

Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds (editors)
Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy
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Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy is arguably the first collection of philosophical essays to be published on the topic.¹ As such, it invites a moment of reflection on the state of scholarly discourse surrounding vulnerability and its analogues, such as care, dependency, and need. To begin with a series of expansive questions to foster deeper consideration: How has the discourse on vulnerability and associated concepts transformed the philosophical terrain? To what extent has this discourse risen to the level of significance and visibility enjoyed by other leading concepts in moral and political philosophy, such as justice, equality, independence, and autonomy? Does vulnerability have a fitting place alongside these concepts? And finally, and perhaps the boldest question of the group: Are we experiencing a pivotal moment in the discipline, in which the centrality of vulnerability to the human condition will finally receive appropriate philosophical attention? The twelve new essays in *Vulnerability* start us well on the path to answering these and related pressing questions.

Vulnerability is a notable volume for multiple reasons, including the variety of philosophical perspectives it contains, the caliber of its contributors, and the rigor of the essays themselves. The value of the collection is evident from the very start, which is to say, from the introduction. Introductions to edited volumes rarely elicit comment, as they tend to function primarily as a preview of coming attractions. In this instance, however, editors Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds demonstrate just how excellent and useful an introduction can be, offering one that is simply not to be missed. They artfully synthesize recent developments in the ethics of vulnerability, providing an incisive characterization of the state of vulnerability in analytic moral and political philosophy. Four target questions structure these efforts: "What is vulnerability? Why does vulnerability give rise to moral obligations and duties of justice? Who

¹ A closely related volume focused primarily on legal and political theory was published around the same time: Fineman and Gear 2013 was published on December 28, 2013. The volume under consideration in this review was published on December 12, 2013.

bears primary responsibility for responding to vulnerability? And how are our obligations to the vulnerable best fulfilled?" (1).

The editors' take on the first question deserves special attention. They answer by way of a taxonomy, providing a productive organizational structure for competing conceptions of vulnerability. The taxonomy includes three sources of vulnerability (inherent, situational, and pathogenic) and two states of vulnerability (dispositional and occurrent). It serves the crucial function of implicitly addressing frequent conflation in the literature, for example, between forms of vulnerability that come with being human (inherent vulnerabilities) versus forms of vulnerability that arise because of how one is situated socially, economically, culturally, etc. (situational vulnerabilities). Taken together, the editors' answers to the four questions provide readers with an indispensable guide to the current state of the philosophical discourse on the ethics of vulnerability.

The twelve essays in the volume comprise a multi-pronged approach to vulnerability, with contributors from several analytic subfields, including Kantian ethics, care ethics, bioethics, and political philosophy of varying stripes.² The book is arranged into two sections--"Reflections on Vulnerability" and "Vulnerability, Dependency, and Care"--and these section titles provide a rough sense of the scope of the book's overarching themes. Many of the authors pursue aspects of the aims the editors establish in the introduction by identifying, categorizing, and defining different forms and representations of vulnerability. Significant conceptual intersections between vulnerability and several key concepts emerge, including vulnerability and dependence, vulnerability and autonomy, and vulnerability and care. These intersections also provide a useful way of organizing commentary on individual pieces in the volume, as I do below. In addition to the categories just named, additional essays address what an ethics of vulnerability has to say about specific topics, such as children and vulnerability (Mianna Lotz and Amy Mullin), reparations (Margaret Urban Walker), and vulnerability to coercion in cases of abused women's "failure to protect" their children (Marilyn Friedman).

In their respective contributions, Jackie Leach Scully and Susan Dodds consider the relationship between vulnerability and dependency. This conceptual intersection represents what I have long sensed is a key tension in feminist ethics regarding which concept has ethical primacy, so to speak. What hangs on the determination of ethical primacy? That which is ethically primary provides the grounding reason for why we have a responsibility to respond to others in the first place. Whether it is others' dependence or their vulnerability that grounds our obligation to respond remains an unresolved matter. The essays by Dodds and Scully both address this issue, though in different ways.

In her essay, Dodds discusses the murky definitional territory of dependence and vulnerability, as well as a third concept at the heart of feminist ethics: care. Her essay, with its meticulous mapping of the conceptual terrain, succeeds in this regard in a way that some others in the

² The collection does not include any contributions from continental scholars, who have provided significant discussions of vulnerability, both historically and as of late. Space does not permit me to discuss comparisons between continental and analytical philosophical approaches to vulnerability, though this is a very interesting topic.

volume do not. As a result, she provides illuminating definitions of multiple related terms, such as partial dependency, secondary dependency, and pathogenic vulnerabilities. Regarding the moral interrelation among vulnerability, dependency, and care, Dodds provides the following helpful articulation: "On my account dependency is a specific form of vulnerability, and the care provided to meet the needs, and support the autonomy of dependents (dependency-care), is a response to this vulnerability" (182). Thus, for Dodds, dependency is subsumed under vulnerability and is therefore rendered as merely one variety of it. Vulnerability is the more expansive moral concept.

Rendering dependency as derivative of vulnerability, however, overlooks the ways in which dependency exceeds the conceptual boundaries of vulnerability, as is apparent when we consider some key differences between the two. Although I take Dodds as my primary focus in discussing this matter, the relationship between vulnerability and dependency is a recurring issue--sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit--throughout much of *Vulnerability*, and thus this criticism applies to multiple essays. While vulnerability involves the possibility of harm, dependency involves the certainty of need. We are vulnerable to various potential harms. We are necessarily dependent upon others to meet a host of our actual and ongoing needs. Thus, vulnerability and dependency address distinctive phenomena both in terms of human experience and, for lack of a better term, probability.

A third key difference involves the kind of moral relationships--and more specifically, the kinds of moral responsibility--that arise in conjunction with vulnerability and dependence. The well-known distinction between negative and positive duties is somewhat instructive for highlighting how these concepts differ concerning the respective normative relations and responses they engender. As we will see, however, this distinction only goes so far. Negative duties are generally understood as duties to refrain from harming another. Positive duties are duties to render assistance to another. Regarding vulnerability, moral agents clearly have a negative duty of vulnerability not to harm others. Regarding dependence, they also have a positive duty of dependency to render assistance to others, that is, to respond to their needs. So far, so good. Things become murkier when you realize that with vulnerability, others are potentially susceptible to harm not only from us as moral agents, but also from other people. Thus, with vulnerability, we are not to harm others (negative duty) and also not to allow harm to come to others. This latter formulation is arguably something more akin to a positive duty. Hence vulnerability appears to engender both negative and positive duties, whereas dependency engenders only a positive duty of aid. For Dodds, care is the moral response to human vulnerability. If dependency is a separate conceptual entity, as I have argued here, this opens the further question of whether the moral response engendered by dependency falls under the category of care (as much of the care ethics literature suggests), a different form or type of care, or some other normative response.

The objections I have raised challenge the assumed ethical primacy of vulnerability, that is, whether it is vulnerability that provides the foundational reason for our responsibility to respond to others. If my conceptual cleaving of dependency from vulnerability holds, dependency could provide another normative set of reasons to respond to others--reasons of need, which are at least as normatively compelling, if perhaps differently compelling, as reasons of harm--and would therefore be potentially morally co-foundational with vulnerability (meaning that they would

both be reason-giving when considering why we must respond to others). Apart from considerations of ethical primacy, I hope at a minimum to have demonstrated that dependency is conceptually distinctive from vulnerability, rather than being one subvariety of vulnerability, as Dodds renders it.³

Jackie Leach Scully's essay, "Disability and Vulnerability: On Bodies, Dependence, and Power," may well be the volume's strongest contribution both because of her razor-sharp definitional articulation of vulnerability and the creative and incisive way she challenges common assumptions that vulnerability and dependence stand at odds with the experience of full autonomy. This latter move reorients perceptions of our vulnerabilities and dependencies and serves to recognize the ways in which both filter through all of our days and lives, hence challenging the notion that disabled individuals are somehow uniquely vulnerable or dependent. Far from being the "natural" or "given" state of things, Scully highlights how social and political forces, structures, and decisions determine which forms of vulnerability and dependency are understood to be exceptional and therefore nonnormative and which forms are, in contrast, thought to be normal and therefore normative.

Catriona Mackenzie and Joel Anderson devote their contributions to another major conceptual intersection in feminist ethics, namely, between vulnerability and autonomy. Like Scully, Mackenzie questions the assumed opposition between vulnerability and autonomy. Informing Mackenzie's account is a desire to avoid paternalistic intervention, a persistent risk for an ethics of vulnerability. The version of vulnerability that Mackenzie sets forth is one that fully invites autonomy, and more specifically relational autonomy, into the mix, especially with regard to the obligations that moral agents have to foster autonomy in the face of vulnerability. Mackenzie also incorporates capabilities theory, a promising connection for an ethics of vulnerability. Anderson also takes on the purported opposition between vulnerability and autonomy, though in a way that differs from Mackenzie's approach. Anderson underscores how vulnerability and autonomy are necessarily intertwined, for example, in the ways in which we are dependent on others' recognition and vulnerable to their exclusion of us in the context of various social practices. Vulnerability, Anderson therefore argues, makes nothing less than a constitutive contribution to autonomy. Taken together, Mackenzie and Anderson (along with Scully and Dodds, it should be noted) provide a detailed and compelling picture of vulnerability and autonomy's variously interwoven nature.

Rosemarie Tong's contribution is one of several essays that stands at the intersection of vulnerability and care, where she considers the broad themes of the assignment of responsibility for caring for the elderly in both private and institutional contexts, as well as whether the current allocation of caring responsibilities is morally acceptable. Some of this material may already be familiar to feminist bioethicists. At the other end of the human lifespan, Amy Mullin zeroes in on a specific form of care of children, namely, care for their emotional needs, as well as the multiple forms of vulnerabilities found in this context for both care-givers and care-receivers.

³ Dodds is in good company in holding that vulnerability has ethical primacy. This company includes Robert Goodin, who wrote the first and still very compelling philosophical text on the ethics of vulnerability (Goodin 1985).

Limited space prohibits detailed commentary on each and every essay in the volume--surely attention they all deserve. I will briefly mention a few additional essays before closing. Wendy Rogers provides a very good diagnostic of the murky uses and abuses of the concept of vulnerability in discussions of bioethics. Paul Formosa's essay plumbs the historical depths of philosophy, as he makes clear the importance of vulnerability in Kantian ethics--and more specifically the vulnerability of our rational capacities, the very foundation of dignity in Kantian ethics. Janna Thompson's essay most creatively expands the discourse on vulnerability. Thompson explores the concept of temporal vulnerability by considering both the ways in which past and future generations are temporally vulnerable to those of us existing now, as well as how we are temporally vulnerable to future persons because of how they can make or break the fulfillment of our interests that exceed our lifespan. Thompson ultimately recommends a contractual approach to temporal vulnerability, especially for the proper determination and fulfillment of intergenerational obligations.

In certain respects, *Vulnerability* raises more questions than it answers, inviting a second moment of general reflection to bookend the questions I raised at the beginning. After reading the volume, and despite the considerable efforts of many writers therein, a lack of clarity remains regarding the precise definition of key concepts and the conceptual relationship between these concepts. Regarding the first issue, just as in discussions of justice competing definitions have congealed over time (for example, justice as fairness, justice as equality, and justice as desert), the same may well be in process for vulnerability. Regarding the second issue, as I have noted, several authors address the relationship between vulnerability and dependency and vulnerability and autonomy. This same examination does not take place for other compelling concepts, such as resilience and precarity, for example. These observations are not meant to function as criticisms of the volume itself, but rather as observations regarding the progress the ethics of vulnerability has made to date and perhaps as suggestions for additional avenues scholars could pursue as this important work continues.

On the very first page of the volume, the editors set forth their vision for *Vulnerability*: "Although moral theorists, political philosophers, and bioethicists generally acknowledge that our human vulnerability is normatively significant, there has been little systematic analysis of the concept of vulnerability. The aim of this volume is to address this gap" (1). This astute observation identifies the long-standing problem within moral and political theory of assuming vulnerability's normative importance without digging deeper to understand and then articulate the normative foundation, scope, and content of the concept. As doing so is a crucial move, the urgency behind the editors' vision makes perfect sense. Yet, ultimately, it is in this particular regard that the volume does not succeed, and that is for the better: the analysis that emerges is richly eclectic, not systematic. No one, overarching sense of the normative form and content of vulnerability emerges. Nor should it. This is not a weakness of the volume; it proves, instead, to be an important strength. The multiplicity is appropriate and productive. Articles sit side-by-side without resolution of tensions between them. Even though its normative significance has long been assumed in moral and political philosophical circles, vulnerability is still emerging as an established, fully rendered concept. Avoiding premature agreement will permit a truly mature and rich formulation of vulnerability, as well as its relation to philosophically related concepts, to emerge over time. Indeed, *Vulnerability* marks a major step in this direction.

REFERENCES

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