stages, subjects reason with reference to social agreements, norms, rules, and laws, conceiving of

[27] To be clear, the studies around which Gilligan's book is organized were not conducted in direct collaboration with Kohlberg. They are based on his theory of moral development and borrow from the methods of his research to explore this theory further, but were not conducted by or with Kohlberg himself.
[28] Lawrence Kohlberg, *The Philosophy of Moral Development* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981). Kohlberg first developed this theory in his doctoral dissertation, "The Development of Modes of Thinking and Choices in the Years 10 to 16," University of Chicago, 1958, and continued to develop it through numerous articles in the decades that followed. It is summarized and most fully explained in the 1981 volume. For Kohlberg's reply to Gilligan's interpretation and criticism, see Lawrence Kohlberg, "Synopses and Detailed Replies to Critics" with Charles Levine and Alexandra Hewer, in *Essays on Moral Development* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1981).
[29] I will use inclusive gender pronouns in the description of his work to reflect his argument that this psychology is "human," belonging to both men and women, even if it was developed in research on men and boys. I follow Gilligan in this practice.

morality as an arrangement of others' expectations and authority. Moral reasoning, at these stages, is characterized by judgments about how to please authority figures and how to follow rules that maintain social order, such as a government's laws or the instructions of the police. These concerns render the individual vulnerable to the forces of social order, both epistemologically and ethically—the individual is exposed to others' rejections of his or her understanding of social norms, as well as their potential redefinition, without recourse to some kind of higher (or more fundamental) authority in reason, as in the later stages. The individual seeks to escape this vulnerability in the final stages, the "post-conventional," in which reliance on social conventions is replaced by "a principled understanding of fairness that rests on the free-standing logic of equality and reciprocity," in Gilligan's words: a morality that can be derived from reason alone in the form of universal principles, and is not bound to particular agreements among particular people and communities (27). For example, someone who has reached these highest stages might question the justice of a system in which a sick woman could be deprived life-saving medicine because of her inability to pay for it, given that it is readily available and not in demand by others. Significantly, though, the inquiry would not be guided by concern for the health of a particular woman but by concerns about the universal right of the sick to medicine and treatment, and the similarly universal rights of individuals to personal property. A solution to the dilemma would take the form of weighing these different rights against each other to determine which must be sacrificed for the other, and thus whose assertion of rights must be limited to make room for another's assertion of his or hers.

In this way, Kohlberg's theory presents moral development as progress toward rational autonomy in which an ethic of universal, individual rights and justice can be derived. It tracks an individual from an egocentric conception of him- or herself singularly wanting and needing through growth in his or her awareness of others, into his or her incorporation as universal subjects to whom the same rules apply equally. Where in the earliest stages something is "not fair" because it conflicts with an individual's own wants and needs, in the middle stages, the individual has become aware that others have wants and needs as well, similar to one's own but sometimes conflicting with them. Moral categories such as fairness, goodness, and rightness begin to seem as if they might apply beyond oneself, emerging to regulate the conflict experienced in encounters with others' wants and needs that interfere with one's own. Kohlberg thus defines a growing awareness of others as the management of conflict, reflected in subjects' increasing interest in social order. He then describes the height of maturity as a return to individualism with new consciousness of these challenges, reflected in the conception of the self as one instance of the universal category of 'the individual,' each with equal standing to assert his or her wishes, wants, and needs. Where these assertions conflict, the mature mind seeks to resolve the conflict by weighing them against each other—the assertions, significantly, and not the individuals, as in the earlier reliance on authority figures to determine right and wrong. Interactions with others are defined by the conflict between individuals' needs and desires and their rights to assert them; morality is defined in turn by the responsibility not to interfere with other individuals where they have rights that supersede one's own.

Relationships have a difficult place in this picture of moral reasoning. Morality adjudicates *encounters,* for Kohlberg, in which individuals' assertions come into conflict and then must be disentangled and separated, with the problematic overlap carefully redrawn through the limitation of one or more participants' assertions. Problems are solved by pushing people apart, defining rights and responsibilities that delineate borders between them. In contrast, Gilligan argues, women and girls often seek stronger ties, closer connections, and greater exposure in relationships to resolve conflicts, seeing them to arise in the first place from the failure of some parties to respond to others' needs instead of an overlapping of self-assertions. Female subjects then suggest that the failure to respond be resolved by making each person's needs "more salient" to the others to spur responsive action, instead of requiring the limitation of action by at least some parties out of respect for others' rights and due (29). With this view of conflict and resolution, women and girls often seem not to emerge from the conventional stages of Kohlberg's rubric. However, they also occupy these stages uneasily, situated in them by interest in interpersonal expectations but without any way to account for the complexity and development of these concerns.

When reasoning through the Heinz dilemma, for example, one 11-year-old girl in Gilligan's third study, Amy, fails to rate highly on Kohlberg's scale because she views the dilemma as "a narrative of relationships that extends over time," as Gilligan summarizes her answer, as opposed to "'a math problem with humans,'" as one of her 11-year-old male counterparts, Jake, describes (28). Thinking through the situation with an eye toward its 'extension over time,' Amy tries to juggle the possibility of Heinz saving his wife's life by stealing the medicine with the potential for his punishment by

incarceration, during which time "'his wife might get sicker again, and he couldn't get more of the drug, and it might not be good'" (ibid.). This potentially fruitful attention to the future development of the relationships of the story is not present in Jake's response, Gilligan notes, and is neither heard nor credited by Kohlberg's rubric. Instead, Amy's response appears as a failure to pursue a solution to the given problem logically, a meandering walk through a series of contradictory concerns that she has difficulty weighing or even organizing in her answer. She offers increasingly confused solutions to the dilemma as the interview continues: stealing isn't right, so he shouldn't steal; his wife's life is valuable, so he should; her death would hurt those around her, so she must get the medicine somehow; stealing might not be a good solution regardless because the husband might not know how to administer the medicine (a thought that Gilligan describes as having been submitted "lamely" as she grasps for solutions); and so on (29). "Failing to see the dilemma as a self-contained problem of logic," Gilligan writes, "she does not discern the internal structure of its resolution" in terms of a calculation of rights and due (ibid.). Instead, she assumes that neither of the conflicting claims to life and property should be sacrificed, appearing indecisive and irrational by offering contradictory answers in response to the interviewer's questions.

Gilligan argues, however, that Amy's reply can be productively reinterpreted apart from Kohlberg's rubric to reveal a promising and coherent train of thought that is simply different from the one his theory recognizes and privileges. Instead of offering contradictory answers, she suggests, Amy's initial response that "he really shouldn't steal the drug—but his wife shouldn't die either" might be understood to express her recognition of the different claims that must be honored in a full resolution of the

situation, in which no one's wants and needs are sacrificed despite their current tension (28). Instead of weighing these contradictory claims against each other to resolve the tension by declaring a winning (and thus a losing) side, Amy suggests that everyone in the story should be more concerned about, and involved with, everyone else's wants and needs, toward their collective achievement: the druggist's claim to property should be of concern to Mr. Heinz and his wife, as shown by Amy's repeated reference to the procurement of a loan or benefactor of some kind, and the survival of the wife should be of greater concern to the druggist, particularly since the need to administer the medication is likely more urgent than the need for payment. In this way, Gilligan argues, Amy locates the problem of the story not in "the druggist's assertion of rights" against the need for the life-saving medication, but in "his failure of response" to the wife's condition (ibid). She then locates the solution to the dilemma in the *strengthening* of the relationships among its actors, toward the druggist's greater awareness of his role in saving this woman's life:

> Seeing a world comprised of relationships rather than of people standing alone, a world that coheres through human connection rather than through systems of rules, [Amy] finds the puzzle in the dilemma to lie in *the failure of the druggist to respond to the wife*. Saying that 'it is not right for someone to die when their life could be saved,' she assumes that if the druggist were to see the consequences of his refusal to lower his price, he would realize that 'he should just give it to the wife and then have the husband pay back the money later.' *Thus she considers the solution to the dilemma to lie in making the wife's condition more salient to the druggist, or, that failing, in appealing to others who are in a position to help*. (29, emphasis added)

The "salience" of the wife's condition is not a matter of justice or rights, significantly; Amy does not suggest that Mr. Heinz make a better argument about the druggist's obligation on these grounds, or really any argument at all. Rather, she looks for the solution to the greater involvement of the druggist in the situation of Mr. Heinz and his wife, with the aim of his developing greater sensitivity to their needs that would

encourage him to respond more as a friend or family member than a distant shopkeeper, concerned only with his own property and business—in Gilligan's language, to respond with care.

Amy "is confident," Gilligan reports, that this sort of development is possible, explaining that "'if Heinz and the druggist had talked it out long enough, they could reach something besides stealing'" (29). But Amy thus appears to be answering a different question than the one the interviewer has asked, leading to some of the difficulty of recognizing the merits of her reasoning on Kohlberg's theory. In the construction of the interview, the question posed to the subject is "*whether* Heinz should act in this situation ('*should* Heinz steal the drug?')," but Amy seems to consider instead the question of "*how* Heinz should act in response to the awareness of his wife's need ('Should Heinz *steal* the drug?')" (31). "The interviewer takes the mode of action for granted, presuming it to be a matter of fact," Gilligan writes, while "Amy assumes the necessity for action and considers what form it should take" (ibid.). Action is necessary because someone will die without it, and the possibility of not acting under these circumstances seems not to cross Amy's mind, on Gilligan's analysis.

Instead of determining a form of action in which some interests are sacrificed while others are honored, moreover, Amy seeks a resolution to the problem in which everyone acts for everyone's interests insofar as they are able, attaining their collective wants and needs through action undertaken together instead of in competition. "Her world is a world of relationships," Gilligan writes, and thus she sees "the actors in the dilemma arrayed not as opponents in a contest of rights but as members of a network of relationships on whose continuation they all depend" (30). This image of a "network" or "web" of

relationships resists the hierarchical organization of the dilemma by which an individualist ethic seeks its resolution, as we will see. It emphasizes instead the maintenance and strengthening of the threads by which people are connected, as Gilligan explains: "Consequently, her solution to the dilemma lies in activating the network by communication, securing the inclusion of the wife by strengthening rather than severing connections" (30-31). Thus Heinz and the druggist "could reach something" if only they "talked it out long enough," though likely not a solution to the moral dilemma of right and wrong on Kohlberg's construction. Rather, they might reach a mutually agreeable path through the situation, likely made possible precisely by setting aside the questions of right and wrong that Kohlberg defines as both the pinnacle and essence of moral maturity. But in this way, "most of her responses fall through the sieve of Kohlberg's scoring system," and so "her responses appear from his perspective to lie outside the moral domain" (31).

In contrast, Jake's approach to the Heinz dilemma as "a math problem with humans" can be well described by Kohlberg's theory to show coherent development and even relative maturity for a subject of his and Amy's age (28). He offers a clear and coherent response to the dilemma as posed, answering the interviewer "from the outset that Heinz should steal the drug" to save his wife's life (26). Articulating the problem as a conflict between the value of human life and the value of property, "he discerns the logical priority of life and uses that to justify his choice" (ibid.). He then goes on to question the justice of social conventions relevant to the dilemma—laws against stealing—while also recognizing their potential necessity to maintain social order, perfectly transitioning through the middle stages of Kohlberg's rubric. Seeing "the law

as man-made and therefore subject to error and change," as Gilligan describes, he suggests that the law does not coincide with what is morally right in this case, but it might also be necessary to enforce for the sake of social order more broadly (ibid.). Thus the judge "'should give Heinz the lightest possible sentence'" in any resulting adjudication of the case, Jake says, a view in which he is "confident," in Gilligan's description, because "his solution is rationally derived," and so "he assumes that anyone following reason would arrive at the same conclusions" (ibid.). "Fascinated by the power of logic," she writes, Jake finds increasing confidence in his reasoning as he is able to rely on logic more and more, which "frees him from dependence on authority and allows him to find solutions to problems by himself" (27).

Unlike Amy's confidence in the power of continued communication and sensitivity to need, however, Jake's confidence in the power of logic is consistently confirmed throughout the interview:

> Just as he relied on the conventions of logic to deduce the solution to this dilemma, assuming these conventions to be shared, so she relies on a process of communication, assuming connection and believing that her voice will be heard. Yet while his assumptions about agreement are confirmed by the convergence in logic between his answers and the questions posed, her assumptions are belied by the failure of communication, the interviewer's inability to understand her response. (29)

Through this process of progressive confirmation of Jake's thinking and repeated frustration of Amy's, the two children's relative maturity appears even further apart than it might under different circumstances. Jake's reasoning follows the logic of the interview, responding to questions as posed and reflecting their internal structure. "Theories of developmental psychology illuminate well the position of this child," Gilligan writes, and the methods of interviewing recommended by these theories reinforce its coherence (27). His movement toward autonomous reason through concerns

about social agreement is both recognizable and promising, as is his method of abstracting values and claims from personal situations toward an impersonal weighing of them against each other. While Amy would likely be scored "as a mixture of stages two and three," interested in social conventions but not yet able to reason with them, Gilligan assesses Jake's responses overall as "a mixture of stages three and four," "conventional on Kohlberg's scale" because of the prominence of social order and authority in his answers, but recognizably on a trajectory toward mature thinking with universal principles (30, 27). As Gilligan explains, "his ability to bring deductive logic to bear on the solution of moral dilemmas, to differentiate morality from law, and to see how laws can be considered to have mistakes points toward the principled conception of justice that Kohlberg equates with moral maturity" (27). Jake is well on the developmental path, therefore, so long as that path is paved by the abstract, logical negotiation of competing rights and responsibilities, toward the determination of just limitations of one individual's rights in favor of another's in a given situation.

Amy and Jake's interviews are only two examples among many in Gilligan's work, but they display some of the key points of distinction between Kohlberg's ethic of individual rights and justice and Gilligan's ethic of care. In Amy's "world comprised of relationships," conflicts emerge where people fail to recognize their role in the lives of others, and their responsibility to respond to others' needs (29). Morality is defined by the obligation to act in response when "'other people are counting on you,'" as Amy puts it, and failures to do so are resolved by strengthening relationships toward greater responsiveness (38). In this way, Gilligan writes, "Amy's judgments contain the insights central to an ethic of care," an ethic defined by relationships with others, sensitivity to

their needs, and an imperative to respond with care instead of the isolation sought and justified by concepts of individual rights and justice (30). Significantly, they also "reveal a continuing dependence and vulnerability" in her "reliance on relationships," a vulnerability that Jake's reasoning, in contrast, seeks to escape (ibid.). Amy's response to the Heinz dilemma emphasizes and seeks to exacerbate the vulnerability of each person to the other, rendering Mr. Heinz and his wife more vulnerable to the druggist and the druggist potentially more vulnerable to them, if he provides the medicine on loan and must then rely on the promise to be paid in the future, for example. Their lives become more intertwined rather than less in Amy's plan, because it is through further entanglement of their interests that they become more sensitive to each other's needs, and might find a course of action that does not require anyone to lose or sacrifice substantially.

Amy's emphasis on a collective resolution without a hierarchical ordering of claims forms the basis for what Gilligan describes as the nonviolent potential of a relational view, "an experience of self…that speaks directly to the problem of aggression" endemic to an individualist ethic (47). The problem is well displayed by Jake's response to the Heinz dilemma. "In resolving Heinz's dilemma," Gilligan writes, "Jake relies on theft to avoid confrontation and turns to the law to mediate the dispute," seeking minimal personal involvement and implication in a way that "defuses a potentially explosive conflict between people by casting it as an impersonal conflict of claims" (32). Jake's solution limits contact between the parties and renders the dispute impersonal with the aim that any contact might be less heated, and can also be adjudicated by third parties.[30]

[30] It is an assumption of the individualist view that an "impersonal" interaction will be less heated; in a relational view, closer personal contact will help to calm situations, as I will discuss.

This approach aims to minimize each party's vulnerability to the another by *ending* the encounter as quickly and completely as possible; it assumes that a protracted encounter only exacerbates the potential for violence in its inevitable end.[31]

These aspects of Jake's response exemplify a larger picture in which relationships and encounters with others are seen as sources of danger and violence, while autonomy and separation are seen as safe and protective—a picture underlying the ethic of individual rights and justice that Kohlberg's theory promotes, Gilligan argues, as well as individualist theories of psychological development more broadly. This picture also seems to belong more to the narration and reasoning of men than women, she suggests, fitting with the larger identification of gender differences with each mode of moral reasoning in her account. In an earlier study, Gilligan and her colleague Susan Pollak found "statistically significant sex differences" in the ascription of violence to given images when subjects were asked to write stories using them as a prompt, as Gilligan explains:

> The study began with Pollak's observation of seemingly bizarre imagery of violence in men's stories about a picture of what appeared to be a tranquil scene, a couple sitting on a bench by a river next to a low bridge. In response to this picture, more than 21 percent of the eighty-eight men in the class [in which the survey was conducted] had written stories containing incidents of violence—homicide, suicide, stabbing, kidnapping, or rape. In contrast, none of the fifty women in the class had projected violence into this scene. (39-40)

One male student, for example, told the story of the 'tranquil scene' from the perspective of a third man drowning in the icy water of the river, as his fiancée and best friend sat watching from the bench, happy for him to die so that they could be together. The story

[31] In the Heinz dilemma, there is barely an encounter at all—the dilemma is constructed around stealing, suggesting an avoidance of personal contact (if the operation goes well) from the start. The sense in which the druggist and Mr. Heinz ever "interact" or "encounter" one another in the dilemma as posed is only in an abstract sense of the encounter of their claims. Amy's consideration of their sustained interaction and dialogue is part of what she adds to the story; it isn't part of the original scenario, or part of Jake's answer. To the extent that Jake imagines their future interaction, it is in a court of law—another mediation and abstraction of their relationship.

depicts relationships as deadly to the individual, and simultaneously cruel and conniving, defined by violence, where they continue. Conversely, women found violence and danger in scenes of individuals alone, particularly when the individual appeared to have achieved success in competitive environments and thus to have distinguished him- or herself from others. Referring to an earlier study by the psychologist Matina Horner for an example, Gilligan describes one woman's narration of "a story that portrays a jubilant Anne, at the top of her medical school class, physically beaten and maimed for life by her jealous classmates," punishment for her distinction from the group (40).

Gilligan argues that standard psychological theories betray similar, if less extreme, anxieties about the conflict and violence that can erupt from failed encounters and relationships. As discussed above, Kohlberg describes the development of moral reasoning as a matter of learning that one's needs and desires often conflict with others', and that the resolution of such conflicts may require sacrifice. Thus, even when conflict-resolution avoids physical violence, people experience their encounters with others as a source of sacrifice and loss. Similarly, the people who reach the highest rungs of Kohlberg's developmental ladder are those who recognize the limits of social agreement in the negotiation of conflict and who call on universal principles, therefore, rather than social conventions, to guide their ethical reasoning.

Likewise, Freud's developmental psychology casts interpersonal encounters and relationships as a threat to the integrity of the (prior) individual. According to Gilligan, Freud's view is "premised on separation and told as a narrative of failed relationships" comprised of "pre-Oedipal attachments, Oedipal fantasies, preadolescent chumships, and adolescent loves—relationships that stand out against a background of separation, only

successively to erupt and give way to increasingly emphatic individuation" (39). Interactions with others are inevitably "explosive," and the continuation of interactions into sustained relationships bears "a danger of entrapment or betrayal, being caught in a smothering relationship or humiliated by rejection and deceit" (Ibid., 42). These are fears learned through the failure of relationships, Gilligan argues, in a process of development that is defined by the violence of encounters with others and the disappointment of efforts to sustain relationships that inevitably end, often with significant violence as well. "Premised on separation," the entrances of others imply their inevitable exit, in this view, and each exit, often violent, reinforces the individual's understanding of him- or herself as both essentially and ideally alone. Striving for connection represents a denial or misunderstanding of the premise of separation, learned and re-learned with each relationship's end.

In a relational view, however, entrances and exits are "construed against a background of *continuing connection*," and so they do not stand out in the same way, and bear different lessons (39). They signify the strengthening or weakening of different threads in the "web of relationships" by which the self is defined, a web that grows stronger with each addition but dangerously thin and weak with too many losses of connection. The extraordinary condition on a relational view is then precisely the kind of isolation and invulnerability that the individualist seeks. "Illuminating life as a web rather than a succession of relationships," Gilligan writes, "women portray autonomy rather than attachment as the illusory and dangerous quest," marking a denial or misunderstanding of a self fundamentally connected, as the quest for attachment marks a denial of the individual fundamentally alone (48). In this way, the threat posed by

conflict is *disconnection* and the violence it does to a relationally constituted self, rather than violence within relationships that threatens a self who doesn't need them in the first place. Conflicts are then addressed by seeking to strengthen connection instead of limit or end it, as we have seen, both by strengthening the particular thread threatened by the conflict and the network supporting it. Conflict appears by these lights as "a fracture of human relationship that must be mended with its own thread," not as further evidence that the self is essentially and ideally alone (31).

What is the trajectory of development, then, for the relational voice? If the individual's development is defined by the failure of relationships confirming his or her premise of separation, what experiences confirm a premise of connection, and otherwise foster the development of the relational voice? Gilligan carries the model of development through the experience of conflict into her argument for the development of the relational voice, but recasts the central conflict as one "between compassion and autonomy," between an orientation toward others and the need not to lose oneself entirely, instead of a conflict between selfishness and self-restraint (71). In this way, she defines the development of both the relational and individualist perspectives as spurred by conflict between the self and relationships, but in opposite directions. For the individualist, the self must discover the presence of the other and the necessity of respect and self-restraint in relations with others. The relational voice must instead "reclaim the self" within the web of relationships, experiencing the violence of self-sacrifice where the individualist learns the violence of self-assertion (ibid.).

Gilligan argues that the conflict between "compassion and autonomy" is entangled with "the conventions of femininity, particularly the moral equation of goodness with

self-sacrifice" (70). Women and girls are taught to attend to others at the expense of themselves, praised for self-sacrifice and condemned for selfishness. Gilligan reports that the fear of selfishness imbues nearly all of her female subjects' voices, a persistent force stunting their own sense of self and confidence in their reasoning. It is the specter of selfishness in particular that makes women hesitate when they try to "speak for themselves," Gilligan argues, fearing that to speak in their own voice is necessarily to speak selfishly and without regard for others at all—despite hearing that their own voices *do* express regard for others, leading to confusion as well as inhibiting self-recriminations (*x*). But as many of her subjects report, an over-emphasis on self-sacrifice renders one unable to care and be in relation with others, as there is no self left to be part of a relationship—a version of what Simone Weil (among others) describes as the lover's paradox, the need for separation to achieve union, and the necessity of distance in order to be close.[32] When someone experiences this paradox, Gilligan argues, she may be spurred to achieve "the inclusion of herself in an expanding network of connection," a recognition of her own role, in Weil's language, as a lover, correcting her one-sided focus on the beloved (39). This growing self-consciousness is accompanied by "the discovery that separation can be protective and need not entail isolation," but is rather necessary, to some extent, in order to be connected with others (ibid.). Thus the pinnacle of maturity in Gilligan's theory of care is an awareness of the self embedded in relationships, in which the self isn't lost to relationships and norms of care, but rather takes care as "the self-chosen principle" guiding his or her judgments (74). But there is one further point of contrast between the relational and individualist perspectives that must be made clear

[32] Simone Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," in *Waiting for God* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2009 [1951]). See especially pp. 72-73.

before we can understand exactly what sort of principle this is, and thus what ethic it founds: the contrast between assertion and response.

From the Relational Self to the Ethics of Care

These two views of the self—the individualist view and the relational view—offer two very different ways of thinking about ethics, in Gilligan's analysis. Recall Jake's interview, and particularly his response to the Heinz dilemma. He approached the dilemma from an individualist perspective, as we have seen, attesting later in the interview that "'the most important thing in your decision should be yourself,'" and then "'you have to take [other people] into consideration'" as a result of the way your actions might impose on them, and cause harm (36). Starting from himself, Jake defines responsibility as "'thinking of others when I do something,'" assuming active self-assertion, and then *limiting* his actions in light of this consideration, reducing their impact on others to avoid or minimize hurt (37). As in the stories from Gilligan's earlier research, his language is surprisingly violent in these answers. He illustrates the first claim by saying, "'So, if what you want to do is blow yourself up with an atom bomb, you should maybe blow yourself up with a hand grenade because you are thinking about your neighbors who would die also'"—a response to the question "When responsibility to oneself and responsibility to others conflict, how should one choose?" (36, 35). To illustrate his definition of responsibility, he describes that "'if I want to throw a rock, [responsibility means] not throwing it at a window, because I thought of the people who would have to pay for that window'" (37). Gilligan identifies this as an ethic of limitation and restraint—limiting and restraining particularly violent self-assertions, significantly—instead of the ethic of action and proactive care on which Amy relies:

> Responsibility in his construction pertains to a limitation of action, a restraint of aggression, guided by the recognition that his actions can have effects on others, just as theirs can interfere with him…
>
> To Jake, responsibility means *not doing* what he wants because he is thinking of others; to Amy, it means *doing* what others are counting on her to do regardless of what she herself wants. Both children are concerned with avoiding hurt but construe the problem in different ways—he seeing hurt to arise from the expression of aggression, she from a failure of response. (37-38)

According to Gilligan, Jake begins from the assumption that individuals are aggressive, and they assert their aggressions until checked by moral awareness and reasoning learned through conflicts that make them aware of others' similarly assertive tendencies. The ethic that follows from this view of the self is an ethic of restraint. In order to navigate the conflicts that emerge between individuals with competing needs and desires, one must hold back from doing all that one wants to do. Responsibility is thus defined by limiting one's actions where they interfere with others.

The relational view, by contrast, leads to an ethic of action, in Gilligan's analysis. Conceiving of herself in terms of connection, Gilligan argues, Amy "locates herself in relation to the world, describing herself through actions that bring her into connection with others, elaborating ties through her ability to provide help" (35). When asked questions about conflicts, Amy situates herself in relation to the conflict as someone who can respond, who can help those who are "counting on her." Asked to "describe a situation in school where they confronted a decision of whether or not to tell," for example, Amy offers a story of having seen "one friend take a book that belonged to another" and then having to determine "how to act, given what she has seen and knows, since in her construction, *not telling as well as telling constitutes response*" (49-50). As in her response to the Heinz dilemma, Amy constructs the situation as "an issue of responsiveness in relationship," Gilligan contends, such that the ethical question is not

whether to act, but *how* (50). By understanding herself "in relation to the world," therefore, she appears to understand herself as always in conversation with it, if we might extend the verbal metaphor—always present and connected in a way that makes anything surrounding her something that addresses her, such that even a lack of response "constitutes response."

Gilligan seems to be arguing that by understanding oneself to be always in relation, one understands oneself to be always in a scene (or scenes) of address, and thus one's actions—or inaction—are always meaningful as responses. There is no possibility of not responding, because even a failure to respond actively and directly is interpretable as a response. If I am walking down the street and someone asks me to participate in a survey, anything I do next can stand as a kind of response. If I keep my eyes down and keep walking without saying anything, I have meaningfully replied to their question in that my lack of reply was a form of reply: "no," "I'm not interested," "I don't want to engage with you," "I don't respect you," or some combination. Ignoring the speaker is as meaningful a reply as saying, "I don't want to participate" or "Yes, I have a minute" because the question has situated me in a scene of address. Furthermore, my intention in ignoring the question does not change its status as a reply (even if it might change its meaning). If I didn't hear the question, or my attention was engaged elsewhere, but a companion tells me moments later that someone was speaking to me, I feel responsible for having ignored him or her, and I bear responsibility for this response, Gilligan suggests. If the person could see that I was merely distracted, the meaning of my reply might be different than if I had made eye contact, appeared to have heard, and kept walking in silence. But the status of my silence as a reply stands in either case because of

my situation in the scene. Gilligan argues that from a relational perspective, one sees oneself as always situated in such scenes, creating an inescapable responsibility to reply.

This move aligns Gilligan's argument with the "demand" of vulnerability that we will see in Cavarero and Butler in the third chapter, and that has defined relational ethics in nearly all of its iterations in the last century. But while on some accounts, it is a demand *of vulnerability*, an ontological feature of the condition regardless of a person's understanding of him- or herself in that way, for Gilligan the demand is a feature of a person's conception of self. Assuming oneself to be in relation with others, one sees one's actions (and inaction) as part of an ongoing conversation in which one is personally implicated to supply the next line. From this understanding, Gilligan derives and defines the central principle of an ethic of care as the "injunction to act responsively," in contrast to the individualist's injunction *not* to act out of respect for others' rights and due. If one is always in conversation, she suggests, one is responsible for their actions as forms of reply. Gilligan then argues that the ethical injunction following from this claim is an "injunction to respond," and specifically an injunction to respond with *care*, as much as one is able given the competing demands of caring for others, including oneself.

Gilligan suggests that Amy's conception of responsibility in this way is produced, like Jake's, by extrapolating from her experience of herself to her understanding of other individuals. Generalizing from her interview, she describes that Amy understands people to be responsive to others so long as others' needs are sufficiently "salient," and it is clear what "others are counting on her to do" (29, 38). Hers is a picture of a self inclined to help, Gilligan argues, a self who will respond with care where the need to care can be discerned—or is at least enjoined to do so, such that she would see a failure to respond as

a meaningful failure of self and a failure to do good. Amy recognizes her own inclination to act in these ways, and then "is confident" that others will behave similarly, Gilligan contends, a belief displayed in her disappointment in the interviewer's resistance to discussion and her faith that Mr. Heinz and the druggist would "reach something" if they could only discuss the problem long enough. This process of generalization is similar to Jake's consideration that everyone feels the same proclivities he does, and Gilligan seems to assume that such generalizations will be part of the process of development in a relational perspective as well.

The idea of development through generalization is common across psychology, philosophy, and religious thought, and is often both productive and compelling. However, I want to suggest that Amy's interview gives us reason to doubt its applicability to a relational perspective. The move from Amy's relational view of herself to the development of a generalizable ethic of care seems less linear than the move from Jake's individualist view of himself to an ethic of restraint, for reasons that Gilligan herself indicates, significantly, but then appears to ignore. In her move from the description of a relational self to a relational ethic, Gilligan seems to elide the particularities of the relationships that constitute different selves, and their effect on the structure of responsibility. Amy insists throughout her interview that context always matters, that the particularities of *which* people and *what* relationships are involved determine one's responsibilities, and that the specifics of the scenario are necessary for her to reason through it. Thus when asked "when responsibility to oneself and responsibility to others conflict, how should one choose?"—the question to which Jake offers a simple formula, "you go about one-fourth to the others and three-fourths to

yourself," and later illustrates with the choice of a grenade over an atom bomb—Amy begins by saying "Well, it really depends on the situation" (35). She then offers an answer defined by the particularities of relationships, by *which* others are involved and what responsibilities she has undertaken with them: "If you have responsibility with somebody else,[33] then you should keep it to a certain extent…if it is your responsibility to somebody really close to you, you've just got to decide in that situation which is more important, yourself or that person, and like I said, it really depends on what kind of person you are and how you feel about the other person or persons involved" (35-36). Amy's description of herself not wanting to let others down who are "counting on her" to do something seems less generalizable to an "injunction to respond"—let alone an injunction to respond with care—by this light. She describes particular relationships in which it means something for someone to be "counting on her," not a larger ethic of responding to and feeling responsible for others in general. Without specifying the context, Amy's understanding of the self—or, more properly, of *herself*, since this conception is also offered particularly—is thus hard to describe, let alone use as a basis from which to derive a general concept of responsibility in caring response.

Amy's interview suggests that in a "relational voice," each person is defined in and by the particular relationships in which he or she is situated. Her emphasis on context, specificity, and particularly, then, may actually be more generalizable than her descriptions of herself and her proclivities to help and respond. Indeed, offering such a substantial "conception of the self" for ethical thinking from Amy's interview seems a strange project, as Amy doesn't seem to have a conception of *the* self (as Jake appears to

[33] A gently moving phrase, and one of the most interesting in the text; that Amy's syntax here is unusual should make us question the usual construction, as I will discuss in the next chapter.

have, or at least to be developing), but many conceptions of self, potential self, and others' selves, constituted in ongoing relationships and marked by constant opportunities for redefinition. Thus when Gilligan writes that "to [Amy], responsibility signifies response, an extension rather than a limitation of action," it seems necessary to add that this signification is contextual, 'depending on the situation' instead of a larger rule of responsibility based on a broad understanding of the self and its relations to others (36). Similarly, when Gilligan writes that for Amy, responsibility means "doing what others are counting on her to do," it seems necessary to add that "others" refers to *particular* others who have and have had particular roles in her life and thus in her understanding of who counts as "counting on her," and what counts as what they are "counting on her to do." For the "relational voice," therefore, responsibility seems to be determined in and by the particularities of relationships, the conversations that continue through and from any given scene of address. In these ongoing conversations, needs and responsibilities can be discerned and debated such that one knows what others are "counting on one to do," and, significantly, one does not come to this conclusion oneself, but through continuous conversation, contestation, and renegotiation.

The importance of context, specificity, and particularity is not something Gilligan would disagree with; she actually argues for it herself in her early criticisms of abstraction in Kohlberg's research methods and developmental model. However, Gilligan obscures the dynamics that it implies in her articulation of a relational ethics defined by an injunction to respond with care. This injunction seems to override the process of negotiating what it means to care, or at least it seems to suggest that the answer will be relatively obvious, as in the Heinz dilemma, and need not be negotiated

except to render needs sufficiently "salient" to generate the obviously necessary response. But needs are rarely so well organized as in a researcher's dilemma, as I will discuss in the next chapter, nor are the responses they require so often as clear. Rather, needs are often complex and opaque, requiring similarly complex efforts to understand them and how best to respond to them. The "injunction to respond" seems to neglect this process by enjoining one to respond however one determines to be appropriate without an injunction to continue the conversation beyond that response, as Amy's testimony suggests: to listen, negotiate, reconsider, and thus develop norms of caring response *with* others, in and though our relations to them.

I will suggest in the next chapter that if we can reinterpret Gilligan's "injunction to respond" as an injunction to continue the conversation in and through any single response or scene of address, her development of the "relational voice" as we have seen it in this chapter could offer a significant reframing of ethical thought as it has been understood through individualist perspectives, a reframing that may form one of the greater contributions of a relational perspective and its attention to vulnerability. This reframing would fulfill the critique Gilligan seeks against Kohlberg's individualism more thoroughly than Gilligan does herself, as we will see. However, Gilligan misses this opportunity by ignoring Amy's emphasis on context and particularity, and the emphasis that it suggests in turn on the development of norms within relationships over time. More than missing an opportunity, actually, Gilligan's contraction of an ongoing conversation into an "injunction to respond" dangerously privileges the voice of the respondent at the expense, potentially, of other voices in the relationship. This potential exclusion of other voices paves a path toward domination in care, as I will argue, while also suggesting a

high degree of difficulty in both preventing this potential and defining it altogether. It is to these issues I now turn in Chapter Two.

Chapter Two

Vulnerability, Dependence, and Domination in Care: The Promise of an Ethics "Extending Over Time"

In the previous chapter, we saw Carol Gilligan's development of a "relational voice" into an ethics defined by an injunction to respond to others with care.[34] I suggested that while this responsiveness seems to honor the conception of constant connection expressed by the relational voice and modeled in Gilligan's analysis as the perpetual occupation of a scene of address, it captures the particularity of those connections and their continuation over time less clearly. A "relational voice" like Amy's seems to hold itself responsible to particular others, in particular relationships, with particular histories (and futures) in which needs, desires, and responsibilities to respond can be negotiated. Gilligan's "injunction to respond," however, seems to shorten the ongoing conversation into one exchange, or even the provision of only one line. In this chapter, I want to consider the effect of this contraction of ongoing relationships on the norms that guide them. I will suggest that it paves a dangerous path toward domination in care, which must be avoided by allowing a negotiation of norms within and around the relationship. However, such negotiations can be very difficult to enact in many contexts, requiring a broader consideration of the risk of domination and the role of "ongoing conversations" in relational ethics, as we will see.

---

[34] Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993 [1974]), 2. Hereafter in this chapter cited in text with page numbers only.

Through the analysis of these concerns, I want to argue that the potential for domination in care indicates a significant failure of Gilligan's critique of an individualist ethics of rights and due. Only minor corrections may be necessary to add protections against domination to Gilligan's account, but the problem emerges, I will suggest, from a larger mistake in her framing of relational ethics, a mistake that simultaneously blunts her critique of Kohlberg and the promise of a relational ethics developed from the voices she describes. The relational voice, as Gilligan writes, expresses its conception of itself in "a narrative of relationships that extends over time," in contrast to the individualist's emphasis on the inevitable end of relationships, thus sought as quickly and "impersonally" as possible to avoid their potential violence (28). The individualist's perspective is well represented, then, by an ethics framed as a series of problems to be solved, analogous to the encounters with others that require "solutions" to escape them unharmed. But when a relational ethics is framed in this way, it cuts off the necessary process of ongoing exchange and negotiation within the relationship that can both protect against domination in care and allow the development of even more fulfilling ways to respond to the other than might appear at any given moment. Gilligan's own description of "ongoing relationships…extend[ing] over time" thus might be productively recovered as a critical contribution of relational ethics, finally realizing its critique of individualism and suggesting the ethical promise of sustained and continuous vulnerability to others in relationships, as I will suggest. I begin, however, in the problem of domination in care itself, toward the development of this relational reframing of ethical thought and practice.

Domination in Care: Opacities, Impositions, and Ongoing Conversations

Communication of any kind, let alone verbal conversation, is not always possible in relationships, particularly those in which the need for care can seem most acute. Needs and desires are often opaque, their "salience" elusive not because of the caregiver's lack of interest or responsiveness but because they cannot be well expressed, understood, or discerned. The meaning of domination can then be similarly opaque. In a standard definition of domination, "One agent dominates another if and only if they have a certain power over that other, in particular a power of interference on an arbitrary basis."[35] But what counts as "arbitrary" in a caregiving relationship? Following the "injunction to respond," we might imagine that for Gilligan, power over the cared-for is exercised arbitrarily by the caregiver where it does not respond to the needs of the other. But that definition leaves a lot to be determined: What constitutes a need? What constitutes a response? How often are the answers to those questions reconsidered? Who gets to consider them? How and how often are needs assessed, so that care responds to present needs appropriately and non-arbitrarily?

Gilligan's ethics of care leaves these questions largely unanswered, and even unasked. More significantly—and more troublingly—Gilligan seems to leave their determination in the hands of the caregiver by emphasizing the importance of his or her response without specifying norms of how this response is determined, or any checks on

[35] Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). Pettit cites Max Weber as one of his sources for this definition. Weber's distinction between power over another and *arbitrary* power over another is a founding argument for many contemporary discussions of the term. Significantly for our concerns here, the distinction is often illustrated with examples of care: a parent has power over his or her child without dominating him or her insofar as it is exercised non-arbitrarily, as defined, for example, by accordance with norms of care and child-rearing. The parent's power over the child is not inherently problematic; what would be problematic is an arbitrary exertion of power, such as an inconsistent application of rules and punishments. See Weber, *Economy and Society* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978).

its determination by the caregiver. The caregiver seems to have the power of assessment, diagnosis, prescription, and the provision of care, in Gilligan's account, all encouraged and even justified by the "injunction to respond." But what if the caregiver poorly assesses the situation, mistaking the needs to which he or she must respond? What if the caregiver poorly determines what would constitute a good response? And what if the response doesn't work, isn't helpful, or is actively harmful, however well intentioned? All of these problems might emerge even where one seeks to "respond with care" actively and concertedly, and Gilligan's ethics seems to offer little help to correct them, because it offers only an injunction on the caregiver and not a means to correct his or her understanding through any other voice. This one-sidedness, I want to suggest, situates the caregiver in a position of being able to exercise his or her power arbitrarily under the banner of care, since care appears to be a matter of the caregiver's perception of need and determination of how to respond, ungoverned by other norms.

The potential for domination in care is illuminated by an example from Eva Feder Kittay's *Love's Labor,* a later contribution to care theory in which Kittay writes movingly of caring for her severely disabled daughter Sesha.[36] Much of Kittay's life with Sesha has been occupied not just with the work of caring for Sesha's needs, but with determining *how* to care: discerning what she needs, what she desires, what would allow her to lead a good life, what a good life means for Sesha and for those who love her, and how caring for Sesha can be a part of a good life for those she loves, as well. The need to respond to Sesha is abundantly salient—she cannot feed, clothe, clean, or toilet herself, among other readily apparent needs—but understanding how to respond is often much

[36] Eva Feder Kittay, *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality and Dependency* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

more complicated and less clear. Caring for Sesha is complicated not only because she requires considerable help to accomplish even minimal life-sustaining activities, but also because it is hard to know what more is needed, what needs a caregiver should provide for, and how best to provide for them. In this way, Kittay's account of her case illustrates the many questions that must be asked within and around a caregiving relationship, and that may be poorly served by an emphasis on the caregiver's *response*, when much of her work may be to *ask*.

As one of Sesha's primary caregivers, Kittay describes the painstaking development a rich understanding of what seems to bring Sesha joy and pain, feelings of being loved and cared for and feelings of neglect:

> As we try to feed her soul as well as her body, we look for activities that give her joy, activities that tap into her diverse pleasures and that will make her function as well as possible. She loves the water, so we arrange for her to 'go swimming.' Swimming in Sesha's case means walking in lap lanes—the only time she can walk independently without support, back and forth, providing her pleasure and exercise simultaneously. Music is a perpetual treat, so she has headphones and a Walkman that, incidentally, connect her to her teen contemporaries…[37]

Kittay describes all of these provisions as care. But these forms of care are not necessitated by her particular disability as it has been diagnosed, and as the needs of someone with her diagnosis have been defined by professional bodies. Any exercise that isn't harmful would be recommended; that it takes place in water, and allows Sesha to walk independently, is inessential. Music would be cast by many experts as extraneous. "Unlike physical therapy and speech therapy," Kittay writes, "swim and music therapies are considered luxuries and are not offered to her" by the "professional team" of experts who determine, officially, what is required for her care, and thus what is supported by

[37] Kittay, *Love's Labor*, 172.

health insurance, public schools, and other resources.[38] Developing an understanding of these activities as ways to care for Sesha—for her particularly, in her particular condition, and with her particular loves, pleasures, and joys—took years of trial and error defined through ongoing exchange, if not "conversation" in traditional verbal senses. After decades of caring for her daughter, Kittay has a reasonable belief that she knows what Sesha wants in her life as well as knowing what she, her caregiver, wants for her. But this knowledge is hard-won, and not even best described as a struggle with a winning or losing side. A complex negotiation of these aims, both what they are and how to achieve them, and of Kittay's own desires and needs and those of others in their family and network of relationships beyond it, must continue throughout their lives together, just as in any relationship there is a complex and ongoing conversation of what it means to engage that relationship well. Kittay writes of another caregiver's discovery that things should be done "Not my way, Sesha. *Your* way, slowly," a principle that seems to represent *flexibility* in who is in charge more than a new rule of Sesha's complete control. Sometimes the caregiver's way may be necessary, as Kittay describes, or different ways converge, change, and grow together.[39] Sometimes a caregiver doesn't know what "her way" is or should be without consulting her charge, and vice-versa. Even in this most extreme example of care and dependency, the relationship isn't defined by either party getting "their way," but by ongoing efforts to find *a* way, slowly, in which to be together.[40]

---

[38] Ibid., 172 and 171.
[39] Ibid., Chapter 6.
[40] Kittay doesn't make this point explicitly, and distracts from it with her use of the language of "your way" and "Sesha's way." However, her first-person account of life with her daughter offers numerous examples of trying to find a way together, when neither clearly knows what the right way might be. In the ethic she seeks to illustrate with this account, the role of uncertainty in determining, together, how best to care is less

Kittay describes a relationship with her daughter that is very much "ongoing," as Gilligan first articulates one of the critical differences between a relational and individualist view. Their interaction and exposure to one another "extends over time," with conflicts arising within it handled through its continuation, instead of by adjudicating its peaceful end. Kittay's argument centers on the claim that extreme dependencies like Sesha's cannot be supported by a society in which an individualist conception of moral and political life is pervasive because there is no peaceable adjudication of Sesha's needs without an ongoing relationship of care. A relational ethic is necessary, she argues, to respond to the dependencies that we all have at different times in our lives, and some have at all times.[41] But what she describes in her narrative of care for her daughter is not *a* response by which care is imposed. Rather, her narrative follows an ongoing relationship of communication, decision, and renegotation on a conversational model (if, again, nonverbal on her daughter's side) that includes her daughter, herself, and the network of people around them. Through this "ongoing narrative," they develop the many particularities of their responsibilities to and with each other, the sense of what it means for the other to be "counting on you," in Amy's words, that is dependent on context of this kind.

---

prominent, to the detriment of the account.

[41] Part of Kittay's argument here is that the extremity of Sesha's case must be paradigmatic, because the extrapolation from an extreme case is easy, while the extrapolation to an extreme case is often impossible. If we base social support for caregivers on less extreme cases—healthy pregnancies and infancy, for example—then we find ourselves at a loss to handle even mildly harder cases. The resources don't exist, the demands of caregiving are misunderstood, and the need for support is often radically underestimated. By taking the most extreme cases as paradigmatic, we are prepared to support them, and can then simply do less in less extreme cases. Moreover, the radical asymmetry of Sesha's need for care is extreme in its duration, but not its instance—all of us are born radically dependent in this way, and many of us will occupy radically dependent positions at various times in our lives. Starting from the extreme cases not only prepares us better for other, less extreme cases, it also accurately represents an inescapable condition of human life.

By contrast, the potential for domination can be seen in Kittay's account of Sesha's "professional team," and the determination by experts of the norms of her care. Experts assess Sesha's needs and then propose a caring response, but Sesha doesn't have the opportunity to show and teach them her response, in turn, to their care, nor do Kittay and other caregivers even always have the opportunity to explain how Sesha's care is a part of their lives, offering their response to the team's prescriptions. Thus the professionals' prescriptions for care often work poorly, or force Sesha into situations that seem more troubling than caring, as in the interaction that produced the principle of "your way, slowly" in which another long-term caregiver finds herself frustrating and hurting Sesha as she tries to get her to perform a recommended therapy. The expert who recommended the therapy assessed her needs and responded to them, but wasn't there to learn how Sesha responded in turn. Without an ongoing relationship with her, even the most well-informed, well-intentioned, expert responses can be more dominating than caring—or, most dangerously, are both, meant with the best intentions but dominating nonetheless.[42, 43]

[42] Kittay's testimony to these problems with "professional teams" indicates a bad way to care, not a problem with care by professional teams *per se*. Many professionals, including on the kinds of review committees to which she refers, are interested in precisely the kind of consultation and collaboration with the cared-for and long-term caregivers that Kittay's experiences indicate is necessary, and that I am promoting against the potential for domination in care. Many movements in medicine and social work over the past thirty years have aimed at precisely this kind of collaborative model, from the early conception of HMOs (if not their later incarnations) to more recent turns to health care collaboratives and patient advocacy programs that seek to transform a medical system based on professional *prescription* into a sustained conversation, developing an ongoing relationship among patients, their families and communities, clinicians, and social workers aimed at determining how best to care, and how to achieve mutually desired goals of health and well-being. Significantly, these initiatives seek to improve care (and avoid domination of the cared-for) not only by trying to turn a prescriptive encounter into an interaction, but also by extending encounters with professionals into ongoing relationships. Efforts to provide "continuity of care" in hospitals, for example, seek to move away from a Kohlbergian model of discrete encounters with professionals to a relational model in which caregivers and patients work together in (and on) an "ongoing narrative" of therapies, treatments, and support.

[43] This claim seems open to the objection that the professional's response is not offered arbitrarily, but in accordance with often excessively explicit, well-regulated guidelines for diagnosis, treatment, and therapy.

Others have raised concerns about the possibility of domination in care, Joan Tronto chief among them in her critical 1993 volume *Moral Boundaries*. For Tronto, care easily tends toward paternalism (or "maternalism") from otherwise productive feelings of closeness to and knowledge of its recipients and their needs.[44] Caregivers frequently have expertise or otherwise superior capacities to provide for the recipients of their care, and even if they don't initially, they likely come to some level of expertise through experience. The feeling that one comes to "know best" what one's dependents need and desire can overwhelm evidence to the contrary, and the inclination to look for it. Furthermore, such evidence can often be hard to find or see depending on the capacities of the dependent and the caregiver.[45] Kittay and others have confronted the latter issue in discussions of dependents' "opacity of needs," referring to situations in which the

---

But the threat of domination is not only that the professional would apply these guidelines arbitrarily, or that the guidelines themselves are somehow arbitrary—drawn from shoddy research, for instance, or applied inconsistently, though these problems may arise as well. The threat of domination, however, can run even deeper in the structure of interaction with the professional team. If the professional (and the professional apparatus behind them) has all the power to assess, diagnose, prescribe, and enforce compliance with treatment, he or she is in a position to apply that power arbitrarily with respect to the cared-for, and thus is in a position of domination over the cared-for (and, arguably, his or her network of loved ones and daily caregivers). Controversies over the imposition of treatment on patients who cannot speak for themselves, such as those on life support, reflect this potential for domination where the negotiation of what it means to care is not well structured, or it isn't clear who should be a part of it. See also note 30, below.

[44] Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 170.

[45] Tronto ties the problem to the attitudes of the caregiver, primarily: "Care is a response to a need; if people didn't have needs that they needed others to help them meet, there would be no care. Often care-givers have more competence and expertise in meeting the needs of those receiving care. The result is that caregivers may well come to see themselves as more capable of assessing the needs of care-receivers than are the care-receivers themselves.
This situation seems to arise out of the caring relationship itself on a concrete level; but we can also imagine that those who are attentive to certain needs begin to develop a sense of their own relative importance in solving a problem. Such a proprietary sense of being in charge is even more likely to occur among those who have assumed responsibility for some problem, who are taking care of a caring need. Thus, care-receivers are often infants or infantilized. Especially when the care-givers' sense of importance, duty, career, etc., are tied to their caring role, we can well imagine the development of relationships of profound inequality." Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, 170. I am more concerned about the structure of the ethics than caregivers' attitudes, and what might encourage or allow the caregiver to resist the idea that they "know best,"—and, perhaps more importantly, what means they have to ask or think with the recipient of care about the best course, or have other checks on their care that might prevent gross infantilization.

caregiver simply doesn't have very much information from the cared-for with which to determine what they need or want, and thus may force dependents into situations that they wouldn't choose for themselves—if that is the right standard, even, by which to judge domination in these cases.[46] Sesha's responsiveness to her long-term caregivers has given them a reasonable belief that their care is welcome, necessary, and appropriate, a belief confirmed not only by an ongoing relationship with Sesha but also with many others in the "network of relationships" in which she and her caregivers are embedded. But not all dependents are as responsive, and not all networks are as supportive, making needs and desires harder to discern and norms harder to negotiate. The potential for domination in care may then remain as a tragic dimension of some relationships, though

[46] See Kittay, *Love's Labor*, especially Chapter One. Two later articles, one by Kittay and another by Stacey Clifford Simplican, offer additional case studies and productive analyses of problems in determining what it means to care. In a 2011 article "Forever Small: The Strange Case of Ashley X," Kittay analyzes a complex treatment given to a severely disabled girl as she was reaching puberty to stunt her growth and development, keeping her "forever small" and child-like. Her parents pursued the treatment because they wanted to continue to care for their daughter (requiring physical labor that would become impossible for them to perform without professional help as she grew taller), and to protect her from the dangers of sexual exploitation by caregivers (an horrifically common crime), pregnancy as a result of abuse, and breast cancer. Kittay argues that the treatment improperly reduces Ashley to an object of care, represented by her parents' reference to her as their "pillow angel." In contrast, Kittay writes of her own care for her daughter that "we try to refrain from referring to Sesha as 'an angel' since that has the unfortunate side effect of edging her out of the human community. To love Sesha as she is, it is of critical importance to us that, unlike an angel, Sesha has a body, and unlike eternal beings, she does age. Especially because it is hard for many to recognize and acknowledge people whose lives are significantly different, we need to reiterate the unqualified humanity of people with serious cognitive disabilities" (613). Ashley's case offers a complex and compelling example of the potential for domination in care, even with good intentions, and the difficulty of determining what it would mean to care. For Ashley's parents, caring for their daughter means being able to lift her, bathe her, clothe her, and perform other physical tasks, in a way that justifies an intensive medical intervention in her development to make such care possible in the future. Ashley cannot express her own view of these interventions or norms of care; what she needs is determined entirely by her parents, doctors, and community, who lauded the treatment as a revolutionary advance in care. For Kittay, the treatment exacerbates the problem of Ashley's opacity of need by rendering her even less human than she may have seemed already, removing her further from the negotiation of how best to care. In a 2014 article "Care, Disability, and Violence: Theorizing Complex Dependency in Eva Kittay and Judith Butler," Stacey Clifford Simplican offers a significant analysis of caregivers' experiences being abused by their dependents—a case in which the complex exchange of vulnerability and dependence is set in relief by the stakes of the situation. See Eva Feder Kittay, "Forever Small: The Strange Case of Ashley X," *Hypatia* 26 (2011) and Stacey Clifford Simplican, "Care, Disability, and Violence: Theorizing Complex Dependency in Eva Kittay and Judith Butler," *Hypatia* 30 (2014).

its recognition might allow caregivers to try to minimize it wherever possible, as Kittay, Tronto, and others suggest.

Such discussions all seek to register problems symptomatic of the silence of the dependent's voice, or to describe his or her silence empirically as one of the problems faced by the caregiver. These are problems worthy of significant attention, and these authors have done much to aid in their understanding and open them for discussion. But they are relatively uncritical of the asymmetries of voice built into the ethics of care itself, which place the caregiver in a position to dominate the cared-for by giving the caregiver a first and final voice in the determination of what it means to care. By seeking to recover a voice of the caregiver, I want to suggest, the ethics of care has neglected the voice of the cared-for, exacerbating his or her vulnerability and rendering him or her dependent not only on the care of the other but on the caregiver's benevolence, good judgment, and perception of the dependent's needs. This asymmetry neglects the dynamics of relationships implied by the importance of context and particularity in Amy's testimony. It also reasserts a conception of ethics as a matter of guiding choices in dilemmas, instead of guiding life in and through an "ongoing narrative of relationships that extends over time." The former represents a larger problem in the structure of the ethics of care, as I will argue in the remainder of this section, while the latter suggests a promising means of its resolution, as I will suggest in the sections that follow.

We see in the example of Kittay's care for her daughter Sesha that relationships require an ongoing negotiation and continual reconsideration of how best to care, and what it means to care well. This dynamic is present and necessary even where there are no extreme needs on either side, and can be derived from the contextual structure of

responsibilities within relationships as well as a consideration of how to avoid the dominating the extremely dependent. Indeed, Amy's unusual construction "if you have responsibility *with* someone else" illustrates the dynamics of relationality in this way: in having responsibilities *to* another, we have undertaken responsibilities *with* another, in that we determine our responsibilities in relationships together, not through a singular assessment from one side of the others' needs, one's responsibility to meet them, and what counts as responding to them sufficiently and well. If we then return to the ongoing "demand" of response that Gilligan ascribes to Amy, we see that this demand emerges from imagining an ongoing connection *with* others and not a one-sided responsibility *to* them. There is a demand to act because the conversation continues. It is in the continuation of the conversation that norms of care are determined, lest care becomes an imposition on the other in a way that risks domination.

From her early discussion of Amy's interview, Gilligan seems likely to agree with this account of the dynamics of relationships and responsibilities forged within them. But in her articulation of the ethics of care as an ethic of *response*, she emphasizes only one moment of this dynamic, one voice in what appears elsewhere as a conversation, and elevates this voice singularly once again. The "injunction to act responsively" is defined as an injunction *on the individual*, an individual, no less, whom she wants to hear "speak for herself" (*ix*). For Gilligan, the concern is to reclaim this singular voice from its dissolution into her relations, such that she can be heard to have views that differ from those for whom she cares and to assert herself as another human being to whom she is responsive, and for whom she is responsible. But in the effort to hear this voice "speak for herself," Gilligan seems to return to a conception of ethics as a matter of guiding an

individual's choices, instead of more broadly redefining ethics in terms of how lives are developed within relationships. Put another way, she defines the ethics of care with a responsibility *to* others, instead of using the relational voice to define the undertaking of responsibilities *with* others, and then considering the effect of this definition on the structure of ethics itself, as I will discuss.

Gilligan's emphasis on response thus forecloses some of the productive space that she opens by moving too quickly from the ethical potential of relationships to an assertion of the self within them, in response to one's perception of others' needs. In this way, it retains some of the potential for violence that an ethic of individual rights seeks to defuse, but masks it as care—intended, at least, as a caring response to the other. It thus opens a path toward domination in care by privileging the caregiving voice as both the respondent and the assessor of how best to respond, an asymmetry that effectively silences the other in the relationship by giving him or her no role in the determination of how best to care, or even of what his or her needs are.

The Perspective of the Caregiver and the Perspective of the Vulnerable: Reconsidering Feminist Implications in the Ethics of Care

This structural problem in Gilligan's ethics of care recalls an aspect of the movement's larger feminist project, which we might now hear "in a different voice" as well. As discussed in the last chapter, the ethics of care looks to women as people who *care for* the vulnerable and dependent, attending to their needs and orienting themselves toward others to do so. "Women know" about vulnerability from this position, the argument goes, having responded to these conditions for generations and confronted their possibilities, challenges, and tragedies in ways that dominant individualist projects have sought to avoid. Insofar as women have been disproportionately vulnerable and

dependent themselves—reliant on men, for example, to provide for their material needs—these conditions derive from their roles as caregivers, not from inherently greater weakness, incapacity, or failures to emerge into independence.[47] Gilligan accounts for the disproportionate vulnerability and dependence of women as a result of their self-sacrifice in caring for others, following the demands of those in their "network of relations" instead of considering their own needs and desires as well. Kittay suggests that even where the caregiver considers herself within the network of people for whom she cares, caregiving is still demanding, engaging the interests, energy, and time of caregivers such that they "enter the competition for social goods with a handicap."[48] Occupied by fulfilling others' needs, women need help meeting their own. But the resulting dependencies should be associated with their caregiving roles and labor, these authors argue, not with some inherent insufficiency. Men would and do have similar vulnerabilities and needs in caregiving roles; they derive from the particularities of caregiving and not the particularities of the people who have been most often engaged in that role.

As this distinction suggests, we might also consider the association of women with vulnerability and dependence from women's experiences *in* these conditions, instead of responding to them. By such a view, "women know" about vulnerability and dependence because women have been disproportionately vulnerable and dependent: subject to violence; exploited; kept from earning money, possessing personal property, or other

[47] Note that I refer here to the *disproportionate* vulnerability of women, not the ordinary vulnerabilities that all human beings are seen to experience by this view. Women experience those vulnerabilities as any person will, these authors argue; the difference is that they also care for them in others, making their denial as ordinary conditions more difficult and their pursuit of life in public spheres defined by this denial more difficult in turn.

[48] Kittay, *Love's Labor*, *xi*.

means toward material self-sufficiency; and more. This suggestion must come with a similar array of disclaimers as those required by the ethics of care, of course, lest it simply reiterate the denigrations and justifications of oppressors: women appear disproportionately vulnerable and dependent as a result of the meaning we have given those words and the social structures that define them, not as a result of any innate or biologically determined weakness, insufficiency, or proclivity. Because of these definitions and traditional social structures, then, we might say that women offer different voices to conversations dominated by individualism and sovereign subjectivity because they have lived the lives individualists fear and seek to avoid, lives defined by vulnerability and dependence that cannot be overcome, despite substantial personal effort, insight, and capacity. This view need not ascribe inherent weakness or insufficiency to women either, as the disproportionate subjugation of women is ascribed, by definition, to social structures and other factors beyond their control. But having experienced conditions of sustained vulnerability and inescapable dependence, women have had to consider how to live, and live well, within them—while also negotiating when to struggle against them, in what ways, and to what extent.[49] As I will discuss in the next chapter, Judith Butler takes this approach in the wake of 9/11, suggesting that women generally and feminist thought in particular have faced for generations the questions faced supposedly anew by the United States at that time: "Negotiating a sudden and unprecedented vulnerability—what are the options? What are the long-term strategies? Women know this question well," she writes, and "have known it in nearly all

[49] One of the most compelling developments of this idea is in Womanist theology, arguing for the insight of the experience of women of color on these grounds. Womanist theology has been regularly engaged with the ethics of care throughout their (largely overlapping) histories. See Emilie M. Townes, *Breaking the Fine Rain of Death: African-American Health Issues and a Womanist Ethic of Care* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006). Regretfully, I am not able to attend to these discussions more fully here.

times."[50] Adriana Cavarero and Sarah Coakley have similar interests in this perspective and its reclamation from prejudicial ascriptions of feminine weakness, as we will see. Instead of recovering the lives and voices of women primarily in caregiving roles, Butler, Cavarero, and Coakley all turn, at least in some portions of their work, to women's experience in and association with the role of the cared-for. Interestingly, the roles of caregiver and cared-for begin to appear less distinct, in certain ways, from this perspective, a feature that I will explore further in the chapters to come.

In very different ways, therefore, Gilligan, Butler, Cavarero, and Coakley each turn to the traditional roles and experiences of women in order to normalize vulnerability against its denial. Each looks to conditions and domains traditionally attended by women to find practices and ways of thinking that might guide ethics and politics proceeding from vulnerability's acceptance instead of ideals of its escape. And each sets vulnerability as the fulcrum of her critique of sovereign subjectivity, as well as the foundation, from the same position, of the imperatives that should define ethical and political life. But are these projects—so similar in many ways—affected by their assumptions of different perspectives, with Gilligan beginning from the perspective of the caregiver and the others the perspective of the vulnerable? Does a distinction between these roles hold through their critiques of sovereign subjectivity, and their constructions of a new, relational ethics in its place? Does this distinction interfere with the relational conception of the self that each develops in place of the sovereign subject? Does a relational self occupy these positions discretely, simultaneously, dynamically, or

[50] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 42. I do not mention this passage to endorse it, even as I endorse the perspective of the vulnerable as the more productive starting point in ethics and politics.

otherwise? Should a relational ethics consider a person's position in and movement between these roles?

Directed toward Butler, Cavarero, and Coakley, of course, these questions are premature, but I pose them here because we might now begin to see how they arise in and from the potential for domination in Gilligan's work, and thus lead us into the discussion of vulnerability to come in the following chapters. The potential for domination in care suggests the unusual grammar of the phrase at the center of these questions, "the relational *self*," a phrase native to Gilligan's work as well as Butler's and Cavarero's. What does it mean to describe a relational *self*, and not simply the relationships in which such a person is constituted? What does it mean to develop, as Gilligan aims, an ethics from his or her voice? Gilligan defines the relational self as one oriented toward others, conceiving of him- or herself through the relationships in which he or she is situated and engaged. But this voice should be heard to "speak for herself," Gilligan argues, even and perhaps especially in "matter[s] of complex relation" (*ix*). What does it mean for one voice to decide on a matter of relation? Does it constitute a withdrawal from the relation, at least for the moment of decision? Does it mean that one has decided for the other, imposing one's decision on him or her? What opportunities are left for the other to reply, negotiate, or to decide *with* the relational voice? Put another way, shouldn't the relational voice always be in conversation? Should relational ethics then be described by conversation, and not by a singular voice?[51]

[51] The prominence of decisions on abortion in Gilligan's analysis of decision-making makes what I call here an "unusual grammar" particularly stark, and particularly strange. It should be surprising, I want to argue, that one of the three central studies in a book developing a "relational voice" is a study of choices to terminate pregnancies. This is surprising not because abortion might seem, to some, to be a choice *against* a relationship with the child to come, but because women's right to choose, in Gilligan's description of it, seems to belong precisely to the individualist ethics that Gilligan first critiques, and then incorporates as the

The stakes of these questions are high, as we have seen already. On one side, as Gilligan argues, recovering a relational voice that "speaks for herself" is necessary against the notion that a voice defined by relationships has no voice, judgment, or self of its own, or should not express them out of devotion to her relations. Gilligan names this problem that of the "Angel in the House," a reference to Coventry's classic poem of the virtuous Victorian woman who speaks only as a vessel for the husband and children for whom she cares (*x*). Coakley describes a similar problem as one of self-effacement, associated, as we will see in chapter four, with Christian valorizations of vulnerability.[52] But while for Coakley the solution comes in rendering oneself vulnerable to a greater and non-dominative power, for Gilligan it comes in reasserting the self as one among the "network of relationships" by which one is defined.[53] The relational voice then "speaks for herself" and not merely for others, though her speech expresses a relational understanding of herself, instead of an understanding of the self originally and ideally alone, as in the voices expressing an individualist perspective.

---

dialectical partner to an ethics of care—it is a *right* to choose, over and even against others, not in relation with them. Regretfully, I cannot address this matter further here, though it deserves much more consideration than it has received thus far in responses to Gilligan's work.

[52] Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy, and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002). See especially the Prologue and Chapter One.

[53] There are ways in which these approaches can seem relatively similar: Coakley is describing vulnerability and submission to a loving God, and thus the recognition of oneself in relation, or potential relation, with God, while also recognizing that relation as the most important thread of the "network" by which one is defined. In this sense, the process Coakley describes might be understood as a version of recognizing the self as part of one's network of relationships. However, the self recognized is more fully transformed by the relationship with God than Gilligan's self is (or should be, Gilligan argues) transformed by her relations. For a Christian feminist reply to the problem of self-abnegation that more closely aligns with Gilligan's view, see Barbara Hilkert Andolsen, "Agape in Feminist Ethics," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* Vol. 9, No. 1 (Spring 1981): 69-83. Andolsen argues that the Christian emphasis on self-sacrifice has poorly served women who, unlike men, "have a tendency to give themselves over to others to such an extent that they lose themselves." In light of this tendency, she argues, "The virtues which theologians should be urging upon women as women are autonomy and self-realization. What many male theologians are offering instead is a one-sided call to a self-sacrifice which may ironically reinforce women's sins" (74). The virtues of "autonomy and self-realization" in Andolsen's account, however, are informed by Christian agape understood as mutuality, in a way that brings them closer to Gilligan's idea of recognizing the self in relations than to either a sovereign subjective conception of autonomy or Coakley's conception of cultivated vulnerability and submission to God.

The recovery of this relational voice against ideals of self-sacrificial feminine virtue is an important part of Gilligan's project, as we have seen, and of the relational voice itself, by her account, which matures into its highest stages of development by discovering the violence of sacrificing itself in the effort to care. But defining a relational ethic by listening to this voice "speak for herself" and decide on "complex matters of relation" has its own potentials for violence against the others in those relations. The voices of others can already be hard to hear, often especially in situations where others' needs and vulnerabilities most demand caring response. Caregiving thus seems fraught with opportunities for domination by even the most well-intentioned caregivers, and the structure of Gilligan's ethics exacerbates these potentials instead of offering an imperative to address them. In this way, the threat of domination in caregiving blunts the critique of sovereign subjectivity entailed in Gilligan's argument by the relational voice, indicating a need to go even further beyond it.

I have looked to Gilligan to identify these problems toward the discussions to come, but I also find hints of their solution in her initial criticism of Kohlberg's individualism, prior to its sedimentation into an ethical imperative to care.[54] In these early arguments, Gilligan describes relationships as domains in which silences can be heard anew, but then forecloses this space, as I have suggested, with the elevation of a "relational voice" singularly once again. In the next section, I want to return to the relationships in which she first confronts the silence of the caregiver and listen once more, as she might say, for the voices of the cared-for—or perhaps for the opportunities of silence itself, neither foreclosing nor requiring particular replies. I will argue that the condition of

[54] I borrow the language of a "sedimentation" from Bonnie Honig, as discussed below.

vulnerability in particular, as it frames the continuation of relationships extending over time, offers considerable promise for ethical and political thought, but not in the way that Gilligan has construed it to *demand* care in response, directly and without further negotiation within the relationship. It is in the assumption of this demand that the ethics of care tends toward domination, while also foreclosing the promise of its critique of individualism in ways that would be well recovered in turn.

Beyond Gilligan: Relational Ethics to "Extend Over Time"

I find a suggestion of how to escape the problematic asymmetries of Gilligan's ethics of care by returning to her early arguments against Kohlberg, with which we began in the first chapter. In particular, I want to return to her rejection of Kohlberg's construction of ethical inquiry as a series of problems to be solved, emerging in discrete and almost momentary encounters with others—run-ins instead of relationships, or even substantially sustained dialogue. In the individualist view, Gilligan suggests, relationships and interactions with others of any kind are well represented by a paradigm of *encounter* because relationships are understood to be marching toward an end, best achieved quickly. Encounters are well represented in turn by problems like the Heinz dilemma, in which an encounter (or potential encounter) between persons can be represented as an encounter of claims, and then "solved" through the adjudication of their conflict. By contrast, Gilligan suggests that an ethic defined by relationships is not well conceived as a series of problems requiring response because it doesn't refer to a series of discrete encounters, but to "a narrative of relationships that extends over time" (28). It is in this reconception of ethics over time that Gilligan's work offers the promise of a

relational view for ethical and political thought, I want to suggest, not in the "injunction to act responsively" with which she ultimately defines the ethics of care (149).

We can see this promise by asking again, echoing Gilligan, what role the design of the interviews plays in the ethics derived from them. Does the path to domination in care in Gilligan's ethics emerge from how the questions are posed, as the domination of women's voices emerged from the Kohlberg's experiments? The interviews are structured around problems and dilemmas, discrete scenes representing one moment of encounter or potential encounter in which certain outcomes might be maximized and others minimized. The participants' conceptions of self, other, relationship, and responsibility are drawn from their consideration of which values to maximize and minimize, and why. Gilligan's innovation is to include a consideration of *how* they propose to maximize or minimize the relevant values, incorporating voices like Amy's that are interested in *how* rather than *whether* to act. This consideration introduces some new parameters into the problem, but the form of the question remains the same, I want to suggest, presenting a "math problem with humans" even if Gilligan suggests means other than the particular math of rights and due with which to find the solution.

The means that Gilligan proposes as an ethics of care are significantly different from the calculus of rights and due, and could guide action through a relationship that is conceived as much more than a series of encounters. However, Gilligan doesn't quite overcome the framing of ethics in this way, reinforcing it instead in her emphasis on response to need. We might then reinterpret the potential for domination in care by this light: it emerges from the effort to "solve" the problem of need, responding to others in this sense, instead of engaging them in an ongoing "narrative of relationships that extends

over time" marked by dialogue, exchange, trail and error, negotiation, and opportunities for recourse. Care tends toward domination when the caregiver imposes the "solution" to the needs of the cared-for without any opportunity for critique, treating his or her needs as a dilemma to be solved with an internal logic or nature that might be unimpeachably deduced, and then addressed through responsive action. Needs, of course, rarely present in this way, as Sesha's case exemplifies, and are rarely well addressed with this sort of reply. Even in Sesha's situation of extreme dependency, it is often unclear what exactly she needs, what would best fulfill her needs, and how best to respond to the challenges she appears to face and to present to her caregivers. The "answer" is discerned over time, but is also always changing as time extends, eluding its status as an "answer" and transforming it instead into the substance of the relationship itself. The mistake available to a caregiver is to understand Sesha's needs as problems requiring an answer, such that the answer, once discerned, can be simply enacted. Kittay emphasizes in her narrative that enacting an "answer" of how to care is rarely simple, and usually requires substantial redevelopment of the plan along the way. If a caregiver tries to follow any plan as originally devised, in response to Sesha's needs as they appear at a given moment, he or she may find that it becomes an imposition on Sesha instead of care, and may even come to hurt her more than helping her or fostering a stronger relationship with her.

The path to domination in care begins here: from understanding care as a problem of "solving" dilemmas of need, following an injunction to respond as needs present in a moment, as one *encounters* them, instead of in and through relationships that develop over time. I think that Gilligan would agree with this assessment, and I want to emphasize that the roots of a non-dominative relational ethics are well articulated on

these grounds in her own description of relationships 'extending over time,' and the reformulation of ethics that this extended, ongoing narrative requires. However, this point is obscured in her development of the ethics of care as a responsive ethic, in which responses to specific scenes, problems, and dilemmas are emphasized once again.

Bonnie Honig pursues a similar line of critique against Gilligan's understanding of problems and dilemmas. "Dilemmas," Honig writes, "are unsettling because they expose the remainders of systems, calling attention to the moments of incoherence that mark moral and political orders."[55] But in the moral domain defined by Kohlberg's experiments and adopted by Gilligan in form, at least, with surprisingly little critique, dilemmas *organize* systems, rendering them coherent to expose the appropriate response or at least the opportunity for reply. Complex networks of desire, vulnerability, inclination, and ignorance are formulated as dilemmas that pose relatively simple questions ready for relatively simple answers. Women and girls understand the questions posed somewhat differently than their male counterparts, Gilligan contends, but she doesn't use their understanding to contest the role of dilemmas in her research more broadly. Rather, she embraces it in her articulation of the ethics of care, in which the complexities of relationships are organized in turn as needs presenting opportunities for responsive action. The challenge of motivating that action, and of strengthening relationships generally, can then be organized as the effort to render needs sufficiently "salient." The ethics of care then guides appropriate action with its "injunction to act responsively," where the individualist can offer only "the paralyzing injunction not to hurt" (149). But this injunction seems to reduce myriad sensitivities to and orientations

[55] Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Cornell, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 208.

toward others to *action in response*, returning the ethical frame once again to a momentary encounter that presents a problem in need of solution, instead of reframing the discussion to extend over time, in ongoing relationships that are poorly represented by problems and dilemmas in this way.

Honig identifies the difficulty with this injunction in its provision of a new rule, leading to a restabilization of Kohlberg's ethic instead of its more thorough critique. Gilligan doesn't see dilemmas as exposures of "remainder," "incoherence," and a multitude of problems, people, and voices otherwise unheard, unseen, and potentially, tragically, insoluble, Honig suggests. Rather, Gilligan specifies *the* voice unheard and then offers its recovery as *the* solution to the problems she identifies in Kohlberg's work, an approach that she then builds into the ethics of care itself. "She tries to soothe the ruptures of dilemmas by developing new rules for them," Honig writes, such that "care turns from a lever of critique into a constraining norm."[56] This "sedimentation" is apparent both at the level of her feminist critique of Kohlberg, as Honig argues, and within the ethic of care itself, as I want to suggest, which similarly mistakes the place and meaning of dilemmas in a "narrative of relationships that extends over time."

Honig argues that as a critique of Kohlberg's ethic of rights and its exclusion of women's voices, "care sediments into a feminine mode of thinking and acting, a women's way of knowing, and the sedimentation generates a range of identitarian and normalizing pressures that discipline both men and women into their gendered subjectivities," as discussed in the first section of this chapter.[57] Gilligan's account "opens some space for difference" by incorporating (some) women where they were

[56] Honig, *Political Theory,* 208 and 207.
[57] Ibid., 207.

previously ignored, "but it maintains itself by closing off others," Honig writes, such as "the more multiple and complicating differences of class, race, or religion" and "the undecidabilities they organize."[58] While identifying a problem of exclusion in Kohlberg's ethic, therefore, Gilligan recreates the problem in her own by incorporating only some new voices and then closing the conversation once again, instead of leaving it open for further inclusions.

This criticism of Gilligan's project can be extended into the ethic itself, a project that Honig might be read to begin with her identification of Gilligan's difficulty recognizing tragedy. Not all conflicts have solutions, as tragedy classically depicts. Choices made in such situations leave much behind, or to be desired; there is no choice that will resolve the tragedy, by definition. Honig argues that "the impossibility of remainderless choices" in this sense is present throughout Gilligan's work in her subjects' expressions of guilt, which Gilligan ascribes to the pressures of feminine virtue.[59] Women feel guilty throughout Gilligan's research, expressing the feeling almost constantly in forms of regret, indecision, and unhappiness at the decisions they've made or have had to make. Honig suggests that these women feel guilty because they recognize tragedy in ways that Gilligan does not. They see that many choices require choosing *against* something else, and that "you'll never know what would happen if you went the other way," as Honig quotes from Amy's interview.[60] Every relationship requires some sacrifice of other relationships, and potentially of the self; every action takes up time and space that might have been used differently, and perhaps better; every choice requires giving something up, leaving something behind, a path not taken and

[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid.

likely never known that may have been preferable in some meaningful way. Understood by this light, guilt recognizes tragedy and the impossibility of complete resolution. But Gilligan "preserves and stabilizes guilt as an ethical, moral response," Honig argues, "transforming it from a symptom of the ethic of rights' incoherences to a sign of moral maturity and competence."[61]

In Kohlberg's ethic of rationally calculated individual rights, guilt indicates a failure to accept the rationally justified solution to a given dilemma. Women's feelings of guilt appear through his lens as a clinging to desires that justice requires them to abandon, or at least as indecisiveness, immaturity, or sentimentalism in the face of logical outcomes. The woman who feels guilty for making one decision rather than another has too little confidence in reason, or perhaps in her own reason, rendering her guilt about the decision justifiable so long as it is directed toward her own irrationality and not any tragic dimensions of the decision itself. The rationally independent individual who solves his problems with abstract calculations doesn't feel guilty about them, but is confident in their truth and sufficiently mature not to cling to sentiments like guilt and regret in the face of reason.

For Gilligan, however, guilt indicates an understanding of personal responsibility and implication in the needs of others. If one takes oneself to be responsible to everyone else's needs, following the "injunction to act responsively," then a failure to respond, however unavoidable, should generate some kind of guilt. Gilligan mentions the tragic dimension of this situation by describing guilt as an indication that women view "moral dilemmas in terms of conflicting responsibilities," in which acting responsively might

[61] Ibid., 207-208.

require the relinquishment of other responsibilities that still belong to the individual and thus can and should generate a kind of guilt (105). But she emphasizes *responsibility* over its conflicts, soothing them with recognition and praise for *responsiveness* instead of encouraging any exploration of the tragedy they indicate. What is important to Gilligan is that these women feel themselves to be in a scene of address, such that their actions are meaningful as responses to others and a lack of action or inability to act is then regrettable. Gilligan's relational self feels guilty for not hearing the survey-taker on the street, unlike Kohlberg's individual who might simply be happy to have avoided an encounter, or at least can be satisfied by the argument that he didn't have time to answer the survey anyway. Gilligan's relational self feels guilty also for not having the time to answer the survey as she rushes to work, even if she had heard the question. Gilligan would praise these feelings of guilt as indications of her awareness of the address of the other and her responsibility to respond both to the other and to herself. For Gilligan, guilt marks the awareness that one is being addressed more than the tragedy of being unable to answer. The scene of address, moreover, is marked as a feminine scene, a gendered proclivity to respond that further obscures her subjects' recognition of tragedy. "Wrapping it in an intricate layering of care, narrative, connection, contextualism, responsibility, and femininity," Honig writes, "Gilligan preserves and stabilizes guilt as an ethical, moral response," closing the possibility that it indicates something other than resolution through personal responsibility.[62]

Honig is a theorist of agonism, interested in "a politics that contests closure" of precisely this kind: the closure of critique, discussion, tragedy, and rupture; the denial of

[62] Ibid.

remainders; and the instatement of new rules, the indications of which are supposed to be accepted as full resolutions to the situations they address.[63] She remains focused in her criticisms of Gilligan on these dimensions of closure in the account, her vision of resolution in the face of tragedy, and her apparent belief in the possibility of "remainderless choices." These are important arguments against Gilligan's work, and they offer another productive perspective on the potential for domination in care. With the proposal of another closed system of rules, newly incorporating only some voices but not others, how would someone identify further differences, such as differences in ideas of the norms of care and what constitutes an appropriate caring response? Gilligan provides one way to criticize a caring response with her interest in the domination of the caregiver, first as a result of individualist norms and then within the self-sacrificial predilections of caregiving itself, reinforced by gender norms. She then encourages an incorporation of the self into the network of people to whom one is responsible, but this "new rule" only addresses some forms of potential domination, or in Honig's language, some remainders from Kohlberg's system. "If the goal is to empower the remainders of the system," however, "then the binary of care and rights must itself be overcome in turn," Honig argues. "Once these levers of critique sediment into norms, they engender remainders of their own, and the only way to remain sensitive to that process is by switching perspectives and positionings yet again."[64] Honig suggests that Gilligan might start by "return[ing] to ask what care looks like from the perspective of rights," a question that might indicate the potential for domination of the cared-for as a remainder that seems especially hard to incorporate into Gilligan's account. The desires and assertions of the

[63] Ibid., 208.
[64] Ibid.

cared-for are likely limited by many forms of care, sometimes inescapably and sometimes inappropriately. A simple assertion of dependents' rights against care in the "dialectic" of the two ethics that Gilligan proposes might not be possible, or might not fully portray the situation.[65] If the cared-for cannot express his or her desires, for instance, it might be difficult to pursue a dialectic of rights and care, but care shouldn't then overtake his or her rights by default—a new dilemma that is hard to consider in Gilligan's restabilized, closed system, as Honig's argument suggests.

But I find glimmers of a "politics that contests closure" in Gilligan's initial critique of Kohlberg's ethic, where she identifies a problem with the construction of ethics as a series of dilemmas in its misrepresentation of the temporality of relationships. Apart from the problems with tragedy and remainder that Honig identifies, dilemmas might well express an experience of relationships as a series of encounters destined to fail, as they organize relationships into moments and scenes requiring only the right ending. But dilemmas distort a conception of relationships that "extend over time" because they restrict the possibilities of relationships to the scenes represented in the dilemma. As Amy looks to the future development of relationships for solutions to the Heinz dilemma, for example, she falls outside of Kohlberg's definition of the "moral domain" by seeking potentials beyond the given problem, and thus failing to reason through it. As Honig might put it, Amy contests the closure of the narrative in the moment of the dilemma, looking instead to a future that might hold innumerable possibilities for resolution, growth, inclusion, and more.

[65] Ibid.

Contesting the closure of *time* in this way also contests the closure of norms in both Gilligan's and Kohlberg's ethics. Each defines their ethics by norms that guide choices in dilemmas instead of the development of relationships over time. Gilligan's "injunction to act responsively," for example, is focused on response to need as it presents itself in particular scenes, not as it develops, changes, and continuously presents itself anew. Gilligan emphasizes that problems are solved in the ethic of care by making needs "more salient" in this sense—by making the potential respondent feel their demand more strongly, which may take time, but the time that it takes is primarily an extension of the scene as it originally appears, not clearly an account of development in which there is the possibility of reconsidering and reevaluating needs over time. The idea of making needs "more salient" suggests that the needs are already known and clearly defined, as in the Heinz dilemma where the wife's condition is diagnosed, treatment has been prescribed, and the result of not being treated by its course is specified. By framing the problem of responding to needs in this way—and relational ethics in this way as well—Gilligan's account overemphasizes the response to a particular presentation of needs, even when relationships might be better strengthened and extended by a further interrogation of each parties' needs and how best to care for them.

The potential for domination in care thus seems to emerge both from the emphasis on the caregiver's perspective at the expense of the voice of the cared-for and from the construction of the caregiver's perspective in a particular moment. Needs are easily misrepresented or misunderstood in any given scene or moment. Even the very sick can have better and worse days; knowing which days are better or worse representations of their ongoing condition requires an ongoing relationship with them, in which what counts

as a good or bad day can be discerned from the accumulation of evidence and a dialogue, of some kind, through which to understand it better. If Sesha appears before her professional team for assessment on a good day, smiling and seeming to enjoy everything and everyone around her without discomfort or distress, her team might have a very different assessment of how best to care than if they spent a week with her to see what discomforts arise and when, what happiness appears to arise and how, and otherwise developing a relationship with her beyond a moment of encounter and assessment. This relationship allows forms of exchange that make it more like a conversation than a monologue, and an understanding of potential within the relationship over time, where the brightest possibilities may lie. It may also encourage the kind of experimentation that has led Kittay to learn that Sesha enjoys music and swimming, and that these are among the best ways to care for her. And it creates a greater possibility for some kind of recourse for the cared-for, since care is not delivered in response to a momentary assessment: thus Sesha can assert "her way" against the result of a therapist's assessment and her long-term caregiver can adapt to it, discovering that the imposition of care seems here to be a form of domination, an unjustified exercise of power over her, necessary to renegotiate.

All of these negotiations, however, are dependent on the continuation of the conversation in the kind of "ongoing relationship" that Amy identifies as ethically promising—a relationship in which two people apparently at odds might "reach something," finding a path through the conflict that has arisen between them, if not a solution, sure to leave some remainder. In this way, Gilligan opens some space but then closes it quickly, trying to reassemble a normative architecture to soothe this opening instead of developing an ethic to describe and guide its extension. But it is in openness

and extension that a relational ethic bears much of its promise, as Amy's testimony suggests and as I will consider further in the next chapters.

In this chapter and the last, we have seen that Gilligan's rejection of an individualist ethics in the development of a "relational voice" becomes perilous where it emphasizes a response to problems formatted for an individualist's experience of relationships as encounters, instead of the experience of ongoing relationship that defines the relational voice in its initial description. The challenges that emerge from Gilligan's emphasis on response—particularly the potential for domination in care—suggest that the relational voice requires a broader reframing of ethics through the dynamics of relationships, learning from testimony like Amy's to look for potential in their development over time.

This is a vulnerable ethics, or even an ethics of vulnerability: it seeks ethical potential beyond the scene as it first presents itself, beyond what we know now of the interaction, in the hope that we can "reach something" and that there might be a way to guide this process even where we don't yet know what it will require or demand. It is an ethics that exposes itself to others' demands, norms, and conceptions of what ethics should be, how the process of "reaching something" should be conducted, and what counts as something having been reached. This is the ethics that Kittay exemplifies in her care for Sesha, in which not only the specific prescriptions but also the norms of care and the methods of determining them are constantly developing within the relationship and through the "network of relationships" in which Kittay and her daughter are embedded. It is also the ethics that Amy seems to express in her persistent efforts to communicate with the interviewer: an ethics that seeks sustained contact and exchange,

keeping relationships going and exacerbating her vulnerabilities within them by resisting the effort to stabilize the scene with its conclusion in a response, whether caring, isolating, or more violent.

As Amy discovers, openness to others is not always met with a similar inclination. Her interviewer seeks to end the relationship, in effect, by cutting off her answers and asking her for something more concise and to the point, at least as the point is defined by the existing interview questions. She resists, and then is judged to have less autonomy rather than more because of this resistance.[66] Her vulnerability to the other's response is thus realized neither in care nor precisely in the *vulnus*, the wound to which *vulnerability* refers, though the interviewer's rejection, misrecognition, and mischaracterization of her thought and efforts to communicate may appear as the latter to some onlookers (including Gilligan). Amy, however, seems more concerned by its realization altogether, and the way it is understood and posed by the interviewer as the end of the relationship. The interviewer's misrecognition hardly phases her, while the failure to communicate is frustrating and confusing, defying her want and willingness to continue the relationship through and beyond these conflicts. A relational ethics demands that we at least try to continue the conversation, or as Gilligan suggests, it is based on the idea that the conversation continues regardless of the conflicts that arise within it. These conflicts will simply become part of the transcript, incorporated into the relationships in which they arise and negotiated through that relationship as necessary, and as possible. The interviewer's misrecognition of her thought frustrates Amy because it frustrates her effort

[66] I am indebted to Bonnie Honig for this framing of the situation. Personal communication, July 8, 2015.

to continue the conversation in this way, cutting of a relationship she understands to be ongoing.

Conceiving of the conversation as always continuing in this way puts us each in a vulnerable position from which there is no simple escape through ending the relationship, or declaring it to have ended. Even when the other refuses to speak, or even if all parties refuse to speak, the scene of address is maintained, Gilligan suggests, and the silences are heard, in potentially devastating ways. We might imagine here the difficulty of disowning children, or cutting ties with parents or siblings. From Gilligan's relational perspective, these efforts can never be completed, because the relation continues even where its parties resist its continuation. I will always have parents even if I never speak to them again. My parents will always have children, even if they withdraw from our lives or want to escape all association with our actions. The silence between us would be part of the conversation, not the complete absence of a relationship. To varying degrees, Gilligan argues, this persistent continuation marks all relationships (though it is more easily seen in familial examples). The supposed end of any relationship is the beginning of its next stage, her argument suggests, a stage defined by the silence of one or both parties. Conceiving of relationships as ongoing in this way thus presents the opportunity to assimilate any conflicts into potentially stronger relationships, but it also *requires* their inclusion in the relationship even where there seems to be no promise of strength. This conception places us in positions of sustained and ongoing vulnerability, then, as there is no full and final escape from the impact of others on our lives—a thought that might make us more sympathetic to the individualist who seeks to avoid vulnerability altogether, though as even Kohlberg's individualist knows, it cannot be avoided entirely.

In the next chapter, I will turn to a different line of argument against individualism and sovereign subjectivity that considers this appeal of avoiding vulnerability, the temptation to seek its escape, and how efforts to avoid or escape its conditions present violent power dynamics of their own that recommend its reclamation—dynamics suggested by Kohlberg's individualism, but controlled and "defused" by self-limitation in the ethics of individual rights and justice that he promotes. In the work I will discuss, Adriana Cavarero and Judith Butler begin their considerations of subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality in scenes where violent actors haven't shown such restraint. In response, they ask whether an ethics that encourages paralysis and isolation to the one who wants to hurt and forms of violent retribution, toward "justice," where one has been hurt, is all we might learn from these scenes, or whether there aren't other lessons to be found within them, or in response to them. They each propose that by exposing vulnerabilities, these scenes reveal our constitution in connection with each other in ways that might form the "basis for community" instead of inspiring its escape.[67] Their arguments thus reclaim vulnerability from a different perspective, and with different motivations, than we have seen in Gilligan's work. Concerned with scenes of violence that destroy bodies and buildings, they focus on a more corporeal experience of vulnerability than the psychological, emotional, and rational vulnerability that seems most present in Gilligan's account.[68] They also approach it, in parts, from the perspective

[67] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 19.

[68] With many exceptions—in the studies on violent imagery and abortion in particular, bodies (and buildings, in Jake's interview) are very much at stake. But the kind of vulnerability that Kohlberg's ethics seeks to avoid and Gilligan's ethics seeks to exacerbate, productively, is described by Gilligan and Kohlberg on intellectual terms, with verbal metaphors. She talks about Amy's vulnerability to the interviewer's words and judgment, and "tough choices" in which the concern is about whether to tell the truth of how one feels, or what one has heard another person say. Cavarero and Butler talk about the exposure of the skin to violent blows, the threat of dismemberment by bomb blasts, and the destruction of bodies in war and terror attacks. The tenor is different, in response to different motivating scenes and also,

of the vulnerable more than that of the caregiver or respondent to vulnerability, both a potential caregiver or potential aggressor. Starting in vulnerability rather than assertions of care renders the roles of the caregiver and the cared-for somewhat more fluid, I will argue, in a way that offers an important next line in the conversation with Gilligan. But the imperatives of vulnerability in these extreme scenes also encourages a further neglect of the ongoing nature of relationships and relational ethics, requiring further lines in the dialogue—and different voices—in turn.

---

as we will see, different conceptions of sovereign subjectivity, or more precisely, different moments and views of the sovereign subject. While Gilligan considers a trajectory of development that includes some violence but comes into an ethic of self-restraint, Cavarero and Butler consider the moments of violence and the conceptions of subject that support them. They have much more in common than their motivating scenes and concerns might suggest, as I mean to argue by bringing them together in this work, but it would be unproductive to assimilate the kinds of violence they discuss too quickly.

Chapter Three

Relationality and Asymmetry: Dynamics of Vulnerability in Adriana Cavarero and Judith Butler

In the previous chapter, I made two claims against Carol Gilligan's conception of relationality that both referred to a kind of stillness or stability in her account. First, I argued that she neglects the dynamics of negotiating norms and responsibilities within relationships by emphasizing the *response* to need, as if self-evident, instead of the conversation surrounding how to respond. Second, I suggested that she neglects the continuation of these dynamics over time, in ongoing narratives of which little may be known from the current moment or arrangement of the scene. In these ways, Gilligan fails to undermine Kohlberg's association of moral maturity, safety, and security with paralysis and inaction in the name of respect for others' rights and due. While proposing an injunction to act, in care, she analyzes moral action as something that occurs in a discrete moment of encounter, instead of in an ongoing, temporally extending relationship. She thus fails to destabilize Kohlberg's individualist ethics in the way the women and girls of her studies suggest we should: by setting moral agents in motion, over time, with others, in ongoing relationships that cannot be reduced to a particular moment, conflict, dilemma, or scene.

As I criticize the lack of movement in Gilligan's account, however, I do not want to minimize the potential for danger borne alongside any promise of a relationship that extends over time. The hope to "reach something" may never be fulfilled, and even more

violent, devastating conflicts may emerge along the way. Negotiations over how best to care may break down into dominative assertions, or provide disappointing, inadequate, and harmful proposals where they continue. Even promising proposals may be executed poorly, or received poorly, in turn. When we open ourselves to others, we also open ourselves to being disappointed by them, and much worse. Thus as we continue, strengthen, and deepen connections over time, we become increasingly vulnerable to these failures. The more we count on someone, the more we are affected by their failures to do what we were counting on them to do; the more we care for and about someone, the more we are affected by their receipt of our care, and its impact on them. The more we entangle our lives with others, the more weight we put on the connecting threads, and thus the more we recoil when one snaps, breaks, or slackens.

An ethics that seeks possibility in the continuation of relationships over time must acknowledge that not all possibilities are appealing, or even innocuous. It must also consider how the anticipation of possibilities—particularly those less appealing, and less innocuous—propels our actions, for better and for worse, and how it should. It is the anticipation of disappointment and harm in relationships, for example, that propels Kohlberg's individual to avoid sustained interactions and to seek the peaceful end of any encounter as quickly as possible—and according to Kohlberg's ethics, this is the right response to anticipations of conflict. It is the anticipation of being able to "reach something," however, that seems to propel Amy, one of the subjects of Gilligan's studies who expresses the "relational voice" identified with an ethic of care, to pursue further communication, connection, and exposure to others in relationships. From these examples we might derive a very simple description of the role of anticipation at work: If

we fear what will come of the continuation of the scene, we will seek to end it. If we anticipate more positive developments (however we define them), we will seek its continuation. Anticipation propels our behavior in either case.

One of the significant insights of the ethics of care, however, is that the continuation of relationships need not be driven by such pursuits of the good, or of good outcomes—it is not an ethical account in that register. Indeed, as I have argued, overcoming the ethical structure of momentary encounters with ongoing narratives of relationship undermines the identification of a "solution" or "good outcome" altogether. In their place, the relational voice seems to express an understanding of *responsibility* for the continuation of relationships—one is enjoined to reply—and *acceptance*, perhaps, of the continuation of relationships as an inescapable part of human life. This isn't quite an ontological account of relationality, as we will see in this chapter, but an ethical and descriptive one, derived empirically and developed immanently. The authors of the ethics of care argue that part of what we see by attending to the lives of women in traditional caretaking roles is that relationships continue even without participants' interest in them, desire for them, or hope for what may be to come. We rely on their continuation because we rely on others' care for at least some parts of our lives. The responsibility to respond to others non-violently with care, moreover, can drive their continuation where they might otherwise flounder, often harmfully and hurtfully.

Anticipation, then, seems to play only a supporting role in a relational ethics, while playing a starring and decisive role in the individualist's view. As the individualist anticipates violence, conflict, and even simple disagreement, he seeks to escape the condition in which they are possible, rendering himself invulnerable to their emergence

and effects. For Judith Butler and Adriana Cavarero, it is this fantasy of invulnerability that most urgently demands ethical and political attention to the term and a reconsideration of its experience. Seeking to escape vulnerability propels some of the worst violence, they argue, as it takes an impossible end and derives means to achieve it that we can only wish were impossible. In this chapter, I will consider these dynamics through a discussion of Butler and Cavarero's accounts of the violence wrought by the ideal of invulnerability, and the possibility of reclaiming vulnerability as the basis of very different forms of action. Beginning from scenes in which violence waged by others fuels our anticipation of future violence, as well as scenes of preemptive violence justified by this anticipation, they ask whether there might be other actions such scenes could motivate. Is there a "basis for community in these conditions," Butler asks, besides a communal effort to strike back, or strike preemptively?[69] How might we reconsider vulnerability such that the responsibility to the vulnerable, or as the vulnerable, is not to attain invulnerability by fighting and defeating whatever threatens?

I will begin with a brief section on the conceptions of subjectivity that Cavarero and Butler take as their critical opponents, and then turn to Cavarero's account of relationality set against contemporary violence and the dynamics of vulnerability that it pursues. Cavarero looks to infancy as a paradigm of vulnerability with which to critique the paradigm of vulnerability in symmetrical warfare, which she argues governs the logic of sovereign subjectivity and anticipatory violence. Her account of the demanding asymmetry of the maternal scene is markedly similar to Gilligan's account of the "imperative to respond" in relational ethics, I will suggest, in which even a lack of

[69] Judith Butler, Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence (London: Verso, 2004), 19.

response constitutes a meaningful reply. In turning to the paradigm of infancy and maternal care, Cavarero then reiterates some the same potentials for domination in relationships that we saw in the ethics of care, blunting her critique of violent symmetries and sovereign subjectivity with the same strokes. Thus like Gilligan, as I will argue, Cavarero neglects some of the important potential in dynamic relationships by returning to another encounter as her ethical frame.

Butler breaks through this framing of encounters with a critical reflection on framing itself: what it limits, cuts off, arranges, and organizes. Frames cut off potentials and possibilities that may lie outside them, directing our anticipation in very particular ways. For Butler, then, both the scene of symmetrical warfare and the maternal scene constitute framings of interaction and relationship that require some critique, at least to identify what possibilities they are excluding beyond the frame, and what potentials within the frame they teach us to anticipate. Butler illustrates this point most explicitly in a discussion of the framing of war in photographs, from the blurry, green images captured through night vision goggles, to the (then-)banned photographs of the flag-draped caskets of dead soldiers, to the tableaus of torture at Abu Ghraib, arranged enthusiastically for the camera. However, I will focus my discussion on her earlier development of relationality and vulnerability in the context of mourning, an experience that frames our connection to others through the failure of this connection, she argues, and thus points beyond any paradigmatic frame. We learn how much we expect others' replies when we don't receive them after they have died, and we can no longer expect to receive them. This derivation of relationality offers a significant response to the way Gilligan and Cavarero frame encounters of vulnerability and care, I will suggest, and points to an important role

for vulnerability in ethical and political thought as an experience of *waiting*—one in which anticipation, action, and even community with others can play important roles in turn. But I will begin with a very different conception of vulnerability, in the ideals of sovereign subjectivity against which both Butler and Cavarero take aim.

*Symmetrical Encounters and the "*homo erectus*": Postures and Dynamics of Sovereign Subjectivity*

Cavarero and Butler begin their considerations of vulnerability with scenes of violence that they argue are fueled by efforts to secure invulnerability. To shore up American sovereignty after 9/11, for example, the United States waged fearsome campaigns of violence that ostensibly sought to prevent the next attack, aiming to achieve a kind of invulnerability. These efforts toward invulnerability are another product of the complex of ideas and ideals of sovereign subjectivity discussed in the first chapter, as I will outline further in this section.

As we saw in Kohlberg's model in the first chapter, the sovereign subject is not constituted in vulnerability to others but as an individual, ideally alone and in control of his life, liberty, and pursuits (of happiness or otherwise). Encountering others threatens his self-sovereignty, as they may interfere with his pursuits and self-assertions in a variety of ways, from the indirect interference of reaching for the same item on a store shelf to direct and even vindictive violence against the subject. This subject's vulnerability to being harmed in these ways—for any interference is a form of harm, to some degree, by these lights—is ideally minimized, suggesting an ideal of *invulnerability* stated more and less explicitly in different accounts. In Kohlberg, the ideal of invulnerability appears as the effort to minimize vulnerability as much as possible, limiting one's exposure to others and ending encounters with them quickly, and with

minimal contact. But regardless of the degree of idealization, invulnerability or the minimization of vulnerability governs the ethics of individual rights and justice, and the conception of the independent, autonomous subject on which it is based.

The subject of Kohlberg's ethics seeks invulnerability primarily through appeals to universal logic and the avoidance of interactions with others. In comparison to the scenes of violence and devastation that Cavarero and Butler consider, the means to invulnerability in the dilemmas Kohlberg presents seem relatively innocuous. Kohlberg's morally mature individuals follow an elaborated version (perhaps ironically) of the mother's advice to "just ignore" people who irritate, bully, or simply interfere, and to try to pre-empt the more harmful effects of such encounters by ending them peacefully and quickly. The end is invulnerability to the undue interference of others, including potential violence, and the means are separation, isolation, and a kind of paralysis, as we have seen: to ignore, avoid, or disengage from others; to restrain oneself from acting in ways that would interfere with them, and thus bring one into conflict; and to restrain from acting, or interacting, with others at all, as much as possible and particularly where violent possibilities loom.

This individualist ethic of self-restraint, however, seeks in part to correct more active and violent means toward invulnerability also encouraged by the ideals of sovereign subjectivity. An ethic of individual rights and justice like Kohlberg's, for example, is developed against the potential violence of interactions in which each party seeks invulnerability by defeating the other, eradicating their susceptibility to the other's blows by eliminating the means by which he can strike, or the person who may strike altogether. Such an active effort toward invulnerability casts inaction as irresponsible in

the face of the perception of one's vulnerability. It is also a restless, constant effort, as much as an ethic of care constantly propels action in response to others as well. Every encounter presents an opportunity for the other to strike, and thus requires a pre-emptive strike to secure oneself against the threat. Anticipating the other's strike generates a responsibility to secure oneself by immobilizing the other, instead of a responsibility to immobilize oneself to avoid the interaction. In the words of Thomas Hobbes, one of the great progenitors of this active view, "there is no way for man to secure himselfe, so reasonable, as Anticipation: that is, by force, or wiles, to master the persons of all men he can, so long till he see no other power great enough to endanger him."[70] With such anticipation, and the responsibility to act on it, "men have no pleasure (but on the contrary a great deale of griefe) in keeping company."[71] They seek isolation, but in lieu of complete isolation, they must fight and defeat whatever crosses their paths.[72] Indeed, they can secure isolation—and self-sovereignty—only by fighting and defeating potential threats, suggesting that they might need to seek out encounters, wage battles, and start fights to find the peace of sovereignty in invulnerability.

Significantly, Hobbes's conception of the subject restlessly seeking secure sovereignty is predicated on a radical vision of equality, in which even "the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest" in a way that propels the "perpetuall and restlesse

[70] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 87-88.
[71] Ibid.
[72] These lines and the others I will quote from Hobbes in this chapter all refer to man in the State of Nature, not under the social contract. Like Kohlberg, Hobbes recognizes that the individual's violent tendencies and potentials need some kind of governing ethic or politic by which to restrain them. Instead of recommending individual self-restraint, however, as in Kohlberg, Hobbes argues for governance by the terrifying figure of the Leviathan, the State to which men have given up their individual rights in exchange for security. Thus Hobbes is a more relevant figure in the discussion of terroristic violence from multiple directions. But to clarify, as I refer to the "Hobbesian subject" in this chapter, I refer to his conception of the subject in the state of nature. As I refer to Kohlberg's subject, however, I refer to the "mature" subject who has these similarly violent, "natural" proclivities but seeks to restrain himself from expressing them.

desire of Power after power, that ceaseth only in Death."[73] There is no one sufficiently weak that I need not fear them at all; I can only *win* a fight, dominating the other, to achieve invulnerability. This idea of the equal ability to kill, and thus an equal vulnerability to others on this axis, implies an important symmetry in encounters with others, when they occur. I meet the other knowing that they are as able to kill me as I am them. Until one of us has defeated the other, either killing or dominating him or her, we must anticipate the other's strike at any moment. This uncomfortable state of anticipation then propels violence to determine its end, relieving the tension of the encounter by realizing either my vulnerability or his or hers.

Cavarero frames this symmetrical encounter as an "exquisite geometry [of postures]," a particularly vivid illustration of the dynamics of sovereign subjectivity at play.[74] Paradigmatically, she argues, as Hobbesian subjects we stand upright, facing each other, each one waiting for the other to strike, or striking to prevent the other from doing so. Whether we follow an ethic of self-restraint or strike violently for victory over the other, our postures, to start, are the same: two bodies, alike in their ability to kill, and poised to do so. To assume another posture would likely put one at a disadvantage, qualifying at best as a peaceful submission to the other's verticality. An inclination toward the other in care would be foreign to the geometry of the scene. Inclined toward the other, relinquishing the position from which one might readily strike, this posture is likely to be translated as surrender, if not taken simply as an opportunity to strike first, while defenses are down. Cavarero argues that the incongruence between the symmetrical encounter of sovereign subjects and the inescapable, life-constituting and

[73] Ibid., 87 and 70.
[74] Adriana Cavarero, "Recritude: Reflections on Postural Ontology," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 27, Number 3 (2013): 223.

life–sustaining inclinations of the mother in care suggest both the extreme horror of violence that seizes on vulnerability (which, by definition, all violence does), and the incoherence of the symmetrical encounter as a paradigm of interaction in relationship. I will discuss the latter first, in the next section, before turning in the following section to her critique of sovereignty in terms of violence against the vulnerable.

Radical Asymmetry and the Mother Inclined: Postures and Dynamics of Relationality

In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German philosophy, the concept of "inclination" was largely a matter of taste. It referred to proclivities, preferences, and pleasures taken in one thing and not another, which stood as important points in the debate over the nature of the Enlightenment's rational individual and the role of society in his constitution. For Kant, inclinations belonged to the realms of desire and habit, and the dimensions of them that are nearly animal instead of reasoned and cultivated according to the capacities of human beings. They are the sorts of inner necessities that are disgusting to our humanity, which seeks to abandon them toward a fully rational life.[75] Romantic philosophers replied to such views by finding inclinations to be less signs of animality and a lack of cultivation than of cracks in the full and sealed autonomy of the capacity to reason. In Johann Gottfried Herder's 1766 essay *On the Change of Taste*, the diversity of inclinations is posed first as a threat to our confidence in reason, and then as a sign of its social constitution, and ours: "As soon as it is shown that what I on the basis of reasons take to be true, beautiful, good, pleasant can likewise on the basis

[75] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. and ed. Mary Gregor and Jens Timmerman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). Kant's discussion of inclination is developed throughout the book, as he draws the metaphysics of morals—the preliminary work of the science of philosophy—in contrast to the inclinations with which we are ordinarily, and naturally, motivated to act. The core of this argument is made in the preface and section one, pp. 3-20.

of reasons be regarded by another as false, ugly, bad, unpleasant, then truth, beauty, and moral value is a phantom that appears to each person in another way, in another shape: a true *Proteus* who by means of a magic mirror ever changes, and never shows himself the same."[76] Herder brings this Proteus to land, situating truth, beauty, and moral value in national contexts by tying our inclinations and tastes—now defined more broadly to include some of what determines our standards of reason, as suggested in the passage above—to the country in which we were raised and now reside, the society we have occupied in that country, and even the most local influences of our family and close companions. "The good mother" herself, Herder writes, is the source of many of our most closely held inclinations, the prejudices and dispositions with which we determine what counts as good, what is true, and in what we will find happiness.[77] In Herder's account, mothers are our first philosophy teachers, because philosophy is closer to maternal guidance than Enlightenment thinkers like Descartes or Kant might have us believe. Before any meditations on consciousness or derivations of duty from the philosopher's chair, our mothers' inclinations become ours, moving us toward certain ideals and away from others, and teaching us the words with which we will speak and thus the concepts with which we will think, reason, and believe.

A different picture of maternal inclination has played a significant role in twentieth and twenty-first century philosophy toward similar ends, of which we have seen one example in the ethics of care. The physical inclination of the mother toward her infant in care has been used to represent a rejection of sovereign subjectivity, autonomy, and

---

[76] Johann Gottfried Herder. "On the Change of Taste (1766)," in *Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. Michael N. Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 247.
[77] Johann Gottfried Herder. "This Too a Philosophy of History for the Formation of Humanity (1774)," in *Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. Michael N. Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 297.

independence under the term relationality, referring to the subject as constituted in and by relations with others. From Emmanuel Levinas and Hannah Arendt to the ethics of care to Butler and Cavarero, these projects frame the scene of mother and infant as an alternative to scenes of idealized self-sufficiency and autonomy, and the actions and behaviors undertaken in pursuit of such ideals. The mother inclined in care stands (or bends) in sharp contrast to the "*homo erectus*," as Cavarero names him, the self-sovereign, self-sufficient, self-legislating human being held up elsewhere as an exemplar, often to ill effect.[78] While the "*homo erectus*" stands upright and alone in his ideal configuration, and may fight to achieve the position, the maternal geometry posits relation in multiple postures: the mother inclined, the infant laid out in radical exposure, completely dependent on the mother's response, and the work of response that follows, the lifting, feeding, rocking, washing, and so on.

Important to the use of this scene in reply to the idealized "I" is its asymmetry. The mother inclines toward the infant lying down, unable even to hold up his or her own head. On this horizontal plane, the child is utterly helpless, unable to flee from danger let alone capable of fighting in self-defense. His or her complete exposure in this way constitutes the child's radical vulnerability and dependence, two terms that define the relational view: Radical vulnerability and dependence necessitate response, the argument goes, since they define even unresponsiveness as a response to the other. To ignore the infant's cries isn't a neutral act, but a violent reply. To care for the infant is the only non-violent behavior; there is no neutral or static form of co-existence without responsive engagement of the relationship. The argument for responsiveness in Gilligan is thus

[78] Cavarero, "Recritude," 220.

intensified, both in Cavarero and in later iterations of the ethics of care, including Kittay's. Here, it is not just a sense of ongoing relation that eliminates the possibility of a "null response," in Cavarero's words, but the radical vulnerability of the infant, the fact that a lack of response would be an immediately violent reply.[79] In this way, the radical vulnerability of the infant makes one's inclinations toward or away from him or her immediately meaningful, and immediately ethical. These are no longer matters of taste and preference that disrupt our confidence in reason, but matters of obligation, imperative, and necessity that seem to precede its exercise and authority altogether.

Vulnerability emerges in these accounts, then, as the demanding condition that inaugurates and defines ethics and politics instead of embarrassing them where it cannot be overcome. But vulnerability in these scenes is ascribed completely to the infant, with ethics and politics following in response to this condition. What does this asymmetry do to the account, and for it? Many arguments for relationality emphasize that we almost all play both roles—mother and infant, caregiver and dependent—at some time in our lives, and so the picture of maternal inclination is a full one.[80] The maternal scene simply recovers the common experience of these roles as distinct—the frequent and normal asymmetry between people disregarded in the sovereign subject's presumption of symmetry in encounters, in which subjects are equal until proven otherwise and worthy of exploitation where thus proven more vulnerable, less powerful, and dependent on the

[79] Cavarero, "Inclining the Subject: Ethics, Alterity, and Natality," 200.
[80] See, for example, Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006), especially pp. 13-15, and Adriana Cavarero, *Horrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), especially pp. 21-32. Similarly, but with significant differences, we arguably play both roles constantly, as in Levinas's description of the encounter with the Other: as I encounter the Other, I play the responsive role, but I am passive in this role to his or her demand on me, resembling some of the passivity of the infant. Likewise, as I encounter another, he or she also encounters me as the Other, and so the roles reverse themselves. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1981), especially pp. 3-11.

other's mercy and care to survive. Arguments for relationality like those developed in the ethics of care generally seek first to recover these asymmetries of power, capability, and vulnerability as normal aspects of human experience, both ordinary and inescapable, and then render them *normative*, in that the asymmetry demands certain responses and not others. However, there are dangers in using a radically asymmetrical relationship of this kind as a paradigm in accounts that are meant to resist dominative arrangements of power, as I have suggested in the context of the ethics of care. How is the extent and nature of care determined such that it doesn't dominate the vulnerable itself, in the form of paternalism, over-protection, or otherwise? What recourse might there be if the response goes awry in these ways? Moreover, what resources does this picture offer to determine what it would mean to respond with care, beyond the admonition against violence?

In the ethics of care, the problem appears as an asymmetry of voice, a question of who gets to speak in the determination of the response to vulnerability and dependence. In these projects, as I have argued, the voice of the caregiver is recovered and revalued as ethically and politically praiseworthy at the expense of the voice of the vulnerable and dependent for whom they care, reinforcing the asymmetry of vulnerability and dependence with an asymmetry of voice and the possibility of critique. Though the ethics of care begins explicitly "in a different voice" meant to resist the dominating register of the sovereign subject, this voice is still a singular one, of the caregiver, not an exchange of voices in relation that might allow a negotiation of power and the possibility of criticism on the grounds of over-protection, paternalism, and other forms of domination in care. Insofar as this is a "relational voice," it is a voice that concerns itself

with relationships, but not one that seems itself in relation with others in the sense of being held to account, questioned, and effectively criticized by those it encounters.[81] Negotiations of "what it means to care" are undertaken by the caregiver herself, with other caregivers, perhaps, and with philosophers, psychologists, and others engaged in the ethics of care, but they do not seem to include the voices of the cared-for, and they are situated wholly outside of the scene of care.[82] Thus as the sovereign subject meets others and presumes symmetry in the encounter, requiring violent contest, the relational subject meets others and presumes asymmetry, requiring care. Both impose their way of relating on the person he or she encounters, even if the manner of relating differs substantially, and significantly.

The imposition of care instead of violence defeats an important problem in the symmetrical encounter: the need to contend for victorious isolation, to vanquish the one encountered toward individual sovereign power. However, it doesn't address other problems of the encounter, as the possibilities for domination in care suggest. It explains, normalizes, and even justifies mothers' inclinations by revealing the vulnerable and needy infants toward whom they incline, but it doesn't fully rescue the infant from domination in that condition, or offer norms that would identify domination in forms other than the violent strike or failure to respond. It rescues mothers from castigation and domination while inclined, in other words, but it ignores the full vulnerability of the infant even to forms of care, however well intentioned, that may be dominative, as discussed in Chapter Two. The distinctions here are fine, and might appear insignificant in light of the violence perpetrated by assumptions of symmetry and the effort to test it,

[81] Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), xiii.
[82] Ibid., xviii.

constantly, toward victory alone and upright. But their subtlety might make them even more insidious, and they represent lost opportunities in philosophical attention to vulnerability: substantial opportunities in the active, dynamic inclination of the previously upright, sovereign subject, instead of merely the explanation and justification of subjects discovered in that position.

The critical project of 'inclining the sovereign subject,' instead of merely justifying the subject already inclined, has occupied Cavarero's work over the last decade with discussions of vulnerability and relationality, and their role in viewing and responding to scenes of contemporary violence. In contemporary terroristic violence in particular, battlefield assumptions of symmetry seem insufficient and particularly violent, encouraging not only retaliation but "preemptive strikes" toward ambiguous opponents. Terroristic violence is asymmetric by design, provoking fear—as Hobbes would suggest—and retaliation often disproportionate to the actual destruction perpetrated or the capability of the perpetrators. The supposed symmetries of war seem not to apply, and when pursued, produce potentially infinite violence and destruction, because there is no opponent to be overpowered so much as an endless potential to fear. Battlefield symmetries can produce their own nearly infinite cycles of violence, as one side retaliates and then seeks to neutralize further threats, and the other retaliates in turn, and so on. But when the asymmetry of terror is viewed and responded to according to these logics of symmetrical war, truly endless and outstandingly disproportionate violence appears justifiable. In her 2009 book *Horrorism*, Cavarero argues that we might find better ways of thinking and speaking about these scenes if we attend to the victims instead of the perpetrators, to the bodies of the dead and wounded in need of care instead of the capable

bodies of the perpetrators who may still threaten. We thus return to the maternal scene from the perspective of the infant, representing the vulnerable and dependent in need of care, instead considering it primarily from the perspective of the mother who responds to their need. In this way, as I will suggest in the next section, Cavarero seeks an ethic of vulnerability instead of an ethic of caring response, an effort that I find productive and insightful in light of the risks of domination where response is too quickly offered and too completely determined without the possibility of reply from the cared-for.

As I will discuss further in the next section, however, Cavarero doesn't complete this project as fully as she might, getting caught in some of the same problems with asymmetry as we saw in the ethics of care. She aims to undermine the "structural premise" of the postures of sovereign subjectivity and the choice, from the position of the upright, either to strike in violence or bend in care. But in her return to the maternal scene for this account, she emphasizes the asymmetry of the encounter between mother and infant once again, and the demand of the infant's radical vulnerability and dependence for the mother's response. She comes, then, to "maternal inclination" as "the postural archetype of an ethical subjectivity already predisposed, and even willing, to account for the dependence and exposure of the naked and defenseless creature," a "necessary configuration, an indispensable inclination" free of the posturing of sovereign subjectivity.[83] But inclined in this way, over the radically vulnerable infant whose vulnerability makes an ontological demand for care, the mother is poised to enact new forms of domination, well-intentioned but possibly devastating in their own way.

[83] Cavarero, "Recritude," 233.

Dynamics of Vulnerability in Contemporary Violence: Adriana Cavarero

Cavarero's *Horrorism* concerns the vocabulary with which we name contemporary violence, and the way it frames possible responses to scenes of wounding, death, and destruction.[84] Naming violence is difficult in part because violence creates scenes that often seem specifically unspeakable, making us fear future violence as beyond both our experience and description. Violence designed and named as terror engages this difficulty specifically, by forcing the anticipation of violence while intentionally obscuring its future form. Crowded, public spaces are bombed in order to make us fear future bombings; seemingly random killings make everyone fear that they will be next, because there is little way to predict who will be next. By striking apparently random targets in unpredictable ways, terror intensifies both the feeling of uncertainty that makes vulnerability to future violence so scary, and the desire—as it frustrates it—to name what will come next, so that we might try to prepare. By design, terror continuously catches those who try to prepare for it by surprise, and it often seems to seek this effect more than any other, more than any particular destruction or scale of impact.[85] Its targets and methods vary apparently without reason, except the effect of this variation on anticipation, preparation, and fear. It thus manipulates our experience of vulnerability and even employs it as an instrument for its perpetuation, in part through an escape from the language we have to describe, anticipate, and thus prepare for it. In response, Cavarero seeks to name it, giving it language that might help us escape its terror in these ways.

---

[84] Cavarero, *Horrorism*, cited hereafter in this section in text with page numbers.

[85] It thus differs from a more general interest in an "element of surprise" when trying to attack. From warriors to muggers to athletes on the court or politicians (or academics) in a debate, taking an opponent by surprise is a familiar tactic. For terroristic violence, however, surprise often seems to be both the means and ends of the attack, because of the way unpredictability terrorizes.

Terror, in her analysis, "moves bodies, drives them into motion," as suggested by the derivation of the word from the root "*-ter*," "indicating the act of trembling" (4). This "instinctual mobility associated with the ambit of terror" manifests as fear, represented by trembling, and then as flight, "in order to survive, to save [oneself] from a violence that is aiming to kill" (5). Violence that encourages this kind of fear promotes chaos as people flee from it, galvanizing the "collective panic" of crowds in motion which may then be "transformed…into a killing machine" in a completion of "the physics of terror" itself: a cycle of fear, movement, violence, and fear again (6). From its original association with trembling to this form of collective panic, terror thus represents a mobility provoked by fear, by Cavarero's analysis, which enacts some of the worst violence itself in this way. Such fear may be the intention of terrorists, the trembling, chaos, and panic a welcome indication of their success. But mobilizing people, even through fear, can lead them to actions other than trembling—in particular, as so many examples of contemporary violence show, strategic and retributive actions against the supposed perpetrators of violence, its potential perpetrators, or whomever we name as such.

When we talk about contemporary violence as "terror," Cavarero argues, we participate in the logic of its perpetrators and thus become perpetrators, of a kind, ourselves. We terrorize, or perpetuate terror, with this language, participating in its enforcement of frantic anticipation. There is a similar problem with "war." In war, vulnerability is an indicator of success or potential defeat, an obstacle or means toward an end. Neither war nor terror thus responds to the scenes of dismembered bodies after a suicide bombing, Cavarero contends, nor to the wounds of victims or the loss that those wounds represent. Neither attends to bodies and wounds nor can either account for them,

except as pieces with which to keep score in a larger game of strategy and risk. But vulnerable bodies should not be a means toward an end in this way, Cavarero suggests, and confronting scenes of their wounding and devastation provokes other reactions than such language captures. "Names and concepts, and the material reality they are supposed to designate, lack coherence" in these scenes (6). "While violence against the helpless is becoming global in ever more ferocious forms, language proves unable to renew itself to name it; indeed, it tends to mask it" (ibid.). "Terror" and "war" engage in a cycle of strategic violence and politics, masking the horrors committed in its turns. But Cavarero argues there is a vocabulary with which to name these wounds:

> On closer inspection, violence against the helpless does turn out to have a specific vocabulary of its own, one that has been known, and not just in the Western tradition, for millennia. Beginning with the biblical slaughter of the innocents and passing through various events that include the aberration of Auschwitz, the name used is "horror" rather than "war" or "terror," and it speaks primarily of crime rather than of strategy or politics. Of course, in war and terror, horror is not an entirely unfamiliar scene. On the contrary. But this scene has a specific meaning of its own, of which the procedures of naming must finally take account, freeing themselves of their subjugation to power. To coin a new word, scenes like those I have just described might be called "horrorist," or perhaps, for the sake of economy or assonance, we could speak of horrorism—as though ideally all the innocent victims, instead of their killers, ought to determine the name. (3)

When the victims, or the victims' bodies, determine the vocabulary and narrative[86] of violence, violence becomes an occasion to discuss wounds and our vulnerability to wounding outside of a cycle of strategy and politics—or at least with some perspective *on*

[86] Cavarero's work here is explicitly about *naming*, a choice that is somewhat surprising given her usual focus on storytelling and narrative specifically, reflecting the influence of Hannah Arendt (e.g., another of Cavarero's books is called *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*). Cavarero does not make a point of the contrast in *Horrorism* (or elsewhere in print). One possibility is that she sees her analysis of *naming* instead of storytelling in contrast to the actual storytelling that she does in the book. Most chapters end, begin, or are interspersed with "scenes," brief stories of contemporary violence ranging from accounts of suicide bombings to a description of photographs of Lynndie England taken at Abu Ghraib (110). These scenes seem to be the *narratives*, in contrast to the *names* of horror, terror, crime, war, vulnerability, and strategy. Such a distinction is likely intentional from an author so attentive to rhetoric and language. Still, as Cavarero would also insist, it is with names that narratives are told, hence the importance of naming well in response to the events one seeks to narrate. Conversely, it is through narratives—such as those she recounts in *Horrorism*—that names develop, such as her "linguistic innovation" of the word "horrorism" itself. See Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, trans. Paul A. Kottman (New York: Routledge, 2000).

it, instead of only within it. Strategy then begins to fall away, Cavarero suggests, and the horror of violence is more noticeable, and affecting. "If we observe the scene of massacre from the point of view of the helpless victims rather than that of the warriors," she writes, "the picture changes: the end melts away, and the means become substance. More than terror, what stands out is horror" (ibid.). In her "linguistic innovation" of the name *horrorism*, Cavarero thus seeks to recast discussions of violently wounded bodies in light of the wounds themselves, instead of the advantage or disadvantage of the effects of such violence and future susceptibility to it.

When we view wounds and are provoked to consider our susceptibility to further wounding, if we consider wounds in the context of terror, or as a means instead of an end, we cast vulnerability in a war of advantage or disadvantage. This framing may be appealing as we move from talking about wounds to talking about the susceptibility to wounding, from thinking about anticipated wounds to thinking about our responsibility in light of this anticipation. But Cavarero's reframing seeks to circumvent strategic thinking insofar as it casts vulnerable bodies as pieces in a larger game. Vulnerability need not be an advantage or disadvantage in a larger struggle between enemies, and our analysis of vulnerability need not be about increasing the vulnerability of our enemies to decrease our own vulnerability to their attacks. By making the wound the "substance" instead of the "means" to other ends, Cavarero argues, vulnerability becomes a question of individuals' susceptibilities in relation to the individual, and specifically the individual's "uniqueness," as we will see, such that vulnerability no longer refers primarily to what threatens. Wounds are about the bodies they affect or destroy; vulnerability is about the life it helps to define. I am a vulnerable being, and not only in relation to particular

threats. My vulnerability is thus not eradicable by defeating any particular threat, nor should it be defined by that possibility.

Drawing on Hannah Arendt, Cavarero suggests that vulnerability might now be seen to be about uniqueness: a uniqueness defined in relations with others, but not absorbed into these relations in defensive opposition (or self-sacrificial care). Rather, following Arendt, "everyone is unique because, exposing herself to others and consigning her singularity to this exposure, she shows herself such" (21). We appear before others as ourselves, or for clarity, I might say that I appear before others as myself. Their recognition of me as a singular, particular person—this person, who appears before them, and not another—reveals and constitutes my uniqueness. Thus I "consign my singularity to this exposure" in that it is in my appearance before others as myself that I am singularly, particularly me. In this way, Cavarero contends, "this unique being is vulnerable by definition," constituted in relation to others and thus vulnerable to their actions, inaction, misrecognition, and more (Ibid.).

The paradigmatic example of the connection between vulnerability and uniqueness in Arendt's sense is natality, the arrival of the infant in the scene, or what Cavarero prefers to describe as the scene of mother and infant together. The infant is absolutely exposed, a state that Arendt emphasizes, in Cavarero's reading, by defining "birth as the decisive category of the ontology of the unique being" (20). The exposure of the infant is radically asymmetrical, "unilateral" in the sense that the infant is absolutely exposed without the possibility of defense, and the other is not (by Cavarero's or Arendt's assessments) reciprocally exposed and vulnerable to the infant:

> Even though, as bodies, vulnerability accompanies us throughout our lives, only in the newborn, where the vulnerable and the defenseless are one and the same, does it express itself so brazenly. The relation to the other, precisely the relation that according to

> Arendt makes each of us unique, in this case takes the form of a unilateral exposure. The vulnerable being is here the absolutely exposed and helpless one who is awaiting care and has no means to defend itself against wounding. Its relation to the other is a total consignment of its corporeal singularity in a context that does not allow for reciprocity. (21)

Cavarero's argument for the unilateral nature of the infant's exposure, and thus the radical asymmetry of the maternal scene, is grounded in this way in the infant's combination of exposure and helplessness. While we are all exposed to others throughout our lives, as infants we are both exposed and helpless simultaneously. We cannot provide for ourselves nor protect ourselves; we have no recourse in the way our exposure is received, and we cannot defend ourselves against misperception or mistreatment.[87] Cavarero thus distinguishes between helplessness and exposure by emphasizing that infancy represents a combination of the two states. We are vulnerable because we are exposed, as we will be our whole lives, following Arendt's argument that we constitute our unique selves by continual exposure to others. But at times this vulnerability is complemented by the ability to help and defend oneself, such that one is not wholly dependent on others for survival. The infant's vulnerability, however, is combined with an utter inability to help him- or herself. Thus Cavarero argues that the infant is vulnerable to the violence of others, as we all are, but also to their lack of care, because without active care the infant will not eat, drink, stay warm, or attain any other necessities of survival, let alone flourishing.

The combination of absolute helplessness and vulnerability to violence reveals the infant's distance from a strategic, warlike realm, Cavarero argues, in which vulnerability is situated in a confrontation of advantage and disadvantage, as the language of war and

[87] This argument is interesting in part because it suggests that later in our lives we have recourse to correct and defend ourselves as we are exposed, a possibility that is not always read into Arendt, or is clearly present in Cavarero's Arendtian discussions of exposure in the loving relationship. See Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*.

terror would have it. War "entails reciprocal, symmetrical violence, not a unilateral violence vented upon those who are defenseless" (11). It intensifies an understanding of subjects encountering each other symmetrically, each with the capacity to kill the other—a founding characterization of the modern sovereign subject, as I have discussed. From this view of ordinary encounter, war casts "the essential difference between the conditions of daily existence and those of war" to lie "in the high probability of sudden death, death that occurs through being killed rather than through illness, chance, or accident" (10). But war is not an intensification of the maternal scene, Cavarero argues; it is an intensification of a more reciprocal encounter to which the unilateral vulnerability of the infant should not be assimilated. Unilaterally vulnerable, "bound to the other and dependent on the other for its very existence, the newborn infant is not a combatant," she writes (23). Neither the infant nor the infant's caregiver can "take their place[s] in this general panorama of reciprocal and natural violence" (Ibid.). Infancy renders the symmetrical model incoherent, as the infant is not an upright, worthy opponent with an equal capacity to kill. Indeed, the infant cannot even be terrorized by the other's uprightness, but lies in need, susceptible, unable to strike, unarmed, and fundamentally defenseless. The infant is not a combatant, and so the subject who encounters the infant—the mother, paradigmatically—cannot begin the Hobbesian cycle of insecurity, anticipation and violence that drives the pursuit of invulnerability and sovereignty. Instead, "the thematization of infancy…allows the vulnerable being to be read in terms of a drastic alternative between violence and care," "the essential alternative inscribed in the condition of vulnerability" (24, 20). The caregiver does harm to the infant by *not* interacting with him or her, unlike in the realm of warlike violence or the symmetrical

encounter of sovereign subjects that it amplifies, in which to be left alone, securely, is the greatest end of any strategy.

If we hear echoes here of Gilligan's distinction between an individualistic and relational voice, they should not be dismissed, although the conceptions of subjectivity that Cavarero seeks to distinguish are defined along somewhat different lines. In particular, we can now see more clearly that Cavarero defines a relational, vulnerable subjectivity against a somewhat different understanding of sovereign subjectivity than Gilligan, one that idealizes a state of invulnerability securable only by a perpetual struggle against potential threats. Hardly Kohlberg's picture of self-restraint, the sovereign subject in Cavarero's sights fears others and acts against them to secure himself. Modeled on Hobbes's anthropology of man in the State of Nature, this subject understands himself to be perpetually vulnerable because all are equally able to kill any other, as discussed in the first section. This equality of "killability," as Cavarero names it, propels the "perpetuall and restless desire of Power after power" toward security.[88]

Significantly, Hobbes identifies the cause of this desire in the perception of vulnerability more than an interest in amassing power itself: "The cause of this," he writes, "is not always that a man hopes for a more intensive delight than he has already attained to; or that he cannot be content with a moderate power: but because he cannot assure the power and means to live well, which he hath present, without the acquisition of more."[89] The subject thus seeks "dominion over men, being necessary to a man's conservation," grasping after power in response to vulnerability.[90] For the individual Gilligan writes against, by contrast, vulnerability is minimized by not interacting with

[88] Cavarero, "Recritude," 228; Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 70.
[89] Ibid., 70.
[90] Ibid., 88.

others instead of seeking dominion over them, a form of self-restraint encouraging by confidence in universal applicability of rationally-derived rules. Hobbes gestures to the appeal of isolation by suggesting that because of the perpetual need to struggle for "conservation," "men have no pleasure in keeping company."[91] But the subject will inevitably encounter others, and so desires "dominion over them" such that he encounters them without fear of their attack.

Cavarero argues that the line Hobbes draws from the equal ability to kill to equal vulnerability to perpetual violence against others is upended by the situation of the infant, or, as she writes in later work, Hobbes's subject is *inclined* in and by the natal scene. The sovereign subject upright, armed, and ready to fight, stands in sharp contrast to the infant laid out in radical exposure on the horizontal plane. The infant does not have "strength enough to kill the strongest," nor even strength enough to take care of him- or herself. Thus the infant's vulnerability is of a different kind, or participates in a different logic, than the vulnerability of a Hobbesian subject that can be well represented as a "combatant" ready to fight to secure himself from harm. The infant not only fails to present a threat, but also could not survive the conditions that the Hobbesian subject seeks. Both vulnerable and helpless, the infant requires another's care, not his or her defeat or paralysis, as Cavarero argues:

> Irremediably open to wounding and caring, the vulnerable one exists totally in the tension generated by this alternative. As though the null response—neither the wound nor the care—were excluded. Or as though the absence of wound or care were not even thinkable. (30)

Where the absence of action may seem desirable to the subject wishing to be left alone and fearing the possibility of violent strikes, it would be devastating to the infant in a way

[91] Ibid.

that challenges such understandings of subjectivity. Through the "tension generated" by the alternative of wounding and caring, then, a new structure of subjectivity and relation can emerge. As Cavarero continues from the passage above, referring to the absence of either alternative,

> …And yet you might call that [absence] indifference, and even bless it, if it were just the absence of wounding, whereas, if it were the absence of caring, we would perhaps have to call it desolation. But exposure to the other that persists over the arc of an entire life renders this absence improbable. In fact, given that every human being who exists has been born and has been an infant, materially impossible.
>
> The infant, the small child—and here lies Hannah Arendt's great intuition concerning the ontological and political centrality of the category of birth—*actually proclaims relationship as a human condition not just fundamental but structurally necessary*. This means that, as a creature totally consigned to relationship, a child is the vulnerable being par excellence and constitutes the primary paradigm of any discourse on vulnerability. (30, emphasis added)

With these lines, Cavarero destabilizes the scene of encounter in a way that challenges the structural integrity of the presumption of symmetry in accounts like Hobbes's, much as we saw in Gilligan's early critiques of individualism. Radically asymmetrical, the relation of mother and infant requires action of a different kind than the symmetry of equal "killability." It requires care and protection instead of violence, actions *for* the other, to ameliorate their condition, instead of actions against the other to ameliorate one's own. Because the infant requires this response, he or she requires relationship, and thus relationships are not only "fundamental" to the human condition, inescapable in certain periods of our lives, but "structurally necessary." The Hobbesian ideal of being left alone does not apply; we are constituted relationally and vulnerable to our relations, irremediably and inescapably. We can't live without their actions, though we persist in the tension between needing them and fearing them, or at least between their ability to care and ability to wound. The infant, after all, does not *fear*, in Cavarero's account, but is unmoved by terror in a way that fully removes him or her from the logic of terror,

strategy, and war. The immobility of the infant is the first hint that something is amiss in the argument, a paralysis within a scene of action that seems at least under-discussed if not devastating to the argument. But let us see a bit more of her view, in both *Horrorism* and later work, before considering these concerns.

In *Horrorism*, Cavarero illustrates the infant's situation between violence and care with the story of Medea, the mother of Greek mythology who killed her "beloved sons" (27). The contrast of violence and care creates a different kind of monster than the terrifying warrior of the realm of strategic violence, she argues, "the mother as potential assassin," who is substantively different from the assassins of war (23). The mother who assassinates, or who is violent against her charges in other ways, is not terrifying in the way that a violent equal appears to his or her opponent in battle because the infant seems immovable in the ways that "terror" describes. The infant cannot flee and certainly cannot fight, and is thus a potential victim of horror, but not of terror. Immobile, helpless, and exposed, the child is vulnerable not just to attack but to a lack of care. Thus the violent mother wounds her infant twice, first in the failure to care, and then in the infliction of wounds. These crimes can only be viewed in light of the wounded body of the infant, Cavarero argues, because the "imbalance between the parties is obvious" such that the language of strategy and war is incoherent (ibid.). The radical asymmetry of power, capability, vulnerability, and dependence thus renders the logic of the battlefield, with its contest between presumed equals for singular victory, no longer relevant to the ethical and political considerations of the scene. The mother and infant cannot relate in this way, and so the corresponding senses of vulnerability, power, and victory become meaningless. The demand of the infant's radical vulnerability overtakes other defining

characteristics of the scene, and the imperative to respond with care instead of violence—because those are the only options—becomes obvious.

Significantly, Cavarero describes this "maternal dominion" as a "power over her offspring," acknowledging some potential for domination in care (24). This power "plays on the alternative between saving [the infant's life] and destroying it," she suggests, for in the mother's complete control over the situation, the infant's life is wholly determined by her with no possibility of recourse, critique, or effective negotiation (ibid.). Thus there is a dominative element to the mother's role in this way, even if it is pursued with the best intentions to care instead of harm. Cavarero thus admits a potential for domination in care that care theorists often mishandle, though she doesn't use this potential toward a revision of the account that produces it, or even a better description of it. She continues to emphasize the mother's response to the infant's helplessness and exposure without considering the possibility that the "thematization of infancy" and vulnerability might call precisely this demand for response, and its role in ethics and politics, into question, as we have seen.

Such questions become particularly important as Cavarero develops the conception of vulnerability in contemporary violence articulated in *Horrorism* in her current work on vulnerability, relationality, and inclination.[92] I will conclude this section with a brief discussion of this work, and its reinforcement of the asymmetries that challenge her account.

[92] This work has been presented in various fora over the last five years, since the publication of *Horrorism*. In 2013, it was published in book form in Italian as *Inclinazioni* (Milano: Raffaello Cortina), but the English translation, by Amanda Minervini for Stanford University Press, is still forthcoming at the time of this project's completion. However, portions of the argument appear in Cavarero, "Recritude" and "Inclining the Subject: Ethics, Alterity, and Natality," which I will discuss here.

In her 2013 essay on inclining the "*homo erectus,*" Cavarero illustrates her argument against the sovereign subject through reference not only to Hobbes, but also to a more recent inheritor of his perspective, Elias Canetti. In *Crowds and Power*, Canetti exemplifies the sovereign subject in the figure of the "Survivor," who stands not upright and ready to fight but upright in victory, over the dead:

> The moment of *survival* is the moment of power. Horror at the sight of death turns into satisfaction that it is someone else who is dead. The dead man lies on the ground while the survivor stands. It is as though there had been a fight and the one had struck down the other. In survival, each man is the enemy of the other, and all grief is insignificant measured against this elemental triumph.[93]

This passage is rich with the images of sovereignty and individualism that Cavarero criticizes by contrast to the maternal scene. Here, it is no longer necessary for there to have been a fight, or any other active instantiation of the symmetrical violence of war. Indeed, the scene is asymmetrical, but as a result of the *destruction* of a symmetry—though not necessary to perpetrate oneself. The Survivor's power comes from the other having been killed because the other was an equal, upright, potential enemy. His death is meaningful, then, as a sign of the Survivor's victory, even if this victory is only implied and not necessary to fulfill through having fought oneself. Subjectivity is thus exemplified not even with the motion and mobility of terror but as a "static figure," in Cavarero's words, "immobilized in the moment of his verticalization before the dead body."[94] In this position, he experiences "something of the radiance of invulnerability" that Hobbes's subject seeks, but never secures, and he need not even have sought it himself to experience it, in a final fulfillment of the sovereign ideal.[95] The survivor embodies the Hobbesian ideal of sovereign subjectivity that Hobbes believes people can

[93] Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power,* trans. Carol Stewart (New York, NY: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1962), 227.
[94] Cavarero, "Recritude," 228.
[95] Canetti, *Crowds and Power,* 228; quoted in Cavarero, "Recritude," 228.

only strive toward, and in this way, Cavarero writes, "the whole picture looks very coherent," reinforcing the "imagery of war" that traditionally frames vulnerability.[96]

The figures in Canetti are arranged asymmetrically, of course, but render the picture of violent symmetries particularly clear from that position. Thus we see in both Canetti and Hobbes an explicit formulation of the supposedly symmetrical encounter in which strategy, war, and terror apply, in Cavarero's analysis; the encounter that the maternal scene is used to resist, and overturn, by its insistent asymmetry. Cavarero argues that in the symmetrical encounter, vulnerability is aligned with "mortality" and "killability," while the asymmetrical encounter, characterized by radical vulnerability and exposure and exemplified by the maternal scene, reveals that "the human condition of vulnerability coincides neither with mortality nor with killability."[97] In its place, vulnerability appears to invoke "responsibility," "a relational ontology" in which the exposure of the other requires response and thus inaugurates ethical responsibility.[98] However, this relationship is not exactly the relationship of mother and infant that we saw before, in which the mother has "dominion" over her child until he or she can encounter her as an equal, a dominion defined and demanded by the "unilateral" exposure and helplessness of the child who remains a *future* combatant, if not yet capable. Rather, Cavarero seeks to imagine

> …the human according to a different geometry of postures. In this geometry, maternal inclination is not only a traditional oblative, or nurturing, paradigm whose specular alternative would be the always possible, and always excreble, violence against the infant. Maternal inclination is, rather, *the postural archetype of an ethical subjectivity already predisposed*, and even willing, to account for the dependence and the exposure of the naked and defenseless creature. As it is worth stressing, we are dealing, here, not with the old alternative between healing and injuring, between the icon of the Madonna with child and the mask of Medea, but *with their structural premise*. What we are

[96] Canetti, *Crowds and Power,* 228.
[97] Cavarero, "Recritude," 228 and 231.
[98] Ibid, 231 and 222.

> focusing on, in fact, is the inclined posture of an "I" that leans out of itself, that is to say, the inclined line that constitutes the axis of the relational geometry within this framework. In substance, within this framework equally freed from verticality and horizontality, "mother" is therefore simply the name of a necessary configuration, an indispensible inclination.[99]

Cavarero's moves here are complex, and somewhat at odds with her earlier accounts of ethical responsibility provoked by radical vulnerability—or aimed differently, perhaps, toward a slightly different claim. Where before she used vulnerability to invoke the "old alternative between healing and wounding," here she suggests that the concern should lie in "their structural premise," in the postures of the two figures on the scene and the possibilities for their positions and movement in relation to each other. Where the mother and infant occupy the 'vertical' and 'horizontal' planes—the mother normally upright but choosing to bend, and the infant laid out, horizontally, in complete vulnerability to the mother's inclination—the subjects are defined by these positions, which imply power and powerlessness, respectively. Here, Cavarero seeks to escape these implications of power and powerlessness through the reconstitution of the subject along the "oblique line," inclined 'indispensably' instead of only momentarily assuming the position as a matter of having chosen between care and violent indifference

This is the closest Cavarero gets to a thorough critique of the sovereign subject, a full destabilization of his uprightness in victory and sovereignty or proneness in defeat. Here, Cavarero recasts the mother's inclination toward the infant as a description of the mother, instead of her response to the infant's vulnerability: "the inclined posture of an 'I' that leans out of itself," instead of the image of the person who might choose between healing and wounding. But she doesn't complete the argument, or at least she hasn't yet. Indeed, she appears largely to emphasize the mother's choice of response to illustrate

[99] Cavarero, "Recritude," 233. Emphasis added.

maternal inclination, distancing herself from her work in *Horrorism* only by considering the "predisposition to respond" instead of a response itself.[100] In what is offered as a critique of "the sphere of care," for example, Cavarero writes that focusing on the maternal through care

> …obscure[s] the alternative between care and wound of which inclination properly consists. Though outlining a relational structure that frees ontology from the centrality of the self and focuses on the other, the scene of the mother who bends over the infant, actually, is not yet a response, but only a predisposition to respond. Differently told, it is a leaning out over the helpless creature who, just because of his unilateral exposition, becomes himself a request.[101]

Cavarero describes vulnerability in this way as the basis of a scene of address, a "request" to which the mother is already responding. But she reduces the infant to this request, without describing how the infant might reply, or what happens beyond the mother's inclination toward him or her. The mother inclined is not reciprocally vulnerable, in Cavarero's description, nor does her relation to the infant—and thus her structural inclination—seem clearly to extend beyond the scene. Perhaps it is reiterated in future scenes, the posture having taken root, but these scenes are not continuous. Relationships do not appear to form in ways that that extend beyond encounters; the "relational structure" appears as a scene of address and reply once again, but not an ongoing conversation. Thus in her effort to undermine the "structural premise" of the symmetrical encounter, Cavarero recreates its *frame* if not the postures within it, depriving the account once again of possibilities beyond those that the frame teaches us to anticipate.

I want to suggest from this point in her discussion that the emphasis on response, responsibility, and the choice or disposition to incline in care misplaces the critical work of attending to vulnerability by emphasizing possibilities still within the "structural

[100] Cavarero, "Inclining the Subject: Ethics, Alterity, and Natality," 202.
[101] Ibid.

premise" of sovereign subjectivity—possibilities that have been ignored or criticized, and might be worthy of recovery, but whose recovery doesn't fully undermine the premise of sovereign subjectivity itself. I applaud Cavarero's recovery of the vulnerable subject as something more, or other, than a threat necessary to exploit, and her rejection of the *postures* of sovereign subjectivity within the encounter, the endless assumption and effort of maintaining uprightness, or "rectitude," as she reminds us to take as a synonym.[102] But she enacts these critiques by reinforcing the arrangement of the scene as two individuals, one facing the other (if having to incline to do so), responding to his or her condition with no clear continuation of the relationship beyond the frame, and the forms of negotiation over the needs and norms of care that it might allow. In this way, I want to suggest, Cavarero considers the asymmetries of encounters between subjects still according to the framing of sovereign subjectivity, with the norms of care, violence, exploitation, and obligation only reversed: instead of finding the other's exposure to be an opportunity to strike and gain advantage, it appears as a demand to care, but within the same closed frame of the encounter. The encounter is no longer strictly face-to-face in the way the sovereign subject expects, as the infant cannot hold up his head to meet his mother's gaze as a potential opponent. But the encounter is still defined by the structure of exposure and response that the face-to-face encounter implies, a structure that insufficiently considers the continuation of the narrative beyond its scene.

Cavarero has one brief moment that hints toward continuation when she analyzes Leonardo DaVinci's spectacular painting "Virgin and Child with St. Anne."[103] In the painting, Anne holds the central, vertical line of the canvas, sitting mostly upright in the

[102] Ibid.
[103] Ibid., 203 (Image reproduced on 197, Figure 13.1).

middle, only her head tilted slightly toward her daughter. Mary sits in her lap, a figure of grasping movement on an "oblique line" as she inclines toward the baby Jesus, reaching to hold him by the stomach to keep him from running off too far, it seems, as he plays—as he plays with the iconographically potent lamb, no less, "an evident symbol of the passion and sacrifice that await him."[104] The grandmother inclines slightly over her child, holding her and supporting her inclination over the baby. "The image, in a sense, suggests that every mother had a mother," Cavarero writes, "according to a potentially infinite series of unilateral inclinations first received and then given."[105] We can then fit "interdependency" into the picture, she argues, as we are all reliant on someone and others are similarly reliant on us, a continuation of the story in "a series of unilateral dependencies."[106] Eva Feder Kittay makes a similar claim in the context of the ethics of care, that an idea of interdependency and "reciprocity-in-connection" should emerge from successive unilateral dependencies.[107] "We are all some mother's child," Kittay writes, indicating that we have all required care, and that we care for others as vulnerable, dependent individuals, not self-sufficient paragons of original and perpetual autonomy who condescend to the needs of others, or as devoted wives, mothers, and nurses who sacrifice their own needs entirely in their care for others.[108] For both authors, the inclination of the caregiver "trusts in continuity," as Cavarero writes of Leonardo's

[104] Ibid., 197.
[105] Ibid., 204.
[106] Ibid.
[107] Eva Feder Kittay, *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality and Dependency* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 23-26 and 67-71 particularly.
[108] Ibid., 23 and 68.

composition, even if in any given moment of the continuous chain "we see only a portion of the series," potentially obscuring its significant continuation over time.[109]

For both Cavarero and Kittay, however, this interest in continuation is an interest in *successive* relations, each modeled as asymmetric encounters in which one party's unilateral dependence demands a response that concludes the scene. The relationship between the mother and infant doesn't clearly continue or develop beyond this provision of response; the infant develops, instead, into someone who can reiterate the scene with her own child.[110] In other words, these authors indicate continuity over time without indicating the extension of this *particular* relationship over time, in which its needs and norms can be negotiated, contested, and renegotiated.

I think this is a misreading of the painting, as well as the dynamics of relationships, to which Da Vinci is here, perhaps, our better guide. The figures of his composition do not face each other in such a closed scene, one responding to the other and entirely bound up in that encounter. Rather, in a posture likely familiar to anyone who has seen a child play, Jesus looks back at his mother while still moving forward toward the lamb, his body still propelled by his interest in the activity while his head turns, acknowledging and responding to the care and protection of his mother. He is unilaterally exposed in a way that requires protection, but the primary exposure indicated by his posture is to the lamb, and to the woods and world just beyond the edge of the (literal) frame. Mary's response

---

[109] Cavarero, "Inclining the Subject: Ethics, Alterity, and Natality," 204.

[110] As discussed in Chapter Two, Kittay's personal narrative of caring for her disabled daughter offers a potent and poignant counter-example to such arrangements, an account of a richly ongoing relationship that continues and develops through complex negotiations of how best to care for Sesha, and a rich and complex mutual love and devotion surrounding those negotiations, and sustaining them. However, in her theoretical arguments in the same volume, Kittay roots her discussion of care and dependence in relations of extreme dependency, in which care is provided as a "response" to the perception of need, as in both Carol Gilligan's work and Cavarero's. See Chapter Two, Section One for further discussion of this issue, particularly in footnote seven.

to his vulnerability comes in a posture of inclination, as Cavarero suggests, but an inclination both toward him and toward the future into which he moves, signified by the lamb as well as the graceful movement of the composition, oriented toward the baby Jesus and then the direction beyond the frame toward which he has oriented himself. Mary inclines both toward and *with* her child, into his activities and pursuits as well as toward his vulnerable body, seeking to protect and care for it. Similarly, Anne inclines *with* Mary, toward Mary's child, instead of toward Mary herself, in a face-to-face 'response.' Anne shares in Mary's pursuit, it seems, as Mary shares in Jesus', both moving with and running after her child. The image suggests movement beyond its frame, a continuation of the story beyond the response of inclination, in many ways. Its "oblique line" does represent an inclination toward the vulnerable infant, but much more: an inclination *with* the vulnerable *into* his pursuits; an inclination *with* the caregiver in her pursuit of her charge; and a responsiveness of the infant to his caregivers as well, a recognition of their inclination toward him, its protective intention and effect, and perhaps a move toward negotiation of whether being held back from playing with the lamb is really the right way to care.

I want to suggest that DaVinci's scene illustrates a nascent opportunity in Cavarero's questioning of the "structural premise" of the sovereign subjects' encounter. The "inclined posture of an 'I' that leans out of itself" might be viewed from another angle, as the "I" who leans toward the future, toward what is to come, whatever that may bring; the "I" who leans toward another in wait for their reply and relation, but doesn't know how that inclination will be met, how the relationship will continue, or even what his or her own next line in the conversation will be. From this perspective, I want to

suggest that to undermine the structural premise of the encounter fully, we must attend to a different asymmetry than the one between the two persons posed in the paradigmatic scene. Rather, we might find ethical and political import in the asymmetrical relationship of each person to time—to what happens next, to what is to come, to replies both violent and caring, to the lack of reply, possibly violent in its own way, and to much else, as yet unimaginable, for which we wait in the experience of vulnerability.

To develop this argument, I will turn to the account of relationality that Judith Butler develops in her work on violence, vulnerability, and precariousness, written over the same years as Cavarero's and motivated by many of the same events and concerns—as well as engaging directly in conversation with her, at times, on these themes.[111] Like Cavarero, Butler seeks to reconstruct vulnerability against cycles of retributive and anticipatory violence. She also contests ideals of sovereignty, independence, and invulnerability by attending to our relations with others, our constitution in these relations, and our dependence on their continuation, despite our perpetual vulnerability within them. Instead of turning to the scene of infancy, however, to develop these concerns, Butler turns to the experience of mourning: a frame, as I will suggest, that is already broken such that she cannot trap her argument in it. She thus offers a significant response to the problems of encounter and framing in Cavarero's work, and the related problems in the ethics of care, as well.

In her 2004 book *Precarious Life*, Butler suggests that we might most saliently discover our dependence on and vulnerability to others precisely when they are no longer there: in mourning and grief, when we are "undone" by their loss and thus find that we

[111] See, for example, Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2005).

were tied up in them, leaning so far outside of ourselves, onto them, that we now find ourselves, as we often say, "beside ourselves" in grief.[112] This condition of grief "furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order," she writes, "by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility."[113] As we discover our constitution in relationships, we discover our perpetual vulnerability to others and the potential for responsibilities, obligations, and imperatives like those of the mother to the infant. But by turning first to the scene of mourning for the discovery of relationality instead of the maternal scene, Butler uncovers a sense of relationality, vulnerability, and inclination that isn't necessarily responsive, or isn't always determined as a *reply*. Rather, she describes the moment of inclination toward the other in which one receives no response, because he or she is gone. More than normalizing asymmetries of power, then, and asymmetrical abilities to harm and care, Butler seems to normalize our asymmetrical relationship to time, the experience of waiting and possibly not hearing what we want to hear, whether an unwelcome or harmful assertion or a lack of reply altogether. Whether this asymmetry then becomes *normative* I will wait to discuss in the next chapter, but I will turn now to Butler's account for a development of these themes.

Mourning, Movement, and Relation in Judith Butler's Precarious Life

Both Butler and Cavarero begin their discussions of vulnerability in scenes of wounding, but Butler pursues the "task of mourning that follows" instead of the task of care on which Cavarero focuses.[114] Butler's path to the discussion of vulnerability in

[112] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 23.
[113] Ibid., 22.
[114] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 19. Hereafter in this section cited in text with page numbers.

Precarious Life begins in this way with grief, set in the terrorist violence of the early 2000s and concerned with its perpetuation—sometimes inspired by grief, and often by the denial of it. "Mourning, fear, anxiety, rage," she writes, "In the United States, we have been surrounded with violence, having perpetrated it and perpetrating it still, having suffered it, living in fear of it, planning more of it, if not an open future of infinite war in the name of a 'war on terrorism'" (28). Being surrounded by violence means that we are always surrounded by loss, losses that we may need to grieve but are sometimes encouraged not to, when grief appears contrary to the needs of the nation in the war that has brought so much of this violence in the first place. With Butler, then, I will begin in these scenes of grief and the conceptions of subjectivity and vulnerability that they display, before moving to the account of relationality she seeks to develop through them.

Unbounded grief, especially when experienced and displayed by a society at large, seems to imply a lack of control akin to weakness, revealing that the society is and maybe always was lacking the cohesion, integrity, and unity that would make it strong and ready to rise against whatever threatens—a singular, sovereign state on the model of the sovereign subject. Endless grief is not the cast of an army ready to fight, and grief undoes us in ways that seem opposed to action altogether, even action against the perpetrators of the wounds we grieve. President George W. Bush, Butler reminds us, "announced on September 21 [2001, ten days after the attacks on 9/11] that we have finished grieving and that *now* it is time for resolute action to take the place of grief" (29, emphasis original). Instead of lingering in mourning, it is time for action—an opposition symptomatic of the sort of denial of vulnerability that Butler seeks to displace. President Obama has drawn the particular opposition between action and grief less strongly, though

he has spoken about these issues on very different occasions of wounding than 9/11. Those scenes of wounding in Lower Manhattan, Arlington, and Shanksville, as we were and are still often reminded, were the products of attacks perpetrated by organized agents from beyond American borders, with an explicit agenda to hurt the nation as such. In contrast, Obama has led and instructed the nation in grief most often after shootings perpetrated by American citizens, individuals who have been immediately cast (not unconvincingly) as mentally ill loners—a portrayal that works to suspend their membership in the nation that grieves, while also not identifying them as or with a persistent threat allied against America.

The persistence of a threat, however, was finally unavoidable by the time Obama spoke after the Newtown, Connecticut shootings of December 2012. Tragedies were accumulating, and the causes seemed the same, if discrete. "Since I've been President," Obama found himself having to say, "this is the fourth time we have come together to comfort a grieving community torn apart by a mass shooting. The fourth time we've hugged survivors. The fourth time we've consoled the families of victims."[115] The cause of this grief could no longer be ignored, and grief could not continue without action. "We can't tolerate this anymore," he proclaimed, his 'this' referring ambiguously to the tragedies themselves or the grieving that follows, or both. Action must be taken, against any political obstruction: "if there is even one step we can take…then surely we have an obligation to try."[116] A call to action, unequivocally, though less opposed to grief and mourning than in Bush's words on September 21, 2001. However, the persistent threat

[115] Barack Hussein Obama, "Transcript: 'We Have Wept With You,' Obama says in Newtown Speech." *CNN Political Ticker Blog* (December 16, 2012). Accessed April 16, 2013. http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2012/12/16/breaking-we-have-wept-with-you-obama-says-in-newtown-speech/.
[116] Ibid.

revealed in Newtown was more general and diffuse than even the "terror" on which Bush waged war. Gun violence, mass shootings, untreated mental illness—the threats Obama addressed were *methods* of wounding more than agents. Defeating this threat doesn't require a brave and united army, as there is no battlefield on which a method of wounding can be defeated (even as words like "war" and "battlefield" are used so loosely today). The logic of the battlefield and the strategic assessments of vulnerability that it entails don't seem to apply. Thus if "the tragedies must end," as Obama told us they must, "to end them, *we* must change."[117]

According to Butler's account of grief, we already have, and we do and will again in every subsequent occasion of mourning, public or private. We discover in our grief that we were constituted in part by what and who is now lost, that the loss of something or someone is not a loss to us as much as the loss *of* us, or of some part of ourselves. We are changed by that loss, and our experience of that change also changes our knowledge of who we are. We discover that we are not the "detached narrator of [our] relations," nor are we detached at all, independent and self-sufficient in a way that gives us control over ourselves and even over our reactions to wounding:

> What grief displays, in contrast, is the thrall in which our relations with others hold us, in ways that we cannot always recount or explain, in ways that often interrupt the self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide, in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control. (23)

We are changed by grief in ways that change our very conception of ourselves, in other words, particularly if that conception had emphasized autonomy, control, and self-sovereignty. We discover ourselves to be dependent on each other, exposed to each other, and constituted by those relations. These are relations in which we are vulnerable,

[117] Ibid.

open to others and unable to protect ourselves from their effect on us without cutting off the relations that make us who we are. Thus just as we experience the horrors of vulnerability's realization in wounds, we discover, or have confirmed, our constitution in vulnerability, and as vulnerable beings.

The confluence of these experiences can be difficult to bear, making denials of vulnerability understandably appealing. And in the midst of these challenging revelations, changes, and the task of mourning itself, there remains the question of what to do next. How do we form our lives again in the wake of injuries, and the knowledge they bring of our susceptibility to such events? What do we do now, with ourselves and with each other? How do I exist alongside others, knowing that I am vulnerable to them, and they to me? These are hard questions, opened by wounds and continued alongside processes of healing, rebuilding, and other responses to the realization of vulnerability.

These are, however, questions about our lives *together*, our political future, and how we will carry on. Far from being privatizing or depoliticizing, then, grief actually "furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order," as Butler argues:

> …first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility. If my fate is not originally or finally separable from yours, then the "we" is traversed by a relationality that we cannot easily argue against; or, rather, we can argue against it, but we would be denying something fundamental about the social conditions of our very formation. (22-23)

Loss and grief display these "social conditions of our very formation," our connections with others and our constitution in those connections. I am changed by losing you, and so I see that "the attachment to 'you' is part of what composes who 'I' am" (ibid.). This insight extends in two directions. First, grief defines the self even when it isn't directed toward the loss of persons with whom we had significant relationships. The dynamics Butler describes can emerge in response to any loss, though some may be far too

insignificant to be analyzed on these terms. I discover how dependent I am on my physical health when I am sick, how much I am formed by a colleague when she takes a sabbatical, and even how integral my usual coffee cup is to my life when it is finally too chipped to use, and must be given up. To say that I 'grieve' something as insignificant as a mug is, of course, to overstate the condition considerably. But to say that I discover how and how much I was constituted in and by my relation to what is now gone seems not inappropriate. (The answer may be, of course, "not much," or "not in any especially lasting ways," but the question is meaningful.)

Second, these emerging definitions of myself make more salient not only what particular relations define (or defined) me, but also that I am defined in and by relations at all. I might have thought myself more independent, self-sufficient, and autonomous than to be changed by grief, or I might think that ideally I should become so independent, less affected by this loss and those in the future, or at least more in control of their effects. We are often embarrassed by our grief, ashamed when it takes us 'too long' to mourn, as if grief and mourning could be bounded willfully. The effort to grieve within limits represents an ideal of autonomy, self-sufficiency, independence, and self-control allied strongly with the Hobbesian, and even Kohlbergian, subject, as if even in my relations with others I can control my exposure and dependence and so too my vulnerability. In grief, we often find this ideal to be unreachable, and maybe ill-advised altogether, as Butler's analysis suggests. But the ideal remains appealing, even—and perhaps particularly—as we discover it to be impossible to attain.

Part of why grief can seem privatizing and depoliticizing, Butler argues, is because it seems opposed to action, even the most basic actions that wounds demand. This is the

opposition Bush drew in his pronouncement that the time for grieving was over on September 21st, a sentiment not entirely absent from Obama's speech in Newtown, as well. Obama's subtle differentiation of the nation and the grieving communities ("we have come together to comfort a grieving community") suggests that the community grieves, while we, the nation, must act—we are all on the same side, after all, and those not paralyzed by mourning will act in the place of those made incapable by their grief. The same logic imbues hospitals—made apparent, or enforced, even in their architecture—where the families can worry and mourn while the doctors must act, and thus should not grieve. Grief disables us, the argument goes, and wounds demand action. So we must stop grieving, as Bush says, and act.

The unfortunate legacy of that particular call for action is well known, and ongoing. The nation acted by invading countries, starting wars, detaining prisoners, torturing detainees, harassing and persecuting citizens, severely constraining civil liberties, and more. Perhaps we should instead have taken the time to grieve, though the greater problem, as we have seen in Cavarero, is the understanding of ourselves that such attitudes toward grief represent. Action in the wake of grief is, of course, not necessarily so misguided, especially when it is seen to work with and from grief instead of in opposition to it. People care for each other, clean up, and try to learn from wounds and devastation. The problem is not that people take scenes of wounding to be significant moments for action, political formation, and personal transformation. The problem is with how these occasions are used, what they taken to be occasions for.

For Butler, then, the discussion of relationality, vulnerability, and asymmetry in our relations begins for many of us in the experience of loss and grief, not the experience of

or reflection on infancy. When we lose someone on whom we have depended, to whom we have bound ourselves in various ways, in relation to whom we have been constituted as the selves we know and may even have assumed to be singularly our own, we discover just how fantastic the perception of our singularity and independence really is. We find ourselves reaching out to the other, trying to lean on him or her as we have been leaning thus far, but missing their usual reply and support. We feel in this position 'beside ourselves' in grief, as we say, leaning so far toward the other that their loss leaves us nearly too precariously inclined to stand. We feel unstable and "undone," in Butler's words, rendering us "inscrutable to ourselves" as we discover the necessity of this relation to our lives and identities:

> Who "am" I, without you? When we lose some of these ties by which we are constituted, we do not know who we are or what to do. On one level, I think I have lost "you" only to discover that "I" have gone missing as well. At another level, perhaps what I have lost "in" you, that for which I have no ready vocabulary, is a relationality that is composed neither exclusively of myself nor you, but is to be conceived as *the time* by which those terms are differentiated and related. (22)

In the instability of grief, in our feeling that we are 'not ourselves' without the person or people we have lost, we find that we were bound up in the other person and our relation to them "in ways we cannot always recount or explain, in ways that often interrupt the self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide, in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control" (23). We discover our relationality, in other words, in this experience—an experience of radical asymmetry as well, but one rather unlike the asymmetry between the mother and infant. Here the asymmetry comes from the lack of the other toward whom we lean, instead of in the distinction between the ably vertical mother who inclines and the infant helpless and exposed on the horizontal plane. Thus the most fundamental "structural premise" of the

encounter is undermined: the presence of two figures at all, whether sovereign subjects or the mother and infant, to make up an encounter that might constitute a relationship of any kind. In its place, Butler suggests, we experience the asymmetry of waiting, occupying "the time by which those terms [me and you] are differentiated and related." We experience the space that had to exist between us for us to have had a relationship at all, but that we hadn't noticed before, perhaps, in the easy assumption of the relation, or our denial of any such relation at all.

In the other's absence, I want to suggest, we thus discover a different view of vulnerability and radical asymmetry in relations, one defined by our *wait* for the reply of the other instead of the *choice* that the other makes in reply. This is not to say that there aren't better and worse choices to be made in reply, and thus that norms are needed to name and define potential replies in substantial ways. It is instead an effort to refocus the ethical and political import of vulnerability on this moment of waiting, the time and space that both relates and differentiates us in relationships, instead of on the response that ends it. In this way, we might undermine the premise of sovereign subjectivity in the power of the other to determine or realize one's vulnerability, and focus instead on the potential contained within the condition of vulnerability itself. Or to return to the language of encounter and frame, we undermine the framing of encounters as a single scene, pointing in only certain directions. As we wait for the reply that never comes, the frame is shaken, and even broken; there is no longer the person to encounter, let alone with whom to continue the relationship through such interactions. The possibilities beyond the frame multiply, then, as new directions for the continuation of the narrative suddenly appear. Without this person, who am I? Someone new, perhaps, or someone with space to

become different, to grow and extend the self formed in relation to this person beyond the relationship we shared together. As we feel adrift, outside ourselves, and undone by loss, therefore, we also discover the space to make ourselves anew—along with the knowledge that such self-making will be a project undertaken with others.

In the next chapter, I will turn to a project of this kind in Sarah Coakley's discussion of contemplative prayer. But toward this development, let me conclude our discussion here by returning briefly to the picture of inclination I mentioned earlier in Kant and Herder. Herder's early "inclination" of Kant's sovereign subject, to borrow Cavarero's construction, was developed more fully by his student Hegel, most famously, perhaps, in Hegel's account of the lord and bondsman in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. In that discussion, Hegel describes another relationship of radical asymmetry, one in which the lord is presumed to have absolute, total power over his bondsman, who in turn has none, neither over himself nor the lord. But this radical asymmetry is actually dependent on a certain exchange of power between the two men, Hegel argues: the lord's power must be recognized by the bondsman even *as* absolute, and thus it is not precisely absolute, since the bondsman wields significant power in the necessity of its recognition. This dialectic realizes the nascent account of socially-constituted reason that Herder places at the mother's knee; "truth, beauty, and moral value" are not just learned from the mother as absolutes, but exist through processes of proposition and recognition akin to the movement of power between lord and bondsman.

The potential for domination in care in the radical asymmetry of Cavarero's and Gilligan's arguments for relationality suggests that they don't improve on Hegel's dialectical model, and might actually regress from its critique of the sovereign subject by

stopping after only the first turn of the dialectic. They attend to the vulnerable as a source of power, in the form of a demand for response, but not to the exchange of demand, mutual dependence, and vulnerability that Hegel describes beyond that first movement. They might recover a caring intention in the lord, in other words, predisposed by the vulnerability of the bondsman to care instead of dominate, but they don't work through the responsive role of the bondsman, the effect of mutual dependence on both parties, and the potential for critique and negotiation contained within it. In this way, the power dynamics of the sovereign subject seem simply reversed instead of inclined or upended, as I have discussed, and Hegel's model of relationship seems far more relational than some of the later models bearing the name of "relationality". Without accounting for the movements back and forth within the relationship, relationality arguments will have a hard time offering the power critique that they aim to make of the sovereign subject, and that Hegel, then, seems to have made more effectively.

If this characterization is right, why should we turn to contemporary arguments for relationality, particularly where these problems seem most intractable? I want to suggest that the asymmetry of relationality arguments might actually be their most promising and productive dimension when reinterpreted in light of these problems with the framing of sovereign subjectivity and the difficulty of escaping it, in ways that contribute significantly to Hegel's inclination of the sovereign subject, and may even extend beyond it. Emerging from these arguments is a picture of vulnerability *as* the experience of asymmetry in relation: the period of *waiting* for recognition and reply that perhaps one demands, requires, and depends upon, but may not receive as one wishes. This is the

experience that Butler's account of mourning emphasizes, particularly when read in light of the problems with Cavarero and Gilligan on similar themes.

The moment of waiting in relationships, whether dialectical or otherwise, is necessarily risky and uncertain, and thus presents a difficult problem for ethics and politics that want to depend on forms of social exchange, mutual recognition, and ongoing responsiveness—an interest of both the relational arguments of Gilligan, Cavarero, and Butler, and inheritors of Hegel's argument for social constitution.[118] I present the former discussions of vulnerability—and juxtapose them, perhaps impertinently and certainly too quickly, with the beginnings of Hegelian challenges to the autonomy of reason—to suggest in part that they offer a significant addition to the latter, and productive ways of thinking about the risk of relational or social accounts of ethics and politics. Where the possibility of misrecognition and many forms of dominative replies to vulnerabilities exist, perhaps a more thorough analysis of the condition of vulnerability itself is necessary.

[118] See, for example, Robert Brandom, "Some Pragmatist Themes in Hegel's Idealism: Negotiation and Administration in Hegel's Account of the Structure and Content of Conceptual Norms," *European Journal of Philosophy* 7:2 (August 1999); Thomas A. Lewis, *Freedom and Tradition in Hegel: Reconsidering Anthropology, Ethics, and Religion* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005); and Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987) and *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2005).

Chapter Four

Radical Asymmetry and Trinitarian Disruption: Christic Vulnerability in Sarah Coakley's Kenoticism

The word *vulnerability* names the susceptibility to wounding, a description that anticipates the realization of this susceptibility but marks the space and time before it, and even the possibility that it will never come. Vulnerability in this sense is an *unrealized*, *indeterminate* condition, named for one of its most fearsome potential determinations but significantly agnostic on its inevitability, or even its probability. As we have seen over the last three chapters, however, contemporary discussions of vulnerability have often ignored this aspect of the condition, assuming its realization to be inevitable and even imminent, and then finding that it demands preemptive realization in response. I have tried to suggest that this characterization of vulnerability's "demand" mistakes its role in ethical and political thought, foreclosing promising possibilities in the extension of the condition over time and imposing its own violence and domination in the name of care and responsibility. Thus while some of the reclamations of vulnerability from sovereign subjectivity that we have considered argue that vulnerability demands a *different* realization, in care instead of violence, I locate the problem in the demand of its realization at all, and the assumptions of inevitable and impending realization from which it is built. Feminist reclamations of vulnerability have reinstated such demands in their accounts to dangerous effect, as I have argued, reiterating some of the problems of sovereign subjectivity that they criticize.

To shed greater light on this argument—and so, I hope, expose its darker recesses as well—I want to turn in this chapter to a discussion of vulnerability that specifically honors its indeterminacy, responding to its agnosticism not with worldly, preemptive determinations but with Christian faith: that God will determine one's vulnerability in ways that Christians should seek, desire, and love. Through an analysis of "the question of Christological *kenōsis*, or 'voluntary self-emptying on the part of the second person of the Trinity,'" Sarah Coakley argues that instead of seeking to determine vulnerability in responses of care or violence, Christians should cultivate it as an indeterminate susceptibility for God to realize, 'emptying' themselves on Christ's example to "'make space' for God to be God."[119] The faith that drives this practice, I will argue, sets critical assumptions of the secular accounts into relief, adumbrating the hard edges by which they define, delimit, and determine vulnerability by suggesting where it might be better left open, indeterminate, and "empty," as the Christic example suggests.

Coakley's discussion of Christic vulnerability and kenotic contemplative practice follows a now-familiar path. She begins with problems in the "Enlightenment demand for an empowered human 'autonomy'" and the framing of power and vulnerability that it provides, and then contends that what is needed to resist such power—for feminist aims, and other struggles against oppression—is not an embrace or reclamation of it for the oppressed, but a substantial reformulation and reframing of its meaning and structure (*xii*). In particular, Coakley argues, feminists do not need a persistent "resistance to 'submission'" that renders Christian submission to God necessarily oppressive and anti-feminist, as some have claimed, but a reframing of the relationship between power and

[119] Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy, and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 3 and 34. Hereafter cited in this chapter in text with page numbers.

submission altogether that allows a transformation of their oppressed condition (*xiii*).[120] Where Gilligan turned to women's voices for a similar reframing and Cavarero and Butler to the experience of vulnerability in infancy, mourning, and wounds, Coakley turns to Christian traditions of Christ's vulnerability, power, and submission to rearrange the sovereign subject's scene and reformulate the questions asked of it. Unlike Gilligan and Cavarero, however, Coakley's question is not "how can we make the scene end well?" because its conclusion is a matter of faith, beyond human control in important ways. Thus she avoids the mistake Gilligan and Cavarero make of reiterating the sovereign subject's question and only offering a different answer, or a different rubric for what counts as an answer. Rather, Coakley asks how human beings can participate in and toward the ending—to be found in, and ultimately determined by, God—maintaining and cultivating an openness to it, and thus specifically *avoiding* the determination of it themselves, which would close the space for "God to be God." Instead of asking how we can make the scene end well, then, she asks how we can act *in* vulnerability, how we might practice indeterminacy, and how we should live in and with it despite the great appeal of securing ourselves against its significantly dangerous risks. Moreover, how can such practices be part of a feminist struggle against worldly domination and masculinist oppression? As we will see, Coakley argues that these practices and the Christology on which they are developed are precisely where "Christian feminism has something corrective to offer secular feminism" (4). It will be the task of this chapter to explore what that offering might be.

[120] Coakley takes Daphne Hampson as her primary opponent in this argument, a theologian who has explicitly claimed that she is no longer a Christian because of its conflict with her feminism. See Hampson, *Theology and Feminism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

I will begin with a consideration of the feminist dimensions and terrain of her discussion, by way of an introduction to the concept of *kenōsis* as she considers it. I will then turn to her rich interrogations of the history of its interpretation, and her proposal for its transformative effects, once rightly understood, on the concepts of power, submission, and vulnerability in contemporary Christian feminist thought. Finally, I will conclude with a consideration of the potential for these ideas to reformulate the concepts of power and vulnerability we have considered in the other chapters, and the light shed on each account through the conversation among them.

"An Abused God Merely Legitimates Abuse" [121]*: Feminist Concerns about Christic Vulnerability*

In her essay "*Kenōsis* and Subversion: On the Repression of 'Vulnerability' in Christian Feminist Writing,"[122] Coakley frames her discussion of Christic vulnerability through the "tangled questions of power and submission" that she finds in Western philosophical disciplines preoccupied with the concept of power, and certain Christian theological movements similarly preoccupied, she suggests, with submission to God, or submission "paradoxically *identified* with divine 'power'" (*xv*). While Western philosophers since the Enlightenment have claimed individual power, autonomy, and agency in various forms as ideals and have consistently argued on their basis for resistance to submission, Coakley argues, theologians have faced "an intellectual, but also a spiritual, crisis of some magnitude" over how to make sense of such resistance while believing in—and submitting to—an omnipotent God (*xiv*). In response to this struggle, some theologians have construed Christian themes of vulnerability and

[121] Coakley *Powers and Submissions*, *xv*.
[122] Coakley *Powers and Submissions*, 3-39.

submission as "a philosophical embarrassment to be explained away," effectively siding with modern ideas and ideals of power and relinquishing what aspects of the Christian tradition conflict with them (25). Other theologians, however, have turned to "a new adulation of 'vulnerability'" in the "*valorization* of Christic 'vulnerability,'" identifying and valorizing Christians' submission to God with the human vulnerability and wounds of Christ (*xv*). By making Christ's human vulnerability and weakness a central Christian story, these theologians contrast his example with the grasping power of sovereign subjectivity and the assumption of autonomous reason by the Enlightenment subject, relinquishing the ideas and ideals of modern subjectivity where they contradict with Christian submission to God.[123] But Coakley worries that this tactic is "double-edged," particularly when one aims to enlist it on behalf of "the powerless and oppressed": "For how can the call for liberation of the powerless and oppressed, especially of women, possibly coexist with a revalorization of *any* form of 'submission'—divine or otherwise?" (ibid.). Christian theologians generally and feminist Christian theologians in particular must protest this "male" theological trend, she contends, in order to prevent the legitimation of abuse that may result from the idealization of an "abused God" (ibid.). However, these protestations need not be made by forgoing a consideration of Christ's vulnerability altogether, as some feminist theologians have suggested. Rather, Coakley argues for a reconsideration of Christ's vulnerability and its role in Christian thought and practice precisely in light of these dangers, and in the service of this important feminist aim.

[123] See Coakley, *Powers and Submissions, xiv,* n14.

The focus of her interpretation of Christic vulnerability is Christological *kenōsis*, the "'voluntary self-emptying on the part of the second person of the Trinity.'"[124] The word is found in Philippians 2.7, when Paul describes Christ,

> who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but *emptied himself* [*heauton ekenōsen*], taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.[125]

This complicated passage presents a series of apparent paradoxes about the nature of God and the second person of the Triune God, the nature of humanity, and the nature of the relationship between and among them. Does "though he was in the form of God" imply a pre-existent divine life for the second person of the Trinity, prior to the incarnation? Is it this pre-existent divine who "empties himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men"? Why would Christ "empty himself," and what could that mean? If Christ is fully human and fully divine, of what has he emptied himself, since he seems to retain his divinity while assuming humanity? And what does kenotic Christology say about humanity—both Christ's human nature and our own? That we are *empty*, if emptiness is "the likeness of men"? Or that we should empty ourselves, perhaps, to follow Christ's example? Of what can we empty ourselves, and how?

Many answers to these questions could fuel the oppression of women, and have, Coakley suggests, for generations (36). They refer to images of servitude and emptiness by which women have been praised into oppressive submission, and they suggest ways of construing the relation between the divine power and humanity as dominating and "obliterating," dangerously encouraging a definition of power on earth as justifiably obliterating as well (15). The imagery only seems to get worse for such concerns as the

---

[124] Coakley *Powers and Submissions*, 3; quoted from Daphne Hampson, *Theology and Feminism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 155.
[125] Philippians 2.5-7, quoted from the RSV in Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, 5. Emphasis added; Greek quoted in Coakley's citation.

passage continues, describing Christ's humbling vulnerability and God's exaltation of him for it in terms that might easily encourage the "adulation" of a disempowering model of vulnerability (*xv*):

> And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every other name, that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth[126]

Here, stereotypically 'feminine' attributes of weakness, humility, and obedience appear to be ascribed to Jesus, and God exalts him for them, fueling the kind of valorization of "an abused God," which "merely legitimates abuse" (*xv*). "Feminist theology has emerged to make its rightful protest" against such "adulation," Coakley argues, but it has often offered an unsatisfying rejection of vulnerability altogether as its reply (ibid.). This rejection, she suggests, misunderstands the significant challenge that Christic vulnerability can pose to oppressive conceptions of vulnerability, power, and submission, though this challenge can be hard to discern from the many interpretations of the term in the history of Christian thought, as she admits. Thus Coakley seeks to disentangle these interpretive strands, as she works toward the articulation of an understanding of Christic vulnerability that "is what finally keeps [her] a Christian as well as a feminist," and may help others with similar aims (39).

Coakley argues that recent feminist rejections of *kenōsis* have ignored the significant challenges and complexities of its interpretation, and instead assume its meaning according to contemporary definitions and structures of power, and its resulting resonance with stereotypes of masculine and feminine roles. She cites Daphne Hampson as a representative of this view and its mistakes. Hampson's charge against *kenōsis* is

[126] Philippians 2.8-10, quoted from the RSV in Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, 5.

that the ideal of Christ's voluntary self-emptying is "a masculist ploy, beset by conscience" that seeks to correct *men's* grasping toward autonomy and sovereignty by encouraging all Christians to diminish themselves on Christ's example (9). It thus asks women to empty themselves of what little autonomy and sovereignty they may have cultivated, offering a paradigm of Christian virtue that exacerbates oppressive forces already keeping women from cultivating themselves in these ways. As Coakley quotes from Hampson's *Theology and Feminism*:

> That it [*kenōsis*] should have featured prominently in Christian thought is perhaps an indication of the fact that men have understood what the male problem, in thinking in terms of hierarchy and domination, has been. It may well be a model which men need to appropriate and which may helpfully be built into the male understanding of God. *But…for women, the theme of self-emptying and self-abnegation is far from helpful as a paradigm*. (3, emphasis original to Coakley's citation)

Hampson's position is significant and should not be dismissed too quickly, in part because the two problems for which Coakley criticizes it are relatively subtle and illuminating of Coakley's own work. Hampson's central claim against *kenōsis* is that while it offers a helpful paradigm for men to follow toward the correction of their tendencies toward hierarchy and domination, it offers nothing corrective to women, either to compensate for their own traits and tendencies or their oppression within traditional roles. In this way, "*Kenōsis* is a counter-theme within male thought," Hampson writes in the original text, but "it does not build what might be said to be specifically feminist values into our understanding of God" such as "the mutual empowerment of persons."[127] Beyond this lack, it might also contribute to women's denigration by correcting their condition in the wrong direction, exacerbating tendencies and norms of self-sacrifice instead of compensating for their oppressive effects.

[127] Hampson, *Theology and Feminism,* 155.

If this position reminds us of Carol Gilligan's, I don't think we should resist the comparison. Gilligan suggests, similarly, that a masculine, individualist ethics exacerbates the self-sacrificial tendencies of women toward their complete loss of self, aided, no less, by the idealization of self-sacrifice as a "feminine virtue." Hampson is arguing that kenotic theology exacerbates tendencies and conditions of women toward a similar loss of self specifically by virtue of its elevation of self-abnegation to a Christian paradigm. In this way, *kenōsis* "is far from helpful as a paradigm" for women, Hampson argues, as the paradigm of the "Angel in the House" in Gilligan's argument was deemed far from helpful for women as well.[128] In both accounts, paradigms of self-sacrifice exacerbate the traditional roles and stereotypes of women and girls, already self-sacrificial and in need of no further encouragement in that direction.

Coakley is suspicious of the assumptions and assimilations required to ascribe "male" and "female" tendencies, traits, and positions in this way. Similar to the criticism we saw in Chapter One of Gilligan's difference feminism, Coakley is concerned by the assimilation of many different power positions, experiences, and relations into "male" and "female" categories. Such assimilations appear to require, or perpetrate, a dangerous erasure of differences among men or women, and thus different needs for "empowerment" and "abnegation," if these can be so contrasted at all. For Hampson, Coakley writes, "'males' (all males, including 'workmen' and 'slaves'?) need to compensate for their tendency to 'dominate' by means of an act of self-emptying; whereas 'women' (all women, including university professors?) do not" (22). Thus Hampson "appears to make some similar gender presumptions" as her opponents,

[128] Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), *x*.

Coakley suggests, perhaps having "fallen into the trap of her own gender stereotypes" by assuming certain attributes as normally female and normally male, and thus necessary to pursue by the other gender "by way of compensation" (ibid.).

More significantly, however, Coakley argues that this "trap" of gender stereotypes expresses an assumption of "'male' power and dominance" as universal norms, necessary for women to achieve to emerge from oppression (22). Hampson appears to interpret these normative terms through their modern, masculinist framing, Coakley suggests, in which power and empowerment are substantially antithetical to vulnerability, submission, and other suggestions of weakness or self-sacrifice. Thus "for Hampson," Coakley writes, "female 'autonomy' is a supreme good which kenotic Christology can only undermine, not enhance" (3). Her "feminist values" are defined by this conception of autonomy as well, seeking "empowerment" that is substantially threatened by *kenōsis*. Indeed, it appears summarily incompatible with *kenōsis*, Coakley suggests, and thus *kenōsis*, in Hampson's view, has to be abandoned.

Coakley disagrees with both ends of this equation. She is significantly concerned, like Hampson, by the oppression of women and the support it finds in Christian thought, practice, and community, and she agrees that the adulation of Christic vulnerability can participate in such oppression. But she sees an important incompatibility between contemporary feminist understandings of empowerment and traditional Christian understandings of submission to God. She thus calls for a reconsideration of both before either is abandoned. In this way, Coakley finds that feminist positions like Hampson's that seek to reject, escape, or minimize Christian themes of vulnerability and submission in favor of ideals of autonomy, independence, and personal empowerment miss a critical

opportunity to reformulate oppositions between vulnerability and power. These oppositions have more often repressed women than saved them, Coakley argues, and strategies that assume them risk "aping the 'masculinism' they criticize," and frequently do (32).

Against this mistake, Coakley organizes her consideration of Christic vulnerability around "an insistence that the apparently forced choice between dependent 'vulnerability' and liberative 'power' is a false one" (*xv*). Rather, it is "the terms of the debate—the different possible meanings of 'power' and 'submission'" that "are crucially at stake" (ibid.). Coakley suggests that the long tradition of doctrinal debate over the meaning of Christ's vulnerability offers a rich archive of potential reformulations of these terms, an archive "that Christian feminism ignores…at its peril" (39). Christian thought cannot idealize sovereign subjectivity and invulnerability as completely as certain strands of modern thought have done, she argues, because it must contend with the incarnation of a vulnerable God, what that means, and what it means for the nature of power, divinity, humanity, and relations between and among them. In place of modern conceptions of assertive, individual autonomy, then, Christian theological debates over Christ's vulnerability struggle with the *movement between* divine omnipotence and the apparent weakness and vulnerability of the incarnate Christ, a movement that *kenōsis* appears to signify. This is a significantly different debate than modern philosophical disagreements about power, submission, and subjectivity, and one that can significantly reframe feminist struggles for liberatory empowerment. However, it requires consideration on its own terms, not filtered through assumptions of the meanings of "power" and "vulnerability," as Coakley identifies to be Hampson's critical mistake.

Thus Coakley turns to kenotic Christology—as we will now, as well—not in defiance of feminist concerns but specifically in light of them, and toward their development, enrichment, and reformulation apart from modern assumptions of power. In this way, her argument is aligned with the other feminist reclamations of vulnerability we have considered, if pursued by different means, through different sources, and toward a very different, ultimate, end.

Reformulating Power, Vulnerability, and Submission through "'Right' Kenōsis"[129]

Coakley suggests that the fundamental paradox of kenotic Christology is the paradox of the incarnate God: how is an omnipotent God also a vulnerable, impotent human being, ultimately wounded and killed? How did God become such, if there was such a moment of becoming? How can we make sense of "Christ's human brokenness" as an attribute of divinity (17)? Is it an attribute of divinity at all, or does its disjunction with other divine attributes suggest otherwise—that these are attributes only of the human Christ, perhaps? And how do these potential disjunctions change our understanding of ourselves, of the nature of humanity, and of the relation between human beings and the divine? The stakes of these issues are high, Coakley argues, both for theological understanding and spiritual and ethical practices. And they are especially high for anyone concerned with power, liberation from oppression, and personal empowerment, she suggests, as their answers provide ideals of power and relation to be emulated among human beings, as well as in human practices in relation to God.

Coakley's fascinating account of the range of interpretations of *kenōsis* begins with what she describes as two ends of a spectrum of interpretation (7). On one end, strongly

[129] Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, 5.

influenced by "history of religions" methodologies of New Testament interpretation over the last two centuries, Paul's description of *kenōsis* is understood to refer to a pre-existent "gnostic redeemer" who "descends to earth and simulates human existence in order to impart secret saving *gnosis* to his select followers" (6). "According to this view," Coakley writes, "*some* form of divine (or quasi-divine) 'pre-existence' is assumed for the Christ redeemer, and the 'emptying' connotes his appearance on earth" (ibid.). Significantly, this interpretation is less interested in debates about Christ's "full and substantial divinity (or otherwise)" than in "the mythological rhythm of salvific intervention and release" (6-7). In this way, as Coakley quotes from Kåsemann, "'Philippians 2 tells us what Christ *did*, not what he *was*'" (7, emphasis original). *Kenōsis* is a description of activity in relation to Christ the redeemer's followers, not Christ's own nature, or, by extrapolation, the nature of humanity.

Coakley locates the other end of the spectrum in the "ethical interpretation," a reading that offers no claim of Christ's pre-existence, but rather looks to the "servant-like example" of Christ as the key to understanding Christ's "self-emptying." On this interpretation, then, Christ's self-emptying is not a reference to the incarnation but to "Jesus' demeanour throughout his life," in which he exhibits a humility and "humbling," as in verse eight, that resists a 'grasping' for power, as in verse six ("…did not count equality with God a *thing to be grasped*") (7). This is a description of "Jesus' earthly existence," Coakley writes, as a humble man who "chooses never to have certain (false and worldly) forms of power" (8, 11). These forms of power were not even held and then relinquished, she explains, but never "grasped" at all, and never even deemed "a thing to be grasped." In this way, "the 'grasping' is a form of moral turpitude and arrogance that

Jesus avoids right from the start of his ministry," offering an important ethical example for human beings (7).

It is striking that the two ends of the spectrum Coakley defines are both less concerned with Christ's nature, or two natures, than with his *activity*, if in quite different ways. The middle positions Coakley describes are all significantly more concerned with Christ's two natures, questions of pre-existence and incarnation, the relation between the two natures, and relations between humanity and God. Coakley also emphasizes these matters of relation in the interpretation of *kenōsis* for which she advocates. However, she maintains this interest in the activity and dynamic of such relations expressed by the "ethical" and "gnostic" readings, developing it toward an account of kenotic contemplative practice in which her interpretative project will emerge. Before we see that emergence, however, let us continue through the other interpretations to see Coakley's argument in slightly greater detail.

Coakley moves from the "ethical reading" described above, Christ's "choosing never to have" certain powers, to a variation of it in the work of C. F. D. Moule. Moule takes Christ's pre-existence for granted, she explains, and uses this assumption to relocate the ethical act of the "servant-like Christ" in Christ's divine nature, instead of Jesus' earthly life. On this interpretation, then, Jesus "chooses never to have certain (false and worldly) forms of power" *as divine*, as Coakley explains: "On this 'ethical' view Jesus' 'emptying' is seen not just as the blueprint for a perfect human moral response, but as revelatory of the 'humility' of the *divine* nature" revealing, in Moule's words, "the self-giving humility which is the *essence of divinity*" (10).

An alternative strand of interpretation emerges from taking Christ's pre-existence as the starting point of its understanding of *kenōsis*, instead of only a point to be grasped (intellectually) by the interpretation, as in Moule. From this perspective, the problem of *kenōsis* is primarily the problem of the "what 'emptying' can *mean*" (12). Is it an "evacuation of the form of God," as Hilary of Poitiers puts it, or "simply the so-called 'abasements' involved in the taking of flesh" that Cyril of Alexandria describes (12, 13)? For Cyril, this "abasement" requires no abandonment of power because it is not an abandonment of divinity, and he takes "Christ's substantial pre-existence and essential divinity *for granted*," Coakley writes (12). Thus his is a picture of Christ's emptying as essentially a kind of addition, a "taking on of human flesh" instead of a relinquishment of divinity (14). From this complex and lively debate, Coakley offers a fifth summary perspective for her spectrum of interpretation, that *kenōsis* describes "the substantially pre-existing divine Logos's *taking on* of human flesh in the incarnation, but without loss, impairment, or restriction of the divine" (14).

This "Alexandrian" reading thus raises the questions with which we began of how to explain "Christ's human brokenness" where he is simultaneously divine (17). Coakley is particularly interested in an approach to this question through an Alexandrian interpretation of *kenōsis* by a group of Lutherans in Geissen in the seventeenth century. Their "slightly novel twist" on Philippians 2, she argues, "might have some life in it as far as feminist reconstruction is concerned," as least for its indication of precisely what feminists should be concerned about in the interpretation of *kenōsis* (17). The Geissen school sought to explain Christ's vulnerability and weakness within the Alexandrian constraints of pre-existence. Their solution, as Coakley describes it, is that Christ was

indeed "empty" of divine attributes such as omnipotence and omnipresence "during the incarnate life," but as a result of temporarily "retracting" these characteristics, a choice and movement described as *kenōsis* (19). Thus Christ's emptiness "pertains appropriately to the *human* in a 'two natures' model," these authors argue, but as a choice of the divine, over which he has persistent power (25).

In sum, then, Coakley presents six distinct interpretations of *kenōsis* in the essay:

Kenōsis as:

1. The temporary *relinquishing* of divine powers which are Christ's by right (as cosmic redeemer)
2. Christ *pretending* to relinquish divine powers while actually retaining them (as gnostic redeemer)
3. A choosing *never to have* certain (false and worldly) forms of power—forms somehow wrongly construed as 'divine'
4. *Revealing* divine power to be intrinsically '*humble'* rather than 'grasping'
5. The substantially pre-existing divine Logos's *taking on* of human flesh in the incarnation, but without loss, impairment, or restriction of divine powers
6. A temporary retracting (or withdrawing into 'potency') of *certain* characteristics of divinity during the incarnate life.[130]

We can see from these descriptions some of the questions, conflicts, and talking at cross-purposes that have characterized the interpretation of *kenōsis*. Indeed, some of these interpretations obviously contradict each other, which should indicate, at least, the level of disagreement, and lend even greater support to Coakley's suggestion that someone like Hampson could view *kenōsis* as masculinist on one definition of it, while a different definition might show it to be hardly masculinist at all, even by Hampson's own criteria.

From the myriad issues that attend the negotiation among these possibilities, Coakley emphasizes the Alexandrian problem of the relation between divine and human powers for the purpose of thinking about feminism and Christianity. In particular, she is

[130] Interpretations numbers 1-4 from Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, 11; number 5, page 14; number 6, page 19.

interested in its formulation in the Geissen school as a problem of explaining "Christ's human brokenness" in light of pre-existent and sustained divinity (17). By these accounts, in order to explain the "all-too-human states of anxiety, weakness and ignorance occasionally displayed by Jesus in the gospel narratives," Christ must be understood to have "permitted" this humanity "from the unshakeable base of the Logos's unchanging divinity" (15). Thus Christ's vulnerability is an imperfection that he allows "his own flesh to experience," while always maintaining full divine power such that he could control and possibly obliterate this humanity at any time (15). Divine power then appears as a condescending, "obliterating" force, Coakley argues, rendering submission to God hardly empowering, and relations with God hardly appealing to a feminist seeking something other than oppression and domination (15). "The spectre raised here of a divine force that takes on humanity by controlling and partly *obliterating* it," she writes, "is thus the issue that should properly concern us…it is a matter of how divine 'power' is construed in relation to the human, and how this could insidiously fuel masculinist purposes, masculinist visions of the subduing of the weaker by the stronger" (15-16).

Coakley's suggestion for the way out of this "obliterating" interpretation returns us to a familiar strategy from the other chapters: the recovery of vulnerability as a starting point for the discussion, a central feature of the story instead of "a philosophical embarrassment to explain away" (25). "What, we may ask, if the frailty, vulnerability and 'self-effacement' of these narratives is what shows us 'perfect humanity'?" Coakley writes (30). What if the lesson of *kenōsis* is that human beings are not improperly, unfortunately vulnerable but *normatively* so—that we should render ourselves vulnerable instead of seeking an illusively "powerful" invulnerability? If Christ's apparently

paradoxical vulnerability and anxiety on the cross is not understood to be an aberration in the story but the "primary narrative," Coakley contends, this vulnerability can be ascribed to his *humanity* as a virtue instead of a condescension, and thus as a normative attribute of his humanity instead of an unfortunate, embarrassing "abasement" of taking on human flesh (25). In this way, Coakley argues for "the remaining potential of the third definition of *kenōsis,*" the "ethical reading" in which Christ "chooses never to have certain (false and worldly) forms of power," where it "join[s] hands with the Geissen school's insight that *kenōsis* pertains appropriately to the *human* in a 'two natures' model," resulting in a conception of "the normative concurrence in Christ of non-bullying divine 'power' with 'self-effaced' humanity" (31). Christ's vulnerability no longer represents a denigration of human vulnerability of which to be ashamed, and divine power now appears to relate to the human power concurring in the incarnated Christ in a "non-bullying," non-obliterating way (31). Thus "a traditional gender stereotype begins to crumble," Coakley argues, as weakness, vulnerability, and anxiety are all reformulated as "normatively human," exemplified by Christ, instead of embarrassingly human, and necessary to avoid, minimize, or escape (25).

We can now see in greater detail Coakley's reformulations of power, vulnerability, and submission through her understanding of *kenōsis*. Domination and oppression perpetrated by human beings now appear as pretensions to the divine "wrongly grasped," while divine power has been reinterpreted as a "gentle," "non-obliterating" force that relates to humanity without seeking to control it (31). Submission to this divine force can thus be easily distinguished from submission to "false and worldly" powers, and so may have a different role, as we will see in a moment, in a feminist project of personal

empowerment. Vulnerability has been substantially redefined as well as the "normatively human" narrative of Jesus Christ, instead of an embarrassment either to some conception of human sovereignty or to divine nature (31). These redefinitions substantially contest the assumptions about power, vulnerability, and submission by which Hampson seeks an "autonomy" incompatible with *kenōsis*, as well as the "tangled questions of power and submission" with which Coakley began her own effort to find a Christian feminism. As I will suggest in the next section, moreover, they might serve to contest the conceptions of vulnerability that we have found in secular feminist arguments for relationality as well—or, indeed, they will not *contest* these conceptions, so much as open them, empty them, or encourage their own self-emptying—appropriate to the topic, of course, and to the mixed terrain on which these discussions must meet.

Asymmetrical Relations and the Practice of "Making Space": Vulnerability in Contemplative Prayer

Coakley suggests that her interpretation of *kenōsis* actually leaves room for *empowerment* in submission to God, the opportunity "to hold vulnerability and personal empowerment *together*" through a practice of contemplative prayer developed on its example (5). Coakley defines this "'spiritual' extension of Christic *kenōsis*" according to Christ's "normatively human" choice "never to have certain (false and worldly) forms of power" as "a regular and willed *practice* of ceding and responding to the divine… 'internalized' over time" in contemplative prayer (34). It is through this practice, she argues, that Christian feminists can "avoid emulating the very forms of 'worldly' power we criticize in 'masculinism'"—precisely by emulating the *kenōsis* criticized by many feminists (34). And it is in this practice, then, that God's "non-obliterating" force can

empower the Christian who has submitted, bringing vulnerability and personal empowerment together, as Coakley has argued it can.

Coakley describes this practice as an "act of silent waiting on the divine in prayer," in which "we can only be properly 'empowered'…if we cease to set the agenda, if we 'make space' for God to be God" (34). In this way, it requires the cultivation of vulnerability on Christ's example in two directions, both by relinquishing dominative, worldly powers and by developing an "emptiness," in Coakley's language, "for God to be God" (34). The Christian "choos[es] to 'make space' in this way," she suggests, "practic[ing] the 'presence of God'" (35). One *makes room*, then, instead of trying to get to the other side of an undetermined, unknown space, and one makes room for a relationship that will be characterized by presence—when God becomes present—instead of care, violence, or any particular action at all that would close the space, or even fully, definitively, define it. Instead of seeking the other's response, opening oneself in order to receive it, the Christian opens him- or herself in order to create a space in which he or she might have a relation with God, though not a relation that will fill the space or close it. God's presence, then, is not the kind of "response" to vulnerability that we saw in Gilligan's or Cavarero's accounts, because it seems to be a presence *with* the Christian, on Coakley's description, instead of response *to* him or her. This is the lesson I take from Coakley's kenotic formulation of God's non-obliterating power: it is concurrent with Christ's humanity, but not in control of it, not poised to take it back at every moment, and thus the God who is present in the space created in contemplative prayer similarly will not seek to control it, but to be present in it, the analogue to God's "concurrence" with Christ's humanity. Thus the divine presence will not *fill* this space insofar as filling it

would "fill it up," eliminating it as a "space" in which the Christian can be in relation. Rather, the Christian must create the space for God to be God, in Coakley's analysis, but the non-obliterating power of God will not fill the space such that the Christian cannot be a Christian—in relation *with* God, and thus present with God, instead of wholly subsumed by God's power or overwhelmed in God's love. In this way, "this special 'self-emptying is not a negation of self," as Hampson would have it, nor an invitation for God to negate the self, "but the place of the self's transformation and expansion into God": an expansion that one cannot force or assertively determine, but must make the space for, actively, and then wait (36).

I want to suggest that the transformative potential of Coakley's argument for our larger discussion of vulnerability emerges from this account of contemplative prayer and the relation with God for which it 'makes space.' This relation is, in some sense, an extreme extrapolation of the asymmetrical relations from which Gilligan and Cavarero seek to derive "imperatives to respond" to vulnerability, and, in more complicated ways, of the asymmetrical relation to the deceased from which Butler develops her account of relationality understood in mourning, a point to which I will return in a moment. In the asymmetrical relations Gilligan and Cavarero describe, one side was radically exposed to the other, unable to help or defend him- or herself let alone assert him- or herself against the other. This asymmetry was understood to subvert the paradigm of symmetry in encounters between sovereign subjects, and then to generate the imperative to respond to the vulnerable, in care, because there is no possibility of a null response.

The relation to God in contemplative prayer presents a kind of asymmetry as well—and certainly a rebuke to any assumption of symmetry—in God's infinite power relating

to the Christian's finitude. The Christian's life, body, and soul are utterly at stake in these practices, as he or she seeks to cultivate vulnerability within the most radically, even perfectly, asymmetric relation, between a person and God. Even more than in infancy, there is no question of advantage or defense in this position, but like in infancy, the asymmetry casts certain assumptions about the disadvantage of vulnerability in a different light. There is no chance of realizing the other's vulnerability before he or she strikes, nor does it make sense to say that one's radical vulnerability in this position "demands" anything of the other, though it demands much of the Christian, who must have faith that God will emerge into it to be present with him or her. In this way, the extremity of the asymmetry makes it impossible to define a similar "demand" as in scenes of maternal care, and, moreover, the Christian cultivates *submission* in this relation that should keep him or her from trying thus to "set the agenda." However, it does not define a stagnant encounter in place of the activity of response, in which the parties are *merely* present, or merely, stagnantly, waiting for God's presence. God acts in the relation by empowering the Christian, and the Christian is acting, constantly and often strenuously, to cultivate his or her susceptibility in and to the relation itself. This is not a complacent waiting but an active development, maintenance, and deepening of indeterminacy, in which relationships continue precisely because the Christian "ceases to set the agenda." And from a feminist perspective, as Coakley argues, these relationships should continue, because God is similarly not trying to control what occurs, and may thus empower without dominating, and love without obliterating.

In this way, I want to suggest, Coakley's reconception of vulnerability through kenotic spiritual practice recommends a reconception of vulnerability in secular ethical

and political thought as well, one that recovers the significance of its indeterminacy and its use, through this understanding, to motivate anticipatory action without trying to over-determine the future, and what promise it holds. The conceptions of vulnerability that we have seen in Gilligan and Cavarero seek a response to vulnerability that aims to reduce the susceptibility to wounding, without a consideration of other developments to which one might be susceptible, and which might be worth the risk of leaving oneself open. The caregiver responds to vulnerability by realizing it in care, ending the exposure of the vulnerable by covering over it, in soothing, protective, nonviolent strokes. As we have seen, the emphasis on response in these models thus prematurely ends the relationships from which they are supposedly developed, reducing an ongoing relation and its persistent vulnerabilities to an opportunity to respond, in order to reduce the susceptibility to wounding, in turn, by concluding at least one encounter in which one might have been wounded with a different, nonviolent outcome.

In contrast, as the Christian cultivates his or her vulnerability to God, he or she does not seek a response to vulnerability that closes the condition in any way, whether in protection, care, or anything else. The Christian seeks an *ongoing* relationship with God, which Coakley defines specifically in terms of indeterminacy and continuous vulnerability—an openness to what may be to come, to whatever God may bring in and with God's presence, instead of an effort to control one's conditions by "grasping" to secure them, particularly through sovereign power. In order to develop and continue a relationship with God, Coakley suggests, the Christian must practice vulnerability, persistently relinquishing the will to foreclose the condition and thus avoid its more fearsome determinations. The Christian opens him- or herself to significant risks in this

practice, as Christ opened himself to the wounds sustained on the cross. One may relinquish false and worldly powers oneself, but others may not have done the same, and their powers may be wielded against one. However, these risks can and should be sustained, Coakley seems to suggest, into the ultimate and glorious relation with God, to which Christians must cultivate their susceptibility even at the cost of substantial worldly susceptibilities. Put another way, Coakley is arguing for the cultivation of a susceptibility to the presence of a loving God even if one effect of this effort is the retention, or the increase, of the susceptibility to worldly wounding.[131]

From this point in Coakley's account, I want to suggest we can discern both an important reframing of the secular recoveries of vulnerability that we have considered and a difficulty that Coakley might do well to address more fully than she has thus far in her work on kenotic prayer. First, Coakley's account of cultivating one's susceptibilities toward empowering relation suggests that the secular models of vulnerability "demanding" response not only bear problematic potentials of domination in care, but also the foreclosure of more promising possibilities in the continuation of vulnerability. Not all relations will control or "obliterate," Coakley suggests, and such non-obliterating relations might be sought toward greater development and fulfillment. However, a "non-obliterating" relation, if Coakley is right, will be marked by the continuation of vulnerability within it, not by caring control over the vulnerable, however well intentioned. Thus we might see the problem of domination in care by this light as a problem of "obliterating" precisely the vulnerability that makes relations possible, filling and closing the "space" in which one might be present with the other. Significantly, this

[131] I am indebted to Stephen Bush for this phrasing.

understanding of vulnerability seems to echo Butler's description of relationality in "the *time* by which those terms [I and you] are differentiated and related," a "narrative gap," to borrow a phrase from Coakley, in which I am simultaneously constituted and vulnerable, persistently susceptible to harm and persistently open to the other's empowering presence.[132] It seems, then, that in both Butler's and Coakley's accounts, my openness to the other constitutes our relationship, marking the space across which we connect, the "gap" in which we might be present with each other, and the time in which we might be together in these ways. Instead of a relation defined by one party filling this space, reaching across it and determining it in either violence or care, Butler and Coakley describe its indeterminate continuation as the condition of relation itself.

This is a condition of vulnerability, however, marking the indeterminacy of the "narrative" that extends in and through this "gap," and which might come to tell a much less appealing, empowering story than what Coakley tells of the relation with God. We might remember, for example, that Butler describes the space by which we are related as it is discovered in the loss of the other in the relation, and thus the extension of this period into a new kind of indeterminacy. We find ourselves unstable and "beside ourselves" in this condition, newly unsure not of how the gap will be filled—for we were already unsure of that—but of who will be present in it, and how they will understand its use and potential. Others may take it as an opportunity to harm, exploit, or dominate, taking advantage of our open susceptibility to them instead of being present with us, toward the promise of the continuation of the story.

[132] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life* (New York: Verso, 2004), 22; Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, 39.

These less promising and more devastating possibilities of the cultivation of susceptibility deserve greater consideration than they receive in Coakley's work. While she admits the difficulty of the practice of contemplation quite freely, she hardly describes the potential for its worldly exploitation, and whether that potential can or should become a part of the practice itself. Of course, in a practice developed from the example of a vulnerable God who suffers mortal wounds by "false and worldly powers," worldly threats are hardly missing from view. But Coakley says surprisingly little about how the Christian practitioner should understand these threats to his or her own vulnerable self—an omission that seems particularly problematic in light of feminist concerns about worldly oppression, violence, and domination.

Conversely, considering the "promise" of vulnerability in conversation with Christian thought suggests certain limitations and dangers in the concept of vulnerability in a secular context. In Coakley's account, it is a matter of faith, often strenuously developed and held, that vulnerability will be determined in God's empowering love and grace. "Waiting" for God's determination of vulnerability is thus a rightly promising endeavor, worth pursuing actively and concertedly despite its worldly risks (though again, it would be helpful to hear more from Coakley about how to contend with them). But there is no such faith for the unfaithful, the non-Christian, or the non-believer. Is living in indeterminacy a dangerous distraction, in these conditions, from the work of trying to determine the future for the better, or at least prevent its worst realizations? What promise is there, without God, to make indeterminacy "promising"? Is indeterminacy perhaps necessary to help resist domination, as I have suggested, but still a danger to be minimized wherever possible?

I want to suggest that the discussion of Christ's "self-emptying" indicates a different kind of emptiness in the secular concept of vulnerability: the emptiness of any particular promise for the future, or any particular expectation of a better outcome than the wounds to which it etymologically refers. This conception poses a significant challenge to the position of "promise in indeterminacy" for which I have been advocating, and should remove any sheen that that promise may have appeared to have. Vulnerability is scary, dangerous, and makes no guarantees. In a secular context, it must not be valorized in any way that glosses over these potentials. But the extension of vulnerability in indeterminacy, into the future, is still significantly promising without any particular promise of a good end, or action to realize an acceptable end, such as care. This 'empty' promise can motivate ongoing, improving activity, even if that activity cannot ensure a good outcome. Contra Gilligan and Cavarero, then, we might see from Coakley that acting to determine vulnerability and an irresponsibly complacent, damaging "waiting" in vulnerability are not the only options. Christian practices of cultivating and sustaining vulnerability to God offer a substantial example of a productive, active practice of "waiting" for what is to come that can inform secular ethical and political practices as well. Thus Coakley's account not only encourages a reframing of the concepts of power and vulnerability; it also offers a conception of alternative practices to pursue by their lights. What these alternative practices might look like in a secular context will be the topic of the concluding pages, and a promising direction for further consideration beyond them.

Conclusion

An Ethics of Indeterminacy?

Vulnerability is a scary thing, whether cultivated on one's knees in contemplative prayer or confronted in the same position before an assailant, the next hand ready to strike after the first has already brought one to the ground. It is tempting, then, to try to escape the condition altogether, fighting to eliminate whatever threatens and avoiding exposure to threats wherever possible. In this project, I have considered the work of four authors who argue against this temptation on the grounds that it leads either to proactive violence against potential threats or forms of violence perpetrated against oneself through isolation. We cannot seek to escape vulnerability without wounding ourselves or others in these ways, and so we must learn to live as vulnerable beings, irremediably exposed and susceptible. We must then determine what responsibilities emerge from these conditions—to ourselves, to each other, and as a community.

Each of the authors I have considered argues for a conception of vulnerability as an inescapable aspect of the human condition, against ideas and ideals of its escapability perpetuated by norms of sovereign subjectivity. Each argues for the critical role of the concept of vulnerability in a critique of sovereign subjectivity and a reframing of the opposition between power and vulnerability that it has developed. And each argues, then, that vulnerability rightly understood is not antithetical to power, so long as power is not defined by complete, secure control over one's situation, best exemplified by either the isolation from all threats of interference or their domination or elimination altogether.

Where our powers are not identified with *invulnerability* in this way, vulnerability can be seen as a productive, promising, and ethically demanding condition, directing our efforts toward the improvement of our conditions while also allowing forms of connection, collaboration, and relationship that appear impossible and undesirable in the sovereign subject's view.

From my analysis of the efforts of Gilligan, Cavarero, Butler, and Coakley to reframe the tense relationship between power and vulnerability in this way, we have emerged with a new tension within the condition itself, between *waiting*, as in Coakley and Butler, and *negotiating*, as I have suggested in response to the potential for domination in care in Gilligan and Cavarero. To conclude our discussion here—so much as an investigation of vulnerability, indeterminacy, and ongoing relations can ever be concluded—I want to examine this apparent tension, arguing that the promise of vulnerability for ethical and political thought comes in pursuing these practices together, negotiating our relations to and into a future unknown for which we must wait.

Gilligan and Cavarero each recover a concept of vulnerability from its castigation in sovereign subjectivity that demands a response, generating an ethical imperative to respond with care because any other response would be a form of violence. There is no 'null response' to the infant's vulnerability, as Cavarero suggests, nor can we escape the demand to reply in any relationship, Gilligan argues, as it situates us in a scene of address in which even a lack of response "constitutes response."[133] But this emphasis on the response to the other in each argument cuts off the "narrative of relationships that extends over time" from which the imperative is developed, I have suggested, returning each

[133] Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 50.

author's promising relational ethics to the same frames of encounter and conclusive action in which the sovereign subject views vulnerability as only a disadvantage, and relationships as only violent, dangerous, and potentially devastating.[134]

The problem with returning to these frames of encounter as a model of relational ethics is best seen in the potential for domination in care in Gilligan's and Cavarero's accounts, which emerges from their elevation of the caregiver's *response* without further consideration of the vulnerable being's subsequent reply, whether literal or more metaphorical. The vulnerable being has no way to negotiate or contest the care he or she receives, by their arguments, as the caregiver responds to his or her needs as the caregiver has perceived them and determined an appropriate reply. The role of the vulnerable and cared-for seems to be the role of the "request" or "demand" of care, not a participant in the relationship: as Cavarero writes, "the helpless creature…becomes himself a request," irremediably exposed to the other and demanding care in response.[135] It seems hard to determine how best to care in this situation, then, and impossible for the vulnerable, cared-for to contest the caregiver's understanding of "himself [as] a request," rendering it easy for the caregiver to dominate the vulnerable even with the good intentions.

In light of this concern, I have argued, Gilligan and Cavarero must recover concepts of ongoing negotiation, conversation, exchange, and mutual recognition within their relational ethics, concepts already suggested by Gilligan in her critique of an individualistic ethics' misunderstanding of the way relationships "extend over time." Thus the recovery of these concepts might finally fulfill the critiques each author begins of individualistic norms of sovereign power, autonomy, and independence, forcing an

[134] Ibid., 28.
[135] Adriana Cavarero, "Inclining the Subject: Ethics, Alterity, and Natality," in *Theory After Theory*, eds. Jane Elliott and Derek Aldridge (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 202.

ethical and political consideration of the continuation of relationships over time, beyond any given scene, into an indeterminate future in which sustained vulnerability to others in relationships forms the promising ground for our development and flourishing, instead of only a threat to it, necessary to eliminate or escape.

Reframing ethical and political thought through "a narrative of relationships that extends over time" would be no small contribution of arguments for relationality and inescapable vulnerability. It allows a productive consideration of future possibilities beyond any given moment or encounter, expanding our understanding of ethical and political options in ways that might help us work in and through tragedy, for example, or other apparently intractable conflicts. It suggests, in the words of one of Gilligan's interview subjects, the possibility that we might "reach something" in the future even if we don't yet see what that could be, and thus that the continuation of our relationships and exposure to each other is not unfortunately, dangerously inescapable but promising, a space in which progress might be made, and in which we can and must negotiate what it would mean to make progress.[136] Defining norms of what counts as progress, how it should be pursued, and who has the responsibility to pursue from outside of these ongoing relationships, or from only one side of them "in response" to the other's vulnerability, undermines these promising tasks. Ongoing relationships must be characterized by ongoing conversation, negotiation, and contestation of these norms, lest they reiterate the potential for domination in a one-sided assertion against the other, without the protections, no less, of an individualist ethics that expects as much and prepares for it with corresponding assertions.

[136] Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, 29.

At this juncture in the argument, we might well have turned to examples of dynamic, ongoing relationships characterized by lively discussions and debates. We might have considered the way that even the infant, Cavarero's paradigm of radical vulnerability and helplessness, "himself a request," actually engages his caregivers constantly in negotiations over how best to care, if pursued less with language than cries, motions, and other forms of communication. We might have continued with the infant as he grows, and the norms of what it means to care, who is responsible to and for him, and whose voices might be heard in the discussion as the norms of care are perpetually negotiated and renegotiated. We might have looked to many other examples of persistent, ongoing exchange as well, from the personal to the political. After all, Gilligan's and Cavarero's arguments for the inescapability of vulnerability in relationship are both premised on the idea that relationships *do* continue in this way, not only that they should or could if we so choose. Examples abound, then, for better and for worse, from the ongoing relationship of the caring mother toward her infant to the ongoing relationship of the abusive mother to hers; from the sustained and sustaining connections of a strong community to the persistent exposures to violence many experience on their streets; from the spiritually enhancing, nourishing, guiding relationship with a trusted clergy member to the insidious risks of his or her abuse; and so on. The opportunity for negotiation of some kind might productively transform any of these relations, exposing in turn their often dangerous assumptions that there is nothing to discuss.

Instead, I turned to two relationships defined specifically by lacks of exchange, or at least unusual gaps in the conversation. In Judith Butler's discussion of relationality in *Precarious Life*, we discover our constitution in ongoing relationships with others

precisely as they end in the other's loss, as we seek to continue the conversation but find that the other does not reply.[137] In Sarah Coakley's discussion of Christic vulnerability and its example for Christians, vulnerability is cultivated by the Christian to "make space" for God's presence, a relationship in which the Christian faithfully "waits" for God precisely by withdrawing and relinquishing his or her assertions in any negotiation or exchange with God. Trying to negotiate, to "set the agenda," might fill the space for God's presence with the Christian's grasping at divine power. Instead, Coakley argues, the Christian must "empty" him- or herself on Christ's kenotic example, cultivating vulnerability as a "narrative 'gap'" for "God to be God."[138]

Both of these discussions transform the ethically demanding asymmetry of relationships from which Gilligan and Cavarero develop their imperatives to respond into spaces and periods of time in which one waits for a reply, and finds things to do in and with the period of waiting. But as Butler's account suggests, one discovers in this experience that one is constituted by relations with others, that the ongoing relationship with and presence of others is what always fills the "space" of ourselves. Thus we discover that as we wait for any particular other's response, we find that others are present with us, waiting with us, perhaps, but also filling the narrative "gap" themselves. This is the worldly community that Coakley too often neglects, to the detriment of her argument, as well as the community that we might find, as Butler suggests, "in these conditions" of mourning, loss, and vulnerability.[139] We are then vulnerable in turn to those present, standing with them not only in wait but also in relation. Their presence

---

[137] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life* (New York: Verso, 2004).
[138] Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy, and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 34.
[139] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 19.

may come to define us as our lives extend into and beyond the space left by loss, or even the space the Christian seeks to cultivate in relation to God. Finding someone to stand or kneel with us as we face that "gap" can create some of the most fulfilling, sustaining relations; understanding that all present "wait" with us, in some way, might do the same. Similarly, understanding that not all who emerge in these spaces will only be present, supporting and empowering but not obliterating, should caution us against any valorization of these conditions. We may find community in them, but we are no less susceptible to the dangerous actions of its members, or the community as a whole. Indeed, we may even be more susceptible in our indeterminate, open state.

We can find, then, that these unusual relations "furnis[h] a sense of political community of a complex order," as Butler argues, but not only "by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility."[140] Rather, we see a community emerge that does not face each other in the ways "dependency" and "ethical responsibility" have implied in either sovereign subjective or relational accounts. The community present in and with me as I wait is a community I stand with, looking out to an indeterminate future. I am dependent on them in many ways, as we share our vulnerable conditions with each other and help to provide (or fail to provide) for each other's needs. But the face-to-face encounter in which the sovereign subject might strike or the caregiver might incline to provide for the vulnerable is rearranged, destabilized not by a demand of vulnerability but by its indeterminate condition, extending into the future to which we must all look, together.

[140] Ibid., 22.

We wait for this future, in some sense, but we also must negotiate how we wait for it together, bringing together these apparently opposing proposals in turn.

Bibliography

Andolsen, Barbara Hilkert. "Agape in Feminist Ethics." *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 9 (1981): 69-83.

Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1958.

Auerbach, J., L. Blum, V. Smith, and C. Williams. "Commentary on Gilligan's In a Different Voice." *Feminist Studies* 11 (1985): 149-161

Robert Brandom. "Some Pragmatist Themes in Hegel's Idealism: Negotiation and Administration in Hegel's Account of the Structure and Content of Conceptual Norms." *European Journal of Philosophy* 7:2 (August 1999): 164-189.

Butler, Judith. *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* London: Verso, 2009.

—. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2005.

—. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, 2004.

—. *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1987.

Canetti, Elias. *Crowds and Power*. Translated by Carol Stewart. New York, NY: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1962.

Cavarero, Adriana. "Recritude: Reflections on Postural Ontology." *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 27, Number 3 (2013): 220-235.

—. "Inclining the Subject: Ethics, Alterity, and Natality." In *Theory After Theory*, edited by Jane Elliott and Derek Aldridge, 194-204. London and New York: Routledge, 2011.

—. *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence*. Translated by William McCuaig. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2009.

—. *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*. Translated by Paul A. Kottman. New York and London: Routledge, 2000.

Cates, Diana Fritz. *Choosing to Feel*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997.

Coakley, Sarah. *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity.'* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

—. "Jail Break: Meditation as a Subversive Activity." *Christian Century* 121 (2004): 18-21

—. *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy, and Gender*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002.

—. "Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations." In *The Work of Love: Creation As Kenosis,* edited by Sir John Polkinghorne. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001. 192-210.

—. *Religion and the Body*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

—. "Kenosis and Subversion: On the Repression of "Vulnerability" in Christian Feminist Writing." In *Swallowing A Fishbone? Feminist Theologians Debate Christianity*. Edited by Daphne Hampson. London: S.P.C.K., 1996. 82-111.

Connolly, William. *The Fragility of Things: Self-Organizing Processes, Neoliberal Fantasies, and Democratic Activism*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013.

Crysdale, Cynthia S. W. "Gilligan and the Ethics of Care: An Update." *Religious Studies Review* 20 (1994): 21-28.

Culp, Christine A. *Vulnerability and Glory: A Theological Account*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

Feder, Ellen K. and Eva Feder Kittay. *The Subject of Care: Feminist Perspectives on Dependency*. Lanham, MD and Oxford, UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002.

Gilligan, Carol. *Joining the Resistance*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2011.

—. *In a Different Voice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993 [1982].

Gilligan, Carol and David A. J. Richards. *The Deepening Darkness: Patriarchy, Resistance, and Democracy's Future*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Gilligan, Carol, Janie Victoria Ward, and Jill McLean Taylor, eds., *Mapping the Moral Domain*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.

Gilson Erin, *The Ethics of Vulnerability: A Feminist Analysis of Social Life and Practice*. London and New York: Routledge, 2014.

Goodin, Robert E. *Protecting the Vulnerable*. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1985.

Gregory, Eric. *Politics and the Order of Love*. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2010.

Groenhout, Ruth E. *Connected Lives: Human Nature and an Ethics of Care*. Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield, 2004.

—. *Theological Echoes in an Ethic of Care*. Amherst, MA: The Erasmus Institute, 2003.

Hampson, Daphne. *Theology and Feminism*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1990.

Held, Virginia. *The Ethics of Care*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Herder, Johann Gottfried. *Philosophical Writings*. Trans. and ed. Michael N. Forster. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. Edited by Richard Tuck. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Honig, Bonnie. *Antigone Interrupted*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

—. *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*. Cornell, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993.

Kant, Immanuel. *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Trans. and ed. Mary Gregor and Jens Timmerman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Kittay, Eva Feder. "Forever Small: The Strange Case of Ashley X." *Hypatia* 26 (2011): 610-63.

—. *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality and Dependency*. London and New York: Routledge, 1999.

Kittay, Eva Feder and Diana T. Meyers, eds. *Women and Moral Theory*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1987.

Kohlberg, Lawrence. *The Philosophy of Moral Development*. San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1981.

Kohlberg, Lawrence with Charles Levine and Alexandra Hewer. "Synopses and Detailed Replies to Critics." In *Essays on Moral Development*. San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1981.

Levinas, Emmanuel. *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1981.

Lewis, Thomas A. *Freedom and Tradition in Hegel: Reconsidering Anthropology, Ethics, and Religion*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005.

MacIntyre, Alasdair. *Dependent Rational Animals*. Peru, IL: Open Court, 2001.

Mercedes, Anna. *Power For: Feminism and Christ's Self-Giving*. London: T. & T. Clark, 2011.

Miller, Jean Baker. *Toward a New Psychology of Women*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1976.

Murphy, Ann V. "Corporeal Vulnerability and the New Humanism." *Hypatia* 26 (2011): 575-590.

Noddings, Nel. *The Maternal Factor: Two Paths to Morality*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010.

—. "A Skeptical Spirituality." In *Philosophy, Feminism, and Faith*, edited by Ruth E. Groenhout and Marya Bower. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003.

—. *Starting at Home: Caring and Social Policy*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002.

—. "Thinking, Feeling, and Moral Imagination." In *Philosophy of Emotions: Midwest Studies in Philosophy* Vol. 22 edited by Peter A. French and Howard K. Wettstein. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998.

—. *Caring, a Feminine Approach to Ethics & Moral Education*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984.

Nussbaum, Martha. *The Fragility of Goodness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

Obama, Barack Hussein. "Transcript: 'We Have Wept With You,' Obama says in Newtown Speech." *CNN Political Ticker Blog* (December 16, 2012). Accessed April 16, 2013. http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2012/12/16/breaking-we-have-wept-with-you-obama-says-in-newtown-speech/.

Petit, Philip. *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Richards, David A. J. *Resisting Injustice and the Feminist Ethics of Care in the Age of Obama: "Suddenly…All the Truth Was Coming Out."* New York, NY: Routledge, 2013.

Ruddick, Sara. *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995.

Simplican, Stacey Clifford. "Care, Disability, and Violence: Theorizing Complex Dependency in Eva Kittay and Judith Butler." *Hypatia* 30 (2014): 217-233.

Smith, R. L. "Moral Transcendence and Moral Space in the Historical Experiences of Women." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 4 (1988): 21-37.

Stout, Jeffrey. *Democracy and Tradition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.

Tong, Rosemary. "Love's labor in the health care system: Working toward gender equity." *Hypatia* 17.3 (2002): 200–213.

Townes, Emilie M. *Breaking the Fine Rain of Death: African-American Health Issues and a Womanist Ethic of Care*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006.

Tronto, Joan C. *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*. New York and London: Routledge, 1993.

—. "Beyond Gender Different to a Theory of Care." *Signs* 12 (1987): 644-663.

Walker, Margaret Urban. *Moral Understandings: A Feminist Study in Ethics*. New York and London: Routledge, 1998.

Weber, Max. *Economy and Society*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978.

Weil, Simone. *Waiting for God*. Translated by Emma Craufurd. Harper Collins Perennial Classics, 2001.

Whitney, Shiloh Y. "Dependency Relations: Corporeal Vulnerability and Norms of Personhood in Hobbes and Kittay." *Hypatia* 26 (2011): 554-574.